Trustee Indaba: The Very Revd Robert Derrenbacker

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What is Truth?

In the Fourth Gospel’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate, Pilate asks whether Jesus is the King of the Jews. Jesus responds, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” To this, Pilate ironically responds: “What is truth?” (John 18:37-38).

Today, I am, for the first time in a long time joining the CUAC Board Meeting from a North American time zone, having spent the last three weeks in the United States – the country of my birth – after nearly two years of being locked down in Australia due to the global Pandemic. During these three weeks, besides marking Christmas, New Year’s, and the feast of the Epiphany, I also marked January 6th – or “1/6” as it is now known in some circles. January 6, 2021 was that woeful and tragic day in American history where an attempted violent insurrection took place at the US Capitol Building. Fueled by the lies told by the former President of a “rigged” and “stolen” election, thousands of protestors breached the tight security of the Capitol Building. A number of people were killed, including two police officers; countless others were wounded or maimed. I remember watching in horror as the events unfolded on live television the morning of the 7th of January in Melbourne, Australia. As an American citizen, I was repulsed, embarrassed and ashamed. Immediately after the event, it seemed that the American people rallied around the truth that the former President bore responsibility for the insurrection. Republican politicians condemned the former President in Congress; some even voted for his impeachment in the following weeks.

But since then, the truth of 1/6 has come under attack. In a recent poll, only 9% of Republicans believe that supporters of the former President participated in the insurrection; and 71% of Republicans who responded to this poll believe that the 2020 election was rigged and stolen. It seems, to me at least, that the Republican Party has ceased to be a legitimate political opposition party and has become a political cult as it hides behind a lie and refuses to stand up for the truth.

As a result, American democracy is at a crisis point. Part of the reason for this crisis has to do with what some have called a “truth decay.” American political comedian and host of the Late Show, Stephen Colbert, coined the term “truthiness” in 2005. According to Wikipedia, “Truthiness” is “the belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the [intuition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intuition_%28knowledge%29) or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to [evidence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evidence), [logic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logic), [intellectual](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligence) examination, or [facts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fact). Truthiness can range from ignorant assertions of falsehoods to deliberate duplicity or propaganda intended to sway opinions.” When talking about “truthiness,” Colbert remarked “It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything.” Colbert’s comments come from the early 2000s, at the height of the Iraq War. His comments were certainly relevant then; they have never been more relevant than today, especially as Americans mark the anniversary of the insurrection and as all of us combat misinformation and conspiracy theories connected to the global Pandemic.

While we might not put it this way, part of our mission as colleges and universities is to fight against this movement of “truthiness,” to be truth tellers and truth enablers, to model inquiry (in all its forms – scientific, philosophical, theological), to foster experimentation, discovery, and debate. It may be that there are all sorts of reasons for this “truth decay,” with “truth” being established only through personal conviction; these reasons might include extreme individualism and political and economic libertarianism, a society saturated by social media, the demise of journalism, the demise of the humanities, and an unchecked free market. And I’d venture to say that it’s not just the United States that is suffering from “truthiness” and “truth decay.” While not as embedded and prevalent in their societies, I have, for example, seen it first-hand in Canada and Australia.

So, I wonder: Where do we see “truthiness” and “truth decay” in the various societal and cultural contexts which are represented around this CUAC Board table? And what are our universities and colleges doing to combat these forces?