

Recently, an acquaintance shocked me with a comment that not only surprised but also angered me. Out of the blue, he raised the issue of the Manchester Arena bombing at an Ariana Grande concert in May that killed 23 and wounded 250 others. The gist of his comment was that the police knew about the plans for the bombing and, yet, allowed the heinous attack to take place. I could scarcely believe what I was hearing, and made it abundantly clear that I thought what this person said was utter rubbish. I noted that reports may have circulated that the perpetrator of the bombing may have been on the authorities radar, but that is much different than knowingly allowing an attack to occur. However angry I may have been, I was also deeply saddened that this individual was susceptible to such nonsense and felt comfortable enough to share it with a relatively new acquaintance.

Of course, such an exchange is a rare occurrence in my life. I know that my existence rests comfortably within the cocoon of a well-educated and critical-thinking community. I may have disagreements with others regarding specific policies within the political world or philosophical differences about any number of issues from personal freedoms versus public responsibility to federalism versus states' rights. However, we do not disagree on what is fact and what is fallacious. This shared version of reality is critical to any community being able to work well, and it is vital to the better functioning of our democracy.

Thus, the aforementioned exchange was deeply troubling. Meanwhile, it was followed relatively recently by another experience where misleading information was shared as if it were true, leaving me all the more disconcerted. The deluge of information and disinformation that we must deal with on a daily basis, as well as the ability of technology to disseminate and disguise information instantaneously, as well as the chipping away at the trustworthiness of the foundations of essential institutions--press, government, religion, and others--to our democracy place us in a critical moment in our history. I don't believe that this is the first time that we have dealt with such realities. Propaganda during the Cold War and Nazi dissimulation and duplicity in politics throughout our history dissuade me that this is something new.

What is new, however, is the ability to conceal truth and untruth, as well as the power of dissemination. Over dinner recently, an executive who works at major book distributor made it quite clear that, from his perspective, Google and Facebook and other tech giants are, in part, to blame for the landscape of credibility and deceit that we find ourselves in. While I recognize the landscape is more complicated, I also trust his insight. And I know that even with stricter enforcement and filters of what is real and what is not, there will continue to be conspiracy theorists, doomsayers, and dupes who continue to purvey in distortion. Which means that we must continue to be better at educating, informing, and engaging in conversation that keeps us continually in touch with reality.

Which is why I think that the Church in particular and religions in general have a functional role to play at this point in human history. While the Church has experienced a decline in participation over the past decades, it can be such a vital part of our collective work to tell the truth. It isn't that we all must believe the same thing, and Lord knows that there are plenty of deniers of reality in the sacred spaces where people gather for worship week in and week out.

However, the Church at its best holds up a mirror to us individually and collectively and invites us into a conversation where we are forced to be honest with ourselves, evaluate our thoughts and actions, and

recognize our interconnectedness with the larger world. While the world is simultaneously more connected and isolated because of technology, religion offers a qualitatively different kind of connection which also tends to mitigate the difficulties and problems of isolation. When we gather together, reflect on a shared narrative, and bump up against other human beings, it isn't, again, that we believe the same things. We are, however, forced to acknowledge realities that we might not otherwise deal with much less accept. If nothing else, the moral teachings, rhythms of liturgy, and the lens of grace through which we view life, offers a vision of reality that is rooted in community, connection, and a bias toward what some would call a hermeneutic of understanding versus a hermeneutic of suspicion. Such a perspective is critical.

As I mentioned, religion can be a place where the denial of reality is allowed to fester. Nevertheless, at its best, religion places us more squarely in reality, in life, and invites us to engage more fully in the mystery that is our life. It doesn't promise everlasting bliss. It does ask that we not check our brains at the door, so that we might take seriously and live more fully into the life we have been given.