

Modern Perspective on Ancient Truth

By Bruce Martin

A friend of mine of rationalistic temperament, and one who considers himself agnostic, recently questioned me about scripture, raising doubt as to how a person could place trust in scripture as the revealed word of God and, as such, a source of infallible knowledge, when much of what has been proclaimed in scripture simply doesn't hold up to critical examination. To do justice to this question we must first take into account the modern, scientific, rationalistic view itself, that the questioner is expressing, and that is largely taken for granted as the way present-day humanity views the world. At first glance the modern view seems to be in direct opposition to the dominant, scripturally-based, religious view of antiquity. Yet, on careful examination of the historical unfolding of events, modernity emerged, in significant measure, from the ongoing search for truth and the valid methods for its attainment, from the need for a more accurate understanding of self, nature and the world, from the value newly assigned to individual fulfillment, distinct from a person's collective worth, and from the hard-fought right to question and expose dogmatic and oppressive authority. The pioneers of modernity, men like Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton and Descartes were all deeply spiritual, and, according to their own accounts, it was precisely this orientation that led them to new discoveries that yet challenged the traditional religious authority and world view of the day.

From this perspective, modernity can be viewed not retrogressively, as a movement away from Spirit, but rather, a forward step of Spirit awakening further to its own fundamental nature. The move away from traditional religious authority, though carrying with it the possibility of rejecting the transcendent altogether, freed the human psyche from the oppression of a merely conventional, culturally inherited or imposed religiosity. This individuation of self, rooted in the ever-expanding refinement of awareness and discrimination, is crucial to the growth of mature spirituality.

Relevance of Scripture Today

Let us, then, build on the gains inherited from the modern tradition to investigate the possible relevance of scripture today. From this perspective, it would serve the purpose of objective study to approach scripture as a body of evidence left by past researchers of consciousness, and subject it to the criteria of genuine scientific inquiry, rather than demand that it be upheld as a source of infallible knowledge to be accepted on faith alone, thus precluding any possibility of invalidation. A substantial body of research on altered states of consciousness across various traditions, from shamanism to Christian mysticism, to Kabbalah, to Buddhism, to Yoga-Vedanta-Hinduism, already exists. Increasingly, this will become a major field of study, as the modern world reconnects with its ancient roots.

The basic components of the scientific method include: hypothesis, the proposition to be proved or disproved; experiment, by which the theory can be tested and repeated by others who subject themselves to the same experimental criteria; and a body of data, the experiential findings, leading to validation or refutation of the theory. Applying this methodology to scripture, we can objectively investigate its claims to valid knowledge. Since scriptures are of many varieties, offering different perspectives, some apparently more comprehensive than others, our investigation would be enhanced by opening it up to a broad range of scripture across various traditions, rather than limiting the discussion to a single tradition.

Progressive States of Awareness

Scriptures themselves cover a range of topics, including, epistemology, ontology, cosmology, moral and ethical principles, methods of practice, such as ritual, worship, prayer, contemplation and meditation, and the progression of consciousness through ever more refined states of being, from psychic awakening, to subtle, archetypal awareness, and onward to liberation, nirvana, satori, mystical union, ecstatic love of God, or nondual awareness. For the purpose of this brief discussion, we can focus, particularly, on the methods of practice, correlating them to the states of awareness disclosed by those methods. This has been the focal point of study already undertaken in most of the research conducted to date. It is also the part of scripture most readily amenable to testing and repetition, and hence, to validation or refutation.

The basic claim of scripture, especially those of mystical orientation, is that anyone who undergoes the methodology, while meeting the emotional, moral, volitional and mental conditions required by that methodology, will experience a successive freeing of consciousness into correspondingly subtle and more expansive states of awareness and being. In their book *Transformations of Consciousness*, Jack Engler and Daniel P. Brown have reviewed a cross-cultural study of meditative states comparing the paths of Yoga-Vedanta, Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism and Pali Theravada Buddhism. The evidence not only validates the claims of these traditions, but also indicates that in spite of divergent doctrinal views of reality, meditation in all three traditions proceeds through the same basic progression in terms of the deeper, underlying structures of consciousness.

A New and Higher Center of Gravity

When these findings are considered in the light of developmental theory, as posited by the growing field of transpersonal psychology, it would appear that meditation is a subtle technology for disclosing the higher reaches of consciousness. With this understanding, the scriptures delineating these methods can be viewed as a vast body of evidence pertaining to the highest potentials of human unfolding, and worthy of minute investigation and reevaluation in modern terms, free of dogmatic and oppressive claims.

The central concern of scripture, then, as the common thread running through divergent wisdom traditions, is not merely to access higher or altered states of awareness, but to shift the entire context of awareness—attention, feeling, volition and action—to a new and higher center of gravity. The aim, in other words, is to effect an integration of mind, body and soul within the all-encompassing ground and context of Spirit. In essence, the scriptural record is an investigation of this hidden, yet innate, human capacity, and it is the legacy left by past explorers of consciousness, as our common inheritance. To neglect it, is to deny and limit the fulfillment of our human potential, to impoverish our lives and the world in which we live.