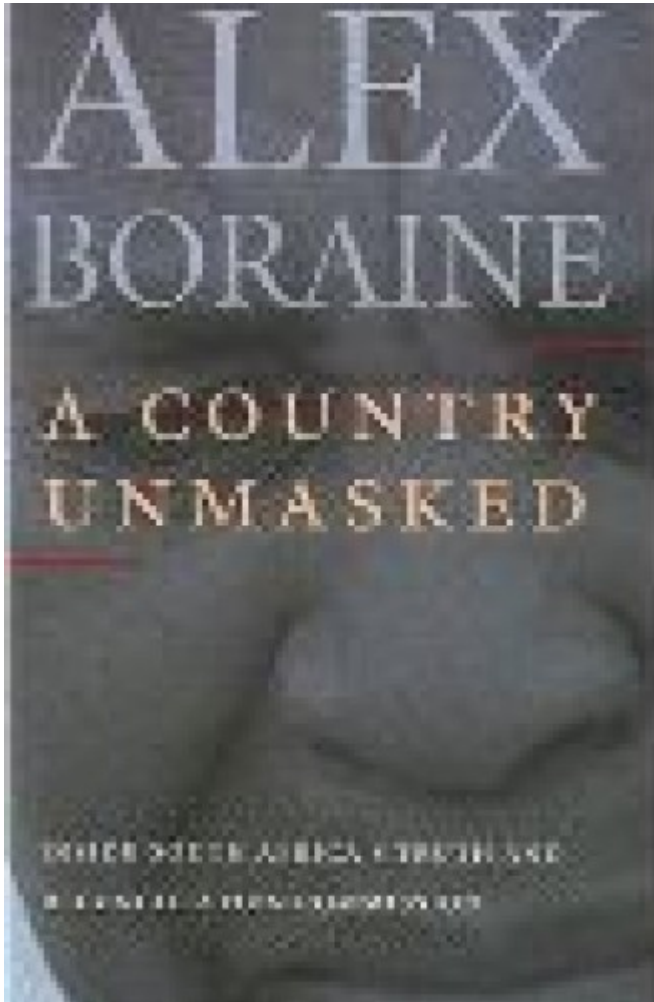


Buried truth

By [Donald W. Shriver](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

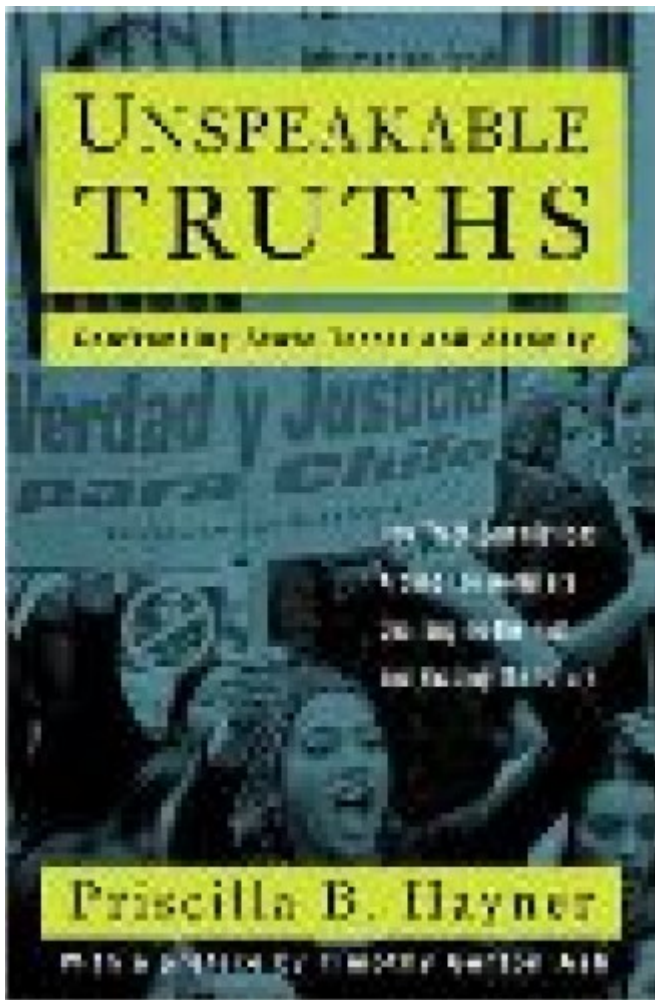
In Review



A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Alex Boraine

Oxford University Press



Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity

Priscilla B. Hayner
Routledge

Truth, justice and reconciliation are big words in Christian thinking about God and the world. How well these words match the empirical realities of human politics will always be a matter of dispute both inside and outside the church. Journalists shy away from the claim that they report truth. They aspire to get just the facts. At the other end of the spectrum, academics talk blithely about postmodernist relativities of truth and fact. Power and group interests define and shade what we claim as truth, they argue. Only the naïve speak of the truth about anything.

Alex Boraine's and Priscilla Hayner's books are powerful retorts to such relativism. Albert Camus's statement that "truth is as mysterious as it is inaccessible, and it must be fought for eternally" is pertinent to the complexities of the politics in which

most of Boraine's life has been immersed. Hayner comments that "there is never just one truth: we each carry our own distinct memories, and they sometimes contradict each other; but debunking lies and challenging dishonest denial can go far in allowing a country to settle on one generally accurate version of history. There are some facts that are fundamental enough that broad acceptance of their truth is necessary before real reconciliation can take place."

Truth commissions are now worldwide phenomena. Hayner has studied 21 of them, and her book assesses the strengths and weaknesses of each as a contributor to the restoration or initiation of peace and justice in societies riven by gross repression and the murder of the innocent. Modest in her conclusions about the achievements of these official inquiries into histories of evil, she is nonetheless sure that governments that seek to bury such histories in public amnesia are courting trouble. One day the inner fury of the victims or their descendants will turn into public outrage. If there is one psychological truth emerging from all 21 of these commissions, it is that perpetrators want the public to forget and victims want the public to remember. Victims may not be reliable sources about what really happened, but they have hold of a human truth which only the crass and contemptuous will question: the truth of suffering.

The old saw "Forgive and forget" is cruel. "Remember and forgive" is better. But even that slogan can be dangerous to the health of body and spirit if not given public as well as inner personal expression. Harm intentionally afflicted by official agents of terror is the worst pain of all. Because so much of the terror of past decades was officially sponsored by governments, more than a pastoral kind of comfort is needed for healing the bodies, spirits and memories of the victims.

For hope of reconciliation, evil done by governments requires acknowledgment by governments and their agents. Boraine recounts a dramatic instance in the hearings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). A colonel of the South African Defense Force confessed his sorrow for "the burden of the Bisho massacre," which, he said, "will be on our shoulders for the rest of our lives. . . . I ask the victims not to forget but to forgive us. To get the soldiers back into the community, to accept them fully, to try to understand the pressure they were under then. That is all I can do."

The audience, which included many relatives of the massacre victims, "burst into applause." When truth about an evil finally is aired by its agents, people have the

chance to put that evil behind them and to decide whether or not the agents can be received back into the community. That decision enacts a version of restorative, as opposed to punitive, justice. And, as so many accounts of the TRC movingly portray, it sets an example for America, which has yet to encompass in its popular concept of “justice” the justice of restoring relations between victims, criminals and the community at large in official prosecutions of crime and atrocity.

Repair of public memory, as both of these books make clear, is a long-term cause. “There is much evidence that history, and particularly a difficult and painful period of history, is remembered and re-remembered in different ways over time, and the intensity of public interest in this history may reemerge in cycles,” says Hayner. She quotes Michael Lapsley, an Anglican priest whose hands were destroyed by a government-planted letter bomb: “We’ll spend the next hundred years trying to heal from our history.”

Current American discussions of reparations for slavery illustrate this wisdom. Many an African-American is sure that the white public has never recognized slavery as the horror that it really was. The recent museum display of photographs of lynchings, from the 1880s through the 1960s, has made some of us realize that vivid images of racism have not infused our memories.

What Hayner’s book achieves through its broad analysis of the truth commissions of the past decade, Boraine achieves through in-depth accounts of the TRC. A longtime opponent of apartheid as a Methodist leader, Parliament member and then deputy chair of the TRC, he reports in detail on the TRC’s legislative origin, organization, hearings (which began in 1996), controversies and conclusions. He writes as a repentant insider, concluding that “I who participated in an undemocratic Parliament have to accept a measure of responsibility for the actions of that Parliament.”

Some American readers may dismiss such language as mere liberal guilt, but again and again Boraine points to the widely shared responsibility for most of society’s gross evils. Recent research on the culpability of institutions north and south for the perpetuation of American slavery underlines this unpleasant truth. Antjie Krog’s wrenching journalistic account of the TRC, *Country in My Skull*, makes the same case as Boraine does for defining honest citizens as Psalm 15:4 defines them: “those who swear to their own hurt.” The TRC brought to light the crimes of all sides of the struggle to defend and to abolish apartheid. That is why, as the *New York Times* observed, “every political party in South Africa denounced it.”

Most American Christians have a long way to go before they grapple realistically with their own implication in truth-concealment in the history of our government's relationship with certain poor countries around the world. Hayner records an especially notorious example in the U.S. destruction and theft of Haitian documents recording American support of the military that carried out many murders in Haiti. "Few governments are eager to reveal the dark sides of their foreign entanglements or honestly admit wrongs." It took 45 years for an American president to admit that wrongs had been done to Guatemalan Indians by the CIA in 1954. But as these two books maintain, better a late confession than no confession. If Christians in any country are to make good on Jesus' statement that we are to become "the salt of the earth," we had better enter into the painful work of uncovering and acknowledging the dark side of our histories.

Americans are interested in South Africa because South Africa's history has many analogies to the American "race problem." Beginning with the publication of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* in 1948, many of us have undergone shocks of recognition that sometimes tempted us to think, "At least what we do isn't as bad as apartheid." Our civil rights movement, the changes in American law associated with it, and the erosion of some layers of racism in our political culture seemed to put us approximately one generation ahead of South Africa. Its antiapartheid leaders learned much from Martin Luther King Jr.

Now that South Africa has undergone its radical shift in political power, however, American presumptions of superiority in progress toward racial justice are due for some uncomfortable reassessments: Is the white majority of this country able to cope with the prospect that one day soon the majority will no longer be white? Is America now competing with South Africa to see which can more surely eliminate the virus of racism from its political power struggles?

Before leaving Atlanta some months ago, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu remarked that "America needs a truth and reconciliation commission." Both Hayner and Boraine caution that the South African TRC, like every other commission of the past 20 years, was a product of its own local history and culture. In recent years the U.S. has seen how certain local communities have begun to address racist evils long-forgotten by subsequent generations: Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rosewood, Florida; the State of Oregon; and even Yale University. Freedoms of press and research are yielding dispersed fragments of painful pasts that gradually seep into public consciousness. One thinks, for example, of the congressional resolution in 1990 issuing an apology

for the massacre of Native Americans at Wounded Knee. Only in recent years have our western films begun to express empathy with the “Indians” rather than the cowboys.

The phenomena of truth and reconciliation commissions, each unique to its locality, force us to recognize that every country on earth has its own undigested negative history. They impel us to ask, “Whose story of unjust, politically enacted suffering have we as yet failed to hear? Whose stories are systematically barred from appearing in our allegedly free press? Who are the perpetrators whose confession would free them and all of us to confront the painful as well as the proud dimensions of our public past? What moral criteria should we demand in the writing and adoption of history textbooks in our schools? What public repair of public damage to victims and their kin are we still capable of enacting?

The answers may be various and long in coming. But from these two arresting studies, there is one answer that every minister and every congregation in the land can undertake if we will set aside our pragmatic dispositions to “get on with the future” and engage in a fundamental act of ministry: listening to the buried truth of our neighbor’s suffering. It may not be enough, but it is an indispensable beginning.