

TRUTH IN THE BIBLE

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“He who is of the truth hears my voice” (John 18:38)

Introduction – Why Truth matters

“Truth isn’t just facts. It’s a mode of being. It’s finding out what’s real and responding to it”, wrote the late philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch. In this statement she expresses well the role played by the concept of truth in human life. Truth connects us to Real and although both truth and reality are notoriously difficult to come by, that in no way diminishes the importance of seeking them.

A conference on Truth is particularly important in an age where seeking emotional gratification is prized above seeking truth and where positive thoughts are seen to be more important than having true beliefs. There is a big difference, however, between a positive thought and a thought that is true. The same goes for attitudes. A positive attitude is certainly an important and powerful attribute but it is, at the end of the day, only an attitude. It is something our mind (or psyche) brings to our experience of reality. It is still of crucial importance that we allow reality to teach us *what is* as opposed to what I *want it to be*.

Whilst the digital age has dramatically increased the volume of information we are exposed to, there is no reason to think that it has added anything to our capacity to seek truth or face reality. In fact there are good reasons for thinking that it has done the opposite. I can lose myself in information, choose what I want to know, put a spin on what I want others to hear and move further and further away from truth or reality, without even noticing¹. That scene from the movie “A Few Good Men” stands out in my mind, where Jack Nicholson delivers that wonderful line to the two sincere army officers: “You want the truth? You can’t handle the truth”.

How many of us *can* handle the truth? How many of us are willing to let others see us as we truly are? We present ourselves to others in ways that we hope will be acceptable. We tend, on the whole, to like only those who like us (which is often just another way of saying, those who don’t challenge our version of the truth). We learn very early to pretend, to please, to present the image that we think people want to see, to say what we think people want to hear. We create our own reality and do everything we can to make sure that reality itself doesn’t find a way in through our defenses. Yet a genuine seeker of truth always welcomes a question or an insight not yet considered, welcomes a challenge that might lead them onwards towards a deeper understanding of reality. For of course, truth and reality are inextricably mixed. If we are not acquainted with truth, we are not

¹ For those interested in reading a more sustained enquiry into the impact of the internet on our subjectivity I recommend Hubert Dreyfus’ *On the Internet*, Routledge, 2001

acquainted with reality. Truth and reality simply become a matter of private preference or taste, the construct of deep-seated psychological responses, preferences and fantasies.

So why *does* Truth matter? Truth operates as a concept that calls us out from our subjectivity and egoism, it stakes a claim on us and calls us to account. It is, therefore, also connected to ethics. In law, justice can only be done if witnesses tell the truth, if objectivity is secured through truthful telling. Of course, like any other concept, we can use it to our advantage, abuse it and distort it. Or perhaps even use it carelessly; ignoring the claim it has on us by preferring our own illusory version of events. But the idea that the truth can set you free is a meaningful one, whether or not we give it religious overtones. Truth calls us out from illusion, fantasy and distortion, inviting us to an encounter with reality, and thereby freeing us from the shackles of subjectivity, personal preference and egoism.

What is so distressing about our current situation is the way in which the concept has become debased and abused. The idea that something is true for me or true for you or that truth is whatever I want it to be *denies us* the reference point of a reality that is outside us, an independent reality that we can hope to come to know. So in an age where I am told that reality is mine for the making, I am condemned to a construct of reality that is self-referenced and self-centered. And you don't have to look very far to see the disastrous consequences of this.²

On a more hopeful note, it might not have done us any harm to have gone through a period where 'truth' has been unusable... "Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning – then it can be put back into circulation".³ A concept like 'truth' takes its place in the pantheon of concepts that provide a transcendent framework in which human beings find meaning and purpose. (Other such concepts include, justice, beauty, good, perhaps even the concept of God). When such concepts become debased or muddied, there is an opportunity to have them cleaned up and put back into circulation with new validity. We cannot do without such concepts. Nor, it seems, do we survive very well when they become muddied, abused or debased. So, perhaps this conference will go some way towards returning the concept of truth to circulation, at least within education. The power of providing young people with 'cleaned up' concepts, by which they might define what is important and make sense of (indeed, make more sensible) a world of increasing madness, cannot be overestimated. What we will be discussing over the next few days is not merely a five-letter word but one of the most powerful human concepts, without which we cannot live fully human lives.

Truth in the Bible: Some preliminary remarks

When I was a student at the UNSW, a serious young man approached me on campus and asked me if I believed in Jesus. Before I had time to prepare a response to what I took to

² Reality TV is probably the best example of the general trend. What is frightening is the popularity of these programs that display naked selfishness, aggression and greed as entertainment. It is no wonder that Plato believed that such base and popular 'art' was a threat to civilized, democratic society.

³ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Blackwell, 1980, p.39

be a rather intrusive and presumptuous approach by a stranger, he proceeded to tell me that if I didn't believe in Jesus I would be going to hell. Leaving me to process that cheery piece of news, he walked off to find another target.

I have often wondered what lies behind this method of attack by serious and sincere believers. I know that if you ask them why they consider themselves sufficiently informed about divine intention, how they have such clear and certain knowledge of God's plan to condemn the majority of the human race to hell, they will tell you *that the Bible says so*. Clearly, they are treating as synonymous, "The Bible says so" and "God says so".

I want to explore what it means to think of the biblical text as a conveyor of truth and at the responsibilities we have as teachers of Religious Education, in developing in our students an understanding of what it might mean to think of the Bible *as True*. I am interested, not merely in The Bible as a catalogue of events, mythical and historical, and a collection of songs and sayings. It is, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, a divine communiqué. It is a text in which it is assumed that *God speaks*. It doesn't just tell of people past, lived faith, of developing communities, of personal doubt and disaster, of towering achievements. It is infused, through every word on every page, with the acknowledged presence of a divine being, creator of heaven and earth, who speaks to, and is with his creatures, guiding and scolding, shaping and molding, the humble human understanding of the meaning and purpose of life. It is, therefore, *as a divine communiqué* (and not merely a human literary achievement) that we need to consider the question of its truth.

What kind of book is the Bible? Let's remind ourselves of some of the basics.

[draw and explain 'revelation' diagram on overhead.⁴]

It makes sense then to think of the spiritual life as a response to an experience of transcendental longing, restlessness; a desire in the depths of our being that cannot find satisfaction or fulfillment in the things of this world.⁵ C.S. Lewis describes it as: 'the sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality [it is]...our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel

⁴ Key points to convey via 'revelation map': Don't assume too much about the nature of the spiritual realm (not even that it is personal). Hone in on traditions to show some differences in the way human beings have made sense of it: Hinduism, Buddhism (not personal/Buddha refused to speculate), Christianity (God taking human form). Hebrew (chosen people, promised land, Covenant)

Specific look at biblical tradition: myth (as record of 'hauntings' that we are not alone, that we have a spiritual origin), laws (what is required of us), histories (tradition tells its story), prophets (reminders of the Real), Gospels (good news about the messiah) etc.

Most important to emphasise that it is humanly authored; humans making sense of experiences understood in the light of their developing understanding of the nature of, and their relationship with, the divine.

⁵ In the first Matrix movie, we meet a restless Neo, desiring a full life of which his Mr Anderson persona knows nothing. He is *seeking* an answer to his question.

cut off’.⁶ The origins of the word ‘religion’ nicely capture the essence of this experience: *relegere* (to turn to constantly), *religio* (to revere) and *religare* (to bind oneself back). Religions try to make sense of the deep human experience of *being in the world but not of it*.

What does this mean for the issue of Truth in the Bible? Two brief asides before I continue. First, given that all religious traditions are in the same boat, so to speak, what I say about truth and the biblical text should also apply to the texts of other traditions. Second, whether we think of the spiritual realm as *metaphysically real* or just *psycho-spiritually real* (as in, merely a reality or dimension of human experience), all that I now go on to say should apply either way.

Put very generally we might say that the biblical narrative is an account of the ways a particular group (or groups) of human beings have made sense of the spiritual dimension of human experience.⁷ As a friend reminded me recently, it is an *esoteric* text.⁸ For the Hebrews (and Christians after them) the spiritual realm is understood in terms of a divine being, a personal God who is the ground and source of all being and who is personally interested in His creation. The Hebrew Scriptures contain myths (making sense of the haunting, that we are not alone, that we owe our life to something else and that somehow things aren’t as they should be). They tell us about individuals who have tried to live their lives in accordance with divine intention (which involves a struggle to discern it and then to abide by it). They contain rules, beliefs, laws and rituals that honour the existence of God and encourage a life of holiness (as well as shaping a tradition of believers, known as ‘the chosen people’). They contain expressions of the human response in poetry and song, contain prophecy (stories of those who within the tradition were recognized as representatives, spoke on behalf of God), and of course the Christian Scriptures continue with the story of God taking human form (rather than sending a rep) and contain a special revelation about God.⁹

⁶ C.S. Lewis *Transposition and Other Addresses*, Chapter 2.

⁷ The best description I have encountered, describing what I mean by experience here is Thomas Merton’s. “It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, for being. It is a vivid realisation of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source. It is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond both reason and simple faith”. (*Essential Writings*, p.88). For a simple but clear philosophical description of the ways human beings interpret experience, see Mel Thompson’s *Teach Yourself Philosophy of Religion*, Ch 1, Hodder and Stoughton, 2003.

⁸ ‘Esoteric’ meaning, intelligible only to those who have special knowledge, which in this case, means those with an existential awareness/experience of the spiritual realm.

⁹ There are different literary genres contained within the biblical text and different kinds of meaning and truth appropriate to those genres. Myth conveys truth but not in the way a historical claim does. Love poetry conveys truth but not in the way parables do. The Book of Job contains truth but not in the way Paul’s letters do. I take it that any decent teaching of the Bible takes into account these considerations and aims to help students become both careful readers of the text and discerning in their understanding of the nature of the claims being made. But we need to do more than simply talk about the different genres and different kinds of truth found in the Bible. Even if one were to list every statement made in the Bible and, being sensitive to its genre, asked about its truth, or even provided good reasons for thinking it true, we would not have adequately addressed the question of Truth in the Bible.

If we accept the premise that the biblical text is to be understood as a text in which *God speaks*; as a text that reveals truths about God and ourselves, about the meaning and purpose of life and how we are supposed to live it and we accept that these truths are expressed (or enfolded) in human language, human interpretation, human sense-making, a question now arises: how do we distinguish the divine from the human and learn to hear the divine voice over and above the myriad of human voices that are the vehicle for divine revelation? This is what I take to be the interesting question of Truth in the Bible when asked by a community of believers (or RE teachers). Obviously a colloquium of scientists or historians might focus on a different question regarding truth.

Hearing God's Voice – Revelation and Transcendence

For the serious young man at the UNSW, the question I have just posed has a very straightforward answer. There is no difference between the human voices and the divine voice. Whilst they may be human words on the page, they are to be read off the page as God's words. I hope that you can see a problem with this response, a problem made clear by my diagram. Human beings come to understand their experiences within the finite realm. If we do not allow for a gap between human understanding of divine reality and divine reality then we effectively *reduce* divine reality to human understanding. Which is to say, we end up with a God of our own making. What lies within the realm of human understanding is not transcendent. In reducing God's reality to our understanding we simply create a god of imminence.

[diagrammatically, illustrate the ontology – the gap. Reading the human text uncritically, as if it is divine speech, does not allow for a gap – god enters imminence]

There are, I think, both philosophical and spiritual reasons for emphasizing the gap between human understanding and divine reality; reasons we would do well to consider before proceeding any further.¹⁰

Philosophical considerations concerning Truth and Reality

What is the philosophical difficulty in thinking that we are automatically hearing God's voice when we read the biblical text off the page (which is what happens when we treat as synonymous "The Bible says" and "God says")? A good way to bring out the problem is to glance briefly at a philosophical debate that is focused on the nature of truth and reality. It is the debate between Realists and Anti-Realists.

Truth as Correctness

Both realism and anti-realism operate from a fairly uncontroversial assumption about truth. They both agree that Truth is found in the match between human thought and reality. For example, the statement that 'there are over 50 people in the lecture theatre right now' is true because it 'matches' a feature of reality, namely, that there are over 50

¹⁰ Put very simply, we might say that the philosophical reasons concern the relationship between belief (thought/language) to reality, whereas the spiritual reasons concern our willingness to face reality.

people in the lecture theatre right now. Both realists and anti-realists have language on one side and reality on the other and claim that truth is secured when there is a match.

Now most of you will know from reading Peter's work that although Realists and Anti-realists agree with the basic set up, defining truth as a match between belief and reality, they differ in how they think the match is made.

Realism: conformity of thought to reality

Anti-Realism: conformity of reality to thought

The Realist holds that truth lies in the *correspondence* between thought and reality. The Anti-Realist holds that truth lies in the *coherence* of reality to thought. The realist is defending our intuition that the way things are *can't depend on* my thinking. The anti-realist is defending our intuition that reality, as we understand it, *can't be completely independent* of my thinking because if truth is somehow found in the relationship between thought and reality, and thoughts require thinkers, then truth must *in some way* be related to thinkers.

Both are good intuitions. The realist understands that we don't create reality but the anti-realist acknowledges that we play some part in what counts as reality. Think of the God-case. The realist says that our beliefs about God are true if, in fact, God is as our language says He is. The anti-realist says that our language about God defines what will count as a match. The realist is not really accessing a reality independent of language or experience. If truth is possible, it is secured within human understanding.

It was the great Immanuel Kant who realized that the intuitions behind both Realism and Anti-Realism were correct. This resulted in him merging the two intuitions into a position he called Transcendental Idealism.

What Kant noticed was that *the very possibility of what can appear before us as reality is already restricted by our capacity to comprehend it.*

Kant's philosophical project was then straightforward. His task was to identify the conditions that constituted our capacities of comprehension. When you've got some time on your hands you can find out what his answer was by reading *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

I think the Kantian insight, that the possibility of what can appear before me as reality is already restricted by my capacity to comprehend it, is of great importance, not merely to the philosophical debate about truth but, more specifically, to our thinking about the possibility of transcendence and revelation. Transcendental idealism brings home the fact that all I think about and claim to know is always (and necessarily) referenced back to me.

In what sense can *the otherness of being* actually manifest itself? This is an extremely important question if we are to avoid committing what Levinas calls, the *violence of ontology*. This is the violence of reducing *what is* to me, or my understanding.¹¹ According to Levinas, to respect otherness is to refuse to reduce it to thought in the first place. It is to respect that it is always more than, *in excess of*, what I think. He writes, “respect of the other as other, is the ethico-metaphysical moment whose transgression consciousness *must* forbid itself”. Truth as correctness can only be secured if we assume that thought is adequate to being (that our thinking can adequately match reality).

The concept of revelation actually designates another concept of truth; a concept of truth that questions the assumption that thought is adequate to being. When we receive a revelation, something that was not seen before is seen; revelation implies *the letting be what shows itself*. This takes place, not by coming to new knowledge within my understanding but through an encounter with reality that shatters my understanding. I do not move from false belief to true belief. My entire system of understanding is questioned. Levinas calls it the ‘rupture of transcendence’.

To be open to revelation, therefore, I must be ready to have my understanding ruptured; otherwise I am simply operating within my system and never genuinely encountering a reality beyond it. As C.S. Lewis puts it: “My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins...All reality is iconoclastic. The earthly beloved incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to; you want her with all her resistances, her faults, all her unexpectedness. That is, in her four square and independent reality”.¹²

Reality rightly resists reduction. The invisible or hidden God is not a God invisible to the senses but unschematisable, unthinkable, always other than thought. Hence, of Moses’ encounter, “tradition rightly identifies the episode of the burning bush as the revelation of the divine name. The dialectic of naming or thinking God cannot be transformed into a form of knowledge. The name is precisely unnameable”.¹³

So it appears that the only way we can remain open to divine revelation is to prize something more important than being right, to prize something more than being in possession of the truth. We must welcome being wrong because we are ready to be taught, and we are ready to be taught because we understand that reality is always *more than* or *different from* what I think it to be. The ethic-metaphysical transgression, of which Levinas speaks, is the act of valuing my beliefs about reality (my construct of reality) as more important than reality itself.

¹¹ In my paper, *Teaching Religion in an Age of science* I argued that the entire edifice of Western scientific knowledge depends on committing this violence.

¹² *A Grief Observed*, p52

¹³ Paul Ricoeur

How then, can we learn to respect the otherness of being and thereby remain open to the possibility of revelation and transcendence? By operating with a different concept of truth; a concept, which unlike ‘truth as correctness’, values *beings* more than *beliefs*.

To value Beings more than Beliefs is itself a mode of being. It is a mode that cares more about beings than about being right. It seeks truth in relationship rather than knowledge, which it rightly understands to do violence to being. When I meet another, I *speak to* him, rather than *speak of* or *about* him. It is, what Buber famously called, an I-Thou relation and it differs from the I-It relationship of knower and object known precisely because it is an encounter between beings which does not attempt to reduce the subject to the objective content required for knowledge.

If we are to preserve the possibility of divine revelation and grant God a transcendent existence, we need a different conception of truth from that which secures truth through beliefs, for as we have seen, the truth that is secured through belief is always a reduction of reality to me or my understanding.

Truth as Being Real

There is a conception of truth that defines truth, not in terms of *beliefs about* reality but in terms of *an encounter with* reality. This conception has its origin in the presocratics (it is also found in Plato. Is scattered through the medievalists and appears more recently in some 19/20th century European philosophy – Kierkegaard, Husserl and Heidegger). The Greek word for this conception was ‘unhiddenness’, thus being structurally similar to the idea of innocence or the concept of veracity. It is also very helpful for our purposes of considering the way in which divine reality can make itself known or appear before us. This conception of truth is more interested in truth as truthfulness or authenticity. The intuition here something is true when it is *being* what it truly is. A tree is being true just by being a tree. It cannot be false. It is authentic and without the possibility of deceit. It has no construct. On this model, truth is secured, not by having true beliefs, but by *being true*.

Plato’s allegory of the Cave is based on this conception of Truth¹⁴. It tells of the pilgrimage of human life as a becoming more beingful in order to truly encounter beings. This pilgrimage does not simply amount to replacing one set of beliefs with another set of beliefs (false ones for true ones) but is the painful journey of *becoming more real* as we move from one level of being to another. It is a move from ignorance and bondage towards freedom and light. What can appear before the prisoners *as reality* is severely restricted because of the situation they are in. To be unshackled, is then, to be freed *from* something but it also enables freedom *for* something. We are free to turn around and begin our journey towards to light and this can be understood as a process whereby we are able to encounter a new level of reality and extend our capacities to embrace it. The

¹⁴ Heidegger’s *The Essence of Truth* provides such a reading, from which I have taken some key ideas. Heidegger points out that ‘truth as correctness’ presupposes a reality that can be known. Truth as Being Real is more interested in exploring this idea of the Being and the origin/nature of beings.

prisoner is freed for the journey of learning to *see other beings* and for *becoming more beingful* himself.

When we are in the cave, Plato tells us, we mistake *artifacts* (images) for the *unhidden* (reality). We are not aware that our construct of reality is just a construct. It is our ignorance that binds us to darkness, shackled by our constructs and unable to realize that reality is elsewhere. We squabble over who has the correct construct, going so far perhaps, as to kill those who dare live by a different one. Alone and afraid in the dark, we are barely alive and barely real. No doubt the cave dwellers have religion but their god is also barely real, a god of words and feelings, reassuring slogans, sentimental images and the product of religious and social routine. The object of their faith is an idea and not a reality but because they are certain their idea is the reality and because they care about their construct more than reality, they have little chance of learning about their mistake. The biggest impediment to discovering truth is the belief that you already have it.

Plato describes the person who is able to leave the cave as someone who in his very essence is *eager for beings*. He will not rest content with what the construct takes for beings but, instead, goes forward, without allowing himself to be blinded and does not weaken in his desire to see beings as they truly are. Plato tells us that he is able to do this *because the faculty of his soul is fitted to do so*, that is, with the faculty having the same source as that which has granted beings their being. Insofar as he brings about genuine perceiving, comprehending and unhiddenness, he will truly know and truly exist and find nourishment [paraphrase of the Republic 490].

This last part is important. According to Plato, we can learn to see things more truly because we ourselves have been granted being by the source of all life and truth. For Plato, the source which grants life to beings is the same source that grants us light by which to see. It was the Form of the Good, which in his allegory of the Cave, is represented by the Sun.

The prisoners who remain in the cave also have the source of their being from the life-giving Sun. So what marks the difference between those who remain in the cave and those who leave? It seems that Plato's answer is that in order to leave the cave, we must be more *eager for beings* than for *beliefs*. I must be prepared to leave the safety of my construct and I must be prepared to acknowledge that it is only a construct. Which brings me to the spiritual considerations I spoke of earlier.

Spiritual considerations concerning Reality and Truth

“Finding out what's real and responding to it”, rightly suggests that when it comes to truth, we are *participants* and not simply *recipients*. What we find will depend on how serious we are about finding it. The possibility of revelation requires a modality of being that remains open, not merely to the possibility of error (within the system) but openness to the possibility of radical learning. And the most radical learning required by the cave dweller is to learn that the shackles are self-imposed and that he is free to leave the cave

whenever he likes. All that is required is a willingness to face or encounter reality outside the safety of his construct.

Unfortunately, it appears that facing reality is one of the most difficult things of all. Becoming more real is, for us, an incredibly painful process. The pain is not physical. It occurs in our psycho-spiritual consciousness, which is where all our spiritual battles are fought. It is, in fact, where we fight the battle between our version of truth and the Truth, our reality or Reality. In spiritual terms, it is the battle between wanting to live in accordance with our own will and learning to live in accordance with the divine will.

Our difficulty is beautifully illustrated in this passage from Thomas Merton:

“A tree gives glory to God (which is Merton’s way of defining what it means to be Real¹⁵) by being a tree. The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like Him. This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do...to be [real] means to be myself... trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them and they are perfectly satisfied. With us, it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can *be ourselves* or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear one mask and now another and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. But we cannot make these choices with impunity. If we lie to ourselves and to others, then we cannot expect to find truth and reality whenever we happen to want them. If we have chosen the way of falsity we must not be surprised that truth eludes us when we finally come to need it”.

He goes on...

“Each of us is shadowed by an *illusory person: a false self*. This is the person *I want [or think] myself to be* but *who cannot exist because God (reality) does not know anything about him*. And to be unknown to God is altogether too much privacy [the privacy, perhaps, that we get when we huddle together in the shadows of the cave, a long way from the light.] A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin. All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life *to which everything else in the universe is ordered*...I use up my life trying to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to my world...my false and private self wants to exist outside reality and outside life. Such a self cannot help but be an illusion.”¹⁶

¹⁵ The Good in Plato is not dissimilar to God in that The Good is the ground of all being. Things are indebted to the Sun not only for their visibility but also for the fact that they are (it is the source of light and life).

¹⁶ Merton: *Essential Writings*, Orbis Books, NY, 2000 p.54-57

What has any of this got to do with truth in the Bible? Let me try to draw some of my threads together. I am hoping we can now understand the dangers involved in treating the text as if divine truth can be read off the page. The first danger lies in failing to realize that when I read the text I bring my own capacities to comprehend that truth that it contains. What I read into it as 'divine truth' is better stated as 'God's truth *according to me*'. (And I am tempted to say that when a group of people do this, they simply get 'God's truth *according to us*'). The truth we glean from the text may or may not have anything to do with God's actual truth and if I am unable to even ask the question (by equating what I take to be the truth with the truth, God's word with human words) I am condemned, like the cave dwellers, to live within a diminished reality of shadows. Saying something is so doesn't make it so. Doing something in God's name does not, thereby, secure the stamp of divine approval.

The second danger, related to the first, involves our failure to acknowledge the spiritual mechanisms that are operating within us and which are very powerfully designed to prevent us from truly encountering the truth. In the Matrix, these mechanisms are represented by the Agents, who will do anything necessary to preserve the illusion. Our false self, who wants to be the center of its own universe, will, likewise, do whatever it takes to cling onto its own existence. If Plato is right, one of the best ways to break the construct is to develop eagerness for beings, to look outward, to welcome rupture. It is, perhaps, the most painful of all spiritual experiences and for that reason, one of the most important.

According to Plato, the more real (or beingful) we become, the less we rely upon our constructs because becoming real is a move towards the light and constructs are, on the whole, ways of keeping light out. It is not surprising to find then, that Jesus, who according to the Christian tradition was perfectly real, was also perfectly free from all constructs. Filled with light and love, he showed us what it means to be more eager for beings than for beliefs. Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees will serve as my final illustration.

Law and Love: Truth as correctness vs Truth as Eagerness for Beings

You know the story well I am sure.¹⁷ The Pharisees have caught a woman committing adultery. They bring her to Jesus, knowing that *under the law* she is condemned. The Pharisees don't bring her to Jesus with a *genuine eagerness* to find out what he really thinks. They *already know* what the answer should be and they are hoping to catch him out. Their challenge is posed from within a system of thought *in which the answer is already given*. According to the law, the woman is condemned.

The Pharisees are *technically correct* in both their understanding and application of the law. The law condemns this woman's behaviour and the law stipulates a penalty. The Pharisees are simply doing their civic and religious duty. They are operating with a concept of *Truth as correctness*. What does Jesus do in response to their request for an answer? He does not answer from within the system at all. Jesus questions, not their

¹⁷ See John 8:1-11

application of the law but the entire edifice or construct within which they are operating. In effect Jesus says “go ahead, stone her. But just be sure that he who casts the first stone *is sure he is in the right*” (has committed no wrong).¹⁸

In Plato’s terms, the law has become an artifice that has enabled the Pharisees to stop their own journey of becoming real. The system of law grants them a reality and justifies who they are.¹⁹ The Law had become a construct, which prevented them from seeing the truth, both about other people and about themselves. In this case, it gives them a label (this woman is a sinner). Jesus reminds them that they too are sinners, a fact which their construct had neatly hidden from them. Jesus forces them to turn inward, away from the safety of the religious formula, away from the construct in which they get to declare themselves righteous. They are forced to face the truth about their own reality. It must have been a truly humbling moment for each one of them as, in silence, they put down their stones and walked away. Although none of them would have felt better, all of them had *become better*. That is to say, in that moment, they became *more beingful*. What the Pharisees did after that, I do not know, but this encounter would surely have reconfigured their understanding of themselves and of reality. It is, I think, one of the most powerful scenes in the New Testament.

One of the most difficult (and I suspect the most ignored) prohibitions placed on us by Jesus concerns the way we judge others. I think that the Pharisee episode helps us understand what is meant by “Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged and the measure you use it will be measured to you” (Matt 7:1-2) When we judge others, our minds impose our construct on reality. This happens at an individual level but also at a social or national level where the constructs of identity are just as jealously guarded. These constructs are, just that. They are systems of thought and belief that are required for communication and meaning making. Perhaps they are even necessary to maintain justice in the human world. But they must be seen for what they are. Like the construct of Pharisaic law, our constructs distance us from the reality of *being* (the tree has no construct, *it just is*). They can prevent us from becoming real (by defining reality for us) and our constructs reduce the reality of others to our system. The Pharisees do not see the woman as a human being because their construct has a name for her. Adulterer. It is the label that prevents them from seeing themselves as no different from her, as fallen human beings. When Jesus enables the Pharisees to see through their construct (and like all his teaching, it is an enabling, and not a telling), they are not only able to see the reality of the woman as a human being but they are able to truly see themselves. And that seeing humbles and silences them.

Jesus’ words about judging and being judged are not really threats but statements of fact. There is an incontestable truth here (although it is painfully difficult to see). The way I judge others is in fact a judgement on me. The construct I choose to impose on reality

¹⁸ There is an irony here of course. Jesus was the only one present who, according to tradition, had done no wrong. It was Jesus, then, who had a ‘right’ to cast the first stone.

¹⁹ As Jesus points out in a separate incident with the Pharisees, their outward, external ‘show’ of religion is cold and empty. The ‘mechanical’ has become a substitute for inner truth, for subjectivity, the only place where the divine voice can truly be heard.

actually indicts me. As Wittgenstein puts it: “God may say to me, ‘I am judging you out of your own mouth. Your own actions have made you shudder with disgust when you have seen other people do them’”.²⁰ In what is almost a karmic like insight, we can see that the more sophisticated the construct, the most sophisticated my fantasy mechanisms become and the less real I am able to be. Hence, the measure you use will be measured to you. Choose the path of illusion and fabrication and you will, as Merton put it earlier, end up creating an illusory and false self; one that has no substantial reality. Therein lies the judgement. As C.S. Lewis put it somewhere: “The doors of hell are locked from the inside”.²¹

The biblical text tells us the story of human beings, caught up in the struggle to become Real²², to live in the light of the Real, to become what they were created to be. It tells how hard this pilgrimage is, where the pitfalls lie (most obviously they lie in the presumptions we make about ourselves; think of Job or Jonah for example). It warns against the idolatries of ego and belief. It teaches, above all, that we become real by letting in light, by being willing to leave the dark, musty passageways of the labyrinths of the ego, to face the pain and confusion of disorientation and of using our eyes for the first time. It is not an accident that Jesus talks, not of having the truth, but *being of it*. Rather ominously he tells us that there will be some who have it (who call him Lord) but whom he knows not (which is, to use Merton’s phrase, altogether too much privacy). It is not in our beliefs but in our Being that we are Real to God.

Reading the biblical text with a view to hearing God’s voice is to be willing to embark on the journey of becoming Real. It will teach me where my fantasies and illusions lie, where my propensity to distort lurks, what are the temptations of evasion and distraction and so on. If Jesus life and death was indeed a special revelation of divine reality, it seems that one of the most important signs of becoming more beingful is that you judge them less and love them more. He looked on people with light and love and by being looked on this way, they became more beingful.

The Pharisee moment can truly be called a moment of revelation. The divine voice is being heard when we learn something that silences us, transforms us, increases our aptitude for love. We have a natural propensity to idolatry, never more fierce when we think we have discovered a truth and consider ourselves to be Righteous. The Pharisee moment shows us what Levinas means by a ‘rupture of transcendence’. When *correctness of belief* becomes more important than anything else, we can be pretty sure we have closed our ears to God’s voice and are simply hearing our own. One of the signs of being a cave dweller is that you do not wish to learn from others, not wanting your version of reality to be questioned. A natural counterpart to this is a certainty and self-righteousness about your version of the truth and intolerance (and condescension) towards others. Although I haven’t got time to discuss it at length here, I am tempted to suggest that this is the error of fundamentalism. What, for example, might Jesus have said

²⁰ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Blackwell, Oxford, p.87

²¹ His book *The Great Divorce* is an exploration of this theme, telling of the spiritual journey of becoming real, or more substantial and the struggle involved therein.

²² For Plato, it was a struggle to return to the real; to return to where we had come from.

to Kerry Noble, a Christian fundamentalist in Texas, whose justification for bombing synagogues and certain churches was that “he and his members wanted to rid the world of Jews, blacks and sinners”, believing that it was God’s will that they did so?²³

²³ ‘Mapping the unholy attraction of holy wars’ in *The Age*, 29/11/03.

Implications for Teaching – Relevance and Revelation

As a divine communiqué, The Bible reveals truths about what it means to be and become Real. It is really that simple. All too often, RE teachers enter their classrooms with the hope that they will get their students to believe what we think they should believe, rather than *become what they were created to be*. So I think that when we introduce our students to the biblical text, it is our responsibility to do two things. We must not trivialize its content and we must be willing to journey out of the cave of our own construct. From my experience, our current failure to get kids interested in the Biblical text can be traced back to these two things.

We trivialize the content when we turn it into a guide for good living. It may contain such a guide but it is much more than that. The cave dwellers, of whom I spoke earlier, are content to read it that way. To make it relevant we must help our students discern reality from illusion, ego from being, truth from preference. To do this, we must help them get in touch with the experience that lies in the depths of our being, the energy of the spirit that is restless and alone and which longs to be reunited with something from which it feels cut off, affirming in them their desire to be and become real. We must also help them care about truth, understood as truth about being and becoming Real.

We must help our students appreciate the gap between human understanding and divine reality by emphasizing that the biblical text is a record of how people have understood divine reality. Such teaching would, I think, have been of benefit to the serious young man who thought that he could read it the other way round.

We must ask ourselves whether we are nurturing the idea of *truth as correctness*, of having the right construct, or *truth as a mode of being*. I suspect that a very good test of whether a lesson has gone well would be to ask: did I look on my students in light and love? Did I help them become more beingful today? This is the difference, and it is an important difference, between teaching in order to instruct, and teaching in order to enlighten.

We must be open to revelation ourselves. “To read well is to answer the text, to be answerable to the text, ‘answerability’ comprising the crucial elements of response and responsibility. To read well is to *be read by* that which we read. It is to be answerable to it’²⁴.

The Hebrew Scriptures are full of episodes where God challenges those who think they know the truth or think they know divine intention (Job and Jonah are perhaps the most dramatic examples). Jesus, too, challenged and disturbed those who thought they had the truth. He taught in parables so that truth could to be realized *in being* rather than *in belief*. It seems fitting, then, to conclude with a prayer attributed to that intrepid explorer, Sir Francis Drake, who could not have helped but known a great deal about being disturbed. It expresses well, I think, our need to be ruptured by transcendence; a rupture that we must invite rather than resist, if we are to move closer towards the source of light.

²⁴ Steiner, *No Passion Spent*, Faber and Faber, 1996, p6

Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
