
TRUTH-TELLING AND HOPE

ARISTOTLE PAPANIKOLAOU

ABSTRACT

Why else would one speak the truth if not out of and for hope? This hope is, indeed, a passion ‘for the possible’ and in Christian anthropology, this possible has something to do with eschatological flourishing that has already been inaugurated and which is never simply a private affair but has public effects and implications. We are created for communion with God – this is our hope; but there can be no communion with God – either individually or politically – when there is no truth-telling.

Keywords

Truth-telling; Confession; Theosis; Deification; Communion; Hope; Martyrdom; Politics

DOI: 10.14712/23363598.2023.22

I was asked to speak about truth-telling and hope. I have written on truth-telling for the past two decades,¹ and I feel compelled to begin with describing here the basic building blocks of my thinking on truth-telling, and then to discern how it relates to the concept of hope. I have never really thought about truth-telling in relation to the human experience of hope, although, as I will soon explain, I think hope was always my implicit motivation for exploring the dynamics or phenomenology of truth-telling as an experience, and, as I will soon argue, I also

¹ ‘Liberating Eros: Confession and Desire,’ *The Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006): 115–36.

believe hope has always been a constitutive part of truth-telling. Why else would some speak the truth if not out of and for hope?

The first thing to say about truth-telling is that there are many different kinds. I could tell you the truth about where I come from – for example, I am from Chicago. This particular type of truth-telling in most cases would be incidental, without much emotional impact. Perhaps there may be a certain pride that one feels when speaking about where they come from – a city that is well-known, with a great tradition for food, architecture, or culture. In some cases, someone may be afraid to be honest about their place of origin or their heritage, as is often the case if someone is from a poorer section of a city or from a region of a country that is known for poverty or violence. There are also situations where we say where we are from and it is simply incidental information. With this example of simply telling the truth of where we are from, we already see how hope can often be attached to a simple piece of information, how hope is somehow woven very tightly with our feelings or emotions, that is, our affectivity, and how hope has something to do with the way we relate to others, with the way others perceive us, with how we matter in the world.

The kind of truth-telling on which I focus is that which is bound up with some kind of affectivity. I am not so much interested in truth-telling as an incidental, non-affective piece of information, although I think attention to that specific experience can help us illuminate something about affective forms of truth-telling. My interest is in affective forms of truth-telling and, more specifically, those forms of truth-telling that are surrounded by the emotion of fear and the feelings of anxiety. It is quite easy, and there is often a very strong desire to tell the truth about something good in our lives, and we need to go no farther than social media to see evidence of this desire. Even truth-telling associated with fear needs to be nuanced a bit. For example, we may feel fear about the fact that we have been diagnosed with cancer, but we are not necessarily afraid to tell others about that diagnosis, unless, of course, it may threaten our job or a relationship. We may want to tell others about our diagnosis for support, prayers, sympathy, and even attention, but that truth-telling does not necessarily mitigate the fear surrounding the cancer diagnosis.

There are other forms of truth-telling in which the content itself is what we fear to be known. In short, there are certain things we are afraid to say, and we are afraid to say these things for fear of what they

might mean for how we perceive ourselves, how others perceive us; for fear of what it might mean for our ability to relate to others, and for how others might relate to us. The content of these fearful things could be things that we have done intentionally or unintentionally, such as betraying a friend or killing innocents in military combat;² it could be things that have been done to us, such as being raped; or things that we have neither done or have been done directly to us but to which we are somehow associated, such as being a relative of someone who commits a mass shooting, an all-too-common occurrence in the United States, or having a parent or sibling who is in prison.

We see how hope is inextricably tied to our *not* saying these things about ourselves to others, as we hope that in keeping these particular things secret, it will affect our relations with ourselves positively, and, perhaps, even our relations with ourselves, although, in terms of our relations with ourselves, there is the risk that in not revealing things we are most afraid to say to others, it will eventually impact us in a negative way affectively. Sometimes we are not even aware of how it is we feel about an event that happens to us, only for it to manifest itself in destructive patterns of relationship later in life. I just saw a beautifully done documentary by a program in the US called ‘Independent Lens’, and it was of a boy whose mother just simply left him and his brother when they were in their early teens.³ After 3 years, he tracked her down. They have since had a relationship over the past 20 years. When his mother first left him, he had thought he was fine, continued with school, was an excellent athlete. Later in his 20s, he had two relationships in which he treated his partners, who were women, very badly. He started to drink heavily. Through truth-telling, he was able to realize that he had not really been honest as a teenager about how he felt about his mother’s abandonment and that, even though they have a relationship now, he still has lingering feelings of resentment and anger at being abandoned, which was, of course, affecting how he was relating to others.

This story, as well as countless others, reveals a couple of things. First, a young, teenage boy, naturally, found it difficult to be honest

² ‘The Ascetics of War: The Undoing and Redoing of Virtue,’ *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War*, ed. Perry T. Hamalis and Valerie A. Karras (University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 13–36.

³ ‘Independent Lens’, Season 24 Episode 14, last modified August 5, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/video/sam-now-bgzszf/>.

about his real feelings about his mother's abandonment, for fear, of course, of what such honesty might mean – that his mother really did not want him, that he did not matter to his mother, that he was unlovable, that he may never see her again, that he may never experience the safety, fun, laughter, joy that he experienced when she was with them. This lack of truth-telling to the self, this form of self-deception, helped him cope, go on, and achieve, in other words, in some sense it allowed him to maintain hope in a certain image of himself and in the relationships he was able to form. Later in life, the self-deception caught up with him and affected both his relationship to himself and to others, especially with those with whom he had hoped to be most intimate.

Insofar as not recognizing or willfully concealing the truth can help us establish relationships we think we want, or the kind of self-image and perception by others we think will foster good relationships, there is a potential link between truth-telling and intimacy. In a relationship of friendship, for example, one could conceal a deep, dark secret that they are afraid to reveal to a friend, and this non-telling could form the relationship in a particular way, but what would not be possible is the degree of intimacy possible if one were to share this deep, dark secret. But there is, of course, a risk. Because on hearing this deep, dark secret, the result could be rejection and the end of the friendship; or, another result could be prudence, compassion, wisdom, and acceptance – in short, greater intimacy. Once the truth is spoken, it cannot be taken back; it hovers in the middle of the relationship either as a wall that divides or a magnet that draws the friends closer to each other. Once the truth is spoken, the relationship will change based on this articulated truth, and, of course, attached to the articulation is hope both of self and the relationship itself. We see here, however, that for the realization of this hope, much depends on the listener.

One would think that the listener is simply a neutral observer in truth-telling, but when we speak about hope and truth-telling, we do not simply point to the transformative potential of truth-telling in the telling itself; that hope has something to do with the listener, who receives this articulation and, in receiving, has the power to actualize this articulation in a particular way. What do I mean by 'actualize this articulation in a particular way'? Once the articulation is given, nothing will be the same; a new event, state of being or 'existential how' will emerge that depends both on what is articulated but also

on its response. If someone reveals something that they are afraid to articulate, and if the listener uses this articulation in such a way as to manipulate, demean, or abuse the listener, then this articulation will realize something that resembles the demonic; if, however, the listener receives this articulation with, as we mentioned, prudence, compassion, wisdom, and acceptance, then something more akin to the theotic will be manifested, which is that in which our hope lies. The listener has the power to iconize either the demonic or the theotic, depending on how they respond.

But it is not simply the listener as a listener that matters in the actualization of the event of truth-telling; it matters who the listener is. The particularity of the listener affects the affective and existential impact of the truth-telling. In plain words, the rebound effect of the listener on truth-telling will be different if the listener is a stranger, friend, sibling, parent, therapist, talk-show host, or priest. As an example, I once asked my students whether it was easier to admit a wrong done to someone in private or on a popular TV talk show. Even though the popular TV talk show may be watched by millions of people, they astutely said that it would be easier to admit a wrong on this TV talk show, to the audience in the attendance and to the audience watching. Why? Because if the response from the person wronged is not what was hoped for, then they could get the support of the audience against the response of the person who was wronged. In other words, it is much more vulnerable and riskier to admit a wrong to someone in private, because we may not get the response we were hoping for; because we have no one else to shield us from the disappointment, hurt, sadness, and anger of the person wronged.

This dynamic of truth-telling, what is articulated, the response of the listener, and who the listener is, helps explain why in the Orthodox and Catholic churches confession is a sacrament.⁴ Of course, there are historical reasons, but theologically it makes sense if one believes in an incarnational understanding of the God-world relation, which means a theotic understanding of the God-world relation. If one understands forgiveness as an event rather than a cognitively willed action, where one faces the forgiver in the hope of being forgiven, then the invisibility

⁴ See my essay, 'Honest to God: Confession and Desire,' in *Thinking through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Scholars*, ed. Aristotle Papanikolaou and Elizabeth Prodromou (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 219–246.

of God would make that impossible if not for the iconic role of the priest (who does not have to be a man). Sure, it is possible to ask God for forgiveness in the privacy of one's own room, and such a confession may prove difficult affectively to articulate; or one could write in a journal, which also could prove difficult affectively; but one could never receive in those articulations an iconicized response of forgiveness, the closest we can actually get to a face-to-face event of forgiveness with God. For better or for worse, even though all of creation is sacramental, and even though all humans are made in the image of God, the priest iconizes God in a way that is distinct from all other iconizations. The priest becomes a conduit for the hoped-for event of forgiveness that we hope to experience in and from God, in a way and to a degree not readily available if when we truth-tell to a stranger, friend, sibling, parent, therapist, or TV talk show.

The importance of the listener is also evident when thinking about truth-telling in the political context. I have written on how the degree of truth-telling possible within a given society is a marker for measuring the degree to which a society is democratically pluralistic and committed to freedom and equality.⁵ One could point to any number of authoritarian regimes throughout history, but we need not look farther than the kind of totalitarianism emerging in Russia, Hungary, Turkey, and Serbia, not to mention so many other regimes in the world. In these particular kinds of regimes, truth-telling is feared; the listener automatically becomes suspect and feared, even when such a listener is a friend, sibling, parent, or priest. In short, truth-telling is severely restricted, and as a result, political communion is stunted. In a space where truth-telling is allowed to the greatest possible degree for a society that values freedom and equality, then such a society allows for more pluralistic forms of openness, honesty, and intimacy not possible within restrictive totalitarian regimes. One sees the link between truth-telling and authentic relationship especially clearly in the contrast between totalitarian regimes and democratic societies. It is true that liberal democratic societies can veer toward a hyper-individualism and a hyper-consumerism, in a way that is the flip side of totalitarian regimes veering toward extreme forms of homogeneity and sameness. The irony is that in a society where truth-telling is feared, isolation

⁵ *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 163–194.

is inevitable. In a society where truth-telling is not feared, where the listener is not feared, then multiple forms of political communion are possible. Even in a political context, the forms of political communion for which we hope depend on the conditions of the possibility for truth-telling, and on a political listener that is not threatening. More could be said here, especially in the era of 'fake news'. Perhaps what we are seeing is that the less truth-telling in politics, either by force or willfully, the more hopelessness there is in a political society. Is this what is happening in our current situation?

I want to end by engaging very briefly an important recent contribution to theological anthropology in which hope plays a constitutive role. It is by David Kelsey, emeritus professor of Yale Divinity School, who writes:

Like faith, hope involves a commitment to an array of diverse practices in public. They are practices celebratory of the quotidian's eschatological flourishing; they are, after all, joyously hopeful practices. They include practices of forming and enacting intentions. They include practices expressive of certain emotions, passions, and feelings. And, because both cooperative human actions and human feelings are conceptually formed, some of them are practices of learning relevant concepts and ways in which to think. In short, they are practices that engage the full range of personal bodies' powers.

A little later, he adds:

A passion is a conceptually formed, intense, and persisting desire for some thing or some state of affairs in the public space of a shared lived world such that it organizes a personal body's energies and time and constitutes one way in which she is engaged in that world. It is in this sense of a 'passion' that we may say, following Kierkegaard at a distance, that hope is a passion 'for the possible' in the sense of a passion for the eschatological flourishing of our proximate contexts that is possible precisely because, and only because, God has already inaugurated such flourishing in our lived worlds.⁶

⁶ *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 503 and 523.

There are several points here that connect to my comments on truth-telling and hope. First, one of the ‘joyful hopeful practices’ that are ‘celebratory of the quotidian’s eschatological flourishing’ must be truth-telling, for why else would one speak the truth if not out of and for hope? This hope is, indeed, a passion ‘for the possible’ and in Christian anthropology, this possible has something to do with eschatological flourishing that has already been inaugurated and which is never simply a private affair but has public effects and implications. This hope in the eschatological promise must have something to do with ‘love’, since, as St. Paul tells us, ‘these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love’ (1 Cor. 13:13). In the end, the possible for which we are passionate, that is hopeful, is love; it is a theotic possibility, to love as God loves – to love God, neighbor, and ourselves. It is for this reason that we hope in the promise that, as St. Paul tells us, ‘nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below – there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord’ (1 Rom 8:38–39).

We are created for communion with God – this is our hope; but there can be no communion with God – either individually or politically – when there is no truth-telling. God does not respond to false images, even the false images we have of ourselves; God shatters them as God did the golden calf; or, rather, God remains concealed amidst the fragmentation caused by these false images. The death of the old self as a result of truth-telling to the other who receives it in truth and love is a form of martyrdom that enables communion because it breaks through the mask that prevents communion with the other. In the public realm, self-assertion is not the same as martyrdom, especially when it fosters a politics of demonization. A real politics of martyrdom would be the visible manifestations of political communion, of forms of relationality across deep and abiding differences that constitute human beings as unique. This is the great gift of the martyrs to the world – that there can be no communion without martyrdom. What the world needs now more than ever in an age of globalization, which is an age of increased encounter across difference, is more martyrs; it needs a politics of martyrdom; it needs death – hopefully more spiritual than physical – that results from truth-telling in the face of the other. It is only through martyrdom – a form of truth-telling in which we get ‘rid

of [the] old self' and 'put on the new self' (Eph 4:22-24) – that love will conquer fear.

*Orthodox Christian Studies Center
Theology – 924
113 W. 60th St.
New York, NY 10023
E-mail: papanikolaou@fordham.edu*