

# Free Speech and its Discontents

*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.*  
John 8:32

Yes, you shall know the truth, except when you don't. And yes, the truth will set you free, except when it does not.

Maybe some religious doctrine, say Catholicism, does speak the truth – maybe abortion and contraception, for example, are evil and not, as humanists would say, a crucial means of reducing human suffering in the world. Or maybe one of the other hundreds of religious sects, with different versions of truth, is right. Who knows? What we do know, through the logic of mutual exclusivity, that since these belief systems are all different from one another, only one, at most, could be true.

Yet these many varieties of religious belief, held by their followers with varying degrees of assuredness, are all considered to embody some sort of truth. Join them and you too shall know the truth; you too shall be set free by this knowledge. But since only one can in fact represent the truth, at least most believers will neither know nor be set free by what they think is truth. Most will be trapped by false beliefs; maybe all will.

The “truth” expressed in religious scriptures is in fact derived from a set of mostly ancient stories, albeit metaphorically rich ones, but still ancient stories. The beliefs these stories generate are sometimes helpful to the human condition, such as when Jesus talks about humility and forgiveness, and sometimes harmful when taken too literally, as when fundamental-

ists claim such stories represent absolute truth. They are stories, with all of the value and all the limitations of stories. Truth in stories is metaphorical, not actual. We will not “know” literal, objective truth by reading the Bible, nor will it set us free.

Where can we turn for truth? To public discourse? John F. Kennedy, a willing partner in many dishonesties, said:

The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.

Perhaps so – myths about economics and racial inferiority, for example, continue to permeate politics, especially in the world's one superpower, a dangerous circumstance indeed. But it is worse now than Kennedy could have ever imagined. In the USA today political mendacity goes beyond the mythical to deliberate, contrived and dishonest lying – with a crass forthrightness that would have chilled Kennedy or most previous presidents.

Donald Trump mocks the very idea of truth. For him, the truth is simply what he says it is. He does not care what is factual; he cares only what his devoted followers think of him. And they love him all the more when he just makes up stories: that Obama was an alien; that hordes of criminal Mexicans and terrorist Muslims are trying to get into the United States and that ex-

treme repressive measures are necessary to keep them out; that removing children from their parents and locking them in cages is necessary; that offering affordable health care to all Americans is a crime against humanity; and so depressingly many more. These lies, in the eyes of Trump's followers, are their truths.

Franklin Roosevelt said that "repetition does not turn a lie into the truth", but we learned from Nazi Germany that, in the minds of a significant number of the people, it does exactly that. "Lock her up," Trump supporters chant about Hillary, because he says she should be prosecuted for security breeches, when his own such transgressions are orders of magnitude more egregious. It is, as many have said, the post-truth era in the USA.

Social media and the internet have created a world in which we find a free-for-all of competing claims of truth, a problem exacerbated by the perhaps naive faith many of us still have that freedom of speech is central to the continuing search for truth. We want to say that free expression is necessary in such a search, but reason and rationality are getting drowned out in the cacophony of hateful and baseless (by any reasoned standard) claims of those indulging in wishful fantasies. To list a few of these: "socialism" in any form is an evil, guns should be everywhere, people with more dark pigment in their skin are intellectually inferior. I, like many liberals, and especially with the election of Obama as President, thought that these had become fringe ideas. Sadly, Trump has proven us wrong.

The irony of the times is that the seeming remedy for the grim condition of the world – free speech – might be making things worse. We like to think of free speech as one of the bedrock requirements for a free and open society – a society where truth can openly speak to power without fear of retribution, where the search for truth will flourish without interference, where facts triumph over "alternative facts." Science and free speech go together – the one being a systematic, evidence-based search for truth, the other being the means by which facts can be transmitted to a wider audience.

But it is not science and the objective search for truth that are flourishing in this new world; it is lies. Maybe the truth can set us free, but how and where can we find it?

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We are in the midst of a very serious crisis in the search for truth. Science is mocked by those who have no understanding of what it is about. Politicians talk about "my scientists and your scientists" as though science is a political enterprise. Free speech is a double-edged sword.

Debates about free speech are raging perhaps as never before, with doubts and reservations being expressed even by those who in earlier times would have been champions of the idea.

We offer no solution to this thorny problem, but present here some different perspectives on the matter, which if not leading to resolutions at least can help us understand the complexity of the issues. Gwyneth Evans writes about the problem of speaking truth to power, as revealed in perhaps the greatest of all works of drama – *King Lear*. Trudy Govier explores the difficult issue of cultural appropriation – should we be free to adopt the voice of other cultures? Clifford Orwin writes about the distressing apparent opposition to free speech on our university campuses; Ian Bushfield argues that some of this is justified. ffynlo Costain explains why, in a complex world full of conflicting ideologies, we do not have the luxury of interacting in an unmodulated fashion. James Alcock discusses the ongoing and corrosive problem of propaganda, observes how Trump is closely following Hitler's playbook, and shows how our predilection for free speech makes us vulnerable to demagogues.

We offer no definitive conclusions, but hope the articles here will help readers reach a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in free speech discussions, as they helped me do so.

– Gary Bauslaugh