



Finding Truth in a Post-Truth World

TAMARA GRAY

YAQEEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Tamara Gray is the founder of Rabata, an organization dedicated to promoting positive cultural change through creative educational experiences. She is an Islamic scholar and holds multiple *ijāzāt* in Islamic sacred texts and subject matters. Shaykha Dr. Tamara completed her doctorate in the Leadership, Policy and Administration program at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN. She holds a Master's degree in Curriculum Theory and Instruction, and worked for twenty-five years in the field of education before moving into the nonprofit world.

***Disclaimer:** The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2022. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Introduction

It was a cold winter day and bits of icy snow were still falling on the windshield. I was in the passenger seat of our station wagon and my mother's mouth was set in "stress." She said, "When we go inside, you will hear me apologize for being late, and blaming the snow. This is a white lie. We shouldn't ever lie. But if I don't, I might lose the appointment." I was a little bit in awe—my mother was about to *lie*. I walked into the hair salon with ears and eyes paying close attention. And she did mumble something to the receptionist about our precarious ride to the shop, after which we were hustled over to a waiting space and quickly given our turns.

The reason this event was forever etched in my mind is that honesty and truthfulness were high priorities in my family. I was taught very early not to lie and that the consequences for lying were far worse than those for mistakes that were truthfully owned up to.

Is truth still important? And what about Truth? Truth with a capital *T* is a truth that is not influenced by whether or not people believe it. It will remain True if all the world sees it as false and it will remain True if all the world sees it as true.

Truth with a capital *T* has faced centuries of challenges, not the least of which have been human attempts to convey or even enforce Truth. These attempts were not Truth, but human truths that were culturally and/or historically bound and therefore did not serve the greater Truth. Truth still exists today, undeterred by a society termed post-Truth by many. Post-Truth is not a chronological claim—it does not mean that we have moved into a time after truth, but rather into a time where Truth and even truth are deemed less important than personal or political gain.

As for truth with a lowercase *t*, it is often connected to a Truth, but does not have to be in order to be true to someone. Lower case *t*-truths are those that emerge from personal experience, true to one person or many, and connected to the words we say and things we do. The presence of truthfulness is a prerequisite for trustworthiness, and so its absence impacts families, workplaces, and all social and community relationships. A lack of trust—in systems, in institutions, in each

other—means a lack of personal safety, and a corresponding need to set boundaries. In a low-trust and post-truth society such as our own, how can one trust that a medical diagnosis is correct, that a restaurant is serving hamburger rather than ground dog, and that a grade on a test is based on an objective rubric? In a society where Truth is passé, can we be people of truth with one another?

How do we locate Truth and live truthfully in a community of truth-tellers?

Locating Truth (capital T)

Pre-modern humanity tied Truth closely to religion.¹ Western societies regarded Church claims as necessarily True, even when they concerned the solar system, human health, and other subjects outside the purview of revelation. Truth for Muslims during this time remained confined to the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and people of God who conveyed their knowledge and experiences to others. There were certainly erroneous claims about science and scientific discoveries that originated in individual Muslim scholars, but they were not considered part of revelation, only interpretations of it. In other words, they were understood as lower case *t*-truths. As modernity dawned, the gap between the Christian and Muslim attitudes regarding Truth began to widen.

Toward the end of these years, new inventions, antibiotics, and a growing confidence in independent human ability began to change Western attitudes toward the source of Truth. Science replaced the Church as the source of Truth.² Muslims began to replace their trust in legal canon with a push for independent research in what were now translated as Islamic “sciences.” However a great difference still remained. While the West became agnostic and atheist, the Muslim “east” was still rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, though admittedly missing early traditions and discourses. Truth remained with God and His Prophet ﷺ, but miracles that could not be explained scientifically were hidden or denied. This caused a loss of

¹ David Rigoni, “Figure 2.1: Major Western World Views” in *Teaching What Can't be Taught: The Shaman's Strategy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2002) 18.

² Rigoni, “Figure 2.1.”

discussion around issues of spirituality and a leaning toward legalism, which in turn had its own effects on Muslim society.³

In the mid-twentieth century, science began to disappoint. Though it did bring forth some truths (penicillin as a cure for bacterial infections), it also brought forth lies (claims of white superiority based on physical characteristics), and confusion (pills prescribed to treat nausea caused frightening birth defects). The reliance on science for Truth began to diminish, especially as it brought about analog machines and eventually the internet. Where colonialism brought the Christian west into power over Muslim lands, the globalizing effect of the internet opened the windows of the world to everyone. Science no longer was Truth. Tradition still was not Truth. Truth lost its capital *T*. Truth became truths and the post-modern stage began.

Of course truths have always existed amongst people. Truth (with a lowercase *t*) is related to our interpretations of our own lives. My mother's lie about the snow-bound roads to the hairdresser was a lie to her because she did not slip on the roads, nor get stuck behind a snow plow. But to me, it was still a truth. There was snow. We had to go slower than usual. Perhaps we got started late because we were looking for boots and gloves, I don't actually remember. But experiences and interpretations of those experiences are personal truths. They are not universal and can only be known through honest communication with one another, and even then may be understood but not fully known. In this case what is true for one person may not be true for someone else. Muslims should have compassion and respect for everyone's personal perspectives on truth, and become aware of how privilege silences some experiences and amplifies others.

Lies and Truth/truth-telling

In every stage of history—premodernity where Truth was grounded in religion, modernity where it was grounded in science, and postmodernity where it was set aside in favor of truths—people have lied. Sometimes it was the Church, offering position, power, and absolution for money instead of piety. Other times it was

³ Read *The Rise and Fall of Muslim Civil Society* by Dr. Omar Imady for a beginning conversation about this.

science, claiming to have empirically proven certain peoples inferior to others. And then, though it may seem trivial, there was the Great Lie of Santa Claus.

Of course as a child of middle America I fell prey to the great Santa Claus lie. I was told that Santa Claus was real, that he brought me gifts, that he flew in a sleigh and lived in the North Pole. I believed it. Discovering the Truth—that there was no Santa Claus—embarrassed me (for believing such a thing in the first place) and shook my trust in adults (who had conspired to ensure I believed this ludicrous idea for as long as possible). I carefully watched my siblings grow through the Santa Claus years, revealing to them the truth before they embarrassed themselves by believing in what their friends now knew to be a lie.

Amazingly, even in a time when everyone's truth is deemed important, non-Christian children in elementary schools across the United States are still called upon to perpetuate the Great Lie of Santa Claus. Children who discover the truth at home—there is no Santa Claus—are told to uphold the lie to their friends at school who still believe that the jolly man with the flying reindeers is real.

I do not know of any research on the impact of a society's agreement to lie to children, but I cannot imagine that it is positive. I think this lie in particular must be damaging to children who believe it and then find the world has agreed to their deception. What does it do to basic trust in humanity? How does discovering that the man who “sees you when you are sleeping, knows when you are awake, knows when you've been bad or good” (lyrics of a famous Christmas song) is made up affect the child's ability to believe in God? This lie is more than a lie. It is an intentional replacement of Truth. It is more than knowing a truth and denying it; it is knowing something is a falsehood and claiming it is truth. It is perhaps part and parcel of what is now called a post-Truth society.

In 2016, post-Truth was proclaimed the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionaries.⁴ Post-Truth implies that truth is no longer important. It is different from a lie. A lie is a falsification of facts; e.g., “I did not eat the cookie.” A liar knows that there was a fact (he ate the cookie), but denies it and claims otherwise.

⁴ “Word of the Year 2016,” Oxford Languages, <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.

A post-truth statement like “Cookies are a poison, created by bakers, in order to cause chaos in American grocery stores” is not a simple denial of fact, but a fabricated concept meant to distract the listener from the missing cookie.

Locating Truth and truth, as well as trusting that truth has been spoken, has become more and more difficult.

Seeking Truth, finding truth, telling the truth, and living a truthful life

Truth and lies between individuals build and break relationships. Friends we can trust are those who neither lie, nor hide important things from us. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was called *al-Amīn* (the trustworthy) by his friends and family many years before revelation. This relationship of trust and truth was an important factor in early conversions.

When I was 17 years old I was struck by the question of Jesus. Was he really God? God’s son? Or was this another place where Truth was watered down, changed, or just not there? It was devastating to learn that the Council of Nicaea, in the year 325 A.D., had voted on this very issue. Voted? In my young opinion, Truth wasn’t something to vote on. It was either True, or not True.

Voting did happen for the president of the United States, however, and in 1984 I was two days shy of 18 so I could not vote. A staunch Democrat from a long line of Democrats, I was incredibly disappointed when Ronald Reagan crushed my home state’s Walter Mondale (a Minnesota candidate with a woman running for Vice President along with him). The media wondered whether President Reagan was only performing or whether he was actually able to fulfill the duties of the presidency. The same uncertainty haunted my religious understanding. How do I know what is true? How do I hold on to Truth? I felt frustrated and helpless. These months were months of elections, religious questioning, and reflections on the fragility of conviction.

Of course the internet was not yet a thing, so my search for Truth would take me from person to person. I asked questions, read books, and considered possibilities. I was looking for more than a truth. I was looking for the Truth—about God, life, and what comes next.

It was January 1985 when I found it. Truth finally had a name: Islam. I became a Muslim immediately. This Truth was a personal truth, one that came about because of a spiritual experience. It was not based on a long academic search for intellectual proofs or even a family tradition of faith. I was stepping out on my own.

A personal truth is sustaining. But in my experience, much of the American Muslim community I came into contact with in 1985 was detached from spiritual traditions and still deeply entrenched in literalism and an unexamined sexism proclaimed as Islam. I was stuck by the disparity between the Truth of Islam and the truths of Muslims that felt nonsensical, sexist, and harmful to me. I didn't know enough about colonialism, or postcolonial dictatorships, modernism and postmodernism to untangle the sticky truth claims that were attempting to unglue the Truth from my heart.

Al-Ḥaqq and b'il-ḥaqq

One of the names of God is *al-Ḥaqq*—the Truth. God is the Truth. God's presence is real and true. The human being seeks Truth and God provides knowledge of Himself. This is the Truth of God.

I became a Muslim on the day I tapped into this Truth. I prayed my first prayer, and in the second *sujūd* asked God the simple question, “Are these your words (the Qur'an)?” I felt an overwhelming certainty that yes, they were indeed the words of God and so when I lifted my head from the prayer mat, I was a Muslim. I had tapped into the Truth, the Ultimate Reality—*al-Ḥaqq*. God is the Truth that is true whether we believe in the Truth of God or not.

How did I know it was the Truth? Prayer opened my heart to my inner need for God (*fitra*), curiosity allowed me to pray that prayer, and the prayer itself was an inner signpost that offered me an opportunity to hold on to the Truth that is God.

Not only is God the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), but God does things in Truth... (*bi'l-ḥaqq*).

- God has created the heavens and the earth, in truth.⁵
- God has created the heavens and the earth in truth, this is a sign for believers.⁶
- Do they not think within themselves Who has created the heavens and the earth, and all that is between them, in truth...⁷
- He created the heavens and the earth, in truth...⁸
- He is the one who created the heavens and the earth, in truth, and the day He will say Be, there will be. His word is Truth and His is the dominion on the day when the Trumpet is blown. He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception as well as all that is visible to humanity. He is the Wise. The Aware.⁹
- And Allah created the heavens and the earth, in truth.¹⁰
- We did not create the heavens and the earth and that which is between them, but in truth ...¹¹
- He created the heavens and the earth in truth, and formed you in the best of forms...¹²

⁵ Qur'an 16:3.

⁶ Qur'an 29:44.

⁷ Qur'an 30:8.

⁸ Qur'an 39:5.

⁹ Qur'an 6:73.

¹⁰ Qur'an 45:22.

¹¹ Qur'an 46:3.

¹² Qur'an 64:3.

Al-Ḥaqq (the Truth) created *b'il-ḥaqq* (in Truth). What does it mean to create “in truth”? The heavens and the earth have been created for a purpose. Truth and purpose collide here in the seriousness of the act of creation. The whole of creation is measured and correct. Each varied particle and detailed difference is known by God and is part of God’s wisdom. The phrase *b'il-ḥaqq* also implies that the entire universe has been created on a foundation of justice, wisdom, and truth. Though we may be exhausted by the tangled lies, [fake news](#), and post truths of social media, there is rest in Truth even when we have no idea what it is.

Truth can be accessed in the unspoiled creation of God. Places of natural beauty are a source of rest for the human being, reconnecting us to the Truth and helping us to build truthfulness within because every falling leaf, drop of water, and blade of grass was created *bi'l-ḥaqq* by *al-Ḥaqq*. But we also need to be in communities of trust, places where we can live together in justice and wisdom, accessing Truth through our truthfulness, authenticity, and goodness. A place where individual truths are grounded in sincerity not manipulation, reality not falsehood, and respect not ridicule.

A community of truth

He climbed up to the top of Mount Ṣafā—a place well known for important announcements. To the people who had gathered, he asked, “Would you believe me if I told you an enemy was awaiting us around that mountain?” (Ibn Hishām). They replied in the affirmative. He was, after all, the truth-teller. He was *al-Amīn*. He was from noble ancestry, and he was good and kind. They trusted him with their money and their goods, and just recently had trusted him to return the black stone to its correct place in the rebuilding of the Kaaba. They all looked at him expectantly. He announced that he was the Messenger of God, that an angel had visited him, that the Qur’ān was being revealed, and that they should follow him.

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ had told them the truth and had told them about the Truth. He had indeed been visited by angel Gabriel, he had spent months secretly sharing with and growing a small community of believers, and he had now been called upon to make the message public. But this truth was too much. Though his

people knew him as the teller of truth, this truth threatened their hold on power. They ridiculed him and denied the Truth of their own truthful one.

When the COVID virus of 2019 fell upon the world, there were those who refused to believe in it. As months went on, nurses reported patients dying from COVID even as they remained in denial.

“What is wrong with me?”

“You have COVID.”

“I cannot have COVID, it is not real! Find out what is wrong with me!” and they would keep shouting this until silenced by the ventilator and eventually death. Did they know it to be true and deny the truth of it? Or were they actually confused by social media ‘science’ and the lies of leadership?

Rudyard Kipling’s poem “A Legend of Truth” begins:

Once upon a time, the ancient legends tell,
Truth, rising from the bottom of her well,
Looked on the world, but, hearing how it lied,
Returned to her seclusion horrified...¹³

The poem goes on to say that Fiction overtook the world until the world fell to so much evil that she needed Truth (sic) to return, and when she did the truth that needed to be told was so difficult she needed to call Fiction back to help her narrate world events.

Sometimes hearing about the horrible things happening around the world is too painful. Knowing the truth of all things can cause anxiety, depression, and heartbreak. Distinguishing between [true knowledge](#) and false information can be

¹³ See the rest of the poem here: [poems_legend.htm](#).

overwhelming. And living in a world we cannot trust is also a cause for emotional pain and difficulty.

When I lived in Damascus I quickly learned that there was a deep cultural habit of not telling sick patients the truth of their illness. As a result I never trusted a doctor, often wondered what the truth of my diagnosis was, and lived sick, medicating myself, instead of going to doctor appointments. Early in the pandemic I had compassion for those who did not believe the medical establishment, though at this point—having returned to the United States and its culture of healthcare transparency—I did. I understood that trust was hard won and easily lost, and that the world suffered because of the mix of politics, science, truths and untruths during the early COVID years.

To live in a community of truth we must be truth-tellers who rely on Truth. We learn from the Beloved Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (in the meaning of the hadith), “the one who is hungry but claims to be full is as who is putting on an act”¹⁴ and this hadith reminds us to be truthful even in the smallest parts of our lives. It reminds us not to cheat or plan to cheat, and to be grateful about what we have and to not lie about what we do not have. It stands strongly opposed to a lie told to save face, reminding us to be honest about our physical states. This makes truth-tellers of us. And from this germinating seed we grow into a truthful community that relies on Truth.

Truthful communities help us grow Truth in the gardens of our souls. A Western philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, once postulated that truth is found in consensus. In other words, we believe something to be true when “our people” say it to be true. Considering that at the very least we are influenced by our communities, living in a truthful community will help us live reliant on Truth.

¹⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, bk. 37, hadith 191. The actual words of the hadith are “الْمُتَشَبِّعُ بِمَا لَمْ يُعْطَ، كَالْبَاسِ ثَوْبَيْ زُورٍ” literally “The one who creates a false impression of receiving what one has not been given is like one who wears two garments of falsehood.” The first word, “*al-mutashabbi*,” means the one who claims that they are full (satiated) but are not, which can be interpreted as one who shows that they have something but do not. Hence my rendering “the one who is hungry but claims to be full is as one who is putting on an act.” This rendering includes the idea of two garments of falsehood in the concept of putting on an act.

Truthful communities are places where people feel safe enough to be honest, clear, and vulnerable. In general, Muslims do not cultivate such communities today. Living under colonialism and dictatorships, corrupt governments and economic pressures, Muslim cultures can struggle with lies, bribes, manipulation, and exaggeration. (Of course it is fully possible that these ills predate colonialism, and as such were part of what made us colonizable to begin with.) Living through a global earthquake of truth has shaken our foundations and our ability to live in truthful communities based in Truth.

Finding our way home

The Prophet ﷺ once said to his companions, “Renew your faith!” and the companions responded, “O Prophet of God, how do we renew our faith?” and he responded with the very cure that they needed: “Increase in *lā ilāha illa Allāh*.”¹⁵ Repeating this phrase of *tawhīd* grounds our hearts in Truth. It erases the darkness of lies and obliterates consensus on falsehood. It grants us the light we need to understand. It is the repetition of the Truth.

As we seek to build a community of Truth we need to first ask of ourselves to be truthful and trustworthy, in the footsteps of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. This is not the truthfulness of justifying hurtful words by saying “I’m just being honest,” but rather the truthfulness of kindness, manners, and a joyful, loving heart. It is truthfulness that builds trust and goodness. ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd (r) said, “It is not correct to lie, not in seriousness nor in jest. None of you should promise his child something and then not give it to him.”¹⁶ The building blocks of a truthful community are found in how we interact with children. Here we are advised to be truth-tellers and promise keepers—two concepts woven together so tightly they can be used as thick yarn to knit a community of truth. When we keep our promises, keep silent instead of lying, and create joyful experiences around truthful and beautiful words we are fulfilling the sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. We are building a community of Truth.

¹⁵ *Musnad Aḥmad*, bk. 2, hadith 359.

¹⁶ *Al-Adab al-mufrad*, bk. 21, hadith 3.

We have been called to be the best of people calling to what is beautiful and pushing back on what is ugly. As the poet John Keats said, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”¹⁷

While the repetition of *lā ilāha illa Allāh*, and a commitment to truth, will help us find the beauty we are all looking for, we also need to know how to maintain faith in a post-Truth world where oppression can be a truth claim and lies are presented as absolute fact. Herein is the intellectual challenge. Ideas need to be identified, untangled, and protected through a mental grappling with and defense of Truth.

When I became a Muslim in 1985, the very first verse I read of the Qur’an declared to me a recognition of women: “Verily the Muslim men and the Muslim women, the believing men and the believing women, the devout men and the devout women, truthful men and truthful women, patient men and patient women, humble men and humble women, and the men who give charity and the women who give charity, and the men who fast and the women who fast, and the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard theirs, and the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember—for them, God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward” (Sūrat al-Aḥzāb, 33:35).

This verse, with its rhythmic repetition, spoke a truth that I felt deeply. When I entered the Muslim community, however, I saw, heard, and experienced sexist jokes, *masjids* that did not welcome me, and cultures that saw women as less than men. I remember literally standing on a street corner and asking God for help. I was confused. My hold on Truth was challenged by truth claims that were harmful and oppressive. I threw myself into learning. I learned Arabic, studied Qur’an, and delved into the study of the Prophet’s ﷺ life and eventually other fields of Islamic study. I surrounded myself with a community of people of light. I avoided books and people who dabbled in the world of lies, ugly words, and corruption. In this way I was able to hold on to intellectual truths that held my heart to the Truth of God, the Prophet ﷺ, and Islam.

¹⁷ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>.

The identification of Truth is an exercise in connecting with *fiṭra*, cultivating curiosity, and examining external and internal signposts.

Fiṭra—the internal need for God—is part of the very make-up of every human being. As Allah (swt) says “So be steadfast in faith in all uprightness; the natural Way of God (*fiṭra*) which has been instilled in all people. No change in the creation of Allah. This is the Straight Way, but most people do not know” (30:30). So everyone has a place deep within that craves to know God, to connect to Truth. It is this need and desire that provides energy for the search, and patience on the path of Truth. Yet it must be cultivated and not ignored. The busy nature of modern life often drowns out the inner call to Truth, but spending time in quietness can raise the volume. Convert stories, and stories of heritage Muslims who found faith in spite of great trials and tribulations, often include descriptions¹⁸ of finding Truth, or becoming aware of what they already knew to be True. This is the gift of *fiṭra*.

Curiosity is a skill that allows for the discovery of Truth. When Ṭufayl ibn ‘Amr al-Dawsī entered into Mecca per usual, he was accosted by scaremongers warning him to stay clear of the man named Muhammad (may God’s peace and blessings be upon him), who (they said) spoke words of derision and danger. At first Ṭufayl, overtaken by their lies and fears, stuffed cotton in his ears. Standing in the sacred precinct, however, a few of the words of the man he had been warned against penetrated that cotton, at which point his own truth awoke. He was an intelligent man! Curious about those words he had heard, he removed the cotton and sought out Muhammad ﷺ. His curiosity brought him to Truth and he became a great *sahabi*. I know a young woman whose friends nicknamed her ‘Ṭufayla’ because she too ignored the warnings of some of her friends to avoid “those people.” She allowed her curiosity and the truth of her own discernment to bring her halfway across the world to study religion and the Qur’an, which she memorized on a one-year break from medical school.

A signpost on a road tells us to ‘stop,’ ‘yield,’ or look out for a tight curve up ahead. In life our signposts are less easy to read. Some are external—an

¹⁸ Samira al-Zayid, *A Compendium of the Sources on the Prophetic Narrative* (Minneapolis: Daybreak Press, 2018), 1:274.

unexpected opportunity, a clearly answered prayer, a sudden change of plans. Others are internal. Allah says, “We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth. Is it not sufficient that your Lord is witness over all things?” (41:53). These internal signposts—the feeling that something is right or wrong—are aids on our path for identifying truth and Truth.

The formula is this: identify Truth by connecting to *fiṭra*, staying curious, and growing an awareness of signposts. Then hold on to it with *lā ilāha illa Allāh* and other acts of worship; be committed to truth; find people of light and truth and be a person of light and truth as much as you can. Do this through learning, loving, and living in a community of truth and goodness. Do this by rooting yourself in Truth, telling truths, and building and living in truthful communities of Truth.