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From the Republic of South Africa to the World at Large: Does the Truth Set One Free?

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Abstract. This article explores the assumption that with the truth comes the triumph of the therapeutic in individual life and that of the collective.

A premise of Judeo-Christian morality is that the truth must not be violated through stating untruth at the expense of spiritual violation. A premise of classical psychoanalysis is that the search for psychological truth through strategically placed interpretation can be the road to health. A premise of cultural Darwinism is that what serves as truth had adaptive significance in the distant past even as it continues to be operative in the present and guiding the evolving truth of the future. A Marxist premise of religious truth is that it may serve as the opiate of the masses--short-term gain for long-term false consciousness. And a premise of classical approaches to industrial-organizational psychology is that appropriate structural, process, and functional modification leads to a truthful view and organizational success.

With the intellectual movements of hermeneutics and post-structuralism, however, the rivers of truth muddied, overflowed, just dried up, or, perhaps, became topologically indistinguishable or invisible. Truth could be reached through a tortuous and deified ideal speech situation--discourses in social contexts. Or truth as socially and/or arbitrarily constructed was but a vehicle of oppression and coercion of object by subject or of both in some perverse tarantella.

With such ferment about the nature or even the death of truth, one might not be surprised that the consequences of Truth Commissions in formerly war-torn and violence-addled countries have been quite heterogeneous. In the Republic of South Africa, however, there has occurred a seemingly uniform consequence. Has the incipient release of a long-awaited report on the more recent apartheid years induced relief? Tranquillity? Grudging respect and willingness to look at the present and future as opposed to the past? No, a spate of lawsuits and violent threats. From virtually all sides to the long struggle to preserve or destroy apartheid. In fact, these legal actions and violent threats against the Truth Commission represent one of the few times that bitter enemies have joined common cause.

Is this the new Modern Truth after Postmodernism--a post-Postmodernism as the next wave that embodies truth as Nietzsche embodied God? It's not that truth is dead but that it is all of us who have killed its possibility. (See Birch, M. (1998). Through a glass darkly: Questions about truth and memory. Psychoanalytic Psychology, 15, 34-48; Brown, A.S., & Nix, L.A. (1996). Turning lies into truths: Referential validation of falsehoods. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition, 22, 1088-1100; de la Rey, C., & Owens, I. (1998). Perceptions of psychosocial healing and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 4, 257-270; Hamber, B. (1998). The burdens of truth: An evaluation of the psychological support services and initiatives undertaken by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. American Imago, 55, 9-28; Some truth about Truth Commissions II. (September 12, 1997). IBPP, 3(7); Webb, R.E., & Restuccia, K.A. (1998). Truth, lies, and wondering. Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 11, 117-132.) (Keywords: Truth Commission.)

1