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Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Alternative and Emergent Religions

David G. Robertson, Guest Editor

ABSTRACT: This introduction addresses a number of approaches to the emerging field of the study of conspiracy theories and new and alternative religions. Scholars can examine how certain religious groups have been the subject of conspiracy narratives created by the wider culture, and how conspiracy narratives are mobilized within religious groups such as Aum Shinrikyo, Scientology or others. Moreover, we can fruitfully examine secular conspiracy theories through ideas typically applied to religions, such as theodicy, millenarianism, and esoteric claims to higher knowledge. Most studies assume that conspiracy theories indicate pathology—paranoia or simply stupidity. Increasingly however, scholars have begun to interpret the term “conspiracy theory” as operating polemically to stigmatize certain beliefs and ideas. The field therefore offers a microcosm of broader trends in the interplay of knowledge and power. The study of both new and emergent religions and conspiracy theories comes of age only when we cease to think of them as necessarily deviant and irrational.

KEYWORDS: conspiracy theories, millenarianism, stigmatized knowledge

The importance of the motif of “conspiracy theories” in contemporary popular discourse has become clear in recent decades, and particularly since the beginning of the new millennium. Of course, there have always been conspiracies in the legal sense, and certainly grand narratives of one-or-other group (be that the Jews, the

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Illuminati, the Jesuits, or the Freemasons) acting as a “hidden hand” manipulating political events from behind the curtain have existed since at least the seventeenth century.¹ During the early Cold War, the conspiracy narrative that Communists were attempting covertly to undermine the United States was a pervasive and accepted part of political discourse, and indeed, Katherine Olmsted argues that the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theory narratives was a direct result of this tendency to posit conspiracies plotting against the United States.² During the 1960s, however, and particularly following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, consensus politicians who were concerned about their power to mobilize discontented minorities, as well as influenced by their own elitism, increasingly stigmatized such grand conspiracy narratives.³ Thus the conspiracy theory as we know it today emerged, filling the vacuum left by the end of the Cold War.⁴

Developments in communications technology—including the availability of AM radio, 24-hour “rolling” television news and the Internet—meant that events such as 1993’s siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, 1995’s Oklahoma City bombing, and the 9–11 attacks of 2001 were broadcast as they happened (including whatever changes there were to the “official line”), and came under intense scrutiny outside official channels. Although conspiracy theory narratives are popularly regarded as taking place within a politically and religiously conservative context, recent studies have suggested significant audiences amongst working class and ethnic minorities, particularly black Americans,⁵ as well as the political left.⁶ At the time of writing, conspiracist narratives concerning the Jade Helm military exercises in Texas, and in the United Kingdom, Operation Yewtree’s investigation into historic child abuse by Members of Parliament (among others), are commonplace beyond the alternative press. Moreover, conspiracist narratives have become an inescapable feature of popular entertainment media.⁷

Academic researchers have only recently begun to treat conspiracy theory narratives as a subject worthy of serious attention, however. Historical, ethnographic, and more recently psychological studies have begun to address this complex field, with the first international conference on the subject taking place at the University of Miami in April 2015. This special issue of *Nova Religio* is intended to introduce and establish the significance of the topic for researchers in the field of new, alternative, and emergent religious formations.

The term “conspiracy theory” first appears in philosopher of science Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 2, in which he outlines what he calls the “conspiracy theory of society.” He describes conspiracy theories as a “result of the secularisation of religious superstition,” with the gods replaced by “the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists.”⁸ So, as Asbjorn Dyrendal notes, the connection to religion was there from the start.⁹ Popular use of the term, however, originates

with a CIA document outlining how to deal with criticisms of the Warren Commission's investigation into the assassination of John Kennedy in Dallas, 1963.¹⁰ This rhetorical function is seen clearly repeated in Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965),¹¹ and the tradition of scholarship that followed his work.¹² From this position, belief in conspiracy theories indicates pathology—either paranoia, or simply stupidity, as clearly indicated in Fredric Jameson's description of conspiracy theories as “the poor man's cognitive mapping.”¹³ The elitist implication in the Marxist Jameson's work is not, I would suggest, coincidental.

As I have discussed at length elsewhere, conspiracy theories cannot be substantively defined¹⁴—that is, there is nothing specific that can make something once and forever a conspiracy theory. Indeed, many now-accepted explanations of historical events have at one time been considered conspiracy theories, the Watergate scandal being a clear example. Nor does it refer to any theory that posits a conspiracy, or we would be forced to consider al Qaida's organization of the 9–11 attacks a conspiracy theory. Rather, the term has a polemical function, operating as “an excuse for neglecting, equating and even repressing political protest of all sorts.”¹⁵

For Michael Barkun, such claims constitute “stigmatized knowledge,” explanations which challenge the epistemic authorities, including knowledge that has been forgotten, that which has been superseded, ignored, rejected, or most pertinently, suppressed.¹⁶ Barkun's *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2003), a historiography of the adoption of UFO-related conspiracy narratives among right-wing millennial Christians in the United States to form a milieu which Barkun names “improvisational millennialism,”¹⁷ was particularly important in that it established a terminology for the academic discussion of such topics. Recognizing the problems with the term conspiracy theory, Barkun suggests that we instead talk of “conspiracy beliefs”—that is, a specific claim that “an organization made up of individuals or groups has or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end”¹⁸—and “conspiracism,” referring to a *weltanschauung* based on a number of conspiracy beliefs, and a propensity to see conspiracies as the major motivating force in history.¹⁹ However, I have concerns about the accuracy of “beliefs” in this context, as subscribers may only partially or even playfully utilize these ideas, so I refer instead to “conspiracy narratives,” which has the added benefit of not making distinctions between proven and unproven theories.

Uncritical use of loaded categories continues to blight research in this field, however. Psychological studies, in particular, tend to reinforce the assumption that conspiracy beliefs equals erroneous thinking by using standardized questionnaires that reduce beliefs to simple binary options that ignore the exploratory and narrative function such ideas may also have.²⁰ Moreover, such surveys do not typically take into consideration

that many—probably the majority—hold beliefs concerning hidden agencies which are not considered to challenge the epistemic norms of their culture, including religions, paranormal ideas such as ghosts or UFOs, and perhaps even such ideological norms as human rights or the free market.²¹ However, even supposedly critical accounts of conspiracy theories will include comments as to how the thinking of those who subscribe to conspiracy narratives may be corrected.²²

The relevance of conspiracy theory narratives to the study of religions, although frequently noted,²³ has only recently come under sustained academic attention. As the field develops, however, three distinct approaches have emerged. Firstly, historical and/or anthropological studies examine how certain religious groups have been the subject of conspiracy narratives by the wider culture—what we might describe as conspiracy narratives *about* religion(s). Very often, these narratives actually construct religions which embody the opposite of what is taken to be morally good. Examples include narratives concerning witches in Europe, the United States,²⁴ and post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa.²⁵ A more modern version of this narrative can be identified in the Satanic Ritual Abuse panic of the United States and the United Kingdom during the 1980s and mid-1990s, in which organized groups of “Satanists” were alleged to be abducting and abusing children and adults on a massive scale,²⁶ and which continues to flare up from time to time.²⁷ Right-wing conspiracists in the United States often describe politicians and other elites as secretly members of a “Luciferian” religion, and taking part in occult rites at sites such as Bohemian Grove.²⁸ In other cases, an existing religion or other group is scapegoated, such as in the case of the anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives behind the creation of the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.²⁹ David Redles argues convincingly for viewing the Nazi regime as a messianic millenarian movement, in which the *Protocols* provided “both an explanation for the world’s impending apocalypse, as well as a plan of action.”³⁰ Sadly, the *Protocols* continue to have an alarming degree of influence in the modern world, particularly in Islamic countries.³¹ Processes of Othering come into sharp focus in these cases, with conspiracy narratives constructing group identity by distinguishing “us” from “them” along moral and ideological lines.

We can also examine conspiracy narratives *in* religion(s), examining how conspiracy narratives are mobilized within specific religious groups. Charlotte Ward and David Voas introduced the subject of conspiracy theories in the New Age milieu.³² Focusing on popular culture and the Internet, they argue that “the world-affirming, cultic ‘New Age’ and the world-rejecting, sectarian conspiracy milieu have merged into a world-accommodating—arguably mainstream—hybrid.”³³ The positing of a conspiracy to prevent the arrival of the New Age provided a ready explanation for the prophetic failure of the New Age to arrive.³⁴

Conspiracy theories have also been examined in new religious movements, including Aum Shinrikyo,³⁵ the Nuwaubians,³⁶ Neopaganism³⁷ and Scientology.³⁸ Problematically however, these descriptions, although rich, have almost universally focused upon marginal groups viewed as extremist and whose actions have, in many cases, led to violence. This is to belie that such mechanisms take place within more “mainstream” religious traditions also.

A third and particularly interesting approach is to examine conspiracy narratives *as* religion, that is, as a way of thinking or acting with commonalities to religious thought and behaviors, such as theodicy, millennialism and esoteric claims to higher knowledge. Making the comparison with Antoine Faivre’s influential definition of Esotericism,³⁹ Asbjorn Dyrendal draws out “the parallel ways in which knowledge, history, and agency are constructed” in these two discourses.⁴⁰ Both rely on special (and stigmatized) knowledge, yet in both cases can lead to a revelation—or *gnosis*—which transforms the individual. Brian Keeley, on the other hand, argues that the epistemological similarity between religious and conspiracist narratives is that they posit non-falsifiable agencies behind evident events. Evidence presented against the existence of this occluded agent is interpreted as evidence of an attempt to conceal it, which has the effect of rendering the belief non-falsifiable. He argues that in religious and conspiracist narratives “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”⁴¹

Inverting this, I have analyzed the use of prophecy in traditional right-wing conspiracist discourse, focusing on the influential Texas-based radio host and filmmaker, Alex Jones. My essay, “(Always) Living in the End Times: The Rolling Prophecy of the Conspiracist Milieu,” introduces the idea of “rolling prophecy,” where small prophecies are made on a regular and ongoing basis, albeit tied to a broader millennial narrative. Most of Jones’ predictions are unsuccessful, but those are quietly dropped while the few successful elements are repeatedly emphasized. Over time, the impression of successful prophecy is established, allowing Jones to increase his epistemic capital.⁴²

In short, the study of religion and conspiracy theories is developing into a distinct sub-field, demonstrated by an increasing tendency for textbooks and anthologies to include chapters on the topic.⁴³ It is therefore exciting to be introducing in this issue of *Nova Religio* the first published volume dedicated solely to the subject. The articles gathered together here are drawn primarily from the two conference panels on the subject I organized, the first at the 2012 British Sociological Association, Sociology of Religion group (SOCREL) conference, in Chester, and the second at the European Association for the Study of Religion conference, at Liverpool in 2013.⁴⁴ It is designed to be at the same time a general introduction to the (sub)field, and to complement two other forthcoming publications: my own more specialized monograph,

UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism (2016),⁴⁵ and the more encyclopedic *Handbook of Conspiracy Theories and Contemporary Religion* (forthcoming), edited by Egil Asprem, Asbjorn Dyrendal, and David G. Robertson.⁴⁶ Here in this special issue of *Nova Religio*, the focus is on the contemporary alternative religious milieu, and the articles have been selected to reflect intersections of conspiracy theories with the alternative and emergent religions that *Nova Religio* examines. The articles gathered together here add considerably to the ethnographic and, particularly, historical research on this subject. Too often, new religions and conspiracism both are considered as though having sprung into existence in the modern world fully formed. Yet as these articles demonstrate, they have identifiable historical roots that, moreover, are not easily separated into “religious” and “non-religious” strands. The cultural context of the development of “new and alternative religions” and “conspiracy theories” is complex, but interrelated; in particular, the issue of detraditionalization is highlighted in these articles, the questioning of all authorities of tradition, experience and—importantly—epistemology.

The articles are also chosen to cover what I have described as the important “discursive units” of the field;⁴⁷ that is, the topics that cross between these fields and enable the transfer of ideas between them. For example, an individual with an interest in UFOs is every bit as likely to come into contact with Illuminati conspiracist narratives through Jim Marrs’ *Alien Agenda* (1997) or Milton William Cooper’s *Behold a Pale Horse* (1991) as they are to come to New Age ideas through Ken Carey’s *Starseed Transmissions* (1991) or David Wilcock’s *The Source Field Investigations* (2011).⁴⁸ Other significant discursive units are alternative health (addressed in this journal by Beth Singler and David Robertson); millennialism (addressed by Kevin Whitesides); alternative histories (addressed by Spencer Dew); and “gnosis,” special knowledge that is both salvational and transforms the individual’s understanding of their place in the cosmos. As is often quoted, “the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32).

The first two articles are case studies examining specific discourses within the cultic milieu⁴⁹ where conspiracist narratives and religious discourses are found together. In the first, Beth Singler shows how the New Age concept of “Indigo Children” (that is, a generation of children who are supposedly being born at a higher level of spiritual development from their parents) feeds into a conspiracy narrative concerning “Big Pharma,” wherein the palliative aspects of mainstream medicine are subsumed under a commercial imperative to create illnesses and syndromes in order to sell treatments. She argues that changes in infant mortality and working patterns have placed greater focus on parenting as a “project,” and therefore greater emphasis on finding the cause of problems that interfere with it. This article highlights the heuristic function of both conspiracist and religious ideas, and asserts that rather than

being irrational and paranoid, these narratives are rational, in as much as they make logical sense of the data that their subscribers have.

The subject of Kevin Whitesides' article is 2012 millennialism. He argues that the 2012 millennial narrative originated in a New Age context but was transmitted into the conspiracist milieu. The article describes this discursive transfer in detail, and addresses the issue of why conspiracist and New Age discourses frequently overlap. As Whiteside puts it, his intent is "to closely assess the ways in which the various alternatives that make up the informational basis of the cultic milieu tend to cluster together in some areas more than others."

As Whitesides notes, this cross-fertilization is driven by a mutual distrust of "the mainstream," which is to say, any institutionalized authority (excepting the odd case where a scientific paper agrees with their conclusions). Whitesides' article is also of particular interest in the ongoing debate about the definition of New Age; despite Wouter J. Hanegraaff's and Steven J. Sutcliffe's claims to the contrary,⁵⁰ millennialism is alive and well in the cultic milieu. "New Age" has not changed from *sensu strictu* (in a strict sense) to *sensu lato* (in a late sense, implying broader and less millennial); rather, "2012" is simply the latest in a long line of millennial tropes within the cultic milieu, of which New Age (and Ascension, Earth Changes, the return of the Christ Spirit) were forerunners.

Carole Cusack's article concerns The Church of the SubGenius, an "invented religion" (to use the terminology from her 2012 book).⁵¹ She argues that it offers a sophisticated critique of Western values focused on resistance to consumerist society, described as a conspiracy. However, SubGenii also fully embrace the consumerist "society of the spectacle" (to borrow from Guy Debord), offering "eternal life or triple your money back!" Cusack's argument is that appreciating both levels at once in all their apparent contradiction is the key to SubGenius "enSlackenment." As well as a welcome examination of how one particularly modern religious formation engages with conspiracy narratives, Cusack's chapter is an important treatment in that it points out that while conspiracy narratives may be treated playfully, this playfulness is an expression of a generalized distrust of the social and epistemic norms of contemporary society, and thus an act of resistance in itself.

The focus on new religions continues in Spencer Dew's article on the Washitaw de Dugdamoundyah. The African American members of this movement claim to be the true legal heirs to the land annexed by the United States in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, having settled there from Muumuu in the time of Moses. Their foundational text, *Return of the Ancient Ones* (1993), by the founder, Empress Verdiacee "Tiara" Washitaw-Turner Goston El-Bey of the Ancient Ones (1927–2014), utilizes language from biblical, Islamic, and Native American traditions within an extended disputation with the legality of the Louisiana Purchase, and is therefore at once a religious and a legal text, albeit one

which is at odds with accepted facts. This mobilization of “counterfactual” legal discourse is found among other new and emergent religious groups, as well as conspiracist groups, notably the Sovereign Citizen or Freeman movement,⁵² and might be usefully considered a *détournement* of the discourse of the elites back against them. For the Washitaw, established history is a lie, part of a conspiracy by White elites to rob Blacks of their land and rights. Nevertheless, “[t]he truth will set you free.”

Finally, the special issue reaches the fringes of the mainstream with this author’s article on the material study of millennialist ideas in right-wing conspiracism in the United States, here focusing particularly on the work of Texas-based independent broadcaster Alex Jones (b. 1974). The article analyses how Jones’ millennial conspiracist narrative is constructed from mundane things, and in turn nurtures material economies that reflect the concerns of his audience. Despite acknowledging the problems inherent in the material approach—specifically that it encourages an essentialist “phenomenology-by-stealth”—the article argues that by focusing on the economies surrounding millennial conspiracist narratives, scholars might be able to avoid reducing such narratives to “aberrant beliefs,” which are constructed as both inherently novel and detached from the broader episteme.

The importance of the study of conspiracy theory narratives is that they are a microcosm of broader cultural trends in the interplay of knowledge and power, both within religious groups, and between them and the broader culture. As Stef Aupers notes, conspiracy theories are “a radical and generalised manifestation of distrust that is deeply embedded in the cultural logic of modernity,”⁵³ and I have described conspiracism as a “counter-epistemology” based on a broader set of epistemological strategies than are accepted by societal institutions. However, value judgments about what is sane, rational, “true,” or otherwise should have no place in the study of cultural meaning, and this is a strong reason to consider conspiracy theories from a religious studies perspective. In theory at least, religious studies scholars are specialists at “bracketing” truth claims (their own and those of others) while studying religious beliefs and practice, and therefore this issue contains no attempts to evaluate the truth or otherwise of particular conspiracy theories. After all, if belief in a “hidden hand” makes one irrational or delusional, what does this say about the approximately 70 percent of Americans who profess to believe in God?⁵⁴ This may make some readers uncomfortable. If so, I will have demonstrated why this field warrants further investigation. Until now, the academic study of “conspiracy theories,” with its emphasis on deviancy, irrationality, and potential violence, mirrors earlier studies of new religious movements; similarly, fair and objective study will likely show that the only new thing about them is their visibility. Both cases demonstrate that if scholars are only willing to consider elite narratives as worthy of consideration, then we are not questioning power structures, but reproducing them.

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ENDNOTES

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- ² Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.
- ³ Katharina Thalmann, “‘John Birch Blues’: The Problematization of Conspiracy Theory in the Early Cold-War Era,” *COPAS—Current Objectives in Postgraduate American Studies* 15, no. 1 (2014): 1–17.
- ⁴ Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, 86–99; Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 59–60; Thalmann, “John Birch Blues,” 9–10.
- ⁵ Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); Anita M. Waters, “Conspiracy theories as Ethnosociologies,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 28 (1997): 112–125.
- ⁶ Antonis Sapountzis and Susan Condor, “Conspiracy Accounts as Intergroup Theories: Challenging Dominant Understandings of Social Power and Political Legitimacy,” *Political Psychology*, 34 (2013): 737.
- ⁷ Some recent examples include *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), Muse’s *Drones* (2015), the *Hunger Games* series (books, 2008–2010; movies 2012–2015), and the *Assassin’s Creed* series of video games (2007–present).
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- ⁹ Asbjorn Dyrendal, “Conspiracy Theory and New Religious Movements,” in *Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. Inga B. Tøllefsen and James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, in press).
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- ¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: And Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965.)
- ¹² E.g. Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From* (New York: Free Press, 1997); Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America’s Growing Conspiracist Underground* (New York: Harper, 2011).
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- ¹⁴ David G. Robertson, "(Always) Living in the End Times: The 'Rolling Prophecy' of the Conspiracy Milieu," in *Prophecy in the New Millennium: When Prophecies Persist*, ed. Sarah Harvey and Suzanne Newcombe (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 207–219; David G. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- ¹⁵ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21: cf. Neil Levy, "Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, 4 no. 2 (2007): 181–192; David Coady, "Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?" *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 4, no. 2 (2007): 193–204; Mathijs Pelkmans & Rhys Machold, "Conspiracy Theories and Their Truth Trajectories," *Focaal*, 59 (2011): 66–80; Sapountzis & Condor, "Conspiracy Accounts as Intergroup Theories".
- ¹⁶ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 26–29.
- ¹⁷ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, xi.
- ¹⁸ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 3.
- ¹⁹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 3; c.f. Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 34.
- ²⁰ Marius H. Raab, Stefan A. Ortlieb, Nikolas Auer, Klara Guthmann, and Claus-Christian Carbon, "Thirty Shades of Truth: Conspiracy Theories as Stories of Individuation, Not of Pathological Delusion," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): 1–9.
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- ²² E.g. Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 156.
- ²³ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 299–300; Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture, Vol. 2* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 272–4.
- ²⁴ David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Ritual Abuse in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
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- ²⁹ Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide; The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); David Redles, "National Socialist Millennialism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 540–541.

³⁰ David Redles and Catherine Wessinger, “National Socialism as Millennial Religion? Interview with David Redles,” at <http://www.wrs.vcu.edu/FORUM/Interview%20with%20David%20Redles.pdf> (13 August 2014), 4; c.f. David Redles, *Hitler’s Millennial Reich: Apocalyptic Belief and the Search for Salvation* (New York: New York University Press, 2005.)

³¹ Neil J. Kressel, *“The Sons of Pigs and Apes”: Muslim Antisemitism and the Conspiracy of Silence* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012); Marvin Zonis and Craig M. Joseph, “Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East,” *Political Psychology* 15, no. 3 (1994): 443–59; Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

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³⁴ David G. Robertson, “David Icke’s Reptilian Thesis and the Development of New Age Theodicy,” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 3, no. 1 (2013): 27–47.

³⁵ Martin Repp, “Aum Shinrikyo and the Aum Incident,” in *Controversial New Religions*, ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper A. Petersen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 168–9.

³⁶ Susan J. Palmer, *The Nuwaubian Nation: Black Spirituality and State Control* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

³⁷ Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

³⁸ Rebecca Moore, “Reconstructing Reality: Conspiracy Theories about Jonestown,” in *Journal of Popular Culture* 36.2 (2002): 200–22; Hugh B. Urban, “Fair Game: Secrecy, Security, and the Church of Scientology in Cold War America,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (2006): 356–389; David G. Robertson, “Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Scientology and Conspiracism,” in *Brill Handbook of Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis (in press).

³⁹ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 119–20.

⁴⁰ Asbjorn Dyrendal, “Hidden Knowledge, Hidden Powers. Esotericism and Conspiracy Culture,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (London: Equinox–Acumen, 2013), 224; cf. Egil Asprem and Asbjorn Dyrendal, “Conspiratoriness Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (in press), which directly challenges Ward and Voas, “The Emergence of Conspiratoriness,” arguing that a long history of a relationship between esoteric and conspiracist narratives can be traced, undermining Ward and Voas’ claims of the novelty of this relationship in the New Age milieu.

⁴¹ Brian Keeley, “God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory,” *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 4, no. 2 (2007): 145.

⁴² Robertson, “(Always) Living in the End Times,” 215–16.

⁴³ E.g. Michael Barkun, “Conspiracy Theories and the Occult” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher H. Partridge (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), 701–709;

Dyrendal, *Conspiracy Theory and New Religious Movements*; Dyrendal, “Hidden Knowledge, Hidden Powers.”

⁴⁴ As my papers from these panels have already been published, I have instead contributed a paper I gave at the 2013 SOCREL conference in a panel organised by Joseph Webster, entitled “Materiality, Secrecy and the End of the World” and featuring Webster, Timothy Jenkins and me, 11 April 2013.

⁴⁵ Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*.

⁴⁶ Egil Asprem, Asbjorn Dyrendal, and David G. Robertson eds., *Brill Handbook of Contemporary Religion and Conspiracy Theories* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

⁴⁷ Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*.

⁴⁸ Jim Marrs, *Alien Agenda* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Milton William Cooper, “*Behold a Pale Horse*” (Flagstaff, AZ: Light Technology, 1991); Ken Carey, *Starseed Transmissions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); David Wilcock, *The Source Field Investigations: The Hidden Science and Lost Civilisations Behind the 2012 Prophecies* (New York: Dutton, 2011).

⁴⁹ Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularisation,” in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 119–136; cf. *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Jeffery Kaplan & Helene Lööw (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002).

⁵⁰ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 98–103; Steven J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London: Routledge, 2003), 114–7.

⁵¹ Carole S. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

⁵² Darren Mulloy, *American Extremism: History, Politics and the Militia Movement* (London: Routledge, 2005); Richard Abanes, *American Militias: Rebellion, Racism & Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

⁵³ Stef Aupers, “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture,” *European Journal of Communication*, 27, no. 1 (2012): 24.

⁵⁴ Pew Research Centre, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> (12 May 2015).