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MUSLIMS IN THE MEDIA

Islamophobia in Reactionary News: Radicalizing Christianity in the United States

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The accuracy and relevance of United States print news media has been called into question at increasing rates in the post-truth era. Conservatives, in particular, have long expressed concerns that mass and digital media censor conservative as well as Christian viewpoints while promoting a progressive and, more recently, pro-Muslim, platform. They have increasingly turned to alternative-right and alternative right-wing sources for news and discussion within what they deem to be unfiltered and unbiased networks. This article employs a mixed method approach of content and discourse analysis of sources from 1 January to 15 May of 2019 pertaining to discourse concerning the relationship between Christianity and Islam within and in response to articles in three such sources: *Breitbart*, *The Federalist*, and *FrontPage Magazine*. The role of these three websites is considered in the radicalization of those who aim to defend a monolithic form of Christianity rather than a particular Christian denomination or belief.

Introduction

False information in the press is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Historians and sociologists of journalism have noted various shifts in reporting throughout the 19th century with the rise of the penny press in the 1820s, post-Civil War reporting strategies, the shift in funding from political parties to advertising and street sales, the waning of objectivity during the Age of Yellow Journalism, and the fortification of objectivity, or the norm that 'guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts' (Schudson, 2001: 150) with the professionalization of journalism, including through news-centered stories and the common use of interviews in the 1890s (Schudson, 2018: 47). Yet part of the challenge of understanding objectivity today is the fragmentation of news and the increasing skepticism of journalistic expertise (Gladstone, 2017; Schudson, 2018). A recent solution to this dilemma of how to evaluate objectivity is to return to a partisan press model, such as one in which journalists explicitly point out 'charlatans, demagogues, and protofascists' (Fitzgerald, A 2019: 71).

It is important in these debates to first articulate a clear definition of 'post-truth'. Lee McIntyre (2018: 13) considers this phenomenon to occur when a particular agenda outweighs the truth as 'a form of ideological supremacy'. Contemporary ideological wars have increasingly manifested in alt-right media such as *Breitbart*: 'One cannot understand the rise of post-truth (or Trump) without acknowledging the importance of the alternative media' (McIntyre, 2018: 148). To complicate this matter, these alternative media spaces claim that the left mischaracterizes the alternative right, such as by arguing that those who are not 'overtly' a racist, anti-Semitic, or white supremacist cannot be considered part of the alternative right (Marcus, 2019).

This article contends that, although proposed solutions to address the post-truth problem by focusing on areas such as funding, objectivity, or local news are sound and correct, they are not sufficient in addressing a core problem of Islamophobia in the digital sphere. More broadly, adhering to longstanding appeals to objectivity is not enough to address the rise of right-wing ideologies around the world, which are blending with the United States alt-right movement both rhetorically and

organizationally as these alternative viewpoints increasingly disguise themselves with mainstream conservative and even liberal discourses. Those who analyze the relationship between Islamophobia and right-wing movements need to reconsider the very notions of truth and religion, or at least, how those expressing Islamophobic sentiments claim to define truth and religion. And this brings me to my two research questions: How might citizen engagement with alternative right-wing and/or alt-right media sources—in lieu of mainstream print and broadcast journalism—shape Islamophobia and simultaneously invigorate a widespread appeal to an imagined Christian history in the United States? And, how have *Breitbart*, *FrontPage Magazine*, and *The Federalist* specifically framed Islam and Muslims in relation to Christianity and Christians in the post-truth era? There are three key areas that govern research on religion and right-wing movements in the digital era: media studies, religious studies, and social movement studies. I will briefly highlight important contributions from each of these three disciplines to help to shed light upon the burgeoning alternative media sphere that bolsters alt-right discourse in the United States.

The post-truth debates require solutions far more complex than increasing media literacy and tackling misinformation, citizen engagement, or journalism ethics. Instead, we must consider how citizens with viewpoints that are incongruent with progressive ideology have found recourse in alternative news spaces (Waisbord, 2018: 1869). Disinformation is a more useful concept than misinformation (or fake news), as it readily considers 'more systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows due to strategic deception' (Bennett & Livingston, 2018: 124). Francesca Tripodi (2017) has found that conservative meaning-making of news information derives from frameworks for analyzing the Bible and the Constitution. And yet, much like the problem of media literacy, to what extent do members of the alt-right media sphere truly understand their own appeals to a Christian history, or, to what extent are they religiously literate (Prothero & Kerby, 2015)?

These questions prompt a better understanding of religion in the public sphere, a public sphere that itself needs reevaluation. Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell (2016: 2) have recently argued that populists invoke religion through the

rhetoric of 'belonging', 'restoration', and 'battle' (as opposed to 'belief'), all of which are rooted in a 'native religious identity or set of traditions and symbols rather than a theological doctrine with rules and precepts' that must be protected from secular elites and invading religions. This article builds upon the notion of a 'native religious identity' by probing the role of alt-right and alternative right-wing media in fostering nostalgia for a fictional, religious past.

Yet recent critiques have suggested that the use of 'populism' has created false equivalencies between movements on the left and the right, often rooted in the ambiguous meaning of the term itself. Although no clear consensus exists on how to define it, many scholars channel Michael Kazin's (1995) understanding of it as a way of speaking and appealing to 'the people' against 'the elites'. Ruth Wodak (2015: 7) has more recently defined right-wing populism as 'a political ideology that rejects existing political consensus and usually combines laissez-faire liberalism and anti-elitism', while Benjamin Moffitt (2016: 27) has emphasized the common 'divide between "the people" and "the elite" or an Other'. Rogers Brubaker (2017: 362) has also acknowledged the central role of 'the people' in conflicting definitions of populism but emphasizes the intersection of 'vertical and horizontal oppositions', including elites who are both external to and above the people (2017: 363). Populists describe these elites as 'rootless cosmopolitans' (Brubaker, 2017: 363) who welcome Muslims and Islamic ideology within national borders, consequently undermining the economic, cultural, and moral fabrics of 'ordinary' people. Anti-elitism has instigated the alternative right's indifference to occupying mainstream media spaces and subsequent motivation to form alternative spaces 'in ways that were largely invisible to the journalists and pundits who controlled the dominant public sphere' (Jacobs, 2017: 413).

Arato and Cohen (2017: 290) have noted prior analyses of the relationship between religion and populism center on the tension between identity-invoking, inauthentically religious populists and genuine, faith-based religious individuals, in which Christian or Judeo-Christian identity serves as a barrier against Islam as well as, in the United States, secularism (Gorski, 2016; Marzouki & McDonnell, 2016;

Roy, 2016). Arato and Cohen (2017: 291) further suggest that populism turns to religion for three reasons: to borrow apocalyptic tropes from religion; to define the concept, 'the people,' by an identity other than 'anti-elite or anti-foreigner'; and to craft a 'moral claim' by pitting the 'good people' against the evil Other. This article argues that the alt-right media-induced version of Islamophobia in the United States is not a case of religious individuals falling for deceitful propaganda of an inauthentically religious populist movement, but one in which religion resides at the root of the movement.

Building upon this focus on religion and the nuances of anti-elitist discourse, rather than on categorical distinctions between populism and other ideologies, Edward Said (1981/1997: 4–5) approached the issue of prejudice and discrimination against Muslims almost 40 years ago regarding the marginalizing, monolithic, reductive, and colonial project of covering Islam, which he posited was rooted in its threat to Christianity: '[S]o far as the West is concerned, Islam represents not only a formidable competitor but also a latecoming [sic] challenge to Christianity.'

Said's overall analysis of the mediation of Islam remains extraordinarily applicable today, but his analysis of an Islam-West dichotomy, versus an Islam-Christianity one, requires new thinking. He argues that the West, rather than Christianity, is often 'pitted against Islam' because 'the West is modern, greater than the sum of its parts, full of enriching contradictions and yet always "Western" in its cultural identity', whereas Islam is reduced to a monolith despite its nuances and cultural variations (Said, 1981/1997: 10–11). Said's observation of Western hegemonic norms and cultural imperialism shaping this imbalance in the West versus Islam dichotomy still applies theoretically, as Talal Asad (1993) has shown in the ways Western scholarship defines religion. Yet in these alt-right media spaces, there is a concerted effort to focus on Christianity, rather than 'the West', versus Islam, in part due to the alternative right's refusal to accept the pervasive progressivist ideology it considers so deeply entrenched in 'the West'. Said's work precedes scholarship that has examined how news organizations report on religion and prompt audience responses (Hoover, 1998), and how media specifically frame and set the agenda for discourse about

Muslims (Morey & Yaqin, 2011). The questions remain whether the secular press has made significant progress in terms of the quality of reporting on religion and how the alternative press fits within mainstream journalism.

Many scholars have noted that Christianity is often employed as a means to reject Islam (Brubaker, 2017; Mudde, 2007; Roy, 2016) and to promote Christianity increasingly in the digital public sphere (DeHanas & Shternin, 2018). More recently, Giulia Evolvi (2019) has analyzed the intersection of Islamophobia and ethnicity, politics, and gender, while Andrea Molle (2018) has probed an analogous appeal to Judeo-Christian roots in Italy. It is important to keep in mind that alt-right and alternative right-wing movements operate differently around the world, but the question of immigration unites movements in Europe and the United States (Simpson & Druxes, 2015: 2). Pinn (2000: 90) observed in German newspapers and magazines that international networks govern extreme right-wing and Nazi communication, an insight that is necessary to remember when analyzing transnational right-wing movements today.

Furthermore, while this article contends that religion lies at the heart of Islamophobia, the entanglement of racism and Christianity is also significant. Aurelien Mondon (2017) has revealed the transformation of class-based to race-based concerns and conflict among those under the influence of the radical right in Europe, as well as in the United States (Mondon & Winter, 2018), while Chip Berlet (2011: 17) has noted that right-wing populists in the United States employ coded language to conceal racism within other policy issues, since racism in far-right discourse actually resides comfortably within mainstream society (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019: 485). This point highlights the underlying racist element of Islamophobic discourse even if critiques of religion lie at the forefront. In short, Islamophobia is a form of racism that indirectly maintains a particular vision of White nationalism, as Muslims ranging in their physical appearances and countries of origin are “‘interpellated” ... solely as Muslims’ (Garner & Selod, 2015: 17, ellipses mine).

This trans-Atlantic phenomenon is not new to the 21st century. Michael Barkun (1994) has traced the growth of the Christian Identity movement within right-wing

radical networks in the 20th century and its racist, white supremacist roots in the 19th century. Tariq Modood (1997/2015: 155) has mapped the historical roots of what he deems 'cultural racism' in Britain as an extension of biological racism that aims to malign cultural assimilation, which provides a useful way to understand how Islamophobia reinforces Protestant hegemonic norms and projects racist ones. Somewhat counterintuitively, the Islamophobic discourse in this article most closely resembles what Mondon and Winter (2017: 2162) call 'liberal Islamophobia', which 'can be contrasted with the illiberal [Islamophobia] by its proclaimed allegiance to fantasized liberal and democratic principles' since it does not overtly invoke or critique the race of those subjects under scrutiny, and in fact might deny doing so as in this *Breitbart* article:

To question or discuss Islam, or any religion for that matter, is not 'racism,' it is not 'hate,' and it is not meant to 'victimize' anyone. It is meant to scrutinize a doctrine as any religion and ideology should be subject to without punitive action, unless of course one lives under Shariah law (Douglass-Williams, 2019).

And yet, as Mondon and Winter (2017: 6) observe, those who claim they are critiquing the beliefs rather than followers of Islam tend to suppress an underlying racist agenda.

The final key realm of scholarship for understanding religion and right-wing discourse is social movement studies. How do we usefully define social movements, an interdisciplinary subject in and of itself, within the interdisciplinary fields of religion, politics, and media? James M. Jasper (2015: 5) has defined social movements as 'sustained, intentional efforts to foster or retard broad legal and social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels endorsed by authorities'. Joshua Gamson (2014: 355, ellipses mine) discusses the dangers of historically and 'socially-produced binaries ... that are the basis of oppression' in the context of the LGB(Q) T(IA+) community. Though not centered on religious movements, his framework helps to consider the ramifications of the 'Judeo-Christian' versus non-Judeo-Christian paradigm that permeates throughout the alt-right media sphere. Finally,

Herman Haines (1984, 1988), who coined the term 'radical flank effects', found that radical black activists actually helped to legitimize moderate civil rights activism through their comparatively radical approaches. We can apply this concept, the "radical flank effects," to the post-truth era to unveil how the alt-right and alternative right-wing movement, 'witnessed in increasing incidences of violence linked to white supremacy, vigilantes, and survivalists' (Crockford, 2018: 238), spreads in alternative media, legitimizing seemingly moderate but nonetheless detrimental right-wing Islamophobic ideology.

Methods

This article employed a mixed methods approach, first conducting a content analysis to retrieve all articles from 1 January 2019 to 15 May 2019, in which 'Muslim' and/or 'Islam' was discussed in relation to 'Christian/ity' and/or 'Catholic/ism'. This time frame was selected in order to provide a snapshot of the most contemporary portrayal of Islamophobic discourse. It is also worth noting that the time frame coincides with the majority of announcements of Democratic candidates for the 2020 presidential election which, in turn, possibly prompted heightened nativist discourse within alt-right media in response to the immigration platforms of these candidates. Of the total 183 articles—40 of which came from *The Federalist*, 53 from *FrontPage Magazine*, and 90 from *Breitbart*—I conducted a qualitative discourse analysis to critically assess how, both in the articles and in relevant comments that explicitly responded to the articles regarding the relationship between Christianity and/or Catholicism and Muslims and/or Islam, Islamophobia operates in this alternative media sphere. Although some articles were analyzed more closely than others, I examined each of them qualitatively. Certain comments were included because, as Hannan (2018: 224) has observed, 'The social aspect of social media decides matters of truth on the basis of popularity and tribal affinity rather than impersonal logic and evidence'. Christian Fuchs (2018: 782) has argued that we must think about affect and emotion, that is, critical psychology, to understand right-wing movements. Mona Abdel-Fadil (2019) has also argued that emotions are political and people 'affectively perform conflict', such as Islamophobia, to trigger fear in others and in themselves, thereby providing

a critical framework for assessing the interplay between social media commentary and anti-Muslim narratives.

To recall, my first research question asked:

How might citizen engagement with alternative right-wing and/or alt-right media sources—in lieu of mainstream print and broadcast journalism—shape Islamophobia and simultaneously invigorate a widespread appeal to an imagined Christian history in the United States?

Results

The results of the content analysis, which help to answer this question, are divided into nine thematic categories, listed below in **Table 1** in order from highest to lowest frequency. The categories were decided using an open coding system, in which articles that incorporated the keywords—“Christian/ity” and/or “Catholic/ism” along with “Muslim” and/or “Islam”—were grouped by the most prominent use of those keywords within each article. Although this process created mutually

Table 1: Results.

Thematic Category	Number of Articles
1. Unfair prioritization of Islam over oppressed Christianity (by the state and/or within the public sphere)	50
2. Israel/anti-Semitism	28
3. Terrorism and/or Islamization linked explicitly or implicitly to immigration	23
4. Observations of (mass and digital) media influence	18
5. <i>Feminism</i>	16
6. <i>LGB(Q)T(IA+)</i>	16
7. Preservation of historical narratives or memories (e.g., art, architecture, historical texts, history of Catholic saints, history of holidays)	15
8. Pope Francis	10
9. The Democratic Party	7
Total	183

exclusive categories, it was possible that a less prominent focus of an article could fall into two or more categories. However, the resulting nine categories, which were subsequently grouped by key themes, reflect the most prominent use or focus within each article pertaining to the keywords. Category 6 implements parentheses to include categories not referenced as part of the acronym in the primary sources, as it is unclear whether or not the authors intentionally excluded the queer, intersexual, asexual, and plus categories from their articles. Categories grouped under Key Finding One are in bold font, Key Finding Two in italicized font, and Key Finding Three in plain font.

Next, the discourse analysis identified three key trends within the primary sources:

1. appeals to a fictional Judeo-Christian historical narrative in order to attack Muslims and justify Islamophobia;
2. the use of liberal discourses to justify questionable critiques of Muslims and/or Islamophobia; and
3. an acute self-awareness among *Breitbart*, *The Federalist*, and *FrontPage Magazine* regarding their roles in countering and combatting allegedly biased, liberal, mainstream journalism.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods in tandem helped to answer the first research question, which will be discussed in the following section.

Analysis and Discussion

First, I argue that categories one through three, seven, and eight (in bold text in **Table 1**), totaling 126 articles, fall within the first key finding: appeals to a fictional Judeo-Christian historical narrative in order to attack Muslims and justify Islamophobia. For example, one *Breitbart* article (Pollak, 2019b) laments the supposed double standard to which the left adheres when assessing Christian versus Islamic principles in the secular sphere. In one of the top comments, which are ranked by votes from other users who must log into Disqus, a global comment system, through their email, Facebook, or Twitter accounts, a responder claims

that the use of hijab for hands-free mobile usage equates to 'acknowledging the superiority of Islam' (Pollak, 2019b).

Within this first key finding, the top category, 'Unfair prioritization of Islam over oppressed Christianity (by the state and/or within the public sphere)', supports the overarching notion that Islamophobia is strongly linked to a sense of Christian preservation within the alt-right media sphere in the United States. The 50 articles can be divided into two main sub-themes: (a.) the unfair persecution of Christians alongside the privileging of Muslims within and beyond the United States, including former Muslims who have converted to Christianity and/or Muslim refugees residing in new countries but are persecuted for it, often in comparison to Christians who are allegedly unable to flee their home nations as easily as Muslims (Ahmed, 2019; Bawer, 2019a; Chalk, 2019a; Douglass-Williams, 2019; Friedman, 2019a; FrontPage Magazine, 2019a; Greene, 2019a; Harsanyi, 2019a; Hayward, 2019a; Horowitz, 2019; Kent, 2019a; Kraychik, 2019a; Lane, 2019a; Lane, 2019b; Markham, 2019; Martel, 2019a; Montgomery, 2019a; Montgomery, 2019b; Mora, 2019; Munro, 2019; Poole, 2019; Spencer, 2019a; Spencer, 2019b; Tomlinson, 2019a; Tomlinson, 2019b; Williams, 2019a; Williams, 2019b; Winston, 2019); and (b.) accusations of a false separation of church and state in the United States or western/northern Europe, as allegedly evidenced by Islamic privilege (Ames, 2019; Breitbart London, 2019a; Breitbart London, 2019b; Caplan, 2019; Church, 2019; Cordes, 2019; Dogan, 2019a; Greenfield, 2019a; Greenfield, 2019b; Harsanyi, 2019b; Iyer, 2019; Kent, 2019b; Metzgar, 2019; Pollak, 2019a; Pullmann, 2019a; Rodriguez, 2019; Siewers, 2019; Spencer, 2019c; Starr, 2019a; Tomlinson, 2019c; Tomlinson, 2019d; Vadum, 2019a).

Category two, 'Israel/anti-Semitism', received the second-highest frequency count (Braunstein, 2019; Danan 2019; Davidson, 2019; Feoktistov, 2019; Fleitz, 2019; Greenfield, 2019c; Greenfield, 2019d; Greenfield, 2019e; Hale, 2019a; Harsanyi, 2019c; Harsanyi, 2019d; Harsanyi, 2019e; Harsanyi, 2019f; Hemingway, 2019; Henry, 2019a; Henry, 2019b; Kaufman, 2019a; Kraychik, 2019b; Meyer, 2019; Moons, 2019a; Osburn, 2019; Pullmann, 2019b; Qudosi, 2019; Spencer, 2019d; Spencer, 2019e; Spencer, 2019f; Weiss, 2019a; Zeigler, 2019).

The third category, 'Terrorism and/or Islamization linked explicitly or implicitly to immigration', secured 23 mentions (Al Iraqiya, 2019; Billingsley, 2019a; Breitbart Jerusalem, 2019a; Breitbart London, 2019c; Delingpole, 2019a; Fitzgerald, H 2019a; Freire, 2019; Friedman, 2019b; Gomes, 2019; Greenfield, 2019f; Greenfield, 2019g; Hale, 2019b; Martel, 2019b; Martel, 2019c; Montgomery, 2019c; Montgomery, 2019d; Pollak, 2019b; Tomlinson, 2019e; Tomlinson, 2019f; Williams, 2019c; Williams, 2019d; Williams, 2019e; Williams, 2019f).

Throughout many of the articles in the first three categories, Islam and progressivism serve as a united barricade against the separation of church and state. The church-state divide emerges in alt-right and alternative right-wing publications as 'a fiction' for 'cultural groups who just don't believe in the idea of separation at all' (Iyer, 2019). One author expands this general framework to suggest that progressivism is itself a 'new religion', that is, 'the church of modern progressivism' (Metzgar, 2019). Some attempt is made at inclusivity, acknowledging that one need not necessarily be Christian to be part of United States culture, so long as there is an understanding as 'an educated citizen' of the 'dominant faith' (Harsanyi, 2019b), one that is at risk of losing its dominance (Breitbart London, 2019b; Kent, 2019b; Tomlinson, 2019a; Tomlinson, 2019c), in part due to what these alt-right publications frame as the prioritization of the plights of Muslim victims of terrorism, such as those attacked in New Zealand, over those of Christian victims, such as those attacked in Sri Lanka (Bawer, 2019a; Douglass-Williams, 2019; Munro, 2019; Pollak, 2019b; Williams, 2019b; Winston, 2019). Some articles suggest that Christians are coerced into renouncing their own religion in favor of Islam, such as through nationwide Islamic prayer in New Zealand after the Christchurch shootings: one commenter on this story lamented it was 'outrageous' for "Christians" to behave sacrilegiously toward their own faith' (Montgomery, 2019b).

Accordingly, Muslim citizens can certainly be 'educated citizens', as demonstrated through the use of Muslim American writers (Ahmed, 2019; Al Iraqiya, 2019; Qudosi, 2019) to discredit the left under the façade of malleable Muslims, including leftist state and federal representatives (Church, 2019; Cordes, 2019; Kraychik, 2019a; Starr, 2019a). Occasionally, these alt-right publications will even dissect the words and

actions of mainstream Republican representatives (Greenfield, 2019b), especially when China, whom the left supposedly ignores in its suppression of Uighur Muslims because it is too distracted by the plights of the Palestinian people (Harsanyi, 2019c), is part of the equation. Educated and acceptable Muslim Americans, according to this argument, are willing to 'set the individual above all else' (Ahmed, 2019), reject anti-Semitism (Harsanyi, 2019d; Henry, 2019a), and obey the Constitution (Caplan, 2019). Frequent reference to Muslims in China seems to be, much like the upcoming discussion of the use of liberal discourses regarding LGB(Q)T(IA+) rights and feminism, a conditional alliance with traditionally liberal values in order to critique a political ally, and often commenters responding to these articles support China's use of camps for Muslim minorities. For example, one commenter notes, 'China didn't say they would let the envoys leave the camps', while another commenter claims, 'Putting Mohammedans in re-education camps is a fine idea. One of China's policies I wholeheartedly applaud' (Martel, 2019c). This approach of appealing to individualism generally reflects a reconstructed history by framing Islam as anti-individualistic and thus necessary to mold to fit within a liberal culture that is controlled by the 'cultural hegemony of the Left' (Spencer, 2019b), even if this means removing Christian children from public schools (Ames, 2019) to address the supposedly preferential treatment of Islam in public schools (Dogan, 2019) as a paradoxical and puzzling way to protect the separation of church and state. It is not merely concern for the spheres of government or education that manifest in these media spaces but also the justice system and Muslims' religious rights in prison (Greenfield, 2019a; Rodriguez, 2019), as well as national security and screening processes (Montgomery, 2019a) and healthcare (Spencer, 2019d; Weiss, 2019a).

While the overarching demand among these alt-right outlets is for Muslims who wish to be accepted in Western culture to prioritize 'individualism' above all else, effectively adjusting their religious expression, many of the narratives paradoxically take issue with the malleable definition of 'Islamophobia', which is often referred to in scare quotes (Douglass-Williams, 2019; Hale, 2019a; Horowitz, 2019; Spencer, 2019c; Spencer 2019d; Spencer 2019f; Vadum, 2019a; Watson, 2019) and is framed as paving the way for ISIS sympathizers and terrorists to freely navigate non-ISIS

public spaces (Billingsley, 2019a; Lane, 2019a). Islamophobia, so the narratives claim, inadvertently permits Muslim Americans to be openly anti-Semitic due to the public's inability to critique Muslims (Hemingway, 2019) and the fear of being labeled a xenophobe if one voices support for Israel (Pullmann, 2019b). A few of the articles suggest a link between Nazi and Islamic ideology when deconstructing Ilhan Omar's critique of Israel's response to Hamas, which the author claims 'relied on the old anti-Semitic trope, popular in both Nazi and Islamist imagery, of powerful Jews controlling the thoughts and behavior of non-Jews in order to advance their interests' (Davidson, 2019). Another article draws more explicit parallels through a reconstructed historical narrative:

Have you ever noticed how Palestinian claims are always rooted in *land-based terms*? They speak of the "occupation" of their land, being "driven out" of Palestine by the Israelis in 1948, and recovering all their land "from the River to the Sea." ... Does any of this ring a bell? (Meyer, 2019; italics original; ellipses mine).

Both narratives appropriate a common accusation from leftist networks of the link between Nazi and alt-right ideology.

An underlying objective to these critiques is to question the validity of Muslim migration (Breitbart Jerusalem, 2019a; Williams, 2019f), even through the use of Catholic doctrine (Williams, 2019c) and secular philosophy (Tomlinson, 2019f) to dispel such validity, a particularly bold tactic given Pope Francis's and other high-ranking Catholic officials' public support for Muslims, immigrants, and refugees (Williams, 2019d). Relatedly, the eighth category within the first key finding, 'Pope Francis', highlights the desire within the alternative right to incorporate Catholicism within its overarching resistance to leftist, pro-Muslim discourse and dominance, and yet its simultaneous insistence on ensuring that the leader of the Catholic Church, or 'the Grand Sheikh Francis of Al-Vatican' (Spencer, 2019g), does not undermine mainstream conservative or far-right values (Mullarkey, 2019; Spencer, 2019g; Williams, 2019h; Williams, 2019i; Williams, 2019j; Williams, 2019k; Williams,

2019l; Williams, 2019m; Williams, 2019n; Williams, 2019o). These sources scrutinize Pope Francis's empathetic rhetoric and gestures toward Muslims in comparison to Christians (Williams, 2019h; Williams, 2019i), at times ambitiously suggesting his own caveats with regard to Islam, for example by claiming that he says 'God only "permits" Islam to exist' (Williams, 2019j), but strongly criticizing many of his actions and statements—including the graphic design of a logo that the Vatican created for Pope Francis's trip to Morocco (Mullarkey, 2019). One commenter characterized the Pope's attempt to draw theological parallels between Christianity and Islam as 'bald-faced propaganda' (Williams, 2019k), while another disputed his inclusion of Islam in the history of Jerusalem: 'Jerusalem is and has always been Jewish and Christian. It is mentioned hundreds of times in the Torah and the Bible. It is NEVER mentioned in the Koran: not once. Islam does not belong in Jerusalem' (Williams, 2019l). In response to yet another article, one commenter alleged: 'This Pope is a fraud installed by obama [sic] and other globalists. The real Pope, Benedict, is still alive' (Williams, 2019n).

The final category of this key finding, 'Preservation of historical narratives or memories (e.g., art, architecture, historical texts, history of Catholic saints, history of holidays)', is a mix of examples centered on the penetration of Islam and supposed deterioration of Christianity in the cultural sphere (Billingsley, 2019b; Breitbart London, 2019d; Chalk, 2019b; Chalk, 2019c; Fitzgerald, H 2019b; Fitzgerald, H 2019c; Glazov, 2019; Hayward, 2019b; Kraychik, 2019c; Martel, 2019d; Newton, 2019; Tomlinson, 2019g; Tomlinson, 2019h; Weiss, 2019b; Williams, 2019g). This range includes the exclusion of Catholic beliefs (Newton, 2019) and the blasphemy of Islamic beliefs, prompting censorship (Breitbart London, 2019d), or the invasive promotion of Islam (Fitzgerald, H 2019b) in art exhibits; the oppressive inclusion of Muslim beliefs in the film industry, both in the content of film (Billingsley, 2019b) and in the political stances of Hollywood stars (Kraychik, 2019c); the tension between Muslim and Christian dominance in architecture globally (Hayward, 2019b; Martel, 2019d; Williams, 2019g); historical references to Catholic saints as lessons for contemporary Christians defending themselves against Islamic violence (Chalk, 2019b; Chalk, 2019c); and the decline of Valentine's Day alongside Islamic-based objections to its

appropriateness within the public sphere (Glazov, 2019; Weiss, 2019b) in comparison to the alleged rise of Ramadan-induced violence (Tomlinson, 2019g).

My second key finding suggests that, based on categories five and six (italicized in **Table 1**) totaling 32 articles, these publications utilize traditionally left-wing concerns—in particular, LGB(Q)T(IA+) rights and (Western) feminism—as a means to justify questionable critiques of Muslims and/or Islamophobia. Articles classified under category five, feminism (Bawer, 2019b; Berry, 2019; Breitbart Jerusalem, 2019b; Breitbart Jerusalem, 2019c; Brown, 2019; FrontPage Magazine, 2019b; FrontPage Magazine, 2019c; Goska, 2019; Huston, 2019; Kent, 2019c; Kent, 2019d; Kew, 2019; Nash, 2019; Spencer, 2019h; Starr, 2019b; Williams, 2019p), and category six, LGB(Q)T(IA+) rights (Blake, 2019; Breitbart Jerusalem, 2019d; Breitbart London, 2019e; Delingpole, 2019b; Emmons, 2019; Feoktistov, 2019; Greene, 2019b; Hale, 2019c; Hayward, 2019c; Kaufman, 2019b, Kaufman, 2019c; Kent, 2019e; Montgomery, 2019e; Pullmann, 2019c; Watson, 2019; Yiannopoulos, 2019), positioned liberal stances on these two issues squarely in opposition to how they operated within Muslim values and Islamic doctrine.

An overarching concern within the feminist category was the implausibility of the autonomy of Muslim women wearing hijab and the struggle of those who refuse hijab to be celebrated in liberal democracies (Bawer, 2019b; Goska, 2019; Kent, 2019d; Spencer, 2019h), which in turn connects to a broader range of articles concerned with women's autonomy and oppression under Islam, both in physical spaces (Breitbart Jerusalem, 2019b; Breitbart Jerusalem, 2019c; Brown, 2019; Kent, 2019c; Kew, 2019; Williams, 2019p) and digital spaces (Nash, 2019). Another concern centered on Muslim women's alliances with anti-conservative stances, including 'the abortion industry' (Berry, 2019) and an 'anti-Trump Women's March', to which one commenter responded, 'The MUSLIM Women's March ... they had permission from the Owners ... Muslim Men!' (Starr, 2019b; ellipses original). Similarly, articles defend the rights of the LGB(Q)T(IA+) community in order to frame Islam as a discursive strategy to combat other presumably more threatening platforms, such as the threat to Christian schooling (Breitbart London, 2019e; Emmons, 2019;

Greene, 2019b; Hale, 2019c; Pullmann, 2019c); Christian hegemony (Blake, 2019); and a cultural morality, derived from conservative principles, that views the left as hypocritical for supposedly ignoring homophobia within Islam (Breitbart Jerusalem, 2019d; Feoktistov, 2019; Kaufman, 2019b; Montgomery, 2019e; Watson, 2019; Yiannopoulos, 2019). In response to an article alleging homophobia in 'Islamized Britain', one commenter expresses concern that supporting gay people will become unwieldy and incapable of stopping 'Big Gay', to which another commenter reassures the original poster that there is nothing to fear as long as they consider the (gay) individuals, that is, individual people who happen to be gay, rather than a massive lobbying collective advocating large-scale protection of gay people, thereby justifying only defending LGB(Q)T(IA+) rights to the extent that it fits within their political agenda (Yiannopoulos, 2019). The latter response recalls an earlier theme of appealing to individualism as a means of incorporating some Muslim Americans in civil society. Occasionally, cracks surface through this façade defending LGB(Q)T(IA+) rights, such as in discussions of the repression of the LGB(Q)T(IA+) community in Brunei, which at times suggests their concern is less about persecuted gay people and more about how such laws might affect non-Muslims in these countries: 'Although the new Sharia code is believed to be popular among the Muslim ethnic Malays who make up 70 percent of the country's population, the laws will also apply to non-Muslims' (Kent, 2019e).

My third key finding drew from categories four and nine (in plain font in **Table 1**), totaling 25 articles, to suggest that *Breitbart*, *The Federalist*, and *FrontPage Magazine* demonstrate an acute self-awareness regarding their roles in countering and combatting allegedly biased, liberal mainstream journalism.

One article representative of category four, entitled 'It's Getting Difficult to Tell the Difference Between *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera*' (Harsanyi, 2019g), discusses the vandalization of mosques but then focuses on a report on the destruction of churches in France to claim that anti-Christian sentiment and crimes are less frequently covered, if at all. The consensus within the comment section is that there is unequal coverage of attacks on Christian and Islamic spaces

(Harsanyi, 2019g). More broadly, the articles in this category scrutinize the framing of Islam and Christianity in mass and digital media spaces (Bawer, 2019c; Bawer, 2019d; Bawer, 2019e; Dogan, 2019b; Friedman, 2019c; Geller, 2019; Hale, 2019d; Harsanyi, 2019g; Hayward, 2019d; Kaufman, 2019d; Kraychik, 2019d; Martel, 2019e; Martel, 2019f; Moons, 2019b; Nolan, 2019; Williams, 2019q; Williams, 2019r; Williams, 2019s). Articles lament the ways in which mainstream liberal papers, such as *The New York Times*, obscure a holistic picture about Islam (Bawer, 2019d; Harsanyi, 2019g; Hayward, 2019d; Williams, 2019r) or Christian persecution stories (Friedman, 2019c; Williams, 2019s). They also accuse liberal papers of intentionally not reporting on negative Muslim-related stories (Bawer, 2019e; Dogan, 2019b; Kraychik, 2019d), as opposed to Chinese media, which explicitly and frequently justify Chinese state-run Muslim camps (Martel, 2019e; Martel, 2019f). As a result of these accusations, they argue that liberal newspapers set the agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) to suit their liberal discourses: 'Bottom line: keep your coverage of such atrocities down to a bare minimum, and you'll have fully performed your duty as a member of the Fourth Estate. ... Such, then, is the standard approach of the British media to Muslim-on-infidel crime' (Bawer, 2019c; ellipses mine). These writers are well-equipped to understand foundational mass media theory such as agenda setting, and they also are aware of the post-truth era, addressing it directly and within the discourse of post-truth paranoia in response to a local Muslim American Florida politician who contested a *FrontPage Magazine* feature about him:

Wahid's use of the terms "racist" and "Islamophobe" is a desperate attempt to suppress the truth and this journalist's ability to get his message out to the public, by implementing the vilest form of defamation. He does this, it appears, because he lacks any concrete arguments to counter what I say or the evidence I provide (Kaufman, 2019d).

These writers not only understand how mediated communication works, but they are prone to critiquing digital media, claiming that Christian views (Williams, 2019q)

and Muslim criticism (Nolan, 2019) are censored on mainstream platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

The second category within the third key finding, 'The Democratic Party', was the least frequent theme of this project (Billingsley, 2019c; Goodman, 2019; Greenfield, 2019h; Harsanyi, 2019h; Ledeen, 2019; Vadum 2019b; Vadum 2019c). Its limited appearance suggests that the contemporary alt-right and alternative right-wing movement in the United States does not surface in media primarily through traditional institutional means, such as by attacking mainstream politics, but through more circuitous paths, such as by appropriating liberal discourses to deconstruct Islam and bolster Christianity. But the critiques here coincide with the sharper focus of these alt-right and alternative right-wing media outlets on pro-Muslim, anti-Christian 'progressivism' than on the underpinnings of the Democratic Party itself:

For many liberals, though, the problem is that the beliefs of many Catholics, and other adherents of various Christian theologies – or, for that matter, Jewish ones, as well – are increasingly grating against progressivism dogma, not constitutional ones (Harsanyi, 2019h).

One author even attempts to position 'American nativism ... coming from radical leftist-Islamist women ... [that] used to be a right-wing phenomenon' (Ledeen, 2019; ellipses mine), which this article aligns with the alternative right, instead of with the left, suggesting alt-right discourse is adept at propagating disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018) rather than misinformation.

Conclusion

These findings contribute to the three prongs of the literature review—media, religious, and social movement studies—by helping to triangulate the key concerns of each field within a useful framework that considers the ways in which alt-right and alternative right-wing media renounce any desire to occupy mainstream journalism. Moreover, religion is foregrounded, rather than utilized as an afterthought, in racist, Islamophobic discourse in the United States. Communication governing Islamophobic discourse in these alternative media spaces strategically appropriates

and mimics traditionally liberal social concerns to sever Islam from a religious culture steeped in white Protestantism.

The three key findings confirm the strategy of crafting a 'native religious identity' (Marzouki & McDonnell, 2016), in which post-truth-era critiques of Islam focus less on theological beliefs and more on the battle between differing accounts of the nation's Judeo-Christian history, Islamic viewpoints versus pan-liberal ones (or, liberal discourses appropriated by the alternative right), and the mainstream versus alternative press. Although Islamophobic cultural gatekeeping certainly mirrors anti-outsider discourse (Brubaker, 2017), the three key findings reveal a stronger strategic focus on the tension between Islam and Christianity rather than Islam and all of 'the West' (Said, 1981/1997), as well as a focus on combatting top-down media elitism (or, the mainstream, liberal press) and bottom-up social deviance (that is, the willingness to accept feminist and queer ideologies if such groups are willing to avoid lobbying for these causes) while adhering to a certain retelling of the 'socially-produced binary' (Gamson, 2014) of a Judeo-Christian—and, though coded in other language, white—history. The dynamic exchanges that 'affectively perform conflict' (Abdel-Fadil, 2019) in the comment sections of these alternative media spaces extend the strategy of countering the elitism of journalistic authority.

Future research might first continue to analyze additional material from these three outlets as well as interview readers (and in particular, commenters) on these sites. New social movements in the mid-20th century regarding power, domination, and ideology required new theoretical approaches to address certain phenomena more explicitly. For the women's movement, scholars turned their attention to feminism and male hegemony, and for the civil rights movement, racism and white hegemony. I suggest there is a comparable blind spot in media and cultural studies where religion is concerned, thereby requiring new theoretical approaches to examine Christian (and, arguably, Protestant) hegemony, which is in turn driven by the ways in which religion is understood and discussed through a Western lens (Asad, 1993) and right-wing movements that together create what I would like to call, based on Haines's original term, the 'alt-right flank effect'. To

better understand, unpack, and unravel the claims of the alternative right about Muslims and Islam, we might combine Talal Asad's contribution with the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall, paying more attention to oppositional readings about religion in both mainstream and alternative media and resisting the two-step flow of communication when analyzing religion and right-wing movements in the digitally mediated sphere.

My second research question asked: 'How have *Breitbart*, *FrontPage Magazine*, and *The Federalist* specifically framed Islam and Muslims in relation to Christianity and Christians in the post-truth era?' Discourse concerning the socially constructed Judeo-Christian versus Muslim dichotomy from these three sources has been shown to be far more dangerous, nuanced, and strategic than I initially suspected. Employing the discourses of conventionally liberal concerns, alt-right and alternative right-wing communication is not a simple case of fallacious versus truthful information, but one of complex maneuvering through the following three ways: carefully concealed, alt-right ideology mimicking mainstream conservatism; seemingly logical arguments steeped in Western-centric historical narratives about religion; and emotional appeals to a longstanding concern among establishment conservatives about the liberal bias of mainstream journalism. To address the Western movement idealizing a Judeo-Christian imagined history, we must unpack conflicting definitions in alt-right sources (that is, of 'truth', 'populism', 'alternative', as well as 'religion' itself), that often bolster religious conflict in the public sphere.

Ethics and Consent

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Competing Interests

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