

What Can Reasonable People Learn from a Faith Healer?

BY MITCHELL MODISSETT

ONE CAN PROBABLY LEARN more from a faith healer than one would expect. Abstract philosophical and theological ideas can often be understood best when seen working in actual practice. So let's look at an event that happened several decades ago in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

There was a fundamentalist faith healer named Oral Roberts. And Roberts wasn't squeamish about asking for money, which he called "seed-faith." In his 1970 book, *Miracle of Seed-Faith*, he writes that one should set aside seed-faith for Jesus, mail it to Oral Roberts, and expect a miracle. When the monthly bills come in, pay Jesus first. Apparently, enough people sent money to Jesus to make Roberts rich.

Then God told Roberts to start a hospital and a medical school. But why would a miracle worker, a saved-by-the-blood television preacher and faith healer be told by God to start a regular hospital and medical school? Was one a backup for the other? Was faith healing needed to cure those for whom modern medicine failed, or was the hospital a backup system for patients with insufficient faith? Perhaps God thought the world needed physicians more than it needed faith healers.

In any case, a nurse from that area reported that Tulsa hospitals already had too many empty beds. And that brings us to the heart of the matter, to the famous and controversial vision that occurred in 1980, at a time when Roberts had been having trouble raising the seed-faith money for the medical complex.

It was then that Roberts saw Jesus! Indeed, he saw Jesus standing beside the Tulsa water tower—which is how Roberts could estimate the Savior's height. He estimated that Jesus was 900 feet tall. Moreover, Roberts reported that the Christ figure stooped and lifted the unfinished buildings of the City of Faith Medical Center, declaring, "See how easy it is for me to lift it."

Roberts took the vision to be an affirmation from the deity that the medical center, strapped at that time for lack of construction money, would be completed. Roberts also spoke to another man nearby, but that man saw nothing unusual.

After this vision was announced, many people in Okla-

homa made a joke of it. All of us have seen highway signs that read "Deer Crossing." The signs depict a figure of a deer with antlers, beneath which appears a big "X" followed by "ing"—Deer Crossing. Suddenly posters appeared on the streets of Tulsa showing the City of Faith Medical Center in the background, and in the foreground a message warning people of a "900 ft. Jesus X-ing."

After that vision Roberts began to fall on hard times. Perhaps Jesus could raise the medical center but Roberts couldn't, not even by modifying his own lifestyle. According to Garry Abrams of the *Los Angeles Times*, Roberts had to sell his four Mercedes-Benz automobiles, his three vacation homes in California, valued at more than \$4 million, his Tulsa home, his son's home, and three other homes owned by the Roberts organization. Roberts subsequently had other visions, but they didn't seem to help. Eventually the last patient was discharged and the City of Faith Medical Complex was closed in 1987, \$25 million in debt.

I find myself somewhat like the man near Oral Roberts who didn't see Jesus. I've never seen Jesus. But if God wants me to turn into a traditional, orthodox believer, he can give me a 900 foot tall Jesus vision. He knows where to find me. Actually, he could turn us all into true believers. Just let everybody see this 900 foot tall splendor. And after Jesus shows himself to all the people in Tulsa, and the evening news, he could walk over to Oklahoma City and down to Dallas. It's easy if you are 900 feet tall. But unfortunately only Roberts saw this vision, and he was already a believer. What a waste of divine effort. God could turn all Unitarians into Trinitarians, all atheists into theists, and all Humanists into true believers just by showing the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, each 900 feet tall.

My point is that there is some wisdom to be gained from this story, especially when we compare Oral Roberts with the man who was there but didn't see anything unusual. As you and I know, all people seek to find or to develop some meaning for life. There are two basic ways for a person to formulate such meaning. These two ways are personified by Oral Roberts who saw Jesus and by the unknown man who saw nothing unusual. Roberts represents the way of theol-

ogy. He and others like him find their meaning of life based on the revelations of God. The stranger represents the way of science. The scientifically minded develop their meaning of life based on what they experience in the world about them.

Theology rests upon revelations from God, which are understood to be absolutely true and correct in every sense. However, not every theologically inclined person has his or her own visions or personal revelations. Most have to depend on past revelations in scriptures and those revelations and visions given to past saints. They have to take somebody else's word that a particular vision or revelation really took place and was divine.

But theologically inclined people have one central problem. How can they be sure that what they hope to be divine revelation or vision is really a revelation from the deity and is therefore absolutely true in every respect? The sad answer is that after several millennia the study of theology has not yet figured out a method for distinguishing a true and absolutely perfect vision or revelation from one that is a fake. Theologians can't even agree with each other. There are many world religions and even Christianity itself is divided into several denominations. Each religious group has its own brand of theology and its own set of divine revelations which the group members consider authentic. But the vision and revelation claims of other religious groups are rejected. There is no known theological method that is used by the various groups to distinguish true from fake revelations. If a fake vision or revelation should become part of one group's tradition, there is no method that can be used to discover the fraud so that the leaders of the group can remove it from their creeds, rituals, and hymnals.

Philosophically inclined people, by contrast, try to develop their own meaning of life and their own understanding of the world by thinking about what they see and hear. They never arrive at absolutely true and perfect ideas. They can only form tentative ideas and see if they work out. Is this thing good to eat or drink? How can I keep warm? Everyone had to use his or her senses and memory to survive. It took prehistoric people a long time to build up a body of more or less reliable information. Ideas had to be tested. Over the centuries people developed the basic steps of the methods of science.

There is more to science than forming a hypothesis and testing it, however. Other people must also be able to test the hypothesis. The exact way the original hypothesis was tested must be explained thoroughly so that others can try to duplicate the results. Some people may change the initial conditions to see in what way this affects the results. Science is based upon public knowledge. In time a faulty conclusion

is certain to be discovered. Unlike theology, scientific mistakes can be quickly and easily discovered. But on the other hand no scientist considers a scientific conclusion, even one that has been apparently verified, to be the absolute truth. In the future a new fact, or insight, or experiment may require the scientific law to be changed. All scientific laws are actually subject to revision.

In this story of the 900 foot tall Jesus, my sympathies are with the unknown man who didn't see the vision of the Reverend Oral Roberts. This anonymous individual chose to rely on his own senses to help him understand the natural world, the only world about which we know anything. So these two men represent two basic ways of thinking, two ways of seeing the world: as basically natural or as supernatural, and they thus symbolize the basic differences between theology and science.

Here at the beginning of the third millennium we need a philosophy that doesn't insist that we believe someone else's revelations and visions. Some people may cling to theological supernaturalism, but we Humanists are philosophical naturalists. We have a philosophy that isn't concerned with getting us into heaven but is rather directed toward improving the lives of all humans on earth. ☒

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