

Jesus as the Truth and the Pragmatic Theory of William James: An Evaluation for Contemporary Christian Education

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Abstract

Truth has remained an enigmatic concept even in our time. Yet, the desire to know and embrace that which is true is as human nature itself. In a bid to search for truth and meaning in life, people have turned towards various forms of relativism and thereby, interpreting everything in reference to the physical order. This project critically evaluates the fact that truth is not limited to everything that seems readily verifiable as taught by William James, the father, transcends practicality and verifiability to embrace the supernatural, which is the quintessential of truth as reflected in the person of Jesus Christ. In the course of this research, we observed that some Christians have been led astray by this understanding of the pragmatic theory of truth, which sees truth merely as that which is practically useful and meaningful to human life. The paper establishes that this theory of truth is deficient in that it creates a certain confinement whereby people are limited to seeking truth merely in material things. This confinement to that, which works alone, in our view has consequently destroyed the core values and principles of Christians. The paper therefore, call for a re-orientation in the right direction by recommending a firm belief which lies on an understanding of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God as the full revelation of truth. This new orientation in the understanding of truth is to be promoted by those who through the means of social communication exert great influence upon the lives of Christians.

Key words: Jesus, The Truth, Contemporary, Christian, Education.

Introduction

The term "truth" ranges in meaning from a general understanding and religious attitude on the one hand to personal acceptance of a specific set of beliefs on the other hand. There are, as a matter of fact many shades and nuances of meaning on the continuum between these two poles.

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Furthermore, since context is constitutive of meaning, one in an accurate sense could distinguish between an ontological, a logical and a moral truth. (Ludwig 1974). Within the logical concept of truth lies the epistemological theories of truth in which the pragmatic theory is but one of them. It is worthy of note that the pragmatic theory of truth refers to those accounts, definitions, and theories of the concept truth that distinguish the philosophies of pragmatism and pragmaticism. The conception of truth in question varies along lines that reflect the influence of several thinkers, initially and notably, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, but a number of common features can be identified. The most characteristic features (1) a reliance on the pragmatic maxim as a means of clarifying the meaning of difficult concepts truth in particular, and (2) an emphasis on the fact that the product variously branded as belief, certainty, knowledge, or truth is the result of a process, namely, inquiry.

However, the nucleus of this work lies in the reconstruction of the pragmatic theory of truth by William James, where Christ Jesus is exemplified as the perfect paradigm for this reconstruction. The pragmatic theory of truth as handed down to us by William James is dreadfully disingenuous and deceptive. For him, truth is anything that works and can thus be verified through inquiry. This understanding has led many persons especially Christians today to believe only those things that work out for them as the truth. Hence, for you to tell them that truth in its very nature transcends such an understanding is like answering a rhetorical question which in itself does not call for any answer. Given this milieu, many Christians today have turned their minds to hearing only those Gospels that purport to solve their problems in the here and now. These have caused a lot of problems because many people especially the young have left the truth which is Christ himself. I am the Way the Truth and the Life (John 14:6) - in search of harnessed minuscule truth which claim to have the answer to every question and problem. Consequently, it has also led to a great tension between doctrine and teachings of the mainline Christian ministers of the Gospel especially the Catholic Faith and those of the Pentecostal Protestant preachers, the former presenting Christ Jesus as the truth par excellence and the later presenting pragmatism as championed by William James in the clothing of Jesus. Hence, the saying of Jesus' "they are wolves in sheep clothing".

The concept of truth has been misunderstood down through the ages. Contemporary world especially Christianity is not immune from these misconceptions. This is evident in the life of its adherents in their approach to religious truth.

Saturated with the philosophies of contemporary times especially the pragmatic principle that whatever works and reflect in praxis is the truth, many Christians now approach Jesus in that light. This finds expression in the obsession for miracles, craze for sensational spirituality, man-of-God syndrome etc. Sadly, all these have resulted to frustrations, disappointments, disasters of various kinds, neo-slavery and even death.

The Concept of Truth

Truth (adjective, true) is derived the German word "true" which means faithful. It involves both the quality of "faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, sincerity, veracity", and that of "agreement with fact of reality" (Merriam

2005). From this definition, it is obvious that truth can have a variety meanings, such as the state of being in accord with a particular fact or reality, or being in accord with the body of real things, real events or actualities. It can also mean having fidelity to an original or to a standard or ideal. In a common archaic usage it also meant constancy or sincerity in action or character. The direct opposite of truth is “falsehood”, which can correspondingly take logical, factual or ethical meanings.

On the basis of human relationship, truth connotes steadfast in adherence to a commander, or friend, to a principle or cause, to one’s promise, faith etc. firm in allegiance, faithful, loyal, constant, trusty, honest, honorable, upright, various, trustworthy, free, from deceit, sincere and truthful. Besides, when reality or factuality is considered as the basic, truth designates “Conformity with the reality; representing the thing as it is; real, genuine; rightly answering to the description; properly so called; not counterfeit, spurious, or imaginary” (Wikipedia 2011).

Truth from the Philosophical Perspective

One of the largest subjects in philosophy is truth. Truth has been a topic of discussion in its own right for thousands of years. Moreover, a huge variety of issues in philosophy related to truth, either by relying on these about truth, or implying these about truth. In the philosophical sphere, questions concerning the nature of truth are usually examined in the various theories of truth proffered by philosophers. Among these are the Correspondence, Coherence, Pragmatic, the redundancy theories and many others. Correspondence Theories of truth constitute the most ancient of all. This type of theories hold that the truth or the falsity of a representation is determined in principle solely by how it relates to ‘things’ , by whether it accurately describes those ‘things’. An example of correspondence theory is the statement by the Thirteenth Century philosopher/theologian Thomas Aquinas in his work, *De Veritate*: - *Veritas est adeaquo rei et intellectus*- “Truth is the equation (or adequation) of things and intellect”, a statement which Aquinas attribute to the Ninth Century Neo- Platonist Isaac Israel. Aquinas also restated the theory as: “A judgment is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality” (Aquinas 1909).

Following Avicenna, and also Augustine and Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas stated in his *Disputed Questions on Truth*: “A natural thing, being placed between two intellects, is called true insofar as it conforms to either. It is said to be true with respect to its conformity with the divine intellect insofar as it fulfills the end to which it was ordained by the divine intellect... With respect to its conformity with a human intellect, a thing is said to be true insofar as it is such as to cause true estimate about itself’. Thus for Aquinas, the truth of the human intellect (logical truth) is based on the truth in things (ontological truth). (Aquinas 1909; 16).

Immanuel Kant in his introduction to *Logic* discussed the correspondence theory of truth in the following manner, criticizing corresponding theory as circular reasoning. Truth is said to consist in the agreement of knowledge with the object. According to Kant, the definition of truth as correspondence is a "mere verbal definition". (Moore, 1902).

Truth from the Theological Perspective

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in his masterpiece, *The Summa Theological*, Questions 109 brings out four points of inquiry as he attempts to discuss the concept of truth. Whether truth is a virtue? Whether it is a special virtue? Whether it is a part of justice? Whether it inclines to that which is less?"

Here the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas states it clear that the term 'truth' can be applied to many things including God himself but the degree is what makes the difference. For Aquinas, God is *Verum Simpliciter*. That is, He is truth itself and every other created reality shares in some degree the truth which resides in the being of the creator alone. Thus, a man who is just and virtuous is a truthful man. Consequently, we can speak of truth as being a virtue, truth as part of justice and truth as being life.

Aquinas also said that real things participate in the act of being of the Creator God who is Subsistent Being, Intelligence, and Truth. Thus, these beings possess the light of intelligibility and are knowable. These things (beings, reality) are the foundation of the truth that is found in the human mind, when it acquires knowledge of things, first through the senses, then through the understanding and the judgment done by reason. For Aquinas, human intelligence ("intus", within and "legere", to read) has the capability to reach the essence and existence of things because it has a non-material, spiritual element, although some moral, education, and other elements might interfere with its capability.

Jesus as the Truth

In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls himself 'The Truth', when he said to Thomas "I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through Me" (Jn. 14:6). The assertion, is strikingly important because the conversation of Jesus with His disciples which led to this affirmative declaration embodies the entire Christ's event. That is, the passion, death, resurrection, ascension and the second coming of Christ in glory (the Parousia).

In his celebrated Encyclical, *Veritatis Splendour* (Pope John Paul II 1994) focuses on the splendor of truth. The Holy Father acknowledges that Christ Jesus makes his light to shine on us and this light if Christ is the truth. He makes this clear in the beginning sentences of Encyclical when he says: (John Paul 1994)

The splendour of Truth shines forth in all the works of the Creator and, in a special way, in man, created in the image and likeness of God. Truth enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom, leading him to know and love the Lord. Hence the Psalmist prays: "Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord" (Ps.4:6). For (John Paul II 1994), Jesus Christ is the true light that enlightens everyone. Jesus Christ, the "light of the nations", shines upon the face of his Church, which he sends forth to the whole world to proclaim the Gospel to every creature (cf. Mk 16:15). Hence the Church, as the People of God among the nations, while attentive to the new challenges of history and to mankind's effort to discover the meaning of life, offers to everyone the answer which comes from the truth about Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

William James Pragmatic Theory of Truth

James first announced his commitment to pragmatism in a lecture at Berkeley in 1898, entitled "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results". Later sources for Pragmatism were lectures at Wellesley College in 1905 and at the Lowell Institute and Columbia University in 1906 and 1907. Pragmatism according to James emerges as six things: a philosophical temperament, a theory of truth, a theory of meaning, a holistic account of knowledge, a metaphysical view, and a method of resolving philosophical disputes.

As a matter of fact, William James's version of the pragmatic theory is often summarized by his statement that 'the 'true' is only the expedient in our way of thinking, just as the 'right' is only the expedient in our way of behaving" (James 2011). By this, James meant that truth is a quality, the value of which is confirmed by its effectiveness when applying concepts to actual practice (thus, pragmatic) James's pragmatic theory is a synthesis of correspondence theory of truth and coherence theory of truth, with an added dimension. Truth is verifiable to the extent that thoughts and statements correspond with actual things, as well as "hangs together", or coheres, fits as pieces of a puzzle might fit together, and these are in turn verified by the observed results of the application of an idea to actual practice. James said that "all true processes must lead to the fact of directly verifying sensible experiences somewhere". He also extended his pragmatic theory well beyond the scope of scientific verifiability, and even into the realm of the mystical: "On pragmatic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, then it is 'true'". (James 2011:13)

The Strengths and Weaknesses of this theory

The popular notion is that a true idea must copy its reality. Like other popular views, this one follows the analogy of the most usual experience. Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them. Shut your eyes and think of a round clock on the wall, and you get just such a true picture or copy of its dial. But your idea of its 'work' is much less of a copy, yet it passes muster, for it in no way clashes with reality. Even though it should shrink to the mere word 'work', that word still serves you truly' and when you speak of the 'time keeping function' of the clock, or of its spring's 'elasticity', it is hard to see exactly what your ideas can copy.

James exhibits a knack for popular expression that Charles Sanders Peirce seldom sought, and here his analysis of correspondence by way of a simple thought experiment cuts right to the quick of the first major question to ask about it, namely: To what extent is the notion of correspondence involved in truth covered by the ideas of analogies, copies, or iconic images of the thing represented? The answer is that the iconic aspect of correspondence can be taken literally only in regard to sensory experiences of the more precisely eidetic sort. When it comes to the kind of correspondence that might be said to exist between a symbol, a word like "work", and its object. The springs and catches of the clock on the wall, then the pragmatist recognizes that a more than nominal account of the matter still has a lot more explaining to do.

The theory though plausible is very categorical as it has to do with correspondence of ideas with reality. Hence, whatever does not correspond with reality is not true. Thus for him, the central feature of pragmatism was what he took to be his theory of truth. Unfortunately, his exposition of this theory as he understood it, again sacrifice accuracy to vigour. He did himself a particular disservice by making remark which seem to imply that he was equating truth with expediency, that he was willing to count any belief as true if it satisfies the interest of the person who holds it. This made this easy for his critics, of whom there were many. With greater goodwill they would have detected that his actual theory although vulnerable to criticism was not nearly so simple.

Scriptural Exemplification of Jesus as the Truth

As seen in the sapiential books, truth is seen as revelation - "revealed truth" and it is usually associated with Jesus Christ. The Jews believe this revealed truth is explicit in the law where they found the will of God. Thus, believers are said to be born to a new life through the word of truth, sanctified through obedience to the truth. They must therefore not stray from the truth. Indeed, the apostles were not preaching an abstract doctrine but they were rather preaching Christ who was "manifest in the flesh... proclaimed to pagans, believed throughout the world" (James 2011).

The ideal of Christ as revealed truth is the father's Word (logos). The word which Christ heard from the Father is the truth He comes to proclaim and for which He comes to give testimony. Truth is both the Word of Christ Himself addressed to us and this Word should lead us to believe in Him (John 8:31) "The Law" (which for the Jews is the truth), it is written, "was given through Moses; grace and truth has come through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17) because with Him and in Him is revelation final and complete.

While the devil is the father of lies, Jesus declares the truth; He is full of grace and truth. In fact, Christ Himself is the truth not because He is God but because as Word made flesh, He has in himself the fullness of Revelation. He Himself declares, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me". He is the way that leads to the Father and as Truth, he passes unto us in Himself the revelation of the Father and thus, he communicates divine life to us.

More explicitly, Jesus declares "I am the way the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." The "I am" statement is at the heart of the Johannine Theology of Revelation. Jesus left the world without any written message. His doctrine was Himself. Ideal and History were identified in Him. The truth that no other ethical preachers proclaimed, ... was not in them but outside them. Our Divine Lord, however, identified Divine Wisdom with Himself. It was the first time in history that it was ever done and it has never been done since Sheen (1995).

How is Jesus the truth?

Having seen the scriptural exemplification of Jesus as the truth, it is pertinent to ask the question: Is Jesus the truth simply because the Scripture attests to him as such? Answering this question is important in the sense that it does not only enable us to reconsider the dependability of our basis of attaining the truth, but

because it equally helps us to reexamine the authenticity for accepting Jesus as the truth. Our claim that Jesus is the truth, is not grounded on the basis of Scripture alone, there are other ways of showing this; however, the Scripture still remains the unmatched source of making this claim, because it is one of the major sources of access we have, that offers reliable information on the person of Jesus Christ as the truth. Yet, we are not going to rely solely on it. There are other sources where we come to see this fact exemplified. According to St. Thomas Aquinas: Truth is primarily in a thing because of its relation to the divine intellect, not to the human intellect, because it is related to the divine intellect as its cause, but to the human intellect as to its effect in the sense that the latter receives its knowledge from things. For this reason, a thing is said to be true principally because of its order to the truth of the divine intellect rather than because of its relation to the truth of a human intellect.

St Augustine's statement that "what is true is true to the extent that it has being" throws light on St. Thomas Aquinas views as he went further to assert that: "it is clear that everything true is being in some way". The paper sees a classical position which recognizes truth with the divine intellect. "Truth therefore, must be from God alone, and so there is only one truth. For him, any other truth is from the divine truth". We see this fact clearly exemplified in Scripture when Jesus declares "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus is the truth precisely because he reveals the truth about the goal of existence and how it may be reached, and making its attainment possible by granting entrance on to life in the father's house, as the truth, Jesus is the mediator of the revelation of God (George 1987)".

Evaluation and Application to Contemporary Christian Education

It is possible for us to attain natural truth by virtue of Christian intellects. But all cannot do this easily; often their efforts will result in a mixture of truth and error. This is particularly the case in matters of religion and sound morals. Moreover, the paper cannot possibly attain those truths which exceed the capacity of nature and the grasp of reason, unless God enlightens and inspires them. All men, therefore, are bound to accept the teaching of the gospel. For, if this is rejected, the very foundations of truth, goodness, and civilization are endangered. Hence the Christ's sayings "you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free".

As a matter of fact, Jesus told Pilate in the context of His upcoming death that He had come into this world to bear witness to the truth- the cross was the supreme witness and exhibition of the truth. There was no doctrine preached there, but rather the way of life which those doctrines ultimately lead to. St. Paul remonstrates with the Galatians as to how they could not obey the truth when the crucified Christ has been so clearly displayed to them; clearly St. Paul saw obedience to the truth as obedience to the implications of the cross. There is a powerful parallel in Galatians "I am your enemy because I tell you the truth... you are enemies of the cross of Christ". Thus, the parallel is made between the cross and the truth. We are sanctified by the truth; but our sanctification is through cleansing in the Lord's blood. The same word is used of our sanctification through that blood. Perhaps this is why the book of Daniel seems to describe the altar as "the truth". The cross of Jesus is the ultimate truth. There we see humanity for what we really are; there we see the real effect of sin. Yet above all, there we see the glorious reality of the fact that a man with

our nature overcome sin, and through His sacrifice we really can be forgiven the untruth of all our sin' and thus have a real, concrete, definite hope of the life eternal.

In William James' theory, truth was reduced to a workable reality. Hence everything that seems not readily verified in practice was discarded as not being the truth. Truth as we have seen in the light of Jesus' life and mission is the very essence of God, thus, we can unmistakably say that truth by its very nature transcends those realities that are verifiable. It cannot be limited to time and space. Its universality is beyond the spacio-temporal order of existence. Thus, as Christians, we should be aware of the fact that truth remains and unchangeable reality.

The harm done by the pragmatic theory to the modern day Christian is such that, it has caused the Christian to limit himself to only those facts that work for him. Hence, denying him the very knowledge of discovering the very quintessence of truth in the person of Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

As a remedy for this relativistic mentality, which is becoming over more common, it is necessary above all to reassert the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In fact, it must be firmly believed that, in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God who is "the way, the truth, and the life", the full revelation of divine truth is given: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him, "For in Christ the whole fullness of divinity dwells in bodily form". Based on the findings of this review, it was recommended among others a careful, exact, and prudent presentation of the truth by those especially who, through books, magazines, and daily newspapers which are so abundant today, have such a great effect on the instruction and development of the minds of men, and especially of the young, and play such a large part in forming their opinions and shaping their characters. These people have a serious duty to disseminate, not lies, error, and obscenity, but only the truth; they are particularly bound to publicize what is conducive to good and virtuous conduct, not to vice. The weapon of truth, then must be used in defense against these weapons of evil. The paper must strive zealously and relentlessly to ward off the impact of evil which every day insinuates itself more deeply. Furthermore, the paper must fight immoral and false literature with literature that is wholesome and sincere. Radio broadcast, motion pictures, and television shows which make error and vice attractive must be opposed by shows which defend truth and strive to preserve the integrity and safety of morals. Thus these news arts, which can work much evil, will be turned to the well-being and benefit of men, and at the same time will supply worthwhile recreation. Health will come from a source which has often produced only devastating sickness.

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