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**James J. Bacik**

The April 3, 2017 issue of *Time* Magazine featured a cover with the question “Is Truth Dead?” and an article examining false statements made by Donald Trump as a candidate and as president. The cover question, reminiscent of the April 1966 “Is God Dead?” issue of *Time*, is significant because it captures the concern of many Americans about Trump’s unusual relationship to the truth. The *Time* article points out that 70% of Trump’s campaign statements reviewed by PolitoFact were judged false. Exit polls showed that nearly two-thirds of voters judged Trump untrustworthy, including around one-third who voted for him. The article noted some of his demonstrably false statements: Obama was not born in the United States; thousands of people in New Jersey celebrated the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers; three to five million people voted illegally for Hillary Clinton, meaning he won the popular vote; his inaugural crowd was larger than Obama’s; Obama asked the British intelligence to surveil his campaign; and his rejected and not retracted claim that Obama wiretapped his phone, which has generated so much controversy.

By way of analysis, *Time* suggests that Trump, who as a business man favored use of “truthful hyperbole” and strategic falsehood, actually believes some of his falsehoods, while others “give every sign of being deliberate and thought through.” For the television star, reality is “something to be invented episode by episode.”

Responding to Trump’s rejected wiretapping claim, a Wall Street Journal editorial, “A President’s Credibility,” declared that he clings to his false assertions “like a drunk with an empty gin bottle, rolling out his press spokesmen to make dubious claims.” He is damaging his presidency “with his seemingly endless stream of exaggerations, evidence-free accusations, implausible denials and other falsehoods.” The editorial warns that if Trump does not “show more respect for the truth, most Americans may conclude he is a fake President.” This scathing criticism of the President is especially significant because it appeared in a newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch, who is reportedly in frequent conversation with the President.

The *Los Angeles Times*, consistently critical of Trump as a candidate and president, ran a series of six editorials accusing the President of being dishonest and telling lies. He has “an apparent disregard for fact so profound that he may not see much real distinction between lies, if he believes they serve him, and truth.” His tendency to accept weird conspiracy theories suggests “he is as much the gullible tool of liars as he is the liar in chief.” As “a stranger to the concept of verification,” he is “undermining the role of truth in public discourse and policy making, as well as the notion of truth being verifiable and mutually intelligible.”

This widespread criticism of President Trump’s veracity is not shared by most of his loyal supporters. After FBI director James Comey refuted the President’s wiretap claim, the *Toronto Star* newspaper interviewed 20 Trump supporters in Newark, Ohio and nearby Zanesville. Only one person was critical of Trump’s false claims. The other nineteen offered a variety of defenses: Obama definitely could have done that; I don’t trust Comey because he let Hillary off the hook; Trump probably lied but he did it to shake up the establishment, which is a good thing; the President believes in his heart that they were trying to tape him; there probably was some sort of wiretapping going on but not by Obama; the media is against Trump and I wouldn’t put anything past Obama and the Clintons; Trump does embellish some things but so did Teddy Roosevelt; he is a forthright man and his wiretap claim was a joke well designed to rattle Obama.

At its best, Christianity fosters respect and love for the truth. For Christians, God is Absolute Truth, the Source of all truth and the Goal of all truth seeking. Jesus Christ is “the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). He is the supreme and definitive manifestation of divine truth. His teachings instruct us in the ways of truthful living. As promised, Christ sent the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth to help his followers understand and practice all that he had taught them. Empowered by the Spirit, the Church has the task of guarding and proclaiming Gospel truth. Prayer, both liturgical and private, is a form of truth telling, reminding ourselves of our complete dependence on our loving Father. Truthfulness is a virtue which inclines us to be honest with ourselves and with others. The traditional spiritual practice of examination of conscience can alert us to distortions in our inner dialogue, to destructive rationalizations, to falsehoods, both blatant and subtle, and to half-truths that diminish our capacity for authentic living. Reflective self-honesty sets the stage for authentic personal relationships, characterized by mutual respect and truthful communication guided by charity. Interpersonal dialogue which retains a dimension of mystery, provides an opportunity to achieve a truth greater than either partner had before. Our private conversations can both invoke and manifest the presence of the spirit of Truth. In the public arena, truthtelling is a moral obligation since respect for truth is absolutely essential to a well ordered society and to a shared effort to serve the common good. In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells Jews who believe in him: “If you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (8:31-32). Christ’s truth sets us free: free to become our authentic self; free to form honest relationships; free to challenge falsehoods in the public forum.

The current distressing talk about living in a post-truth society of alternative facts, freshens my memory of a conversation I had in Prague back in April of 1990 with Fr. Vaclav Maly, a significant leader in the Velvet Revolution that toppled the Communist regime and elected playwright Vaclav Havel as president of the Czech Republic in June of 1990. Ordained in 1976, Maly signed Charter 77, demanding the government show greater respect for human rights. His courageous stand cost him dearly: he lost his priest’s license; was imprisoned for seven months; forced to work in a factory; interrogated more than 250 times and, on at least one occasion, brutally tortured. Nevertheless, he persevered in opposing the Communist government, helping to establish the Civic Forum, which organized massive rallies that brought down the repressive dictatorship without any bloodshed.

In a lengthy conversation with Fr. Maly in his tiny apartment, he told me that under torture he experienced a terrifying sense of aloneness that taught him to rely completely on God. With this faith perspective in mind, he adopted the practice of spending one hour each morning in prayer and meditation with special emphasis on listening to God. This enabled him to deepen his dependence on God and to forgive his persecutors. With great passion, he spoke about “fighting for the truth.” The government did not ask him to renounce his faith, but only to mute his criticism a little bit. Under that pressure, Maly determined to fight for truth by speaking truthfully in all situations; naming the good and evil in the world accurately; and avoiding platitudes, slogans, clichés, stereotypes and ideologies. He spoke of the obligation of faith communities to promote honest communications and to identify instances of deception and repression perpetrated by institutions, including the government, with the goal of creating a more open and just society.

He then went on to suggest that Christians in pluralistic democracies must also fight for the truth by recognizing the contradictions and inequities in our society; by being more alert to distortions that diminish self-worth and impede honest communications; and by avoiding easy accommodations with the powerful that enable demonic forces to thrive. This admonition, held in my memory for almost three decades, now comes newly alive as a personal obligation, a Christian responsibility and a timely call for all citizens to fight against falsehood and for truth.

In 1967, the social philosopher Hannah Arendt, a German Jew who left Germany in 1933 and lived in New York from 1941 until her death in 1975, wrote an article for the *New Yorker* entitled “Truth and Politics,” which is amazingly relevant for our current situation. Arendt, who wrote an important book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* comparing the dictatorial strategies of Hitler and Stalin, argued in her article that factual truth, known by common observation, is even more important than philosophical truth, known by reason, in maintaining a healthy political order. Totalitarian governments make political dialogue impossible by promoting falsehoods, viewing truth as the enemy, systemically distorting reality, treating undesirable facts as state secrets and claiming false statements are acceptable opinions.

In modern democratic societies, leaders have great resources for spreading false narratives and creating distorted images which become reality for many citizens. Arendt insists: “Under fully democratic conditions deception without self-deception is well-nigh impossible.” Politicians who lie to their people can come to believe their own falsehoods. Lying has a way of expanding and multiplying, since falsehood “has a thousand shapes and a boundless field,” which makes it impossible to maintain a stable political order and leaves citizens feeling “a trembling wobbling motion of everything we rely on for our sense of direction and reality.”

In this situation, truthtelling is a political obligation of decisive importance. Citizen truthtellers must embrace “facts,” which do admit of interpretation, but in their core reality are “stubborn and resistant” and are more powerful than falsehoods. We all benefit from various forms of truthtelling: “the solitude of the philosopher; the isolation of the scientist and artist; the impartiality of the historian and judge; and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness and the reporter.” A healthy society needs the media, the judiciary and the institutions of higher learning as “refuges of truth” which keep alive the high ideals of honesty and integrity. In seeking truth, there is no substitute for “the secure stability of factual reality.“ Truthtellers are more credible and effective when they are willing to sacrifice for their convictions. Political life can only function effectively when subject to truth, ”the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us.” Although Hannah Arendt wrote decades ago, she provides a remarkably astute analysis of our current post-truth society as well as valuable advice for restoring respect and love for truth.

As we look for ways to achieve a more open political dialogue, we can find wise guidance in the work of John Courtney Murray, S.J. (1904-1967), the most influential Catholic theologian in the history of the United States. In his book *We Hold These Truths*, Murray recognized the threats to our democracy posed by “modern day barbarians” who resort to force and fear and who “replace dialogue with monologue, reason with passion and civility with harsh rhetoric.” He identified “structures of passion and war” that threaten to turn healthy pluralism into destructive polarization. Rejecting the utopian ideal of achieving unity among disparate worldviews, he proposed the more realistic goal of understanding the diverse viewpoints operative in our political process. Practically, we should strive to limit the warfare and enlarge the dialogue. Americans share an “emotional solidarity” because we inhabit a rich and vast land, share a common history of building a new nation, and are committed to the free pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, we share a common public philosophy based on self-evident truths known by reason: all persons are created equal, possess a sacred personal dignity, and have certain inalienable rights. We honor justice as the goal and ground of civil law and believe in the “principle of consent” by which we accept the rule of law as the basis for social stability and orderly change. Given this common ground, Murray envisions concerned citizens “locked together in argument” and passionately engaged in serious discussion about significant public policy issues. The political task is to achieve enough common ground so we can have a genuine argument about issues, which is possible only if we respect truth and hold significant shared truths. Murray held that Christians engaged in public debate should stick to natural law arguments and avoid specifically religious language and arguments. Although many theologians today think this approach is too restrictive, Murray remains a helpful guide as we struggle to find a constructive way forward in a society that wonders if truth is dead.