

Conspiracy Theories

Relationships between conspiracy theories and religion may heuristically be distinguished into three types: conspiracy theories *in* religions, *about* religions, and *as* religion. All three highlight the social functions that conspiracy theories play in creating in- and out groups, allocating blame, explaining events, and creating a sense of meaning and order; hence they are tied to key aspects of sociological theories of religions.

What are conspiracy theories?

People theorize conspiracies all the time; yet, only a small subset of such claims is usually labelled "conspiracy theory." The first attested analytical use of the term is by Karl Popper, who in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* defined (and criticized) what he called "the conspiracy theory of society," as a framework for understanding society that seeks intentional, self-interested agency behind every event. "Conspiracy theory" has since developed into a term of derision, applied to social explanations that are generally considered bogus or in attempts to delegitimize certain claims. The critical study of conspiracy theory must therefore account both for the term's polemical uses and the concept's empirical domain.

In the broadest sense, the subject matter can be defined as *the behavior of narrating secret plots connected to real-world events*. Such behavior can serve a diverse range of social and psychological functions and demand a number of different explanations depending on the context. Spanning from the individual level to the group and societal levels, narrating conspiracy may explain inexplicable or traumatic events, provide coherence to chaotic information, reduce cognitive dissonance, produce feelings of empowerment, manufacture doubt and mistrust in an audience, construct scapegoats, identify enemies, and strengthen in-group identity. In terms of explanations, loss of control is a reliable antecedent to conspiracy thinking on the individual level. On the socio-political level, narrating conspiracy is associated with (perceived) disenfranchisement, while on the historical level, the behavior is seen to blossom in periods of rapid social change.

Conspiracy theories in, about, and as religion

Religious communities frequently narrate the actions of powerful, concealed agents. Formal theologies can even be compared with Popper's "conspiracy theory of society": causal explanations are replaced by intentional ones; natural contingencies are turned into purposeful

designs; and historical (mis)fortunes explained through the psychology of divine or demonic minds. While religious and conspiratorial world-making probably utilize an overlapping set of cognitive and psychological building blocks, framing conspiracy theories *as* a form of religion is problematic; doing so tends to construct both as irrational and essentially non-scientific. It may be more useful to focus on how similar functions and shared building blocks create overlaps, on the one hand, and the concrete roles that narrating conspiracy takes in religious contexts, on the other.

One context in which shared functions and building blocks become sociologically relevant is in explanations of evil (theodicies). Religions often provide abstract theodicies that explain suffering in terms of, e.g., the absence of God, karmic retribution, or the agency of demonic antagonists. In concrete experiences of crisis, conspiracy theories provide a way to activate these abstract theodicies by demonizing this-worldly individuals or groups. Thus, we get demonic witchcraft as explanation of crop failure, the Pope as Antichrist in Reformation-era anti-Catholicism, or the "Satanism scare" as an element of the late-1980s moral panic.

A related religious context in which conspiracy theories often occur is prophecy and millennialism. As David Robertson has argued, postulating conspiracy is one strategy available for explaining failed prophecy: the "new age" of peace, love, and prosperity did not arrive as expected because it was purposefully *prevented* by the forces of evil. Conspiracy reduces cognitive dissonance, and can thus be viewed alongside the other strategies discussed in Leon Festinger's classic *When Prophecy Fails* (i.e., miscalculation, spiritualization, aversion, privation).

Most conspiratorial narratives lack a religious orientation; asserting them may nevertheless be significantly correlated with specific religious communities. For example, American evangelicals are more likely than Catholics and Jews to say that climate change is a hoax, while theories about vaccines and genetically modified organisms seem to spread well in "holistic health" oriented spiritualities. Such correlations may possibly be explained by demographic factors other than religion, but more research is needed in this area.

Conspiracy theories in religious groups are often *about* other religions. Most religious conflicts involve an element of conspiracism, from the persecution of Christians in antiquity to the many European pogroms against Jews, to conspiracy theories about coordinated

Muslim takeover among Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, or (mostly secular) "Eurabia" theorists in Europe. This is not surprising, since conspiracy theories are not only linked to intergroup dynamics, but also associated with the social-psychological phenomenon of seeing an out-group as a single entity with singular goals, rather than as a collectivity of separate individuals (i.e., ascribing high "group entativity"). As religious identity displays remain high-salience, there is a short step from identifying "Jews" or "Muslims" to generalized talk about "their" unified, covert collective goals.

"Conspirituality" and Conspiracism as Worldview

Conspiracy theories are usually narrated piecemeal and ad hoc, but sometimes they become all-encompassing to the extent of approximating a worldview. Following Michael Barkun, in conspiracist worldviews *nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected*. While we find this phenomenon among politically oriented conspiracy auteurs like Alex Jones, we also see it in the contemporary confluence of alternative spirituality and conspiracy theories sometimes labelled "conspirituality." To people like David Icke, unveiling the hidden machinations of the cosmic conspiracy provides a soteriological goal: "truth" (about our reptilian overlords) shall set you free. Usually rationalistic in its outlook and dismissive of all "establishment" authorities, conspirituality is less an anomaly than a predictable product of modern esotericism and the cultic milieu.

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Further Readings

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Dyrendal, Asbjørn, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem (eds.). *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

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Cross-references: Anti-Semitism; Apocalyptic Movements; Esotericism; New Age Movement; Identity.

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