

/TO PROVIDE AN ENVIRONMENT
FOR FELLOWSHIP, SUPPORT,
INSTRUCTION AND NETWORKING.

/TO EQUIP SAINTS WITH THE
BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW AND THUS
AID THEIR CREATIVITY.

/TO UNDERSTAND THE
DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURE, ITS
INFLUENCES - PAST AND PRESENT.

/TO FOCUS ON OUR ROLE IN
ENGAGING AND TRANSFORMING
CULTURE FOR JESUS.

CREATIVES
NETWORK



PART 1 KNOWING THE TIMES: WORLDVIEW

Introduction

The title 'creatives'

Hazardous term theologically – but increasingly used sociologically [creative index, etc]

Centrality of our 'worldview'

Positively and negatively [today we focus on the received worldviews of our culture]

George Barna: Without a biblical worldview, all the great teaching goes in one ear and out the other. There are no intellectual pegs... in the mind of the individual to hang these truths on. So they just pass through. They don't stick. They don't make a difference

What is a worldview? Does it matter? How do our worldviews affect us?

James Sire: A worldview is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false), which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic makeup of the world.

A worldview is a grid through which we interpret existence. We all have a worldview. All are philosophers – all are theologians. All have an intellectual infrastructure upon which we base our life values and ideas (even if this is not consciously constructed). Presuppositions, which answer the key questions (from James Sire's *The Universe Next Door*):

1. What is prime reality – the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN/POST-MODERN THOUGHT / 1

DISCLAIMER 1: Someone always says: *haven't these ideas always been around?*
Yes and no!

Wrong worldviews are just idols and sin – let us not blame all of our failings on Jean-François Lyotard, etc... *there is nothing new under the sun...*

But: All people's worldviews are subtly shaped by culture – and culture is influenced by intellectual developments – whether we like it or not!

Remember this can work in our favour as well! If the gospel influences the top of **Schaeffer's staircase** there will be long term consequences.

DISCLAIMER 2: These are broad brushstrokes.
1500-1900

- Pre-modern dominance of theistic worldview (Reformation)
- Renaissance to 'Enlightenment'
 - Cartesian epistemology
 - Secular-Humanism – Deism, Scientism, Empiricism and Rationalism (Newton, Locke, Kant, Hume, Voltaire).
 - American Revolution
 - Romanticism (Rousseau, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelly)
- 1789: French Revolution – followed by 1848: Liberalism/Nationalism
 - Emergence of secular meta-narratives (Imperialism, Communism, Capitalism, Socialism, Fascism, Freudianism, Social Darwinism) - culmination of each
 - Nietzsche's nihilism –

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN/POST-MODERN THOUGHT / 2

- Disillusionment with modernity (Colonial oppression, two world wars, Holocaust, Hiroshima, Post war architecture, statist economies, Apartheid, nuclear threat, Chernobyl, the bankruptcy of scientism)
 - Effect of nihilism and existentialism – Sartre, Beckett, Surrealism.
 - 1960's: Effect of Darwin, Freud, contraception, etc. on wider society, youth revolt, independence and experimentation.
 - Youth culture; gurus in popular culture – Dylan, Lennon, Bowie, Madonna, Cobain, Dr Dre, Gallaghers, Eminem, etc...
- Derrida and Foucault... Deconstruction; 'hermeneutical morass' – deconstruction of language, history, epistemology, culture, morality, aesthetics and identity.
 - Lyotard: 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'
 - Hyper-suspicion of claims of objectivity – absolute rejection of absolutes.

Interviewer on Today programme: *So there is no such thing as absolute truth...*

Scientist: *Yes, in many ways that's absolutely true...*

Openness to non-empirical 'knowledge'.

Pessimism rather than 'progress' - how can there be a notion of progress when there is no consensus on what is right and good?

Hyper-materialism and consumerism

The enshrining of autonomy and choice

GK Chesterton (writes prophetically - long before Post Modernism):

The new rebel is a sceptic and will not entirely trust anything. He has no loyalty; therefore, he can never really be a revolutionist. And the fact that he doubts everything really gets in his way when he wants to denounce anything. For all denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind and the modern revolutionist doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it. Thus he writes one book, complaining that imperial oppression insults the purity of women, and then writes another book, a novel in which he insults it himself. He curses the Sultan because Christian girls lose their virginity, and then curses Mrs Grundy because they keep it. As a politician he will cry out that war is a waste of life, and then as a philosopher that all life is a waste of time. A Russian pessimist will denounce a policeman for killing a peasant, and then prove by the highest philosophical principles that the peasant ought to have killed himself. A man denounces marriage as a lie and then denounces aristocratic profligates for treating it as a lie. He calls a flag a bauble and then blames the oppressors of Poland or Ireland because they take away that bauble. The man of this school goes first to a political meeting, where he complains savages are treated as if they were beasts. Then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting where he proves that they practically are beasts. In short, the revolutionist, being an infinite sceptic, is always engaged in undermining his own mines. In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality, and in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore the modern man in revolt has become practically useless for all purposes of revolt. By rebelling against everything he has lost his right to rebel against anything.

PART 2 KNOWING THE TIMES: WORLDVIEW

Recap – Knowing the culture

Knowing the times – knowing the past.

Modernism [Secular humanism]

Romanticism – a reaction against the 'machine age' (yet within its constraints)

Postmodernism or (ultra-modernism)– a reaction against the concept of a meta-narrative

Influence of Modern/Postmodern Worldviews:

Morality: much contemporary western morality still holds the vestiges of a bygone Protestant ethical consensus (e.g. views on work, marriage, property, education, charity, trustworthiness in business), but this is simply a leftover shell.

We still exist in the benefit of this heritage – unlike some under developed countries. Liberal Humanism does not have an inherent consistent ethical framework except that which it borrowed from Protestantism (See Appendices - Prospect article and Antonia Senior article). As these relics are steadily eroded, the moral bankruptcy of secularism becomes more apparent.

Logically outworked from modern/post-modern worldviews – materialism; consumerism; divorce; sanctity of life – abortion, euthanasia, infanticide, genetic engineering; animal rights; vegetarianism; sexual amorality; gender confusion; paedophilia; genetic determinism (as opposed to economic determinism); personality cults.

Education: Rousseau, Dewey, etc... authority of teacher undermined; teaching must be seen to 'entertain'; form, structure and impartation of norms, standards and traditions seen as 'oppressive'; 'child-centred education' – totally contrasted to effective forms of education espoused in history and in scripture.

History becomes empathy exercises and enquiry skills – history of diverse ethnicities.

Politics: Depolarisation; loss of traditional forms of nationhood – patriotism is now quirky and ironic; deep lack of confidence in politicians and democratic system; profound political apathy – many under 35s do not vote – 'no point...'

Religious interests: self worship; syncretism and relativism.

Literature: Deconstruction; Texts of Shakespeare and EastEnders may be given equal credibility; linguistic structure and norm radically challenged – parochial, localised grammars and dialects championed as equal in validity.

Painting and sculpture: Shock value can become the ultimate value (often working in partnership with shrewd marketing). It has become difficult to find a consistent universal standard of aesthetics without sounding oppressively western, imperialist, or modernist.

Architecture: rejection of modernity's predictability, symmetry and reductionism.

Music: From melody to discordance - dance music – sampling.
Often lyrics show an evident longing for transcendence and awareness of loss.

REM: Reveal - 2001

have you seen? have not, will travel. have I missed the big reveal?	was I wrong? I don't know, don't answer. I just needed to believe.	and I know I know you want the same I can see it in your eyes.
do my eyes do my eyes seem empty? I've forgotten how this feels.	I've been high I've climbed so high but life sometimes it washes over me.	I've been high I've climbed so high but life sometimes it washes over me.
I've been high I've climbed so high but life sometimes it washes over me.	so I dive into a pool so cool and deep that if I sink I sink and when I swim I fly so high	washes over me close my eyes so I can see make my make believe believe in me
have you been? have done, will travel. I fell down on my knees.	what I want what I really want is just to live my life on high.	

But this is left searching in a sea of post-modern relativism.

REM: When asked what the title Reveal meant in an interview Stipe responded: 'Intentionally, nothing . . . you can take what you want from it though' (The Guardian, 24/04/01).

Chris Martin of Coldplay: 'All this is fun, but it's nonsense. So is our music. When human life ends, what will it all mean? Who'll listen to all the great records, who'll read all the great books, watch the great movies. Nobody. So do it now. Do it now!' (The Observer, 29/07/02).

Image becomes identity - Madonna's constant self reinvention; Constant flow of unconnected images - MTV.

Constant references to sovereignty of the self:

Films: You might say that movies have become the big remaining social unifier. And each cinema event will communicate values and worldviews (some with more subtlety than others).

TV: Big Brother, reality TV.
The Office; The Thick of It. It seems that much of the best (most cutting edge) television drama/comedy is the most nihilistic

Literature: free verse; surrealist poetry; nihilistic themes.

10 Strengths and Weaknesses of a Postmodern Generation in the Church.

1. Will love fellowship and community – will not like structure and authority. Great difficulty with leadership – authority – submission (becomes a sordid obscene concept).
2. Will love relationship – will not like accountability. Reluctance to face confrontation (synthesis or 'balance' between divergent opinions sometimes seems more important than truth)
3. Will love equality – will not like role distinction. Profound gender confusion.
4. Will love opportunity and experience – will not love responsibility and confrontation.
5. Will love creativity – will not like doctrine
Complete fear of conformity – virtues of creativity and spontaneity over discipleship and imitation (CS Lewis' essay: Christianity and Culture).
6. Will favour dialogue – will not like proclamation.
7. Will love visual information – will not like texts.
8. Will love contemplation – will not like definition.
9. Will love empathy – will struggle with objectivity. This generation has grown up in the context of affluence, comfort, generally easy health, instant availability of necessities and luxuries. Relative political/economic stability – the end of long term conflicts and apocalyptic threats (1989).
More at home with emotions – but less accountable with them and less able to connect them with meaning. 'Honesty' is elevated to the status of highest virtue – or virtue that excuses all vices: 'I am just being true to myself...'
10. May have individual vision – not corporate vision – 'my vision; my career; this move will be really good for me...'

The ultimate distinction: we live by a **story**.

And a story which takes into account the glories and joys of creation and redemption...

...but also the evil and agonies and darkness of sin.

As opposed to fascist/communist poster art...

Or architecture which is simply utilitarian...

Or poetry which is sheer nihilism...

...though these things may still exhibit a beauty.

The *imago dei*.

Equipped and directed rightly we can perpetrate a biblical worldview in the midst of our city:

Gresham Machen "False ideas are the greatest obstacle to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervour of a reformer & yet succeed only in winning a struggler here or there, if we permit the whole collective thought of a nation... to be controlled by ideas...which prevent Christianity from being regarded as (no) more than a harmless delusion"

Time for Q and A

Discussion groups.

- In what ways may these developments be observed in western art developments?
- Should we see all creativity shaped in a non-biblical worldview as worthless and/or dangerous? If not, why not? Can such work be 'appreciated'? How?
- In what ways could postmodernism be understood as a welcome change (seen from a biblical worldview)?
- Can a consistent idea of beauty/aesthetics be formed from a biblical worldview without being sucked back into modernism? How would a biblical worldview stand out in the kind of field of creativity where you operate?

PART 3 THE WORK OF THE ARTIST

Recap – Knowing the times – knowing the past

Modernism [Secular humanism]

Romanticism – a reaction against the 'machine age' (yet within its constraints)

Postmodernism or (ultra-modernism) – a reaction against the concept of a meta-narrative

Marks of these philosophies in popular and 'high' culture

Characteristics of the generation assimilated into postmodern worldview

Put simply, there are two alternative dangers to avoid in relating to the arts.

1. 'Pietistic' suspicion.
2. Elevation and idolatry.

Each of these owes their existence to a dualism, which wrongly splits all existence into two basically incompatible spheres. As such they each have their root in Platonic philosophy rather than a biblical worldview.

1. 'Pietistic' suspicion.

Here the dualism is expressed in mistrust towards work that does not seem 'spiritual' – in the non-material definition of that term. So all things 'temporal' are less than worthwhile. The world is an evil place and God has mercifully created the ark of Christianity as a means of escape and preservation. At some stage we will be rescued from this cumbersome weight of physical life and live an ethereal existence in 'heaven'. All we should be concerned with in this world is sacred activities – as opposed to secular. There are certain jobs and activities that are to do with the work of the Kingdom (i.e. pastors, 'missionaries', worship leaders, evangelists) and all other jobs (plumber, teacher, nurse, retailer, musician, painter, journalist) basically exist as a means of funding the former ones.

Here the arts are seen as a distraction. Since heaven is all that matters, who needs to waste time beautifying this material world?

This view is understandable as an expression of Platonic philosophy (physical = bad; non-physical = good), but it is also hard to argue against on a superficial reading of the New Testament. How many frescos, symphonies and logo designs are referred to in the book of Acts? Did the early church care about aesthetics that much?

Versions of this error can be seen in the certain monastic ascetic groups, in some of the iconoclasm of the Reformation and in the pietistic trends of post enlightenment evangelicalism.

It's also seen when believers suspect that time devoted to artistic creativity is not spiritually valuable. It's seen in the tendency for the church to be slow in producing artistically credible or innovative work, since certain formats which are familiar can be seen as the more spiritually safe (when in fact they are only the tried and tested ones).

2. Elevation and idolatry.

Defined

Historical manifestations

Current manifestations

Attendant dangers...

A Biblical 'Dualism'?

Having said all of this, there is a kind of dualism (though we should not call it that), which plays out in the drama of redemptive history. What makes it different to Greek thinking is that it is a feature of the process of time, rather than an inescapable eternal condition of duality. The Bible does split time into the present (evil) age and the future age, in which the curse of sin over creation will be utterly removed, and God's redemptive work in Christ will be consummated.

In this worldview, evil is not an eternal force holding a grasp over a large chunk of the cosmos indefinitely. Rather it is a temporary aberration playing a small part in God's overall (and unstoppable) story. God is ultimately the creator of the cosmos, and its champion redeemer. His double vote of confidence in the goodness of creation opens the door for the whole range of expression in the arts – for His glory. He put the cosmos in place as a theatre for the celebration of His worth – and His victory. This potentially gives meaning to all of our creative efforts.

Nevertheless, this biblical 'dualism' opens the possibility of some 'artistic' endeavour that is wrong, simply because it uses good materials (creation and creativity) for the celebration of evil, thus distorting their purpose (an example would be pornography.) But even in these cases, it isn't the creative impulse that is evil in itself, but the inversion of it towards a goal other than God's glory.

Neither is this to say worthy art should always avoid any reference to the 'unredeemed' features of the current age. The bible proves otherwise by its own example! The curse of the fall (and all its multiple effects) can be a noble subject of artistic expression for many reasons (not least because it heightens our appreciation of the scale of His triumph).

Questions for discussion...

APPENDIX 1: EDWARD SKIDELSKY A LIBERAL TRAGEDY (ARTICLE TAKEN FROM PROSPECT MAGAZINE JANUARY 2002)

Liberalism is facing a crisis. This judgment may seem extreme, given the current confidence of liberal rhetoric. Back in 1988, many liberals felt inhibited from condemning the fatwa against Salman Rushdie for fear of displaying "cultural imperialism." Who has felt any such inhibition in relation to the Taleban? Commentators openly condemn Islam as "anti-progressive." Such sentiments would have been unprintable 15 years ago. A new consensus has emerged, uniting the bellicosity of the right and the political correctness of the left. It is embodied in Tony Blair.

Yet the recent upsurge of confidence hides a deeper anxiety. We proclaim to the world the values of equality, liberty and toleration, but we have no idea on what authority we proclaim them. The older liberalism had no anxieties on this count. It derived its principles either from Christian tradition or else from the supposed attributes of human nature. Both these sources of justification have fallen into disrepute. Human rights are held to be a universal possession, not the patrimony of Christians. Yet these universal human rights are no longer grounded in a universal human nature. The classical conception of man as a rational animal, separated by an unbridgeable gulf from other animals, is condemned as "speciesism." The dominant modern theory of human nature is purely biological. It is concerned with those characteristics that we share with

animals. It provides no basis for human rights.

Thus rights are no longer deduced, either theologically or philosophically. They are proclaimed. Fiat has replaced argument. Our faith in our own civilisation is without rational foundation. This accounts for the shrill, dogmatic tone of modern liberalism. Classical liberalism, as exemplified by Tocqueville, Mill and Isaiah Berlin, was discursive and philosophical. It tried to engage its opponents, to appeal to their reason and humanity. It could afford the luxury of argument, because it rested securely on an idea of human nature as benevolent and reasonable. Modern liberalism does not rest on any such conception. What is left is a set of legal claims, advanced in peremptory fashion, with no appeal to common reason. Liberalism, in short, is no longer particularly liberal.

One of the best recent attempts to restore to liberalism some of its former depth has been Larry Siedentop's influential Democracy in Europe. Siedentop argues that if liberalism is to recover its true identity it must acknowledge its roots in Christian faith. Christianity proclaims that the individual is more than whatever social position he happens to occupy, that his relationship with God constitutes a "primary" identity in contrast to other "secondary" identities: "there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian... but Christ is all, and in all." All existing social relations are thus open to criticism; none is ultimate. Siedentop sees this principle working itself out in European history, undermining the moral foundations first of slavery and then of serfdom. Christianity endowed Europe with "a kind of constitution, a sense of the limits of the legitimate use of public power,

limits established by moral rights.”

Yet if liberalism is the inheritor of Christianity, why is it so reluctant to acknowledge its debt? Why have the liberal movements of the last 200 years been secular in inspiration? Siedentop regards the separation of liberalism from Christianity as an unfortunate accident. The church—particularly the Catholic church—became identified with “the stratified society based on privilege.” It thereby violated its own principle of “equal liberty.” Henceforth this principle took a secular form.

Yet the estrangement of liberalism from Christianity was surely more than an accident. It followed an inexorable logic. The universalism of the Christian proclamation had to burst the bounds of Christian doctrine and ritual. Christianity, to be true to itself, had to transcend itself. No one saw this with greater clarity than the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Just as Christianity had transcended the exclusivity of Judaism, opening up salvation to Jew and gentile alike, so it must now, argued Bonhoeffer, transcend its own exclusivity. Bonhoeffer saw that the church had not risen to the challenge of the age. In its confrontation with totalitarianism, it had sacrificed the universal cause of humanity to the preservation of its privileges. It became nothing more than one corporation among others. Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis. He died, appropriately, not as a Christian martyr but as a political dissident.

Christianity's fate, then, is to abolish itself, to dissolve into liberalism. But is this fate happy or tragic? And can liberalism itself survive, once severed from its Christian roots? Does it have an independent source of life, or is it living off its religious inheritance? Siedentop himself

is optimistic. Liberalism, he writes, is a “purged” form of Christianity, preserving the ethical content of Christianity while discarding its mythological form. Christianity is a preliminary, an imperfect first shot at liberal constitutionalism. It was Hegel who first defended Christianity as a prototype of the constitutional state. Writing after the horrors of Jacobinism, his aim was to make liberals conscious of their debt to the past, thereby encouraging a more peaceful transition from tradition to modernity. Siedentop's aim is similar. Like Hegel, he is in no doubt that religion belongs to the infancy of the human race.

But these theories betray a shallow conception of religion. Liberalism is not the essence or fulfilment of Christianity; it is its shadow. It substitutes for the concrete life of faith a set of abstract formulae. It is a sketch, an outline, a précis of religion. If Christianity is poetry, then liberalism is the prose translation. Christianity is first and foremost a narrative. It tells the story of man's fall, his bondage to sin and the law, his redemption from sin and the law and his restoration to grace. This narrative is no mere allegory; it is the primary reality of our lives. Liberalism extracts from this narrative a few catchphrases—“freedom,” “dignity,” “equality”—and sets them up as ultimate principles. These phrases have become a secular litany; they are incanted endlessly at international summits. But detached from the context which once gave them meaning, they appear increasingly arbitrary.

A good example of this is the anti-racism movement of recent years. The original US civil-rights movement was religious in inspiration; it drew its strength from the Christian vision of human brotherhood. But its modern inheritor is resoundingly secular. It is no longer inspired by a

positive vision of humanity, but—as the designation “anti-racism” suggests—by the merely negative goal of “eliminating discrimination.” Yet in the absence of any positive ideal, the justification for this negative goal is no longer clear. Human equality is a religious, or at least a metaphysical proposition. Natural science offers it no unambiguous support. Even if the races are equal in intelligence—and it is not clear that they are—this is no more than a biological fact. It carries no implications for moral or civic equality.

Because our civilisation no longer rests on a positive ideal, it can define itself only negatively. This accounts for the increasing prominence of the holocaust in political rhetoric. Holocaust memorials and remembrance days are the rites of a new state religion. Like all state religions, it aims to create unity. But we are joined, not in the worship of an ultimate good, but in the execration of an ultimate evil.

The cult of the holocaust signifies the negative character of our civilisation. Liberal freedom has become nothing more than “freedom from...” tradition, from authority, from Nazism. But in the absence of any positive ideal to support it, the liberal proclamation of individual freedom looks increasingly like a mere licence to selfishness. That is often how it seems to members of other cultures; this is what they mean by the “decadence” of the west. Religious freedom, by contrast, is what Berlin termed “positive freedom.” It denotes not only absence of constraint but a positive ideal of holiness. The ultimate Christian ideal is not freedom but love. Without love, freedom is empty self-assertion. If the liberal ideal of freedom is to represent something more than licence, then it must recover its original religious meaning.

But how? Christianity had to secularise

itself in obedience to its own fundamental principle of universality. Today, this moral imperative has been joined by practical considerations. With non-Christian minorities living within their borders, western states can hardly return to Christian confession. In a world divided by religious strife, only a secular form of liberalism can underpin international order.

Thus the fate of liberalism is—in the precise sense the word—tragic. A tragic fate is one that proceeds not from external and accidental causes, but according to an inexorable internal logic. This is precisely the situation of liberalism. It must sever itself from its historical roots in Christianity, yet in doing so it severs itself from the source of its own life. Liberalism must follow a course that leads directly to its own atrophy. It must extirpate itself.

APPENDIX 2:
A FLAWED PHILOSOPHY THAT
BOLSTERS THE BNP THE CHATTER
OF THE CHATTERING CLASSES FADES
TO A WHISPER WHENEVER CULTURAL
DIFFERENCE COMES UP. THAT'S WHY
EXTREMISTS FLOURISH.

Antonia Senior

Philosophy, despite the best obfuscatory intentions of philosophers, occasionally seeps out of the ivory towers and informs our lives. We may not be able to cite the theorists whose theories we live by, but culture is shaped by great minds as much as by our collective will.

The dominant philosophical framework of the postwar era has been moral relativism; the notion that there are no universal truths. Truth, and moral worth, are entirely relative to a culture or society. I think bacon is divine; you are a vegetarian; he thinks pig meat is an affront to God. Each of these positions is true, because truth is in the eye of the believer. I think Nick Griffin is a buffoon; you think he is a dangerous fascist; he thinks he is a fearless hero of the Right. It is so easy to be a moral relativist. It means never thinking through an argument, never offending anyone, never feeling as if you are channelling the unsavoury views of a lunatic fringe. Relativism has a long tradition; the Greek historian Herodotus had some relativist sympathies in the 5th century BC.

It took off in the 20th century, prospering in a haze of post-colonial guilt, feeding

off a desire to atone for our forefathers' racism and assumptions of superiority. It is a moral code for those who do not want to be impolite or rude. It's the ideology of holding hands in a circle or drinking tea together. Small wonder it has been so seductive within these shores. Moral relativism, as philosophies go, is just so nice.

It's a shame, then, that it is also incoherent, logically flawed and utterly tired. Few philosophers take it seriously any more. Yet having escaped the ivory towers, it has taken on a life independent of the theorists. It sits at the heart of our society like a jolly, beaming tumour, eating away at our ability to take on the BNP and their ilk.

The incoherence is laughable. The relativist's position is that all cultural views are equally valid, unless your culture is that of a white, male racist. In which case, you are wrong and the relativists are right, despite the fact there is no objective right and wrong, only cultural practices. Eh? The logical flaws are also obvious. Take female genital mutilation. I think it is an abhorrent, evil crime. Yet the woman slicing out the clitoris of a child with a rusty knife thinks she is doing the right thing. Clearly, one of us is absolutely right and one of us is deluded. If your culture believes in genital mutilation and mine does not, then my culture is right and good and yours is wrong and bad. This is an argument made persuasively by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the former Dutch MP and political activist. Ali argues that Western feminists retreat into silence when faced with the subjugation of their Islamic sisters, hobbled by their unwillingness to criticise other cultures. Germaine Greer famously accused the critics of circumcision as launching attacks on "the cultural identity" of the circumcised. "One man's beautification is another man's mutilation," she said.

But Greer's defence of the indefensible was ten years ago now. Consciously or not, we have moved away from a world where she could say something so absurd and be taken seriously.

It's impossible to be a cultural relativist when faced with daily examples of other cultures getting it wrong. There is no validity in any view of right or wrong expressed by the Taliban. There is no truth in any cultural creed that treats women as inferior, let alone those that mutilate them. There is no cultural excuse for child abuse disguised as exorcism. Relativism is in retreat, but there is no coherent moral framework taking its place. It helped us move from the certainties of the imperial age into a more tolerant era, but it's almost impossible to work out what comes next.

For those of us who grew up with a ubiquitous relativism, it is incredibly hard to break its bonds, even though we know we must. We are squeamish about dealing in moral absolutes. It feels counter-intuitive and unbearably arrogant to stand up and say: "I am right and you are wrong." It feels embarrassingly strident to be vocal about the facets of British life that are better than elsewhere; such as women's rights and freedom of speech and the fact that Mehmet Goren is on trial for the suspected honour killing of his daughter, where elsewhere the lack of a body would have been a convenient excuse to let it lie.

Part of this squeamishness comes from a fear of being accused of racism. My generation is terrified of being accused of racism, not because we're all secret racists afraid of being outed, but because we find racism shocking and offensive. But the problem is also a more general unease with dealing with moral absolutes: fascists and fanatics have monopolised certainty.

There seems to be no middle ground between an absurd relativism and a shouty, strident nastiness. This poses a problem: the chattering classes stop chattering as soon as a culturally sensitive topic comes up.

The only way to decide if a proposition is true or not, or if an action is right or wrong, is to test it and debate it. This takes more rigour than a lazy assumption that all views are truth and rightness is relative. It's also tricky if you are an atheist, as so many of us are. Religion is like a moral short-cut, providing a template against which you can test moral propositions. Without God, certainty is even harder to come by. Who am I to say what is right or wrong? A little divine back-up would be useful, if only I could find a scintilla of faith.

So, paralysed by our inherited relativism, fearful of seeming racist and adrift in a Godless world, we fall silent just when we should be debating and talking. Into this silence strides Nick Griffin, Britain's own fascist hobgoblin. If he is the only one talking about immigration, or the role of women in Islam or the sense of alienation and disenfranchisement felt, rightly or wrongly, by some white Britons, then his voice will be amplified. He is shouting while we whisper. If his voice is heard above ours, we have only ourselves to blame.

