

Emergence of Relativism in Liberal Democracies: Joseph Ratzinger's Assessment of the Postmodern Interaction of Religious Currents

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This paper attempts to analyse the postmodern trajectories through which the phenomenon of relativism mounted up in liberal democracies towards the end of twentieth century and continues to dominate the existential pattern of our times. Various writings by Joseph Ratzinger provide us insights into this process. Following the Second World War, reconstruction in Europe was attempted with great moral imperative. However, the young generation of late 1960s were dissatisfied with the whole process, who therefore protested against the epoch in 1968. Marx appeared as a great guidebook in this reaction, for which the intellectuals such as Habermas, Adorno, and Horkheimer provided the necessary theoretical framework. Atheism became public currency in several parts of the north of the world through the neo-Marxist movement. Meanwhile in the global south, Marxism manifested as liberation theology as well. A second aspect that deserves our attention is the trajectory taken by Christianity in the latter half of the twentieth century. Christianity was called into question in varying degrees and on various aspects in different settings. New religious movements emerged, and novel theologies were developed, thereby contributing to the global discourse. Incorporation of Hindu and Buddhist anthropology into the global discourse and the appeal to Asian religions is an important feature of the new religiosity that emerged since the 1970s. Mysticism assumed new forms and gained new relevance through the interactions between the West and Indian religions, thereby creating the general mood of neo-agnosticism and neo-paganism in large terrains of the planet, particularly in the former Christendom.

The renaissance of Islam and its encounters with the liberal democracy is another important feature of the religious discourse in the past decades. Curiously, while technological growth and material prosperity in Europe diminished the religiosity of the continent, the economic prosperity that came through boom in oil prices resulted in ever-new religious vigour in Arabia and in other Islamic countries. Consequently, Islam felt itself to bear a message for our times in the face of atheistic and agnostic materialist mainstream propagated in the Western hemisphere.

The tensions created by these religious and intellectual currents resulted in the 'dictatorship of relativism,' says Ratzinger. In an era marked by liberalism, Marxism, libertinism, radical mysticism, syncretism, agnosticism, atheism, and individualism, a whole generation is tossed off between contradictory ideologies and thereby left in confusion and in uncertainty. This paper is written with the conviction that the interaction between various contemporary intellectual and religious movements deserves close scrutiny, which alone enable us to undertake a renewed dialogue between faith and reason. According to Ratzinger, such a dialogue is all the more necessary for peaceful ordering of today's political and social life which is deeply rooted in interculturality and plurality.