

WHY TRUTH MATTERS MOST:
AN APOLOGETIC FOR TRUTH-SEEKING IN
POSTMODERN TIMES

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The word “truth” is a staple in our language and in every language. One cannot imagine a human language lacking the concept of truth. Such a language would never inform anyone of anything: it would lack any intellectual access to reality. No language *qua* language could be so constrained (although some political and celebrity “discourse” comes close). The idea of truth is part of the intellectual oxygen that we breathe. Whenever we state an opinion, defend or critique an argument, ask a question, or investigate one kind of assertion or another, we presuppose the concept of truth—even if we do not directly state the word, even if we deny that truth is real or knowable.

The notion of truth haunts us, ferreting out our shabby thinking, our lame excuses, our willful ignorance, and our unfair attacks on the views of others, both the living and the dead. Conversely, when our own ideas are misrepresented or our personal character falsely maligned, we object by appealing to something firm and hard that should settle the issue—the truth. In these cases, we sense that something is wrong—not with the truth itself, but with its inept handlers. Truth seems to stand over us as a kind of silent referee, arms folded confidently, ears open, eyes staring intently and authoritatively into everything and missing nothing. Even when an important truth seems out of reach on vital matters, we yearn for it and lament its invisibility, as we yearn for a long-lost friend or the parent we never knew. Yet when the truth unmask and convicts us, and we refuse to return its gaze, we would rather banish it in favor of our own self-serving and protective version of reality.

Nevertheless, a variety of postmodernist philosophies and postmodern social conditions have tended to undermine the notions that objective truth exists in the first place. Truth has been dissolved into language games, ethnicity, and other contingent social arrangements. It is constructed, not discovered. Rather than elaborate on these truth-eroding acids,¹ this paper develops a general apologetic for the significance and value of both objective truth and truth seeking. Many works of Christian apologetics assume that unbelievers want to know the truth, but have simply failed to avail themselves of good

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¹ See Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), especially Chapter One.

arguments to that end. While good arguments are indispensable, they are not sufficient because the unbeliever may never seriously consider these arguments due to their various truth-suppressing habits and proclivities. The apologetic seed, however excellent, must find fertile soil in which to grow.

Reflecting on Jeremiah's concerns along these lines (see 17:1–5), Eugene Peterson notes that “[t]he presumption here is that the kinds of lives we lead, who we are, not just what we do, are huge factors influencing our access to truth, any truth, but especially the Truth that is God.” In other words, “The understanding of the knower must be *adequate* to the thing being known.”² Many in the postmodern world have given up on the existence of objective truth entirely, and so find no need to pursue it. There is, therefore, an apologetic need and duty to: (1) defend the concept of a knowable and objective truth philosophically and to (2) commend the virtues requisite to attaining it. The focus of this paper is on (2).³ Although I will not give a rigorous defense of the reality of objective truth, I assume that the concept is neither unknown nor absurd to even to the most ardent postmodernists. In fact, the concept is tacit in all their assertions and in all their denials. The arguments presented here will build on this assumption and proceed to challenge the truth-denier to become a truth-seeker.

In the pursuit of an honest reckoning with truth for apologetic purposes, I will first broadly explore the relationship of truth, self-deception, and personal virtue. Then I will consider specifically how humility relates to the quest for truth, address the vice of intellectual apathy, and discuss the truth-avoiding temptations of diversions, and the truth-attracting possibilities of silence.

I. TRUTH, SELF-DECEPTION, AND VIRTUE

It is evident that we have some intuition of the meaning of truth, even if we cannot articulate it very well philosophically. Truth is something we may know, or fail to know, but it is not something we should manipulate according to our own desires, fears, whims, or hatreds. Winston Churchill quipped that, “Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.” This barb underscores the value of truth to life. Brushing away truth in the rush and tumble of life is somehow wrong—and we know it. If so, there must be another way of life that seeks, honors, and is willing to submit to truth, especially concerning matters of supreme consequence. This orientation requires a kind of courage—one of the classical virtues—since the truth may not be what we would prefer. It may make us uncomfortable. (It is revelatory that so many people today express approval by saying, “I’m comfortable with that,” and disapproval by saying, “I’m not comfortable with that.” Comfort is rather important when

² Eugene Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality* (ed. Jim Lyster et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 81.

³ For a philosophical defense of objective truth, or the correspondence view of truth, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, Chapter Four.

it comes to furniture and stereo headphones, but is utterly irrelevant when it comes to truth.)

Conversely, the pursuit of truth requires that one must shun sloth—one of the classical vices—since truth may be tucked under the surface of things and not easily ascertainable. Moreover, one should cultivate the virtue of studiousness instead of mere curiosity. Curiosity may be no more than lust for what one need not know (or should not know); and it may be driven by ulterior motives such as vanity, pride, or restlessness. Curiosity is not intrinsically good because it can lead to gossip, violations of privacy (snooping, voyeurism), and wasted intellectual time and effort—as represented by the content of any issue of *People* magazine. In other words, curiosity can be a vice, despite the fact that it is a principal passion (or lust) of contemporary Western culture. Studiousness, on the other hand, earnestly inquires after what ought to be known in ways fitting the subject matter. Studiousness sniffs out its own areas of ignorance and pursues knowledge prudently, patiently, and humbly—not resting until what needs to be known has been pursued to its end. Thus, one labors to avoid both gullibility (holding too many false beliefs) and extreme skepticism (missing out on too many true beliefs).

One must be ruthless with oneself in the process of pursuing truth, given the manifold temptations to self-deception and denial. The well-respected physicist Richard Feynman highlighted this imperative in his 1974 commencement speech at the California Institute of Technology. After discussing scientific integrity in evaluating one's own research and having others evaluate it, Feynman warned, "The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool. So you have to be very careful about that. After you've not fooled yourself, it's easy not to fool other scientists."⁴ After relating a parable relating the danger of seeking worldly benefit instead of loving God, Kierkegaard warns of "failing to invest your life upon that which lasts: to love God in truth, come what may, with the consequence that in this life you will suffer under the hands of men. Therefore, do not deceive yourself! Of all deceivers fear most yourself!"⁵

II. THE WILL TO DISBELIEVE

But not all exercise this healthy fear of self-deception. The great essayist and novelist Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) gives us a window into the machinations of the human soul in this candid revelation about the philosophy of his youth.

I took it for granted that there was no meaning. This was partly due to the fact that I shared the common belief that the scientific picture of an abstraction from reality was a true picture of reality as a whole; partly also to other

⁴ Richard Feynman, *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman: Adventures of a Curious Character* (New York: Bantam, 1989) 313.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, "An Eternity in Which to Repent," in *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (ed. Charles Moore; Farmington, PA: Plough, 1999) 47. See also Jer 17:9.

non-intellectual reasons. I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently, I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption.

Most ignorance is vincible ignorance. We don't know because we don't want to know. It is our will that decides how and upon what subjects we shall use our intelligence. Those who detect no meaning in the world generally do so because, for one reason or another, it suits their books that the world should be meaningless.⁶

Huxley goes on to confess that, "For myself as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation."⁷ He coveted freedom from the received political, economic, and sexual norms of his day, all of which were substantially influenced by Christianity. "There was one admirably simple method of confuting these people and at the same time justifying ourselves in our political and erotic revolt; we could deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever."⁸

In another noteworthy confession, contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel admits that theism repulses him at a level deeper than merely rejecting religion's "objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence" or its "acceptance of empirical falsehoods."⁹

I am talking about something much deeper—namely the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.¹⁰

Nagel speaks of his propensity as "a cosmic authority problem," which he takes to be common in our day.¹¹ These candid pronouncements are not made in an intellectual void; Nagel attempts to explain the existence of eternal moral and intellectual truths (against relativism) without recourse to theism.¹² Nevertheless, Nagel's visceral disclosure resembles the apostle Paul's description of those, in opposition to the divine knowledge of which they have access, suppress the truth of God's existence, fail to give God thanks, and thus become darkened in their understanding (see Rom 1:18–21).

⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (3rd ed.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937) 312.

⁷ *Ibid.* 316.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Nagel does not specify what he has in mind with these references. Concerning "empirical falsehoods," does he think that the Bible is committed to a flat earth or to geocentrism? If so, he is mistaken, since references to "the four corners of the earth" or to "sunrise and sunset" can be viewed as phenomenological or perspectival language and not to physical specifics of cosmology. We still use these figures of speech today with full knowledge that the world is round and that the sun revolves around it.

¹⁰ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 130.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 131.

¹² I find these arguments wanting. See Douglas Groothuis, "Thomas Nagel's 'Last Word' on the Metaphysics of Rationality and Morality," *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, 1/1 (1999) 115–22.

While Jesus frequently engaged in intellectual arguments,¹³ he was acutely sensitive to the moral status of those with whom he was communicating, realizing that the state of one's soul affected one's ability to know certain things. The Gospel of John reports Jesus saying to some unbelieving religious leaders, "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if others come in their own names, you will accept them. How can you believe [in me] when you seek approval from others?" (John 5:44, TNIV). Jesus claimed that an unhealthy concern for approval or status could impede proper judgment—in this case, a sober assessment of his own identity and the proper response to it. After discussing the love that God manifested in "his one and only Son" in order to provide eternal life to those who trust in the Son, Jesus went on to reflect on those who will not avail themselves of this gift and why. His language is stark and gripping.

This is the verdict. Light has come into the world but people loved darkness instead of life because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light or fear that his deeds will be exposed. But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God (John 3:19–21, TNIV).

An honest pilgrim on the path to truth will not recoil from truths that seem distasteful or "too horrible to be true" (*argumentum ad horrendum*), since what is the case may or may not be pleasing to us.¹⁴ Rather, Truth should be sought for its own sake, but also in tight relation to the intellectual flourishing of the individual. That is, there should be a conviction that it is best for one to follow truth wherever it leads, whatever the effect may be—and that this is the imperative for anyone with a modicum of intellectual rectitude. In a famous and poetic essay, "A Free Man's Worship," Bertrand Russell articulated a worldview that was anything but cheerful. In one passionate half-page sentence he wrote that humanity appears as the result of blind causes "which had no prevision of the end they were achieving" and that all a person's heroism, intensity of thought and feeling were futile to "preserve an individual beyond the grave." Indeed, "the whole temple of human achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins."¹⁵ One should salute Russell's courage to face up to the implications of what he took to be true, whether or not one agrees with his conclusions. In fact, the essay in question never gives any *arguments* to support the conclusion of a God-less world; instead, it draws out the consequences of such a view.

Another great philosopher, equally hostile to the Christian worldview, also rejected that idea of an omniscient deity who peered into the human situation—apparently on the basis of the *argumentum ad horrendum*. Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) critique of Christianity is multifaceted, but

¹³ On this see Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus* (Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003) Chapter Three, "Jesus' Use of Argument" 23–35.

¹⁴ See Peter Geach, *Truth and Hope* (Notre Dame, IN: University Of Notre Dame Press, 2001) 6.

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (ed. Paul Edwards; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957) 107.

his rejection of a personal God appears as much instinctive or dispositional as philosophical. Consider this statement from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the “ugliest man” speaks of God:

But he had to die: he saw with eyes that saw everything; he saw man’s depths and ultimate grounds, all his concealed disgrace and ugliness. His pity knew no shame: he crawled into my dirtiest nooks. This most curious, overobtrusive one had to die. He always saw me: on such a witness I wanted to have my revenge or not live myself. The god who saw everything, even man—this god had to die! Man cannot bear it that such a witness should live.¹⁶

The book’s hero, Zarathustra (a kind of atheistic anti-prophet), speaking in Nietzsche’s voice, approves of the speech. This passionate statement is hardly a rational argument against God’s existence; it is, rather, revulsion at the horrible thought of a holy and all-knowing deity gazing upon human uncleanness. It defies as much as it denies.

This observation is not intended as a refutation of Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole or of his rejection of Christianity. On the contrary, these observations emphasize the importance of honesty before reality, whether it is the face of God, or a faceless and indifferent universe, or something else. On other occasions, Nietzsche wrote equally passionately about the demands of truth.

At every step one has to wrestle for truth; one has had to surrender for it almost everything to which the heart, to which our love, our trust in life, cling otherwise. That requires greatness of soul: the service of truth is the hardest service. What does it mean, after all, to have integrity in matters of the spirit? That one is severe against one’s heart, that one despises “beautiful sentiments,” that one makes every Yes and No a matter of conscience.¹⁷

It is questionable that Nietzsche was able to reconcile his overall philosophy—which embraced radical perspectivism—with a true respect for objective truth,¹⁸ yet the moral advice of the above quote is worth pondering.

In a note related to his unfinished apologetic treatise, Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) laid down his goal for the work:

I should, therefore, like to arouse in man the desire to find truth, to be ready, free from passion, to follow it wherever he may find it, realizing how far his knowledge is clouded by passions. I should like him to hate his concupiscence [lustful desire] which automatically makes his decisions for him, so that it should not blind him when he makes his choice, nor hinder him once he has chosen.¹⁹

Pascal spoke further of the gravity of truth and the possibility of forfeiting it. “Truth is so obscured nowadays, and lies so well established, that unless

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (ed. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Viking, 1975) 379.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The AntiChrist*, section 50, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 632.

¹⁸ For a brief critique of Nietzsche’s perspectivalism, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay* 107–8, 198–202. In *Truth and Truthfulness* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2002) 12–19, Bernard Williams claims that Nietzsche was not a perspectivist, but he glosses over several Nietzschean texts that seem to refute his theory.

¹⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (ed. Alban Krailsheimer; New York: Penguin, 1966) 119/423.

we love the truth we shall never recognize it.”²⁰ Moreover, once having recognized it, truth must have its way with us. “Weaklings are those who know the truth, but maintain it only as far as it is in their interest to do so, and apart from that forsake it.”²¹ As T. S. Eliot put it, “Humankind cannot bear very much reality.”²² It takes courage and fortitude to interpret existence aright. But a false sense of humility may throw one off the scent.

III. TRUTH AND HUMILITY

A tendency toward tentativeness about objective truth—hidden under the guise of “humility”—is advocated in a recent book by an evangelical writer. While rightly warning of the dangers of arrogance and triumphalism in apologetics, John Stackhouse affirms an attitude quite foreign to the great apologists of Christian history by claiming that Christianity cannot be known to be true “beyond a reasonable doubt.”²³ He further claims that naturalism and Buddhism can be believed rationally.²⁴ After discussing 1 John 1:1–3, he says, “Postmodernity concurs. No human being knows anything for certain.”²⁵ This supposed humility is ill-advised for at least five reasons.

First, the apostle John would never agree with the statement, “No human being knows anything for certain,” since he evinces certainty that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate. Second, most postmodernists are not skeptics, but non-realists. Knowledge for them is not difficult, but easy: Just assent to the language game in which you find yourself—unless you deem it a totalizing meta-narrative—and stop worrying about objective truth. Third, Stackhouse asserts that he *knows* that no human being knows anything for certain. If Stackhouse is *certain* of this proposition, then it is not clear how he could know the proposition to be true. It looks self-refuting. Fourth, there are plenty of counter-examples concerning things we know for certain such as: (1) torturing the innocent for pleasure is always wrong; (2) the law of noncontradiction is universally true (3) “murder is wrong”; (4) there are physical objects. Fifth, Scripture repeatedly promises that confident *knowledge of God* is possible for humans rightly related to their Maker (see Rom 8:15–16). Being “humble” in apologetics should not commit us to an epistemological quagmire. One may have intellectual confidence in believing apart from absolute proof.²⁶ Stackhouse has not rigorously assessed the best apologetic arguments and found them wanting. Rather, going with the cultural flow, he simply capitulates to the notion that any strong claims to certainty about the objective truth of worldviews is somehow unfitting or embarrassing in the postmodern world.

²⁰ Ibid. 739/864.

²¹ Ibid. 740/583.

²² T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963) 69.

²³ John Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 111.

²⁴ Ibid. 150.

²⁵ Ibid. 166; see also 232.

²⁶ Ibid. 166.

The question of apologetic method cannot be taken up here, but a few comments on humility in apologetics are imperative in light of postmodernism's dismissal of meta-narratives and its readiness to label any strongly argued convictions as dogmatism, intellectual imperialism, and the like. Any intellectual quest is sabotaged and hamstrung by quarantining certainty at the outset. It is like injuring a horse before a race on the general principle that a strong, swift, and healthy steed is too proud to compete fairly or honestly. One should assess the strength of a given conclusion on the basis of the arguments given to support that conclusion, not by stipulating some "humble" ideal that forswears certitude in principle and in perpetuity. After the dust of a good argument settles, one may err by either understating or overstating the force of one's conclusions. If one understates, one is not being humble, but timid. If one overstates, one may be too proud to admit the limits and weakness of the argument. The ideal is neither timidity nor grandiosity. Honest and rational truth seeking should set the agenda.

In 1908 the prolific Christian apologist, novelist, and essayist G. K. Chesterton faced a similar worry about the use of humility to forestall argument. "Humility," he wrote, "was largely meant as a restraint upon the arrogance and infinity of the appetites of man."²⁷ For anyone to enjoy the grandeur and largeness of the world, "he must be always making himself small."²⁸ But Chesterton worried that humility has moved from "the organ of ambition" to "the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed."²⁹ One may assert oneself, but doubt "what he ought not doubt—the Divine Reason."³⁰ By this, Chesterton means the confidence that truth is available through reason. He frets that "the new humility" might give up on finding truth through reason entirely. "The old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. The new humility makes a man doubtful of his aims [such as truth], which will make him stop working altogether."³¹ Indeed, misplaced humility continues to bedevil discourse a hundred years after Chesterton's musings.³² Certainty is no vice, as long as it is grounded in clear and cogent arguments, held with grace, and is willing to entertain counter-arguments sincerely.

While the postmodernist dismissals of objective truth end up ringing hollow and intellectually unsatisfying,³³ the postmodernist suspicion of received meta-narratives (or worldviews) has some point. Some grand narratives that inspired so many for so long in the twentieth century have been brought into question, particularly Freudianism and Marxism, both of which are intrin-

²⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image Books, 1908) 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.* 32.

³² The entire chapter from which these reflections are drawn, "The Suicide of Thought," is still amazingly pertinent to the contemporary intellectual situation (see pp. 30–45).

³³ See Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, Chapters 4–10.

sically atheistic. Even the edifice of Darwinism is being challenged scientifically and philosophically of late and shows some signs of cracking and teetering. While one cannot reduce the concept of truth to power relationships and nothing more, it is the case that the way in which cultures view truth and falsity is partially determined by those who control the discourse (who “owns the microphone”).³⁴ Views may be marginalized not because they are intrinsically illogical or lacking in evidence, but because they are threatening or subversive or simply out of style.

It is likewise true that even within a rationally supported worldview, some aspects of that system of belief may be reified or absolutized beyond reason. Even if we argue convincingly that Christianity is a rationally warranted worldview, it is still the case that some Christians have made improper judgments according to misunderstandings of what their worldview entails. For example, some Christians supported slavery as a perpetual God-ordained institution when, in fact, it does not appear as such in Scripture itself. The postmodernist “hermeneutic of suspicion” calls us to reevaluate such claims to see if they may be based more on the vested interests of the powerful than on truth itself.³⁵ But this hermeneutic of suspicion itself must presuppose that the true can be separated from the false according to wise judgment. So, if we look back at the southern slave owners’ and traders’ interpretation of Scripture, we discern that their reading was adversely affected by their investment in the institution of slavery, that is, both their hermeneutic and their racist views were wrong, false, and out of alignment with reality. Therefore, the hermeneutic of suspicion cannot properly function without the concept of objective truth and its desirability.

IV. APATHY AND FALSE TOLERANCE: ENEMIES OF TRUTH

Denizens of the early twenty-first century may be taken hostage to another enemy of truth: intellectual apathy. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jonathan Rauch coined the term “apatheism” to describe a relaxed attitude toward religion and irreligion that he takes to be laudable.³⁶ He is not alone. Apatheism rests on a benign indifference, refusing to become passionate about one’s own beliefs or the beliefs of others. One may have religious preferences, but they are not the engines of energetic commitment, nor do they fuel controversy. One is neither called nor driven by these beliefs; one just has them. In apatheism, beliefs simply do not mean that much, nor should they. Rauch defends this attitude by claiming that apatheism is not a “lazy recumbency, like my collapse into a soft chair after a long day.” Rather, “it is the product of a determined cultural effort to discipline the religious mindset,

³⁴ See Phillip Johnson’s reflections on this in relation to how the creation-evolution controversy is often handled in *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 32–34.

³⁵ On the use and abuse of the hermeneutics of suspicion, see Merold Westfall, *Suspicion and Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

³⁶ Jonathan Rauch, “Let it Be,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2003) 34.

and often of an equally determined personal effort to master the spiritual passions. It is not a lapse. It is an achievement."³⁷ He takes apatheism to be the antidote to both religious extremism—so evident in the world of Islamic militancy—and the tyrannical secularism of the Chinese government.

Rauch's advocacy of apathy as the tonic to incivility is a clear case of a virtue that has run amuck, and which now lies in ruins. That virtue is tolerance, which, as understood by the American Founders, is a kind of patience that refuses to hate or disrespect those with whom one disagrees, even when disagreement concerns the things that matter most. The ideal of tolerance, in the Western classical liberal sense, is compatible with strong convictions on religious matters and with raging controversies. In fact, John Locke, one of the leading proponents of early modern tolerance, was himself a Christian who engaged in apologetics. Rauch's view would exclude in principle the discovery of and adherence to any truths not found comfortable by people who place tranquility above reality. Moreover, his recommended attitude is antithetical to the teachings of all religions (and much of irreligion): that one should care about one's convictions and put them into practice consistently. Some religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, have been quite concerned about conversion, but even less evangelistic religions, such as Buddhism and Judaism, still make significant truth claims that their adherents believe ought to be accepted and followed. Contemporary forms of tolerance, apatheistic or otherwise, tend to fall into the abyss warned of by novelist and apologist Dorothy Sayers, when she writes of the sixth Deadly Sin, *acedia* (or sloth),

In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.³⁸

Nevertheless, apatheism seems to be, if not epidemic, at least a widespread toxin in the United States. Rauch finds it in his "Christian friends who organize their lives around an intense and personal relation with God but who betray no sign of caring that I am a unrepentantly atheistic Jewish homosexual."³⁹ For the serious Christian, however, an attitude of apathy over the eternal destiny of another human being is not an option. Jesus warned the church of Laodicea that he was nauseated by their mere lukewarm (or apathetic) attitude (Rev 3:14–16). For decades polls have consistently indicated that while belief in God is very high in America, and most identify themselves as Christians who believe in the inspiration of the Bible, there is a dearth of the knowledge of the Bible. Further, high percentages of "believers" are relativists whose behavior differs little from professed unbelievers.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Dorothy Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 152.

³⁹ Rauch, "Let It Be" 34.

It seems to be an inescapable conclusion that many of those who identify with an ancient and worldwide religion claiming to possess and dispense a body of life-changing knowledge seem to have little genuine interest in matters of truth and the difference it makes. This is certainly not the case for vast regions of Islam, which takes its authoritative claim to reality seriously and seeks to make it known globally, however much that might threaten many in the West.⁴⁰

Intellectual sloth is age-old. Both Socrates and Jesus combated it through their probing questions, dialogues, and debates. But cognitive apathy is strengthened in the contemporary world by several defining features of postmodernity. This apathy is not only justified in the name of tolerance, as indicated by Rauch, but also encouraged by the endless diversion supplied by a culture of entertainment. The diversion mindset is typified by the bumper sticker that reads: "I've given up on reality, now I'm looking for a good fantasy."

V. DIVERSION: TRUTH ON HOLD

In the middle of the seventeenth century in France, Blaise Pascal went to great lengths to expose those diversions that kept people from seeking truth in matters of ultimate significance. His words still ring true. In his day, diversion consisted of things like hunting, games, gambling, and other amusements. The repertoire of diversion was minute compared with what is available in our fully-wired and over-stimulated postmodern world of cell phones, radios, laptops, video games, omnipresent television (in cars, restaurants, airports, etc.), extreme sports, and much else. Nevertheless, the human psychology of diversion remains unchanged. Diversion consoles us—in trivial ways—in the face of our miseries or perplexities; yet, paradoxically, it becomes the worst of our miseries because it hinders us from ruminating on and understanding our true condition. Thus, Pascal warns, it "leads us imperceptibly to destruction."⁴¹ Why? If not for diversion, we would "be bored, and boredom would drive us to seek some more solid means of escape, but diversion passes our time and brings us imperceptibly to our death."⁴² Through the course of protracted stupefaction, we learn to become oblivious to our eventual oblivion. In so doing, we choke off the possibility of seeking real freedom.

Diversion serves to distract humans from a plight too terrible to encounter directly—namely, our mortality, finitude, and failures. There is an ineluctable tension between our aspirations and our anticipations and the reality of our lives. As Pascal wrote,

⁴⁰ See Irving Hexham, "Evangelical Illusions: Postmodern Christianity and the Growth of Muslim Communities in Europe and North America," in John Stackhouse, ed., *No Other Gods Before Me?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 137–60.

⁴¹ Pascal, *Pensées* 414/171, p. 148.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Despite [his] afflictions man wants to be happy, only wants to be happy, and cannot help wanting to be happy. But how shall he go about it? The best thing would be to make himself immortal, but as he cannot do that, he has decided to stop thinking about it.⁴³

Pascal unmasks diversion as an attempt to escape reality, and an indication of something unstable and exceedingly out-of-kilter in the human condition. An obsession with entertainment is more than silly or frivolous. It is, for Pascal, revelatory of a moral and spiritual malaise begging for an adequate explanation. Our condition is “inconstancy, boredom, anxiety.”⁴⁴ We humans face an incorrigible mortality that drives us to distractions designed to overcome our worries:

Man is obviously made for thinking. Therein lies all his dignity and his merit; and his whole duty is to think as he ought. Now the order of thought is to begin with ourselves, and with our author and our end. Now what does the world think about? Never about that, but about dancing, playing the lute, singing, writing verse, tilting at the ring, etc., and fighting, becoming king, without thinking what it means to be a king or to be a man.⁴⁵

Pascal notes that “if man were [naturally] happy, the less he were diverted the happier he would be, like the saints and God.”⁴⁶ Diversion cannot bring sustained happiness, since it locates the source of happiness outside of us; thus, our happiness is dependent on factors often beyond our control, so that we are “liable to be disturbed by a thousand and one accidents, which inevitably cause distress.”⁴⁷ The power may go off, the screen freeze, or the cell phone connection may break up. Worse yet, our own sensorium may break down as sight dwindles, hearing ebbs, olfactory awareness fades, and all manner of bodily pleasures become harder to find and easier to lose. As the Preacher of Ecclesiastes intones, “Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’” (Eccl 12:1).

Diversions would not be blameworthy if they were recognized as such: trivial or otherwise distracting activities performed in order to temporarily avoid the harsh and unhappy realities of human life. However, self-deception often comes into play. In the end “we run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing it.”⁴⁸ According to Pascal, this condition illustrates the corruption of human nature. Humans are strangely not at home in their universe. They cannot even sit quietly in their own rooms. “If our condition were truly happy we should feel no need to divert ourselves from thinking about it.”⁴⁹ Woody Allen highlights this in a scene

⁴³ Ibid. 70/165, p. 45

⁴⁴ Ibid. 24/127, p. 36.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 620/146, p. 235.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 132/170, p. 66.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 166/183, p. 82.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 641/129, p. 238.

from the movie “Manhattan.” A man speaks into a tape recorder about the idea for a story about “people in Manhattan who are constantly creating these real unnecessary neurotic problems for themselves because it keeps them from dealing with more unsolvable, terrifying problems about the universe.”⁵⁰

The compulsive search for diversion is often an attempt to escape the wretchedness of life. We have great difficulty being quiet in our rooms, when the television or computer screen offers a riot of possible stimulation. Postmodern people are perpetually restless; they frequently seek solace in diversion instead of satisfaction in truth. As Pascal said, “Our nature consists in movement; absolute rest is death.”⁵¹ The postmodern condition is one of oversaturation and over-stimulation, and this caters to our propensity to divert ourselves from pursuing higher realities.

VI. SILENCE AND TRUTH

Diversions and the omnipresent noise and clutter of contemporary culture erect barriers to the serious and disciplined pursuit of truth. Although I have no knowledge of it being included as part of any apology for the Christian worldview (and it is scarcely mentioned elsewhere), one of the key elements in considering Christian truth claims is not an argument at all, but a condition in which arguments may be appreciated. That condition is silence. No one has stated it better than Kierkegaard, who wrote before the onset of electricity and its manifold mind-numbing media.

In observing the present state of affairs and of life in general, from a Christian point of view one would have to say: It is a disease. And if I were a physician and someone asked me, “What do you think should be done?” I would answer, “Create silence, bring about silence.” God’s Word cannot be heard, and if in order to be heard in the hullabaloo it must be shouted deafeningly with noisy means, then it is not God’s Word; create silence!

And we humans, we clever fellows, seem to have become sleepless in order to invent every new means to increase noise, to spread noise and insignificance with the greatest possible ease and on the greatest possible scale. Yes, everything has been turned upside down. The means of communication have been perfected, but what is publicized with such hot haste is rubbish. Oh, create silence!⁵²

In his poignant song, “The Rose Above the Sky,” singer and songwriter Bruce Cockburn sings of “The silence at the heart of things/Where all true meetings come to be.” In the silence of rational reflection, much not otherwise reachable may be explored and even known.

Despite the truth-allergic pathologies of our postmodern culture, truth remains to be considered, known, and embraced. If one rejects truth-avoiding

⁵⁰ Cited in Thomas Morris, *Making Sense of it All* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 32.

⁵¹ Pascal, 641/129, p. 238.

⁵² Kierkegaard, “Silence and Solitude,” in *Provocations* 372.

attitudes and actions, embraces the virtues of knowing, and finally casts oneself on the mercies of whatever truth may exist (whatever the consequences), the truth itself may disclose itself to such a receptive soul—and the light of grace may dawn. If so, all credit and praise are ultimately traceable to God himself, who underwrites and oversees the administration of all truth as well as the conditions required for its welcome into the truth-needing soul.