

# The Godlessness of Fake News

## ‘Godfulness’ - putting God back into news - how Christians can respond

It was once said of stories that seemed too good to be true - ‘You couldn’t make it up.’

Well now it seems you can.

BuzzFeed lists as the second the top fake news story on Facebook in the run-up to the US election as: ‘Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump For President, Releases Statement’. At number one was: ‘Obama Signs Executive Order Banning The Pledge Of Allegiance In Schools Nationwide.’ Only today, we report that Pope Francis is the victim of another fake news story that claims he changed the Ten Commandments.

News is of itself and always has been a contentious subject. Almost before a journalist has finished reporting an event, be it a news conference or a football match or general synod, they might have betrayed, probably unintentionally, a bias in one direction or another. This can happen simply through who they choose to quote - Jeremy Corbyn or Theresa May for example. The bias can be demographic. Did Chelsea win or Man U lose? Does this therefore make the report accurate only for those who share the reporter’s views, or who live in the same place? Does this make it bad, or indeed fake, for those who don’t?

There is now a huge and growing overlap between ideas of ‘badness’ and ‘fakeness’.

It is such a serious problem that even the founder of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, released an open letter voicing his concerns about fake news and other matters to mark the 28th birthday of his creation. His definition of how it works is worth repeating here: ‘Today, most people find news and information on the web through just a **handful of social media sites** and search engines. These sites make more money when we click on the links they show us. And, they choose what to show us based on algorithms which learn from our personal data that they are constantly harvesting. The net result is that these sites show us content they think we’ll click on – meaning that misinformation, or ‘fake news’, which is surprising, shocking, or designed to appeal to our biases can **spread like wildfire**. And through the use of data science and armies of bots, those with bad intentions can game the system to spread misinformation for financial or political gain.’

‘Fake News’ is also a handy weapon of abuse, often directed at journalists. As just one example, a recent story I wrote about Trump’s travel ban was that a Christian family was among the first to be turned away at a US airport and sent back to the

Middle East. Supporters of Donald Trump's policy on this issue didn't like this story because it contradicted Trump's own message at that time that Christians would be getting special treatment and not be subject to the ban. So my completely accurate story was comprehensively damned in forums online - mainly Facebook - as 'fake news'. And those people damning it were mainly from the Christian community. A good analysis of the current fake news situation is in [The Sun](#). The 20 top performing fake news stories before the US election generated 8,711,000 shares reactions and comments. The top 20 genuine news stories generated 7,367,000.

When was the term 'fake news' first used? The journalist Etan Smallman found and [tweeted](#) a clipping of the Daily Mail from 1939 which contains what is possibly the first recorded reference to 'fake news' as it is used today:

**M.P. Brings  
Charge of  
"Fake"  
News**

*From Daily Mail  
Parliamentary Correspondent*

WESTMINSTER, Monday.

**M**R. J. MORRIS (Con., N. Salford) asked the Prime Minister in the Commons this afternoon if he was "aware that certain organs of the Press during the past few years had continuously published alarming statements regarding the international situation, which, in many cases, were grossly exaggerated and in others false."

Would Mr. Chamberlain consider introducing legislation imposing penalties upon "the publication of demonstrably fake news, which resulted in causing anxiety and loss to the business community, the Stock Exchange, and the general public?"

**The Prime Minister:** "I am aware that sensational and inaccurate statements on the international situation have not infrequently been published by certain sections of the Press.

**Importance of Restraint**

"The Foreign Secretary and I have on a number of occasions emphasised the importance of restraint on the part of the Press in dealing with foreign affairs—a view fully shared by the more responsible newspapers in this country and bodies representative of their interests.

"I trust their influence may be sufficient to keep the undesirable practice referred to in check. I am not thinking of introducing legislation."

We in our own faith are right in the middle of this debate, because our faith draws on a story that we believe to be true but it is dependent on the Bible, itself drawn from a belief in events reported down the ages as ‘Gospel truth’.

Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* was really an exercise in attempting to designate the Bible as ‘fake news’. Likewise, in the present climate, critics of *The God Delusion* might feel they need not engage with its arguments but can simply wield this handy new weapon against it, turning back the criticisms of their beliefs to criticise the book itself as ‘fake’.

There are the newspaper columnists such as CNN’s Jake Tapper who report, on attempting to admonish their children, how they are being met with the retort: ‘Fake news’. As if this automatically defeats all argument. A wonderful excuse not to engage.

And then there are the more serious manifestations, so serious that the Culture, Media and Sport committee in Parliament has launched an inquiry to seek evidence and report back. Launching the inquiry, Damian Collins, chair of the committee, said: ‘The growing phenomenon of fake news is a threat to democracy and undermines confidence in the media in general.’ Anyone can make submissions so I’m hoping to submit the text of this lecture. One issue the inquiry will consider is legislation that would force social networks to improve the way they handle complaints, after Facebook’s failure to remove sexualised images of children, the Guardian reports.

I make these points to show that in the use or even overuse of the term ‘fake news’ that we are seeing around us, there can be as much bias or at least predisposition in the hearer of news as there is in the bearer.

One of the reasons we are witnessing an ‘outbreak’ of fake news is that whatever you think of President Trump’s politics, he has decided that it is high time to challenge the veracity of the media - a media which incidentally in his country, though far from perfect, does enjoy the liberty of enormous variety, in terms of ownership, temperament and affiliation. Trump and his staff seem to wheel out the term ‘fake news’ to attack almost anything they simply don’t like. For example Trump tweeted on 7 March ‘Don’t let the FAKE NEWS tell you that there is big infighting in the Trump Admin. We are getting along great, and getting major things done!’

(Note for clarification added post-lecture: Trump referred in his tweet to FAKE NEWS. This was clever of him. The over-use of capital letters, particularly in headlines, is now recognised as one of the indicators of fake news. Although it is not clear at present whether capitalisation affects Google rankings per se, the algorithms have quality controls that are constantly being enhanced, so it is safe to assume the SEO

algorithms favour good grammar and will eventually, if not yet, favour appropriate capitalisation. There is in addition a technical issue about the use of capital letters in headlines and resulting pixel size. More can be read about that [here](#). In general, best practice is to use ‘good English’. In other words, to avoid articles being mistaken for ‘fake news’, journalists should use short headlines, and capitalise in headlines and the copy only where standard English grammar or a publication’s style guide would support this.)

Trump earlier dismissed a dossier containing claims about his private life and relationship with Russia as a disgrace and described BuzzFeed - which published the document in full - as a ‘failing pile of garbage’. Trump has also repeatedly attacked CNN over the dossier and other issues.

If we want to put it at its crudest, as President Trump is often accused of doing, here is a leader whose aim appears to be to shoot the messenger. He is doing so before an audience that is as divided as American audiences generally are. If you believe the thrust of his argument, and can bring yourself to think that it is not the product of entirely partisan motives, you might accept that an attack on the press is long overdue, and that the president is right to cry ‘fake’ at every hostile headline.

There is inevitably another way of looking at this behaviour. Namely that here we have a man who has thrived both in business and in politics on adversity. It was already evident in his style as the presenter of TV’s *The Apprentice*. It was also plainly on display in his rebarbative patterns of behaviour during the Primaries. And then even more so in his three live broadcast slugging matches with his Democrat rival.

In the course of all these encounters, he wasted no opportunity to tell his opponents that their arguments were fake. He called Ted Cruz of his own party ‘Lyin’ Ted’. This nickname stuck, and no matter how often Cruz retaliated, attacking Trump as a ‘narcissist’, a ‘pathological liar’ and a ‘philanderer’, nothing worked. Trump called Clinton ‘crooked Hillary’.

In other words, what Trump sought to do was discredit anyone of different opinions than his own. His aim was to show that they were using fraudulent facts.

Then once in the White House, with the dust settled and these opponents gone, he had to train his fire on a fresh target. And there before him, arranged in their familiar rows at press conferences, stood or sat the press. What he chose to see, rather than ranks of potentially lethal interrogators, were lines and lines of sitting ducks, long overdue for a killing spree.

So what exactly was he charging them with?

He was telling them that their product was a sham, that they were peddling falsehoods for a living. For someone whose own accounts of events were, to say the least, at odds with the record, this was a classic case of getting your tackle in first, even if this meant resorting to some horrific fouls.

Already it has proved to be a terrific irritant, just as he must have intended.

It has meant that reporters and commentators, in order to demonstrate their diligence and impartiality, have to give detailed and accurate accounts of a ferocious, sustained attack on their own selves, on very purpose.

Whatever else this has achieved, it has managed to make the Presidential spectacle trump soap operatic versions. It has even appeared to spike the guns of his constitutional auditors.

There is an inevitable price for such a tactic. And that price is potentially a serious cocktail of tedium and absurdity. There is a limit, surely, to the number of times when you can simply silence a difficult line of enquiry by shouting 'fake news'. There is law of diminishing returns in any such ploys.

And it is important for all of us, because as a recent Stanford university study showed, the ability of the upcoming generations of 'digital natives' to evaluate accurately the information they see on their phone - on Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and media, is 'bleak'. They had difficulty telling the difference between ads, editorial and advertorial. And their abilities to assess accurately the partisan position of a site they were reading were alarmingly limited.

And in fact, it is worth mentioning at this point that Donald Trump has been the victim of a seriously fake viral news story. Trump last year was widely reported to have said in 1998: 'If I were to run, I'd run as a Republican. They're the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they'd still eat it up.'

He never said it.

You can sort of see why he is so angry.

And it is no coincidence that the man to make the most outspoken challenges against the established media of his country is himself a compulsive tweeter. Not just compulsive but mightily influential, causing tumult with the contents of his 140 characters. This is power indeed and power of a kind that previous potentates could not have dreamt, power possibly even greater than his assumed prerogatives of office, hedged about as they are by the democratic inconveniences of Congress and the Constitution.

So we are at a moment in history when media – the mainstream media or MSM as much as any other – are under attack as never before, charged with manufacturing fake news. And at the same time, the wide variety of different media, the fact that anyone can now publish on many platforms, means that trusted, verifiable news has never been a more valuable and essential commodity. Trusted outlets such as The Times and The Financial Times are succeeding in their monetisation of content precisely because of the rarity of this commodity. It is shocking that Trump is going so hard for the New York Times and CNN. It is shocking that he and others are being hit so hard by fake news. Yet at this time of flux, perhaps all media, anyone with a social media profile, are vulnerable.

In the 500th anniversary year of Luther's nailing or waxing or whatever it was he actually did to attach his 95 theses to that door at Wittenberg, it is appropriate to make a connection between the Reformation and our own internet age. As well as shooting the messenger, there are concerted attempts to sabotage the route the messenger goes on. Just as the Reformation opened up the vernacular and the printing process to the masses, liberating the Bible - the sacred word - from ecclesiastic circles to the general populace, now the internet has opened up publishing itself to the masses, liberating the secular word to the wider populace. The medium is becoming the message in a way that goes far beyond what Marshall McLuhan can ever have imagined.

So why does this liberation, so welcome in so many ways, seem to have resulted in this strange proliferation of the fake news phenomenon? Because what we must resist at all costs if for the overriding message is to become one of 'fake news'.

There now so many allegations of fake news that tempting though it might be, we simply cannot place all the blame, or praise, at the door of the White House's new incumbent. The fact is that there are now more news outlets, fake or otherwise, than there have ever been. And more consumers of the produce. The result of this is that we now live in a time of revolution in our manner of communication such as we have never witnessed before. It is surely not as outlandish as it might sound to say that the effects of this revolution are becoming in their own way as far-reaching and as challenging of established orders as was the Reformation five centuries ago.

In 1517 and before, the profoundly good news for humanity was conveyed in a language - Latin - understood by only a tiny fraction of those who were meant to benefit from it. By this message being then translated, and distributed through the new technology of the Gutenberg press, this good news story related in the Bible was in effect downloaded into the national database of knowledge. It changed the world.

A comparable process is happening now.

The present spread of ownership of the word, not only its means of production but its means of dissemination, means we are all publishers now. Moreover, our contribu-

tions fly across the planet at the speed of light. Whether they enlighten is another matter.

What we say in our communications may strike us as true, honest accurate, meeting all the standards by which the supposedly upright presses of the West have since claimed they may be judged. But we are all in danger of being tainted by the mischief being done by others whose values are completely different.

Because one of the things that's happened by virtue of all of us being publishers now is that as a result of this revolution, certain power centres have broken down. Certain patterns of dominance have been dispersed. One of them is the model of the printed newspaper. With the remarkable exception of the Daily Mail which has mastered its online operation, the taken for granted postwar dominance of news disseminators and opinion formers has, perhaps not so much broken down in fact, but the power has certainly been diluted. They are still with us, a bit reminiscent of the ice caps - rumours of whose demise remains doggedly premature. Think Mark Twain. Everyone keeps tweeting that they are on the way out, but somehow they are still hanging on. Rumours of their death are exaggerated.

Yet one of the things that does seem to be going on is a diminution of the power of these blocs of information and opinion provision. And as a result they don't enjoy the widespread deference they have been able to take for granted in last 40-50 years by people who looked to them for truth and fairness.

There was a time when a Guardian reader might say of the Telegraph that it was not credible because of its particular right wing stance. A Telegraph reader might say likewise that the Guardian was nothing but utopian moonshine.

This was old fashioned parlance for what we now call fake news. It was a forerunner to fake news.

The result of the breakage of these old media blocs is there has been a shift in notions of authority, of which the prevalence of fake news allegations is a symptom. If looking for godlessness in this unfolding scene, it is to do with the fact that everyone is now their own master, can say what they want. Authority, checks, rectitude, balance are all up for grabs in the rush to express opinion .

So in the loss of authority, it is as if the world has gone godless. I'm not suggesting that the old coalition of Guardian-Times-Telegraph was a peculiar trinity that amounted to a deity, but these publications were a set of figures in whom people had faith. Among older generations, such as mine, people still do. But among young people - well I guess all of us with teen children have had that surreal experience of talking to them in their bedrooms upstairs by SMS.

I get the feeling, when watching those press conferences in the White House on TV and the US President attacking the journalists, that they are at a loss how to respond - because what they are accused of is certainly so far removed from the truth of how they see their jobs. To have reached the positions they have, those White House correspondents will be people of the most extraordinary integrity, hard work, ethics. They are at the top of their professions, and will be used to respect and deference - that they have certainly earned. It is surreal to see the President making the kinds of allegations against such people that he does.

My own experience working for 27 years in the national press was one of really trying to get it right, working in a climate where getting it right was always important. Where there was a great premium on accuracy and the often elusive balancing of truths known as 'fairness'. So much is the telling of a story a tendentious matter that sometimes I felt the only time that I was getting a story 'right' or a running issue right was when there was an equal balance of vituperation coming from both ends of the debate after the story appeared. But does conflict that surrounds religion reporting mean I was always condemned to be writing in the eyes of at least half my readership, 'fake news'? Perhaps in today's world, it now does.

So what's the answer?

Because the fact is, some news may be fake, and that problem is nothing if not real.

For tonight, I have one suggestion which is more of a personal tool for developing a spiritual approach than anything else but I am finding it works for me.

If fake news leads to godlessness, then it follows that one way to redress that balance is with 'Godfulness'. Perhaps a Christian version of mindfulness, although not quite 'Christian mindfulness'.

I would like to do a lot more work on this, perhaps even write a book. It relates very strongly to my own journey in a 'recovery fellowship' with a strong emphasis on a spiritual programme. But tonight, of course, I can only briefly address the problem of how practise Godfulness to the best of one's ability. Can you switch it on like 'mindfulness'?

Fake news is not new of course, although the term has attained new currency. There was the Donation of Constantine, a forged imperial decree supposedly transferring authority over Rome to the Pope that used in the Middle Ages in attempts to justify papal expansionism. Benjamin Franklin in 1782 actually wrote and had printed an entirely fictitious newspaper in a serious endeavour to discredit the British.

All news is narrative. All narratives have the inherent risks - and the dangers they run kick in the moment and individual looks at an event with a view to recording it. Some fake news, like Franklin's, is deliberate and deceptive. Others are more satirical, test-

ing the reader's credulity. In the United States, for example, Private Eye is mistaken sometimes for a fake news publication. This is editor Ian Hislop on the confusion: 'We were listed as fake news originally on one of those sites, and we had to point out that quite a lot of stuff in the magazine is deliberately not true. The queen as far as I know hasn't signed the petition against Trump's state visit this week, but we did put that on the cover.'

Just as media sites such as Snopes are trying and testing news outlets for 'fake news', we individually then can take steps to help ourselves in an environment that can feel frightening and sinister, especially if you are unlucky enough to find yourself being trolled on social media. So my small suggestion for tonight is to move towards using and defining a sense of how Godfulness works in the sense of being a practitioner when going through this persona testing of ourselves as we try to live and work in this environment. And it has to do with Christ-like principles of neighbourliness, of loving our neighbours as ourselves, treating others as we would wish to be treated. How can we 'turn the other cheek' when we are being traduced? Or sometimes should we simply call the lawyers and sue? Journalists among us can try to enact the ideals spoken of by Jesus Christ, so that even our opponents do not feel misrepresented when we write about them. And we can turn to the beatitudes, to the lives of the saints, which apply still in so many ways today, when working out a response to a social media or 'fake news' storm that might one day catch us by surprise, either about ourselves, a loved one or an idea or institution we care about. I'm not suggesting we go and sit on columns away from it all like Simon Stylites although some people I know very well still have phones that do nothing more than make calls and SMS. So it is one option. But these are the kinds of things I would like to explore in a future book.

As the means of news production have become more sophisticated - with technology is such that in five years time we could be able to alter moving images so much that we can make videos of people saying whatever we want - it is no longer case that pictures cannot lie. The technological capacity to ape reality is gathering momentum. The implications for fake news are obvious. If it is easy to manufacture, more will be made. So we do need to work out responses, both at individual and organisational levels.

So it is good that the Government is looking at this. It is good that Tim Berners-Lee feels so strongly about it. Legislation is probably one way forward. And while we wait for that, we can meditate on seeking the truth in the white-out of the media blizzard. Hopefully, if we can remember to keep God in the picture, we won't go too far wrong.

(Note: This is an edited version of a lecture delivered by Ruth Gledhill, editor of [Christian Today](#), at Hinde Street Methodist Church as the Hugh Price Hughes Lecture

on 14 March 2017. The live videos of [the lecture](#) and the following [q&a](#) can be viewed on [Periscope](#).)