

The Quest for Truth and Freedom

The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 was ‘post-truth’ – an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.’

Dictionary editors said that, while the word had been in existence for the past decade, there was a ‘spike’ in frequency last year ‘in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States.’

‘Post-truth’ is not quite the same as ‘lies’. It is about exercising power and control, and manipulating public opinion. The liar may know the truth, but the post-truth politician does not care what is truth and what is not, whether this is a £350 million advertisement on a bus, or the message about EU immigration from UKIP’s terrible poster. In ‘post-truth’ politics, we pick and choose our ‘alternative facts’.

For post-truth politicians and journalists, - and indeed for many users of social media – ‘truth’ no longer carries the transcendent quality that it does, for example, in the Bible, where it points to reliability, integrity and trustworthiness, rooted in the faithfulness of God’s Word. The departure from the transcendence of truth could have deeply troubling consequences for public life. The 20th century scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi expressed his commitment to science in terms of a ‘love of truth’. He also related science’s quest for truth to the importance of transcendent values in public life: ‘a general respect for truth is all that is needed for society to be free.’ Conversely, when truth is no longer respected, or even acknowledged, he argued, our very freedoms are at stake.

Polanyi was outraged at the way 1930’s Marxist society handled questions of truth. Truth was what the Party defined it to be. Scientists were free to follow their own interests, but ‘they would inevitably be led to lines of research which would benefit the current Five Year Plan.’ Polanyi would have none of this. Just as science is a ‘society of explorers’ committed to the belief that there is some transcendent reality to discover, so – by analogy – a free society needs to hold fast to transcendent values and work together in their light. ‘The ideal of a free society is in the first place to be a *good* society: a body of people who respect truth, desire justice and love their fellows.’ Polanyi is not far from the commandment ‘You shall not bear false witness’, nor from Jesus’ saying: ‘the truth will make you free.’ But a long way from post-truth.

Of course, in a world of sin, selfishness and stupidity, much of our truth is partial. There are compromises with competing value claims. The doctor, out of love, does not always tell the whole truth to a dying patient. More dubiously, a government seeking to keep a measure of peace, uses bluff concerning nuclear weapons. Too often, for unworthy commercial or political advantage, truth is withheld or denied - as by unscrupulous scientists who sowed doubt about the harmfulness of tobacco, and are now doing so about climate change. Journalists often find it hard to tell the truth, despite the text-book words: ‘Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.’ Of course there are different interpretations, and all our knowledge is limited and open to correction. Polanyi acknowledged that in science – which is why our theories are tested by our peer group, and corroborated or criticised. We might get it wrong. But journalism, despite the uncertainties and difficulties in verification, can still aspire to tell the truth. That is utterly different from not caring about truth. Post-truth politics can lead to disillusionment with politicians, and open the door to extremist views that no one feels it is important to verify or challenge.

Social media seems to be increasingly dominated by opinion, and opinionated news. A false news item or allegation becomes a tweet and goes viral through the networks among like-minded people who reinforce each other's views. Politicians are routinely accused of lying - not least during an election campaign - and increasingly that is accepted as part of the 'game'. The really troubling thing in a post-truth world is that truth ceases to matter.

What motivated Polanyi was what he called a crisis in our culture: where a society loses touch with transcendent values such as truth, justice, love and beauty, our proper human moral passions become increasingly liable to be pushed in other directions, too often into violence.

Writing in 1975, just before his death, Polanyi had a poignant warning: 'When a judge in a court of law can no longer appeal to law and justice; when neither a witness, nor the newspapers, nor ever an scientist reporting on his experiments can speak the truth as he knows it; when in public life there is no moral principle commanding respect; when the revelations of religion and of art are denied any substance; then there are no grounds left on which any individual may justly make a stand against the rulers of the day. Such is the simple logic of totalitarianism.'

David Atkinson