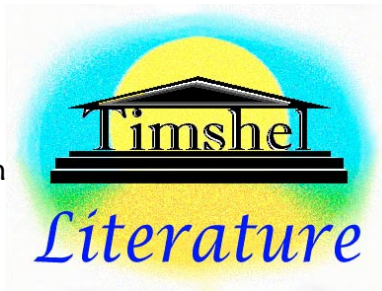


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Just Thinking, 06/02/03:

By the Authority Vested in Whom?

by Justin Katz

The same Sunday that I finished reading Mark Shea's book, *By What Authority? An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition*, the priest of my Massachusetts parish read a letter from the state's bishops regarding gay marriage. In the coming months, the state's highest court will rule on a case called *Goodridge v. Massachusetts Department of Public Health* and will either change the law to exclude specification by gender from the definition of marriage or confirm that such an action would not be within the power of the judiciary.

In a vague sense, this battle is between the legal documents of our nation and the unwritten tradition. Mark Shea says, of traditions "added" to the Catholic Church over the millennia, that they were merely responses to new social movements' causing "the Church to... declare what it has always believed, even if it never had to say it before" (162). Similarly, the definition of marriage has always been heterosexual, and it is the challenge to that norm that represents something new, unwritten, and unknown.

By What Authority? describes the journey through which Shea came to trust in the validity – indeed, the necessity – of "the known" Tradition within Christian faith. He did so as he attempted to grapple with "Christian" modernists' efforts to dismantle the points that undergirded his Evangelicalism. It speaks well of Mark's faith that he was willing, ultimately, to open himself to

the arguments of a different branch of Christianity than he had initially chosen upon discarding his “fuzzy agnosticism.” Others, perhaps based on lingering confidence that their brand of faith was the best on offer, will simply declare the whole endeavor a parsing of falsehoods and choose atheism or New Age maudlinism. The same ends might be reached by those with ulterior motives — reasons that they desire religion to be fantasy.

Whatever the case — prejudice that one’s discredited faith must have been the most creditable or lust for things forbidden by the most objectively true religion — the underlying reason for rejection of faith seems very often to come down to wanting one’s preconceptions and self-interested conclusions to be true, all or nothing. Nowhere is this more apparent in the modern day than with abortion:

Advanced People are now obsessed by Choice. ... Let us have Choice, no matter what we choose. Let all our choices be right and none wrong. In the name of Choice, let us destroy the weak one in order to save her. (94-95)

Shea sees this new posture as ironic, considering that “not terribly long ago, all the Advanced People were Marxists, materialists, and Skinnerian psychologists all agog for determinism and convinced that Choice (known then as Free Will) was sheer superstitious illusion” (94). I’d suggest that it is more the case that the positions of the Choice-obsessed would not be morally acceptable, even to themselves, were it not for the innovation of determinism’s dissipation of personal responsibility. Thus, the pop ideology has created the right to “have no choice” but to do what ought to be unthinkable. Whether this shift was a leap or a continuum, however, is a quibble; the significant factor is the apparent mutability of social doctrine. Subordinating sacred Truth to fashionable movements is what Mark had been guarding against when he began defending Evangelicalism, and it was also the danger that he perceived, back then, in the Catholic idea of Tradition.

Because Shea's conversion to Catholicism was rooted in his conviction that Christ brought Truth and salvation to humanity, this book may not persuade those who are not already convinced of some form of Christian validity. It is for those who do not dismiss two millennia of religion with a blink of the skeptical eye — for those willing to assume that something of cosmic (or at least intrinsically human) occurred. However, perhaps for this very reason, *By What Authority?* may be ideal for maintaining faith among those who find themselves in a slide toward a loss of it.

Not long ago, Internet atheist Rachel Lucas sparked a firestorm of argument on her Web site with her condemnation of a Fundamentalist Christian who was being considered, at the time, for a position on a White House AIDS commission. In her response to criticism and her explanation of why arguments based on the Bible would not change her perspective, Ms. Lucas demonstrates a danger inherent in the Protestant insistence that all Christian revelation and Truth is transmitted exclusively through the Bible:

I said that viewing EVERYTHING through the prism of the Bible is not reasonable. Hundreds of Bible passages can be thrown about by Christians in an attempt to “explain” things to me, but I can easily respond with hundreds of others in an effort to “explain” to them that the Bible is not the greatest guide to modern life. ...

I've read the Bible all the way through, TWICE. ... I did not eschew Christianity on a whim. I read the Bible a couple of times and decided it didn't ring true to me.

This touches on a large concern of Mark Shea's “investigation”: discerning the justification for the specific books included in the Biblical canon, the “Tradition of the Table of Contents,” as he calls it. Without reference to some extra-biblical guide, it is surely a precariously simple matter to fall to picking and choosing among books and passages to view the Bible through the prism of one's own desires.

Among the “modernists” whom Shea begins his journey to refute is Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, who has argued that St. Paul's “guilt,” “shame,” “self-loathing,” and “negative feeling toward his own body” indicate that he, himself, was homosexual (24). The phrasing of Spong's

“proof” provides pretty clear implication of what the Bishop, in all his modern wisdom, would have advised St. Paul to do. But only by discarding the underlying ideas passed along as intrinsic to the Church can St. Paul’s sexuality be seen to matter. Only by disregarding the understanding behind Tradition can a doctrine of compassion for homosexuals but condemnation of their activities be seen as nonsensical.

In the context of abortion, Shea sums up the relationship between Tradition and Scripture thus: “Tradition without Scripture was a darkened lens without a light; but likewise, Scripture without tradition was, on this vital issue, a blurry, unfocused light without a lens” (100). The “tradition” of society, as represented by its definition of marriage, has no scripture, and it developed in ways much less traceable than the events in and following the New Testament.

Nonetheless, the light of the world’s secular tradition is the same. Even in a society that acknowledges that faith must be chosen freely and that civil affairs must, therefore, have significant distance from the explicit practices of religion, it ought to be acknowledged that our culture owes its success to its foundations in God’s word – written and passed along as “known.” And alongside this acknowledgement should come the realization that, in secular organization, the option is always open to jot down that knowledge and call it law... as long as we do it through the legislature.

Shea, Mark. *By What Authority? An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition* (Our Sunday Visitor, 1996)