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Introduction

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Piraino, F.; Pasi, M.; Aspren, E.

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1 Introduction

Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories

Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, and Egil Asprem

Conspiracy theories have had a long presence in Western culture, often responding to anxieties caused by rapid social, political, or religious transformations. In the modern period, moments of extraordinary change such as the French and Russian Revolutions have inspired the creation of a plethora of conspiracy theories, attributing agency to mysterious and powerful secret societies (Roberts, 1972). Starting in the 2000s, conspiracy theories have become increasingly visible on the global stage, developing in different geographical and cultural contexts, and becoming so common in everyday language that they have been identified as a peculiar feature of contemporary societies (Robertson, Asprem and Dyrendal, 2018). Some authors have even suggested that we live in a ‘conspiratocracy’ (Jacobsen, 2011). These strong claims are difficult to verify (cf. Uscinski, DeWitt, and Atkinson, 2018), but what is certain is that conspiracy theories have moved from a marginal position to mainstream culture (Knight, 2000; Kellner, 2002; Melley, 2016).

The concept of ‘post-truth’, selected as word of the year in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries,¹ pairs with conspiracy theories, describing a fragmented public sphere where competing narratives and political discourses cannot even find common ground about the most elementary social and political facts. A post-truth narrative focuses on belief and emotion, challenging factual analysis. While the notion of post-truth may be new, the idea that truth is fluid, and fact and fiction are intertwined, will be familiar to anyone who has been researching conspiracy theories. A good example would be the famous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published in Russia in 1904 and spread worldwide, which described an alleged Jewish conspiracy against traditional society. As is well known, while the text was proven to be a forgery quickly enough, various anti-Semite activists continued to regard it as authentic or at least plausible (Taguieff, 2020). ‘Facts’ were unimportant; imagination, a desire to believe, and political drive were essential.

Conspiracy theories may be a defining trait of contemporary societies, but they are also a well-attested historical phenomenon. This book contributes to the growing literature on conspiracy theories by taking a historical perspective and relating contemporary phenomena to historical precursors. On the other hand, it also intends to bring attention to the important but still little explored *religious* dimension of conspiracy theories.

Before entering this complex field, we will begin by offering some key definitions. These should not be considered definitive but rather as working tools that can be adjusted to diverse specific contexts. In this pragmatic spirit, we can identify some common elements of a conspiracy theory:

- 1) The idea that an (elite) group operates in secret.
- 2) That this group aims at imposing its worldview and/or interests on wider society.
- 3) That this conspiracy, although extremely well crafted and therefore almost invisible, can be grasped through special ways of understanding the evidence of its existence.
- 4) That these ways of understanding involve a patterned form of suspicion, which often implies discrimination against a specific group (religious, ethnic, political), accused of being the instigator, the executor, or the collaborator (whether intentionally or as ‘useful idiots’) of the plan.

It can also be useful to distinguish between conspiracy theories and conspiracism. A conspiracy theory in its most basic meaning refers to a particular context, a particular group, and a particular narrative or story. Conspiracism, on the other hand, can be understood as a *Weltanschauung*, or a whole worldview in which conspiracy theories offer an explanation for everything that happens in society and that has happened in history. Agency is attributed to a ‘hidden and overwhelming’ power (Barkun, 2003, p. 3), which operates in the dark but leaves traces that can be grasped by those who know how to interpret and understand them. As a worldview then conspiracism (1) delineates and explains the evil forces at play in society, which take the form of (2) a malevolent organisation, acting covertly and/or with an element of secrecy. And (3) in this worldview nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected (Barkun, 2003, p. 6).

Several explanations have been offered to account for the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories and conspiracism in contemporary societies. A distrust of religious, political, economic, and scientific institutions can sometimes be based on reasonable arguments, and some conspiracies do exist (Pigden, 1995; Coady, 2012). Furthermore, scholars have argued that the ‘ontological insecurity’ of contemporary societies facilitates scepticism and paranoia:

[t]he omnipresence of these opaque systems in the life world of modern individuals does not merely raise insecurities about ‘what is real’ and ‘what is not’ in the external world, but even about the authenticity of one’s own subjective awareness.

(Aupers, 2012, p. 28)

This epistemological and ontological fragmentation and insecurity have been ridden by new actors, also called ‘millenarian entrepreneurs’ (Barkun, 2003, p. 234), capable of addressing these new cognitive, psychological, and political

needs. Alex Jones is a good example in the United States, disseminating conspiracy theories as and through journalism, politics, religion, and marketing.

Other explanations for the growing presence of conspiracy theories concern the new global challenges of climate change and the collapse in biodiversity. Some people look at these dramatic transformations as pointing to an apocalyptic future, and this intensifies their feeling of insecurity. For others, the radical solutions to climate change may induce a sense that one's identity is threatened, whether through the weakening of national sovereignty or through an attack on identity-defining lifestyles (such as eating meat or driving petrol cars). Existential insecurity also fuels 'paranoid politics' (Hofstadter, 1965), a political atmosphere characterised by a perception of imminent and overwhelming danger, which can be perceived in several political contexts. Frequent media dramatisation of deep-impact, large-scale phenomena, such as immigration, global pandemics, radical political activism, and hacker attacks, favours the emergence of conspiracy theories, especially via the Internet (Reyes and Smith, 2014). More particularly, the Covid-19 pandemic favoured conspiracy theories, not only due to the cognitive insecurity about the virus but also because it implied a social confinement which isolated people from family, work, and other social relations and boosted a massive consumption of social media, which may have reinforced prejudices and favoured paranoid behaviour (Berry et al., 2018; Johnson, 2018; Zimaitis, Degutis, and Urbonavicius, 2020).

Finally, conspiracy theories are spread through books, movies, and other media because they are entertaining, offering intricate plots and unexpected twists (good examples are the *Men in Black* film franchise and the TV series *X-Files* and *True Detective*). The relationship between the arts and conspiracy theories is deeper and more entwined; it is bidirectional and does not concern only contemporary societies. For example, Titus Livy's account of the Bacchanalian conspiracy (first chapter of this book) follows a number of conventions of ancient Roman comedy (Scafuoro, 1989), and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* draws on the satirical pamphlet *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* (Joly, 1864). Returning to contemporary times, David Icke's idea of a reptilian conspiracy against humanity may have been inspired by a story by Robert Howard published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (see Barkun, 2003, p. 121) and has an entertaining counterpart in the early 1980s TV series *V*, in which extra-terrestrial 'Visitors' land on planet Earth first disguised as normal human beings but then reveal their reptilian nature and their plans of global takeover. Icke has continued to strategically reference new relevant popular culture ever since, most notably *The Matrix* movies. More recently, QAnon's supporters exposed the alleged use of adrenochrome by a supposed paedo-satanic elite, which controls the world and has had former American president Donald Trump as one of its biggest enemies. According to them, adrenochrome is extracted by torturing children so that they produce adrenaline, and is used by this maleficent elite as an elixir of life. This conspiracy theory most probably draws from the novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Thompson, 1971) or from the movie adaptation by Terry Gilliam (1998),

in which one of the main characters describes adrenochrome as the ultimate drug produced by Satanist freaks.² Another recent example is the ‘anti-vax’ Covid-19 narrative based on the movie *I Am Legend* (Lawrence, 2007). According to this narrative, the transformation of humans into zombies in the movie due to a vaccination campaign is perceived as a warning sign that vaccination against Covid-19 should be rejected.³ Finally, both the QAnon conspiracy and the anti-zombie-vax narrative may be rapidly converted into a prank, a provocation, a test, a *détournement*, by their same supporters. In this perspective, the factual truth is not even relevant anymore; the aim is to challenge the perceived status quo and its authorities.

The intertwined relationship between artistic representations and conspiracy theories could be understood as evidence of the situationist idea that contemporary society is increasingly run on spectacle (Debord, 1967) and that the boundaries between social relations and artistic representations have broken down. At the same time, the fluid nature of truth, from fact to fiction, and from belief to prank, is not a prerogative of contemporary societies. Theorising conspiracies is a very common human phenomenon; fully fledged conspiracy theories have always existed and exist beyond the Western context. Hence, the present book takes a broader historical perspective on the topic. The book’s chapters discuss conspiracies in the 2nd century BCE, in the Middle Ages, and in modern and contemporary societies. Furthermore, they discuss conspiracies from a global perspective, with examples from Italy, Japan, Zambia, Egypt, and Norway, among others. Thus, the book adds support to the recognition that conspiracy theories are a transcultural aspect of human societies.

We endorse a comparative approach focusing on transcultural and transhistorical elements while emphasising local differences. Such comparative enterprises can focus on cultural transfers and entanglements (a genealogical/homological approach) or on the emergence of similar patterns in different contexts (analogical approach). *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* represents a good example of a series of cultural transfers. This document was conceived by the Russian secret services at the beginning of the 20th century to discredit Jewish communities and liberal-progressive ideals, but it travelled to and was transformed in the American New Age culture. In the new *Protocols*, the Illuminati or the reptilians replace the Jews, as the political framework has changed from monarchic conservatism to neoliberal politics (Barkun, 2003, pp. 55, 61, 105, 146). As shown in Chapter 5 of the present book, we see the *Protocols* travelling as far as Japan. With a surprising twist: in this particular story the conspiratorial elite – the Jews – ends up taking on a positive role.

As regards the analogical approach, some of the transcultural building blocks of conspiracy theories can be found in cognitive tendencies such as pareidolia, which consists of recognising patterns and imposing meaningful readings on a complex, contradictory, and nebulous reality (Brotherton, 2015). There are other cognitive elements that facilitate the emergence of conspiracy theories, such as the intentionality bias, on the basis of which every event and action is perceived as intentional (Moore and Pope, 2014), and the confirmatory bias, or the tendency

to confirm one's own belief and discard challenging evidence (Rabin and Schrag, 1999). Therefore, even if it has become commonplace to describe conspiracy theories as irrational, they could be better explained as hasty or closed rationalities: conspiracies offer easy solutions to complex problems.

Other transhistorical and transcultural elements which would hardly be understood via a genealogical approach are the fear of mind control, the fear of harming children, the fear of subverting fundamental moral norms, and the general fear of social and political change. Violence, perceived sexual deviations or abuses, and ritual killings of innocent children are powerful *tópoi*, which can be found in several historical and cultural contexts: in ancient Rome in the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BCE, in England in the 12th century with William of Norwich, in Italy in the 15th century with the case of Simon of Trent (both discussed in Chapter 3 of this book), and in the contemporary QAnon narratives in the United States (Chapter 14). The fear of social and political change can be seen in the flourishing of conspiracy theories around the French Revolution – of which the Abbé Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (Barruel, 1799) remain the most famous example, – or in contemporary Zambia (see Chapter 10 of this book). Another interesting contemporary example is found in conspiracy narratives focusing on 'gender ideology'.⁴ In this sense, conspiracy theories can be seen as being functional to the preservation of a hegemonic status quo.

Conspiracy theories, however, can also be used to upset the status quo, to challenge dominant narratives about politics and epistemology, and as such they can also be found in progressive and liberal milieus. Even so, it is problematic to apply the Gramscian label of counter-hegemonic (Gramsci, 1975) to conspiracy theories, because they do not challenge power relations between hegemonic and subaltern classes. Conspiracy theories spread rapidly and virally, but they are often generic and describe overwhelming powers that are impossible to counter; de facto, they polarise existing tensions and remove any personal and collective responsibilities. Furthermore, even if the targets of these theories are global elites, the consequences always concern subaltern classes. For example, in the case of conspiracies concerning the capitalist elite and immigration, global entrepreneurs are not affected, but immigrants in Europe are daily influenced by how they are perceived and represented by mass media. As Wu Ming 1 argues, conspiracy theories are ineffective instruments, they 'seem to aim high, but they strike low' (Wu Ming 1, 2021, p. 165).

While conspiracy theories routinely make specific predictions or empirical claims, they typically revolve around a set of core beliefs that are in practice unfalsifiable. Thus, the specific claim that there is a secret sex trafficking centre in the basement of a named pizzeria in Washington DC can and has been falsified, even by true believers, but the core belief that there exists a satanic paedophile ring with ties to the Clinton family will remain intact to the community of believers come what may. In this, conspiracy theories have much in common with religions. While this epistemological comparison of religion and conspiracy theories has been around since Karl Popper, a systematic study of how religion and conspiracy theories are related has only recently started to appear (Dyrendal,

Robertson, and Asprem, 2018). As Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem (2018) have argued, the complex relationships between religion and conspiracy theories can be categorised as belonging to three types: conspiracy theories *in*, *about*, and *as* religions. The simple focus on epistemic parallels between the two domains is an example of conspiracy theories as religion. Other examples of this focus include the study of how conspiracy theories perform religious *functions* (whether to individuals or to communities), or of *conspiracism* as a totalising worldview. These perspectives are useful for analysing certain contemporary forms of conspiracy culture. From a historical perspective, however, and in most of the case studies discussed in this book, the role of conspiracy theories *in* particular religious communities and (often at the same time) *about* (other) religions is more prominent. Whether the conspiracy theories blend with theological notions, such as theodicies explaining evil and localising it in social reality, or perform more mundane identity-protective functions building on existing prejudices or tensions, it is clear that religious communities have historically been important sites for the articulation of conspiracies. Vice versa, conspiracy theories are an understudied aspect of religious community building. This book will hopefully shed some more light on these subjects.

For the contemporary period, scholars have particularly noted the continuity between religion and conspiracy theories in the context of esotericism and New Age culture, or the ‘cultic milieu’ (Campbell, 1972). Esoteric knowledge defined as ‘absolute and secret’ (von Stuckrad, 2005), ‘special’ (Asprem, 2016), ‘rejected’ by both scientific and religious authorities (Hanegraaff, 2012), often invites a reading of hidden patterns in society and history, revealing the ‘real causes’ behind events (Asprem and Dyrendal, 2018). Conspiracy theories can take the form of a theodicy, deciphering the causes of the world’s evils and narrating the clash between the forces of good and evil (Barkun, 2003; Robertson, 2016). Knowledge of the plot becomes salvific knowledge (Dyrendal, 2014) and allows an all-inclusive reading of history through hidden signs, in a sort of ‘theological history’ (Hagemester, 2018, p. 428) and eschatology (see Chapter 13 in this book). In these contexts, it is tempting to see conspiracy theories emerging *as* religion, as the unveiling of secret plots is elevated to eschatology: knowledge (for instance of your reptilian overlords) shall set you free.

The intertwined connections between New Age spiritualities and conspiracy theories have led some scholars to conceptualise the phenomenon of ‘New Age conspiracism’ (Barkun, 2003) or ‘conspirativity’ (Ward and Voas, 2011). However, as has been argued by Asprem and Dyrendal, this is not a brand-new phenomenon; the relationship between alternative forms of spirituality and conspiracy theories has a long history in Western esotericism and occultism (Asprem and Dyrendal, 2015). New Age and conspiracism share a tendency towards syncretism, an organisational culture based on informal or small-scale social networks, and an ideology of ‘seekership’ or endless research where everything is seen as potentially connected. Furthermore, conspiracy theorists and the New Age often share the conceptualisation of an imminent epochal change in the consciousness of humanity and a social criticism that mixes political and spiritual issues. This hybrid

phenomenon has been described by Barkun as ‘improvisational millennialism’ (Barkun, 2003, p. 2) and by Robertson as ‘millennial conspiracism’ (Robertson, 2016, p. 4). What is certain is that, during the 20th century, the New Age, esotericism, and conspiracy theories have all undergone a normalisation process, losing their marginal aspect and taking up more and more space in political discourse and in popular culture (Partridge, 2014).

Still on the theme of conspiracy theories as religion, some authors have looked at the psychological and cognitive parallels between conspiracy beliefs and religious beliefs (Wood and Douglas, 2018). Even if we cannot talk about conspiracy theory as a form of ersatz religion, it is important to stress that elaborate conspiracy theories – and especially fully fledged conspiracism – often take on hybrid characteristics, mixing elements lifted from ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ contexts (Aupers and Harambam, 2018). Some scholars have described conspiracy theories as a form of ‘secular or rational enchantments’ (Aupers and Harambam, 2018). These notions are, however, problematic insofar as they assume a sharp secular/religious and rational/irrational divide, both of which, if essentialised and taken without nuances, complicate rather than clarify the phenomena in question.

Finally, conspiracy theories could be understood as a form of religious counter-epistemology (Chapter 13 of this book): a form of knowledge, based on religious experience (dreams, visions, revelations), ‘stigmatised knowledge’ (essentialism, orientalism), and reified sociological theories – called also ‘popularised sociology’ (Aupers and Harambam, 2018, p. 57). In fact, starting from one of the earliest classics in the study of conspiracy theories (Hofstadter, 1965), it has been noted that they do not present themselves as anti-scientific. On the contrary, they mimic scientific method and style. Conspiracy theorists challenge scientific institutions and truth claims, but they do not challenge the possibility of a purified scientific method.

To conclude this introduction, we need to briefly discuss the relationship between social sciences and conspiracy theories. The first reaction of the social sciences towards conspiracy theories was to demystify them, condemning them as pathological and dangerous (Pipes, 1997) and as reminiscent of religious superstition (Popper, 2013). Following these authors, conspiracy carries the stigma of irrationality and the task of the human and social sciences is to determine what is rational and what is not, embodying what Bruno Latour would call a modern ‘practice of purification’ (Latour, 2012). Delimiting the boundaries of knowledge would eventually exclude conspiracy theorists from public debate (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; Popper, 2013). This militant approach has been questioned in recent years for its lack of analytical depth. Some scholars have stressed the significance and relevance of these phenomena, paying attention not only to their ‘deviant’ nature (as seen from the vantage point of the scholar’s study) but also to their own inherent logic as well (Bratich, 2008; Aupers and Harambam, 2018; Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem, 2018).

The importance of taking conspiracy theories seriously is increasingly acknowledged by journalists and political activists who understand how pathologisation and debunking will not help in understanding how these phenomena work. Even

in terms of interventions, the focus on debunking conspiracy theorists' fantasies and on revealing the facts behind the inventions is a response that only has limited effect on this complex social, cultural, and cognitive phenomenon. Conspiracy theories contain religious, emotional, and social dimensions that cannot simply be reduced to a matter of separating real facts from 'fake news'. Moreover, conspiracy theories often have very real consequences, as evidenced by QAnon believers whose fight against the alleged paedophile Deep State has motivated murders, kidnappings, and the 2021 storming of the US capitol, and Japanese soldiers in World War II, who tortured Freemasons in order to learn from them their Masonic secrets (Haffner, 1977).

The aim of this book is to continue nuancing, clarifying, and unpacking the world of conspiracy theories by exploring the links with religious phenomena in a historical perspective. We want to stress the continuities and discontinuities between new and old forms of conspiracy theories, and foster new forms of comparative research, focused on historical and socio-anthropological data.

The book is divided into two sections. The first, 'Reading History with New (Conspiracist) Lenses', proposes a new reading of historical cases of conspiracy theories. The second, 'Connecting New Phenomena with Old Trends', analyses conspiracy theories in contemporary societies, underlining transhistorical dimensions by showing correspondences and assonances.

The first chapter, 'The Bacchanalian Conspiracy: From the Paranoid Style to Conspiratorship' by Victoria E. Pagán, delineates similarities between conspiracy theories propagated during two hundred years of Roman history, which demonstrate how conspiracy theories were manipulated to promote elite hegemony. The second chapter by Emily Pothast, 'Magic, Money, Ink, and Blood: Mediating the Social Body in the Case of Simon of Trent', deals with the late medieval period and focuses on a conspiracy theory around Simon, a child who was alleged to have died by ritual murder at the hands of the Jewish community. Pothast connects this case with conspiracy theories about child abuse in the contemporary United States. The third chapter by Tomasz Szymański, 'Anti-Masonic Conspiracy Theories and Universal Religion: From the French Revolution to the New World Order', describes the purported conspiracy of a universal religion developed by Freemasonry that was meant to replace Christianity, a theory diffused in the Catholic Church starting from the 18th century. The fourth chapter by Avery Morrow, 'Conceptualising Secret Societies and Conspiracy Theories in Imperial Japan: From Countering Socialism to Rescuing Jewish Refugees', describes the impact of the Protocols of Zion in 20th-century Japan. The author shows the connections and assonances with other occult theories that arose in contemporary Japan. The first chapter of the second part by Aaron French, 'Esoteric Nationalism and Conspiracism in WWI', focuses on how the events of World War I were interpreted through the lenses of conspiracy theories and esotericism.

The second chapter of the second part by Niklas Nenzén, 'Going to the Ends of the Earth to Unmask Conspiracy': Radical Scepticism in the Modern Gnostic Narratives of the Lectorium Rosicrucianum', analyses the Dutch esoteric movement

Lectorium Rosicrucianum, founded at the beginning of the 20th century. Nenzén shows how this movement re-elaborated Manichean and Gnostic themes in conspiracist fashion. The third chapter by Allison P. Coudert, ‘Toxic Positivity’: From New Thought to Donald Trump’, deals with conspiracy theories in the context of self-help groups, showing how the philosophy of positive thinking shares unexpected correspondences with eschatological narratives. The fourth chapter by Asbjørn Dyrendal and Inga Bårdse Tøllefsen, ‘Conspiracy Theory, Altered States, and Alternative Community: Conspiracy Beliefs in a Sample of Nordic Yoga-Practitioners’, presents an empirical study of how paranormal beliefs, involvement in the ‘alternative scene’, and conspiracy theories are related among yoga practitioners in Norway. The fifth chapter by Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps, ‘Conspiracy Theories in Africa: A Continuum of Narratives About Evil Agents’, describes Satanism in Zambia, questioning the analogies between conspiracy theories and witchcraft beliefs. The sixth chapter by Giuseppe Tateo, ‘When Conspiracy Meets Faith: Making Sense of Tragic Events in Bucharest’, deals with the intertwined relations between Orthodox eschatology and conspiracy theories in contemporary Romania. The seventh chapter by Barbara De Poli, ‘Jesuit Fathers, Maronites, Muslim ulama’, and Islamists: The Role of Religious Institutions and Organisations in the Spread of the Judeo-Masonic Conspiracy Myth in the Middle East’, deals with the institutionalisation of conspiracy theories among Muslim theologians in Egypt. The eighth chapter by Francesco Piraino, ‘The Eurasia Network: Riding the Conspiracist Tiger in Contemporary Italy’, describes the radical Eurasia network in Italy; its production of conspiracy narratives about Jews, migrants, and capitalists; and its relation to Western esotericism. The last chapter by Marc-André Argentino, ‘Qvangelicalism: QAnon as a Hyper-Real Religion’, explores the QAnon conspiracy theory in the United States, showing how it could be understood as a (post-modern) religious phenomenon.

Notes

- 1 <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>
- 2 www.wired.com/story/opinion-the-dark-virality-of-a-hollywood-blood-harvesting-conspiracy/
- 3 www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-58164833
- 4 Such theories consider the cultural change regarding attitudes to sexual and gender orientations to be the result of a conspiracy against traditional society, heterosexuality, and ‘traditional’ gender roles (Marchlewska et al., 2019).

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