

## Recovering Truth Religion, Journalism, and Democracy in a Post-Truth Era

**Overview:** We witness today a striking indifference to truth. In parts of our government, swaths of the media, some of our classrooms, and key sectors of culture, the imperative to seek and tell the truth is ignored, even viewed with contempt. Authoritarian, anti-democratic, and anti-expertise movements are surging in the United States and around the world. The credibility of scientists, journalists, educators, and civil servants erodes as trust in the institutions of civic life falls away. Religious actors and institutions play ambivalent roles, in some cases resisting and in others supporting the traffic in fabrications and falsehoods.

To respond to this “post-truth” moment, the [Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict](https://csrc.asu.edu) at Arizona State University is undertaking a three-year project dedicated to the pursuit, discovery, and recovery of truth, with a sustained focus on the intersections of religion, journalism, and democracy. As a research unit in one of the largest public universities in America, we acknowledge our responsibility to consider how the academy has contributed to the deterioration of truth as an object of civic care, and how it can marshal resources for reversing this trend. We also ask how the media might do better.

We are especially interested in exploring the place of theology in democracy. In this project, theology serves as a provocation for deeper conversation—an invitation for apprehending truths that resist reduction to statements of fact. We wish to examine the role that different religious as well as secular beliefs about reality, transcendence, moral principles, and other truth claims have played—and might play—in animating democratic life. Truth claims grounded in religious faith visibly inform and impinge upon politics, culture, and the everyday lives of believers and unbelievers alike. More subtly, *implicit* theologies—faith in science, progress, or the market, for example—also shape the ways we live together. Theology invites us to apprehend knowledge as formation—intellectual, moral, civic—and not just information. Among the deepest repositories of thought and learning on the human condition, theology offers methods and models for daring to think big, and doing so with clarity, depth, empathy, and rigor.

The project deepens the capacity of journalists, scholars, and citizens to seek and stand for truth. In particular, it will foster collaborations between scholars and journalists that will help each group to write more richly and accessibly. In bringing them together, we also commit to strengthening the capacity of our students and fellow citizens to bear witness to truth, to safeguard the public trust, and to begin the shared work of repairing the damaged fabric of democratic life.

**Sponsors & Participants:** The Recovering Truth project is undertaken in partnership with the [Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication](https://www.asu.edu/walter-cronkite-school-of-journalism-and-mass-communication). It is supported by a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation’s Program in Theology and builds upon an [earlier Luce-funded project](#). Led by John Carlson and Tracy Fessenden, religious studies professors and Center leaders, the project team also includes religious studies professor Gaymon Bennett; Cronkite associate dean Kristin Gilger; and Anand Gopal, a journalist, sociologist, and Center research professor. The project is rounded out by journalists, visiting scholars and speakers, and a university-wide cohort of faculty fellows drawn from the disciplines of religious studies, anthropology, political philosophy, psychology, ethics, literature, and law. Finally, members of a national advisory board serve as advisors to and ambassadors of the project.

**Guiding Questions:** The project is conceived around the following questions:

- Are we living in a post-truth era? If so, what does that mean, and how did we get here? What role have the academy, the media, and religious actors and institutions played in giving way to this moment of “alternative facts,” “fake news,” and irresponsible claims that “truth isn’t truth”?
- How do we move beyond this “post-truth” moment by pursuing truth as a shared aspiration and public good? How shall we conceive truth or recognize it? Is truth reducible to fact? What dangers do we court or avoid if we insist that it is? What is the relationship between facts and values? What is the relationship of personal experience, feeling, or authenticity to truth?
- What resources do theological traditions, religious practices, moral inquiry, and political thought provide for recovering truth in civic life? How do power, authority, law, and force either underwrite or undermine truth claims? Does truth have standing apart from them? What relation does truth bear to objectivity, neutrality, reason, fidelity, beauty, or virtue?
- Is truth singular or multiple? What does it mean to invoke universal or self-evident truths? Is the commitment to truth (or Truth) compatible with seeking or speaking one’s *own* truth?

**Project Goals:** The project seeks to nurture shared vocabularies and orientations by which journalists, academics, and citizens can scrutinize and speak about truth claims. To that end, the project will:

1. Cultivate new and renewed understandings of the relationship between religion and democracy, with critical attention to how religious ideas, actors, and institutions contribute to—or undermine—the democratic project. We will critically examine whether and how theological ideas, religious traditions, and secular accounts reveal compelling accounts of reality. While unpacking presumptions surrounding our current “post-truth” moment, we will cast an eye toward new understandings of the relationships among religion, truth, and democracy for the generation coming of age.
2. Advance traditional and public forms of scholarship that share project findings through innovative publishing and promotional platforms.
3. Create new professional networks—local, regional, and national—of scholars, journalists, and civic leaders eager to learn from one another. In forming a network of intellectual and community leaders—across the Southwest and beyond—the project seeks to promote and elevate those committed to recovering truth as the foundation of democracy.

**Activities:** At the core of the project is a collaborative laboratory—a space and process—for scholars, journalists, civic leaders, and students to deliberate together and create new platforms for communicating about the role of truth in democratic life. Each year will focus on a different theme: “Recovering Truth in Political Life” (year 1); “Recovering Truth in the Academy” (year 2); and “Recovering Truth in Culture” (year 3). The “collaboratory” (or co-lab) will draw from interdisciplinary methods including theology, religious studies, philosophy, political thought, and ethics to examine assumptions—and advance new proposals—concerning the accessibility, nature, and meanings of truth. These ideas will be placed in dialogue with the vital ways of discerning and disseminating truth in the natural and social sciences, the arts, law, history, and, especially, journalism. The co-lab encompasses a rich array of activities including seminars, workshops, [social media](#) and [websites](#), visiting speakers and fellows, video and podcast series, graduate fellowships, and publications in popular media outlets. These activities will initiate new conversations about religion and democracy, examine how truth is conceived and constructed in the media, and foster public scholarship that strengthens civic life.