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THE GOSPEL TRUTH OF RELATIVISM

by Brad Kallenberg

To many, Alasdair MacIntyre seems to epitomize the sort of dangerous confusion they fear from ‘postmodernity.’ Consider two separate passages from MacIntyre’s recent writing.

But in asserting that something is true we are not talking about warrant or justification, but claiming rather that this is in fact how things are, whatever our present or future standards of warrant or justification may lead us to state or imply, that this is in fact how things are, not from the point of view of this or that culture, but as such. Such assertions of course often turn out to be false, but once again what they turn out to be is not false-from-a-point-of-view, or false-by-this-or-that-set-of-standards, but simply false.1

Between those older beliefs and the world as they now understand it there is a radical discrepancy to be perceived. It is this lack of correspondence, between what the mind then judged and believed and reality as now perceived, classified, and understood, which is ascribed when those earlier judgments and beliefs are called false.2

The first passage seems to suggest a model of truth that is objective in a realist sense: a proposition or belief has a truth value regardless of its relation to human subjects. But the second passage seems to imply that the status of a proposition or belief is relative to the conceptual framework currently in operation. To put it this way constitutes the problem of relativism. If the possibility of engaging

1 I am grateful to the insightful readings of earlier drafts of this paper by Nancey Murphy and James Wm. McClendon, Jr.


in, and winning, a contest for superiority between rival religions is a necessary condition for Christianity’s continued existence, and if the term ‘relativism’ reminds us that modern philosophy has thus far failed to locate transcultural criteria for determining the winner, then clearly relativism spells trouble. But modern philosophy’s failure to locate an objective means for adjudicating between rival world-views is not what poses a problem for Christianity. Admission of this failure signals neither that we are imprisoned in the dark cave of Cartesian solipsism nor that we inhabit the sunny plains of Donald Davidson’s global solidarity. Rather, by this admission we own up to the fact that we live in foggy bundles and that the same realities which enable intracultural communication and seem to foil intercultural communication suggest a way to overcome the problem. In this paper, I argue that *concession to one form of conceptual relativism does not render incoherent the Christian practice of making unqualified, universal truth claims in the proclamation of the gospel.*

**What is not the problem**

In the last quarter of the twentieth century there has been a growing awareness of the extent to which human knowledge is socially, linguistically, and historically conditioned. As a result, many thinkers have abandoned the search for some form of ‘strong foundationalism’ which might serve as the theoretical means for overcoming relativism. And whether or not a softer form of foundationalism can be found, one that concedes this conditioning and is still strong enough to overcome relativism, is widely debated. What poses a greater danger to the integrity of the Christian message than the fact that we do not yet possess the antidote for relativism, after which we so desperately seek, is the profoundly *unchristian* character of our seeking.

The entire project to conquer relativism by theoretical means runs against the grain of Christianity in at least four ways. First, we must ask, ‘For whom might such a defector be intended?’ If we, as Christian believers, seek to find theoretical grounds for demonstrating the superiority of our religious tradition without simply talking to ourselves, it appears that we can only hope to do so by drawing comparisons between Christianity and other religions in terms of something held in common with them and yet, at the same time, by which we excel them. For example, H. Richard Niebuhr argues that because of his zeal to *justify* Christianity in the eyes of its detractors, Schleiermacher resorted to construing Christianity in purely anthropological terms in order to gain a sympathetic hearing by Christianity’s ‘cultured despisers.’ Hendrikus Berkhof notes that this apologetic strategy distinguishes liberal theology from Schleiermacher to the present. This project finds its contemporary exponent in the writing of John Hick, who, in the name of fostering interfaith dialogue, re-interprets Christianity’s metaphysical claims (about sin, about God, about salvation) as a function of the impact religious commitment has on its practitioners, thus, once again, reducing Christianity to anthropology. In each case this strategy necessarily marginalizes just those features that are distinctively Christian—incarnation, revelation, resurrection, etc.—because correct use of these concepts requires being an insider to the history of the communal life.

This anthropological bias points to another way in which ‘conquering’ relativism may run counter to Christian identity. Some think that firm ground for adjudication can be found within the ‘universal’ dimension of human nature. Hume sought this in human passions, while Kant sought it in reason. But the search for an Archimedean fulcrum within human nature can succeed only if human nature is historically, geographically, and religiously immutable. On what grounds, then, can we claim that human beings share a universal nature? Perhaps human nature is everywhere different; perhaps the term ‘human nature’ names a family resemblance rather than an essence common to all. Kant’s assumption that human beings share a common universal nature has been called ‘a transcendental presence.’ More significantly, Kant’s anthropology is incommensurable with a Christian description.

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of humanity. For the Christian story depends upon human nature (in all its variety) being open precisely to the sort of change (in the fall, in redemption, in the eschaton) that the Kantian project necessarily disavows.

The third problem is epistemological, rather than metaphysical, but is an extension of the second. The closest that Christians come to a universal description of human nature is in the doctrine of human depravity. While Christians disagree among themselves about the scope and extent of sin's consequences, this much is agreed upon: unredeemed human beings cannot ever see with perfect clarity; the sinful will-to-power always distorts our vision. John Howard Yoder puts the point this way:

... Christian faith tells me that my selfish mind, my impatient and retaliating spirit, and my adrenaline positively warp the way I perceive the facts in order to make them reflections of my self-esteem and my desire to be independent of my Creator and of my neighbor.

Thus while common sense argues for modesty about my capacity to make a valid decision all by myself, the Christian understanding of sin calls for me to repent of the very idea that I might make a decision completely on my own. As a result, consistency demands that Christians be the first to confess that every purported theoretical defeater of relativism rests on self-preserving presuppositions that run counter to the doctrine of sin.

To miss the content of the third objection can give rise to the fourth way the theoretical project to refute relativism may be unchristian. If one group thinks that it has access to a set of truths that is immune to the deceitfulness of the human heart, such a group will feel duty bound to coerce dissenting persons 'for their own good.' Yoder continues:

The real temptation of good people like us is not the crude and the crass and the carnal, as those traits were defined in popular puritanism. The really refined temptation with which Jesus himself was tried was not crude sensuality but that of egocentric altruism: of being oneself the incarnation of a good and righteous cause for which others may rightly be made to suffer; of stating in the form of a duty to others one's self-justification. *


The warlike ethnocentrism that grows out of such an altruism is nothing other than a thinly disguised imperialistic against which since Constantine Christianity has perennially battled.

If conquering relativism by theoretical means threatens our very identity as Christians, than perhaps our failure to locate some objective means of adjudication by which pluralism can be overcome does not pose as big a threat to Christianity as our insecurity tempts us to suppose. We have no need to acquire 'permission' for evangelism by first obtaining proof of Christianity's unsurpassability. Rather, we evangelize for particularist reasons: we evangelize because we have embraced the gospel and our interpretive framework and in so doing have joined its storyline. We evangelize because of who we are. I will argue that this 'ethnocentrism' (to borrow Richard Rorty's phrase) is the key to dissolving the problem of relativism because it enables what MacIntyre calls 'tradition-constituted inquiry.' Part and parcel of Christianity's tradition-constituted inquiry has been the ability of its evangelists to embody the gospel within rival cultures. Relativism is not overcome by an appeal to universal objectivity but dissolves in the face of human facility to learn multiple conceptual languages.

However, having said this, what is problematic in the contemporary situation is the tension that the opening citations from MacIntyre illustrate. How can we concede some form of conceptual relativism without damaging the universal scope of our distinctively Christian claims about sin, about Jesus' lordship, and about the salvific sufficiency of the gospel?

To get at this question, I need to explore the epistemological resources of recent post-modern thinking. Nancy Murphy and James Wm. McClendon, Jr., describe the modern epistemological axis as lying between the extremes of pessimistic foundationalism (skepticism) and optimistic foundationalism (certitude). Those who embrace a holist epistemology leave this axis altogether. Does holism lend itself to a similar spectrum of positions? What might be its extremes? Is there a radical relativist pole at which end the web of belief is construed as the possession of individual subjects? This would leave the threat of solipsism very much intact.

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Is there a radical optimism end where the web of belief is understood as the commonwealth of all humankind? This would leave the threat of imperialism very much intact.

From subjectivism to ethnocentricity

Post-Enlightenment theories about truth appear unable to make room for the conditionedness of human knowledge. One such theory holds that beliefs are justified, and propositions deemed ‘true,’ to the extent they correspond with the real world. How could it be otherwise? Doesn’t the denial of this relation between language and the world imply ‘Anything goes?’ On this view, the danger of setting aside the correspondence theory of truth is both that beliefs become understood as the private property of the individual and that the basis for owning these (rather than other) beliefs, is also private property. When the man or woman in the street blurts ‘What is true for you may not be true for me’ it is easy to suppose that only someone unaware of the binding nature of truth-as-correspondence could make such an unschooled assertion. On this view, then, relativism risks solipsism.

However the very fact that makes solipsism a danger is sufficient grounds for rejecting the correspondence theory altogether. For if ideas in the mind (or language on the tongue) stands in one-to-one correspondence with the real world, how is one to climb out of one’s mind and measure the adequacy of this link? Richard Rorty criticizes the Cartesian notion of ‘inner representation of the environment’ for having no protection against ‘wholesale slippage between organism and environment.’ In fact, the notion of thought or language being out of phase with the environment leaves us with a mystery: where can we stand to make sense of the notion ‘out of phase?’ Human inability to do this renders the correspondence theory impotent as a theory of epistemology and toothless as a means of adjudicating rival versions.

Equally unsuccessful is a theory in which justification is located in the internal coherence of one’s system of beliefs. The charge most often leveled against truth-as-coherence is that internal consistency is an insufficient criterion for adjudicating between equally self-consistent, but rival, systems. ‘After all,’ some might say, ‘which one of them is true?’ Of course, this way of asking the question presumes that only an appeal to some notion of ‘contact with reality’ can settle the matter.

For example, in the 1820s the Russian mathematician Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky showed that it was possible to construct an internally consistent system of geometry that begins with the counterintuitive axiom that, given a line and a point, there is more than one line in the same plane that passes through the point and is parallel to the line. When faced with a choice between Lobachevsky and Euclid, the ‘realist’12 complains that the coherentists haven’t given enough to choose between the two equally consistent, but mutually exclusive, descriptions of the world. In such a situation we are likely to assign ‘truth value’ to one of the systems on purely pragmatic grounds after noting which system (in this case Euclid’s) gives better mileage in the work-a-day world. Of course, the coherentist might counter with the reminder that within three decades German mathematician G. F. Bernhard Riemann created an equally consistent geometrical system and yet one that is incommensurable with both the Euclidean and Lobachevskian versions for its claim that all coplanar lines meet (i.e. no Euclidean parallels). However, Riemann’s system does have application in the ‘real world’—which is to say, post-Einsteinian world. ‘Now then,’ might go the rejoinder, ‘is “contact with the real world” any help when settling the dispute between Riemann and Euclid?’ The realist might dismiss the putative incommensurability of the two systems as merely a difference in range of application—Euclid working for the world of middle-sized dry goods and Riemann’s system being applicable to interstellar astrophysics. But, in the final analysis, questions about range of application can only be asked by a realist and never by the coherentist.

If both the correspondence and the coherence theories of truth limp, maybe what we are looking for is not a ‘theory’ at all. It was the genius of Ludwig Wittgenstein to suggest in their place

12 By ‘realist’ I mean someone who holds to a representational theory of language (and hence to some version of the correspondence theory of truth) and who believes that reality divides neatly into subjects and objects (or into language and world; or ideas and things).
a social model of knowledge. If justifying one position against another depends upon elevating some theory over others then justification may not possible: ‘The danger here, I believe, is one of giving justification of our procedure where there is no such thing as justification and we ought to simply have said: “that’s how we do it.”’ 15 The problem to which Wittgenstein points is that in attempting to justify a conceptual scheme by means of a theory born of that scheme we are trying to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Furthermore, David Bloor points out that formal codification of the reasoning process—i.e. the system which specifies laws of logic, rules for deduction, etc.—is itself unjustifiable because both providing and recognizing justification involves an underlying skill, or practice, which we call judgment. 16 This skill has to be learned, and as it cannot be learned free from a conceptual framework, it will always implicitly justify (by default) the framework in which it is situated.

Wittgenstein was fond of quoting Goethe: Im Anfang war die Tat (‘In the beginning was the act’) to remind us that language gets going by means of conventions of action rather than incorrigible beliefs.

And it has often been put in the form of an assertion that the truths of logic are determined by consensus of opinions. Is this what I am saying? No. There is no opinion at all; it is not a question of opinion. They are determined by a consensus of action; a consensus of doing the same thing, reacting in the same way. There is a consensus but it is not a consensus of opinion. 17

Wittgenstein is saying that the justification of some system of knowledge need not itself be a bit of knowledge. For example, epistemological foundationalists sometimes counter constructivists


16 Cp. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §212: ‘If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (quieter as this may sound) in judgments.


(who hold to some form of conceptual relativism) with the charge, ‘But surely you do not drive your car that way.’ In other words, the foundationalists claim to have found in the ‘law of noncontradiction’ an ideal example of a universal principle that transcends conceptual schemes. But Wittgenstein is recommending a more nuanced position that questions the very assumption that our conceptual frameworks stand in need of disinterested justification. The following sort of question is not as innocent as it might appear: ‘Must a conceptual framework be grounded upon something indubitable, such as the “laws of logic”, or, rather, is our belief in such laws itself a part of our socially constructed framework?’ 18 That Wittgenstein can even ask questions like this one exposes the presumptuousness of the foundationalist dogma. But Wittgenstein doesn’t stop there. He constructs a viable alternative description of language free from a priori certainties. Bloor summarizes Wittgenstein’s thinking on this matter: what we want to call logical constraint is not a transcendent criterion, or universally binding force, but ‘the requirement that we can continue to play the language-game, and this means being able to sustain our interactions with people who have certain dispositions and behavioral tendencies.’ 19 The phrase ‘compelled by logic’ has no more teeth than the fact that we happen to accept certain conclusions; it is to say that our social framework requires of us these constraints as the conditions for continued participation in the language-game. Inference and deduction are not special operations in that they cannot be

18 For a discussion of the correspondence theory of truth see, e.g. P. F. Strawson, ‘Truth’, in Logico-Linguistic Papers (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 190–213. For a critique of the ‘candidacy’ of the law of noncontradiction and the reality of perceptual objects as indubitable see Barnes and Bloor, ‘Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge,’ in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds), Rationality and Relativism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 21–47. On the one hand, what we commonly identify as the set of ‘the laws of logic’ turns out to be a learned body of knowledge which not only has changed over time, but is susceptible to replacement, in certain contexts, by other coherent axiomatic logical systems. On the other hand, information about our perceptual ability to navigate successfully through an environment cluttered with middle-sized dry goods may be indeed universal but fails to provide the transcendental criteria necessary for answering discrepancies which arise not at the individualistic level of animal navigation, but at the social level of, say, cartography.

questioned but simply because, in point of fact, they are not questioned—but it might have been otherwise with us. To put it differently, ‘Logical necessity is a moral and social relation’—the only penalty for attempting to play the game otherwise is the conflict nonconformists face within the society. In a similar fashion, what we call a ‘contradiction’ is not something that binds us with logical force, but an illegitimate move, something which ‘lacks use,’ in the larger social enterprise.

However, the later Wittgenstein is in no danger of the solipsism that the realists fear. Since the pattern of action out of which language emerges takes place within the world-as-socioculturally-constructed there is no danger of speakers ever losing contact with this world. We squint at bright lights and pucker at lemons and thus words like ‘bright’ and ‘sour’ take root in our linguistic form of life. Is there an ontological reality behind our squinting and puckering? In Wittgenstein’s mind that question misses the point—it is enough that we share common patterns of behavior (squinting and puckering) for it is these that enable members of the linguistic community to inhabit the same conceptual world. Coparticipation in a common form of life by speakers of a given language guarantees that each speaker is firmly in touch with this world. To espouse a language that is entirely ‘out of touch’ with the world threatens only those who maintain that private language (which amounts to the generation of a conceptual framework in total isolation) is a genuine possibility.

To summarize, solipsistic relativism is not possible for those who acknowledge the sociality of language and knowledge. The fear of solipsism is felt only by those realists who hold a prior commitment to the notion that language pictures reality by ‘corresponding’ to it. To follow Wittgenstein’s rejection of the correspondence model is to end up with a brand of ‘ethnocentrism’ that implies, on the one hand, that no individual can escape the historically- and socially-conditioned parameters of knowledge. Therefore, radical subjectivism is impossible because no single individual is the origin of the assumptions, opinions, and beliefs by which one navigates through a text or world. However, ethnocentrism implies, on the other hand, that the fate of the individual is wrapped up with that of the community: ‘At worst, the community of inquiry to which she belongs, the one which shares most of her beliefs, is stuck, for the time being, within its own vocabulary.’

Solipsism, then, cannot define one extreme of the holist (postmodern) epistemological axis. The social nature of language means that the limits of language are the limits of our communities. That knowledge is relative to our communities means that the axis of holist epistemologies is bounded on one end by ethnocentrism. What of the other putative pole? Is universal solidarity possible?

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18 Bloor, Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge, p. 130.
20 Wittgenstein deftly seizes this threat by observing that the possibility of private language cannot be expressed except in terms of public language—a criticism which damages the autonomy of the private language. There is an enormous body of literature revolving around Wittgenstein’s comments in PI, §§824–93 (etc.). While this topic is clearly outside the bounds of this paper, that his comments have stirred such a vigorous response at least shows that the possibility of private language is not intuitively obvious. For an alternate account, one which takes J. L. Austin, rather than Wittgenstein, as its starting point see James Wm. McConld, Jr. and James M. Smith, Convictions: Defining Religious Relativism, new, revised ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), reprint. Originally published as Understanding Religious Convictions, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, pp. 148–80.
From ethnocentrism to global solidarity?

When W. V. O. Quine first introduced his holist epistemology, he identified the web of belief with the totality of human knowledge. His heir apparent, Donald Davidson, followed suit arguing against the possibility of there being two (or more) human groups embodying incommensurable conceptual schemes. Davidson comes to this conclusion by taking ‘incommensurable’ to be synonymous with ‘untranslatable’ since, on his view, having a conceptual scheme amounts to having a language. Davidson argues that the claim ‘Our conceptual scheme is totally incommensurable with theirs’ is confused—even self-defeating. Why? Well, suppose we discover a primitive tribe and set out to study their linguistic behavior. We observe their grunts and clicks and howls but can make no headway whatsoever in translating these vocabularies into something we can understand. On the one hand, we might feel justifiably in concluding their conceptual framework is totally incommensurable with ours. But Davidson undermines this conclusion. If nothing translates, then what evidence do we have that these primitives have a conceptual scheme at all? In order for us to identify a conceptual framework in another group we must recognize in their behavior activities analogous to what we call ‘making truth claims’ or ‘ordering experience’ or the like. In other words, in order to recognize a rival conceptual scheme, some activities must be translatable. Yet, once this bit of translatability is admitted, we can no longer assert total incommensurability. Davidson concludes that if conceptual relativism is not a situation we can even recognize then those whom we do recognize as possessing a ‘rival’ conceptual scheme must share with us a vast number of mostly true beliefs.

But wait a minute. Is it possible to imagine conceptual schemes as partially incommensurable? Davidson himself follows Alfred Tarski, who taught that some propositions belong to ‘metalinguage.’ Therefore, must not Davidson concede the possibility that only a select range of ‘metbeliefs’ might be translatable—i.e. those which enable us to recognize a conceptual scheme qua conceptual scheme—while the content of the scheme remains untranslatable? The question of whether partial incommensurability is possible arises when we concede a minimal overlap exists between our scheme and another’s (i.e. enough to recognize verbal behavior of others as constituting their language) but maintain our claim that vast portions of the content of the rival scheme are untranslatable. Davidson denies this possibility by two arguments. First, he examines the nature of the relation that is thought to exist between a scheme and its content. Of these there are two. Either schemes are said to ‘fit’ their content or they are said to ‘organize’ it. In the first case, ‘the trouble . . . [with] the notion of fitting the totality of experience, like the notion of fitting the facts, or of being true to the facts, adds nothing intelligible to the concept of being true.’ Having formerly discarded representationalism as an unfruitful model of language, Davidson reasons that the concept of ‘fit’ is every bit as ambiguous as ‘true.’

Our attempt to characterize languages or conceptual schemes in terms of the notion of fitting some entity has come down, then, to the simple thought that something is an acceptable conceptual scheme or theory if it is true. Perhaps we better say largely true in order to allow shares of a scheme to differ on details. And the criterion of a conceptual scheme different from our own now becomes: largely true but not translatable.

However, we cannot understand the notion of truth independently of our notion of translation. Thus, seeing ‘fit’ as the nature of the relation between scheme and content results in two schemes that are necessarily intertranslatable.

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27 Davidson, ‘On the Very Idea,’ pp. 193-4

Seeing the relation between scheme and content as one of ‘organizing’ leads to the same conclusion. On the one hand, if schemes are thought to organize the world’s middle-sized dry goods, then each conceptual scheme must individuate the same objects. This indicates that the two languages already share a common inventory of intentional objects. This alone is sufficient for intertranslatability. On the other hand, if schemes are thought to organize experience, rather than objects, the same sort of point can be made: ‘whatever plurality we take experience to consist in—events like losing a button or stubbing a toe, having a sensation of warmth or hearing an oboe—we will have to individuate according to familiar principles. A language that organizes such entities must be a language very like our own.’

Davidson concludes that it is not possible to distinguish between scheme and content, a distinction upon which the case for conceptual relativism has been built by Paul Feyerabend and others, and encourages us instead to recognize that a principle of ‘charity’ is forced on us: translation is always possible between our conceptual scheme and another’s because we already share with them a vast number of mostly true beliefs. Thus, alternate cultures are not self-contained axiomatic systems in the same way alternate geometries are (pace Wittgenstein). Incommensurability appears to reduce to cases of misunderstanding, and thus, misunderstanding between cultures is of the same variety as misunderstanding within one’s own culture: dialogue serves as the means to happy translation.

What then can be the criterion for happy translation? Comparing the translation to the ‘world’ is disallowed for two reasons. First, following Quine, Davidson argues that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a single experience and a single belief in the web. There is causal connection, but all newly precipitated beliefs require simultaneous reweaving of the web so that adjacent beliefs condition the resulting configuration as

much, and more, than does the single experience. What results is a new pattern of beliefs that while shaped by experience does not mirror it.

Second, Davidson’s rejection of the scheme-content distinction is another way of making Wittgenstein’s point that language (the prime candidate for ‘conceptual scheme’) cannot be separated from the world. It is permissible to conceive language as co-extensive with the world or supervenient upon it, but it muddies the waters to view language as one thing and the world as something else and then ask about the relation between the two not only because, as discussed above, there is no one-to-one causal relationship between discrete experiences and individual beliefs, but also because there is no way to conceive the world apart from our conceptual tools. Rorty puts it this way: ‘the notion of “the world” that is correlative with the notion of “conceptual framework” is simply the Kantian notion of a thing-in-itself.’ Such a world is always just out of grasp. Reference is, at best, a posit we need to implement a theory of truth which on the macroscale only seems to justify the way we use individual sentences on the microscale. But, as we saw with Wittgenstein, Davidson’s denial of realism does not mean that contact with our environment is lost. In Rorty’s words:

By contrast, if one follows Davidson, one will not know what to make of the issue between realist and anti-realist. For one will feel in touch with reality all the time. Our language—conceived as the web of inferential relationships between our uses of vocabularies—is not, on this view, something ‘merely human’ which may hide something which ‘transcends human capacities.’ Nor can it deceive us into thinking ourselves in correspondence with something like

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8 Davidson, ‘Reality Without Reference.’
that when we are not. On the contrary, using those vocabularies is as
direct as contact with reality can get (as direct as kicking rocks,
c.f.).

So what Davidson offers as a model of happy translation is not just
another version of representationalism. Translation does not
involve the mapping of a linguistic-chunk onto a reality-chunk but
instead involves correlating what-is-the-case-as-I-see-it (my
intentional object) with what-is-the-case-as-I-hear-or-read-it.
The ultimate means for testing this correlation is simply what
Quine called 'the ability to bicker with the native like a brother.'

Davidson’s ideas on correct translation have important con-
sequences for New Testament hermeneutics. Anthony Thisselton
has made similar moves when he likened correct exegesis to
achieving facility in playing the language-game of the text in
order that the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader
become fused. However, Davidson points us further. For
Davidson the hermeneutic circle is gone round and round with a
living partner. The measure of a field linguist’s translation is
his or her ability to dance with other living inhabitants of the
yet-to-be-translated rival scheme. Of course, in the case of the
New Testament, the original host community is extinct. To
extend this point: correct translation in this situation demands
an interpretive community which strives to embody the target
language-games by conforming themselves to the underlying
communal form of life. The hermeneutic circle, therefore, takes
the entire community through successive approximations: the
community which strives to play the language-games of the text
creates a boundary condition for excellence in translation (both
by being the embodiment of the language-games and the means
by which the character and conceptual scheme of the translators
are shaped) and such translations further reveal the form of life
to which the community must strive to conform in order to
continue to play the language-game with excellence. (The
significance of these observations will become apparent when I
take up the discussion of how the evangelists’ ability to ‘embody’
the gospel enables one of Christianity’s constitutive practices.)

To return to my present topic, we can summarize Davidson’s
response to the problem of relativism in a phrase: ‘There is no
problem.’ The gist of Davidson’s argument is the identification
of incommensurability with untranslatability. By then pressing
on the idea of untranslatability Davidson concludes that in the
absence of a recognizable rival scheme the worry of relativism is a
hodgepodge. Davidson has located all language speakers in the
sphere of global solidarity.

But Davidson’s argument is flawed for at least three reasons.
And for these reasons we are warranted in rejecting his global
solidarity. First, untranslatability is not an adequate criterion for
specifying instances of incommensurability. Rorty, a self-
proclaimed admirer of Davidson, summarized Davidson’s
principle of charity this way: ‘our form of life and the natives’ already

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{What can be thought to enable the hermeneutic circle (or better, the
hermeneutic spiral) in its initial engagement is first, in Davidsonian terms, a version
of the principle of charity which assures us of some experimental overlap between
contemporary and New Testament believers, and second, the concept of historical
trajectory which I will discuss in the next section. For a parallel argument on the
centrality of the interpretive community for biblical exegesis, one which takes
reader response theory as a starting point rather than Davidson, see James E.
Brenman, \textit{Causes in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy} (New
York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also, Nancey Murphy, \textit{Textual Relativism,
Philosophy of Language, and the Baptist Vision}, in the festschrift for James Wm.
McClendon, Jr., \textit{Entrenched Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future
of Theological Truth}, eds Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Naiton
(Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 215–79. While I have argued for
philosophical reasons (i.e., Davidson, Wittgenstein, etc.) that something about the
readers (rather than the text) must be made to conform to preconditions for
understanding, McClendon makes the same sort of point for theological reasons.
The Church’s hermeneutic depends upon the \textit{continuity} (what McClendon calls the
‘baptist vision’) it sees between the narrative of its own identity and the biblical

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2}}\text{Is global skepticism thereby a worry? Rorty thinks that such a claim is un-
intelligible in light of previous discussion on the causal connection we have with

\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\text{This point was made clear to me by chapter one of Nancey Murphy’s disserta-
tion which is published as \textit{Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning} (Boca Raton, FL:
Cornell University Press, 1990).}


\[\text{\textsuperscript{2}}\text{Richard Rorty, \textit{Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor}, in \textit{Objective, Relativism,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\text{Anthony C. Thisselton, \textit{The Two Horizons} (Carlisle, UK and Grand Rapids, MI:
Paternoster Press and WM. B. Eerdmans, 1980).}
overlap to so great an extent that we are already, automatically, for free, participant-observers.” But notice the way Rorty has substituted the notion of ‘overlapping forms of life’ for Davidson’s original notion of ‘overlapping beliefs.’ This really gets to the heart of the matter. If we take Wittgenstein’s description of language as persuasive, then, in principle, communities may differ widely in their beliefs because beliefs can only be expressed by the language which is itself a function of the form of a community’s life together. So, conceptual schemes are translatable only to the extent that underlying forms of life are similar and untranslatable to the extent the underlying forms of life are dissimilar.

Although Rorty is incurably optimistic about the range of overlap between contemporary forms of life, he alludes to a problem lurking in Davidson’s version by conceding that when a native carves up the world in a manner wildly different than ours, ‘communication becomes harder and translation less helpful. Translation may become so awkwardly periphrastic, indeed that it will save time simply to go bilingual.’ Less helpful? Save time? Sometimes going bilingual is the only way to achieve understanding. This is, in part, due to the fact that a conceptual framework involves more than merely the spoken words of a language as Davidson maintains. Who could reduce the sound of a clarinet to a set of propositions, much less translate this into Swahili? Yet the ability to distinguish the sound of a clarinet from that of an oncoming train is essential to how we travel railways and attend concert halls. There are countless ways in which tacit knowledge is embodied in our conceptual framework and determines how we use our language. For example, at times one word may appear to translate another word neatly, when in fact, highly significant features may be lost to the recipient of the translation who lacks the historically- and linguistically-formed character adequate to perceive these features. Machirye gives the example of how the Protestant ‘Londonderry’ names the same location but connotes an entirely different history than does its Catholic counterpart ‘Doire Colmcille.’ Other times the identical word may be used by inhabitants of two different conceptual frameworks to denote two incommensurable ideas. For example, the word ‘mass’ is used by Einstein in a manner completely unintelligible to Newton (Lorentz transformations notwithstanding). And yet there is no better word available to express either concept than ‘mass.’ More radical examples show that translation is sometimes prevented on the grounds that success in translation would entail destruction of the recipient paradigm. So, as Paul Feyerabend illustrates, when Achilles considered Agamemnon’s honor as a charade he introduced the distinction between essence and appearance. This distinction cannot occupy the same space as the ‘paratactic aggregate’ view held by Greek speakers prior to Homer; those who understood Achilles’ point lost all ability to see the world in the old way.

This leads to a second flaw in Davidson’s argument. Even if we restrict our attention to cases where some translation is possible, Davidson assumes that translation leaves everything as it is. Unfortunately for Davidson, this point is debatable. Because of the performative nature of language successful translation can change both the language and the speakers of it. For example,

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Paul Feyerabend describes what lengths historians of science must go in order to explain archaic terms such as ‘impetus’ to their students:

Explaning the notion of ‘impetus’ in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century science, they first teach their readers the physics, metaphysics, and even the theology of the time; in other words, they introduce a new and initially unfamiliar semantic landscape, and then show where impetus is located in it.”

The historian’s ‘translation’ succeeds only in so far as he or she succeeds in accommodating the students to the new knowledge. But this, then, is no longer translation. Davidson has construed translation as a task of mapping sound to senses and marks to meanings in a way that leaves everything as it is. But to think in this way overlooks the Wittgensteinian insight that meaning is inextricable from the use words have within a particular form of life. Understanding is achieved, not by translation, but by participation in a form of life and thereby learning the second language like one learns a first language.

These first two objections have challenged the way Davidson reduces the notion of incommensurability to that of untranslatability. If this move is questionable, then he must provide additional arguments to warrant his denial that we could ever recognize an incommensurable conceptual scheme as such.

Yet even if we grant Davidson this reduction, his argument fails for a third reason. MacIntyre has observed that in its ongoing quest to be tradition-free, contemporary liberalism tried to fulfill Leibniz’ dream for the creation of an international (i.e. context-independent) language. In such a language, where translation is reduced to one-to-one mapping, it is hard to see how shared beliefs about rocks and doorknobs could help produce adequate translations of controversial terms such as ‘good’ or ‘God.’ Yet can life in the ‘global village’ get by without them? This universal language is doomed to rise no higher than the greatest common denominator of all those particular languages now spoken in the innumerable particular communities throughout the world. How could such a language possibly deal justly (!) with religious claims and not evacuate them of their distinctive content?

Wittgenstein charged Sir John Frazer’s late nineteenth-century anthropological study of magic and religion with this very crime: ‘Identifying one’s own gods with the gods of other peoples. One convinces oneself that the names have the same meaning.” We can see, then, how in the case of rival beliefs a universal language necessarily marginalizes (whether by oppression or absorption) particular beliefs for their particularity. But this will not prevent such questions of ultimate concern from being discussed. Rather, conversations about goodness, truth, the gods, and God will be driven back into communities whose ‘tribal’ languages possess vocabularies rich enough to handle the tasks. Ironically, instead of overcoming relativism, the creation of a universal language makes relativism inevitable; ‘truth’ becomes nothing more than ‘warranted assertibility’ and ‘reasonableness, so far as possible, is relativized to social context.” If such ‘thin’ accounts of truth and rationality do not possess the stuff for overcoming relativism, what does?

Back from Utopia: tradition-constituted inquiry

A revolution for philosophical ethics began with MacIntyre’s disquieting suggestion that the Enlightenment project had failed to produce a universal criterion for rationality, so that the move to jettison all things social, religious, linguistic, and traditional was a mistake.53

In the wake of this revolution, MacIntyre describes moral inquiry as both tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive. By the first term he means that all moral inquiry is situated within some tradition or other. Moral inquiry is done within a tradition because traditions are ‘the repositories of standards of rationality . . . which are crucial to moral deliberation and action.” At a

56 Feyerabend, Farewell to Reason, p. 206.
basic level, a tradition requires a shared language. To share a language is to share a form of life. To share a form of life is to be a community. To be a community is to be concerned over the meaning of the story that recounts the group’s joint history. Thus, a tradition, for MacIntyre, is defined as an ‘historically extended, socially embodied argument.’ Apart from the life people share within some particular tradition, ‘there is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument.’

By saying that inquiry is tradition-constitutive MacIntyre means that the tradition itself is a part of the argument. In his sequel to *After Virtue*, entitled *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre expands his definition of tradition: ‘an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition . . . and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.’ To locate moral inquiry within a narrative tradition does not capitulate to relativism since rival traditions compete for viability in a battle of ‘survival of the fittest’ where justification entails overcoming external challenges and internal crises. The tradition which fails to vindicate itself in the ‘historical process of dialectical justification’ will, and ought to, die and in dying will no longer be a rival.

Although the process of historical justification spans centuries, even millennia, nevertheless, this way of construing the problem provides two resources for those who are faced with challenges from rival traditions and do not have millennia to play with. First, the fact that inquiry is tradition-constituted means that we are unable to transcend tradition-bound categories for perceiving the world. But this is not bad news. Our ability to inhabit one tradition suggests the possibility of gaining understanding of other traditions—not by translation but by acquiring the rival scheme as one may learn a second-first-language. Second, our natural expertise at inhabiting traditions means that we already possess fluency in the language of evaluation that is internal to the tradition(s) we inhabit. Both of these features touch upon the problem of conversion.

Kierkegaard was among the first to recognize the problem of conversion when, in *Enten-Eller*, he noted that transition from the sphere of the ethical to the sphere of the religious could only be conceived of as a criterionless leap. Because justification for adopting a different paradigm (P₂) is internal to that paradigm, the reasons offered from out of P₁ to a person inhabiting P₂ could only be intelligible after conversion to P₂ has taken place. Does this mean that conversion between paradigms is never rationally driven? Feyerabend concludes that this aptly describes Galileo’s defeat of the reigning Aristotelian–Ptolemaic cosmology: ‘Galileo secured his victory over his Aristotelian opponents, not by meeting the standards required by some relevant type of rational argument, but by deceptive rhetorical manipulation.’

MacIntyre summarizes Feyerabend’s argument by asserting that if all the resources for making the transition (i.e. P₁ → P₂) come from P₁, then the incommensurability of the two paradigms implies that no rational persuasion for conversion can be given. Thus, MacIntyre concurs with Kierkegaard that no transcendent rational criterion is available to govern the ‘leap.’

Yet MacIntyre objects to Feyerabend’s conclusion, claiming instead that conversion between incommensurable paradigms *can be rationally justifiable*. How can this be? When the host tradition lacks resources for overcoming epistemological crises, one is rationally justified to shop around. But one need not fully inhabit (i.e. convert to) a rival tradition in order to understand the resources it offers:

> the possibility of learning to understand the other incommensurable point of view from within imaginatively, before it can be occupied

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59 My exegesis of Kierkegaard at this point is indebted to MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 30–50.
60 MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, p. 118. MacIntyre may have overstated the case here. Persuasion need not be deceptive though it is ‘rhetorical’ in the sense that it is broader than the mere self-syllogism which characterizes some ‘rational argument.’
intellectually, can never be ruled out. It is by such uses of the imagination that one can come as if to inhabit another alien culture and in so doing recognize how significant features of one’s own culture to which one has hitherto been, and could not but have been, blind can be discovered and characterized from the other culture’s point of view.\(^a\)

So justification is rational, even if retrospective. Once one ‘inhabits’ both paradigms, one imaginatively and one in actuality, identification and explanation of the host tradition’s sterility may be achieved.

This analysis takes us a long way toward seeing that the criterion for measuring superiority of one tradition over another is not a bit of knowledge at all. Rather, the criterion for measuring superiority is both a function of human linguistic skill and of the essential narrative nature (which is akin to saying, the historical nature)\(^b\) of traditions. Thus, overall schemes are ‘justified by their ability to do better than any rival competitors so far.’\(^c\) On the one hand, the proof of this victory is shown by the rival tradition’s ability to attract adherents. But this case is made all the more convincing if the rival tradition also promises more resources than its competitor for overcoming the respective obstacles each tradition faces.

Is there any way in which one of these rivals might prevail over the others? One possible answer was supplied by Dante: that narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.\(^d\)

To put it differently, a tradition stands justified if it can provide explanation as to why the rival version must fail on its own terms.\(^e\)

\(^a\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, p. 120.

\(^b\) For a helpful discussion of the seven ways MacIntyre uses the concept of narrative see L. Gregory Jones, ‘Machair MacIntyre on Narrative, Community, and the Moral Life,’ *Modern Theology* 1 (1985), pp. 53-69.

\(^c\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, p. 81.

\(^d\) It is important to note that for MacIntyre the condemnation of Dante’s literature as heretical by the Roman Church represents the kind of in-house discussion that occurs in traditions defined as historically extended, socially embodied arguments (*After Virtue*, p. 222). As such MacIntyre is probably comfortable with conceiving Dante’s literature as a source of justification from within, rather than from without, the Christian tradition.

\(^e\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, p. 61.

...the claim to provide a standpoint which suffers from less incoherence, is more comprehensive and more resourceful, but especially resourceful in one particular way. For among those resources, so it is claimed, is an ability not only to identify as limitations, defects, and errors of the opposing view what are or ought to be taken as limitations, defects, and errors in the light of the standards of the opposing view itself, but also to explain in precise and detailed terms what it is about the opposing view which engenders just these particular limitations, defects, and errors and also what it is about that view which must deprive it of the resources required for understanding, overcoming, and correcting them.\(^f\)

I have shown that the holist epistemology admits to neither the extreme of subjectivism nor the extreme of global solidarity. Holist epistemology is thoroughly ethnocentric—a system of belief is mutual property of a given community but may mutually exclude rival belief systems. But as MacIntyre’s model suggests, ethnocentrism need not entail relativism.

**Christian resources for overcoming relativism**

We are now in a position to discuss whether the truth in relativism may be thought to constitute a crisis for the historical tradition of Christianity. How dare we (I speak from within this tradition) make universal truth claims (about sin, about the lordship of Jesus, about the sufficiency of the gospel) if apologetics is internal to our conceptual framework? And how do we coherently maintain the practice of evangelism (constitutive for the tradition) which presumes that we are ‘right’ and those not (yet) converted are ‘wrong,’ if the meanings of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are relative to our web of belief?

Bernard Williams argues that relativism does not pose a problem to any moral tradition. While it is true that there is no *a priori* nonrelative principle to which traditions can appeal in order to solve disagreements, ‘there are inherent features of morality that tend to make it difficult to regard morality as applying only to a [i.e. one particular] group.’\(^g\) Williams notes that all moral

\(^f\) Ibid., p. 116.

systems share four features. First, they all share a propensity for making exclusivist and universal claims. Second, they each justify themselves by means of supplying 'reasons.' Third, a moral system has the feature that its followers strongly internalize certain sorts of reactions and motivations. (Thus, caring deeply is essential to morality and, conversely, any standpoint of studied disinterest is amoral.) Fourth, moral systems are humanizing: members cannot discount all their cross-cultural reactions as parochial because these reactions are what they are precisely because members of rival systems are regarded to be 'human.' Williams concludes:

it cannot be a consequence of the nature of morality itself that no society ought ever to interfere with another, or that individuals from one society confronted with the practices of another ought, if rational, to react with acceptance. To draw these consequences is the characteristic (and inconsistent) step of vulgar relativism."

It is tempting at this juncture to lose sight of the fact that both the problem of relativism and that which justification amounts to are theory-laden, tradition-constituted notions. The way Williams sees and defuses relativism is born of his atheistic naturalism for which morality is identified with an aspect of (unfallen) human nature and for which the relation of God to the discussion is unintelligible."

So then, the resources Williams affords us in our Christian struggle against relativism are themselves the resources of a rival tradition. This fact, in itself, is not troublesome nor should it dissuade us from dialogue. For MacIntyre’s thesis instructs us that when a tradition lacks resources for overcoming crises, to import resources from a rival tradition may result in a synthesis which amounts to the best tradition so far. Such was Aquinas’ synthesis of Aristotelian and Augustinian. Yet in order for Christianity to retain its identity through such a synthesis, it must be able to trace a line of continuity from the old version to the new. My

fear is that the salvation Williams offers to Christianity might succeed in rescuing the practice of evangelism from incoherence but lose the God of whom the Evangel testifies in the process.

I mention Williams in order to highlight the fact that I do not believe relativism constitutes a crisis for Christianity at all. Christianity has within its history the resources for overcoming the ‘problem.’ An astute reader will have already perceived how the arguments that I raised against Davidson, while disabling his solution to relativism, opened the way to a different solution. To say that the criteria of rationality are culturally specific and to claim, further, that human beings are able to inhabit multiple, and even rival, traditions requires us to provide Christian justification of our practice of evangelism and thereby of our universal truth claims. I will argue that the practice of evangelism itself constitutes justification for our tradition.

Evangelism as a self-justifying practice

What I mean to say is this. The threat that relativism appears to pose to evangelism (namely, how can Christians consistently proclaim ‘Jesus is Lord of all’ while acknowledging that such proclamations are judgments made from within, or relative to, the conceptual system of some particular community?) requires, in response, some type of answer for, or justification of, the practice. As I have been careful to maintain throughout, what justification amounts to varies from tradition to tradition. If we concede this, then we must not be fooled into searching for unqualified justification but, rather, attend to justification (historically called apologia) offered from within the Christian tradition. That we are prone to overlook this historical resource only shows the extent to which we have adopted modern, secular canons of philosophical procedure. In other words, as Feverabend and MacIntyre maintain, post-Enlightenment rationalism is itself a tradition within which justification amounts to theoretical argumentation. But in striking contrast, Christianity has historically preferred an incarnational, or embodied, apologetic. To put it differently, the earliest Church fathers did not think that their faith could be defended via an appeal to universally-accepted knowledge nor by means of a theoretical reasoning. Rather, what constituted justification of the faith in their eyes, was a certain

10 Williams, Morality, p. 25.
11 Williams, Morality, p. 72: “If God existed, there might well be special, and acceptable, reasons for subscribing to morality. The trouble is that the attempt to formulate these reasons in better than the crudest outline runs into the impossibility of thinking correctly about God. The trouble with religious morality comes not from morality’s being inescapably pure, but from religion’s being intrinsically unintelligible.”
12 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions, pp. 105–106.
mode of living. Although the earliest apologists composed elegant treatises, these invariably pointed back to the life of the community as the substance of their arguments. Athanasius writes:

But among us you will find uneducated persons and artisans, and old women who, if they are unable in words to prove the benefit of our doctrine, yet by their deeds exhibit the benefit arising from their persuasion of its truth; they do not rehearse speeches, but exhibit good works; when struck, they do not strike again; when robbed, they do not go to law; they give to those who ask of them, and love their neighbors as themselves. 1

The importance of 'embodiment' has already appeared in our discussion. I have argued above that within the Christian tradition the practice of exegesis cannot get off the ground unless there be simultaneously an interpretive community that strives to embody the form of life that underlay the (original) New Testament language-games. Likewise, the practice of evangelism (another tradition-constitutive practice) is justified for the community that simultaneously embodies the story that it strives to proclaim.

Evangelism has always been the Christian response to a pluralistic world. Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:

The task of the Christian is not to defeat relativism by argument but to witness. . . . The command to witness is not based on the assumption that we are in possession of a universal truth which others must also 'implicitly' possess or have sinfully rejected. If such a truth existed, we would not be called upon to be witnesses, but philosophers. Rather the command to be a witness is based upon the presupposition that we only come to the truth through the process of being confronted by the truth. 2

1 For a contemporary account of justification, one that transcends the stalemate between epistemological foundationalism and skepticism by showing the significance of cases where an isomorphism exists between a conceptual system (e.g., the history of philosophy of science) and a mode of behavior (e.g., the history of the practice of science), see Nancy Murphy, 'Philosophical Fractals: Or, History as Metaphilosophy,' Studies in the History of Philosophy of Science 21, no. 3 (1995), pp. 501–8.


Not only is evangelism one of Christianity's constitutive practices. It appears to be uniquely Christian in origin. While many fault the Church, or at least the Western Church, for maintaining strong insider-outsider boundaries (a feature shared with many religions), nevertheless, Christianity is also marked by its hope to make insiders out of outsiders: 'God our Savior . . . desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.'

What does it take for an outsider, which is to say, an inhabitant of a rival tradition, to become an insider? As I have argued elsewhere, conversion amounts to the emergence of a new mode of life occasioned by a self-involving participation in the shared life, language, and paradigm of the believing community. It would be a mistake to lose sight of the fact that this process is not usually initiated by the convert; the convert is generally preceded in his or her decision by an evangelist who has already inhabited the Weltanschauung of the rival culture and proclaimed the good news from within it. Thomas went to India, Columbia to Scotland, and Hudson Taylor to China. Every missionary in Christianity's history illustrates human facility to adopt other forms of life and to learn second-first languages in order to speak the gospel adequately.

Three aspects of evangelism combine to overcome what Hauerwas describes as the true problem of cultural pluralism, namely, 'our inability to envision something about another life as a "real option" for me.' First, a message is proclaimed that the interpretive power of the rival tradition. When Augustine embraced the gospel he gained by it the ability to see the disjointed episodes of his life (licentiousness, Manichaeism, neo-Platonism) as a narrative whole; a restless quest which found its terminus in God. Second, this message is incarnated in the life of a community. Just as no human action is intelligible apart

1 1 Timothy 2:4 (RSV).
from a context which gives it sense, so too, the gospel cannot be adequately understood if there is no group who lives it. The goal of evangelism, therefore, is not to explain the gospel in a series of universally understandable tenets but to embody the gospel so that it becomes a real option. Third, this message is, ideally, embodied from within the rival culture. Here I am not thinking of those missionaries who rigorously maintain Western culture within their isolated enclave, but of those ‘incarnational’ missionaries whose koinonia involves the adoption of an alien form of life, so that they become all things to all people so as by all means to save some. Hauerwas summarizes: ‘the task of Christians is to be the sort of people and community that can become a real option and provide a real confrontation for others. Unless such a community exists, then no real option exists.’

In defense of an unqualified gospel

I have argued that the evangelists’ ability to inhabit rival cultures in authentically Christian ways enables one to hold on to the truth of relativism—that criteria of rationality are relative to conceptual schemes—while avoiding the charge that Christian practices, such as evangelism, are inconsistent. Now I must return to the unfinished business of Christians’ epistemic right to make unqualified, i.e. universal, truth claims. Christians proclaim Jesus as Lord over all, sin as the universal human condition, and salvation in Jesus as sufficient for everyone. If these three claims cannot be maintained while the truth of relativism is embraced then Christian believers must deny the (so-called) ‘truth of relativism’ lest Christianity in its New Testament form be finished. I argue that universal truth claims can coherently be maintained by understanding the gospel under the genre of ‘news.’

The above claims (i.e. ‘Jesus is Lord over all,’ etc.) comprise the heart of the gospel. Therefore, the Christian problem with relativism is really a question about the validity of the gospel. In short, in claiming that the gospel is everlasting and universally true, Christians are claiming to possess good news which can validly be spoken in any, and every, extant culture.

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28 Yoder, ‘On Not Being Ashamed,’ p. 293.

29 1 Corinthians 9:22.

dimensions of validation, or justification, in MacIntyre's account.® Diachronic justification refers to the way the communal web of belief, born out of continuous reflection upon a canonical text (or voice), increases in coherence, correspondence, and explanatory adequacy as it overcomes obstacles through time. For Christians to say that their web is 'true' in this sense is to say that it is both viable and the best one so far. Synchronic justification refers to the comparison of two historical traditions at some given point in time. One tradition can be called synchronically justified if it demonstrates superiority over its rival in overcoming common obstacles as well as being able to provide an explanation of why the rival must fail at precisely those points it does fail.

Yoder's first criterion, 'whatoever things are true,' involves diachronic justification. In the case of the Christian message, only those who are fluent in this language-game are qualified to pass judgment on whether what is spoken constitutes a valid move in the game. This evaluative process is called theology and keeps one eye on the canonical text and the other eye on contemporary communal practice in order to insure coherence.®

Yoder's second criterion involves synchronic justification. A sufficient (though not necessary) condition for showing successful communication which is valid according to Yoder’s second criterion, 'adequacy,' occurs in the case of the recipient who hears the news, receives the news, and joins the ranks of those whose lives have been irrevocably altered by the news. If pluralism describes the contemporary milieu, in which various groups navigate life by means of interpretive stories other than the gospel, then relativism names a serious problem if, and only if, there exists a rival conceptual scheme none of whose adherents are able to choose the gospel as their interpretive story (and not simply that they possibly may not, but cannot, so choose).® The Christian claim that 'the gospel is true,' therefore, is validated by each particular conversion because each conversion expresses a concrete judgment that the gospel is superior to some rival conceptual scheme despite human propensity to prejudice judgments in favor of one's host tradition.

By extension, the Christian claim that the gospel is universally true expresses the implicit conviction that standing before the throne of the Lamb on the last day will be at least one convert representing every possible conceptual scheme—every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.® To put it differently, this conviction expresses confidence that the gospel can be, and, in fact, will have been, embodied in any and every rival culture.

Such universal claims could not be made unless salvation were a live option for adherents to any, and every, conceptual framework. Not that the gospel must be embraced by all (in which case it would cease to be good news) for our claim historically has been simply 'sufficient for all, efficient for some.' Nevertheless, Christian optimism that our tradition ultimately will be shown to have offered an adequate possibility for all (i.e. that it will show itself synchronically valid) is strengthened by each conversion to Christianity by a former adherent to a rival scheme from which there had been no prior conversions.

® In other words, the possibility of successful communication for all adherents to a rival scheme rests on the possibility of a felicitous speech act in the case of one such adherent. If, for whatever reason, persuasion is necessarily unattainable for even one, then the practice of communicating the good news fails to be validated in Yoder’s second sense; those with good news to communicate could not consistently claim that the possibility of successful communication was one of universal scope.


® Revelation 5:9-10. Note how fitting it is for my argument that the writer describes followers of the Lamb in social categories.
Of course, examples of ‘reverse evangelism’ can be found as well—Christians quit the faith and become Muslims, Mormons or Moons. But this admission only reminds Christian believers that universal claims (analogous to ours) made by members of rival traditions are equally rationally tenable as those made by Christians. My point has never been to argue that Christians, and Christians alone, have the epistemic right to make universal claims on the grounds that at the end of time only their tradition will be left standing—although as a believer, this is my conviction.” Rather, I have simply argued that one can espouse a form conceptual relativism and still be rationally justified in making universal claims."

Finally, Yoder’s third criterion is identical to what I have drawn attention to earlier in this paper, namely, that there is no transcultural reference point by which adherents to one position can secure total victory against all comers. Of course, to claim that the news must be proclaimed in a noncoercive way belittles the message of a slaughtered Lamb. In addition, the truth in relativism ought to keep Christian demeanor humble and inter-religious dialogue noncoercive.

Conclusion
In this paper I have argued that the Christian claim to universally valid truths is not rendered unintelligible by trading the ‘correspondence’ theory of truth for local criteria of rationality. I have further argued that to give up on ‘reference’ as a criterion of

truthfulness does not fix one’s place on an epistemological axis at risk of solipsism at one extreme and global solidarity at the other. Rather, a holist epistemology is unavoidably historical and ethnocentric—a combination that receives explication in MacIntrye’s tradition-constituted inquiry. In light of this model, both the practice of evangelism and the universal truth claims of the gospel show that the Christian tradition is synchronically valid and diachronically justified. In maintaining the practice of evangelism Christians express confidence that their tradition is unsurpassed and unsurpassable at every stage of its development and that the development of the tradition in going round and round the hermeneutic circle—whereby the community reflecting on the canon has its sensibilities and character shaped, a shaping which, in turn, enables increasingly fitting reflection on the canon—is a convergent, rather than a divergent, algorithm.

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* For us to apply the term ‘true’ to the gospel is not simply tantamount since what counts as ‘truth’ is internal to the conceptual framework definitively shaped by the gospel. Instead, to claim that the gospel is true, is to claim that our web of beliefs—though never complete (which is to say that some beliefs in their present form may eventually be discarded and the web renewed)—is on a trajectory which converges toward truth and is unsurpassable by any synchronous rivals. This use of ‘truth’ as the terminus of the historical process of dialectical justification has precedent in Aquinas. Machiaville observes that (in contrast to post-Enlightenment thinkers) Th Thomists do not conceive of arguing from first principles but toward them. C. Test (Rival Visions), p. 205. Though Machiaville sides with Aristotle against the notion of a tradition even attaining the telos (cf., Nicomachean Ethics, 1096h, 32f.), Christians hold that the epiphany will be, indeed, realized and thereafter we will no longer be constrained to see in a glass darkly.