

## When Citizens Can't Agree

BY JAMES W. SKILLEN

ONE TRUTH IS SIMPLE ENOUGH TO UNDERSTAND: IF citizens in the same country find themselves fundamentally at odds over very basic matters such as slavery, abortion or the legitimacy of government itself, then it is quite possible that political order may collapse into civil war or into some lesser display of chaos. Radical disagreement at the foundations cannot be papered over by handshakes and smiles.

The question about American society in this age of increasing relativism and multiculturalism is whether the disagreements are fundamental or only superficial. I think the disagreements are of both kinds, and Christians ought to work diligently to distinguish them. We should not make too much of superficial differences, but neither should we underestimate the importance of deeper differences.

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their relativism. It would be a mistake, I believe, for Christians to try to do this by asserting that our own position is not relative. All human actions, arguments and affirmations are relative; the question is, "What are they relative to?"

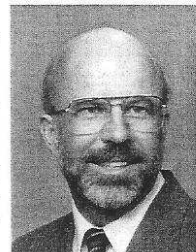
### We are Relative to God

The difference between a Christian answer to this question and a relativist answer is illuminating. We Christians should freely admit to our own fallible, limited, non-absolute standpoint as human beings. But we take our stance and assume our responsibilities in *relation to God*. We confess that we and all creation are *relative to the Creator/Redeemer*. Fully committed relativists, on the other hand, affirm that their viewpoint and responsibilities are *relative to nothing at all* (or are relative to nothing other than their own relativity).

This relativistic confession follows from the firm, dogmatic starting point that most modernists and post-modernists have taken, but it ends in self-contradiction. If nothing in this world—including human reason, human will, human justice or human law—can be taken to be an absolute standard by which to judge everything else, and if nothing beyond this world exists, then of course everything must be relative. But if one insists dogmatically on this position, then one must also admit that such dogmatism functions as the single firm truth to which the relativist is committed. To insist absolutely on

the truth that all is relative, however, is to contradict the very affirmation of relativism. Dogmatic relativism thus shows itself to be grounded in a blind and contradictory faith.

A Christian starting point leads in a different direction. If we admit that everything about this world—including all of our human thoughts, actions, laws and political systems—are relative to God, then we will agree with the relativists about the relativity of everything human, but we will reject their dogmatic starting point that excludes the Creator/Judge/Redeemer from the outset. Instead, with bold, open-eyed faith, we will take our firm stance in relation to God rather than in relation to nothing or in relation to a dogmatically asserted relativism.



### A Position of Humility

For Christians, this is an important expression of true humility. Christians should never claim that our legal reasoning or political positions *are* God's will, as if we have been granted authority to make divine judgments about ourselves and others. Rather, we should always argue that our legal reasoning and political proposals represent only our human attempt to respond in obedience to God's will. God alone will judge whether we are doing His will. We should recognize and willingly affirm our own relativity when we insist on acknowledging God alone as the one who is truly absolute and non-relative.

Among other things, this approach has the advantage of being logically consistent. In affirming human relativity (relationship) to God we acknowledge that we cannot escape the requirement that human beings must always depend on a non-relative foundation beyond themselves. By pointing to the Lord as the only secure foundation for human life, we expose ourselves, as we should, as limited and relative. But consistent with this humility (which conforms to reality) we avoid the logically inconsistent error of insisting that something relative is absolute. Everything created is relative to God, and God is the only absolutely sure foundation for all that has been created.

As Christians we need not react defensively to post-modern deconstructionists and relativists. Rather, we should act with humble yet bold firmness in arguing with them as we bear witness to the One on whom we depend. **Q**

*James Skillen is the executive director of the Center for Public Justice (Washington, DC). His most recent book is **Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community** (Baker Books).*