“What is Truth?”
Said Jesting Pilate... And Did Not Stay to Hear

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Abstract: Reflecting on our post-modern situation where truth, meaning and value have become slippery notions—or else are colonized by fundamentalisms of all types—the author proposes a vision of truth that is genuinely open to human experience, suffering and the history of freedom and unfreedom. Using classical and contemporary authors, the notion of truth as “interruption” and “radical questioning” of cultural assumptions is employed. Unlike jesting Pilate, who did not stay to hear Jesus’ answer, we may hear the deeper resonances of truth, meaning and value to the extent we open our hearts to the full reality of human others and to the Divine Other.

Key Words: truth; fundamentalism; interruption; colonialism; human experience

This is the opening of Sir Francis Bacon’s essay ‘On Truth’ written in the sixteenth century. I don’t want to pursue Bacon’s further argument here. What I want to do, however, is to reflect on the fact that many of our contemporaries today would share his scepticism. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, in a culture which rests on ‘the exaltation of signs based on the denial of the reality of things’¹ — and, I would add of people. Everything is oversignified so that meaning—which I’m assuming at the moment is another word for ‘truth’, what is the case—seems not only undesirable but also unattainable. In that sense, like Pilate, most of us have little sense of any authority, any over-riding order outside the self and therefore tend to ‘bow down in the amor fati... before the powers that be’, as Adorno puts it and attribute ‘reality to wishes and meaning to senseless compulsion.’² At the other extreme fundamentalists of all kinds, religious, political and economic, claim that they and they alone know the ‘truth’ and that they and they alone possess it.

What then is my take on this situation? Here again I find Bacon helpful because, of course, he was referring to John 18:38, the scene in which Jesus stands before the Roman Governor who asks him ‘What is truth?’ As Bacon says, Pilate does not stay to hear any answer that might be given. But had he been among the disciples earlier that night he would have heard Jesus declare: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ (John 14:5). We don’t know what Bacon would have made of this: probably nothing much because his priorities were political—our old friend ‘law and order.’

Theology is academically unfashionable today, I know. But as William James argued, religious experiences ‘have the right to be absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.’³ And in this case there is something worth thinking about here,

¹ Jean Baudrillard, Revenge Of The Crystal: Selected Writings On The Modern Object And Its Destiny (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1990), 63
especially if we are to find a way of coping with the clash between conflicting notions of truth, that is, of reality and value. The words attributed to Jesus here suggest that ‘truth’ is not something abstract and propositional but experiential, is revealed — a suggestion here of the Greek notion of alētheia?— in this man and the way he lives. But it is a way which points beyond itself to a reason and order beyond our comprehension and control, the mystery of what is ultimately the case to which he was attuned and to which he was obedient: (according to Scripture scholars the ‘I am’ sayings in John make this claim.)

This is not to say, as Fundamentalists do, that Scripture sets out a clear map of reality and code of behaviour. To the contrary, the ‘truth’ embodied in this man has to be experienced and lived out by each person according to her/his lights in her/his particular context who is attempting, as St Thomas More was supposed to have said, to ‘serve God wittily in the tangle of our mind’. Conscience in that sense, as Christian tradition has held almost universally is therefore the ultimate authority. It is true, as Walter Benjamin observed, that in the culture which rests on the exaltation of signs at the expense of the reality of things and people, ‘experience has fallen in value and it looks as if it has fallen into bottomlessness.’4 Paradoxically, the word ‘truth’ has often become a weapon against others and a means of self-justification.

Examples abound, in the ‘war on terror’, American policy in the Middle East and so on. But I would like to look at an example closer to home, the relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Essentially there is a clash here of notions of ‘truth’, of conflicting notions of reality and value. But of the two it seems to me that ours is the more intransigent and determined that our ‘truth’, our way of living in the world, must prevail.

In effect colonial cultures like ours are culturally dogmatic, based as they are on the myth of Ulysses who left home and journeyed through strange places but always with the intention of returning home or of turning those strange places into home, in our case (as one of the early settlers put it) to ‘build a new Britannia in another world.’5 Identity thus becomes ‘a closed circle around sameness’,6 a ‘critical understanding distinguishing and identifying good and evil in a particular way based on itself, on its glorious position as basis and referent of the whole of reality spread out at its feet.’7 ‘White’ thus becomes synonymous with ‘civilised’ and responsible and ‘black’ with ‘savage’ and irresponsible, which means in effect that even those who wished Aboriginal people well tended to believe that the best thing was to assimilate them to our culture.

If you think of it, however, this is a form of fundamentalism, of what Karl Rahner calls ‘the idol of an answer’ which fails to meet the question, the radical question posed by the encounter between two very different cultures, each of which has a great deal to contribute to the other but which attempts to bring the question to an end not by attempting to understand but by superior force. If, however, one accepts the definition of ‘truth’ I have proposing, this is a misappropriation of the truth since it involves a fundamental closure in relation to the wholeness and complexity of existence, turning what is finite into an absolute and refusing to allow for the claims of these others. It also inhibits the possibility of growth, of learning new possibilities from them, of realizing, as Adorno suggested, that ‘reality is not yet real.’8

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5 Ian Turner (ed.), The Australian Dream (Melbourne, 1968), 12.
8 Cristando and Baker, Messianism, Apocalypse and Redemption, 37.
The fact is that, as Levinas argues, ‘truth’ has an ethical dimension since, as he writes, ‘it is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty that we find ethics.’

In turn this involves responsibility for and to the other. Faced with the interrogation of our right to be by a new situation, in our case being in a strange new place and confronted by people very different from ourselves we appealed to the absolute and anonymous law of imperial certainty, we failed to realise that, to quote Levinas once more, that our ‘being in the world our “place in the sun”[has resulted] in the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other... whom I have oppressed...or driven out into a third world.’

Truth, then, may interrogate the commonsense of a culture in the name of some other, some ‘reality which is not yet real’, beyond the logic of a history in which might often equals right, suggesting that there may be a wisdom different in kind from the one we value – at least if we define wisdom as its etymology suggests we should, Wys being the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Greek arête, the perfection of a person or thing and dom a suffix which signifies an abiding state, so that wisdom properly describes a person attuned to what is ultimately the case. If this is so, then in the way it situates human beings in the cosmos and in relation to one another Aboriginal culture may have a wisdom from which we may learn.

The notion of ‘truth’ we are proposing may interrogate the logic of our culture in another way. According to J.B. Metz, the best definition of this truth is ‘interruption.’

But the neo-Darwinian premises on which we operate assumes that that the ‘winners’ represent the growing point of history and that the ‘losers’ deserve to be subordinate to and obey them, if they are not to disappear from the stage of history. I would argue, however, that a richer and fuller conception of the world suggests that the ‘losers’ may have a meaning yet to be realised, that ‘the history of human suffering is not merely part of the pre-history of freedom but remains an inner aspect of the history of freedom’ and that, as Metz argues, ‘freedom degenerates wherever those who suffer are treated more or less as a cliché and degraded to a faceless mass.’

The truth is that we need to preserve and enlarge this kind of freedom.

It is time to conclude. My argument, I realise, will seem highly unrealistic to many. So be it. But it may also be the case that the notions of reality and value by which our present Culture lives is leading in increasingly disastrous and destructive directions and in this sense to be at odds with the truth. To see things from the point of view I have been attempting to describe which is not dogmatic but open and flexible and oriented to others and to the Other and to understand with thinkers like Socrates that the more we know is part of a larger whole of unknowing may be more in tune with the way things really are.

Let me conclude then with another theological reference. The story of Pentecost which could be seen as concluding the story of the ‘way, truth and life’ which opens into a humanity for the future implies that ‘the reconciliation of the tensions and conflicts that come with plurality does not lie in returning to [a] lost unity’ but that ‘we should speak in such a way that everyone hears the truth in their own language.’

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10 Hand, *Levinas Reader*, 82.
14 Borgman, “Theology,” 141.
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