

The Great Emergence: Part Three – A century of Emergence

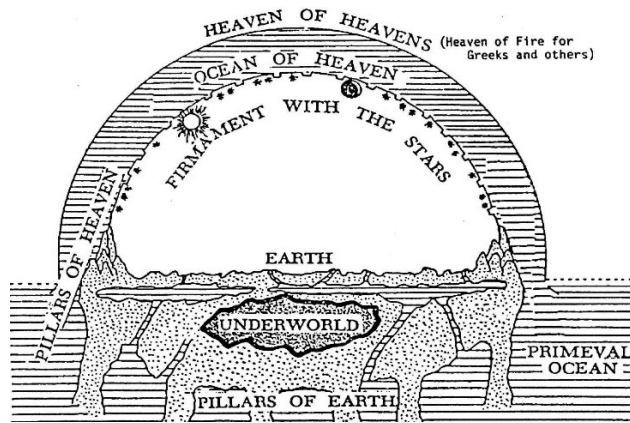
Source: "The Great Emergence" by Phyllis Tickle

In the 16th century, because of the work of Martin Luther and other reformers, the locus of authority shifted from the Papacy to the Bible. In areas where the Protestant church had taken hold, the dominant opinion was "sola scriptura" – the Bible and the Bible alone is the source of ultimate authority; not the Pope.

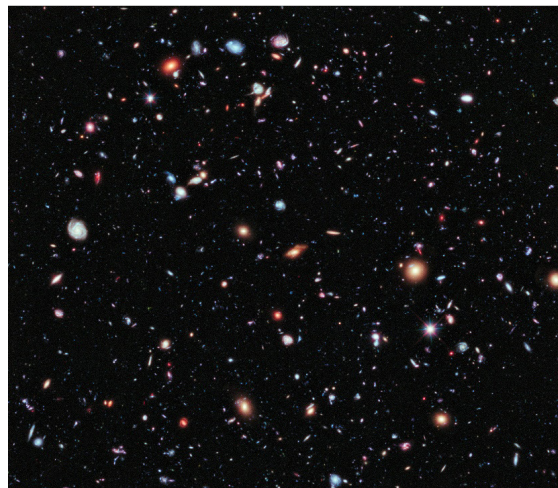
Today, humanity is now living through another 500-year transition, and again the main question is: "Now what is the source of authority?" Just as the 16th century Reformers pushed the pope to the sidelines, during the last couple of centuries, the Bible has been pushed to the sidelines, mainly because of the scientific revolution that has occurred during the last couple hundred years. But other factors are also involved.

We will now look at a few of the developments that have led people to question the divine authority of the Bible and the claim that it is inerrant and infallible, which interestingly were terms ascribed to the Pope prior to the 16th century reformation.

Here you see the author of Genesis' understanding of the universe.



This is a deep space image from the Hubble Telescope of a tiny section of the universe.

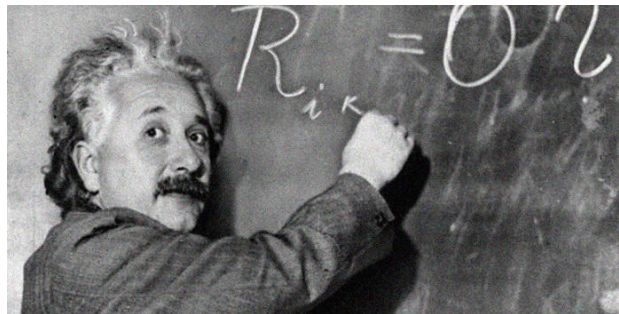


As you can see, the description of the known universe found in the book of Genesis, which was written thousands of years ago, has dramatically changed in our generation. The little dots in the Hubble telescope's deep space image were at first thought to be stars, but upon closer examination were seen as other galaxies, each containing billions of stars. And this image was taken through a tiny section of our sky. Suddenly before our eyes, the known universe exploded into infinity. Not only was the earth not the center of the universe as Genesis taught, but neither is our solar system or the Milky Way galaxy the center.

So, now where does authority reside? "Sola scriptura" has proven to be an inadequate source of ultimate authority within our modern world. Particularly if one expects the Bible to be a science text book.

In 1630, when Galileo looked through his telescope and said, "Look, Jupiter has ears!" referring to Jupiter's moons, but church officials refused to look. He was placed under house arrest for fifteen years until his death for teaching heresy.

This doesn't mean the scriptures are not true, what it means is that the Bible was never meant to be a science book. Trying to make Genesis into a science book flattens it. It misses the deeper meaning and spiritual value of the Bible. It is also dangerous because the Bible is then used to diminish fact and truth, and drives intelligent people, who believe in science, away from the church. Much of our atheism today is the result of attempting to proclaim the Bible to be scientifically true.



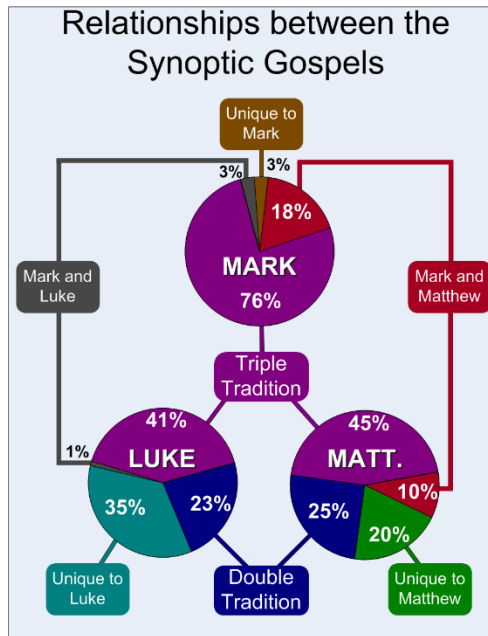
Science continued to poke holes in the belief that the Bible was the only source of ultimate truth and authority. In the early 20th Century **Albert Einstein** published four papers that would change our world forever. In these papers he:

- Discovered that light can be understood as quanta (or bundled together) and that it interacts with matter, which led to the birth of quantum physics. Quantum physics was found to take some of the mystery out of the invisible world because it proved that the invisible world is operated by describable laws, rather than by the mysterious hand of God. Einstein found that the movement of tiny particles suspended in water provided proof of molecular energy and the existence of atoms. His discovery also resulted in the invention of the atom bomb.
- Another one of Einstein's discoveries was the "special theory of relativity", which stated that there is no absolute space or time. Both are dependent on the observer and his or her location and time and speed in which they are traveling. All of this science and the discovery of

technological instruments that made the invisible world visible diminished what was previously thought to be the result of the mysterious hand of God.

If the Bible is viewed as a book of faith that provides nourishment to our hearts and souls, rather than a scientific text book, these discoveries do not diminish the value of the Bible. Humanity was given remarkable intelligence to help us unlock the mysteries of our world and universe. This intelligence is not at odds with God or our faith. Rather, it helps us to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of faith and our understanding of God.

Modern Biblical Scholarship



Moving on from Einstein, another important person during the first part of the 20th century was **Albert Schweitzer** who wrote a book titled, “The Quest for the Historical Jesus”, where he found that the Jesus of Nazareth is not the same as the Christ of western Christianity and Western thought. He helped to develop what was to become known as the “critical exegesis of the Bible”. This scholarship viewed the scriptures through the lens of technical methods of exegesis. Scholars found that during the first two or three hundred years of Christianity, the people who worked with the original writings of the Bible sometimes edited them in order to emphasize their particular theological point. For example, in the Bible passages that records Jesus carrying his cross, Mark, Luke and Matthew state that Simon of Cyrene helped him carry it. But the Gospel of John clearly states that he carried his cross alone. Why did John say he carried it alone when the other three gospels indicated that Simon helped him?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is portrayed as all powerful which was seen during his arrest. When the soldiers indicated they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus stepped forward and said “I am He”. John then writes that all the soldiers fell to the ground just by the power of Jesus’ voice. Yet, there is no mention of the soldiers falling down in the other three Gospels. Biblical scholars found that the author of John was emphasizing that Jesus was all powerful and didn’t need anyone to help him carry his cross. So, historically did Simon help Jesus carry his cross? The answer is yes, but John changed it to

say Jesus carried his cross “by himself” in order to emphasize that he was all powerful. John’s Jesus didn’t need anyone to help him carry his cross.

Another example is Jesus going up the mountain to proclaim the beatitudes. Here Jesus is portrayed as a new Moses going up the mountain to get the ten commandments. The beatitudes are the new law proclaimed by Jesus. The author of the Gospel wants us to see that He is the new Moses, so he presents him as the new Moses going up a mountain to proclaim His new law: the beatitudes. Was his going up the mountain historically true? Maybe. But the author’s main concern was showing to his Jewish audience that Jesus is the new Moses and worthy of their faith.

Another example is seen in Saint Paul telling women to be silent in church, which contradicted what he said earlier in his writings. Many scholars think this is the result of a later note written in the margin of the text by someone other than the original author. The next person who copied Paul’s letter inserted that marginal note into the main text, and this is why Paul seemed to contradict himself.

This critical study of the scriptures may cause anxiety for some, nevertheless, this scholarship has been used in all mainstream Christian seminaries during the last seventy or so years to help students better understand the process of how the Bible developed.

Does this mean that the scriptures have been corrupted? NO. What it does mean is that all four Gospel writers had their own emphasis because each author was addressing issues and challenges unique to their faith communities. What we have with the four Gospels are four portraits of Jesus, because no one portrait can capture the richness of who he was and is for us today.

We, in our scientific era, look at truth as “fact” but truth goes far beyond the one dimension of factuality. It penetrates the soul and changes hearts, it is multidimensional and it has meaning far deeper than just “facts”. We who prayerfully read the scriptures have found this to be true many times when we read it found inspiration and guidance. We were not reading it like a history book or science book. Perhaps the best description of the Bible is that in is A Book of Faith.

Other challenges to Biblical and Religious authority during the past century:



The automobile changed American Christianity by giving people the ability to roam wherever they wanted to go. It pulled many away from Sunday church attendance and Sunday dinner at grandma’s

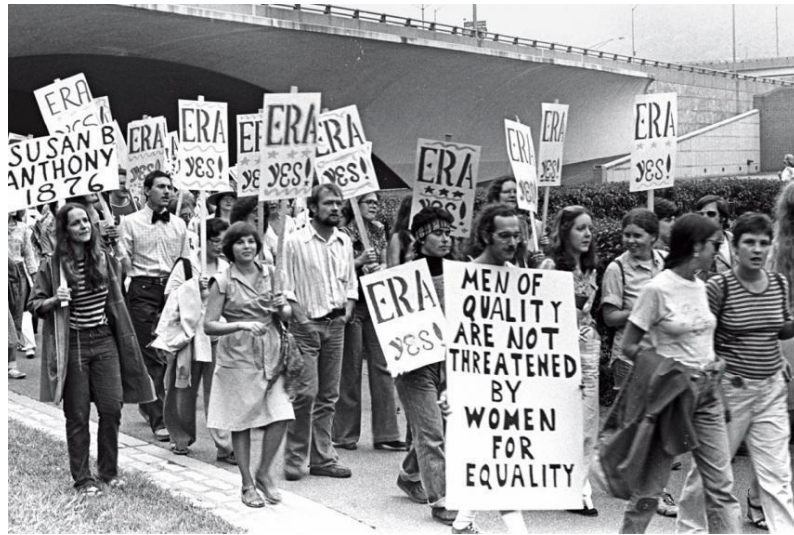
home, where she asked her grandchildren about their Sunday school lesson. It wasn't too long and grandma found out that little Johnny never even attended church, much less Sunday school. When the automobile pulled family away from grandmas home, their connection to the church slowly diminished. Church attendance began to give way to traveling to shopping malls and Little League games. For many, the most valued event on Sundays became football, basketball and baseball games.

Alcoholics Anonymous proclaimed that the only way an addict can find help was turning his or her life over to God as they understood God. The generic non-doctrinal "higher power" often replaced the Biblical God, and **a kind of churchless spirituality** began to flourish. People began to look to **self-help books** for answers and sought out professional counselors rather than clergy to help them manage their lives.

As church authority diminished, other forms of spirituality became available and people were happy to refer to themselves as "**spiritual but not religious**".



Slavery. While the Bible does not order up slavery as a practice to be followed by the faithful, it did acknowledge it as an institution. This biblical ambivalence about slavery allowed thousands and thousands of devote Christians to own slaves. During the Civil War, America's Protestant Churches all but split in two over the scriptural teaching about slavery. Both sides were using scripture to support their position for or against the owning of human beings as slaves. Today the owning of slaves is repugnant to most people.



Women demanding equality. The Bible clearly indicated that women should be submissive to men. The Bible itself arose out of cultures of patriarchy, where men were clearly in charge. Increasingly in America, women demanded the right to vote and to be allowed to participate in political power that previously only men enjoyed. During this time, the Bible was quoted to keep women subservient to men. In time that changed. Bras were burnt and the slogan “you’ve come a long way baby” became popular, even though the Bible didn’t support it – at least in the passages men were quoting. Soon the word “obey” would be removed from wedding vows throughout America.

Ordination of women. It is difficult to wiggle around the passage in scripture where women are called to keep silent during Sunday assembly. If she has questions, the bible says, she should ask her husband when they return home from worship. Today, not only do we have women pastors, many Synods have women presiding bishops, including the ELCA.

Divorce. There is almost no way to revisit the divorce debates without mention of personal stories of the abuses and horrors that led, ultimately, to its acceptance into American Christianity. Truth be told, what the Bible says about divorce is not all that black and white. Even so, the loosening of divorce laws was for many, particularly men, a blow to sola scriptura. It wasn’t too many years ago that clergy who divorced were required to leave the ministry.



IF YOUR RELIGION MAKES YOU HATE
SOMEONE YOU NEED A NEW RELIGION

Homosexuality. Today, the acceptance of gay and lesbian people in our church and society has been the latest issue of controversy. Like slavery, equal rights for women, divorce and ordination of women, both sides used the Bible to support their views. Although it is still hotly contested in churches that believe the Bible is infallible and inerrant, within the ELCA and most other mainline churches, it is no longer an issue that threatens to tear the church apart.

Before we can understand the seriousness of the emergence in which we are presently living, we have to understand the limitations of “sola scriptura”, which was proclaimed authoritative in the last emergence.

And so the question for humanity today is “Where now do we look for authority?” Or maybe another question is: “Has humanity reached a point where a diversity of opinion and beliefs no longer tears a society apart?” We will examine this during our next seminar.

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