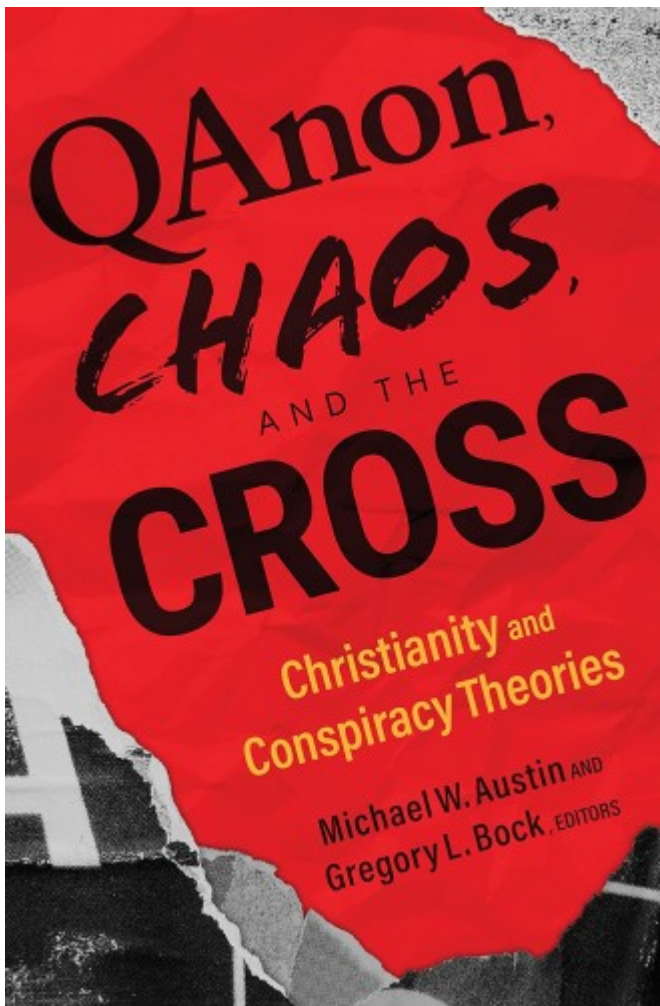


Fake news at church

Three new books investigate how misinformation shapes evangelicals—and propose better ways to reason together.

by [Stephen Healey](#) in the [November 2023](#) issue

In Review

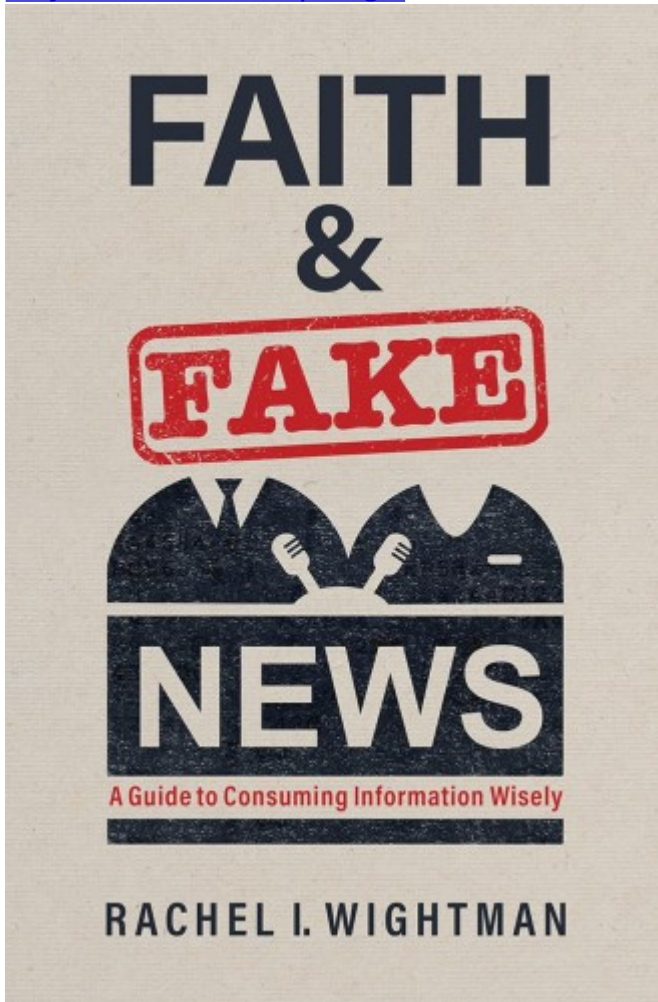


QAnon, Chaos, and the Cross

Christianity and Conspiracy Theories

Edited by Michael W. Austin and Gregory L. Bock
Eerdmans

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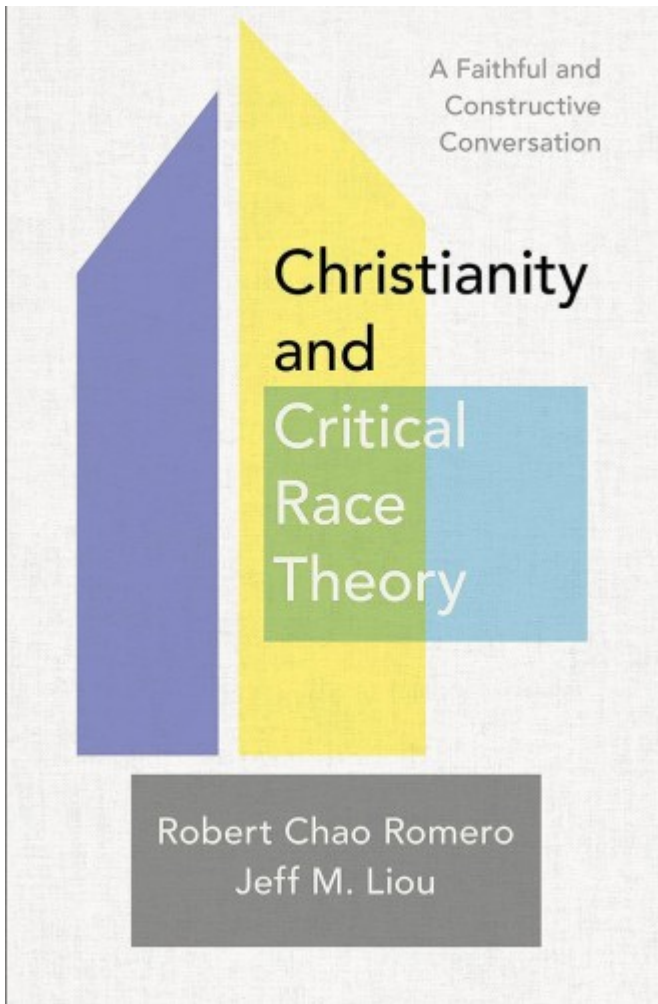


Faith and Fake News

A Guide to Consuming Information Wisely

By Rachel I. Wightman
Eerdmans

[Buy from Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org) >



Christianity and Critical Race Theory

A Faithful and Constructive Conversation

By Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou
Baker

[Buy from Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org) >

In 1960, John Courtney Murray wrote *We Hold These Truths*, offering a Catholic reflection on the American proposition. The Jesuit theologian named the truths of the proposition: All men are created equal. Nature's God bestows inalienable rights on all. Neither government nor a majority can infringe upon these rights. With our liberty we are free to pursue happiness, and the happiness of everyone is consistent with creating a more perfect union for all. We create a government of laws, not individuals.

Throughout American history, these core truths were held by most. Political parties, religious groups, and voluntary associations disagreed mightily about how to seek and secure the most abundant future, but few doubted the tenets underlying liberal democracy. The core outlook was expanding—to include women, people of color, and those who did not own land—and was promoted internationally by US foreign policy.

That core vision, still dear to many, no longer exclusively guides the national discourse. Truths of the proposition have been replaced by social media trumpeting, outright lies, and conspiracy theories. Yesterday's big lie is tomorrow's truth. Deeper still, truth itself has become a question mark. As a result, our sense of "we" is increasingly fractured. Immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ people, and political antagonists are frequently portrayed as dangerous animals, criminals, and sources of cultural decay. Those supportive of the outcast are leftists, Marxists, and pedophiles.

How we got to this point, where the core cultural guidance system has started to fail, is a matter of no small controversy. Some blame the ascent of anti-intellectual evangelicalism with its denunciation of "the world" and the concomitant decline of mainline Protestantism's theological anchoring of the liberal project. Others believe the culprit is liberalism's untenable focus on identity. In any event, deciding how we got here is less important than determining what we should do about it.

Several authors address this challenge in timely, largely jargon-free books that should be read by all pastors and Sunday school teachers as well as professors and students of theology. *QAnon, Chaos, and the Cross*, a 24-chapter volume edited by philosophy professors Michael W. Austin and Gregory L. Bock, illustrates the peril of living religiously in a context dominated by conspiracy theories. When shared reason collapses, everything willy-nilly is equally likely. Chaos ensues. Baseless claims abound. A chapter by Austin includes an example from Global Vision Bible Church pastor Greg Locke, who said from the pulpit, "There are child-trafficking tunnels under the White House. Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, Oprah Winfrey, and Tom Hanks are all pedophiles. Donald Trump won the 2020 election."

However fanciful, conspiracy theories are more common than we imagine. According to a recent study, nearly half of Protestant pastors report having heard their congregants repeating them. Austin and Bock, in collecting the various chapters, hope to provide a tool kit for Christians to respond to those who hold conspiracy

theories. They also hope to model civil engagement based on listening (what is being claimed?), praising (what are the positive intentions?), and probing (what are the implications?).

With a wealth of disciplinary outlooks and diverse understandings of conspiracy theory, this volume deserves the sustained attention of those seeking to understand QAnon and its impact. Chase Andre, in a chapter titled “The Religious Rhetoric of QAnon,” reminds readers that Q, the shadowy prophet behind the QAnon movement, claims we are in a state of spiritual warfare. In deliberate opposition to our liberal democratic origins, Q proffers Christian nationalism, an idolatrous “conflation of God and country.” Andre further argues that large swaths of evangelicals have fallen for Q’s prophecies because they resonate with the evangelical outlook: “The rhetoric of Christian nationalism is the key that unlocked the evangelical community for Q. It enunciates identity.” Kaitlyn Schiess further explores the political implications of QAnon in a chapter titled “A City Divided.” She concludes that understanding and articulating a robust political theology is essential for combating conspiracy theories in our churches, families, and communities.

In *Faith and Fake News*, Concordia University librarian Rachel I. Wightman provides a strategy for evaluating truth claims, based on workshops she has led around the country. (Wightman is also a contributor to *QAnon, Chaos, and the Cross*.) Writing about the information-rich, misinformation-addled realm of social media, she avers, “If Christians want to be salt and light in our world, we need to understand and engage mindfully and intentionally in these online spaces, inviting the Holy Spirit into this part of our lives.” She offers a user-friendly guide for analyzing claims and provides strategies for dealing with emotions that arise when we consider claims not to our liking.

Wightman also discusses how algorithms, based on known features of our commitments, determine the information presented to us on social media, leading to confirmation bias. Streams of things with which we agree are presented to us, and this hardens our resistance to considering alternative points of view. *Faith and Fake News* intends to help Christians faithfully discern truth in this era of online misinformation.

In *Christianity and Critical Race Theory*, Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou utilize critical race theory (itself a frequent target of misinformation campaigns) to show that the original American proposition was not as inclusive and spiritually rich as

alleged, nor has it been able to consistently guide us to a culturally enriched common life. Most evangelicals denounce CRT, but Romero and Liou find it helpful in revealing a concealed and obdurate racist foundation to our nation's origins. CRT, they explain, "looks at how US laws and public policy have been manipulated and constructed over the years to preserve privilege for those considered 'white' at the expense of those who are people of color." However important were the founding maxims, they held that people of color lacked properties essentially held by White people. This deficit thinking has profound implications for the treatment of people of color.

Liberal self-evident truths were limited—and in need of theological deepening—even at their inception, argue Romero and Liou. Drawing on the vision of the lamb in Revelation 7, the authors envision God creating a culturally enriched, inclusive community that honors all nations and ethnic groups.

Taken together, these books outline grounds for theological, spiritual, cultural—and thus, political—renewal. In a recent opinion piece for the *Daily Beast*, Connecticut senator Chris Murphy and Harvard Medical School philosopher Ian Marcus Corbin argue that both the left and America as a whole need a spiritual renaissance. We often feel empty while we vigorously denounce political opponents, they write. "Scratch the surface and you will find that nearly everyone, of whatever party, feels an emptiness—a soullessness—to our shared political life." Because of its implications for the common life, how we view our neighbors, and whether we remain free to seek diverse individual purposes, there is no greater pastoral and theological issue in our time than crafting a response to our deeply unwell cultural, political, and spiritual circumstance.

The path to renewal is not just spiritual deepening. Romero and Liou show that limitations in the original compact conspired—and still conspire—to serve narrow (primarily wealthy White) interests. Since their analysis shows that racism is an ordinary state, theological renewal must begin with repentance. Our core truths have been enfeebled partly due to our unwillingness to confront and weed out racism. That malign spirit, released from a hellish place by antagonists to America's first Black president, is destroying us from within.

To their credit, the American left and progressive Christians have been trying to weed out this sin for 150 years. Victories, such as progress on civil rights, were real. However, the undoing of that noble work is now leaving progressives astonished and

mystified. Too few liberals conclude that limitations and tacit racism in their outlook are partly responsible. Like their conservative counterparts, liberals frequently resort to demonizing opponents and name-calling.

For the authors of all of these books, the answer to this dilemma must come from grace. Long-lasting change requires a change of heart. The most profound renewal will come as we respond to God's call to embrace the beloved community envisioned by Romero and Liou.

The phrase "we the people" is not limited to people of faith, and theologically trained pastors should define worthy non-Christian and secular approximations of graceful response. As the authors of *QAnon, Chaos, and the Cross* show, unless sophisticated pastoral teaching shapes public life, fanciful lunacy will dominate our discourse. The rationalist fantasy of a sane, completely secular social space has been invalidated. As Wightman shows, truth itself needs constant discernment. Absent that, conspiracy thinking is likely to burgeon. As Romero and Liou show in their selective use of critical race theory, applying nontheological insights can deepen theological thinking. Moreover, at least in principle, theological insight will ensure that no limited understanding can masquerade as a complete explanation. If we begin in repentance, we will not conclude with arrogance nor allow others to spread poisonous views.

Upon taking the oath of office, President Gerald Ford asserted that "truth is the glue that holds government together, not only our government but civilization itself." The volumes reviewed here, though primarily directed to church audiences, raise the same point. Truths may be difficult to articulate and our formulations may be partial, but seeking truth is our common obligation. The country needs renewal, bridging the best ideas of secular and religious truth seekers. This includes evangelical, Catholic, and liberal theological thinking, and it includes tools such as CRT. If we are fortunate, Black and Brown voices, numerous in the evangelical and Catholic worlds, and those of LGBTQ people, more numerous among liberals, will help define truths sufficient to guide this nation into a culturally enriched and abundant future.