

The Good Facebook
Society's New Inerrant Authoritative Word of God
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
June 13, 2021

January 6, 2021 will go down as a day of infamy in U.S. history as the day hundreds of American's violently stormed the nation's Capital building in an effort to prevent the certification of President Joe Biden's election. Many of us understandably blame Donald Trump for inciting the riot, who, for many weeks prior, had been making unsubstantiated claims that the election was stolen, and on the day of the rioting spoke to the disgruntled demonstrators urging them to "show strength" and to "fight like hell" or "you're not going to have a country anymore." To the dismay of millions, though not to their surprise, Republican legislators chose to give Donald Trump yet another pass, this time for his role in the failed coup. It would appear an attempt to overthrow American democracy is hardly cause for denouncing him as their Party leader.

Still, as much as Trump ought to be held accountable for his indisputable role in the failed overthrow of our Government—because that's what it was, not an insurrection, but a failed coup—there is another, perhaps even more powerful actor at fault for what happened on January 6th. In a brief opinion piece in *Wired* magazine the next day, Roger McNamee wrote, "President Trump and his enablers in government and right-wing media will shoulder the blame for Wednesday's insurrection at the US Capitol, but internet platforms—Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, in particular—have played a fomenting and facilitating role that no one should overlook."¹ McNamee, who was an early investor in Facebook and a mentor to its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, goes on to explain, "In their relentless pursuit of engagement and profits, these platforms created algorithms that amplify hate speech, disinformation, and conspiracy theories."²

His main concern is that social media platforms are no longer restricted to online conversation but are having detrimental impacts in the real world. McNamee writes, for example, "Facebook's own research revealed that 64 percent of the time a person joins an extremist Facebook Group, they do so because the platform recommended it. Facebook has also acknowledged that pages and groups associated with QAnon extremism had at least 3 million members, meaning Facebook helped radicalize 2 million people."³ Not only did it radicalize them, but it helped them to coalesce and organize their concerted efforts. McNamee writes, "Over the past six months, QAnon subsumed MAGA and the antivax movement, with a major assist from the platforms and policies of Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter."⁴

I think we would all agree that the use of computer algorithms that foster anger and hostility just to turn a profit are a terrible thing, and that something should be done. The question is, what? Freedom of speech must remain a fundamental principle of a free society, including the speech expressed on social media, even if it is speech we disagree with. The problem, however, is not one of speech, but the blind, unsolicited, and automated promotion of extreme speech. It is one thing for an individual to express an unsubstantiated, paranoid conspiracy on social media, but it is another for a thoughtless algorithm to amplify such extremism with preferential placement that shares it with millions of others. Were this not happening, it is unlikely that QAnon would even exist. As another contributor to *Wired*, data scientist Renee DeRista, explains, "These algorithms are invisible, but they have an outsized impact on shaping individuals' experience online and society at large. Indeed, YouTube's video-recommendation algorithm inspires 700,000,000 hours of watch time per day—and can spread misinformation, disrupt elections, and incite violence. Algorithms like this need fixing."⁵

Since the spread of such misinformation has nothing to do with human intentions, but is being automated by computer algorithms, it can be argued that changing the algorithms would do nothing to violate anyone's free speech. They can still use social media to express themselves—including their wildest, meanest, dumbest ideas—but the algorithms don't need to help them do so. As DeRista says, "free *speech* does not mean free *reach*."⁶ Just because someone says something crazy and conspiratorial does not mean social media companies are obligated to share it with millions of people, especially when its algorithms don't tend to do so for claims that are less radical, more positive, and better substantiated. In other words, these algorithms currently favor extremists and promote extremism, but they don't have to.

Getting back to McNamee: while I agree with his explanation of the problem, I disagree with his assertion that, "These platforms also enforce their terms of service in ways that favor extreme speech and behavior, predominantly right-wing extremism."⁷ In fact, his article only refers to examples of right-wing misinformation, while lifting up Democratic President Biden as the guy who has the power to fix the problem. After mentioning social media's role in the Capital riots, promoting white supremacy and antivax conspiracies, and organizing QAnon, McNamee says, "The Biden administration has an opportunity to change incentives. It can put the tech industry back on a productive course, as an engine of growth and empowerment."⁸

Not that he gives us any assurances that the Biden Administration will take advantage of its opportunity to correct this problem, but, in my opinion, it is itself misleading to suggest the spread of right-wing conspiracies should be at the core of our concerns. After all, the "cancel culture," as it has been named, which uses social media to ruin the lives and livelihoods of individuals, is a socially progressive phenomenon. Using social media to spread misinformation and to effect real harm in our society is happening as much on the Left as it is on the Right, if not more so, which should be a concern for those of us on the Left who still care about liberal values like freedom, reason, truth, and fairness.

Tragically, to prove the point, we need go no further than our own liberal religion. In recent years, the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association has consolidated its control of our religion by eliminating districts and the involvement of local congregations and church members, as well as self-selecting its own Board members in uncontested elections. Since we are no longer engaging with each other through traditional means, by serving on District Boards, program committees, or having representation from around the country on a large UUA Board of Trustees, the UUA leadership is acting as if its member congregations are living out our lives on social media, which they appear to be monitoring like George Orwell's *Big Brother*.

Earlier this year, for instance, Reverend Kate Rohde wrote a letter of explanation after she was suspended from the UU Minister's Association. "My UUMA colleagues will have already heard that I have been 'cancelled' (suspended from membership) by the UUMA," she begins, "the professional organization for UU ministers that I have been a member of for more than 40 years and to which I gave several thousand hours of volunteer time in many leadership capacities for more than two decades. Although you know I was suspended, they did not tell you why." In previous years, such an extreme action would have occurred only after a formal grievance had been filed against a minister, had been presented to the minister, and the minister had an opportunity to address the matter. But in this case, there wasn't even a formal grievance. As Rev. Rohde says, "Although I do not know precisely what the accusers said, I do know that there were three of them, making three different complaints but working together to do so. These were not people I have ever met. My sins appear to be in the form of Facebook posts."

Without even being told precisely what it is she is supposed to have said or who complained, she says she was given a list of demands to meet, including two requests she considered unacceptable. She says:

One involved never speaking or posting any material at all on a specific topic. This, I felt, would give up my right to freedom of the pulpit and I do not feel they have a legal right to ask that. The other involved cutting off all relationships whatsoever with a group of people I had known many years ago. Although I am not in a close relationship with any those people, I am Facebook friends with several of them and, again, I do not think the UUMA has a right to tell me to unfriend them.

So, not only had they tried, convicted, and sentenced Rev. Rohde for some undisclosed comments she made on Facebook, before she knew there was even an issue, but she was additionally told whom she could be friends with on Facebook. Because she has not fully cooperated, a.k.a., obeyed, Rev. Rohde is now also in trouble with the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC), and is at risk of losing her professional credentials. Like me, she may soon find herself disfellowshipped, or, as I prefer, excommunicated from the official order of UU ministers, at which point she will also be immediately kicked out of the UU Minister's Association, as was I, in a polite letter that will conclude, "With wishes for a joyous day."

But even before my public flogging and defrocking, Rev. Richard Trudeau, another seasoned UU minister received a similar letter of censure from the UU Minister's Association for something he said on Facebook in March of 2018. His entire post is a bit lengthy for our purposes, but it begins with a simple question: "I have reservations about current UU racial-justice ideology, and would like to find a place to discuss them with colleagues (of all races). I can't imagine that our moderators would allow such a discussion here. Can anyone suggest a place?" He then goes on to briefly outline his specific areas of concern in calm and rational terms. Not long afterward, he received a letter of censure from the UUMA accusing him of being "out of Covenant" and violating its Code of Ethics without explaining how he did so. The censure also says, "The board took these actions as a result of complaints made against you on Facebook and in your chapter meetings. We hope that in receiving this admonishment from your fellow ministers you may take time to reflect upon how your words have been harmful to colleagues, specifically women and colleagues of color." This is another example of a minister being blindsided by the UUMA, with no advance warning that there was even an issue, for unspecified complaints made on Facebook.

Similarly, Rev. Richard Davis, who has served as my Good Officer since the controversy around my book erupted two years ago, was pressured to stop publicly supporting me by UUMA Trustees who were monitoring his posts on social media. The first communication began with a Trustee, who had censured me, stating, "A fellow good officer noticed your posts on the Gadfly Facebook page and emailed me concerned that you seemed to be struggling to clarify your role," then offered to help clarify that role for him. Eventually, Rev. Davis, who continued publicly supporting me in the same way that the UUMA had publicly condemned me, was officially removed from his Good Officer role, a position he had served in for nearly thirty years. On April 2, 2020 he received a letter from the UUMA President explaining, "I am writing today to inform you that we are removing you from the UUMA's list of Ratified Chapter Good Officers effective immediately," for repeatedly ignoring their warnings.

More recently, it was announced that another young minister has been disfellowshipped by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Although we have not been given the details, an email I've seen explains that he was removed for "bullying." As soon as I saw this word, I recalled a public letter of

condemnation in reaction against me and my book regarding my questioning of a Latina applicant who accused the UUA of being a white supremacist organization simply because she didn't get a job she wanted. The letter of condemnation called my mere questioning of her unsubstantiated accusation "a clear case of racial bullying." I cannot help but believe this latest excommunication was also the result of something the young minister said on Facebook that somebody else simply disagreed with.

I know of other UU ministers who have been kicked out of collegial Facebook groups for questioning the party line, being accused of abusive and harmful behavior. And recently the 5th Principle Project, founded by Frank Casper and Jay Kiskel in 2019, authors of the recent book, *Used to Be UU*, had their application to have a booth in the exhibit hall of this year's UUA General Assembly placed on hold because of complaints made against them on Facebook. "The application has been placed on hold," an April 2021 notice explained, "because our office is in receipt of three emails expressing concern about the presence of a Fifth Principle Project booth at GA." The email went on to share the three emails they'd received, each of which complains about the 5th Principle Project's comments on social media. Without citing a single example, the complainants make *ad hominem* remarks like, "Mr. Casper has a history of toxic behavior towards UUs in online spaces," "The online behavior Fifth Principle Project founder Frank Casper and other 5PP group members has been disconcerting." But the real reason for banning their booth appears to be their dissenting opinions. As one of the emails admits, "The idea that someone can get an exhibitor booth to promote said book seems very out of covenant to me. If their booth is approved, it would make me very uncomfortable and many other people as well." The email concludes with the UUA representative stating, "that the UUA GA will not be complicit when our intended audience, registered attendees of General Assembly, perceive rhetoric to be deliberately antagonistic and harmful." In other words, if anyone says they dislike what someone else says, the UUA's new policy is to prohibit them from speaking.

The final example I'll give regards a conversation I myself had with a UUMA Board member just two days prior to receiving their letter of censure nearly two years ago. The Trustee said, "I know you don't pay much attention to social media, but it's a mess out there." This perceived mess is why the UUMA, it was explained, felt compelled to act by censuring me. Yes, like Rev. Rohde, Rev. Trudeau, Rev. Davis, the younger minister I've mentioned, and the 5th Principle Project, I was being punished as a consequent of what people were saying on Facebook.

All of this is to get back to the larger point with which we began: Social media, as wonderful as it is in many ways, has some alarming drawbacks. It too often plays upon our most primitive emotions and instincts, like fear and anger. If the Internet is the beginning of what many predict will become a global brain, I suspect we'll look back someday and consider social media the reptilian part of that brain. During the past couple of years, people I've enjoyed knowing for a long time have said things about me on Facebook that seemed completely out of character: comments that are so mean-spirited and hostile and unsubstantiated that it's as if someone else must have said them. But on the few occasions I've been in the same room with some of them, or, at least, the same Zoom room, face to face, as it were, it was as if they were their old selves again, kind and polite, if not also a little embarrassed. This tells me there is something about being on social media that is a lot like stream of consciousness. It's like being on Freud's couch and he asks us to say whatever comes to mind. Communicating on social media is too often an emotional, if not entirely unconscious experience.

This makes sense if you stop to think about it, and that's the point, we should stop to think about everything we say, especially on social media where what we say will last forever and could come

back to haunt us. In his book about thinking in the age of social media, *Think Before You Like*, journalist Guy Harrison brings up several unconscious effects that can overcome us when using this technology because of the amount of misinformation online and our own unconscious tendencies to believe what we read, confirmation bias, groupthink, joining the bandwagon, overestimating the importance of what we ourselves say, and gravitating toward authoritarian figures. Social media lends itself well to unconscious thinking and reacting, which, unfortunately, often leads to real life consequences for those who are subject to our thoughtlessness. Harrison says, “Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter users know that great power is always at their fingertips and the fingertips of others. With a simple click they can banish or be banished from a community forever.”⁹ He also reminds us that “Exiling was a common practice in some ancient societies . . . And here we are again. Today, people are exiled from social media tribes every moment.”¹⁰

While I am certain there are many thoughtful, intelligent, fairly moderated conversations and groups on Facebook, and that there are many users capable of thinking before they react, and that social media is here to stay, as religious liberals we should be aware that the irresponsible and destructive use of this powerful technology is undermining both our religion and our liberal values. Unitarian Universalists don’t have a holy book that determines who speaks the truth and who should be silenced and punished for disagreeing with the Church authorities. And Facebook is not, by any means, our new Bible. Nor does Unitarian Universalist community happen on social media platforms that can easily be monitored by a small group of people in Boston who have consolidated control of our religion into their own tiny hands. Even without our democratic systems in place, or representation on the national Board of Trustees, or denominational involvement allowed on district levels, Unitarian Universalism still happens in our local congregations, where it should happen. And this means it is still up to us to do the right thing, to practice our liberal values by communicating with care, and intelligence, and openness to dissenting opinions on any platform.

¹ McNamee, Roger, “Platforms Must Pay for Their Role in the Insurrection,” *Wired*, Ideas, January 7, 2021, 5:16 PM.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.wired.com/story/free-speech-is-not-the-same-as-free-reach/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ McNamee, *ibid.*

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Harrison, Guy P., *Think Before You Like*, Prometheus Book, New York, NY, 2017, p. 187.

¹⁰ Ibid.