3.9

CONSPIRACY THEORY AND RELIGION

Asbjørn Dyrendal

Introduction

The relation between conspiracy beliefs and religion has often been treated as having three different components: Conspiracy theory as religion, conspiracy theories about religion and conspiracy theories in religion (e.g. Robertson et al. 2019). These draw on different sides of complex cultural dynamics. Conspiracy theory as religion centres on the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of ideation, while the other two deal with case studies of socio-political relevance. Conspiracy theory about religion typically focuses on ingroup/outgroup dynamics in complex socio-political situations. Conspiracy theories in religion deal with different sets of conspiracy beliefs ideologically attuned to the particular religious group and circumstance. This chapter will give a brief introduction to all these relations.

It will do so by paying some attention to the dimensionality of the terms and their associated behaviours. Both religion and conspiracy theory are complex cultural concepts; they are contested, second-order constructs whose meaning varies between social formations (Dyrendal et al. 2019). Both terms are loaded with vernacular meanings that inform academic perspectives. In academic treatments, their meaning is constructed by, often implicitly, calling upon lower-level building blocks that vary between academic disciplines. As shown in the first section of this handbook, the disciplines study conspiracy theories in different ways. For psychology, belief is an important dimension of both conspiracy theory and religion, and the cognitive and emotional underpinnings (see Chapters 2.2 and 2.3) are central building blocks in how both are constructed. Studies that relate the two constructs focus on surveys of individual beliefs and characteristics.

Other Western academics have classically also in good, Protestant tradition tended to focus their construct of religion on (supernatural) beliefs. Such a categorisation is, implicitly or explicitly, based on theories that religion is something specific, i.e. ‘belief in supernatural beings’. These yield substantive definitions. Functional definitions focus on what behaviours we call religions achieve. They have been more important to approaches where the history of religions consists of histories where particular communities with various ideologies and amount of power interact with each other. Such approaches focus on the discourses, practices, communities and institutions we call religion. Belief is transformed to religious discourses, the ways they are authorised and how they again authorise practices, communities and institutions (cf. Lincoln
Relations between e.g. discourse and community vary. Holding a religious identity (e.g. ‘Catholic’) does not necessarily mean holding religious beliefs, nor even partaking in related practices. It may be a mere marker of belonging to one community rather than another. Nor does holding certain supernatural beliefs mean agreeing with the discourse of the institution of one’s ascribed community in these and other matters.

All of this is relevant for relations between conspiracy theories and religion in specific socio-political contexts. The collective organisation of identity can become central when religious identity becomes a marker of ingroup or outgroup. That ‘religion’ also carries connotations of being a unifying discourse (or coherent set of beliefs), organised in communities and controlled by institutions, can go some way towards legitimating fantasies of hidden, organised conspiracy. From another angle, ‘religion’ covers strategies for legitimising and delegitimising claims to authority, moral behaviour and ideas about what is the correct relation to other social groups, and may thus be used as a resource in both the promotion and the arrest of conspiracy beliefs. From the mainstream to the margins of society and politics, religious actors participate in the economy of conspiracism as targets, promotors, bystanders and, perhaps least recognised, as organised opposition. This chapter will give a short overview of these through the use of examples.

Conspiracy theory as religion will be illustrated briefly through the lenses of philosophy, psychology and esotericism studies. We shall look briefly at the argument that ‘the conspiracy theory of history’ is a substitute for or the continuation of religion by other means. This will lead us to consider the psychological building blocks of religion and conspiracy theory, before looking at the argument for conspiracy beliefs as ‘esoteric knowledge’.

Conspiracy theories about religious groups, imagined or real, are numerous throughout history (see e.g. Chapters 5.4, 5.8 and 5.11). Here, we shall note some general, transferable tropes that imagining conspirators as organised religion make possible, and look briefly at conspiracy theories about Islam. Conspiracy theories in religion will be the central focus of this chapter, with examples from Nigeria, Russia and Norway. The cases will illustrate some of the variety of roles religion has played in relatively high profile cases of controversy over conspiracy theories. The stress is on context, social dynamics and relations to different kinds of power. Two examples deal with mainstream, majority religions. The Orthodox Church in Russia gives an example of a strong, hierarchical national institution with close relation to an authoritarian regime, and a religious (semi-)monoculture. Nigeria gives an example of a strong, local religious majority in a pluralist country, in a situation of contested power and multiple locations of identity. The final example, Norway, deals with a minority, ambiguous religious identity, where a small number of entrepreneurs had partial control of access to the marketplace of ideas. Together, these give some idea of the complexities involved when translating ‘religion and conspiracy theory’ into the realities of society and politics.

**Conspiracy theory as religion – or its substitute**

Widely encompassing conspiracy beliefs, sometimes called conspiracism, have been seen as a continuation of religious modes of thinking. Among other things, both are seen to explain evil (‘theodicy’), and promote narratives about hidden, intentional agency that control large-scale events. Conspiracy beliefs as ‘mythical’ narratives identify values and social actors in stark contrasts of good and evil, and may follow the lines of prophetic speech in revealing evil’s hidden plans. Through the presentation of this (secret) knowledge, they make salvation from evil consequences possible. Both moreover present a worldview that is largely teleological, and they present parallel epistemologies that make claims ‘unfalsifiable’. The two thus may be presented
Conspiracy theory and religion

as sharing similar content, form and function (Franks et al. 2013), albeit with some difference (Wood, Douglas 2019).

Some of these ideas date back to the philosopher Karl Popper and his conceptualisation of ‘the conspiracy theory of society’ in The Open Society and Its Enemies (Popper 1963). He argued that such encompassing conspiracy beliefs were a result of secularisation, with superstitious, unfalsifiable beliefs in providence and evil forces replaced by all-knowing, powerful conspirators. His specific claims and the boundary work they perform have been criticised from both philosophy (e.g. Pigden 1995) and sociology (e.g. Aupers, Harambam 2019). In addition to the critical remarks that have been made, one could add that secularisation usually is thought to mean domain loss for religion, so that one would expect ‘secularists’ to be those taking to conspiracy beliefs to make up for the loss of the ‘outdated’ form of enchantment. Since recent quantitative studies suggest that we have, if anything, less conspiracy beliefs now than when religious adherence was more common, and since religion is usually not negatively correlated with conspiracy beliefs, the secularisation argument seems weak (Oliver, Wood 2018; Uscinski, Parent 2014).

The parallels in form and function seem better grounded. Some of the general predictors of conspiracy thinking are increased, including illusory agency detection (Douglas et al. 2016), teleological thinking (Wagner-Egger et al. 2018) and anthropomorphism. All these also relate to an increase in the proclivity to see intention as a cause of events (Brotherton, French 2015). Moreover, these also seem to correlate with increased holistic, intuitive, symbolic and magical thinking, which again correlate to an increase in the tendency towards seeing things as related in meaningful patterns (Oliver, Wood 2018; Wood, Douglas 2019). To the cognitive science of religion, these are all lower-level building blocks of religious ideation, thus conspiracism and religion share important, underlying cognitive factors.

They also share something in the affective domain. Both conspiracy beliefs and religion are related to anxiety and used in terror management (Vail et al. 2010; van Prooijen 2018a), and certain forms of religious experience seem to predict increased conspiracism (e.g. Dagnall et al. 2015). These may be related to experiential dimensions of schizotypy (van der Tempel, Alcock 2015).

Since there are vital, shared underlying mechanisms, and shared forms and functions, one might ask whether it makes more sense to consider conspiracy theory as religion in the sense that they overlap, rather than as a substitute. The answer is more complicated. While some of the general mechanisms behind conspiracy beliefs and religious beliefs are identical, the empirical relations vary. Simple questions about e.g. to what degree respondents consider themselves ‘religious’ or believe in ‘God’ correlate only very weakly or not at all with general proclivities for conspiracy thinking and for most specific conspiracy beliefs (Oliver, Wood 2014; Hart, Graether 2018). However, other religious beliefs are more clearly predictive of conspiracy beliefs. Culturally rejected beliefs like ufology and conspiracy theories are related, and entrepreneurs within the scene of believers present as an alternative epistemic elite (cf. Robertson 2016), a ‘priesthood’.

There are thus two angles from which one may argue that it can be analytically helpful to look at conspiracy beliefs as a particular form of religion or ‘esotericism’: The social and the epistemic. They are partially intertwined in Kocku von Stuckrad’s definition of esoteric discourse as a ‘rhetoric of hidden truth, which can be unveiled in a specific way and established contrary to other interpretations of the universe and history – often that of the institutionalised majority’ (von Stuckrad 2005: 10). Their epistemic status as counternovel is important here, but so are the particular ways these hidden truths are uncovered; they may follow common esoteric knowledge strategies (see Asprem, Dyrendal 2019). Furthermore, there can be an initiatory element to both belief and participation. Acceptance of this higher counterknowledge separates those on the inside.
from an unknowing outside, and the degree to which one is accepted as initiated in the knowledge can be ‘organised’ in levels. There are thus parallels between the sociology of conspiracy culture and esoteric societies. For both, the secret knowledge holds salvific potential, although in the case of conspiracy beliefs mostly on a collective and political level (see Dyrendal 2013).

**Conspiracy theories about religion(s)**

Conspiracy beliefs often have an intergroup dimension, as narratives involved in how we construct, maintain and mobilise community. They can be part of how we manage group- and self-image by exaggerating differences between ingroup and outgroup, and present the outgroup as a cause of social ills and a threat to moral order. Conspiracy theories about religious groups have been employed in larger social conflicts, mostly in attempts to deflect responsibility for problems on scapegoats, thus attempting to unify and mobilise a conflicted ingroup (cf. Butter 2014). The historically most consequential examples of this involve antisemitic conspiracy theories (see Chapters 3.8 and 5.4).

The social imagination of religion and religious identity that assist the elaboration and justification of outgroup constructions can start at a very basic level. A conspiratorial ‘they’ involved in coordinated subversion of all that is good must be highly unified. In typical conspiracy stereotypes, outgroup members are nothing but subordinate executors of a collective will (Kofta, Sedek 2005). This coordination of a collective will can be imagined along folk models of religion: As religious identity, controlled by religious ideology and the authority of religious institutions. One example of this can be seen in nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-Catholic conspiracy narratives, where the hierarchical nature of the Church, with one man, the Pope, as its head, has served as one way to make narratives of a unified conspiracy more plausible. In anti-Muslim conspiracy narratives, religion as identity and ideology does the same work: Muslims are united by ‘Islam’, and this (relatively unmediated) ‘Islam’ unites them all in a common plan for domination.

The combination of a folk model of religion and some practical knowledge can also combine to deliver other content. The ritual practice of confession became both an arena of crime, a control mechanism and a scene of intelligence gathering in anti-Catholic conspiracy narratives (e.g. Sobiech 2014). In conspiracy theories about esoteric, secret societies, the degree system with initiation into new levels with gradual revelations of knowledge serves as an argument that only the top levels really know what is going on, and that the lower levels are dupes in sinister plans hidden from them. This ‘practical knowledge’ is often a mixture of experienced-based stereotypes and flights of fancy. The latter ruled alone in anti-satanist conspiracy narratives, where the alleged ideology and practice of ‘satanism’ was a mere inversion of idealised Christianity. Since this made a ‘Satan’ that was pure evil, satanists were presented as worshippers of evil, and satanism as an ideology and practice of evil. This ‘satanism’ was used to explain the motivations for imaginary, but horrifying, crimes and the imagined crimes themselves were often presented as ‘rituals’ (e.g. Victor 1993).

We see examples of all these dynamics in current, and sometimes global, sets of conspiracy beliefs about Islam. ‘Islam’ may be configured mostly along the lines of a civilisation in a ‘clash of civilisations’, where it is typically represented as backwards, fanatic and violent. It is presented as always also being a totalitarian, political doctrine. These elements are combined in and are made to typify the religion, and they are usually tied to religious ideology through terminological references to a ‘global jihad’, waged against ‘the house of war’ to force indigenous people into ‘submission’ (e.g. Zuquete 2018: 172–4). Adherents are, as in antisemitic conspiracy stereotypes, mere executors of a religiously based, collective will. The references to a global jihad are made to mirror...
the discourse of radical jihadists, who with the worst regimes thus come to typify Islam. All Muslims are conflated with jihadists through an essentialising approach: Islam is presented as having a fanatical, fundamentalist nature and, in the end, every believer will be made to follow its radical version. Muslims who identify as anything but radical Islamists on a scale are often presented as willfully disguising their true purpose. This alleged dishonesty is tied to religion by using the term ‘taqiyya’ (in a distorted manner) to mean lying to hide the religion’s conspiratorial plans.

Religious identity also tends to be presented as immutable. The essentialised religion-as-culture is made to stand in for ‘race’. Thus, jihad is conceptualised along some fairly similar lines throughout the world, as a demographic ‘great replacement’ by routes that mirror local concerns. In large parts of Europe, the populist and radical right present refugees as a Trojan horse in a demographic war, while ‘birth jihad’ in various versions seems a more global concern (cf. Frydenlund 2019: 294–7).

Islamophobic conspiracy theories tend to be invoked in reactionary, nativist politics and serve as a mobilising crisis narrative. The enemy invoked is not only that of Islam, but of what is seen as emasculating, passive and destructively cosmopolitan politics committed by political and cultural elites. While there are versions where these enemies within are merely weak and easily fooled, they are also presented as greedy and traitorous partners in paving the road for ‘Eurabia’ (e.g. Fekete 2012). Such conspiracy beliefs are tied to increased support for violence, and they form a vital background for the target selection of massacres such as the terrorist attacks on the Christchurch mosques in New Zealand in March 2019 and Utøya in Norway in July 2011.


Conspiracy beliefs about religions are legion. They can also be examples of conspiracy beliefs held within religions, as expressions of troubled interreligious relations. Are any types of religion more associated with conspiracy beliefs than others? What answers we have to that question are mostly related to Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (W.E.I.R.D.) countries.

A first observation is that religious adherence does not necessarily predict specific conspiracy beliefs one way or the other. Nor does religious adherence typically predict direction of belief or disbelief in conspiracy theories in general. But some types of religion seem to have a higher, more general propensity towards conspiracy beliefs than others. One of these groups is the cluster of religious identities commonly dubbed ‘Fundamentalists’ in folk categorisations (cf. Oliver, Wood 2014). Conforming to the original description of the ‘paranoid style’ of politics (Hofstadter 1996 [1965]), these groups are more likely to hold a clearly dualist, ‘Manichean’ worldview. They are more likely to have apocalyptic expectations, and their political language is characterised by jeremiads listing woes as signs that the hour is drawing nigh. They are somewhat less likely to have had higher education, and measures of right-wing authoritarianism are ‘highly related to religious fundamentalism’ (Altemeyer 2003: 24). All these factors contribute on their own to conspiracy beliefs and, in combination with cultural pessimism and high symbolic thinking, evidence clearly indicates that this form of religion tends more towards conspiracism than others (Oliver, Wood 2018).

Individualised, alternative spirituality and some related forms of new religious movements may also be particularly prone to conspiracy thinking. In so far as they already include a lot of other ‘stigmatized knowledge-claims’ (Barkun 2003) – such as ufology, alternative medicine or alternative history – conspiracy beliefs indeed fit a pattern (Stone et al. 2018). Considering established individual difference predictors of conspiracy beliefs, this confluence is unsurprising,
Asbjørn Dyrendal

as the cognitive style of the spirituality-scene is characterised by holistic, intuitive, magic and symbolic thinking. Furthermore, the emic historiography of the scene is characterised by conspiratorial root narratives, and the related economic practices give ample opportunity to employ conspiracy theories in self-defence as collective, motivated rejection of science-related criticism (Asprem, Dyrendal 2019).

These different forms of religion may both be more prone to conspiracism, but that does not necessarily translate into holding the same conspiracy beliefs. Both groups may be inclined to believe badly about established authorities opposed to their own ideologies, but conspiracy stereotypes about other religious minorities seems more the province of fundamentalists (Dyrendal et al. 2017; cf. Oliver, Wood 2018). The latter will be more likely to hold conspiracy beliefs about outgroups and theories that attack enemies of those they deem legitimate authorities (cf. Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Wood, Gray 2019). We see that conspiracy beliefs in religion relate to power and authority, a complex field better understood by looking at some specific dynamics.

**Conspiracy theories in religion: State, Church and Pussy Riot**

Religions are part of a larger social fabric. They are heterogeneous, and often contested scenes that are related to a variety of mechanisms of power, and their interaction with a specific conspiracy theory often changes over the latter’s public life cycle. One such example is the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the controversy over the feminist punk band, Pussy Riot (Yablokov 2018).

The conflict started with a staged protest on the soleas of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Pussy Riot’s target was two-fold: Putin’s regime, and the Church leadership for supporting him. The criticism of Patriarch Kirill was already far-reaching. His support for Putin in the upcoming elections was just one element. Lawsuits had also shown that he owned suspiciously expensive items, including ‘an expensive flat in the centre of Moscow’ (Yablokov 2018: 100). This set the stage for a deliberate deployment of authority-supportive conspiracy theories with religion cast in the role of both supportive structure and violated victim. First, the band was merely accused of hooliganism, but in an ongoing campaign to make Orthodoxy ‘the key element of Russian identity’ (Yablokov 2018: 100), the protest was soon viewed as part of the West’s supposed conspiracy against Russia. By attacking and undermining faith and Church, the argument went, the West and its Russian proxies were trying to deny Russia its true, messianic role in world history.

Representatives of the Church played important roles in the beginning of the affair. Patriarch Kirill stated that the Church ‘had become the victim of an “information war”’ (Yablokov 2018: 101). The Moscow Patriarchate decreed prayer services defending the relics of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, now redefined as having been ‘desecrated’ by the protest. Official, political narratives tied the band and its supporters to a conspiracy consisting of the internal opposition, the intelligence operations of the West, atheism, a ‘Neo-Bolshevism’ that might instigate new pogroms against the Church and sexual deviance. The Orthodox Church played a role as the injured party, as the sacred institution upholding the values threatened by the conspiracy and as entrepreneurs pressing the conspiracy claims. Later, all these faded into the background. As court proceedings followed a different discursive regime, the emphasis shifted to the alleged collusion between internal and external political conspirators, and the ‘narrative of Orthodoxy under threat was replaced by attempts on the part of public intellectuals and politicians to justify the Kremlin’s policy in relation to the opposition’ (Yablokov 2018: 107).

The role of religion in the episode is complex. Its role as guardian of threatened, traditional values in the face of internal and external threats is a common conspiracy trope, and its role as violated victim of evil a common trope of the culture wars. However, Ilya Yablokov (2018) demonstrates
Conspiracy theory and religion

that the conspiracy theories were instrumental, a tool for promoting the Church and state power while distracting the public from less palatable topics, such as corruption and political partisanship. Religious and nationalist sensibilities were wielded as a tool in the service of state power through the use of conspiracy theories, consolidating internal support. The interests of Church and state became intertwined, as was their external discourse. However, the state took the lead, with the Church playing a supporting role in the symbolic assertion of Russianness and nation.

Conspiracy theory in religion: Islam and polio vaccine theories in Nigeria

An example from northern Nigeria shows more complex relations, when political power is contested and religion is brought in on both sides. Polio is endemic to the northern parts of Nigeria, thanks to its wild strains of the bacteria. Health care is often sparse and expensive, and vaccination numbers vacillate according to circumstance. In the early 2000s, the campaign to rid the region of its endemic polio was well under way. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (G.P.E.I.) had reduced the incidence of polio from more than 350,000 cases in 1988 to just under 500 in 2001 (Ghinai et al. 2013). Then, conspiracy rumours about the oral vaccine took hold. It was a Western plot to sterilise girls, spread H.I.V. and cancer, the rumours said. Five states of the mostly Muslim north discontinued the vaccine (Ghinai et al. 2013), with new polio outbreaks inside and outside the region as a result (Jegede 2007; Yahya 2007).

The boycott seemed driven by religion, with Islamic regions at the heart of it. Muslim scholars and politicians spread the rumours, made decisions from their seats of political office and supported the decision from their role as legal and theological authorities. The rumours also functioned as part of Islamist responses to the American ‘War on Terror’, which was seen as a more general, worldwide attack on Islam (Robbins 2011).

Religion serves here as a regional and group identifier, where it is also explicitly identified with political power. The majority of religious identity in the region flows directly into the political arena, into legal and theological authority. But it is not merely local. The role of Islam as group identifier translates into identification with a global ummah. Religion as identifier on a global stage facilitates infusion of tropes and narratives from globalised, political discourses on religion and power, including conspiracy narratives.

The choice to use these global tropes were, of course, grounded in the situation of local actors. Contextualising the vaccine boycott, Ayodele Jegede (2007) ranges from geography of religion to colonial and recent political history. The older colonial histories resulted in primarily Muslim northern regions, and a Christianity-dominated south. More recently, power in Nigeria had passed from a military regime from the north to an elected regime dominated by the Christian south. The contested elections of 2003 gave the country a Christian, southern president.

The elections themselves may have driven partisanship, but they also took focus away from the vaccination drive, which was concentrated in the north. When the drive was resumed in the aftermath of elections, the political climate made it easy to draw on both international and more local conspiracy theories about vaccines. The head of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (S.C.S.N.) may have gotten his conspiracy theories from then-current international sources (Yahya 2007: 188), but rumours that vaccines were tools for population control were not new to the region. They had been in popular circulation in both the north and the south following 1980s population control policies (Jegede 2007). The policies may have added to suspicion about vaccination, since it was a free element of health care that was made more easily available. A recent scandal with a medical trial going wrong (‘the Trovan trial’) added to suspicion, as likely did the fact that the treatment of victims and population in the aftermath was not seen as transparent and fair (cf. van Prooijen 2018b).
Many factors known to drive conspiracy rumours were thus in place: Ideological divisions, a recently lost election, long-standing distrust re-actualised and elite signals supporting a folk belief. Religion served as a collective identity that could be threatened by the conspiracy’s alleged goals and mobilise collective action around a common goal. Religion also supplied the elites that legitimised the rumours and the ideological, religio-political context that made them make sense in a global perspective.

If religion could be employed as a resource to spread the conspiracy rumours, it would also be one of the resources drawn on to quell them. This is what both outsiders and regional opponents did. The World Health Organization appealed to, among others, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (O.I.C.) and the Arab League. It got their support. Late in 2003, the O.I.C. ‘adopted a resolution to pressure Islamic countries to make greater efforts to eradicate polio’ (Yahya 2007: 191). The O.I.C.-associated, prestigious International Fiqh Council – a council of Islamic jurisprudence – spoke out against the vaccine boycott, with the prominent Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi stating that the views of international ‘fellow scholars in the Muslim ummah’ should take precedence over the local authorities (Yahya 2007).

Such appeals to stronger, international Islamic theological and legal authorities and their rulings constituted only one usage of religion as a resource in fighting the conspiracy theory and its consequences. Political authorities also tried to allay fears by getting the vaccine first tested by Muslim countries, then also had it produced there. Both at the time locally, and later, on the global scene, separate lines of juridical-theological arguments were employed to support the use of ingredients that might be religiously controversial, followed by a more concerted effort to make halal-certified vaccines (Ahmed et al. 2018).

The example above shows a situation that is easy to overlook in discussions of religion and conspiracy beliefs, because it can work both ways. Religion in context includes arguing about authority and content: Who speaks for religion, and what does religious content entail with regard to behaviour? Even when we define religion as a socially authoritative discourse, ‘whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal’ (Lincoln 1996: 225), desire does not translate into reality. Religious communities do not speak with one voice. There are always potential cleavages that can be made larger. The radical Islamists who called on a threat towards a global ummah of their own imagining (a threat by a Western conspiracy using vaccines to destroy them) were creating a local crisis narrative to recruit eligible ingroup members into radicalised positions (cf. Berger 2018). The local authorities were engaging in conspiracy speech in a way that, instrumentally intended or not, supported their own, local political power against national rivals. On the other side, religion as a source of moral authority was used to combat the conspiracy rumours, but not as full narratives to be debunked. These critics undermined select aspects of the rumours as a route to re-establish trust and vaccine-acceptance. Getting data about vaccine safety from Muslim populations and moving production to Muslim countries undermines the discourse about vaccines being un-Islamic and harmful. The theological arguments for vaccines being acceptable, and the later production of halal-certified vaccines, serve the same function: Adopting religious authority to bolster the argument for vaccination. The counter-discourse rejected the more explicit arguments against the conspiracy rumours and its anti-Western elements. It also resisted defining the ingroup in terms of behaviour related to the conspiracy rumours, and thus additional division. It did, however, very consciously draw on religious authority to oppose the crisis narrative the conspiracy theory presented.
Conspiracy theory and religion

Conspiracy theory in religion: New Age and ‘conspirituality’

Religion and religious elites, in their role of conservative power brokers for the social order, may often act to dampen crisis narratives that threaten disruption. This may, to some extent, be why the public find it so interesting when religious authorities promote false accusations of conspiracy. At other times, the same public may be more surprised when everyday adherents turn out to be conspiracy prone, such as in the case of ‘conspiritual’ New Ageism (Asprem, Dyrendal 2015).

In the autumn of 2011, the organisers of Norway’s central ‘New Age’ venue disinvited noted conspiracy theorists from their fairs, and issued a general warning against the attractions of conspiracism. The general prohibition of conspiracist speakers came in the wake of Anders Behring Breivik’s terrorist attacks on a government building and a political youth camp, attacks which left 77 people dead and many more wounded. The warning showed and addressed an internal discursive divide, which effectively made it stronger.

As noted above, in W.E.I.R.D. countries the religious expressions that are strongly tied to paranormal beliefs are also closely associated with conspiracy thinking. ‘New Age’ religion is one such arena. This can be seen as strange, as New Age practitioners tend to be white, middle class and well educated. If ‘conspiracy theories are for losers’ as, among others, Uscinski and Parent (2014) proclaim, New Age believers do not fit the typical profile. Nor are the beliefs typically associated with New Age what one would assume to be conducive to conspiracy beliefs. New Age is typically marketed as a world-affirming religion with a positive view of human nature, warning against attracting negative forces through focus on them. This would, arguably, make it seem paradoxical to find so much of conspiracy beliefs in the milieu (e.g. Ward, Voas 2011). Evangelical conspiracy theories about New Age religion have been legion (e.g. Saliba 1999), and being subject to conspiracy thinking has been used in warnings against harmful othering in conspiracist form.

However, esotericism is an important background for New Age. The polemical accusations of conspiracy between the religiously orthodox and those marginalised as heterodox have been reciprocal. These polemics have been partially embedded in esoteric identity discourse. This is part of what esoteric discourse shares with conspiracy theories, as a ‘rhetoric of hidden truth … established contrary to other interpretations of the universe and history’ (von Stuckrad 2005: 10). Conspiracy narratives flow, moreover, between different identities; there is a ‘dark occulture’ (Partridge 2005), which fundamentalists and New Agers both draw on. The narratives share in the ‘grand polemical tradition’ that created esotericism (Hanegraaff 2012), and which constitutes an ongoing dynamic in the production of identity.

A central part of the polemical tradition revolves around knowledge claims, with identity discourse including opposition to perceived orthodoxies. This is partly held together by a network-based circulation of ‘rejected knowledge’ that includes conspiracy lore. Conspiracy theories serve in identity protection as e.g. the language of motivated reasoning; they are part of the explanation why promised paradigm shifts in their own direction continue not to happen (see Asprem, Dyrendal 2019: 218–20). Tales of how a conspiracy tries to suppress the practices and evidence for their effect serve as identity-protection, mobilisation narrative and theodicy in one go. Conspiracy narratives explain failure and absolve guilt. For those who want to present as an alternative knowledge elite (Robertson 2016), this is important, as failure is exacerbated by the rudimentary, unstable organisation and market vulnerabilities of New Age practices. Uscinski and Parent note that: ‘Sharing conspiracy theories provides a way for groups falling in the pecking order to revamp and recoup from losses, close ranks, staunch losses, overcome collective action problems, and sensitize minds to vulnerabilities’ (2014: 132). Presenting criticism
Asbjørn Dyrendal

as part of an evil conspiracy is part of confronting it and serves to confer a stronger sense of ingroup identity, and thus to mobilise for collective action.

This brief excursion should make it clear that conspiracy narratives are a useful and natural component of New Age cultural production and heritage. This does not, however, mean that any belief goes equally well, nor that it does so in any climate – which returns us to our empirical example.

Considered as religion, New Age is not a prototypical case. Neither a set of organisations nor a common creed, it is an outsider term for networks of loosely overlapping practices and beliefs served up mostly to a market of individual consumers. There is little formal power outside therapy-client relations, and customers move on, consuming new commodities. This means that market access becomes vital. The Norwegian New Age scene has been held together and promoted through two central venues: A popular journal and alternative fairs. Both have been under the relative control of a very small set of entrepreneurs. With the advent of Internet 2.0, they also moved into the sphere of interactive online activity. While conspiracy theories of different stripes, mostly by way alternative history and alternative medicine, had been a recurrent topic in the journal and at fairs, the entrepreneurs had control and employed editorial discretion. After 2001, conspiracy beliefs grew in popularity within the milieu. The milieu leans left, and has been highly liberal, but even explicitly far-right radical conspiracy theories got more coverage. This increased interest in and sympathy for encompassing conspiracist ideation was even more pronounced in online venues (Dyrendal 2017). However, with increased interaction between hardline conspiracy believers came an increasingly clearly expressed unease among the more conventional New Age practitioners. Drawing on the world-affirming side of the discourse, their interests revolved more around spiritual self-development, their politics tended more towards liberal and green, and they found the conspiracist focus harmful and hateful. The silent majority became more vocal as the conspiracists established their own additional venues, but an internal, New Age ethos of tolerance for all ‘alternative’ discourse made it hard to censure discussion online. It was even more difficult in the public venues.

The rhetorical situation shifted with Breivik. The mass murder of Norwegian citizens by an extreme right-wing conspiracy theorist made public opinion rise against conspiracism in general. This facilitated more direct intervention from the owners and directors of the fair and journal. Suddenly, there was both an increased call for taking responsibility for others’ utterances from their platform, and for controlling access. In practice, they made use of the dominant market position of their own venues to explicitly combat a segment of their public, including ‘de-platforming’ popular speakers and writers. While the idea of censorship had long been deemed problematic, and the conspiritual segment had established their own outlets, this cemented the situation. The conflict became open and hardened. This to some degree deprived the conspiracist segment of internal legitimacy. Conspiracist entrepreneurs had to look elsewhere for a platform and recruit customers through their own networks. Coalitions within the conspiracist segment were loosened. The constricted market for their lectures, goods and services added to internal strains (see Dyrendal 2017). While conspiracism obviously did not disappear within the ‘alternative mainstream’ of Norwegian New Age, the conflict pushed it into the background and marginalised those deemed too consumed by such concerns.

Conclusion

The term religion covers not only a range of cognitions, it also covers very different private and social behaviours, forms of social organisation and power relations. As such, the relations between conspiracy theory and religion are diverse and complex. Each is at the same time a
Conspiracy theory and religion

possible resource for understanding the world, for identity construction, for ordering social relations, and for gaining or disputing authority and power. Even secular conspiracy narratives often serve as templates for predicting future troubles – ‘prophecy’ – as well as stories of what has already gone wrong. When imbued with extra status from association with values and institutions people hold sacred, such roles can become even more important. But religion does not play a simple, unified role. Even in simple religious communities, there will always be struggles over authority. We should always ask questions about who speaks, in what context and for which interests, as well as about what authority they claim, and the effect on the audience they address.

The causes of and intentions behind the narration of conspiracy are complicated, with ‘belief’ being but one possible aspect involved. Religious elites and their dominant discourses may be more or less ideologically attuned to a conspiracy narrative. This will tend to be one of the factors that select tales for re-telling, combined with other elements of fitness to group or elite purposes in their current situation. Neither group nor elites being homogenous, the potential for disagreement on what religious authority or religious identity should mean for interaction with the conspiracist ideas is always there.

There are some important social differences. Church religions, those a local population are born into, and heterodox religion will typically be embedded differently in power structures. This will tend to involve different social dynamics of conspiracy theory. In psychological research, conspiracy mentality predicts beliefs about the powerful, whereas authoritarianism better predicts conspiracy beliefs that protect power (cf. Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Wood, Gray 2019). The marginal and marginalised tend to use conspiracy theory more as a language of opposition, while dominant religion will, as in the Russian and Nigerian cases above, use them more as a language of counter-subversion. In the nativist variety, this can make ‘religions’ the target of conspiracy theory, as in the classical antisemitic arguments about Jews acting as a hidden ‘state within the state’, or in the case of Buddhist ‘counter-jihadism’ in Myanmar and Sri Lanka (Frydenlund 2019).

With the increasing dominance of a market economy, including in the area of religion, the dynamics of power may change again. In an open information economy with increasingly diminishing costs to establishing an outlet, any conspiracy entrepreneur has cheap access to disseminating their ideas. Being heard is another matter. One way of finding an audience can be speaking from and appealing to an established spiritual market, using established tropes and narratives to interpret news. As we saw from the Norwegian example, those who dominate the market can to some extent regulate access and serve to delegitimise even what they have earlier legitimised. Religious belief, even in the sense of established Church religions with doctrine, is often less a coherent, doctrine-based phenomenon, and more a selective, context-related pattern of feeling and thinking. Religiously authorised values and narratives are chosen, consumed and applied according to social and individual circumstance. The specific narratives are not chosen randomly; socio-political context activates types of religion and religious ‘beliefs’ as much as they activate conspiracy suspicions and narratives.

References


Conspiracy theory and religion


