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9

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An (Un)happy Marriage of Conspiracy Theories and Spirituality?

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Whoever witnessed one of the many anti-COVID-19 policy protests held throughout the Netherlands between 2020 and 2022 years saw a remarkable sight: right-wing sympathizers holding the Dutch national flag, walking hand in hand with a variety of spiritual groups carrying yellow umbrellas with red hearts and positive slogans painted on them.[1] They, and several others, carried signs reading "The Media is the Virus" and "COVID-19*84*." While the flags expressed a nationalism that is rarely publicly displayed in the modestly patriotic Netherlands, the yellow umbrellas reflected a bottom-up and newly developed symbol of "Loving, Peaceful and Positive Resistance" by two women (one of them a person of color) who came up with the idea in February 2021 after being aggressively dispersed by police water cannons.

The contrast between these two public symbols is striking. Yet their bearers all shout in unison: "Love, Freedom, No Dictatorship." This chant became the motto of the Dutch coronavirus resistance movement, heard throughout the country. At protests against government mandates, one found young men

with jeans, bomber jackets, black army boots, and shaved heads marching next to fifty-year-old female hippies wearing colorful clothes and bead necklaces while giving out group hugs. There were people shouting angrily about how the government is lying, while others gave away flowers to riot police officers. The coronavirus demonstrations in the Netherlands were, like many of their international counterparts, a true hodgepodge of individuals, social backgrounds, political leanings, and worldviews.[2]

This unusual sight confused many in the Dutch media: How do these radically different groups come together so easily? What unites right-wing nationalists, urban yoga hipsters, and leftist spiritual tree huggers? How do their (seemingly) different worldviews collide into one master narrative of distrusting public authorities and resisting "dictatorial" policies? Is their shared dissatisfaction with the governmental approach to the COVID-19 pandemic enough to bridge such great ideological differences? Quickly, Dutch journalists found the answer: the common denominator across all these circles was a penchant for conspiracy theories.[3]

Both left-leaning spiritual seekers and angry populist-right protesters (and many in between) held strong convictions that the reality about the pandemic presented to them by media, politicians, and scientists was a scam organized by technocratic global elites to force the public into obedience. For these dissenters, the COVID-19 pandemic was nothing more than a massive plot to fool ordinary people into permitting the government to take away their civil liberties, roll out new surveillance technologies, destroy small businesses, and enforce mandatory vaccinations. It was the perfect story to legitimize the "Great Reset"—the radical reconfiguration of our economic and societal global order introduced in June 2020 by Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum (WEF). Schwab's plea to seize this "rare but narrow window of opportunity to reset our

world" quickly garnered popularity among world leaders and suspicious notoriety in conspiracy circles for its covert ambition to restructure the world in nefarious ways.[4]

This gradual recognition that conspiracy theories serve as the central thread connecting these varied and seemingly contrasting groups was not unique to the Netherlands, but rather present all over the Western world. From Italy to the United States, and from France to Australia, journalists expressed confusion, unease, and surprise about this startling alliance of "soft positive female spirituality" and "hard negative male conspiracy theories." In *Wired* magazine, a journalist with ties to the holistic milieu wrote that while she knew she needed to "monitor the spread of online disinformation and conspiracy theories," she "never expected to find them at [her] yoga class."[5] While a *Guardian* article remarked that on Instagram "wellness advocates used to talk about Bali retreats and cooking with coconut oil. But now they [are] posting links about 5G, Bill Gates or more coded but no less strange messages that 'we' shouldn't trust 'them.'"[6]

What happened? Should we be surprised that spiritual adherents were suddenly expressing conspiratorial worldviews? And were these left-leaning spiritual progressives suddenly turning into conspiratorial militant right-wing activists, as these journalists supposed?

Despite the apparent novelty of these developments, scholars studying spirituality have previously pointed out that certain central characteristics of the spiritual worldview, movements, and practices share affinities with what has come to be known as "conspiracy culture." For instance, Colin Campbell's original conceptualization of the "cultic milieu" emphasized spirituality's cultural kinship with certain kinds of deviant belief systems, ranging from (pseudo)scientific narratives, political ideologies, and esoteric beliefs and practices.[7] What they all share, Campbell

argued, is a common opposition and distrust of dominant societal or culturally mainstream discourses. Similarly, Christopher Partridge speaks of "occulture" as a mélange of "hidden, rejected and oppositional" beliefs and practices that are explained by conspiratorial understandings.[8] In the previous chapter in this volume Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers emphasize how spiritual and populist groups share a marked anti-institutionalism that challenges the cultural mainstream. Interestingly, these affinities have also been picked up on from the other side—by those studying conspiracy theories. For example, in the early 2000s political scientist Michael Barkun and historian Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke wrote about the popularity of various esoteric ideas, supernatural beliefs, and occult epistemologies in U.S. millennialist movements and Aryan Nazi cults.[9]

Of course, the affinities are not hard to miss: contemporary conspiracy culture is rife with websites that discuss New World Order theories alongside spiritual awakening narratives—all while selling nutritional supplements used to maximize natural health potential.[10] Or take the many Instagram celebrities, yoga coaches, and wellness influencers urging their followers to resist vaccinations, to focus on nutritious organic food and building up their immune systems, and break free from the shackles of the corporate medical-health industry.[11] And what of the "QAnon Shaman" who became (in)famous in the 2021 insurrection on Capitol Hill and turned out to be a nature-loving, organic food–eating practitioner of yoga and meditation?[12] Spirituality, in short, is often a key feature of contemporary conspiracy culture.[13]

Not surprisingly, there exists a neologism to capture this cultural confluence. In an influential article, Charlotte Ward and David Voas coined the term "conspirituality" to describe what they saw as a "rapidly growing web movement expressing an

ideology fueled by political disillusionment and alternative spiritual worldviews."[14] Prescient and insightful, Ward and Voas's analysis has inspired a growing body of research and popular commentary, which exploded in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.[15] Indeed, many simply take as fact Ward and Voas's assumption that the coalition of spirituality and conspiracy culture is a frictionless, tension-free endeavor.

Yet this assumption is not warranted. Over the course of my ongoing ethnographic research in the (Dutch) conspiracy milieu, I have encountered many instances of cultural conflict between these two elements.[16] Given the peculiarity of this blend of seemingly opposed ideologies and cultural groups, it perhaps makes sense to highlight their affinities. However, my hunch is that the tendency to foreground affinities over conflicts derives in part from their methodological approach. Ward and Voas's analysis was not based on empirical data but rather armchair theorizing. By contrast, an empirically grounded cultural sociological approach may be necessary to bring to light the tensions that exist on the ground. In fact, in support of this claim, Griera and colleagues found in their recent study of the Spanish antivaccine movement that Twitter analyses show clear confluences of far-right conspiracist with spiritual ideologies, while ethnographic fieldwork reveals far more complexity.[17] Thus, like in any other social configuration, there are always both affinities *and* conflicts—also in conspirituality.

In this chapter I explore how conspiracy theories and spirituality go together and draw from similar cultural understandings of the world, but also how this confluence creates frictions and disputes in both milieux. To do so, I draw on ten years of research into the many different worlds of (Dutch) conspiracy theorists and present empirical examples of such converging and contentious engagements between the spiritual and the conspiratorial.

But to situate these better, I start with a theoretical overview of the history of this confluence of spirituality and conspiracy theories and continue with more contemporary manifestations in the digital "post-truth" age. The underlying methodological argument is that a cultural sociological approach to the topic of conspirituality yields more comprehensive insights in both their affinities and conflicts because it stays close to the lived experiences of actual people and their ideas and practices.

HISTORICAL BEDFELLOWS OR A NEW HYBRID SYSTEM OF BELIEF?

Both "spirituality" and "conspiracy culture" are complex and diffuse signifiers. They are both container concepts that encompass various ideologies, beliefs, practices, and people that have historically been united by their opposition to the cultural mainstream. Now, as Colin Campbell notes in this volume, given the popularity and increasing public presence of spirituality, the extent to which it remains opposed to the cultural mainstream remains open to debate. Yet it remains the case that both conspiracy theories and spirituality are understood *by their adherents* as being opposed to certain dominant religious, political, and scientific orthodoxies and authorities. Moreover, the social and cultural worlds in which spiritual and conspiratorial ideas and practices flourish are similarly diverse and fluid, taking the form of loose networks more than neatly bounded communities. Hence, I have used Campbell's original notion of a cultic "milieu" in my own work on conspiracy culture to describe this relatively stable yet dynamic subculture.[18]

However, to think about the affinities and conflicts between spirituality and conspiracy culture, it is necessary to provide some

working definitions of each. As Watts and Houtman explain in the introduction herein, spirituality can be conceived as a third-way mystical tradition in which the divine is seen as an omnipresent and immanent life-force, with religious truths attained through personal experience rather than exegesis, and salvation necessitating the pursuit of authenticity instead of conformity to social norms. Spirituality is found in various domains of contemporary life, from the workplace to social media, and includes all kinds of practices associated with (westernized) Eastern cultural forms such as yoga and meditation, reiki and acupuncture, and the healing power of natural food.

Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, are generally seen as explanations of social events that point to hidden and nefarious actions by particular groups of people.[19] These ideas embody a wide array of topics, ranging from the mundane to the supernatural. But whether we speak about concerns about the rise of "Orwellian" totalitarian governments, strong anti-institutional distrust directed against mainstream media, QAnon inspired notions of satanic pedophile networks, beliefs in the existence of extraterrestrial beings, or ideological resistance to Big Corporations, they all come together in the conspiratorial worldview that opaque global power bastions covertly work together to put humanity into submission. And since conspiracy theories go against the explanations that mainstream epistemic authorities offer (science, media, and politics), they serve as countervailing understandings of reality. That said, they are more than epistemic beliefs alone, since conspiracy theories blossom in various (online) subcultural communities and shape their practices and identities.[20] People find meaning and community in those oppositional understandings of reality. They create new symbols, rituals, and ways of living that go against the grain of mainstream society. Moreover, these ideas circulate in (online) networks where

entrepreneurship, algorithms, and social cohesion spur their popularity. Conspiracy culture is thus broader than mere beliefs alone, but the central unifying factor is indeed the conviction that an elite cabal controls and shapes the world for their own benefit.[21]

From these descriptions it may seem odd that spirituality and conspiracy culture go together so easily. The former is much more concerned with the *inner world*, while the latter contrasts by focusing on the *outer world*. This is indeed the argument of Ward and Voas as they introduce the concept of conspirituality. They note that conspiracy theory is "male-dominated, often conservative, generally pessimistic, and typically concerned with current affairs," while spirituality is "predominantly female, liberal, self-consciously optimistic, and largely focused on the self and personal relationships."[22] Yet despite these cultural differences conspiracy theories and spirituality find common ground, Ward and Voas contend, in the shared belief that a paradigm shift or a radical societal awakening will counter the looming totalitarian New World Order.

Furthermore, there is actually much historical affinity between spirituality and conspiracy culture. Asprem and Dyrendal, for example, argue that "conspiracism and esoterism are joined at the hip," while stressing the "historical continuity between the occultist milieu of the nineteenth century and the cultic milieu of the second half of the twentieth century."[23] But also in cultural terms, there is much similarity; in addition to the shared opposition to dominant orthodoxies, both spirituality and conspiracy culture conceptualize the world in holistic terms (all consciousness is one—everything is connected), both disavow mainstream ontologies (reality is alienating illusion—nothing is what it seems), both distrust and reject modern institutions for corrupting our minds (the system imposes suffocating

societal roles—trust no one), and both prioritize the self as the ultimate epistemological source (find truth by looking deep down in yourself—do your own research).

Additionally, these affinities are not merely ideological but play out in social life. Ward and Voas propose as key examples of conspirituality the British conspiracy theorist David Icke, the American documentary series *Zeitgeist*, and the Australian *Nexus Magazine*. David Icke is a genuine conspiracy theorist celebrity who enjoys worldwide popularity through his many books, YouTube videos, and performances in large event halls. In his work, Icke weaves together everyday conspiracy theories about media, the scientific establishment and global leaders into an overarching narrative that holds we are ruled by an alien race of shape-shifting reptiles. But he also fuses these ideas with belief in a radical awakening of humanity that would reinstall original spiritual gifts and higher consciousness.[24] The *Zeitgeist* documentary series, which became known worldwide between 2007 and 2011, chronicles conspiracy theories about the mystical origins of Christianity, 9/11, and the financial system, and has been viewed more than 400 million times. The documentary argues for a radically different socioeconomic system, in which sustainability, technological innovation, and care for people and nature stand central. The series became so popular that a global social movement to achieve those goals emerged.[25] Last, *Nexus Magazine*, which dates to the 1980s, publishes alternative news and articles about geopolitics, surveillance, and conspiracy theories as well as alternative medicine, the supernatural, and UFOs. What all these examples have in common, Ward and Voas argue, is that they temper the political cynicism of conspiracy thinking with spiritual optimism and the belief in the coming of a new, better world.[26]

This everyday mixing of spiritual and conspiratorial elements was present in my own fieldwork. Many of the (Dutch) conspiracy

websites I examined have categories such as "Consciousness," "Health," and "Spiritual," next to "Politics," "Corona," and "Propaganda." And at the many physical places where conspiracy theorists meet each other (e.g., film screenings, demonstrations, and social meetups), it was clear that various forms of spirituality merge effortlessly with conspiracy theories.[27] At such places, one finds stalls with books on personal growth, self-help, and alternative healing. There are brochures for reincarnation therapy courses and other workshops helping people to find their spiritual path. And in the coffee breaks people speak of the importance of waking up from the Matrix that "they" have built around us. Spirituality is a staple ingredient of conspiracy culture—present and past.

NETWORKED CONSPIRITUALITY IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

What is perhaps new and surprising about conspirituality is how the internet and its specific affordances have enabled its dissemination and popularization. Ward and Voas note how "the web is central to its [conspirituality's] importation of political and spiritual ideology into the mainstream," because "as websites became easier to access and build, transmission and adoption were facilitated. The virtual social networks created by web users make it possible to spread ideas very widely and very quickly."[28] Indeed, this is even more the case now given that the ubiquity and specific participatory affordances of social media platforms have not only created the infrastructures to reach massive audiences and unite different groups but have also fostered the emergence of online cultures characterized by a distrust of mainstream epistemic authorities, personal seekership, and dedication

to "doing one's own research" to find spiritual and political truths.[29]

This platformization of conspirituality has multiple dimensions. A first aspect to consider is how the business models and the algorithmic systems of social media platforms easily funnel "innocuous" people toward more and more extreme conspiratorial content simply because it "sells."[30] Keeping people hooked on social media platforms is key to their profit and survival, and controversial content like conspiracy theories accomplishes this well.[31]

But even more generally, social media platforms use filtering and recommendation algorithms that suggest items that have been liked/consumed before by like-minded people. This easily leads to feedback loops, with people interested in spirituality and related matters (like health, nutrition, or mindfulness) soon ending up with all kinds of conspiracy theories in their feeds, simply because of the political economy of social media platforms.[32]

But it is important to note that technology and media exposure alone cannot explain the confluence of spirituality and conspiracy theories online—what would imply a return to simplistic media effects theories.[33] Assuming that people are ignorant and manipulable cultural dupes does not reflect how social media use actually works. For in fact people actively consume and create online content on the basis of their own worldviews and interests. And following social media logics, they also do so to share with others and to create a following, which often becomes a business model. Indeed, contemporary scholars stress the way spiritual gurus, yoga teachers, and wellness advocates actively propagate conspiratorial content through their own social media channels.[34]

This can take many forms. Some literally provide a platform to conspiracy theorists by inviting them on their YouTube channel,

as Kundalini yoga teacher Guru Jagat did to talk about "facts that aren't factual and truths that aren't true."[35] Alternatively, they co-opt conspiratorial language about "evil forces at work" in podcasts about health and lifestyle.[36] Still others, like Dutch top model Doutzen Kroes, who, inspired by her sister and nutritional power food coach Rens Kroes and her fellow spiritual friends, posts inspirational quotes from spiritual handbooks combined with calls to "do your own research" and to "remain vigilant about what *they* want you to believe."[37]

Halafoff and her colleagues report on the way the Australian wellness movement participated in the online show of conspiracy theorist Fanos Panayides and the New Earth Project's (NEP) online platforms. These platforms are run by British conspiritualist Sacha Stone, who strives to "empower a conscious humanity to reclaim its sovereign birthright."[38] Or consider how yoga influencer Stephanie Birch used conspiracy theory hashtags such as "#greatawakening" on her Instagram while posting that "we are experiencing a spiritual warfare against mastery manipulating puppets that go back years."[39] These social media practices are often packaged in "soft feminine aesthetics" that "make conspiracy theories beautiful" and more attractive to women.[40] And this has seeped deep into the conspiracy world, giving rise to the term "pastel Q-Anon," since as female influencers use pastel colors and similar forms of aesthetic branding to mainstream dark conspiracy theories to their audiences.[41] The point is that these "spiritual influencers" utilize the cultures and affordances of social media platforms, also called "micro-celebrity branding techniques,"[42] to reach and bring together the spiritually and conspiratorially minded, thus enabling networked conspirituality.

Many journalists and scholars emphasize the economic gains these spiritual influences garner by reaching larger audiences and making conspiratorial thinking more mainstream. Guerin

contends, "yoga entrepreneurs have become adept at seizing the opportunities the pandemic has presented and preying on the vulnerabilities of their audiences."[43] And in her insightful study of what Baker calls "alt.health influencers," she speaks about how they "monetise their audiences by appealing to alternative health and wellness modalities instead of conventional medical practices."[44] Similarly, Halafoff and colleagues show how Australian conspiritualists sell various goods and services online while taking advantage of their celebrity status as online influencers.[45] They advertise and sell nutritional supplements, spiritual books, yoga retreats, and consciousness festivals while promoting conspiratorial thought and fostering distrust of mainstream authorities. Following the key social media business logic of engagement and traffic, the more followers they have, and the more interactions with influencers' contents, the more they earn from platforms.[46] Bridging different worlds, as conspirituality influencers do, has become a business model.

Finally, there is now a Netflix for conspirituality: the online media platform Gaia. For about ten euros per month, customers can enjoy "over 8,000 informative, consciousness-expanding and enlightening films, original shows, yoga and meditation classes, and more that you won't find anywhere else."[47] Gaia embodies a professionalized and mass-produced form of conspirituality: its website is well designed, its content can be viewed on all kinds of devices, and it deploys filtering and recommendation algorithms. Their motto is "Watch, Transform, Belong," illustrating how the platform promises a sense of community. Furthermore, the website boasts "exclusive, original series on topics you won't find in the mainstream media—the nature of the universe, ancient wisdom, the unexplained, alternative healing, and more." It describes itself as "a member-supported media network of truth seekers and believers empowering an evolution of

consciousness." On the main page, there is a customer review section, replete with testimonies of how formative Gaia has been in their spiritual journey toward radical awakening. The fusion of spirituality and conspiracy theories is clear as the light of day.

Despite these technological and commercial features, it remains clear that the substantive elective affinities between the spiritual and the conspiratorial worlds are the main drivers of (networked) conspirituality. These mostly revolve around their (strategic) opposition toward mainstream epistemic authorities, the preference for "softer" epistemologies (such as perennial knowledge, intuition, and experience), and their focus on personal discovery and societal awakening. Yet this fusion of spirituality with conspiracy theories also creates frictions and fissures, and clear resistance from both parties.

CONSPIRITUALITY SUPERSTAR DAVID ICKE INSPIRES AND IRRITATES

If anyone personifies conspirituality, it is David Icke. As mentioned earlier, Icke is a true conspiracy theory celebrity: he has been around since the early 1990s and has since built an entire emporium around his controversial conspiratorial ideas. He has a multimedia website boasting articles, books, videos, and an e-commerce shop. His website is visited over one million times per month by a diverse audience (in terms of age and sex) from all over the world (although dominated by the Anglo-Saxon countries).[48] But he is also very much a performer. Next to conveying his ideas in various media forms, he enjoys taking center stage. Literally: he frequently does hourlong shows in stadiums and theaters around the world, during which he takes his audience on a compelling tour through his ideas. And he has

charisma, too; he makes jokes in a working-class East Midlands English dialect but is dead serious at times as well.[49]

Icke is most famous—or infamous—for his "reptilian thesis": the idea that the world's elites are shapeshifting reptilian-human hybrids that pass as humans yet originate from other domains of our universe. Although outlandish, his theories actually start rather mundane, by stressing the corruption and dogmatism of our modern institutions—media, science, politics, religion, and so on—and how they manipulate "us" and "program our minds" into acquiescence.[50] Icke integrates all these institutions into a single pyramid with a network of secret societies and powerful families at its top, sometimes called "Illuminati bloodlines" and at other times the "Rothschild Zionists." But, as Icke explains, "there is this other-dimensional, non-human, level to look at"—the supernatural and ancient history explaining where we are now. This is how we get to the "reptilian thesis" through which Icke gained his fame and notoriety.[51] According to Icke, these alien races have infiltrated our human bloodlines and undermined our potential to reach higher consciousness.

Icke's ideas are great exemplars of today's "super conspiracy theories," that is, "conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically."[52] Icke brings the heavens and the earths together in one overarching conspiracy theory about institutional corruption, pervasive mind control, multidimensional universes, and shapeshifting reptilian races. This is quite an accomplishment: being able to convincingly bring so many different ideas together in one master narrative of deceit is a narratological feat. Indeed, as Lewis and Kahn rightfully note, "Icke's greatest strength is his totalizing ambition to weave numerous sub-theories into an extraordinary narrative that is both all-inclusive and all-accounting."[53]

But he is also known for his "synthesis" of seemingly different or even "antithetical" ideas: he brings together New Age teachings with apocalyptic conspiracy theories about a coming totalitarian New World Order.[54] Icke sketches a pristine image of a forgotten past when people still lived in harmony with the natural world and were connected to higher levels of consciousness. But he then argues that "the road to tyranny began when these reptilians arrived here and changed our DNA so that we can no longer access the world beyond our five senses: 'they want to lock humanity in that prison.'" He anticipates salvation from all the misery and subjugation extra-terrestrial elites have imposed on humans by means of a radical awakening of humanity that will bring back the spiritual powers we once had. But to get there, Icke maintains, we need to "get off our knees" and revolt against their domination; we need to "free our minds from the programming of a lifetime [and] remove the barriers of belief and perception that keep us from enlightenment."[55]

Similar to many people in the field of spirituality, Icke eclectically draws on a multitude of epistemic sources to support his arguments and persuade his audience.[56] His claims to truth are a hodgepodge of epistemological strategies: he draws on his own personal experience, talks effortlessly about all kinds of perennial narratives in ancient cultures, uses technological imagery, and references to science fiction to help people believe, yet also draws on both natural science and critical social theory to support his super conspiracy theory. This eclectic use of epistemologies, moving from the visceral to the cerebral, is also common in the spiritual milieu. Scholars of spirituality practically all emphasize how both leaders and followers deploy several epistemologies to express and support their views. They all "pick-and-mix" from established epistemic authorities and various

kinds of heterodox knowledge.[57] In late modernity, where no single institution has a monopoly on truth, and where people remain wary of mainstream institutions and their truth claims, deploying a diverse range of epistemic strategies is a winning formula.

But Icke's fusion of conspiratorial and spiritual thought is not just ideational; it is visible in his audience too. Many scholars highlight how he is able to bring together a diverse range of people.[58] As Lewis and Kahn argue, "Icke appeals equally to bohemian hipsters and right-wing reactionary fanatics [who] are just as likely to be sitting next to a 60-something UFO buff, a Nuwaubian, a Posadist, a Raëlian, or New Age earth goddess."[59] His fan base is strikingly diverse: from new religious movements to political anarchists, alternative healers, and far-right militants—a radical assortment of societal classes, generations and subcultures come together in his audience.[60] All of them, however, share a discontent with our current societal order, and more precisely with the way our primary institutions (e.g., science, politics, religion, media, etc.) work.

Icke is not without critics, even among those who actually buy his books and visit his shows. Over the course of my fieldwork—which included attending a 2011 performance of his in Amsterdam—I found out that his fanaticism and radical activism are often met with resistance, because many do not see militancy as the way forward.[61] To give some examples of what my interlocuters had to say about him: "Well, David Icke for example, a very intelligent man who has really done his homework, so with 80 percent of what he is saying, I think yes, fine, feels good, I get it. But at a certain point he completely tips the scales and goes way too far, way too fanatic. That's all based on fear (Julie, a twenty-eight-year-old therapeutic counselor)."[62]

Or in the words of Robert, a posh middle-aged man who works for an international fruit trading company and enjoyed Icke's performance in Amsterdam until the militancy took over:

> I had that with David Icke at the end of his show, that's really a pep talk, like, "Yeah, let's fight, let's go into resistance!" I don't agree with that, that's not the way to go, to stand up and "get off your knees." Those are powerful terms . . . it's a shame people are so easily lured into resistance, you'll hear that as the audience applauds and whistles when David calls for resistance, revolt and mutiny, well, that's exactly what *not* to do, it only works negatively. It generates counter-effects.[63]

Like Robert, many of my interlocutors spoke of the adverse effects Icke's aggressive attitude generates, how fighting and resistance only generates more bloodshed. Instead, they argue that there must be another way than radical activism to bring about change:

> David Icke, I've followed him for five years or so, but he is always in such a fighter's mood. That doesn't generate good responses. I don't agree with fighting, that only provokes counter fighting, provokes resistance. The same counts for ArgusEyes6 [a Dutch conspiracy website], also in a fighter's mood. Barricade work. Barricades never worked, well, maybe, but they incite so much resistance. I think there are other ways and entrances (Lucy, a 46-year-old haptonomic therapist).[64]

This attitude is especially common among spiritually minded conspiracy theorists, who largely oppose the activist strategies of protest, resistance, and confrontation that are popular among

many others. Activism, these people contend, is based on negative emotions like aggression and fear which should be avoided. As Julie and Lucy continue:

> It's to turn fanatic, push matters over the edge and end up in frenzy. But instead of informing yourself, being aware about things, you're basing your decisions on fear. Basically, you have two choices: either you go along with that fear or you go along with what happens if your consciousness opens. Someone like David Icke, for example, he drags you into fear. (Julie)[65]

> Fear is our biggest enemy. It destroys our own judgment, our feelings and discriminatory capacities so that we will comply with the arbitrary whims of others. (Lucy)

While these people may share with the more radical or activist conspiracy theorists the importance of "awakening" to understand what is really going on under the surface of society, they strongly reject the idea that convincing others of one's truth by screaming louder than the rest and by standing on the barricades is the way to go. They believe instead that real change can only occur by finding the good within oneself, and by being a living example for others.[66] Steven, a thirty-two-year-old consultant in the green energy industry, who refers to himself as a "dreamer of a better world," explains: "And one wonders, couldn't it make sense that whatever you see happening "outside," is actually a reflection of what happens inside? In the end, the revolution that is going on now, truly is an inner revolution."[67] Tellingly, the influential 1980s New Age bestseller *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, written by Marilyn Ferguson, already develops the argument that "real" revolutions are not built on political protest

and activism, but rather on personal change and "inner discoveries." A new age of peace and stability, she claims, can emerge only when individuals exemplify a better world. Many of my interlocutors agree:[68]

> If you're imposing things, you're not doing it right. If you really believe in something, you become what you believe, you'll radiate and don't need to say anything at all. (Julie)

> If I make sure to raise my frequency by being honest, treating people well, and by loving, the rest will vibrate along. I don't need to interfere with other people's lives! (Pauline)

> I don't think resistance is the right way to go, what I do instead is to apply it to myself. And if other people notice it, ask about it, feel touched by it, then it will have an effect, not by imposing it on people. I think that will have much more effect than pushing. To inspire others instead of terrifying them. (Robert)

What all these spiritual seekers are saying is that "the hard and negative male side of conspirituality," as Ward and Voas call it, does not merge easily with "the soft feminine side of spirituality."[69] Put even more strongly, these radically different ideas about how to position oneself and act in the world create marked frictions and divisions in the conspiratorial milieu, with the radical militancy and activism of some conspiritualists dismissed by many others. This appears even more true now that various far-right conspiracy theorists have appropriated the culture of the holistic milieu while taking the stage of social media and (world) politics. And the same counts for spiritual resistance to the anti-scientific tendencies of their counterparts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONSPIRITUALITY CONTESTED FROM BOTH SIDES

The tensions between the spiritual and the conspiratorial worlds have been tolerated by each side for a long time, which explains why Ward and Voas conceptualized their confluence as unproblematic and fictionless. However, with the rise of Trump and the QAnon movement in the United States over the last decade and the COVID-19 pandemic, which shook virtually all societies to the core, this lenient attitude has started to become problematic.

Jonathan Ong, for example, presents fascinating digital ethnographic research done among fifteen online spiritual influencers who practice "various forms of resistance against dangerous disinformation and white supremacy within alternative spiritual, or 'woo woo,' communities."[70] He shows how and why these "progressive spiritual influencers took actions against the collision of mystical teachings with far-right (QAnon) conspiracy theory, protesting specifically against the legitimation of anti-scientific, antidemocratic, and anti-institutional discourse by "hijacking" popular spiritual discourse about "resisting fear," "raising consciousness," and "radical awakening." Their resistance takes many forms, from "educational content that calls out the spiritual hijacking of esoteric beliefs" to explicitly "correcting dangerous conspiracy theory and medical disinformation."[71] Ong warns that while these spiritual vocabularies may sound "well-meaning," they "could be intentionally repurposed to promote insidious political agendas without believers being fully aware what they have gotten into." Whether this suggestion of guilelessness actually holds is an open question, but fears of spiritual seekers being lured into extremist positions are certainly real.

Cécile Guerin speaks about spiritual teachers who actively opposed the incorporation of conspiracy theories in the holistic milieu.[72] She points to cult survivor and yoga teacher Matthew Remski, who "lists figures in the wellness industry who have shared conspiracy theories and aims at exposing 'faux-progressive wellness utopianism.'" Or consider Seane Corn, cofounder of Off the Mat and Into the World, a California-based "community bridging the tools of yoga with sustainable and conscious activism."[73] Since the start of the pandemic Corn experienced increased paranoia and hostility in her yoga and wellness community that went far beyond the "antivaxx stuff" she was used to: "I felt like I had a responsibility to speak up as a member of the community. I hoped that by interjecting, I would help some of the students that were getting drawn into this rhetoric." Finally, Halafoff and colleagues show how "prominent influencers in the wellness industry in Australia, such as Sarah Wilson, made public statements challenging conspiracist views and encouraging members of wellness communities to be vaccinated for the public good."[74]

And then there are the various testimonies of journalists in the Netherlands about how the popularity of conspiratorial thought in people's spiritual circles has caused severe discomfort and conflict.[75] These reporters have written about their unease with the amount of disinformation about the pandemic that was shared in their social circles, and about how people they had been doing yoga or spiritual trainings with for years suddenly pushed them away because they followed government guidelines. I myself got many emails from people about how their "smart, sensitive and spiritual loved ones seemed brainwashed by conspiracy theories." As a response to the surge of conspirituality in the Netherlands during the pandemic, various spiritual practitioners, from yoga teachers to reiki coaches,

grouped together on Facebook. As one member states: "having that uncanny feeling that something is wrong is one thing, but believing that governments are colluding internationally is quite another. It felt like people I've worked with and befriended for years suddenly turned right-wing, where I kept being left."[76] Stine Jensen, a Dutch philosopher, yoga teacher, and author of the book *Go East: A Philosopher's Journey through the World of Yoga, Mindfulness and Spirituality*, expressed a similar discomfort in a major Dutch newspaper, pointing out how spiritual people have now come to be put on a par with extremists and are "forced to actively disassociate from fascism," while the connections between the two are actually far from evidenced by empirical data.[77] The key point is that the fact of conspirituality has engendered a real divide within the holistic milieu.

Interestingly, disapproval of the confluence of spirituality and conspiracy theories is also expressed by hard-core conspiracy theorists. Their criticism and unease come from a strong disapproval of "soft epistemologies" that allegedly erode their credibility in public debates. While spiritual people endorse following intuition, experience, and feelings, critical conspiracy theorists reject these sources of knowledge in lieu of positivist epistemologies. Aiming to decipher the "real" truth, they insist on facts, evidence, and the scientific method.[78] Think, for example, of the 9/11 Truth Movement, whose members analyze videos and boast complicated mathematical calculations to argue that planes cannot possibly have caused the collapse of the Twin Towers. Or Flat Earthers, who perform all kinds of experiments with lenses, binoculars, and geometric slats to establish that Earth is actually flat. This positivistic stance clearly conflicts with spiritual seekers' disposition to follow their intuition and feelings rather than rely on rationality or science.[79] For spiritual folk, real knowledge is not something rational but first and

foremost something deeply emotional, while hardcore conspiracy buffs get irritated by such "woo-woo" epistemologies.

These conflicts are not merely ideological but also relate to credibility in public debates. Tired of hearing spiritual people say that "things don't feel right" or that "the facts don't resonate with them," positivist conspiracy theorists understand that if they and their alternative visions of reality are to be believed, they need to produce solid evidence and hard facts.[80] This conflict often becomes manifest in projects that conspiracy theorists and spiritual people set up collaboratively. For example, for years I have been following the online media platform Café Weltschmerz, which publishes videos that feature "discussions and perspectives that are not present (enough) in the regular media." Their mission is to "use citizen journalism as a means of change. . . . Our interviewers are autonomous cross-thinkers and experts in their field."[81] The platform is run by volunteers from all walks of life, both hardcore conspiracy theorists and more spiritually minded individuals. Yet few of their broadcasts cover topics that appeal to spiritual audiences, much to the chagrin of their spiritually inclined volunteers. In their conversations with me, the producers indicate that they frequently bring up the desirability of expanding the number of spiritual programs yet consistently receive no for an answer, because such programs are seen by its owners to undermine the credibility of the media platform.

SHARED AFFINITIES AND BOUNDARY WORK

In recent years the affinities between the worlds of spirituality and conspiracy theories have become apparent. Commentators witnessed QAnon-related conspiracy theories packaged in soft

pastel colors thriving on the Instagram feeds of domestic housewives and spiritual women alike.[82] During the COVID-19 crisis, many supporters of holistic philosophies of life, alternative medicine, yoga, reiki, and mindfulness distrusted and contested the official narratives and measures taken to contain the pandemic.[83] The notion that mainstream epistemic authorities cannot be trusted, so that "doing one's own research," "waking up," and "following one's inner-knowing" become necessary, is fundamental to a conspiratorial worldview that finds considerable resonance in the holistic milieu.

For many this is an (unpleasant) surprise.[84] However, those who have studied both spirituality and conspiracy theories will be less shocked, since there are longstanding historical and intellectual affinities between spiritual groups and ideologies and their conspiratorial counterparts.[85] According to Ward and Voas, the evolution of these historical affinities has produced conspirituality, a unified movement that combines the pessimistic elements of conspiracy thinking with the spiritual belief in salvation through radical human awakening.[86] And given the very public character of this alliance during the COVID-19 pandemic, many in academia and the popular press simply accepted Ward and Voas's analysis without qualifications.[87]

But should we conceptualize "conspirituality" as a unified movement? Or is it rather a pragmatic synthesis of distinct ideologies? In this chapter I have tried to show that although conspiracy theorists and spiritual seekers share a distrust of societal institutions and a do-it-yourself epistemology in common, there are also many frictions and conflicts when they meet and interact. The emphasis on facts, evidence, and scientific calculation of conspiracy theorists clashes with the spiritual prioritization of feelings, resonances, and intuitions as guides to true knowledge. And while the spiritually inclined tend to reject the

militant activism of conspiracy theorists as a way to attain a better world, the more positivist conspiracy theorists fear that their credibility is undermined when "softer" spiritual epistemologies take over.[88]

It makes more sense, therefore, to conceptualize the confluence of the spiritual and the conspiratorial as resulting from an elective affinity in the classical Weberian sense. Because there surely exists an overlap between these two cultural worlds, talk of "conspirituality" is useful, if also somewhat misleading. We should beware of essentializing conspirituality as a unified and stable movement, and instead stay sensitive to the everchanging and porous boundaries between the two cultural forms. One way to do so is by drawing on the great work of Thomas Gieryn and Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, who direct attention to the practical work that needs to be done to maintain or dissolve (cultural) boundaries.[89] This invites sociological studies of conspirituality that address how and why different people try to erect, blur, or bridge boundaries between the spiritual and the conspiracy world—be they real conspirituality buffs or those who oppose their confluence. Given the cultural and political stakes, I hope to have demonstrated that such a perspective sheds much-needed light on the internal complexity attending conspirituality.

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