

Evangelical critics of "liberalism" allege that its hallmark was—and is—"a cognitive relativism." By making experience the one and only primal (noetic) source of theology, liberalism condemned theology to be like all other human efforts to know and to understand. It thereby became simply one more part of "the human quest for understanding, . . . which is one undertaken from within the flux of human experience employing the tools available to human experimenters" and never yielding "any certainty beyond that of an interim report offered from within the fallabilities of the fragile, human psyche." In thus becoming "relative and fallible," like all other human knowledge, theology becomes quite different from "the kind of knowledge given by revelation" (David Wells: 179, 174).

But this charge of "cognitive relativism" cannot be sustained. It confuses what may very well be only a critical, nondogmatic attitude toward claims to validity (and authority) with a relativistic attitude according to which all such claims, being valid for each of the individuals or groups who make or imply them, must be accepted as equally valid. Conversely, those who make this charge typically seek to commend their own uncritical, dogmatic attitude toward (at least certain) claims to validity (and authority) by arguing that any other attitude either is or necessarily devolves into relativism. Significantly, liberals or radicals who think of themselves as holding an extreme contrary position to that of evangelicals, reason in essentially the same way—inferring, as Gordon Kaufman does, for example, that any claim to absolute truth has to be given up if one is to maintain a consistently critical, nondogmatic attitude toward claims to validity (and authority).

My question is whether the whole anti-foundationalist polemic of many contemporary philosophers doesn't involve something like the same confusion. One is not, or need not be, a foundationalist simply because one insists that our claims to validity (and authority) be critically validated somehow by reason and experience. Or, alternatively, if such an insistence simply as such makes one properly a foundationalist, then being a foundationalist is nothing to be ashamed of, or apologized for. Nor can an uncritical, dogmatic anti-traditionalism be foisted off onto the

Enlightenment, as distinct from positions that may have been held by thinkers representing themselves, or represented by others, as belonging to the (normative) Enlightenment tradition. Enlightenment means, normatively, not anti-traditionalism, but, if one may say so, anti-uncriticalism, anti-dogmatism—including such expressions of an uncritical, dogmatic attitude as may well characterize persons taking non- or even anti-traditionalist positions.

20 December 1991