

Kellyanne and the Truth

What is truth? It is a big question. Philosopher Charles Taylor has argued that religious fundamentalists are prone to violence, because they feel compelled to protect the moral purity of God, which is encapsulated by their concept of truth. So, what about Christian fundamentalism?

There are two broad streams of Christian fundamentalism: American Protestant and traditionalist Catholic. Both streams are concerned about the threat posed by modernity (e.g. Darwin's theory of evolution). Typically, fundamentalists feel called to defend *the* truth, at all costs. This entails a call to heroic service, which they accept in good faith, confident they possess the truth. In other words, they have the truth, which is absolute and non-negotiable. As such, the congealed nature of their truth statements distinguishes *fundamentalist* from *mainstream* Christianity.

In contrast, I am contending that the Christian understanding of truth has an important existential dimension. For instance, the Gospels are compelling, because they disclose the truth of our lives. We identify, for example, with the lost son, the haemorrhaging woman, or the Samaritan woman at the well. When we connect with these stories, they become *our* stories, *our* truths. Subsequently, we come to see Jesus as embodying God's truth. In Christianity then, truth is vital. However, it is a living truth, which takes root in our lives, in the ordinary, underlining what theologian Karl Rahner describes as "the mysticism of everyday life".

Undoubtedly, we have the Scriptures and Tradition as prime sources of authority. The joy of Christianity, however, is realized in practice, which is illuminated by Scripture and Tradition. In other words, Christian principles like *Jesus as saviour* usually resonate with us *personally*, before we make sense of them *intellectually*. Of course, both aspects are important and inseparable. The point here is the hands-on nature of Christianity, because we discover the risen Christ, the life of the Spirit, and the gifts of Wisdom (Sophia) in life, in prayer, in community, and works of compassion.

For several reasons, this process of discernment is becoming more complicated. First, if we reject absolutist versions of truth, does it come down to opinion? Second, there are different kinds of truths. For example, I have grey hair. This is a true, but trivial, fact. It is not an important existential truth. Third, in our postmodern era, the goal posts have moved, and there are other ways of discerning truth. Such complexity, for example, has emerged inadvertently in American politics.

Months ago, President Trump's press secretary Sean Spicer defended exaggerated claims about the attendance figures at Trump's inauguration. In turn, Kellyanne Conway, who is an advisor to Trump, leapt to Spicer's defence arguing that he was just presenting "alternative facts". At one level, this is amusing, and there are ways of assessing crowd numbers. At another level, she unwittingly raises a philosophical issue about determining reliable criteria for establishing facts, truth, or knowledge.

Such determinations come under the heading of *epistemology*, which is a complex area dealing with the study of knowledge. Moreover, there are many epistemologies, ranging from social to philosophical as well as scientific epistemologies. However, all this may seem remote, even esoteric. Nevertheless, would we cross a bridge, for example, if we knew the engineers had failed to get their *facts* right? In everyday life, the reliability of facts is presumed, and we accept they are true on the testimony of others (e.g. "the engineer said"). So, the quest for truth involves trust.

But the world has changed, and the criteria for establishing reliable truth statements has changed too. Nonetheless, we want our clergy, and our theological students, to learn the practice of critical thinking, so that they can provide us with reliable information, outlining the knowledge gaps, while carefully addressing the controversies. In fact, most of us learn these skills of discernment for

ourselves. But this can be daunting. To explore this further, let's divide history into three eras: premodern, modern, and postmodern. The premodern period extends into the 16th and 17th centuries, the modern begins in the 18th century and the postmodern emerges in the 1960s. Of course, this schema is debatable. Some scholars, for example, consider postmodernity as *late* modernity. The point, however, is that the criteria for determining truth has changed.

In premodern times, religion was regarded as *the* source of truth. With the rise of modernity, the epistemological authority of the Church was challenged (cf. Galileo). In due course, science became *the* source of epistemological authority. Its epistemological status was reinforced by the technological success of the 19th century (e.g. steam trains, factories). In postmodernity, a more nuanced understanding of science emerged, where scientific conclusions are conditional, relying on explanatory power, evidence, testing, and the testimony of other scientists. But what about this postmodern period? Postmodernity is an umbrella term, which includes

- Recognition of diversity: religious, ethical, cultural, and sexual diversity
- Caution about trying to describe the complexities of life with one theory
- Recognition that without some concept of truth, we could barely function

Philosophers like Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault are broadly categorised as *postmodern*. In Christian circles, however, these scholars have not been taken very seriously. That is, they have not been read in-depth, and subsequently, they are portrayed as caricatures.

Ironically, Foucault could not abide the term *postmodern*. Moreover, he was committed to truth, and the unfinished work of the same Enlightenment that shaped Anglican theological practice. As such, Foucault's commitment was to a critical, contextual, and historical approach to truth. As a result, he challenged systems of domination, affirming the importance of thinking, freedom, and working for the sake of others. In the process, he reminds us that the process of discernment is not a theoretical exercise, but an existential experience, which offers the possibility of discovering new truths here and now.

For Foucault, the study of the past has a role in discerning truth in the present. Theologians, like Karl Rahner and Rosemary Radford Ruether, have also encouraged us to take history seriously. History, for them, is where the truths of Christianity are to be discerned. Truth then is more than an abstract principle, let alone a dogmatic assertion. It is rooted in, what philosopher Linda M Alcoff describes as, "lived reality". And so, the discernment of truth is an ongoing context-related process, which is mediated through our language and our experience. In the end, it is an open conversation, which relies on the Holy Spirit, as well as mutual engagement in our faith community, where we cherish the old, as we discover the new. In this sense, it is profoundly incarnational.

Dr Steven Ogden

Rector, Fortitude Valley

Author *The Church, Authority, and Foucault* (Routledge, 2017).