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Book Review

Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2015). Relativism and Religion: Why Democratic Societies Do Not Need Moral Absolutes. Columbia University Press.

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This study revolves around two interrelated topics, either of which would actually merit its own book. The first deals with the discourse of anti-relativism as it is present in official statements of the Catholic Church. It is often said that political philosophy, which Ian Shapiro called "narcissistic", has nowadays become encapsulated in its own canon and self-commentaries [Shapiro, Ian. Problems, *Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, Or What Is Wrong with Political Science and What to Do about It*. In *Political Theory 30:4 (August 2002)*, 596-619; 596]. The project that brings our attention to the body of texts criticizing liberal democracy from an intellectually elaborate point of view opens up our political philosophical discussion to the voices which are labeled "traditionalist" and thus are left unheeded. Historical analysis of how the concept of relativism has become so prominent in Catholic political theory is, however, only a foundation for the second part of the book, which is an analytical study of "the challenge represented for democratic theory by the idea that democratic regimes need to be complemented by the reference to a set of absolute moral or political truths in order to avoid degenerating into a form of tyranny or totalitarianism" (p. 6). The focus on the Catholic doctrine is explained by the facts that, on the one hand, it is in Catholic teaching that we find the most sophisticated formulations of anti-relativism

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discourse, and, on the other hand, there emerged "a sort of inter-denominational division of labor whereby Catholic apologists provide the intellectual foundations, while Protestant organizations supply the grassroots support, for a set of essentially convergent positions. Thus, the Vatican's formulations of the discourse of anti-relativism can be considered exemplary of a much broader range of arguments raised from a variety of religious standpoints" (p. 8).

The first part of the book offers us penetrating insights into the historical dynamic of the notion of relativism. The original use of this concept is traced back to the encyclical letter *Humanum Genus* promulgated by Pope Leo XIII in 1884. Pope Leo XIII attacked freemasonry's "endeavor to obtain equality and community of all goods by the destruction of every distinction of rank and property" (p. 35). The dissolution of the Church's authority and actual separation of church and state, in his opinion, will inevitably result in moral decline and anarchy, culminating in tyranny. The standard criticism of democracy's susceptibility to tyranny, which dates back to Plato, is linked here with the views of the intransigentist reaction to the French revolution. Rejection of rank and authority in society, disregard for the transcendent in religion, and the elevation of human beings to being the sole measure of the true and the good are all subsumed under the introduced concept of relativism and detected in the political form of liberal democracy. Instead of the intransigentist "blanket rejection of modernity," however, "by focusing the Church's critical attention on a single term, ultimately traceable to an expression of the active impulse of the city of Man in human history, Leo XIII was able to implicitly carve out space for the recognition that there also exist other aspects of the modern world that are not tied to relativism or the freemasonry, with which the Church can come to terms. Hence, paradoxically, the focalization on the notion of relativism succeeded in opening up the conceptual space for the possibility of a compromise with the aspects of modernity that had been left out from this critique" (p. 39). During the next stage - between the First World War and the end of the Cold War - the main assault was directed at communism, later renamed totalitarianism, which "almost completely overshadowed the discourse of anti-relativism" (p. 43), and, in a way, allowed the Church first to come

to terms with fascist regimes and later to side with liberal democracies. "Hence the discourse of anti-relativism was effectively silenced throughout the duration of the Cold War in order to avoid any ambiguity over the side that the Church had chosen to endorse" (p. 47). The criticism of relativism, however, "began to be employed as a conceptual weapon for dealing with internal dissidence within the Catholic Church itself" (p. 49); first and foremost, "as a strategy for reasserting the principle of authority within the Catholic Church against the perceived destructive effects of the Second Vatican Council" (pp. 53–54).

After the collapse of the Soviet block, the threat of militant atheism disappeared and the discourse of anti-relativism re-emerges. Since the political form of liberal democracy stands now unchallenged by any alternative power, its criticism has been re-focused by the Church leaders – Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI – and is now emphatically limited to the domain of morality. The new targets are false freedom, tolerance and "knowledge through dialogue" (p. 66). The ancient argument against democracy, that cited its vulnerability to demagogues and hence to tyranny, is now rephrased by reference to new evils. In these documents it is now claimed that democracy without moral foundation in absolute truth will degenerate into totalitarianism. "One of the most important functions of the Catholic discourse of anti-relativism had historically been to mediate the Church's relation with the political form of democracy. Here, however, the link becomes explicit: the central claim is that, like freedom, democracy requires "guidance," because if it is grounded merely in a form of philosophical relativism, it is deprived of any sense of the necessary moral limits that must be imposed on the people's exercise of power over themselves and therefore runs the risk of converting into its opposite" (p. 62).

Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), in his debate with Habermas, stresses the necessity to subordinate the exercise of power to the requirements of the law and recognizes that now democracy is the sole form for legitimate political authority, yet, it is not capable of being the sole source of norms. Democracy has in itself no *a priori* limits to power and can be corrupted easily, unless its legislature is subject to external criterion, which, as Cardinal argues, is the notion

of human rights. The notion of human rights replaces the traditional category of natural law, because "the idea of natural law presupposed a conception of 'nature' in which nature and reason interlock. The victory of the theory of evolution has meant the end of this view of nature" (cited on p. 74). Therefore, we must look for those forces within nature, which represent rationality, that is human beings, and if rationality is the essence of humankind, their rights are the last rational foundation for just law and legitimate power. The fight against relativism is continued by Popes Benedict XVI and Francis I with the same vigor and targets 'unlimited freedom', 'hostile tolerance or distrust of truth'. In sum, we observe that criticism of relativism by the Catholic leaders entails criticism of democracy not founded on absolute moral truth, we, then, have to conclude that "religion is not incompatible with democracy but actually required by it" (p. 85).

The second chapter offers a conceptual analysis of the notions upon which the Church's discourse of anti-relativism hinges: relativism, absolute truth, authority, freedom, and totalitarianism. It is clear that relativism is often confused by its critics – whether intentionally or not – with nihilism or with indifferentism and it is presented as a dogmatic postulation of absolute relativity. Relativism may not imply an actual rejection of or indifference to all values; and it does not require the exclusion of the truth from our moral reasoning. "While not renouncing taking a stand and formulating moral judgments, therefore, the relativist is conscious that, from a second-order perspective, his stand and judgment remain relative to the specific cultural and discursive framework from which they emerge" (pp. 93-94).

The claim that without absolute moral truth political society will degenerate into tyranny or totalitarianism does not actually give us an answer to the questions whether the absolute moral truth exists, whether it can be known, and whether it can be grasped uniformly and unanimously. Moreover this argument implies that religion is, in fact, instrumental in maintaining political community regardless of its actual relation to truth, that is, as a civic religion. This implication may be offensive to true believers and seems rather Machiavellian. On the other hand, once we accept the fact that there are many believers who

claim knowledge of the absolute truth and are unlikely to compromise on it, the violent conflict between these 'truth communities' becomes inevitable.

The legitimate exercise of power presupposes the notion of authority. The interpretations of this notion stem from at least two separate but sometimes intermingling traditions. The first tradition, inherited from Platonism, derives all legitimacy of rule from the privileged access to truth, while whilst the second – a Roman juridical tradition – sees legitimacy as being grounded in contract relations, in which "two individuals can agree to sign a contract whereby one counts as the author of the actions of the other, and the latter can accordingly be said to act with authority of the former" (p. 106). Yet, social contract theories normally compound two elements: "*pactum unionis*, whereby isolated individuals reciprocally contract with one another to form a social unit" and "*pactum subiectionis* whereby an already constituted political entity agrees to submit to the authority of the government" (p. 108). For true democratic authority the "idea of pactum unionis constituted horizontally through reciprocal agreements among human beings is sustainable on its own and does not need to be tied to the idea of pactum subiectionis introducing the vertical dimension of the distinction between rulers and ruled" (p. 109). Thus, a certain similarity of presuppositions is present in Catholic discourse of anti-relativism and in many social contract theories. The presupposition that stability and order can be based only on subjection to higher authority is undermined if we rely on "a properly democratic conception of authority." No external pole to legitimate and to regulate the workings of democracy is conceptually needed, because social contract retains its internal dynamic, that is, "an iterated practice, constantly renewed through an ongoing process of negotiation among the members of a social order" (p. 112), and "does not work top-down but bottom-up" (p. 109).

While it is clear that the Church advocates the principle of authority and criticizes freedom, it should be taken into account that the Church operates on its own notion of freedom. Unlike 'relativist' freedom which has no content and, in fact, implies that human beings can do whatever they want, Christian notion of freedom relies on the acceptance of

man's creation in the image of God and, therefore, "when human beings obey the commandments of God they are not really submitting to an extraneous authority, but rather complying with the highest part of their own intrinsic nature" (p. 117). Obeying God thus means not being unfree, but being free in its true meaning, being properly autonomous. Invernizzi Acetti here claims that "while recognizing its astuteness, I nonetheless judge this argument to amount to a form of conceptual manipulation, because it effectively inverts the meaning traditionally ascribed to the concept of freedom" (p. 117) and "effectively deprives the enemies of the Catholic Church of the terms to formulate their own position" (p. 118).

The idea that freedom should be a part of the hierarchical system of values which alone can lend it substantive content is developed by Pope John Paul II in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and by Cardinal Ratzinger in his "*What is Truth? The Significance of Ethical and Religious Values in a Pluralist Society*", in which the latter defines the content of freedom as safeguarding human rights, that is, social peace and harmony. Here I believe the criticism of the Church's discourse is the weakest as Invernizzi Acetti argues that this conception of freedom does not stem from the internal logic of the principle of freedom, it does not have to be consistent with other values or even with itself. Consequently, "it is not freedom that requires a content, but the Church's project of inscribing it within its own hierarchical system of values, which introduces this necessity from outside. The paradox involved in the idea that the content of a free action can be determined logically a priori therefore proves to be not a consequence of the meaning traditionally ascribed to the concept of freedom itself, but rather the result of the Church's own contradictory goals with respect to it" (p. 120). Leaving aside the ulterior motives of the Church's argument alluded to by Invernizzi Acetti, it should be noted that freedom is never disentangled from other values. In liberal discourse, it is inseparable from the value of equality, these are twin values of modern polities, each supporting and limiting another, as the author recognizes in his own argument, and adds tolerance (pp. 176-177). If freedom is not a bare capacity to act without interference, which is merely the absence of

physical obstacles, then the notion of freedom implies acting in relation to and in communication with other human beings, it will necessarily be entwined with other values and often be subordinate to them.

In the third chapter, the interpretations of Rawls and Habermas, who provide us with an alternative to grounding democracy in absolute moral truths, demonstrate that both are inadequate for "developing a fully convincing response to Catholic discourse of anti-relativism". The cultural relativism is taken into account, but Invernizzi Acetti's aspiration is "to explore whether a theory of democracy can do away with the orientation to an idea of moral truth altogether" (p. 161).

The last chapter deals with an original defense of a relativist conception of democracy based on an interpretation and extrapolation of Hans Kelsen's connection between democracy and relativism. Generally, the argument can be summarized as follows: "the absence of any absolute ground for political justification can itself function as the ground for a specific conception of democracy. ... this absence implies that all exercises of coercive power and attempts at discrimination between different substantive conceptions of the good or the right must be considered illegitimate, unless they are consented to by the individuals to whom they apply. Since democracy can be understood as a political regime based on the principle of consent among equals, it follows that a form of philosophical relativism implying the unavailability of any absolute grounds for political justification constitutes a sufficient philosophical ground for justifying such a form of democracy" (pp. 212–213).

Moreover, Invernizzi Acetti claims "that it is not only possible but necessary to be a relativist about one's own relativism - which implies that positing such a form of relativism as the philosophical foundation for the legitimacy of democratic institutions amounts to a way of grounding their legitimacy not in a figure of the absolute, but in something that is inherently relative; that is, relativism itself" (p. 213). Now if we recollect the criticism of conceptual inversion and manipulation that Invernizzi Acetti directed at Catholic intellectuals for their interpretation of the notion of freedom, this summary seems to be doing the same. Are we to infer that to be a democrat one has to be a relativist? We claim that this conception of democracy is inclusive and safe from extremes

of both secularism, which excludes religion from public discourse, and post-secularism, which privileges religion, but this 'middle path' conception of democracy no less suppresses the aspiration of religions to be what they are –- belief in the absolute and in universally valid morality. On the last pages of his book, Invernizzi Acetti recognizes this objection, but brushes it away: "this objection misses the point of the overall conception of democracy I have sought to articulate and defend in this book. For the latter has never aimed to be absolutely 'neutral' between all possible religious views and opinions, but rather to give expression to a specific set of substantive values that are assumed to follow logically from the assumption of a form of philosophical relativism" (p. 219).

Finally, the actual response to the concern that democracy is amenable to tyranny is rather homely, but nevertheless strictly to the point: there are no risk-free polities. If democracy votes itself into another political form, it may be a tragedy to a committed democrat, but it in no way de-legitimizes democracy.