

**Reconciliation:**  
Christian Perspectives – Interdisciplinary Approaches

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Vol. 3

LIT/GBFE

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## Table of Contents

<i>Forward</i> .....	5
<i>1. Theo Witvliet as Hermeneutic Guide for White Theologians Engaging Black Theology of Liberation</i> .....	7
Cobus van Wyngaard	
<i>2. The Gospel of Reconciliation in the Gospel of Mark</i> .....	23
Morten H. Jensen	
<i>3. “And there arose a sharp disagreement” (Acts 15:39): Inner-Christian Conflicts and their Resolution in Acts 6–15</i> .....	45
Christoph Stenschke	
<i>4. A Study of Ephesians: A New Identity Reshaped by the Gospel of Reconciliation</i> .....	60
Ester Petrenko	
<i>5. Shalom without Recompense? Some Notions on the Hebrew Term “Shalom”</i> .....	84
Hans-Georg Wünc	
<i>6. Reconciliation as Healing of Memory – A Missionary Task of the Church</i> .....	100
Johannes Reimer	
<i>7. Knowing the Other: A First Step Towards Unity in Christ in a Post-Western Christianity</i> .....	115
Matthias Ehmann	
<i>8. Noble Lies, Augustinian Lies and the Post-Modernist Black Hole: Truth, Reconciliation and the Church</i> .....	128
Catherine Morris	
<i>9. Violence, Trauma, and Reconciliation – the Role of the Church after Community Trauma in Guatemala</i> .....	169

Marcus Weiland

*10. The Peace Witness of the Church - Swords into Plowshares - and "Building Leaders For Peace" (BLAP)..... 183*

Randy Friesen

*11. Sustainability - Reconciliation with Creation, Global Neighbours and Future Generations..... 195*

Thomas Kroek

*12. Reconciliation Meetings in Egypt..... 215*

Jonathan Andrews and Christof Sauer

*13. Inter- und (verdeckt) transsexuellen Menschen versöhnt begegnen..... 232*

Martina Kessler

*14. Authors & Editors ..... 262*

## Forward

Peace and Reconciliation is in. No other issue lately has received as much attention among missiologists, both Evangelical and Ecumenic, as the issue of Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. Praised as the new paradigm of Christian mission on the one side, it is ascribed to the field of Christian ethics by the other. A heated debate is in process.

In this volume, we want to examine this important question from different interdisciplinary and international perspectives in order to develop an overall understanding that will contribute to reconciliation in various cultural and religious fields of conflict in the world. Particular attention will be paid to the theological perspective on reconciliation, in which justice and restoration of relationships play a central role.

Surprisingly few authors provide proper theological foundation for their views. At the same time the practical suggestions seem to stay preliminary.

Reasons enough for an international symposium of theologians from Europe, Africa and North America to explore the issues on a deeper level. This volume represents their views from different angles and perspectives in theological thinking. Papers read in biblical theology present both Old and New Testament views on the issue. Added are systematic theological, practical theological and missiological as well as interdisciplinary perspectives.

All in all, a thought-provoking conference which may move the discussion a step on. Interested readers will find a wealth of theological thinking and some challenging practices.

Many thanks to Elke Meier and Manuel Reimer for all work on the manuscript.

Editors, in May 2020

# **Noble Lies, Augustinian Lies and the Post-Modernist Black Hole: Truth, Reconciliation and the Church**

Catherine Morris

## **Abstract**

The text of Psalm 85:10-11 provides striking metaphors for the biblical concept of shalom: “Mercy and truth have met each other: justice and peace have kissed.” Accordingly, this essay proposes a framework for reconciliation that recognizes truth, justice, forgiveness and peace. The necessity of truth for genuine peace and reconciliation is singled out in light of some North American Christian leaders’ engagements with a “post-fact” world. Questions about truth are nothing new. When Jesus told Pilate that he came to testify to truth, Pilate is recorded as retorting: “What is truth?” (Jn 18:37-38). Have church people adopted Pilate’s approach by relegating truth into a postmodernist “black hole”? Have church leaders slipped into blind acceptance of Plato’s “noble lie” (sometimes known as propaganda)? Are churches endorsing bare-faced lies of the kind Augustine and Aquinas would decry? The essay explores contemporary concerns about truth and lies in light of biblical concepts and statements of Jesus. Drawing on examples from Cambodia, Rwanda, Canada, and the United States, the essay examines historic Christian church complicity with untruths that subvert reconciliation. The essay concludes with suggestions of ways for churches to engage with truths that foster reconciliation, including the tradition of prophetic lament.

## **1 Introduction**

Talk about truth-telling and lying has become increasingly popular and intense in North America as public conflict has become politically polarized, particularly in the United States (US) (United Nations 2017). Christian churches are at the centre of public diatribes that threaten to split congregations and denominations along increasingly thick ideological lines that blur somewhat, as controversies seep across the Canadian border. In the US, hate speech has been dramatically amplified since 2016 and echoes ominous racist ideologies of

World War II (WWII) and centuries-old conflicts over slavery and colonization. There are also calls for justice, peace, neighbourly love, and national reconciliation. In August, 2017, the uprooting of civil war memorials in the US and Canada dramatically exposed the depths and darkness of subterranean histories and unhealed wounds of remembered bloodshed and atrocities (Holland 2017, Roache 2018). In this polarized context, there is concern that mendacity is becoming normalized, particularly in the US (Shellnutt 2018). In this essay, written primarily for Christian church audiences, I propose that a deep commitment to truth and truth-telling is the basis of authentic reconciliation. I use a biblical framework for reconciliation found in the vision of *shalom* in Psalm 85, which integrates movements towards truth (Ps 31:5), justice (Is 45:21), lovingkindness (Dt 4:31, Jnh 4:2, 1 Jn 4:8; Ex 34:6, Jn 3:18), and peace (Zch 8:16). Each of these four themes is crucial to a biblical conception of reconciliation, but truth is foundational: God is characterized by truth (Ex 34:6). Jesus describes himself as “the Truth” (Jn 14:16, Jn 1:14). The church is called the “foundation” of truth (1 Tm 3:15). “Speaking the truth in love” is the basis of relational unity of believers in Jesus (1 Tm 3:15, Eph 4:15). Using examples from historic conflicts in Cambodia (Morris 2004; 2016), Rwanda, the US, and Canada, I outline three challenges to truth that are affecting the Church in North America. I conclude with reflections on how to address these challenges in ways that foster genuine reconciliation.

## **2 A Biblical Framework for Reconciliation**

### **2.1 Why focus on reconciliation?**

The recorded purpose of Jesus’ ministry is to “reconcile all things” to God, including rescuing humanity from entrapment in all forms of evil and oppression (e.g. 2 Cor 5:18-19). John 17 records the prayer of Jesus for the unity of the future church. “May they be one as we are one,” he prays, “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17: 11-23). This prayer of Jesus emphasizes that church unity is inextricably connected to the unity of God, with whom Jesus identifies himself as “one.” If churches were to join persistently with Jesus in the John 17 prayer, their focus would be directed towards learning to live together in ways that imitate the love of God. People would more frequently witness and experience reconciling love when they are in the midst of church people. The church would become more visible as “the cadre of reconciled individuals” that Schreiter (1998, 116) suggests is essential to social reconciliation.

## **2.2 Four themes of reconciliation: Truth, Justice, Forgiveness and Peace**

What is “reconciliation”? Scholarly literature discloses a confusing array of meanings attached to this term. The fields of dispute resolution, peacebuilding, and international human rights uphold largely liberal democratic frameworks for action towards peace, including independent judiciaries and legal professions (e.g. Morris 2016; Des Forges 1999). Peace and conflict studies also include structuralist (e.g. Galtung 1996) and poststructuralist perspectives, also referred to as “social constructionist” or “postmodernist” perspectives (e.g. Lederach 1996; Pearce and Littlejohn 1997). Within the diverse, interdisciplinary literature, meanings of “reconciliation” range from “thin” ideas of mere coexistence (Ignatieff 2003), or toleration (e.g. Gamberale 2008), which approaches may be accompanied by “social amnesia” (Cohen 2001:132-133, 238-239), to “thicker” (Crocker 2003:54) conceptions of acknowledgment and forgiveness, mercy, shared vision, mutual healing, or harmony (Cohen 2001; Katongole 2005). Meanings of reconciliation vary across religions and cultures (Redekop 2002).

The New Testament definition of “reconciliation” – as translated from the Greek – means “transformation” of relationships, from enmity towards friendship (for discussion see, e.g. Lederach 1999; Schreiter 1998; Tutu 1999; Volf 1996). Mennonite peace and conflict scholar John Paul Lederach locates his conceptual framework for peacebuilding and reconciliation within scripture (Lederach 1997, 1999), particularly the metaphors found in Psalm 85:10-11: “Steadfast love (mercy, lovingkindness)<sup>131</sup> and faithfulness (truth)<sup>132</sup> will meet; righteousness (justice)<sup>133</sup> and peace (*shalom*)<sup>134</sup> will kiss each other. Faithfulness (truth) will spring up from the ground, and righteousness (justice) will look down from the sky.”

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<sup>131</sup> Hebrew כֶּחֶד (kheh'-sed), Also translated as “love” or “loving-kindness.”

<sup>132</sup> Hebrew אֱמֻנָה (eh'-meth), also translated as firmness, reliability, faithfulness.

<sup>133</sup> Hebrew צְדָקָה (tseh'-dek), also translated as righteousness.

<sup>134</sup> Hebrew שְׁלוֹמָה (shalom, shaw-lome'), also translated as welfare, health, prosperity, friendship. This conception of peace is consistent with the concept of “positive peace”

These verses capture a biblical understanding of reconciliation that recognizes the human needs for truth, justice, mercy, and peace (*shalom*).<sup>135</sup> Such an approach avoids at least three conceptual traps. First, the images of meeting places in the Psalm contradict a notion that processes of “reconciliation” involve placing truth and justice on one end of a balance scale with forgiveness and peace on the other end (resulting in a metaphor that suggests that more justice results in less peace, or vice versa). Second, the metaphor recognizes that the experiences of peacemaking and reconciliation rarely unfold in the tidy, linear sequences often described in Western technocratic approaches to “post-conflict” reconstruction, which emphasize sequential “stages” of peacebuilding. For a critique of a linear, sequential analytic approach to reconciliation, see Lederach and Lederach (2010:41-57). Third, the Psalmist’s approach avoids “thin” conceptions of peace that involve acquiescence to power or the mere absence of direct violence, described as “negative peace” by peace scholar Johan Galtung (1996:3).

In real-life experiences, the four themes of truth, justice, compassion, and peace intertwine themselves in people’s journeys over time and place – often in tension with one another – through people’s needs and yearnings when they are in conflict, including their impulses to “do something” about it. Biblical admonitions concerning the use of power are a key aspect of this model. Followers of Jesus are to exert their full strength in the service of God’s purposes, which are constituted in Jesus’s ministry of reconciliation (Lk 10:17). Followers of Jesus are to exert this strength not in reliance on political might but on the power of God’s Spirit (Zch 3:6, Mt 20:25-28). While each of these themes deserves extensive attention, this essay has its emphasis on truth.

### **3 Truth: Integral to Justice, Forgiveness and Peace**

#### **3.1 Why truth?**

Why focus on truth? I have demonstrated Jesus’ central concern about the unity of believers. Unifying relationships can develop only when people are able to

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coined by Galtung (1996).

<sup>135</sup> These needs are congruent with findings of needs theorists, e.g. Redekop (2002). The “capabilities approach” has valuably addressed limitations of needs theory to redress problems of deprivation of human capabilities for functioning towards wellbeing and flourishing (Nussbaum 1999; Sen 1993).

trust one another to be fair and compassionate in their relationships in interpersonal interactions and in governance. The Hebrew word in the Bible often translated as “truth” (אֱמֻנָה, *eh'-meth*) is more accurately translated as “faithfulness,” “reliability,” or “trustworthiness.” Faithfulness is as important in congregational relationships as it is in marriages, friendships, businesses, and political relationships. If truth – trustworthiness – is crucial to people’s wellbeing and relationships, to the social fabric of our congregations and communities, why do people lie?

### **3.2 Why do we lie?**

Literature in the field of negotiation and conflict resolution indicates that outcomes of agreements rooted in reality – and truth-telling about reality – are more stable than those rooted in inaccuracies, falsehoods or deceptions. When misrepresentations – innocent or not – come to light after deals are made or settlements reached, results include mistrust, renewed conflict, or even retaliation and revenge (Lewicki et al. 2001). Despite the risk of unstable outcomes and damage to relationships, negotiators often try to deceive other parties to gain “leverage” for outcomes that favour themselves or their constituents at the expense of others (Lax and Sebenius 1986:363-70). Some writers on negotiation ethics have justified certain kinds of lying as part of the “rules” of the negotiation game (Shell 2004:215-17, but see Menkel-Meadow 1997). Some claim that to “conceal one's true position, to mislead an opponent about one's true settling point, is the essence of negotiation” (White 1980:27-28). In political and other arenas, lying is often defended as sometimes necessary to achieve justice or for the protection of other people, society or the Church (see Chapters 9, 10, 11, 14 in Griffiths 2004; Smith 1911; Verhey 1999; ). I will address these justifications below.

When people are accused of wrongdoing, they may go to great lengths to avoid acknowledging responsibility, even when their guilt is obvious (Cohen 1996, 2001). Wrongdoers lie or deny moral responsibility out of fear of reprisals, legal accountability, social ostracization, or loss of political or economic power.

#### *3.2.1 An example from Cambodia: Lies and denials*

Rather than turning immediately to the American civil war, I will briefly discuss aspects of a 20<sup>th</sup> century conflict, the Cambodian “side show” in the major powers’ proxy war in Southeast Asia (Shawcross 1979; Kiernan 2004). Churches in North America were far from unified in their stances on the Vietnam War (Wacker 2014; Balmer 2012; Balmer 2016). Christian leaders who

encouraged the war feared the communist movements that had emerged as part of nationalist struggles against 19<sup>th</sup> century European colonization. They supported the containment of communism, which they saw as hostile towards religious and other freedoms (Toulouse 1993). Some Christians opposed the war as being incompatible with traditional just war theory (Toulouse 2007). Christian pacifists opposed the war on the grounds of Jesus' teachings on non-violence (King 1967; and Gordon C. Zahn, see Toulouse 2007).

Starting as early as 1965, the Nixon administration deceitfully escalated the war by means of massive, illegal, and clandestine bombing of Cambodia, killing hundreds of thousands and displacing nearly a third of the population. The bombings are credited with driving "an enraged populace into the arms of an insurgency that had enjoyed relatively little support until the bombing began" (Owen 2006:63). American bombing of Cambodian civilians thus contributed to the rise of Pol Pot's 1975-1979 Khmer Rouge regime, which was responsible for the deaths of at least 1.7 million people; more than a fifth of the population died by summary execution, torture, overwork, or privation (Kiernan 2004:xli).

After the unearthing of mass graves and the scrutiny of thousands of documents, there was plenty of evidence against high-ranking Khmer Rouge officials involved in massive war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide (Heder and Tittmore 2004; Chandler 1999; Documentation Center of Cambodia). One Khmer Rouge leader, Ieng Sary, who died in 2013 before his international war crimes trial was completed, said he "had no information about ...the killings" (Ehrlich 2001) despite evidence that he publicly encouraged arrests and executions. Nearly all Khmer Rouge regime leaders recited similar litanies of denial (Barber and Munthit 1996; Handley 2017b, 2017a; Thayer 1997). An exception is Kaing Guek Eav (known as "Comrade Duch") who, when the Vietnamese invaded in 1979, made his way to the western border, where "he disappeared into the murky world of secret camps" held by the remnants of the Khmer Rouge (Dunlop 2010:198). In 1996, he was converted to Christianity. When journalists found him living under a false name in 1999, he said "it is God's will you are here... I have done very bad things before in my life. Now it is time for *les represailles* [the consequences] of my actions" (Dunlop 2010:272). He freely admitted overseeing the torture and executions at Tuol Sleng prison, where at least 14,000 people perished (Chandler 1999). Yet Duch, too, reverted to forms of denial during his trial and appeal, saying, he would have been killed if he had not followed orders and that he was "just like a cog

in a running machine” with no ability to escape the regime (Carmichael 2015:261, 165-180, 260-266, also see Ledgerwood 2009).

China has become a major donor to Cambodia’s current authoritarian government but continues to deny its involvement in assisting the Khmer Rouge regime (Levin 2015). The US points out that it has contributed to the funding of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which researches Khmer Rouge atrocities, the war crimes and genocide prosecutions of Khmer Rouge officials in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), and the clean-up of unexploded ordnance in the region, but the US at the same time continues to demand repayment of US\$500 million in loans given to Cambodia’s 1970-1975 right-wing coup government that ruled with US support until the Pol Pot regime took Phnom Penh in April 1975 (Wright and Kuch 2017). This demand has nurtured Cambodian bitterness about US atrocities during the 1960s and 1970s.

### *3.2.2 Ideology and denial of truth*

Denials of truth and moral responsibility for wrongdoing are often propped up by ideologies. This is true not only of US officials implicated in the rise of the communist Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia or Chinese support of the regime from the 1960s throughout the 1980s (Mertha 2014; Wight 2014). For a decade after Vietnam’s 1979 expulsion of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime, the anti-communist ideologies of United Kingdom and US governments were used to justify the refusal of official aid to Cambodia’s Vietnamese and Soviet backed rulers (Mysliwiec 1988). High ranking officials of the Pol Pot regime have continued to deny their moral responsibility for the atrocities and genocide. The high-ranking Khmer Rouge official, Nuon Chea denied his agency in these crimes until he died in August 2019; before completion of the appeal of his convictions by the ECCC for genocide and other atrocity crimes. He used euphemisms, saying: “I admit that there was a mistake. But I had my ideology. I wanted to free my country. I wanted people to have well-being” (quoted in Leitsinger 2004). At the closing of his trial in 2013, Nuon Chea denied direct knowledge or responsibility for the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime, saying, “There is no evidence to prove I did it...” His purpose for participating in the Pol Pot regime was “to liberate Cambodia from colonialism, to protect her from neighboring countries who wanted to swallow Cambodia” (Dernocoeur 2013).

### **3.3 An old, old story**

People deceive to maintain control over information, thus avoiding vulnerability. They may also use lies and denials to manipulate narratives to justify their version of history and maintain legitimacy. At the heart of lying is the purpose of gaining or keeping power or the fear of losing it.

The problem of lying is old. In the biblical account of the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God, the Lord called out to the man, “Where are you?” Adam replied, “I heard...you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” The man went on to prevaricate by blaming Eve. She, in turn, blamed the serpent for lying to her (Gn 3:1-13). The two of them manoeuvred to try to hide their vulnerability and to control the narrative through denial and deceit. And God expelled them from paradise. Later, after Cain committed the Bible’s first recorded murder, God called out to Cain: “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain responded with a lie and a sarcastic retort: “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” God replied, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground” (Gn 4:9). God called for truth. In return, God received lies and denials of responsibility. And so it goes.

There are two points to emphasize about these biblical stories. First, the Bible suggests there is no progress towards reconciliation until truth and moral responsibility are acknowledged. Second, from the beginning, God is recorded as having initiated reconciliation and restoration of relationships. God seeks out humankind first, asking for truth and responsibility. The Bible’s message about Jesus emphasizes that truthful acknowledgement of responsibility for wrongdoing unlocks people’s ability to receive God’s grace and forgiveness and results in the invitation to join in Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation.

Human experience confirms that truth-telling powerfully releases possibilities for our transformation towards justice as well as possibilities of receiving increased trust and forgiveness from those we have wronged (Govier 2006:58). In contrast, falsehood and denial by a wrongdoer signals a desire to enjoy the power of impunity, not to mention continued danger for victims. Apologies fail to convey moral truth when they are not accompanied by repentance, including reparations and institutional changes to prevent reoccurrence of wrongdoing (Barkan 2006).

## **4 Three Challenges to Truth: Lies, Noble Lies and the Supposed “Death of Truth”**

Churches in North America are currently facing at least three contemporary challenges to truth. First is the need for a return to the virtue of truth-telling. The normalization of lying is harming the personal integrity of church people, the reputation of church and the moral fabric of the broader community. Second is the perpetual temptation for church people to become mired in dominant societal myths that render them vulnerable to propaganda and which are contributing to a sharply polarized political and social climate. Third is concern about cooption by moral relativism – blamed by some on the so-called postmodernist “death of truth.”

### ***4.1 The need for renewed church emphasis on truth-telling***

Over the centuries, much scholarly ink has been spilled on the topic of honesty and lying. In contemporary North America, church preaching on truthfulness appears to be relatively rare and superficial compared to teaching on other topics.<sup>136</sup> This is despite the emphasis on truthfulness and condemnation of dishonesty and slander throughout the Bible, from the ninth commandment (Ex 20:16), prophets (e.g. Ezk 22:9, Jr 9:4-6), psalms (e.g. Ps 101:5, Ps 120:1-2), and proverbs (Pr 12:22), through to the Gospels (e.g. Mk 7:21-23), letters (Rm 1:29-31; 2 Cor 12:20, Eph 4:31, Col 3:8), and Revelation (Rv 21:8).

Gaps in preaching and teaching about truth-telling may be related in part to historic controversies about the ethics of lying within and outside the church. Augustine in the 4th century, Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century taught that lying is sinful, without exception (for discussion, see Griffiths 2004; Tollefsen 2014; Blacketer 2008). Other Christian thinkers, including Chrysostom, Cassian, and Newman, endorsed narrow exceptions to the ban on lying in order to prevent injustice or harm to innocents (see Griffiths 2004; MacIntyre 1994). Often cited in defence of lies is the apparent biblical applause of the lies by the Hebrew midwives to save newborn babies from murder by Pharaoh (Ex 1:15-22) and Rahab’s lie to protect Hebrew spies from discovery in Jericho (Jos 2:1-3, 6:17-25, Ja 2:25).

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<sup>136</sup> A Google search revealed many sermons that discuss the truth of the Bible and the gospels but only a handful on honesty and integrity.

Gaps in Christian literature on truth-telling include a lack of women's scholarship. Among the few ancient or prominent women scholars are Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), who briefly addresses truth-telling. Among Teresa's maxims are: "Never affirm anything unless you are sure it is true," and "Never exaggerate, but utter thy mind in simplicity" (St. Teresa of Avila 1963). In *The Interior Castle*, she writes "never do I wilfully say what is untrue. No; by the mercy of God, I would rather die a thousand times than tell a falsehood: I speak of the matter as I understand it. I believe that in this case the will must in some way be united with that of God" (St. Teresa of Avila, 1577 (1921)). Her understanding of holiness was based on friendship and unity with Jesus, which precluded offending God in any way including by means of lying. A handful of contemporary women scholars have discussed truth-telling briefly (e.g. Sumner 2011).

Paul J. Griffiths adopts Augustine's definition of the lie as "speech that deliberately contradicts what the speaker takes to be true" (Griffiths 2004:25-39, at 31). Christopher O. Tollefsen uses the same definition which he refers to as "assertions contrary to belief" (Tollefsen 2014:21). I adopt this definition.<sup>137</sup> Thus, lying is always deliberate. A mistake about the truth is not a lie.

In Augustine's view, God is truth, so that lying "ruptures God's image in us" (Griffiths 2004:73; see Gen 1:26-27). Thus, all lying is a wilful denial of our created essence. Lying also misappropriates speech, which God gifts to humankind for God's purposes and for adoration and confession to God (Griffiths 2004:73-84). Speech is not to be appropriated to our own use as we see fit (Griffiths 2004:85-100). Our speech, like everything else, belongs to God, not to us. Speech is to be deployed carefully in the presence of God; as Jesus said, "let your yes mean yes and your no mean no" (Mt 5:37).

According to Griffiths, Aquinas viewed lying not so much as a rupture of the divine image within humankind, but more as a sinful violation against justice. Tollefsen argues that Aquinas' proscription of lying is based on more than its likelihood to cause injustice; rather his concern is based in the lie's violation of personal integrity and sociality (Tollefsen 2014:102-28, 147). The fundamental purpose of speech acts is to communicate among persons. If one cannot count on truthful communication, social relationships – and society – are injured. Lying is also incompatible with the love of truth, the virtue of truthfulness, and

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<sup>137</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to canvass other definitions. For discussion, see Tollefsen (2014:12-30) and Griffiths (2014:73).

friendship with the God of truth. It is important to note that Aquinas, in his articulation of the doctrine of divine simplicity saw God's character of love, justice, and truth as a unified essence (*Summa Theologiae*, Part 1, Question 3). The corresponding human virtues, e.g. love, justice, and truth (and other virtues) are also interconnected in Aquinas' thinking (*Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 23 Charity, Question 58 Justice, Question 109 Truth, for discussion see Porter 1993).

While both Augustine and Aquinas banned all lies as sin, both saw some kinds of lies as more serious than others (Griffiths 2004; Tollefsen 2014). Augustine's hierarchy of lies extends from harmless lies that save someone's life or virtue, lies that help someone, and lies that create "smooth discourse," to more serious lies that harm others and help no one. Augustine states that lies told in religious teaching are the most serious of all (Augustine 1952 [395AD]).

An absolute ban on lying was dominant in the church until the 16<sup>th</sup> century at least, although there has been a less prominent thread that supports lying in narrow circumstances to protect others. Martin Luther is sometimes cited as defending "a good hearty lie for the sake of the good and for the Christian Church, a lie in case of necessity, a useful lie" (Smith 1911; Verhey 1999).<sup>138</sup>

In the context of the current American political ethos, it is important to address some relevant thinking of American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, given his great influence on American politicians since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Haas 1999; Niebuhr 1932; Niebuhr 1935/2013; Weitzman 2017). Niebuhr situates Christian ethics in "the tension of historical and the transcendent" (Niebuhr 1935/2013:9). Niebuhr denounces perfectionist approaches to ethics, pointing out that perfectionism is unrealistic in a sinful world in which:

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<sup>138</sup> While Martin Luther is reported to have defended a hearty, useful lie for the sake of the Church, the context is often ignored. Luther's complete quote is found in the context of correspondence and writings about a controversy in 1540 over whether to confirm information disclosed in confession. Luther is reported as saying "Is it not a good plan to say that the bigamy had been discussed and should not Philip say that he had indeed debated the matter, but had not yet come to a decision? All else must be kept quiet. What is it, if for the good and sake of the Christian Church, one should tell a good, strong lie?" In further correspondence, Luther advised "to give an ambiguous answer by which you could remain." (Smith 1911) In a short article for *Christianity Today* in 1999, Professor Allan Verhey cites a variation of this quotation without its context, saying, "Luther defended 'a good hearty lie for the sake of the good and for the Christian Church, a lie in case of necessity, a useful lie.' Such lies, he said, 'would not be against God'" (Verhey 1999).

“[S]elf-deception and hypocrisy is an unvarying element in the moral life of all human beings... Naturally, this defect in individuals becomes more apparent in the less moral life of nations. The dishonesty of nations is a necessity of political policy if the nation is to gain the full benefit of its double claim upon the loyalty and devotion of the individual, as his own special and unique community and as a community which embodies universal values and ideals. The two claims, the one touching the individual’s emotions and the other appealing to his mind, are incompatible with each other, and can be resolved only through dishonesty. This is particularly evident in wartime... The nation is always endowed with an aura of the sacred, which is one reason why religions, which claim universality, are so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment, religion and patriotism merging in the process... In the life of the simple citizen this hypocrisy exists as a naïve and unstudied self-deception. The politician practices it consciously (though he may become the victim of his own arts), in order to secure the highest devotion from the citizen for his enterprises. The men of culture give themselves to it with less conscious design than the statesman because their own inner necessities demand the deceptions, even more than do those of the simple citizens” (Niebuhr 1932:95).

Niebuhr grounds his ethics of “Christian realism” in the belief that “the ideal of love is real in the will and nature of God, even though he knows of no place in history where the ideal has been realized in its pure form” (Niebuhr 1935/2013:8). Pointing to the impossibility of perfection and the universal need for forgiveness, Niebuhrian ethics would mean (in the words of Haas) “fulfilling the law of love to the greatest degree possible, given the world as it is” (Haas 1999:608). According to Niebuhr, the “principles of equal justice are ... approximations of the law of love in the kind of imperfect world which we know” (Niebuhr 1935/2013:149). Niebuhr’s definition of justice is “the approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of sin” (Haas 1999:626 citing Niebuhr 1949:254). Niebuhrian thinking, according to Haas, would acknowledge that “[t]o use a famous example, a person cannot simultaneously keep his promise to the Jews in his protection and tell the truth to the Nazis” (Haas 1999:623). Thus, exercising responsibility in an immoral world may end up calling for a lie for the sake of justice as the best approximation of love in an imperfect world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who studied with Niebuhr in 1930 (Hauerwas 2013), also seems to contradict Augustine in his assertion that “the essential character of the lie is to be found at a far deeper level than in the discrepancy between thought and speech” (Bonhoeffer 1955:364). Bonhoeffer defines the lie as “primarily the denial of God as He has evidenced Himself to the world.” In this, at least, he may be closer to Augustine than is sometimes perceived (Hauerwas 2013). Bonhoeffer also states: “Every word I utter is subject to the requirement that it shall be true” (Bonhoeffer 1955:365). However, he points out that truth-telling, like other ethics, cannot be detached from the larger reality of relationship with God or the particular relationship. Human beings cannot, with reference to themselves alone, decide what is “true” in the context of all relationships and realities. Truthfulness does not “mean the disclosure of everything that exists” or of every opinion or thought (Bonhoeffer 1955:371-72). Speech must be justified and occasioned by the responsibilities of the relationship or office in which it may occur.

Of importance to the topic of reconciliation is Bonhoeffer’s overall theme in his *Ethics*, which centres on God’s overriding purpose of reconciliation (Bonhoeffer 1955:26). Bonhoeffer shares with Augustine and Aquinas a commitment to truth at all times, based on the central premise that humankind – persons, created in the image of God – originate in God but have misattributed and misappropriated their origin to themselves (Bonhoeffer 1955:18). However, Bonhoeffer’s approach to the ethics of truth-telling is not entirely based on an exceptionless “rule” but rather on discernment of the truths to be disclosed within a particular relationship on a particular occasion, centred on relationship with God and God’s overriding purpose of reconciliation of “all things.” Bonhoeffer is famous for his deceitful involvement in the resistance to the Nazi regime in Germany, so it is important to understand how he characterized his actions. Bonhoeffer was committed to a life of responsibility in a broken world where particular situations might call for action that risks bringing guilt on oneself for the sake of responsible action. Bonhoeffer states:

“When a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, and no responsible man can avoid this, he imputes this guilt to himself and to no one else. He answers for it; he accepts responsibility for it. He does not do this in the insolent presumptuousness of his own power, but he does it in the knowledge that this liberty is forced upon him and that in this liberty he is dependent on grace. Before other men

the man of free responsibility is justified by necessity; before himself is he acquitted by his conscience; but before God he hopes only for mercy” (Bonhoeffer 1955:360).

Thus, in Bonhoeffer’s thinking lying always incurs guilt, but some situations in a broken world force responsible action to address evil. In such situations, we rely on God’s grace.

It is always an assumption that a wilful lie will, in fact, prevent harm or work for good. Human beings are not omniscient and cannot accurately predict immediate or longer-term consequences of speech acts. It is illogical to imagine that a lie (and only a lie) will successfully stop proverbial murderers at the door from harming their intended victims. It is also important to consider the impact of lying on the liar’s integrity, including the possibility that a liar will become inured and practiced in lying to achieve other just ends, resulting in damage to social relationships and to societal trust. Lying also deprives those who believe the lie of the ability to make fully informed choices. Lying is a method of trying to take the future into one’s own hands.

There may be other means to achieve good ends or to prevent harms. No Christian commentator suggests that everyone is owed all of the truth all of the time. Some persons are forbidden to pass on information by virtue of their moral or legal duties of confidentiality or privilege. There is no duty to pass along harmful gossip even if one believes it is true – in fact, scripture abundantly forbids gossip and other careless speech (see, e.g. Pr 11:9; Pr 26:20; Mt 12:36; Lk 6:45; Eph 4:29; Ja 1:26; Ja 3:5-11; Tt 3:2). Christian teaching is clear that one is not to associate oneself with wrongdoing or cooperate with evil by means of speech or other actions (e.g. Ex 23:2; Eph 6:10-18). However, resisting evil may not necessitate lying. There is a significant literature on the casuistry of applying the ban on lying in particular situations (Tollefsen 2014:147-97). It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully canvass such approaches, which include creative use of silence and non-verbal misdirection to save someone from the murderer at the door, or camouflaging the truth in self-defence (Griffiths 2004:179), as Abraham did when he said his wife Sarah was his “sister” (which, strictly speaking, was true) (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Section Part, Question 110). Finally, it is important to say that untruths that are not formally “lies” (assertions contrary to belief) are not necessarily free of wrongdoing. While I have come to the position of Augustine, Aquinas, Bonhoeffer and others that all lies incur guilt for the liar, it is important to state that other

forms of deliberate deception that fall short of outright lies are not necessarily right and must not be undertaken unconscientiously by anyone, particularly to serve one's own individual, social or political interests.

Christian thinkers disagree on the ethics of lying, but they all affirm the virtue of truthfulness and constrict the reasons and range of allowable lies. People differ about where the downward slippery slope begins. Even if one believes falsehoods can be justified “for the sake of the church,” there is significant risk of widening the scope too much when our decisions to speak or act fail to discern or seek overall, longer-term purposes of reconciliation.

We do know what can happen to those who slither too far down the slope. Recent decades have seen several well-known North American Christian leaders jailed for fraud after they have misused audience donations (Applebome 1989; Ohlheiser 2015) or lied about their sexual misconduct or crimes even in the face of overwhelming evidence (Friscolanti 2009). Many outside the church mock Christian leaders – and their followers – for justifying or overlooking partisan political lies in aid of a “higher purpose” (Balmer 2018 ). Non-church people often express contempt for American church people who have supported politicians' obvious lies and other blatant wrongdoing in return for promises to appoint judges (Iszler 2017) and make laws and regulations aimed at furthering particular social, economic, or political goals (Jones 2017).

Christians in North America have become profoundly polarized based on an intertwined combination of political and religious ideology (Miller 2016). Flashpoint controversies surround issues of abortion, rights of LGBTI persons,<sup>139</sup> and immigration. While these three issues have often been conflated in polarized media reporting, it is important to note that Christians hold diverse opinions on each of these issues. Those who support pro-life positions argue that the unborn share with all human beings the image and likeness of God; accordingly, they have inherent dignity and should not be rendered legally expendable.<sup>140</sup> Many Christians hold pro-life positions privately but support pro-choice laws and politics because they oppose the imposition of their values on

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<sup>139</sup> LGBTI is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex persons. LGBTI is the international acronym currently in use by United Nations bodies and experts.

<sup>140</sup> It is important to note that evangelicals in the US opposed restrictions on abortion until the 1970s on the grounds of compassion regarding the devastating consequences on the lives and well-being of some pregnant women. Others considered that the church should not rely on the state to enforce its moral standards (Balmer 2016).

those who hold differing religious (or non-religious) views that emphasize women's freedom and equality. Many Christians support pro-life positions on abortion but are in favour of welcoming refugees and immigrants without discrimination. The issue of LGBTI rights is also fraught with contention among Christians who base their views on differing traditions, interpretations, or emphases of the Bible.

Some Christians promote politicians who promise to help Christianize the nation by regulating against abortion, same-sex relationships or immigration from countries where people are predominantly non-Christian, non-Protestant, or non-white (Balmer 2018; Jones 2017). Those who support the creation of a "Christian nation" have been accused of heresy by those who promote allegiance to God alone with clear separations between church doctrines and state regulation (Stevens 2017; Wallis 2018). Some Christians place their emphasis on Jesus' social justice teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, advocating government laws and policies to support poor people and promote economic, social and cultural equality. Those promoting social justice themes in the Bible may point out Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement:

"The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.... It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority" (King 1963/1998).

Church people who support government measures toward economic, gender, or racial equality may be accused of socialism by Christians who believe the Bible supports individualist libertarian and capitalist approaches. Government documents show that during the 1960s Martin Luther King Jr. was branded a communist despite having denounced communism, although he also rejected *laissez faire* economic capitalism (King 1963; Johnson 2018).

Those on all sides of these complex issues may hold sincere views, but public discourse has tended to be marked by discourteous or even hateful accusations that misrepresent their opponents' positions. Compounding this challenge is the fragmentation of media. No longer is mainstream news the only alternative. Numerous alternative news sites, blogs, and social media pages focus attention on issues important to those holding particular religious points of view. There are hundreds of Christian magazines, denominational newspapers and Christian

organizations' newsletters.<sup>141</sup> Those writing for most media outlets may express their views truthfully, but some prominent Christians have accused their Christian opponents of lying to accomplish their political goals (Brigham 2018). It is a challenge to discern what information is carefully researched and what is baseless opinion. Media labelled as "Christian," may be no more trustworthy than any other purveyor of information in today's media marketplace. North American church people face the same risks as those outside the church of sliding into lies that distort relationships, subvert social trust, deny God's image, and allow them to fall into the hands of the power-hungry. Isaiah 59:14-15 connects the faltering of public truth-telling with societal injustice:

So justice is driven back,  
and righteousness stands at a distance;  
truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter.  
Truth is nowhere to be found,  
and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.

People's commitment to truth and the Christian "witness to truth are undermined by lying" (Tollefsen 2014:195). If church people are to be considered trustworthy there is a need for much deeper and wider engagement in concerted discussion and teaching about Christian ethics of truth-telling and the social consequences of tolerating or being associated with public lies and liars.

#### **4.2 Propaganda: religion and culture**

It is not enough to avoid being involved in, supporting, or tolerating lies. Church people are warned to avoid being deceived. Jesus warned his disciples: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees", by which he meant false teachings (Mt 16:6, Mt 16:12) and hypocrisy (Lk 12:1). Jesus also cautioned his disciples in a paired warning: "... beware the yeast of the Pharisees [meaning religious leaders] and the yeast of Herod [meaning the political establishment]" (Mk 8:15). One American commentator points out that many North American church leaders believe that "the salvation" of the US depends on the ability of religious adherents to "rope a raging bull of political power and get him into our corral," thence getting their "man in office" (Erwin,

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<sup>141</sup> See, for example, the 206 members listed as publication members of the US-based Evangelical Press Association, <https://www.evangelicalpress.com/member-list/>. For a list of Protestant Magazines, see World-Newspapers.com, [www.world-newspapers.com/protestant-magazines.html](http://www.world-newspapers.com/protestant-magazines.html). See a list of Catholic magazines published by Catholicity, [www.catholicity.com/links/10/](http://www.catholicity.com/links/10/).

n.d.). The attempt of Christian religious groups to harness political power demonstrates a perverse understanding of the kind of power that, according to the biblical record, accomplishes God's purposes.

In a contrasting image, the Bible likens the reign of God to yeast that an ordinary woman kneads through a large quantity of dough until it is all leavened (Mt 13:32-33). Thus, the Bible teaches that people of God are to be thoroughly permeated with the yeast of the Spirit of God. The prophet Jeremiah explains, saying it is "not by power, not by might, but by my Spirit, says the Lord" (Zch 4:6). According to the Bible, the power Christians are to seek is the Holy Spirit enabling them to "knead the dough" toward spreading the leaven of God's reconciling purpose (Lk 13:31-32). Christians are to copy Jesus, not in seeking political power but in resisting cooption by perverse or evil powers. Like Jesus, Christians are to "tell that fox [the ruler, Herod] that I [we] will keep on casting out demons and healing people today and tomorrow; and the third day I will accomplish my purpose" (Lk 13:32).

Historically, church people have frequently become mesmerized by political power and engulfed by propaganda. Jacques Ellul points out the difficulty of resisting social and political propaganda that manipulates powerful metaphors and cultural icons and myths.<sup>142</sup> Each society has deep narratives about the proper social order, who is in charge, who is privileged, and who serves whom. Plato taught that "noble lies" (*gennaion pseudos*) should be instilled in the population through education so as to promote social order and loyalty to the State (Cornford 1945:Chapter X). Plato's famous "myth of the metals" taught that people are created with different metals inherently incorporated into their being: Rulers (which Plato refers to as "Guardians") are gold, auxiliary helpers

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<sup>142</sup> Jacques Ellul points out that to be effective, propaganda "attach[es] itself to what already exists in the individual, but also ... the fundamental currents of the society it seeks to influence. Propaganda must be familiar with the collective sociological presuppositions, spontaneous myths, and broad ideologies." (Ellul 1965:38-39). The full quote is: "Propaganda must not only attach itself to what already exists in the individual, but also express the fundamental currents of the society it seeks to influence. Propaganda must be familiar with the collective sociological presuppositions, spontaneous myths, and broad ideologies. By this we do not mean political currents or temporary opinions that will change in a few months, but the fundamental psychosociological bases on which a whole society rests, the presuppositions and myths of not just individuals or of particular groups but those shared by all individuals in a society, including men of opposite political inclinations and class loyalties."

are silver, and farmers and craftspeople are iron or brass. Each class has a function. The myth, which fitted the hierarchical worldview of the ancient Greeks, was intended to train people to acquiesce voluntarily to the State's expectation of them. Historical myths of many societies perpetuate discriminatory social ordering.

Classical liberal theory is supposed to foster equality by restraining executive power with an independent legislature and judiciary. This European idea is one of the guiding myths that ground North American constitutional ideals and frameworks. However, the promises of social equality through the rule of law are often foreclosed by legalized structural power imbalances that favour elites and work against those who have been marginalized or historically colonized. Social inequality has been fostered by the myth of European superiority that infused the colonizing spirit of past centuries, including the "civilizing mission" of states and churches. While this myth has been much assailed since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the legacy of European supremacy remains alive in North America today. In some quarters in North America, people of European descent who claim Christian identity seem unmoved by the explicit rejection of discrimination and abuse of power by Jesus and the apostles (see, e.g. Gl 3:28, Gl 5:14, Mt 7:12, Rm 2:11, Jn 13:12-20).

Canadian and US governments have not yet acknowledged or grasped the full truth about the history and consequences of centuries of extensive unlawful seizure of Indigenous peoples' lands and forcible relocation of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples' lands and resources have been seen as fair game for European enterprise and settlement (Anaya 2004). Historians are uncovering more and more evidence of genocide of Indigenous peoples in North America (MacDonald and Hudson 2012). In Canada, there has been official recognition that European settlement was accomplished by means of land-grabbing aided by cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples (TRC Canada 2015a). During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Canadian governments forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and cultural communities and placed them in Indian Residential Schools where they were forbidden to speak their own languages and were subjected to neglect and other abuses. Many were subjected to sexual abuse and other forms of torture (MacDonald and Hudson 2012). Thousands of children died, and many disappeared. Some are buried in unmarked graves (TRC Canada 2015a). Several denominations of Christian churches were directly involved in running the schools with government funding (TRC Canada

2015b). The legacy of systemic racism and oppression against Indigenous peoples continues today (TRC Canada 2015a, 2015b).

Religious traditions and Bible proof-texts have been used to uphold these forms of subjugation (Swartley 1983). American Catholic scholar, Scott Appleby, puts it this way: “Religion is apt to ‘hide’ in culture, be appropriated by politicians, or blend into society in ways that make it hard to identify as an independent variable” (Appleby 2000:47). Religion and culture are inseparably intertwined. Christians who are not firmly grounded in the ethical teachings of scriptures have little defence against cultural myths or political and social propaganda and may become coopted and aligned with social movements or political leadership that bear no resemblance to the moral character of Jesus.

Europeans were also involved in abduction and slavery of Indigenous peoples from Africa who were forcibly taken to colonies in the Americas. Race-based slavery was not seriously challenged in the Western world until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Ideas of white superiority were grounded in baseless 19<sup>th</sup> century notions that harnessed fantasized, Eurocentric interpretations of certain biblical stories (Eltringham 2006).

Western expressions of Christianity played a significant part in the emergence of Cambodia's 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts. François Ponchaud, a French priest and historian of Cambodia, argues that from the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church presence in Cambodia in the sixteenth century, the Church was coopted and manipulated over and over again by European rulers seeking economic opportunities and by Cambodian rulers seeking European protection against aggressive neighbours (Ponchaud 1990). The French protectorate in Cambodia (1863 to 1954) was brokered with assistance from Catholic clergy. Church involvements have historically resulted in political entanglements in a succession of Cambodia's political conflicts that led to local resistance to colonization, communist anti-colonial struggles, and the Pol Pot regime. After the fall of the Pol Pot regime, Christian humanitarian organizations who received state funding from their home countries were viewed as directly or indirectly serving their home states' strategic interests (Cormack 1997:437).

In Rwanda, the Church's historical political entanglements, justified by the colonial “civilizing mission”, are implicated in the 1994 genocide. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian missionaries took with them Eurocentric and racist theories that included the notion that Tutsi people were superior to Hutu people. The resulting divisions fomented among Tutsi and Hutu eventually led to purges,

culminating in the Hutu Power government's highly organized, genocidal killing of between 500,000 and a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus over 100 days. Relentless propaganda over state-owned radio convinced the population that the Tutsi "cockroaches" must be exterminated on the grounds that they were all allied with the invading Rwanda Patriotic Front (Des Forges 1999; Prunier 1997). Land grabbing from Tutsis was among the true motives (Des Forges 1999:12-14). The Hutu Power government purchased huge numbers of machetes, small arms, and grenades and recruited tens of thousands of young people to conduct the massacres (Goose and Smyth 1994; Melvern 2004). The massive atrocities have been called a "Christian" genocide, because 90 percent of Rwandans are church-attending Christians (Longman 2010:3-30). Churches were deeply implicated, often through their silence (Longman 2010; Hatzfeld 2006; Prunier 1997). While many clergy died trying to protect their congregations (Rutayisire 1998, 2007), other clergy became overwhelmed by propaganda and failed to condemn the killings (Longman 2010). Some church-leaders even lured their Tutsi parishioners into massacres, claiming that their choice to sacrifice the lives of Tutsi members of their congregations was justified so as to save the lives of others (Longman 2010:6).

Here is what two of the killers told reporter Jean Hatzfeld. One *génocidaire*, Jean Baptiste, said: "Deep down we knew that Christ was not on our side in this situation, but since He was not saying anything through the priests' mouths, that suited us" (Hatzfeld 2006:145). Another mass murderer, Élie, said:

All the important people turned their backs on our killings. The blue helmets [UN], the Belgians,... the humanitarian people and the international cameramen, the priests and the bishops, and finally even God. Did He [God] watch what was happening...? Why did He not stab our murderous eyes with His wrath? Or show some small sign of disapproval...? In those horrible moments, who could hear His silence? We were abandoned by all words of rebuke (Hatzfeld 2006:137).

Twenty-five years after the genocide, there remains significant dissension about the truth of what happened before, during, and after the genocide, as the current government constructs and enforces its official narratives of the genocide and suppresses dissenting views about post-genocide atrocities and contemporary human rights abuses. For a recent nuanced examination of efforts at

transitional justice and reconciliation processes and human rights during the post-genocidal period, see Longman (2017).

While Rwanda is an extreme example, the church can learn from this history. Extremes do not start out that way; they start out with ideas, sparked by propaganda into brushfires that escalate to consume everything in their paths if they are not stopped. Clergy and lay church leaders, being closely connected to congregations, have the possibility and responsibility of early warning and pastoral rebuke of wrongdoing that has been justified by government lies and propaganda. God is said to speak through believers who have been paying attention. If Christians perceive God calling “where are you?” at times of crisis and overwhelming propaganda, one hopes they will not remain silent for the sake of “political neutrality,” or deny responsibility by saying “we are hiding in culture,” putting the blame on ideological or political opponents, the education system, the media, or the clergy. When Christians perceive God asking: “where is your neighbour?” one hopes that they will not retort with the denial: “Am I my neighbour’s keeper?”

#### ***4.3 Postmodernism: The rumoured “death of truth”***

A third challenge to the churches is Western postmodernism, which is said to be putting the truth to death. Since the 2016 US election, scholars and commentators have pointed out that “the core concept of truth has become deeply politicized” as President Donald J. Trump’s supporters, which include the majority of evangelical Christian voters, have tolerated thousands of easily confirmed untruths promulgated by Mr. Trump during his presidential campaign and his presidency (Edsall 2018; Politifact 2019). Even after facts are publicly corrected, the President has been recorded repeating lies over and over, fanned by political “surrogates” (Goodstein 2018). The President’s supporters passionately and persistently believe the lies or deny that they matter (Balmer 2018). This phenomenon has led some to call him the first postmodernist president in that he and his supporters undermine objective reality by manufacturing social truths through the exercise of propagandic power (Heer 2017).

Questions about the meaning of truth are nothing new. During the trial of Jesus, Pontius Pilate questioned Jesus about the charge that he had claimed to be a king. Jesus answered by saying, “My kingdom is not of this world. ... You say I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify

to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18: 28-40). Pilate’s famous retort, “what is truth?”, has become a preoccupation of postmodernist thinkers.

Postmodernism defies any simple or convenient definition. The only common thread of postmodernism is the rejection of the modernist “metanarrative” – the elevation of objective, rational epistemology above all other ways of knowing (Olson 2010; Grenz 1996). Postmodernism is often overgeneralized as the idea that all individuals have equal claim to their own truth. “Truth” becomes “truth claims,” and all sincere truth claims are said to be equally valid. Thus, postmodernism is often incorrectly assumed to be synonymous with cultural or moral relativism.

Christians have traditionally believed – as an absolute truth – that everyone on the side of truth listens to Jesus who in turn insists that people pay attention to “the law and the prophets” (Mt 5:17). (It is acknowledged that unconvinced rationalists cannot be persuaded by this argument, which is not based on rationalist epistemological foundations, but on faith. Neither can this argument persuade “anti-foundationalists” – those who point out the lack of universal human consensus on truth.) Without a firm grasp on truths revealed by the biblical authors, church people may easily fall into the so-called “post-modernist black hole” (Cohen 1995:12) of post-factual relativism. This is particularly so if there is a lack of focussed moral teaching on truth-telling, a slippage of commitment to honesty, a lack of understanding of how propaganda works, an unwillingness to challenge overt dishonesty of political leaders, and a poor grasp of reconciliation themes of the Bible.

It is important to acknowledge some themes of postmodernism that Christians might welcome while being mindful of darker pitfalls. First, the postmodern “turn,” brings welcome relief from the hegemony of Western enlightenment liberal, rationalist, individualistic, humanist, materialist discourse. In today’s North American cultural climate, Christian apologists are not compelling when they use rationalist arguments to try to demonstrate that the Christian faith is based on objectively verifiable facts of history (e.g., Francis Schaeffer 1968). Today, there are fewer barriers to recognition of other ways of knowing, including revelation of sacred texts, traditions, symbols, mystical experiences, and spiritual practices. Christians can welcome the demise of the “grand narra-

tive” of Western rationalist enlightenment. The dark side is the lack of agreement on what ideologies and spiritual practices have value, as well as the risk of “anything goes” relativism.

Another welcome postmodernist idea is that minority and marginalised views, including religious views, are no longer to be silenced in favour of perspectives of powerful political, economic, or religious elites.<sup>143</sup> The dark side is that it is difficult to resist voices that oppose oppressed groups and peoples. Ironically, norms of “freedom of speech” are being invoked by claiming an unfettered right to public space to spread discriminatory slander against historically oppressed groups and peoples (Human Rights Council 2013).

It is inaccurate to say that postmodernism denies the existence of verifiable truth. Postmodernists do not suggest, for example, that people should not use road maps or determine facts in courts of law (Dennett 1998).<sup>144</sup> Yet, it is important to acknowledge that even these kinds of every-day truths are socially constructed or discerned through processes of dialogue, debate, and the sifting of evidence. As Christian scholar Stanley Grenz states, “no observer can stand outside the historical process... On the contrary, we are participants in our historical and cultural context, and all our intellectual endeavors are unavoidably conditioned by that participation” (Grenz 1996:166). Where particular conflicts are concerned, Mark Amstutz points out that

historical truth is not coherent and unitary but contested. It may be possible to develop a high level of agreement about the empirical, objective facts about the past, but developing an authoritative interpretation of past political conflict is likely to be elusive, since perceptions and views will depend on the worldviews of participants (Amstutz 2005).

Postmodernist thinkers acknowledge that people’s unique situations make their knowledge subjective. No one knows all or sees from a God’s-eye view. The scriptures confirm that we “see through a glass darkly.” Despite a common faith

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<sup>143</sup> Postmodernist ideas provide a way in which people of faith can insist that their minority moral and spiritual perspectives be respectfully taken into account, including universalist and absolutist perspectives, e.g., those who subscribe to the scriptures common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

in the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christian biblical traditions are not legitimately divorced from the talk and actions of communities of believers localized in time and place. Christians in North America are diverse, and their perspectives – including perspectives of women, African Americans, and Indigenous Christians – are now being asserted and must be heard (see e.g. Woodley 2012). Western rational thought dominated by men of European background can no longer trump. This reality necessitates respectful humility in everything we assert as “truth.”

Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to listen more than talk, particularly paying attention to the voices of those who have rejected Christianity because of oppressive and deceitful behaviour by Christians past and present. Assertions of Western superiority have no weight except to drag down the reputation of Jesus.

Not all views are morally equivalent. Now in the US and Canada political centrists are being challenged by the so called “alt-right,” or “white nationalism,” insidious euphemisms for a range of anti-socialist, anti-liberal, anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic, anti-Black, and anti-immigrant groups espousing notions of white supremacy wrapped in a pastiche of imagery of the 19<sup>th</sup> century pro-slavery movement of the American South, various crosses of the Ku Klux Klan, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Jim Crow era of discrimination, and even the Nazi flag (Politico 2017). While Canada seems less prone to white supremacist extremes, there have been significant increases in crimes motivated by hatred of particular religions or ethnicities. Anti-Semitic crimes accounted for 18 percent of all hate crimes, and 17 percent were anti-Islamic hate crimes (Statistics Canada 2019). Systemic discrimination against Indigenous peoples continues in the US and Canada.

On the “left” there is a similar diversity – ranging from centrist neo-liberal capitalists to moderate social democrats, to smaller groups of Marxian anti-capitalists, pacifist anarchists and “antifascists,” some of whom are proponents of nonviolent dissent. Others countenance the use of weapons.

The confusing assortment of actors includes Christian leaders who align themselves in politically partisan ways, stand neutral between “both sides,” or remain completely silent. Other church leaders try to remain non-partisan while condemning discrimination and bigotry and calling for prayer (Green 2017).

Archbishop Desmond Tutu takes a dim view of neutrality, saying “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor” (as quoted in Brown, 1984:19). Ascribing moral equivalence to every truth claim

makes a mockery of justice, truth, and mercy when dominant groups fearfully claim they are “the real victims” as their previously undisputed power and privilege is questioned by those who have historically enjoyed less clout (Blake 2011). Claims of racist victimization by white people contradict historical truths and thwart possibilities for forgiveness and reconciliation now and in the future.

Pilate’s “what is truth?” was a sarcastic rebuttal to Jesus’ claim that everyone on the side of truth listens to him. Christians can hardly escape similar criticism for asserting absolute truth, since this claim does not enjoy public consensus anywhere. It would be foolish to deny the fact of multiple truth claims. However, we do need to avoid ascribing positive moral value to just any ideology. It is right to be concerned that a cacophony of truth claims might easily devolve into hyper-individualized, radical forms of factual and moral relativism by which people justify what seems “right in their own eyes” (evoking Judges 17). Those of us who believe the absolute truth of Jesus’ claims can ameliorate the seeming arrogance of this truth claim by ensuring that we reject what Jesus rejects – including discrimination, lies, hatred, oppression, and violence. Such attitudes and behaviours are not morally equivalent to the positive ethics Jesus teaches, such as impartiality, justice, careful truth-telling, loving-kindness, and peacefulness.

## **5 Concluding Thoughts on the Path towards Reconciliation: Confession, Lament and Doxology**

How do we as Christians escape entrapment in hyper-individualistic moral relativism and move towards reconciling relationships – both individual and political? What kinds of truth-telling are integral to genuine reconciliation that integrates compassion, justice, and peace?

### **5.1 Commitment to truth-telling**

First, individual Christians need to commit themselves to discerning and telling the truth according to the norms and principles established by scripture. Augustine’s views based in the nature of the Holy Trinity, and the nature of speech as a gift of God to be returned to God in confession and adoration are, I suggest, the aspirational benchmarks, keeping in mind warnings that we see our imperfect world “through a glass darkly.” Second, Christians can aspire to humble and caring respect of our neighbours as we affirm what we believe to be factual,

moral, or religious truth. Third, it is important to develop moral courage to respectfully challenge falsehoods and to curtail any slothful failure to interrogate false claims made by religious or political leaders. Church leaders must be challenged when they demonstrate entrapment in social or state propaganda based on national or cultural myths that have little or no basis in Christian scriptures. These commitments necessitate immersion in the teachings of the Bible, interpreted in ways that are consistent with Jesus' ministry of reconciliation and which emphasize virtues and practices of justice, truthfulness, compassion, and peacefulness.

### ***5.2 What do we do when we hear blood crying out from the ground?***

Truthful confession and repentance of wrongdoing are integral to justice, forgiveness, and peace. How can those wishing to deepen engagement in the ministry of reconciliation assist the church in transformation away from denial of societal injustices that are impeding genuine peace?

Blood and bones crying out from the earth are often more than a metaphor (Lederach and Lederach 2010). All over the world there are violently displaced peoples and the unidentified remains of those unlawfully deprived of their lives and identities. Many have been "disappeared." Such atrocities often implicate state officials and elite members of society, including church people.

Europe's, Cambodia's, and Rwanda's mass or unmarked graves, the unmarked graves of slaves in the US (Jones 2018), and Canada's unmarked Indigenous children's graves have not yet yielded the identities of all the victims. Their surviving loved ones and descendants suffer the torment of not knowing the truth about what happened to their loved ones. People in countries where massive atrocities have been perpetrated have a basic need and the right (Naqvi 2006) to know what happened – beyond the rumours, speculations, denials, and lies that circulate and become solidified. Survivors and their descendants struggle to have their stories heard and believed. Future generations need to know the truth if for no other reason than to avoid the resurgence and spread of new lies or justifications for atrocities.

Truth matters – and it is strongly intertwined with demands for justice (Govier 2006). Methods of revealing truth include apologies (Barkan 2006; Govier and Verwoerd 2002; Regan 2007; Tavuchis 1991), reports by journalists, academics, or human rights organizations, trials (Minow 1998:58-59), or truth commissions (Hayner 2001). These methods may produce only partial truths, yet

they serve to “narrow the range of permissible lies” that can circulate unchallenged (Ignatieff 1996).

The church can claim additional resources. People of faith are not required to accept the arguments of postmodernist intellectuals or the “cultural alibis” that cover the powerful as “they go on doing what they have always done” abusing their populations and suppressing dissent (Cohen 2001:286, quoting Wole Soyinka). Christians are subject neither to Western enlightenment thinking nor to postmodernist intellectual worries that there are no truths but only truth claims that dissolve into the bottomless void of anti-foundationalism. Christians are entitled to believe and to embrace evidence-based truths and moral values that cohere with historic understandings of scripture, faith, and practice. The core of traditional moral practice of Christians is the teaching that to love God entails loving our neighbour. Jesus defines the neighbour as the one who reaches out to care beyond the comfortably narrow confines of family, friends, and one’s own territorial, cultural, or gender-based boundaries.

Christians are not confined to helping that one neighbour. Christians have resources to address broader social issues that overwhelm our efforts to alleviate the suffering of individuals. Christians can align themselves with those advocating social justice and humanitarian concern. Christians can turn to the example of Jesus and the ancient Hebrew prophets who model ways to confront those in power with disagreeable truths of social injustice, including dishonest or oppressive business enterprises, self-seeking elites and rulers, and corrupt justice systems, all of which fail the poor and vulnerable in society.

Such prophets are often associated with harsh, doom-saying criticism. How do we reconcile social critique with Jesus’ admonition, “do not judge lest you be judged”? First, it is important to recognize that this admonition against judging refers to condemnation rather than to discernment. Second, as Walter Brueggemann suggests, the task of prophetic ministry is not merely to criticize but to energize people of faith towards an alternative vision for the community. Energization of the community includes piercing our “numbness” about injustice to the point that we can deeply grieve and lament oppression and injustice and embrace the God who exercises sovereign freedom towards love and justice (Brueggeman 1978). Soong-Chan Rah’s reflections on the book of Lamentations propose that the church integrate practices of grief and lamentation of injustice and oppression in solidarity with the poor and oppressed within our societies (Rah 2015).

This necessarily entails turning away from celebrating citizens' service to nationalist and civilizational causes, identities, and myths. It entails a dedicated focus on the teaching that followers of Jesus have a new identity based on the victory of Jesus over "the father of lies" who can never prevail over the God of life and truth. This God raised Jesus from the dead and invites people to join him in the ministry of reconciliation. The Christian's true identity is that of daughters and sons of the God of reconciliation. When this truth deeply penetrates our being we receive energy to receive and offer of forgiveness, speak truth, do justice, and move towards the peace of Jesus.

The goal of telling the truth of injustice is not to elicit cheap remorse but rather lamentation that transforms and energizes us to move towards compassion and towards responsibility to participate in dismantling injustices at the root of suffering and societal dysfunction. The Psalmist implies that when the goal of our journeying is *shalom*, we will long for and seek places where compassion and justice embrace. Truth will spring out of the ground to replace denials about the blood, bones, and tears of fallen sisters, brothers, and neighbours. And justice and peace will embrace in God's sovereignty of love.

Finally, we must resist the temptation to imagine that the movement towards reconciliation means merely working harder. Paul Griffiths warns that "[b]ootstrapping ourselves out of sin is impossible" (Griffiths 2004:64). Instead, with Augustine, Griffiths suggests that the remedy for sin is adoration of God through Jesus who "came humbly, although he was most high...[and has] every right to say 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'" (Griffiths 2004:64). As Walter Brueggemann puts it, doxology (or praise) "sets us before the reality of God," and God's faithfulness "vetoes our faithlessness" (Brueggeman 1978).

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