



Sunday Meeting Report – 10:00 AM, January 21, 2018  
By Joyce Tombouliau

## **THE RELIGIOUS ORIGIN OF FAKE NEWS AND ALTERNATIVE FACTS** **By Dr. Christopher Douglas**

This timely topic, which is certainly of interest to secular humanist advocates of critical thinking, was the subject of today's excellent presentation and lively discussion that followed. Our presenter, Dr. Christopher Douglas, is currently a Professor of English at the University of Victoria, where he has been a sought-after teacher since 2004. His primary research interests include contemporary religious imagination in American literature, as well as multiculturalism and postmodernism. His latest book is titled: *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right*, and he has recently written an article on the topic of today's talk.

His observation is that the fake news phenomenon that emerged during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and since has been more directed toward conservatives than liberals. And there is a religious basis for the content and spread of such fake news. He refers to fake news as 'engineered facts for profit', in this case, the political 'profit' of getting Trump and a conservative Congress elected. Some 81% of evangelical Christians supported Trump.

His hypothesis: Fake news in the U.S. is successful because of the historical religious tradition in Christian Fundamentalism, which has surged and taken over the Republican Party in recent years. This tradition promotes an attitude of suspicion toward science and analytic thought. As a result, over 50% of the U.S. population does not accept evolution, and there is a discrediting of the historical/critical method of analyzing religious texts. (This is substantially greater than in any other developed country.) Starting with the Scopes trial against the teaching of religion in schools, there has been an organized effort to 'prove' evolution wrong by promoting counter-expertise in the form of the intelligent design movement, attempts to insert creationism into the public school curriculum, establishing 'creationist' museums (with exhibits purporting to show that humans and dinosaurs walked the earth at the same time), etc. There is also an element of racism, which religious proponents claim is biblically inspired.

Such views, as well as other fundamentalist Christian beliefs, have been spread in the mainstream media, especially by evangelists who have been able to sponsor programs and promote literature, such as Billy Graham, Pat Robertson ('700 Club'), Jerry Falwell (*The Clinton Chronicles*), and recently, Fox News (which tends to play to the conservative 'base'). Such media outlets also promote the fundamentalist views opposing abortion, homosexuality, etc. and are staunch supporters of the gun lobby and justifications for racism. There is an asymmetry here, in that there is nothing equivalent which promotes religious views on the liberal side. And mainstream Christian religions generally do not advocate biblical literalism.

This all feeds into much of the 'fake news' being spread by the mainstream media (not always knowingly), but especially social media where there is little to prevent it. People tend to access websites and media that reinforce their preconceived views. Thus the potential for dividing a country socially and politically, as well as promoting the fundamentalist Christian agenda. There is also profit to be made by those who spread fake news. The extent of this situation is less prominent in Europe and other developed countries where populations are smaller, potential profits are less, and religious traditions are more liberal. Thus, their elections have not been subject to as much of this kind interference as the U.S.

In summary, this talk by Dr. Douglas brought a new dimension to the recent troubling phenomenon of fake news and alternative facts and its interrelationship with U.S. Christian fundamentalism. Though it was attended by a disappointingly small group of only about 20, the talk was followed by a lengthy and lively discussion.