

Introduction—Emperor Nero Redux: Fake News and Anti-Cult Movements

Massimo Introvigne
CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)
maxintrovigne@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Since the times of Roman Emperor Nero, tyrants willing to suppress religious minorities use a pincer consisting of violent persecution and fake news. These campaigns do not succeed because of brutality only. Religious and secular enemies of the persecuted minorities cooperate in spreading the fake news. What we can call “Nero’s formula” is still at work today, and this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is devoted to the theme of fake news used by totalitarian regimes, rival religionists, and secular anti-cultists to justify the discrimination and persecution of new religious movements.

KEYWORDS: Fake News, Anti-Cult Movements, Counter-Cult Movements, Religious Persecution, Nero (Roman Emperor).

I am a native of Rome, and my grandmother used to take me to see the grave of Emperor Nero (37–68), telling me how bad he was. Later, I learned that what tourists still visit as “Nero’s Grave” was in fact the grave of somebody else, but this was not important. The infamous memory of Nero stayed with me.

My grandmother was a pious Catholic, and told the story in a very simple way. Nero persecuted the Christians, for the good reason that he believed to be God himself, so Jesus Christ could only be an imposter. He killed several thousand Christians, men, women, and even children. They were thrown to the lions, crucified, or burned alive. The carnage appeared excessive even to some of Nero’s supporters. To justify it, he spread the false rumors that Christians celebrated orgies at night and ritually killed and ate children. But these accusations of imaginary crimes became less and less believable. So, he decided to accuse them of a *real* crime. Arsonists had burned the city of Rome in 64 CE.

Nero accused the Christians of being responsible of the fire. In fact, he had burned Rome himself.

Again, I am aware that some contemporary historians such as Princeton's Edward Champlin remind us that Nero's story mostly reached us through the Emperor's opponents, both Christian and non-Christian, and may include fabrications and exaggerations. However, Champlin admits that other eminent modern historians believe that the substance of the traditional story is true (Champlin 2003).

Nero is back, and this time he has got a computer, and Facebook and Twitter accounts. Probably several different accounts, and not under his own name. What we can call "Nero's formula" is at work against many persecuted religious minorities throughout the world today. The formula is old, but it still works. Persecute a religious group. Justify the persecution by inventing false stories about them, preferably involving sexual perversions and child abuse. If this is not enough, attribute to the persecuted group your own crimes. Then, persecute it even more. Insist that the persecution is needed by spreading more false rumors. And so on.

One can claim that we are no longer in Nero's times. And rightly so. Nero had at his disposal only rumors spread by his agents in the markets. Today, we have fake news. On January 11, 2017, Donald J. Trump held his first press conference as President-elect. He presented himself as victim of a massive "fake news" campaign. "It's all fake news. It's phony stuff. It didn't happen," he said, referring to Russian actions to favor his elections. And he told a CNN journalist, "Your organization is terrible... You are fake news" (Wojcik, Hogan and Juang 2017).

The genius was out of the bottle. "Fake news" became a household word overnight. In fact, Trump had used it during the campaign, but now he commanded planetary attention. Unfortunately for Trump, once unleashed, the genius could not be controlled. The President's opponents started accusing *him* both of spreading fake news and to have been elected thanks to fake news disseminated by his Russian friends.

Since Nero's times, fake news and religion have a very intimate relationship. The name "fake news," of course, did not exist, but the substance, minus Facebook and Twitter, did. All persecuted minorities and "heretics" throughout history were repressed through a generous use of Nero's formula, crashed

between the rock of the oppression and the hard place of the false rumors spread to justify their persecution.

As we started with the Roman Empire, we can as well switch to Latin, and quote one of the few verses of the Jewish Bible that became proverbial among the Romans, *Nihil sub sole novum* (*Ecclesiastes* 1:10), “there is nothing new under the sun,” or, in modern English, “history repeats itself.” From the Waldensians to the Mormons and beyond, all minorities were persecuted by applying Nero’s formula to them.

It is important to note that Nero was not alone, and alone he would not have succeeded. Christians had other enemies, who helped the Emperor spread the fake news. Here, again, *nihil sub sole novum*. Just like the early Christians, persecuted religious minorities usually have three enemies: totalitarian governments, religionists who perceive them as competitors, and those who do not deeply care about religion but see them as a social threat.

This is the case for “cults.” They may suffer under democratic governments too, but they are banned and persecuted by totalitarian regimes. And they have two different sets of enemies: “counter-cultists,” i.e. religionists who want to protect their own religion against dangerous competitors, and “anti-cultists,” who claim they do not care about theology but regard “cults” as “destructive” because they “brainwash” their “victims” (Kilbourne and Richardson 1986; Richardson 1978, 1993, 1996, 2014, 2015). I introduced myself the distinction between counter-cult and anti-cult movements, now widely used (Introigne 1993, 1995).

Yet, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* both embraces the distinction between fake news about “cults” spread respectively by governments of dubious democratic credentials, religious competitors of the slandered movements, and secular anti-cultists, and notes that this business is more complicated than some may imagine.

In the first article, I discuss one of the most egregious purveyors of fake news in the world today, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). When it comes to “cults,” only Russia can be compared to China as a fake news factory, with its massive campaigns of rumors spread to justify its repression of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Church of Scientology.

CCP is, by its own definition, an atheist organization. However, campaigns such as the one against The Church of Almighty God, a Chinese new religious movement (to which issue 2:1 of *The Journal of CESNUR* was devoted) whose members are tortured and killed by the thousands (Human Rights Without Frontiers and *Bitter Winter* 2018), could not succeed without the support of Western anti-cultists, who relay CCP's fake news internationally, and Christian counter-cultists, both in China and abroad, happy to help the CCP hunt the heretics.

Ian Camacho, an independent scholar, in what should be saluted as a scholarly tour de force, dissects a fake news about the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), who has been consistently, but falsely, accused of lying about his supposed academic degree in Engineering, including by scholars who should have known better. This would seem a typical *secular* criticism of Hubbard. Yet, it has been used by Russian anti-cultists associated with the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Center, who merely *claim* to be secular but are in fact part of an armed wing of the most reactionary faction of the Russian Orthodox Church (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

The same machinery is at work in Israel. Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Sharon Warshawski examine the Israeli law on hypnosis, and how it was passed based on the same fake news and prejudices normally mobilized against the “cults.” In passing, they mention the Israeli Center for the Victims of Cults (ICVC), part of the same international network of anti-cultists, known as FECRIS, to which the falsely secular (but in fact Orthodox) Russian “anti-cultists” (but in fact *counter*-cultists) belong.

The article focuses on hypnosis, and the following comments on the ICVC are mine, not the authors'. The story of ICVC is complicated, and would deserve further study. However, from an article published in 2011 in *Yedioth Ahronoth* (Mula 2011), which has been for many years the largest newspaper in Israel by sales, and from documents I collected during several trips to Israel, it seems that the ICVC is remarkably similar to the Russian anti-cult organization St. Irenaeus of Lyons Centre. The latter presents itself as secular, but is in fact tightly controlled by employees of the Russian Orthodox Church. The ICVC certainly recruited also secular Israelis, but it seems to have been established by ultra-Orthodox Jews, including businessman Rami Feller, who provided to ICVC most of its funds through an organization known as The Office for Charity (Mula 2011,

38). Both Feller and Rachel Lichtenshtein, the public voice for the ICVC, were associated with Yad L’Achim (Mula 2011, 38), an ultra-Orthodox group that, according to several yearly reports on religious freedom by the U.S. Department of State, was accused of “harassment, threats, and vandalism directed against [the] buildings, and other facilities” of “evangelical Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Reform and Conservative Jews” (U.S. Department of State 2001).

The same pattern seems to repeat itself in Russia and Israel. Religionists designate as “cults” and fabricate fake news against any religious competitor perceived as “heretic.” To mobilize the resources of the (allegedly) secular state against their enemies, they construct another level of fake news, centered on the false claim that they are secular anti-cultists concerned with the “danger of the cults,” while in fact most of them, or at least those who pull the strings in the movements, are religionists whose intent is to protect “orthodoxy,” punish the “heretics,” and harass the competition.

The Journal of CESNUR is multi-lingual and the last two articles of the issue, by Massimo Giusio, an attorney, and Raffaella Di Marzio, a scholar and religious liberty activist, are in Italian and devoted to how Italian anti-cultists try to do their share in spreading fake news about “cults.” One of the reasons why we do not publish an English version of the texts is that the article defaming Soka Gakkai discussed by Di Marzio supposedly is an Italian translation of an English original. However, when she asked to be supplied with that original, which would have been essential to prepare a meaningful English version of her article, the anti-cultists adamantly refused.

Some of the examples Giusio and Di Marzio offer verge on the ridiculous, and one may ask whether it is worth discussing them at all. However, as the authors note, ridiculous as they may be, fake news about “cults” have a certain audience in the Italian media, and the minuscule Italian anti-cult movement is part of the same international network to which its more dangerous Israeli and Russian counterparts belong.

Perhaps, one of the reasons anti-cultists prosper a little bit less in Italy than elsewhere may have to do with how well-known Nero’s story remains there. In the end, the fake news he had spread came back to haunt him. He was accused of crimes he did commit, and of others he probably didn’t. Rome’s Senate and army both rebelled against him. Rather than surrendering, and facing trial and possible

execution, Nero asked his secretary to kill him, crying out, *Qualis artifex pereo!* (“What an artist dies in me!”). A deep national memory tells Italians that fabricating fake news is indeed a dangerous art.

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