



6th Summer School on Human Rights
Freedom of Expression, Theology and Populism
Lisbon – Portugal

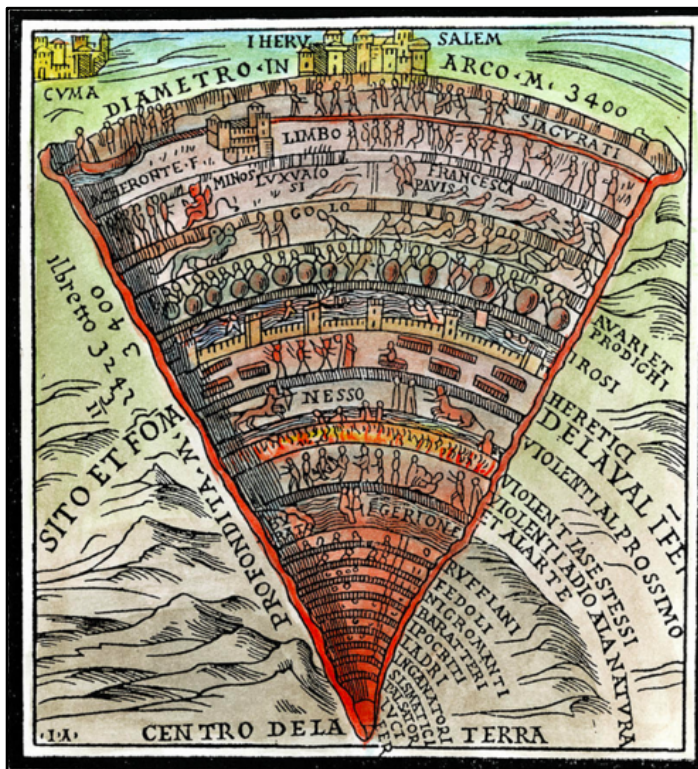
Theology, Populism and Freedom of Expression: Biblical and theological input

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Let me give you three approaches to our topic:



Dante's Inferno

People often say that the church is hung up on sex.

For most of the Christian tradition the Church has been far more preoccupied with lying.

In Dante's Inferno, the top circles of Hell, where people get off lightest, are reserved for people who got carried away by their passions. They desired the good, but got themselves into a mess by desiring it wrongly.

The middle regions of Hell were reserved for people who desired what was bad, above all for the violent.

But the absolute pits were kept for those who undermined the human community of truth: the liars, the fraudulent, the flatterers, the forgers, and worst of all the traitors.

Timothy Radcliffe, Dominican Friar, 2004

„What response can Christians give to the Crisis of truth telling in our society?“

I believe that was before the Trump era.

That leads us to a second approach, an analysis of our era:

An age of shameless lies (Sandra Lehmann and Ruth Wodak)

- The only thing that matters is to impose signs – words and images and their spectacular melange – against other signs.
- „Alternative facts“
- To lie as if they were not lying
- Truth claims are simply ignored.

Sandra Lehmann, 2018: Becoming real in an age of shameless lies

The only thing that matters is to impose signs – words and images and their spectacular melange – against other signs.

In line with his politics of „alternative facts“, US President Trump has ceased to follow the imperative of credibility, respectability and decency which used to be binding for the heads of representative democracies. ...

What is disturbing is that the lies of these actors are well documented. ...

Trump and Putin and others lie as if they were not lying....

It serves as a ruthless exhibition of entirely mundane power with all its presumptuousness and ruthlessness.

Therefore linguist Ruth Wodak is right when she states that our age is less a post-factual age than an age of shamelessness:

“Shameless lies are brought into the world ... without negative sanctions, even without apologies.”

In other words, we are in a situation where truth claims are simply ignored, because apparently, they can be simply ignored.

In the same year CEC issued a statement, and that will be our third approach:



Public Issues Committee statement on populism 6/2018

- The method of populist movements is also to question ... the media. By alleging fake news, the movement creates their own truth; post-truth.
- Exclusionary politics ... shrinks public space.

Response

- Not in any way to believe in the post-truth; that there is no truth. As churches we are on a continuous way to understand what truth means for our witness for justice and peace. As Jesus says: I am the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14.6)

This leads to focus my contribution on the topic of truth.

Last year I focused on an analysis of populism and how it affects FORB.

This time I leave the specific examples to the following presentations and focus on some foundational questions.

Living in God's truth

in the face of

- Freedom of expression as a human right
- Populism and „alternative facts“
- Hate Speech and Hate Crime
- Surveillance of Religion
- Criticism of Religion
- Fake News

Let me share some fruits of my reading surrounding these topics.
Not an expert, but theological generalist with focus on R+M and FORB
Here is a an outline of the next steps:

Outline

1. Biblical foundations
2. Theological reflections
3. Philosophical reflections and political ethics

1. Biblical foundations

God's truth as the living space of humanity

- A God who speaks and is not silent
- A God who seeks communion
- A God who does not lie (Titus 1,2)
- Sending his son as the „true witness“ (Rev 1,5) and the „true light, that enlightens all humans“ (Joh 1,9)
- Jesus, the truth in person (Joh 14,6)
- Truth and love unseparable

Just for reference:

Titus 1,2: Faith and understanding rest on the hope of eternal life. Before time began, God promised to give that life. **And he does not lie.**

Rev 1,5:

5 and from Jesus Christ, **who is the faithful witness**, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,

Joh 1,9: The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

God's truth as the living space of humanity

- Living in relationship with the God of truth and love
- Rejoicing about truth in relationships (1 Cor 12,31)

1 John 4-5

- Living in the truth
- Keeping God's commandments
- Anchored in love

➤ Speaking the truth in love (Eph 5,15)

1 Cor 13,6: Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

1 Joh 4

18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth

Let us go on a brief excursion on freedom of expression in the ORT + NT, in very broad and rudimentary strokes:

Freedom of Expression in Old Testament

- Imago Dei
- Conscience
- Within the prevailing cultural framework
normatively marked by a theological factor
- No breaking of covenant relationship
 - Therefore no use of God's name in vain
 - Therefore no blasphemy (disrespect of God)
 - Therefore no apostasy
 - Therefore rejection of other gods and idols

Freedom of Expression in New Testament

- Theological content preserved
- Focused on new covenant in Jesus Christ
- Denial of Christ (1 Joh 2,22) or preaching other gospel is „anathema“
 - However no worldly punishment
 - Only church discipline
- Satan rejected as „father of lies“ (Joh 8,44)
 - Within that framework liberty and diversity

1 Joh 2,22 **Who is the liar?** It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ.

Joh 8,44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and **the father of lies**.

Another brief excursion on examples in the Bible of those who experience suffering in God's mission while exercising their freedom of expression

**Suffering for
exercising freedom of expression:
Experiences by those in God's mission**

- OT prophets often rejected or killed
- John the Baptist incarcerated and decapitated
- Jesus condemned of blasphemy and crucified
- Disciples commanded not to preach and heal in the name of Jesus (and successively executed)
- Paul encountering social and religious hostility by Jews and Gentiles for his preaching (and finally executed)

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Back to the issue of truth and lie. Now on the level of contemporary theological reflections.

2. Theological reflections

Bonhoeffer on truth and lie

“Lying is opposing against the word of God, as he has spoken it in Christ and in whom creation rests. Lying is therefore the negation, denial, and knowing and willing destruction of the reality as God has created it and as it exists in God, in as far as that is effected by words or silence.

Our word/speaking has the task to express – in unity with God’s word – reality as it exists in God, and our silence is to be the sign for the boundary, which is given to the word by the reality, as it exists in God.”

(My translation)

How does my speaking become true? (Bonhoeffer)

Truth-telling

1. is a skill that must be learned.
2. Is a contextual and situated practice.
 - By recognizing, who is causing me to speak, and what entitles me to speak.
 - By recognizing the place in which I stand.
 - By placing the object on which I am speaking in this context.
3. Allows recognition, critique and active opposition to the power of the “big lies”.
4. Emerges precariously and partially in a world in which lies abound.

From point 3 on, it is more a deduction from Bonhoeffer following Rachel Muers: The ethics of stats - Some contemporary questions about telling the truth

Pope Francis
Fake news and journalism for peace

Message for World Communications Day, 24 January 2018

1. What is “fake” about fake news?
2. How can we recognize fake news?
3. "The truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32)
4. Peace is the true news

This is just the outline of a very noteworthy statement, focusing on the task of journalists.

I will only pick up here what feeds in to a systematic theological reflection.

The curse of lying (Pope Francis)

"People who lie to themselves and listen to their own lie come to such a pass that they cannot distinguish the truth within them, or around them, and so lose all respect for themselves and for others. And having no respect, they cease to love, and in order to occupy and distract themselves without love they give way to passions and to coarse pleasures, and sink to bestiality in their vices, all from continual lying to others and to themselves."

(Dostojewski: The Brothers Karamazov, II, 2).

Distinguishing truth (Pope Francis)

- We can recognize the truth of statements from their fruits: whether they provoke quarrels, foment division, encourage resignation; or, on the other hand, they promote informed and mature reflection leading to constructive dialogue and fruitful results.
- The best antidotes to falsehoods are not strategies, but people.

3. Philosophical reflections and political ethics

Respecting truth in political action (Schockenhoff)

- Two aspects of freedom of expression
 - Passive: The right to be comprehensively and truthfully informed
 - Active: The opportunity to introduce the position of one's own group or oneself into the discourse of society

Most of the following is based on the extensive work by Eberhard Schockenhoff: (in German) *Damned to lie? Politics and the ethics of truth*. 2nd ed. 2005

Hanna Arendt (1906-1975)
Truth and lie in politics, 1972:61f

“The ability to form a qualified opinion depends on the possibility of a reliable establishment of facts.

If the political dispute is no longer squarely anchored in the world of facts, but is only conducted as a competition among opinions, ideologies and subjective versions of reality, there are no more limits to the manipulation of the citizens.”

Schockenhoff quotes the German philosopher Hanna Arendt who studied totalitarianism.

Types of truth

- Object related truths (in natural sciences)
- Truths of reason (in philosophy)
- Truths of fact (in politics and historical sciences)

➤ Categories must not be confused!

Truths of fact are true because they happened that way and no other. No reason can be identified why things have happened that way and no other.

Truths of reason in contrast, in the mind of the one who is convinced of them, they have inescapable convincing evidence.

The problem with Truths of fact is: they are susceptible for reinterpretation attempts. Manipulation of facts by a system of organized lie.

The attitude of tolerance, allowing a plurality of views, might be right towards religious and philosophical views. But if it is applied to truths of fact this is actually a particularly mean form of their denial.

Again on the binding nature of certain truths:

Mathematical truth: The angles of a triangle total 180 degrees.

Natural science truth: The earth moves around the sun.

Truth of fact: In August 1914 German troops invaded Belgium.

Once these truths are recognized and acknowledged as truths, their validity can neither be strengthened by consensus or assent nor questioned by discussion.

Their convincing nature is not strengthened by the number of people assenting to them.

The content of their message is not of a nature that wants to convince, but that

imposes fact.

Proper dealing with truths of fact

- Acknowledgement ≠ degrading facts to opinions
- Weighing and Interpretation ≠ Manipulation and interpreting away
- Distinction of degrees of certainty of facts
 - present and historical
 - Basic historical facts – reconstructed evidence – complex historical factual claims

The transformation of facts into opinions (Schockenhoff)

1. Totalitarian regimes

- Systems of organized lie
- Denial of historical facts

2. Strategy of media politics

- Facts are transformed into opinions about facts
- Facing the facts becomes superfluous
- Being concerned about other points of view (basic element of democratic elaboration of political will) becomes obsolete
- Undermines the ability for taking collective responsibility, and to deal with burdensome aspects of political reality

The system of modern organized lie, on which the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century were built, does not consist in the addition of individual lies, which could be recognized as such.

Rather inconvenient facts are pushed out of collective consciousness, displacing the perception of actual reality to create an illusionary pattern of the totality of reality.

Be it the genocide of non-russian population segments in the Soviet Union, the turkish genocide of Armenian, Assyrian, Greek and other oriental Christians, the oppression of the freedom of the press in Eastern Germany,

The denial of historical facts is the basic strategy of totalitarian regimes.

It becomes an act of self assertion in the ideological battle, which is conducted as total war on the non-military level.

Moral aspects of lies of politicians (Schockenhoff)

- Basis: What politicians say, should be true!
- But they do not have to tell everybody and all the time everything that they know and intend.
- Distinguish: Political wisdom & necessary confidentiality vs. unnecessary secrecy & intentional deceit.
- The boundary to untruth is crossed where the right of others to information is infringed upon, and their ability is curtailed to actively contribute to the process of formation of democratic will, or to effectively exercise their mandate of control.

Scenarios of political life (Schockenhoff)

- Every day government work
- Fighting crime, countering espionage, state security
- Linguistic games following special rules
 - Diplomatic denials
 - Election campaign promises
- Transparency of party funding
- Parliamentary plenary or commissions of investigation

In the first two limited transparency is acceptable.

In special settings special rhetoric is accepted and properly interpreted and not taken at face value.

The last two cases require the strictest standards of truth telling.

What response can Christians give to the Crisis of Truth-telling in Our Society? (Timothy Radcliffe, 2004)

- Crisis of trust
- Accusations, denunciation, exposure
- Call for total transparency is misguided
- Enlightenment paradigm of truth seeking is misleading, only leads to unmasking hypocrisy and denouncing failure.
- Increases the pressure on politicians not to tell the truth in order to avoid losing or to extend their mandate.

(DO NOT READ SLIDE, READ HERE!)

„Western society is suffering from a crisis of trust. We are suspicious that we are not being told the truth. No amount of accusation, denunciation or exposure will allay our fears. Total transparency seems neither possible nor the solution.

The root of the crisis lies in a particular conception of what it means to seek for the truth, which dates back to the Enlightenment. It is in many ways a fine and fruitful tradition, to which we are all indebted, but by becoming the dominant paradigm then it leads to the sort of mistrustful and fragmented society which we inhabit.“

A culture of complete transparency also might actively discourage one from being truthful“.

Increases the pressure on politicians not to tell the truth in order to avoid losing or to extend their mandate.

In order not to end on that sober note, let me close with a prayer from the message of Pope Francis to journalists.

Prayer for peace

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Help us to recognize the evil latent in a communication that does not build communion.

Help us to remove the venom from our judgements.

Help us to speak about others as our brothers and sisters.

You are faithful and trustworthy; may our words be seeds of goodness for the world:

where there is shouting, let us practise listening;

where there is confusion, let us inspire harmony;

where there is ambiguity, let us bring clarity;

where there is exclusion, let us offer solidarity;

where there is sensationalism, let us use sobriety;

where there is superficiality, let us raise real questions;

where there is prejudice, let us awaken trust;

where there is hostility, let us bring respect;

where there is falsehood, let us bring truth.

Amen.



Sources

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