

The Truth — Our Only Weapon Against Lies

As totalitarian governments around the world have shown, lies beget violence. But brave people in those regimes have shown that truth can stop lies, wrongness, and evil.



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by Rt. Rev. James D. Heiser, M.Div., S.T.M.

What is the biggest problem in the world today? Many answers might be offered up to this question: war, poverty, immorality, environmental concerns, the erosion of civil liberties, secular humanism, the decline of “traditional values” — the list which could be offered up is almost limitless. But regardless of the specific issues, our biggest problems are posed by a lack of people willing to speak the truth to others, including to the “powers that be.”

Life in our age is often quite perplexing; citizens are presented with a world in which problems are seemingly no longer on a human scale. Whether speaking of “globalization” or “the environment” or any of a dozen similarly nebulous problems, the sheer immensity of the problem is presented as overwhelming. For many

citizens, the scale of the pressing troubles of our age is set forth in a way that they grasp an “obvious” answer: “Only the government can do anything about that.” But most of the time, government simply finds a way to make such problems even worse by depriving citizens of their liberties, or taxing them to fund a false solution, or doing both. The “solution” to such problems is to make the state more powerful. But what if the real solution was to speak the truth to the “powers that be”?

One of the most pressing questions of our age is fundamental: “What is the truth worth to you?” Of course, many people deny the existence of “truth,” favoring the “post-modern” relativism that speaks of “narratives” instead of “truth,” as if men were only telling their version of a story rather than saying that which they believe to be the truth. It is the age-old problem of Pontius Pilate being able to look Christ

“Power kills; absolute Power kills absolutely”: Genocide, totalitarianism, and the “Big Lie” are all part of the legacy of the 20th century.

Jesus in the eye and ask, “What is truth?” Pilate — like many within the modern state — could deny the truth while looking it in the face.

In his first Epistle to the Church in Corinth, St. Paul wrote that love “does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Love and truth are thus joined together so that that which rejoices in iniquity is not only false; it is unloving — even hateful.

There were efforts back in 2000 and 2001 to classify the passing century. Some have referred to the 20th century as “The American Century”; others have called it “The War and Welfare Century.” Perhaps a

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more enduring description would be “The Century of Genocide” or “The Century of the Big Lie.” Totalitarian and authoritarian governments lied with little fear that they would be confronted with the truth. In his 1997 book, *Death by Government*, R. J. Rummel makes the observation:

Power kills; absolute Power kills absolutely.... The more power a government has, the more it can act arbitrarily according to the whims and desires of the elite, and the more it will make war on others and murder its foreign and domestic subjects. The more constrained the power of governments, the more power is diffused, checked, and balanced, the less it will aggress on others and commit democide.

Rummel’s careful and conservative estimate of the fatalities amassed in a century of slaughter at the hands of government is appalling. Rummel begins by assessing what he refers to as “this century’s mass murderers” — states that committed acts of democide that resulted in one million or more murders — and he found that 15 regimes

have wiped out over 151 million people, almost four times the almost 38,500,000 battle dead from all this century’s international and civil wars up to 1987. The most absolute Powers — namely, communist USSR, China, and preceding-Mao guerrillas; Khmer Rouge Cambodia, Vietnam, and Yugoslavia, and fascist Nazi Germany — account for nearly 128 million of them, or 84 percent.

Each of these murderous regimes was based on lies. They lied about God, for they were either militantly atheistic in nature or neopagan in character. These regimes lied about the nature of mankind and either promulgated racist propaganda or denied the existence of the human soul and ascribed to

mankind a purely mechanistic existence. They lied about history. They lied about economics. They lied about other nations. And they lied about the future of mankind with dark visions of a “thousand year reich” or “the triumph of communism.”

There were men and women who bravely proclaimed the truth in the midst of the lies. But quite often vastly larger numbers of men and women were content to remain silent in the presence of the lie.

Perhaps the most famous statement summarizing the failure of the common men and women of Germany to resist the evil of the National Socialists was expressed in a poem by Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) in the aftermath of the war. Niemöller apparently varied the wording of the poem on various occasions, but the most famous version is that which is quoted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

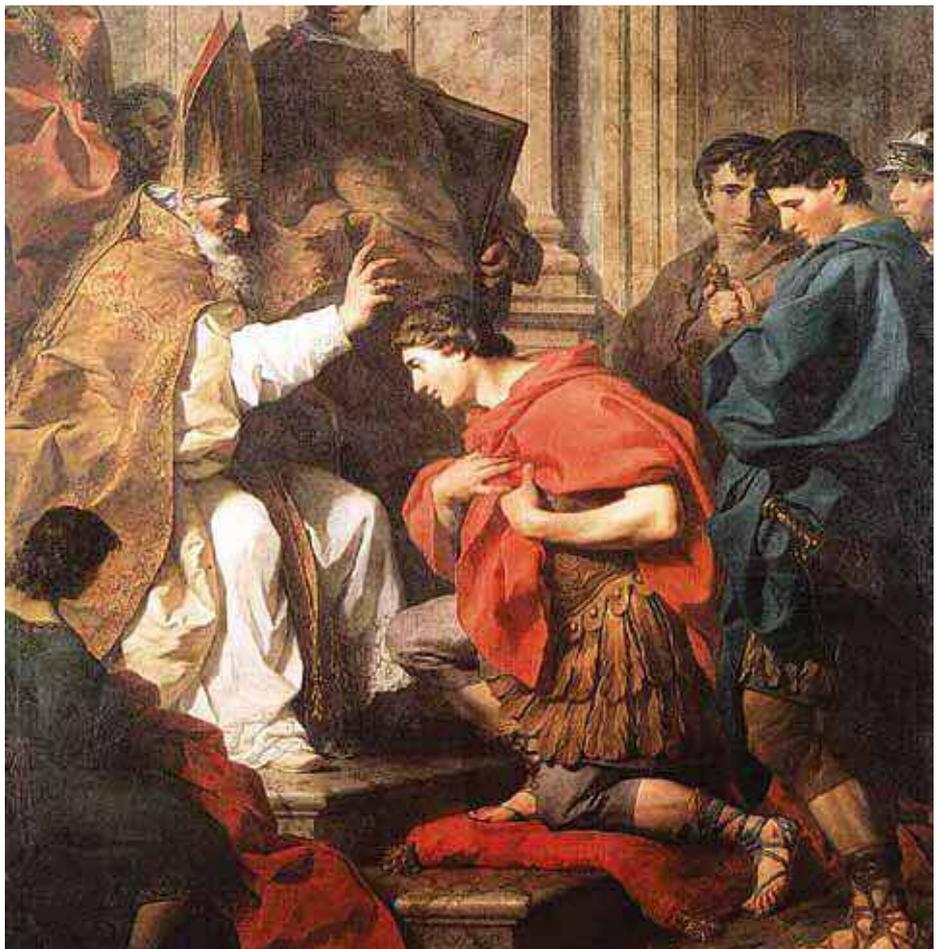
First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out — Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out — Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out — Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me.

The poetic form of Niemöller’s words may be more elegant than those words that he spoke to the so-called Confessing Church in Frankfurt in January 1946. However, the raw honesty of Niemöller’s original words carries the sense of speaking even more directly to our own day because they strike more closely to the spirit of compromise with evil that overcomes so many men and women in our own generation:



A history of examples: St. Ambrose’s rebuke of Emperor Theodosius I brought about the repentance of a ruler, and his submission to a law higher than himself.



Telling the truth may be deadly: Margrave George told Emperor Charles V, “Rather than deny my God and suffer the Word of God to be taken from me, I will kneel down and have my head struck off.”

If you demand my person, I am ready to submit: carry me to prison or to death, I will not resist; but I will never betray the church of Christ. I will not call upon the people to succour me; I will die at the foot of the altar rather than desert it. The tumult of the people I will not encourage: but God alone can appease it.

Ambrose and the faithful refused to abandon the basilica that Valentinian had targeted as a gift to the Arians; even when soldiers surrounded the church, the Christians refused to leave, passing their days singing hymns. And the emperor and his court backed down.

But this was not the end of Ambrose’s confrontations with the imperial office. Valentinian’s successor, Theodosius I, was an adherent of the Nicene Creed, but that did not mean that Ambrose would ignore his transgressions any more than he had those of Valentinian. In 390, following the murder of a high-ranking general by a mob in Thessalonica, Theodosius allowed a retributive slaughter against the population of that city that left as many as 7,000 people dead. Ambrose rebuked the emperor and Theodosius publicly repented of his sin. At a time that was only a few generations removed from venerating the emperor as a living god, the significance of such a public rebuke — and the emperor’s repentance — was not lost on the people.

The history of the West has been the context for numerous contests between church and state, with the struggle for freedom of conscience a repeated theme. The context of the reformations — Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic — presents issues of conscience that continue to be points of contention to this day. Some stories of conscientious confrontation with the state are well known, such as Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms or Thomas More before the power of Henry VIII.

Less well known is Margrave George of Brandenburg-Ansbach (1484-1543), who stood among the Lutherans — a belief he

When Pastor Niemöller was put in a concentration camp we wrote the year 1937; when the concentration camp was opened we wrote the year 1933, and the people who were put in the camps then were **Communists**. Who cared about them? We knew it, it was printed in the newspapers.

Who raised their voice, maybe the Confessing Church? We thought: “Communists, those opponents of religion, those enemies of Christians — ‘Should I be my brother’s keeper?’”

Then they got rid of the **sick, the so-called incurables** — I remember a conversation I had with a person who claimed to be a Christian. He said: “Perhaps it’s right, these incurably sick people just cost the state money, they are just a burden to themselves and to others. Isn’t it best for all concerned if they are taken out of the middle [of society]?” — Only then did the church as such take note. Then we started talking, until our voices were again silenced in public. Can we say, we aren’t guilty/responsible? The persecution of the **Jews**, the way we treated the **occupied countries**, or the things in Greece, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia or in Holland, that were written in the newspapers I believe, we Confessing-Church-Christians have every reason to say: *mea culpa, mea culpa!* We can talk ourselves out of it with the excuse that it would have cost me my head if I had spoken out. [Emphasis in original.]

When we have counted those who were slain by tyrannical regimes, we have still not made an accounting of the tens of millions murdered by the abortionists. When we have numbered those who were imprisoned in labor camps or the Gulag or psychiatric hospitals because they spoke a truth that the regime would not tolerate, we have still not enumerated those who are confronted with “free speech zones” or the soft-coercion of political correctness that ends careers, shatters lives, and deprives men of their fortunes.

Fear of the lie has bred ambivalence to the truth. We must regain our confidence to speak the truth to defeat the lie. And we can learn to confront the lie by looking to the heroes of conscience of the past.

Consider, for example, St. Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 340-397), who resisted the efforts of the state to seize the property of the church and who called on Emperor Theodosius I to repent of murder.

In 385 and 386, influential adherents of Arianism pressured Emperor Valentinian II to suppress the faith of those who confessed the Nicene Creed — which included the three basilicas of Milan. Summoned before the emperor, Ambrose was inclined to give in to the emperor’s demand that he surrender one of the basilicas to the Arian party, but the laity of Milan prevailed upon Ambrose to preserve the church, and he refused the emperor’s demand. In 386, when the emperor made it a capital crime to criticize Arianism, and soon reiterated his “request” that Ambrose surrender one of the basilicas, Ambrose declared:

Passive resistance: Estonia's "Singing Revolution" was a powerful demonstration of the power of truth to defeat the lie.



had embraced in the mid-1520s — and worked with the state assembly of his region to slowly implement reforms. Such reforms were conducted according to the rules adopted at the imperial Diet of Speyer (1526), where both the imperial representative and the princes concurred to the agreement, “Every State shall so live, rule, and believe as it may hope and trust to answer before God and his imperial Majesty.” However, at the next Diet of Speyer (1529), the imperial representative reneged on that agreement, infuriating many of the rulers and guaranteeing that the next Diet would mean further contention.

When he travelled to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, the margrave understood (as did all of the reform-minded secular representatives) that Emperor Charles V would attempt to break the resistance of the magistrates who had sided with the various Reform movements. But the margrave steadfastly proclaimed the courage of his convictions:

When the Emperor, after entering Augsburg, stubbornly demanded that the Lutherans cease preaching, Margrave George of Brandenburg fi-

nally declared: “Rather than deny my God and suffer the Word of God to be taken from me, I will kneel down and have my head struck off.”

Witnessing the courage of the political leaders as they remained steadfast in their faith, the theologian Johann Brenz (1499-1570) wrote: “Our princes are most steadfast in confessing the Gospel, and surely, when I consider their great steadfastness, there comes over me no small feeling of shame because we poor beggars are filled with fear of the Imperial Majesty.”

But such testimony to the convictions of conscience is hardly something that is reserved for the dim memories of history. Consider, again, the conclusion of some of the more brutal pages in recent history. In the 20th century, the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia endured brutality at the hands of both the Nazis and the Soviets. The persecution, prison camps, deportations, and executions that the people suffered at the hand of armies of occupation are not a distant memory. For example, the Museum of the Occupations in Tallinn, Estonia, is not only a memorial to the past; rather, it is a place where students may study the records of those savage days to learn from them.

What could such small nations do to resist the force of occupiers who could literally bring in an army that would be capable of overcoming any conceivable armed re-

sistance? The lessons learned under the boots of the Nazis and Soviets was that the resistance to the lie need not require violence — truth was their only weapon, and it was wielded with an indomitable spirit by a people seeking to live free from tyranny. The expression of that spirit was what would be known as the “Singing Revolution.”

The “revolution” began in 1987 with the beginning of mass demonstrations that soon spread to expressions of Estonian patriotism during music festivals. Thus, in 1988, a series of music festivals became the places where tens of thousands — and, eventually, hundreds of thousands — of Estonians gathered to sing hymns and patriotic songs that the Soviet regime had forbidden. In September 1988, 300,000 Estonians gathered for the “Son of Estonia” at the Song Festival Grounds in Tallinn. Estonian dissidents began to openly call for the end of Soviet domination of Estonian society, and there were simply too many people for the Soviet authorities to arrest, and thus the tyrants had little choice but to impotently watch the country sliding away from their control. The risks associated with a crackdown were more than the communist regime was prepared to assume.

The breaking point came during the days of the apparent collapse of communist power in Russia. Estonians acted as human shields to protect critical locations — including the television station — from occupation by Soviet troops. On August 20, 1991, independence was declared by the Estonian Supreme So-

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viet and the Congress of Estonia, and while the rest of the nations of the world seemingly bided their time waiting to see whether or not the “Singing Revolution” would be overturned by Soviet tanks, one of the smallest nations in the world, Iceland, became the first to recognize the new government, extending diplomatic recognition on August 22, 1991. Russian troops were not removed from Estonia until 1994, but the people had accomplished the seemingly impossible without firing a shot.

While the communist regime in Estonia was crumbling, in Russia the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Aleksy II, stopped the communist coup that was moving against communist Boris Yeltsin with the threat that he would excommunicate any soldier who committed murder during the attempted coup. But there was undoubtedly more to the dramatic sea-change events than met the eye, as later evidenced by the fact that the apparent demise of communism was not followed by either a de-communization program (along the lines of the denazification program in post-WWII Germany) or trials of communist thugs who had committed horrible crimes against humanity. Instead “former” communists became “democrats.”

Aleksy II was an unlikely candidate for rebellion against the “old guard”: Brought up and educated in Estonia, he had served the KGB since 1958. When Aleksy Rediger was elected to the patriarchate in June 1990, the KGB was undoubtedly pleased to have “their man” in such a role — but there was a different end in store for him. The KGB and the Communist Party had made contingency plans to deal with threats to their authority, as former KGB officer Anatoliy Golitsyn documented in his book *New Lies for Old*.

Boris Yeltsin had been president of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic for less than a month when the attempted coup was launched on August 19, 1991. The leaders of the coup had taken control of the launch codes of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. As in Estonia, a human shield was formed around the Russian Parliament, but as John and Carol Garrard observe in their book *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent*:

The defenders had ten tanks, whereas the party and the KGB commanded whole armored divisions. If they attacked, thousands would die in the carnage. Yeltsin fully expected a bloodbath and tried to get help.... Stymied by the West, Yeltsin then took a fateful step.

He appealed to the new patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Tanks began to approach the Russian “White House” shortly after midnight on August 21; several men were killed and all that seemed to be lacking was an order to finish the coup, when the patriarch addressed the nation:

In these circumstances, my duty as Patriarch is to warn every body for whom the word of the Church is dear and carries weight: Every person who raises arms against his neighbor, against unarmed civilians, will be taking upon his soul a very profound sin which will separate him from the Church and from God. It is appropriate to shed more tears and say more prayers for such people than for their victims.

The reaction of the coup leaders — and their troops in Moscow — has puzzled Sovietologists ever since. According to the Garrards:

In hindsight, Aleksy’s address to his “Brothers and Sisters” was arguably the final nail in the coup’s coffin.

Soviet defector Anatoliy Golitsyn provides a much different (and more realistic) view of the “August Coup” than that of the Garrards. In his book, *The Perestroika Deception*, Golitsyn entitles the final chapter “The Fake ‘August Coup’ and Its Calculated Failure.” He subtitles it “A deliberately engineered ‘Break with the Past.’” The chapter reproduces the series of detailed memoranda he provided to the CIA explaining that the “coup” was a controlled provocation that had been planned to fail from the beginning, for the purpose of convincing the West that Soviet Communism had died. None of which is to suggest, of course, that all of the demonstrators against the “coup” were agents provocateurs; undoubtedly, many genuine Russian patriots and fervent Christians joined the demonstrations and heroically put their lives on the line.



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A violent man’s polished legacy: The image of KGB founder Felix Dzerzhinsky was toppled after the failed 1991 coup and replaced with a cross. However, the Kremlin strategists and their KGB/FSB minions have been working ever since to rehabilitate his Soviet-era reputation.

At the headquarters of the KGB, the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky (founder of the Cheka — the predecessor organization to the KGB) was torn down and replaced with a cross, and an inscription was painted on what had been the base of the statue: *Sim pobedishi* — “By this sign, conquer.” A communist regime that had endeavored to present itself as omnipotent found it was necessary to retreat to the shadows: It would take decades to prepare the new version of the old lie, with the ideology of “Eurasianism” taking the place of Marxism as the state doctrine.

Speaking Truth to Tyranny

Near the conclusion of his 1970 Nobel Lecture, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who made the world aware of the atrocities of the Soviet gulag system, faced the seemingly insurmountable problem of confronting the unspeakable evil of Soviet Communism while armed with nothing more than the truth. The first point that he proclaimed in 1970 — and which we must remember today — is that those who oppose the truth combine violence and the lie:

We shall be told: What can literature do in the face of a remorseless assault of open violence? But let us not forget that violence does not and cannot

exist by itself. It is invariably intertwined with *the lie*. They are linked in the most intimate, most organic and profound fashion: Violence cannot conceal itself behind anything except lies, and lies have nothing to maintain them save violence. Anyone who has once proclaimed violence as his *method* must inexorably choose the lie as his *principle*.

Violence and the lie are thus inextricably bound up with one another: Speak the truth, and those who are of the lie will reply with violence. Thus, those who are of the truth understand the importance of the distinction between just wars and unjust wars. Just wars — beginning especially with those that are clearly defined as wars fought in self-defense — are ethically of a fundamentally different category from heedless violence. When one beholds wars of aggression, those who are of the truth must always ask: “Why is this war being waged using the methods of those who have the lie for their principle?” [Emphasis in original.]

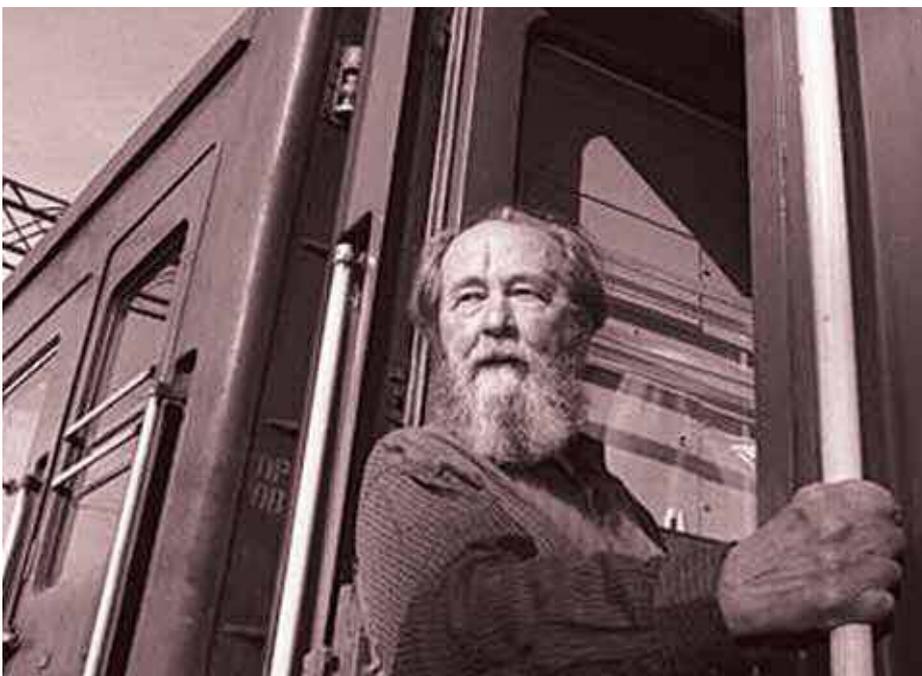
But Solzhenitsyn made a further point: The lie need not always resort to violence; it merely requires that people consent to the lie. “No longer does violence always

and necessarily lunge straight for your throat; more often than not it demands of its subjects only that they pledge allegiance to lies, that they participate in falsehood,” he said.

This is the point when men and women must determine inflexibly that they will refuse the lie and confess the truth: “The simple act of the ordinary brave man is not to participate in lies, not to support false actions! His rule: Let *that* come into the world, let it even reign supreme — only not through me.” It was thus that Solzhenitsyn found comfort in a Russian proverb: “One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.” Solzhenitsyn thus confesses a truth which the church also sings in Martin Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”: “This world’s prince may still scowl fierce as he will, he can harm us none, he’s judged; the deed is done; one little word can fell him.”

Today, both at home and abroad, the lie and violence are found everywhere and, as instruments of the evil one, they are the tools of the one who is “seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). The problems that confront us can seem “too big” and the evil that we confront can seem “too powerful.” But the truth remains the same: “One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.”

To confront the lie with the truth, it is necessary that we first know the truth. As Jesus declared to the Jews who believed Him: “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” The necessity of truth begins with the divine truth that has been revealed; being faithful with that which has been given to mankind, and then to demonstrate integrity with that knowledge that men have learned through the faculties that have been given to them. Refusing the lie begins with each individual refusing to lie to himself and to others. Then, he may confront the lies — both great and small — that assault the commonweal. In that endeavor, men and women with such a commitment to the truth seek out others who share that commitment and labor together to refute the lie. When we are speaking against the lie, the truth is our only weapon — and it is the only weapon that we need. ■



Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: “One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.”