

Religious Authority and the Christian Dispensation

THE LAW was given by Moses, but Grace and Truth came by Christ Jesus.” These words from John 1 refer to two forms or phases of authority and truth which correspond to two stages in an individual’s spiritual development. Let us consider this development with respect to the cited passage.

THE MOSAIC DISPENSATION

Fallen man, man oriented exclusively to the world of sense perception, cannot recognize truth without knowing error. Error stems from ignorance of Cosmic Law, from spiritual amnesia, and manifests through the impulses of an ungoverned and unenlightened desire nature by which man sows seeds of confusion and suffering and thereby reaps a bitter harvest. Mosaic Law and Old Testament morality were formulated by lofty Guardians of human evolution and imposed on pre-Christian man to aid him in curbing his instinctive lower nature by inculcating fear of the repercussions of his immoral or illegal actions. Initially, physical punishment and deprivation of material benefits acted as deterrents to the expression of selfish tendencies. Jehovistic religions taught and continue to teach a preponderant awareness of sin and error. To the degree they teach Truth at all, they teach it negatively, from the vantage point of what it is not. They teach the separation of man from the unapproachable, awe-ful sublimity of Deity. They establish obedience to external authority as the ideal, and they locate this authority in a priesthood which categorically determines Truth, functions as a spiritual police, and serves as a dispensary of salvation.

When, through the wisdom gleaned by suffering from ignorant acts springing from selfish motives, man attains to considerable control over his lower

desire nature, he ceases to profit from prohibitive Old Testament authority. Then his budding spiritual awareness demands a higher Teaching, and he gratefully awakens to and embraces the New Testament teachings whose keyword is “love.” We should understand, however, that love will ever be the euphemistic substitute for personal desire, however subtle or refined, until man’s lower self becomes wholly subject to the control of the spiritualized mind and until its basic desire energies are fully transmuted by the spiritual will. Then love will be understood as the mighty power maintaining cosmic manifestation—as the embodiment of the Second Person or Principle of Triune Deity, whose active working manifests as Living Truth.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

As each of us journeys out of the Egypt of an Old Testament world and stands at the threshold of the Christ-permeated New Testament consciousness, we come to discern the pivotal role that the *persona* of John the Baptist plays in this transition from the worldly to the esoteric dimension of conscious being. The Bible unfolds the spiritual drama whose manifold characters we each in turn re-create and project as we make our way from the first Adam in Eden to the second Adam, the Christ, in the New Jerusalem. Although John was the greatest of beings born of woman—born of flesh—yet he is the least in the Kingdom of Heaven; that is, one who is born of spirit is greater than he.

As prototype of an intermediate phase in our spiritual career, John takes the law of Moses and the outward authority of the old dispensation and applies it to his own conduct and life with a terrific zeal, purging and clarifying his consciousness. John builds the Law into the Ego ark of his own living

tabernacle. In turn, his moral strength and spiritual authority stem from his mighty self-discipline. He brings the desire nature totally under the control of the will. And no outward law can ever check or chasten one who has taken it upon himself to prepare the way for the indwelling Christ with the requisite energy and vision. Generally speaking, the Old Testament primarily works on the desire body. The New Testament exerts its major influence on man's vital and mental bodies by encouraging and strengthening the faculties of loving and knowing. John marks the period of conversion of emphasis from the old to the new.

The John in each of us reaches the point where outward authority and man-originated law are superfluous to continued spiritual development because they condition the mind to dwell on and think exclusively in terms of the merciless perspective of violation, sin, and condemnation. Under the Law, all are sinners. Who, then, is fit to judge?

Not one. Who dares, in all conscience, cast any stone? Christ, the immeasurably greater, suffered Himself to be baptized by John, the merely mortal. Christ comes to our physical person—to the prepared "John vehicle"—in each of us. Christ, the only blameless, suffered and suffers himself to carry the planetary cross of selfishness and error, in order that its appalling weight might be somewhat lifted from the shoulders of humanity and that, through love, humanity might begin to redeem its



Oil on canvas, Hans Holbein (1497-1543), National Gallery of Scotland

Allegory of the Old and New Testaments

Holbein's pictorial allegory is a gloss of John 1:17: "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." The word "lex" appears above the kneeling Moses who is receiving the tables of law from Jehovah. As Paul writes in Romans, "By the law is knowledge of sin" ("peccatum" is written above Eve beguiled by the serpent) and the wages of sin is death ("mors" is imprinted on the casket containing the skeleton). The plight of man ("homo"), sitting on the rock of spirit-imprisoning earth, is given in the lament of Paul: "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" The prophet Isaiah has the answer and points to the Virgin Mary: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Is. 7:14). Mary, the purified soul, is full of grace ("gratia" appears above the cross-bearing cherub), the Christ Spirit, the Truth which incarnates in the man Jesus. The serpent raised up by Moses in the wilderness prefigures the lifting up of the crucified Son of Man ("our justification") The attention of distraught man is directed by John the Baptist to the Lamb of God ("Agnus Dei") "which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). So is death, "the last enemy," destroyed: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Note the tree, emblematic of the vital body, blighted on the law side and flourishing on the side of grace and truth.

fallen state. Continuing love, the active and ongoing forgivingness of sins, is the panacea brought by the Christ to mankind. This is the unmerited healing power given as grace by the Father through the Son, by which we may and will raise ourselves above the judgmental and condemnatory perspective of Old Testament morality.

ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY IN HISTORY

Grace and Truth came by Christ Jesus. The spiri-

tual aspirant of the Aquarian dispensation, especially the one whose development requires heavy infusions of higher philosophy and metaphysics, is called upon by his curious or skeptical brethren to justify his knowledge. His task is not easy because those who inquire of him may not appreciate the profound transformation signified by the interiorizing of authority. To the casual observer, this change may outwardly be equated with mere subjectivism and personal convenience. Thus, the historical Christ Jesus frequently was confronted by proponents of the old order who demanded of Him by what authority He taught, healed, and generally conducted Himself. Frequently, His actions and words had no doctrinal precedent or appeared to be outright blasphemy.

We might benefit from a brief look at religious authority as it has been exercised in the more recent Western tradition. Religious authority is the formalization of what was, originally, divine inspiration and revelation received by spiritually evolved persons. The authority, following in the wake of these revelations, describes the institutionalization of Spirit, whereby that which is heavenly is taken over by earthly organizations and used to expand and justify their worldly power. Orthodox religions, and religions generally, conveniently tend to forget their own transcendent origins. They tend to forget that the power they exercise is borrowed or vicarious. They claim primacy and irrefutability for their doctrines when, in fact, only the divine Source of the Truth they purvey is primary and undeniable. When early Christianity was being amalgamated into the Roman political regime, the executors of this empire took every measure systematically to root out all trace of the pre-existing mystery cults which made spiritual truths accessible to the duly prepared candidate. The Roman state aimed to be the sole dispenser of spiritual truth and foisted the delusion that Spirit beings and spiritual experience would work only through the access of emperors and their appointed ministers. Thus the Catholic religion was from early times established as a theocracy—that is, a spiritual monopoly. The tremendous power of the Mother Church dictating all facets of life to a captive laity became, with the approach of the Renaissance and the rampant abuse of office and

the sacraments, intolerable. The Protestant Reformation was the consequence.

Martin Luther asserted the primacy of the individual conscience in determining spiritual truth. He re-established the priority of the inner voice as the high priest of one's religious life. Yet Protestantism, too, went the way of formalism and intolerance, splintering into a myriad of sects, each with its code of observances and anathemas.

AUTHORITY AND THE MODERN ASPIRANT

The modern aspirant to higher wisdom recognizes no *true* spiritual authority in political fiat or ecclesiastical mandate. He has made a momentous transition from an exoteric to an esoteric perspective and he discerns in the Christing of Jesus a universal paradigm applicable (eventually) to all evolving humanity. This signifies the marriage or fusion of the terrestrial man and the celestial man, the outer personality and the inner individuality, the Son of Man (lifted up) and the Son of God (descended to Earth). To him who assigns outer authority with complete rulership over his life and retains the exoteric perspective, Jesus Christ was either a man among men, however exemplary, or an historical superman, but lost in time. To him who awakens to his own Divine nature and begins to participate in the being of his sacred I, Jesus was the mortal vehicle and vessel for the living, universally individual, Christ Spirit, even as the Simon Peter in each of us, eventually, can perceive and testify spiritually.

The Way, the Truth, and the Life are open to all, directly from within—a condition obtaining from the time of the crucifixion of Christ Jesus and the rending of the Temple veil. In fact, only through individual effort can one now attain to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not simply the gratuity conferred for refraining from violating the Ten Commandments. Even less is it the Sunday dispensation of one's neighborhood church.

AUTHORITY AND WESTERN WISDOM TEACHINGS

Christ now is to be received through the intercession of one's own ministering heart and mind. And what of the Western Wisdom Teachings that describe the magnified context in which the Being of the archangelic Christ appears in Cosmic glory

and power? By what authority are they to be accepted? Initially, by the inherent authority of their very reasonableness, their fundamental rightness, and the deep and vital appeal they make to our fullest understanding. What better criteria do we have at the outset than that our questions can be answered rationally, contradictions can be resolved, and diverse theories and facts can be systemized and harmonized? There is no coercion here, and no metaphysical passing the buck by invoking dubious outer authorities or invoking ecclesiastical infallibility.

The procedure of validating spiritual truth, prior to confirmation by first-hand revelation, is identical to the method employed in the physical sciences wherein, at the outset, we accept as true those theories which explain and order the phenomena of sense-experience. Likewise, we accept on a provisional basis the plausible formulations of the science of Spirit relating to cosmic structure, origin, and event and put them to the test. Do they bring light and order to experience? Do they answer questions arising out of everyday occurrence?

It is abundantly clear, however, that occult truths are not the end of our seeking. On the contrary, they are the beginning of our living with purpose and dedication in the fraught and fret of day-to-day circumstance. This day-to-day experience is the fire that will try the quality of what we deem to be true, whether it is of man or God.

The first and foremost precept of the aspirant living along the lines of the Rosicrucian philosophy is that Christ Jesus will be his ideal, and a second precept is that the student shall refer to his inner self as the ultimate and most reliable source of Truth. The synthesis of these two precepts clearly indicates that true authority proceeds from within and from on high: from the Christ within. The author of true authority is the Higher Self, which partakes of the selfsame divinity as does the Godhead. Truth is not from mortal man but from the God in man. Outward man merely receives, manifests, and demonstrates. As Paul puts it, “we have this treasure [of the knowl-

edge of the Glory of God] in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the Power may be of God and not of us” (2 Cor. 4:7). Humans are expressive channels for and exemplars of the one Truth—the Logos or Word begotten of His Father before all worlds.

The Spirit of Truth, or Holy Spirit, is the Comforter because He has come to man as witness and confirmation of the ongoing Cosmic Deed of the Christ. The Truths imparted by the Holy Spirit



Opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper. J. James Tissot, 1836-1902, Brooklyn Museum

The Chief Priests Ask by What Authority

Christ Jesus makes clear the source of his authority by pointing heavenward.

testify to the Love of Christ and His continuing cosmic sacrifice. The Lord of Love has descended from the heart of the Sun and taken up his lowly abode in the abused body of planet Earth and, especially, in the fallen form of humanity, that we might attain unto the conscious realization of our divine natures and repossess them in wisdom and in strength.

Christ in man is the one revealed Truth by which all men are made one, even as all the members of our physical bodies are indissolubly linked together by the indwelling Ego. Because Christ is in all and all are in Christ, one man is, essentially, neither more nor less than another. Similarly, we cannot say that the arm is more than the leg or the heart is better than the head. Since each man is a living part of the living Christ, none is dispensable. Likewise, if one part ails, the entire body is affected.

Esoteric Christianity comprehends all teachings

within. It recognizes differences and it accounts for disparities. Subsidiary doctrines and specific techniques may vary, but the core Truth is ever one and the same. By analogy, we may say that a circle has an infinite number of radii, but only one center. It is not a question of which religion is right or true. God is Right and True, and the vital religion describes the life consecrated to the realization of the Son of God in man. It is not which path to choose, for there is but one Path, at once individual and universal. On Earth, there is one common air. It is the one life of us all, physically, even as we breathe separately. Likewise, there is one spiritual air or Life that we, individually, each in our inimitable way, enfold, which is Christ: "I Am the Way." "I Am the Door." The name may change but the spiritual Being remains the same. Christ is the way. Christ is within: in the center of and permeating our solar system; in the center of the spiritual Earth; in our souls; at the heart of our daily lives. In fact, Christ, speaking through Jehovah, identifies Himself to an anxious Moses, troubled by the burden of authority he is to assume, as "I am the I AM." Christ is not a doctrine. Christ is not a teaching. Christ is. Christ is Love, unfathomable Power, Light brighter than mere mortal sight can behold.

The brain-bound mind can assent to or dissent from any thesis brought to its attention; it may accept or reject any theory. This movement of the mind is itself of no consequence if the will does not seize upon the formulated truth and ground it, bring it into the marketplace of daily life, and use it. Herein is Truth tested. Truth is pragmatic: it works; it is useful; it endures the daily onslaught. Words come easy. Rather, try the words, whether they come from mortal man or from the God in man.

As a personal criterion for the Truth to which we may aspire, we may apply the words of Christ: my doctrine is not mine but His that sent me. If any man do the Will of the Father, he will know of the doctrine, whether it be of God or whether man speaks of himself. And what is the Father's Will? That we love one another even as He has loved us. Love, then, is the criterion by which we determine the authority, that is, the truthfulness or authenticity, of a teaching.

What does love enjoin? It urges a living in, to,

and for the Whole, the One; it urges selfless service. The servant is not greater than the Master, and the Master gave his life. We, too, may give our life daily in service to God, working for the upliftment of our total immediate environment, praying, praising, making every effort to keep alert peace in our minds and purity of motive in our hearts. Love urges and demonstrates simplicity, humility, harmony, compassion, nonjudgment. Love manifests in continuous readiness to be of use to others. As acts of service build the soul body, the reflecting ether shall make known to man truths not dreamt of by his brain-bound philosophy.

THE EXPERIENCE OF TRUTH

In *Teachings of an Initiate* (p. 136) we read: "As the luminous soul body grows in and around a person, this light will teach him or her about the mysteries without need of books, and one who is thus God-taught knows more than all the books in the world contain."

Or, as this truth is formulated in I John 2:27: "The anointing which ye have received of Christ abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you; But the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth." John's visions as set forth in Revelation refer, in part, to the book of living wisdom that we each are; that is, each of us is a book or Bible bound by seven seals. These seals are loosed to him who awakens the vital centers or convokes the churches to which each corresponds, and he thus becomes God-taught. These etheric centers serve as messengers of the Word of God.

God imparts truth to them who are ready to receive it. "When ye have lifted up the son of man, then shall ye know that I AM He." As Thomas à Kempis expressed the idea: "If thy heart were right, then every creature would be to thee a mirror of life and a book of Holy Doctrine. If thou were good and pure within, then wouldst thou discern all things without impediment and understand them rightly."

"I AM the Truth." As we set about seeking the Source of living Truth and inspiration within our beings, let us realize that the Word intones its high forms in our hearts and minds to the degree that we have put off the old man, the personal self, and put on the New Man, the planetary Self, which partici-

pates in the fellowship of humanity as the very body of Christ and knows all separative distinctions, all outward differences, as fundamental illusions tempting us to deny the living presence of the unifying Life Spirit, which is the high body of Christ. Therefore, that which does not contribute to the well-being of the planetary whole, that which favors a part to the exclusion of its larger context is, ultimately, false.

APPLICATION OF TRUTH

Again, one cannot really know the Truth until one brings it into one's life and makes it part of the flesh and blood of daily experience. Truly, Christ is the bread and the blood of life. All too commonly what passes for religion is a temporary solution to life's problems by means of which an individual can obtain short term security without changing his life and his apparent being. This is a great deception. The inner experience of spiritual certainty, the I-identification with Christ (rather than imitation or even emulation) demands an utter transformation of life. As Max Heindel describes it, the structure we are is broken down to its basic components, which then may be restructured, with Christ as the foundation and cornerstone. We deceive ourselves if we think this dismemberment and restructuring do not alter us to our very core. We remember the lines of Angelus Silesius: "The cross on Golgotha thou lookest to in vain,/ Unless within thyself it be set up again." In a real sense, each of us is Jesus. Each of us, as the Son of Man, ultimately re-enacts the Christ experience: "Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born/ And not within thyself, thy soul will be forlorn."

The Christ Truth designates the Way that life transcends itself. It is the Way the soul of man soars above its mortal coil and its mutable forms. We must look to our lives here and now if we are to find the Truth that liberates from the suffering and error incident to this same momentary perspective. We must love Truth into vital being. We must inject our hearts, our minds, and our souls into this continuous *now*. Then we will know the Truth and the Truth will set us free. Then we will know even as we are now and ever known.

Let us resolve to prove our readiness to receive

ALONG THE ROAD

I walked a mile with Pleasure;
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne'er a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.

—R.B. Hamilton

what we seek—which is what seeks us. Far more earnestly than we, does It seek to disclose Itself to us. For Truth comes down to us from the realms of light, ordering and sustaining creation. Christ waits at the door on the side of Light. We are striving upward and inward, from out of ignorance and darkness, dimly comprehending what we seek, knowing that it awaits our readiness, our sanctification, through full victory over our lower natures, our ennoblement through years of selfless service.

We gain little by looking to others for confirmation of our spiritual understanding. From others we sometimes receive consolation. With others we may and do live in spiritual fellowship. The truths and convictions of others, however, cannot be imported as our own spiritual I-identity. Truth proceeds from within and awaits the giving of our lives to it. Truth is quickened by our inner strivings and our tireless aspirings. Let us each strive to be worthy to enter those inner precincts where the living Truth is found and can be experienced.

From our present vantage on the path of spiritual unfoldment, we may state with certainty that our higher understanding, our wisdom, increases and deepens directly with our capacity to experience and live spiritual love.

Finally, when we speak of spiritual enlightenment, we speak of establishing the Christ in each. We earnestly strive to be invested by His Spirit as our guiding light. If we live by the highest truth we know, and in love, we shall grow in all ways into the perfect man, even unto the fullness of the stature of Christ. □

—C.W.