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**SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED:
THE ALT-RIGHT ON BUILDING CHRISTENDOM WITHOUT CHRIST**

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Abstract: The rise of the Alt-Right has changed the face of the American and international far-right. Although an online movement, it has shown a growing influence on political discourse. One puzzling and understudied aspect of this movement is its relationship to religion. Staunchly anti-Muslim and heavily reliant on Christian identity and iconography, it is nevertheless made-up of a significant number of avowed atheists. A desire to protect Christendom from outside influences is combined with a focus on rationalism and anti-Christianity drawn from the writings of the new atheists. This paper will combine preliminary content analysis of online comments with an examination of prominent alt-right YouTube videos in order to understand the role of these competing ideological strands within the movement. YouTube has become a particularly fertile group for the Alt-Right, with many prominent commentators achieving popularity on the site. Crucially, these mediums allow for the candid observation of deliberation on religious and ideological issues between members of the Alt-Right. This methodology will allow for an understanding of how this group perceives and constructs its own relationship to religion, rather than simply how it presents itself. This paper will therefore seek to make a contribution which is both theoretical and methodological.

Key words: Far-Right, Alt-Right, Paganism, Christianity, New Atheism, Social Media, YouTube, Social Movements, Discourse.

1. Introduction

The rise of the white nationalist Alt-Right has changed the face of the American and international far-right. Initially an online movement, it has shown a growing influence on political discourse and has been the driving force behind mass protests. One puzzling and thus far understudied aspect of this movement is its contradictory relationship to religion. Staunchly anti-Muslim and heavily reliant on Christian identity and iconography, it is nevertheless made-up of and led by a significant number of avowed atheists. A desire to protect Christendom from outside influences is combined with a focus on rationalism and anti-Christianity drawn from the writings of the new atheists, neo-pagans and Nietzsche. This differs from the traditional American right, which tends to be extremely religious. This tendency to use religious identity for secular purposes mirrors developments elsewhere, for example the Hungarian government's attempt to paint itself as a defender of Christianity. This paper will examine this ideological tension around religion within the Alt-Right. Specifically, it will seek to understand the nature of this internal debate by examining how issues of religion and spirituality are debated in the online spaces frequented by this movement. Inductive qualitative thematic analysis will be used to identify the key themes and issues under discussion.

Firstly, the contradictory relationship between the Alt-Right and religion will be briefly discussed. The results of the thematic analysis will then be presented, with a focus on how the debate is constructed and viewed by those involved in the movement. Finally, I will describe the Alt-Right's conscious attempt to build a Christianist (Brubaker 2016), rather than Christian, identity in order to serve their broader, racially constituted goals.

2. Religion and the Alt-Right

The Alt-Right is not a religious movement but rather an ethno-cultural one. It is also not an organization with a fixed membership but rather a collection of individuals and group mobilizing around particular online spaces and temporary political events. For the purposes of this paper the term Alt-Right will be used broadly, to talk about figures on the newly emerging far-right who subscribe to similar views around race, culture and politics. It is worth noting that there is significant debate within the movement, and that some of the figures mentioned may be considered 'Alt-Lite', or peripheral to the movement. The twin pillars of the movement are white nationalism and antifeminism, with issues such

as gay rights and abortion being more contested (Hawley 2017, 15-17). This commitment to white nationalism, and in particular the goal of creating an ethno-state, marks the Alt-Right out from more mainstream U.S. conservatism. However, the methods and appearance of the group are modern, having emerged from online discussion groups and with a focus on attracting young, middle-class men (Lyons 2017). This differentiates the Alt-Right from preexisting white nationalists such as the Ku Klux Klan or neo-Nazis, despite deep ideological similarities. The lack of Christian identity also marks the Alt-Right out from many other groups on the right, particularly in America where both the extreme and mainstream right have been heavily influenced by religious ideas. However, while there is no fixed Alt-Right approach to religion, there appears to be a recognition that the movement requires spiritual symbols to mobilize around. At various times the Alt-Right has appropriated Christian, Germanic pagan or Greco-Roman symbolism, while jokingly creating their own symbolic religion known as 'Kek'. This, often esoteric, spirituality is not an entirely new phenomenon in the far-right in general, harking back to the fascist mysticism of Julius Evola and the neo-paganism of Else Christensen (Ross 2017, 76-88). What is new, however, is that we can see discourse surrounding religion and spirituality being played out in online spaces. Furthermore, this need for religious symbolism runs somewhat against the intellectual heritage which the Alt-Right shares with new atheism, and in particular the use of scientific rationalism as a justifying worldview.

This is a fundamental tension within the Alt-Right's approach to Christianity, which was explored recently in a debate published by the Institute on Religion and Public Life (Grubaugh 2018; Rose 2018). Many leaders of the Alt-Right are avowedly irreligious, with the prominent right-wing activist Richard Spencer describing the average Alt-Right member as an atheist (Hawley 2017, 78). Alt-Right thinkers regularly cite pagan and Nietzschean ideas, while implicating moderate Christianity in the degeneration of Western culture (Rose 2018). The universalism of Christianity does seem incompatible with an ideology explicitly built on racial particularism, with the Alt-Right mantra being 'Race is real; race is fundamental; race matters' (Driscoll 2016). This has led Grubaugh (2018) to assert 'the impossibility of "Alt-Right Christianity."' Indeed, it may be this antipathy towards Christianity which marks out the Alt-Right from the more traditional far-right groups in America. Despite this, there are certainly Christian members within the movement (Rose 2018; Lyons 2017) as well as significant areas of political overlap with the Christian right. While prominent Alt-Right leaders such as Spencer are atheists, Steven Bannon is a conservative Catholic. This shows the potential reach of this atheist-religious coalition, given that Bannon was the editor of Breitbart, 'the home of the Alt-Right' (Posner 2016) and a senior member of the Trump administration. Both movements hold traditionalist views on issue such as feminism, gender, abortion and homosexuality, potentially making

for an admittedly uneasy political and electoral coalition. This policy overlap can be seen in President Trump's adoption of an anti-abortion position (Moghul 2017). This pleased pro-life groups on religious grounds, but also appealed to the Alt-Right on pro-natalist grounds. This pro-natalism is not based in scripture, but instead in anxieties around white birth-rates and woman's freedom (Moghul 2017). Nevertheless, it shows the potential for issue-based alliances around traditionalist policy positions between the mainly atheist Alt-Right and conservative Christians.

A second connection between the Alt-Right and Christianity is at the cultural and symbolic level. Vox Day, a prominent Alt-Right figure, included 'Christianity, the European nations, and the Graeco-Roman legacy' as part of defining features of the movement (2016). These three pillars show an attempt to draw together culture, nationhood and religion to construct the idea of a uniquely white identity. However, in doing so he has equated ancient pagan civilizations with Christianity and a modern, self-consciously scientific movement. Some Christian members of the Alt-Right claim that Christianity is malleable, and can be shaped to fit with their 'race realism' (Grubaugh 2018). This would allow the Alt-Right to use the symbolism of Christianity without being restrained by its theology. This symbolism is powerful for a group which claims to be concerned with Western civilization, given the close connection between this civilization and Christianity. This creates a clear tension, as the movement is based around the concept of Western Christendom while being disdainful of Christian theology and practice (Illing 2018). The preoccupation with the cultural symbols of Christendom can be seen in the use of online and offline symbolism such as Crusader flags and the phrase "*deus vult* (God wills it)" (Tharoor 2016; Perry 2017). This paradoxical relationship to Christianity is further complicated by the connection between the Alt-Right and the new atheist movement.

The Alt-Right and new atheism are in many ways completely different movements, with new atheism reflecting a generally liberal and tolerant view which criticizes religion's totalitarian tendencies (Schulzke 2013; Kettell 2013, 63). However, many have pointed to a shared heritage between the two movements (Nagle 2017, 109; Lewis 2017; Torres 2017). At a superficial level, the shared disdain and distrust for Islam is one area of overlap between the movements. Anti-Muslim sentiment is almost a defining feature for the Alt-Right, while new atheism has been accused of being overly focused on Islam as compared to other religions. Mondon and Winter (2017) see the new atheist movement as having a significant role in the mainstreaming of anti-Muslim rhetoric, while Stahl (2015, 35) sees Islamophobia as being a central feature of the movement. This has arguably contributed to the "clash of civilizations" rhetoric surrounding the West's relation to Islam (Robinson 2017). However, negative sentiment towards Islam is common across the right of the political spectrum, and this shared hostility towards the Muslim world likely reflects the

geopolitical situation in the post 9/11 world. A more substantive connection is in the shared use of science and scientific rationalism as a justifying worldview.

The Alt-Right is a self-styled scientific movement, in the same way that new atheism is. However, the Alt-Right has deployed the language of science against quite different targets, focusing on race and progressive causes rather than religion. Racial separation is justified on the grounds of apparent immutable differences between ethnic groups (Muhammad 2018), while feminism is criticized as acting against natural sexual hierarchy (John Press 2016). This use of science has been compared to the “scientific racism” of the early 20th century (Hanlon 2017; Lyons 2017), with biological science being deployed in support of “race realism” (Muhammad 2018). The scientific evidence being deployed is often highly selective and empirically dubious, with the Alt-Right claiming uncontested scientific evidence in support of their positions on everything from homosexuality to climate change denialism (John Press 2016). This desire to present themselves as scientific can be seen as reflective of a growing secular-rationalist in America, particularly among the young (Voas and Chaves 2016). This could potentially put the Alt-Right at odds with the Christian right, which has a more ambivalent relationship with science. However, the need to ground their controversial ideas in (pseudo) science is so strong that Christian members of the Alt-Right have attempted to combine religious and social Darwinist explanations. For example, prominent Alt-Right figure Gavin McInnes, when asked “why would God... make dumber races?”, answered that God created the world but that evolution had led to racial IQ inequalities. Specifically, “He can’t make us all the same at the same time or... now you’re just the fucking Justice League.” (Welcome to Clownworld 2018) This view, neither scientifically or theologically consistent, encapsulates much of the tension within the Alt-Right. Another article published on a popular website for “Western Chauvinists” claims that “Christianity led to science, atheists” while encouraging readers to “Proclaim Your Culturist Christian Identity!” (Press, 2016). The desire to use the mobilizing potential of religion and religious symbolism needs to be balanced against the desire to appear modern and scientific. The debate about whether and which religious symbols to use is one that is being played out online, among both the leaders and followers of this movement.

3. What the Alt-Right Talk About When They Talk About Religion

This paper is based on qualitative thematic analysis, which was conducted by searching for popular YouTube videos related to the Alt-Right and religion and following links to recommended videos. Following

Mayring (2000) I inductively developed categories from both the videos, which featured vloggers and writers associated with the Alt-Right, and the comments below the videos. Specifically, debates and discussions between different commenters were purposively selected in order to examine areas of agreement and disagreement. The goal was not just to collect examples of how people in this movement think about religion, but to observe how they deliberate and debate the role of religion. This is an effective way of identifying key aspects of the debate and revealing how religion is constructed and understood within the movement. Given the lack of existing literature on this topic, this represents a strong starting point in this research. Without a preexisting coding scheme, there is a need for work which helps to develop content categories and themes. However it is naturally limited in scope and generalizability by the small sample size, with automated text analysis or larger scale deductive work being a necessary next step.

3.1. Results

The results of this preliminary investigation reveal four broad themes around which the internal debate over religion in the Alt-Right is structured. Examples of the themes discussed below can be found in Table 1, which shows a selection of YouTube comments. The primary focus of this discussion tends to center around Christianity, given that this is the dominant religion in America and the West in general. While attitudes towards Islam and Judaism are nearly universally negative, there is polarization on the issue of Christianity's role within the far-right.

Table 1: Example YouTube Comments

Example	Ethnicity of Christianity	Conspiracies/weaknesses	Scientific Rationalism	Need for white spirituality
If I was a pagan I'd take this moment to create a pagan/christian option. That could unite both Pagans and Christians.. but that would be [SHUT IT DOWN] worthy.				X
Marxist have taken the warrior out of Catholicism. We need fresh blood and revive the Knights Order. Belief in something needs to be backed up with an iron fist.		X		X
Christianity is 100% alien to the Western mentality..Christianity has been manufactured by the enemy to crush the White soul . . . The problem is this religious program itself, that has held back society in all ways. Spiritually, scientifically, technologically.	X	X	X	
<p>A: '. . .historically all white people were of the christian religion for apprx. 2000 years, and that is what made them do well. look at all the other regions of the world that didn't have chrisitanity, well that's where all the blacks, and jews lived.'</p> <p>B: 'Oh, now you want to re-write history itself, both the few bits of real history that is slowly uncovered every day AND the jooish propaganda taught in schools?</p> <p>A: 'You seem like a black person, you should just shut up.</p>	X	X		
Yeah, I'm sure Jesus was an anglo-saxon ubermensch, give me a break . . . we don't need a universalist humanitarian cult with its origins in Judaism. I don't care what religion people are, but do I want Christianity at the center of white society? No, we need some form of racial religion that isn't connected in any way to Judaism	X			X

Reflecting the ethno-nationalist outlook of the Alt-Right, the ethnic background of Christianity is a major point of contention. Several commenters displayed virulent anti-Semitism towards both Christ as an individual and Christianity as a religion with a basis in Judaism, while the fact that it originated in the Middle East rather than Europe is controversial. This is often countered with the argument that while Christianity may have its roots in Eastern Judaism, it had become associated with white Europeans, and the apparent successes of the white race. This fits with a statement made by Richard Spencer in one of the videos, in which he argued that 'we did turn Christianity into something European. We did, you could say paganize or Germanize it.' (Snakeisninja 2017) Bearing in mind Spencer's atheism, this shows an attempt to claim Christianity as a white European religion despite its Eastern roots. Elsewhere, Christianity is credited with advancing the white race, following the argument set out by Press that Christianity led to Europe's social and political advancement (2016). Christianity's defenders also attempt to link it to the Roman Empire, giving it a certain martial appeal. Other commenters engaged in more specific racial theorizing, arguing that Jesus was in fact white, or that he could not be Jewish as he was a god.

Another prominent theme, closely linked in some ways to the idea that Christianity is a Jewish sect, are conspiracies around the effect of religion on white civilization. Several commenters posit the idea that religion has a weakening effect, and is designed as a weapon of social control. The forces behind this are unclear, with Jews, globalists and Marxists all being mentioned. Others view religion less as a deliberate conspiracy and more as a universalist doctrine which has passively resulted in weakness and degeneracy. This fits with the misappropriated Nietzschean ideas around 'slave morality' which have become popular in right-wing circles (Ross 2017, 308-309). However, this view does suggest that Christianity can perhaps be rescued from itself, if reconstituted away from pacifist universalism and towards a martial white identity (Press, 2016). For others, the only way to reconstruct a sufficiently strong white identity is to fall back on pre-Christian religions. These commenters often bemoan the forced conversions of the Roman Empire, and view an updated Germanic paganism as a viable spiritual framework.

The issue of science is similarly contested, with some commenters pointing out that Europe was Christian during its most prodigious periods of technological advancement while others view religion as inherently regressive. The issue of racial science unsurprisingly appears, with some enthusiasts of such views criticizing the Church's universalizing outlook as unscientific. However, there is not necessarily a huge amount of conflict between Christianity, as it is understood by the Alt-Right, and science. While some of the Christians within this movement are true believers, for many commenters the value of Christianity lies more in its role as a defining identity against non-white cultures than any particular theolo-

gical truth claims. This links to the widely accepted position that the Alt-Right needs to develop a spiritual identity in order to further its political goals, rather than due to any notion of genuine spiritual truth.

Many commenters implicitly or explicitly describe religion in such instrumental terms, referring to what it can do for their movement and the white race more generally rather than for any inherent features of a religion. This explains the view that Christianity can be reformed in a way which makes it more suitable for the goals of the movement. This is especially true of right-wing pagans, who do not seem to hold any kind of fundamentalist belief in the metaphysical reality of the Norse pantheon. Instead, they favor paganism as a set of uniquely white martial archetypes around which to mobilize. For both the Christians and the pagans this sense of mobilization is keenly felt in relation to Muslims, who they believe represent an existential threat. However, the need for religion within the movement runs deeper than that, with Spencer admitting that ‘we are going to need big spiritual binding forces. There will have to be a spiritual awakening as much as a political awakening.’ This need for a binding spirituality stems from the belief, known as the Breitbart doctrine, that to change politics you must first to change culture (Cadwalladr 2018). This view that “politics is downstream from culture” (Cadwalladr 2018) partially explain the focus on relatively fringe issues of identity and belief. It also fits with the idea that feminism and atheism has reduced white birth rates, thereby weakening the white race.

Given that the Alt-Right’s most consistent goal is the creation of an autocratic white ethno-state, it is understandable that some form of state religion would be necessary. Indeed, Spencer has posited Israel and Zionism as a type of model, requiring the construction of a dual ethno-religious identity (Orlared 2017). This theme, of requiring a religious framework in order to further secular goals, is particularly interesting because it shows that both leaders such as Spencer and online commenters are deliberating about the practicalities involved in building their movement. This suggests the value of online spaces as sounding boards for widely dispersed social movements, which currently lack the organizational capacity to engage in sustained local activism but which wish to move beyond purely ideological discussions. It also shows the role of online media in flattening communicative hierarchies as the divide between political entrepreneurs and members of the movement is overcome through the use of online commentaries, video interviews and podcasts.

There is no clear winner in the debate between paganism and Christianity, although given the fact of actually-existing Christianity in the West it would certainly seem to have an advantage. An article in *Radix*, the preeminent journal of the Alt-Right, sets out the debate; ‘Three questions seem to arise here. Should we return to the faith of our ancestors? Should we save Christianity from itself? Or should we overcome both Paganism

and Christianity with a futuristic religion that would set space conquest as our “Manifest Destiny?” (Bernard 2014).

Bernard’s article suggests a synthesis of paganism and Christianity, worrying that a return to traditional paganism alone would manifest as ‘farce’. Spencer similarly views paganism as ‘a non-starter’ (Snakeisninja 2017), while recognizing the need for a spirituality that differs from modern Christianity. Christianity, as a set of institutions and symbols intimately connected with European history, represents a readymade framework for the Alt-Right. However, the goals and outlook of the Alt-Right would require the universalism and pacifism associated with Jesus Christ to be shorn from the religion. While it is out-with the scope and methods of this paper to assess which view currently holds sway among members of the Alt-Right, there is perhaps the beginning of a consensus around the idea that some form of symbolic, repurposed Christianity could best serve the purposes of this movement. This reflects the fact that the electoral basis of support for far-right politics in the West generally rests upon a significant base of religious voters (Minkenberg 2018).

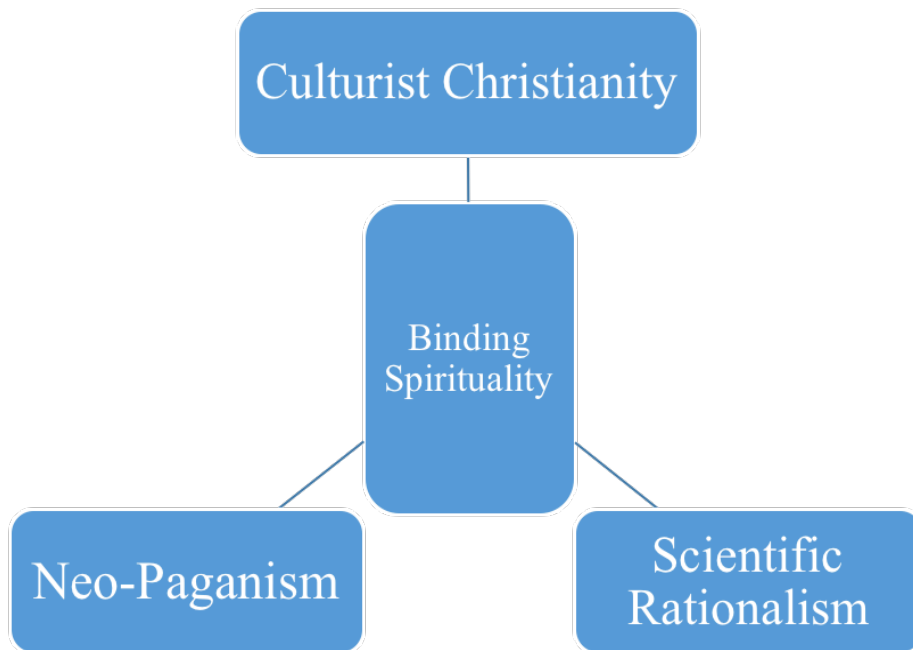


Figure 1: The Future of Religion and the Alt-Right

4. Constructing Alt-Christianity?

By looking at the speeches and publications of the Alt-Right, as well the online comments examined here, it is possible to understand the Alt-

Right's approach to religion from a social movement theory perspective. Social movements need to develop a form of bricolage, as they utilize mobilizing symbols which reflect both cultural traditions and new ideas (Tarrow 2011, 145-147). This is particularly true of the Alt-Right, which commits itself to traditional values while at the same time attempting to appeal to a younger constituency. With its online base, deft use of memes and embrace of new atheism's approach to science the Alt-Right has clearly attempted to present itself as a modern alternative to the traditional right. However, it remains conflicted over how to incorporate traditional symbols into the movement, with both paganism and Christianity potentially filling that role. While these two religious traditions could not practically operate in tandem in the white ethno-state imagined by the Alt-Right, as symbols for a fringe movement they both serve similar purposes. While they are theologically incompatible, their utility lies not in their ability to provide religious truth but in their ability to mobilize and unify a particular identity group.

However, the drive for this internal conflict to reach a resolution stems from the very real commitment which the movement has shown to the idea of an ethno-state. In addition to the old symbols of religion and the new symbols of technology and science, the Alt-Right has borrowed the language and symbolism of the ethnic homeland from Israel. The irony of such a deeply anti-Semitic group taking inspiration from Israel is noteworthy, but the leaders of the group appear serious about this long-term goal. For such a state to exist, there would likely need to be consensus on the state religion. Of course, it is possible that an ethno-state could be politically secular. However according to Spencer; 'A truly secular government could never exist. Sovereignty is a magical thing. For a political order to function – for it to accomplish its tasks, including war-making – the population must *believe* in it.' (McAfee 2017).

A multi-cultural, multi-faith state would be against the ethos of the Alt-Right. We can therefore expect them to continue attempting to build a binding white identity by constructing a vision of Christianity in line with their exclusionary ethnic ideal. The question is how they square this with an increasingly secular youth cohort, as well as the weakening and fragmentation of organized religious institutions.

5. Further Research

This paper has attempted to sketch out some of the main points of debate on the issue of religion within the Alt-Right. In particular, it has pointed to the way in which the movement has reflected and deliberated on the need for a mobilizing vision of spirituality with which to bind together the wider community. This manifests in a utopian vision of a white ethno-state, with a mono-culture backed by a state religion. The

exact form which religion takes in this group is highly contested, with a great deal of antipathy being displayed towards Christianity. However, there is also widespread skepticism about the practical viability of either classical or Germanic paganism as an effective vehicle for far-right ideology. Ironically, many within this antisemitic community look towards contemporary Israel as a model of a state which has fused together ethnic and religious nationalism. As the dominant religion of the West, it seems likely that Christianity will remain the predominant religious framework of the far-right.

As a preliminary piece of inductive research, this paper leaves significant room for further development and testing. It can say little about the relative strength of the various factions within the Alt-Right, a question which will require some form of quantitative content analysis. Automated text analysis is the most viable way to conduct such research, although this is hampered by the divisions within this movement and the porous membership. It also suggests several interesting lines of research into the discursive practices of the Alt-Right and similar online communities, as they attempt to design and build their movement while interacting in online spaces. Online ethnography and discourse analysis both provide routes forward here. What I hope this paper has achieved is to highlight the issue of religious debate within the Alt-Right and the broader far-right while providing a route forward for this research agenda.

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