

## Reason, Experience, and Other Claims to Authority

Who do you suppose wrote the following words expressing concern that Christians not be found ignorant of what we today would call scientific knowledge?

“Often a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other parts of the world, about the motions and orbits of the stars and even their sizes and distances, . . . and this knowledge he (sic) holds with certainty from reason and experience. It is thus offensive and disgraceful for an unbeliever to hear a Christian talk nonsense about such things, claiming that what he is saying is based in Scripture. We should do all that we can to avoid such an embarrassing situation, which people see as ignorance in the Christian and laugh to scorn . . .”

Reading these words, I think of Christians who vigorously deny the facts and theory of evolution. I think of Christians who scorn the evidence for anthropogenic (human-caused) global climate change. I also think of Christians, and lots of other folks as well, who are blind to empirical realities that do not fit their doctrinal and/or ideological world views. Some of them are free-market capitalists who despise any regulation of the fossil fuel industry. Some are Tea Party libertarians who think almost everything the government wants to do is conspiratorial and dangerous to human welfare and freedom. The common thread is that they invoke other sources to support their preferred notions – notions that fail the tests of reason and experience.

Yet here is Augustine of Hippo (aka St. Augustine), one of Christianity’s most important thinkers, writing in his commentary on the book of Genesis in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, instructing his readers to heed those who know things based not on Scripture but precisely on reason and experience.

Now I know, people do not always reason well. Science is not always right. Augustine was not always right. Nonetheless, it is perverse and utterly embarrassing, when it comes to such matters as evolution and global climate change, that some Christians, including many prominent persons associated with the religious right, have so little regard for the considered judgment of the great majority of scientists, researchers, and scholars upon whose knowledge we otherwise so thoroughly depend for the medical, technological, and social practices, products, and remedies that enhance our daily lives.

Augustine knew better than to claim an authority such as Scripture in opposition to that of reason and experience, and so should we.

*Copyright 2015 by Byron C. Bangert*