CHAPTER 4
RELIGION IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

Introduction

In 2016, the same year Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, the Oxford Dictionaries organization named 'post-truth' its word of the year. In his book on this phenomenon, journalist Matthew D'Ancona introduces the idea via an episode that occurred early in the new president's time in office. Donald Trump claimed that the crowds at his inauguration in 2017 were larger than those in attendance at Barack Obama's eight years earlier. Responses across the print and broadcast media marshalled clear photographic evidence to the contrary. After an uncomfortable, fractious exchange between reporters and Trump's team, Kellyanne Conway, senior aide to the president, tried to settle the dispute by stating this was a matter of perspective. But she went further, stating on National Public Radio, 'It's kind of like looking at ratings or looking at a glass of half-full water. Everybody has a way of interpreting them to be the truth or not true. There's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore as facts' (quoted in D'Ancona 2017: 13).

This intervention heralded a new and peculiar tendency within the Trump administration, so that expressions like 'alternative facts' and 'fake news' became a familiar feature of political discourse over the subsequent four years. The implication was plain: there was no longer any shared verifiable reality, only a battle for dominance defined not by an external measure of truth but by brute force of volume. On many occasions, Trump did not even attempt to shout down his detractors; he merely dismissed their claims without explanation, as if their tendentious unreliability was plain for all those wishing to see it. By contrast, his own authority was beyond reproach and in no need of justification, even on the numerous occasions when the president opined on issues well beyond his knowledge, whether the projected direction of hurricanes, the blame for global economic instability or possible treatments for Covid-19. It is tempting to see this phenomenon of 'post-truth' as unique to an especially unusual US president, whose disinterest in the conventions of political process was matched by his lack of interest in checking his facts against the evidence. But this would be naïve. Trump's distinctive style has mirrored that of other populist political figures across the globe. Jair Bolsonaro, elected president of Brazil in 2019, is an open admirer of Donald Trump; his similarity in style and policies has led some to call him the 'Trump of the Tropics'. As with Trump, evangelicals are among Bolsonaro's strongest supporters, sharing his conservative opposition to abortion, same-sex marriage and secularism (Webber 2020). In the traditionally more restrained world of British politics, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been subject to multiple accusations of lying while in office. The rules of the UK's House

of Commons bar Members of Parliament from openly accusing one another of lying, which is judged 'unparliamentary language'. But Johnson's behaviour has provoked some of his colleagues into challenging these archaic regulations, Green Party MP Caroline Lucas making the pointed remark: 'We need new rules for this Trumpian era of British politics' (Harding, Elgot and Sparrow 2021).

There is plenty of evidence to suggest the 'post-truth' tendency predates Trump and that it has emerged as a social development with global momentum independent of his presidency (Harsin 2015; Nichols 2017). Precedents can be found in the United States' 'culture wars', the polarization of public debate around conservatives and liberals that emerged in the 1970s. In his book on the topic, James Davison Hunter describes how moral debates escalated to fractious levels, with 'artificially contrived enmity' used as a means of securing funding from partisan supporters or ensuring media coverage (Hunter 1991: 169). Distorting public debate to ensure maximal exposure goes back much further than Donald Trump. Consider also the cases of climate change denial, anti-vaccine campaigners, as well as the numerous claims about 'deep state' conspiracies among those suspicious of government intervention. The blatant use of disinformation within political campaigns (e.g. Trump's 2016 election, Brexit in the UK) reflects a global phenomenon involving state authorities and private sector firms. Research at the Oxford Internet Institute found that in 2020, organized campaigns to manipulate information via social media could be traced to eighty-one countries across the world, sixty-two of which involved state agencies using such methods to shape public opinion (Bailey 2021). The spread of disinformation by conspiracy theorists about the coronavirus – from its purported link to G5 technology to claims it does not exist at all – has caused public panic, disorder and death (Spring 2020). The notion of a 'post-truth' era is starting to look more and more believable.

'Post-truth' as a social phenomenon might be summarized as a heightened tendency to reject or dismiss truth claims based on established authority. It is not the same as what has traditionally been understood as scepticism, as it is not interested in critical debate. It has been associated with anti-intellectualism (Hofstadter 1964) and with a populist hostility to elite groups traditionally viewed as the gatekeepers of authorized knowledge. Importantly, what distinguishes the 'post-truth' of the twenty-first century is not the use of false claims in political debate – this has a much longer history – but 'the fact that these claims continue to retain their political force despite being extensively debunked by multiple and authoritative sources' (Mavelli 2020: 68). Some have suggested we live in an *age* of 'post-truth', one that represents a crisis for liberal democracies. If traditional sources of knowledge are dismissed out of hand when their claims are inconvenient, what does that mean for the process of evaluating evidence? If that is no longer important, what's to stop mass manipulation of the public via lies and deception? Others view these developments as crucial to the democratic process, signalling the empowerment of populations to challenge established authorities (Fuller 2018). Does the destabilization of knowledge enable a healthy questioning of traditions and powers that might otherwise go unchallenged, inspiring an uprising of voices that were previously unheard and ignored?

The campaigns within higher education to 'de-colonize' the curriculum serve as a powerful example of the moral arguments *for* destabilizing the structures of received knowledge. Critiquing established assumptions about the production of knowledge is becoming increasingly commonplace within universities in the global north, as they seek to foster a more inclusive learning experience and a more critical approach to the cultural conditions that frame scholarship (Bhambra et al. 2018). Knowledge does not emerge from nowhere, and its destabilization can be understood as a necessary part of uncovering injustices of the past and retrieving voices that were previously excluded from public debate. To treat knowledge as contested also has a strong legacy within the sociology of religion. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's definition of knowledge was 'everything that passes for knowledge' in society (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 15), implicitly acknowledging that claims to knowledge are subject to contestation and inviting their critical scrutiny. While their significant influence has not produced a developed social constructionist approach within the sociology of religion (Hjelm 2018), an enduring interest in 'plausibility structures' has kept questions about the social underpinning of religious beliefs centre stage.

But what does all this mean for the status of religion? Any social movement that disrupts widely held notions of truth has potentially massive implications for the status and power of religious identities. A scepticism towards mainstream education, knowledge and power makes sense if you believe your tradition to be correct while the rest of society is in error. This is not to suggest that all religious people are sceptical in this way, but it does go some way towards explaining why scepticism of the kind we associate with the 'post-truth' era and religious conviction might be closely related. But what exactly is this relationship, and does the post-truth age herald fresh challenges or opportunities for religious expression? If 'post-truth' signals a cultural change in how truth claims are managed, how have religious identities been caught up in this process? The present chapter explores these questions and attempts to ascertain what the implications of the 'post-truth' tendency might be for the sociology of religion.

The destabilization of knowledge

The scepticism associated with 'post-truth' is fed by various kinds of doubt. It can be a tendency to doubt mainstream science or institutions of knowledge, representatives of political elites or those who are spokespersons for powerful organizations. It can be a general wariness towards claims made by those who represent power or influence. Back in the 1970s, an age of 'postmodernity' was declared, one in which the big stories are not believed anymore. While debates about postmodernity have been overtaken in recent years by other concerns, the postmodern destabilization of traditional forms of knowledge has persisted and been popularized, finding expression via the language of 'fake news', 'alternative facts' or 'post-truth'. The notion that there is a single truth to which we can all point and which offers grounds for confidence in one's perspective seems less credible or realistic than it used to. This intuition has found its way into common

parlance, with 'truth' now used not in a singular form – 'the truth' – but as a personal possessive – 'my truth'. The light-hearted, mass authored online *Urban Dictionary* defines 'my truth' as a 'Pretentious substitute for "non-negotiable personal opinion"', citing its usefulness as a means of avoiding arguments or challenges to unpopular points of view. More seriously, it has been invoked to mark the special status of a narrative previously silenced or marginalized. In her now infamous exposé interview with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, broadcast in March 2021, Oprah Winfrey invited Meghan Markle to share 'her truth'. While postmodern thinkers often presented the de-centring of truth as a liberating experience, many critics of our contemporary 'post-truth' age are much more despairing.

Phenomena associated with the category of 'post-truth' share a suspicion of conventional authorities, scepticism towards established expertise and a tendency to affirm 'alternative facts' based on a range of unconventional, unstable or highly tendentious sources. The denial of climate science, the manipulation of political rhetoric for blatant partisan gain, the use of media platforms to peddle what are widely acknowledged to be falsehoods – all signal an era in which truth appears to be in crisis. The use of social media to disseminate such claims on a mass scale makes the issue global in scope. While advocates of 'conspiracy theories' have been around for many years, their claims have traditionally been dismissed by the public majority as fringe oddities. The case of former British footballer and well-known conspiracy theorist David Icke is a telling example. Icke famously claimed the earth had been hijacked by a race of reptilian beings, who manipulate events in order to keep humans in fear and feed off their negative energy. This, among a series of other bizarre claims, published in over twenty books and promoted via speaking engagements across the globe, has attracted widespread ridicule as well as accusations of anti-Semitism. Icke has become emblematic of conspiracy theory as a vehicle for the absurd, the irrational, the baseless and paranoid. In November 2020 he was permanently suspended from Twitter for contravening its rules on Covid misinformation.

But what was once marginal and without credibility is now apparently the stuff of more mainstream discourse. In some cases – for example Donald Trump's frequent dismissal of his critics' accusations as 'fake news' – such strategies are used to reinforce political agendas and influence the terms of public debate. The deliberate use of disinformation for political gain obviously has sinister connotations, recalling totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, for example. But the twenty-first century is very different, not least as the internet has – in many parts of the world – made information much more freely available. Consumers of the web have a range of sources at their disposal, from online news outlets, blogs, podcasts and the various interactive opportunities presented via social media. The phenomena associated with post-truth do not depend on the straightforward censorship of public knowledge, as with the state-led propaganda machines of the past. Instead, the abundance of information accessible at the click of a mouse reflects a different set of circumstances, including fresh opportunities for the democratization of knowledge *and* for its manipulation in the service of political or commercial interests.

The apparent mainstreaming of conspiracism is not ubiquitous, but it does span cultural boundaries. According to a March 2021 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, 15 per cent of US citizens believe that 'the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping paedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation'. Among Republican Party supporters the proportion increases to 23 per cent (PRRI 2021). This conspiracy theory, commonly associated with the QAnon movement, has been widely ridiculed, and yet it appears to command the support of almost fifty million Americans. Similarly contentious claims are sometimes channelled into the mainstream via influential public figures, as when Donald Trump lent his support to the 'birther' conspiracy that questioned the legitimacy of Barack Obama's candidacy for US president. Questioning of the president's eligibility was largely restricted to fringe conspiracists until such campaigns were endorsed by Trump, who thereby enhanced his public profile in advance of his own presidential campaign. The rumour that Obama was not a 'natural born' US citizen was given further oxygen in Arizona. Ken Bennett, secretary of state with responsibility for election procedures, and Joe Arpaio, sheriff of Maricopa County, both went to great lengths to ascertain the validity of documentary proof, held by authorities in Hawaii, that Obama was indeed born there (Barkun 2013: 187).

The picture here is of tenuous claims being granted a platform via their passage from the margins to the political centre of society. Their association with public officials or celebrities gives them credibility and, most importantly, mass exposure. Social media plays an important role in building momentum, something Donald Trump fully exploited during his time in office. But there are also social-structural factors that play a role and which illustrate how conspiracism can achieve an enduring place at the centre of the social order. In his study of the role of conspiracy theories in contemporary Turkey, Julian de Medeiros cites David Coady's work in proposing three social conditions that militate *against* conspiracy theories gaining traction. These are effective freedom of information legislation, a diversity of media ownership (and independence from government influence) and relative independence of different branches of government (de Medeiros 2018: 9). Conversely, it is the absence of these conditions that enables conspiracy theories to become established as part of an enduring post-truth politics, as in the case of Turkey under the AKP government. Both presidents Trump and Erdoğan have pursued a populist strategy which has included the destabilization of public knowledge for political gain. They have also arguably exploited the capacity of 'post-truth' as a transnational development, one given momentum via neoliberal consumerism. It is not so huge a leap from 'the customer is always right' to 'the consumer always deserves to have their truth validated'. We will return to this link later on in this chapter. Before then, let us consider how insights from the sociology of religion can shed light on the 'post-truth' tendency.

Religion, deviant knowledge and public dispute

The relationship between religion and wider cultural claims about knowledge or truth is rarely straightforward. On the one hand, increased access to knowledge has, through

history, often been accompanied by religious resurgence. The modern changes that have placed religious texts directly in the hands of ordinary people have disrupted inherited authorities, especially those that rest on a hard distinction between religious leaders and their followers. In this respect the democratizing effects of the internet are part of the much longer process marked by the emergence of the printing press, mass production of paperback books and the introduction of the affordable home computer. All enabled empowerment through knowledge among the mass populace. The consequences for religious movements can be charted across the globe. For example, the late-twentieth-century resurgence of Islam was characterized not just by conservative Islamist groups but also by the 'pluralization of religious authority' among those who benefitted from mass education and the ready availability of print and online Islamic media (Hefner 2009: 158). Access to new sources enabled ordinary Muslims to bypass religious elites in their engagement with religious knowledge.

Other cases suggest a relationship of tension. Indeed, some religious movements have been distinguished by a worldview that challenges, refutes or undermines assumptions considered to be foundational by their surrounding culture. The sociology of religion has a long history of researching sectarian groups distinguished by strict rules of conduct and hard boundaries between themselves and wider society (e.g. Troeltsch 1931; Wilson 1970). A range of 'world-rejecting' sects have upheld convictions at radical odds with values embraced as the social norm. Early Mormons practised polygamy, what they called 'plural marriage'. While the mainstream Mormons discontinued this practice formally in 1890, fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints are known to continue this practice to the present day. Jehovah's Witnesses have traditionally resisted blood transfusions on the grounds of biblical teaching. Early members of the Church of Jesus Christ Scientist (or 'Christian Science') – founded in New England by Mary Baker Eddy in the late nineteenth century – believed all physical illness was an illusion that could be cured by prayer alone, rather than medical science. Within the context of a culture increasingly turning to modern medicine as a means of living a longer, more comfortable life, Christian Scientists were promoting a 'deviant body of knowledge'. Sociologically, this can be both marginalizing and empowering at the same time. For a movement to contest a central assumption of society is to present itself more convincingly as unbound by society's rules and conventions. It is to be free from the habits of normality and bold enough to affirm a completely different way of life.

However, we find closer analogies to today's 'post-truth' in religious groups that, rather than withdraw from society, have sought to engage in public dispute with the guardians of mainstream knowledge. One striking example is the Church of Scientology, which is rooted in explanations about the origins of the world and about the nature of human identity that are profoundly at odds with mainstream Western science. Scientology owes its worldview to its founder, American former science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. Hubbard's 1950 book *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* proposes a science of the mind that explains the origins of a range of human illnesses. According to Hubbard, humans' capacity to use the full potential of their 'analytic mind' is hampered by the 'reactive mind's' tendency to retain damaging memories called 'engrams'. These

'engrams' cause problems and ill-health later in life, unless addressed via a special form of counselling Hubbard calls 'Dianetic auditing'. Progressing through different stages of this auditing process can lead individuals to a status of 'clear', distinguished by a superior IQ and enhanced physical and mental health.

The claims of Hubbard and of successive representatives of Scientology have attracted widespread hostility and scepticism from mainstream scientists, many of whom dismiss Dianetics as a pseudo-science without foundation or merit. Especially fraught has been the conflict between the Church of Scientology and the psychiatric profession, so that, in sociological terms, the latter has been a major 'outgroup' against which Scientology has defined itself (Smith 1998). Indeed, at its inception, Dianetics was claimed by Hubbard to be as effective, if not more so, at addressing mental health problems as psychiatry. After being snubbed by numerous guardians of the psychiatric profession, the Scientology movement switched its strategy from a quest for scientific legitimacy to a campaign against psychiatry, which was presented as the main cause of humanity's decline, its misguided treatments leading to crime and human suffering. Subsequent mutual hostility led to Hubbard's 'determination that Dianetics and psychiatry were rivals in a struggle over the fate of humanity' (Kent and Manca 2014: 7). Scientology's campaign against psychiatry has been maintained over many decades, well after Hubbard's death in 1986. And while the Church of Scientology now engages in a range of relief initiatives (e.g. at major disaster sites), internal documents suggest they are framed by a quest to undermine and discredit the efforts among mainstream mental health professions to respond to the same crises (Kent and Manca 2014).

The case of Scientology is especially striking because of its concerted attack on psychiatric medicine stretching over many decades. It has possessed an enduring determination in promoting ideas outside and against the scientific mainstream. It has done so publicly and through the courts in a way that underlines the difference made when religious groups are financially well resourced. Thus, while still constituting a deviant body of knowledge in sociological terms, Scientology's ability to accumulate financial wealth, not least via celebrity endorsements and by charging clients for its services, means it has managed to sustain its campaign. It is also an example of defending deviant knowledge by going on the attack. Using the terms of a well-known framework formulated by Peter Berger, Scientologists have engaged in a process of 'cognitive rejection', grounded in its opposition to norms and values associated with wider culture. Not content simply to preserve the integrity of its own boundaries, however, Scientology has sought society-wide change, determined to bring the social order into line with what it considers to be the truth (Berger 1992: 41–5). It channels its efforts into a specific sub-sphere of knowledge: professional psychiatric medicine. This is not to suggest Scientology's aims are in any way parochial or specialist, for it lays at the door of the psychiatric profession some of the most serious problems afflicting humanity. The eradication of psychiatry and its replacement with Scientology as the basis for addressing mental health is understood to be the route to humankind's salvation.

Debates surrounding so-called deviant science (Dolby 1979) encompass a wide range of cultural movements, from acupuncture and feng shui to the 'auditing' of Scientology

and the 'anti-vaccine' campaigns that have resurged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. There are indications that the distinction between orthodox and deviant knowledge is now less clear than it has been for some time. We live in an age in which approaches to truth and knowledge emerge in a plural market of possibilities, even if some command more status than others. Michael Barkun makes sense of this differential treatment of knowledge as a symbolic economy of information. In his book *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions of Contemporary America*, he asks what makes certain conspiracy theories appealing. More specifically, what makes them credible for those attracted to them? One persistent pattern relates to their status as 'rejected knowledge' that leaves a 'stigma applied by mainstream institutions'. According to Barkun, the sense of cultural rejection that accompanies knowledge that is refused validation by 'official' gatekeepers – whether mainstream media, government or universities, for example – is a 'powerful force' which carries the 'thrill of the forbidden' (Barkun 2013: 223, 24). According to the logic of conspiracism, any widely accepted belief must of necessity be false, because it is tainted by association with the forces that shape the 'official' version of reality, the forces attempting to deceive us. Therefore, rejected knowledge is accorded particular validity; its rejection by the guardians of cultural orthodoxy signals its proximity to the truth.

Similar logic can be found among some of the most prominent religious movements of the twenty-first century. This is not surprising, given the similarities between conspiracy theories and the supernaturalist or theistic claims made by religious people. As Brian Keeley points out, both tend to explain worldly events with reference to intentional agents 'not readily available for interrogation' (Keeley 2007: 139). In this sense, we may expect epistemological tendencies to be shared by UFO seekers, believers in the 'deep state' and mainstream Christians, Jews and Muslims. This is true up to a point. Some religious writers have merged Christian fundamentalism with the methods of secular conspiracy theorists. US televangelist Pat Robertson published a book in 1991 entitled *The New World Order*, a capacious account arguing a plot to establish a one-world government was being guided by Satan and signalled the imminent end times. Indeed, it is the appeal to an opposing force with which one must contend and compete that is the most important parallel. Whether conceived as 'the world', pluralism, white Christian conservatism, liberalism or the secular state, having a citable nemesis is a powerful means of shoring up religious identity boundaries. For this reason, the parallels between conspiracism and religious movements increase with the level of tension with what are considered to be mainstream social values and assumptions about reality. For the Church of England, the US Episcopal Church and Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia, the parallels are likely to be weak and rare. Among more sectarian groups, oriented around a wariness towards mainstream society, parallels with conspiracist thinking are more likely to be evident. Conspiracism aligns with a perception that one's world view and values are under attack (Castelli 2007). This sometimes corresponds to a situation of material deprivation but not always. Spokespeople for the US Christian Right (many of whom supported Donald Trump) often present themselves as victims of persecution even when they are part of the white majority: relatively wealthy, well represented in government and with a vibrant right-wing media that wholeheartedly supports their position (Marti

2020: 209). Their perception of themselves as unfairly marginalized appears to be closely related to a tendency to make sense of things in conspiracist-type terms.

Citing a powerful, opposing 'outgroup' also helps demarcate where legitimate and illegitimate knowledge is to be found. It signals who can be trusted and who cannot. A long-term example is the creationist movement, which has since the early twentieth century shaped its public campaigns around its rejection of Darwinian evolution (Numbers 2006). Over this period, especially in the United States, creationist campaigners have sought to advance opportunities to promote their perspective in the public sphere. Education has been a key target sector, with the development of curricular resources for schools but also via museums and theme parks structured around a creationist world view (Bielo 2018). In a process that could be described as 'cognitive bargaining', creationist advocates have, over time, adjusted their strategies in line with broader cultural norms in order to improve their chances of success. With the emergence of 'creationist science', for example, the strategy was to adopt the norms and language of mainstream science in order to lend contentious knowledge credibility among a broader audience, much like the Scientologists had done in the 1950s. Hence Whitcomb and Morris's 1961 book *The Genesis Flood* argued that the great flood was a historical event not because it was mentioned in the Old Testament but because there was geological evidence for it. The intelligent design (ID) movement was an extension of the same process, taken a step further by avoiding any explicit reference to the Bible or God. Instead, ID was about using conventional academic tools to establish the likelihood that a supreme being lies behind the complexity of the natural world. In claiming for itself academic credibility, the creationist–intelligent design movement also emphasizes the 'theoretical' status of evolution, attempting to secure a status of equivalence. In other words, they shore up their own position by attempting to destabilize their opponents'. A related strategy is described by its critics in terms of 'false balance': claiming equal status between two sides of a debate when the vast majority of experts support one 'side' of the issue. This strategy can be found in debates on a variety of topics, from climate change to evolution to Covid-19. It is a means by which conspiracy theories can secure a platform on grounds that appeal to liberal-democratic values (such as fairness, equality and free speech). Therefore, while emerging boundaries between the mainstream and the marginal are often presented as rigid and absolute, it would be more accurate to describe them as contours that frame a negotiation between religious movements and their cultural environments.

If the Church of Scientology has reinforced its campaign against psychiatry by making the stakes of the dispute about a shared human priority, i.e. health, creationist evangelicals have done something similar with evolution, but in this case, the stakes are about education and free speech. In the former case, Scientologists claim that to get the issue wrong is to jeopardize the future of human health and well-being. In the latter, creationists call for vigilance in order that the next generation of young people avoid being corrupted by a school of thought that will draw them away from the Bible or by a secularist agenda that lacks moral substance. Both rest on a dualistic framework and define their mission over and against a form of established knowledge they reject as

erroneous, malign or both. Both appeal to issues of the human good that have universal resonance. While there are many who do not see things in these terms, the strategy adopted by both movements makes sense as a means of maximizing appeal to a broad audience. They also engage concerns that carry weight in legal contexts, and it is not incidental that both Scientology and creationists have been involved in numerous legal disputes over the past few decades, as they have sought to defend and promote their point of view.

Religion, power and legitimacy

Despite these commonalities between particular religious movements and elements of the post-truth tendency, there are important differences as well. One important quality of the post-truth tendency has to do with power. I had a friend at university who claimed he was a direct descendent of King Solomon. He was eccentric and often said strange things. No one believed him. But then again, he had no power. He was not in a position to steer public opinion or for his views to have an influence over people's lives. When Donald Trump rejected the claims of experts or dismissed the very idea of expertise itself, the consequences were, clearly, much more significant. Much of the debate about the 'post-truth' phenomenon has focused on the behaviour of politicians and their advisors, in other words: those with power. This is not just a case of pointing out unreliable statements made by politicians, which is – sadly – a long-established tradition. Rather, it is to observe a tendency to treat knowledge in a political fashion. This relates to what Tom Nichols calls the 'politicization of expertise' (2017: 225). In other words, the increasingly normalized willingness to manipulate public discourse in a way that serves a given agenda. The phrase *increasingly normalized* is important here. Some readers may see this as an obvious point. Of course people in power behave in this way; it was ever thus. This may be true, but there has been a shift in strategy in recent years that does, I would argue, represent a step change. A number of different social forces converge to bring this distinctive arrangement about.

The first and most obvious point is about *information overload*. As Tom Nichols puts it, in despairing tones, 'I fear we are witnessing the death of the ideal of expertise itself, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers – in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all' (Nichols 2017: 3). Not all commentators are as pessimistic as Nichols, but the explosion of information to which he refers is undeniable. Within the global north, and in increasing waves elsewhere, an abundance of data, opinion and knowledge – across a vast spectrum of quality – is available with unprecedented ease to an unprecedented proportion of people. With such volume comes confusion, as established authorities are just one among many voices. Voices that were previously marginal or esoteric can build new communities of support. The 'post-truth' tendency is, in part, a by-product of excess information.

Another factor is a type of *heightened relativism*. In their influential book *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah et al. (1985) wrote about expressive individualism as the idea that identity is formed by personal experience, rather than inherited or shaped by one's circumstances or family. This has been extended in the twenty-first century. There is now a widespread assumption – especially among younger generations – that identities can be treated with greater flexibility than in the past, whether in terms of gender fluidity, body modification or the curation of multiple identities online (Katz et al. 2021: 75–81). All identities are changeable, and personal reinvention is a positive thing to be affirmed and supported. In fact, to suggest that there are limitations is a moral infringement on individual autonomy. The dramatic shift in debates about gender identity over the last decade is a striking case in point. To say one's gender identity is biologically determined and unchangeable would have been, twenty years ago, a truism. It was not a claim that would have been challenged by most people. To say the same thing in the second decade of the twenty-first century would be to invite criticisms of intolerance and even outrage. The pace of change has been dramatic. Identity is malleable and subject to personal choice. With this privileging of individual agency comes a correlative scepticism towards external authorities, especially those perceived to impose on that agency. This is sometimes cynically dismissed as the hyper-sensitivity of the 'woke' generation, preoccupied with the quest for 'safe spaces' as shelter from the 'microaggressions' of a world in which they struggle to cope. Some commentators have written of a rise of 'victimhood culture' (Campbell and Manning 2018). And yet this emphasis upon individual agency is not necessarily a sign of self-centredness. The same underlying assumption shapes young people's reluctance to tolerate judgementalism or hostility to minority groups (Perrin 2020). In my own research, it has been discernible in attitudes of Christian university students, who are uncomfortable with evangelism as they do not feel they have the right to speak with authority into others' lives (Guest 2015). Whether self- or other-directed, the emphasis is on respecting individual agency over and above external voices. Within the context of 'post-truth', such individualism provides a rationale for rejecting established authorities.

The third social force instrumental in this pattern was introduced in the last chapter in terms of a *strategic orientation to authority*. I used this concept to interpret some of the distinctive characteristics of populism, especially in those cases where it intersects with religion. This orientation, distinguished by a willingness to engage tactically, selectively, in order to maximize advantage over one's perceived opponents, was identified among those wishing to harness power in the public realm. We see it plainly in the behaviour of populist politicians like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. But these national leaders model an approach that can be seen in much wider circles. As I argued in the last chapter, this can be seen as part of a migration of neoliberal ideas about competition into non-economic spheres of life. It reflects a utilitarian form of individualism driven by self-interest and transactional exchange. It prioritizes winning the game over any rules of the game and teaches us that bending the rules is fine if it gets us to where we need to be. Insofar as this tendency shapes public discourse, it heightens the circulation of post-truth tendencies by legitimizing lying and manipulation when it

serves our interests. A point about exposure is important here. While Donald Trump's behaviour is of moral concern for numerous obvious reasons, it is of sociological interest because we, and everyone else who turned on the TV at least once during his four years in office, knows about it. In the age of 24-hour news and social media, political corruption is plain for all to see. What was so shocking about Trump's presidency – and numerous other examples of 'post-truth' before and after him, if we are being entirely honest – is that lying and manipulation of truth were so blatant and unapologetic. And if they treat this as part of the game, why shouldn't we do so too?

Sustaining post-truth in a neoliberal age

Post-truth, while clearly sounding echoes from the distant past, is a quintessentially neoliberal phenomenon. As such, its effects on religious movements provide an important part of the picture in explaining how neoliberal conditions have furnished a new contextual framework for religious expression. There is no doubt that the 'post-truth' era has generated opportunities that some religious actors have used to their advantage. It could be argued that the conditions of neoliberalism have enabled religious expressions of 'rejected knowledge' to gain global traction and public support as never before. This is not simply a matter of the World Wide Web democratizing access to information, providing a platform for contentious and subversive claims and in so doing unsettling the epistemological norms of the mainstream. This is part of the picture, but also important are the consumerist affirmation of personal opinion, social media as a relatively unregulated site for generating mass followings and the cynical rejection of established authorities reinforced by populist political movements.

But how should these changes alter how we do the sociology of religion? Specifically, what kind of changes to our conceptual apparatus might be required if we are to make sense of religious phenomena apparently caught up in the post-truth shift?

Sectarian groups have remained interesting to sociologists of religion in part because they represent concerted attempts to maintain purity of belief and practice within contexts that exert multiple pressures to accommodate to wider social norms. Sects have traditionally done this by maintaining distance – geographical or social – from wider society as a means of more effectively filtering their members' exposure to polluting influences. The Mennonite Amish maintain geographical distance from non-members within rural areas of the United States. The Plymouth Brethren maintain hard boundaries with the outside world by restricting their reading, not watching television or listening to the radio and not eating with non-Brethren. Their doctrine of separation demands this. One twenty-first-century compromise has seen Brethren using networked laptops as part of their work, but even these are subject to technical modifications that filter access to information on the World Wide Web. A similar religious argument for technological modification emerged among ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel in 2004. Religious leaders' campaign for a 'kosher cell phone' was motivated by concerns that 3G mobiles granted young people easy access to morally dubious web content (Rashi 2013).

We tend to conceive of these measures as 'top down' phenomena, that is strategies of control imposed by religious hierarchies, sometimes reinforced with the threat of expulsion or public sanction. But they also, of course, have an important voluntary dimension. Members of sects choose to limit their own exposure to malign influences and engage in an active effort to avoid experiences, ideas or people they believe will undermine their religious identities. Such voluntary life management is compatible with the pillarization that was historically the norm in some European countries like Belgium and the Netherlands. Pillarization is characterized by the segmentation of society into groups which identify with a common worldview, with each 'pillar' possessing its own institutions – for example schools, universities, trade unions – tied to their identities as Protestants, Catholics or Socialists, for example (Houtman 2020). It is also common in analogous form within twenty-first-century everyday life. Indeed, maximizing exposure to ideas, influences and people likely to reinforce one's pre-existing beliefs is arguably a highly popular strategy for dealing with the cultural pluralism of the neoliberal age. Negotiating diversity is hard work and often requires reconfiguring one's appreciation of social normality: what's conventional, commonplace, legitimate or acceptable. What better way to deflect these challenges while having one's prejudices and values validated than to populate one's social life with like-minded associates?

In the previous chapter, we discussed Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart's impressive study *Cultural Backlash*, about the rise of authoritarian populism across the world. They argue this development may be interpreted as a counter-reaction to the 'silent revolution' that has propelled liberal values into a position of dominance in many societies. It is this shift in values, they argue, that triggered the rise of populist parties discussed in the previous chapter. At the individual level, there are various ways in which people have reacted to this. They may adapt to the new reality, rail against it via authoritarian populist politics or stay silent in a strategy of self-censorship. A further option Norris and Inglehart describe is especially interesting for the present chapter. They write of 'a retreat to social bubbles of like-minded people, the great sorting, now easier than ever in the echo chamber of social media and the partisan press, thereby avoiding potential social conflict and disagreements' (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 16). Norris and Inglehart's description captures a distinctive feature of twenty-first-century neoliberal culture. It might be summarized as a confluence of social forces that enable the easy exclusion of dissenting voices. In simpler language, we are talking about like mixing with like and the facilitation of this via particular social arrangements. This pattern is commonly described in terms of 'echo chambers', when all those involved in a conversation are affirming the same viewpoint. The lack of dissent prevents underlying assumptions and overt errors or misjudgements from being called out.

Post-truth and commercialized knowledge

Norris and Inglehart's analysis is relevant to the current chapter because it offers a way in which we might explain how post-truth tendencies achieve voice and maintain

momentum. However, what we are confronting here is not a form of social organization – like the church or sect theorized by Ernst Troeltsch or Bryan Wilson – but a style of social engagement, made possible, attractive and normative by commercial forces. Insofar as these forces function according to the logic of market preferences, they also have a tendency to reaffirm the consumer's pre-existing cognitive biases or values. We get what we like and so are rarely challenged to change our habits. This is especially acute on social media, where the algorithms used by platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and TikTok ensure content is flagged based on a user's prior engagement, alongside commercially sponsored material that is filtered according to presumed market preferences. As Luca Mavelli puts it, the 'algorithmic personalization of information means that we are more likely to receive in our social media feeds stories, news, and perspectives that confirm our established beliefs' (2020: 69). According to Jayson Harsin, this corresponds to a 'decline of institutional enclosures' and a 'hyper-segmentation of society', undermining previously stable societal structures of meaning-making (Harsin 2015: 330). What keeps information in circulation is not its truth or authenticity but its appeal to consumers. With each click the story gains more momentum. At the same time, the competition for public engagement incentivizes providers to heighten sensationalism and hone their ability to meet consumer demands. The speed and ease with which information is accessible in the neoliberal age have changed the expectations of individual consumers. As Tom Nichols comments in his book *The Death of Expertise*, laypeople may be interested in expert knowledge, but they 'are mostly interested in experts who are accessible without much effort and who already agree with their views' (Nichols 2017: 222). In this respect the economic characteristics of a neoliberal age are instrumental in enabling the exchange of information along post-truth lines.

This argument can be taken further by reconceiving post-truth not merely as a tendency or orientation to reality but as a regime or market. Jayson Harsin builds on Michel Foucault's argument that all claims to truth are not simply measurable against an established body of verified reality but are subject to the *regimes of truth* operative within a given context. Each society, according to Foucault, has its own regime of truth, which dictates the discourses it takes as reliable, the dominant criteria cited in establishing truth, the status of those charged with sanctioning truth and the mechanisms for distinguishing truth from falsity. In other words, truth is framed by a political arrangement and is closely related to the distribution of power (Foucault 1980). But as Harsin points out, we live in very different social conditions to those in which Foucault was writing in the 1970s. And if there has been a regime (of truth) change, then this is characterized by the multiplication of media, the shift away from chronologically scheduled news delivery and the consumption of information via an expanding multitude of technologies configured to consumer convenience. As Harsin summarizes it:

> the geography of news and truth has shifted as has the temporality of news consumption: no longer delivered in morning and evening, or broadcast at six

> or eight – it is composed of millions of beeps and vibrations, revolving tickers that shape-shift and/or disappear by the second, and news unfolds in a highly affectively charged attention economy of constantly connected cognition. (Harsin 2015: 329)

Harsin's idea of an 'attention economy' is crucial here. It highlights the ways in which the exchange of information has been restructured around a commercial impetus to maximize consumer engagement, often financially incentivized via advertising revenue. If the commercial providers are competing for our attention, then the exchange of information is very much functioning like a market. Insofar as truth is traded within such contexts, what ultimately counts as true may well be 'a function of the extent to which a "truth" is marketable, transferable, usable, and consumable' (Mavelli 2020: 59). Truth becomes a commodity, achieving heightened profile by virtue of its consumer appeal and irrespective of its authority in non-market terms (Lyon 2000: 80). Part of its consumer appeal involves the invitation to consumers to interact with the information offered – clicks, likes, retweets, new posts or blogs. We have an unprecedented opportunity to be informed, while the means to achieve this undermines any possibility of a settled or universally shared version of the truth.

The 'attention economy' is an important factor in how information is engaged online and in associated commercialized networks. How it impacts religious phenomena is far from clear, and future research will need to consider how 'social bubbles' function as sites of social and religious engagement, identity and community. Online gatherings have been undertaken of necessity during the coronavirus pandemic; they may persist with renewed significance after Covid-19 has been brought under control, in light of practical advantages and accessibility for less mobile religious practitioners. What the present moment indicates, perhaps, is that online possibilities of engagement appear generative of new opportunities to speak and be heard. This, in turn, incites new opportunities for subversion, even while being channelled through commercial platforms. One example that has recently come to light is that of Abraham Piper, described on Wikipedia as a 'serial entrepreneur and artist', who is living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is the son of influential US conservative evangelical John Piper, co-founder of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. The younger Piper has had a rocky relationship with his evangelical upbringing, being ex-communicated from his father's church after abandoning his faith aged nineteen. His estrangement from the evangelicalism associated with his father came to a head when he went public with his criticisms of this tradition. At one time, these would have been shared among a small group of friends, perhaps a network of post-church supporters. In 2021, it was announced via a series of videos on TikTok, the social media platform based around the sharing of short video content. Abraham Piper has, at the time of writing, 1.7 million followers on the platform. If the post-truth age has introduced a public mood characterized by popular scepticism and emotive reasoning, it has also been accompanied by the introduction of new platforms for the expression of dissent and subversion.

Assessing the post-truth age

The phenomena associated with 'post-truth' have provoked serious concern among a variety of commentators. There is a strong argument that they pose a danger to democracy itself; as Tom Nichols argues, 'a stable democracy in any culture relies on the public actually understanding the implications of its own choices' (2017: 231). The undermining of trust in expertise and conventional sources of knowledge has worrying implications for political governance as well as for the education of citizens. Others are less worried. Sociologist of science Steve Fuller addresses 'post-truth' as a lens through which knowledge production as a matter of power is laid bare and the interests of so-called experts rendered open to critical challenge. As he comments, 'There is more to knowledge than the consensus of expert opinion, and even what the experts take as knowledge need not be interpreted as the experts would wish' (Fuller 2018: 181). This might resonate with Scientologists and creationists who remain sceptical of 'established' knowledge, especially when it appears to undermine the truth claims at the heart of their own traditions. The conditions of 'post-truth' constitute a benign arena for religious groups comfortable engaging with new technology but wary of established or official 'expertise'. They are able to inhabit online spaces that provide platforms from which individuals can hit back, launch counter-narratives and find others of like-mind (Singler 2015).

A note of caution is also necessary though. Reporting on their research into the migration of 'culture wars' debates into the UK context, Duffy and Page (2021) note the radical disconnect between the mass media and the public. In the main UK newspapers and news sites there has been a massive expansion of content on the UK 'culture wars' in recent years – just 21 articles in 2015; in 2020 there were 534. By contrast, the language associated with these 'culture wars' appears entirely alien to large proportions of the populace. In their survey, Duffy and Page found that 38 per cent didn't know what 'woke' meant, a figure that increases to 50 per cent among those aged over fifty-five. Almost 49 per cent had never heard of 'cancel culture'; the figure was 54 per cent for 'microaggressions', 34 per cent for 'trigger warnings', 35 per cent for 'identity politics'. While these terms are not the same as 'post-truth', they form part of the same cluster of developments in public discourse, characterized by the heightened relativism described earlier. We need to take care that we do not take media reporting to be the same thing as social reality. We must also avoid uncritically projecting the priorities of particular strata of people onto the entire population.

But there is nevertheless a dimension of the 'post-truth' phenomenon that has society-wide reach, one we might abbreviate as the *metric exception*. The risk of growing public disillusionment with 'experts' is that politicians will surround themselves with advisors who tell them what they want to hear. Knowledge will be manipulated by those who govern in the interests of placating the public and consolidating their power. We have already witnessed examples of this within some of the populist regimes that were discussed in the previous chapter. One element of this step change involves the co-option of a particular kind of expert into government agendas. Academic observers of the neoliberal age have

noted the significance of private think tanks in steering political discourse and government policy (Davies 2017: 134–7; Peck 2010). The role of think tanks is not straightforward, but it does represent a layer of intellectual culture closely associated with governing powers. As private providers, think tanks also have an incentive to provide the ideas, the thinking and the data that is palatable to those in power. Knowledge is here politicized within its own industry, as an established part of the political process, especially in Anglo-American contexts. This change of political culture has introduced new participants into the power play of liberal democracies; some are focused on economic concerns – such as the promotion of competition in neoliberal terms – while others have a social democratic profile. Many attempt to combine the two, and in so doing clothe sociopolitical agendas in economic language. An important dimension of this relates to what David Beer (2016) calls 'metric power', i.e. the privileging of numerical data as a measure of value. We see this in the pre-eminence of statistics in the justification of public policy, as well as in systems of accountability in public services. We see it in the privileging of quantitative evidence within government and think tank reports. We see it in the importance of maximizing the number of 'likes' we get on Twitter, friends on Facebook or subscribers to our blogposts. We see it as we track our credit scores, our loyalty card points or our performance in league tables. If it can't be counted, we learn, it doesn't count. The neoliberal age does not, therefore, involve the destabilization of *all* forms of knowledge. Metric power is apparently exempt from post-truth scepticism, up to a point anyway.

Beer argues that metric power is a core element of neoliberalism and a principal means by which neoliberal influence is extended. As he states, in a neat summary of its internally reinforcing logic, 'Measurement and competition run hand in hand, in terms of having the capacity to justify one another' (Beer 2016: 23). Taken as a form of knowledge, metrics carry a number of important social consequences that are relevant to the 'post-truth' era. First, they sideline the need for personal trust and familiarity. Such 'subjective' considerations are secondary to the 'objective' truth of numbers, which are portable and communicable beyond the perspectives of individuals. Second, the privileging of metrics de-values the notion of considered judgement, preferring instead the immediate, obvious and blatant. There is no need for interpretation, for the meaning is plain. Moreover, metrics constitute a universal measure that transcends cultural difference; its mathematical form gives it a universal quality that places it beyond reproach. This pattern is reinforced by the desire for immediate gratification fostered by consumerism. Other forms of knowledge are easily crowded out. As Beer puts it, metric power operates by 'chipping at the boundaries of discretion and thoughtfulness' (2016: 178). In assessing how religious movements have been shaped by the post-truth era, one important question will be how have they engaged with these privileged forms of knowledge and with what consequences.

Further reading

There is an emerging, cross-disciplinary literature on the phenomenon of 'post-truth' and its social contexts. For a journalistic, but highly thought-provoking, discussion, see

Matthew D'Ancona's *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (2017). For more focused studies of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in today's world, see Barkun (2013), Medeiros (2018), Robertson (2016) and Singler (2015); excellent discussions that engage broader debates about the status of knowledge in the 21st century can be found in Mavelli (2020) and Nichols (2017). For a characteristically provocative and insightful treatment, see Steve Fuller's *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (2015).