

2 ISSUE 1: TRUTH IS RELATIVE

BEN'S STORY

My early childhood was one of unhappiness, bitterness, and deep psychological scars which I sought to dispel with pseudo-intellectualism in college. Then, during a stint in Vietnam, which added to my restlessness and anxiety, I began to seek out abstract philosophies and acquired a strong interest in metaphysics. Tapping into my inner resources, I thought, would help me to overcome the inconsistencies of my life. This led to a study of eastern religions and the use of mind-altering drugs. Endlessly, I sought release through Zen philosophy, astral travel, transcendental meditation, Nichiren Shoshu, and other such avenues. I believed I had found the mainstream of truth as I explored the meaning of life, reality, and my own identity. However, while these philosophies brought a semblance of peace, I was unable to dispel the restless hunger within me.

TOPICS

New Age Ideas about Truth

New Age and the Theory of Knowledge

What the Bible Teaches

DESCRIBING YOUR WORLDVIEW . . .

WHAT ARE YOUR BELIEFS CONCERNING KNOWLEDGE?

As you begin this lesson, consider the following questions which will help you to identify and describe your views on knowledge, one of the five components of a well-rounded worldview. Use your notebook to write your impressions in answer to each of these questions:

1. Is knowledge about the world possible?
2. Is sense experience reliable?
3. What is the place of reason in discovering knowledge?
4. Can we know God?
5. Is truth absolute, or is it relative?
6. Can religious faith and reason coexist?

NEW AGE IDEAS ABOUT TRUTH

The old adage, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” becomes, for followers of the New Age worldview, “*Truth* is in the eye of the beholder.” Each person has his or her own truth. What you believe to be true is true for you, and what I believe is true for me. That point of view helps us to understand why the New Age worldview includes such an eclectic mix of Eastern and Western religions: the occult; pantheism; a profound, subjective, mystical experience; and even some of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. As Nash says, “It is difficult . . . to get a clear grasp of the major elements of the New Age perspective. The experience is not unlike that of attempting to pick up a handful of sand on a seaside beach. The harder one squeezes the sand, the more it slips through one’s fingers.”⁴

According to New Age thinking, truth is relative. Each person has his or her own truth. Something may be true for me and not true for you. Or something may be true in one situation, but not in another. When New Age author Shirley MacLaine asked an occultist if he believed reincarnation was a “fact,” he responded, “It’s not a question of whether it’s true but more a question of how it works. . . . Who knows if it’s true? It’s true if you believe it and that goes for anything, right?”⁵

This acceptance of relative truth makes it possible for people with a New Age worldview to draw from many contradictory sources ideas that fit their particular immediate experience. They often quote the Bible (where it agrees with their personal beliefs), or the sacred writings of Buddha, or the sayings of popular channelers (name for *mediums* in New Age terminology), and in doing so give each equal value.

This reminds me of an encounter I had in West Africa with an elderly woman who wanted to join the church. I asked her why she wanted to join, and she replied, “I have joined every religious group in town, because I don’t know which of them is true, and I want to be sure I belong to the right one when I die.”

Many New Agers rely for their “Truth,” to a great extent, on the messages they receive from *spirit guides* through channelers. Ruth A. Tucker describes a message that came from a spirit guide named Soli, who spoke through channeler Neville Rowe. Speaking before a large crowd of people (who had paid to hear him), Rowe gave this message from Soli: “You are here to search for yourself. The highest recognition you can make is that I am what I am. All that is, is. You are God. You are, each and every one, part of the Second Coming.” To which someone in the crowd “shouted out, asking if murderers were God, too. Soli responded, ‘Your truth is your truth. My truth is my truth.’”⁶

NEW AGE AND THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Can we know what is true? Philosophers today generally recognize four possible sources of knowledge.⁷ They are:

1. *An authority*: The testimony of people of integrity who are recognized as authorities in their specialized field.
2. *Our five senses*: Also known as *sensationalism* or *empiricism*, this source of knowledge teaches us facts, such as *fire burns*, *water is wet*, *fried chicken tastes good*. However, our senses may also sometimes mislead us, and our empirical knowledge can be distorted by our expectations, prejudices, or emotions.
3. *Rationalism* or *thinking*: Reason is seen as the major source of

knowledge by rationalists. The human mind is actively involved in acquiring knowledge, and thinking is the instrument for discovering knowledge. The mind is able to distinguish between true and false, right and wrong by comparing opposing ideas. The mind also has the ability to create and to imagine.

4. *Intuition.* This source of knowledge has been described as a direct insight into truth or an immediate feeling of certainty about something. Intuition seems to be an inborn, instinctive reaction to life, a natural response of life to particular problems that arise. Some people see intuition as part of the mystical realm or mystical knowledge which comes from an external source. There are a number of widely divergent views on the subject of intuition as a source of knowledge.

Christians would add one more source of knowledge to those sources identified by philosophers: *revelation*. Christians believe God has revealed the truth about himself, human beings, and the universe in His Word, the Holy Bible, and that His written Word is a reliable source of knowledge about things we could not otherwise know.

BEN'S STORY PART 2

I met Sally while I was in the Army. She was beautiful, gentle, and free-spirited, a trait which appealed to my own sense of abandon. We soon married, and after my release from the Army, we decided to live in Mexico where we could bask in the sun and fully enjoy life. But this lifestyle did not satisfy long, and soon we returned to California with a determination to extend our search for meaning in life by a deeper study of the mysteries of philosophy and metaphysics. We were looking everywhere for a truth which would help us to make sense of our world and our place in it. Nothing satisfied.

Ben is typical of so many people who have a sincere desire to make their lives count for something, but do not know where to find the truth. Could that be said of you as well? The New Age worldview is appealing to many because it teaches that each person is divine by nature and can therefore create his or her own reality (or version of truth). It teaches that people are limited only by their lack of knowledge. As we shall see later in this study, Ben's search for truth led him down some strange and difficult paths.

The New Age point of view—that all spiritual paths lead to the same goal, even though these various paths are contradictory—is another example of the relativistic theory of knowledge held by New Agers. Yet they will also claim that biblical Christianity should be rejected because it is dangerous. It is the one path rejected by all New Agers.

Roger Olson points out that the relativism of New Agers is itself an inconsistency. Nash quotes him as saying,

In spite of attractive denials of exclusive truth, most New Agers believe that all other worldviews and belief systems are fundamentally flawed while theirs is the pure wisdom of Higher Knowledge, above rational embrace or criticism.⁸

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES

Is truth absolute? Are there universal truths? The founders of the United States of America believed so. Their introduction to the Declaration of Independence includes these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” What *truths* were they talking about?

1. All people are created equal.
2. We are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, including the right to *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*.

The Bible also holds certain truths to be *self-evident*. For example, the Bible *assumes* God's existence from the first verse of Genesis. The apostle Paul indicated this was a self-evident truth when he stated:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Romans 1:18–20)

Jesus declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father [God] except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus prefaced many of His declarations with these words: “I tell you the truth” (John 5:19,24; 6:26,32,53; 8:34; and others). Another time He said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31). One of His strongest declarations of truth is in John 8:42–47:

If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.

The devil's first untruth recorded in the Scriptures is the lie he put in the mouth of the serpent when he asked Eve:

“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

The woman said to the serpent, . . . “God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:1–5)

As the story continues, we discover that Eve believes the serpent and eats the fruit. She also gives it to Adam, her husband, to eat. This brings the curse of death upon them and their descendants (3:19). The same lie the devil told Eve is the one he is telling those who caught up in today's

New Age worldview: “*You will be like God.*” In this respect, the New Age worldview is not new.

Douglas Groothuis says the New Age worldview is “the most recent repeat of the second oldest religion, the spirituality of the serpent. . . . Satan lied; Adam and Eve complied; and we all died.”⁹ As we shall see in Lesson 6, the devil is still up to his ancient trick of trying to deceive men and women into believing they are equal to God. He counterfeits everything Christians hold dear, including Christ, prophets, miracles, angels, spirits, doctrine, and gospels.¹⁰ Satan is called “*the tempter*” because he is an expert at enticing people to follow “counterfeit” spirituality. We must constantly be on guard against his deceptive ways. As Jesus declared, “There is no truth in him” (John 8:44). Our best defense is the truth of God’s Word: “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Ephesians 6:11).

When people insist that truth is relative and whatever they believe to be true is, for them, the Truth, the result is chaos. The Old Testament has examples of this. Twice we read the words: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). The people, lacking a godly leader, abandoned the standards for right living given to them in the Ten Commandments. The result was hatred, anarchy, and upheaval as the people gave themselves over to idolatry and immorality, each one doing “what was right in his own eyes” (21:25 NKJV).

In Lesson 3, we will look at the New Age understanding of the spirit world as a very real and powerful resource into which knowledgeable people can tap to realize their spiritual potential.