

Believers and Secularists: “Postmodernism,” Relativism, and Fake Reasoning

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Abstract. In spite of the long tradition of coexistence, and in spite of the emergence of some kind of “postmodern relativism,” the positions of believers and secularist remain very distinct. What is it more precisely that distinguishes secularists from believers? In this article I explore the topics of “postmodernism” and relativism in order to establish parallels and differences. In particular, I compare two critiques of “western” relativism, one formulated by Muslim scholar Ziauddin Sardar and the other by the American philosopher Allan Bloom who criticizes relativism as a belief.

Keywords: secularism, postsecularism, postmodernism and religion, nihilism, relativism, Allan Bloom, Ziauddin Sardar

In Western countries, religious and secular worldviews have coexisted for at least three centuries, and also in non-Western countries, believers and secularist have learned to accept each other during the twentieth century. The postmodern world is often characterized as a place in which boundaries of the secular and the religious have collapsed. However, in spite of the long tradition of coexistence, and in spite of the emergence of some kind of “postmodern relativism” that will be examined below, the positions of believers and secularist remain very distinct. Those differences extend into the deepest layers of culture and politics. In America, polls have shown that one third of Americans are dominated by the fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and charismatic Protestant denominations (cf. Himmelfarb, 2001: 90) and religiosity might now be “a better predictor of voting behavior than religious affiliation” (Wilcox and Robinson, 2007: 2). The Christian Right controls over 2000 radio stations and 250 T.V. stations, has established universities and colleges, and home-schools at least two million children. The evangelical novel series *Left Behind* has sold over 60 million copies and 60% of all Americans (according a Time/CNN poll) believe that predictions in the Book of Revelation, particularly of Judgment Day, will come true. One out of four Americans think that the Bible predicted the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Scherer, 2004).

In the Muslim world things are not very different. Research from 2013 shows that Muslims around the globe are “deeply committed to their faith and want its teachings to shape not only their personal lives but also their societies and politics (Pew Research Center survey). A recent Gallup study concludes that, by far, the largest part of the population in Muslim countries indicates that they are attached to religious beliefs and want to “bring religion back into life” when asked “what do you admire most in your own society?” (Esposito and Mogahed: 6). Since the late 1960s, secularism has become an unusual position in the Middle East, even among intellectuals: “Only a handful of Arab thinkers have embraced secularism as a liberating and dynamic philosophy,” writes Ibrahim Abu-Rabi (2004: 112). In many Arab countries, regimes still set secularists against Islamists.

God makes a difference in the twenty-first century. However, what is it more precisely that distinguishes secularists from believers? In this article I explore the topics of “postmodernism” and relativism in order to establish parallels and differences. In particular, I compare two critiques of “western” relativism, one formulated by Muslim scholar Ziauddin Sardar and the other by the American philosopher Allan Bloom.

BELIEVERS AND SECULARISTS

Believers presume that only a religious worldview can provide sense and meaning in a world that would otherwise remain based on random and incoherent mundane principles. For them a worldview that recognizes only culture or civilization but no god, cannot explain the universe and the reason of *everything* while religion does. Many religious people see the secular worldview as a purely technocratic enterprise that might be efficient with regard to details but lacks holistic principles able to “explain” things.

Secular people find the religious worldview equally random and incoherent because its main principles remain based on presumptions that secular people find imaginary and fantastic. In the end, believers and non-believers reproach each other on the same thing: being victims of mere hallucinations. For secularists, God is an illusion while for believers the kind of contingency suggested by a godless world “when everything becomes unfastened and nothing is predictable or secure” can come close to schizophrenia (Robbins, 2007: 129). While non-believers think

that believing in a personal god¹ or in dogmatic religious principles (“Jesus is the son of God,” “Mohammed received the Quran from God,” etc.) is rationally unfounded, Christian theologian John Betz finds that Enlightenment people continue hosting “the cherished illusion that reason alone is able to provide a sufficient basis for morality or culture” (Betz: XII). Muslim scholar Ziauddin Sardar writes that the “western perception equated mathematics with truth and reality [while] the non-western cultures and civilizations have always held both reality and truth to be infinitely more complicated” (Sardar, 2003: 339). A look into Heidegger or Feyerabend, or any conversation with a German butcher or a French baker reveals that the “western perception” of reality or of truth cannot be reduced to mathematics or scientism. In a way, Sardar’s statements still echo those of Mohammad Iqbal (1877–1938) who perceived the West mainly in terms of “atheistic materialism” (Iqbal, 1992); or those of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1960), the main ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, who believed that the Americans’ and the westerners’ “conscience is all derived from the same source – namely, the materialistic civilization that has no heart or conscience, and which hears nothing but the sounds of machines” (Ahmed, 2011: 107).

Some religious people like to depict “secular culture” as a mixture of Comteian positivism and Fukuyama’s liberalism. However, a naturalistic conception of the universe, a purely historical view of the scriptures (or even atheism) as well as a socially and psychologically based ethics, do not necessarily produce a totally mechanistic view of the human being and of life. Most secular people are not mere technocrats but can engage in a self-critical commitment to well-defined ethical ideals. Often Enlightenment is not accepted unconditionally but one is aware that, in the hands of statesmen such as Frederick the Great or the Jacobins, the Enlightenment had also become an instrument of obscurantism and terror. The fact that secular people see natural laws as unrelated to divine powers does not imply that they see also social life and culture only in terms of brute facts and mathematical structures.

It is true that anti-religious tirades like those of Richard Dawkins have not done much to improve the reputation of secularism as a complex cultural expression. Still it is a fact that secularism has incorporated into itself three hundred years of self-criticism (from Kant to Habermas), and it is with this heritage in mind, that secular people attempt to affirm the value of *culture* when it comes to the shaping of society. This culture

is even likely to carry within itself traces of a religious heritage. True, secular people perceive this heritage not necessarily as religious but as *cultural* because, contrary to believers, they do not integrate culture into religion, but rather religion into culture. Still the heritage is present. Religious people criticize this strategy as relativism which, in their view, leads to the neutralization of all intrinsic *religious* values. The philosophical foundations of this relativism reproach need to be examined.

RELATIVISM AND “POSTMODERNISM”

Betz suggests that culture be founded on faith and the values of religion. On what do secularists base culture if it is neither on pure reason nor on faith? They base it on culture itself. Culture is here understood in the comprehensive way described above. Religious people see the circularity of “basing culture on culture” as a major problem while secularists accept it because they do not see what else could be done. For secularist, the circularity of the foundation of culture is not absurd, but its application can lead to knowledge. Culture bears in itself traditions as well as elements of religion plus a solid amount of critical thinking and self-reflexivity that has been transmitted to western culture by the Enlightenment tradition as well as by other philosophies. This means that culture is a mixture of everything that history can offer: there is reason but there are also those transmitted beliefs that have been examined by reason. When a complex phenomenon such as culture examines itself, the result will not be a circle but rather a spiral.

At the sight of such circular structures, religious people most typically launch the word “postmodernism:” at worst, the entire secular “religion as culture” project will be scheduled as just another aspect of “postmodernism” attempting to eliminate meaningfulness altogether. Here, the term “postmodern” vaguely denotes a skeptical or relativist attitude that is believed to be supported by “deconstructionist” or post-structuralist philosophy. However, this is a strawman because the “spiral” of reasoning is not meant to be circular at all.

In the first place, religious peoples’ aversion to “circularity” is surprising: how often have I heard religious people – from Alabama to Kuwait – affirming that everything written in the scriptures is true because it is written in the scriptures *that* it is true. Is this also postmodernism? It is indeed a very particular kind of postmodernism. Strictly speaking, the

origin of postmodernism is not secular but religious: it began in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution and is thus a gift from religious people to the world. The postmodern option is that of post-secularism, an option which did not exist in modernity. The recent “re-veiling” wave of women in Muslim culture, for example, interprets a traditional and religious theme within new contexts and is thus a typically postmodern phenomenon.

The relationship between postmodernism and religion remains complex. On the one hand, many philosophical theories that had claimed to have done away with religion (such as positivist scientism or Marxism) are no longer authoritative. On the other hand, in postmodernism religion can easily be combined with consumer culture leading to the commodification of religion.

For most religious people postmodernism remains linked to a long list of bad connotations most typically framed as the “loss of God” or the “loss of a center.” The reality is that while modernity killed God and replaced it with reason, *their* kind of postmodernity killed reason and replaced it with God, whose existence is only based on itself. In general, self-referential, “circular” forms of thinking lead to the worst thing that can be said about any kind of thought: to the loss of reality. Religious people themselves have the “loss of reality” on their agenda when it comes to critiques of secularism but are rarely aware of how closely their own thinking is related to this pattern.

When religious people criticize the “lack of reality” in postmodern thought, they often quote the existence of virtual reality and pornography to draw a parallel or, more precisely, to establish a causal link between the latter two and “postmodernism.” Inayatullah and Boxwell even manage to equate – at least indirectly – western postmodernism with Islamic fundamentalism, because both have become unable to distinguish illusion from reality. For them, postmodernism is just like “Islamic fundamentalism, where distinctions between the real and the imaginary, fabricated history and true tradition, have been lost. In this sense, Islamic fundamentalism is a by-product of postmodernism” (Inayatullah and Boxwell, 2003: 14). Given the above-mentioned connections, those authors are not entirely wrong with regard to similarities, but the link they establish falls victim to the *non causa pro causa* fallacy. It is not virtual reality and discourses about “imagined communities” that have produced fundamentalism. It is rather the appearance of postmodern post-secularism that has made fundamentalism possible. In general, “reality”

is a complex phenomenon in a postmodern world in which traditions do not merely exist, but are constantly invented and reinvented. However, this is not just a privilege of the secular “West,” it also goes for the “Rest.”

It goes without saying that many non-western religious people will not hesitate to characterize the above illusionary postmodernism as a new form of imperialism. Once the positivism/Fukuyama project has been declared mischievous and imperialist, the invention of postmodernist pluralism and multiculturalism (though they represent in most respects the contrary of imperialism) will be declared equally wrong and imperialist. This puts secularists into a very uncomfortable position: they will agree with much of the criticism of the postmodern situation, just as they will criticize the financial crisis, drug culture, or global warming. They are also very much aware of the deficiencies of western civilization “where technique is more important than an ecology of self and environment” (Inayatullah and Boxwell, 2003: 9) and will freely admit that in Western cultures, individual freedom is often devoid of human sympathy and responsibility for relatives except under force of law. However, the concept of “postmodernism” has been invented neither by them nor by anybody else as an ideology that tells us what should be done, but it serves merely as a description of facts. When Sardar writes that “Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* illustrate the total meaninglessness, well, of everything” (Sardar, 2003: 192) he is right, but does that also mean that those authors *propagate* this kind of meaninglessness? Sardar obviously believes that they do. In the same vein, it is certainly right that, as Sardar explains:

from Nietzsche to Marx, Russell to Sartre, Ayer to Foucault, Bloom to Baudrillard we are confronted with a profound sense of despair at its inability to give not just a complete and satisfying account of the human being and of society, but even of being able to give an intelligible account of itself. (Sardar, 2003: 240)

However, have those authors invented this situation or do they even agree with it? When Nietzsche said that God is dead this was an announcement and not a claim. Equally, postmodernism should not be seen as autonomously legitimate but only as the consequence of delegitimization of modern philosophical discourses. It qualifies simply as a sign of the times.

Secularists want to employ their *cultural* and *critical* resources to amend the situation and refer even to non-western cultural resources (Chinese medicine, yoga, Japanese diets, etc.) in order to do so. Many are even ready to engage in more profound cross-examinations of eastern and western science as long as this does not require a belief in a god. Believing in something merely for the sake of it remains for them the most nihilistic of all options, be it only because it negates reality. Faced with this option, they prefer to go back to modernity's pure reason.

Philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida were convinced that modern rationalism exhausted its promises and became suspicious of positivistic rationality. If those philosophers, all of whom wanted to go "beyond modernity," share something, it is their conviction that if we want to live authentic lives we have to negate existing conditions and start from within an intellectual, cultural, and religious void or abyss. Initially, such radical uncertainty is diametrically opposed to the world of knowing which, today, is caricatured by the world of the fundamentalists. The existentialist view invites us to give up all normative and social constraints, truths, and certainties in order to effectively confront ideologies like capitalism, consumerism, and bureaucratization. Secular postmodernists also believe, like Nietzsche, that "the man of faith is a dependent man" (*Anti-Christ*, §54). And since they want to create free individuals, secular postmodernists are – at least in this sense – also aggressively individualistic. However, to classify the entire existentialist agenda as simply nihilistic is wrong because truth and authenticity are supposed to be encountered once we emerge from the abyss. Then the free individual who is aware of her existential condition will appear as diametrically opposed to the religious fundamentalist whose individuality is undermined by identity crises, a feeling of insecurity that she tries to compensate with dogmatism, intolerance, inferiority (or superiority) complexes, and whose intellectual capacities are flawed by conspiracy theories. Where existentialist postmodernists want non-alienated individuals, fundamentalists want conformity and obedience to community standards on which they insist because it helps them hide their own existential insecurity. It is thus far-fetched to say, as Inayatullah and Boxwell do, that the secular kind of postmodernism has produced fundamentalism.

At the bottom of the eager religious search for "a center" are not just proper religious concerns, but more generally, what Richard Rorty has described as the mentality of the "liberal metaphysician" who wants "a

final vocabulary with an internal organic structure” (Rorty, 1989: 92) and who cannot bear the existence of a patchwork of contradicting meanings and situational truths. However, is it possible to have such a “final vocabulary” today? A desperate search for “innate values” (Sardar, 2003: 208) and the nostalgia for a world in which signifiers overlap exactly with the signified without mediation or simulation is understandable, but it is simply not available in today’s cultures, not even in Saudi Arabia. In the end, the disappointed ambition to find such a reality will lead to the negation of reality.

RELATIVISM AND “FAKE REASONING”

Sardar makes the structure that supports religious reasoning very clear. Its main characteristic is the a priori acceptance of revelation:

In most non-western cultures truth is a priori given; in Islam (...) its source is revelation. In western perception, truth is arrived at by some act of observation and mathematical formulation; it is known only a posteriori. Thus, while non-western cultures start with a set of basic axioms, western civilization is forever searching for truth, something to believe in. (Sardar, 2003: 340)

In logic, Sardar’s reflections are called “fake reasoning,” which means that, instead of proceeding from premise to conclusion, the conclusion will be written down first and the premises will be adjusted in order to match the conclusion. The inquirer is not concerned with finding the right answer but with an ulterior goal that is extraneous to the question. According to Sardar, in non-western cultures we know the conclusion beforehand because it has been revealed: all we have to do is find suitable premises. Of course, for believers this circularity very effectively reinstates the validity of the argument. Sardar deals with the problem of “Western secularism” in the same fashion when refuting any “Western” claim to truth. The pre-given conclusion is that Western thought finds emptiness while religion finds truth; and this will be attributed to the premises that Western thought looks for scientific truths while religion looks for truths that have already been *revealed as truths*. In the end, only religion can find truth simply because it is looking for truth.

However, believers are not the only ones who produce such a circular thinking. The problem is that secular Western culture does often fall into the same trap. This happens when it abandons its critical Enlightenment

resources and turns secularism into a sort of religion. It has been suggested above that the circularity of basing “culture upon culture” should be seen as a spiral because critical and self-reflective moments prevent secular culture from becoming merely circular. How does this work for one of those intellectual models that represents the red cloth of all believers: relativism?

Relativism is certainly present in secular culture. The whole idea of turning religion into culture produces relativism. According to John Caputo, to talk of “The one true religion” makes no sense or at least “no more sense than ‘the one true language’ or the ‘one true poetry,’ ‘the one true story’ or ‘the one true culture’” (Caputo, 2001: 110). Still secular culture cannot be reduced to relativism.

The circular structure of modern relativism is not always easy to guess. Its detection is mainly the merit of Allan Bloom, who criticizes the modern (he never speaks of the “postmodern”) infatuation with relativism as a moral doctrine that comes close to the creation of a new religion. Bloom believes that relativism as it is practiced in modern western societies is superficial, lacks self-reflectivity, and therefore loses sight of truth altogether. In *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) Bloom explains that the new students who enter his university have been “indoctrinated” by the idea that everything is relative and think that “the true believer is the real danger” since “history teaches that all the world was mad” mainly because of too strong beliefs. Therefore we should be “tolerant.” Tolerance is defined as “never think you are right” (Bloom, 1987/2008: 25).

Bloom’s criticism overlaps with Slavoj Žižek’s criticism of contemporary (postmodern) Marxists who relegate

politics to the domain of *doxa*, of pragmatic considerations and compromises, which always and by definition fall short of the unconditional ethical demand. The notion of a politics which would not have been a series of mere pragmatic interventions, but the politics of Truth, is dismissed as ‘totalitarian’. (Žižek, 2001: 1)

At times, Bloom’s analysis reads like a critical treatise of secular culture written by a believer. However, in reality Bloom discusses the topic of relativism in a completely different context: relativism is criticized *as a belief*. The problem is that for those students “the relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society” (Bloom, 1987/2008: 25), which means that relativism *functions* here

very much like a religion. The “anything goes” relativism that Bloom has so famously dubbed the relativism of the “Nietzscheanized Left” (217) firmly “believes” that nothing is true as well as that any belief is as valuable as another.

In the first place, the above liberal relativism was meant to overcome the communitarian relativism of fundamentalists. The problem is that open-mindedness, tolerance, and democracy are, in this case, no longer perceived as concepts that need to be critically evaluated at any instance, but appear like ideas that we should “believe” in. In other words, they are presented as the *results* of a critical thinking that has been done for us a long time ago and which do not need to be submitted to further critical inquiry. The dire consequence is that the belief to be free of prejudices turns out to be a prejudice in itself; or to be against ethnocentrism becomes the new “ethnic” identity of the Western class. The process can also be described as a mythologization or a ideologization of relativism, as depicted by the following observations from Gianni Vattimo:

When postmetaphysical philosophy limits itself to the defense of pluralism for its own sake or to the legitimization of proliferating narratives without hierarchy or center, it ends up preaching a pure and simple return to myth and ideology without setting up any critical principle, apart from the important principle of tolerance. Are not tolerance and pluralism themselves ultimately myths and ideologies, which cannot claim the status of normative metadiscourses? (2002: 20)

Finally, the pattern can be incorporated into the postcolonial discussion: the West is open-minded by definition while the non-West is closed-minded, which means that by being open-minded, the West has once again confirmed its closed-mindedness. Here it becomes clear that, though Bloom does not manifest any religious tendencies on these pages, his thoughts about relativism overlap with those of religious critics of Western culture such as Sardar’s. The latter believes that western secular culture decimates non-western religion through its “imperialistic tendencies, dehumanization, domination and meaninglessness” (2003: 165). Bloom calls this dangerous force not secularism but relativism. What Blooms’ vision has in common with Sardar’s idea of “postmodern secularism” is that both are based on circular structures. This is no coincidence because Sardar’s “meaninglessness” drives very much at the kind of fallacious relativism that is not backed up by belief.

There is still another parallel. For both Bloom and Sardar the Western pattern becomes colonialist when relativism is declared to be good and everything which is not relativist is seen as bad. It has been said above that Sardar's critique, which criticizes the circularity of Western thought, is circular in itself. Does Bloom's critique of relativism suffer from the same deficiency?

CRITICAL AND UNCRITICAL RELATIVISM

Bloom explains that by being tolerant, the western person becomes intolerant towards intolerance. How is such a paradox possible? The problem is that culture (even though it is presented as "open") is here *conceptualized* as a hermetically closed entity. Though this culture obviously desperately attempts to overcome itself and to observe and analyze itself from the outside, in the end, it remains trapped in its own method and performs an open-mindedness that traces its own limits circularly and in a doctrinal fashion. Thinkers who elevate relativism to the status of a doctrine have their own way of basing culture upon culture. It has been said above that *all* secularists base culture upon culture because they see no other option. However, what has happened in the case described by Bloom is that culture has been left "on its own:" it has been asked to function "like a religion" without having been given any critical tools to evaluate itself *as a culture* and in relationship with science. Originally, relativism was not meant to be a new philosophical doctrine. Like nihilism, it stands for the negation of generally accepted assumptions that should rather lead to anti-authoritarian forms of philosophical hermeneutics. This is where we perceive a difference. Bloom's young people who adhere to relativism in such a religious fashion, can easily appear as if their pluralism and tolerance has been forced upon them. The reason is that they still *do* have a desire for the absolute. Though making relativist statements several times per day, they do not seem to live serenely and without anxiety in the relative world of half-truths they affirm.

At the same time it would be wrong to say that those young peoples' relativism is entirely uncritical. It does indeed excel in some sort of critical auto-evaluations of the cultural *content* within which it is operating (and which is declared to be of relative value). However, the question "What does it mean to be a culture?" or, more precisely, "What does it mean to be a relativist culture?" is not submitted to critical evaluations at all.

Bloom submits relativist culture to this critical examination. First, he points out that this cultural model of relativism contains no “positive” elements such as science or nature that could provide a standard of truth. Here he is right: we need science and nature at least as counter models in order to oppose them to the blunt relativism of self-referential culture. Bloom thinks that “men cannot remain content with what is given them by their culture if they are fully human” (38). Culture is not the solution but only a means. Culture is always ethnocentric, and this is true even for that kind of culture, which is most opposed to ethnocentrism. Like religion, culture is not more than a Platonic cave, which means that, strictly speaking, it is always against science. If, as Bloom says, the only purpose of studying other cultures is to reassert our relativism, we are simply victims of our own cultural indoctrinations. Bloom points to the Greeks who in studying the past examined other peoples’ cultures in order to see what “other peoples had to contribute to the discovery of nature” (38). Herodotus studied cultural history “to see what was good and bad about each and find out what he could learn about good and bad from them” (40). Modern relativism, on the other hand, *starts with the conclusion* that good and bad do not exist and that the examination of other cultures is supposed to lead to the reinstatement of this conclusion. Modern relativists are therefore not better than religious people who insist that everything that is written in the scriptures is true because it is written in the scripture *that* it is true. Each in their own way practices fake reasoning. If everything remains based on the relativism of culture, if the only purpose of openness is to gain incertitude instead of certitude, then we do really teach our students, in the words of Bloom, “openness to closedness.”

Bloom does not glorify the non-Western closeness (let alone religion) but merely criticizes the Western doctrinal openness. He describes the non-Western “closedness” as ethnocentrism and explains why it does or did exist: “men must love and be loyal to their families and their people in order to preserve them” (37). It is striking that “only in the Western nations (...) is there some willingness to doubt the identification of the good with one’s own way” (36) while non-Western truth is a communal truth that will not be contested. All this sounds exactly like a general critique of Western culture that could have been drafted by a non-Western religious-minded critic like Sardar. The only difference is that Bloom does not link “communal truth” to religion.

In my opinion, instead of bashing the West for its senseless relativism and sketching a non-Western communal mind as an alternative, the borders need to be drawn in another way if we really want to grasp the problem of “Western relativism” in the way it is depicted by Bloom. Non-western (in Sardar’s terms) closedness, as it remains captured within its own circular reasoning, is indeed similar to Bloom’s Western openness that is closedness. The difference is, however, God. Bloom avoids the religious theme of absolute truth that Sardar proudly presents as the primordial quality of non-Western cultures. Bloom’s non-Western truth is communal or common-sensical and is supposed to appear as an interesting alternative to relativism. We simply cannot doubt everything, there are also some things that *are* true simply because they must be. It is only along these lines that Bloom lauds non-Western cultures and past cultures: *they* manage to avoid doctrinal relativism by referring to communal values or some form of “scientific truth.” Sardar, on the other hand, lauds non-Western cultures because they avoid relativism by referring to the *a priori* truths of religion, that is, to God.

In this sense, Bloom’s description of circular reasoning in relativist Western culture is diametrically opposed to Sardar’s findings about relativism in secular culture. Sardar praises Islam and religious thought for directing all examinations and analyses back to *the* conclusion represented by “some basic axioms.” He criticizes Western thought because it *lacks* this circularity. Only such a circularity could stop Western civilization’s eternal “searching for truth, something to believe in” (Sardar, 340). The circular model ready to submit knowledge to belief is seen as the most important strength of non-Western culture. Paradoxically, Bloom detects another circularity in Western culture (which is, in fact, very similar), but for him this circularity represents the starting point of a *critique* of contemporary Western thought.

It is courageous of Bloom to launch a debate on a topic that remains politically incorrect for many people. I share his observations about relativism in Western universities. Still it seems to me that his thoughts are Americano-centric because he criticizes the culture of tolerance in terms of what? In terms of tolerance! This circularity is still “ethnic” because it would not necessarily be written along the same lines in other cultures. An inappropriate aspect of Bloom’s critique becomes clear through a comparison with Sardar’s position. I wonder if Bloom has ever taught in a non-Western country, perhaps in the Middle East, where tribal thinking

prevails, where religious indoctrination eliminates the slightest chance of critical evaluations, and where “cultural” (religious) norms are defended as provided by nature. Here open-mindedness is such a precious value that any reference to the danger of being “indoctrinated by open-mindedness” must be perceived as missing the point.

Bloom refers to the necessity of some sort of unconditional reality. However, this reality is always present. Even in the most postmodern of all worlds we cannot use words like “truth” or “good” *only* in a relative sense. Some values might be indisputably relative (in which case we might speak of “my truth” or “my good”) but we cannot do without at least *some* values that are general and unconditional. The problem is that the need for a firm grounding is felt to different degrees by different individuals. It is very strongly felt by Sardar and Bloom.

While I can go along with Bloom for much of the path, at some point I have to abandon the course because I find that he becomes circular. While he desperately attempts to overcome the modern culture of relativism and to contemplate his own culture from the outside, in the end, his analysis of Western relativism works along the lines of Sardar: Western thought can only find emptiness (which is the conclusion) while pre-modern, Greek culture could still find truth. Why can Western thought not find such truth? Because it has decided to find only relativism.

Cultural relativism is not as caricatural as Bloom depicts it. If cultural studies and the other human sciences taught at universities did nothing but reinstate generalized relativism (leaving “truth” to the hard sciences), they would probably have long disappeared. The point is that they are too often confronted with self-enclosed models of thought that contradict the most common-sensical enlightenment values in such a blunt fashion that the danger of “falling into the ethnocentrism of relativism” appears to be minor, trivial, and far-fetched. Apart from that, one does not need to go teaching in the Middle East to experience this, but a stint in the American South can yield similar insights.

CONCLUSION

Relativism is not necessarily as superficial as Bloom and Sardar want it to be, but it can contain the right amount of self-reflectivity needed to prevent the total loss of truth and reality to which is given, for example, extremist religious thought or nationalism. Normally, the human sciences or the “cul-

tural sciences” are aware of this paradox because their mere existence is based on the contradiction of being “sciences that are against science.” Bloom himself reminds us that science was originally invented to liberate us from culture. The openness advocated by science was meant to lead us beyond culture towards more general truths. Bloom is also right in saying that this openness *can* become meaningless: “scientism” (the belief in the universal applicability of the scientific method) *is* a form of closedness. And relativism is the first step also out of *this* closedness. Relativism remains part of the process of searching the good and knowledge through critical evaluations of our own culture and other cultures. Today, in many places of the world, this *first step* has not been taken. And this was probably the case even at Herodotus’ times. Instead one eagerly engages in the next step, which is, for example, drawing caricatural pictures of western secular relativism. Seemingly without being aware of it, Bloom leads the way of those people. Bloom’s analysis of the kind of circular relativism that contents itself with proving that relativism is right, is interesting; but *this* relativism is not the main problem today. The problem today is religious fanaticism and nationalism; and relativism remains here a necessary means to change cultures. It is a means but not an end.

Bloom is skeptical of the Western culture of tolerance but, contrary to Sardar, he does not want to appear as a believer. He defends a cultural approach that will not lose sight of “truth” as scientifically defined. Still, both Sardar and Bloom are wrong for the same reason. Sardar thinks that “western civilization is forever searching for truth, something to believe in” (340) without finding it. The question is: does secular culture really look for something to believe in? Maybe Sardar means this in a psychological sense: secularists think they do not need any belief, but deep inside they are still looking for “something to believe in.” I see no evidence for this; the concept looks more like the perception of secularism from the point of view of a believer who will also conclude that atheists must believe in something, be it in Darwinism. Bloom commits the same mistake. By depicting the relativist paradigm as if it were underpinned by quasi-religious ambitions, he attributes something to critical thought that might emanate from the minds of his students or the “Nietzscheanized Left,” but which is not included in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. Those thinkers are merely suspicious of positivistic rationality; they are never looking for something “to believe in.” At most, what those philosophers believe in is the power of cri-

tique and debate and certainly also the fact that such critique will prevent us from falling into the “religion of relativism.”

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Note

¹ I do not mean a metaphorical or pantheistic God but the “moral God” or what Dawkins describes as the “interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-pushing, prayer answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language” (Dawkins, 2006: 41).