



Moral and ethical views of relativistic and radicalistic tendencies¹

Johannes Michael Schnarrer

Prof., Dr.phil., Dr.theol., professor at the University of Karlsburg, and at the University of Vienna.

Author of the books:
Arbeit und Wertewandel im postmodernen Deutschland: Eine historisch, ethisch-systematische Studie zum Berufs- und Arbeitsethos (1996), *The common good in our changing world* (1997), *Allianz für den Sonntag* (1998), *Aktuelle Herausforderungen der Ethik in Wirtschaft und Politik: Perspektiven für das 21. Jahrhundert* (1999); *Anything goes? Sittlichkeit im Zeitalter der Skepsis* (2000); *Komplexe Ethik 1 – basics* (2005).
E-mail: jmschnarrer@yahoo.de

Abstract: The free world stands and falls on its cultural and religious policies, which affect not only the social structures within countries, but also the relations between people and peoples, generations and nations. No culture can exist in the abstract, and therefore no one can take an intelligent interest in cultural and religious affairs without a clear and consistent philosophy of life. However, after years of development we see a widening gap between people and groups in the same society caused by different viewpoints on the same issues. The „fringe population“ becomes more and more disillusioned because of unemployment or poverty. In this marginalized zone lie the strongest roots of radical issues, because these people do not have very much to lose. These people find hope and solutions in the radical ideas of extreme groups, i.e. in religious sects, in right-wing quasi-political groups (the Neo-Nazis) or left-wing groups (Neo-Communists). It may prove fruitful to look into the fundamentals of the tension between relativism and radicalism for a better understanding the role of morality and ethics in a globalized world.

Morality in the extreme sense

One alternative to ethical relativism is moral absolutism. A moral absolutist holds that there are eternal moral values and eternal moral principles which are always and everywhere applicable. There are different versions of the extreme morality. Some absolutists, for instance, hold that the most general principle of morality is absolute, but that, as it is applied in differing circumstances, certain lower-level norms may vary. Other, even more extreme, absolutists claim that all moral norms are everywhere and always the same. Between the two positions is a third position, which holds that the most general principle of morality is everywhere and always the same, and that the moral norms are everywhere and always the same, but these norms have exceptions, which are also everywhere and always the same.

And there is a difference between holding that the principles of morality are universal and eternal and holding that one knows with certainty what the principles are. A person might hold that there are eternal moral principles without being able to produce them. Instead,

Key words:

morality, ethics, culture, religion, society, relativism, radicalism

he might produce various approximations of those principles, which he is willing and ready to modify when he sees they are not exact in their formulations.

However, there is an alternative to absolutism, which does not fall into the category of relativism. This position claims that morality is not eternal. It is an attempt by human beings to adopt principles to govern human society and the lives of those within society, principles that will help people live together and abide by rules that all of them, in their reasonable and objective moments, would accept. Unlike the absolutist, someone holding this position need not claim that some final, ultimate, eternal moral principles exists somewhere, for instance, in the mind of God. He needs only claim that the idea of such a principle forms an ideal toward which ethics strives. He is then content to examine the various moral principles that have been suggested during the history of mankind, and the various ethical theories that human beings have produced. He can see which ones stand up best to rational scrutiny, which ones are most helpful to him, and which ones correspond most closely to the values he perceives. This is not only an individual endeavor, but also a collective one, for we can build on the accomplishments of others as well as on their mistakes. We shall follow this alternative in the succeeding arguments.

Morality in the open sense

Our European society is diverse, a combination of various cultures and traditions. It is heterogeneous in composition, with many ethnic, national and radical groups. Dynamic and changing, it is pluralistic in many ways. It is culturally pluralistic, and it is also, to some ex-

tent, morally pluralistic because of different mentalities and religions.

Four levels of moral pluralism we can distinguish: radical moral pluralism, the pluralism of moral principles, the pluralism of moral practices, and the pluralism of self-realization. Radical moral pluralism describes that state of affairs in which people hold mutually irreconcilable views about morality, such as what the terms right and wrong mean, and which actions are right and wrong. People who hold such radically divergent views, however, do not form a society. To be a society, a group must accept certain fundamental practices and principles. At a basic level, for instance, there must be general agreement that life is worth living, that the lives of the members of the society should be respected, or that people will respect existing differences to the extent that they do not interfere with each other. Some people do not care whether they live or die and also believe it is their moral duty to kill others, it may not be possible to convince them they are mistaken. But people with such a view cannot form a society. To the extent that society and morality go together, the morality of a society must be a shared morality, not a radically pluralistic set of opposing moralities. Yet a society may be morally pluralistic on the other three levels.

Secondly, a plurality of moral principles within a society does not necessarily mean irreconcilable diversity. Pluralism on the level of moral principles is compatible with social agreement on the morality of many basic practices. Such agreement does not necessarily involve agreement on the moral principles different people use to evaluate practices. The vast majority of the members of our society, for example, agree that murder is wrong. Some members of our society operate only at the level of conventional morality, and do not ask why murder is wrong. Some may believe it is wrong because the God in whom they believe forbids such acts; others because it

violates human dignity; others because murder has serious consequences for society as a whole, and so on. Each of these involves a different moral principle. These different principles are compatible with similarity of moral judgments.

Further, we look on the third level, where we see specific actions. On this level, we encounter a variety of moral opinions about some of them. This pluralism regarding moral practices may stem from differences of moral principles, but it may also stem from differences of fact or of perception of facts, differences of circumstances, or differences in the weighing of relevant values. Even when there is basic agreement on principles, not all moral issues are clear. In a changing, dynamic, developing society there is certainly room for moral disagreement, even if there is unanimous agreement that what helps the society to survive is moral. New practices might be seen by conservatives as threatening the society's survival, and the same practice might be championed by others as the necessary means for survival. Pluralism of practices, however, is compatible with areas of agreement, and this is usually the case.

On the fourth level of moral pluralism is that of self-realization. As long as the members of a society abide by the basic moral norms, they are allowed, in such a pluralistic society, to choose freely their other values and their life-styles. This constitutes a kind of moral pluralism, because self-development and fulfillment, according to some views, are moral matters. A society that allows divergence of self-development within the basic moral framework tolerates a great many differences that would not be allowed or found in a homogeneous society.

Morality in Europe and America

Moral pluralism of the second, third and fourth kinds are found in the USA, but most of them also in Europe. These varieties of pluralism do not imply normative ethical relativism, and in fact they presuppose a wide common background of moral practices. The diversity of moral practices that we encounter is often so striking that we forget the similarities. But respect for human beings, respect for truth, and respect for the property of others are all commonplaces found in America and Europe, making social life possible. With this background of moral pluralism, we have adopted laws to enforce common moral norms, to define proper areas of toleration, and to provide adjudicatory functions in cases of moral disputes on socially important issues.

And if one considers the cohesiveness of the American and the European society, despite its pluralism, and then thinks about the diversity of the rest of the world, one should understand the difficulty of making some moral judgments on the international level. Europe is different pluralistic as the United States, because of its longer traditions, and still today, Europe is not unified in the whole sense. There are certainly some basic similarities in all the moral codes and views held in each country and region of the world. In every country, the murder of members of the society is prohibited, otherwise no society would exist. In all them, lying is immoral; otherwise there would be no secure social interaction. There is respect for property, however defined; if this were not so, no one would be able to count on having what is needed to live. Yet the way in which the nations of the world form a society is at best a tenuous one. National sovereignty limits the extent to which any nation wishes to abide by a tribunal higher than itself. For instance, on the international level, law cannot always play the same mediating and adjudicating role it does in the United States, because there is still no generally acknowledged body to enforce such law. The differences that divide na-

tions are much more profound than the differences that divide members of the same society. The notion of a common morality for everyone in the world, pluralistic in nature but providing a basic framework within which all can work, is a goal still to be achieved, not a present reality. There is, however, sufficient agreement among societies to allow business to be carried on internationally. But even in business there are a host of unresolved problems... The moral intuitions, feelings, and beliefs of most people have been primarily focused within their own society, and on the level of personal morality. Their moral views on an international level of obligations among nations are less well informed, partly because people in general have not given it much thought. We find, therefore, few ready answers to questions on this level.

Concluding the topic of moral pluralism, however, we can put to rest the question some people raise when speaking of morality, for instance in business. The question is: Whose morality? This is a bogus question. Moral pluralism in the open society presupposes a society, and if a society is to function, it must have a large core of commonly held values and norms. These norms form the common morality of the society. They are yours, mine, and ours. We hold them as applicable to everyone. In areas of serious differences the clash of moral views must be decided by public debate, and perhaps by legislation. Moral arguments are raised and countered until clarity emerges, or until a way of resolving the problem, while recognizing differences, is worked out. It is not true, therefore, that when faced with moral claims against me or my work or life practices I can dismiss them as being

your moral views and not mine. Moral claims are universal in this sense of view.

Questions of culture

One property of the human person is his ability to achieve true and full humanity only through culture, that is, through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature. In human life, nature and culture are intimately linked. Culture refers to all things which go to the refining and developing of man's diverse mental and physical endowments. Human beings strive to subdue the earth by knowledge and labor. Culture humanizes family and civic social life through improved customs and institutions. In his works, man expresses the great spiritual experiences and aspirations of men throughout the ages; he communicates and preserves them to be an inspiration for the progress of all mankind. Because culture has historical and social overtones, and may carry sociological and ethnological connotations, one can speak of a plurality of cultures.

Circumstances of life today have undergone such profound changes on a social and cultural level that one is entitled to speak of a new age of human history. New ways are open for the development and diffusion of culture. Factors which have occasioned it have been the tremendous expansion of natural and human sciences, the increase of technology, and the advances in developing and organizing the media of communications, and expansion of goods according to the globalization. Modern culture is characterized as follows: the exact sciences foster to the highest degree a critical way of judging; recent psychological advances furnish deeper insights into human behavior; historical studies tend to make us view things under the respect of changeability and evolution;

customs and patterns of life become more uniform daily; industrialization, urbanization, and other factors which give birth to new patterns of thinking, of acting, and of use of leisure; heightened media of exchange between nations and different branches of society open up riches of different cultures to every individual, so that a more universal form of culture is gradually taking shape, and through it the unity of mankind is being fostered and expressed in the measure that the particular characteristics of each culture are preserved.

In each nation and social group, a number of men and women grow conscious that they are the craftsmen and molders of their community's culture. Worldwide, the sense of autonomy and responsibility increases with effects of greatest importance for the spiritual and moral maturity of mankind. We are witnessing the birth of a new humanism (with all positive and negative effects to the societies) where man is defined before all else by his responsibility to his brothers and sisters and at the court of history. In such circumstances, man feels responsible for the progress of culture and nourishes high hopes for it, but foresees numerous conflicting elements he must resolve. Human culture must evolve today and tomorrow so that it will develop the whole human person harmoniously and integrally and will help all men fulfilling the tasks to which they are called, especially believers who are fraternally united at the heart of the human family.

Culture must be subordinated to the integral development of the human person, the good of the community and of the whole of mankind. Man must be encouraged to develop his faculties of wonder, understanding, contemplation, of forming personal judgments and cultivating a religious, moral and social sense. Since culture flows from man's rational and social nature, it has continual need of rightful freedom of development and a legitimate possibility of autonomy according to its own principles. It demands respect and enjoys certain inviola-

bility, provided the particular and universal rights of individuals and the community are safeguarded within the limits of the common good.

It is more difficult nowadays than in the past to form a synthesis of the arts and different branches of knowledge. While the constituent elements of culture are on the increase, there is a decrease in the individual's capability to perceive and harmonize them, so that the picture of a „universal man” has almost disappeared. Still, each man has the duty to safeguard the notion of the human person as a totality in which predominate the values of intellect, will, conscience, and brotherhood, since these were established by the „Human Rights”. This education has its source and cradle in the family where children, in an atmosphere of love, learn the true scale of values, while approved forms of culture are almost naturally assimilated by the developing minds of adolescents. Because of the boom in book and computer publications, and new techniques of cultural and social communication, there are many more opportunities favorable to the development of a universal culture. Leisure time should be used to refresh the spirit and strengthen the health of mind and body by means of voluntary activity and study; of tourism to broaden the mind and enrich man's understanding of others; and by means of physical exercise and sport. Believers should cooperate in the cultural framework and collective activity characteristic of our times to humanize and imbue them with a true human spirit of tolerance and balance, devoiding radicality! These advantages are insufficient to confer full cultural development unless they be accompanied by a deeply thought out evaluation of the meaning of culture and knowledge of the human person.

The relativism in the cultural sense

Reletavists defend their position by appeal to anthropological data indicating that moral rightness and wrongness vary from place to place and that there are no absolute or universal moral standards that could apply to all persons at all times. They add that rightness is contingent on cultural beliefs and that the concepts of rightness and wrongness are therefore meaningless apart from the specific contexts in which they arise. The claim is that patterns of culture can only be understood as unique wholes and that moral beliefs about normal behavior are thus closely connected in a culture to other cultural characteristics, such as language and fundamental political institutions. Studies show, they maintain, that what is deemed worthy of moral approval or disapproval in one society varies, both in detail and as a whole pattern, from moral standards in other societies. This form of relativism has plagued moral philosophy, and many philosophical arguments have been advanced in criticism of it. Among the best-known criticisms is that there is a universal structure of human nature, or at least a universal set of human needs, which leads to the adoption of similar or perhaps identical principles in all cultures. This factual argument rests at least partially on empirical claims about what actually is believed across different cultures.

But even more important than this empirical thesis is the argument that although cultural or individual beliefs vary, it does not follow that people fundamentally disagree about ultimate moral standards. Two cultures may agree about an ultimate principle of morality yet disagree about how to apply the principle in a particular situation or practice. For example, if personal payments for special services are common in one culture and punishable as bribery in another, then it is undeniable that these customs are different, but it does not follow that moral principles underlying the customs are relative. One culture may exhibit the belief that practices of

grease payments produce a social good by eliminating government interference and lowering the salaries paid to functionaries, while the people of another culture may believe that the overall social good is best promoted by eliminating all special favors. Both justifications rest on an appraisal of the overall social good, but the people of the two cultures apply this principle in disparate, indeed apparently competing ways.

And this possibility indicates that a basic or fundamental conflict between cultural values can only occur if apparent disagreements about proper principles or rules occur at the level of ultimate moral principles. Otherwise, the apparent disagreements can be understood in terms of, and perhaps be arbitrated by, appeal to deeper shared values. If a moral conflict were truly fundamental, then the conflict could not be removed even if there were perfect agreements about the facts of a case, about the concepts involved, and about background beliefs.

If those are opposed to relativism, then it does not need, however, rely on this argument alone. Suppose that certain persons or cultures do not agree on an ultimate principle so that their ultimate moral norms are in fact culturally relative. It does not follow from this disagreement that there is no ultimate norm or set of norms in which everyone ought to believe. To see this point, consider an analogy to religious disagreement: From the fact that people have incompatible religious or atheistic beliefs, it does not follow that there is no single correct set of religious or atheistic propositions. Given current anthropological data, one might be skeptical that there could be a compelling argument in favor of one system of religion or morality. But nothing more than skepticism seems justified by the facts adduced by anthropology, and nothing more than this skepticism would be justified if fundamental conflicts of beliefs were discovered. Skepticism of course presents serious philosophical issues, but alone it does not support relativism; and

skepticism leaves ethical theories free to try to determine which is the best set of moral beliefs.

Relativistic viewpoints in the normative sense

Some cultural relativists might reasonably be said to hold that „what is right at one place or time may be wrong at another.” This statement is ambiguous, however, and can be interpreted as a second form of relativism. Some relativists interpret „what is right at one place or time may be wrong at another” to mean it is right in one context to act in a way that it is wrong to act in another. This thesis is normatic, because it makes a value judgment; it delineates which standards or norms determine right and wrong behavior. One form of this normative relativism asserts that one ought to do what one’s society determines to be right – a group or social form of normative relativism; and a second form holds that one ought to do what one personally believes is right – an individual form of normatic relativism. This normative position has sometimes crudely been translated as „anything is right or wrong whenever some individual or some group judges that it is right or wrong.” However, less crude formulations of the position can be given, and more or less plausible examples can be adduced. One can hold the slightly more sophisticated view, for example, that in order to be right something must be conscientiously and not merely customarily believed. Alternatively, it might be formulated as the view that whatever is believed is right if it is part of a well-formed traditional moral code of rules in a society – for example, a medical code of ethics developed by a professional society.

And the evident inconsistency of this form of relativism with many of our most cherished moral beliefs is one major reason to be doubtful of it. For example, not general theory of normative relativism is likely to convince us that we must tolerate all acts of others, although that is exactly the commitment of this theory. At least some moral views seem relatively enlightened, no matter how great the variability of beliefs is; the idea that practices such as slavery cannot be evaluated across cultures by some common standards seems patently unacceptable. It is one thing to suggest that these practices might be excused, still another to suggest that they are right. But how can normative relativism be refuted?

Morality is concerned with practices of right and wrong transmitted within cultures from one generation to another. The terms of social life are set by these practices, whose rules are pervasively acknowledged and shared in that culture. Within the culture, then, there is a significant measure of moral objectivity, because morality by its nature does not exist through a person’s individual judgment. Individuals cannot create it by stipulation or correctly call a personal policy a morality. Such moral individualism would be as dubious as anarchism in politics and law is, and none of us readily accepts a declaration by another person that his or her political and legal beliefs are validly determined by himself or herself alone. It is, of course, true that some moral codes and practices must be formulated within social institutions and will be modified over time. But this fact does not mean that moral rules can be created without regard for the prevailing morality or be invented like the latest technology. For example, a hospital corporation cannot develop its professional ethics from whole cloth. No hospital chain can draw up a code that brushes aside the need for confidentiality of patient information, or that permits surgeons to proceed without adequate consents from patients; and a physician cannot make up his or

her individual „code” of medical ethics. Room for invention or alteration in morality is thus restricted by the broader understanding of morality in the culture. Rules cannot be moral standards or beliefs simply because they are so labeled. If relativism means they can be so invented or labeled, then relativism is mistaken.

However, it must be acknowledged that this particular defense of objectivity in morals is not transcultural and so does not refute cultural forms of relativism. This argument only supplies strong reasons for doubt about individual relativism. Can an equally strong reason be given for rejecting cultural forms? One plausible answer is that cultural relativism is not definitively refutable but may nonetheless be a theory of morality that deserves to be discarded in living the moral life. One argument to this conclusion appeals to the unacceptable consequences of accepting any form of cultural relativism, especially if relativism has the effect of preventing serious reflection on and resolution of moral problems. Consider this analogy: If a husband and a wife have a serious disagreement over whether to allow a handicapped newborn to die, they place different values on the life of the infant and they may have different views of family life and their relationship. Their problem will not vanish simply by declaring that their views about children are relative to their different views about the value of fetal life, family life, and spousal relationships. Their problem is in pressing need of resolution, and among reasonable persons resolution will come only through hard thinking and perhaps considerable negotiation and compromise – the time-honored way of handling problems through diplomatic channels, for example.

With pressing moral problems, similarly, even if extraordinarily different viewpoints prevail a resolution is still needed, and there is no reason to think it is not possibly by appeal to some range of shared values. From this perspective, trans-individual moral reflection is in order

even if relativism is entirely true. When two parties argue about some serious, divisive, and contested moral issue – killing animals or withholding information from contracting parties, for example – we tend to think that some genuinely fair and justified compromise may be reached, or perhaps we remain uncertain while anticipating the emergence of the best argument. We seldom infer from the mere fact of a conflict between beliefs that there is no way to establish one view as correct or as better argued than the other – or certainly that there is no ground for compromise. The more absurd the position advanced by one part, the more convinced we become that some views being defended are mistaken or require supplementation. We are seldom tempted to conclude that there could not be any correct ethical perspective or any reasonable negotiation that might resolve disputes among reasonable persons. One use of ethical theory is to provide a structured approach to moral reasoning that enables us to work on these problems. This use entails a rejection of normative relativism and questions the need for any form of commitment to relativism. And a much more dangerous form of thinking is the fundamentalism!

Radical religious views and actions

Radicalism in the sense of belief essentially applies to those who have split off from modern Christianity’s mainline developments; these dissenters hold to inerrancy of Scripture, see both the faith and the world caught in a militant struggle between the faithful and the secularizers or compromisers, and understand history in terms of a dispensational premillennialism. These features differentiate radicalists from other evangelical and conservative thinkers who accent the five smooth stones by which the Goliath of secular humanism is to be slain:

substitutionary atonement, Christ's imminent return, the reality of eternal punishment, the necessity of personal assurance of salvation and the truth of the miracles.

It has to be mentioned that every religion is based on certain radical and fundamental views; and radicalism arises when these basics are imperiled, obscured or ignored. All religions contain, at their core, something like a metaphysical and moral view about what is true, reliable and worthy of ultimate loyalty. In complex religions, a great number of doctrines, religious practices and symbols are thought to point to the transcendent vision. When this vision becomes blurred, neglected, threatened or subject to neglect, the basics are not only reasserted, but also reasserted in specific formulas or cultic forms that are often confused with fundamentals themselves. „Reassertion” is in this circumstance a decisive term, for radicalism seems to rise when the authoritative bearers of religious tradition are perceived as falling into intellectual drift, when those responsible for cultivating and propagating the vision do not, cannot or will not defend the fundamentals that give the vision articulate form, or when they begin to advocate changing the definition of what is basic. This is one reason why movements that approximate radicalism often attack the established clergy first, and why they manifest both anti-intellectual and schismatic tendencies.

But here, the term „anti-intellectual”, however, must be used cautiously, for radicalism internally develops elaborately rationalized schemes to explain almost everything, and it often develops a striking commitment to a dogmatic lay intellectuality. Unable to develop an apologetic that meets the tests of adequacy from cosmopolitan scholars, it enforces its doctrine by exclusion, by intensifying internal discipline or by coercion. These tendencies are exemplified by early Christian heresies that doubted any possible relationship between Jerusalem and Athens,

and developed an extensive legalistic theology against the compromising church.

Radicalism in the sense of fundamentalism tends to arise in lower and lower-middle classes at times of class mobility. Here, the nonradicalists must be cautious, for our hostility to fundamentalistic thought may be tinged with classism. Nevertheless, downward mobility appears to be the occasion for the rise of radicalism; some scientists call people of this religious radicalism also fundamentalists. But the term radicalists is broader and therefore more appropriately. More often, radicalism tends to arise when the nonprivileged classes experience upward mobility after being converted to a highly disciplined piety that has carried them through tragedy and pain. Class mobility, however, occurs in many places and at many times without rendering a radicalism. Several other conditions besides mobility seem also to be required, like the presence of a charismatic leader who defines reality for those whose world is threatened by chaos.

Although, radicalism tends to arise in prophetic religious traditions. And they may begin in priestly, mystical or communal religious traditions, radicalist-like movements seem to be found more frequently in those religions that claim to have received through revelation or great discovery a grand message of new truth, which must be delivered and which turns all ordinary understandings on their head. Prophetic religion differs from other kinds of religion in that it is willing to condemn culture, society and even the people whom it attracts, as well as those whom it rejects for failing to heed or embrace its message. If the movement survives early hostility and adjusts to the demands of social and economic life, however, radicalism will tend to become more mystical, communal and priestly. In the process, it often incorporates the values of the social environment, becoming, in fact, little more than the legitimizer of its social context. And it seems to be impossible to predict

whether radicalism will be left-wing or right-wing. Because radicalism must draw its adherents from among those who are outside the religious mainstream, it tends to ally with populist extremes. Radicalism tends to oppose pluralism and freedom, preferring authoritarian social structures, whether of the right or the left.

Radicalism like fundamentalism ordinarily requires texts, for example a scripture, as the exclusive source and norm of its authority. In this, radicalism differs from religious that focus on a person or a cultic practice. An enduring radicalism is difficult to maintain in some religions. Although all the world's great religions have seen something like radicalism come and go, some religions are so constituted that radicalism cannot claim to be the authentic representation of that tradition. Hence radicalist movements in these religions either fragment into tiny factions or modulate to join the mainstream.

In the case of radicalism, a definite orthodoxy is linked to a specific orthopraxy, forming a manifest power structure that will, it is believed, confirm its truth to history. Key terms in radicalism include belief, obedience and enforcement. These are seen as decisive because either they are predetermined, or those who do not observe them will experience the damning consequences. Those who do believe, obey and enforce what is already predetermined become true agents of the ultimate power of history. Those who do not believe, obey, enforce or submit themselves to enforcement will be destroyed in a great crisis, either apocalyptic or revolutionary. All religious radicalisms tend toward a political religiosity or a political theology in the sense that they establish an identity between religious community and whatever political community has coercive authority. All religions are, to be sure, social in character; if they do not incarnate in some specific social group and give guidance about living in community, they dissipate. Nonradicalists, on the other hand, make a distinction be-

tween the decisive religious community and the political authority, even if there is a good bit of mutual influence.

Only a few decisive ways are able to confront and combat religious radicalism, like constantly clarifying the basis of faith in a critical and dialogical apologetic; like preserving the distinction between church and state, and between religious and political institutions; like being willing to declare that radicalism is schismatic and heretical, and being able to show why this is the case when militants attempt to take over or subvert serious religious understandings and communities; being sensitive to those persons or groups whose frameworks for living are threatened by social change or persecution (humans require a sense of vision and security); loving one's enemies (treating the radicalists with charity and grace, while leading them to a larger, deeper and broader vision of that to which they are attached, attempting always to draw them into a wider – also ecumenical – conversation). But the most important thing to do is making this radicalists more sensitive for freedom, tolerance and open mind.

Ethical considerations and conclusion

The fact of moral disagreement raises questions about whether there can be correct or objective moral judgments. Cultural differences and individual disagreements among friends over issues like terrorism, abortion, euthanasia, and the right to health care (especially in America) led many to doubt the possibility that there are correct and objective positions in morals. This doubt is fed by popular aphorisms asserting that morality is more properly a matter of taste than reason, that it is ultimately arbitrary what one believes, and that there is no neutral standpoint from which to view disagreements.

The tension between the belief that morality is purely a matter of personal or social convention and the belief that it has an objective grounding leads to issues of relativism in morals. Moral relativism is no newcomer to the scene of moral philosophy. Ancient thinkers were as perplexed by cultural and individual differences as moderns, as is evidenced by Plato's famous battle with a relativism popular in his days. Nevertheless, it was easier in former times to ignore cultural differences than it is today, because there was once greater uniformity within cultures, as well as less commerce between them. The contrast between ancient Athens and modern Manhattan or modern Paris is evident, and any contemporary pluralistic culture is saturated with individuality of belief and lifestyle. At the same time, we tend to reject the claim that this diversity compels us to tolerate racism, social caste systems, sexism, genocide, and a wide variety of inequalities of

treatment that we deeply believe to be morally wrong but find sanctioned either in our own culture or in others.

Our world today is not any more secure. Radicalism, fundamentalism and extremism is wide spread. But what can we do in such a difficult situation? At first, everybody has to look to himself or herself for evaluating his/her own social environment. Many people make a lot of compromises in the everyday life. What it needs is more civil courage to show and to say the right thing in the unclear situation. In the case of religion but also the cultures and continents we need even more dialogue between them, for a better understanding of each other's positions. The ethical values can be a very important tool finding a common ground for discussions.

Notes:

¹ Cf. J. M. Schnarrer; *Komplexe Ethik 1 – basics*. Vienna 2nd ed. 2005.