

RESOLVING THE TENSION BETWEEN TOLERANCE AND TRUTH:
JACQUES MARITAIN ON THE MORAL EXTREMES OF RELATIVISM AND
FANATICISM

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There is an apocryphal Abraham Lincoln story that is as insightful as it is humorous. It tells of a Mississippi River barge that rammed into an abutment of a railroad bridge spanning the river. The railroad wanted to hold the barge company liable, and hired a high-powered law firm from the East. The barge owner questioned the right of the railroad to interfere with navigation, and hired Abraham Lincoln as its sole counsel. After a long, detailed, and complex trial, it was finally time for closing arguments.

Those for the railroad spoke eloquently, summarizing the evidence, advancing watertight arguments, and clearly impressing the jurors. Then came Lincoln's turn. He rose, strode to the jury box, smiled, and made a single statement: "My learned opponents," he said, "have presented an impressive case. There is no question that they have their facts absolutely right. But they have drawn completely wrong conclusions." The jurors laughed uproariously, adjourned to their deliberations, and after only a few moments returned with a verdict favoring Lincoln's client.

As soon as court adjourned, the railroad attorneys besieged Lincoln with questions. "We had that case won," they told him. "Then you simply tell the jurors that our facts are right and our conclusions wrong, and they decide in your favor. Why? What did you do to them?"

"Well, boys," Lincoln replied, "it just happened that when the court had adjourned for lunch today, I happened into a saloon where the jurors were eating, and I told them a little story. A story about a farmer who was working in his barnyard one day when his ten-year-old boy came rushing up to him, all excited. "Paw," said the boy. "Come quick. The hired man and Sis are up in the haymow, and he's a-pullin' down his pants and she's a-liftin' up her skirts. Paw, they're gettin' ready to pee all over our

hay." "Son," said the farmer, "you've got your facts absolutely right, but you've drawn a completely wrong conclusion."¹

For however charming and amusing this Lincoln anecdote may be, its simple wisdom also provides us with a useful framework for critiquing the prevailing, popular, and politically-correct understanding of tolerance in a democratic society such as ours: specifically, the theory that, in a pluralist society, where cultural and political differences abound, citizens are truly tolerant only when they suspend any claims to truth and, when making decisions, they let the majority decide.

Living in America in the 1940s and 50s, Jacques Maritain had a first-hand opportunity to reflect on the problems of democracy in general, and on the problem of the tension between tolerance and truth in particular. Some of these ideas are found in his book, *Reflections on America*.² In an earlier essay, "Truth and Human Fellowship," however, Maritain addresses Hans Kelson's theory of "relativist democracy," a theory that holds Pontius Pilate, in Maritain's words, as the "lofty precursor of relativist democracy." Maritain's critique summarizes Kelson's position in this way: "Because Pilate did not know what truth is, Kelson concludes, he therefore called upon the people, and asked them to decide; and thus in a democratic society, it is up to the people to decide, and mutual tolerance reigns, because no one knows what truth is."³ Those who concur with this conclusion might argue that, since American democracy is indeed characterized by great racial, ethnic, political, and religious diversity, how else might we hope to resolve this pervasive pluralism? Isn't the suspension of truth-claims, by leaving the resolution of issues to the majority, at the very foundation of any true democracy? In reply, others may wonder, either

¹ P.M. Zall, ed., *Abe Lincoln Laughing* (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), pp. ix-x.

² Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (Garden City, New York: Image Books [Doubleday], 1964).

³ Jacques Maritain, "Truth and Human Fellowship," *On The Use of Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 19; the essay was originally published in 1957.

in reference to America specifically, or to democracy in general, whether those who make this claim aren't a perfect example of those who get their facts about the diversity of American culture right, but draw "a completely wrong conclusion!"

To begin, let us make sure that, descriptively, we get our facts right about American culture. First, the world's boundaries continue to shrink. Made possible by cable and wireless communication systems and the progressive advancements in human flight, the global proliferation of information and personal transportation have become so fast today that virtually no part of the planet is any longer remote or isolated. Fueled by international corporations and a vast entertainment industry, world cultures have slowly, almost imperceptibly, become more homogenized, in spite of their retention of certain essential elements of their own national cultural identity.

Secondly, the ever-increasing means and availability of human mobility and resettlement, prompted by forced expatriation or inspired by free choice, have moved, uprooted, and relocated vast ethnic populations throughout the major urban and industrial centers of the civilized world. In some places, these immigrant populations have been welcomed and comfortably assimilated, while in other places, these *auslander* have been forcibly channeled to ghetto-like enclaves or refugee camps, where frequently clashing cultures intermingle.

Thirdly, from the abolition of slavery and the commencement of women's suffrage to the civil rights movement and the feminist revolution, the worthy affirmation of universal human rights, coupled with the two facts previously noted, have led to dramatic progress in the quality of, and respect for, human life and the character of human societies in many parts of the globe (for example, the United Nations, the Geneva Conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Nuremberg Trials, the World Court, the formation of the European Union, the universal condemnation of terrorism, etc.). While surely laudable in itself for the progress in preserving and insuring the inherent human rights brought about by these changes and organizations, we also can observe the way in which claims about the universality of these intrinsic human rights have come into conflict with local and regional mores, laws, and customs. The resulting discord

has fueled debates about "nature versus nurture," the national and political imperialism of larger, first-world nations imposing "their beliefs" upon smaller, often third-world nations, and moral and cultural pluralism in general. These debates themselves have spawned the even larger philosophical debates about truth, moral relativism, and tolerance.

While additional cultural facts may be observed, mention of these alone is sufficient for making clear the cultural upheavals that they have wrought over the last century. As the vast diversity of cultures, races, and religions flooded 4th century B.C. Athens and gave rise to the moral relativism of the Sophists, so too, though this time on a global scale, there is a similar contemporary confusion about truth. Sample questions are plentiful: what is truth? Where is it to be found? Isn't truth relative to time, place, and power? How do we know for sure who's correct about what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false? From the macrocosm of the melting pot that is America to the microcosms of cities like New York, Los Angeles, or Miami, politically correct ways of thinking challenge those who desire to be good, truly democratic, citizens with questions concerning multiculturalism, diversity, and true tolerance.

This cultural analysis is not without its analogue in philosophy. Here, too, the latter part of the twentieth century has witnessed the slow but steady rise to prominence of post-modernism. From its subtle, virtually imperceptible influence on metaphysics and epistemology, to its culturally observed and significant influence on morality and politics, post-modernism has given an intellectual voice to the undercurrent of moral, cultural, and political relativism which ultimately culminates in, and characterizes, post-modern skepticism: if there are only stories, narratives, and perspectives, themselves the products of nurture in specific cultures or individual lives, then "truth" is entirely relativized as acts of community or personal empowerment, where each "unit" finds and expresses its "own voice." As a result, "truths" are no more or less than whatever the individual, group, tribe, or community may say they are.

Of course, logical reasoning and philosophical debate are of little use here. There can be no goal of discovering the truth by philosophical

interchange since, for post-modernism, there is *a priori* no possibility of any absolute or universal truths. Rather, by deconstructing narratives, one may hope to gain an increased understanding of another's perspective or world-view. Shared understanding, while genuinely good and worthwhile in itself, will also lead, so this thinking goes, to harmony within any community populated with diverse groups and sub-groups; each segment, while espousing and embracing its own voice, also ought to tolerate and support the many other voices that also have the right to express themselves and be heard. Criticism concerning this cacophony is futile since post-modernism tends to view truth-claims as little more than assertions that oppress the less powerful. Thus, for post-modernism, mutual respect for the kaleidoscope of diversity is itself the highest value; it alone produces the sonorous harmony that communities, of whatever size, need. In place of any pursuit of truth, they would argue, a democratic society ought to embrace that form of political pluralism that gives pride of place to the voice and will of the majority—so long, of course, as everyone has a voice, and the rule of the majority does not violate the canons of political correctness. In this way, truth is abnegated and tolerance rules ... or so this is the conclusion that such thinking would have us believe!

Opposing these claims of post-modernism, however, are those who would argue that the framers of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution understood that American democracy is rooted in immutable truths ("We hold these truths"), and that true tolerance and human and political fellowship are impossible without those truths and the inalienable rights that follow from them. Herein lies the tension between tolerance and truth; that is, herein we find the problem of having our cultural and political facts right even as we draw "a completely wrong conclusion" from them! Certainly, as the world shrinks and cultures homogenize, we can and ought to celebrate cultural diversity and all of those differences that constitute "matters of taste" (as opposed to "matters of fact"). However, to go from the affirmation of this panoply of diversity to the post-modern and politically correct claim that, ultimately, there are no universal truths, is simply to draw the wrong conclusion.

Maritain discusses this tension between tolerance and truth in his essay, "Truth and Human Fellowship."⁴ In it, he makes the classical philosophical problem clear: the tension is between two real goods—tolerance and truth—neither of which can be ignored or forgotten. Articulated as a question, the problem that this tension conceals is as follows: how is it possible for a democratic society to balance two essential but *seemingly* contradictory goods, both of which are foundational pillars? More specifically, how can the citizens of a pluralist society maintain a mutual respect and tolerance for the various and diverse ideas of their fellow constituents and at the same time hold firmly to the fundamental truths of a healthy democracy, including the essential, inherent dignity of all human persons and their inalienable, universal human rights?

In the course of human history, at different times and places, human societies have suffered from the discernable moral extremes that result when those in power support only one of these two pillars of a good democracy at the expense of the other. As such, at one extreme, there are those who are so dedicated to the ideal of tolerance that they sacrifice any firm commitment to truth, including the foundational truths of democracy. Doing this results in the moral extreme of Relativism, which sees those who affirm the foundational truths of democracy as intolerant fanatics who oppose diversity.

Swing the pendulum to the other extreme and, in order steadfastly to affirm the fundamental truths of an enduring democracy, there are those who sacrifice an open tolerance for all ideas, especially those that might subvert and undermine the moral and political fabric of democracy. This results in the moral extreme of Fanaticism, which sees those who affirm the need for tolerance in a democracy as skeptical relativists who oppose democracy's foundational truths.

The solution to the errors that lie at the heart of these two moral extremes of Relativism and Fanaticism involves what Maritain calls "right thinking" about both the objective order of ideas and the subjective order of persons. When we think rightly in the objective order of ideas, we see that truth ought to reign and errors ought to be

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

eliminated. The intellect naturally desires to know the truth of things; instinctively, we don't like it when people lie to us, and we quite naturally seek to correct errors when we observe them and can show the reasoning that leads to their correction; two contradictory propositions of ideas cannot both be true. On the other hand, thinking rightly in the subjective order of persons affirms the immutable intrinsic worth and dignity of all human beings, regardless of the truth or falsity of the ideas they may happen to hold.⁵

This right thinking about the objective order of ideas and the subjective order of persons is essential for the proper and successful balancing of the tension between tolerance and truth; shift or confuse that thinking and the moral extremes result. Specifically, in the first case, if one shifts the right thinking about persons to ideas, the following results: instead of saying, correctly, that "all *persons* are to be loved and respected even when they may be in error," one could incorrectly conclude (because of the desire to preserve mutual tolerance) that "all *ideas* are to be tolerated and respected, especially when our ability to know truth may be shrouded in doubt." Should this shift occur, the moral extreme of Relativism is born, and the right desire for truth becomes its casualty.

On the other hand, if one shifts the right thinking about ideas to persons, the opposite error results: instead of saying, correctly, that "only those *ideas* that are true ought to be defended and proclaimed, and those *ideas* that are in error ought to be corrected or eliminated," one could incorrectly conclude (because of the desire to defend truth itself) that only those *persons* who embrace truth have legitimacy while those *persons* who are in error ought to be eliminated. Should this shift occur, the moral extreme of Fanaticism is born, and the right desire for mutual tolerance becomes its casualty.⁶

The prevailing thinking today is that of the moral extreme of Relativism and, together with the philosophical endorsement it receives from post-modernism, it sacrifices the good of those

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 22. (N.B.: Maritain refers to this Fanaticism as "Absolutism.")

immutable truths that are at the foundation of democracy. From this perspective, tolerance appears the easier good to attain. For not only is truth itself more difficult to acquire rationally, there are also erroneous misconceptions about it: specifically, one frequently hears the position that, either no one has the truth and it cannot be known, or, if one should claim to have the truth, that person must necessarily be intolerant and impose it on others. And yet, these are misconceptions about the nature of truth; truth is possible, but it is to be won only by hard thinking and sound reasoning. Acquired slowly and through rational investigation, logical reasoning, public discourse and collegial cooperation, we also discover that the more we know, the more we come to understand how much there is yet to know. Humility in the face of truth is essential for its very preservation.

In this regard, Maritain is again insightful. There are two kinds of ignorance, he tells us, "the ignorance of those who know, [and] the ignorance of those who are in the dark."⁷ The latter ignorance leads to Relativism when it concludes: "I don't know the truth ... and neither does anyone else." These people are the ones "who think that the primary condition of tolerance ... is not to believe in any truth..."⁸ The former type of ignorance is the ignorance of those who can identify what they don't know and who are humble in their ignorance; they are the ones who know "that it is truth, not ignorance, which ... gives us the sense of what remains unknown in our very knowledge."⁹

Moreover, we quite naturally tend to think that Fanaticism is worse than Relativism because of our fear of the violence and harm that it so often brings to individuals, groups, races, or religions. And yet, as Maritain points out, Relativism may become equally heinous should it reach the point where it holds those who disagree with it as "barbarous, childish, or subhuman, and it may happen to treat them as

⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America*, p. 47.

⁸ Jacques Maritain, "Truth and Human Fellowship," p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

badly as the zealot treats the unbeliever." In this way, Relativism becomes a "fanaticism of doubt."¹⁰

Regardless of which of these extremes may be prevalent in a democracy at any given time, they are both fatal; for a genuinely healthy democracy, we need both mutual tolerance and a commitment to truth. Thus, the "completely right conclusion" to be drawn from all of the facts about social, political, religious, and cultural diversity now should be perfectly clear: a healthy democracy needs civil discourse where its citizens respect one another with a mutual tolerance for the diversity of ideas, even while they engage in a civilized pursuit of truth, one that realizes and affirms that "no democratic society can live without a common practical belief in those truths which are freedom, justice, law, and the other tenets of democracy;"¹¹ for indeed, "...without a general, firm, reasoned-out conviction concerning such tenets, democracy cannot survive."¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹² Jacques Maritain, "The Philosopher in Society," *On The Use of Philosophy*, p. 12.