



November 2018

Dear listener,

In October of 2005, on the pilot episode of his political satire program *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert coined the snarky term “truthiness.” It’s a good word that highlights a bad condition. (I’ve read that Colbert also sometimes used the pseudo-Latin “veritasiness.”) It’s a good word because it captures the paradox of living in this postmodern moment in which *appeals to truth* still evoke a lingering sense of obligation, but in which *beliefs about what truth is* are so confused, attenuated, contradictory, or dubious as to undermine any authority that truth should actually command.

The divisive election of President Trump seems to have precipitated a sense of crisis about truth. Last year, just weeks after the presidential inauguration, I got an e-mail from the *New York Times* inviting me to save 50% on a subscription. In big, bold letters, I was exhorted: “The truth is hard. Living without it is harder.” The text of the e-mail provided comfort and hope: “The newsroom of The Times works constantly in pursuit of the truth,” a claim that conjures images of pious, monkish devotion . . . until I remember my own experience in the newsroom at NPR.

At about the same time last year, sensing a threat in the rhetoric of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” the *Washington Post* created a banner graphic that displays every time you launch their app: “*Democracy Dies in Darkness.*” (You can also wear that slogan on a somberly hued T-shirt or baby onesie, available at the Washington Post Store.) The *Post* is thus the self-proclaimed bearer of light, revealing to its readers *what is true*. Or at least what is *factual*. And there is the crack in the foundation that causes truth to tumble to truthiness. The modern tendency to equate “truth” with “facticity” — constraining Truth’s origin and consequences within the boundaries of what is useful and confirmed by the senses — is at the center of our problem with “truth,” and with much else.

The fateful trajectory of modernity has for centuries undermined confidence about truth. Modern public life is in principle ordered without reference to any transcendent reality; the only truth about human being that can be officially honored is that which can be empirically verified. But, as Richard Weaver warned years ago, “the denial of everything transcending experience means inevitably — though ways are found to hedge on this — the denial of truth.” We may believe that we are still (however faintly) honoring truth with knowing allusions to “truthiness,” but the prospect of repudiating our preferences in the name of the truth is not widely welcome. After all, the Supreme Court has assured us — in the spirit of truthiness — that the essence of our freedom is the right to define existence and the meaning of human life however we want to.

On volume 103 of the *Journal*, I interviewed law professor Steven D. Smith, author of the 2004 book *Law’s Quandary*. His book describes how “the malaise of modern law and legal thought . . . is a manifestation of what is at bottom a metaphysical predicament.” Law is in a quandary (as is, I would add, politics) because accepted modern notions of *what is really real* leave no room for conceptions of Truth and Goodness that could guide or limit human choosing. And yet, the practical authority of “the law” depends on an affirmation that human laws are truly expressions of eternal laws. As Smith notes, “it seems that we cannot believe in ‘the law,’ and we also cannot live without quietly harboring something like this belief.”

Smith later describes two contradictory movements that dominate the modern West:

There is a movement in politics, law, and ethics that has attempted to give ever greater elaboration and practical realization to the idea that human beings have intrinsic value — that they are endowed with human dignity and entitled to equal concern and

respect. We may associate this movement with terms like ‘Enlightenment,’ ‘humanism,’ ‘liberalism,’ and ‘progressivism.’ Then there is a reductionist and physicalistic movement in our underlying ontologies — we associate this movement with science — that quietly operates to make claims about human value and dignity look like sentimental nonsense. Perhaps surprisingly (or perhaps not), the same people are often truculent proponents of both movements. As a consequence, our modern lives have for some time now been carried on in a sort of gaping ontological gap.

In his book *Returning to Reality*, our recent Areopagus lecturer Paul Tyson wrote that the sense of being in a quandary suffered by many modern institutions — the sense that we face “unsolvable problems in relation to truth, morality, high ideals, and meaning” — can only be addressed by reorienting our “understanding of knowledge and truth.” As did Lesslie Newbigin, Tyson emphasizes the fact that the Gospel’s announcement of the Kingdom is a call to *metanoia*, to a changing of our minds about what is real and thus about what is true. As he proclaims near the end of his book, “For the very hope of a basic shift in our civilizational direction there needs to be an alternative vision of the very nature of reality.”

Unfortunately, modern Christians have often attempted to communicate the message of the Gospel in merely *moral* terms, without reference to the *metaphysical* framework in which morality itself is intelligible. St. Paul tells us that the One born in Bethlehem is the One through whom and for whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together. The *Logos* made flesh is the *origin* of life and light, of goodness and truth. The modern West’s effort to defend truth and pursue goodness while in countless ways denying the One who is Truth and Goodness is a Promethean project destined to fail, and the growing sense of dis-ease in Western societies is a symptom of that failure.

In an introductory essay in the 1998 edition of Henri de Lubac’s *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, David L. Schindler (a guest on *Journal* volumes 112 and 131) summarized one of de Lubac’s fundamental insights: “the Church could best — most comprehensively and profoundly — speak to the heart of modern humanity, not by shrinking her message, but by displaying the beauty of her central Fact in all of its fullness.” The Church’s central Fact is a *person*, not a proposition, Truth made flesh, a man in history, thereby transforming both humanity and history’s trajectory.

Since 1993, the mission of MARS HILL AUDIO has been about exploring the cultural consequences of the Gospel. But over time, I’ve come to a deeper appreciation of the inescapably *Christocentric* character of those consequences. The Church’s life in the world — in every aspect of human experience — is nothing less than “displaying the beauty of her central Fact in all of its fullness.” We are committed to enacting the cultural consequences of Christ, beginning with the recognition that efforts to shore up “truth” while despising and rejecting Truth lead to dehumanizing idolatries.

The guests I interview are selected in the overarching interest of sustaining that “alternate vision of the very nature of reality” with which Christian thought can challenge modern dogmas. We need help and it takes time to learn to see with new eyes, confirming the wisdom in Flannery O’Connor’s observation: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.”

My staff and I are extremely grateful for the generosity shown by many supporters for our odd project for many years. Given the trend lines in the society around us, I anticipate that faithful Christians will increasingly be perceived as unbearably odd. But I also believe that the truthless trajectory of modernity will induce a hunger for reality and truth in the hearts of many. May we all be adequate to the challenge of bearing witness in such a time.

In Advent hope,



Ken Myers
Producer and Host