

# Hang Together

"We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." Benjamin Franklin

## The Infinitely Regressive Source Of Truth

Posted on February 12, 2013 by Daniel Kelly



Only a brief thought for today. Actually, it's more like a question. How self-referential are we? I know we have a natural tendency to interpret the world around us in terms of how it immediately affects us. I'm not especially concerned about that kind of self-reference – the simple act of growing up normally destroys much of that self-absorption.

The type of self-reference that has piqued my curiosity is more of a structural variety, the type challenged by the liberal arts tradition of trying to discover how the world works and what our place in it might be. One of the first lessons in this tradition is that the world is not all about us – not as an individual, nor even as a collection of individuals. We are not, so to speak, the center of gravity. As it turns out, there are things that exist apart from, and without regard for, our wishes about what they are and how we might want them to behave.

I have always thought we broadly agreed that religion was one of those things. Religion is, if nothing else, a claim to truth that is independent of its adherents. And although there are many conflicting belief systems, the idea behind each is that *you* conform to the religion's tenets, they don't conform to you. That is to say, whatever truth the religion professes comes not from you, but from some source beyond your authority to gainsay. It stands apart. If it was anything less, it would be nothing more than a self-governing community club.

I bring this up because of a peculiar popular reaction in the commentariat to the Pope's recently announced retirement. Much of the commentary has centered on whether his successor will moderate certain of the church's teachings, or "bring it back to the center." As if the church was a political party whose beliefs arise from the consensus of its members.

That's the reaction of a culture that just isn't serious, isn't it? It's what self-absorbed people say as they look in the mirror to confirm the truth of what they believe. For them there is no independent, fixed point of reference. Truth, and its significance, is derived from its relation to them and what they think of it.

This poses a bit of an awkward problem. A renewed moral consensus – the goal of what we are doing around these parts – is pretty much dependent on popular recognition that there is truth that exists apart from us, and that we can and ought to discover what it is. Days like today make me wonder whether there are enough people who don't subscribe to the infinite malleability of principle and objective reality to make the project work.

Is there some measure of how many people are sufficiently serious that they understand they have a place in the universe, not that the universe has a place in them? It would be nice to know that there are enough people with whom we can talk to make a difference.

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7 THOUGHTS ON "THE INFINITELY REGRESSIVE SOURCE OF TRUTH"



Mark Garsombke

on **February 12, 2013 at 10:37 am** said:

Good point on religion. To elaborate, most people don't practice Christianity or Catholicism. They practice their own brand of Christianity. In effect, they've created their own humanistic religion.



Greg Forster

on **February 12, 2013 at 11:14 am** said:

To be fair, the U.S. media react this way in large part because the U.S. bishops spent the last half of the twentieth century aggressively teaching the media to think of the Roman Catholic church in precisely this way. Their strategy for social impact was precisely to “position the church on the 50 yard line” (in the words of the most influential bishop of this school) on the theory that this makes the church attractive as a coalition partner to both sides. For a brief history of this movement and the reasons it has been such a disaster, see [here](#).

Evangelicals have the opposite problem. We’ve spent the last half century rigidly clinging to language and applications that have become outdated, on the theory that we dare not change our language and applications in response to changing circumstances, on the theory that we’d be compromising the eternal truths of the faith.

The challenge for Christians and the church is that the truths of the faith are unchanging and we must not be “blown about by winds of teaching,” but God’s mercy is also “new every morning” and must be expressed and applied anew as human civilization changes.



Daniel Kelly

on February 12, 2013 at 2:01 pm said:

That just makes it worse, doesn't it? If the defenders of the faith speak and act in political terms, aren't they denying the truth of what they teach?



Greg Forster

on February 12, 2013 at 3:30 pm said:

Only if “in political terms” means “allowing political expedience to determine the content of the message.” But we can *apply* the gospel to new situations (including new political situations, because the gospel needs to be applied to all of life, including public issues that implicate the civic order) without changing the gospel.

This takes place at the most basic level with language itself. Words change meanings over time; if we keep using the same words, we become isolated in a linguistic ghetto where nobody outside our tribe is even able to understand what we’re saying. I’ll keep pulling out this quote from C.S. Lewis as long as it takes: When we send missionaries to the Bantus we expect them to learn Bantu, but we send missionaries to the English without teaching them to speak English the way the English people speak it.

In addition to language, applications and illustrations also need to change. The classic example in political philosophy is the theft of water. In a city by a large river they don’t even bother to keep track of who owns the water, but

among desert nomads stealing water may be a capital offence. Does that mean these societies practice radically different moralities? No, it means that what's just in one situation can be unjust in another. So the examples we use and the practical applications we identify for living out the gospel need to be sensitive to changing context.



Daniel Kelly

on **February 12, 2013 at 4:04 pm** said:

Yes, by “in political terms” I meant changing the contents of a truth claim to accomplish a political goal.

I’m glad you pointed out the distinction between changing a truth claim, on the one hand, and on the other applying the same truth to new situations. The former is unfaithful to the truth, while the latter is a reaffirmation of the continuing vitality and power of the truth.

Further, you are dead on about the linguistic ghetto we create for ourselves when we insist on using language that has ceased to accurately convey an idea. Changing the language doesn’t change the content, just the vehicle. When the jalopy doesn’t work anymore, you get a new car.

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