

Emmanuel or E-Manual: Faith by the Book

Without a manual, could Faith function or Religion run?

Manual (adj.): “relating to or done with the hands.” A manual (noun) is a handbook, a text made by manual labor, for people to use their hands (*los manos*) in constructive projects. Yet, manuals can get in the way if we spend too much time reading them and not enough time doing the work, seeing and handling what is before us and making something we can use.

Almost everything comes with a manual of instructions (sometimes ridiculously detailed with nonsensical warnings: “NEVER use this toaster in the shower!”). We have step by step instructions on the parts, how to assemble, how to operate. If we follow the directions, we piece together something that works and we know how to make it work. It operates, and we operate it correctly. A manual guides us through the process; we complete the process and then put the manual away in a drawer or file as a resource, a reference, in case that’s ever needed.

Some would argue that their holy book is not a manual but the “word of god” that needs to be constantly referenced in order to hear and obey that word. In practice, at least in a thoughtful devoted practice, these books (scriptures) aren’t necessarily used in this manner. Many believers contemplate passages for private prayer, meditation or study. Others recite passages publicly to inspire or read texts as sermonic illustrations. Yet, we must ask: What is the primary purpose of a book that is believed to be a guide for life?

The pandemic has revealed more than any revelation about faith, particularly *manual-based* Christian faith in America. We’ve seen and heard a loud chorus of protest from those who claim and proclaim: “Meeting in person is *essential!* God *requires* we gather and hear the Word *together*, especially inside and *unmasked!* It’s our religious liberty!” We’ve learned, if we needed to learn, that for thousands if not millions of believers their faith is more vital than anything or anyone else, their god is more interested in their unquestioning devotion and obedience (and church attendance more critical) than the health and safety of their communities, the general public.

In many ways the current nature of “Me First” faith (which is, we could note, a correlate to “Me and God” faith) can be traced directly back to the use of scripture as a pocket-reference, a manual and unfortunately often as a defensive/offensive weapon.

Let's get to the main question: *What is the central message of any given scripture?* If we asked billions of believers why they turn to their chosen holy book, why it is so important to their life and faith, we would no doubt hear a million different responses. Digging behind all responses, what would we discover to be the central message? Would we also discern those messages (instructions) were similar across most religious texts?

We might hear the central instruction is Love or Compassion, Building Community, Justice or Service. Others might say it is a relationship with God or Salvation. Once we determine the main point of the revered reference book, another manual becomes useful: "Instructions for Loving," "Instructions for Serving," etc. When we open this very small, very short booklet we find one crucial warning: DO NOT use this manual in place of doing the work! DANGER: reading a manual while performing manual labor is hazardous!

Holy-Manual students may recall the line from the writer of Hebrews: "The word of God is living and active" (4:12). It seems believers are not to stop to check a book when *action* is required.

Clearly the issue is not what you are reading but what you are doing. If a book teaches love, then love, do the work. If the instruction is to construct a functioning community, get to it. You don't need to stop and read over and over. The manual got you started. Now you operate the machine, put the completed concept into action. The manual is in the file if and when you need to refer to something. Otherwise, use your mind, use your hands. The manual labor is yours—get busy.

Another angle on this concerns the need for many believers, even liberal people of faith, to have Someone or Something out there in order to fully appreciate and experience the natural world. A reader of one of my columns recently wrote to say (my emphases):

*"I want to thank you for your article in the ACT, titled: 'Breathing and belonging in the sanctuary of nature.' I have never really struggled with faith as I have always identified the wonders that are around us are to me the miracle of **some entity or energy beyond** any scope we can imagine. So I have taken solace at a very early age by being in the presence of these wonders, by walking, hiking in the woods or marveling at the little things one finds on those journeys ...*

When I read your article I was happy that someone could confirm the feelings I have had in regards to spirituality ...

*Being out on a mountain top or surrounded by a grove of white birch with golden leaves on the floor of the forest in the Adirondacks have given me the moments of awe that only **some spirit or entity** was so generous at letting me in on.”*

No doubt I have much in common with this reader’s experience of the “wonders” in Nature. I understand the desire to look beyond it, behind it, above it—even IN Nature, a form of pantheism or panentheism—seeking Something greater, Someone else—“some entity or energy beyond.” I truly do sympathize with this feeling, but to me it is only a feeling. Surely a profound and meaningful **intuitive feeling**, but without any content beyond the emotion. Believing the wonders are “miracles” adds an unnecessary layer, something that we simply can’t bring anyone else into. Your experience of wonder as “miracle” bestowed from beyond, is my experience of wonder and beauty, which is, for me, entirely sufficient and fulfilling.

Even if one’s “manual” (holy or not) describes and explains there is “divinity” or “spirit” active in the world, the direct experience does not justify that projection. You point to a beautiful sunset, canyon or mountain and proclaim: “There, you see? God and His handiwork!” I respond: “Sorry, I don’t see your deity or divine activity, but it sure is a gorgeous natural scene!” Do I take something from you, from your experience? Or does this actually add to, or potentially enhance, what you could experience if there was “nothing but what you see there”?

“Nothing but” may sound hollow or without meaning for some, but for those of us who are happy seculars, *there is literally a world of meaning, a universe of delightful wonder contained in every encounter with the natural cosmos!* The wonder itself is truly wonderful, and incredible—no believing necessary. Far from leaving one feeling empty, there is a sense of fullness, in fact an expansive sense of the greatness and great beauty in the All.

What is a secular’s manual? They are countless and constantly being written as more and more people express their explorations and discoveries in an ever-expanding field of knowledge. Endless scientific and philosophical investigations as well as poetic creations add to the incredible encounter with Everything.

If the holy books of the world were constantly amended, new verses, chapters and supplements appearing all the time, we might have an interesting conversation about that. Yet, they are literally **Closed Books**, Absolute Truth locked in their pages. Each bound copy is not boundless. It is The Final Word. Add to them at your peril; your blasphemous attempts to add more to God’s Word endangers your mortal soul! But I will say it takes something away from my personal experience of a beautiful moment in Nature when someone feels the need to sing a hymn, say a prayer or say

“Praise God!” Let me hasten to add, I would feel the same resistance if a biologist, geologist or physicist exclaimed in that moment: “Let me break it down, explain what is happening here, give you the technical terminology and natural history of all you’re seeing here” (as when a botanist wants to impress us with the Latin names of plants). I may very well be interested in hearing about those things, but let me simply have an immediate (unmediated) experience minus the added interpretation. In other words, I don’t need the religious person or the scientist to impose their beliefs or analyses on the moment of pure awe and wonder. Or, and I think this is the most important for me, simply *let the moment be the moment*. Be quiet and enjoy it! Not to say you can’t or shouldn’t have your thoughts, interpretations and whatever else you need in your head, just leave it be for the rest of us (discuss it later over a tea or brew, write a story, song or poem about it, but, as Buddhists might say, *be present in the presence of the Present—primarily!*).

You can have all the manuals you want, be they holy or secular, but when your manual actually gets in the way of life and living, of having a full and meaningful experience with people, the environment, the cosmos, it is useless and disrespectful to bring that out, literally or figuratively, and drop it into the moment, seizing all the attention.

What I’m calling attention to is how “E-manuals” (digital or paper copies) distract and denigrate a direct experience of the wonder. Even for a believer in a living deity, a manual is a distraction from the experience of divine encounter, if you believe in that. Who needs a book (or a song, prayer, or ritual) when you can meet your “sacred” face to face, to have a “spiritual” encounter? (*Emmanuel*, “God with us,” not “Manual with us.”). Mystics teach that. They don’t focus on books, manuals or even words sometimes.

Ultimately, I suppose, the greatest respect we can show each other is to stand in silence, exchange a smile, nod in recognition, simply walk through a forest, sit on a beach, saunter a mountain trail or participate in the presence of Humanity at our best (people helping people, marching for justice, simple acts of kindness, etc) and be together—no manuals in sight, or mind.

The world is full of manuals. Sometimes they offer us inspirational hints. But Life comes with no instructions. How we use our senses and our hands—our manuals made flesh—is what makes things happen, what matters the most.

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