

Do holy books speak? More importantly, do we listen?



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When I was a jail chaplain one of the most satisfying parts of my work was bringing books inside to prisoners. These were mostly "spiritual" or "inspirational" books like "Daily Word," "Each Day a New Beginning" (AA meditations) or selections from "wisdom teachers." What surprised inmates the most was how happy I was to bring them scriptures. I handed out hundreds of free Bibles, but I also honored requests for other holy books as well as pagan, wiccan and other literature incarcerated people have a constitutional right to access.

Many people think there is only one "true" scripture, which is a nice idea but doesn't hold water in the real world. Jews have their Torah; Christians have their Bible; Muslims have their Qur'an; Hindus have their Gita; Buddhists have their Sutras; Sikhs have their Granth Sahib; and of course there are Mormon books and Christian Science books and many many more. There is a world of scripture for a world of religions.

What makes one book exceptionally special for some is the belief that it was "given," "handed down," "delivered" or even dictated by a god or gods. And this makes those who "received a revelation" very exceptionally special, too. Unfortunately, many forget or choose to ignore the fact that they and their cherished book are but one patch stitched into the massive quilt of belief.

Let's talk about one book, the only sacred scripture most Americans ever read: the Bible. The word "bible" simply comes from the Greek word, *by-blos*, meaning "book." Some say this one book is the most published on the planet. I have no doubt (Gideons has distributed more than 2 billion copies). The Qur'an is a close second, and there are millions of copies of the Hindu Vedas and Bhagavad Gita (Song of the Lord) as well.

People say "old" and "new" testa-



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ments but after thousands of years I think we can say it's all pretty old. Old doesn't mean it isn't worthwhile to read, that there aren't some stories worth retelling in those ancient pages. But as Emerson asked, why shouldn't we too have an "original relation" to the universe, nature, god? Why should we always look over our shoulder and listen to voices from long ago? Isn't there a "God's word" spoken today? If so, how would we know?

Holy books raise a whole library full

of questions!

Once, in a gathering of jail inmates, I asked the question, "What does the Bible say?" This caused puzzled looks all around. After a number of comments and guesses, I joked that "The Bible doesn't say anything; it's a book. People say what they think it says." Some groans. Some heads nodding.

It wasn't really a joke, you see. The truth was sinking in. A book does not speak. If we rely on "authorities" to tell us what the book says and what it

means, we are relying on them to tell us what a divine voice says. As long as we keep that in mind, we'll be fine. Maybe. It might be more important to read it for ourselves and think about it. We might decide we don't believe some of the things written thousands of years ago. Who says that's a bad thing?

We've all heard of people who have died for a book. And sadly, we hear of people who kill for a book. Books that are supposed to be sacred sources of peace and compassion and justice. Strange how we handle them — use and misuse them.

Naturalist John Burroughs wrote of "Nature's great book" and said it is important "to see with your reason as well as with your perceptions, that is to be an observer and to read the book of nature aright" ("Reading the Book of Nature," in "Ways of Nature," 1905). It's hard to be a good observer of the world around us if we have our noses in dusty old books that speak of other worlds. The best thing may simply be to read, think, reflect and read more, even as we observe more, learning from the life surrounding us.

A French Jesuit, Jean-Pierre de-Caussade, was a mystic in these matters. He wrote encouragement to some nuns and his writings were published as "The Sacrament of the Present Moment." He essentially said, "living scriptures are being written today." Remarkable words. Wisdom texts are being written now — maybe you and I are writing them? If our spiritual life is rooted in the past, tied only to books and ideas of long ago, we won't hear what we need to hear today.

Maybe, when it comes right down to it, believer or not, Life is our Bible, and it's open for us to read, and to write.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and Interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and freethinker. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, are new to Asheville, but not new to the issues common in all communities. Learn more at chighland.com.

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Fri, Aug 25, 2017