

Fr. Ron Rolheiser, O M I
Speaker, Columnist and Author
Website: <http://www.ronrolheiser.com/>

Discerning the Truth

2010-06-13

Many of us today tend to be intimidated by any kind of knowledge that makes scientific claims. Who dares argue with science? Who dares argue with the experts? Very few, and those who do are easily dismissed as backward or ignorant.

And so inside of our lives, objectified expertise generally trumps moral insight or, worse still, is simplistically identified with it. Truth is truth, science has the truth, and science trumps our moral concerns (which can be made to appear parochial and fear-based in the face of scientific claims). Thus the idea is prevalent that we should listen to the scientific experts when it comes to discerning the truth.

But is it really that simple? And who really are the experts? What makes someone an expert? A post-graduate degree? Being a mother who's raising her family well? Being a respected researcher? Living a good life? Being steady and faithful? There are various kinds of experts.

Moreover there is also the issue of personal integrity and how this relates to "expertise". What's to be said for the truth of someone who produces scientific insight but who leads an unhealthy life? Does man or a woman's personal life affect his or her research and professional expertise?

Many great thinkers - philosophers, theologians, and even scientists - would say that it does. Truth can never be divorced from moral insight since truth and morality are really one at their base. Hence personal integrity or lack of it in any researcher or scholar in some way does color his or her expertise, however imperceptible this might be on the surface. How?

Aristotle, for example, had a concept he called phronesis, which taught that it is impossible to separate the teaching of truth from the practice of virtue. For Aristotle, genuine knowledge, the type that ultimately makes you a better human being, could not issue forth from someone whose intellectual theory and personal moral life were radically out of sync.

Albert Einstein, in effect, said that it is impossible to do research that does not include a lot of me-search. Who we are and what perspective we have on reality will always help determine how we see the world and articulate any theory about it. And who we are and our perspective on reality is always partly shaped and deeply colored by our own moral lives. Our moral lives deeply influence our research because they help shape our eyesight.

The medieval mystic, Hugo of St. Victor, had an axiom for this: Love is the eye! For him, our eyesight is largely shaped by either the love or bitterness that is inside of us at any moment. When I look at the world with love, I see it one way; when I look at the world with bitterness, I see it another way. That's also true for every researcher. Granted mathematics is beyond emotion, but the realities to which we apply it aren't.

Finally, and not least, Jesus teaches that we see the world accurately only to the extent that we are pure of heart. When he said this he wasn't just talking about having purity of heart in order to see straight religiously, he was affirming that purity of heart is a pre-condition in order to see straight in every way, religiously, morally, practically, and scientifically.

What we see through a microscope is partly colored by how we are feeling about life in general and how we are feeling about life in general is deeply colored by how we are living morally.

And so what's the lesson?

The lesson here is not the one that you sometimes hear in circles of fundamentalist religion, namely, that we should stop listening to scientists, academics, and technological experts and should try to dispute their insights by using

scripture. Our task is not to become defensive about the findings of the various professional academies, to stop studying.

Rather, these are the lessons:

First, honor the findings of genuine science and research even if you aren't always enthralled about their source. All truth has one author, God. Thus God is the source of the bible and God is also the source of science and its findings. Accept truth in all its guises, but be less intimidated by the teachings of those experts who claim scientific objectivity without acknowledging their own limits, their own hidden judgments, and their own biases, particularly when their truth touches questions of health, meaning, morality, and happiness. A good researcher admits elements of me-search, is humble about the truth.

Next, recognize that expertise is a wide charism that issues forth from many circles. There are experts in science, but there are also experts in goodness, in love, in friendship, in kindness, in fidelity, in hope, in peace-making, in courage, in prayer, in honesty, in chastity, in aesthetics, in practical sanity, and in humor.

When you are looking for stars by which to guide your life scan the heavens widely. Don't lock-in on one narrow corner. There are many stars, each with its own particular expertise in giving off light.

Reprinted with permission