

## Article

# Adventism and Mediatization of Fake News Becoming a Church

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**Abstract:** This article explores the becoming-church of fake news against the background of the rise of the mediatization of faith and religious beliefs through classic media supports, such as newspapers, magazines, and journals, between 1840 and 1863 in the United States. The analysis focuses on the expression of Seventh-day Adventist Church beliefs in the Adventist press before 1863. The observation of this corpus follows the construction of the “narrative” of fake news from the story propagated by William Miller. The aim is to understand how the Seventh-day Adventist Church was created in the media from the fake news of William Miller. The article shows that the mediatization of William Miller’s fake news made the Seventh-day Adventist Church appear as the embodiment of an agnostic movement, as the material trace of a cultural expression of romanticism, but also as a spiritual organization, with a social and auxiliary political vocation.

**Keywords:** fake news; mediatization; myth; religion; the Seventh-day Adventist Church



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## 1. Introduction: Context, Approach, and Method

In 1832, Poultney’s Morning Star lodge suspended its activity, and William Miller, former grand master of this lodge, publicly made known his Adventist beliefs previously reserved only for his fellow Freemasons (J. White 1875, pp. 59–64).<sup>1</sup> William Miller’s approach was fundamentally centered on the announcement of the imminent return of Christ in 1843. However, this announcement was and remains historically resounding fake news: the return of Christ did not take place either in 1843 or in 1844. Later, Adventist rhetoric—“Present Truth”—showed a major concern for the rationalization of the original fake news. In this context, what makes the mediatization of this fake news quite special is the fact that it is the socio-historical foundation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA Church): “In 1844, fake news was the catalyst for the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And, over the years, church members have been caught out by it” (Bridcutt 2019). This empirical observation, thus formulated in 2019 by the Adventist press itself—“Adventist Record”—implicitly induces the theoretical legitimacy of an “actualization” (Lévy 2013) in terms of scientific explanation which constitutes the main research question of this article: How can fake news become a church against the background of the rise of mediatization of faith and religious beliefs?

It should be noted that the notion of fake news currently refers to news that is fabricated and disseminated via digital social media or represents a polemical generic term intended to discredit traditional news media. The former interpretation is particularly common among academics and journalists, and the latter is common among some politicians. The phenomenon of fake news seems to characterize the era of digital media, digital platforms, and artificial intelligence. However, it is not only an effect of the digital turn, but of a media turn linked to the transmission of information; a social, political, economic, and religious discourse; or a vision of the world via the media, starting from books and extending to mass media and the Internet. Therefore, it existed before the Internet because the false, the fictitious, the manipulation, and the rumor have always existed without being specific to our contemporary societies and their digital turn. The virality of a speech, the distorted story, and the interaction between the true, the false, and the fictitious are

consubstantial to any media society through the specificity of the respective medium. It is, therefore, from this perspective, already examined by consistent scholarly work (Pinker 2020), that we test our hypothesis, which aims to account for the intersections between truth, falsehood, and fiction in the field of religion and, very particularly, the founding stories of certain denominations, in this case the Seventh-day Adventist Church, from its founding doctrinal history emerging in 19th-century media societies already known for their viral quality (Winston and Winston 2021; Bourdin and Le Bras 2018; Froissart 2002). The aim here is not to account for the way in which fake news can be conceptualized through this case study, but to illustrate the virality as a type of communication based on mechanisms specific to disinformation, with a simplified character and an emotional and decontextualization potential, “the result of the adaptation to the diffusion constraints of the various media ecosystems where communication occurs” (Tarde 1895, p. 201). From this perspective, the virality must be understood as a fact of transmission which is based on the symbolic effectiveness of ideas carried by words such as “the preaching of Urban II in Clermont, which throws bands of pilgrims on the road, then whole armies could have given birth to the first crusade; (...) the posting by a German Augustinian monk of ninety-five theses in Latin in the village of Wittenberg could have given birth to the Reformation, that is to say civil wars, new states, a capitalist boom in the north of Europe etc.; (...) the Communist Manifesto could have given birth to a communist system” (Debray 1994, p. 20). It is therefore a question of showing that fake news is not only the monopoly of media productions, but also systematic constructions that interweave fiction, truth, and falsehood and which are then naturalized by being put in the media, that is to say, which become institutionalized through propagation and diffusion according to media logics. More precisely, it is a question of highlighting the symbolic effectiveness of William Miller’s fake news as a fact of transmission, because “to transmit is to organize, and to organize is to prioritize. These are institutional and anthropological invariants: when we want to transmit ideas, we create a medium (a magazine, a book, etc.) and we organize a group, and thereby define the boundaries of those who are inside and those who are outside, but also the hierarchy of the group” (Ruano-Borbalan 2002).

Therefore, in this article, we will use this historical perspective on fake news. In a broad sense, fake news is a virality that arises from the intersections between truth, falsehood, and fiction. In a limited sense, fake news is “deceptive content (or fake news) that can be defined as: untrue (false, fake), partly true (...), or unconfirmed information (... )” (Grynkó and Baeriswyl 2023, p. 186; see also Aspiriadis 2023; Ehrl 2023). More precisely, we use a typology of fake news resulting from a combination of contextual fake news based on real information/real content, but distorted/distorted by false facts; viral fake news arising from the intersections between truth, falsehood, and fiction; and manipulated fake news, content that distorts facts and the veracity of information. That said, the intentionality of lying does not necessarily characterize fake news, even if it can allow a distinction between provoked fake news and spontaneous fake news. What irreducibly characterizes all fake news is the adherence—not always for different reasons—of the promoter and the peddler of lies to false beliefs. They do not think a priori of spreading a lie. They transmit information that they believe to be true, or at least that they do not consider a priori to be false. Fake news “can come from individuals with ‘good reasons’ (Boudon 1990, 1995) to believe in the information they disseminate” (Dauphin 2019, p. 22).

The existing literature has attempted to answer the question of *how fake news is the foundation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* by highlighting explanations which relate more to the mystical, theological, and ideological order, or which are simply oriented by an explanation for confessional use (E. White 1861; Land 1986; Syme 1973; Knight 1999; Oliver 2007; Reynaud 2016). Contrary to these quasi-traditional thesis, the answers given here to the question of “how William Miller’s fake news became the Seventh-day Adventist Church” are part of an approach that considers mediatization as a theoretical framework for analysis and interpretation (Tudor and Bratosin 2021), an approach which shows that the institutional construction was forged on the basis of a media propagation of this fake news, particularly with the tools and support of the Adventist press of the respective time.

Our approach to the study of the origins of the Adventist Church, therefore, consists of highlighting the role of this media narrative based on fake news in the creation of this neo-Protestant movement.

In order to explain the epistemological framework of mediatization used in the present research, some contextual elements are necessary.

Current hypermedia societies pose the problem of understanding current changes in the context of the urgency of the unprecedented growth of digital technology. In the 2010s, a transversal theoretical approach which explained and provided elements for a better understanding of the past and contemporary phenomena related to media development began to be formalized under the theories of mediatization. This innovative perspective in communication theories aimed to raise awareness of the problems generated by the long-term cumulative historical effect of media growth, culminating in the digital turn and the development of digital and platform media products (Lundby 2009; Couldry and Hepp 2013; Deacon and Stanyer 2014; Strömbäck 2008; Deuze 2011; Gomes 2016). Two schools are at the origin of this approach under construction: “institutionalist”, which means, by mediatization, an alignment to logics of the media, and “social constructivist”, which understands “mediatization” as a process through which the evolution of information and communication technologies leads to “transformations of the communicative construction of the culture and society”. These schools lay the foundations for a phenomenological approach which takes into account the role of media in the construction of society through the prism of the history of the media, which passes through mediatization such as mechanization, electronization, and digitalization.<sup>2</sup> With digitalization, societies have arrived at a moment of radical mediatization which inevitably penetrates all of human life (Couldry and Hepp 2013; Tudor and Ozon 2023). Therefore, mediatization is understood in this article as an adaptation of the different systems and domains of reality—social, cultural, political, economic, religious, etc.—to the logic of the media, classical and digitalized, and also as a process where the evolution of information and communication technologies (from Gutenberg print to Artificial Intelligence) leads to transformations in the communicative construction of culture and society (cf. Bratosin 2020).

In this context, we used a mediological analysis which consisted of “the establishment, case by case, of correlations [...] between the symbolic activities of a human group [...], its forms of organization and its mode of entry, archiving and circulation of traces. (...) [having] as a working hypothesis that this last level exerts a decisive influence on the first two. The symbolic productions at a moment cannot be explained independently of the technologies of memory in use at the same moment. This means that a dynamic of thought is inseparable from a physics of traces” (Debray 1994, pp. 21–22). More precisely, this analysis focuses on the expression of Adventist beliefs in the Adventist press before 1863 by considering seven media forms of transmission: (1) presentations, (2) debates, (3) explanations of the meaning of signs and rules of interpretation (signs and hermeneutics), (4) images and diagrams, (5) poetry and music, (6) courses, and (7) announcements and correspondence.

The analyzed corpus is composed of seven newspaper titles (*Signs of the Times*, 20 March 1840–13 March 1841; *Advent Herald*, 14 August 1844–16 October 1844; *Midnight Cry*, 17 January 1842–20 April 1843; *Western Midnight Cry*, 9 December 1843–7 February 1845; *The Day-Star*, 18 February 1845–28 February 1846; *Present Truth*, July 1849–November 1850; *Adventist Review*, August 1850–November 1850; *Review and Herald*, 1 November 1850–26 May 1863) published before 21 May 1863<sup>3</sup>, which include, combined, a total of 693 issues. The objective of the approach is to show how mediatization of the fake news of William Miller (cf. Bridcutt 2019) was an act of formation and organization of sensitive data. In this perspective, the experience of this act will be considered as an irreducible phenomenon that accounts for a “kind of experience or test of reality which remains completely foreign to the form of explanation and scientific interpretation, and which one finds wherever the being reached in perception, instead of consisting of things or simple objects, approaches us in the mode of the existence of a living subject” (Cassirer 1972, t. 3, p. 78). Within the

limits of this theoretical and empirical framework, the transmission of William Miller's fake news was considered according to the following coding scheme (Table 1):

**Table 1.** Transmission scheme.

Transmission Apparatus	Transmission Fact
Message	Fake news
Forms of social organization	Adventist press (organized matter) Adventist movement (materialized organization)
Medium	Mediasphere
Mediation	Preaching

The qualitative approach to content analysis that complements the method is understood as "a generic term designating all the methods of analyzing documents, most often textual, allowing to explain the *meanings* contained and/or the manner in which they achieve *the effect of meaning*" (according to [Mucchielli 2009](#), p. 815).

The restitution of the results will discuss, at the same time, two categories of data corresponding, respectively, to the two conditions met to produce the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the media from William Miller's fake news: (a) the interpretation of socio-political and economic news of the time in the myth paradigm and (b) the direct relationship of expression with the sensory and affective worlds.

## 2. Mediatization of the Interpretation of Socio-Political and Economic News

The mediatized expression of Adventist beliefs between 1840 and 1863 constitutes a corpus of "revelations" or an offer of information that takes up not only the fake news of William Miller, but also the history of this fake news, at different levels and on different registers. Originally deist-inspired, the construction of the "narrative" of fake news induces an evaluation of social reception through the activation of an agnostic attitude towards mythic and religious discursive content. This is the first structural mutation of fake news in its process of transformation into the Seventh-day Adventist Church: fake news becomes a myth. The approach does not pose problems in terms of categories in the mediatization process because "the myth is not fundamentally and definitively opposed to the logos" ([Bratosin 2007](#), p. 48), and it goes unnoticed by a certain public since "It is extremely difficult (...) to succeed in truly distinguishing the myth from the logos" ([Cassirer 1972](#), t. 2, p. 12). The concrete and inescapable consequence of this mutation is the promotion of the paradigm of myth as a framework for the intelligibility of the Adventist message, that is to say, the promotion of "a system of thought which articulates both a symbolic framework directing the perception of things, a sociological construction guiding the questioning and the research process and, finally, an interpretative technical construction, a paradigmatic artifact made up of a set of rules, tools and concrete procedures" ([Bratosin 2007](#), p. 24). The production of this framework of intelligibility which forms the basis of the process of transforming William Miller's fake news into the Seventh-day Adventist Church involves two moments, which are separated and at the same time linked by the great Adventist "disappointment" of 22 October 1844.

Before 22 October 1844, and more particularly at the beginning of the 1830s, when William Miller began to make public the results of his studies on biblical prophecy, the symbolic framework guiding the perception of things made sense in an English-speaking religious context where "reason, not emotion, had been the lodestar of the Evangelicals (...) for their ideal of a Christian society" ([Bebbington 2003](#), p. 81). In this context, "the pious expectation of the imminent personal return of Christ, to establish his millennial kingdom on earth and personally supervise the evangelization of the world, was easily assimilated into a Romantic outlook that readily accepted that the supernatural could break into the natural world" ([Brown 1997](#), p. 24; [Bebbington 1988](#), p. 104). Thus, in reaction to the American evangelical religious context, "Adventist hopes (...) reflected the Romantic

yearning for more intense spiritual experiences" (Brown 1997, p. 25). Consequently, Adventism appears culturally as the product of Romanticism, which, in the 1820s and 1830s, had a clear impact on the way of considering a religious phenomenon: "The intellectual interpretation of religious truth was thus becoming more subjective and belief was justified in terms of the 'place of feeling and intuition in human perception' and 'the importance of nature and history for human experience'. Religion was seen in terms of a heightened supernaturalism that fostered new attitudes towards the church and its work, public issues, and the purposes of God" (Brown 1997, p. 24). Indeed, by revisiting the religious relationship of human beings with the world, Romanticism then gives itself as a means of exploring the myth that it proposes to reconstruct in the opposite direction to the allegories of its founding narratives. The theoretical proposal made by Friedrich Schlegel in his "Interview on Poetry" in 1800 (Lacoue-Labarthe and Jen-Luc 1978) perfectly illustrates this approach. It is a question of considering the myth as a tautology, that is to say of transforming the symbols into myth and of making the myths quite simply say the things that they tell. In the specific case of Adventism, the details of the mythic-religious thought on which the framework of intelligibility of Adventist beliefs rests is presented by William Miller in an autobiographical letter regarding his mental journey from deism to Christian faith with the imminent return of Jesus, published in the first issue of *Signs of the Times* (Miller 1840b, p. 8). Obviously, such an interpretative approach does not leave room for reason or, more exactly, for the suspicion that a symbolic appreciation given its circumstantial subjectivity could always taint the "truth" of the "revelation" to the point of transforming it into fake news. In the paradigm of myth, Adventists "believed the dragons, beasts, and angels of the apocalyptic menagerie were, in a specific and univocal manner, symbolic divine forecasts of the political and religious forces that would play an important part in the history of salvation (...) The American Republic, on the other hand, was the "two-horned beast" of Revelation 13:11–18, which, para doxically, provided the benevolent setting of freedom for the rise of Adventism and yet would become the agency for the confederated forces of evil in the climactic struggle of human history" (Morgan 2001, p. 11).

After 22 October 1844, when the mediatization of Adventist expression had to face the non-Adventist mediatization of the "great disappointment",<sup>4</sup> the Adventist symbolic framework guiding the interpretation of current affairs was reframed more in the paradigm of the myth and, more precisely, by a *mise en abyme* in the myth of the State (Cassirer 1993) in its 19th-century American version. In the issue of *Midnight Cry* published immediately after the disappointment suffered by the Adventists on 22 October 1844—in a general media context of denunciation of the Millerite fake news concerning the return of Christ—this positioning is announced in the following terms: "Of what crime against the laws of our land of boasted freedom, are we guilty (...)? Reading our Bibles, and noting the signs of the present time! (...) Our fathers fled from a land of religious intolerance and oppression—toiled and bled to rear in this once wilderness world the pillars of a Constitution, into each one of which, was interwoven a glorious privilege, for generations then unborn—the privilege of worshiping God according, to the dictates of their own consciences. It was this that gave birth to the American Republic. And yet the public press—the guardian of this "cradle of Liberty," have combined their influence against a body of people that have come before the public with their Bibles, and their Bibles only" (*Western Midnight Cry* 1844, p. 1).

Later, in May 1863, just before the historic date of the organization of the SDA Church, the Adventist press reiterated and, henceforth, in some way formalized the commitment of Adventists to the framework of mythical intelligibility conceived in the Morning Star lodge and proposed by William Miller lamenting the misunderstanding of "signs of the times": "Within these thirty years, numberless publications have issued from the press, in this country and elsewhere, calling upon the Christians of all classes to be ready to welcome their Lord. But who attends to these calls? The great masses of professing Christians are indifferent to these monitions, being satisfied, like the foolish virgins, in having the lamp of the profession without oil in their vessels. The signs of the times have no meaning for them". (*Adventist Review* 1863, p. 179) From this perspective, the problem of reception

posed to the non-Adventist public by William Miller's fake news was shifted to the social and political impact of the mediatization of this "revelation". Also, this perspective made it possible not only to safeguard the mythical framework of Adventist intelligibility of the news, but to perpetuate it in the discursive world covered by the syntagm "spirit of prophecy", which even became one of the fundamental Adventist beliefs ([Fundamental Beliefs 2020](#)).

The second constitutive element of the framework of mythical intelligibility mediatized through the expression of Adventist beliefs is the sociological construction guiding the public questioning, as well as the process of the search for meaning mediatized by the fake news of William Miller, because "The picture of Adventism disseminated by the media draws on a long tradition rooted in the newspaper coverage of the Millerites in the 1830s and 1840s" ([Bull and Lockhar 2006](#), p. 2). This social construction of Adventism, like all religious constructions, is realized "at the level of ideology and discourse as well as that of myths, symbols and rites" ([Beckford 2003](#), p. 373). It is attached to a mythic-religious thought through which "is realized the philosophical metamorphosis of an ideological conviction into a truth (...) that can be instrumentalized" ([Chaumont 2008](#), p. 97). More precisely, the social construction of Adventism concentrates all these constitutive elements in the mediatization of a separation that is not theological, but socio-cultural, centered fundamentally on the question of the Sabbatarianism of the seventh day: "The 'new rule' of seventh-day Sabbatarianism divided Adventists from non-Adventists at numerous fundamental points: Adventists from Protestants, who sought "blue law" legislation on behalf of Sunday observance; Adventists from trade unionists, who "conspired" with Catholics and Protestants for Sunday laws to shorten the work week; Adventists from evolutionists, who destroyed the literal creation week for which the sabbath served as a memorial" ([Butler 1986](#), p. 62). On the discursive level, the media expression par excellence of this separation, which is the key to the sociological construction of Adventism, is centered in an obsessive way on the myth of Babylon, this city with a negative symbolic connotation in the political mythology of 19th-century popular American Christianity ([Zajchowski 2019](#)). Indeed, between 1831 and 1845, the media coverage of the Adventist movement in the sense of the famous "Come out of Babylon" transmuted the original ecumenism of the Adventists into "come-outerism" ([Judd 1986](#)) without a possible alternative. Thus, in 1843, Adventist press clearly marked this separation in the following terms: "If you intend to be found a Christian when Christ appears, come out of Babylon, and come out Now" ([Fitch 1843](#), p. 10). In this context, the culmination of the sociological construction constituting the mythical framework of intelligibility proposed by Adventism through the mediatization of its beliefs was indicated by two symbolic syntagms: (a) "remnant", a syntagm taken into account by many studies (for example, [Teel 1995](#); [Hachalinga 1997](#); [Pfandl 1997](#); [Rodríguez 2000](#); [Chung 2005](#); [Owusu-Antwi 2010](#); [Lazić 2019](#)) and (b) "Advent people", a syntagm frequently used to sociologically designate the Millerites in the texts published in the newspapers of the period observed here. Without doubt, the mediatized construction of Adventism as "remnant" was the major ideological opening that led to the transformation of the Millerite movement into the Seventh-day Adventist Church: "When the Millerite predictions had not come true and the Great Disappointment shattered both their immediate hope and their unity, the tendency of Adventists to view themselves as "the remnant" increased. (...) The self-understanding of "remnant" became so common in that period that the more radical Adventists soon began to use it in contradistinction to what they called "Laodicea," i.e., those Adventists who organized themselves in a quasi-denominational manner in 1845" ([Höschele 2013](#), p. 277). As for the syntagm "Advent people", its meaning retains a strong symbolic charge in relation to the mythic-religious interpretation of Christian and biblical narrations concerning the city of Babylon. Thus, in the Millerite press, one can read many texts which oppose "Advent people" to the inhabitants of the city of Babylon, such as, for example: "The Advent people have come out of Babylon, meaning thereby an oppressive ecclesiastical despotism, and they will not readily place their necks again under the yoke, of "bondage" ([Pickands 1845](#), p. 9), as well

as “... an entire separation takes place between God’s “people” and Babylon,” between the “Kingdom of Heaven,” and the “Political and Ecclesiastical world,” between those who “worship God” and those who “worship the Beast and his Image” ([Chaplin 1846](#), p. 62). In the sociological construction of Adventism, the syntagm “Advent people” calls for the transformation of the informal organization of the initial Adventist movement into an institution organized around the belief in the Saturday Sabbath as a sign of separation from “Babylonian” organizations who observe the Sunday Sabbath. An example is the Adventist response<sup>5</sup> when “on 28 July 1853, the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference passed a resolution to enquire about the beliefs of the “*Seventh day [sic] Advent people*” ([Campbell 2017](#), p. 201). Thus, referring to Adventist publications that have extensively covered the subject, this response points out that: “It is now a little more than eight years since the Sabbath was first introduced among the Advent people; and as a people, they rejected it. A few stood firm amidst violent opposition. The Sabbath cause did not advance with us but very little up to 1849. At that time it began to rise and its progress has been steady and firm till the present. (...) As a people we are brought together from divisions of the Advent body, and from the various denominations, holding different views on some subjects; yet, thank Heaven, the Sabbath is a mighty platform on which we can all stand united” ([J. White 1853](#), p. 52).

Finally, the third constitutive element of the framework of mythical intelligibility mediatised by the Adventist expression of Millerite beliefs is an interpretative technical construct, a paradigmatic artifact consisting of a set of rules, tools, and concrete procedures. This construction has appeared partially or entirely in terms of presentations, lectures, or debates since the beginning of the publication of the Millerite beliefs in all the journals of the movement. For example, the text by William Miller unveiled—on 17 January 1842 in the first issue of *Midnight Cry*—its “Rules of interpretation” ([Miller 1842](#), p. 4). This paradigmatic artifact became the object of media debate, raising fewer questions of hermeneutics and more socio-cultural, political, and communicational questions. Thus, the debate focused on the right of any person, whatever his education or intellectual condition, to produce his own interpretation of the Bible under conditions where the meaning of the text is not a production of the mind, but an artifact given to the thought: “The question may arise, from the (...) rules of interpretation, whether the common people have the right to interpret the Bible for themselves. (...). Search or not search, read or not read, THE SENSE IS FIXED,—it is at the peril of their preferment to VARY” ([Miller 1840c](#), p. 25). This social abandonment of the interpretation of the Bible in the world of popular imagination and experience, of lived experience, indicates the strong proximity between the Millerite framework of mythical intelligibility and the specific political environment of the United States in the 19th century. The arguments in favor of this technical framework of interpretation are not due to the reason of a logical demonstration of its objectivity, but to the self-proclamation of an indisputable legitimacy given by the possibility of establishing similarities of biblical historical and doctrinal order. Adventist disregard for scientific rules of interpretation is embedded in Millerite discourse regarding reading the news of the time: “The Pharisees and Sadducees were two of the most learned and popular sects among the Jews; many of them were scribes, lawyers, doctors, and teachers of the law; yet so perfectly blinded, that they could not or would not apply the simplest rules of interpretation to the law or prophets. They would apply the rules of common observation and common sense to the weather, but neither the one nor the other was used in understanding the Scriptures. They were well versed in the skill to tell the weather for the morrow, but had no skill in the promises, prophecies, and word of God” ([Miller 1840a](#), p. 3). Adventists also wonder in their media whether other Christians from the Historic Reform Movement of the 16th century may have a technical framework of interpretation different from that adopted by the Millerites: “How then has it come to pass, in these days of degeneracy, that so many who profess to rejoice in the principles and practices of that great Reformer do now so stoutly maintain, that ‘principles of interpretation’ ‘must be imposed on Holy Scripture,’ and that the word, of God must not be left free, to express its own meaning, in the language

which God has been pleased to use” ([Fitch 1844](#), p. 75). And this position of systematic refusal of reason in the face of objective evidence culminated and continued after 1844—that is to say, even after the obvious failure of this technical framework of interpretation—by the matching of interpretation of lived reality and actuality with Adventist doctrine: “Seeing these errors, I was led to see that my rules of interpretation for the word of God was not correct, for I had not interpreted the one Testament in conformity with the other: Hence I commenced reading my Bible as though I had never read it before, in relation to the “2d Advent doctrine” ([Christian 1845](#), p. 34).

The mediatization of this set of rules, tools, and concrete procedures of interpretation reinforced the headlong rush in the defense of Millerite fake news as “present truth”, which must de facto be a social body, an organization, a church, who can assume it as an identity and represent it. More exactly, the mediatization of this set of rules “produces” the Adventist myth, that is to say, the similarity of the non-place incessantly, because it must be remembered that the myth is “a discourse relating to the place/not-place of concrete existence, a story cobbled together with elements taken from common places, an allusive and fragmentary story whose holes fit together on the social practices it symbolizes” ([de Certeau 1990](#), p. 154).

First Adventists mediated the interpretation of the socio-political and economic events of their time through the prism of William Miller’s fake news, seeing in them signs of the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. These mediated interpretations of socio-political and economic events shaped the beliefs and practices of these first Adventists, reinforcing their conviction in the imminence of the return of Jesus Christ, giving them a religious identity and distinctly marking their social commitment.

### 3. Mediatization of the Relationship with the Sensory and Affective Worlds

Concomitant with an understanding of immediate actuality in the paradigm of myth, a second communicational mutation—that is to say, of the production of meaning—which favored the transformation of Millerite fake news into the church was the mediatization of the reportedly direct relationship maintained by William Miller and his followers with the sensitive and affective worlds of American society in the first half of the 19th century, a relationship whose translation into action consisted of the mediatization of the socio-cultural and political activism of Adventist “militants”.

When we speak of the emergence and spread of Adventism in the United States in the 19th century, we must always keep in mind three historical contextual characteristics of Christianity without which the understanding of the sociocultural phenomena of this period is likely to be partial and little in line with the reality experienced by the Americans of that time. The first characteristic concerns the lay character of Protestant American Christianity. The origin of the secularization of American Christianity can be found in 18th-century English Romanticism. Poets and philosophers like Henry Needler, James Thomson, David Mallett, Isaac Hawkins Browne, Henry Brooke, Henry Baker, Mark Akenside, John Gilbert Cooper, and James Harris, etc., “sing of a more or less Neo-Platonic Divine Spirit of truth, beauty, and love who has thought the universe into being by an exercise of creative imagination. “Nature” is the universe as permeated by this benignly fecund spirit. The creation is full, complex, and richly variegated; but it is also a perfectly integrated and harmonious whole. Man is a part of the universal harmony. His bosom is full of expansive benevolent impulses akin to those possessed by his Creator” ([Fairchild 1940](#), p. 20). American secular Christianity is not a Christianity without faith in God, because in American collective thinking, “believing” is something good and therefore, culturally, it is always gratifying for an American to seize the good. From this Romantic perspective, secular American Christianity in the 19th century appears as a general belief in which God is not denied, but simply restricted to a deity who offered persecuted Christians on the old continent a welcoming country and a constitution guaranteeing to each person the inalienable right to choose to believe in the god of his choice, a right, moreover, synonymous with the right to life, liberty, and happiness. Taking this context

into account—which, in its broadening, strongly engages deist sentiments and pantheist aspirations against the background of a recognition of the transcendence and immanence of the divine—makes it possible to understand and explain the secularism of Miller’s Adventism, but also—later—a number of tensions that marked the movement, such as the John Harvey Kellogg case (See [Wilson 2014](#)). At the same time, consideration of the secular character of Adventist Christianity by William Miller—himself sensitive to deism—and his followers offers a theoretical justification and, above all, a pragmatic basis for the transformation of Millerite fake news into an Adventist church. This justification and base were built by the mediatization of secular Adventist Christianity.

The second characteristic of the historical context in which William Miller’s fake news became the Seventh-day Adventist Church concerns the political anchoring of American Christianity. Indeed, unlike European political engagement, which is fundamentally ideological, American political engagement is intrinsically pragmatic, shifting, and dependent above all on specific interests that are concretely inscribed in the issues of the moment ([Almond 1948](#)). Thus, when William Miller publicized his fake news, the opposition between the Whig and Democratic parties mobilized American opinion and evangelists of all faiths. In this public debate, the boundaries between religion and politics are ambiguous and, therefore, very difficult to read. Both in form and content, the practices and discourses of evangelists and politicians are indistinctly part of a commitment that is both religious and political: “Most evangelicals were politically engaged, although they were not monolithic in their party affiliations. Those who viewed politics as a means of advancing their reform agendas tended to join the Whig Party, agreeing with its vision of an activist role for government, including the responsibility to uphold public morality. For evangelical Whigs, the old Puritan idea still loomed large: the state was a moral entity, and Christians had a duty to influence it. Democratic evangelicals, on the other hand, tended to believe that government should be neutral, and that regenerated individuals should voluntarily regulate their own behavior. While they may have disagreed on the proper affiliation for evangelicals, both Democratic and Whig evangelicals would have affirmed Finney’s statement: ‘In a popular government, politics are an important part of religion. No one can possibly be benevolent or religious, to the full extent of his obligations, without concerning himself, to a greater or less extent, with the affairs of human government’” ([Harder 2014](#), p. 49). In this context, for very different reasons, some preachers—a minority—and their followers considered political involvement inappropriate for true Christians and supported or encouraged political abstention.

Adventists following William Miller are sometimes considered too hastily to be among these political abstainers because of their belief in the imminent return of Christ, which, therefore, made politics unnecessary considering that the world would soon be destroyed ([Harder 2014](#)). But in reality, they never manifestly distanced themselves from the partisan spirit because it led—as other religious sensibilities maintained—to an attitude which went against the desired harmony in a Christian society, because it promoted moral degradation, dishonest behavior, or the weakening of the churches. Nor did they withdraw from the political world for theological reasons or simply for faith, like some Presbyterians, for example, who believed that the American system of government was essentially non-Christian. Therefore, it would be a mistake to conclude that apocalyptic pessimism eradicated all Adventist–Millerite impulses toward social reform, for the passion for justice and righteousness in society remained constitutive of Adventist expression as a fundamental dimension of apocalyptic hope. Adventists believed that preparation for the Second Coming was the best way to eradicate sin in society, and they mediatized the fear that this preparation would not be widespread enough to transform human society before Christ’s return. The mediatization of the Adventist political expression is, however, marked by an obvious ambiguity that preserves and develops the “fake” spirit of the Millerite message in the process of changing towards the institutional state of the Church. Thus, in the same editorial that declared Adventist neutrality in politics, Smith outlined the fundamental principles he saw being contested in society: republicanism versus tyranny, freedom versus slavery,

temperance versus intemperance, Protestantism versus Catholicism. He described these principles as “essential elements of religion,” and when such principles appeared in politics, be asserted, “every Christian knows or should know which side he is on”. The “sympathies of all merciful and humane persons must be with those who desire to see the chains of the bondman broken, and the slave go free”. The actions of “Border Ruffians” in Kansas and the “Pro-Slavery Demagogues”—generally supported, Smith noted, by Democrats—“must create some feeling in the breasts of those who have formerly engaged actively in these contests; though they now feel compelled to confine themselves to questions of paramount importance to this age of the world” ([Morgan 2001](#), p. 27). This ambiguity is an Adventist choice of public communication that takes the risk of promoting and institutionalizing William Miller’s fake news in favor of the divisions that took place in the 1830s and 1840s in the three major Christian denominations—Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist—regarding slavery. These divisions, which fractured the Churches then strongly anchored in the political debate, led to the emergence of new political commitments of various ecclesiastical bodies, commitments which played a decisive role in the political reconfiguration and, in particular, in the subsequent creation of the Republican Party. Undoubtedly, for the sake of unity, Adventist political expression developed its credibility through its own media by taking into account the many sensitivities governed by the borders resulting from these divisions.<sup>6</sup> More precisely, the credibility of William Miller’s fake news will always be produced in this context by both religious and political content, but in the logic of the media and not in the logic of civil religion, which had originally inscribed it in the public sphere.

The third characteristic of the historical context in which William Miller’s fake news became the Seventh-day Adventist Church concerns the social anchoring of American Christianity. The decades which preceded the middle of the 19th century in America were socially marked by two major upheavals which opened up an enormous field of activism to Adventism and made it possible to blur the gap in objectivity contained and peddled by the message of William Miller. The first upheaval was in the order of culture. The rise of the printing press led to the massive and rapid transmission of information, mainly through newspapers and magazines, but also through brochures and books, and led to the emergence of mass culture. The appearance of mass print culture integrated the already existing moral culture as well as social constraints to thus become a natural part of the social order. Concretely, the readers of the various products of the printing press—who cultivated guilt and fear of bad behavior—considered that alcohol, prostitution, gambling, etc., are sources of suffering and social disorder. In this perspective, religious leaders, including a growing number of secular reformers, middle-class women, influential believers, and political figures, believed that they could achieve the construction of a perfect society thanks to the massive mediatization of information (see [Royot and Ruel 1996](#)).

The second upheaval was in the order of society. It was the preparatory moment of the transition from the social activism of Christian communities to social Christianity ([Phillips 1996](#); [Smith 2004](#); [Carter 2015](#)) against the background of urbanization, immigration, and industrialization which marked the second half of the 19th century in America. In order to save the corrupt world, as the press presented it, but also as people lived it, a multitude of reformers made it their mission to improve morality in American society by teaching and helping people to live a decent way. To this end, since the desire for bodily enjoyment could be dangerous for society, lead to crime, or generate social chaos, many programs appeared and were promoted aimed at temperance, sexuality, and women’s dress reform, but also women’s rights, workers’ rights, etc. These programs were attached to associations, foundations, or companies that encouraged and developed volunteering, the gift of oneself in favor of one’s neighbors ([Mead 1953](#); [Rosenberg 1973](#); [Sizer 1979](#); [Nederveen Pieterse 1991](#); [Walters \[1978\] 1997](#); [Bratt 1998](#); [Morgan 2001](#); [Blanco 2014](#); [Harder 2014](#); [Almond 1948](#)).

The direct relationship with the sensitive and affective worlds (see [Dufour-Kowalska 1996](#)) maintained by the movement sparked by William Miller’s fake news was remarkable for its pragmatism. Millerite Adventism perfectly integrated into its objectives the two related upheavals observed above: “Voluntarism offered the practical means to millennial

perfection. At the outset, Millerites might have been taken for one of the many voluntary associations of the day. Like the voluntary societies, they eschewed sectarianism for an inter-denominationalism through which they remained, for the most part, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Christians. And in this era of the multi-reformer, they recruited antislavery, temperance, and education advocates". Miller, who had been a radical abolitionist, viewed these benevolent reforms as forerunners of his own movement. Joseph Bates, an erstwhile sea captain who organized a local temperance society as early as 1827 and an antislavery society in the mid-1830s, saw Millerism as the 'fountainhead' from which effective moral reform flowed" ([Butler 1986](#), p. 54).

The mediatization of Millerite fake news in relation to the sensitive and emotional worlds of the 19th century plays a crucial role in the birth and spread of the Adventist movement. By influencing the perceptions, emotions, and values of individuals, media shaped the ideologies and doctrines that formed the basis of what would become the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

#### 4. Conclusions

Two concluding observations serve as an opening for the actualization of the "present truth" of the "material becoming-forces of symbolic forms" ([Debray 1994](#), p. 17) in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

First, the present study emphasizes that William Miller's fake news has become the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a socio-political and economic context where (a) the social sacred is held by the church through the prophets, clerics and dogmas; where (b) the engine of obedience is the faith with its registers going as far as fanaticism; where (c) the legitimate reference is God; where (d) the top of the attraction is occupied by the mysteries, by the frightening and by the incredible; and where (e) the symbolic authority belongs to the invisible. This is a context that has since been conquered entirely and irreversibly by the logic of the media.

Finally, the results stress that the mediatization of William Miller's fake news has become the Seventh-day Adventist Church while historically proving the presence of superficial minds in a hurry to see the birth of a new Christian sect in the socio-administrative coming of this religious association (another neo-protestant movement or a church in the true sense of the term). The mediatization of William Miller's fake news makes the Seventh-day Adventist Church appear as the embodiment of an agnostic movement and as the material trace of a cultural expression of romanticism, but also as a spiritual organization with a social and auxiliary political vocation.

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#### Notes

- 1 For more details, see ([Bratosin 2020](#)), a research article which precedes the present study.
- 2 Mechanization corresponds to the invention of printing, of the written press and the typewriter; electronization to the development of electronic media in the 20th century such as radio, television, telephones, and digitization to the datafication, digital connectivity, and algorithmized digital media (cf. [Tudor and Ozon 2023](#)).
- 3 Date of creation of the representative association of Adventism in the United States.
- 4 After 22 October 1844, the media had a field day, ridiculing the Millerites and the failure of their predictions (i.e., "The world still hangs fire. The old planet is still on track, notwithstanding the efforts to 'stop 'er.'". [The Cleveland Plain Dealer 1844](#), October 30).
- 5 Response to the following letter from the Corresponding Secretary of the Seventh-day Baptist Central Association: "MR. JAMES WHITE, DEAR SIR: - At the sitting of the Seventh-day Baptist Central Association in Scott, last month, it was "resolved that we instruct our Corresponding Secretary to correspond with the Seventh-day Advent people, and learn their faith". As Corresponding Secretary of that body, I know of no more proper person to correspond with upon that subject than yourself, as I understand that you are the Editor of the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, the organ of that people. If you will afford me the

- desired information, you will greatly oblige. De Ruyter, N. Y., 28 July 1853. J. C. ROGER" (*Review and Herald* 4.7, 11 August 1853: 52–53).
- 6 James White wrote in the *Review and Herald*, 21 August 1860: "The political excitement of 1860 will probably run as high as it has for many years, and we would warn our brethren not to be drawn into it. We are not prepared to prove from the Bible that it would be wrong for a believer in the third message to go in a manner becoming his profession, and cast his vote. We do not recommend this, neither do we oppose. If a brother chooses to vote, we cannot condemn him, and we want the same liberty if we do not".

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