

David Icke's Reptilian Thesis and the Development of New Age Theodicy

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ABSTRACT

Despite its considerable currency in popular culture, David Icke's Reptilian Thesis is almost always viewed academically as irrational and anti-Semitic. Here, I suggest that it be considered instead against a) traditional conceptualizations of "evil," and b) the development of the New Age milieu. The need to reconcile a holistic, relativizing construction of evil with the perceived failure of the New Age to arrive was keenly felt in the New Age milieu through the 1990s and 2000s. An Other had to exist, yet could not be constructed as human. The Reptilian Thesis introduces a theodicy into New Age, of a globalized, extra-terrestrial Other. Icke's Reptilian Thesis seeks to portray the extra-terrestrial as that which is, literally, "alien," in order to explain away the perceived failure of the New Age. The New Age, Icke suggests, did not fail to arrive, but was prevented from arriving. The Reptilian Thesis is therefore not so much a departure from New Age Theodicy, but a reconfiguration of it.

Keywords

conspiracism, David Icke, theodicy, New Age, Reptilian Thesis

Introduction

United Kingdom-based writer and lecturer David Icke is one of the most significant figures in the "alternative" milieu today. After initially positioning himself in New Age circles, Icke began to combine conspiracy theories with New Age beliefs during the mid-1990s, and today commands a significant

audience. His website steadily ranks in the top 10,000 worldwide,¹ he has twenty books in copyright, and has lectured in at least twenty-five countries, in the type of venues more associated with major pop concerts (Lewis and Kahn 2005, 3). In October 2012, he talked for ten hours at Wembley Arena, London's largest indoor venue, to an audience of approximately 6,000, with further viewers via an online stream. Michael Barkun has described Icke as "the most fluent of conspiracist authors," possessing "a clarity rarely found in the genre" (2003, 163), and he is probably best known internationally for his theory that reptilian human-alien hybrids are in covert control of the planet, here referred to as the *Reptilian Thesis*.

This article attempts to explain the significant appeal of such an apparently outlandish idea, by placing Icke's ideas in a broader context of the development of the New Age milieu. Following the "crisis of the New Age" in the mid-1990s, when many of its leading figures began to reassess their millennial beliefs, popular conspiracy theories gained increasing currency within the milieu. I argue that, for some, the existence of the Illuminati or other covert agents offered the best explanation for the apparent failure of the New Age to manifest. This resulted in hybrid belief systems which propose that an occluded elite conceal the true nature of the world, and humanity's place in it, but that the New Age will commence when sufficient numbers become cognisant of their oppression. This article presents the work of David Icke as the clearest and most detailed exposition of this New Age conspiracism.

After some comments on terminology, I begin with an exposition of the development of David Icke's life and works. Next, I discuss the "crisis of New Age" in the mid-1990s, and how it made it possible for New Agers to adopt conspiracist ideas. In conclusion, I argue that Icke's portrayal of an extra-terrestrial reptilian race in covert control of world events represents a conspiracist conception of the Other which locates evil outside ethnic or ideological differences, and is therefore acceptable in the New Age milieu. Thus, Icke establishes a theodicy which reconciles the New Age conception of holistic humankind with the perceived failure of the New Age to create a world of peace and plenty. This suggests a way towards understanding his considerable popular appeal, and that of New Age conspiracism more broadly.

1. See <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/davidicke.com#>. Ranks 6,424th as of 15/2/2013. By way of comparison, on the same date, Wikipedia.org ranked 6th, the London Times (timesonline.co.uk) ranked 6,368th and the University of Edinburgh (ed.ac.uk) ranked 9,872nd.

Conspiracism

While *conspiracy* can be defined simply as “an agreement between two or more persons to do something criminal, illegal, or reprehensible” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), the term *conspiracy theory* is more problematic. Scholars approaching conspiracy theories have tended towards dismissal, taking them as evidence of paranoia (Hofstadter 1964; Pipes 1997; Kay 2011) or, following Frederik Jameson, dismissed as over-simplifications of the complexity of the world; “a poor person’s cognitive mapping” (1988, 356). These approaches, however, both assume a fundamental difference between proven *conspiracies* such as Watergate, and unproven *conspiracy theories*, despite a number of now-accepted historical events having once been considered conspiracy theories (Bartlett and Miller 2010, 16). We would therefore be in error to assume *a priori* that because some conspiracy theories are irrational and/or paranoid, all therefore must be. Conspiracy theories cannot, moreover, be defined simply as a theory which posits a conspiracy. For example, both the official and alternative explanations of the events of September 11, 2001, both involve conspiracies, yet the al Qaeda theory as presented by the 9–11 Commission report is never regarded as a conspiracy theory (Coady 2007, 132).

The term conspiracy theory cannot therefore be defined substantively; rather, as I have argued previously, its function is *rhetorical* (Robertson 2013). A conspiracy theory is “an explanation that conflicts with the account advanced by the relevant epistemic authorities” (Levy 2007, 181), as is therefore in effect “an excuse for neglecting, equating and even repressing political protest of all sorts” (Fenster 1999, 21). For this reason I prefer to use Barkun’s terms *conspiracy belief*, denoting a discrete unit of belief in a conspiracy, i.e. that “an organization made up of individuals or groups has or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end” (2003, 3), and *conspiracism* for a world-view made up of a number of interconnected conspiracy beliefs.²

Conspiracy beliefs have been a feature of American politics since the Civil War (White 2002, 3–7), but gained greater public attention in the fallout of the Watergate affair in 1972 (Smith 2001, 155). Conspiracism has long been associated with far Right politics, but since the 1990s the construction of conspiracist narratives no longer necessarily takes place exclusively within

2. I acknowledge that Barkun’s definition of “conspiracy belief” can be seen as perpetuating the rhetorical function; what constitutes “malevolent ends” remains relative to the groups in question; for example, the promotion of policies concerning gun control may be viewed as benevolent by left-leaning groups, at the same time as forming the malevolent agenda of the New World Order in right-wing conspiracy beliefs. Therefore it is defined only in reference to the agenda of the power-wielders of the culture in question.

right-wing or Christian discourses and has moved into the mainstream (Partridge 2005, 317). To some degree this has been encouraged by the emergence of the Internet, which allows unofficial or oppositional material to be distributed widely, cheaply and quickly (Fenster 2010, 244–245). Conspiracist narratives are today a prominent feature of popular culture, including music, movies, television and novels, and may be beginning to influence mainstream political debates (Robertson 2013; Ward and Voas 2011, 112–113).

New Age

The term New Age is similarly problematic, lacking both agreed academic categorization and self-identification by practitioners (Sutcliffe 2003a, 9–13). The earliest academic accounts of New Age, while implying it was a “movement,” avoided attempting to posit clearly bounded definitions (e.g. Heelas 1996, 63; York 1995, 330). Hanegraaff’s *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996), therefore, was a welcome attempt to establish a bounded definition of the category. He conceptualizes New Age as a commodified version of Western esotericism, which includes a rejection of the strictly dualistic scientific-materialist tendencies of modern Western thought (1996, 515–517). Invoking Campbell (1972), he describes New Age as signifying “the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself as constituting a more or less unified ‘movement’” (1996, 17). Hanegraaff also usefully introduces the distinction between a New Age *sensu stricto* and a New Age *sensu lato* (1996, 98–103). *Sensu stricto* (“New Age” applied in a restricted sense) refers to the early movement of the post-World War II period, closely connected to Theosophy and highly millennial. *Sensu lato* (“New Age” applied in a general sense), on the other hand, refers to the post-1960s explosion of eclectic, cross-cultural explorations in spirituality.

Sutcliffe, however, suggests that New Age should be used to signify a field of Anglo-American *popular religion*: “the popular religion of our own backyards” (2003b, 24). This is essentially how I use it in this article; New Age signifies a particular narrative within the twentieth century Anglo-American religious field typified by *millennialism* and *holism*. Millennialism refers to the teleological doctrine that a radical, progressive transformation of the world is imminent, the term being drawn from the New Testament motif of the return of Christ to earth, but here used in the sense of both global and personal transformation. It is here understood in contrast to *apocalypticism*, which posits destructive, rather than transformational, teleological scenarios. Holism refers to the doctrine of the inter-connectedness of all levels of existence. Such a worldview sees all beings as parts of a complete system, and

seeks to dissolve the separations implicit in dualistic worldviews, for example between man and nature, or pertinently, the spiritual and material (Hane-graaff 1996, 119–158). Indeed, New Age discourse commonly describes the modern West's separation of the spiritual and the material as the root cause of its malaise.

Moreover, holism is a feature of the conspiracist *weltanschauung*; the idea that everything is connected and that researchers can “connect the dots” to reveal the larger conspiracy parallels New Age discourses concerning “meaningful coincidences” (e.g. Redfield 1993). Both New Age and conspiracism are teleological, although traditional conspiracism was typically apocalyptic rather than millennial. However, a new teleological narrative developed in the 1990s which reconciled these apparently oppositional positions, as I describe below. The reason for this was the increasingly apparent fact that the New Age had not arrived as predicted.

The “Crisis” of the New Age

The New Age was, like the United Nations, part of the “post-war dream” that a better world could be built. By the early 1990s, however, it was becoming increasingly insupportable to argue that a New Age was in fact manifesting. War had continued unabated, as it has to the present; social inequality, as measured by the difference in wealth between the richest and poorest, was increasing (Mishel 2011); there was a widespread increase in feelings of disenfranchisement, with declining voting figures and membership of voluntary groups and political parties suggesting that fewer believed they could affect the political process (Goldberg 2001, 240). As Introvigne puts it, “it could not be maintained that a new age of general happiness was in fact manifesting, notwithstanding any evidence to the contrary” (2001, 60).

Around this time, conspiracist narratives were increasingly appearing in New Age discourses. Despite both being considered part of the cultic milieu, New Age and conspiracism had not traditionally been easy bedfellows, and pre-1990s, most involved in New Age didn't like conspiracy beliefs “because to them it is creating negativity even to think about it.”³ Nevertheless, the 1990s saw what Goodrick-Clarke described as the “endemic spread of conspiracy theories in the New Age milieu” (2002, 299). *Nexus*, a bi-monthly “alternative news” magazine based in Australia but widely available in North America and Europe, began to publish conspiracist material alongside its New Age content. Lynne McTaggart published the first of the *What Doctors Don't Tell You* series in 1996, positing the idea that the etiological diagnoses of con-

3. *Nexus* editor Duncan Roads, interview via e-mail, dated 4/6/2008.

temporary Western medicine are intended to make money, rather than to heal. In Redfield's best-selling *The Celestine Prophecy*, "organized religion" has conspired to suppress truths capable of transforming human consciousness (1993, 14). Conspiracy beliefs were suddenly widespread within the New Age milieu; Kay quotes researcher Linda Milligan as stating that by the mid-1990s,

Aquarian-age optimism has been transformed into a dark new-age despair... Interest in the mind has shifted from speculation about the mind's as-yet unrealized powers (ESP, for example) to absorption in the belief that evil beings, UFO aliens referred to as the Greys, are implanting mind control devices in the brains of thousands of Americans. And they are doing this, my informants believe, with the cooperation of elements of the U.S. government along with the internationalists bent on creating a one world government. (2011, 61–62)

Barkun suggests that some Baby Boomers developed feelings of "contempt for a society that has failed to transform itself spiritually in line with their aspirations in the 1970s" (2003, 299). Goodrick-Clarke goes further, asking if some within the New Age milieu began to adopt conspiracist narratives as explanations as to why the New Age had failed to arrive (2002, 299). I will return to this possibility later, and turn now to the most public face of this conspiracist New Age, David Icke, focusing particularly on his synthesis of New Age with conspiracism during this period.

David Icke

David Icke was born in 1952 to a working class family in Leicester, in the midlands of England (Icke 1993, 28). Upon leaving school aged 15, he embarked upon a career as a goalkeeper, first for Coventry City, then Hereford United, but was forced to retire in 1973 at the age of 21 after being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (Icke 1993, 48–70). He began working as a sports reporter for a local news article, which eventually led to a job presenting sports programmes for the BBC, including co-presenting the launch of their innovative and high-profile breakfast television show, *Breakfast Time*, in 1983.⁴ He was also a National Speaker for the UK Green Party from 1988 until 1991. Part of his new found political conscience included refusal to pay the Poll Tax, introduced by the Conservative government in 1990 (1989 in Scotland) (*Guardian* 1990). His prosecution led to his dismissal from the BBC, although there were suggestions that they had been forewarned that he was planning to go public with his recent spiritual experiences (Christy 1991).

4. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-21040879>. Accessed January 30, 2013.

He describes feeling an overwhelming sense of a “presence” accompanying him through his time in the Green Party. In an oft-repeated story, he claims that during a hotel stay, he said to the presence, “For goodness sake, if you are there, contact me. This is driving me up the wall” (Icke 1991, 14). In 1990, he visited psychic Betty Shine, after coming across her book *Mind to Mind* in a railway bookshop (Icke 1991, 15). Although ostensibly seeking relief from his arthritis, he claims that from the beginning he was also attempting to contact this “presence” (1991, 16). On his third visit, Shine claimed to make contact with the presence, despite Icke saying nothing in regard. She described the presence as “Chinese in appearance,” that his name was Wang Ye Lee, and that he said “Socrates is with me” (1991, 16–17).

Wang Ye Lee then made a number of prophecies:

There will be great earthquakes. These will come as a warning to the human race. They will occur in places that have never experienced them...

He is a healer who is here to heal the earth, and will be world famous. He will face enormous opposition, but we will always be there to protect him... Sometimes he will say things and wonder where they came from. They will be our words...

He will write five books in three years.

Politics is not for him. He is too spiritual. Politics is very unspiritual and will make him unhappy.

One man cannot change the world, but one man can communicate the message that will change the world. (1991, 16–22)

Although Icke's later works tend to downplay the Theosophical connection, his early works state explicitly that he believes himself to be guided by a group of entities which include Wang Yee Lee, Jesus and Rakorczy (1991, 73), identified by Alice Bailey as the Master tasked with establishing the Age of Aquarius (1957, 667). His descriptions of Atlantis in 1992's *Love Changes Everything* are clearly indebted both to Blavatsky (1888) and Bailey (1957, 122; 1954, 231).

In February 1991, he travelled to Peru, where he had a revelatory experience in a circle of stones on a mound near the ruins of an Inca city. He heard voices and had the sensation of being flooded with energy, and felt that his consciousness had been irrevocably transformed, an experience that was again described in New Age terms; energy, chakras and crystals (2003, 21–22). On returning to the UK, he undertook a number of press conferences and media appearances, most famously on the prime-time BBC interview show *Wogan* in April 1991. He was laughed at by the audience and mocked by the host, some-

what cruelly. Much of the controversy revolved around his statement that he was the “Son of God,” which the audience and the tabloid press took as Icke claiming he was Jesus (Ronson 2001a, 147–148), although his insistence on only wearing turquoise shell-suits was also frequently referenced. He became a public laughing-stock, and when he began presenting his talks around the country soon afterward, they were sparsely attended (Icke 2003, 22–23).

Interestingly, even at this point, the seeds of his later conspiricism had already been planted:

when a child dies in this world of preventable disease every two seconds, when the economic system of this world must destroy the earth simply for that system to survive; when you see all the wars, and when you see all the pain, and when you see all the suffering, is it a force of love and wisdom and tolerance that is in control of this planet? (*Wogan*, BBC Television, broadcast 29/4/1991)

This was the direction his work would increasingly take, beginning with 1994’s *The Robot’s Rebellion*. Icke began to use conspiracy beliefs as source material, rather than channelled sources and Theosophical texts, connecting them into a meta-narrative concerning the enslavement of humanity by the Illuminati, who covertly rule the world by manipulating world events. Icke again alludes to his belief that it is the Illuminati who have prevented the arrival of the New Age:

this book is the story of a conspiracy to control the human race. That may sound fantastic to you at this stage, but read on and you will see that it is very real and affecting our lives every day. It is, however, a conspiracy that we can, and will, dismantle... At the heart of this attack on human freedom is the desire to keep us from the knowledge of the spiritual realities of our true selves and the understanding of our place in this wondrous web of life we call Creation. (Icke 1994, xi)

The Illuminati concept originated in in a 1798 book by John Robison, Professor of Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, which included material on the Bavarian intellectual Adam Weishaupt. Although Weishaupt’s Order of the Illuminati, which promoted Enlightenment thought, was quickly shut down, Robison was convinced that they continued covertly, seeking world domination (Partridge 2005, 273). This concept has remained an important part of conspiricism, and has developed in recent decades to include the idea that Illuminati dynasties originated in early civilizations such as Sumeria and Babylon. Drawing from William Milton Cooper’s *Behold a Pale Horse* (1991), Icke cited the notorious anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (although renamed the “Illuminati Protocols”) as evidence of their plans (1994, 139ff); I return to this issue later.

His follow-up ...*And the Truth Shall Set You Free* (1995) developed what was only hinted at in *Robot's Rebellion*, that the power at the very top of the triangle is extra-terrestrial, an idea that was not uncommon in the UFO and right-wing conspiracist milieu in this period (Barkun 2003, 88–97). Nevertheless, the somewhat surprising development of this idea that Icke presented in his next major work, *The Biggest Secret* (1999), placed him outside the mainstream of both conspiracism and New Age thinking. In it, he first presents what I refer to as the *Reptilian Thesis*; the idea that the Illuminati are a race of extra-terrestrial reptilians who assume human appearance. Although originally from stars such as Draco and Zeta Reticuli, they are also extra-dimensional, existing in a co-existent but less dense energy frequency. The reptilian Illuminati keep humanity in a state of fear and anxiety in order to feed on these emotions, which he claims are sustenance to beings made of less dense matter.

Icke is primarily a synthesizer rather than originator of ideas, and the Reptilian Thesis, however controversial, was no exception. One major source for *The Biggest Secret* was controversial historian Zecharia Sitchin, whose *The 12th Planet* (1976) and successive works posited a planet unknown to human science that orbits the Sun on a 3,600-year elliptical orbit. Sitchin claimed that the planet's occupants, an alien race called the Anunnaki, came to Earth and assumed control of human society, heralded as gods and founding bloodlines which exist to this day. Sitchin's evidence is drawn primarily from controversial translations of Assyrian and Babylonian tablets and the Old Testament, interpreted literally, as is typical of conspiracist revisionist histories.

Icke combines Sitchin's historical narrative with South African Zulu *sanusi* Credo Mutwa's accounts of reptilian and other extra-terrestrial races interacting with humans in prehistoric Africa (Chidester 2005, 182–183; Steyn 2003, 84). By making the bloodlines of the supposed Illuminati families originate with reptilian extra-terrestrials, Icke's thesis connects the "ancient astronaut" cosmogony with political conspiracism. As UFOs and the "ancient astronaut" thesis had long been popular in the New Age milieu, they provided a bridging mechanism between New Age and conspiracism.

Although the Reptilian Thesis brought Icke back into the public eye, it proved divisive in conspiracist circles. In 2001, Austin, Texas-based radio host and film-maker Alex Jones described Icke as a "conman," and his reptilian hypothesis as the "turd in the punchbowl" of his otherwise lucid conspiracist research (Ronson 2001b). Even active supporters of Icke, such as one-time Greenpeace activist Brian Selby, have sought to distract from the centrality of the reptilian hypothesis, claiming that it "confuse[s] things" (Ronson 2001a, 157–180). Yet Icke has never rescinded his thesis.

Icke was quick to react to the events of September 11th, 2001, publishing on his blog that the attacks were orchestrated by the reptilian-controlled US government as a reason to further restrict the freedoms of the population, and to promote centralized government and war in the Middle East, which fitted neatly with what was quickly becoming the conspiracist consensus that the attacks were orchestrated from within the US government (Barkun 2003, 161). However, this narrative spread beyond conspiracist circles; Michael Moore's 2004 documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which directly challenged the official version of events (although stopping short of claiming that the Bush administration were directly responsible for the attacks), won the Palme d'Or at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival and grossed over \$220 million, making it the most successful documentary of all time.⁵ With this mainstreaming of 9/11 conspiracies, and conspiracism more generally, Icke's reputation was to some degree rehabilitated. UK television channel 5 screened a documentary entitled "David Icke: Was He Right?" in December 2006 (Hull), and even Alex Jones softened his position, as Icke became—and remains—a frequent guest on Jones' radio show.⁶

Following a further channelled revelation in 2003 during an experience with the South American hallucinogen ayahuasca, Icke's work entered a third phase which attempted to reconcile his conspiracist and reptilian material with his Theosophical *weltanschauung*. He returned to stressing that each human and non-human being is a part of one greater entity, part of "one infinite consciousness... referred to as 'the Infinite', 'Oneness' and the 'One'" (Icke 2003, 322–325). This pantheistic conception of god can be seen as drawing from the Theosophical interpretation of Hindu philosophies regarding the individual soul (*Atman*) as a part of the universal soul (*Brahman*). Humans and reptilians, while "real" within this Infinite Oneness, have forgotten that they are essentially parts of the same being (2003, 329–330). In Icke's later work, although it appears from the everyday point of view that humanity has been enslaved by the reptilian Illuminati, on a higher level, this situation continues only because we allow it to, a pessimistic interpretation of the New Age motif that we manifest our own reality (Hanegraaff 1996, 124–125). Nevertheless, Icke believes that the possibility remains for individual human beings to see through the illusion that the world of four dimensions is all that exists, and reconnect with Infinite Oneness. Should enough individu-

5. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=fahrenheit911.htm>. Accessed May 2, 2011.

6. During an interview with Icke on 3/11/2011, Jones apologized to him, stating that he made his "turd in the punchbowl" comment because he was "naive". http://rss.infowars.com/20111103_Thu_Alex2.mp3. Accessed April 26, 2012.

als realize this, choosing love and oneness over fear and separation, this false reality (called by Icke, with typical populism, "the Matrix") collapses, and the New Age is manifested. As Icke was told during his ayahuasca experience:

This transformation is not a maybe... It is happening now and the power and speed of the change will become ever more profound and obvious. What you are seeing is the last desperate attempt of the 'Matrix' to stop the inevitable, that's all. The transformation from prison to paradise is a done deal. (Icke 2003, 332)

Icke's *weltanschauung* can be summarized as follows:

1. The political, social and religious structures of the world are result of the machinations of an extra-terrestrial reptilian elite, who retain power by keeping the masses ignorant of information which would suggest their existence.
2. Through questioning and accumulating knowledge, and making connections between anomalous events, individuals can begin to see through the reality imposed by the reptilian elite, and comprehend that all life is one being.
3. When a sufficient number of individuals realize their enslavement and the means of their liberation, there will be a gestalt shift and the planet will move into a higher state of existence.

Here, Icke reinterprets the traditional conspiracist apocalyptic narrative as a world-wide change of consciousness brought on by a critical mass of individual "awakenings", leading to the emancipation of humanity, an interpretation more compatible with New Age thought. Similarly, Icke combines the holism of New Age discourse with the conspiracist ideology that everything is connected and nothing happens by accident: everything is connected below, in the political world, because everything is connected above, at the spiritual level. New Age narratives typically construct humankind's political disenfranchisement as the result of their disconnection from their spiritual selves; in Icke's work, however, this is reversed, and humankind's spiritual disconnection is constructed as the direct result of their political disenfranchisement, as the occluded powers that control events conspire to deliberately repress awareness of spiritual matters.

Academic and popular reception

Scholars have found Icke's work difficult to take seriously, largely due to the apparently outlandish nature of some of his claims. Furthermore, his evidence is frequently drawn from non-scientific sources; channellers (particularly Icke

1992, but throughout); popular films, which are interpreted as coded fact (e.g. 2003, 312); and discredited researchers such as Sitchin, although naturally Icke claims that the reason that they are discredited is their exposing of the truth (2003, 17).

Lewis and Kahn (2005) interpret his work as a complex satire. In portraying the wielders of power as demonic and modern society as based on the fear-based and hierarchical structures of the residual reptilian brain, his work is read as presenting a critique of the rapacious avarice of free-market capitalism. In portraying those at the top of the power structure as reptiles, Icke would be suggesting that their values are literally inhuman. In interpreting Icke's ideas as satirical, however, they imply an authorial intent which I do not feel they provide adequate proof of. Although they demonstrate that Icke's work *may* be interpreted in such a satirical manner, they fail to present examples where it *must* be. I do not think that Icke believes he is presenting the Reptilian Thesis as a metaphor for the inequality of modern society; rather, for Icke, the perceived inequalities are a manifestation of the literal inhumanity of our leaders.

In the United Kingdom, Icke is still widely remembered as, to paraphrase, "that TV presenter who claimed he was Jesus." Indeed, it is possible that this is why he initially found greater success in the US, where the *Wogan* interview was never broadcast. However, there has been an on-going argument by the left-wing press in the UK that Icke is an anti-Semite, and uses "reptilian" as a code-word for "Jew" (Ronson 2001a and 2001b; Honigsbaum 1995). This interpretation is reinforced by the prominence of the Rothschilds and other Jewish families among the reptilian bloodlines, his references to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in *Robot's Rebellion* (1994) and alleged Holocaust revisionism in an early draft of *...And The Truth Shall Set You Free* (1995) (Honigsbaum 1995). As early as 1994, these accusations saw him heckled repeatedly at his Glastonbury presentation by Green Party national spokesman, David Taylor (Honigsbaum 1995), and banned from speaking at the Green party conference (Chaudhary 1994). As a result, Icke has been picketed by left-wing activist groups during some public appearances, notably in Canada, as documented in Jon Ronson's documentary *Secret Rulers of the World* (2001a). However, as Ronson notes, this reading requires disregarding the many non-Jewish reptilians named by Icke, including many of his most well-known examples, such as the British Royal Family (2001b, 149). Ronson, despite frequently being cited by Icke's critics, comes to regard the picketers as no more rational than Icke, and concludes that Icke intends the Reptilian Thesis literally (2001b, 162).

It is noteworthy that both these interpretations—the satirical and the anti-Semitic—require conspiratorial thinking in themselves, in positing that Icke's *real* meaning is available only to initiates. Icke, however, frequently insists that his work is to be understood literally. Ultimately, it may be easier for most people to accept that he is anti-Semitic than that he believes that extra-terrestrial reptiles control world politics. The question of Icke's potential anti-Semitism is serious and sensitive, but space prevents me giving a full discussion here, although I shall be examining it fully in a future work. Here, however, I intend to bracket the question off for now in order to examine the Reptilian Thesis within a broader context of portrayals of otherness and malevolence, and how it relates to the conceptualization of “evil” in the New Age milieu.

New Age Theodicy

In Christian theology, a theodicy (from Greek *theo*, god, and Latin *dike*, justice) is essentially a response to the “problem of evil,” why it exists and why it is seemingly distributed unevenly. The problem of evil poses a considerable theological challenge; as J. L. Mackie wrote in 1955, the existence of evil proves that there cannot be a god because the preposition “that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible” (1990 [1955], 26). Of course, such arguments will not sit well with those who insist that they know that a benevolent god exists. Christian theological responses have argued that evil is not a thing in itself, but an absence of good (Davies 2006, 17); that evil is a necessary outcome in a cosmos which allows free will (O’Conner 2008, 50ff); or that what we perceive as evil on our earthly individual level may be part of a necessary, if regrettable, course of action towards a greater good (Davies 2009 19).

Perhaps the simplest response, however, is to blame some reified oppositional entity: the Other. As the Other must be known to the culture in question, however, it has typically been found in the margins of that culture, and as a result there has been a historical tendency for the Other to be constructed in ethnic or national groups—the Jews in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe being a pertinent example. However, the increasingly multi-cultural and globalized culture means that nations other than our own no longer seem as alien as they may once have done, a point underlined by modern scientific understandings of genetics and evolution. “[G]lobalization of society does not lead mainly to the death of God,” Frisk writes, “but the death of the Devil” (2001, 35). The Other was traditionally found on the local margins, but when the societal group is constructed as including everyone, there are no outsiders who can be blamed when things go wrong (Beyer 72). New Age is

often considered as globalized, capitalist religion *par excellence*; for example, Frisk writes that “New Age as a ‘transnational culture’ is inherently linked to globalization” (2001, 31), its consumerist “spiritual supermarket” and commercialism reflecting the capitalist ideology of the territories where it is most prominent. It is therefore untenable for the Other to be constructed in terms of ethnicity or nationality within the holistic, globalized New Age milieu.

New Age Theodicy tended, until the 1990s at least, to explain the problem of evil by positing “good” and “evil” as two polarities within a larger whole. As Hanegraaff observes, “holism is incompatible with the very idea of a system of morality: the latter, after all, should be able to distinguish ‘good’ from ‘evil’, while the former cannot accept such distinctions as absolute” (1996, 276). Therefore, “[i]t is in fact the dualistic idea that evil is something which exists and should not be, that according to New Age sources, prevents us from seeing the universe as one benevolent entity. ‘Whatever is, is right’, it is us who need to learn and to adjust” (Ibid. 277–278). An emic account is found in the work of prominent New Age writer Shirley MacLaine:

...negative didn’t mean wrong. It simply meant the opposite polarity - the other end of the balance—of positive. Negative energy was as necessary as positive. It was the interacted combustion that produced and created life... Understanding the basic tenets of that principle was helpful then in extending our understanding that “evil” exists only in relation to point of view; If a child steals to live, if a man kills to protect his family, if a woman aborts a fetus (sic) rather than give birth to an unwanted child, if a terrorist murders because he has been raised all his life to believe that killing is his right and proper duty—who is evil? (1987, 144–145)

After the crisis of the New Age in the mid-1990s, this theodicy seems to no longer have been satisfactory to many in the New Age milieu, Icke included, and an explanatory Other was sought. However;

As these models of ritual once informed western understandings of “primitive” religion on the cultural or historical *periphery*, so they have often (as now) been turned *inward*, to construe in religious terms the fear of subversive evil *among us*. (Frankfurter 2003, 112; emphasis in original).

In other words, as the Other could no longer be located in the social or geographical periphery, it was instead constructed as an occluded group *within* our societal structures. For Goodrick-Clarke, this Other must be conspiratorial in nature. The Other is identified as the Illuminati, typically portrayed as being in collusion with powers which are *literally* alien, as in Icke’s Reptilian Thesis. Icke’s descriptions of the reptilians are unambiguously demonic, mirroring traditional religious descriptions of demonic figures in numerous respects. Most

obviously, their resemblance to snakes seems drawn from Christian imagery relating to the genesis serpent, who from the Middle Ages has been equated with Satan himself, and who is also frequently portrayed with reptilian features (Barkun 2003, 123). What's more, Icke portrays them as living in subterranean cities and tunnels, and a chthonic origin for evil creatures, as well as Hell being located underground, is widespread in Judaeo-Christian mythology (Partridge and Christianson 2009, 6). Shape-changing is another ability associated with demons, including the ability to appear in human form. Icke's reptilians can also control those with high levels of reptilian DNA, operating them remotely, a narrative that parallels accounts of demonic possession (Partridge and Christianson 2009, 8–9). Indeed, this idea of hybridization may also tie into the biblical demonic narrative of the *nephilim*,⁷ in which demons are the result of the interbreeding of human women with fallen angels (Flaherty 2010, 85–91). Icke further portrays the reptilians and their hybrid bloodlines as partaking of paedophilia, child sacrifice and cannibalism, claims made of those purportedly influenced by the Devil in the medieval witch crazes (Victor 2001, 3–4).

In the globalized, humanistic New Age milieu, then, it is untenable for the Other to be portrayed in terms of human groups on the margins of society. As this article has argued, however, in the 1990s the need for such an oppositional entity upon whom to blame the failure of the New Age was keenly felt. Icke's Reptilian Thesis echoes historical constructions of Otherness, yet posits that Other as both *within* a globalized humanity (the Illuminati), and *without* (reptilian extra-terrestrials). In doing so, he constructs a theodicy which explains the failure of the New Age without contradicting its sacralized view of humanity.

Conclusion: The Reptilian Thesis as New Age Theodicy

This article has argued that the need to reconcile a holistic, relativizing construction of evil with the perceived failure of the New Age to arrive was perceived in the New Age milieu through the 1990s and 2000s. An Other had to exist, yet could not be constructed as human. Understanding this finally places us in a position where we can understand Icke's reptilian hypothesis. The Reptilian Thesis introduces a theodicy into New Age, of a globalized, extra-terrestrial Other. Icke's Reptilian Thesis seeks to portray the extra-terrestrial as that which is, literally, "alien," in order to explain away the perceived failure of the New Age. By controlling the Illuminati bloodlines through interbreeding, the purported reptilian Other operates within humanity and within human social structures.

7. Genesis 6:1–4; Numbers 13: 32–3; 1 Enoch, *passim*; Jubilees 7: 21–25. See also Partridge and Christianson (2009, 4–6).

Recalling Lewis and Kahn's analysis (2005), Icke's Thesis is a fierce critique of contemporary social and political structures, but by placing the responsibility for their rapaciousness and iniquity with the reptilians, Icke effectively removes the responsibility from humanity. In this way, Icke's cosmology reconciles a holistic view of humanity and the cosmos with a conspiracist narrative of unseen malevolent agents. The Reptilian Thesis thus allows Icke to address the problem of evil within a pantheistic, globally humanistic worldview.

For Icke, the New Age did not fail to arrive; it was prevented from arriving. Icke's movement from New Age narratives to conspiracist narratives does not represent an abandonment of the central premises and aims of New Age; rather, it represents a re-contextualization for a demographic in a situation Alice Bailey never imagined. This, I argue, goes some way towards understanding the popular appeal of his work, and of hybridizations of New Age and conspiracism more broadly.

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