

# Propaganda, Paranoia, and Providence

The supreme [ill-]logic of conspiracy disinformation



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*“Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“To be effective, propaganda must constantly short-circuit all thought and decision. It must operate on the individual at the level of the unconscious. He must not know that he is being shaped by outside forces (this is one of the conditions for the success of propaganda), but some central core in him must be reached in order to release the mechanism in the unconscious which will provide the appropriate—and expected—action.”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: the Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, New York: Vintage Books, 1965, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 27.

## CANCEL-CULTURE COLD WAR PROPAGANDA AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY



The phrase “Fake News” may oftentimes simply represent fabricated stories and parodies that are meant as satire for people’s amusement, as in comical tabloids and memes, and thus are generally without consequence or harm.

Yet, using the term to disparage or dismiss *credible* news sources (evidence based and corroborated), more seriously, can be used as a smokescreen for the bearers of contrary “news” narratives. Yet ironically those feigning to bring the “real” news are the ones spreading fake news – intentional disinformation.

We have all witnessed the consequences of total absence of online accountability. And now, especially with AI, anyone can claim (or present visually) anything from their unhinged imaginations without hindrance or effectual reproach. The damaging consequences of revisionist propaganda have been seen in every sphere of human life, whether political, personal, social, medical, governmental, technical, religious, economic, international, occupational, and more. The potential ramifications of this should concern us all.

Reflecting on the mass social and political hysteria (and violence) we experienced during the Covid pandemic, it has been especially troubling to consider how Christians were so swiftly caught up into beliefs and actions that appear with hindsight to have been born largely from disinformation and convoluted political, social, and medical conspiracy theories.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the confusion and divisions this generated in a so-called atmosphere of “cancel culture” were augmented dramatically by theological and biblical ideas stirred into a toxic potion of untrue assumptions and expectations. The outcomes for many people were lethal to relationships in families, churches, and communities. This cancel-those-you-disagree-with culture and reprisals on the political left, right, and middle became commonplace in the social-mediaverse, and most grievously bore its bad fruit in divided relations.

When I set out to compose some reflections on this topic, I was sufficiently stunned to find such a proliferation of recent books, studies, articles, and

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<sup>3</sup> We should note the prevalence of conspiracy theories in much of recorded human history. There are many historical accounts of people, entire communities, and even nations being deluded by them from ancient to modern times, and oftentimes with tragic outcomes. The advent of the WWI has compounded this immeasurably.

blogs on these issues that I put my outline for this aside for a time, doubting that much could be added (see samples in bibliography). Despite that initial hesitancy, my frequent ongoing encounters with conspiracists (conspiratorialists) lured me foolishly again to enter the fray, though it is an unwinnable skirmish.<sup>4</sup> Yet, my main concern is certainly not to win some imagined battle over this issue but primarily to reflect on the impact these conflicts and aberrations of our *shalom* may be having on Christians and the church, and further, to draw attention to some biblical themes that may be pertinent.

## I NOW CANCEL YOU – BY SLANDER AND GOSSIP – BECAUSE I AM SO RIGHT TO DO SO



For discussion purposes, definitions of the terms slander, gossip, and conspiracy propaganda are in order. Cancel culture generally depends on *slander* or *famacide* (or as some call it, *slanters*) and *gossip* – the dissemination of unproved derogatory assertions, assumptions, innuendos, claims, or ideas about other individuals and organizations. This is the *propaganda* norm in the social combat to discredit ideological opponents. *Gossip* carries the notion of uncovering something that was meant to remain hidden or private, whether it is true or untrue. A gossip or slanderer is one complicit in sharing both true and false information to harm another's reputation or for other deleterious objectives.<sup>5</sup> Other terms used to describe this kind of

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<sup>4</sup> I am not discussing *conspirators*, defined as those who conspire to some action or another. Conspirators as a term has historically had negative connotations as those who seek to do harm, as its synonyms indicate: plotter, schemer, colluder, conniver, and machinator. My focus is on conspiracists (or conspiratorialists), defined as those who engage intensively in discovering the *presumed conspiracies* of conspirators. A conspiratorialist would be anyone who has some observable degree of conspiratorial ideation but generally having no (initial) intention to *conspire* against the imagined *conspirators*.

<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that all who call out evildoing are slandering, such as whistleblowers. *Telling the truth* is a biblical concept, of course, but the Bible also requires due process in the proper context of witnesses and effected parties to substantiate claims or charges against others. Indeed, there are emergency situations where one might be obligated to expose something (before all the evidence is presentable) to protect others, but this has nothing in common with the *widespread re-distribution of unsubstantiated disinformation* I am addressing here by calling it out! See also p. 8.

defamation include *speaking evil* as a *busy body*, *talebearer*, *backbiter*, *libeler*, or *belittler*.

Does it need to be said that, biblically speaking, slander and the gossip used to spread it are a serious offence against God and neighbor?<sup>6</sup> It should hardly need mentioning, but it has become part and parcel to our cultural social fabric. Its fever-pitch tone has been mind-shatteringly loud with a prime example set by a former U.S. president, every perceived slight or criticism responded to with toxic defamations and slanderous vitriol.

To set the issues of contemporary conspiracy theories and their supporting propaganda in the broader context, we must consider the overworn phrase “the culture war.” Nevertheless, this is one “cold war” that seems impossible to clearly define or declare. There are some who would like to characterize it as the basic conflict between the “Left” and the “Right.” This would seem to be correct if the dividing ideological issues were always obvious. But since they are not, this would appear to be an overly simplistic understanding. It is likely that many of the perceived divides are as much polarizing *attitudes* or *emotions*, more than they are ideological.

For example, one of the many undercurrents in both the so-called Left and the Right is the fundamental *assumption* that the solutions are in the main *political* ones. This means that each side believes that they must win the fight at all costs and by any means, and that any loss of an election is put forward as (conspiratorial) proof that it was all rigged in the first place.

Each side believes that the other side is absolutely wrong about (absolutely) everything, incapable of reasoned discourse, and so brainwashed by their ideology that only *deprogramming* would suffice to win them over. This may be one reason the cultural atmosphere is fearful vitriolic shouting-down to silence opposing voices. Does it need to be said that this suggests the Left and Right these days are divided less by ideology and more by the *deep feelings of angst* that others threaten some imagined vision of what (the good life for) the world should be? And yet, all-the-while sharing different versions of the *same notion* that the real solutions, and redemption of the human situation, can only be realized when their side wins the cultural-political war and is in power to set the agenda for society. The degree of handwringing and fist-and-teeth-clenching angst on all sides of the divisions may therefore speak more of anxiety about imagined threats than coherent philosophical disagreements.

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<sup>6</sup> See *slander* in Lev 19:16; Ps 15:3; 31:13; 41:6; 50:20; 59:10; 119:23; Prov 10:18; 30:10; Jer 6:28; Ezek 36:3; Matt 15:19; Mk 7:22; 2 Cor 12:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; 1 Tim 5:14; Tit 3:2; Jas 4:11; 1 Pet 2:1; 1 Pet 3:16; 2 Pet 2:10; Jude 1:8; Rev 13:6; *gossip* in Prov. 11:13; 16:28; 18:8; 20:19; 26:20, 22; 2 Co. 12:20.

On the latter, it has been my entirely unscientific impression that few on either side can articulate a fully formed understanding of what they stand for as claiming the label “conservative” Right or “liberal” Left.

Yet, one thing seems clear: all sides are certain that they are *in the right*, are on the side of the angels, and have not been unduly influenced by propaganda or disinformation. Evidence of this is the widespread propensity to cancel others through slanderous claims and assertions to discredit the “other” side in very personally demeaning ways. When all else fails, raise your voice loud enough with name-calling and character assaults that it will appear believable. This approach leads us into an attitude of *polarized* cultural/political totalitarianism (or messianism) that shuts down discussion and rationalizes the employment of all forms of propaganda; so long as one feels their version of societal salvation is under siege, all guns keep blazing in hopes to manipulate (or obliterate) opponents. In the meantime, the genuine issues of our times remain *unaddressed* and *unresolved*.

### TO CANCEL OR NOT TO CANCEL: MORAL MUTENESS OR CONFRONTING EVILS THAT SHATTER SHALOM?



To “cancel” others and to degrade them because we disagree with their viewpoints on politics, social issues (like vaccines or masks or . . . [fill in the blank]), or any issue for that matter, indicates an elevation of personal viewpoints on non-essential matters and interpretations to the level of scripture-like authority and that wrongly rationalizes and justifies mistreatment of others. Yes, we are “to bring every thought captive to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5) but are we instructed to verbally slay our friends, families, and neighbors because we disagree on something, or because they do not believe the latest fiction and fabrication of Q’Anon, or they refuse the more subtle *slanting* of others’ character because of some petty social/political disagreement? In the least, this leads to a serious *distortion* of relationships through coercion and discrimination, and to its worst extent it disrupts and can cruelly shatter *shalom* and *trust* within the covenant community. Much social media discourse could be characterized by the “acts of the flesh” that Paul says are a threat to our place in the kingdom of God:

Gal 5:20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy;

Once again, to be clear, I am not saying we do not confront evil and stand against it as humanly as possible, while also remembering that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*” (Eph 6:12).

*Yet, while looking to God for ultimate victory in this battle, for the battle is in his hands, we are not to be morally mute in the face of evils and corruption, either in the world or the church.*<sup>7</sup> For example, we all know on the short list that there is much corruption in the marketplace and our government is not under-sourced in corruption. Pharmaceutical companies and others wrest exorbitant costs from consumers. Most egregiously, the massive abortion industry has cost the lives of hundreds of millions of fellow humans during our lifetime. Of the writing of the book on human corruption there seems to be no end in sight.

Yet, just calling out evils does not end them, nor does it naturally result in bringing justice, nor does it generally stop the evils, nor does it restore those who are already casualties. Yet, denying these realities as horrors simply does not make it go away. All the same, we must begin somewhere. To be clear, confronting and opposing such things cannot be construed as slander or conspiracy fearmongering. Using biblical categories, we must examine every such issue of evil in their light: “Bringing every thought captive to Christ” and the Scripture.

As noted, another such example is Marxian Communism/Socialism. It is a false, totalizing messianic religion promising final deliverance, yet it has wrought more suffering, death, and destruction than any before it.<sup>8</sup> To blithely ignore this reality, or any others like it, in our mission to bear witness to the gospel of Christ, would be tantamount to forsaking our neighbors at risk. Are we not to “rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter” (Prov 24:11)?

Correspondingly, we are not to be silent (“see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing, do nothing” monkeys) when discovering or witnessing corruption within our employment, church communities, or in the national arena. Surely,

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<sup>7</sup> Whistleblowers beware: you will probably be terminated or exterminated.

<sup>8</sup> As Berdyaev states it “. . . like every religion, it carries with it an all-embracing relation to life, decides all its fundamental questions, and claims to give a meaning to everything; it has its dogmas and its dogmatic morals, publishes its catechisms, has even the beginnings of its own cult; it takes possession of the whole soul and calls forth enthusiasm and self-sacrifice” (“The Religion of Communism,” p. 60).

to protect or cover-up any abuses of the community resulting from corruption is *complicity*.<sup>9</sup>

“Much of history is shaped by silence . . . and bystanders are the unidentified perpetrators of and collaborators in wrongdoing.”<sup>10</sup>

For example, speaking more broadly, our materialistic culture calls us to value *things*, and thus their *acquisition*, above all else; it too is a danger that should be confronted, for such a thing feeds the corruptible orientation of our hearts. Ironically, especially for those who claim to believe in the providence and care of the Living God, it seems to me that much of the fearmongering I am addressing is rooted in a *materialistic* view of the world, that we are going to lose something tangible of our comforts or assets if “they” succeed in implementing their opposing ideology.

The truth is, whenever corrupted hearts rule by corrupted motives, philosophies, and perspectives, “the people groan” (Prov 29:2) since we do live in a fallen world in rebellion against the Lord of lords and King of kings. As noted, the utopian promises of Marx and his many followers who reject the God of creation for a view that the material world is the “god” that dialectically determines our destinies – which are purely socio-economic – have led to greater harm and suffering for the world than most Americans can imagine. We should resist such idolatrous ideologies, but we must do so with truth – gospel centered truth. So also, the same would apply to our *materialistic* acquisition-driven culture in the West that is spreading around the globe feeding this human hunger with the emptiness of “*just a little more . . . will be enough.*”

Similarly, to apply all this to the topic at hand, we must also courageously resist and challenge unsubstantiated conspiracy rumors (slander) designed to do harm to the human community. Choice morsels of untruth that disparage “them” and make one feel superior, as an initiate into the inner ring of those-who-know, work their malice in the deepest recesses of the heart.

**The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;  
they go down to a man's inmost parts.** Pro 18:8

Along with those who engage in manipulating others socially and politically by spreading fear and confusion through rumors of disinformation, it is also widely known that external enemies perpetuate damaging falsehoods by

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<sup>9</sup> On whistleblowing, see fn. 5.

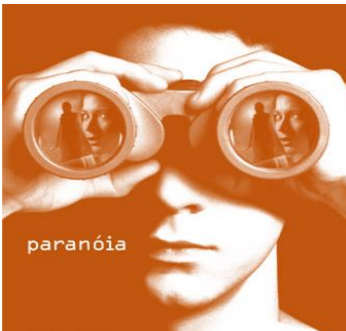
<sup>10</sup> Johnson and Ridley, *Elements of Ethics*, p. 76



targeting vulnerable recipients to divide and disrupt our communities.<sup>11</sup> The social aspect of disinforming propaganda of national conspiratorialists together with political and international bad actors create a colossus of difficulty for us beleaguered citizens and for the church; we are often too amenable to the allure of receiving hidden knowledge – either of the present or the future – for us to accurately discern truth from falsehood. Disarmed by this, we fail to identify the harm being caused by our complicities in the campaigns of the conspiratorialists of paranoia.

In all the bombarding anarchy of mis-dis-information that decimates our capacity to reason cogently, and that disorients and shatters our *shalom*, we place our trust in the Narrators of Doom and Woe. Instead, we should be looking to the Author of the true narrative of the universe which is that the worlds were created by the words of God through the Logos and for his glory and it is not controlled by some cabal of lizard people or Deep State (more on p. 32f.).

**I'M AFRAID TO ASK, BUT WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE OUT TO GET US? WHY CONSPIRACY PROPAGANDA IS DESIGNED SO SUCCESSFULLY TO AMPLIFY ANGST.**



Conspiracy propaganda covers a broad spectrum of efforts to disseminate information that (may be) believed to be true (or that is deliberately manufactured).<sup>12</sup> Most frequently, it is about those who are perceived as a threat to a particular vision for the world (or an attitude about the world) shared by a beleaguered group of adherents. Most importantly, we must understand that it

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<sup>11</sup> See fn. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Governmental, political propaganda often includes such deliberate interpretive mis/disinformation generated by nation-states to mislead and deceive state enemies, or to brainwash its own citizens to comply with Statist mandates or expectations, but this is not my focus here. It must be acknowledged all the same that propaganda as so defined is not exclusive to totalitarian and dictatorial regimes but is equally a concern in democratic and constitutionally governed societies with free access to unlimited information. It has often been reported that Russia has continued since the beginning of the Cold War to use a small army of people working to disseminate misinformation and to foment unrest and confusion in democratic nations (See [NYT documentaries "Meet the KGB Spies Who Invented Fake News"](#) (The New York Times, Nov 19, 2018,

depends upon rudiments of *factual* information in order for its *interpretive* mis/disinformation to convey sufficient *plausibility* to appear *possible* and then as *probable*.<sup>13</sup>

For the fear-provoking (fear-mongering) objectives of conspiracy propaganda to take hold and bear fruit in the popular imagination, they are most effective when there is a creative combination of truth (facts) and speculations of grand, cataclysmic consequences of doom *if* certain outcomes result from that “truth.” This is where ironic expressions like “*Don’t fear ‘them,’ but stay informed and do the research!*” gets traction among co-conspiratorialists. In this context, it is crucial to speak adequately to the shared assumptions and cultural mythologies of the propagandee to establish probability that their fears are warranted. The grand truth is *hidden* out there somewhere, but “do the work” to discover its secrets. The greater the lack of evidence is itself considered *proof* that the truth believed must be discoverable!

Yet, must we not wonder why Domsday conspiracies proliferate as rapidly as they evaporate, unfulfilled in the untethered ether of forgetfulness?<sup>14</sup> And

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nytimes.com); [“The Seven Commandments of Fake News”](#) (The New York Times, Nov 20, 2018 nytimes.com) [“The Worldwide War on Truth”](#) (nytimes.com). This was witnessed during the Covid pandemic when some riots and other anarchist activities were reportedly fueled by their efforts. See further, J.Ellul (*Propaganda*). See statistics on this by Bradshaw, Samantha and Philip N. Howard, “The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation” (Oxford Internet Institute): “Social media has become co-opted by many authoritarian regimes. In 26 countries, computational propaganda is being used as a tool of information control in three distinct ways: to suppress fundamental human rights, discredit political opponents, and drown out dissenting opinions “(p. i).

This was witnessed during the Covid pandemic when some riots and other anarchist activities were reportedly fueled by their efforts. See further, J.Ellul (*Propaganda*).

<sup>13</sup> The truth/factual content of successful propaganda will be explored further, pp. 13ff.

<sup>14</sup> Although some recent ones have had surprising longevity. Some examples of widespread conspiracy theories: the Holocaust (did not happen), JFK (assassinated by the CIA), moon landing (faked), Princess Diana’s death (murdered by royal family), 9/11 attack (inside job of controlled demolition), Martial Law is coming, Deep State (clandestine cabal of federal government, FBI, and CIA employees that engineer wars and the government for their profit and are thus the “real” unofficial government), Sandy Hook shootings (faked by the “deep state”), “The Storm” (Deep State will be arrested and sent to Guantanamo Bay for execution), stolen 2020 presidential election (false claim of QAnon, etc.), reptilian lizard humanoids (rule the US and world governments), FEMA (have built concentration camps in USA), Pizzagate (Democrats run a child trafficking ring from a pizza shop), jet-chem-trails (government experiment to poison citizens), HAARP (secret government program to build directed-energy

though unsubstantiated, as such fabrications in the main are, more arise daily from the imagination of those so inclined to invent them (for reasons we can only cynically surmise) to fill the unsated demand by those who thrive on them. What the reasons or motives are of those who create and spread such tall tales of woe is more difficult to ascertain than the reasons often proposed for those who ingest them. A diet of mis/disinformation may result in severe malnourishment for truth-telling and hearing, but it seems to feed something in the human psyche seeking self-worth, or affirmation of importance, in both the telling and in the imbibing. There is also the *angst factor* that naming things, *especially* if disquietingly wrong, infuses an addictive fear that becomes dependent upon more of the same.<sup>15</sup> There is the adrenaline rush, or other hormonal excitements, that one is on the inside, in-the-know, of some grand scheme of cosmic and cataclysmic proportions.

As for the conspiratorialists who spread the anonymous “drops” of falsehoods (mostly grossly distorted information), they may experience a sense of invigorating power over weaker minds, those needing access to the inner ring through the password of their [not-so-secret] secret knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Much akin to the drawing power of ancient “Mystery” religions, that were a constant threat to the early church, the initiates are promised access to the otherwise forbidden realms of the illumined. And perhaps, the illumined sincerely believe they are rescuing their insecure understudies with the liberating power of knowledge that will redeem them from the many impending calamities coming.<sup>17</sup> Though in reality, as it was proclaimed or predicted, the anticipated conspired “thing” does not occur. And yet, contrary to what we should expect from the disillusioned, the initiated enthusiasts demand more *drops* to sustain their restless habit of preparing for the horrors coming.

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weapons, instruments for weather, and mind control), Flat-earthers (earth is a flat disk), 5-G wireless (designed to undermine Covid-19 resistance), Covid 19 (created with tracking chips for population control), various government depopulation initiatives, Covid 19 vaccines (designed to kill for population control; and, alien material was implanted in them that kills humans), Bloor-Libel (false antisemitic charge of desecrating Christian blood), classified Area 51 in Nevada (many aliens live here) (content easily expanded from Fortesa Latifi, “[The 11 Most Popular Conspiracy Theories in Recent History: Social media has helped amplify and circulate misinformation](#),” accessed Jan 11, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Presumably, there is a similar psychology in this to those who love *horror* books and films, though for which I have no sympatico nor experience.

<sup>16</sup> Names of some popular conspiratorialist organizations: Qanon and Q, America Project, ReAwaken America, The InfoWars (Alex Jones), WorldNetDaily, Alt-Market.com, 4Chan, and Anonymous.

<sup>17</sup> “Drops” are what adherents of conspiracy generators like QAnon call their occasional public releases of conspiracy propaganda.

Yet, the question of the *motives* of the conspiratorialists remains impossible to reduce simplistically to one or two motives, being a complex issue. But one motive not here addressed, especially for professional and governmental entities that are spreading distortions of information for their own subjects, may be to provoke specific *action* on the part of their recipients. As noted, many nation-states (fn. 12) disseminate manipulative disinformation to deceive other nations for political and military reasons.

Therefore, we must also ask whether the private, conspiratorialist civilians, and the many organizations they have created since the dawn of the internet, may also have had deleterious motives to spark specific actions by their followers? The question in this case is also complex due primarily to the fact that there are so many different such entities vying for our attention and devotion. This makes it impossible to say that there is an orchestrated (conspiracy!) symphony of conspiratorialists playing the same propaganda tune, but rather we hear a cacophony of conspiracies that often overlap and rather frequently clash with one another.<sup>18</sup> The point for my purposes is simply to identify the often unacknowledged power of conspiratorial propaganda to lead people to do things based on their angst stoked into action by such conspiratorialists.

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<sup>18</sup> I believe this was observable in the famous Jan 6, 2021, riots (what some call an *insurrection*) in the nation's capital wherein an association of many, diverse conspiracy-oriented and motivated groups stormed the U.S. Capital building. These groups may have been organized around a handful of shared mythologies and interpretations of the presidential elections as rigged the previous year, but it is fair to say that the interests and objectives of these disparate groups do not fully align (some of more than a dozen such groups present then included Anarchists, Proud Boys, Oath Keepers Militia, Ministry of Self-Defense, Neo-Nazis, Texas Freedom Force, Fascists, various white supremacists), alt-right, Three Percenters, Qanon, "Christian" nationalists, Nationalist Socialist Club or NSC-131, No White Guilt, Rise Above Nation, Boogaloo Bois, Last Sons of Liberty).

In other words, the organizations lacked a coherence and organization necessary for *successful* action, but in this case, there appears to have been some consensus in *activist intention for an outcome of violence in domestic terrorism*. On the flip side of the white supremacist groups, there may also be a place at this conspiratorialist's table for the Black Israelites sect that holds to various revisionist anti-Anglo and anti-Semitic historical claims.

## AND ALSO WHY. . . ARE WE SO VULNERABLE, MALLEABLE, AND NARCISSISTIC?



I have been partly motivated here by an interest in *the why* in our democratic age of unrestricted access to more information than any former generation could imagine, we are *so vulnerable* to believe the mis/disinformation of conspiratorial propaganda. And even more confounding is why victims are also so reluctant to relinquish untruths when presented with certain evidence against them? Surprisingly, studies suggest that it is even *more* effective among the highly educated and well-fed among us.<sup>19</sup>

As David French puts it,

Combine vast choice with algorithmic sorting, and we now possess a remarkable ability to become arguably the most comprehensively, voluntarily and cooperatively misinformed generation of people ever to walk the earth. The terms “voluntarily” and “cooperatively” are key. We don’t live in North Korea, Russia or the People’s Republic of China. We’re drunk on freedom by comparison. We’re misinformed not because the government is systematically lying or suppressing the truth. We’re misinformed because we *like* the misinformation we receive and are eager for more.<sup>20</sup>

Surely, most rumors of grand conspiracy schemes and massive disasters coming are rooted in *mis-interpreting* the factual details of (past or predicted future) incidents, or limited facts, or of social/political scenarios, reported in the news. Yet, once the full facts become known, it might be expected that we would see acknowledgments and retractions of the mistaken interpretations, and even genuine apologies for the harm they have caused (especially when slanderous). Instead, we are informed that those who provided the clarifying counter-facts are not to be trusted, in the first case. So, they must undermine

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<sup>19</sup> The intensely debated question of the *effectiveness* of propaganda and brainwashing is complex and probably not possible to answer. Suffice it to say that *it all depends* is the only adequate answer, since it depends on many variables of each context and the methods *needed* that factor immensely in effectiveness. For example, it has been frequently observed that even when individuals have effectively come to believe something through propaganda/brainwashing that they will nevertheless *act entirely contrarily*. See comments on the “image of God,” fn. 25.

<sup>20</sup> David French, “[Bespoke realities and the cultural tyranny of the algorithm](#),” accessed Nov 28, 2023.

the credibility of the witness to the facts in view and move on to the next gargantuan twist of truth. Armed with the notion that so long as they resonate with a shared cultural mythology and attitude, it does not matter how grand the tall-tales and interpretations of them, for they are then all the easier to believe and spread to others to share – all in the hopes of preserving the community of like-minded, anxious believers – who become *complicit* accomplices in perpetuating falsehood.<sup>21</sup>

It may ultimately be imponderable why people find it nearly impossible to let go of conspiracy disinformation, but it is widely acknowledged that this is often the case even when incontrovertible evidence is presented to them. For example, though the likely possibility of a genuine “Deep State” in the USA is negligible, most Americans believe it is an active, cohesive, and adverse entity. Considering a few of the reasons *why* people believe such implausible things in the first place, may shed some light on why so often quicksand of irreason and irrationality further cement the ideas such that they reject the rescue-line of truth and reason. For one, since they need to be *non-falsifiable* in some

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<sup>21</sup> *Confirmation-bias* (that people want so strongly to believe what they believe that they cannot/will not consider counterevidence) is often thought to be a prime motivator in this scenario since the information/propaganda/interpretation is *non-falsifiable* and people *want* to believe it. There are widely distributed lists of **cognitive biases** that contain other terms that may shed light on this question. Some that are relevant to the questions of this discussion include *anchoring bias* (over dependence on initial information received); *availability heuristic* (overestimating the value of available information); *bandwagon effect* or *in-group bias* or *group-think* (belief increases in proportion to the number of adherents); *blind-spot bias* (seeing bias in others while failing to see your own); *choice-supportive bias* (despite flaws in something we choose, we are inclined to feel positive about it); *clustering illusion* (seeing patterns in random events); *recency* (tendency to trust more recent evidence than previous information); *selective perception* (tendency for expectations to influence perceptions of the world); stereotyping (tendency to expect a person/group to have characteristics determined by associations); *anchoring* (our first judgment wrongly influences following ones); *backfire effect* (doubling-down when core beliefs are challenged by evidence); *barnum effect* (filling in the gaps of vague statements); *framing effect* (tendency to be unduly influenced by delivery and framing of information); *just-world hypothesis* (tendency to presume a just world exists); *halo effect* (tendency to judge things based on liking someone); *negativity bias* (aversion to pain or loss tends to negatively and disproportionately influence our judgment); *pessimism bias* (tendency to significantly overestimate the likelihood of negative outcomes). These tendencies we all share have the effect of *distorting* our view of reality. See [24 cognitive biases that could affect how you see the world | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#); [Infographic : 18 Cognitive Bias Examples Show Why Mental Mistakes Get Made \(smallpocketlibrary.com\)](#); [20 Cognitive Biases that Screw Up Your Decisions \(Infographic\) | SocialTalent](#).

significant part, there is no amount of evidence to the contrary that will suffice to dissuade.<sup>22</sup>

Joe Forest states it this way in a blog on this topic:

“Instead of accepting reality, we construct elaborate fantasy worlds to process our cultural and existential anxieties.”<sup>23</sup>

On an equally pessimist note, Tom Nichols suggests our problem is a *narcissistic refusal to accept that our life circumstances are often impossible to understand*:

[Conspiracy] “. . . theories also appeal to a strong streak of narcissism: there are people who would choose to believe in complicated nonsense rather than accept that their own circumstances are incomprehensible, the result of issues beyond their intellectual capacity to understand, or even their own fault.”<sup>24</sup>

Though there is much truth in that, as I will conclude below, such an answer is ultimately inadequate for the believer in God and his providences. The position of faith is one that can accept the presently incomprehensible without adopting grand illusions to help us live with the terror of the unexplainable. Even more, we understand the world as created by God is still

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<sup>22</sup> Often, the *complexities* of conspiracy theories further contribute to their *believability* because the more complicated they are the more non-verifiable and non-falsifiable they become. The *absence* of evidence is another important factor, as Tom Nichols states it: “After all, what better sign of a really effective conspiracy is there than a complete lack of any trace that the conspiracy exists? Facts, the absence of facts, contradictory facts: everything is proof. Nothing can ever challenge the underlying belief” (*The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2017, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Forrest blogged some reasons he thinks people are so susceptible to conspiracy propaganda: 1) Conspiracy Theories Make Us Feel Special 2) Conspiracy Theories Help Us Make Sense of a Chaotic and Complicated World 3) Conspiracy Theories Make Our Reality Seem More Exciting (“Joe Forrest, “[Why your Christian friends and family members are so easily fooled by conspiracy theories](#)” accessed 01/31/2024. See also the blog by Max Read, “[5 Theories About Conspiracy Theories](#)” accessed 01/31/2024).

<sup>24</sup> Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*, p. 43. Some studies indicate the strongest correlates for *conspiratorial ideation* pertain to several pervasive key factors 1) perceiving dangers and threats 2) relying on intuition and having odd beliefs and experiences 3) being antagonistic and acting and thinking with superiority (Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “[The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates](#)” [*Psychological Bulletin*, Volume 149, issue 5-6, May-June, 2023, 259–293 accessed 01/31/2024]). This is the most comprehensive recent meta-analytical aggregated review of 170 recent research studies that included 158,473 participants.

a good world, and even though human choices continue to evoke brokenness and death, that is not the whole story of the human experience. We have God's promise to make all things new, and he is doing that in his people and will eventually do that in all creation. We also do not live now lacking adequate answers or hope, even though our understanding is provisional and proximate.

The gospel of Christ exalted and reigning as Lord is our best inoculation against vulnerability and malleability to desperate action. Since God alone has comprehensive and complete knowledge and understanding of all reality, we can place our trusting confidence in his infinite knowledge and wisdom. Thus, we give no place to the anguish of Postmodern epistemological skepticism and nihilism.

### THREE CHEERS FOR SMALL TRUTHS THAT CONNECT THE DOTS FOR GRAND LIES TO REMAKE THE HUMAN HEART, STARTING WITH A BRAIN-CLEANSE



Yet, propagandists do not need big lies to brainwash others; they depend mostly on the constant feeding of the *same perspective* in small and *pervasive* bite-size proportions of small *truths* (as *facts*) that are ever in their subjects' stream and social feed, and especially possible now with immediate

"notifications." Even George Orwell (1984) would probably be astonished at the inescapable, *notifying* screens that govern all our waking hours and influence our actions, thoughts, and dreams. Orwell had remarkable foresight in this regard, seeing the potential for governments to brainwash the populace through *totalist* governmental endeavor to change and control the language, thought, and actions of all citizens. This form of propagandizing and brainwashing depended on threats of physical painful, severe deprivations, isolation, and mind-altering drugs. He would not have been surprised by the Soviet and Chinese success in this kind of brainwashing.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Yet, true *enduring* success in these cases is open to serious question, since resistance was widespread. Even their Gulags, where millions of dissenting people languished in dread of torture and died, were unable to eradicate the old man and replace it with the new man of the Soviet or Communist ideal. Indeed, they could not do so since all people are made in God's image, and this cannot be erased by any amount of human effort. Thus, the term "brainwashing" fails to capture the whole picture, since it is not possible to *wash* the brain or person of what they are as human beings made in God's image. See comments on the *effectiveness* of propaganda/brainwashing, fn. 19.



There is the fascinating case-study in Mao ZeDong's method of *total* brainwashing (which has similarities to the way the cults in the West gain mind-control, and allegiance of, otherwise free citizens). Ellul gives an exposition of Mao's tactics that I think sheds light on elements of the more broadly cultural, sociological kind we have seen in our times. Though they are very different in form, it raises the question of defining the term "brainwashing" *too narrowly*. To "brainwash," is it necessary to forcibly compel citizens against their will to be molded in thought, character, and action to conform in allegiance to some Statist ideal of the desirable citizen?

We typically understand brainwashing as "a technique designed to manipulate human thought or action against the desire, will, or knowledge of the individual" to "persuade nonbelievers to accept a certain allegiance, command, or doctrine."<sup>26</sup> Yet, can we find any similarities to such Statist forms in our context where free citizens willingly choose to be subjected to, and thoroughly molded by, brainwashing (sociological) propaganda that produces comparable allegiance to [false] beliefs and doctrines?

To explore this question, two primary aspects of Mao's Marxian system are worth defining:<sup>27</sup>

1. *Propaganda*: employ a "democratic" method of a discussion and self-criticism system (sometimes called *dialectical*) for the populace to integrate all education/information with propaganda that manipulates shared myths and symbols and that is designed to mold the individual to conform to the Socialist ideal and to produce *unity* of thought, doctrine, and action. This is effectively aided by creating ambiguity for the individual's convictions and ideals, sowing uncertainty and guilt, while then providing *redemption* from that guilt for those who embrace the required social/political explanations/propaganda and who seek to purify themselves.<sup>28</sup>

*Uniformity* or *elimination* became the only options (for those who could not escape), otherwise dissent would disrupt and preempt the

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<sup>26</sup> "Brainwashing" at Britannica, [Brainwashing | Cults, Indoctrination, Manipulation | Britannica](#). Accessed 03/02/2024.

<sup>27</sup> Adapted from Ellul, *Propaganda*, pp. 303-313.

<sup>28</sup> This was the main theme of the movie "The Last Emperor" (Puyi) which depicted the last Qing Dynasty Emperor being "re-educated" *for ten years* and finding his *redemption* (rehabilitation) from his former bourgeois guilt as Emperor. This film is a classic example of Marxist propaganda which was fully approved by the Chinese Communist Party which gave them full access to film in the Forbidden City.

desired outcome of mass indoctrination.<sup>29</sup> The incorrigibles in Mao's system must be eliminated.

2. *Brainwashing*: cut off the individual from their former social milieu (through deprivation, criticism, disruption, ostracism, humiliation), bombard them relentlessly with slogans of propaganda to inhabit them and to prevent personal reflection. The objective (preferably unknown to the victim) is the complete transformation of the individual's values, judgments, and ultimately their actions of both passive and active participation in the collectively re-educated and unified mass that solely serves the purposes of the State.

Though the forms differ dramatically, there are many items in these definitions that we could find in varying degrees and kind in both statist and sociological propaganda: manipulation of shared mythologies, sowing ambiguity and doubt and guilt, molding opinion to produce unity of thought and hope of redemption from one's own failings. The latter is especially found in the Left who often believe that humans are the problem with the universe, and that they (ironically) must assuage their guilt by trying to save the planet through dieting, purchasing certain fabrics, veganism, or whatever the cause might be. One does not need to be in a re-education camp to receive relentless slogans, fear of ostracism, humiliation, and criticism that come to inhabit one's life and lead to a transformation of value's and actions.

Yet, is not the more remarkable kind in this case that in which propaganda brainwashes free citizens who live in democratic societies? And these are citizens who have access to all the necessary tools to guard against such personal and collective transformation and conformity to pernicious narratives of untrue mythologies!

Carl Sandburg captures the totalizing nature of this that can be applied to all forms, whether Statist implemented or sociological, social media generated, in his poem "Brainwashing":

**BRAINWASHING**

Repeat and repeat till they say what you  
are saying. Repeat and repeat till they are helpless  
before your repetitions.  
Say it over and over till their brains can  
hold only what you are saying.

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<sup>29</sup> A Chinese friend from Indonesia, who had believed the early Communist propaganda broadcasted in her hometown and returned to the mainland to help build the promised utopian heaven on earth, described the eventual reality of Mao's Cultural Revolution as "mass insanity, or national demon possession."

Speak it soft, yell it and yell it, change  
to a whisper, always in repeats.  
Come back to it day on day, hour after hour,  
till they say what you tell them to say.  
To wash A B C out of a brain and replace it  
with X Y Z—this is it.

Remarkably, we need not look just to prison camps in Russia or reeducation camps in China for this, but it is right before us daily in every corner and cupboard of the world where the internet and its alluring screens prevail to provide a bottomless torrent of propaganda. Advertisers understand this. And, along with anarchists and totalitarians, conspiratorialists need this. The key is *pervasiveness*, so that the echo is felt wherever the recipient turns. The coagulation of many small truths cloaks the rational arteries with cosmic scale distortions of conspiratorial interpretation in a stealth tsunami of Grand Lies.

In this case, the **conflation** of *information* and *interpretation* is thus vitally necessary for successful subterfuge of rationality and to win over the heart that eventually will succumb and fail to discern what is happening. The propagandists of the world have long come to understand that outright, grand lies must be avoided, since when caught out it greatly reduces the propagandists' power to influence. As Ellul notes, "The truth that pays off is in the realm of *facts*. The necessary falsehoods, which also pay off, are in the realm of *intentions* and *interpretations*."<sup>30</sup> He concludes that the primary problem for propagandists is the need "to create an irrational response on the basis of rational and factual elements."<sup>31</sup> The keys are pervasiveness, repetition, and persistence.

We still might wonder in fantastic puzzlement how otherwise rational and well-intentioned and educated people come to irrationally believe in mythological constructs that are untrue to the "facts" that are claimed to support them. Ellul's extended discussion of this should be consulted by all who share these questions. As noted, it is astonishing that in our age of unfettered information we find so much irrational belief. As Ellul expresses it, the sheer amount of information present to us itself has contributed to the morass of why so many believe what is *not rational* (please note that the following was written back in the 1960s *before* the world wide web):

"A surfeit of data, far from permitting people to make judgments and form opinions, prevents them from doing so and actually paralyzes them. They are caught in a web of facts and must remain at the level of the facts they have been given. They cannot even form a choice or a judgment in other areas or on other

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<sup>30</sup> Ellul quotes Lenin: "In propaganda, truth pays off" (*Propaganda*, p. 53).

<sup>31</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 86.

subjects. Thus the mechanisms of modern information induce a sort of hypnosis in the individual, who cannot get out of the field that has been laid out for him by the information.”

“It is not true that he can choose freely with regard to what is presented to him as the truth. And because rational propaganda thus creates an irrational situation, it remains, above all, propaganda—that is, an inner control over the individual by a social force, which means that it deprives him of himself.<sup>32</sup>

One might like to think that in our free and unfettered world of information access, the mythologies of conspiratorial propaganda would be entirely ineffective. Yet, precisely because of that freedom of mass information, those living on this malforming disinformation-diet can “choose” only to attend to those voices that confirm or reassure them of the perspective created by the propaganda.<sup>33</sup> So long as the myth is created, the *impression* will sustain it, not the truthfulness of the information.

In an oddly perverse way, the fear, paranoia, and anxiety that conspiratorial propaganda creates is self-propagating and perpetuating. It becomes the very thing that brings self-affirming comfort in being-in-the-know, or some sense that one can control the bizarre and disconcerting world of information and world-events by imposing an organizing principle upon it. That principle’s strength resides in assumptions that our world is controlled by a cabal of conspirators, or some such, and we must resist and fight. Ironically, an alternative vision must be adopted to create a just world that is free of the cabals’ control, one that fits our adopted mythology to that end.

Despite how outrageously inaccurate and untrue they might be, adherents of misinforming organizing principles of interpretation become devotees of what those ideas produce because it *seems to them* to “ring true.” And that is because they rely on our innate human need to find patterns that make sense of life and the world, as it is the nature of the human brain always to make sense of the data it receives. This is why the brain will even work to make sense of data while under the influence of psychedelic drugs, organizing it into recognizable patterns that generate believable hallucinations, as in seeing

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<sup>32</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> This ironically creates a willfully chosen home of *cultural totalitarianism!* Consider the amount of data online today: the number of websites and adherents and followers. There are 5.17 billion social network users online in 2024 ([Number of worldwide social network users 2027 | Statista](#)); there are over 200 social networking [sites online](#); the social media app market is valued over \$49 billion, and “influencer” spending hit \$4.14 billion in 2022 ([Top Social Media Statistics And Trends Of 2024 – Forbes Advisor](#)).

*mirages* of things that are not truly there as perceived.<sup>34</sup> So likewise, political and social conspiracy theories give shape to the patterns in the clouds of data (and dis/misinformation which is skewed data) by which one can confidently believe there are clearly visible all kinds of “recognizable” things to see and fear.<sup>35</sup>

“Broadly, conspiracy theories refer to causal explanations of events that ascribe blame to a group of powerful individuals (the conspirators) who operate in secret to form hidden plans that benefit themselves and harm the common good.”<sup>36</sup>

It is a kind of **confabulation** (also called *false memories*) wherein the one who is processing the disjointed data, through the re-forming grid of *possibility* and *plausibility* that *probability* is imagined, and in which an otherwise reasoning and intelligent mind firmly believes what is confabulated as true.<sup>37</sup> The

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<sup>34</sup> This was noted as a “clustering illusion” (fn. 21).

<sup>35</sup> Many technical and popular level studies on conspiracy, propaganda, personality, and the human mind have been done that demonstrate, among many other things, this human tendency to “connect the dots” even when the dots *do not* connect. Such studies also have demonstrated observable correlations between *motivational* and *personological* (personality) variables (including a range of disorders). See especially, Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind.”

Examples that contain links to numerous other studies: “Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural” ([Jan-Willem van Prooijen](#), [Karen M. Douglas](#), [Clara De Inocencio](#). *European Journal of Social Psychology*. First published: 21 August 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2331> and see <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ejsp.2331> accessed 01/17/2024); “Something’s Going on Here: Psychological Predictors of Belief in Conspiracy Theories” ([Joshua Hart](#) and [Molly Graether](#), *Journal of Individual Differences*, Volume 39, Issue 4, October, 2018); “Explaining the paradox of conspiracy theories and system-justifying beliefs from an intergroup perspective” (Jia Yan Mao, Zhao-Xie Zeng, Shen-Long Yang, Yong-Yu Guo, and Jan-Willem van Prooijen, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12924> accessed 01/17/2024).

<sup>36</sup> Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind,” p. 2. They add further to the definitional recipe of conspiracy theories as involving three primary ingredients: (1) conspirators, (2) hidden plans, and (3) malintent against others or society (*ibid.*, p. 2).

<sup>37</sup> Recent studies have done much to clarify this phenomenon in which one’s memory errs when the brain (“unconsciously”) completes or fills out a memory with misinterpreted or distorted perceptions and (false) recollections. The imagined then becomes real enough to believe and share with others without being charged with outright, intentional *lying*. This is very common with those suffering dementia, but we find it is also a frequent problem for everyone. We often do not remember things without distortion or *filling in gaps* with what is imagined. This is a perennial problem in the courtroom, where exact details among multiple witnesses can become suspect, since no two people will recall everything in an event precisely the same way.

confabulation transforms the convoluted data into “reasoned” chunks of interlinking puzzle pieces that create a mythological pastiche of believability. In other words, it creates an *illusory pattern perception*.

As in all forms of propaganda, conspiratorial propaganda therefore builds upon, and further induces, already existing insidious mythologies, prejudices and stereotypes, shared resentments, ideologies, sociological presuppositions, organizing principles, and visions of the future. In this way, it does not need to depend upon pure fabrications nor create something entirely new; it effortlessly builds upon what is already a shared ethos, and by creating ambiguity begins the formation of something new. This new thing need not be rationally *consistent* with the ethos so long as it is shared and leads to action for the vision. It is often enough just to generate sufficient ambiguity in the minds and hearts of the recipients (*maladaptive perceptions*) to provide the appearance of plausibility for this new formation to blossom. In such a way, propaganda does not need to provide certain evidence or proof; only a modicum of *plausibility* or *possibility* is needed for *probability* to be assumed.

This effect in conspiracy propaganda can only occur through the denial (or failure to see) that grandiose rumors must *depend upon* the extravagant assumption that they be *kept secret* by those purported to be behind them. This typically demands the involvement of many thousands of complicit people and organizations for the conspiracy to succeed and to be kept in secret (except that now you, the recipient, know the secret, as well!). The confabulation required to sustain faith in the mythology is insurmountable for the average devotee, so the increase of dependence on the makers of misinformation also increases in proportion to their need for it. This is simply the circular nature of propaganda and its religious psychology.<sup>38</sup>

#### **Lessons**

on brain  
washing:

scrub  
a dub  
dub...

#### **Propaganda**

Prop  
again

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<sup>38</sup> As noted, the ancient “Mystery” religions and cults were a pressing problem in the world of the New Testament era and indicate that “there is nothing new under the sun.”

da da  
prop a  
gan  
da  
pro  
pag  
and  
a  
da da  
pro  
pa  
ganda  
void  
da mind  
da da  
da dum

I have also observed that those most prone to believe the subtle twists of truth generally believe the gargantuan illusion that they are the only ones *immune* to propaganda. Indeed, their faith appears to be sustained by the belief that everyone else is brainwashed, but that they are gifted with the power of (“secret” or inside) knowledge and insight that gives them unique access to the impenetrable mysteries of human scheming. The real twist here is that misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and simply wrongly understood and interpreted information are all propaganda that produce varying degrees of harm in the world.<sup>39</sup>

Believing we are not under the influence of any propaganda may be the best proof we are blinded to it and by it. Someone might even charge that my dramatic words of warning here are but the product of an alternative propaganda, too! If something is *true* though, the question remains whether it can be considered propaganda in the negative sense assumed here. We could explore the nature of truth as propaganda, if space allowed, and that might conclude with asserting the existence of a positive form of propaganda, if defined as the effort to publish the truth (as we do in gospel declaration and witness). In that case, though the word “propaganda” has perhaps too many negative connotations, if we were to fashion an alternative positive definition it would of necessity be absent of manipulation, distortion, and compulsion.

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<sup>39</sup> **Mis-information** (false connections, misleading content and interpretations); **dis-information** (false context, imposter context, fabricated content); **mal-information** (leaks, harassment, hate speech). These move in degrees from *false* to *harmful*, from *mis-* to *dis-* to *mal-*information (see Clair Wardle & Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*” (Council of Europe), 2017.

During a two-year stint of teaching in Communist China, I daily passed in the hall the Department of Propaganda. And, as a typical westerner from a democratic and pluralistic society the term only had negative connotations. To me, in that context, it could relate only to *brainwashing* in a false ideology, and in this case an atheistic ideology entirely out of sync with economic, social, and religious human reality.

Yet, anytime we systematically teach or convey information, or things we believe, the term *propaganda* could possibly be used if we do not mind such inescapably negative connotations. Nevertheless, this cannot be done if we adhere in any way to Ellul's succinct definition:

*Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated into an organization.*<sup>40</sup>

Interestingly, similarly to the Nazis, Communists have been masters of co-opting biblical language and concepts in their propaganda for revolution. For example, the promise of the New Man and New Society, unity, liberation, equality, martyrdom for the revolution, catechism, true dogma, self-sacrifice, elimination of heresy, comrades, community (*commune, communion*), reform, justice, humane, freedom, dignity, peace. They hold seminars to “discuss” the hope of a new heaven on earth without religion (the Final Judgment is transformed into the Communist Revolution of the Messianic proletariats’ elimination of capitalism and its corrupt bourgeoisie). Though this is a *secular “religious”* Messianism of the proletariat, in their propaganda they piggy-back on the *shared mythologies* of entire civilizations (Russian Orthodoxy, or Chinese Confucianism for example) they alchemically transmute entire societies through propaganda, activism, subversion, indoctrination, brainwashing, and the inevitable revolutions that transpire (hundreds of millions of people have died thus far in the process). Its godless spirituality is an absolute rejection of God that leads to an absolute denial of humanity (as made in his image); it is designed and propagated to message and promote hatred between the classes and revolution that is presumed to produce the brotherhood of true communist civilization.

So, yes, propaganda is not neutral and can manifest evil of the worst kind. This example may seem an extreme one – because it is – but it does illustrate well the nature and power of propaganda in our generation to subvert, controvert, and convert its initiates; its *materialist, godless* promises represent an idolatrous messianism without Christ. As Nikolai Berdyaev has written,

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<sup>40</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 61.



“There was a demoniacal element in Marx’s teaching, which gave it its invincible dynamism. He believed that good can be produced by evil, that light can be obtained through darkness, that freedom would result from dire blind necessity. Evil must increase, darkness must thicken. That is how he understood the dialectics of the social process.”<sup>41</sup>

Berdyaev persuasively shows that Russian Communism was a brilliant, though diabolical, *inversion* of Russian Orthodoxy (and Marx’s Jewish messianic consciousness, eschatology, and expectation. It built upon the religious psychology of Russians, being rooted in the language, culture, theology, and psychology of Orthodoxy but presented it as a new and purified religion without God.

In the least, we can see that their call to faith in Communist propaganda promises to create (redeem) a new person out of the enslaved old bourgeoisie (eventually eliminating private market economies and constitutional democracy) who would then populate a new society of good, humane people living in peace, freedom, and harmony. A new divinity would arise from the ashes of the revolution against the dead god Capitalism.<sup>42</sup>

Berdyaev’s argument includes the assertion that Communism was well-suited to Russia as a religious inversion. It co-opted the dead and unsanctified church, and decadent pseudo-Christianity prevailing at the time, by filling the void with new utopian hope and religious fervor to usher in the new heaven of human *communion* on earth, though entirely a materialist redemption. Most of their successes have been the result of the power of propaganda that is rooted in and exploits the mythologies and assumptions of targeted audiences.

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<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev “The Religion of Communism” in *The Russian Revolution: Two Essays on its Implications in Religion and Psychology* [London and New York: Sheed & Ward], 1933), p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> The religious comprehensiveness of the Communist Party USA agenda is still very evident in the lengthy communist propaganda declaration in the [“CPUSA Program”](#) accessed 01/17/2024.

## THE PROBLEM OF BEING “INNOCENT AS DOVES” WHILE BEING “WISE AS SERPENTS” (MTT 10:16), AND WHY THE SKY IS NOT FALLING



We do acknowledge that this can be a dangerous world from the human vantage-point, since there are many potential threats to us, and that we must exercise due diligence and caution for self-preservation and that of our loved ones.<sup>43</sup> This principle can also apply to our faith communities and where Jesus seems to touch at least in some measure on this when he said, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” Nevertheless, it would not be consistent with many other scriptural texts to suggest that he intended for us to live in fear and angst.

Fear and paranoia are no sure guides for our daily living; especially so, since perspectives of anxiety and fear manufactured by falsely presented information are at best *false* guides. This is most evident when we honestly consider that the proposed predicted eventualities of the conspirators do not occur, and their slanderous distortions rarely bear out as true. Ironically, the deception of such disseminated false theories, speculations, and predilections is itself the greater danger to our communities and to covenant shalom.

Putting it in the context of the meta-analytic study mentioned above,<sup>44</sup> the three *primary* correlative characteristics identified that drive conspiratorialism need to be addressed:

### 1. perceiving dangers and threats

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<sup>43</sup> To name just a few: Anarchists, ethnic Supremacists, Left and Right political and religious terrorists, criminal gangs, corrupt political and religious leaders, liars and deceivers, thieves, and fraudsters. Though many dangers are physically threatening, we often downplay threats that are less tangible, as so-called “white-collar,” but the deceptions of fraud (most commonly to steal by skimming funds or misrepresenting and concealing facts or using bogus credentials for financial gain) by crafty people is truly destructive of covenant relationships and is a form of *unfaithfulness*: “. . . fraud is violent in its own way by destroying trust, killing hope. And stirring anger and desires for retaliation” (Michael E. Cafferky, *Business Ethics in Biblical Perspective* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press], 2015, p. 284). See my longer alphabetary list of fraudsters [here](#).

<sup>44</sup> Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind. See fn. 24. This is an aggregation of massive amounts of data about conspiratorial ideation.

2. relying on intuition and having odd beliefs and experiences
3. being antagonistic and acting and thinking with superiority

Yes, in this life we will have both real and imagined fears of *dangers* and threats, and yes we will often respond by turning to *odd beliefs* and *subjective intuitions and experiences* (rather than the facts) to explain them, and yes we often will *react* with *antagonism* and *superiority* to what is felt as adversarial. But no, those responses to our fears should not be considered biblical responses.

Further, the three identified *primary* motivational correlates in conspiratorialism need to be addressed:

1. ***epistemic*** motives: to form a reliable, certain, and stable view of the world.
2. ***existential*** motives: to feel safe and in control, particularly in the face of threat.
3. ***social motives***: to reinforce a superior, albeit fragile, image of oneself and one's ingroup.<sup>45</sup>

On 1. ***epistemic motives***:

It is human to want a stable view of the world, as well as a stable world. We all long for certainty and reliability for both our understanding of the world and for the world itself. This is intrinsic to our human nature as made in Eden in God's image to enjoy the presence of God in his glorious creation. Creation was stable, predictable, and sustainable. That was the God-given order in the original creation. And though it is still mostly stable and predictable, it is not entirely so and not consistently. Yet to seek any of these things through the conspiratorialists' view of the world and world events, is a misplaced hope.

The biblical gospel gives us a reliable worldview, a certitude guided by faith in God's character and promises. The gift of prayer is also available to ask God who answers in remarkably unexpected ways. The gift of the Word of God is an ever-powerful resource for truth, encouragement, courageous perspectives, understanding, and wisdom for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16). The gift of the Spirit of God is ever-present to empower, illuminate, encourage, comfort, and strengthen us in faith and trust in God who is sovereign.

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<sup>45</sup> Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, "The Conspiratorial Mind," pp. 3ff.

### On 2. *existential motives*:

It is human according to research – *and common sense* – that when people “detect more threats in their environment and regard the world as inherently dangerous, they are likely to (a) feel more anxious, (b) perceive that they have less control, and (c) feel less efficacious.”<sup>46</sup> This is a natural response to any sense of loss of dominion in life, but biblically speaking we must acknowledge that we do not really have all that much control over life-events and certainly not world-events. This is not to say we have *no limited* control, influence, or dominion in our daily lives over the course of events, since we do have choice and engagement with our immediate social and eco-environments. Yet, to be manipulated into anxious fear or panic that we are being threatened and must act to respond to those threats, when those threats are manufactured or exaggerated by those manipulating the data, is to fall prey to the malicious intentions of bad actors.

The biblical response in principle is that we must do all that we can to discern and guard against our being taken hostage by fear to others’ machinations, while acknowledging this is sometimes nearly impossible, especially in the heat of the moment. As in all life’s challenging *existential* moments, there are some basic common-sense principles, foremost of them being *do not panic* and carefully examine all the evidence before coming to any firm conclusions or making any decisions.

### On 3. *social motives*:

It is human to be social and to defend one’s clan against real threats, either physical or other. Yet, to reinforce a superior image of oneself and clan through maligning that of others, and for purposes of aggrandizement of power or influence over others, due to real or imagined threats, may not serve the purpose of seeking protection. In this case, I am not so much addressing threats of physical violence which should be addressed by the proper law-enforcement authorities, but common sense certainly tells us that in this case using retaliatory means of rhetoric that exacerbates the perpetrators generally is ineffective at best and may lead to real conflict. On the other hand, in response to the conspiratorialist who is seeking to reinforce fear of presumed threats to our ingroup, we must be vigilant in discerning what is a real threat and in what way it is a threat. If we can identify real threats that would undermine our security, we must prayerfully seek proper ways to find safety or to flee.

Biblically speaking, we can anticipate sometimes being maligned and mistreated by the world for our faith, or other unjust reasons. But our response should be

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<sup>46</sup> Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi, “The Conspiratorial Mind,” pp. 5.

one of confidence in God's justice and vindication, and that we must not seek vengeance for ourselves. Our identity and self-respect is not rooted in the view others' may have of us, but rather in Christ and his gospel. Thus, there is no good reason we have biblically to diminish the image of others that we fear threaten our image of ourselves. Even though it may feel natural to strike out at real and imagined threats, in hope to reinforce our self-image or ingroup's image, it is grossly misdirected when those threats have been manufactured or exaggerated for effect by conspiratorialists with ulterior motives.

To summarize a scriptural response to these three motivational correlates in conspiratorialism, for the Christian there is the serious matter of our confidence in God's providence and presence in our lives when we claim his loving guidance yet think and speak as though he is absent and not sovereign, which is a kind of "practical atheism." The faith to live in this world of uncertain (to us) outcomes requires a trust in God's purposes and plan, a *certain* plan that promises a coming end to all human scheming and evil. God also promises in the coming renewal of creation that we will no longer suffer sorrow or fear or want. Does that mean in the meantime that we never experience fear of dangers or grief, or other threats? No, and to suggest otherwise would be absurdly misleading, as well as inhumane, since we live in a world so broken by angelic and human rebellion that it required the coming of Christ in human flesh to bring a cosmic reversal through redemption. So, it means that in the meantime we do not live in denial of the present reality of pain and suffering. But because we know God is faithful and always keeps his promises in fulfilling his purposes, we can find our rest in him amid turmoil and unrest around us.

This perspective does require a grand view of God's purposes, one that embraces the Bible as a whole story, the "true story" of the world as the arena of God's glorious plan. As D. Willard calls it, the *divine* conspiracy, one that is far more profound and exciting than all other real or imagined fables of human conspiracies and machinations put together. For this conspiracy has truly been happening, since it is the only account of things that subsumes the whole of creation in God's plan. This story is about the Creator who has a purpose, a mission for his entire cosmos, and who made creatures in his image to know and love him and gave them choice to find their significance in creational commissions that glorify him. That choice was *real* choice and therefore necessarily included the possibility of disobedience and death. Though this element of God's plan is inscrutable to us, the rebellion of his creatures cannot thwart his original creational nor subsequently his redemptional purposes. Yes, angelic and human schemes and conspiracies

(select texts<sup>47</sup>) will abound until the consummation of redemption when all creation will be purged and renewed and Christ will reign in glory over all:

Rev 11:15 The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.

All-the-same, because we know the Sovereign God is trustworthy and faithful, we do not fear – “though the mountains be cast into the midst of the sea” (46:2) – nor give in to false despair at the state of the world’s affairs. The world will not end by “the sky falling”; in truth, it will indeed never end, since Scripture clearly promises that God is going to restore his creation and us along with it (Rom 8)!

Rom 8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Some of the *addictive* nature of conspiracy theories is the fruit of a poorly understood, or undeveloped, theology of suffering (theodicy) and the problem of evil in the world. That is, such theories can give needed (and addictive) comfort to those who feel that there is randomness in our suffering and to the evils in the world. Instead of placing trust in God by faith and his providence in life’s inexplicable circumstances, suspending judgment on events we do not understand, we can clutch onto the closest conspiracy debris floating by in hopes to survive the flood of unanswered questions.

As such, conspiracy mythologies give the appearance of explanation, or in the least indicate that *someone is causing these things*, someone is in control (even if only the Wizard of Oz). This overthrows the biblical narrative that God alone is Sovereign. Still, even if these confabulations addictively give the pretense of calming our confusion and anxieties, we must not give heed; the many false claims that identify cabals or characters conspiring behind the

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<sup>47</sup> דִּוּר noun [masculine] council, counsel; — ד' absolute Prov 11:13 +; construct Jer 6:11 +; suffix יְדוּרֵי Jer 23:22; Job 19:19; יְדוּרוֹ Amos 3:7; Prov 3:32; מְדוּרָה Gen 49:6; — b. *secret counsel*, which may be revealed (גלה), Amos 3:7; Prov 11:13; Prov 20:19; Prov 25:9. “Hide me from the conspiracy (דְּוִדֵי) of the wicked, from the plots of evildoers.” NIV Ps 64:2); “They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, hoping to take my life” is followed with, “In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?” Ps 56:6, 11; “With cunning they conspire against your people; they plot against those you cherish” is followed with “May they ever be ashamed and dismayed; may they perish in disgrace. Let them know that you, whose name is the LORD—that you alone are the Most High over all the earth” (Ps 83:3).

scenes to control reality are narratives that supplant the true story of God's sovereignty in human history in which even our suffering will result in glory.

Rom 8:18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

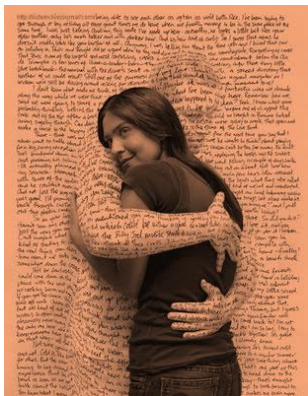
Yes, Jesus has said that we must be "wise/shrewd as serpents" (while living in this present age of rebellion and evils). But also, we must be "innocent as doves" (Mtt 10:16), meaning not corrupted by the evils and idols of the age. Therefore, on topic, stirring up fear and distrust among the people of God through the fabrication and propagation of false information, or through the gossip of *false testimony* (slander of others as a distortion of the truth, that results in discrimination and bullying of others), is tantamount to *idolatry* in biblical terms. That is, it should not need mentioning that *propagating untruth* has been the most successful work of our enemy thus far, and we therefore should have no part to play in it (Jn 8:44).

Yet, even according to common wisdom and common sense, we know that "truth will out in the end." We also confidently know this from the God who is the Truth and has spoken truly in the Word written by the Spirit's inspiration and in the Son who is the incarnate LOGOS of God. The Son who is The Truth will prevail in setting us free from our bondage to the lies of fear (Jn 8:32). Would it not benefit more the people of faith to be reminded of God, stirred to faith and encouraged to trust him above all, than to be catechized in the fears spelled out in the tea leaves of false prophets?

Heb 1:1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

God's conspired a plan born of a love that deconstructs all disorienting lies and banishes their promulgators to eternal exile. This should calm our fear of them. This love reorients our hearts toward the glory of God revealed incarnate in the Son of God who is sustaining and restoring all things, every atom, to his glorious presence. This is the source and center of our hope and trust, the incarnate Logos who has spoken the universe into being and is redeeming the same.

## GOD'S EN-COMPASSING LANGUAGE: THE DISORIENTATION OF THE LIE, AND THE REORIENTING INTEGRITY OF TRUTH IN THE LOGOS THAT "DEMOLISHES STRONGHOLDS"



At the beginning, God created the world through his perfect use of language. But also, since the beginning, language has been the primary device used to distort the truth and deceive. Certainly, language is the most powerful tool available for great good and great harm. Language aligned with God's truth is reorienting and reintegrating because it is true to what is and integral to reality.

Conversely, language that distorts or deceives can disable cognitive capacity to discern truth from falsehood and can corrupt the heart by distorting our reason, disabling our taxonomic capacity to

differentiate one thing properly from another (often collapsing the law of non-contradiction, that A cannot be non-A). Our forebears Adam and Eve can attest to this.

To be properly *oriented* means to be able to walk forward in the right direction, which metaphorically speaking means that to be *disoriented* is to be *dissembled* (feigning truth) and that *untruth* has been effective in encompassing one in confusion. There may be a compelling correlation from ancient times of the idea that for the compass to guide one it must be *true* and if not it would en-compass one in circles. (Indeed, the mathematical instrument that inscribes circles has also been called a *compass* for some 700 years.) A most *apropos* contemporary metaphor for the confusion prevailing everywhere is Jack Sparrow's compass in "Pirates of the Caribbean" which cannot be used to navigate in any conventional way but directs its owner to whatever is most desired. This may be quite an apt analogy for what drives the engine of disorientation caused by both the falsehoods in propaganda and in the hearts of the recipients who want what they want to believe. It reminds me of the pilot who reportedly said, "The good news is, we are making great progress. The bad news is, we are lost . . ."

"Language determines the realities we attend to"<sup>48</sup>

So, we must recognize that our use of language, biblically speaking, is of paramount importance to God, since ***life and the entire universe are rooted***

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<sup>48</sup> William Kirk Kilpatrick, *The Psychological Seduction* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 127.



***in the Logos who made the world through speaking.*** Reflecting on that thought, consider the LOGOS: “I am that I am, I will be who I will be”; “I am the Alpha and the Omega”: The *Shema* in Deut 6:1 declares: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” These texts correspond with “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God . . .” (John 1).

God is one God, not multiple, and he is the undivided meaning, the LOGOS of the universe. As the LOGOS of all, he is the *rational* (or logic) for all that is; he is the *reason*, the *source*, so also the *significance* of all that exists. There is nothing that is unrelated to the LOGOS, for through him, by him, and for him all things exist (in him “we live and move and have our being,” Acts 17:28). The Logos *comprehends* all that is and is comprehensive over all that is. Yet, all that exists cannot fully comprehend him, but only get glimpses, through revelation, of the outskirts of his magnificence. The LOGOS is the one who begins and ends the story of creation and redemption (when the restoration of all will mean that he is in all and above all, and all unity will be restored to creation).

The gospel of the Logos is the hermeneutical key to all of reality, since it is the Logos who became flesh “who is the mediator of the meaning of everything that exists.” As Goldsworthy has written, “. . . *the gospel is the hermeneutical norm for the whole of reality.* All reality was created by Christ, through Christ, and for Christ (Col 1:15-16).”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it is imperative that our presentation of the gospel of Christ includes the promise that he indeed redeems (restores) our rationality and renews our mind in accordance with himself. Thus, aligned with the truth of the LOGOS, we are reintegrated in God, our infinite reference point, and we find increasing integrity in our rationality and our communication and rhetoric. It also means that we *find rest* in God from the fears which so easily ensnare us.

This is why it is imperative that we “put on the Lord Jesus” in all things, that we work towards epistemological sanctification of our minds, reason, and language/communication, learning to recognize logical, historical, and exegetical fallacies, “bringing every thought captive to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), that we pray and work for wisdom deeply rooted in the perspectives of biblical truth.<sup>50</sup> This requires that we carefully discern language used by others

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<sup>49</sup> Goldsworthy, *Gospel Centered Hermeneutics*, p.63. This relates closely to the problem of the noetic (p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) effects of sin and the contrasting redeemed mind able to accurately understand and interpret scripture and the world in light of scripture.

<sup>50</sup> To extend this for further discussion, we could also include the significant role of informal *logical fallacies* in forming faulty and erroneous theories, premises,

and zealously guard how we use this greatest of gifts in all our communications. In this way, we will be disinclined to believe and spread false reports calling us to fear what is unknown or to be anxious over impending dooms that are based on what others claim they can see coming. It should be noted that the prophecy-like claims of conspiracy-generators never come to pass, and yet millions continue to place their trust in the predictive words of these false prophets.<sup>51</sup> Sadly, many of those who believe in Christ and his gospel are found among the number of those who believe in the hype and hysteria of conspiracy propaganda.

There is also the clear biblical injunction to discern the prophets and reject the words of false prophets. The number of predictors claiming to know many dire future events coming are almost all false prophets. This is a serious concern for the church, since so many of these false messages come from within the church community. When dire prognostications are put forth with infallible certitude, and that fail to transpire, this means that the prophet spoke falsely.

Why should we place our trust in the visions and dreams of those who claim to see what we cannot see and to walk by their sight and not by our faith. Even if the sky were falling – the world system collapses today or tomorrow – “though the mountains be thrown into the midst of the sea, we will not fear . . . (Ps 46:2).

When the earth  
and all its people quake,  
it is I who hold  
its pillars firm. Ps 74:3

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deductions, and irrational conclusions. Interestingly, the role of the *word*, as in the concept of *logos*, or logic, is at the heart of numerous concepts related to my subject: ideo-logical, theo-logical, mytho-logical, socio-logical, eschato-logical, psycho-logical, and anthro-logical. As noted already on the Logos concept, this suggests that the Triune God and his universe is fundamentally about *communication*, his greatest gift to humans, and thus why, how, and what we communicate is fundamentally important to him; how we use words to bring either disrepute or praise to his triune glory.

<sup>51</sup> Stella Morabito recommends ten questions to ask whether we are being manipulated by propaganda: <https://home.isi.org/intercollegiate-review/author/1625180> Is your natural curiosity being suppressed? Are you being threatened with slurs or labels? Do you feel you will be ostracized if you ask a question or express a politically incorrect view? Do you notice a “herd effect” as people shift their opinions to adapt to a politically correct opinion? Are you being pigeonholed as a result of your question or opinion? Do you sense that if you express ideas freely, you will be labeled a nutcase? Do you sense relational aggression at play? Will others be “triggered” by your opinion? Are you expected to trade in reality to prop up somebody’s illusion? Do you sometimes feel like you’re stuck in a cult? (“Truth or Propaganda?” *Intercollegiate Review*. Fall 2017. See article [here](#)).

We must always in every generation of this present passing age “walk/live by faith [*in God*] and not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). This is the center that holds true.<sup>52</sup>

Yes, we are to “demolish strongholds” (2 Cor 10:4) but may they be real and not just efforts to assassinate the characters of those we disagree with on social or political issues, nor just efforts to spread conspiratorial falsehoods about others, or slander, *even if* there is some partial truth to them.

“One person can mislead another person without telling a lie. The receiver of a misleading statement bears some responsibility for discerning the truth or falsehood that exists in a statement.”<sup>53</sup>

Discerning truth from falsehood is one of our most important creational commissions, and as in Eden the prophetic taxonomic task given to Adam and Eve was one of life and death.

## POLITICAL MESSIANISM, THE TYRANNY OF SOCIAL ANGST, AND THE MESSIAH’S EVERLASTING KINGDOM



One of the most striking ironies has been what seems to me a massive cultural turn among all political persuasions to perceive that our problems, and solutions to them, are mostly *political*. This is a turn towards political *messianism* (an idolatrous, false religion). It is a remarkable departure from the ideals of personal responsibility, the freedom of the conscience, recognition of our need to bring every thought captive to the bar of Christ in Scripture (2 Cor 10:5), and to trust in the

lordship of Christ over all of creation *not* in any political or social figures who demand our trust and allegiance. Unless we discern the source of our ultimate hope, we run the risk of hoping in what is penultimate.

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<sup>52</sup> Contemporary perspectives on the world seem often to follow [W. B. Yeat’s](#) famous poetic sentiment that “the center does not hold” more than the Scriptural one:

*The Second Coming*

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

**Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;**

**Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .**

<sup>53</sup> Cafferky, *Business Ethics*, p. 277.

In that regard, *political messianism* is a greater threat to our ideal of freedom from tyranny than all the crackpot ideas found in popular conspiracy theories put together.<sup>54</sup> Placing trust in falsehoods and [failing] human beings is idolatry, as since the beginning is believing and trusting the words of those who lie. *Trusting* in our nation’s power, prosperity, and politics (goods in themselves) for our hopes to be fulfilled is, in the least, placing our confidence in what can only fail to deliver the kingdom. The conspiratorialists would have us believe that our earthly kingdom is at threat, so we must then do whatever it takes to save it. But the kingdom of God is his kingdom and belongs to no finite person nor nation; nor does it originate in anything finite. Indeed, we ourselves do not usher in or build the kingdom of God! As Jesus rejected the Satan’s false offer of the kingdoms of the world, he also taught his disciples to pray, “Thine is the Kingdom . . .”

Tim Alberta seems to have upset some American Evangelicals by suggesting perhaps our trust and hopes have become misdirected, as when he says . . .

That word, *Thine*, implies something more than mere ownership; it connotes exclusivity. Everything that Satan offered Jesus in the wilderness—to give Him power over all the kingdoms of the world and the glory that comes with it—Jesus rejected. *Why?* Because the only authentic version of those things belongs to God. What the devil tempted Jesus with two thousand years ago, and what he tempts us with today, are cheap counterfeits. God has His own kingdom; no nation in this world can compare. God has His own power; no amount of political, cultural, or social influence can compare. God has His own glory; no exaltation of earthly beings can compare.”<sup>55</sup>

**“Do not put your trust in princes . . .  
in mortal man, who cannot save.”**

Ps 146:3

Our citizenship is in the heavenly kingdom not in any kingdoms of this present world, not even America (Phil 3:20)! Though we are citizens of earthly kingdoms, we belong first and foremost to the kingdom of God. God who promised that Christ will return from the heavenlies and “by the power that

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<sup>54</sup> Such messianism is the idolatry of Nationalism. This must be clearly distinguished from patriotism and love of one’s country, since the former is a religious idolatry that blinds us to the sins of our nations especially when it leads us to trust in nation-states’ human leaders instead of our God. We have seen some of this in American political life even with some professing Christians who considered President Donald Trump deeply intertwined with the *theocratic* and *eschatological* hopes of an imagined divinely appointed political-messianic destiny for America as the New Israel (see Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* [New York: Harper Publishers, 2023]).

<sup>55</sup> Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, p. 18.

enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (3:21). This is our “blessed hope,” not rapture-escape nor monastic withdrawal from the troubles of the world. Nor, on the other hand, is our hope in any radical political dream of returning to some vainly longed-for golden-age or utopia in this present world. Rather, it is in a restored creation where we will forever delight in the pleasures and joys of God’s glorious presence. So yes, as sojourners and citizens of the world, we must also work towards “a better country” here and now (in anticipation of the new creation coming in its fulness): that is, when we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Mic 6:8) whereby we bless our neighbor and our nations and have a foretaste of the good coming forever.

God promises us that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom 8:38). It is a promise that gives us peace with God and peace of heart and mind in the face of our trials since it is true and reliable information about the true state of things both now and forever. There is no distortion or misrepresentation in the promises of God. It is not coercive propaganda; it is an invitation to drink of the rivers of life and to eat of the bread of life that forever satisfy. To rest in him from our anxieties and dreads, to embrace his shalom and to share its benefits, is to encourage one another that he is coming soon to raise us up from death; he is coming not to help us escape the world but to redeem it! (1 Thes 4:18).

Rom 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### ***Fear not . . .***

“In this world you will suffer trials, but take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). “Do not worry about tomorrow,” Jesus said, and why? Because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. He is Sovereign over all of life and reality.

Col 1:15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and **in him all things hold together.**

## The Fog of War: learning to rap C19 in FB isolation

Misinformation is infectious,  
disinformation fatuous,  
for facts and figures  
fake the news.  
Covid  
gave us time  
to talk again  
to think and plan again  
to walk the dog and dream again  
to learn how to order Chinese take-out  
masked at six feet – plate-glass between us  
speakers wired to cheap microphones  
to notice things we never noticed  
to fix broken parts of the house  
to reconstruct our information  
about Columbus and Fred Douglass  
both busted into pieces  
broken-floating in the harbor  
they found hands and feet  
miles away.  
Infectious  
this information  
to realize our ignorance  
to read our old books  
to greet our neighbors  
to meet them for the first-time  
in a dream of days running together  
of months  
the calendar confusing us  
as a Dali dream  
children must go back to school  
or they will break open  
We were given a chance  
to fact-check  
the fact-checkers  
get fat-free  
stimulus checks  
and curb-side service  
to learn to doubt words,  
stats, the priests, and prophets  
of the CDC.  
Politics and the idea-war escalated

casualties on both sides,  
friendly fire  
collateral damage  
of Facebook Friends  
cancelled,  
mistook for hostile targets.

Don't disagree  
with me  
we shoot our own  
though fully masked  
we "don't mention the war"  
since at war posturing proves us right,  
after all, it is worth the fight:  
*verbacide*  
(murdering a word),  
*linguicide*  
(killing a language),  
*famacide*  
(defaming by slander).

No wonder morale is down;  
shock and awe urbicide (destroying the city)  
is no longer just an oxymoronic virtual reality.



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- **Online Resources**

- [First Draft News](#)
- [Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network](#)
- [Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy](#)
- [Data Society Research Institute](#) "The Disinformation and 'Fake News' Ecosystem."
- [Global Disinformation Index](#)
- [EU vs Disinfo](#)
- [Digital Forensic Research Lab](#)

“. . . if you were to construct the ‘perfect’ conspiracy theory, you couldn’t do much better than believing there’s a secret department at the Pentagon that’s sole job is to spread conspiracy theories to make people believe the government is competent enough to pull off a conspiracy.” Joe Forest

