

# Os Guinness: Time for Truth - living free in a world of lies, hype and spin

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Cogently argued; exactly right. Truth - Christian, modern, or postmodern approaches? Jargon-free, and it looks like a Penguin; good eg of how to write for non-Christians. Definitely where it's at! Short - 134pp.

## ***Introduction: but not through me***

1989 was a year of victory over truth - Berlin wall came down, 'velvet' revolution in Prague under leadership of the Czech philosopher Havel. Characterised by conflict between lies (Soviet regime) and truth. Charter 77: 'truth prevails for those who live in truth'. Solzhenitsyn: 'one word of truth outweighs the entire world' (Nobel speech). Havel in 1978 essay: *for the crust presented by the life of lies is made of strange stuff. As long as it seals off hermetically the entire society, it appears to be made of stone. But the moment someone breaks through in one place, when one person cries out, 'The emperor is naked!' - when a single person breaks the rules of the game, thus exposing it as a game - everything suddenly appears in another light and the whole crust seems then to be made of a tissue on the point of tearing and disintegrating uncontrollably.*

But now, we have postmodernism. 'Within it, truth is dead. Truth in any objective or absolute sense, truth that is independent of the mind of the knower, no longer exists' 12. At best truth is relative, at worst it is socially constructed, a matter of human convention and a testament to the community that believes it and the power that established it. So in a postmodern world, truth is created not discovered. Nietzsche: 'truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are'; what remains is a world of lies, hype and spin. So truth is dead and knowledge is only power.

He argues the opposite. This doesn't usher in a brave new world of greater enlightenment and freedom; it produces a profound crisis of cultural authority in the W. 'Far from being a naive and reactionary notion, truth is one of the simplest, most precious gifts without which we would not be able to handle reality or negotiate life... Truth is a vital requirement not only for individuals who would live a good life but for free societies that would remain free.' 14. Truth not dead; it is alive, well and undeniable.

## Preview

This not a comprehensive study; it comes from a practical and not theoretical concern; it doesn't argue for the modern view against the postmodern (both are bad).

Postmodern position is cynical and uncertain; but modern position is naive and too certain. Postmodernism is the mirror image of modernism and is born of its deficiencies.

We need a third position - the faith/community/tradition view of truth, represented by the Jewish and Christian faiths. Includes the strengths but not the weaknesses of the other two.

Postmodernism is a watershed moment, esp for US, the world's 'lead society'.

Issue of truth has far deeper moral and political seriousness than it receives now. Walter Lippmann: 'there can be no liberty for a community that lacks the means by which to detect lies' 18.

Doesn't claim to live up to truth without fail; in fact many of insights of the book come from consequences of not doing so.

'If we live in truth and become people of truth, our primary responsibility will be evident: ourselves. Our overarching life-task will be clear: to seek the truth, speak the truth, and live the truth. And the one effective stand that no-one can take from us will be certain: as Solzhenitsyn declared in his Nobel address, 'Let the lie come into the world, even dominate the world, but not through me' 20.

## **1. Back to the moral stone age**

Chapter about the impact of the crisis of truth on ethics.

Crisis in ethics. Value of not-judging leads to acceptance of evil, unwillingness to stand out for good. Accompanied by resurgence of interest in applied ethics - ethics is now about holding politically correct views on the buzz issues (eg environment, DNA research); about social policy. Ethics isn't about hypocrisy, self-deception, cruelty, lust, violence. Ethics doesn't convey moral truths, it explores issues. So we talk about ethics, but we have emptied it of its content.

Most powerful philosophical source of the crisis of truth is Nietzsche. He relativised truth (many different perspectives, hence many different kinds of truth), and rationalised truth - truth is a mask for power, pity for resentment, virtue for hypocrisy. For Nietzsche, power is everything.

## **2. We're all spinmeisters now**

Chapter about the impact of the crisis of truth on character.

Nobel peace prize won by sister of 16 year-old killed in Guatemala by soldiers; ghost written account. Problem is, it isn't true. Justified by saying it tells a 'larger truth' - often used as an argument. Idea of persona as propaganda. Jesus coined the word hypocrite - normal Gk word for actor at the time. We live in a world where we have to sell ourselves on sight; character loses significance, face value becomes all important, and spin doctors and plastic surgeons become the in people. The human type our time has produced is all surface, skills and CV, and no character. Emphasis now on surface, not on depth, possibilities not qualities, glamour, not convictions. Designer personalities. 'Character may be its own reward, but personality is what wins friends, gets jobs, attracts lovers, catches the cameraman's eye, and lands the prize of public office' 51. If God does not exist, any self is possible - and the question as to which of the selves is 'true' becomes meaningless.

## **3. The West vs itself**

Chapter about influence of postmodernism on national and global levels in US

Postmodernism is a movement and a mood as much as a clear set of ideas, so it often feels as if it is everywhere and nowhere.

Political correctness is direct result of postmodernism, for when truth dies and power becomes the operative principle of speech, the result is conformity, the tyranny of consensus.

It can be argued that the story of the West is a movement with three phases:

- Christendom, to C18
- European civilisation, to end WW1; secularisation
- American leadership of the W

All over, under force of postmodernism - Christian faith, Enlightenment and idea of the W are all repudiated. We are not only post-modern, we are post-West.

Indirect influence. Health care - rise of alternative medicine, including Eastern. Politics - Clinton as the rep of postmodern politics, with his 'fluid conception of what's real', his 'situational veracity'.

Seven habits of postmodern lying, all characteristic of Clinton:

- pride of mind; if truth is created, not discovered, anyone can crack any problem
- compartmentalising
- people pleasing
- posturing; doing things for effect
- prevarication
- powerplays; everything else irrelevant but who gets the power
- personalising; stress on story over propositional truth; people resign/support because of personal factors, not ones of principle

## **4. Differences make a difference**

Arguments for importance of truth.

Primo Levi on Auschwitz: places not only of unchallengeable, arbitrary authority but of absolute evil that defied all explanation. In the face of such wickedness, explanations born of psychology, sociology and economics were

pathetic in their inadequacy. 73. Primo Levi: mission to witness. But no faith, no truth to stand on; eventually committed suicide like other survivors. There is an alternative to despair. 'It is that truth, like meaning as a whole, is not for us to create but for us to discover. Each of us may be small, our lives short, and our influence puny. But if truth is there - objective, absolute, independent of minds that know it - then we may count on it and find it a source of strength.' 79.

Contrast Solzhenitsyn, who stood on truth.

Guinness not raising purely theoretical arguments against the postmodern view of truth, for few people outside universities follow the complexities of the higher academic debates. Rather, he is deliberately underscoring the practical difficulties that grow out of the theoretical deficiencies of the new radical relativism. We can easily be cowed into submission by the force or fashionability of new ideas without realising their disastrous practical consequences for ordinary life.

a) Argument for importance of high view of truth for those who hold to traditional Jewish/Christian assumptions about truth but have grown careless/hesitant in defending it: without truth we cannot defend our faith from the charge that we believe because we are afraid not to believe (bad faith) or that we believe because it works, because it is true for us, etc (poor faith).

*'What is truth', someone will immediately ask. Let me answer straightforwardly. In the biblical view, truth is that which is ultimately, finally, and absolutely real, or the 'way it is', and therefore is utterly trustworthy and dependable, being grounded and anchored in God's own reality and truthfulness.*

b) truth matters for Jews and Christians because it is a question of the trustworthiness of God himself. In contrast, for western secularists final reality is only matter, a product of time plus chance, and truth to them has a corresponding status on that level. It is therefore always open to doubt, always uncertain. In the biblical view, on the other hand, we can think freely and pursue the full range of human enquiry, knowing that our intellectual powers and our disposition as truth-seekers are underwritten by the truthfulness of the Creator of the universe.

*'In the beginning was the Word, John's gospel begins - which means that in the end meaning itself has meaning, guaranteed by God himself and now spoken forth as an effective, liberating Word.'* 86.

Without truth we are all vulnerable to manipulation. Without truth there is no genuine freedom and fulfilment. Freedom is both negative and positive: freedom from (parents, teachers, authority) and freedom for. Those who set out to do what they like usually end up not liking what they've done.

*'Truth without freedom is a manacle, but freedom without truth is a mirage. If freedom is not to be vacuous and stunted, it requires truth - lived truth.'* 93. John Paul II when still a Polish cardinal: 'there is no freedom without truth' 93.

## **5. Turning the tables**

Strategies for responding to those who insist on rejecting truth.

First effective strategy for countering relativism is to expose the fallacy - demonstrate negative consequences of the beliefs held. Do they really live by their philosophy, or when it comes to the crunch do they want something else? Relativism is inconsistent, selective in its application of principles - to others but not to self. Press relativism to its consistent conclusion and you debunk it. Eg Elijah vs prophets of Baal. Eg students who insist everything is relative yet want absolute standards applied to their scripts. All people at some point behave true to their beliefs; sooner or later they will act on the assumptions they truly hold and reap the consequences. We often say people don't live up to their beliefs; but it would be more accurate to say that when it comes to the crunch they switch to other beliefs and live up to those instead. We do live by our beliefs - q is, which ones?

Beliefs drive behaviour; behaviour follows beliefs as surely as thunder follows lightning.

So the goal is to look for the contradictions between logic and life

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Second effective strategy is to point out the signals of transcendence - draw attention to the yearnings and contradiction in people's beliefs which point beyond those beliefs towards entirely different possibilities. More positive approach.

Postmodernism cannot look evil in the eye. We reject it, and cry out for judgment. There is one.

## **6. On record against ourselves**

Choices which the discipline of living in truth confronts us with.

Either we conform the truth to our desires or we conform our desires to the truth. This is the central challenge of living free.

Aristotle: the person who loves truth for the very sake of truth when nothing is at stake will be still the more truthful when someday everything is at stake.

Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals*, examines the people of ideas who have arisen to replace the guardians of traditional society and who on the basis of their unaided intellects now prescribe our remedies and direct our future. In practice they are no wiser than witch doctors. 'Such accounts of western intellectuals leave the myth of the dispassionate Enlightenment truth-seeker in tatters. The real situation is almost the opposite: the cleverer the mind, the slipperier the heat, or (expressed more carefully), the more sophisticated the education, the subtler the rationalization' 121.

*Unbelief in the biblical view is not passive, an innocent but inaccurate view of the world that has unfortunately 'got it wrong' at a few points. Rather, unbelief is active, driven by a dark dynamism. In fact, the Bible says, behind unbelief lies the most radical relativism of all: a relativity born not of culture, race, gender, class, or generation but of sin, the claim to the 'right to myself'. 125.*

Unless this relativity is addressed and the standard of absolute truth brought back into the picture, our love can never escape being self-love. And our self-knowledge can never rise above self-deception.

Disbelief has many faces - suppression, exploitation, subversion, delusion. But truth always remains truth.

Budziszewski (philosopher) identifies 7 degrees of descent on the downward path of dishonesty:

1. Sin. We lie because we have done wrong.
2. Self-protection. Each ring of lies breeds another.
3. Habituation. Lies repeated become habits, habit becomes character. We become a liar.
4. Self-deception. We lose hold of truth.
5. Rationalisation. We believe our lies and give other explanations for all we do.
6. Technique. We get good at lying.
7. Morality turns upside down. The moment lying is accepted instead of condemned, it becomes required.

Living in the light (John) is living in truth. Challenge of practising the truth. 'For truth does not offer itself as convenient and user-friendly; nor does it come to us from someone else's mind ready-made with 'no assembly required'.. Knowing always entails more than knowing will ever know, so the deepest knowing comes only in doing. The task of living the truth requires that we stake on it our very existence.' 130. We also face the challenge of practising the truth before God. 'To become true we must live bathed in the full floodlight of One who is true. Only when we realize that all our pretences, evasions, and fig leaves are useless can we achieve the honesty and humility needed for change.'

Those who seek to conform the truth to their desires compartmentalise.

Those who seek to conform their desires to the truth confess.

### None dare call it cliché

Three points made.

1. The gravity of the present crisis of truth in the western world
2. The wisdom of lifting the debate out of its rut as a controversy between the modern and the postmodern world views
3. The richness and strength of the positive biblical vision of living in truth.

'For people of faith whose book is the Bible, truth can never be mere theory, let alone one that is sterile and contentious. Truth is the direct representation of reality - that which throbs with created life, and that which is

given and guaranteed by the Creator who is himself the final reality. God is truth just as God is love. He speaks truly and he acts truly.' 133.

Kierkegaard: 'the truth consists not of knowing the truth but in being the truth' 133. That is the sort of truth that sets free.

*The dawn of the third millennium finds the western world in a quandary over one of its most vital foundation - truth. Caught between a tarnished modernism and a dangerous postmodernism, between a view of truth (part arrogant and part naive) that is no longer credible and a view of 'truth' (part sceptical and part gullible) that every day grows less desirable, the West is at odds with itself, its past, and its future.*

*At such a moment the view of truth that originally inspired the West shines clearer than ever. Anchored in the very meaning of the universe, capable of simple application as well as sophisticated analysis, a spiritual and moral requirement with vast implications for the whole of life, the biblical.. view of truth has the strengths of the modern and postmodern views, the weakness of neither, and just one snag: the cost of its unsparing moral challenge.*

*Which brings us back to where we began. The West (and its lead society) are at a crossroads. In a world of lies, hype and sin, there is an urgent need for people of truth at all levels of society. There is quite simply no other way to live free. The choice is ours. So also will be the consequences. 133-4*

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