

## The naked truth

### ABSTRACT

The author argues that truth is the result of experiences that provide us with data that display a structure and provide people with a comprehensive symbolic universe wherein everything was originally included – even science and religion. After the religious wars in seventeenth century Europe turned to a more limited concept of truth, scientific evidence became dominant. In spite of attempts to introduce history and, later, human relations into scholarly work, this idea remained dominant for many people. The author argues that, in practice, human beings do not maintain these generalisations because truth based on unique experiences is decisive. The most unique is a person – in the case of Christian faith, the person of Jesus. That cannot be argued. He is the truth that presents itself as the naked truth of the hanged man on the cross.

### INTRODUCTION

The Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences and Arts organised a series of public debates about the relation of religion and science. Eight scholars from different disciplines and with different worldviews made their statements on selected topics in this field and discussed these with the public. One of the topics was about truth and was titled, ‘The Naked Truth’. The biologist Sander Bais and the author of this article discussed this theme after they both presented their opinions about the ‘Naked Truth’.

Because the subject is also debated in South Africa, I think I can contribute to the discussions in my second homeland by developing my introduction into an article in English and publishing it in a South African journal.

### THE ORIGIN OF TRUTH

“What is truth?” said the Roman praetor Pontius Pilate to Jesus of Nazareth in the court case against Jesus. Just before this, Jesus had said that He considered it his vocation to reveal the truth. “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me.” (Jn 19:37). That is beyond the mindset of the sceptic Pilate. Jesus speaks idealistically about truth, but Pilate knows that truth is relative. It is not truth that rules our decisions, but power. In the play of power, the piece of truth is sacrificed. Jesus is hanged.

Religious people held the idea that there is truth – even absolute truth. The tendency in present – modern and, even more, post-modern – culture is opposite: no absolute truths. Even if people do not embrace postmodernism, truth is a relative concept for them. Science has a somewhat ambiguous position in between both extremes. It occurs that a scholar tends to a religious interpretation of science, as Stephen Hawking at the end of his famous book, *A Brief History of Time*. For other people, science is nothing else than describing how nature works, and how we can make use of that knowledge. For them knowledge is power, indeed. Due to this ambiguity of opinions, it is impossible to speak about the relation of science and religion in general. It is always about a specific theory of science and a specific religious tradition.

I would like to reduce the tension between both poles even more. For what is truth, indeed? How do we gain knowledge of the truth? That knowledge is given to us. Truth is based on data in the most literal meaning that ‘data’ can have. Truth is inductive. Absolute, deductive truth is nothing else than a prolongation of our brain, a partial duplicate of ourselves. Truth that is more than a bare tautology is truth that we received.

What is the origin of human knowledge? It has to do with being informed. We receive data. That is from the very beginning of a human being’s life. A child discovers the world. A flower appears to him or her. The impression of a laughing mother comes to the child. There is the taste of a spoon of spinach. And then, the discovery that you can blow in it – and the power you can execute by doing so! Life is one great, wonderful discovery journal with continuously new information.

So an image of the world grows in a human mind, as a composition of impressions. These impressions become symbols in our symbolic universe.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I prefer to speak about a human being as the subject of a passive sentence. That is most basic to a human being: *I am* born; *I was* conceived; *I was* nourished; *I am* touched; *I am* called. My name was *given* to me. It is as the apostle Paul says: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1Co 4:7). Only secondary is a human being a subject of an active sentence: *I do* something. However, I always do something with something that I received before.<sup>2</sup>

Human beings discover structures, relations, and connections in what they experience. That is the beginning of science. That is also the beginning of religion. Principally, there is not so much difference between science and religion. Both have to do with experienced reality. There is an abundance of data that are given to us in just as many moments of experience: seeing a flower, the matter under a binocular, the radiation of a distant star, a child at the school yard, a hymn in the church, and the accident on the street. All these impressions fill our symbolic universe, and they provide us with knowledge of the world.

## DIFFERENCE IN EXPERIENCE AND DIFFERENCE IN TRUTH

Not all human beings have the same experiences. A person can have more and different impressions – and, thus, data – than someone else. By consequence, they differ in knowledge. Everybody has his or her own image of reality, and often people can hardly imagine that someone else’s reality is different, larger, or greater. When the first skins of duck billed platypuses were brought to Europe, people thought it was fraud because animals with both bills and hair do not exist. They did not fit into European reality. Such a lack of knowledge can be announced as the highest academic research. Great German scholars in the beginning of the twentieth century read ancient Near-East texts historical-critically. Every irregularity in the text was resolved into editorial compilations. They read a text according to their own frame of mind: a consistent logic discourse. Inconsistencies could only originate from the hand of a later editor because a good text does not have either inconsistencies or repetitions. Reading only one thesis of an African student could have changed their minds. Usually, such a thesis is full of repetitions that are never exactly the same and, therefore, display an irregular discourse. It shows subtle or sometimes paradoxical

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1 See, on this topic more extensively, Van de Beek 1994; 1996:48-85 and 2005:53-93.

2 Modern Western culture prefers the active. That is also the case with the active voice in language, preferably with a transitive verb and in the singular: “I do something.” It is interesting that in the spelling and grammar control of Microsoft Windows, passive sentences are often marked as grammatically wrong. As one of my Ph.D students said: “Bill Gates does not like the passive.”

differences in the obvious repetitions. That is the way a narrative works: life experience is told by the storyteller. The telling takes a topic, turns it around, repeats it, and does so once again – always slightly different or opposing. One who knows Africa – and the Near East – knows how this occurs. A professor who never came further than the study room in Göttingen or Tübingen has very limited knowledge. You must dispose of more data and more varied experiences in order to understand. You must once have been in Africa or in Arabia and listened to the people in order to interpret old texts from the Near-East more correctly.

In the large field of experiences, religious experiences also occur to people. We must understand this term ‘religious experiences’ correctly. It is not about inner mystical feelings that would be of a totally different kind than feelings from observing a star or seeing a table. Also in religious experiences, it is about an experience wherein something happens to us that is, first of all, outside of ourselves. The basic experiences of the Jewish religion are bound to an experience of liberation from slavery in a dramatic event and a path through the sea and the desert. They are shaped by a strong leader as David and by the bitter experience of deportation to the present Iraq. Christianity has assumed these data into its own tradition. Christianity is different from Judaism because Christians experienced new events: the death of Jesus of Nazareth, who was hanged by Pontius Pilate, and his appearing to his disciples as one who was raised from the dead. These events also reshaped the old tradition in the light of new impressions.<sup>3</sup> Present day Christianity is shaped by many other events through a history of ages, such as the incomprehensible experience in the fourth century. After centuries of persecution, they were suddenly in the centre of power as a result of the new politics of the Emperor Constantine.<sup>4</sup> Christianity received a totally different structure through this experience.

Differences in experiences cause differences in symbolic universes. They also cause different opinions about truth. To Jews, truth is different from what Christians conceive as truth. For Christians before the age of Constantine, truth was different from truth for later generations. This is not merely about the extent of knowledge. Knowledge is not merely quantitatively cumulative. Certainly, this is an aspect of it. Christians of the second century did not have the history of Constantine within the horizon of their experiences. It is, however, also about a more decisive difference. There *are* events that give only ‘more’ knowledge. There are also, however, events that provide us with *different* knowledge, and more specifically: so different that all other data receive a new meaning as well. Christians of the second century did not have the history of Constantine within the horizon of their experiences, and therefore they could not consider truth in the perspective of these events, not even the truth of their own persecution.

That some events evoke a new perspective on the whole truth has to do with the fact that not all data are equal. There are experiences that have such an impact that they give all other experiences another orientation – simply said: one event has more weight than another one. There are experiences that open a new perspective on truth and provide us with new insights about how reality is composed. The politics of Constantine apply to such experiences, but the famous apple of Newton and Darwin’s journey to the Galapagos Islands also apply. If these events are not fully new, as an absolute new happening, and even if they are of a legendary character, these stories show that a difference occurred in insight that had to do with new data.

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3 For this process of reading texts, compiling new versions, and creating new interpretations, see esp. Talstra 2002.

4 Roldanus, 2006, gives a very clear insight about what happened to the Christians in the age of Constantine. They entered a new world with a new worldview.

Some data, either alone or in a combination with other data, cause a revolution of truth. I consciously do not say “a scientific revolution.” It is about the *whole* structure of truth, including the claims that belong with it. That is more than scientific, unless one defines ‘scientific’ in a very broad meaning as anything that has to do with knowledge. It is really about a revolution of truth as the whole paradigm of world experience and worldview.<sup>5</sup>

Truth about an isolated fact can hardly be called truth. Truth really only becomes relevant if it is about the orientation of data by specific discoveries or events. Finding a bone somewhere in Africa is not very interesting. There are so many bones in Africa. It makes a real difference if the bone is of a primate that connects human beings to apes and makes a connection between both. That makes a difference that causes people to think differently about themselves and the world. It is the *relation* of events and data that makes the difference. They cause systems of truth. They also cause different truths precisely because people have different, dominant experiences that orientate the other data.

Truth was something different to Jesus of Nazareth than to Pilate because He had seen different things and other people than Pilate had even dreamed of. Truth is different for Christians after Constantine than before Constantine, for biologists before Darwin than biologists after Darwin, and for physicists before Heisenberg and Bohr than those after them. Truth is totally different for people who have received religious experiences, and those who did not experience such an event. The same is the case for people who had a religious experience, and those who had a different one. In this way, different opinions arise, sometimes about small issues and sometimes about the comprehensive understanding of reality.

Some people did not see specific things, and therefore these do not play a role in their symbolic universe. When it is about topics of low importance, we can take them for granted by the authority of other people – although, I have never seen an okapi or a Martian. The existence of okapis does not deviate so much from what I know, and so I do not doubt the truth of information about them.

However, information that re-orientates our total understanding of reality is of a different kind. We do not easily embrace such information. We tend to deal critically with it. We even resist admitting it into our thoughts about reality. Many Christians have had, and still have, the conviction that the world is God’s creation wherein He made everything perfect in the beginning. That is the way they conceive the world. They refuse to take serious data from geology that point to an evolutionary development because they reject evolution beforehand. They have an impression of reality, and when data do not fit to this idea, “um so schlimmer für die Tatsachen.” Some creationists frenetically try to interpret data so that these fit in the format of creationism. Then, however, the data are not taken serious. It is violating truth in the name of truth. The reverse position also happens: people are so certain of an autonomous development of life that they deny any sign of intervention.

In this field another factor plays a dominant role: tradition. No one can discover everything by him or herself. No one starts thinking about reality from the bottom. We achieved a major part of our knowledge because it was passed on to us by other sources: parents, teachers, books, and papers. People in the past were impressed by structures, discovered new data, and experienced new events; all these shaped their impression of reality. They passed this on to new generations. Hendrikus Berkhof described this as “a cumulative process of experiences and their

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5 Actually Kuhn in his famous study on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* means such a comprehensive turn in thought (Kuhn 1962). The later use of ‘paradigm’ shows inflation compared to the way Kuhn introduced it. He focused on the sciences, but the impact has to do with the way human beings live in the world.

interpretations” (Berkhof 1973:66). Our own experiences are conformed to this pattern. Actually, this pattern that is handed over to us by tradition is itself a given that we receive, and which is so dominant that it orientates all new data almost automatically.

Most people never saw or experienced the data whereon these comprehensive models are based. In the present generation, no one ever saw Jesus of Nazareth in his earthly life; no one ever encountered Constantine. We must accept the data of others. No one ever saw the most elementary particles, and most people have not even seen the traces they leave wherefrom scientists conclude their existence. We depend on the information of experts, and we trust the authority of other people. We begin our knowledge by accepting many data and ideas that we cannot verify, or for which we feel no need to verify. We make do with what was handed over to us in a tradition of knowledge whereon we build further.

Various traditions have existed along each other as far as human memory reaches. People receive different experiences, and they have different cumulative processes of experiences. By consequence, they developed opposing truth claims about reality.

We can enter into a discussion about these claims, but this is usually not effective. People who do not share basic data are not willing to easily accept claims on the authority of someone who does not belong to their own authoritative tradition. Then the slogan is – ‘Believe it when I see it.’ And there will be even less willingness to see. The more compelling tendency is to oppose the other viewpoint. And as the arguments become increasingly compelling, resistance grows.

That does not mean that transition from one model of truth to another is impossible, but it is not easy. If it does not concern details, but the orientation of thought, traditions are highly closed systems. Usually, transition of these systems does not occur because of insight, but is forced by power. That is exactly Pilate’s position. Truth as such is irrelevant to him. The decision caters to power. It is not usual that traditions of truth change by the strength of arguments. They change by economic, political, or military overruling – unless someone sees that reality is different with his or her own eyes; in that case, you have a real problem because you will have troubles with the dominant culture.

As long as truth claims and historic, social, ethnic, or political communities fully overlap, there is a problem. All nations have their own imagination of reality, their own gods, and their own idea of their place in the cosmos. A problem arises when some people have a mission and are convinced that their own concept of truth should be accepted by other people as well. One way to fulfil this mission is to try to win others for your own faith by arguments or by expressions of culture that attract other people. Usually this is only successful if it is attached to power. That is the way Romans forced their truth on other people and aligned the thoughts of the subjects; Christians gave pagans the choice to be baptised or killed; Muslims expanded the *dar-al-islam* by the force of weapons. Western powers not only colonised the wealth, but also the thought of people all over the world.

It will be clear that this manner of dispersing truth takes the edge of the essence of the origin of truth from data of experience (unless one conceives blunt application of power itself as a core given that orientates all other data). The consequences of this merging of power and truth are disastrous – not only for truth, but also for human beings and for their lives. A horrible example in history is seventeenth century Europe, where, on a small piece of land, an attempt to settle different truth claims with weapons occurred. About half of the population of Germany was lost in these religious wars. The consequences were so disastrous that this experience forced people to deal with truth in a new way.

Until the seventeenth century in Western civilisation, there was unity of truth. There was only *one* truth. People thought about all data as fitting into one comprehensive structure, and they dealt with them in their mutual relationships. Religion and science intrinsically belonged together – just like nature and history. This attitude can imply a tremendous openness to new data. We live in an open universe wherein God does new things, and that, as such, is so abundant that we cannot totally conceive it. Truth is always greater. But it can also work the other way around. The maintenance and propagation of religion in the perspective of power as developed in the Middle Ages since the time of Constantine excluded any openness to new data. Dissidents were persecuted, and when they finally organised themselves, war was the consequence. Truth stood against truth, and if power has to ultimately decide about truth, only the last human being can switch off the light of history.

Viewing this, European culture came to a radical decision: if it is about truth, we will restrict ourselves to what we all agree about, i.e., to those data that are accessible to every one. Everything that is specific is irrelevant for finding truth. At least an analogy to our own experience is required. That is the origin of modern science. It is based on what all human beings have experienced or can experience in common. About that, we can finally agree. Only this is what we can call ‘knowledge.’ The rest is belief or private opinion. We cannot say anything about it scientifically. By consequence, modern science deals with the common denominator of reality. Therein we can find a high level of certainty, but it is at the same time limited to an extremely small segment of life.

This reduction to a specific segment is not wrong in itself. We continuously investigate data while excluding other aspects. It is impossible to take everything into account that we need to make a coincidental decision. In order to see things sharply, we must exclude much. It is not even bad if we, as in English, restrict the term ‘science’ to this field of shared and repeatable experiences. That is a mere matter of definition. It becomes only problematic when we conceive this selection as the only field where we can apply truth claims.

Soon it turned out that human beings cannot live with only natural laws. In the nineteenth century, researching history developed as a powerful, scholarly activity. There is not only nature, but also history. There are unrepeatable events whereof we never were or can be witnesses, which are, nevertheless, true and shaped reality. The breakthrough of the unique in scholarship was not really successful, however. Historic research also increasingly sought the common by its stress on the principle of analogy. Historic scholarship subsequently became suspect by World War I, as religion was in earlier times. The great stories of history that were developed in the nineteenth century appeared just as disastrous in Verdun as the great stories of Christian faith in the seventeenth century.

The rise of social studies by the late twentieth century was a new attempt to broaden the field of knowledge and to bring a new dynamic to human thought. Human beings are not mere natural entities or substances, but people living in communities. A human being is more than “was er isst.”<sup>6</sup>

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6 Feuerbach 1971:358 made use of the ideas of the medical doctor, Moleschott, who wrote a book about nutritious food for people (Moleschott 1850). Social studies, on the other hand, introduced human beings as acting persons in community, and thus refuted Feuerbach’s reduction. In the course of academic work, we can notice periods or research groups that stress the reducibility of human behaviour, and those who stress the independence of human mind and relations. Investigation in the field of neurosciences gave a new impulse to reductionist thought. What is remarkable is that not only religious people reacted against this, but also humanists who defend the free will. A similar discussion is now burning between hardcore evolutionists and people who propagate intelligent design.

The euphoria did not last long. With human beings in the field, power was also in the field. Consequently, so were private or group interests. Conflicts are again on the horizon. In order to avoid these, social studies try to increasingly find the objectivity of their truth claims in quantitative analyses: in general and not in the specific of unique persons that makes human beings precisely human. Therefore, social *studies* are turned into social *sciences*.

## IS THIS REALLY ALL THAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT TRUTH?

Truth in modernity seems to be limited to what people have in common with the capabilities of observation by the senses. The rest is private. The sciences shape the face of truth in modern society. That is not without reason because the success of their results is enormous. They changed the face of the world, even more than the Constantine difference in the fourth century. This is a fact – a new event in history – that people have to take into account. The success of modern science inevitably orientates thinking about and observing human beings. The reduction of data that is basic to modern science appears to be successful. It changed the world. Thus science proves that she is right. She is true. Other ideas or things may be somewhere, but we can neglect their data. They may exist, but we cannot do anything with them. They are awkward or amusing rather than relevant.

This seems to be the truth. Reality is different, however. Ultimately, it appears that people conceive truth differently, so that historic events, social relationships, and religious convictions are more decisive than the sciences and their results. Scholars may exist who keep their scientific work pure and rationally orientate themselves, just as people exist who keep their religious faith clean from any influences that do not suit them. It is, however, a limited truth that truth should be limited to the sciences. The truth of our world is that ‘irrational’ power decides it. The truth is that religious convictions play a dominant role in it – be they authentic or not. It is absurd to think in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that truth has nothing to do with all those factors that are outside the domain of the sciences. Science is only a piece in the play of being right in the world. One who is not conscious of the very limited character of science has no real awareness of truth.

I can also present it positively: scholars who are interested in truth are open for all data that are discovered, whatever their character may be. That is to be applied to all repeatable data of the sciences, as well as to those that can be manipulated. That is to be applied to unique historical events. That is to be applied to the peculiarities of the human mind and to human relations, including all the ambiguous layers that are therein. That is also to be applied to the experience of God’s presence and actions.

It is precisely the experiences that cannot be generalised that are the most relevant for people. A unique experience has more impact on the orientation of our symbolic universe than repeatable tests. The more unique an experience is, the less accessible it is for outsiders – and the greater its impact.

The most unique experiences have to do with people. A person can never be generalised. If he or she is generalised, it is no longer about this unique human being. But though a person cannot be generalised, he or she nevertheless belongs to truth. Denying this person in the truth of my life would imply that I do not speak the truth. The most unique experience of a person is the most decisive for our life. A person defines our orientation to the world. A person is the ultimate truth.

This person can be my own person. When anything can be truth, as Pilate suggests, only one truth is left: Pilate’s own interests. The ultimate person can also be the other one or the other ones. When we exclude them from the unity of truth, whereby we orientate our thinking and acting, only blunt egoism is left. That is the ultimate consequence of Cartesian modernity. We are enclosed in ourselves – in our own mind.

It is the other – what is essentially different from me – that opens our life. It is in this perspective that Pascal says: “How do I hate those who deny miracles.” (Pascal 1954:1317). Truth is found in openness to all experiences and all data. The data that orientate our being in the world and our understanding of the world most are unique experiences. No experience can be more unique than the encounter with a person. Most of all, which is the case with a unique person who cannot be compared to anyone else. For me as a Christian, this is the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is not unique for me because I am a Christian, but I am a Christian because He is unique and came decisively within the horizon of my life. He is the truth according to whom all other truths are orientated. He is truth itself (Jn 14:6).

In my office I have a poster of a wooden crucifix by Michelangelo. It is Jesus hanging on the cross. With crucifixes, it is normal to cover the genitals of Christ with a cloth. This crucifix shows Jesus totally naked. He is the naked truth.

This truth is the truth from which the truth of generalising science is the most distant. He is the most unique *Given* who does not fit in any model. On the contrary, He gives meaning to all other data, events, things, persons, and encounters. The truth of Jesus is absolutely vulnerable – as vulnerable as a naked, hanged person is.

The alternative is Pilate – or all those people who think they are the subject of an active sentence for everything, even for God. Some of them think that God is a projection of the human mind. Others are convinced they are acting in the name of God in order to change the world – and mold it to their own will. Both do not differ very much as they are left with their own power and interests.

I hold to the naked truth.

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