



Relativism and Religion: Why Democratic Societies Do Not Need Moral Absolutes (Religion, Culture, and Public Life)

By Carlo Invernizzi Accetti

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Moral relativism is deeply troubling for those who believe that, without a set of moral absolutes, democratic societies will devolve into tyranny or totalitarianism. Engaging directly with this claim, Carlo Invernizzi Accetti traces the roots of contemporary anti-relativist fears to the antimodern rhetoric of the Catholic Church and then rescues a form of philosophical relativism for modern, pluralist societies, arguing that this viewpoint provides the firmest foundation for an allegiance to democracy.

In his analyses of the relationship between religious arguments and political authority and the implications of philosophical relativism for democratic theory, Accetti makes a far-ranging contribution to contemporary debates over the revival of religion in politics and the conceptual grounds for a commitment to democracy. He presents the first comprehensive genealogy of anti-relativist discourse and reclaims for English-speaking readers the overlooked work of Hans Kelsen on the connection between relativism and democracy. By engaging with contemporary attempts to replace the religious foundation of democratic values with a neo-Kantian conception of reason, Accetti also makes a powerful case for relativism as the best basis for a civic ethos that integrates different perspectives into democratic politics.

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Editorial Review

Review

Since the emergence of democracy in the Western world, the Catholic Church has warned that democracies' association with cultural relativism would lead to a new totalitarianism. In this compelling book, Accetti reveals the origins of this demand for absolute moral and political truths. He defends a challenging point of view: individual moral relativism not only complements but reinforces democracy. Clear and convincing!

(Patrick Weil, Yale University)

An original and bold argument that offers a compelling and critical account of how particular religious institutions aim to impose their views on politics by using the 'authority' of religious beliefs. It sheds light on our present debates concerning religion and politics.

(María Pía Lara, author of *The Disclosure of Politics: Struggles Over the Semantics of Secularization*)

An important and timely book that provides an outstandingly well-researched reconstruction of the history of the religious discourse of anti-relativism, and then advances a bold and original response, defending relativism as the most adequate philosophical foundation for democracy. The scholarship is impeccable and the argument is both challenging and persuasive: it will become a reference point.

(Justine Lacroix, Université Libre de Bruxelles)

Relativism and Religion offers a lucid and creative reinterpretation of Hans Kelsen's still neglected democratic theory.

(Jan-Werner Mueller, author of *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe*)

A courageous and truly original contribution to the study of democracy as a society that is structurally based on opinions that citizens form in their free and open exchange of their political and moral judgments and decisions. This makes democracy not easily welcomed by supporters of absolute visions of truth, religious or otherwise. Accetti shows very convincingly how the call for the reassertion of a reference to a notion of absolute truth in contemporary politics constitutes one of the most resilient expressions of the resistance against the democratic principle of self-government from within democratic societies.

(Nadia Urbinati, Columbia University)

About the Author

Carlo Invernizzi Accetti is an assistant professor of political theory at City College, City University of New York, and an associate researcher at the Center for European Studies of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po).

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