



Faith, reason and conspiracy theories

Clay Nelson © 5 September 2021

Ever since the pandemic began the tin hat brigade has been out in force, spreading misinformation and, worse, disinformation. The former is “false information that people didn’t create with the intention to hurt others,” and the latter is “false information created with the intention of harming a person, group, or organisation, or even a country.” They have always been around, but this time, thanks to social media, conspiracy theories have never been more deadly. I have seen videos of people in ICU dying of Covid still claiming it is a government hoax and that Bill Gates has put microchips in the vaccine to control us. It beggars belief. Up to now I’ve just dismissed them without a second thought, lumping them in with the few who believe in the Flat Earth Society and those who believe the moon landing was a hoax spoon fed to the “sheep”. But now their nonsense is threatening extinction. With the world increasingly on fire or underwater, their denouncing of climate change as not real and their undermining public health efforts to eliminate a deadly virus are a real threat. They have forced me to take them seriously and consider why people come up with conspiracy theories in the first place and why others are taken in by them even when it isn’t in their best interest.

Watch this opinion piece on CNN regarding a conspiracy theorist in Congress who won her district with 75% of the vote. She makes Trump sound rational.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU8NYOEL3aM>

I am thoroughly sickened by what is happening in the country of my birth. I can barely make myself read or watch news from the US. It does make me thankful to live in Aotearoa New Zealand. But I am not complacent. While much of the disinformation originates in the United States, like the Covid virus it has spread globally. We are not immune.

The polling firm Colmar Brunton surveyed a representative sample of 2300 New Zealanders.

It found that just about everyone is affected in some way, no one is immune to misinformation. You can't make assumptions about someone's vulnerability to misinformation based on things such as their age, gender, ethnicity or other characteristics.

It is apparently not unusual for New Zealanders to believe in at least a few ideas that are linked to misinformation, and that's okay. However, at some stage belief in misinformation becomes a problem. That stage is very hard to define, but often it connects with the point at which people start relying on false or misleading information to make important decisions that can affect our own health and safety or the safety of our communities.

About half of New Zealanders hold at least one belief associated with misinformation, just under a third hold two or more beliefs and just under a fifth hold three or more. Among these beliefs are Covid-19- and vaccine-related conspiracy theories, beliefs that the 9/11 or March 15 terror attacks were hoaxes, and denial of the scientific consensus on climate change.

People who have higher levels of trust in news or information from people they know personally and lower levels of trust in news media or experts are more likely to be susceptible to misinformation. Those who use social media and trust it more as a source of information are also more likely to hold multiple of these beliefs.

Sadly the world has become a petri dish where people like Billy Te Kahika, a musician turned aspiring politician, flourish. He fronted packed meetings in town halls around New Zealand in 2020. He told the crowds Covid-19 was a conspiracy — a government takeover plot by the United Nations and a coterie of billionaires. He conjured visions of a military-enforced vaccination programme and shared dark theories about the health effects of 5G and fluoride.

On the surface, conspiracy theories are rooted in the supposed conflict between faith and reason. On one level that is true; simply look at who

supports QAnon, a collection of conspiracy theories published online in the dark net that claims Donald Trump is waging a secret war against “a worldwide cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles” that, conveniently for Republicans, includes Democrats and progressives.

The Economist asked Americans their racial and religious affiliations, whether they thought of QAnon favourably or unfavourably and whether they believed in a variety of popular conspiracy theories.

Americans who attend church the least are also the least likely to have a favourable view of QAnon. Adults who attend church at least once a month are eight percentage points more likely than predicted to rate QAnon favourably.

White evangelicals, the most religiously devout group among those surveyed, are particularly susceptible to supporting QAnon and believing other conspiracy theories. They also tend to attend church frequently.

It is not enough that QAnon is busy corrupting Christian denominations; QAnon followers are forming a new religious movement, the Omega Kingdom Ministry (OKM) has a two-hour Sunday morning service.

It uses an existing model of neo-charismatic home churches — an offshoot of evangelical Protestant Christianity that is made up of thousands of independent organizations — where QAnon conspiracy theories are reinterpreted through the Bible. In turn, QAnon conspiracy theories serve as a lens to interpret the Bible itself.

Their objective is to train congregants to form their own home congregations in the future and grow the movement.

On its website, OKM references the *Seven Mountains of Societal Influence*. Seven Mountains utilizes the language of Dominionism — a theology that believes countries, including the United States, should be governed by Christian biblical law. Its goal is to attain socio-political and economic transformation through the gospel of Jesus in what it calls the seven mountains or spheres of society: religion, family, education, government, media, entertainment and business. This blends QAnon’s apocalyptic desire to destroy society “controlled” by the deep state with Dominionists’ need for the Kingdom of God on Earth.

As an antidote to this swamp of conspiracy theories perpetrated in the name of religion, we need to revisit the 11th century and listen to Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm thought deeply on the relationship between faith and reason. He concluded that faith is the precondition of knowledge (*credo ut intelligam*, "I believe in order to understand"). He didn't despise reason; in fact he employed it in all his writings. He simply believed knowledge cannot lead to faith, and knowledge gained outside of faith is untrustworthy.

He highlighted that no knowledge is ever fully available to the one who does not trust. This is why we can speak not simply of faith as a theological virtue but also of faith as being natural — “natural faith”. As John Henry Newman pointed out, if we do not trust our senses or our intellects, we cannot even begin the process of knowing. Everything we know — or even think we know — we know by some combination of faith and reason.

Christian faith is not, as is sometimes asserted, blind. From the beginning, Christians have presented evidence for their claims. Consideration of this evidence might lead a person to believe or to doubt, but evidence is offered. No one is invited to believe without reference to some argument that belief is reasonable. But evidence does not compel belief. Instead, it makes the choice of where to put one's faith clearer. Reason clears the ground for faith.

Scientific knowledge is not, as is sometimes asserted, purely rational. Instead, it relies on certain unproven — even unprovable — presuppositions. Indeed, science only ever emerges in a culture that takes for granted things like the possibility of a true correspondence between the human mind and physical reality. Such “natural faith” does not do the work of science. It is the foundation that makes science possible.

One reason why modern science emerged when and where it did in world history is precisely because medieval theologians had spent centuries carefully considering and articulating the roles of faith and reason in human knowing. Christian theology produced the epistemological prerequisites for the development of science. It is not

surprising then that Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and Descartes were all people of strong faith.

Faith will have a role in human knowing, for good or ill. But that role is much more likely to lead to knowledge of the truth if it is acknowledged.

At the root of conspiracy theory thinking is often precisely this refusal to acknowledge one's faith commitments. But in conspiracy theory thinking, this takes on a kind of inverted form. The conspiracy theorist on your social media feed is, at one and the same time, both the loudest in their assertion to be a critical thinker and also the least likely to have their mind changed by evidence.

A critical thinker is sceptical of various claims made by all kinds of media outlets. It is healthy and necessary to double-check claims, investigate sources, distinguish between facts and interpretation. This is what conspiracy theorists imagine themselves to be doing.

In reality, however, the conspiracy theorist has crossed the line from healthy scepticism into unhealthy suspicion. This leads to the ironic situation in which they reflexively reject any and all facts that do not comport with their preconceived notions and accept almost any claims at all, even mutually contradictory claims, provided that those claims counter what they take to be the mainstream narrative.

As a people of faith who hold reason paramount, Unitarians need to seek ways to turn this tide that threatens our families, society and the planet. But how? Entering into rational debate has never fared well against belief. Mocking their beliefs will only entrench deeper those who have accepted conspiracy theories. Ignoring them, hoping they will go away, is magical thinking. We need to respect their human dignity and listen to them. Ask questions about their fears. Remain connected to them. Love them.

On another level we need to push social media platforms to do a better job weeding out both misinformation and disinformation. We need to respond on social media with accurate information when we encounter these weeds. It is unlikely to change the minds of those already committed to such thinking but may influence those who have not yet made up their minds.

Lastly, we must apply critical thinking to evaluate the misinformation we hold onto, for all of us do.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

I saw on Facebook a quote by Abraham Lincoln who said, “Don’t believe everything you read on the Internet”.

Have you ever accepted misinformation as true and passed it on?

Be specific if you can.