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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Patrick Hannon

To Tell The Truth

March 2017

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As this is written President Trump has been tweeting a denial of media reports about the number of people present at his inauguration. And his Press Secretary Sean Spicer has endorsed the President's denial, only to have his own account of the occasion rejected by mainstream media, whose fact checkers have been uncovering falsehoods put out by White house officials as well as by the President himself, from the moment he came into office. The Press Secretary's account was defended by Presidential Counsellor Kellyanne Conway, who declared that what Spicer had provided was 'alternative facts': a novel concept surely. Storm in a teacup one might say, a touch of farce; yet not to be taken lightly, for it tells something about the prospects for the truth in the news in our times.

'It's what's happening', says the website for Twitter Inc, 'from breaking news and entertainment to sports and politics, get the full story with all the live commentary': the promise of its owners about a product which enables users to post messages – 'tweets' – and interact with each other. The company was launched in 2006 and is now thought to have more than 300 million monthly active users. But one may question its website's claim, for, as the Trump exchanges show, it remains difficult – is perhaps more difficult – to know what *is* happening, what the full story is. If we're expected to believe the Counsellor to the President of the United States that there's such a thing as alternative facts, is it any wonder that we're having to contend with 'fake news'?

TWEETING, TRUTHINESS, AND THE FUTURE OF TRUTH

Twitter is an instance of an expanding repertory of technological applications known as social media, which according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary means 'forms of electronic communication ... through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content'. Familiar and popular examples include Facebook, Tumblr,

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Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Snapchat. These platforms have unquestionable advantages: one can be in instant contact with family and friends from anywhere in the world; share and collaborate with people of like interests; access real-time news and all kinds of information; do business with clients from all over the globe. But they can be misused: suffice it here to mention cyber-bullying, the anonymous destruction of reputations, viciously hurtful responses to people who think differently, all of which have led to suicides.

Waiting as it were in the wings for alternative facts and fake news was another neologism, ‘truthiness’, a term which made its appearance in 2005. Coined by Stephen Colbert, media critic and host of a well-regarded television show, truthiness was chosen by the American Dialect Society as its Word of the Year for 2005 and by Merriam-Webster in 2006. Announcing its choice Merriam-Webster cited the Society’s definition; ‘the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true’. All three terms add colour to the suggestion that we live now in what yet another neologism calls a post-truth era, a time when ‘objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’, according to an on-line definition by Oxford Dictionaries, which made post-truth its Word of the Year for 2016.

Telling the truth, in the sense of uttering what is true, is only one dimension of truthfulness: Scripture speaks of ‘doing the truth’ (Jn 3:21, 1 Jn 1:6), and Bernard Häring writes of ‘being in the truth’ as we participate in the life of the Trinity.¹ And there’s more than one kind of lie. One might fail the truth by silence at a time when speaking up is called for, or by concealing truth when one’s duty is to declare it; and we speak of ‘living a lie’ when there’s a discrepancy between the values people publicly profess and how in fact they conduct their lives. Truthfulness is at stake too when we make promises, as is suggested in the expression ‘keeping one’s word’, and loyalty, fidelity, and honour are among its other related virtues. But these wider dimensions merit separate treatment, and here I want to confine attention to truth-telling in its most obvious senses, and in the context of its fortunes in the media of information and communication, for it’s this which seems especially in jeopardy at present.

A LIAR’S WORLD?

‘It is certain that the father of lies has never had such opportunities to exploit as he has today’, wrote Karl Rahner in 1960.² He was

1 *The Law of Christ* 3, Cork: The Mercier Press, 1967, 557.

2 *Theological Investigations* 7, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, New York: Herder & Herder, 1971. All quotations are from p.242.

referring to mass media, which he names as the press, films, television, ‘instructional facilities’, and party propaganda, all of which he saw as ‘subject to the tyranny of public opinion, exploited in advertising, and the artificial creation of need, brainwashing etc.’ The prevalence of lying, he said, is not that people have become more evil ‘objectively speaking in God’s eyes’, but rather that the possibilities for lying have so greatly increased. To that list of ‘opportunities’ one must nowadays add the extraordinary developments in information technology and the technology of communications, developments that have come upon us so suddenly that our societies are still at a loss as to how best to handle them.

But the proliferation of opportunities for the father of lies is only one of the causes of the current malaise. Bernard Williams wrote of a paradox of modern life whereby what he called a passion for truthfulness is combined with scepticism about the possibility of achieving truth. ‘On the one hand, there is an intense commitment to truthfulness – or, at any rate, a pervasive suspiciousness, a readiness against being fooled, an eagerness to see through appearances to the real structures and motives that lie behind them’. But then, ‘there is an equally pervasive suspicion about truth itself: whether there is such a thing; if there is, whether it can be more than relative or subjective or something of that kind; altogether, whether we should bother about it, in carrying on our activities or in giving an account of them’.³ The latter state of affairs has given rise to much academic debate, not just in philosophy departments but also as to its bearing on disciplines such as history, social and political theory, the social sciences, and of course the humanities. But its influence extends well beyond the walls of the academy, and it poses problems for what Williams called the commitment to truthfulness, and we’ll have reason to return to it later.

WHAT TO DO?

Such, sketchily, is the situation in which anyone with a concern for truth and truthfulness will wonder what, if anything, is to be done toward remedying it. The problem is multi-layered and any attempt to cope with it must be multi-pronged, and anything like a comprehensive answer is out of the question here. But a first need must be an education to fit recipients to appraise the media critically. In Ireland, a media studies module is now available as an option on the Junior Certificate English Course, but one must wonder why a more advanced approach isn’t on the programme for the Leaving Certificate. Perhaps the deeper questions – about what truth means, for example, and certitude, and objectivity, and how one might reach for these – will be treated in any philosophy course

3 *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, 1.

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that may be introduced at second level. Education of the public generally is a more daunting enterprise, even if its availability is greatly helped by several of the media themselves. But what one might ask in these pages is whether or how Christian faith can inform an approach to the challenges. More specifically, is there pertinent Catholic teaching?

The short answer is that Christian faith and Catholic teaching do provide resources which can help the believer to address the situation, and the remainder of this piece is a look at the chief of those. But it may be useful first to advert to a distinction between different levels of moral discourse, and different ways in which we think about the moral life. The first that comes to mind is likely to be the type exemplified in the Decalogue's prohibition of murder and adultery and stealing, all of which specify acts that a morally upright person is enjoined to avoid. Behind each of these lies a second kind of principle, more general, giving a kind of shape to our actions, indicating an orientation to the values that the rules protect: respect life, be faithful to a spouse, have regard for the rights of others. And at the back of these stands one's view of life, the ground and horizon of all our values and rules.

It's at this third level that Christian faith illuminates morality most fundamentally. Think again of what being moral means: making choices that seek what's good and avoid evil, good and evil being what makes or does not make for a genuine flourishing of humanity; choices which impact on those around us and on our world; choices that in the end depend upon what we make of those around us and of our world, what we make of life, what our view or vision of life is. A Christian's view of life is nourished by certain biblical and doctrinal assertions: that all that God created is good; that though humans are sinful and the best of human constructs flawed, salvation is possible owing to all that's involved in the Christ-event; that the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus will prevail; that there is hope. And to get a sense of how such a view might shape our choices, think of what choices might follow from a view such as Thomas Hobbes had in mind when in *Leviathan* he wrote of the natural state of man as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

Other biblical and doctrinal themes move closer toward the shaping of our choices in the concrete: that we are all equally made in God's image for example, each the possessor of a dignity possessed equally by all; that therefrom is generated the rights we call human and their correlative responsibilities; that our dignity and the rights which flow from it can never be lost; that we are stewards of ourselves and of the world which is our home. So we are called to respect life in all its manifestations, and to give to

each what is his or her due, and – in terms of our interest here – to seek the truth and live by it, and to be truthful in our relations with ourselves and others. Whence arises the level of thought and discourse first mentioned above: don't murder, commit adultery, steal, or lie – the bottom line, minimal requirements of respect for life and for the values of commitment and fidelity, and regard for what belongs by right to someone else, and for the trust that humans must place in each other if social life is to be possible. And to be genuine our embrace of these values and principles can only come from a right attitude and a pure heart, a constant theme in the preaching of Jesus, central to what he calls his followers to in the Sermon on the Mount.

There's another step to be taken if these values and principles are to be applied in the various contexts in which Christians find themselves, at work, at home, as members of the wider society. And it's at this point that codes of ethics appropriate to the different occupations find their place, and they will be forged in day-to-day experience, and will reflect the values that those who follow them hold important. The making of such a code is not the work of an outsider but of one who knows the running, as we say, though the work must benefit from contact with a broader ethical context and the contribution of those served by those who follow the calling. Christians will normally find that many of their values are shared by people of other persuasions, and in modern circumstances an occupational code is best couched in a secular idiom.

The upshot of the foregoing glance at what light Christian faith might shed in the quest for truth and truthfulness in today's world is that it provides a way of looking at life that is shaped by some central biblical and doctrinal themes, a framework within which a follower of the way of the Lord Jesus may see moral choice illuminated. But it also offers certain general principles which function as starting-points for reflection and discernment as to what concretely is to be done. And it helps to mark off the bottom line if the values protected by the principles are to be realised. These apply to the Christian life in general but we must now ask whether there's anything that concerns in particular the value of truthfulness, a point at which one might turn to Catholic teaching.

CATHOLIC RESOURCES

Earlier I referred to a corpus of Catholic teaching and thinking which concerns truthfulness and its communication. At its head is an Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II,⁴ which on its

4 In English called *The Rapid Development*, its opening words. The text is on the Vatican website, as is the text of the documents of the Pontifical Council for Communications mentioned in the paragraph.

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appearance was described by the Jesuit journal *America* as the most authoritative papal statement on the Church and communications in nearly fifty years, a position which it still holds. As we've seen, much has happened in the media world since the Letter appeared in 2005, yet it can still be read with profit for its vision and for the principles it proposes. The bearing of Catholic teaching on some particular questions can be tracked in the documents issued from time to time by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, recently incorporated into a new Dicastery called the Secretariat for Communications. Among these are statements on Ethics in Advertising (1997), Ethics in Communication (2000), The Church and the Internet (2002), and Ethics in Internet (2002); and again, more recent developments notwithstanding, all of these contain material helpful toward a faith-informed appraisal of their subject-matter.

A compact summary of the main lines of official Catholic teaching on truthfulness can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* under the heading of the Eighth Commandment. The *Catechism* is following the manual tradition of moral theology in dealing with truthfulness under the rubric of the Eighth Commandment, but it redresses the manuals' negativity by the prominence it gives to its positive dimensions. Thus the first section is entitled 'Living in the Truth', the second 'To Bear Witness to the Truth', and only then is attention given to 'Offences Against the Truth'. The positive re-appears in Section IV, 'Respect for the Truth', and is sustained in the next Section's account of the use of the media, as it is in the concluding Section, a reflection on 'Truth, Beauty, and Sacred Art'.

Implied in the *Catechism's* approach and at one point made explicit is that truthfulness is a virtue, by which is meant 'a habitual and firm disposition to do good' (1833). Here the *Catechism* is reflecting a turn in moral theology and philosophy that has taken place over the past couple of decades and that can be characterised as the recovery of virtue, to borrow the title of a book by Jean Porter.⁵ The central insight is that a morally good life isn't only a matter of compliance with rule and principle, rather is it in the first place a matter of the heart, of disposition and attitude, a habit, acquired and expressed in faithful practice. The *Catechism* says that 'The human virtues are stable dispositions of the intellect and will that govern our acts, order our passions and guide our conduct in accordance with reason and faith. They can be grouped around the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance' (1834). The virtue of truthfulness consists in 'showing oneself true

5 *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics*, Westminster MD: John Knox Press, 1990.

in deeds and truthful in words, and in guarding against duplicity, dissimulation and hypocrisy' (2468). It is, as Aquinas taught, a part of justice, the virtue which is, according to a definition that Thomas adopted from the Roman jurist Ulpian, the habitual and constant will to give everyone their due.⁶

A first requirement of truthfulness, therefore, is a *commitment* to seek and live and speak the truth, and to say this is to echo Karl Rahner at the outset of his reflections in the paper cited above: 'The first point to be recognised is that truthfulness has something to do with truth. It is the will to truth, a mentality, an attitude of mind, in which one reverences truth first as something of intrinsic value in itself ...'. The intrinsic value of truth is a deeply Christian insight and a persistent theme in Christian theology, of critical importance in an age when truth's instrumental value is all that is likely to be acknowledged. For Rahner its recognition is, *inter alia*, the prerequisite of a truthfulness that will permeate every interaction one has with others and with the world. 'Only on this basis...can truthfulness become a fixed and enduring attitude freely adopted, in which one speaks the truth to one's neighbour and avoids lying to or deceiving one's fellow man.'⁷ Rahner's concern is shared by Bernard Williams, albeit from a different starting-point and in other terms: against philosophies and worldviews that deny the existence of truth he argues that 'to the extent that we lose a sense of the value of truth, we shall certainly lose something and may well lose everything'.⁸

Earlier I remarked that the scepticism about truth described by Williams - about whether there is such a thing, or whether, if there is, it's worth bothering about - is influential outside the walls of the academy. And the scepticism is often joined by cynicism about the institutions in our societies which purport to deal in truth, a cynicism which begins to look plausible in the light of developments such as those sketched in our first few pages. It's imperative that cynicism not be let take hold, for it represents collusion with truth's destroyers.

6 *Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 58.

7 Rahner *op.cit.* Both quotations are from page 1, and the emphasis in the second is Rahner's.

8 Williams, *op. cit.*, 7.