

One New Book for the Preacher

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TELL ME NO LIES: INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND ITS TRIUMPHS
edited by John Pilger. Jonathan Cape: London, 2004. 626 pages.

John Pilger is an Australian investigative journalist. Early in his career, in the 1960s, he helped uncover and bring to public consciousness the hidden depth of social depravation and injustice in Britain. Since then, as war correspondent and filmmaker, he has covered all of the major global conflicts, relentlessly telling truths that those in power would rather keep hidden. Invariably, because he works at the grassroots he gives voice to the voiceless and always infuses his writings with the need to improve human rights.

In addition to his journalism and filmmaking, Pilger has also written several important books, which together articulate an alternative version of reality to that propagated by official voices about such places as Vietnam, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Rwanda, and latterly Afghanistan and Iraq. In *Tell Me No Lies* he gathers together articles by similarly oriented writers, who on a wide range of very different and divergent topics not only attempt to keep the record straight but also hold those in power to account.

Introducing the criteria by which he has selected articles from 1945 to the present, Pilger explains that “Secretive power loathes journalists who do their job: who push back screens, peer behind facades, lift rocks. Opprobrium from on high is their badge of honour” (xv). To be included, therefore, journalists have to have a strong sense of their own voice and be willing to tilt against the establishment apparatus. Indicating the appropriate journalistic cast of mind, which is sparkingly on display throughout the book, Pilger approvingly quotes the Irish journalist Claud Cockburn’s skeptical insight: “Never believe anything...until it is officially denied” (xv). In this perspective, one of the key aims of authentic journalism is “rescuing ‘objectivity’ from its common abuse as a cover for official lies” (xiv).

Beyond this, however, as the American journalist T. D. Allman observed,

Genuinely objective journalism not only gets the facts right, it gets the meaning of events right. It is compelling not only today, but stands the test of time. It is validated not only by “reliable sources,” but by the unfolding of history. It is journalism that ten, twenty, fifty years after the fact still holds up a true and intelligent mirror to events. (xiii)

It is journalism that therefore has a pronounced literary quality. Furthermore, in the dynamic of truth telling confronting official mendacity, even though many of these articles are from the past, they still raise pertinent questions about present realities.

This is starkly illustrated by Wilfred Burchett’s 1945 article, “The Atomic Plague.” While hundreds of other journalists allowed themselves to be manipulated by the military authorities of the day, Burchett, as he put it, “slipped the leash” and headed

for Hiroshima. He was the first Western journalist to enter the city after the bomb had been dropped and in his prophetic article, subheadlined "I Write This as a Warning to the World," he bore witness to a truth the authorities wanted to keep hidden: he had actually seen the effects of the bomb, so he warned about radiation poisoning. The authorities denied its very existence, and Burchett was denounced, not only by those in power but also by other journalists seduced to purveying propaganda.

Attempting to read the present through this lens from the past makes you wonder what is being covered up around the world by the mechanism of "embedded" journalism. Part of the answer is supplied in the last section of *Tell Me No Lies*, in which the heirs of people like Wilfred Burchett report independently from firsthand experience the shocking realities of Iraq.

In "Eyewitness in Falluja," Jo Wilding concludes her piece on the impact of war on the lives of ordinary people by counterpointing George Bush's Easter Sunday pronouncement to U.S. troops that "I know what we're doing in Iraq is right" with what she has witnessed. From a grounding in actuality rather than abstraction she asks the president right back: "Shooting unarmed men in the back outside their homes is right? Shooting grandmothers with white flags is right? Shooting at women and children who are fleeing is right? Firing at ambulances is right?" (582). She continues: "Well, George, I know too now...I know what it looks like when a man's chest is no longer inside him and what it smells like, and I know what it looks like when his wife and children pour out of his house" (582). She concludes: "It's a crime and it's a disgrace to us all" (582).

Throughout *Tell Me No Lies* there is a resolutely moral tone. At times some readers might feel that in a bend over backwards way to avoid being hoodwinked by their "own side," some of the writers have had the wool pulled over their eyes by the "other side." This is certainly what journalist James Cameron experienced concerning his reporting of North Vietnam during the Vietnamese War. The BBC bought his work only to suppress it as "unacceptable in the current circumstances" (72). Cameron notes, "They whispered that I was a dupe, but what really upset them was that I was not *their* dupe"(xv). Attacked by *Time* magazine as "a conduit for the North Vietnamese Communists," he responded acerbically:

My definition of "conduit," in common with that of a dictionary, is a channel. I noted down and recorded what diverse people in North Vietnam told me...It is true that I did not intersperse this record with descriptions of [Prime Minister] Pham Van Dong as a slant eyed, evasive, yellow skinned and doubtless anti American example of Asian Communism...If the function of a reporter is not that of a channel, I am at a loss to know what his function is, unless it be that of writing for *Time*. (71)

Effectually Cameron humanized what Western journalism had casually come to denigrate and demonize.

This theme of focusing on the human and personal in the midst of mayhem is one that binds the book together. As a fitting touchstone for what is to follow, it starts with Martha Gellhorn's account of the Dachau concentration camp. At the end of her article, Gellhorn describes how a "half naked skeleton" shuffles in with news that the war is over. After an initial silence, Gellhorn records that "Dachau seemed to me the most suitable place in Europe to hear the news of victory," before ending, "For surely

this war was made to abolish Dachau, and all the other places like Dachau, and everything that Dachau stood for, and to abolish it forever”(9). That did not come to pass. So the challenge to report, raise consciousness, shine light in dark places goes on.

Preaching too is about shining light in dark places, raising and shaping consciousness, reporting on how power is abused in this world, even and maybe especially by those who claim to have God on their side. We all know the mantra of preparing for the privilege of the preaching task by reading with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In *Tell Me No Lies* the preacher will find much more than passing sermon illustrations, for this book is a richly informative array of how at its best journalism shines with nobility.

Although completely secular in perspective, it is replete with issues resonant of the deepest dimensions of faith: raising prophetic voice; bearing witness to truth; seeing the world through the eyes of the pushed aside; crossing boundaries to live in solidarity with the enemy (exemplified in Israeli journalist Amira Hass’s depiction of life among Palestinians suffering under Israeli army occupation); the irrepressible hope that rises among those most crushed by the present structure of power; the cost of commitment—one of the articles is by murdered Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who exposed too much truth about the dirty war in Chechnya and needed to be silenced; the conviction that truth will set us free to build a better world.

Tell Me No Lies is an arrestingly fitting title for a book to read in Lent, when we are called to radical reflection on the nature of the world, our complicity in its sin and our hope for its healing. It challenges us about how we have been co-opted to systems of power discordant with the standards of the kingdom. It reminds us, as the Puritans put it, that part of our calling is to speak truth to power.