

## **LAW AND TRUTH**

**Ignatius Jesudasan\***

The author of the fourth gospel states in 1:17, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” This was John’s way of contrasting law and truth.

One can start recognizing here the intrinsic difference between truth and law. Truth is that which happens freely, naturally, spontaneously and without creating any sense of guilt or sin. Law is that which is imposed with pressure or force from outside through promises of reward or threats of punishment for non-conformity. Law is a socio-culturally super-imposed second nature. But the fourth gospel’s differentiation between law and truth is a metaphorical locus and identification of a mutual conflict for superiority and power existing between two groups, namely the powerful sections among traditional Jews and the converts to Christianity.

Every law pre-supposes a law-maker or law-giver. But most of the ancient law-makers imposed their own will to power and superiority as the will of God. Weaving God in was their ingenious metaphor and myth to make their discourse credible, by concealing their human ambition. Proclaiming some law as a divine will or revelation for their followers was an effective poetic device to conceal their human will to power. Thus the law-makers made God into the mask behind which to hide their real will to secure their legitimacy as law-makers. In today’s world religious fundamentalists from all faith traditions also use divine sanction to impose their intolerant laws on others.

This makes every God-invoking unjust law an implicitly concealed lie. Every such law is a lie, which masquerades as the truth of God. The priestly class of every ethnic society has thrived on such lies. Thus the scriptures of every ethnic group have harbored and been built on such lies of its ruling priestly class. But the nature of truth is to expose the lie or secret, which is concealed behind the law. In exposing God as the lie behind the law, the gospel of John demythologized the Law of Moses.

What, then, is the fourth gospel’s working definition of the truth? In the abstract, truth in the fourth gospel is that which exposes every lie promulgated as the law or revelation of God. In concrete, as Jesus constantly engaged in such Socratic practice of exposing false propaganda and myths, he is described as the truth in his very person (Jo 14:6). However, such a description of truth is not to be applied exclusively to Jesus, but typologically so as to include all, who do what Jesus also did. When they expose the lies or myths that serve as channels of people’s

enslavement to other men, truth is the established law's demythologization, which liberates people from such enslavement (Jo 8:32).

Jo 8: 1-11 gives a concrete exposition of what law, truth and grace meant to Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries. This text speaks of some Scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem, who brought to Jesus for his verdict, a woman, whom they had caught in adultery and wanted to stone to death, according to the traditional Law of Moses. That law meant death to the woman. But to them, it was a symbol of their power over the morals and life and death of people. In the name of preserving the ethos of their society, they were exercising sovereignty over a poor woman, who could not indeed defend herself.

They did not expect Jesus to echo the law. They expected him rather to say something else, which they could construe as his speaking against their ethnic law. Would he confirm the traditional ethic and their own authority over it or undercut both of them? He neither echoes nor reinforces the law, nor lets them condemn her to death. Instead, he spontaneously reveals what grace and unmasked truth are. Truth is honesty to oneself and one's 'sinfulness' against the law, with consequent compassion towards another or other sinners against the laws. Only sinless persons may denounce others of their sins. But who is sinless before the law? Not even Jesus. He dare not condemn the woman: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (8:11).

How could the others dare to condemn her? They only could, because they forgot their own sinfulness. "Has no one condemned you?" (8:10). Jesus' conditional permission for the sinless one among them to cast the first stone on her has convicted all of the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees to acknowledge their sinfulness to themselves and leave the scene and act of accusation.

Thus the Law, in Jesus' mouth, is not a symbol of power over others, but of liberation and empowerment of everyone in the acknowledgement of one's own truth. The personalized truth, nurtured by deep compassion, can unmask the rigidity of the law because each one owns his or her weakness and need for forgiveness, and therefore forgives others also.

*\* Ignatius Jesudasan is the author of the highly acclaimed book 'A Gandhian Theology of Liberation', published by Orbis Books. Another book of his is titled: Roots of Religious Violence: A Critique of Ethnic Metaphors. He is a Jesuit priest and lives in Chennai.*

**Contact:**

Meeting Rivers

Fireflies Inter-cultural Centre

Dinnepalya, Kaggalipura Post

Bangalore - 560 082 India

Phone: 080-28432725

Email: [meetingrivers.fireflies@gmail.com](mailto:meetingrivers.fireflies@gmail.com)

URL: <http://pipaltree.org.in/index.php?page=meeting-rivers>