

Of truth, tolerance and tyranny ☒ PART II

Phil Miles

In the first part of this article, published in kategoria #22, Phil Miles examined the relationship between relativism and intolerance in contemporary Japan, and in European fascism of the twentieth century. His discussion of these two cultures, one foreign to Westerners and the other close to home but rejected, has demonstrated so far that philosophical relativism, in which no group lays claim to absolute truth, actually engenders tyranny rather than the tolerant society so beloved of Western minds. Phil now turns to examine the free-wheeling culture of the American sixties, surely the most tolerant of times...

Your karma just ran over my dogma

Writing about contemporary history is a notoriously difficult process, but what we have seen of modern Japan and European fascism should give us a good framework in which to analyse what has been happening in American society since the 1960s. For



one thing, it will soon become obvious that we are again dealing with a movement based on relativism, and our survey so far must lead us to raise the question of whether or not the sixties have led to any growth in tyranny in American society. In fact, though the American way of life is often treated as virtually synonymous with the idea of freedom, there are clear indications that the revolution of the sixties has led to an erosion of that freedom and not to its increase.

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The sixties were years of turmoil and change throughout the Western world, but perhaps had their greatest impact in the United States. The great cry of the times was the call to break down the ‘establishment’ and create a new and vital social order. Within this new order, the stultifying mores of a previous generation would be replaced by new freedoms and new possibilities. People could break away from

dull conformity, leave their ‘ticky-tacky boxes’ and do whatever turned them on!

Of course, what we are talking about here is relativism. The sixties stood for the rejection of traditional notions of truth and morality—not simply their content, but the very idea that there can be absolutes at all. This break from the past was understood to be fundamental to the ‘peace and beads’ programme. In particular the whole idea of absolutes was seen as inimical to personal freedom, and therefore to be discarded. Thus the sixties saw the birth of such things as non-conformity, situational ethics and all manner of “if it feels good, do it” ideologies.

In virtue of this relativism, it was (and is) an extremely eclectic movement, drawing inspiration from twentieth century Western philosophy (especially Romanticism), the religions of the East, American Indian culture and a bewildering variety of other sources. All possibilities needed to be explored in the attempt to create a new, vibrant society. The exact content of this new society was, from the beginning, never clearly spelled out—but that very ambiguity was part of the essence of the movement’s commitment to freedom.

All of this is now so familiar to us that there is no need to explore it at length. The rest of the story, however, is that the radicals on the campuses in the sixties went on to take up positions of leadership and influence within American society. What had began as a fringe development made itself part of the cultural mainstream of the Western world. Its key ideas and images are thus now part of our everyday vocabulary in the West. In particular,

commitment to the tolerance of ideas and people as essential to the creation of a good society, is now treated as if there were no valid alternative. To express a commitment to some form of absolute truth or morality today is to be immediately labelled 'intolerant'.

The thorough-going relativism of this ideology, however, should immediately raise some serious questions. In particular, could the commitments born in the sixties eventually lead us to the same point of tyranny that we have already observed in Japan, and Europe under fascism? To answer that, we need to see beyond the rhetoric of the movement and find out what has actually been happening in the United States since the sixties. What has been the impact of the philosophy of the sixties on the shape of American life and culture? This is not necessarily an easy question to answer, but a certain amount has been published on this topic in the United States in recent years, and we can start to get a better picture of the actual social consequences of sixties-style relativism.

In the first place, if it is contended that relativism is a breeding ground for moral anarchy, then we can certainly see supporting evidence in the early days of the sixties revolution. *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties* by Peter Collier and David Horowitz, articulates the underlying social destructiveness of what went on at that time.¹ At the

extreme end were bombings and many other forms of violence, all carried out in the name of the revolution. Less dramatic, but perhaps even more worthy of thoughtful consideration, was the destructive effect which radical ideology had at a more personal level. It is very sad to read of families, friends, and even communities torn apart in the maelstrom of moral chaos created by the anti-authoritarian ideology of this period.

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All of this is, of course, hardly surprising. Relativism represents the breakdown of normal notions of morality, and as a consequence we might expect to see it give rise to all manner of unwanted behaviour—tyranny included. It *permits* tyranny because in the absence of any objective standards almost any kind of behaviour can be justified, including random bombings and murder, or the use of personal relationships merely as tools for achieving the ends of the revolution. This may perhaps not be tyranny on a grand scale but it should give us pause for thought. Thus even in the early days of the movement we can see some of its destructive consequences.

Such a state of moral chaos, however,

1 Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties*, Summit Books [Simon & Schuster], New York, 1990.

8 | cannot continue indefinitely. As we have previously observed, society can only put up with so much ambiguity and uncertainty. Of course the average law-abiding citizen might naturally fear that the breakdown of traditional morality would turn the whole of society into one long orgy of sex and drugs and Adult Oriented Rock—and perhaps that’s just what the original proponents of the idea had hoped. But human society is averse to such trends. It demands an enormous amount of structure and predictability. Consequently, the original excesses of the sixties gradually faded from public view.

Despite all the rhetoric, it seems clear that sixties-style relativism has only led to a gradual diminishing of personal freedom in American society—and that at the cost of an increase in the power of the state.

This does not mean, however, that the impetus of the period was lost. Instead, as the ideals of the revolution have been taken out of the campuses and disseminated throughout the key structures of American culture, they have been implemented in new ways—ways that are more compatible with the ordered running of society. This should not be surprising—in the case of both Japan and fascist Europe we have seen how relativism made its peace with social stability. It would be

surprising if something very similar *didn't* occur in the United States. What has happened, then, in the US experience? Is the same tendency toward tyranny in evidence? I believe it is. Despite all the rhetoric, it seems clear that sixties-style relativism has only led to a gradual diminishing of personal freedom in American society—and that at the cost of an increase in the power of the state. Needless to say, the issues are complex, but the evidence consistently points in one direction.

Robert H. Bork, for instance, in *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*, has traced a number of disturbing developments in American society occurring under the aegis of ‘modern liberalism’—his term for sixties-style relativism.² These developments have led to an accumulating diminution of personal freedom for the American people, while at the same time fostering a rise in state control, at least in certain areas of government activity.

For example, he looks at the shift in emphasis in modern liberal circles away from the pursuit of liberty to the pursuit of equality—understood not in terms of equality of opportunity but as equality of outcome. Both liberty and equality have been important concepts in American social history, but as the emphasis on equality of outcome has increased, there has been a corresponding weakening of the value placed on liberty.

2 Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*, Regan Books, New York, 1996.



The big push in many circles has been to ensure that American society exhibits an equality among its citizens which is not just vague but definite—and even quantifiable. Hence we see various efforts at ‘positive discrimination’ where the goal is to have ratios of different ethnic groups in the community reflected, say, in the hiring and promotion activities of particular companies or government institutions. The ideological motivation for this approach is at least partly the relativistic notion that no one ethnic or cultural group should have precedence over any other. The key word here is, of course, ‘tolerance’.

The way in which the goal of ‘equality of outcome’ has been pursued, however, is highly significant. It has been invariably achieved by direct government interference and coercion—and no doubt there is

no other way to achieve such desired results. This represents an enormous shift in the balance between government power and individual autonomy. In the first place, this approach gives government the role of deciding how society should shape itself, right down to the finest detail. In the second place, it often requires government officials to intervene quite forcibly to ensure that the desired outcome is

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achieved. The issue here is not whether people should be treated fairly or not, but rather the way in which a relativistic ideology is so easily compatible with the diminution of personal liberty in the name of structural social goals.

Similar developments have been occurring throughout American society, especially where government bodies are directly involved. Of particular note is the phenomenon of ‘awareness training’. Not only must external actions conform to official directives, but the very thoughts of individuals must conform as well. Thus if your attitude toward some group in society (such as women, gays or African Americans) is not considered to be proper by the company or government depart-

10 | ment for which you work, you may be compelled to attend ‘sensitivity training’, where your mistaken attitudes will be duly corrected. That this approach to social health is disturbingly similar to methods used by various totalitarian regimes does not yet seem to have occurred to its liberal proponents.

Perhaps the best place to view developments since the sixties is in the arena of education.

Another development noted by Bork is in the area of the American judiciary. It seems that a number of modern liberals in the judiciary have been using their powers to speed along the process of social change. Various legal judgements—some of them crucial ones—have been made in recent years, not on the basis of precedent or the clear meaning of the relevant laws, but simply in line with the agenda of sixties-style relativism. This is extremely significant. In the name of modern values and a particular vision of how society should operate, the role of the law as a bulwark against tyranny has been placed under threat. The whole point of the rule of law is that it is a protection against the arbitrary use of power within society, but when the judges themselves are able to wield power in legal decision-making without the restraint of law, then tyranny already has its foot in the door.

Of course, these judgements have no

doubt been made in good faith according to the tenets of modern liberal thinking, and are intended for good. But relativistic ideas of what is good become too easily identified with what is good for the state. In that context, the rights of the individual are soon overlooked. Certainly, in these various recent judgements it seems that unwarranted rulings have been made, not for the good of the specific individuals involved but as part of a wider social and political agenda.

Perhaps the best place to view developments since the sixties, however, is in the arena of education. The control of education is always critical to any revolutionary agenda, and the radical ideas of the sixties,



which often arose in the university context in the first place, soon became entrenched in the wider educational system. The shape of government-controlled education in America today invariably reflects those sixties-style values, both in the content of what is taught and in the way education itself is perceived.

Sadly, American education has not fared well under this influence. For one thing, it has become increasingly poor academically in the face of the inescapable anti-intellectualism of relativism. As a balance to that, the emphasis has come to be placed on socialization rather than traditional approaches to teaching. Even here the results have been less than praiseworthy. Schools have become centres of social chaos rather than the centres of tolerance and light which sixties-style ideologues would have them be. Despite the rhetoric of freedom and tolerance, the only ideology that is tolerated in the end is that of modern liberalism, and that has meant a diminution of even the social meaning of the whole education experience. Students may come from a variety of social, religious and ethnic backgrounds but are unable to express what that reality may mean within the confines of a public schooling system which only recognizes the validity of one system of thought—sixties-style relativism.

Consider one example of what has been occurring within the American education system: that of ‘values clarification’ courses, a technique which developed out of the ‘human potential’ movement of the sixties. It is worth quoting some comments on this at length. Dana Mack writes:



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...since the 1970s [values clarification] has been used widely as a classroom approach to ethics and character education, usually in an express effort to challenge the value system that children bring with them from home. In their book

Facing Value Decisions: Rationale-Building for Teachers, the influential educators James P. Shaver and William Strong advocate values clarification as a means by which the school might counter the efforts of parents to “impose” values on their children. “The home,” they contend, “is a difficult environment for a critical inquiry into values. It is too difficult for parents...to be analytic and to ask questions in ways that are not overt or subtle reminders...of what the child *ought* to believe.” Despite the claims to objectivity in moral inquiry, however, values clarification is prone to disorienting children’s moral compass, and to promoting of the unhealthiest peer influences on moral development. The bible of the method, Sidney Simon et al.’s *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students*, urges teachers to engage students in peer group discussions and “trust building” exercises designed to challenge wherever possible traditional concepts of morality and to encourage “risk taking experiences”. (Along this line, the Quest drug awareness curriculum enjoined teachers as late as 1989 to “push [students’] risk levels gently.”) Simon and his co-authors also present classroom exercises that encourage kids to regard the most profound moral dilemmas as if they were trifling matters of personal

taste. In one exercise, called “Values Voting”, the teacher asks students to vote on such innocuous questions as “How many of you like to go on long walks or hikes?” or “How many of you like yoghurt?” Slowly he or she begins to interject more loaded questions, such as “How many of you approve of premarital sex?” or “How many would approve of...abortions...[or] marriage between homosexuals?”³

There are a number of realities about the American education system which are indicated by the above quotation. For one thing, it is clearly heavily ideological. Of course no system of education can do without some form of intellectual under-



3 Dana Mack, *The Assault on Parenthood: How our Culture Undermines the Family*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1997, p 125.

girdings. What we see here, however, is something rather different from what we might normally understand that to mean. In the usual course of things, an ideology gives birth to the idea of education or perhaps to some specific educational approach. The young are then taught whatever is deemed appropriate in that context, including perhaps something about the undergirding ideology as well. In the present American system, however, the teaching of the ideology itself has become paramount. All else is subverted to the task of inculcating modern liberal values. Of course, this is especially evident in a class on values but it is not uncharacteristic of the rest of the system.

Nor is this an innocent process. It relies on the appearance that school is a place of objective learning, unsullied by ideological bias of the kind apparently found in the family. However, the children are not actually free to think through the issues and come to a conclusion which they believe is correct: the end point of that process has already been determined for them, and it is relativism. Yet they are being made to believe that what they are doing *is* somehow objective and free of bias. They may study comparative religion, for instance, under the impression that they are learning about the real world. But what they are actually studying is relativism—and all information on religion will be fed through a grid which serves merely to bolster modern liberal tenets about the nature of religion.

This is a very tyrannical process. It really amounts to one group in a society

trying to shape, in a subversive way, the beliefs of that whole society via the education system. The ultimate goal, of course, is the creation of a society of peace and love, but in the absence of absolutes, this can only be achieved by either force or propaganda—and it's the latter which pretty much describes today's American education system.

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A further point which can be made from the quotation above is in regard to the importance given to the peer group. This is a natural way forward for relativism, and it is in fact fundamental to the way Japanese education works. Where morals are relative, the important issue is fitting yourself in with the group. Arguing the rights and wrongs of an issue is simply a waste of time and energy if there is no final answer. The important issue is learning to observe what others around you are thinking and doing, and then being able to conform yourself to that.

This begins with the peer group but ends with the totality of society. In other words, an approach to education which puts emphasis on conforming to one's peer group is ideally suited to preparing people to conform to the requirements of the

14 | state. It may not be that this is anyone's intention in teaching values clarification, but it is a real consequence nonetheless. As we have seen, in the absence of absolute values there must be some other point of reference found if society is to function smoothly. This may be determined through general social pressure or by the dictates of the social hierarchy, but in the end the two are not significantly different. They both require the suppression of rational debate in favour of the flexibility of mind required to mould yourself to the requirements of the group. Thus the radical non-conformity of the sixties has given rise,



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quite logically, to a doctrine of conformity.

A final point arising from the quote above is that modern educationalists are extremely dismissive of the family. Traditionally, the family has been seen as the basic unit of society, and its protection of utmost importance. Likewise, state-sponsored education was understood as an aid and support to the family. According to sixties-style ideology, however, the family is an outmoded institution—antiquated at best, and at worst a hindrance to the radicalization of society. Thus, the family as an institution has come under serious threat in contemporary America.

This is dealt with at length in Dana Mack's book, and the reality of the situation is really quite shocking. What interests us here, however, is the connection this all has with tyranny. The reality, put simply, is that where the family is strong, it acts as a buffer between the individual and the state. The same is true of other institutions, such as the church, which crystallize around the core of strong family life. Such contexts provide a place where alternative voices may be heard, rather than simply the state line. They foster the growth of independently-minded individuals, and in many subtle ways serve as guardians of personal freedom. Where the family is weak, however, government is more able to interfere in coercive ways in the lives of individual citizens. Thus oppressive regimes usually waste little time in trying to undo traditional family or religious structures. This

reality can be seen in modern Japan and was true of life under fascism.

It is thus highly significant that in the United States the family has been under heavy attack for some years. The ideological attack on the bourgeois middle-class family has, of course, been going on for some time, with all manner of experimental forms of co-habitation being proposed to replace it. More recently, however, there have also been direct efforts by government to wrest more and more prerogatives from the family. Rather than rely on the family to do all sorts of things, such as raise and care for children, the state has steadily done more and more to increase its involvement in these activities—via the education system, food programmes, welfare, child care and so on. On the surface, much of this may look quite charitable and well-intentioned, but the underlying agenda seems often to be simply the expansion of government control. Modern liberal ideology invariably assumes that the state can do a better job than the individual and it is this thinking which seems to lie behind both the attack on the family and the increase in governmental involvement in the lives of citizens. None of this bodes well for the future of individual freedom in the U.S.

Thus we can start to see how sixties-style relativism has actually led to a deterioration of freedom in the American experience. It may be over-zealous to blame every problem the country is facing on one ideology, but the evidence is overwhelming that the philosophical commit-

ments born in the sixties have had an increasingly negative effect on the right to self-determination of the American citizen. The all-consuming passion for tolerance has actually created a society which is becoming increasingly intolerant of anything other than the party line.

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All these developments, of course, are aptly summed up in the phrase ‘politically correct’. This is a highly illuminating choice of words because we have here the association of ethical notions (‘correct’) with the concept of the body politic (‘political’). As we have seen in previous sections, this is the ethical system you have when you’re not having an ethical system. Rather than ethics being an area of discussion based on absolutes existing independently of political arrangements—and by which those arrangements may be judged—morality itself becomes bound up with those very contingencies. This is exactly the sort of mindset to be found in modern Japan and which existed in Europe under fascism.

None of this should surprise us, however. As we have seen, once relativism is more than just a philosophical idea and

16 | actually becomes the basis by which you try to run a society, you *must* resort to various forms of coercion. Relativism *requires* tyranny. And to this we may add the observation that sixties-style ideology has never been simply about the individual. From the beginning it has been about the transformation of *society as a whole* in order to actualize each individual's potential. Thus, as the flower children of the sixties have moved into positions of power throughout American society, they have found it both necessary and 'morally' justifiable to use increasingly coercive methods to achieve their goals.



sented simply as harmless entertainment, or an objective portrayal of life in the real world, when in fact it is highly politicized.

Whatever the details, the key issue is that the embracing of relativism by much of America's intellectual elite has led to the slow erosion of traditional freedoms. Things in the United States are not yet *in extremis*, though, and in fact a backlash is well under way. Americans now find themselves in the midst of a 'culture war' between traditional values and those of the radical sixties. How this will turn out is by no means clear.

Aussie! Aussie! Aussie!

Try as I might, I just can't imagine Australians becoming fanatical about neo-fascist politics or world domination. Just picture someone trying to organize a Nazi-style mass rally in Sydney—one hint of good weather and half the crowd would be off to the beach for the afternoon. The rest would discover they'd forgotten some pressing task like re-pointing the bricks on the barbie. Of course, if the whole thing was somehow cleverly disguised as a sporting event you'd be likely to get a few more

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Of course, this doesn't necessarily imply that the methods used are overtly violent, or that America is about to become a totalitarian dictatorship. Tyranny can take on a number of forms, and what we have surveyed here is of a more subtle variety. We might also think of the use of propaganda under fascism, which tried to mould minds and wills by means other than brute force. A quick perusal of recent American film and television gives the distinct impression that the tradition of 'Triumph of the Will' is alive and well. So much coming out of Hollywood is little more than special pleading for the modern liberal cause, but what makes it particularly coercive is that it is pre-

stayers. In Australia, even clam racing would be sure to pull in a few thousand punters—especially if there was cheap beer on offer and a chook raffle or two.

No, it's not for the humble I-gave-at-the-office type Aussie to be leading the way in organized political tyranny. We are dealing with quite a different national type, a different history, a different cultural reality. Does this mean, therefore, that our discussion up to this point is simply irrelevant to the Australian context? I don't believe so. As I have already pointed out, and as we have seen in our tour of Japan, fascism and contemporary America, tyranny can manifest itself in a surprising variety of ways. The loss of personal freedom and the concomitant rise of external forms of control within society are not developments which can be reduced to a few basic—and easily spottable—distinguishing features. In considering the Australian case, therefore, we need to go beyond a few simple stereotypes of what tyranny involves and try to look at the evidence from some fresh perspectives.

The first thing we need to confirm is that Australian society has for some decades been moving toward a relativist position on truth and morality. The culture has followed the tendencies of the Western world as a whole in moving away from the traditional Christian understanding of the nature of truth and what this means for our moral commitments—both as individuals and as a society. In Australia today it is not just the intellectual who takes this position—committed, perhaps, to some form of 'post-modernism'. Even the so-called 'man in the street' thinks in terms of plu-

ralistic categories such as tolerance, and shows a strong disinclination to be dogmatic about anything any more.

This philosophical shift would no doubt have been a lot slower in coming without the advent of multi-culturalism in Australian life. In the midst of a growing plurality of cultures within Australian society, especially in urban areas, the average Australian has found it fairly easy to conclude that an ethic of tolerance is the only logical way forward. Few Australians want to go back to the dogmatism and exclusivity of the 'white Australia policy' years. It seems far more appropriate to accept that no-one has a monopoly on truth and try to build the nation on the basis of the wisdom that *all* Australians have to offer—regardless of race, creed or religion.

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But if Australia is moving steadily towards relativism, our discussion so far would lead us to expect an accompanying rise in tyranny. Is this actually the case? I believe it is. I think there are ample indications that the breakdown of absolutes is leading Australia in the direction of increased tyranny and the loss of individual freedoms.

I have spent little time in Australia over the last decade (mostly living in Japan), and so I am not qualified to speak authorita-

18 | tively on the present state of play. Also, its probably a far more fruitful approach to let readers think through the specific situations in which they find themselves. What I have said so far should, however, give a good groundwork for thinking past the normal rhetoric of tolerance in order to assess the situation for what it actually is. Nevertheless, there are a few points which I would like to make by way of indicating directions for further thought.

The story reveals what can go wrong when there are no limits placed on the interactions of government, the media and commercial interests.

If we wish to get a good picture of what tyrannical social arrangements could look like in the Australian context, and where relativism might take our society in the future, a good place to begin is the book *Whistling in the Dark* by Chris Nicholls.⁴ If we have trouble imagining how tyranny could grow and prosper in the land of “She’ll be right mate!” and summer afternoons at the beach, then this book will soon solve that problem.

Chris Nicholls was a journalist with ABC radio when he uncovered a political scandal in South Australia in 1992 related to

poker machine legislation. The end result of this effort was that Chris Nicholls himself was gaoled for four months for failing to reveal his sources—an act which was interpreted as contempt of court. At the time, this was a record sentence for a journalist who refused to reveal his or her sources, and it seems clear that various political machinations behind the scenes were responsible for the severity of the sentence.

The story reveals what can go wrong when there are no limits placed on the interactions of government, the media and commercial interests. Chris Nicholls himself is a Christian who grew up in a missionary family in Asia and was quite aware of the way the media is managed in that context. It came as a rather rude shock for him to discover by bitter experience that things don’t always work very differently even in Australia. He learned about the susceptibility of the police and the courts to political pressure. He also found, by being on the wrong end of the microphone for a change, just how loose with the truth the media pack could be, and how easily it swallowed whatever line was fed to it by the government or the police. The months in prison also taught him much about the corrupt state of the prison system. His eventual release, in turn, taught him that a courageous stand for the truth, such as he had made, is treated in our society not with honour but with unemployment and the virtual impossibility of ever working in one’s own field again.

Chris Nicholls’ story is a truly salutary one and needs to be given careful consideration by anyone interested in the state of con-

4 Chris Nicholls, *Whistling in the Dark*, Deakin Publishing House, ACT, 1994.

temporary Australian society. Corruption, however, can occur in any context. As long as human beings are sinful and self-centered there will be individuals who suffer unfairly, such as Chris Nicholls did. What relevance does his case have, therefore, to the rising influence of relativism in Australian life?

The fact is that the issue of relativism plays a definite behind-the-scenes role in the events described in *Whistling in the Dark*. In the early stages of the story, the

whole thing could be just as easily interpreted as merely an isolated problem in an otherwise sound system, and it seems that is how Chris Nicholls himself initially understood what was happening to him. As events progressed, however, it became clear that what was going on was not so much extraordinary as business as usual in a society moving away from its Christian roots.

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Chris Nicholls doesn't deal directly with the issue of relativism itself, but his experiences occurred in a context where issues of truth and morality were definitely seen as secondary to political and commercial interests. It is the thorough pervasiveness of this attitude which made what occurred possible, and this pervasiveness in turn can only be explained, I believe, by the increasing influence of relativistic attitudes to truth within Australian society. Thus, in the course of the book, the specific issues of tolerance and modern attitudes to truth and honesty become increasingly evident as part of the background to the discussion.

What we particularly learn from *Whistling in the Dark* is that the pervading attitude that there are no objective standards of right and wrong opens the way for interactions between government,



business (in this case the gambling industry) and the media which are inimical to individual freedom. Of course, as I have argued, the increasing influence of relativism will do more than just make such

tyranny in terms of increased government interference in the lives of citizens. However, big business and the media are just as powerful in Australian society as government (if not more so), and any discussion of tyranny cannot leave them out of consideration.

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interactions possible. It will make them *inevitable* as the only way to run society on a sound basis in the absence of fixed points of reference.

Naturally, we tend to associate the notion of tyranny with the actions of government, and look for the growth of

Actually, Australia has never had quite the same tradition of freedom from government interference as the United States. Since colonial days, it has been a place where government has had a fair degree of power. We expect the government, for instance, to force us to wear car seat belts, whereas Americans tend to see that as an excessive interference in individual freedom of choice. For such reasons, any growth in political interference in Australians' lives would be hard to classify as the result of the growth of relativism. It could, after all, be simply the natural growth of bureaucratic interference in evidence (though the other side of the coin is

that such political traditions would form a dangerous place for relativism to take root).

If we turn, however, to the areas of business and the media, many issues come more clearly into focus. For one thing, it is not difficult to discern in these two areas a growing assault on the freedom of the individual to make informed decisions about important areas of their lives. Furthermore, it is fairly clear that this profound change in character has been due to the impact of relativism.

In the area of employment, for instance, there is a growing ability on the part of big business to determine how employees conduct their lives. This may be due to a large extent to the need to compete with companies such as those based in Japan, and so even Australians have been dragged into the vortex of unfettered power created by Japanese relativism. But this development has no doubt also been aided by shifts in the values of Australians themselves—as absolutes are abandoned, stances such as economic rationalism become far harder to critique, and the almighty dollar easily becomes the sole arbiter in disputes over values. In that context it becomes tantalizingly easy to justify reductions in personal freedom and autonomy for the sake of the economic health of the company or of society as a whole. As one commentator has indicated, Australians have moved from being *citizens* to being *customers*. We find it difficult to justify national decisions on anything other than a purely economic basis, and our own significance as members of society tends to be seen only as being passive consumers. In such a con-

text, issues of freedom begin to seem like luxuries we can't afford.

Shifts can also be seen in the area of the media. As absolute truth is jettisoned, the whole nature of the media in general, and journalism in particular, comes under threat. An enterprise which has traditionally been understood as an attempt to convey the truth of an issue must take on a whole new complexion if the very idea of truth itself is called into question. At the very least, truth is trivialized into

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“infotainment”. It becomes little more than a way of promoting the goods of those who pay for advertising, or perhaps a means of distraction from the grim realities of life—the equivalent of Rome’s ‘bread and circuses’. At worst, the breakdown of traditional notions of truth can lead to the situation where the media *manufactures* truth for the sake of itself or whoever has a controlling interest in it, including the government. This has enormous and far-reaching implications for the way in which Australian society as a whole functions. ‘Cash for comment’ scandals, for instance, indicate how the media can be manipulated in ways which restrict the freedom of the individual—we make decisions which we *believe* are free (based on what we have learned through the media), yet what we hear has

22 | already been predetermined by deals going on without our knowledge. There is every indication that under the impulse of relativism, the Australian media can only continue further down the paths of trivialization and manipulation.

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Of course, big business and the media working hand in glove is the end point of this process. One aspect of relativism is the breaking down of categories and the erosion of the walls that might have previously separated big business, the media and government. As relativism increasingly becomes the philosophy of choice in Australia it will no doubt mean an increasing degree of collusion between these dif-



ferent sectors of society, replacing the traditional pattern of a separation of powers and the resultant ability of one sector to keep another in check.

All of this is extremely sobering but, sadly, Australian commentators seem blind to the realities of the situation. Take, for instance, this quotation from *The Bulletin*:

It seems the price for increased tolerance in our society is an encroachment on other democratic freedoms. In many areas our lives are not our own, they are an extension of government policy. Rights and wrongs are determined not by who you are in Australia, but where you live and which particular federal, state or local political banner flies over your patch.⁵

Here we have an apt description of a society run along tyrannical lines. The power of government encroaches on the freedom of the individual, and the only way to get along in such a context is by having good political connections—which assumes that many will not have such connections. But what is the justification for this situation, for this “encroachment on...democratic freedoms”? Simply that it is the price we have to pay for “increased tolerance in

5 *The Bulletin*, June 28, 1994. (Quoted in Chris Nicholls, *Whistling in the Dark*, Deakin Publishing House, Deakin, ACT, 1994, p. 191.)

our society”. One good seems to be possible only at the cost of another. But is that an accurate portrayal of the situation? A moment’s thought, I believe, will show us that this “increased tolerance” is pretty much a chimera. I think it is arguable whether Australian society, at the level of individual relationships, is significantly more tolerant than it was decades ago. Some people are tolerant, some people aren’t—and certainly government interference isn’t going to do much to alter that reality. What we have today, rather, is a situation where legislation has been set up to ensure that people are less overtly *intolerant* than they were previously. It is doubtful we’ve actually achieved a more tolerant society, but have instead created one where intolerance is less in evidence in the public arena.

But if it isn’t on behalf of increased tolerance that we have surrendered our democratic freedoms, then what has been our reason for doing so? Quite simply, this is the price we have to pay for *relativism*. A society built on relativism simply cannot function without some imposition of social order which is at the same time a restriction on our freedom. The price for increased relativism in our society is an ongoing encroachment on our democratic freedoms, though the rhetoric of tolerance can easily blind us to this reality.

What the rise of relativism will mean for the future of Australian society only time will tell. All that I have said in this article, however, indicates that we cannot be sanguine about our country’s future. Strange as it may seem, the lucky country

is set on a dangerous course. Though a commitment to relativism appears to many to guarantee life in a paradise of tolerance and social harmony, it may actually mean the loss of the very freedom which we hold so dear. Indeed it has often been remarked that a culture focussed on the pursuit of personal pleasure at the expense of the tougher choice of political awareness, is in fact ripe for the rise of tyranny. Thus, no matter how ‘un-Australian’ this all sounds, we need to give it our most serious attention.

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In conclusion

I began this article with a story on television, the story of an alien civilization’s struggle to preserve its higher culture against thuggish rationalism. It is highly significant that this programme was an American one. Of course it was not ultimately about alien civilizations, but was another shot fired in the current culture wars—landing rather haphazardly in an Australian lounge room (but any war requires finance and selling stuff overseas is as good a way to raise it as any). As a story, it is an extremely powerful weapon. It can communicate convictions about life



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without being easily open to counter-attack. After all, how do you critique a story? It doesn't make formal truth claims so how can you say it is 'incorrect' in any significant sense? Of course you can create 'counter-stories' which communicate what *you* believe, but in doing so you may simply be capitulating to the anti-rationalism of the whole relativist position.

This all illustrates an important point: it is extremely difficult to know how to deal with relativism. How do you deal with an approach which denies the validity of intellectual debate or reduces it to angry invective and personal attack? How do you argue from the facts of history when our culture's understanding of its past has already been laundered to fit current preconceptions? How do you argue for truth when to do so is to invite the accusation of intolerance? Certainly it will be difficult, but try we

must, if we are going to stop Australia—and other Western societies—going further down the slippery slope towards social and political tyranny. Of course much could be said in this regard, but I would like to make just three specific recommendations.

In the first place, the Bible must be proclaimed—and proclaimed as absolute truth. This is *not* going to be popular. Any compromise on this issue, however, is only going to hurry us further down the path toward tyranny. It is only through the West's heritage of having the Bible treated as absolute truth that we have developed our various freedoms in the first place. Despite pervasive cultural ignorance on this matter, there is ample evidence to show that modern Western democracy is the historical outworking of the teachings of the Reformation in general, and the theology of John Calvin in particular.⁶ Thus, in pursuing relativism in the name of freedom, Westerners are being gravely misled by the prejudices of Enlightenment thought. Ironically, they are turning away from the very source of the freedom which they so earnestly desire.

In that regard, it needs to be noted that not just any old form of absolute truth will do. Having argued that relativism leads to tyranny, it does not therefore follow that any form of belief in absolute truth is going to automatically lead to political

⁶ See, for example, Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th Through 18th Centuries*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1992.

and social freedom. Muslim society is a case in point: despite a strong commitment to absolute truth, it nonetheless puts strong emphasis on hierarchy and social control. Rather than the claim to absolute truth alone, it seems that it is the *content* of that truth, as well as the understanding of how it is *known*, which determine its particular social and political implications.

For this reason, it is important both for the content of the Bible to be taught accurately, and taught on its own terms as truth revealed by God rather than as the product of human speculation. To do otherwise only locates standards of truth and authority in human structures and human decision-making processes—and it was only by breaking away from such attitudes that the Reformation was able to pave the way for the development of modern Western democracy in the first place.

The second suggestion is to strengthen the family as an institution within our society. This may not seem directly relevant to the issue at hand, but it does, in fact, have profound political implications. As we have already seen in our examination of con-

temporary American society, the weaker family structures are, the easier it is for outside forces to interfere in the lives of individuals. In any state structure the family functions as a buffer between the individual and wider society. Where the family as an institution in society is strong, it is more difficult for the state to bring the members of that society into line with its wishes.

If we wish to battle rising tyranny, therefore, we must strengthen the family as an institution. This doesn't mean just government support for families with young kids. Rather, it means giving stronger recognition to the family structures and relationships which we are *all* involved in. Too often we turn to political solutions to social problems, but if we do that in this case we will only become further mired in the bog of increasing government intervention in the lives of citizens. This, of course, raises all sorts of issues in regard to education, child care, employment and the place of the individual in society, but they will need to be tackled if we wish to keep the family functioning as a bulwark between the individual and the powers that be in the wider world.

Third, in regard to the issue of tolerance, we must not be taken in by our culture's 'two storey' view of reality. If we accept that viewpoint as the terms of the debate then we have already lost, because the conclusions are simply bound up in the premisses. Instead, we need to be far more courageous in our acceptance of the Bible's viewpoint as well as being far more cynical about the world's. I trust that what I have



26 | said in this article in regard to relativism and tyranny will help us to do just that.

What does the future hold for Australian society and wider Western culture? It would be foolhardy to be too dogmatic but I don't believe we can be very optimistic. All indications point to a slow erosion of the political and social freedoms which have been so hard won over the last centuries. This does not mean, however, that we should just give up in despair. We must continue working for the good of society as a whole. In particular we need to proclaim clearly and forthrightly that our society's commitment to relativism is a dangerous one. Perhaps there might be more hope of retaining the freedoms we value if the average person could only grasp the fact that truth is *not* the enemy of freedom, and that tolerance and tyranny are but two aspects of the same reality. ☒

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