

Chapter 7

Open and Closed Societies

It might be argued that authoritative tradition is a fourth approach to truth. But I will maintain that the so-called authoritative tradition has truth value only in so far it is in accord with the three approaches to truth outlined so far.

It is true, however, that the notion of authoritarian truth has played a large role in history. For example, Martin Luther's conflict with the Roman Catholic Church of his time was outwardly staged as a conflict between the authority of the Bible and the authority of the Church. In other words, it was a conflict within one overall system of authority: Biblical authority versus Recent Church Authority. But, within Luther's choice of the Bible as his authority, we can discern a deeper emphasis upon the autonomy of the individual person of faith. Such positioning of the solitary person over against the massive authority of the core institution of that society can be interpreted as a contribution from the pole of contemplative inquiry. Luther loved the Bible because he found in the Bible support for his sense of truth found in his own solitary depths. But quite soon in the history of Protestantism, the authenticity of the solitary person was neglected in favor of a new systems of authority. One example of this is the rigid claim for the propositional veracity of the verses of the Bible (with selected verses having greater authority than others).

The authoritarian view of truth plays a role not only in religious communities but in scientific communities as well. Once Sir Isaac Newton's grand pull-together of basic physics had become "authoritative" for the conduct of "normal" science, there was strong resistance within the community of physicists to the revolutionary innovations being initiated by Albert Einstein and others. While the very essence of the scientific method includes an openness to further truth, scientists can feel quite secure within the older formulations and be defensive concerning those older theories, which they take to be authoritative. Once Einstein's system of physics was spelled out and mostly validated, Einstein himself became engaged in defending his new system from certain developments in quantum mechanics that he never accepted.

Such a conflict between authority and innovation goes on in every arena of culture. As an example, I will sketch how authority and innovation operated in pre-civilization tribal societies. Such societies were very slow to change. Their cultural norms and systems of wisdom had been accumulated over centuries of trial and error and were seen to be well tested truth about which little innovation was needed. Indeed, these societies were slow to adopt innovation. This carefulness had justification, for new things did not have the lived experience and verification of the grandfathers and grandmothers of their society. They realized that human societies are fragile and that new things can have destructive as well as enriching potential. They were aware that nature is a stern Mother who does not put up with innovations that ignore her. The role of the shaman was to live on the edge of society in close contact with nature and nature's mysteries, and from that place of lookout protect individual persons and society as a whole from straying too far from nature's disciplines. In spite of this deeply conservative attitude, these early human communities could change rapidly if their most treasured values could be kept. A new stone tool, a new animal to use, a ritual that healed someone, these innovations could be quickly integrated into the whole. In some measure, ancient tribal societies were open societies, and they had been for thousands of years.

The dawn of civilization was both a radical innovation and a new sort of authoritarianism. It was radically innovative in terms of pulling together many small parochial, conservative tribal groups into a unified whole of greater numbers, greater

scope of consciousness, and brand new patterns of social structure. This closer proximity of formerly separated groups forced dialogue on hitherto-ignored topics. This expanded dialogue fostered elements of openness and fresh innovation of cultural, political, and economic designs. The economic innovations of these hierarchically organized civilizations freed part of the population for an increased scope of creativity in art, architecture, religion, science, technology, and more. At the same time, civilizations were authoritarian arrangements in which a small part of the population was creating these “newer” traditions and forcing them upon the vast majority who had little opportunity for shared creativity or for protest against wrong directions and injustices.

In the context of this hierarchical structuring of human society, innovative pull-togethers often became oppressive “truths” that were actually a class-interested shaping of “truth” into partial-truths and lies that were used to support the empowerment, enrichment, and illusions of the ruling classes. This familiar development has given authoritative truth a bad press among many people today. Indeed, many people have come to fear any useful integration of a cultural consensus to be a threat to scientific research and contemplative discovery (not to mention a threat to people’s own authoritarian dogmas).

This conundrum can find a degree of resolution only if we realize that the authoritarian view of truth has no validity. The inherited traditions of culture are only useful to the extent that they are integrations of wisdom fully supported by scientific objectivity, contemplative authenticity, and consensual workability. Since every society is part of the ever moving drama of history, we always need fresh reconstruction of the overall social consensus. There is no royal authority, no divine authority, no depth of historical tradition that cannot be changed. The creations of the past are not thereby useless. They are just the pull-togethers of an earlier culture of people who were facing their own challenges and dealing with them well or poorly. We can learn from the past. We have our memory of the past as a great treasure. But in our present, we have only three approaches for seeking truth to live by: scientific research, contemplative inquiry, and the societal consensus building of workable forms for living within our particular moment of history.

The above thoughts can be summarized by defining what we mean by open and closed societies. A closed society is a society that is locked into past formulations and their current rationalizations. An open society is one in which detachment from the past and openness to fresh futures is present in a numerous and effective portion of the population. An open society need not hate the past or reject every aspect of it. Rather, the past is viewed as a valuable paint palette for painting a significantly new picture. The living NOW is always both a departure and an opportunity. We can depart the patterns of the past when we see clearly our everlasting ignorance as well as the specific foolishness of the currently obsolete teachings that have been handed down to us.

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I am ending Part One of this book by pointing out that these explorations into the valid approaches to truth is one of the arenas that a truly open society must explore. Until we can form a working consensus on the topic of truth, we will not be able to form a workable consensus about the overwhelming challenges we confront. One of those challenges is the reconstruction of our understanding and practice of religion. In Part Four I will begin exploring how we can usefully discuss religion and see why religion is important. But before doing that, I will explore in Part Two the elemental topic of consciousness, and I will explore in Part Three “The Enigma of Wonder, a foundational understanding for the discussion of religion.

