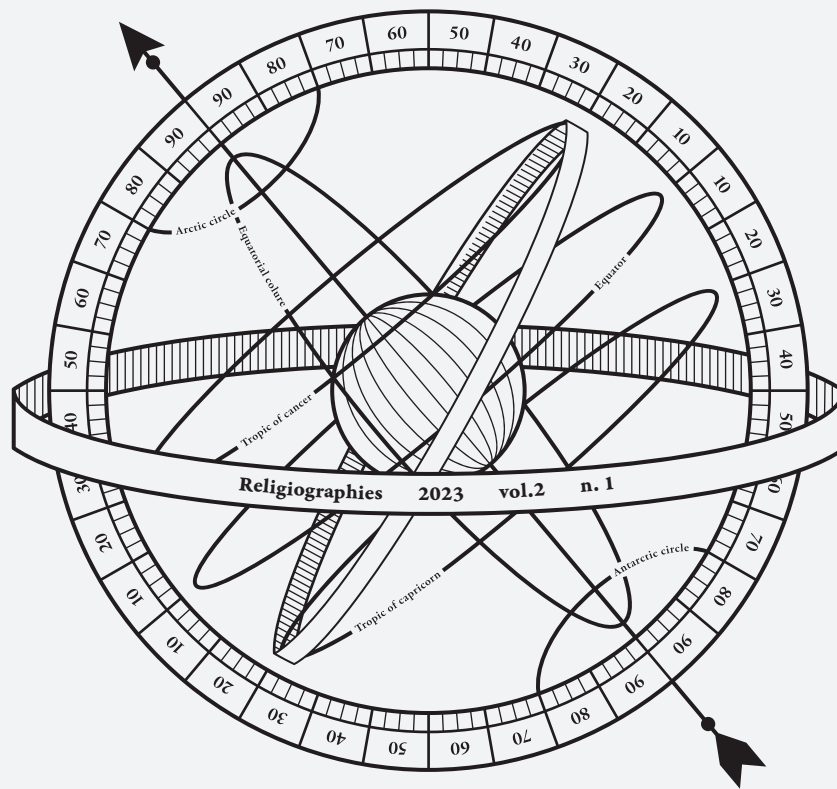


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The website of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, which I co-founded in 1988, was created by a nationally well-known web designer, Nicoletta Ferrari (1965–018). She also created a tradition: every year, on April 1, she celebrated April’s Fool Day by posting a false story. In 2001, her April 1 story was that PierLuigi Zocatelli, an Italian scholar of esotericism and the deputy director of CESNUR, had purchased both the ruins of the Abbey of Thelema, rented in Cefalù, Sicily, in the early 1920s by the sulphureous British magus Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), and the Catholic publishing house LDC, which had published some of CESNUR’s books. The article explained that Zocatelli would keep the acronym LDC (which stands for “Libreria Dottrina Cristiana,” “Library of Christian Doctrine”), which after all had existed for more than a hundred years, but would change the meaning in “Libreria di Crowley,” and make publishing Italian editions of Crowley’s works the main task of the publishing house.

Ferrari’s April 1, 2001 story remained on CESNUR’s web site for that day only, and it was so obviously false that we did not expect anybody to believe it. Yet, to this very day, you can still read on the web that Zocatelli and CESNUR are really part of a Crowleyan occult society in disguise, and the owners of both the Sicilian Abbey of Thelema and LDC. Some of these websites are part of the network commonly referred to as QAnon, which brings us to the book *La Q di Qomplotto* by Wu Ming 1, a member of the group internationally famous for their brilliant books and even more entertaining pranks perpetrated under the name “Luther Blissett,” taken from a famously inept AC Milan soccer player.

In fact, Ferrari’s April 1 joke is a perfect confirmation of one of the book’s main theories, which is presented with such elegance and persuasiveness that it deserves to become a new law of sociology. We can perhaps call it the “Law of Wu Ming.” It can be stated as “Never invent a fake conspiracy as a joke. Some conspiracy theorists will take it seriously. It will take a life of its own, and you will never be able to stop it.”

I was also involved in a more far-reaching incident where the Law of Wu Ming was at work, and one part of a main theme of Wu Ming 1’s book, Satanic panics. You can read in thousands of books, articles, and websites in all languages, including Japanese, that there were once 40,000 Satanists in Turin, Italy, and they had made alliances with co-religionists abroad creating two “magical triangles,” one with London and San Francisco and one with Prague and Lyon. The story came from a false “report” written in 1969 by Gianluigi Marianini (1918–2009), a local eccentric who had become famous as the winner of a TV quiz show and was also an inveterate prankster. The “report’s conclusions” were published in a local daily newspaper by his friend and accomplice, journalist Vittorio Messori, who was then a secular humanist but later converted to Catholicism and became famous as the interviewer of two Popes. Both of them were my friends, I knew the real story, and after I blew the whistle without naming names, they both publicly confessed. To no avail. It seems that the story of the magic circles and of the 40,000 Satanists in Turin is now beyond any possible denial, and will remain with us forever.

The title of Wu Ming 1’s book refers to QAnon, but there is much more in the text. As the author explains, there is nothing really mysterious in QAnon. We more or less know who was behind the messages signed “Q,” minor right-wing American extremists whose main aim was to make some easy money. The story of how QAnon kept being expelled from reputable social media and platforms and had to migrate to increasingly disreputable ones is also known. And of course we all know how Donald

Trump both hailed QAnon and used it for his own purposes, including in the fateful day when the Capitol was assaulted, January 6, 2021.

When QAnon surfaced in 2017, the name “Q” allegedly identified an American agent with a “Q clearance,” i.e., with a U.S. Department of Energy authorization to access secret information about nuclear weapons. The clearance was falsely presented as one making the holder privy to classified files about pretty much everything, including the supposed pedophile-Satanic rituals in which Democrat politicians such as Bill and Hillary Clinton were said to be involved. However, one possibility is that whoever started QAnon was inspired by the allegorical and faux conspirationist novel “Q” by “Luther Blissett,” the predecessor of Wu Ming, which had been published in Italian in 1999 and translated into English in 2003. Although the novel was set in 16th-century Europe, this would be the quintessential evidence for the Law of Wu Ming. A satirical novel signed under a false name about false conspiracies generated the largest real-life conspirationist movement of the 21st century.

Wu Ming 1’s main argument is that nothing is new in QAnon, except some bizarre theories—including the one that goes under the name #ItalyDidIt and claims that former Italian Prime Ministers Romano Prodi and Matteo Renzi were able to change the results of the American presidential elections of 2020 through mysterious machines—the endorsement by a U.S. President, and the skilled use of dark web technologies. On the other hand, as Wu Ming 1 demonstrates, all the false theories circulated through QAnon were already there. Some created or risked to create fatal violence. One was the Pizzagate, the conspiracy theory claiming that in the cellars of a Washington DC pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong (which, by the way, has no cellars) leaders of the Democrat Party raped children and officiated in Satanic rituals. The Pizzagate mythology emerged at least three years before QAnon. In 2016, it persuaded a man from North Carolina to travel to Washington DC, assault the pizzeria, and start shooting with a rifle, miraculously with no casualties.

However, another dark myth that existed before QAnon but was popularized by it, the so-called Kalergi Plan, did lead to homicides. The Kalergi Plan is a non-existing plot allegedly conceived by Austrian-Japanese diplomat Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894–1972) to destroy the white race in the West by overwhelming the Western countries with African and Asian immigrants. True believers in the Kalergi Plan decided to act against it by killing immigrants in various countries.

Wu Ming 1’s book actually goes much further, by arguing that QAnon conspiracy theories would not exist without a long prehistory that dates back to the French Revolution and the idea that it had been organized through a great plan involving Freemasons, Satanists, and Jews. As Wu Ming 1 rightly argues, this international scare had its roots in earlier anti-Semitism. In turn, it was the matrix of all subsequent conspiracy theories, from the 19th century return of blood libel accusations against the Jews to the 20th century Satanic panics. I told this story myself in my *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), and Umberto Eco (1932–2016), a constant reference in Wu Ming 1’s text, popularized it through his novels *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Prague Cemetery*. What *La Q di Qomplotto* has to add is the author’s personal recollection of the Luther Blissett group’s defense of Marco Dimitri (1963–2021), who operated in Bologna a movement of “rationalist Satanism” (i.e., referring to Satan mostly as a symbol of human freedom and higher potential), and spent years in jails for crimes courts finally acknowledged he had never committed.

In 1997, a previously unknown organization reportedly devoted to fighting “Satanic cults,” called “Cosamo,” started issuing press releases claiming that they had the best evidence of Dimitri’s crimes, including a video where “Satanists” molested a young girl. Eventually, this generated a national interest, and one of the main Italian TV networks stated it would be prepared to broadcast the full video, if Cosamo would provide it. Finally, the mysterious Cosamo disclosed the video, where masked “Satanists” surrounded a young girl, ostensibly ready to molest her or worse. When the audience was prepared for the worst, however, the girl rose and started dancing a jig with the “Satanists.” There was no Cosamo. It was all a prank organized by the Luther Blissett group.

The Cosamo prank worked, in the sense that the Italian media had to recognize they had been fooled and to promise they would be more cautious in the future when confronted with sensational accusations against “Satanists” and “cults.” Parenthetically, the book notes that even “experts” and scholars were fooled by false accusations against Dimitri, with the exception of the author of this review, who was perhaps the proverbial anomaly confirming the rule. In another sense, in fact, the prank did not succeed, because after a few years the media started repeating again unbelievable and false stories about Satanist pedophiles operating in both Catholic and secular kindergartens and “cults,” a label Wu Ming 1 rightly suggests to handle with care (I would recommend to avoid it altogether).

Why are both the media discussing these subjects and conspiracy theorists incorrigible? Trying to answer this question may well be the most important part of the book. Wu Ming 1 dismisses the idea that only right-wing extremists embrace conspiracy theories. Leftists do too. The author then offers a deep reflection on the limits of debunking. Inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer’s (1788–1860) famous 1831 small book *The Art of Being Right*, Wu Ming 1 explains how difficult it is to deny a conspiracy theory. Seasoned reporters have an old saying, that publishing a denial is just publishing the same news twice. If Hillary Clinton claims in a press release “I do not abuse children,” Wu Ming 1 assures us that the effect in the public opinion would mostly be to reinforce the idea that Clinton has something to do with the abuse of children. This is why debunkers of conspiracy theories and pseudo-scientific arguments mostly preach to the converted, and rarely persuade followers of QAnon, anti-vaccine activists, and other conspiracy buffs.

Schopenhauerian laws of rhetoric can help, but Wu Ming 1 tackles the subject more deeply. The debunkers normally do not succeed because they start from the premise that they occupy a higher moral ground. “We” are right and “they” are wrong. “We” represent Science and Rationality, “they” root for Ignorance and Superstition. This, Wu Ming 1 argues, is the attitude of the old uncle who goes to a birthday party, regards the balloons as silly, and bursts all of them with a pin. The only result he achieves is to be regarded as obnoxious and unpolite.

Ultimately, Wu Ming 1 dares to utter a heresy in typical “Luther Blissett” style. He argues that broad, universal conspiracy theories are false while small, local conspiracies may really happen: Watergate, for example, was one. However, in the lived experience of those who believe in grand conspiracy narratives there are kernels of truth and the expression of genuine needs. It is false that Bill Gates manipulates anti-COVID-19 vaccines to install microchips under our skin. However, it is true that not all that glitters in the philanthropic foundations created by tycoons such as Gates is gold, and that large software

companies have been found guilty of unethical practices by courts of law. In this sense, the most bizarre conspiracy theories, Wu Ming 1 concludes, are the best friends of “the system” or “the big powers” they claim they are opposing. Once conspiracy theories against them so preposterous that no sensible person would believe them have been created, it becomes easier to liquidate even valid criticism as a product of the same paranoid “conspiratorist” mindset. Or perhaps this is just another conspiracy theory about conspiracy theories. The Luther Blissett/Wu Ming game continues.