

TRUE AND FALSE

By JUSTIN J. KELLY

AT THE climax of Tolstoy's great short novel, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*,¹ the hero comes to a terrifying realization. He sees that his whole life has been a lie, 'a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death' from him. Until his impending death forces that insight upon him, he is convinced of his own innocence. He can find nothing for which to reproach himself; his has been a life of unfailing decorum and 'correctness', of doing always what pleases him and is socially approved (especially by those in high places). As a result, his discovery in mid-career that he has a fatal illness seems to him not only painful but tragically unjust; he can make no sense of it. The agony of his dying is made ten times harder by his inability to accept it. But reality, in the form of death, finally breaks through, forcing him to face his own failure to live 'in the truth'. He suddenly sees that it was not this or that action, but in some way the entire pattern and orientation of his life that has been wrong. While keeping the law, he has violated the first and most fundamental of life's commandments, the command to be true to oneself and to love.

Yet by recognizing and accepting this bitter truth, Ivan is at last set free, in the final minutes of his life, to 'de-centre' his ego-dominated existence, to put the feelings and needs of others (his wife and son) for once ahead of his own. He truly lives for the first time in those last moments, and in the process, the sting of death is removed. 'He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. "Where was it? What death?" There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light' (pp 155-56).

The example of Tolstoy's hero poses the question of truth and falsehood at the most personal level, by dramatizing the possibility that one's whole existence may be inauthentic, that one may be living in untruth. 'For thought to be true to life, life must first be true to itself', said Blondel. The primacy of existence — truth in the concrete — over thought or truth in the abstract, is well reflected in

the medieval axiom: *non in dialectica placuit Deo salvare animam* ('It has not pleased God to save the soul by means of logic'). In an age nearer our own, Flaubert made his famous comment on the happy mother surrounded by her family: *Ils sont dans le vrai*. They are indeed 'in the truth', whatever the contortions of mere intellect in its attempt to understand and formulate truth.

But if in comparison to living, intellectual truth is of minor importance, it is nevertheless of immense importance for the sake of living. Only because of truth is a *human* life really possible, and life brings forth truth precisely so that it may be all the more life. One has only to read Augustine's *Confessions* to be struck by the passion a person can bring to the search for truth — in particular, for religious truth. It would devalue the meaning of that life, and falsify even the most cynical reader's perception of its heroic quality, to insist that the truth does not matter; for if that were so, how could its ultimate recognition bring such joy?

In our own century, Gandhi saw God as truth, and described his life as a series of 'experiments with truth', or attempts to discover it in experience. In order to appreciate the significance truth had for him, one need not agree with all that he considered the results of these experiments, or the part it plays in human life generally. It matters more, finally, than that 'good will' which we like to assume everyone has. For it is not sincerity alone but truth, ultimately, which saves. In terms of their own convictions, the Nazis were sincere in trying to exterminate the Jews; and even the Pharisees whom Jesus called hypocrites were probably not aware of their own dishonesty. One can be so sure of one's own rightness as to make it impossible for truth itself to get a hearing: 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die' (John 19,7).

Yet recognizing the importance of truth for life does not make the attainment of it any easier. This is particularly the case with regard to religion. Our contemporary awareness of the transcendent character of divine truth tends to make any effort to articulate it in human words seem futile and presumptuous — 'like trying to pour the ocean into a stoup', as someone once said. The apparently insuperable pluralism of religions, outlooks, and codes of behaviour, each with a certain claim to legitimacy in its own sphere, makes it difficult to accept any one as *the* way. The more aware we are of God's goodness, his infinite exaltation over all he has created, the more sensitive we become to the limitations of human discourse, its embeddedness in the finite and concrete. We can speak of God from

no other perspective than that of our own time and place, our cultural 'givens' and presuppositions — with all the historicity that this implies. All this makes confidence in the absolute reliability of our faith-statements — in a word, their truthfulness — difficult to maintain, at least for the person who has once been liberated from religious parochialism. Is the christian view of God as triune and personal any more reliable than the monadic or pantheist or non-personalist views found in the east? Or than the Buddha's refusal to speak of God at all? Who can say?

The contemporary Christian, moreover, may experience a kind of identity with some who profess radically different religious views, even while he experiences a lack of identity with others who share the 'same' faith. He may feel closer in spirit to a Gandhi or a Camus than to many fellow-Christians; though a Catholic, he may find Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King more of an inspiration than some ecclesiastical models of sanctity. This can lead to an acute crisis of confidence in once-trusted authorities. On what basis do I believe what I believe? Who can be relied on as a source of truth?

The problems raised above are not only challenges to the individual believer in his or her quest for religious truth. Today's Church faces similar questions also. Karl Rahner, in a brilliant essay published a little over a year ago, describes Vatican II as 'the Church's first official self-actualization as a world Church'.² That is, it marked the beginning of the Church's becoming in actual fact what she has always been in name and in intention, 'catholic' or universal. If hitherto Christianity has been brought to other cultures largely as a european or western export, from now on it will exist in increasingly indigenous forms, inculturated in each locale. This means that its individual churches will exist with a certain independence, not merely receiving influence from Rome or the West, but influencing them reciprocally. This local inculturation, however, demands a thorough-going re-translation of the gospel message: a transformation as radical as that which occurred in the first century, when St Paul translated an originally Jewish Christianity into the language and thought-forms of the Graeco-Roman world. When Paul denied the necessity of circumcision and other jewish practices for gentile Christians, he proclaimed something that cannot be directly derived either from the preaching of Jesus himself or from that of the first apostles about him. And yet Paul taught this with the authority of revelation, as a truth pertaining to the essence of the gospel message.

The existence of such a radical discontinuity within the unity of salvation history, involving a break with previous tradition of such magnitude that 'a human being cannot undertake [it] on personal authority alone', leads Rahner to interpret the emergence of the 'world Church' at the Second Vatican Council as another such event — indeed, only the second event of this kind in the history of the Church. Accordingly, Rahner goes on to envisage that history in terms of three major epochs: first, the period of Jewish Christianity, stretching from the ministry of Jesus to the preaching of St Paul; second, the period of Hellenic and European Christianity, inaugurated by Paul and continuing into the present century; third, the era of world Christianity whose arrival was signalled by the Council. He views these three eras as equal in importance if not in duration. If this notion of a 'theological break' within the catholic and christian tradition is correct, it confronts the official guardians of that tradition with a complex and challenging problem. Faced with a pluralism of proclamations, how can those in authority distinguish true from false expressions of the essential gospel message? From the very definition of the problem, past norms and formulations are of very little help in the situation of the 'new' world Church. Rahner makes these questions concrete by inquiring whether, for example, a Masai tribesman in East Africa is simply obliged to reproduce the marital morality of western Christianity, 'or could a chieftain there, even if he is a Christian, live in the style of the patriarch Abraham? Must the Eucharist even in Alaska be celebrated with grape wine?' (*Art. cit.*, p 718).

It is evident that unity in truth can be sustained, and such a transition managed, only by doing what St Paul did: that is, by maintaining a vital and continually renewed contact with the source of life and truth, the Spirit speaking within. Henri Le Saux, the french Benedictine whose self-chosen hindu name, Abhishiktananda ('Bliss of the Anointed One'), symbolized his own effort to synthesize christian spirituality with the highest religious intuitions of Hinduism, refers to 'that very central point where the Spirit abides within the spirit of man' (Rom 8,16). 'In the frightening whirl of contemporary evolution, the only point on which a man can stand without constantly being in danger of losing his foothold and being washed away no one knows where is that very central and fundamental experience'.³ The experience of which Le Saux speaks is that mystical awareness of 'the self without qualifications', where the mystery of one's own personal existence disappears into the supreme

mystery of God, where (in the words of Paul) 'I live; now not I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2,20).

It is this experience of the Spirit of Jesus by which 'all things are judged', including the truth and falsity of particular expressions of faith. The Gospel of John calls this *pneuma* the 'Spirit of truth', and presents Jesus as saying: 'He [the Spirit] will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself, but will say only what he has learned. . . . He will glorify me, since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine' (Jn 16,13-14). Only in this Spirit, in other words, can we go beyond ourselves into the totality of truth, transcending the narrowness of our particular conceptualizations of it. It is this Spirit which both brings to explicit awareness, 'gives voice to', the new perceptions needed to express the unchanging heart of the gospel in today's pluriform cultural world, and at the same time enable us to recognize and acknowledge the new expressions as authentic. This is the experience the book of Acts attributes to Peter at the home of the centurion Cornelius: 'The truth I have now come to realize', he said, 'is that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10,34-35).

All this emphasis on the experience of the self and the inward witness of the Spirit, however, leads to the 'new' problem of truth. If the contemporary situation forces the individual (and in an analogous way, the Church also) back upon himself or herself in order to discern the true, this necessarily means relying on something less definable and objective than tradition and external authority. But the self may be more questionable and less reliable. The spirit which speaks within speaks with many voices, not all of them divine. Both the New Testament and our own experience suggest that spirits need careful discerning and testing (1 Jn 4,1); not all impulses can be relied on. Religion and psychology alike pose the question whether the self can even be trusted as a source of truth. *Omnis homo mendax* ('every man is a liar' — Ps 115, Vulgate): for christian doctrine, our minds are darkened because of our fallen nature; we need to be saved precisely from the distortions arising from our own love of untruth. For modern psychology, what we are conscious of is only the iceberg-tip of the whole psyche, and the machinery of repression and denial is always operating beyond the edge of our awareness. How do we know when we are truly in touch with the truth?

While granting that no absolutely reliable criteria can be set up — since they must be applied and interpreted by the very self

whose integrity is in question — I would nevertheless offer the following signs of being 'in the truth':

1. Humility, or the sense of truth as something greater than oneself, as manifested in self-acceptant humour. True knowledge is always paradoxically joined to the sense of one's own ignorance, as great minds from Socrates to the present have recognized. In contrast, untruth, or a lack of reality in one's conceptions, often shows up in defensive arrogance and an inability to take one's own ideas lightly. The violent bigots, as Gordon Allport observed, are almost invariably humourless.⁴ The power to laugh, especially at oneself, seems to indicate that one is in touch with a truth larger than one's own ideas. In the light of that larger truth they can be seen as wonderful and yet limited, even slightly absurd. 'Straw, all straw' — the judgment Aquinas is said to have pronounced on his great theological works after his final mystical illuminations is a testimony to their truthfulness as well as to their inadequacy. The truest truth is perhaps that which can be humbly and yet absolutely affirmed, as the example of Jesus in the gospels suggests.

2. Openness: to development, to change and correction by further experience, to completion by the contributions of others. As the previous 'sign' implies, an indication of actually having the truth is the awareness of not having all of it. Because reality is greater than our minds, holding something as true involves the expectation that it will manifest itself in new and perhaps surprising ways, and be visible to others in different perspectives. We are all familiar with the story of the five blind men trying to describe the elephant, each of them holding on to a different part — legs, trunk, tusk, etc. — and saying what he feels: a parable of religious or transcendent knowledge. 'The truth begins with two', it has been said; the finding of truth is both individual and social, just as the search for self-identity and openness to relationships with others are not opposites but part of one dialectical process. Truth is found in both talking and listening, and neither is complete without the other.

3. Conformity to one's previous experience of the truth. In a strange way, when truth is found, it is found as the new manifestation of something we have always known. 'It has always been familiar to us', says Rahner, of the mystery of God; 'and we have always loved it'.⁵ The resurrection accounts in the gospels depict the disciples' encounters with the risen Lord as sudden acts of recognizing Jesus in some new, and at first unfamiliar, form. He appears as a gardener, a stranger standing on the beach, a

companion on the road. The moments of recognition are instants of ecstatic awareness joining the present to the past: the continuity between the new form and the already known and loved is suddenly perceived. 'Rabboni!' 'It is the Lord!' 'And they recognized him in the breaking of the bread' (Jn 20,17;21,7;Lk 24,35). Even in science, the most revolutionary discoveries have a way of preserving the truth of earlier understandings, while presenting them in a wider, more far-reaching perspective. Part of that 'fidelity of the Lord' which 'remains forever' is the confirmation and validation of one's earlier perceptions of truth. They were not final; they may have been, and were, one-sided, partial, incomplete. But they were none the less true, and as such share in God's own everlastingness.

4. The sense of illumination which truth brings with it — clarifying, shedding light on other things, putting hitherto chaotic facts in order. Formerly puzzling and painful experiences suddenly fall into place, making 'a crazy kind of sense' (as they do for the doctor-hero of Bergmann's film classic, *Wild Strawberries*: 'I began to discern in the day's jumble of events an extraordinary logic'). 'So foolish and slow of heart to believe in the message of the prophets', says Jesus to the saddened and discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus. 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?' (Lk 24,25-26) A strange 'necessity' is disclosed in the very facts that have given rise to frustration and despair — a mysterious 'rightness' springing from the Father's incomprehensible but benevolent design. Life's painful enigmas are somehow resolved as one is granted a glimpse of God's presence in and beyond them. One is able finally to say with conviction: 'This is of God. All goes well'.

5. Harmony, joy, peace are a last but most important sign of the presence of truth, which is the presence of the Spirit. Although truth can come in forms that are initially challenging, upsetting, even violent — witness the account of Saul's conversion in Acts 9 — the overcoming of resistance leads to a peace which is not momentary or superficial, but which endures. It brings with it, moreover, a new and deepened power to love. The Christ who is Truth is also the Way and the Life: encountering him in whatever new form is a vivifying and humanizing experience. 'I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly' (Jn 10,10).ⁱ

The importance of this element can hardly be exaggerated, for one of the indispensable conditions of finding the truth is hope: the conviction that the truth is not only available but that it will be *good*

for us when found. Many people have seen the poster which shows a rag-doll being squeezed in a wringer, over the caption, 'The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable'. A lot of us find the latter half easier to believe than the former. The greatest source of resistance to the truth, and the major obstacle to discovering it, is fear. We suspect that the truth about ourselves is ultimately ugly and unpleasant, and that knowing God would uncover that truth in all its hideousness. Even to be known truly as we are by other people is too awful to contemplate. Though we suspect some of seeing through us, we hope they will have the courtesy not to tell us. (I once accused a friend, who had complimented me in a letter, of flattery. She wrote back insisting that what she had said was not flattery but the truth. 'Not the whole truth, maybe, but any time you want the whole truth, you just ask', she said. Somehow I haven't gotten around to it yet.)

In contrast to this deep-seated sense of our fundamental unlovableness, psychotherapist Carl Rogers affirms, on the basis of a lifetime's work with people, that 'persons have a basically positive direction'.⁶ Though individuals can be driven by inner fear and defensiveness to cruel and destructive behaviour, at the core of each person is something healthy, life-seeking, containing at least the desire to love and be loved. 'The facts are always friendly', he concludes — or, as one friend of mine assured another who was tormented by self-doubt: 'Truth is *friend*'. Perhaps the most important aspect of the christian message is that it confirms and reinforces precisely this fragile sense of the ultimate goodness of truth, the worthwhileness of the people we are. Hoping in the truth is believing that it is 'on our side'.

In sum, there are three conditions for finding the truth: faith, hope, and love. Faith involves the conviction that the truth exists and that it matters: and moreover, that it wills to give itself to us. The seemingly endless variety of religious options and points of view offer a continual temptation to give up the quest in sheer weariness and despair, to conclude that there are no 'right' answers and that it doesn't matter anyway. Here above all it is necessary to believe that 'Whoever asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks, will have the door opened to him' (Lk 11,10). Hope translates this faith into action, enabling the individual to abandon himself to life in all its ambiguity and complexity, trusting that truth will meet him on the way. 'For it is not of the dead but of the living that he is God' (Mt 22,32).

Finally, to find the truth, one must love it, want it indeed 'more than anything else'. It is evident that Augustine was moved as much by a lover's longing for truth as by the desperate anxiety of dying without finding it — *de timore mortis et non inventa veritate* (*Confessions*, VII, 5). Loving the truth one does not yet possess is mysterious. It involves an alertness to its epiphanies, like that of the Magi in the gospel of Matthew: 'At the sight of the star they rejoiced exceedingly' (Mt 2,10). This implies a careful noting of signs as they appear, a loving attention to differences in experience. The lover of truth is sensitive above all to the difference between what satisfies the whole person and what does not — as the convalescent soldier Inigo de Loyola noted with surprise that his gospel-inspired fantasies of 'doing great deeds for Christ' left him with a deeper, more lasting satisfaction than his romantic and chivalrous imaginings. For love of the still hidden truth is above all a matter of desire, and truth itself is present in the desire for it. 'True happiness is to rejoice in the truth, for to rejoice in the truth is to rejoice in you, O God, who are the Truth. . . . I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with the love of your peace' (*Confessions*, X, 23,27).

'In the end, there remain these three, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of them is love' (1 Cor 13,13). In a mysterious way, discovering the truth hinges upon living it in advance, doing it before we know what it is. Theologians have coined the word 'orthopraxis' to describe the kind of 'right action' which takes precedence over orthodoxy, or right belief, and is in a certain way its basis. Thus John can write: 'My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active; only by this can we be certain that we are children of the truth' (1 Jn 3,18-19). If knowledge of truth finds its completion in deeds of love, the apprehension of truth is already implicit in loving behaviour. For John, the one who loves is in a certain way beyond the dilemma of true or false, guilty or innocent. The one who loves is 'in God', since God is love: 'for God is greater than our conscience, and he knows everything' (1 Jn 3,20). Such a person, whether or not he or she grasps the truth, is already grasped by it.

In this sense, though perhaps in it alone, truth and falsity do not matter. That is to say, it is not a question, finally, of true or false, and so of the need to discriminate between them, but rather of both true *and* false, which are inextricably bound up in our experience. We ourselves are always both — as are the conclusions we arrive at.

Only by surrendering our truth together with our falsity into the always-greater love and all-surpassing reality of God, do we attain the truth which saves. 'A friend', runs the arab proverb, 'is someone to whom one can pour out all the contents of one's heart, the chaff and grain together, knowing that the gentlest of hands will sift and keep whatever is of value, and, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away'. In just this way, by giving ourselves in loving trust to the God beyond our understanding, we allow him to *make us* true: to dissolve our untruth, and to align us with the Son who is truth. Perhaps this is what John means when he writes that 'the darkness is passing and the real light already shines. Christ has made this true, and it is true in him and in you' (1 Jn 2,8): that is, 'in your own experience'.

NOTES

¹ New York, 1960, p 152.

² 'Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II', *Theological Studies*, 40 (December 1979), p 717.

³ *Prayer* (Philadelphia, 1973), p 76, n 3.

⁴ *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, N.Y., 1958), p 409.

⁵ 'The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology', in *Theological Investigations*, 4 (Baltimore, 1966), p 57.

⁶ *On Becoming a Person* (Boston, 1961), pp 25, 26-27.