The hidden hand: Why religious studies need to take conspiracy theories seriously

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Abstract
What seemed like fringe concerns to most then have, with Trump's election and Brexit and the growth of the alt-right across Europe, become of concerns of mainstream commentators. Moreover, the rise of ISIS and the increasingly overt religious language being employed in the political sphere have made the powerful combination of religion and conspiracy plain. This emerging subdiscipline cuts to the very core of some of the most pressing issues in the academic study of religion—and indeed, the social sciences more generally in this postcolonial environment. This article is intended to set out its scope and some of its future directions.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2009, I submitted my undergraduate thesis on conspiracy theories in the New Age milieu at the University of Edinburgh. I was then aware of only one other scholar looking at religion and conspiracy theories seriously—Michael Barkun—and he came from political studies rather than a Religious Studies angle. Although my examiners appreciated the innovation of the piece and rightly criticised my poor structure and theoretical specificity, I got the distinct impression that one of my examiners had found the topic distasteful. The comments were dismissive but suggested that they had not read the dissertation carefully, and unusually, a third reviewer had been sought. I had forgotten that although my supervisor was pretty forward-looking, I was still part of a fairly conservative department. Luckily, the third reviewer was more interested in innovation.

How things have changed. What seemed like fringe concerns to most then have, with Trump's election and Brexit and the growth of the alt-right across Europe, become of concerns of mainstream commentators. Moreover, the rise of ISIS and the increasingly overt religious language being employed in the political sphere have made the powerful combination of religion and conspiracy plain. I am no longer the only scholar looking at the connection; on the contrary, we are looking at the emergence of a distinct and, as I shall argue, important subfield.

Charlotte Ward and David Voas' "The Emergence of Conspirituality" (2011) was the first publication specifically examining conspiracy narratives from a Religious Studies perspective, focussed on the nebulous New Age movement. Ward took part in a panel I organised at the 2012 SOCREL (the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion group) conference in Chester, UK, the first on the subject at a major RS conference, and I organised another at the 2015 conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion in Erfurt, Germany. While I was completing my doctoral research (published in 2016 by Bloomsbury as UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism), I also published papers on conspiracism and millennialism in the Christian right in the United States.
(2013), “invented religions” (2017), and Scientology (2017). I also edited a special issue of Nova Religio on conspiracy theories and new and emergent religion, published late 2015, which included papers from several people who had contributed to the aforementioned conference panels. These remain the only volumes dedicated entirely to the subject, although two recent encyclopedic works, the Oxford Handbook of Religion, Vol. 2 (2016) and The Occult World (2015) have included entries on religion and conspiracy (by Asbjorn Dyrendal and Michael Barkun, respectively). This year will see the publication of the Brill Handbook of Religion and Conspiracy (which I am coediting with Egil Asprem and Dyrendal), at which point a large volume from a major publisher will be in the major academic libraries, marking the point at which this upstart subdiscipline gains some measure of respectability.

Contemporary political events aside, what fascinates me about this field and which has made it grow over the last few years is that it cuts to the very core of some of the most pressing issues in the academic study of religion—and indeed, the social sciences more generally in this postcolonial environment. My intention in this piece is to point some of these out to you, to pique your interest and guide you to some of the most important contributions thus far. Before I do, however, I need to spend some time unpacking just what we are talking about when we talk about conspiracy theories.

1.1 Researching conspiracism: definitions and approaches

To be blunt, a “conspiracy theory” cannot be defined simply as a theory that posits a conspiracy, as is often suggested. The need to seek explanation for events and the positing of intentional agents is a natural human response, and perhaps even a necessary one. We might make the comparison with Justin Barrett’s theory that human brains possess a “Hyperactive Agency Detection Device,” which functions to protect us from predatory threats but may also as a by‐product predispose humans to posit supernatural or otherwise occluded agencies (1994).

Nevertheless, there have absolutely been political conspiracies, at least as far back as the Roman Empire, and at certain times, narratives concerning conspiracies by one or other group have been an accepted and public part of the political sphere—for example, a Jewish/Masonic plot behind the French Revolution, Senator McCarthy’s Red Scare, or more pertinently, that Russia has covertly attempted to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Obviously then, there is something more to the term “conspiracy theory” than simply this.

If your knowledge of conspiracy theory comes from the popular press, you will almost certainly associate it with paranoia and irrationality. To some degree, this dates back to Richard Hofstadter’s famous 1964 article, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, although it should be noted that Hofstadter did not mean paranoia in the clinical sense, despite how his work has typically been received in the intervening years. Rather, he was addressing a rhetorical style based on a polarised, Manichaean worldview and an entrenched ideological stance. Hofstadter promoted consensus politics, that is, government that sought stability and order through reason and by seeking consensus rather than antagonism. Following the divisive rhetoric of McCarthyism, conspiracy narratives were portrayed as irrational, totalising and promoting of conflict, and capable of the mobilisation of minorities (Thalmann, 2014: 8–11). He may have been correct in that respect, as conspiracy narratives have played a not-inconsiderable part in the results of the election of Donald Trump and Brexit in the UK. Yet it is a big leap to posit that these voters were motivated by paranoia; after all, Clinton supporters were positing conspiracies too (Russian hacking, for example, something for which no direct evidence has ever been presented).

The idea that conspiracy narratives are necessarily irrational is likewise difficult to sustain under close scrutiny. Despite Frederic Jameson’s oft-quoted aside that conspiracy theories are the “poor person’s cognitive mapping” (1990, 356), it is by no means clear from a philosophical perspective whether there is any systemic flaw in conspiracist reasoning that demonstrates it to be necessarily unjustified (Dentith, 2012). For example, it is often pointed out that conspiracy theories are nonfalsifiable. However, as Keeley points out, falsifiability is a decent criterion in the natural sciences but not in the social sciences where actors may quite likely be concealing their motivations, deliberately or unconsciously, wholly or in part (1999: 120–121; Dentith, 2012: 79–83). Although it may be true that many—though by no means all—conspiracy beliefs do not stand up to scientific standards of proof, they are by no means unique in
that respect. Nor do human rights, love, support for football teams, political ideologies, identification with particular races or nation states, yet these are felt deeply by actors and have a more profound effect on human behaviour than scientific rationality. Further, as social scientists, our concern should not be whether particular beliefs are de facto correct but how they motivate individuals and how they relate to broader social structures and processes.

Some of the most interesting work on the intersection of religion and conspiracy theories is coming from psychologists. Is conspiracism above all a style of thinking? Some psychologists have attempted to quantify conspiracism according to a “Generic Conspiracist Belief scale” (Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013) or a “Conspiracy Mentality scale” (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), which we might to some degree equate with the idea of conspiracism as a worldview which seeks conspiracies as the primary motivating force in history. Others have sought to relate it to schizotypic tendencies or “cognitive illusions” (Kruglanski, 1987: 220).1 If so, how is that style of thinking related to religious modes of thinking?

However, there is a tendency in these studies to use “folk categories” uncritically. Such studies will almost always start with the statement that conspiracy beliefs are unwarranted, before listing a number of patently implausible examples, but do not deal with either those that are accepted and promoted by power-brokers (e.g., McCarthyism, Al Qaeda, etc.) nor those that later turned out to be true (Tuskegee, Iran-Contra, P2 scandal, etc.). If we start with the assumption that conspiracism in necessarily paranoid and/or incorrect, then base a survey on that assumption, then the results of that survey cannot help but reinforce our initial assumptions. Such quantitative work needs to be combined with critical analysis for it to do more than simply reinforce entrenched ideological categories.

That said one very important contribution of these studies has been to expose the inaccuracy of many of the assumptions surrounding conspiracy narratives. They are neither marginal nor evidence of mental illness or irrationality. They happen as much in the workplace as they do in the political sphere. It is neither a uniquely Western phenomenon nor one that is more typical of men than of women (Bruder et al., 2013: 11). Rather, it is a tendency we all have, and sometimes, something that large groups can buy into—think of McCarthyism, for example, though there are lots of other examples I might mention. Of course, a theory is only a conspiracy theory when a minority holds that opinion. And even then, if it gets proven correct—as in the case of the Iran Contra affair, Watergate, Tuskegee, drones in the Middle East, and the Chilcot Report—it is no longer a conspiracy theory, reinforcing the idea that “conspiracy theories” must, by definition, be irrational.

To restate the point: Why is not Christianity also one of the irrational beliefs? Can you be brainwashed into Christianity?

The definitional issues are complicated because, like religion, most people using the term have a horse in the race. When George Bush famously stated in the wake of the 9–11 attacks, “Let us not tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories” (cited in Byford, 2014: 20), he did not mean, “let us not consider any theory which posits a conspiracy.” In fact, the official version is a conspiracy, carried out in secret towards a concrete and malevolent goal—which is exactly the definition of a conspiracy theory we have been given by most scholars. Rather, his statement makes it clear that a “conspiracy theory” is that which we are not permitted to think. And that makes conspiracy about power and knowledge.

This is the basis of much of the recent sociological work on conspiracy theories. Barkun’s A Culture of Conspiracy (2003) presented a clear historical narrative of the increasingly millennial turn in American right-wing discourse and the role of UFOs in the milieu. The book introduced terminology that is widely employed in subsequent research. In order to distinguish between specific claims of conspiracy and large-scale, systemic conspiracies, he introduces the terms “conspiracy belief” (a specific claim, e.g., the Vatican covered up child abuse claims) and “conspiracism” (a worldview that sees conspiracy as the primary motivating force of history, e.g., Jews control all governments, banks, and media; Barkun, 2003: 3–4). However, I prefer to use the term “conspiracy narratives” rather than “beliefs,” as I have concerns that the latter reifies the degree to which an actor treats these ideas as true, when many might only consider them to be one possibility among several, or treat them playfully or even as a form of entertainment. Importantly, however, Barkun suggests that what ultimately defines “conspiracy theories” is the mobilisation of “stigmatised knowledge”—that is, claims that challenge the accepted epistemic authorities and often based on rejected forms of knowledge (Barkun, 2003: 26–9).
Rather than irrational or antimodern, Stef Aupers argues that conspiracist narratives are part and parcel of processes of modernity: “a radical and generalised manifestation of distrust that is deeply embedded in the cultural logic of modernity” (2012: 23). Bruno Latour makes a similar point:

What’s the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized... version of social critique...?... in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always constantly, continuously, relentlessly ... I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations ... it worries me to detect ... many of the weapons of social critique (2004, 229-30).

Might it be that what upsets intellectuals and politicians so much about conspiracy theories is that they represent a democratisation of knowledge, and therefore a direct challenge to the elite’s epistemic power?

1.2 | Conspiracism and religion

There are a number of ways we can consider the relationship between religious and conspiracist discourses: conspiracism as religion, conspiracies about religions, and conspiracies in religion. I will consider these in turn.

From a philosophical position, it can be illuminating to compare conspiracism to religion, and draw out common features such as teleology, soteriology, theodicy and claims to higher knowledge. Keeley has argued that there is an intrinsic epistemological similarity, as both posit nonfalsifiable occluded agents behind observed events. He suggests that any evidence that points to the nonexistence of said agents is inverted to become evidence that the agents are deliberately concealing their existence (2007: 145). We might suggest that the difference is that in conspiracism, the agents are malevolent, and in religion, they are benevolent, but this is an oversimplification: in many, if not all, religious traditions there are both benevolent and malevolent (and often indifferent) deities, and conspiracism also often has its benevolent agents, frequently in the form of “secret chiefs,” guardian angels, or extraterrestrial guides.

Taking a slightly different tack, Dyrendal demonstrates “the parallel ways in which knowledge, history, and agency are constructed” in conspiracism and esotericism (2013: 224). He compares conspiracism to esotericism using Antoine Faivre’s influential four-point definition: that a complex of correspondences forms an underlying structure of reality; that all life is interconnected; that by using ritual, meditation, or symbolism, human minds can access extra-mundane levels of being; and that individuals, and indeed, groups, and even planetary bodies can experience ontological transformations (1994: 119–120). In both conspiracism and esotericism, history is conceptualised as a struggle between the majority and those in possession of elite, transformative knowledge. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of both conspiracism and the esoteric milieu is the propensity to draw on a broader range of epistemic sources than is accepted by the epistemic authorities. Conspiracists will draw on channelled information, intuition, tradition and (despite etic claims to the contrary) scientific reason, as well as giving undue weight to individual testimony and linking small pieces of circumstantial evidence across time, space, and context to create what I call “synthetic” knowledge (Robertson, 2016a: 51–52).

Very often, certain religious groups (real or imaginary) have been the subject of conspiracy beliefs by the broader population. Perhaps, the archetypical version of this narrative is the claim of a Jewish plot to take over the world, as presented in the infamous forgery, The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, which influenced the Third Reich and continues to have influence in the far right in the United States and Europe, and particularly in the Middle East. Less obviously, though, we can see the same dynamics at work in Sub-Saharan African witchcraft discourses, and even in the Satanic Ritual Abuse panic of the 1980s and 1990s when politicians and law enforcement agencies took seriously the claim that a large and organised network of “Satanists” was regularly abusing children as part of ritual observance (Robertson, 2016b: 86–88).

The Satanism of Satanic Ritual Abuse had little, if anything, to do with actual satanic groups, nor the more traditional esoteric groups they were frequently polemically linked with, especially the Ordo Templi Orientis and other Crowleyan groups. Nevertheless, conspiracy narratives have particularly targeted New Religious Movements (NRM).
To some degree, this has been a result of secularisation: as the churches have declined their representatives, religiously conservative governments, and media outlets have reacted by inordinately demonising NRMs as dangerous and subversive. The idea of “brainwashing” (now largely discredited) moved from communism to the Korean War to NRMs but can be seen as a modern manifestation of a human tendency to posit almost supernatural powers of persuasion to the malevolent other (Dyrendal, 2016: 200–202; Bromley, 1994).

Scientology is a good case in point. The church is frequently described as engaged in espionage (sometimes justifiably), exerting obsessive control over the flow of information, often to the point of threatening behaviour, of physical and mental abuse of apostates, and perhaps most frequently of being an elaborate scheme intended primarily to make money for its leaders (Robertson, 2017). Such accusations are common in portrayals of NRMs by media and enforcement agencies, transgressing the taboos of the majority and provoking both revulsion and fascination in the process (Palmer, 2004: 65, 71; Doherty, 2014: 50). Interestingly, Scientology actively promoted conspiracy narratives about the Jonestown mass suicide, perhaps in an attempt to make themselves look less like a dangerous “cult” and more like a “legitimate religion” by comparison (Moore, 2003).

Scientology is also an example of how conspiracies develop within specific religions traditions. Faced with ongoing resistance in a number of countries (including the United States, France, and Australia), some Scientologists began to posit an organised conspiracy against them. As early as the 1950s, Hubbard claimed that psychiatrists and government agencies including the CIA and FBI were conspiring against him (Urban, 2011: 167; Cusack, 2012: 305), and his successor, David Miscavige, would later claim that “every single detractor on there is part of a religious hate group called Cult Awareness Network... it’s the same as the KKK would be with the blacks” (cited in Cusack, 2012: 306). For many Scientologists, the positing of a conspiracy against them explained away the resistance of the general populous to their teachings.

In many cases, the development of conspiracy narratives in NRMs is related to millennialism, and in particular “failed” prophecies. In When Prophecy Fails (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956), Leon Festinger and his collaborators analysed what happened to the small group who had gathered around channeller Dorothy Martin (named “Marian Keech” in the text) when her prophetic claim that the world would end on 21st December, 1954, apparently failed. They noted the several collective and individual strategies adopted in order to reduce the cognitive dissonance between their belief in the prophecy and its apparent disconfirmation. I have identified four different strategies of reinterpretation identified in the text: Miscalculation (that the prophecy was somehow garbled during its reception or interpretation); Spiritualisation (that the prophecy was correct but on the spiritual, rather than physical, plane); Aversion (because of the group’s actions, a new status quo established, which superseded the prophecy; and Privation (the prophecy applied to the insider group but not universally). To these, I would add a fifth strategy: Prevention (a hitherto unsuspected agency prevented it from happening). In other words, the prophecy was prevented from happening due to the machinations of previously unsuspected conspirators. So conspiracism and failed prophecy work together in mutual reinforcement.

Benjamin Zeller charts this process within Heaven’s Gate in the years leading up to their group suicide. There was a high degree of synergy between conspiracist and UFO subcultures in the 1990s (Barkun, 2003), and Heaven’s Gate was no exception. They became interested in a number of conspiracy narratives through the Coast to Coast AM radio show, where they heard the claim that a UFO was tailing the Hale-Bopp comet. This would lead to their eventual group suicide in 1997, as the members left their bodies to join the UFO’s occupants. In a video made shortly before his suicide, member Srrody explicitly compares the government’s treatment of NRMs with their alleged treatment of African Americans, invoking both the cover-up of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments and allegations of genetic experimentation on infants (Zeller, 2014: 205–208). In this way, the failure of the group to attract large numbers of adherents is explained away by positing a hidden, conspiratorial counter-agency. I have elsewhere argued that we could see the same dynamic as responsible for the growth of conspiracy narratives in the “New Age” movement during the 1990s, as the posited global transformation failed to transpire (Robertson, 2013b). When tied to more apocalyptic NRMs, conspiracy theories are often considered to contribute towards violence. Although this is certainly true in a small number of cases, most obviously Aum Shinriko (Repp, 2005), in other cases, the connection is exaggerated (such as at Waco, where it would legitimise the ATF’s siege of the Branch Davidian compound) or entirely fabricated (such as Heaven’s Gate, where there is no evidence of coercion or suffering at all).
However, this connection between conspiracism and prophecy can also be seen in right-wing nationalism. In groups including U.S.-based Christian Identity (Barkun, 1994), Colin Jordan’s British National Party (Goodrick-Clarke, 2002: 30–51), and racially charged Nationalistic Paganism in the United States and Northern Europe (Gardell, 2014), and less overtly in U.S. “alternative media” outlets such as the Alex Jones Show or the Drudge Report (Robertson, 2013a; 2015), racial and/or religious identity is bound up with a conspiracist teleological narrative of the oppression and ultimate destruction of “the white race.” The identity of the conspiring force changes over time, as the social and political context changes; the Illuminati remains a popular sobriquet, although this can itself indicate a range of groups, from “cultural Marxism” to “the industrial military complex” to, in the most racially charged versions, “the Jews.” Islam is an increasingly popular target (especially for Alex’s Jones’ UK-based collaborator, Paul Joseph Watson), although in the majority of cases the argument is that antagonism with Muslims is being deliberately promoted by these larger groups of conspirators, again with the intention of destabilising Europe.

We should not, however, relegate these ideas to the cultural margins. The truth is that, like many forms of popular religion in the modern West, although these groups may be small, the ideas they are based on are not. In recent surveys, some three-quarters of American adults profess belief in UFOs, clairvoyance, reincarnation, or other paranormal phenomena (Newport & Strausberg, 2001; Moore, 2005), and around half agreeing that the official account of the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy was a deliberate fabrication (Williams, 2013). More astonishingly, the same poll found that 4% of U.S. adults agreed that the government is ruled by “lizard people” (Williams, 2013). As I have argued elsewhere, there is a significant crossover between conspiracy beliefs and supernatural beliefs (Robertson, 2014), but the crossover with religious ideas and conspiracism, or for that matter, with religious and supernatural beliefs remains underexamined.

Most writing on secularisation present the debate as being between the religious on one hand, and the secular or “nones” on the other. The merest glance on the data on conspiracy beliefs completely undermines this. Many of these people reject religion altogether (more so in the UK than in the United States, interestingly), yet subscribe to non-scientific ideas involving channelling, spiritual beings, and diabolical forces. It requires significant investment of time and often money. It provides both an overarching narrative of the individual’s place in the world, the beginning and often the end of the cosmos, and a justification for the existence of suffering in the world. By any measure of what religion is these people are doing religion—–with the significant exception of regularly attending a group ritual. It does not even matter that they do not identify as religious or as part of a specific community—–we regularly ignore those issues when talking about, for example, Hinduism, Buddhism, or African religions. As scholars, we have to address why it is that we treat popular religion differently in the West from the “developing world.”

1.3 | The hidden hand: knowledge is power

As we have seen, conspiracy theory, like religion, is difficult to define. You can point to specific features, essential ideas, or common functions, but in every case, there will be significant exceptions. For it to be analytically useful, we would need to narrow it significantly in one or other direction, but that just is not going to work in practice because people have gotten used to using the term with its pejorative aspersions. Essentially, like religion, conspiracy theory is whatever we say it is. The question you should be asking, however, is not what conspiracy theories are but rather who are the "we" in that sentence?

This brings me to perhaps the most important issue. Not only is a conspiracy theory something we are not permitted to think but also the very subject is something we are not permitted to take seriously. But ask yourself, is there anything intrinsically more irrational about the claim that reptilian extraterrestrials run the political system than the claim that Satan does, or that a deity felt it necessary to sacrifice his son? A being has a plan for humanity but will not make it explicit? Sounds like a conspiracy to me, and from a philosophical point of view, there is nothing inherently more irrational about any of these claims. The difference, however, is that you are more used to the religious examples—and because of their ubiquity in our culture, you are permitted to think them. That we have completely internalised these narratives but ridicule other equally illogical narratives is, of course, exactly how hegemony works.
Is it our job as scholars of religion to tell people what they should think? Or rather, is it to observe and report with as much objectivity as we can the weltanschauung of others? Anthropologists have long treated the beliefs and practises of communities in exotic parts of the globe with respect, and attempted to explain the inner logic of their thinking, even when certain aspects are somewhat offensive to Western sensibilities—witchcraft, cannibalism, circumcision, and so forth. Even so, in most cases, the critique that their society is primitive compared to our modernity is clear, whether implicitly or explicitly. We do not tend openly to mock their irrationality, their paranoia, their lack of judgement, however—but this is precisely what the majority of academic work on conspiracy theories does.

Perhaps, the reason why is that we are happy to think of other cultures as primitive but find it harder to see ourselves in the same light. We are better than that, no? In which case, the category of conspiracy theories is a continuation of colonialism and nothing else. It is hard to imagine a situation where a conference on Christianity had the aim of correcting the irrational beliefs of Christians. The hegemony of the church continues so long as we permit their irrationality to be taken seriously but deny other irrationalities the same privilege. Not only that but we are failing in our duty to accurately report the data we find. These are beliefs held by vast swathes of the public in the modern West that many would prefer to ignore, but they are there nonetheless. It should not be part of our purview to decide which ideas are permissible. We ignore them at our peril—as recent elections in the United States and UK demonstrate.

So long as we focus on conspiracism as irrational and dangerous, we are, as Aupers puts it, “constructing conspiracy theories about conspiracy theorists” (2012, 23). We are contributing to the polarisation of epistemic power between Western elites and those we claim to objectively study. Scholars of RS are supposedly experts in “bracketing off” the relative factuality of the beliefs of others. If we cannot do this in the case of conspiracy theories, we have failed.

NOTE

1 See Byford, 2014 for an excellent overview of this research and its strengths and weaknesses.

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