

Spiritual Authority: Thus It is Written. Or Not.

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By what authority do we in Religious Science believe as we do, and then get up and *teach* what we believe in our variety of churches and centers? Prob-

ably if you practice this way of life, and certainly if you teach it, you've been asked to provide something like a philosophical pedigree for our assertions that the universe is a whole interconnected and intelligent system; that all people carry within them a "spark of the divine;" and that changing one's mind changes one's life.

Where is this written, we may be asked in so many words, and can that source be trusted as accurate? People don't want their time wasted, don't wish to be taken in by anything, and have been around the block enough times to spot out another bogus spiritual system beckoning seductively from some doorway. Bad things happen to those who stray from the straight and narrow. It's a caution as old as that of not wandering far from the tribal campfire: something out there will gobble you up. This is why, marketers will tell you, folks tend to prefer brand names over generics; and why, in spiritual matters, the familiar is so very appealing. I pass a church sign: "We teach from the Bible and sing from the hymnal." It is saying, there is a recognizable and trustworthy basis to what happens in this place, in the supposition that right-thinking people do, or certainly should, recognize a Bible and trust a hymnal, or vice-versa.

Much further afield from this — too far further, some say — you find spiritual systems like ours. We are neither based on a book, nor on a prophet's or revealer's charismatic legacy that gave rise to the culture that produced such a book, nor even on the fruits of especially great intellectual exertion on the part of our adherents. Our spiritual authority comes from another direction altogether.

Every philosophy, religious or not, is a *story* that some person entirely made up, or had revealed to him or her via in some special moment, or that was arrived at by some interplay of imagination and mystical event. Orthodox Christianity, for instance, exists by virtue of the stories found in the four Gospels, whose essential messianic message is elaborated upon in the letters of the Apostle Paul and others — notwithstand-

ing those letters being written a generation before the four Gospels. All of this only has meaning insofar as it describes the life of a God/man as its "grand subject," whom the reader is invited to consider as divine and as a personal savior. Further, the God/man Jesus' story only packs the wallop it does because it climaxes dramatically with his overcoming death by resurrection. On this point, together with the promise of a glorious afterlife for those who place their faith in this story, a complete cosmology takes shape and everything that follows as moral instruction (through Paul and company, and on down the years to today) is presumed by the reader to logically fit, and be worth the considerable effort required to live up to it. Protestant Christianity

"And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

— MATTHEW 7:28-29

exists by virtue of there having been Orthodox Christianity first, and adding to that a 15th century reconnection with the Bible itself, first-hand, as the primary source of religious light, as well as various reformers' particular interpretations that led to the forming of the sects Calvinist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and so on — and subtracting any reliance on apostolic succession to provide popes or prelates, much less any subservience to their authority.

Judaism's story is the *Tanakh*, 24 books codified by the Great Assembly of learned rabbis — containing the Torah, the Prophets, wisdom books, poetry, history, genealogy and tribal lore — as well as what generations of rabbinical thought has since produced as commentary thereon. Christianity is Judaism's expectation of a Messiah freshly realized, 450 years later, in the being of Jesus, and then a conceptual framework for an entirely new religion (that would ultimately include Rome, half of it even being headquartered there) instead of a just a new Rome-opposing Jewish sect. Islam's story, almost 700 years after that, is the *Tanakh* plus the Christian Testament plus the *Quran* (or "recitation"), dictated by the archangel Gabriel into the mind of the prophet Muhammad for him to recite to the waiting world. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three major religions of West, are term in Islam *Ahl al-Kitāb*, or "people of the book" because all three trace their roots to the biblical patriarch Abraham, though what constitutes that book's precise position is seen quite independently by each group.

Is the Religious Scientist a "person of the book"? If by book we mean Bible, our founder, Ernest Holmes, loved the Bible and taught from it daily. On the other hand, what he taught was his own interpretation on what he had read, that may not sit well with other

Bible students. For instance, he seldom took Bible stories literally, and he was far less interested in the historical Jesus or the messianic Jesus than he was in a Jesus who had developed a knack for using spiritual law to effect healings and apparent miracles. He was willing to concede that Jesus died on the cross and then rose again after, but instead of using these events to bolster a sense of Jesus as unique Son of God, he went completely the *other* direction by saying that if Jesus could do these things, so could anybody, given the right frame of consciousness of oneness. Similarly, Holmes considered himself a Christian; *then* he went on to define and explain his personal beliefs to the point where the only Christian denomination into which he could appropriately fit would be some branch of 2nd century Gnosticism, if that.

To be precise, our teaching is not Bible-based. We believe, or like to believe, that it is Bible-supported, meaning that if we read between enough lines and elide our way past enough thorny passages, the Bible will say what we want it to say, such as that changing one's mind changes one's life. However, the ancient Hebrews and early what-came-to-called Christians were no more

What gives anyone the right to declare a spiritual stand? No less than the Spirit within that seeks expression through us. Our spiritual quest is inner-directed, which is where all the outer authority originated anyway.

united around this or other metaphysical ideas in their times than are the people on your block or mine today. Such thinking was the province of the mystics, and it has never been the mystics who write the histories and craft the doctrines. The Bible may be accepted as sole authority, thumbed through for inspiration or comfort, or overlooked altogether, but it just isn't good scholarship to do all three when the mood strikes and call that a consistent approach. The Bible says what it says. True, it says it differently depending on the translation at hand, and also true, the same stories are told in different voices so as to wind up with different characters in different roles, such as when Jesus' body turns up missing from the tomb — explaining all this keeps literalists busy. Nevertheless, consider, for instance, what the Bible says on the topic of homosexuality and what might be done with that information. First, nothing remotely like the term "homosexual" appears in the source documents, that having been coined in the late 19th century. Leviticus refers to a sex act, but what is it exactly? Its injunctions against same-gender sexual relations may refer to any such relations, ever; or relations between two men, but with no application to women; or relations between two men *while*

in a temple during religious ceremonies or elsewhere that's deemed out of bounds, where the rules would have all the weight of a no-smoking ordinance: *this isn't the place for that.*

Bible-following conservatives, and liberals, can choose to interpret as broadly or narrowly as they wish. What is also true, and I would say is most relevant, is that whatever the Bible says about anything is indicative of the opinions of the day, the culture and the people toward whom it was specifically pointed. Among the Hebrews of long ago, certain behaviors were regulated, or were not tolerated at all, under mortal penalty. That is interesting information, if one enjoys learning what ancient people believed, but whether it's information that should be upheld and enforced today won't be found in the ancients' words but in the modern interpreter's heart.

In a Religious Science church or center you are very likely to find a bookstore, or at

least a table or shelf with some variety of books for sale or borrow, many of which will be by Ernest Holmes, who wrote copiously, and some of his students, discussing the Religious Science viewpoint and its application. But you're also very likely to find in the selection various Bible translations, perhaps a *Quran*, or a *Book of Mormon*, or *Rig-Veda*, as well something on Inuit lore or how to make a sand mandala. Not all this material will converge in agreement around any point. It's there to stimulate and widen, not narrow, the field of the reader's spiritual focus. So we might say we are people of many books. Our classes tend to all reference the "textbook," Holmes's *The Science of Mind*, his most exhaustive treatise on our faith system. Yet he didn't mean it to be his final word, and certainly not *the* final one. He continued to mature as a student of life for another three decades after the textbook's appearance in 1926, and his late works, transcribed from class notes (especially the three-volume *Philosophy of Ernest Holmes*, edited by George Bendall) are really his most engaging, brilliant, and fun to read.

Ernest Holmes is not our spiritual authority. He would be the first to tell us this. Nor would he defer to some other teacher, or other corpus of spiritual lore, as being better qualified. He would direct us within the self, as his writings always did. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," may be sung in comfort to a child. But any outer authority telling us so, isn't going to make us feel more loved than we make up our minds to be. Telling us we're sinful

**"The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul."
— R. W. EMERSON, "The Over-Soul"**

wretches isn't going to make us feel as such, either, unless we're already inclined to that style of masochism. The only authority anybody ever really has is in personal spiritual experience. We can argue endlessly over theological points up to and including whether there is a God and "the person convinced against his will is of the same opinion still," as Holmes used to quote.

Then let us proclaim unapologetically that ours is a teaching that rests upon the spiritual authority of the individual's own soul and its convictions. First-hand spiritual experience gives us all we need. Then we might write it down, others may read it, we all roundly agree, and there's a new religion, or a variation on the theme of an existing one.

Nevertheless, a thing is not more true when written for many, than when believed by one, as Emerson points out in "The Over-Soul:" "Our religion vulgarly stands on numbers of believers...He that finds God a sweet enveloping thought to him never counts his company." Is it safe to follow the dictates of your own soul rather than a well-informed and experienced leader? Leaders are useful up to a point, but we must constantly measure their wisdom against our own. No one is closer to God than another, and therefore no one possesses more truth. Trustworthy leaders are quick to point this out.

Using Jesus as a prime example of someone who followed his own, so to speak, star, consider the Matthew passage. He delivered his sermon on the mount, it is said, not as a scribe — or one who writes, or one who recites what has been written. Alarming, he departed from any existing script in order to state his truth which, perhaps for the first time, lauded the "meek" and elevated the "poor in spirit." Perhaps your or my emulating the Christ-nature is about something as subtle, and ultimately earth-shaking, as doing just that.



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