



Psalm 119.105

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## Is Morality Relative? by Tabitha Thiemens

Almost every  
student  
entering the  
university  
believes, or  
says he  
believes, that  
truth is  
relative

— Allan Bloom

In coffee shops and on college campuses, you'll often hear the statement, "That's true for you, but not for me." Though stated as if it were common knowledge that truth could be individualized, the remark is actually an expression of the moral and ethical viewpoint known as Moral Relativism.

When I was taking an Ethics class at Long Beach City College, we read a paper called "*A Defense of Moral Relativism*" by Ruth Benedict. The essay did a very good job of presenting the argument for Moral Relativism. She emphasized the diversity of views that various people and cultures have on moral issues. Our professor asked the class "How many students agreed with Benedict's viewpoint of Moral Relativism?" About 80% of the students immediately raised their hands. My fellow students acted as if the teacher had asked if the earth was round or the sky was blue. The professor then asked, "How many of you believe in some kind of moral absolutes?" Three students, including myself, lifted our hands. What followed next was a complete surprise. Our professor took apart the Moral Relativist position piece by piece, for he believed in moral absolutes.

My experience in Ethics class closely mirrors the situation in colleges everywhere. "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of," philosopher Allan Bloom writes, "almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative...."

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The students, of course, cannot defend their opinion. It is something with which they have been indoctrinated.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the assumption made by many that morality is relative, I will show in this paper that the position is a failure, and that the source of our morality is a higher intelligence best explained by Biblical Theism.

What is Moral Relativism? It is the view that there are no objective moral norms or values that transcend either culture or the individual. Moral claims are merely opinions, cultural rules or personal preference.<sup>2</sup> One of the arguments that the Moral Relativist puts forth to prove his position is that no objective moral norms exist *because cultures and individuals disagree on moral issues*. To defend this position the Relativist points to a number of examples, such as cultural differences over the morality of sexual practices, capital punishment, abortion, and war.<sup>3</sup> One example of this type of argument is the essay by Ruth Benedict. Benedict believes that since cultures and individuals differ in certain moral practices, there are no objective moral values.<sup>4</sup>

How do we refute this argument from cultural differences? We can offer several objections to it. First, just because different cultures disagree on what is moral, it does not mean there is no objective truth. If you and I were to disagree on whether or not the earth is round, our disagreement would not prove that the earth has no shape at all. The fact that people disagree about something does not mean that there is no objective truth. Just because people disagree about values, it does not follow from this that nobody is right or wrong. If that were the case, there could be no morally wrong individual or culture; Adolf Hitler and the Incan civilization would be exonerated for their respective human sacrifices.<sup>5</sup> Also, if the fact that there is disagreement were enough to conclude that objective norms do not exist, we would then have to admit that there is no objectively correct position on such issues as slavery, genocide, and child molestation. In the end, moral disagreement proves nothing about the true nature of morality.

Besides proving nothing on the nature of morality, perceived cultural disagreement on morality is sometimes a difference of practice but not of principle. For example, many people who live in India do not eat cows because they believe in reincarnation. They believe that



these cows may possess the souls of deceased human beings. In the United States we do not believe cows have human souls. Because of this we do eat cows—but we do not eat Grandma. Although it appears at first that there is a major difference in value between Indians and Americans, this is an incorrect conclusion. Both cultures believe it is wrong to eat Grandma; the Indians, however, believe the cow could be Grandma. So, it is a difference in practice and in the application of religious beliefs, but *not a value difference* that separates our cultures on this point.<sup>6</sup>

Not only do superficial

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differences between cultures fail to prove the truth of Moral Relativism, but disagreement actually counts against Relativism. Some of us disagree with the Relativist over the nature of morality. We believe that objective moral norms do exist while the Relativist does not. The Relativist has set down a principle—disagreements mean there is no truth—which unravels his own case.<sup>7</sup> Moral Relativism is inconsistent. The Relativist announces that *no system is absolutely right*, but then proclaims *his* system as right. In pronouncing the rightness of his system over others, he establishes it as the absolute standard by which others are measured. He violates his own position by believing it.<sup>8</sup> No worldview can be true that contradicts itself.<sup>9</sup>

Another problem with the argument from differing cultural practices is that it puts an excessive emphasis on differences while ignoring similarities. In other words, disagreement is overrated.<sup>10</sup> Although it is true that people and cultures disagree on moral issues, it does not mean that they do not share the same values, or that there are not moral norms that are binding on all nations, in all places, and at all times. When we talk about moral conflicts in the United States we tend to focus our attention on current issues about which there are wide and passionate differences of opinion, such as abortion, euthanasia, and affirmative action. Yet, despite these moral debates we hold a number of values in common. There are many moral issues on which almost all Americans agree. For example: “It is wrong to molest six-year-old girls.” Also, there are a number of past moral conflicts that have been solved, such as slavery, and women’s suffrage. Consequently, by focusing our attention only on disagreements, our perception has become distorted.<sup>11</sup> While it is true that people disagree on moral issues, it does not mean that they do not share the same values.

The final refutation of the argument from cultural differences is that several absurd consequences follow from Moral Relativism. To begin with, if no culture can be morally better than another, the Relativist cannot condemn slavery, apartheid, or the holocaust. By such reasoning there is no moral difference between Adolf Hitler and Mother Theresa. We could not say that murder, rape, or torturing babes is universally wrong. And when two different moral judgments conflict, how are we to decide between them? No one’s moral principles would be superior to any other. As Francis Schaeffer points out “If there is no absolute beyond man’s ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.”<sup>12</sup> Yet to say that no judgments are universally true is absurd. Every instinct within us tells us that at least some moral judgments are absolutely correct, regardless of what other cultures or individuals may think.<sup>13</sup>

In reality there is no difference between a Relativist and a person who admits she has no morality at all. How does a Relativist make a moral decision? He decides for himself what he thinks is best. How does someone with no morality know how to act? She decides for herself what she thinks is best. Even those people with no principles at all can be said to have ‘their own’ morality. We cannot make

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sense of an alleged morality that functions the same as not having any morality. In the end the ‘morality’ of Relativism is no different than having no morality at all.<sup>14</sup>

A further irrational consequence that follows from moral Relativism is that if, as it claims, morality can be individualized, what happens when individual moralities conflict? For instance, suppose that Jeffrey Dahmer’s morality permits him to cannibalize his neighbor but his unfortunate neighbor disagrees. What would the Relativist suggest be done to resolve this moral conflict between the cannibal and his reluctant dinner? Since nobody’s morality is in principle better than another’s, should we then flip a coin or simply conclude that “might makes right”? In addition, if the moral life is no more than a reflection of people’s individual tastes, preferences, and orientations, then we cannot tell youth that it is morally wrong to lie, steal, cheat, smoke, abuse drugs, kill their newborns, or drop out of school.<sup>15</sup>

Still other illogical problems follow from Relativism. For instance, the Relativist position is self-refuting. What does it mean for a position to be self-refuting? When a statement fails to conform to its own criteria of validity, it is self-refuting. Here are some examples. “I cannot say a word in English” is self-refuting when spoken in English. The claims “there are no truths” or “all generalizations are false” are self-refuting.<sup>16</sup> These statements can be false, but if they are taken as true, then they become irrational because to grant that there are no truths or that all generalizations are false, would negate the statements themselves.<sup>17</sup> If we examine the Relativist position we can see that it is similarly self-refuting. For the Relativist maintains that there are no objective and universal moral norms and for that reason everyone ought to follow the morals of his own culture. But the Relativist is making an absolute and universal moral claim, namely that everyone is morally obligated to follow the moral rules of their own culture. So if this moral norm is absolute and universal, then Cultural Relativism is false.<sup>18</sup> The Relativist cannot say that “Nothing is universally true” and at same time “My view is universally true.”<sup>19</sup>



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Another absurdity that follows from Relativism is that if morality is completely dependent upon culture, then there can be no real moral progress. The only way a person can say that a culture is getting better is if there are objective moral norms that do not rely on culture. There must be some standard, some superior moral principles to which the society may progress towards. However, if what is morally good is only what a specific culture says is morally good, then we can only say that society changes, not that it is progressing or getting better. Yet it seems clear, for example, that the abolition of slavery and the establishment of civil rights of African Americans in the United States were instances of real moral progress. Did America change for the better, or did it simply change?<sup>20</sup> Moral Relativism has no answer to that question.

Along with disallowing moral progress, Relativism precludes true moral reformers who change a culture for the better. This is because moral reformers change how a society acts by arguing that it is somehow morally flawed. Yet, if culturally-based Moral Relativism is true, an act is right only if it is already found in the society's moral values. So, since the reformer adopts a set of values outside the society's code, and attempts to change that code, he is, by definition, immoral. If this were true we would have to hold that every moral reformer who ever lived— Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Aristotle, Martin Luther, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr.—was immoral! Any moral view that implies this cannot be true. As a result, the Moral Relativist must deny that real moral progress or moral reformers exist, for their existence would require a belief in objective moral norms.<sup>21</sup>

As we have seen, Moral Relativism fails to prove its validity based on the argument from cultural differences. A second set of arguments for Moral Relativism concern the question of tolerance. To begin with the Relativist assumes that only their position can consistently promote tolerance. They reason that if you believe that your moral position is correct and others incorrect, you are closed-minded and intolerant. There are several problems with this argument. To begin with, tolerance presupposes a moral judgment regarding another viewpoint. I can only be tolerant of those ideas that I think are wrong.<sup>22</sup> For example, I can only be truly tolerant of homosexuality if I believe it is wrong, yet treat homosexuals with civility and respect, as people whom God loves. Yet, the Relativist states that no viewpoint is wrong, and so they can, by their own definition, never be tolerant.

Ironically, the call to tolerance by Relativists assumes the existence of at least one moral value that is not relative, but universally and objectively correct: tolerance. If everyone must be tolerant, then tolerance is an objective moral norm. If this is true, then Relativism is false.

Also, tolerance presupposes that there is something good about being tolerant, such as being able to learn from others with whom we disagree. But that assumes objective moral values, namely, that one may be able to gain moral truth and insight from someone else. If that is the case, then objective moral truths must exist that can be learned<sup>23</sup>

Sadly, instead of being tolerant, Relativism is

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itself a closed-minded, and judgmental position. The Relativist passionately asserts that there is no moral truth. But this is an extremely closed minded and arrogant worldview.<sup>24</sup> Francis Beckwith uses this illustration:

“... consider a dialogue (based loosely on a real-life exchange) between a high school teacher and her student Elizabeth. The teacher instructs her class, “Welcome, students. This is the first day of class, and so I want to lay down some ground rules. First, since no one has the truth about morality, you should be open-minded to the opinions of your fellow students.”

The teacher recognizes the raised hand of Elizabeth, who asks, “If nobody has the truth, isn’t that a good reason for me not to listen to my fellow students? After all, if nobody has the truth, why should I waste my time listening to other people and their opinions? What’s the point? Only if somebody has the truth does it make sense to be open-minded. Don’t you agree?”

“No, I don’t. Are you claiming to know the truth? Isn’t that a bit arrogant and dogmatic?”

“Not at all. Rather I think it’s dogmatic as well as arrogant to assert that no single person on earth knows the truth. After all, have you met every person in the world and quizzed them exhaustively? If not, how can you make such a claim? Also, I believe it is actually the opposite of arrogance to say that I will alter my opinions to fit the truth whenever and wherever I find it. And if I happen to think that I have good reason to believe I do know the truth and would like to share it with you, why wouldn’t you listen to me? Why would you automatically discredit my opinion before it is even uttered? I thought we were supposed to listen to everyone’s opinion.” This should prove to be an interesting semester.” Another student blurts out, “Ain’t that the truth,” provoking the class to laughter.”<sup>25</sup>

Relativism is, then, a closed-minded position.

Finally, Relativism freely judges contrary viewpoints. The Relativist says that if you believe in objective moral truth, you are wrong. Consequently, Relativism is judgmental.<sup>26</sup>

To summarize this argument from tolerance: the Relativists have made clear one central value—equal respect and tolerance for other ways of life, which they insist to be absolute and universal. *Then they disparage other ways of life.* As a result, Moral Relativists fail to prove their philosophy’s validity based on “tolerance.”

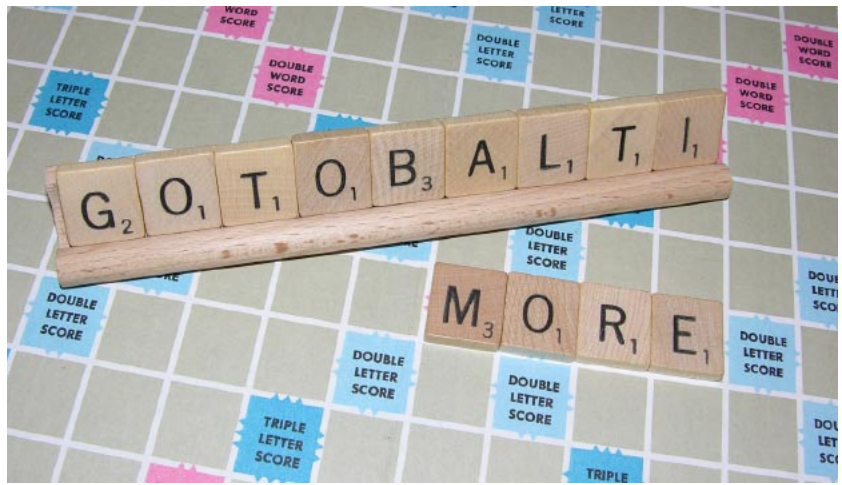
We see that Relativism fails to prove its position by either an appeal to cultural differences or to tolerance, but we must also ask, what kind of culture would Relativism produce? For starters, Relativism would produce chaos. Imagine a world in which everyone lived without a sense of absolute right or wrong. No ethical standards could be imposed because there would be none. Contracts could contain lies and deception by either party. Frustrated neighbors could murder the guy next door when they got angry. Governments could conquer their neighbors for any reason they made up.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, justice dies under Relativism. Administering justice requires the assumption of an absolute standard. If right and wrong is based on individual determination, no statement, thought, or action could be condemned. Lying, stealing, and murder are given the green light because they are not subject to punishment. No punishment could be pursued for wrongs, because wrong would not exist.<sup>28</sup> If morals are only cultural, the Nuremberg Trials could not have taken place.<sup>29</sup> With Relativism, no true justice could exist. Finally, Relativism tolerates inhuman cultures. No historical atrocities can be criticized. We may hate Hitler’s Germany, but it could not be labeled “wrong.” If you dislike any ethnic group or you grow tired of your political opponents, exterminate them. Slavery may be different from our way of life, but it can’t be called evil. If you want free labor, feel free to kidnap people and work them to death.<sup>30</sup> In summary the kind of world that Relativism would create is monstrous, chaotic, and lacking any clear, consistent form of justice.

The two main arguments for moral Relativism—the argument from disagreement

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and the argument from tolerance—are seriously flawed. Also Moral Relativism would create a chaotic society. Given this philosophical failure of moral Relativism, it must be accepted that objective and universal moral norms exist.<sup>31</sup> But if they exist, what is their source? Where do they come from? I believe that the God of the Bible best explains the existence of universal and objective moral norms. Only in a universe in which God exists do objective moral values make sense.

Are there other possible sources or explanations for the phenomenon of morality? There appears to be only three possible explanations of moral values: they are an illusion; they exist but are accidents, a product of chance; or they are the product of intelligence. To consider the first possibility, is morality an illusion? This is the position of the Relativist, and as we have just seen this position fails. Morality is real; it is not an illusion. Next, are morals accidents, or products of chance? If morals are products of chance, then they are the result of unguided evolution. But this does not seem reasonable, for if morals have no mind behind them, then there is no reason to obey them. As Francis Beckwith illustrates: “If while playing Scrabble the letters randomly spell, “Go to Baltimore,” should I obey the command, buy a plane ticket, make hotel reservations, and/or take up temporary residence in Baltimore? Of course not, for “the command” is a chance-created phrase and is thus really no command at all.”<sup>32</sup> Morality then is not a result of chance or else it would not be worth obeying. Since morals are neither illusory nor the product of chance, only one option remains: They have their source in an intelligent being. The existence of moral law implies a moral lawgiver, as C. S. Lewis makes clear in *Mere Christianity*.<sup>33</sup>



The Bible confirms that the source of Moral law is the Moral Lawgiver, namely God. Romans 2:14-15 (NLT) tells us that people have Moral law written on their hearts: “*Even Gentiles, who do not have God’s written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God’s law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right.*” This is confirmed in Romans 1:19 (NLT) which says: “*For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts.*” Although this law has been clouded by the Fall, people can still form moral values based on Gods law, which have been written on our souls.

Since God is the best explanation of the existence of morals, it makes sense that His moral laws flow from His nature, and His commandments conform to His character. God, then, is the standard by which everything is judged. In 1 Peter 1:15-16 (NIV) it says: “*But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’*”

Moreover, since God is the source of morality, it follows that God’s Law exists above our morality, and that all societies will be judged by Him. Isaiah 5:20-23 speaks of the consequences of denying the distinctions between right and wrong: “*What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark...*” But there is still hope for all those who accept Moral Relativism as true, if they repent. Amos 5:15 (NLT) tells us “*Hate evil and love what is good; turn your courts into true halls of justice. Perhaps even*

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*yet the Lord God of Heaven's armies will have mercy on the remnant of his people.*" God is the moral lawgiver, and only by turning to him can we find truth.

Moral Relativism fails to answer our moral questions. It fails to make its case from the arguments from disagreement and tolerance, and would create a lawless, chaotic society. Given the failure of moral Relativism, we must conclude that objective moral norms do exist. And since they are neither an illusion, nor the product of chance, we must conclude that the existence of morals can best be explained by the existence of God. In the end, it is clear that Christianity and Moral Relativism are incompatible. Max Hocutt, who is a Moral Relativist, clarifies this when he writes, "The fundamental question of ethics is, who makes the rules? God or men? The theistic answer is that God makes them. The humanist answer is that men make them. This distinction between theism and humanism is the fundamental division in moral theory."<sup>34</sup> Who makes the rules? It is clear that God makes the rules of morality.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987), 25.
- <sup>2</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "A Critique of Moral Relativism" in *Do the Right Thing: Reading in applied Ethics And Social Philosophy*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith (Belmont California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2002), 4
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12
- <sup>4</sup> Ruth Benedict, "A Defense of Moral Relativism" in *Do the Right Thing: Reading in applied Ethics And Social Philosophy*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith (Belmont California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2002), 6-11
- <sup>5</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "Philosophical Problems with Moral Relativism," *Christian Research Journal*, Fall (1993): page 20 [Journal Online]; available from <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/crj/crj-jrnl/crj0161a.txt> ; internet; Accessed 4 January 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "A Critique of Moral Relativism" in *Do the Right Thing: Reading in applied Ethics And Social Philosophy*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith (Belmont California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2002), 14
- <sup>8</sup> Richard W. Cornish, *5 Minute Apologist: Maximum Truth in Minimum Time*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress), 39
- <sup>9</sup> Paul Coban, "True for You, But Not for Me" (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 24
- <sup>10</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "Why I Am Not a Moral Relativist" in *Why I Am a Christian: Leading Thinkers Explain Why They Believe* ed. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 19
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- <sup>12</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976), p. 145.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 16
- <sup>14</sup> Greg Koukl, "What is moral Relativism?" UCCF [bethinking.org](http://www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=229), (2005) Available from <http://www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=229>; Internet; accessed 4 January 2007.
- <sup>15</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "A Critique of Moral Relativism" in *Do the Right Thing: Reading in applied Ethics And Social Philosophy*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith (Belmont California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2002), 16
- <sup>16</sup> Paul Coban, "True for You, But Not for Me" (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 24.
- <sup>17</sup> J.P. Moreland quoted in Francis J. Beckwith, "A Critique of Moral Relativism" in *Do the Right Thing: Reading in applied Ethics And Social Philosophy*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith (Belmont California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2002), 17
- <sup>18</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "Why I Am Not a Moral Relativist" in *Why I Am a Christian: Leading thinker Explain Why they Believe* ed. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 22
- <sup>19</sup> Paul Coban, "True for You But Not for Me"
- <sup>20</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "A Critique of Moral Relativism" in *Do the Right Thing: Reading in applied Ethics And Social Philosophy*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith (Belmont California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2002), 17
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- <sup>22</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "A Critique of Moral Relativism" in *Do the Right Thing: Reading in applied Ethics And Social Philosophy*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith (Belmont California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2002), 18
- <sup>23</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "Why I Am Not a Moral Relativist" in *Why I Am a Christian: Leading thinker Explain Why they Believe* ed. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 24
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- <sup>25</sup> Gregory P. Koukl and Francis J. Beckwith, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid Air* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1998), 74
- <sup>26</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "A Critique of Moral Relativism" in *Do the Right Thing: Reading in applied Ethics And Social Philosophy*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith (Belmont California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2002), 19
- <sup>27</sup> Richard W. Cornish, *5 Minute Apologist: Maximum Truth in Minimum Time*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress), 39-41
- <sup>28</sup> Richard W. Cornish, *5 Minute Apologist: Maximum Truth in Minimum Time*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress), 39-41
- <sup>29</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, *The Law above the Law* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1975) 33
- <sup>30</sup> Richard W. Cornish, *5 Minute Apologist: Maximum Truth in Minimum Time*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress), 39-41
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- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 27
- <sup>33</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: MacMillian Publishing Co., Inc., 1952) 36-39
- <sup>34</sup> Quoted in "Ethic Fact" Sheet Summit Ministry (2006) Available from [http://www.summit.org/pdf/resource/fact\\_sheet/ethics.pdf](http://www.summit.org/pdf/resource/fact_sheet/ethics.pdf); Internet: accessed 3 January 2007.

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