

Is Truth the Road to Reconciliation?*

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Truth is a good thing. Reconciliation is a good thing. To argue against truth and reconciliation is like arguing against motherhood and friendship. I am not going to argue about *that*. The question I would like to pose, and the doubt I would like to cast, is on the putative causal relation between the two, namely on the idea that truth brings about reconciliation — or, put more cautiously, that truth contributes to reconciliation.

There are excellent reasons to pursue the truth. Truth is good in and of itself. There are excellent reasons to pursue reconciliation in countries torn by strife and suffering. The issue, however, is whether truth is a good tool for bringing about reconciliation. So what I propose to put under scrutiny is the slogan of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), "Truth, the road to reconciliation."

The issue, I believe, is of great moment, since the South African model for bringing about reconciliation through truth is regarded by many as the right model for handling transitional justice in many other troubled parts of the world. As I write this sentence, the South African writer André Brink is being interviewed on Israeli television and the first question he is asked is whether the truth-and-reconciliation format is applicable to the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. So I believe I have a great stake in probing this model, not mere academic curiosity.

Faith in the healing power of truth is half as old as time. It took a spiritual bully like Nietzsche to pose the quest for truth as a problem. The problem is whether truth contributes to our well-being, or, in Nietzsche's idiom, to "the forces of life." Nietzsche notwithstanding, the force of the traditional healing power of truth was never seriously questioned. Psychoanalysis was based on the belief in the emancipatory power of bringing repressed truth to the open. Once truth is revealed and acknowledged, its subversive dysfunctional role is supposed to stop.

The psychoanalytic model of liberating the repressed, which was meant to serve as a model for the individual psychology, was quite naturally — yet uncritically — extended to the collective. Thus we are told, for example, that the French people, with the help of the arch-censor de Gaulle, repressed their shameful memories of the Vichy government during World War II, and that those memories continued to play unconscious subversive tricks on the French psyche — so much so that they put the whole nation into a neurotic dysfunctional state, manifest in the wars in Algeria and Indo-China. Yet brave people forced the truth on French society, so the story goes, and made it confront its shameful past of collaboration, which was buried under the myth of the French Resistance. Once the painful truth was out in the open, a healing process started to take place.

This picture of a nation on the psychoanalytic bed, crude as it is, constitutes a powerful claim for the healing power of truth. But it is a picture, not an argument. So let me expand a bit on my question about the relation between truth and reconciliation. I shall start with truth.

Already Pilate asked, in a sarcastic tone, "What is truth?" Well, by truth here I mean uncovering and disclosing shameful, painful, and distressful facts that people try hard to conceal from others or from themselves. More can be said about the practical sense of truth here, and more should be said, since the TRC cluttered the notion of truth first with "social or dialogue truth," then with the addition

of "narrative truth" (which includes "stories and myths"), and on top of all that dealt with "healing truth." I believe I understand what the TRC was trying to do with these unfortunate divisions of truth, which seem to relativize truth beyond recognition. The idea, if I understand it correctly, was not only to capture the relevant past propositionally but to bring the past to life by reliving the experiences and the emotions of its victims. To enable this reliving of the past, the TRC invited first-person accounts of how the experiences of apartheid looked and felt to the victims at the time, even when these accounts were not fully accurate when viewed from a third-person perspective. The idea was to capture what it was like to be under the dark grip of apartheid — and it seems that the success of the testimonies was exactly in their ability to convey those experiences.

But then the idea of reliving the past takes its toll when the past was deeply humiliating. You cannot relive humiliation without being humiliated anew. The scars of humiliation never fully crust over, especially if humiliation has come with torture. Trauma, which is the Greek word for "wound," is a bleeding wound. The effort of the TRC to reenact the past seems to undermine the very idea of healing its wounds.

And here I come to the second term of the concept I'm dealing with, namely, reconciliation. Reconciliation, unlike repentance, is a symmetrical relation: both sides in a conflict have to settle and resolve their bitterness by accepting and admitting their shameful deeds toward each other as a way of restoring harmony. This is why no one can ask for reconciliation between Jews and Germans. There was nothing symmetrical in the blame between Nazi Germany and the Jews; it was all one-sided. When people like Ernst Nolte try to create such symmetry, accusing "world Jewry" of having declared war on Nazi Germany and of being a side in the war, this sounds morally outrageous. In the case of apartheid the issue of symmetry in the wrongdoing is a very serious matter indeed. It is true that in order to counter the evil of apartheid, black Africans resorted to violence and terror. But I can see how many of them resent the idea of symmetry that the notion of reconciliation implies. They see their violence as reactive violence, and they do not subscribe to the doctrine of original sin according to which there is an in-built symmetry among all human beings, who are all burdened by evil through the mere fact of being human.

It took the moral authority of Desmond Tutu, with his deep religious convictions, to reconcile the black community to reconciliation, with its implied acknowledgment of wrongdoing by their side too. Tutu indeed conferred a religious meaning on the act of reconciliation as an act of atonement, which requires an explicit confession of sins as a necessary condition for restoring the original relation between man and God. Atonement plays a role in Tutu's world view, and truth-telling by the perpetrators of evil is viewed as a confession within such an act of atonement. It seems to me that a community that shares this world view is a community in which truth may indeed lead to reconciliation, because even when a perpetrator receives immunity from the TRC in exchange for telling the truth, he is not immune from being accountable to God. So religion, in the case of truth and reconciliation, helps.

But what about those cases when religion does not help, because the community is not religious? We can easily see arguments both for and against the belief that truth, in a secular society, can bring about reconciliation. To start with some arguments against this belief: when people who have suffered immeasurably know all too well that their former tormentors are going to get away with murder, torture, and rape in exchange for telling their stories, even if they do so in a less than truthful way and without any sense of repentance — why believe that these people will be forgiving? Why believe that now, having been told exactly which perpetrators did what and to whom, it is easier for the victims to reconcile with the past? And as for the perpetrators, it is true that telling a dark secret can bring about a sense of relief, but it is a short-lived relief. Having told it, you and your family are tain-

ted for many years to come. Moreover, you are bound to feel resentful toward those who were once in your hands but are now calling the shots and forcing you to tell what you were reluctant to admit even to yourself. These are powerful reasons against believing that truth is the road to reconciliation.

What then counts for this belief? One powerful argument in favor of the healing power of truth in the relevant cases is the great need that victims have for their suffering to be recognized. Denying or ignoring their suffering robs it of its meaning, making the sufferers feel as if they counted for nothing and denying their humanity. So even if victims feel a strong urge for retributive justice, their need for their suffering to be recognized is stronger still. In communities in which former victims and former perpetrators are destined to live together after a period of transition, retributive justice can be too costly, or a political impossibility. The second best possibility, from the point of view of the sufferers, is that their suffering will at least be recognized by all. "Confession first," then, makes not just religious sense but psychological sense as well.

So the question for us to debate is: Is truth the road to reconciliation?

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