

Truth and politics¹

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It has often been said that truth is the first casualty of war. This implies among other things that deception is frequently essential to successful strategy and tactics; for surprise is a vital advantage in war, worth many battalions. Deception can also be essential to the overall management of the struggle, in the eyes not only of the enemy and allies, but of one's own people. For, realistically, whether in democracies or autocracies, war cannot be continued unless it has the substantial support of the people. So the temptation for governments to deceive their peoples about the progress of conflict, and the people's willingness to be deceived, are significant.

Truth is the frequent casualty of peacetime politics as well. Dictatorships are driven to practise untruth and deploy the tools of propaganda to maintain their position in the adversity of events and against opposition. But truth is, in fact, probably at even greater risk in democracies, because of the need to maintain public support for one's own political cause against that of one's opponents. This is the more so in the instant communication of modern electronic society, in which government and opposition are ad referendum via the media from day to day, not just at elections every two, four, five or seven years. The result is that politics is a permanent election campaign to retain the good opinion of the people or one's own supporters. In Anglo-Saxon parts, this has given rise to the concept of 'spin' – of seeking to utilise the media daily to put the best face on policies, positions and actions, even to the point that the appearance of action is more important than the action itself; or of appearing to pursue one policy for the purpose of public consumption, while in reality pursuing a quite different one or not pursuing one at all. But, as Abraham Lincoln is famously reputed once to have said, there are limits to which the people can be fooled, and the sense of being deceived is an important factor in current cynicism about the political process and the collapse in electoral turn-out in many countries in the developed world.

But on this question, we should avoid the self-righteousness with which the media and the public often view politicians – in my own country, consistently opinion polls suggest that journalists and politicians, in that order, are the least regarded, because the least credible, of professions. In the liberal democracies, the media like to represent themselves as disinterested hounds of the truth and exposers of moral turpitude. Sometimes they are and we should be thankful for it when they expose mendacity, corruption and want of integrity. But the media's stance is often vitiated, for two reasons. First, by the economic need to attract viewers and readers – to win the ratings war. The resulting temptation is to write what they think consumers wish to hear, to apply their own 'spin' in their own interest. And, second, there is the desire of the press themselves to be campaigning political participants, to bring down governments, to be kingmakers. One strand of origin of the press is, of course, not as disinterested informers, but precisely as an instrument of political propaganda and lobbying. The result may be exaggeration of argument and distortion of the truth. The temptation is all the greater, the

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action can appear all the more justifiable, in a postmodern society which holds that there is no objective truth, only my perspective or my own truth.

But if for a moment we define 'political' behaviour as entailing the desire to exercise power, to get one's own way at all costs, including statement of the false and distortion of the truth, and clandestinely manipulating people and outcomes against the will of others, we can see that the question of 'truth and politics' arises not just in high politics but at all levels of human interaction: in the family, enterprise, bureaucratic organisation (the school, the hospital, the charity), office, in church and para-church organisation. Indeed, in the university and the church, I have observed political behaviour, the shocking character of which real politicians would be ashamed to be accused of! So we should approach the question of truth and politics with due humility, because it is highly relevant to us as well as at the political levels to which we shall never aspire.

What are the relevant principles which should determine conduct in this regard? (Since God is creator and all human life falls under his judgment, I suggest that they apply equally to Christian and non-Christian, to the secular institution as in the church.)

- God is indeed judge of all, to whom all will have to give account, including for 'every thoughtless word' (*Matthew* 12: 36).
- In judgment, that which has been done in secret will be made known, according to Jesus (*Matthew* 10: 26, 27; *Mark* 4: 22 ; *Luke* 8: 4; & 12: 1 – 3). These scriptures contain the notion that, even from day to day in this life, what is done clandestinely *ought* to be made publicly known. We are to live as children of the light, having nothing to do with the deeds of darkness, which we are rather to expose (*Ephesians* 5: 8 – 14).
- Our 'yes' is to be 'yes' and our 'no' 'no' – again the Dominical injunction (*Matthew* 5: 37; see also *1 Corinthians* 2: 17, 18, *Titus* 1: 10 – 12; and *James* 5: 12). There is to be a simple honesty rather than deception, or even jesuitical legalism and casuistry, in our dealings
- We are not to bear false witness (*Exodus* 20: 16). The original context is legal process, where dishonesty if successful could lead to legalised theft, and destruction of the character and even the life of the unjustly-accused person. But by analogy with the process which Jesus adopted in the Sermon on the Mount, we can legitimately extend the underlying moral principle to all human expression of fact and opinion. Our goal must always be accurate expression of the truth, irrespective of the consequences for our own interests.
- 'Put off falsehood and speak truthfully...' (*Ephesians* 4: 25) In this context, the Medieval casuists were right to argue that lying involved not only positive statement of what is untrue (*suggestio falsi*), but also it involves deliberate misleading by stating the truth only in part (*suppressio veri*). The state and the politician are inclined to argue that it is not necessary to say more than is absolutely required by the context – the principle of being economical with the truth. But as a number of British and American public servants have learned to their cost in the last 35 years, the public are, rightly, deeply sceptical of this principle. In the British courts, the witness swears to tell 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' While politicians know that it is usually not prudent to state what is untrue, the temptation to state less than the whole truth is frequently succumbed to by us all.
- Lying actions are to be foresworn, such as the clandestine moving of boundary stones, the effect of which was to steal land from another.

These points imply a Divine requirement of substantial *transparency, openness, honesty* and *integrity* in the conduct of affairs. In fact, on the question of integrity and honesty of expression, there is a remarkable uniformity of position across Scripture as a whole. This is scarcely surprising since Satan is himself characterised by Jesus himself in extreme terms as a liar: 'He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies' (*John 8: 44*). By contrast, God himself is defined as truth.

The natural human response is to argue (1) this is an impractical approach – it puts the person who follows it at a hopeless disadvantage in fallen world and threatens to deny the profession of politics to the Christian; and (2) that under the doctrine of consequentialism even the statement of positive untruth can be justified by the results – that there is such a thing as the 'noble lie', at least in conditions of extreme emergency (*cf. Rahab's lie (Joshua 2: 4 – 7)*).

To the first, the answer must be given that in a fallen world Christian virtue often puts the practiser at a potential disadvantage; on the prudential argument, all the commandments could be disregarded. And, either in principle or in particular circumstances and conditions, a profession, or certain aspects of a profession, may indeed be denied to the person who wants to obey God. This is happening widely as secular society imposes principles which fly in the face of Christian truth: in my own country, Christians have difficulty with aspects of obstetrical practice and their career prospects are affected as a result; and experienced magistrates have had to stand down because they are unwilling to be the instruments of adoption by same-sex couples. Ultimately, this is an issue of trust in God. And secular society increasingly recognises that transparency, openness, honesty and integrity are, in fact, crucial to the effective working of society, as we would expect, given the divine origin of society.

There is no space in a short article properly to discuss the second objection. Let it suffice to say that rigorous consequentialism is a highly questionable basis for morality, certainly a Biblical morality. And that the difficulty with the argument from extreme emergency and of the safety of the state is that of determining when the principle is satisfied and policing against its abuse. Politicians would be very ready to claim it, of course, in respect of what happens to seem to them to be essential today. But, in fact, the argument is irrelevant to day-to-day politics, and to day to day life in organisations and churches.

To the postmodern objection that truth is unknowable and therefore it doesn't matter what we write and say, we reply, first, that that leads to a mad-house society and postmodernists do not really believe it themselves; and, secondly, that within the moral framework of divine creation, the truth can be substantially known and established, even by fallen human beings, at least in part, provided that they search it out with integrity.

As Bacon said, "What is truth", said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer." The biblical text makes clear that, though he was not in a democracy, Pilate found himself in intensely political circumstances, in which, as the Sanhedrin, equally politically, did not fail to point out to him, his own career prospects were at stake. It is clear from scripture that both

Pilate and the Sanhedrin failed the truth and integrity test. Do we in our churches, para-church bodies and employment?

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