

Religion and Fake News: Faith-based Alternative Information Ecosystems in the U.S. and Europe

■ Christopher Douglas | 6 January 2018

Summary

The intersection of fake news and religion is marked by three asymmetries. First, fake news circulates more among Americans than Europeans. Second, fake news circulates among conservatives more than liberals. Third, fake news for conservatives often feature religious themes. The origin of the fake news information-entertainment ecosystem lies largely in Christian fundamentalism's cultivation of counter-expertise. The intersection of fake news and religion today is being exploited by Russia to subvert Western democracies and deepen social divisions. Western countries need to strengthen mainstream evidence-based journalism, incorporate conservative religious leaders into mainstream discussions, and detach high religiosity from fake news information ecosystems.

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One of the weirdest examples of fake news during the 2016-2017 elections in the West was the conspiracy known as “Pizzagate.” Supposedly, a D.C. restaurant housed a pedophilia ring involving members of the Democratic Party, including Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager, John Podesta. Podesta’s emails—released by WikiLeaks, and probably hacked by Russia—revealed phrases like “cheese pizza” and other code words for child sex-trafficking. Hillary Clinton herself may have been involved. The ring seemed to include Satanic rituals. The Clinton campaign was engaged, on the side, with running a devil-worshipping child sex-trafficking business.¹

The story encapsulates many aspects of our post-truth fake news world, including Russian subterfuge. But it also illustrates three asymmetries of circulation and reception that are essential to recognize. Aimed at conservatives, it illustrates the way fake news has greater distribution and receptivity on the right than the left. In its religious suggestion of Satanic Democrats, it conveys the way right-wing fake news often has a religious dimension that left-targeted fake news does not. And in its sheer American absurdity—which eventually prompted a North Carolina man to investigate the pedophilia ring himself, bringing an assault rifle that he fired in the restaurant, and later admitting about the absence of child sex slaves that “The intel on this wasn’t 100 percent”—it demonstrates the way fake news seems to have more traction on one side of the Atlantic than the other.²

It is impossible to understand the function and origin of the fake news phenomenon without recognizing these essential asymmetries. While only one of these asymmetries is explicitly based on religion, I propose to show here that all three asymmetries can be partly explained by the connection between fake news and religion.³

Religion and fake news are intimately entangled in today’s world in three important ways: 1) Religion is often the subject of fake news; 2) religious believers are often among the targeted audiences for fake news; and 3) religion in the particular form of Protestant fundamentalism is an important historical origin of fake news.

The term “fake news” is almost unusable now because it is regularly employed by some politicians and information-entertainment hosts to describe real stories they don’t like. This new use is not accidental, since the fake news system attempts to destroy the distinction between real and false, rendering all knowledge partial and partisan. For the purpose of this paper, “fake news” denotes purposefully invented falsehoods known to be so by their creators, and not the more regular (but still consequential) practice of truth-stretching and misrepresentation by politicians—as in the case of the idea that leaving the EU would result in a refund of £350 million a week that Britain was sending the EU.⁴

Fake news does exist on the liberal/progressive side of the political spectrum. One of the best-known purveyors and originators of left-targeted fake news is Conservative British MP-turned American blogger Louise Mensch.⁵ During and since the 2016 US Presidential campaign, Mensch’s blog and twitter account provided a rich array of conspiracy theories and false stories suited to liberal desires. Mensch and others seem to fabricate—or at least purvey to their large Twitter and blog audiences—political misinformation stories related to the real Russian interference in the US election. Such false stories feed an appetite on the left for affirming its perception of the criminality of the Trump Administration, and are occasionally amplified or echoed by unwitting liberal politicians and news commentators. The primary focus of left fake news

is Trump, and liberals are being targeted with stories that make them “feel good” about their in-group identity as Democrats, and which they then share with friends on social media.⁶

But fake news is asymmetrically consumed and shared by political audiences. In the US, fake news is not circulated as widely by Democrats as by Republicans, even though liberal fake news seems to be on the rise since Trump’s election.⁷ As Lazer et. al. note, “misinformation is currently predominantly a pathology of the right.”⁸ The way fake news tends to get better reception among conservatives than liberals, even by a two to one margin, has also been recognized.⁹

Intriguingly, if left-targeted fake news has Trump as its focus, right-targeted fake news often seems to have a religious inflection. A review of the biggest fake news stories of the 2016 and 2017 elections reveals that a significant number of right-targeted fake news stories had a religious subject or dimension, including:¹⁰

- the Pope was endorsing Trump
- the Democrats were running a Satanic child trafficking ring
- Clinton had sold arms to ISIS
- ISIS called for American Muslims to vote for Clinton

Several European fake news stories had religious themes, including:

- the liberal-centrist Dutch leader Alexander Pechtold had marched in an “Islamist” rally
- Emmanuel Macron’s campaign was being financed by Saudi Arabia
- Chancellor Merkel appeared in a photoshopped image with one of the Brussels terrorists¹¹
- that Turkey was joining the EU¹²

In contrast, none of the biggest left-targeted fake news stories had a religious subject.

The European Scene: Smaller Reach, Smaller Effects

This intersection of religion and fake news takes place in an environment dominated by two new developments: the rise of social media, which is a primary mode of circulation for fake news and is part of a larger ongoing partisan fragmentation of the information ecosystem,¹³ and Russian attempts to subvert Western democracies. As Christopher Stroop has argued, it has become obvious that white Christian nationalists in the West have a kind of sympathy for white Christian nationalists in Russia,¹⁴ imagining a reinvigorated clash of civilizations with Islam. Russia is likely to continue to target Christian populations in Europe with anti-Islamic fake news.

While Samuel Huntington imagined the clash of civilizations dividing Orthodox Russia and the East from the Protestant and Catholic West, it is safe to say that conservative ethno-nationalist forces in the West and Russia are reimagining the fault lines with the goal of dissolving antipathies among the three major branches of Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) and, unified by a white European identity consolidated by religion, posing a united front against brown Islam. The byproducts of sowing dissension, social division, and chaos in Western multicultural societies is a feature and not a bug from the Russian point of view.¹⁵ To this end, we can imagine further Russian fake news and anti-Islamic propaganda aimed at Western Christians. We are also likely to see increased attempts by Russia-linked trolls to

Merkel hat ein Selfie mit einem der Brüssel-Terroristen gemacht?

VON NOCH.INFO - VERÖFFENTLICHT 24/03/2016 - AKTUALISIERT 24/03/2016



Source: BuzzFeed

sow civilizational tension by targeting Western Muslims with spurious anti-Western fake news.¹⁶

Thus far, however, instances of fake news in Europe seem to have had smaller circulation and audience reception when compared to the United States. Fake news fizzled or failed to have large impacts in the 2017 British, Dutch, French, and German elections. This seems to be true despite Russian hacking of French political parties¹⁷ and German government accounts.¹⁸

The fake news that Emmanuel Macron had a secret offshore bank account¹⁹ in the Bahamas did not seem to gain much traction, and neither did far-right American attempts to aid Marine Le Pen.²⁰ The fake news that Saudi Arabia was funding Macron's campaign²¹ was shared on social media by Le Pen's niece, but the story was quickly debunked and she deleted her tweet.²²

A review of Facebook-shared stories about Angela Merkel during the German election revealed that 7 out of 10 of them were fake.²³ But fake news did not seem to be playing as large a role in the German election,²⁴ partly because of new German legislation aimed at punishing social media that circulate it.²⁵ That said, fake news stories about migrants and refugees may have contributed to the relative electoral success of the Alternative for Germany.²⁶

The March 2017 Dutch election featured a piece of fake news wherein far-right candidate Geert Wilders tweeted a photoshopped image of a political opponent participating in an "Islamist



rally." It was quickly debunked, and the Netherlands otherwise reported a low incidence of fake news during the election.²⁷

Fake news was in full swing in the June 2017 British election, but was somewhat contained by a robust office of fact checkers partly funded by Google and Facebook.²⁸ One study found that "UK users shared better quality information than that which many US users shared, but worse quality news and information than German and French users shared."²⁹ Fake news seems to have had a notable effect on Brexit, although this may be part of a longer tradition of anti-EU bias and misinformation in a segment of the British press.³⁰ Lastly, there is evidence Russia used social media to attempt to influence the recent Catalanian referendum.³¹

There are several explanations for the asymmetry of circulation and reception of fake news during these European elections compared to the 2016 US election. Observers and analysts attribute this trans-Atlantic imbalance to several factors:

1. *Greater European awareness of the problem of fake news following its prominence in the US election.* This awareness led to increased fact-checking, better electronic security measures, and more robust Facebook vigilance about fake news in the face of large fines for hate-related content. Experiments show (Polage 2012) that the more people hear a fake news story, the more they believe it,³² so policies that actively and quickly remove fake news stories from circulation are important.
2. *Higher European consumption of and trust in mainstream media.* This includes a "less complex media landscape"³³ in European countries than in the US—a point elaborated below.
3. *Linguistic diversity in Europe makes its countries more difficult and less lucrative to target.* There were fewer Dutch-speaking than English-speaking content creators in Russia or Macedonia (another major source of fake news), for example, and the Dutch election was a less lucrative target for native and foreign content-creators because

its audience was smaller and would yield fewer clicks and shares, and thus less advertising revenue.

These explanations all make sense, and go a long way to explaining the trans-Atlantic asymmetries of circulation and reception. In addition, Russia's cultural ties to Europe may be undercut by European awareness of the greater threat Russia's geographical proximity poses—and thus a greater skepticism that downgrades the effectiveness of Russian fake news influence.

But in order to better understand the partisan and trans-Atlantic asymmetries regarding the reception and dissemination of fake news, as well as the reasons why right-targeted fake news is more likely to have religion as its subject matter than left-targeted fake news, we must uncover the institutional origin of fake news in American religious history.³⁴

The American Scene: The Religious Origins of Fake News

I would like to suggest that an important contributor to the three fake news asymmetries mentioned above has to do with the religious roots of today's Republican Party in the Christian Right. The last four decades have essentially seen the Christianization of the Republican Party, as conservative white evangelicals returned from a mid-century hibernation to claim renewed social and political power through the vehicle of the GOP. During this time, conservative Christians helped reshape the Republican Party and its policies, particularly on issues such as abortion, the sexual revolution, gender roles, pornography, and homosexuality.³⁵ The Christian Right was also motivated by Supreme Court decisions affecting public schools, including the elimination of public school prayer and Bible-reading, the striking-down of anti-evolution statutes, and, for many, racial desegregation.

US voters have continued to “sort” themselves over the last few decades, as political liberals became less religious and political conservatives more religious. Sociologists and political scientists who study religion and politics call this the “God gap” in partisan religiosity.³⁶ Conservative white evangelicals have formed a hugely important and

highly motivated core group of the Republican electorate for several cycles, holding special influence during the primaries.³⁷ In 2016, 81% of white voters who self-identified as evangelical cast their ballot for Donald Trump—higher than Mitt Romney, John McCain, and even the born-again George W. Bush.

But it wasn't religion in general or even Christianity in general that helped make Republican voters more likely to be duped by fake news than their Democratic compatriots. There were, and continue to be, many progressive or liberal people of faith. There is an American Christian Left.³⁸ Similarly, Pope Francis has given new, if complicated, energy to a Catholic Left in Europe and worldwide, and the social gospel has been a theological tradition across the Atlantic for well over a century.³⁹ Rather than Christianity at large being an origin for fake news, I am arguing that susceptibility to fake news has its particular historical origin in Protestant fundamentalism's rejection of what expert elites contended was true.

To see this connection, it bears recalling what it meant to be a Christian “fundamentalist” in the early twentieth century. Christian fundamentalism was characterized in particular by its rejection of two theologically disturbing bodies of knowledge that emerged from the nineteenth century: the theory of evolution and the historical-critical method of Bible scholarship. While mainline Protestant and Catholic churches have had to a large degree come to terms with these expert knowledge consensuses, Christian fundamentalism is defined primarily by its rejection of them.

Evolution, we remember, threatened the biblical account of creation in the book of Genesis (at least, if it was read literally).⁴⁰ It dethroned humans as the culmination of God's specific acts of creation during 6 days approximately 6,000 years ago. It replaced this story with one of natural selection and random mutation across eons. And evolution also undermined a theological explanation for human and animal suffering as being the result of God's fit punishment of the sin of Adam and Eve.⁴¹ Today, 57% of US white evangelicals reject evolution, believing that humans have always existed in their present form, and another 25% of them believe evolution was

guided by God.⁴² Among the general US population, 34% reject evolution entirely. Western European populations' belief that humans were created in their current form seems capped at 20 to 30%.⁴³ While the numbers in Eastern and Central Europe are on par with the US, these countries lack a significant creationist infrastructure, as I explain below.⁴⁴ The United States remains an outlier in terms of (dis)belief in evolution among major Western democracies.

The historical-critical method of biblical scholarship, meanwhile, threatened the idea of Scripture as the inerrant, inspired, uniform Word of God. There were multiple authors and editors of Scripture, scholars began to demonstrate, sometimes with incompatible stories and contradictory theologies. The New Testament's gospels, this scholarship contended, were not composed shortly after Jesus's death by his eyewitness disciples Matthew and John, as well as Mark, an associate of the eyewitness Peter, and Luke, a companion of the apostle Paul. Rather, they were written accounts based on oral traditions and other now-lost writings, composed decades after Jesus's death, with all the attendant problems of memory and record-keeping that entails. Historical-critical scholarship about the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible has argued that many authors, editors, and redactors produced a text with sometimes inconsistent stories and divergent theologies.

Counter-Expertise

Fundamentalist Christians rejected these accounts. But more importantly, fundamentalists critiqued the methods, assumptions, and institutions of mainstream academic expertise. Fundamentalists questioned the biologists' and Bible scholars' suspension of the question of God's supernatural intervention. They rejected the secular university as a site of neutral science and objective scholarship. And they didn't just question the ideas and conclusions of the secular world and its institutions of knowledge. *In a form of resistance, they adapted modern institutions and technologies to create bodies of counter-expertise.*

Christian fundamentalist Bible colleges and universities, publishers and bookstores, newspapers and magazines, radio and then

television shows, museums, websites, and campus ministries, together formed a network of institutions that resisted elite, secular expert knowledge. Recognizing the power of expertise's infrastructure, Christian fundamentalists created this counter-infrastructure to cultivate and curate its alternative forms of knowledge, such as creationism and conservative Bible scholarship.



Diorama from the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Ky. (David Berkowitz), CC BY-NC

This alternative educational and media ecosystem of knowledge was galvanized and mobilized when the Christian Right emerged in the late 1970s to influence the Republican Party. There were two long-term consequences for our fake news world. First, theologically and politically conservative Christians learned to distrust the proclamations of the supposedly neutral media establishment, just as they had grown to suspect the methods and conclusions of elite experts like scientists or historians. And second, they learned to seek the truth from alternative sources — whether a church sermon, a Christian newspaper or book, a Christian radio or television show, or a classroom in a Christian college.

These linked consequences are demonstrated, for example, in Christian Right televangelist Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network.⁴⁵ It airs the popular television show "The 700 Club," decries evolution, and inveighs against the mainstream "liberal media." Its conservative, white, older Christian audience was among the first adopters of the conservative alternative television Fox News and the advent of talk radio, both of which polarized the US news environment when they emerged in the early- to mid-1990s.⁴⁶

The growth of right-wing American populist media was asymmetrical, having no comparable equivalent on the left, and while it was initially exploited by the GOP, it is today outside the party's control.⁴⁷ Christian Right leaders sometimes helped popularize fake news stories before the rise of the new social media, using old media formats like videotape.⁴⁸

Theologically fundamentalist Christians have for years explained to themselves that what seem to be secular, mainstream wisdom and conclusions are really the results of conspiracies, biases, and misplaced human pride in academic, scientific, and journalist communities. This cognitive training to reject expert knowledge and to seek alternative, more amenable explanations, has helped disarm the capacity for critical thinking and analysis.

In the following years, the areas of rejected expert knowledge have grown to include anthropogenic climate change,⁴⁹ the efficacy of abstinence-only sex education,⁵⁰ and even the supposed link between vaccinations and autism.⁵¹ One could make the argument that even issues that don't appear to have any religious resonance at all—such as the efficacy of supply-side economic policies, or the idea that Saddam Hussein had Weapons of Mass Destruction and ties to Al Qaeda—were likewise successful partly because of this conservative cognitive training in the rejection of mainstream expertise and the cultivation of other sources of information such as Fox News and talk radio and now also websites like Breitbart, Infowars, 4chan, and others. Earlier derision of the “reality-based community”⁵² now seems put into perspective; our post-truth world is the logical outcome.⁵³

The goal of counter-expertise is not to convince mainstream experts, and not just to provide more amenable facts, but to destroy the notion of a neutral, expert consensus. If scientists don't appear to agree on evolution or climate change—“teach the controversy”—then all belief options appear equally valid. Similarly, the goal of “fake news” and “alternative facts” goes beyond providing different data. Their purpose is actually to destroy the notion that there could be impartial news and objective facts. Maria Bustillos calls this endgame “dismediation,” “a form of propaganda

that seeks to undermine the medium by which it travels.”⁵⁴

We can see this in the way the charge of “fake news” has been easily turned around and used against reported truths that a partisan does not like.⁵⁵ As Russian dissident, exile, and chess champion Garry Kasparov explained of the fake news circulating in our post-truth world, “The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.” Russian state media is explicitly premised on this view.⁵⁶



Asymmetry and Religion

It will rightly be noted that part of this phenomenon is simply our shared human propensity to believe in the comforting things we want to be true rather than accept the tough things we don't want to be true. The cultural and political left certainly shares this general propensity. We all are vulnerable to these ordinary processes of mental sifting and harmonization. We all suffer from confirmation bias, making it easy for us to uncritically accept ideas we already like, and to resist actual evidence counter to what we already believe.⁵⁷

While this is certainly true, it doesn't explain the asymmetry of the situation in terms of fake news reception or that asymmetry's origin in Christian fundamentalism. It is conservative voters who are measurably more credulous to fake news sites. The origin story of that credulity in Protestant fundamentalism holds a similar imbalance.

The truth is that millions of non-fundamentalist Christians in Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions accept evolution and the historical-critical method of Bible scholarship, and

there are lots of practicing Christian scholars pursuing research in both those fields. But there are no non-Christians (or, more broadly, non-theists) who do “creation science” or believe in the literal Genesis account of Creation, and there are no non-Christian scholars who believe the Bible is inerrant and that the authors of the four Gospels (who never identify themselves) are the actual people Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This is not because these two particular theological beliefs were the original instances of fake news, but because they became the basis for institutions of counter-expertise through which particular religious populations in the US (and elsewhere to a lesser extent) were cognitively trained to suspect mainstream academic and journalistic expertise.

This is a highly controversial question because it begins to name that which must not be recognized in polite company: the asymmetrical polarization and extremism in America’s current political climate. That asymmetry was famously expressed by the bipartisan team of Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein in *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism* (2012), where they explained,

However awkward it may be for the traditional press and nonpartisan analysts to acknowledge, one of the two major parties, the Republican Party, has become an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition. When one party moves this far from the center of American politics, it is extremely difficult to enact policies responsive to the country’s most pressing challenges. (xiv)

It’s past time for us to consider the possibility that the God gap in partisan religiosity is linked to the asymmetry of the extent to which voters consume fake news. Akin to *National Review* founder William F. Buckley standing athwart history and yelling stop,⁵⁸ the sister conservatism of Christian fundamentalism has stood athwart modern expert knowledge and in many key areas yelled no. In cultivating alternative sources and

alternative ideas, Christian fundamentalists laid the ground for the fake news to come.

Tribal Epistemologies

If this genealogy placing Christian fundamentalism as an important part of the historical background of fake news and alternative facts is correct, we begin to apprehend fake news as part of a larger system of “tribal epistemology.” As David Roberts explains, in tribal epistemology “Information is evaluated based not on conformity to common standards of evidence or correspondence to a common understanding of the world, but on whether it supports the tribe’s values and goals and is vouchsafed by tribal leaders.”⁵⁹ Under these circumstances, the question is not ‘which fact is true?’ but rather ‘which fact helps my side?’ Social media like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and 4chan are key circulators of fake news and alternative facts, the distribution system of tribal epistemology wherein one shares stories with like-minded friends, as Facebook⁶⁰ and Twitter⁶¹ have belatedly conceded. We are facing an epistemic crisis, as Roberts has argued elsewhere.⁶²

Tribal epistemology exists for both the left and the right, but it is asymmetrical in part because of the religious origins of counter-expertise explained above. According to one account of ideological information,

only the Republican Party has actively opposed society’s central information-gathering and -disseminating institutions—universities and the news media—while Democrats have remained reliant on those institutions to justify policy choices and engage in political debate, considering them both independent arbiters and allies.⁶³

That battle, I have sought to show, had an important precursor in the conservative religious rejection of expert academic knowledge. A complementary battle was fought by some conservative politicians like Newt Gingrich, who sought successfully in 1995 to permanently close the Congressional Office of Technological Assessment, whose mission was “to produce reliable nonpartisan information and analysis for members of Congress.”⁶⁴ Other important antecedents include the fossil fuel-industry

campaign to sow doubt about facts established by climate change research,⁶⁵ and the tobacco industry campaign to blur the evidence that smoking causes cancer.⁶⁶ In all these cases, the notion of the neutral referee itself became the enemy. Ignoring this asymmetry puts mainstream expertise and journalism at risk.

Recommendations

If my hypothesis that the religious origin of US fake news helps explain the three asymmetries of its circulation (trans-Atlantic, left-right, religious content) is correct, it entails some policy recommendations.

1) Policymakers should proactively assess and engage highly conservative religious communities in Europe and North America that develop alternative information ecosystems which increase vulnerability to fake news manipulation. This vulnerability could be deepened for populations that already feel besieged by a secular society in which they are a disrespected minority—as was experienced by the US Christian Right. Creationism is on the rise in Europe, for example, and a Muslim version of it is being encouraged in Europe by Turkish creationists.⁶⁷ European Muslim identity awareness may be encouraging this Islamic creationism in Europe—and, as with the existence of a strong self-identity and distinct information ecosystem, may develop into a vulnerability to fake news (Hameed 2014).

It is important to remember that views on evolution are incidental to the real question about the circulation of fake news; it could be any religious issue so long as it generates institutions and traditions of suspicion toward mainstream expertise and results in the creation of counter-expertise and counter-institutions to circulate and defend alternative facts.

2) Western countries must recognize, publicize, investigate, and counter Russian attempts at subverting Western democracies and deepening social divisions and mistrust within our pluralistic societies. “The key to understanding Russian internet policy is that it is part and parcel of an overall information control policy, the goal of which is the accumulation of power and wealth for Russia’s kleptocratic elites,”

Nathalie Maréchal writes (2017). She continues, “If politics is war by other means, then we might call this terrorism by other means. Like terrorism, information warfare turns open societies against themselves, creating chaos and breeding suspicion.”

We need a clear-eyed awareness of Russian attempts to manipulate information to aid far-right nationalists in their renewed vision of a religious-racial clash of civilizations. Important tools include Hamilton 68,⁶⁸ which tracks Russian troll and bot influence on Twitter, and efforts to starve fake or salacious news websites of advertising revenue, such as is being done to Breitbart.⁶⁹ Other countries may wish to weigh the pros and cons of German legislation that fines social media platforms as publishers of fake news hate speech in particular.⁷⁰ Such efforts must nonetheless respect our liberal commitments to freedom of speech and belief, remembering that fake news creators’ intention is to lie, divide, warp, and profit.

3) Instead of instigating campaigns of counter-propaganda, the West should encourage real news. We need greater financial support for robust fact-checking, as well as continued financial support—as is already the case in many European countries—for factually accurate, professionally researched reporting. Mainstream, professional, evidence-based journalism must likewise avoid the lazy equivalencies of “bothsidesism” and “whataboutism.”

That said, mainstream and public broadcasting cannot be consumed uncritically. Outlets like PBS, BBC, *The Washington Post* and others maintain rigorous journalistic standards but may not be entirely free of political constraints and bias.

4) Mainstream journalism and other public forums should increase the presence of conservative and traditional religious leader participation, particularly of communities who feel themselves to be religious minorities (the Christian Right in the US, Muslims in Europe). The goal here should be intensive and critical dialogue formats, not entirely separate and parallel news formats that—à la American talk radio and Fox News commentators—reinforce the tribal epistemology of conservative religious thought-bubbles.

Religiously conservative communities must not only be heard, but they must feel themselves to be heard. Mainstream journalism might interview conservative religious leaders, equipped with accurate facts and reporting, with the goal of having a civil exchange of views governed by a robust presentation of evidence and facts. Conservative religious leaders should also be paired with less conservative leaders of the same religious tradition with whom they can dialogue. Such critical dialogue formats should help prevent them from becoming platforms for yet more repetition of fake news.

5) Given the principle of religious freedom, efforts to counter fake news should not pressure religious audiences to renounce their religious identities. Rather, the goal should be to encourage the loosening of “tribal” religious identities and their epistemological ecosystems. As *Christianity Today*, the leading magazine of American evangelicalism, has recently argued, believers can be critical consumers of information and still be authentic Christians characterized by orthodox belief.⁷¹ This is done by demonstrating to more conservative audiences that there is more than one way to be a good Christian, Muslim, or Jew: that one can believe in evolution, climate change, LGBTQ rights, religious pluralism, and mainstream journalistic and academic expertise while simultaneously being a sincere, properly observant religious believer. The goal here is to detach high religiosity from fake news information-entertainment ecosystems.

Loosening the bonds of tribal epistemology might be accomplished by giving voice—to use my examples about the origin of counter-expertise structures—to the tens of millions of Christians in the West who accept evolution, the authorial and compositional complexities of their sacred text, anthropogenic climate change, the legitimacy of LGBTQ rights, and multicultural society. The goal is to demonstrate that there is flexibility in their enduring religious identity, and that reality and mainstream news sources are not the enemy.

Conclusion

A hostile nation is conducting information warfare against Western countries, seeking to deepen our social divisions and to weaken the EU

and NATO. It is targeting, and is consciously and unconsciously abetted by, religious conservatives in Western countries and the information-entertainment ecosystems those conservatives have built up over the last four decades. The best weapon against the intersection of fake news and religion is to seek the truth, for only the truth might set us free.

Notes

¹ German Lopez, "Pizzagate, the fake news conspiracy theory that led a gunman to DC's Comet Ping Pong, explained." *Vox*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/12/5/13842258/pizzagate-comet-ping-pong-fake-news>.

² CBS News, "'Pizzagate' shooting suspect: 'The intel on this wasn't 100 percent'." *CBSNews.com*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pizzagate-shooting-suspect-edgar-maddison-welch-intel-wasnt-100-percent/>.

³ Parts of this article are adapted from material previously published in *Religion Dispatches*.

⁴ Gareth Harding, "Media Lies and Brexit: A Double Hammer-Blow to Europe and Ethical Journalism." *Ethical Journalism Network*, <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/publications/thics-in-the-news/media-lies-and-brexit>.

⁵ Zack Beauchamp, "Democrats are falling for fake news about Russia." *Vox*, May 19, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/5/19/15561842/trump-russia-louise-mensch>.

⁶ BBC Trending, "The rise of left-wing, fake news about Trump." *BBC.com*, April 15, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-39592010>.

⁷ McKay Coppins, "How the left lost its mind." *The Atlantic*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/liberal-fever-swamps/530736/>. See also David Lazer, Matthew Baum, Nir Grinberg, Lisa Friedland, Kenneth Joseph, Will Hobbs, and Carolina Mattsson, "Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action." *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy*, May 2, 2017, <https://shorensteincenter.org/combating-fake-news-agenda-for-research/>. This report notes that "when Republicans are in power, the left becomes increasingly susceptible to promoting and accepting fake news."

⁸ Lazer et al, "Combating Fake News," <https://shorensteincenter.org/combating-fake-news-agenda-for-research/>. This asymmetry in fake news reception is mirrored by the growth of a "populist right-wing media" in the US since the 1990s that has no corollary on the left. See David Roberts, "How conservative media helped the far-right take over the Republican Party." *Vox*, July 30, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/platform/amp/2015/7/30/9074761/conservative-media-republican-party>.

⁹ See Christopher Ingram, "Why conservatives might be more likely to fall for fake news," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/12/07/why-conservatives-might-be-more-likely-to-fall-for-fake-news/?utm_term=.6ae8451bd17a. See also Craig Silverman,

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