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## Politics, Power, and the Abandonment of Truth

### Have We Given Up Hope?

By: Tom Gilson | Published: April 16, 2010 2:01 PM

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The central political tragedy of our day is not any of the decisions being made regarding health care, abortion, marriage, or morality.

Nor is it special interest group influence, campaign negativity, or even governmental encroachment on our freedoms. It is that we have abandoned truth as the guide for our political processes. We've given up hope in it.

Pollster [George Barna](#) tells us only one-third of Americans believe in absolute moral truth, adding,

*Feeling freed from the boundaries established by the Christian faith, and immersed in a postmodern society which revels in participation, personal expression, satisfying relationships, and authentic experiences, we become our own unchallenged spiritual authorities, defining truth and reality as we see fit.*

It seems very liberty-enhancing on the face of it, but in the last clause there is a deadly stinger: “defining truth and reality as we see fit.” This is the slow poison that kills liberty from within. For ultimately there are only two ways to make political decisions. One is by an appeal to truth as best we understand it: “Which course is actually, objectively, truly more right and good for us to take?”

But if we deny that there is anything that is “actually, objectively, truly more right and good,” then *power* must be the deciding factor. There is nothing else left. Nietzsche saw this clearly, and some modern theorists even more so: If we are not ruled by truth, we will be ruled by power.

We have never understood truth perfectly, and we never will; but when we have believed truth existed and had authority over all, we have known that no person or group could have ultimate dominion. We knew that kings, as much as their subjects, were subject to truth higher than themselves.

The [Emperor Theodosius](#), who in AD 390 slaughtered 7,000 Thessalonians—and held the power to do it again—could be stood down by a bishop speaking on behalf of truth. King John of England in AD 1215 could recognize and accept the *Magna Carta's* limits on his rule.

Not just any truth will do for this. It is said that there are many truths, and that we each choose our own; or that truth is “constructed” out of society, culture, and language. Truth, then, is contingent on personal or societal history, and subject to change and revision. But this leads directly back to power, for when one person’s “truth” clashes with another’s, both “truths” stand on equal ground.

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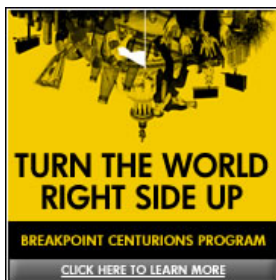
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There is no higher court to appeal to. Neither truth can be judged more true than the other. So the matter can only be decided according to who wins. The reigning truth at any time is determined by whichever side has won the last battle. This is not anti-relativistic prejudice saying this, by the way. Postmodern theorists acknowledge candidly that on their view, power takes the place formerly thought to be held by truth in human interactions.

I saw someone's online lament over the passage of health care legislation last week. The next commenter said, "Get over it. You lost." (I've seen conservatives say the same kind of thing to liberals.) There are winners and there are losers—"Get over it." That's power speaking. Truth has little to do with an interaction like that.

We will be ruled either by truth or by power. Is there a truth that will lead to liberty? What kind of truth would that have to be?

This truth must be able to speak to power; therefore it cannot be owned by the powerful. Before there was a Declaration of Independence, truth had to have its own independence. No merely human truth, subject to those who own it, could ever achieve this, so this truth must be transcendent. It must come from a higher place than you or me.

This truth must contain realistic, genuine hope within it; for only those who hope for justice and liberty will stand and fight for it.

It must support those with less power, calling every person to an ethic of love and compassion, and providing a sufficient reason for that ethic. It must also provide a compelling basis for the dignity and worth of every person. Otherwise why should the powerful care about the weak? Plato, Aristotle, and many early Americans considered their slaves less human than themselves. We need a truth that corrects that attitude among the powerful.

It must account for the known dangers of power. "Power corrupts," Lord Acton famously said, "and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Politics based solely on power will inevitably lead to corruption—even if that power is won through democratic processes. We need a truth that accounts for this, so that we can understand it and build protections against it.

The latter two of these truth-requirements stand in tension with each other—every person has high dignity, yet everyone is corruptible. Secular versions of truth that tell us humans came about just by natural, material processes have trouble with the former; those that say human nature is essentially good have trouble with the latter.

There are then at least six things necessary of truth that will protect liberty. It must be transcendent, not owned by any one person or group. It must be hopeful. It must be able to speak to power. It must support compassion. It must affirm each person's value and dignity, and yet it must also, without contradiction, explain how persons of such value and dignity can so easily fall into the corruptions of power.

The Greeks never conceived of a truth like that. In Plato's *Republic*, human *inequality* was essential to society's proper functioning. Democracy in Athens was limited to just a few, compassion as we understand it was rarely seen, and Aristotle believed he was living in a "Golden Age," the best of possible times.

The great civilizations of Asia never found it, either. Hinduism, with its castes, may be the most philosophically entrenched system of inequality and injustice the world has seen. As for China, [Li Si](#) wrote about 2,200 years ago,

*Only an intelligent ruler is capable of applying heavy punishments to light offenses. If light offenses carry heavy punishments, one can imagine what will be done against a serious offense. Thus, the people will not dare to break the laws.*

These "heavy punishments" amounted to torture, and their practice was continued in China until at

least the mid-1800s. Buddhism, on the other hand, for all its peaceableness, contains within it very little drive for justice and compassion, but rather the end of all quests and extinguishing of all drives. Islam is obviously no example of truth that keeps power in check. Modern secularism, besides fatally rejecting the transcendence of truth, also provides (as discussed above) little to no basis for essential human dignity.

Of all the great world philosophies and religions, only Christianity meets the tests of a compassionate truth that can stand over power. Grounded in God himself, it is transcendent. It affirms the worth of all persons as created in God's image, and by the Fall it explains how we have gone wrong. Its redemptive message restores hope to us in our fallen condition. Jesus Christ called for an ethic of both truth and love, even love for one's enemies.

Christianity is the one thought system that can support true human freedom and liberty against the corrupting tendencies of power. The prominent German philosopher [Jürgen Habermas](#), an atheist, has rightly said,

*Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it...we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.*

This by itself does not prove Christianity is true. It does help us answer other important questions, though.

For one thing, there has been much controversy, some of it very current, over "[How Christian were the founders?](#)" The debate tends to center on head counts of practicing believers among the Founding Fathers. That isn't the most relevant metric, though. Look instead at the founders' hope, which led them to sacrifice so much for liberty's sake, and see also their unshakeable belief in transcendent moral truth. Look at what they produced: a constitutional government based on the dignity and worth of all citizens, and on deep conviction that human power needed to be kept in check, because of its tendency toward corruption. Regardless of their individual views on Jesus Christ, together they built a government that was based on clearly identifiable biblical principles.

They applied their ethic inconsistently, and thus they failed on the matter of slavery. But the fault lay not in the principles on which the Constitution was grounded; rather it was in their application. The truths on which our government was based eventually proved large enough to include all races and classes.

Our nation was founded on biblical beliefs. In that strong sense we have always been a Christian nation. We are certainly not a Christian nation in every possible sense. We have no established religion, our populace is very pluralistic and diverse, and (as our history of slavery demonstrates) our practice has often been seriously lacking. But our foundational form and structure are undeniably grounded in Christianity.

Which leads to one final point. This biblically based system has proved its goodness, as America has led the world in establishing freedom and liberty. There are those who consider Christianity to be repressive or enslaving. They are wrong. Abandoning truth, or choosing the wrong "truth," are what will cause us to lose our freedom. Biblical principles support the only lasting protection against the rule of power.

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