

The Church and Truth-Telling

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THE major problem confronting every person, whether recognized consciously or not, is that of survival. By survival I do not mean the continuation of physical existence only. Survival in any significant sense means much more than this. The complexity and ambiguity of life produces in each man a deep sense of anxiety. From this condition he attempts to escape by establishing his own existence through the exercise of whatever degree of power he is capable of acquiring. This inevitability involves him in relationships with other people, both as individuals and as groups. In most cases these groups are structured to a greater or lesser degree as institutions which operate according to some set of ground-rules whether clearly defined or not.

The individual who would establish his existence in any institution must discover what ground-rules operate in this particular institution and act accordingly. Since societies are made up of many and varying institutions with different sets of ground-rules, and since any particular individual may belong to several institutions and oppose the ground-rules of one to those of another, conflicts arise. Further, since the interests and needs of any particular institution may be varied and complex, there is a corresponding variety in its ground-rules and the possibility of conflicting sets of ground-rules. There may be one set for the internal affairs of the institution and another set for its external relationships. There may be a set explicitly stated for public relations and another implicitly understood as that by which the institution actually operates. Such conflicts may be taken

into the inner life of the individual and lead to a serious disintegration of personality unless some hierarchy of loyalty can be established.

Much has been written about the problem of integrity (or the lack of it) in American life since the quiz show scandals of a few years ago, but seldom does anyone deal with this problem in terms of an individual's survival or the establishing of his existence in his relationships to institutions. It is not my concern here to deal with this problem in its entirety. I am concerned with only a preliminary analysis of this problem as it relates to the religious institution.

At this point two things may be said by way of clarification.

1. By "religious institution" I mean the actual organized church as a corporate body participating in the actual life of society, not some sort of transcendental reality beyond time and space.

2. By "integrity" I mean truth-telling. Statements which one makes about states-of-affairs which he takes to be actual assert that these states-of-affairs are actual and conversely statements about states-of-affairs which are not taken to be actual assert that they are not. Further, one does not give assent either implicitly or explicitly to the statements of others which assert that certain states-of-affairs are when they are not or are not when they are.

Is truth-telling as defined a characteristic feature of the religious institution? Does the institution itself operate in terms of the exhortations it directs toward its members? Is integrity one of the ground-rules by which the institution orders its internal and external relations? How does it compare in this regard with other institutions? With respect to this last question, it appears that the religious institution compares favorably with the other in-

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stitutions of society if one exception is taken into account. This exception is the science institution. One of the internal ground-rules of the science institution as stated by Professor Rubin Gotesky of Northern Illinois University in an unpublished paper entitled "Science and Society" is "the telling-of-the-truth-no-matter-what." According to Professor Gotesky, "Should any science-institution cease to abide by this rule, then it would not survive as a science-institution." His ground-rule is a necessary condition for its existence. Sir Charles P. Snow has made the same point in somewhat different language in an article in *Science*, January 27, 1961, entitled "The Moral Un-Neutrality of Science." In speaking of scientists Snow says, "They know that the truth, as they use the word and as the rest of us use it in the language of common speech, is what makes science work . . . On it rests the whole great edifice of modern science."

Is it the case that the religious institutions of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition take "the telling-of-the-truth-no-matter-what" as their basic ground-rule? Clearly the answer is no. Evidence for this assertion is to be found in the great disparity between what is taught about the Bible in the Protestant seminaries and what the churches teach concerning the scriptures. Biblical literalism has long since been a dead issue as far as most Protestant seminaries are concerned, and yet it is still a rather powerful position among numerous laymen including some college professors. Professor John Knox claims that there are millions of lay members in the non-fundamentalist church bodies who are naively literalistic.¹ This condition is due in part to the great obstacles faced by the churches in their attempts at religious education but it is also due to the fact that many ministers, writers for church publications and religious education

directors do not tell what they know. Admittedly some biblical research today results in relative, tentative and hypothetical conclusions and no one could be expected to share these conclusions with non-specialists. However there are some conclusions that have such a high degree of confirmation that they can be said to be **known** as true. These conclusions and biblical literalism are contradictory. Yet most laymen are naively literalistic. Therefore there has been a failure on the part of church leaders to communicate these conclusions to the laity, and/or a refusal on the part of most laymen to be undeceived whenever the truths of modern biblical research have been made known to them. As is well known, the greater numerical growth during the past fifty years has occurred among the conservative religious groups holding literalistic views of the Bible.² This means then, that "the telling-of-the-truth-no-matter-what" is not held as the basic ground-rule of the religious institution nor that its survival depends upon abiding by such a ground-rule. Why is this the case?

1. One reason might be found in the nature of the religious situation. Here man is operating in what Professor Willem F. Zuurdeeg has called "the convictional situation."³ He gives himself to a conviction not on the basis of empirical evidence but because he has been overcome by a "convictor." There are certain elements involved in the act of decision or assent on the part of the one convinced. According to Zuurdeeg they are: "first, the convictor, a power which for him comes to him from the world outside himself; second, the witnesses, who by means of their testimonies have influenced this decision; third, the "goods" which are at stake—himself, his world, his whole way of

² Benson Y. Landis, "Trends in Church Membership in the United States," *The Annals*, Vol. 332 (November, 1960), p. 5.

³ *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1958), pp. 27-31.

¹ *Criticism and Faith*, (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1952), p. 17.

living; fourth, the threat to these 'goods' by hostile powers; fifth, the promise of a new life waiting for him who shares these convictions and who follows the convictor."⁴ By contrast the scholar or scientist gives or withholds assent to a scientific hypothesis only after detached deliberation and a careful weighing of the evidence. For the most part his decision calls for no radical change in his own life. As a person he remains very much the same as he was before the decision.

This analysis emphasizes three important facts about the religious situation which help to explain why "truth-telling-on-matter-what" is not an indispensable ground-rule for the religious institution.

a) In spite of Matthew Arnold, religion is not simply morality tinged with emotion. The basic ground-rule for religious institutions is commitment to a "convictor" expressed in ways the institution deems appropriate. Morality is supposed to be an out-growth or by-product of this commitment, not a condition for it, nor identical with it. If "truth-telling-no-matter-what" conflicts with the basic ground-rule, then so much the worse for "truth-telling-no-matter-what."

b) Decision for a convictor is made on the basis of the persuasion of witnesses. Empirical testing and evidence is not considered relevant with regard to the basic ground-rule. Since this is the case with regard to that which is held most important there is a tendency to disregard it where it is relevant, namely in biblical study. In most churches biblical study is almost entirely convictional rather than empirical.

c) Members of religious institutions find their way of life and hope for the future bound up in this ground-rule of commitment. Consequently, there is resistance to any attack, real or imaginary, that seems to threaten their commitment. Their survival in its deep-

est sense is at stake. Thus they are likely to resist being undeceived concerning that which rightly or wrongly is considered to be essential to the commitment.

2. Another reason why "truth-telling-no-matter-what" is not of indispensable importance as a ground-rule for the religious institution arises out of a historical fact. This fact is simply that the Hebrew-Christian tradition arose in a pre-scientific age and includes thought-forms that are no longer relevant in the modern world-view. Many church leaders and perhaps the majority of the laity feel secure with the ancient thought-forms and much of the language by which they are expressed. In their thinking, the thought-forms have been cemented to the convictor so that to destroy the one is to destroy the other. This leads many a modern Christian into some rather interesting inconsistencies. On the one hand, he accepts the ancient world-view and thought-forms in the realm of the "spiritual" and the "religious." On the other hand, he accepts the modern world-view of science in the other areas of his life. In his "spiritual" life he is quite willing to accept the Genesis account of creation as literal fact even though it is predicated upon the notion of a three-layer universe. Yet, he also accepts as literal fact that which we are being told almost constantly today through every means of communication concerning the planets and space. The logical contradiction in this state of affairs does not seem to be recognized and even if it is he refuses to resolve this contradiction, but continues to live in these two "worlds."

This situation poses some very serious questions for the clergy and other church leaders.

a) Shall one "tell-the-truth-no-matter-what" concerning the Biblical myths? Shall one where it is relevant to do so follow Paul Tillich's advice and try to "break" the myths? Is such a procedure worth the risk involved with respect to one's career? What good can

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

one accomplish over the long run if he is branded as a heretic? Isn't the temptation to become a martyr just as great as the temptation to rationalize? The notoriety gained by such a martyrdom might "pay off" in very unexpected ways.

b) What of the danger to the institution itself? Would not the "telling-of-the-truth-no-matter-what" endanger the internal harmony of any particular institution? Do not heresy charges and trials have a disrupting effect? Even if the application of the truth principle did not have this result, would it not likely alienate large numbers of the members of the institution?

c) Is there not an even more serious question than these two? One might be willing to take a calculated risk with respect to one's career or the institution as an institution, but what of those devout and sincere persons within the institution who would have their faith and their security shaken? What of those simple people who demonstrate Christian love in their actions and yet understand this faith in terms of pre-scientific thought - forms. Have not these people caught the essential ingredient of the Christian faith? Why, then, should one run the risk of producing an emotional and spiritual trauma in their lives? Should one not be willing to sacrifice his own moral purity to a degree if it is in the interest of the well-being of others? Cannot one do this without outright lying by avoiding direct answers to questions and by withholding information? What right has one to destroy the convictions of others?

It seems rather obvious in light of the above that while the ground-rule of "telling-the-truth-no-matter-what" is a necessary condition for the survival of the science institution, it may pose a threat or at least raise serious questions concerning the survival of leaders, institutions and members when applied to the religious institution. This should not be understood as a value judgment or as implying that the science institu-

tion is a "better" institution. It is simply to recognize the difference between them.

3. A third reason why "truth-telling-no-matter-what" does not play an indispensable role in the religious institution consists in the fact that religious commitment does not often develop in individuals a readiness to be undeceived. Two factors are involved here:

a) The primary appeal of religion is to the emotions and to the will, and only secondarily to the intellect.

b) The appeal of religion cultivates devotion to the highest type of idealism.

The religious man is likely to become so committed to what is hoped for that he is unable to face what is actual. Thus he lives in the "world" of ideal possibilities rather than in the world of actual probabilities. He may be dominated by such a strong drive for wish fulfillment in terms of his "ideals" that he is literally incapable of acting in the actual situation in such a way that at least proximate goals may be realized. Instead his actions often only succeed in destroying any possibility of realizing any goals, either ideal or proximate. Usually others in the situation are blamed for this failure. They are the "unenlightened ones" or the "evil ones" who actively or passively opposed the "good" which only he, the enlightened idealist, has the intelligence to see. Therefore, he rejects those with whom he must work if he is to accomplish anything in the actual situation and retreats still further into his "world" of deception. When this "world" falls apart he is exceptionally surprised and is very likely to feel betrayed by both friends and God. As long as his "world" holds together, he adamantly refuses to heed the voices that speak from the world that is.

This condition, of course, is not new with modern man. It has occurred before in man's religious life.

One of the most striking illustrations is to be found in the Seventh Chapter of Jeremiah when the prophet con-

demns his fellow-countrymen for living in a dream world based on the notion of the inviolability of the temple and predicts its destruction. As is well-known, this doctrine had its origin in the time of Isaiah when the forces of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, had withdrawn from the vicinity of Jerusalem without an attack upon the city. Although it seems likely that this withdrawal had been occasioned because Sennacherib was having trouble in other parts of his empire, found his forces being decimated by disease, and had been satisfied with a large tribute payment from Hezekiah, popular opinion in Jerusalem and Judea saw it as a miracle of Yahweh. Isaiah had perhaps unwittingly contributed to this popular notion by abandoning his message of judgment to encourage steadfastness and hope in the face of the peril. At any rate, this circumstance of a concrete situation was generalized into an universal abstraction and became a dogma which served as a touchstone for loyalty and orthodoxy.

Jeremiah attacked this dogma as unrealistic, serving even to deceive. With clarity and courage he declared, "Do not trust in these deceptive words. 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'"⁶ For daring to attack this hallowed but deceptive dogma, Jeremiah received nothing less than ridicule, scorn, and persecution. The people refused to be undeceived.

The deceptive words uttered in Jeremiah's day remind one of much that is being said today. For example, "God is not going to let the Russians win the world" or "God is not going to let His world be destroyed by hydrogen bombs. I don't know how He will accomplish it, but somehow He is going to preserve this world." One who asks that evidence be put forth to confirm such predictions or who asserts that there is evidence to support the opposite predictions is attacked as either un-Amer-

ican or an atheist or both. Religious commitment may actually have hardened the resistance against outside attempts to remove one's self-deception. After all, one's whole way of life may be at stake.

4. A fourth reason why "truth-telling-no-matter-what" does not play an indispensable role in the religious institution lies in the fact that religionists just as many people in other realms tend to create closed systems of thought behind which they hide. In so doing, they refuse to face up to the possible truth in opposing systems or in what might be called "open-ended" thought. Thus they tend to "label" ideas and persons in these opposing positions as false or heretics no matter what the facts may be or no matter how much evidence there may be to support the truth in these opposing positions. Man is quick to create devils in order to escape realities which he does not want to face. The employment of "labels" is enormously helpful at this point, for once one has succeeded in labeling another person, he no longer has to deal with the actual person but only with a hated abstraction. Sufficient evidence for this contention can be found in the divisions between Christian bodies and between rival "schools" of theologians. Impartial studies might reveal that it is difficult in today's theological world to survive in any significant way unless one at least tacitly permits himself to become identified with one of the rival "schools" of theologians. If such is the case, then even the vanguard of the religious community's attempt to understand itself and to communicate with others is also invaded by the subtle seductions of self-deceit.

According to the analysis presented thus far, the religious institution does not take as its primary ground-rule in either theory or practice the "telling-of-truth-no-matter-what." In theory this principle is of secondary importance to the religious commitment. It is thought of as accompanying commitment is supposed to create that type

⁶ Jeremiah 7:4. R.S.V.

of inner life that can bear the light of public scrutiny. Without integrity and sincerity the genuineness of the commitment itself is jeopardized. As we have seen, however, in actual practice in institutional life conflicts may arise between the two principles which are wedded in theory. The exigencies of institutional life and the inconsistencies within each person often lead to the sacrifice of the lesser for what seems to be more important principle in spite of the danger to the more important principle which is involved in such procedure. But since the lesser principle is so involved with the more important one it would seem that it would be the better part of wisdom to sacrifice it only after very serious consideration and further to take every opportunity to increase its application in the practical life of the institution.

Certain suggestions are offered here as to procedures which might lead in the direction of such increased application. No claims are made with respect to them either in terms of finality or exhaustiveness. They are offered simply as guiding principles. As such they are resolves and thus cannot be treated as statements which can be tested with respect to truth or falsity. The only test which can be applied to them is that of usefulness. Certain experience had led this writer to believe that the following guiding principles would prove useful to the religious institution as it attempts to deal with the problem of truth-telling.

1. Those persons who desire to live responsibly in the institution at least can make a beginning attack on the problem by recognizing that no one understands himself completely. As Zuurdeeg has pointed out, "Nobody understands himself well enough to account for his convictions, that is, for himself, as well as for the convictor who is the center of his life."⁶ Once this is genuinely admitted and faced honestly, it may be that one will find a basis from

which to make a beginning at understanding dimly his own convictional situation in a non-convictional way. At another point, Zuurdeeg says "the notion that nobody can cast off his own skin has to be offset by the one that nobody can see anything who is not able to withdraw from the ivory tower of his own convictions."⁷ Such an attempt at rigorous self-analysis may assist one in destroying some of his own self-deception and thus provide him with that openness necessary to consider truths from whatever source they may come.

2. In following this very painful but rewarding procedure, it is possible for one to secure assistance through a careful study of some biblical personalities such as Jeremiah, Job and Jesus. In various passages, either by them or about them, it is either stated explicitly or implied that God is more greatly honored by those who are honest with their doubts than by those who cover them over in some false and mistaken notion of piety.

A study of the founders of the great world religions other than Christianity reveals the fact that most of these men were much more realistic than those who followed them. The Buddha insisted that clarity of thought and expression was basic to good conduct and Confucius supported as one of his main tenets the doctrine of the rectification of names. Careful consideration of the convictions of these non-Christians may serve to cast more light upon the Christian's own convictional presuppositions and to assist him in the struggle against self-deception.

3. Another leading principle which may be of assistance is the resolve to resist the temptation to label persons and ideas. For the individual who is attempting to live within a Christian convictional frame of reference, this resolve is founded on the experience of having been forgiven and accepted by God. On the basis of such experience,

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

one may painfully and slowly come to learn what it means to love others. It is nonsense to talk in terms of loving someone to whom a label has been attached. No one can love a label. Behind the label the person is hidden and love can operate only in terms of communication between persons.

For communication to operate on the basis of love and to produce fruitful results, several procedural rules must be followed. These rules may be stated briefly. (a) The communication must be a genuine dialogue with both parties really listening to the other. (b) Each one must concentrate on understanding the other. (c) Emotional reactions must be controlled. (d) Points of difference must be defined as precisely as possible. (e) Each must be willing to speak openly, yet humbly, of the convictions

which motivate his life insofar as these are understood. (f) Each must be prepared to learn from the opposite point of view. Such a procedure may be personally painful but it will be exciting—this meeting in conflict without armor or self-defense. Further, it will banish much of the deception that is now practiced.

I do not claim that the actualization of the suggestions made above would make "telling - the - truth - no - matter - what" the primary ground-rule for the religious institution for, as already indicated, the major purpose of such an institution transcends this principle. However, it would allow for a greater degree of honesty which in turn should contribute to the realization of a more realistic and profound commitment.

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