

Truth and Freedom

One of the freedoms that Western democratic societies cherish and are determined to defend is the freedom of speech or expression. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articulates the right to the freedom of expression as thus:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The right to the freedom to hold a view and to express it is without question important if society were to remain open and if a discursive form of democracy were to be allowed to mature and flourish.

The freedom of expression is so important that some have argued that the society that inordinately suppresses it would be greatly impoverished. This is because it is in an environment where the free discussion of views is encouraged that the truth is most likely to emerge, recognised and embraced.

The idea of truth implies the existence of 'untruth'. And although in an open society, people must be allowed to articulate viewpoints that are simply not true, these viewpoints should always be contested and corrected. Truth, therefore, should guide the way in which we think and speak.

This emphasis on truth is at the heart of the Christian understanding of the freedom of expression, for without truth there can be no real freedom (John 8:31-32). This point is especially pressing in our postmodern climate, where the idea of objective truth has been eclipsed and where what is true has become radically relativised.

The Bible clearly emphasises that speech should be truthful. The Apostle Paul exhorts the Christians in Ephesus to 'put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour' (Ephesians 4:25).

Commenting on the Eighth Commandment in the Decalogue ('You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour'), the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: *The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. This moral prescription flows from the vocation of the holy people to bear witness to their God who is the truth and wills the truth. Offenses against the truth express by word or deed a refusal to commit oneself to moral uprightness: they are fundamental infidelities to God and, in this sense, they undermine the foundations of the covenant.*

The discussion on the freedom of expression must, therefore, give equal attention to the question of duties and responsibilities as it does to liberties. Speech must always be responsible if it is to protect the freedoms of the speaker and the community to which he belongs.

Speech has the responsibility towards the truth. It must be truthful. In fact, it is when speech is truthful that it liberates the speaker and his hearers from the distortions of falsehood and the unfreedom that results.

For speech to be truly free, it must be truthful.



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