



# laetus in praesens

23 November 2020 | Draft

## Reframing Fundamental Belief as Disinformation?

### Pandemic challenge to advertising, ideology, religion and science

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Development of an earlier argument (*COVID-19 as a Memetic Disease -- an Epidemic of Panic: learning from terrorism, communism, fascism, and evil, as pandemics of the past*, 2020)

### Commentary

There is no lack of strongly articulated concern about [misinformation](#) and [disinformation](#), as highlighted by the assertion early in the pandemic by the Secretary-General of the United Nations (*Hatred going viral in 'dangerous epidemic of misinformation' during COVID-19 pandemics*, *UN News*, 14 April 2020; *Global report: virus has unleashed a 'tsunami of hate' across world, says UN chief*, *The Guardian*, 8 May 2020).

The complex nature of disinformation and its relation to misinformation is a continuing focus of comment (*Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic: promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation*, *Joint statement by WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC*, 23 September 2020; *The epic battle against coronavirus misinformation and conspiracy theories*, *Nature*, 27 May 2020; *Disinformation campaigns are murky blends of truth, lies and sincere beliefs -- lessons from the pandemic*, *The Conversation*, 23 July 2020).

Disinformation is framed as a focus of preoccupation for the new US administration (Nina Jankowicz, *How to Defeat Disinformation: an agenda for the Biden Administration*, *Foreign Affairs*, 19 November 2020). It is a primary concern for the European Commission (*Fighting Disinformation*, 2020). In the UK it is now evoking proposals for mandatory testing and criminalization (*UK terrorism chief calls for 'national debate' on criminalizing doubts about Covid-19 vaccine*, *RT*, 19 November 2020; *Jeremy Hunt: take test to earn freedom pass*, *The Sunday Times*, 20 November 2020).

**Dissent:** The case with respect to the pandemic was preceded by prolonged concern with "fake news", seen as undermining democratic processes and debate, and highlighted by the style of President Donald Trump. Less evident however is how fake news is to be identified and characterized, and whether or how it is understood to be a feature of misinformation and disinformation, as previously explored (*Varieties of Fake News and Misrepresentation: when are deception, pretence and cover-up acceptable?* 2019); and more problematic is the response by authorities to expression of dissent with regard to information claimed authoritatively to be well-founded (Rob Watts, *Criminalizing Dissent: the liberal state and the problem of legitimacy*, 2019).

At the 15th [G20 Summit](#) (Riyadh, November 2020), China proposed a coordinated security system to safeguard international travel (*China's Xi Jinping is pushing for a global Covid QR code*, *CNN*, 23 November 2020). Related views have been echoed by the airline industry (*Covid: Vaccination will be required to fly, says Qantas chief*, *BBC News*, 24 November 2020).

The possibility of [immunity passports](#) is now widely discussed, potentially to be required for entry to public buildings, health facilities, public transport, educational institutions, or to obtain employment. Such certification has been criticized by human rights bodies as a form of Trojan Horse enabling other restrictive measures (*Debate swirls on use of virus 'immunity passports'*, *MedicalXpress*, 29 April 2020; *Should People Without Coronavirus Antibodies Be Second-Class Citizens?*, *The New York Times*, 28 April 2020).

How is misinformation to be distinguished from any information with which authorities disagree or prefer to have suppressed?

**Complicity of authorities:** Especially problematic is the degree to which authorities can themselves be held to engage in disinformation, or be complicit in misinformation -- whilst both vigorously denying such complicity and accusing the accusers in turn.

It is now a feature of international discourse that authorities accuse each other of promulgating disinformation whilst claiming total innocence in that regard -- a posture preceded by claims to [electronic surveillance](#) of each other and of major intergovernmental institutions (*Alleged Breach of UN Treaty Obligations by US*, 2010). Such information interferences have now been reframed as "everybody does it". This is a view less evident in the case of disinformation, where some continue to claim total innocence -- as with denial of [interference in foreign elections](#).

**Belief and disbelief:** The dynamics of these issues are being played out with almost no reference to information and belief as it is widely

experienced. Irrespective of the assertions of politicians and ideologues, and the beliefs they evoke, **how is information delivered as commercial advertising of products and services to be distinguished from fake news and disinformation?**

There is a dubious leniency given to claims made in advertising, with whatever authoritative research it is presented; legally this is termed **puffery** and excesses supposedly moderated by fair trading legislation. Unresolvable difficulties in this regard are evident in the claims of the pharmaceutical industry to those offering "natural medicine" or homeopathic products. Each accuses the other of a form of dangerous disinformation -- whether people are free to choose between the products, whether based on evidence, persuasion or belief in their efficacy.

**Infection by religion?** It is curious to note the extent to which either belief or disbelief may now be recognized as a form of "cognitive infection" -- a "memetic disease" (*Memetic and Information Diseases in a Knowledge Society*, 2008). The matter has been of concern in distinguishing problematic cults from authentic religions. However, given the manner in which disinformation is becoming framed, how is a religion to be distinguished from what is thereby subject to condemnation -- even through legislation? The issue is especially complex in that each religion has a remarkable tendency to perceive other religions as a form of "infection", cognitively understood -- and consequently as a fundamental danger to the soul in the afterlife or here on earth.

The point could be made otherwise in that each religion promotes its capacity to provide 'ease', especially for the suffering soul. It follows that each religion attaches credibility to the "disease" associated with subscribing to the beliefs of other religions. Whilst some readily assert that all religious claims are effectively "fake news", the challenge of distinguishing misinformation from disinformation is clearly one that is inadequately addressed -- especially in democracies of Christian inspiration.

A more prosaic variant of the dilemma is offered by competing commercial products, each desperately promoted to ensure customer loyalty -- to the point of constituting a religion -- as with Coca-Cola and Pepsi. From a marketing perspective, is any increase in enthusiasm for the competing product to be recognized as a consequence of disinformation -- dangerously "infecting" potential customers and alienating them from more appropriate belief?

**Holy water?** More strikingly controversial are the unproveable claims made by religions, however these are protected by tradition and the complicity of government authorities. Faced with pandemic requirements for **sanitisation** at the entrance to many institutions, what is the role of **holy water** in other contexts?

Having been blessed by a member of the clergy or a religious figure, the use for cleansing prior to a baptism and spiritual cleansing is common in several religions, from Christianity to Sikhism. **Given the stringent requirements for proven efficacy in the case of the pandemic, to what extent should claims for the role of "holy water" be understood as an instance of disinformation?** Beyond the requirements for scientific proof, is the use of sanitising liquid to be understood as having been somehow "blessed" by health experts?

By the same token -- despite their focus for belief -- are the claims associated with sainthood, relics, icons, and the merit of pilgrimages, to be framed as disinformation? How indeed to reconcile the use of holy water in the creation of 500 saints by John Paul II, now formally reported to have been involved in the institutional complicity regarding abuse of children (Binoy Kampmark, *Dim Halos: Suppressing the Cult of Pope John Paul II, Australian Independent Media*, 21 November 2020). Are the number canonised, far exceeding the 300 in the previous 600 years -- and the unseemly speed of his own canonisation -- to be recognized as forms of disinformation?

**Masking?** There is widespread protest against the requirements for masking recommended or imposed by authorities in response to the claimed threats of COVID-19 (*Protests over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, Wikipedia*; Andrew Rettman, *Anti-mask protesters pose challenge for EU authorities, EU Observer*, 24 September 2020; Morgan Lowrie, *Addressing anti-mask protests poses a challenge for leaders, experts say, Global News*, 20 September 2020). This has historical precedents (Christine Hauser, *The Mask Slackers of 1918, The New York Times*, 3 August 2020). Controversy on the matter is currently highlighted by the divided opinion of major Swedish institutions (*Sweden REFUSES to recommend mask-wearing as Nobel institution insists it's important against Covid-19, NY Pilot World News*, 21 November 2020; *'Divided opinion': Sweden REFUSES to recommend mask-wearing as Nobel institution insists it's important against Covid-19, RT*, 20 November 2020).

For **Roger Hodkinson**, MA, MB, FRCPC, FCAP, CEO and medical director of **Western Medical Assessments**:

**Masks are utterly useless. There is no evidence base for their effectiveness whatsoever.** Paper masks and fabric masks are simply virtue-signaling... Seeing these unfortunate... people walking around like lemmings, obeying without any knowledge base, to put the mask on their face. Social distancing is also useless because COVID is spread by aerosols which travel 30 meters or so before landing... And a word on testing: I do want to emphasize that I'm in the business of testing for COVID. I do want to emphasize that positive test results do not, underlined in neon, mean a clinical infection. (*Leading Canadian Health Expert Outraged at Government Response to COVID, Global Research*, 18 November 2020)

Curiously the masking issue was preceded by controversial pressures from authorities to restrict facial covering. Pressure had particularly focused on the attire for women in the Islamic tradition (*Facism as Superficial Intercultural Extremism: burkha, toplessness, sunglasses, beards, and flu masks*, 2009). The prevention of identification by security cameras is ironically now secondary to the restrictions on such identification imposed by masking against COVID-19 -- requiring recourse to complex processes of contact tracing. To what extent is the case for masking as well-founded as that against use of the burkha -- or are both to be recognized as instances of belief, to be challenged as appropriate?

**Coronavirus visibility?** Especially problematic is the veracity of information regarding the coronavirus itself. Clearly stated to be invisible to the human eye, it is questionably "visible" to experts with the aid of the most advanced technology, such as electron

microscopy (Sria Chatterjee, *Making the invisible visible: how we depict COVID-19*, LSE, 10 July 2020; Michaela Porubanova, *Humanizing the coronavirus as an invisible enemy is human nature*, *The Conversation*, 22 May 2020).

Arguments are presented by some authorities to the effect that the virus, as claimed to exist, does not exist but that purported images of the virus are figments, or are of some other entities. Counter-arguments are presented to the effect that the virus' existence is proven by the fatalities with which it is held to be associated.

**Evil?** The difficulty with such arguments is that they merit comparison with the style of argumentation associated with [witch-hunts](#) of the past -- requiring unquestioning acceptance of injunctions as a means of avoiding the effects of evil. Curiously, although undetectable by science, evil continues to be strongly asserted to exist by the highest authorities -- who may well claim each other to be evil (or satanic), as detailed separately (*Existence of evil as authoritatively claimed to be an overriding strategic concern*, 2016).

To what extent are such claims to be recognized as instances of disinformation -- meriting the sanctions deemed appropriate for those who question the existence of the coronavirus in any way? Should claims regarding evil by the highest authority be subject to condemnation and censorship as "[hate speech](#)"?

**Playbooks of the past?** Is there a sense in which the response to disbelief is becoming dependent on policy "playbooks" which have been an habitual feature of the response by authorities challenged in the past by witches, heretics, dissenters, and unbelievers?

Are there important differences to be detected? Is the nature of the truth by which authorities deem themselves to be currently empowered totally different from that of those who employed those policies in the past?

Is society vulnerable to a "[Big Lie](#)" -- and how might the possibility be recognized, given the degree of complicity of authorities (*Existential Challenge of Detecting Today's Big Lie: mysterious black hole conditioning global civilization?* 2016). Writing in the period when [Thanksgiving](#) is joyfully celebrated, the challenge is only too evident in the light of its extremely dubious history -- carefully ignored on the occasion (Charles M. Blow, *The Horrible History of Thanksgiving*, *The New York Times*, 27 November 2019; Richard Schiffman, *The Truth About Thanksgiving: what they never taught you in school*, *HuffPost*, 22 November 2016). As with tales to children regarding the arrival of Father Christmas, is the promotion of Thanksgiving to be recognized as a form of disinformation?

**Being "put to the question"?** A particular response of Catholic religious authorities to the challenge of evil, as purportedly embodied by heretics and witches, has been the process of the [Inquisition](#) whereby people were "[put to the question](#)" -- as prescribed by the *Hammer of the Witches* (*Heinrich Kramer, Malleus Maleficarum*, 1486). In the form of [waterboarding](#), a similar process is now approved in the interrogation of alleged terrorists in some countries.

Given the manner in which infection by the coronavirus is now framed, and the need for widespread testing of populations, testing could be seen as dubiously analogous to the question posed in the course of such procedures of the past (Torsten Engelbrecht and Konstantin Demeter, *COVID19 PCR Tests are Scientifically Meaningless*, *OffGuardian*, 27 June 2020; *COVID19 PCR Tests are Scientifically Meaningless*, *Bulgarian Pathology Association*, 1 July 2020; *Portuguese Appeals Court Deems PCR tests unreliable*, *TAP News*, 16 November 2020; *PCR: the Unreliable Test Locking Down the World*, *COVID Watching*, 5 September 2020; *Portuguese Court Rules PCR Tests "Unreliable" and Quarantines "Unlawful": Important legal decision faces total media blackout in Western world*, *OffGuardian*, 20 November 2020).

A study published by a Spanish medical journal (*Fraudes y Falsedades en el Ambito Medico*, *D-Salud-Discovery*, November 2020) concludes:

The test is worthless and all "positive" results obtained so far should be scientifically invalidated and communicated to those affected; and if they are deceased, to their relatives. Stephen Bustin, one of the world's leading experts on PCR, in fact says that under certain conditions anyone can test positive! (Unofficial English translation published as *The scam has been confirmed: PCR does not detect SARS-CoV-2*, *Philosophers Stone*, November 2020)

Is the framing by authorities of any dissent to be deemed comparable to that of the controversial predecessor of the current [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](#)? For one commentator on the above analysis:

Consequently, all claims about the alleged impact of COVID 19 on population health are groundless. **The entire official COVID 19 narrative is a deception.** Ostensibly, there is no scientific foundation for any part of it. If these claims are accurate we can state that there is no evidence of a pandemic, merely the illusion of one. We have suffered incalculable loss for no evident reason, other than the ambitions of unscrupulous despots who wish to transform the global economy and our society to suit their purposes. (Iain Davis, *COVID19 -- Evidence of Global Fraud*, *OffGuardian*, 17 November 2020; emphasis added).

**Role of science as a religion?** The question goes to the heart of the current role of science in relation to government, in contrast with that of religion in the past -- framed as the [separation of Church and State](#). The difficulty for authorities is the extent to which "God" is now specifically cited in judicial and other processes, with a pandemic readily recognized as an "[Act of God](#)". By contrast the authoritative detection of "evil" evokes no concerted allocation of resources towards its understanding or alleviation -- as in the continuing practice of [exorcism](#). Who indeed should be recognized as "possessed" according to the beliefs of many -- and what is the appropriate response?

In its complicity in adopting the systemic role of a religion, are the systemic consequences for [scientism](#) to be anything other than predictable? As noted by Jason Blakely:

On a range of issues -- from climate change and vaccination to evolution and nutrition -- America now teems with popular movements whose central aim is the rejection of one or another scientific finding or position. COVID-19 has further dramatized these tensions, driving antipathies between scientific experts and the sundry movements commonly referred to as "populist" out onto the streets. (*Scientific Authority and the Democratic Narrative: how did we arrive at this crisis of scientific authority? The Hedgehog Review*, Fall 2020).

It is curious to note that science continues to be complicit in widespread reference to "sunrise". Although appropriate in terms of appearance, it is factually incorrect -- given the movement of the Earth around the Sun, as tragically argued by Galileo before Church authorities. Is the complicity of science to be construed as a form of disinformation of a style deprecated as sexist by feminists -- "mankind"?

**"Act of COVID" as "Act of God"?** Are challenges to the existence of COVID-19 to be deemed as unquestionable as those with respect to the existence of "God" -- or are both to be recognized as a form of misinformation given the criteria for proof? Ironically an "Act of COVID" could then be recognized as an "Act of God", at least in legal terms (James Morvell, et al, *COVID-19: an 'act of God'?* Hall and Wilcox, 2 April 2020; Amanda M. Waide, *Litigation Advisory: Is the COVID-19 Outbreak an "Act of God"?* Why It May Matter for Your Contracts, Alston and Bird, 25 March 2020). As clarified by Sridhar Acharyulu:

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown a range of legal issues. One of them is *force majeure*, an unforeseeable circumstance that prevents one from fulfilling a contract... It's a paradox that in legal terms we can call act of coronavirus as 'act of God'. This logic may not take us to infer COVID-19 is equal to 'god'. If the terms of contract become impossible to be performed, not because of the fault of the parties but something beyond their control, it is not proper, both legally and morally, to impose liability. (*'Act of God'? Invoking 'force majeure' in the time of coronavirus*, The Federal, 24 April 2020)

As an "Act of God", the pandemic is of course already cited with respect to variously prophesied "end times" scenarios (John Blake, *Coronavirus is bringing a plague of dangerous doomsday predictions*, CNN, 23 March 2020; Baruch Korman, *Is COVID-19 the Plague that Heralds the End Times?* Vision, 8 May 2020; Julie Zauzmer, *This is not the end of the world, according to Christians who study the end of the world*, The Washington Post, 18 March 2020; Jayson Casper, *Middle East Christians Grapple with Apocalyptic Pandemic: COVID-19 offers eschatology experts opportunity to refine public understanding of what Revelation teaches*. Christianity Today, 15 June 2020).

Are prophecies, in which adherents of a particular religion are called upon to believe, to be understood as disinformation by society at-large, or are the claims of religion to be understood as "religious puffery", extending the legal tolerance accorded to advertisers? In the same way, are scientific predictions, as in the case of climate change, peak oil, and the like, to be recognized by critics as disinformation (*Checklist of Peak Experiences Challenging Humanity*, 2008). How is any required proof to be distinguished from that required of religion? Accusations of "scientific puffery" are usually employed by scientists to those whose claims they term "pseudo-scientific", when critics might well accuse science of disinformation. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

**Revelation?** As a systemic process, it is strange to compare the current use of "revelation" with that in religious contexts of the past (*COVID Revelations*, University of Divinity, 11 September 2020; Ryan Weston, *COVID-19's powers of revelation*, Anglican Journal, 27 May 2020). Whereas the latter were held to be a form of divine inspiration by which a person was graced, "revelations" now take the form of information imparted by individuals freed from the restrictions of a curtain of security (Alex Lantier, *Revelation of US government conspiracy on COVID-19 exposes EU herd immunity policy*, World Socialist Website, 12 September 2020; Lawrence Sellin, *Yet another stunning revelation about the true origin of COVID-19*, WION, 6 July 2020; Phoebe Loomes, *Chinese defector virologist Dr Li-Meng Yan publishes report claiming COVID-19 was made in a lab*, News, 17 September 2020).

Both forms of revelation are a challenge to belief, with the insights conveyed being equally questionable and unsubstantiated -- and potentially self-serving.

**Unbelievers?** Framed by any religiously inspired playbook, are authorities upholding the insights of selected health experts (as with any priesthood), in a period when there is an emergence of unbelief, whether or not it is to be both deprecated and criminalized? Are some non-believers effectively defining themselves as "atheists" or "agnostics" in relation to claims regarding the coronavirus?

How are such challenging beliefs to be protected in the light of the freedom of opinion enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*? Or is unbelief in COVID-19 to be subject to the extreme sanction currently prescribed by some religions? To which religion might science then be considered systemically comparable from that perspective -- especially given religion's preoccupations with pseudoscience and those held to be practitioners of it?

**Indulgences?** In failing to recognize a degree of correspondence with patterns of the past, the many authorities inspired by Christianity are likely to fall into the trap of the sale of indulgences. With indulgence recognized as "a way to reduce the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sins", will the marketing of vaccines -- and the pressure to benefit from them -- then bear an unmistakable resemblance to the marketing of indulgences in the past, and the claims made in that regard?

Given the level of controversy around vaccination, and the cost and profitability of the many vaccines to be marketed, it is curious to note the widely-cited declaration of Matt Hancock, as UK Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, that the National Health Service was ready to "inject hope into millions of arms" (10 November 2020).

Historically the associated abuse -- seen as the sale and purchase of salvation -- was a primary factor in evoking the Protestant Reformation. Should popular protest against the science-inspired lockdown restrictions then be seen as heralding a new form of

**If you do not understand how you are part of the problem,  
can you understand the nature of the solution required?**

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