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# Time for Truth – Who Can We Really Trust?

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Os Guinness is an author and social critic who gave a talk at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University on Monday 6<sup>th</sup> November 2017 with the sole topic of 'the truth' and what role it can play in modern society. What the description of the event and the beginning of the talk both shared in common was an emphasis on the history of the speaker and on the history of the subject matter. Throughout the talk this was shown to be a vital element as, Mr Guinness suggested, it is only through our history we can see the vital importance and freeing power of 'the truth' and thus find its value today. Opening the talk with his thoughts and respect for the Czech people regarding the fall of communism and the Velvet Revolution, Guinness quickly outlined what he saw as the need for truth: that it is the basis of any movement aiming to break a regime of oppression. What stuck out about this stance, and indeed the name of the talk, was perhaps that it called for the audience to question how much truth we really find in today's society. With the emergence of 'fake news' and the 'post-truth era', the lecture seemed to suggest that it is important that we look at ourselves and redefine how much the truth is really prevalent in society.

Seemingly in seeking to further this goal, the lecture was interestingly partnered with another talk by John Lennox entitled *'Time for Science: What can we really know?'* which focused on the concept of scientific certainty. Comparing the two topics Mr Guinness noted remarkably that 'truth' in scientific disciplines was an absolute with no scope for relativism. This might therefore mean that science is protected from what Guinness termed the 'attack on truth', at least in one part because the truth cannot be insubstantially altered from one person to the next.

Although remarking that being protected in this way seems most enviable, Guinness suggested 'the truth' may, in fact, fall victim to a far greater threat: the 'will to power' (as originally expounded by Friedrich Nietzsche). This suggests that the very pursuit of truth is just a pursuit of power. Although a somewhat cynical argument, it does have a certain realism about it; after all, any absolute truth is a notoriously elusive concept which leaves open the door to deception from anyone willing to claim they know the truth absolute.

Of course, there is an alternative to absolute truth. A certain amount of relativism, that one person's truth is different from another's, could fix the problem of desperately searching for absolute truths. For example, every day we rely on social contracts; that when someone says that they will go for a coffee that afternoon, they will. Perhaps then this relativism is necessary on the small scale to allow for discrepancies based on truths (to allow that person to come to coffee a few minutes late or early), altered from person to person by socio-economic factors. Reflecting on this, however, Guinness suggested relativism is only helpful up to the point where a person encounters an act so morally wrong that the opinion that it is right can in no way be the truth. He suggests that this is in fact the place for relativism, in the easing of social contracts, and not in areas of high morality.

One final point that was made by Guinness was how we must pursue the truth going forward. He suggested two options: that we fit the world to fit our truth or we structure our truth around the world. Reminiscent of the common scientific adage of 'making the facts fit the theory' as a mark of bad practice, his final points of the talk reminded us that, despite the quest to find knowledge, and within it the truth, the way in which we pursue it is perhaps just as important as the fact itself.

Guinness concluded the talk with a sentiment he presented as key to his beliefs and Christian philosophy: the idea of being a witness to the truth. That ultimately, suppression of anyone's truth, before point of 'moral evil', is a block to finding our own truth. After opening the floor up to questions at the end of the talk it seemed apparent that, perhaps, the journey to finding any sort of absolute truth of being a tolerant one is as important as actually finding that truth.