

Epistemology 1

(How we come to know spiritual and theological truth)

How do we know when it comes to spiritual and theological truth? How do we know anything about God or Jesus or the Spirit, about human nature and destiny, about the resurrection, life after death and our hope for this world and beyond? How do we measure truth in our beliefs and right from wrong?

We live in a world dominated by a scientific understanding of how truth is derived. It has to be demonstrated by experimentation, and it has to be measurable in some material way. But when it comes to love or hurt and harm or many other things that are at the core of life lived and experienced, such measurement is ineffectual. And this is certainly the case with many of our less than tangible beliefs like God. So then, what is our criterion for truth?

Christianity is not on the same page when it comes to all of this, and this is certainly the case with criteria for spiritual truth. However, let me offer what I believe are three core questions I ask of any faith or truth claim when it comes to spiritual teaching or doctrinal belief.

1) Does compassion shine forth in it? Does the teaching inspire, evoke and raise up compassion as the highest good? Whether it's God or Jesus or the Spirit, the church, human nature and destiny, life after and a vision of the future kingdom of God we are called to live out of here and now in our serving and loving, is compassion the beginning, middle and end shining brightest in it?

2) Does the teaching engage human vulnerability? Does it recognize compassionately that even as we are created out of love and for love, our vulnerability as humans makes us afraid and insecure, and such fear and insecurity often leads to thinking that judges and mistrusts, and behaviour that seeks to dominate and control what appears a threat in some way. Human freedom and destiny are all about the flourishing of love and yet love is often a big casualty when our human vulnerability throws us off in times of crisis, when we are attacked or threatened in some way or perceive we are, or the day to day grind wears us down spiritually eroding our love in relation. Any solid teaching or doctrine in Christianity must engage human vulnerability with honesty, depth and compassion.

3) Does the teaching promote justice? How does compassion meet both the victim and the perpetrator of human vulnerability gone wrong? How does justice atone for the wrong, inspire healing rather than revenge, and encourage forgiveness even as it seeks to accompany the wounded through a journey of healing which also calls for accountability and reparation? Any good theology and spirituality must inspire at its core the kind of compassion that is robust enough and honest enough to integrate the harms and traumas of life that require accountability and responsibility too.

So then, compassion, human vulnerability and justice? Three core criteria for evaluating spiritual and theological truth.

OK, so why not end this post with an example. The doctrine of hell has been part of Christian theology for 2000 years. Although the Old Testament never mentions it, it is part of a cosmic narrative in the New Testament. But how does it stand up to our three-question criteria for truth? Does it hold up compassion as the highest good? No it does not. If hell is the last destination of any living soul, it is also a declaration that in some cases love cannot win. It also teaches that justice is often about revenge as there is no option left for repentance or reform in hell. Hell traditionally conceived is about eternal suffering and torture with no parole. Is God less merciful than even the most basic of human justice systems? Hell traditionally conceived also teaches that human vulnerability gone wrong is terminal and God's compassion is not great enough to meet and transform life here and now and in the life to come.

OK, so what do we do with those bible passages that mention hell? We go back and read them again using our very same questions as criteria. And what do we find? We find hell used by those with power religious and political to keep people afraid and ashamed in their vulnerability, and also dependent on the institution to save them in this life and the next. Rather than throw it out altogether, Jesus and the New Testament turn the very concept of hell against those who use it as a threat most – the religious authorities and the power elite. In all of Jesus' parables, for example, hell is turned into a threat for the rich and powerful, and that includes the whole temple establishment and Pharisaic power-hungry zealots. Alternatively, Jesus proclaims and embodies the empowering and resurrecting love of God to the common people, planting the seeds for their freedom. When enough love meets human vulnerability, hearts are opened in trust, change becomes possible and justice with healing and reconciliation rather than revenge becomes a real option. That's what the kingdom of God Jesus was proclaiming is all about.

So then, is hell real? Is it true? My thoughts: Hell is a place and a space where love is totally absent, a place and a space that is emptiness of love and therefore total darkness. God cannot be where love is not, for God is love. Can you? Can you ever imagine a place and a space where there is no love? I would never want to be there and I'm sure you wouldn't want to be there either. God created all things in love, and even when they and we stray far from love, we are never totally emptied of it either. And so, there is hope, there is always hope in this life and the next.

Criteria are important and they help us uncover deep spiritual truth. This also includes shining a light on bad Christian teaching and doctrine used for centuries to control, dominate and dehumanize in the name of God. What do you think?