



WHAT IS TRUTH?

A WELCOME ADDRESS TO THE DIALOGUE
AUSTRALASIA NATIONAL CONFERENCE AT
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BY THE PRINCIPAL, DR STEPHEN CODRINGTON

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a particular pleasure to welcome you to Prince Alfred College this morning. I feel a deep sense of honour that you have chosen this school as the venue for this most important conference – colloquium – that has real potential to change the lives of many young people in our schools for the better.

The theme of your conference is ‘truth in the curriculum’. Truth is obviously something very important. And that question – what is truth? – is a central question for us as educators, regardless of the subject we teach, because we often hear today about ‘his truth’ or ‘her truth’ and ‘your truth’ and ‘my truth’, as though whatever everyone believes has equal validity, provided, of course parenthetically, that those truths are held sincerely. It is a form of relativism, we see it almost every day in the media, in universities and in schools, and it can be very seductive.

Let me give you a real life-and-death historical example of why multiple truths are oxymoronic. In the period 1898 to 1901, as many of you would know, there was a rebellion in China by a group known colloquially as the Boxers. The Boxers were an organization opposed to the growing foreign influence on Chinese soil. They believed that certain martial-arts gestures which they practiced made them immune to bullets. They were wrong. Having successfully slaughtered large numbers of Western missionaries, the Boxers were in turn slaughtered by the combined British, French, and Czarist Russian armies, who very quickly demonstrated that immunity to bullets did not work very well in actual field conditions. Their belief was sincerely held, but that did not make it ‘truth’.

I suspect that these days, truth is drifting into becoming a cultural construct. Let me give you two strongly contrasting views of truth to make the point. Example number 1 – Stalin’s Russia. The Soviet Union conducted a national census in 1937, its first since 1926, which had shown a population of 147 million. Extrapolating from the growth figures of the 1920s, Stalin said that he expected a new total of 170 million. The Census Board reported a figure of 163 million – a figure that reflected the disastrous impact of Stalin’s policies. So, Stalin had the Census Board arrested and shot. The census result went undisclosed, but the board was publicly denounced as a nest of spies and wreckers, despite the fact that it had delivered its report to Stalin and not (say) to the London *Times*.

In 1939 there was another census. This time the new Census Board contrived the figure of 167 million, which Stalin personally topped up to 170 million. Perhaps the Census Board knew that if Stalin found the figure too low, then it would have to be lowered still

further as Stalin would have to subtract the membership of the Census Board yet again. Sure enough, the (1937) Census Board was shot for “treasonably exerting themselves to diminish the population of the USSR”.

In 1948, an official biography of Stalin was nearing completion and it was sent to him for a final check of its accuracy. Stalin made an addition to his official biography. He wrote this about himself: “At various stages of the War, Stalin’s genius found the correct solution that took account of all the circumstances... His military mastership was displayed in both defence and offense. His genius enabled him to divine the enemy’s plans and defeat them.” Stalin then made this addition to that addition: “Although he performed his task of leadership of the Party with consummate skill and enjoyed the unreserved support of the entire Soviet people, Stalin never allowed his work to be marred by the slightest hint of vanity, conceit or self-adulation”.

Now that we have some insight into ‘truth’ in the Soviet Union under Stalin, let us move on to example number 2. In a remote corner of north-west Brazil, there is a language spoken by about one hundred people called Tariana. In Tariana it is grammatically incorrect to make a statement without saying how you know it is true.

Every sentence must contain some form of marker that indicates on what evidence the statement is based; for example, whether the speaker saw it, or heard it, or inferred it from indirect evidence, or learned about it from someone else. This grammatical category, referring to information source in a language, is called evidentiality, and Tariana is particularly rich in evidentiality. I cannot just say ‘the dog stole the fish’. If I want to speak proper Tariana, I will have to add a little suffix at the end of the verb. If I did see the dog drag the fish over the grid of the fireplace, which is where the Tariana people usually keep their fish, I would say ‘the dog stole *ka* the fish’. *Ka* says that I saw what happened. If I didn’t see this happen, but I heard the noise of a fish falling from the grid in the kitchen next door, I would have to say ‘The dog stole *ma-ka* the fish’. *Ma-ka* says that I either heard what happened or perhaps smelled or tasted it. If I come into the kitchen and see the fish missing, and a dog sitting there and looking well-fed and pleased with itself, with fish bones scattered around, this is enough for me to infer that the dog ate the fish. I then say ‘the dog stole *ni-bka* the fish’. *Ni-bka* shows that what I say is inferred based on the evidence I have seen. But if I come in and the fish is gone and my general knowledge is that only dogs steal fish (Tariana normally do not keep cats), I will say ‘the dog stole *si-ka* the fish’. *Si-ka* is the way to mark information based on general assumption. Finally, if someone else had told me what had happened, then in reporting this I have to use the ‘reported’ suffix – ‘the dog stole *bi-da-ka* the fish’. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our politicians had obligatory evidentials, and were compelled by the language to say how they knew that Iraq still possessed weapons of mass destruction, to take one example? To us, evidentiality is secondary information – to the Tariana it is basic to communication and understanding. The Tariana MUST be precise in telling others how they know something.

Perhaps Stalin and the Tariana provide the extremes, the end-points, of that continuum of truth on which every society and every individual sits. Now, you can ask yourselves how

you can know, right here and now, whether or not the information I gave you about the location of the toilets may or may not be true.

Let me conclude with a challenge to you. At a conference I attended a few years ago of IB Heads of Schools in Buenos Aires, the Vice-Chancellors of Argentine universities were asked to comment on those skills which they believed were lacking among the secondary school students who were being prepared to come into their universities. Most of the Vice-Chancellors spoke for 5 or 10 minutes, listing a range of skills that most of you could probably guess. But one of the Vice-Chancellors simply stood up, said one sentence, and sat down again. All he said was this: “We want students who can distinguish between truth and consensus”. “We want students who can distinguish between truth and consensus”. It would have been excellent advice for the Boxers in China just over a century ago!

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you enjoy your conference and that you do make some real progress as you search for truth rather than consensus.