



Workshop contribution

Case Study: The Catholic Right and Online Hate Speech in the United States

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Good morning, and thank you to Church and Peace and the Fellowship of Reconciliation for inviting me to be with you today. As was mentioned, I'm Bob Shine, associate director of New Ways Ministry.

It is unfortunate we cannot be together in person. I've been to both Ireland and the U.K. a couple times, both of which have been lovely visits, and I always welcome a trip across the Atlantic. But even if virtual this morning, I am most grateful to be together with fellow disciples committed to nonviolence, including members of those peace churches from whom my own Catholic community has much to learn.

In today's talk I am going to offer some contextualized examples of Catholic hate speech in the U.S., briefly examine the wider social implications of such hate speech, and offer some suggestions on how to counter online hate speech. Some of the content may be upsetting I realize, but I include it to be clear about the harms being done.

To proceed, let me narrow my scope to the Catholic right in the U.S., with which I am most familiar. Extremist views have been fomenting for several years now. Much of this discourse on the Catholic right is tied to objections over Pope Francis and his liberalizing tendencies. Abortion rights are a primary target of these right wing Catholics, but I will set that question aside here to focus on my own experience with their other fixation, namely opposing equality for LGBTQI people.

While there are more prominent groups--for instance, Church Militant and LifeSiteNews which portend to be media outlets--and movement leaders--like Fr. Frank Pavone who actively campaigned for Donald Trump--that exemplify this trend, there are many smaller groups and leaders, too. At varying levels, these groups and their members spread disinformation, amplify extremist views, and couch it all in religious belief. Allow me to share a few examples.

In February of this year, one of these right wing Catholic groups known as Church Militant "outed" a gay employee for the Archdiocese of Detroit, Michigan. Church Militant's "report" was based on a person who had visited the employee's home, masquerading as a queer inquiring homebuyer and recorded the encounter without the employee's knowledge. During their conversation, the employee shared that the neighborhood is very LGBTQ-welcoming, including to him and his partner. This is all reported as "news" by Church Militant, which then encouraged its followers to aggressively petition the archdiocese to fire the employee. There is real harm being done with such targeted doxxing, or the exposure of individual's private details online in order to do harm.

At times, this internet activism spills over into real life hate crimes. A few years back, a gay employee at a Catholic parish resigned over fears about his family's safety. This resignation followed him being verbally assaulted at church and vandalism on parish property that included spray-painted anti-gay slurs, and having his home address made public.

Right wing Catholics also contribute to the spread of disinformation and extremist speech. While the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is not comparable to an extremist group, its statements about Donald Trump are notably less intense and antagonistic than the bishops' relationship with former President Barack Obama and now President Joe Biden.

Individual bishops and priests have even gone beyond the bishops' conference in their intensity and antagonism. Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas has used wild rhetoric on his Twitter account in all but explicit support for Trump and in nasty condemnations of LGBTQ people and other marginalized groups. In a homily video that went viral, a Michigan priest compared the Black Lives Matter movement to terrorists. At the Republican National Convention which celebrated Trump, a nun from a traditionalist order gave a speech in which she highlighted her rosary beads as a "weapon." Bishops were largely silent about these and other incidents.

The common thread in all of these examples is the role that the internet has played in allowing these right wing Catholic groups in the U.S. to have an outsized, and indeed global influence. The viral spread of disinformation and hate speech, and the pressure campaigns which flow from them come from not only Catholics, but Evangelicals, too. Many of these believers have embraced a Christian nationalism and even Christofascism, and they are very well funded.

The January 6th terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol was an example of how internet hate can culminate in loss of life and damage to people and property, not to mention democracy. The attack followed months of Donald Trump and his affiliates spreading the so-called "Big Lie" that the November 2020 presidential election had been fraudulent.

More broadly, domestic terrorism has been an underreported reality for decades in the U.S. For example, the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City killed 168 people and injured nearly 700 others. Since then, especially during the Trump presidency, domestic violence has been flourishing: attacks on racial justice protests, a synagogue, a Baptist church, a Walmart in an immigrant-heavy area, and more.

But perhaps this growing threat and the January 6th attack specifically would not have happened without extremist groups proliferating online as they have done during the Trump presidency, and especially in this past year. Let me offer but one set of statistics. In April 2020, about a month into lockdown, it was reported that some 125 groups on Facebook with nearly 73,000 members were dedicated to another coming civil war in the U.S. Approximately half, or some 36,000 members of those groups joined in the first 30 days of lockdown.

The fruits of all of this religious cover for hate, use of online tools, and conspiratorial thinking were laid bare on January 6th. One participant wore his Knights of Columbus jacket while committing a terrorist act (a jacket which helped identify and indict him for crimes). Others sported flags that said "Jesus is my savior. Donald Trump is my president." The flag for the University of Notre Dame, the U.S. leading Catholic university, appeared, too. In very real (and violent) ways, Catholics participated in the terrorism that occurred, even if they did not personally storm the Capitol. As a church, we are complicit in what happened, not only for our sins of commission, but for our sins of omission, of what we have failed to do to check extremism and hate.

I conclude now by offering two suggestions for how we can counter hate and extremism under the guise of religious belief, drawn from my work with New Ways Ministry and Pax Christi USA. These suggestions could roughly be framed as prophetic challenge and personal encounter. Lisa has sort of prepared these in similar terms, and Erin has already addressed the need for counter-speech, so I'll be brief.

I would frame counter-speech need for prophetic challenge. To be prophetic is not to predict futures, but to properly interpret the signs of our times and then act accordingly. When we see instances of

disinformation and hate speech, whether online or in person, we need to call it out and condemn it in ways that are safe for us. We should not equivocate with words or actions that promote dehumanization and violence. Experts suggest its impact is huge for curtailing what is socially acceptable discourse. The caveat here is that we should never amplify. If challenge would mean giving them a wider audience or a boost on social media from engagement, we must use prudence to decide what is most effective to nullify their message. In other words, don't give oxygen to a fire lest it become an inferno.

The second, and possibly harder task, is personal encounter. When it comes to LGBTQ equality, in just four or five decades, we have seen some nations go from criminalizing homosexuality to affording queer couples equal marriage rights (although certainly there is much work to be done). A key reason for this movement is the relationships which people already had or formed with LGBTQ folks. Having a family member or friend come out put a human face on a lesbian and gay person in times when homosexuality in the abstract was deeply stigmatized.

Likewise, we need to be forming relationships with those on the fringes of extremist movements who might otherwise be tempted to violence if left unchecked. We need to get people off the dangerous corners of the internet and back into real life. In the U.S. there are multiple reports about families being split apart by the QAnon conspiracy theory, often when parents' whole lives are consumed by it and their children become cut off. QAnon is a cult, and many extremist circles function similarly. The internet and right wing media become their reality as they disassociate from actual life. The only way we can help people out is if we treat them as subjects, as human beings with full capacities and potential, and invite them to walk out of their distortions slowly.

I have painted in broad strokes these few minutes, I realize. I hope the Q&A session can help us go deeper in areas of interest, and I always welcome your perspectives from Ireland and Britain on how religion and online extremism have interfaced.