

Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories: Connecting Old and New Trends



CALL FOR PAPER

DEADLINE 1 JUNE 2019

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Conspiracy theories have had a long presence in Western culture. They have usually signalled the presence of anxiety caused by rapid social, political, or religious transformations. In the modern period moments of extraordinary change such as the French or the Russian Revolution have inspired the creation of a plethora of conspiracy theories, usually attributing agency to mysterious and powerful secret societies (Roberts, 1972).

Nowadays, conspiracy theories not only have a significant presence in social media, but they have also become part of mainstream culture (Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000; Kellner, 2002). Despite this important presence in contemporary societies, conspiracy theories have been studied mainly from a political and cultural point of view, and only very recently they have begun to be studied much from the perspective of religion and alternative spirituality (see Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprems eds. 2019). Our intention is to contribute to fill this gap, organizing an international conference, focused in particular on the religious and esoteric dimensions of these theories.

Earlier research on conspiracy theories described them as irrational and dangerous phenomena (Hofstadter, 1965; Pipes, 1997), embodying what Bruno Latour would call a modern “practice of purification” (1993), based on a strict separation between the rational and the irrational. On the other hand, other scholars have stressed the importance and the relevance of these phenomena by paying attention also to its inherent logic. They pointed out that the distrust towards political, economic and scientific institutions is often reasonable and that conspiracies sometimes do exist (Coady, 2012; Pigden, 1995). Furthermore, they also argued that the “ontological insecurity” of contemporary societies (Aupers 2012) facilitates skepticism and paranoia: “The omnipresence of these opaque systems in the life world of modern individuals does not merely raise insecurities about ‘what is real’ and ‘what is not’ in the external world, but even about the authenticity of one’s own subjective awareness” (Aupers, 2012: 28).

The relevance of conspiracy theories also has a political dimension. In fact, conspiracy theories provide an anti-hegemonic discourse against transnational powers, but also against the “regime of truth” (Foucault, 2014), questioning the basis of knowledge production. As has been argued by Aupers (2012), there are some affinities between the social sciences and conspiracy culture, which can be described as a “sort of pop-sociology” (Birchall, 2006; Knight, 2000). But their relevance also dwells on the opposite phenomenon: conspiracy theories are sometimes instruments of hegemonic powers. Trump’s former spin doctor Steve Bannon draws from old and new conspiracies in order to stigmatise or discriminate particular categories of persons such as queer people, Jews, and Muslims.

Conspiracy theories have been described as religious phenomena (Keeley, 1999) and as theodicies (Aupers forthcoming). The intertwined relations between New Age spiritualities and conspiracy theories have led some scholars to conceptualise the new phenomenon of ‘New Age conspiracism’ (Barkun, 2003) or ‘conspirituality’ (Ward and Voas, 2011). On the other hand, as has been argued by Asprems and Dyrendal, this is not a brand-new phenomenon and the relation between conspiracy theories and religion

is rooted in the history of Western esotericism (Asprem and Dyrendal, 2015; Dyrendal, 2013; Robertson, 2016). Following this perspective, we could compare the category of Western esotericism understood as rejected knowledge (Hanegraaff, 2012) with conspiracy theories, another waste-basket category.

Conspiracy theories do not concern only marginal religious movements, but are also present in mainstream religious organizations. A good example could be the “gender conspiracy theory”, widespread among Catholic conservatives, which describes the supposed planned homosexualisation of society. Similarly, conspiracy theories are also present in Islamic and Jewish contexts.

Finally, the debate on conspiracy theories touches upon another problematic epistemological problem: the relation between religion and science. In fact, as has been argued by Harambam and Aupers (2014) and Achterberg et al. (2017), those who believe in conspiracy theories claim to believe in the scientific method, but distrust scientific institutions. In this context, the boundaries between skepticism and belief, and between science and religion are frequently challenged and transgressed (Aupers, 2012; Harambam and Aupers, 2015).

With this conference we wish to involve scholars from various scientific backgrounds in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. We invite contributions focusing on one or more of the following points:

- Conspiracy theories, alternative spiritualities, and Western esotericism
- Conspiracy theories, the New Age and new religious movements
- Conspiracy theories and religions (Islamic, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hinduist, etc.)
- Conspiracy theories, religion and gender
- Conspiracy theories, religion and politics

Abstracts and texts

Abstracts up to 300 words, accompanied by a CV, should be submitted in English by the 1st of June to conspiracy.conference@cini.it A notification of acceptance will be forwarded by the 1st of July. Following the notification of acceptance, we will require you to send us a draft chapter by the 1st of October, so that all the participants in the conference can prepare in advance. A few months after the Conference, we will ask participants to send us their full paper, to be published in an edited book. We welcome submissions from doctoral students, early career researchers and established scholars.

Timetable

1. The call for papers is open – 1st of March 2019.
2. Abstracts (300-500 words maximum) and CVs to be received by 1st June 2019.
3. Notifications of acceptance will be given by 15th July 2019.
4. Papers (between 6000 and 7000 words - including references), to be received by 1st October 2019.
5. Conference will be held the 14th, 15th, and 16th of November 2019.
6. Final papers in English to be received by 15th January 2019.
7. Publication of the book in late 2020, early 2021.

Practicalities and Funding

The Giorgio Cini Foundation and the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents will provide accommodation on San Giorgio Island, coffee breaks and lunches for all participants. Participants will arrange and pay for their own transportation, and will be requested to donate to the Library of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities one book related to religious studies they authored or in which they have participated. Extra funding may be available to cover the travel expenses of a limited number of scholars who cannot obtain funding from their own institutions. If extra funding is needed, please indicate this in the email with which you submit your abstract.

For further information, please contact: conspiracy.conference@cini.it

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