



Populism & the Post Truth society: How should the Churches respond?

*Canon Paul Brett, formerly Social Responsibility Officer
in Church of England diocese of Chelmsford*

I am glad to have been asked to introduce our session today on Populism and the Post-truth society. Actually I would want to add two other items to this list and they are Alternative Facts and Fake News. These concepts have burst upon us in the last months and are, to my mind, very worrying developments.

But what do they mean, and what should be done about them? And how, in particular, should the churches' respond to them? I have been following the debate about this for several months, and have found it both amusing and frightening.

First, some definitions and examples.

Populism

Populism is, to my surprise, no new concept. It is defined in my 1995 Collins College Dictionary as 'political strategy based on a calculated appeal to the interests or prejudices of ordinary people'. And that is more than 20 years ago. And even more surprising is the definition of populist in my 1951 Concise Oxford Dictionary: 'Adherent of US political party aiming at public control of railways, graduated income-tax, etc., formed 1892' and also: 'Adherent of Russian political party advocating collectivism'.

Well then! Not quite as bad as this, however, in our own country, has been the idea, much repeated, that 'the people had spoken' in the EU referendum last June, and that Parliament should respect the will of the people, and their narrowly-reached decision to leave the EU. This is populism today.

In reality this was not a rational decision. As we know, David Cameron called the referendum to try to stave off right-wing revolt within his own party. Extraordinary possibilities were put forward by both sides to try to influence the voters, entirely speculative possibilities at the time – though some of them may eventually happen. Cameron failed to defeat the Leave campaign in the face of a wave of popular but false information, fear, emotion and prejudice. The country had spoken, yes, but not on the real subject in hand.

This phenomenon could also be seen in the US presidential election campaign. Donald Trump's appeal proved popular in many places. Much of what he said played into fears about the loss of jobs and economic decline, coupled with xenophobia, racism, misogyny and islamophobia. It also found an echo in resistance to state intervention through, for example, a health care programme that seemed to undermine the individualism of the American dream.

Populism was beaten off in the Dutch election declared on 16th March, but continues to gain popularity elsewhere, not least in France.

The word populism, obviously, has its roots in the Latin *populus*, people, nation, the whole body of citizens. At the heart of it is the connection between political policies and the prejudices of the mass of people.

Post-truth

On the face of it, the 'post-truth' society is an extraordinary idea. Surely things are either true or false? But in reality this is hard to justify, as things look different from different perspectives. Some things are so complicated that the word 'truth' seems hardly to apply at all.

Lucy Worsley's TV series in February 2017, for instance, entitled *British History's Biggest Fibs*, re-interpreted the widely-accepted history of battles in South Africa, of the Norman conquest of Britain, of the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of Protestant William and Mary in 1688, of the activities of the self-styled Honourable East India Company in the 18th century, and of the British Raj in Victorian times.

The idea of post-truth is even about to get into the Oxford English Dictionary. It chose 'post-truth' as its 2016 word of the year, defining it as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.

The truth question is not new. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate asked this very question of Jesus (John 18:38), though no answer is given.

Two books in the Jewish Scriptures tell of the same event, and differ noticeably. Judges 1 describes the settlement by the 12 tribes as a gradual process, a matter of 'peaceful co-habitation' (vv.27-36). But Joshua 11 says the land of Canaan was conquered by an 'impressive military campaign achieving forceful penetration' (vv.15-23). There is apparently no archaeological support for a forceful conquest, in spite of the story about the walls of Jericho coming 'a-tumbling down' (Joshua 6.20) – remember that African-American spiritual? Some scholars see attempts like these to rewrite history as providing a mythological explanation of Israel's origin in, and right to, the land. Stories like these are, technically, aetiological myths – from the Greek *aition*, cause – myths about causes or origins.

In the Christian Scriptures, to quote another example, all four Gospels tell the story of the feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish (Mark 6.30-44; Matthew 14.13-21; Luke 9.10-17 and John 6.5-15). It is the only miracle mentioned by all of them. Twelve baskets of left-overs were collected, they record. Mark and Matthew also describe the feeding of 4,000 (Mark 8.1-9), besides women and children (Matthew 15.32-38), with seven loaves and a few fish.

But what is the truth here? Could so many have been fed with so little? No. Did this happen twice? Unlikely. The accounts are very similar in wording and so are probably dependent on prior sources, or were copied from each other. The idea of 12 baskets echoes the 12 tribes of Israel. The 5,000 were fed in Jewish Galilee, whereas the feeding of the 4,000 probably took place in Gentile territory. There are Eucharistic overtones too. The Christian dispensation, this story is claiming, fulfils the old Jewish one, and applies to all nations. Clearly there has been some tweaking here. Additional information has been added later on to what may have been a

much smaller original factual event. Is this another aetiological myth? Is post-truth at work here?

There's nothing strange about this way of understanding the Bible. The historical-critical method, with all its varieties, stretches back to the rise of rationalism in the 17th century. It was characterised in its early days by such theologians as Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) at the end of the 19th century, with his 'documentary hypothesis' about the origins of the first five books of the bible. Another significant step was taken by Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) in the first half of the 20th century, as he set out to 'demythologise' the New Testament. Many others have gone on along this route ever since. Today theologians have moved on to be more interested in the context of the texts they examine, and the varied contexts of those who read them – political, racial, feminist, environmental, etc.

This general critical approach, however, looks at these writings in the same way as any ancient text, and has been accepted by serious scholars ever since. But the stories are still presented as factually true by the church in its liturgies, and many Christians still take them literally. The four evangelists are telling a story to support the fledgling Christian community. What actually happened was a secondary consideration.

Some things may have happened, or were imagined to have happened, and are then added to, enhanced, re-interpreted, in order to make a point. It's a bit like Shakespeare's historical plays, such as *Richard III* (c.1592) presenting him as very evil, or Sir Walter Scott's historical novels, such as *Rob Roy* (1817) at the time of the Jacobite rising in 1715, or Hilary Mantel's Tudor history in her Booker-prize winning novels *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012). Much of this is not what actually happened, but it's not un-true. It reveals a world of emotion and relationships. It's a phenomenon known as historical fiction, and we love it.

Alternative Facts

The idea of alternative facts was popularised by the White House press secretary Sean Spicer. On 20th January 2017 he said that the crowd that welcomed President Trump was 'the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period', a claim that was immediately debunked by aerial photos of the much bigger crowd for Obama. He was then defended by Trump's senior adviser Kellyanne Conway, who spoke about 'alternative facts'.

This presentation of so-called facts was also the case with the EU referendum. If we came out of the EU - so a Leave campaign poster on a 'battle bus' trumpeted – we could save £350 million a week and put it into the NHS. In reality, the true figure, given the rebate and money reinvested in the UK by the EU and other factors, was £136 million according to the UK Statistics Authority, or £110 million according to the Treasury Select Committee. That still sounds like a lot of money, but an internet fact-checking site has said that it's really £120 million a week, and 'Per person, that's 26p a day – or half the price of a Mars bar'. It's a very small proportion indeed of our whole national income. It was an appeal to emotion rather than reason, to so-called alternative facts rather than true ones.

What are we to make of this? The Brexiteers – another word about to enter the dictionary – in assenting to the result of the popular vote, are building a house on sand, to quote a biblical image from Matthew 7. And, following that image (in v. 27), great will be the fall of their house.

Perhaps Mrs May and her lot will be gone in a couple of years' time if Brexit is shown to be an economic and social disaster. It will take a brave politician to face up to this and begin to stop the process before it does any real damage. Tony Blair, along with Peter Mandelson, John Major, and the Lib Dems, and others, are right to encourage people to rethink the vote in the light of more detailed, and more truthful, information. I said some of what I would say might be controversial!

Fake News

The phenomenon of Fake News is not new either. Remember the story that Prince Philip wanted Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed murdered, a story spread by Mohammed Fayed in October 2007? Fayed may have said this, but it was a fake.

The idea of fake news has been much quoted recently by Donald Trump, and its stories spread by Facebook, Google and Twitter without any control over the veracity of the reports. Look it up on Google and you'll find a long list of examples. One such site has listed some of what they call the 'biggest fake election stories', as follows: 'That Pope Francis endorsed Trump ... That Trump once called Republicans "the dumbest group of voters in the country",' and even more astonishing 'That Clinton and her inner circle ran a child-sex ring based in a Washington pizza restaurant.'

Trump is not making America great again but progressively, if it weren't so sad, he is making himself the laughing-stock of the world, and marvellous material for comedy shows. His allusion to a 'terror attack' in Sweden on 18th February, and on 4th March about Obama tapping his phones during the election campaign shows him to be responding to fake news outlets of his own. He needs help, psychiatric help.

There was a hilarious Channel 4 programme called *The Fake News Show* on 6th February. Channel 4 was having a fake news week, reporting on various aspects of the phenomenon. On 9th February, for instance, it highlighted Google's Autocomplete function bringing up prominent websites claiming that the holocaust was a lie, that homosexuality was a sin, and offering various sexist views on feminism. Google, apparently, responds to usage volume and does not edit material. If it did, it would become a publisher and subject to libel laws, etc. Since then some guilt has been shown by Google and others about this.

And on 21st March Radio 4's *The Long View* programme told the story of fake news from Norwich in the 12th century about a boy allegedly murdered by the Jews, a story promoted by a monk to boost the visitor numbers and the income of the cathedral, as miracles happened at his shrine.

And on it goes. Is it true that there is evidence of Russia attempting to hack into US computers to influence the American election? Did Obama ask our own GCHQ to do the same, something claimed on Fox News and most unusually said by GCHQ on 17th March to be 'nonsense' and 'utterly ridiculous'? The American FBI is taking all this seriously and investigating it. And is the Kremlin helping to finance Marine le Pen's French right-wing Front National, as claimed in a BBC1 Panorama programme on 3rd April? Are these news items fake? What is the truth here?

Since then, further examples, and more discussion of the phenomenon, will no doubt be making the news. Even fake news is news.

How can anyone trust the media if they spread stories like this? And how can we trust Facebook, Google, etc., if they allow such stuff to appear on their sites? Anyone can counter such claims, if they wish to, of course, by declaring them not true at all, even if they are true, though once said, they can't be unsaid.

Rule by the mob

What are we to make of all this? If this is populism, or any of its off-shoots, it is a disaster. It is little more than rule based on lies and deceit, and manipulation. It is rule by the mob.

That's a strong assertion. But what else is it, if policy is decided by mass opinion based not on evidence but on false information, emotion, prejudice and propaganda? How can we challenge the delusions of post-truth and alternative facts? If such deceit is not exposed, it can open the door to manipulation and corruption, even to authoritarianism. As countries defend themselves against the possible consequences of such things, they are likely to increase their spending on armaments. The world becomes frighteningly more unstable.

Of course populism's not necessarily all bad. Elites, establishments, the Westminster 'bubble', the rich and powerful, autocratic monarchies in the past in France or Russia, Hitler in Germany, and dictators in Africa and Asia, can dominate political and communal life, and need to be challenged – by the people. Though experience in France at the end of the 18th century, in Russia in 1917, in India in 1946- 47, and more recently in the Middle East, does not inspire confidence in the process of transition.

How should the Churches respond?

Archbishop Welby made a useful statement about post-truth during the annual Holocaust Memorial Day service in Westminster Abbey on 26th January. With what happened to the Jewish community very much in mind, he said:

'Life goes on amid a culture of alternative facts, of post-truth, of collusion with deeds that sing the tunes of evil, a culture which needs to be challenged at every level and in every conversation and debate in this country, if it is indeed to be a place of safety and healing for those fleeing tyranny and cruelty, if indeed life is to go on, flourishing and fully'.

What we want, I would summarise this message, is a society, a world, in which everyone can flourish.

But what might this actually imply? And surely the Christian church does not have a very good record of promoting this aim? To what extent is our message undermined by our own commitment to alternative facts that are not born out by reason and logic, or are little more than superstition? Of course, human beings are an amalgam of reason and emotion, but how far do we, too, as it has been put, 'resonate more with appeals to emotions rather than facts'? It is a hard question.

As I've already hinted, the churches are not blameless in this matter. I could recount lots of false so-called facts that have appeared throughout the development of Christian doctrine, but here are a few:

1. **The mother of Jesus was a virgin**, so Matthew 1.23, not a young woman as the word means in Isaiah 7.14 and which Matthew is quoting.
2. **Mary was herself immaculately conceived and assumed into heaven**, so later theology claimed, somehow to prove that Jesus was human but without sin.
3. **Sex is sinful** - St Augustine (354-430 CE) thought this, because sexual desire led to human beings losing control of themselves.
4. **The validity of the sacraments** is dependent on the validity of the ordination of the priest, and this is secured by the historic episcopate. It is 'conveyed mechanically through an unbroken chain of the laying-on of hands'. Of course you don't ordain those who you think have got it all wrong, but it is claimed that touch proves validity.

These so-called facts are all irrational. They are false facts.

The same might be said for some of the other doctrines of the Christian faith. What about some interpretations of the effectiveness of the crucifixion for the remission of sins, or the ascension, or the resurrection of the body, or the second coming of Christ?

Even more challenging, is the designation of Jesus as 'son of God'. Egyptian Pharaohs were referred to as sons of God. In Greek mythology Heracles, son of Zeus, was considered a son of God. In the time of Jesus, the Roman emperor Tiberius (14-37 AD) was the adopted son of Augustus, his predecessor, who was regarded as divine. Other emperors were called divine, even gods – various words are used: *divus* divine, *deus* god – and during their lifetimes, not just after they had died. To attribute this title to Jesus has to be understood in this context. And yet we constantly use it to affirm the actual divinity of Jesus in our liturgies – I speak as an Anglican – and in sermons. The Nicene Creed, emerging from the councils of Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381CE, describes him as:

'The only son of God... true God from true God... of one being with the Father...'

What do we really mean today by saying this? When the title was first used, was it any more than what was said about Roman emperors, also sons of God? Or are we saying this time it's real, the only one; the others were false? Is its use in the much later Creed an alternative fact?

Many, perhaps most, Christian doctrines are important not because they actually happened, or will happen, or are literally true, but because of their symbolic meaning, their significance. They offer us a mythology by which we can order our lives. They give us a foundation for living, not 'the' foundation but 'a' foundation for our relationships with one another and in society as a whole. In this sense it doesn't matter if these doctrines are factually true or not. They are symbolically true. They are metaphors, pointing to underlying meanings. They are our 'back story', to use a modern term. They are events and theories that have helped to shape what we have become, what we are now.

Social Justice

But back to populism, post-truth, alternative facts and fake news. How could the churches respond to them today?

The traditional Anglican approach to this is to keep a balance between scripture, reason and tradition. This idea was developed by Richard Hooker in the 16th century (1554-1600). Today it is mostly enhanced to read: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. How does this work? Well, compare these things with each another. What ideas are there in the bible? How have they been interpreted throughout Christian history? Do they seem acceptable to reason? Do they ring true to experience? I would claim that this is a good basis on which to approach our question.

It is here that scientists offer us an important clue in what they call the 'evidence-based approach'. Of course, most of the history of the world was recorded before this scientific method took hold, and we should not perhaps condemn our past for talking a more populist approach. Today we need to look at the events and ideas of our faith through the prism of reason and logic. If they seem irrational, if there is no logical justification for them, then they are 'non-sense', but not nonsense because they have profound symbolic significance. We should think of the old doctrines as the way a pre-scientific society tried to describe things, in the best way they could at the time.

We may not be on very strong ground in trying to stand up for truth, given what has taken place in our religious tradition, but there is one theme that is strongly there in the tradition that does ring true. It is that of social justice, of respect for everyone as equal in the love of God.

It's there in embryo in our scriptures. Look at the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 (v.16): 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour'.

Oppressive and unjust relationships are condemned in Isaiah 61 (vv.1-2 & 8a), where the prophet declares:

'The Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.'

It's there in powerful statements about the denial of justice in the Hebrew prophets Isaiah (3.14-15; 10.1-2; 58.6-7), Jeremiah (5.26-28; 7.5-9; 22.3 & 13), Amos (2.6-7; 8.4-6), and Micah (2.1-2; 3.9-11; 6.11-12), and in many of the Psalms (e.g. 82.3-4; 146.6-9). There's a marvellous phrase in Micah 6 (v.12): 'Your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths'. Nothing much has changed.

Then at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus applies Isaiah's theme to himself in Luke 4 (vv.18-19), leaving out the broken-hearted, equating the poor with the oppressed, and adding the blind: 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

The philosophical basis for this is the command to love God and love ones neighbour as oneself. The primacy of love is there in Deuteronomy 6 (v.5) and Leviticus 19 (v.18), and is repeated in Mark 12 (vv.30-31), Matthew 22 (vv.37-39) and Luke 10 (v.27). Loving the neighbour also comes in John 13 (v.34) and Galatians 5 (v.14). Fake news, we may understand, is a denial of love and respect both for God and for the neighbour. It is profoundly unjust.

Look at how this is applied in Galatians 3 (v.28):

‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’

Surely not just in the Christian community, but in a renewed society as a whole?

Colossians 3 (v.11) repeats the theme, adding a racial element, but leaving out male and female:

‘There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.’

And the fruit of the Spirit, the Christian spirit, is set out in Galatians 5 (v.22):

‘Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.’

This concern for social justice, for just and equal, honest, caring, compassionate, and truthful relationships between people, whoever they are and whatever their circumstances, is a strong theme in the scriptures which we inherit. Without relationships based on these values, our tradition says, there can be no good society, no human flourishing.

What might be done?

So given this basis, what might actually be done? How can populism and the post-truth society be controlled and corrected? Firstly, to promote truth, we need:

- **greater emphasis on transparency in public life**, so everything can be brought to light and properly examined.
- **a free, and most importantly, responsible press**, so what has been said or done is properly validated beforehand, and can be investigated, exposed and challenged. Trump’s attacks on the media, calling them several times ‘enemies of the people’, and his banning of certain press representatives from a briefing on 24th February was a dangerous move. That the BBC was one of those refused access was an insult to Britain. That *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail* were also refused admission did perhaps, however, show some sort of balance!
- **an independent legal system** through which disputes about these things can be properly tested. Trump’s attack on ‘so-called judges’ infringed this vital aspect of democracy.
- **a strong opposition to centres of power and of government**, so that one interpretation, however biased, does not prevail unchallenged. Opposition political parties and free trade unions are a vital element of this.

- **more emphasis on dealing with social media**, on fact-checking before items are posted on its sites. On 16th February Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, declared his concern about fake news, or false news as they're now calling it (7th April), and said they would do something about it with fact-checkers, etc. *The Times* set this out in some detail in its 18th February edition. Action after the event may be too late, of course. Once seen it can't be unseen. We don't want censorship, but we don't want untruths and malicious gossip either. Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the world-wide-web in 1989, has 'become increasingly worried' about websites showing us

'content they think we'll click on – meaning that misinformation, or “fake news”, which is surprising, shocking, or designed to appeal to our biases, can spread like wildfire',

according to his article in *The Observer* on Sunday 12th March 2017. They do this

'based on algorithms that learn from the personal data they are constantly harvesting'.

An algorithm – I had to look it up – is a calculating mechanism used in maths and computer science, first invented, apparently, by Euclid, around 300 BCE, and used since by such as Alan Turing, the famous World War II Enigma code breaker.

- **the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport committee inquiry** into fake news, announced at the end of January 2017, to make some tough proposals.
- **to teach people**, especially young people, to discriminate between what can be verified and what has just been made up. This is an important job for schools.
- **to develop a culture of truth**, of reason and logic, to counter mis-information, and appeals simply to emotion, prejudice and superstition. In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph* on 11th February the CEO of Apple was reported as saying that fake news was 'killing people's minds' and calling for 'governments to lead information campaigns to crack down on fake news'. We need, as Libby Purves said in an article in *The Times* on 13th February, to 'foster a bracing abhorrence of untruth'.

Secondly, to counter populism, we need

- **a stronger democratic ordering** of our corporate life.
- **proportional representation (PR)**, not the present first-past-the-post method of electing Parliament. In one form or another PR is used in 94 countries, and it makes for a wider representation of views than might otherwise be the case. Even the General Synod runs this way, with its single transferable vote system (STV).
- **to stop having referenda**, or if we do have them, they need to be clearly presented as advisory, and not mandatory, rather like focus groups. There should also be a two-thirds majority for any major proposal, as there is in Article 8 of the constitution of the General Synod for permanent changes to church liturgies or the Ordinal, or relationships with other Christian bodies. Politically-speaking we have a very long-established system of parliamentary democracy in this country, even if we may want to change some of its procedures. MPs make the political decisions for us, informed by a substantial civil service. If we don't like what they do, we can tell them so, and we can vote them out at a general election. A binding referendum by-passes this system, and a two-thirds majority might prevent serious errors taking place.

- **a much wider application of the ‘Seven Principles of Public Life’** first put forward in 1995 by the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life chaired by Lord Nolan, and known as the Nolan Principles. They are: Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership. The definitions of these principles have been refined over the years, most recently in 2015. These ethical standards should apply to the press, social media, and all public discourse, and not only to holders of public office as such.
- **to give strong support to the UK Human Rights Act of 1998**, as well as the underlying European Convention on Human Rights signed by members of the European Council in 1950, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, and the courts that support them. We want no watering down of these bulwarks against discrimination in its various forms, and we want them as effective means of opposing it.

Thirdly, in our churches, we need:

- **churches which stand up for these things.** We care about truth for it is the basis of just and loving relationships between people and with the natural world around us. These are our values. They are what our scriptures and our tradition, the use of our reason, and our experience, tell us are important for human flourishing.
- **church leaders who speak about these things**, clergy who preach about them, services in which they find a prominent place and inform our social action.
- **an outward-looking church that stands for truth and social justice**, and is not afraid of challenging lies and deceit, prejudice and untruths.
- **a church primarily known for these things**, and not, as now it seems, for an escapist, inward-looking emotionalism and the repetition of words and texts and views from a by-gone age. We have a vision of a renewed society in which human dignity and equality is respected, in which false distinctions based on nationality, religion, class, gender, sexuality, income, disability, and race play no part. Human flourishing depends on it. It is what we stand for, and we are to oppose all that denies this vision.

It is there in our religious tradition, and it appeals to our reason. Now it needs to be made true in our experience.

But maybe everything I’ve said amounts to no more than selective, liberal-minded, mildly left-wing, alternative facts from a grumpy septuagenarian populist?

Well, what do you think?

Paul Brett

8th April 2017