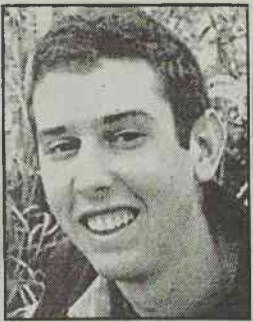


Perspectives

The baffling incoherence of modern activism



Jim Kirk

columnist

With Eric Millin

The incoherence of life in the late twentieth century sometimes baffles us. Take the recent call to activism on our campus. UNCA's students have gathered together to mobilize people on campus to bring their convictions to bear upon the world. We have been confronted by these issues in the very pages of this publication: environmental degradation, racism, animal rights, abortion, etc. This work is encouraged by the faculty. In fact, some have said we should have more of it, like back in the 1960s when students united to exercise their power and influence over the world!

And yet (and this where we get to that baffling incoherence), this kind of activism just doesn't seem to give

with the general relativistic milieu that envelops so many at UNCA, including faculty. Many people, including most liberal activists, assume that morality is a personal thing. Of course, there are obvious exceptions for environmentalism, racism, and animal rights, but when it comes to sex, religion, cultural differences, or any other moral disagreement, the word often is: "Well, that's what you believe; I just believe something different, we can both be right!" A lot of this is supported by some so-called "postmodern" theory (the strand that is really just old-fashioned, boring relativism) that tells us that our ideas of God, truth, and morality are only cultural constructions.

Thus, to become a truly diverse community we must let go of our belief systems as "true" and embrace our cultural traditions of morality as exactly that—traditions.

But where does such radical relativism leave us? Upon such a basis, how can UNCA's activists lay claim to the truth of their moral theory that the environment should be respected? How can Nate Conroy impose his own morality upon the Dog Pound (certainly a culture unto itself), and tell them that racism is wrong? And what is more personal than the act of eating? How dare some animal rights fundamentalist judge my personal morality?

Given that relativism has been embraced by so many, UNCA's activists should not be asking themselves what to protest next, but whether there is any way to reconcile a culturally constructed morality with a consistent interest in bettering the world at all. If the basis for morality is the assumptions of moral relativism, we suggest that one must conclude that the activist impulse can only be seen as a form of cultural imperialism.

To illustrate this, allow us to pick on Amnesty International, prob-

ably the most respected and broadly supported activist group at UNCA. From a consistent relativist perspective Amnesty International has obviously fallen into the trap of taking culturally constructed morals and values and, with missionary zeal, imposing them upon the rest of the world. Relatively speaking, what right do we, as Westerners, have to tell the Chinese, who have operated their culture upon fundamentally the same principles for 3,000 years, that a violent takeover of Tibet is wrong? What right do we have to criticize female genital mutilation in Africa? How can we judge their culture? Since Amnesty must be referring to some universal morality for its judgments upon all humanity, the relativist can only understand them as saying: "We Westerners are better than you. If you'd only agree with our deep wisdom and be like us, then the world would be a better place." Even though Amnesty may have an international following, its origin and impetus still lie in the Western world.

Some might suggest that Amnesty escapes the relativist critique because it is based upon universal

human rights. Yet, as strange as it may seem in our time, such "rights" are not universally self-evident. Although natural law thinking goes back to Aristotle, our modern conception of rights are, for the part, an inheritance of Christian morality, based upon the idea that all people are "made in the image of God". We have arrived at our secular version by way of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers, in an attempt to identify rational and universal moral schemes apart from God, merely co-opted and secularized Christian understandings of morality. This is seen in Thomas Jefferson's articulate statement that "All men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Although there are many who would like to deny it, the Western Christian inheritance still informs most of our ethical norms, albeit in secularized forms.

If one is going to be a consistent relativist, and advocate a "pluralistic" worldview, this Christian inheritance is, of course, nothing more than a cultural construction. In contradistinction to fundamentalist and Evangelical claims that Christian morality articulates the

moral law, most modern university people believe that the religion was constructed in first century Palestine and merely reflect that culture. Again we are faced with relativism.

Where does this leave us? It leaves without a reason for activism. If all cultures are valid expressions of humanity and to criticize another based on our own cultural assumptions is to claim cultural superiority, then, even in our own culture we cannot criticize sub-cultures (like the Dog Pound, carnivorous folk, big business clearcutters, or anyone operating with different values). If we truly desire to be "pluralistic" (or non-rights) are just as "good" as our own. If we are to be consistent, and there can be no religious or rational basis for morality, then we should admit that our inherited Christian notions of morality as universally applicable are wrong and we should stop doing activism.

However, if this relativistic conclusion seems not only incoherent, but morally bankrupt, then we must evaluate again the all too easily accepted relativism of our age.

Letters to the Editor

Meat fit to eat

Dear Editor,

I would like to comment on the article "Animals not made for consumption" by Krystal Black (Opinions, Feb. 12). I would like to say that I do not agree with the idea that animals have rights or that they should have rights.

I grew up on a small farm in North Carolina, and the idea that animals have rights is ridiculous. All of this school's scientific classes teach evolution, so really we are animals. Animals eat other animals. Humans are at the top of the food chain. The reason for that is that we have the power to kill any animal or plant if we want to.

Black mentions that no anesthesia is used in cutting the tails of hogs. She must remember that less than a hundred years ago that their was no such thing as anesthesia. Pain is a fact of life. Animals that die in slaughterhouses die a better death than those in the wild. I would rather be knocked out with a hammer and have my throat cut than to be killed by a pack of wolves.

Black mentions that rain forests are being cut down to make pasture, that is not necessarily true, they are being cut down to grow crops because the ashes rejuvenate the soil and after three or four years the land is no longer of any value.

I do not condone the poor treatment of animals by any means. There is something wrong with people who set dogs on fire or tie two cats together and throw them over a clothes line. I have never condoned it and I never will. I am not being judgemental. If people want to be vegetarians, so be it, and more power to them.

Richard Parham
Sophomore, accounting

Greene off base

Dear Editor,

Wise man saith, "Only a fool goes head to head with an OX." Is it just as unwise, the question emerges, to refute one? After all, oxen have never been known for their intelligence.

On Feb. 12, a letter appeared in *The Banner* written by David Bruce Greene, in which it was argued that Nate Conroy had seriously blundered in his appraisal of certain behaviors seen at a basketball game

as racist. There are two points which Greene raises in support of his attack against Conroy which deserve serious consideration. The rest of Greene's ingratiating exposition on his fraternity and his "huge hand" are not worth words.

The first point which needs redress is Greene's claim that it is absurd and "beyond belief [to] compare the Dog Pound...to the KKK." Greene explains, and without a doubt most sincerely, that he as an African American has experienced racism in all of its devastating and terrifying forms. He also adds, confusingly, that he has "been at the receiving end of more racism...than any of you." One wonders what the rest of the African American community reading this statement thought of this, but that is another matter. Greene goes on to explain that racism cannot be found in the "insulting antics" of the Dog Pound, implying that racism is the sole weapon of white supremacist institutions. Where does Greene believe that racism comes from? Does it fall from the sky into the laps of these KKK members? It is essential to see that racially colored epithets yelled at a basketball game explicitly contribute to a racially colored environment. In other words, it is precisely these kinds of subtle remarks uttered at sports events, with which Conroy had a problem, which are at the root of America's race problem. It makes perfect sense to compare what happened at that basketball game with the workings of overt racist structures, because it is this behavior which helps make possible an atmosphere in which subtle racism thrives. The types of behavior which Greene passionately condemns Conroy for comparing (the Dog Pound and white supremacy) are linked in the way that the spreading of germs is conducive to an environment where it is easy to get sick. To think otherwise is simply counterproductive in any battle against racism.

The second point Greene raises is that "Destructive criticism breeds destructive results." This argument's basis is harder to figure out than Greene's first. Conroy saw behavior which to him smacked directly of racism. He therefore decided to call it out, and hopefully, destroy such behavior. If racism is not deserving of destructive criticism, then what possibly is? Even with Greene's assumption that Conroy's attack was far off base, no one reading Conroy's article could

have missed the point that the target of Conroy's darts was racist behavior. Therefore, why such harsh criticism of Conroy? Even if the *was* way off the mark with his allegations, shouldn't Conroy, at the very least, be praised for attempting to battle racism where he sees it? Especially from an African American, such a sweeping condemnation is truly confusing. If we should not stand up and protest racist behavior when we see it (even if when we might be mistaken, which is unlikely given that this is America) what is there left to do? Unwarranted criticism is surely a bad thing, but do we really want to enter a world where we make it *harder* for "white" people to stand up against racism in fear of not only being attacked by other "whites" for their stand, but people of color as well.

It is delusional to believe that comments of a racially charged nature exist in a vacuum and cannot have an impact on people's attitudes towards others. It is frightening that an individual at UNCA has had to deal with such condemnation for speaking out against what he deemed as racist behavior. We already know that only a fool messes with an ox. If in Greene's writing we see the philosophy of such oxen, we can only hope that UNCA has a full stock of fools.

Ralph Biggs
Freshman, undeclared

Differences count

Dear Editor,

Recently, someone I know was walking down a hall on campus, and heard loud remarks coming from the mouths of a group of people that had just passed. The comments were made in reference to the stereotypical flair of my friend's hair color.

Upon hearing these comments, my friend turned around and saw that everyone else in the hall was staring at them. My friend saw no other option than to confront the intrusive people who thought it their duty to insult the unfamiliar color of my friend's hair. Once confronted, the people's reaction was open hostility.

There are so many shades of hair color; it could have been any one of us. Think for a moment of yourself and your own possible reactions.

What would they have been if it was your hair color that was so offensive?

In all honesty, the comments were not inspired by the color of my friend's hair. However, we have more control over the color of our hair than over our (OROTHERS') sexuality. This is true for most of the other large number of things for which so many people are daily persecuted. Any of the other minorities, including racial, ethnic, or religious minorities are vulnerable, and often victim to similar such attacks. To make such comments such as were made about my friend simply shows one's own ignorance. Think of the parts of yourself that make you different and unique and special. What if you were ridiculed and persecuted for these differences?

As has been said many times before, this is a liberal arts campus, and although we can not be guaranteed freedom from persecution in the "real world" is it unreasonable to ask that we be given the freedom to be ourselves on this campus without fearing hateful reactions?

To be different is not a joke. It is simply being different. It takes courage to stand out from the crowd. We should be celebrating our diversity and learning from the uniqueness of each person as an individual, not stifling each others' growth and personal expression. You can learn from me just as I can learn from you, if we are given (and take) the opportunity. Instead of ridiculing that which you do not understand, why not take the time to see how much you can learn from the experience? Maybe you could turn it into a cultural event.

Charity Crabtree
Senior, sociology

Following his own advice?

Dear Editor:

Does Justin Stein ask the cops to give him a ticket, not just a warning? Does Justin Stein ask the salesperson why they are not looking at him suspiciously? Last of all, does Justin Stein "go out of his comfort zone?"

"Nothing is as last sacred but the integrity of our own minds." - Emerson.

Michael W. Maher
Junior, computer science

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