

Chapter 5: Seeking Truth

Hide and Seek

Who would withhold the truth? What would be their purpose for doing so? If there was something to be gained or something fundamentally important why and how could this be hidden from us? Unfortunately the truth can even be hidden within a church environment. This may sound a little strange but when we consider the actual knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith by the general population we find that it is lacking in many areas. This is interesting when we consider that most people have attended a church for a significant period of time in their lives, and some have attended Christian schools. Therefore we would assume that in general people should have a strong understanding of Christianity. However many people would not be able to quote a single verse from the Bible, therefore how could they understand the principles which it teaches us?

Who is responsible for this? Why do most people lack understanding? Have most people become uninterested? If so, for what reason has this taken place? It is critical to realise that our understanding is based upon our experiences. If we base our understanding solely on the observation of religious practices we can miss the fundamental truth, which it attempts to portray. For example, the rituals of both the Roman Catholic and the Church of England churches may seem a little outdated and strange to us at times, and if we attempt to gain our knowledge from these practices we can become a little confused. Most of these rituals are based upon biblical teachings. Therefore if we have no understanding of these teachings we are unable to understand their meanings and importance.

Multi-Faith Acceptance

It is important to understand that as the world is changing, and we are becoming exposed to more diverse beliefs and religious practices from many different world cultures our religious systems are also changing their role and function in society. There has been a noticeable move towards multi-faith acceptance. It is now common to see Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders accepting each other's teachings and adapting their practices to accommodate their ideologies. Unfortunately this gives us a confusing message. We may ask which one is correct, or does multi-faith acceptance contradict the teachings of all faiths? Ashamedly we would receive a generic and unfulfilling answer. Consider the following:

“We seek co-operation with people in other faith groups on practical projects where this is appropriate and possible. We believe that our Churches have a particular role to play in encouraging our national governments and local authorities to explore and to understand the complexities of faith community organisations. We recognise that people of all faiths have a concern for the whole of society, while at the same time we all need to be honest about the real differences we can experience when we try to interpret in practical terms values which may sound the same when expressed as generalities. We believe that the Churches are called to work with people of other faiths in seeking the welfare of asylum seekers and refugees.”

Porvoo Communion Consultation on Inter Faith Relations (2003)

The concepts which the Church of England are presenting in the statement above are noble and important within the perspective of tolerance and political correctness but unfortunately this does not give us a clear answer as to where the “path of truth” is. We are no longer encouraged to question, and determine which faith is correct, which results in all others being false according to our understanding that there can only be one truth and many lies in any circumstance in life. Therefore in the effort of increasing multi-faith unity are the church leaders suggesting that there is a plurality in truth? Can it be possible that more than one point of view can be true? As we know from our own lives there can only ever be one truth. Consider the following counterstatement from another group within the Church of England:

“They [Christians] have watched with despair as the mainstream Churches abandon biblical morality and surrender slavishly to political correctness, the downgrading of the place of the Sacraments within the worship of the Church, and worst of all, the steady undermining of the very belief in Christianity as a revealed Faith. It has become fashionable to say that Christians cannot know anything for certain about God. Faith has become the subject for debate, instead of something that is simply accepted as being true.”

Dutton (2005)

Let us consider why this has taken place. In this example the Church of England is showing signs of change. It has adopted practices, which would be more commonplace in a business environment. Have they created such policies to consider and protect their reputation? Or are they reaching out to other groups simply to expand their numbers, hence increase revenue? Regardless of the motive it is apparent that the mainstream church is operating more as a business than a place of religion and spirituality. This is not an isolated case, as there are increasing examples of more religious institutions adopting business practice.

In 2001 I spent some time studying and debating with the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The organisation of their religious activities and practices are considerably more business-like than the established church. An example of this is the distribution of their promotional and educational materials. Each month they publish a magazine called The Watchtower, which contains a corporate interpretation of biblical scriptures from their own translation, techniques and information, which can be used to recruit new members into their organisation. Every meeting, which is held, contains identical information and practices throughout all their locations in the world. They have utilised a McDonalds approach to spirituality. They offer the same content and the same service worldwide. You are asked to eat from the spiritual menu and if you prefer a different flavour to your food this is not catered for. Once a religious establishment adopts corporate practices individuality is slowly lost. Not in terms of disagreement with their belief system but rather in effective individual education. Members are encouraged to adopt corporate ideals, to accept the establishment’s translation of the scriptures or more fundamentally their interpretation of morality. This is not a condemnation of any particular group but an example of how we adopt a corporate mindset and apply it to spirituality. Unfortunately the Jehovah’s Witnesses are just one example of many groups who have applied a corporate approach to their religion.

The Mechanics of Self Deception

The Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 2005 Harold Pinter mentioned the pursuit of truth in his controversial acceptance speech for his prize, which was broadcast on international television. Consider the following extract:

"In 1958 I wrote the following:

'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.'

I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?"

Pinter (2005)

His argument is a valid one. We must seek the truth and be absolute. To accept that a fact cannot be categorised, as true or false is an assumption, which itself is false. As Pinter suggests this is only acceptable in the "*exploration of reality through art*" for example fiction, but this ideology has no place in the discernment of fact from fiction. As we understand there can only ever be one truth and many lies, this is a clear distinction to which there can be no blurring of boundaries for to do so will distort our perception of reality.

So what can cause us to disregard an absolute perspective of truth? It is only our conformability factor and desire for comfort. We take refuge in the answers and authority of our scientists, leaders and peers and it is largely due to the fact that we actively avoid confrontation in an attempt to preserve our own comfort which causes us to disregard absolute truth. You may have heard or used phrases similar to this one: "That is your/their truth", "You are entitled to your own opinion", "All roads lead to Heaven". What will we compromise to avoid jeopardising our comfortable lifestyle? Would you risk losing your job or the respect of your colleagues to even mention your beliefs or opinion in a workplace? Naturally we tend not to, but it is this, which causes us to compromise our search for the truth and accept assumed facts, which are given to us by our authorities and peers. Perhaps it is our desire to belong to a group, which can dull our desire for learning and questioning. Sometimes we perceive that by our acceptance of a group's ideology we will remain an acceptable member. When we consider this it is surprising how we will compromise our will to learn and question just to be accepted. Can our desire for belonging keep us from self-discovery of the truth?

Stanley Milgram conducted an experiment to discover a conflict between obedience to authority and personal conscience. He setup a room and invited people to be instructors to a person who was situated in another room. The instructors asked questions to their subject and if they answered incorrectly they administered an electric shock. Each time the subject was incorrect the voltage was increased with the final setting reaching 300 volts. In most cases the instructor administered electric shocks even to lethal levels when encouraged and reassured by the scientist who was overseeing the experiment. Of course the electric shocks were not real and the subject was actually an actor in

another room who was trained to give verbal responses for the experiment. However this provided Milgram with some interesting information and as a result he made the following observation:

"With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who are in everyday life responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority, by the control of their perceptions, and by the uncritical acceptance of the experimenter's definition of the situation, into performing harsh acts. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority."

Milgram (1965)

Therefore Milgram proved that people would commit horrific acts if they receive approval by an authority figure. This disturbing finding has a much greater impact upon our understanding. We can now perceive that we as people will modify our behaviour, suspend our ethical reasoning, and even change our beliefs according to the wishes of an authoritative person. Consider this. Do we reject believing in a Creator God because a scientist informs us that this belief is close-minded in comparison to the knowledge of science? Do we reject considering the reason for our own existence because our friends think the subject is "too deep", or do we suspend this thought process because belonging to the group is more important than to appear as an individual who thinks differently to others? Do we assume that an authority figure, our peers, teachers and the people who appear on television are correct about all matters of knowledge and reasoning? Will we allow them to dictate a belief and morality system to us and accept it without question? Sadly, if we are to examine ourselves the answer is yes.

Desiring Truth

Now we must consider the consequences of our actions. As we have previously discussed the educational establishment has withheld information, which could be used as a counter argument against the Theory of Evolution. We have seen interesting parallels between the work of Stephen Hawking and The Book of Genesis' account of creation. Yet we have accepted teaching, television programming and literature, which tells us that to consider the existence of God is a primitive notion as they claim Evolution to be a fact when it is merely a theory. We have considered how some of us may follow religious rituals in established churches and never question their meaning and correctness because of our overwhelming compulsion to conform. Now we have a choice. We can accept our assumed knowledge, or we can begin to question and learn the truth and discover what the world has tried to hide from us by examining it for ourselves from the beginning to the end.

To find truth we must walk on its path, we must be prepared to learn and re-educate ourselves. It is a tragedy that we can disregard the teachings of the Bible and the consideration of the existence of God without personally examining the teachings that are available to us. This is our challenge. To discover the information for ourselves before those who are opposed to it cause its complete elimination.