

RELS 241/341
Religion, Conflict and
Conspiracy Theory

Semester One, 2021



Photo by Hope O'Brien (6 January 2021)

Course Outline
& Study Guide

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Religion, Conflict and Conspiracy Theory examines contemporary conspiracy theories, and how they have been shaped by religion and societal conflict.

The course is organized as follows:

Part A: Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorists

The first part of the course will cover the range and significance of conspiracy theories, examine what we can say about the typical psychological characteristics and cognitive style of conspiracy theorists, and consider whether conspiracy theories share some logical flaw that would require us to reject them.

Part B: Social Conflict, Crisis, and Control

The popularity of conspiracy theories tends to peak in times of societal crisis or the occurrence of momentous changes to society. In this part, we will consider the effects of crisis on conspiracy theory ideation, the role of the perceived 'culture wars' or polarization of society, and examine in detail two conspiracy theories in which this conflict is operative (flat-earthism and climate change skepticism).

Part C: Red-pilled

In the third part, we will consider the social dynamics of possessing imagined secret knowledge, looking in particular at conspiracies about Reptilian rulers, Illuminati, the John Birch Society, and demonic experiments on human DNA, while also considering the formative role of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature.

Part D: Demonization

In the final part, we will examine the way conspiracy theories demonize their imagined opponents, with reference to heretics and antisemitism, QAnon and earlier satanic panics, the white genocide and great replacement conspiracy theories, Islamophobia, and the heightening of the Manichaean view of the world by Trumpism and social media.

ABOUT THE LECTURER

Deane Galbraith lectures on Judaism, Ancient Religion (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Levantine), Conspiracy Theories, and in the introductory course to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Deane's major areas of research include the development of traditions within the Jewish Pentateuch, contemporary Evangelical prophecy movements, and resurrection stories. He is also the founding editor of *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*, a journal examining the influence and effects of religious traditions within history and modern culture.

Please contact him either by telephone or email:

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Office hours: Room 4S9, 4th Floor Te Tumu, after class or by appointment.

ESSENTIAL COURSE COMPONENTS:

To complete this course successfully, you will need to (1) attend or view all your lectures; (2) complete your required readings contained in the Course Readings books; (3) follow the Study Guide; and (4) consult Blackboard regularly.

1. LECTURES are held on the Dunedin campus Monday and Wednesday at 1:00 – 1:50pm. The lectures may also be viewed online via Blackboard, both live-streamed and recorded for later viewing. Lectures build upon each other, and assume you have heard and understood the material in earlier lectures. Copies of the PowerPoint slides for each lecture will be made available on Blackboard after each lecture.
2. The COURSE READINGS book contains all of the required readings, and is available as a pdf via Blackboard. It contains all the readings necessary for lectures, and to complete your assessment for the course. You should aim to complete your readings before each lecture, as lectures both explain and build upon the required readings.

In addition, **only for those taking the RELS 341 paper**, there is an ADDITIONAL COURSE READINGS book, which contains some *additional* readings required at Stage Three.

3. A STUDY GUIDE is included at the end of this Course Guide. This provides an introduction to your readings within an overview of each topic in the course. You should follow the Study Guide when you do your readings, as this provides the context for each of your readings and explains many key terms and concepts you will encounter in your readings.
4. BLACKBOARD: This course relies heavily on the web-based program, Blackboard. Please make sure you have access to this. In particular, the assessments require access to Blackboard, and so also require that you have reliable internet access. If you require assistance, please contact the ITS helpdesk (<http://www.otago.ac.nz/its/contacts/>).

Blackboard uses your University email address, so please make sure that you check your university email at least every couple of days, or arrange for forwarding of your university emails to your personal email account.

LECTURE AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

Date	Lecture no.	Lecture Title
Monday 1 Mar	A1	Introduction: Conspiracies versus Conspiracy Theories
Wednesday 3 Mar	A2	Conspiracy Theory and Religion
Monday 8 Mar	A3	Why We Want to Believe (1): The Paranoid Style and Conspiracist Personality Types
Wednesday 10 Mar	A4	Why We Want to Believe (2): Cognitive Style and Cognitive Biases
Monday 15 Mar	A5	Why We Want to Believe (3): Patternicity, Agentivity, and even more Cognitive Biases
Wednesday 17 Mar	A6	Can We Prove Conspiracy Theories Wrong?
Monday 22 Mar	B7	Fantasies of Control
Wednesday 24 Mar	B8	The Culture Wars
Thursday 25 Mar		Online Test 1 due at 9pm
Monday 29 Mar	B9	Flat-Earthism
Wednesday 31 Mar	B10	Climate Change Skepticism
<i>Friday 2 Apr – Sunday 11 Apr</i>		<i>Mid-Semester break</i>
Monday 12 Apr	C11	Secrecy and the Deeper Truth
Wednesday 14 Apr	C12	Conspiritoriality, David Icke, and our secret Reptilian Overlords
Thursday 15 Apr		Essay Outline due at 9pm
Monday 19 Apr	C13	Apocalyptic: The Mother of Modern Conspiracy Theories?
Wednesday 21 Apr	C14	Illuminati, The John Birch Society and the New World Order

<i>Monday 26 Apr</i>		<i>ANZAC Day observed (no lecture)</i>
Wednesday 28 Apr	C15	Billy Te Kahika and the New Zealand Public Party
Thursday 29 Apr		Online Test 2 due at 9pm
Monday 3 May	C16	Urzeit/Endzeit: Atheist Scientists are Recreating Giants with Demonic DNA
Wednesday 5 May	D17	Demonization, Heresy & Antisemitism
Monday 10 May	D18	Holocaust denial
Wednesday 12 May	D19	QAnon: Saving the Children
Thursday 13 May		Essay due at 9pm
Monday 17 May	D20	Satanic Panics
Wednesday 19 May	D21	White Genocide and the Great Replacement conspiracy (1)
Monday 24 May	D22	White Genocide and the Great Replacement conspiracy (2)
Wednesday 26 May	D23	Fake News! The Legacy of Trumpism
Monday 31 May	D24	Is Social Media to blame?
Wednesday 2 June	25	Concluding Lecture: Out of the Rabbit Hole

ASSESSMENT

The assessment for this course is comprised as follows:

	RELS241	RELS341
1. Short-answer Online Test 1	10%	10%
2. Essay Outline	10%	10%
3. Short-answer Online Test 2	10%	10%
4. Essay	20%	30%
5. Final exam (2 hours)	50%	40%

1. Short-answer Online Test 1

(10% of total assessment)

Due Thursday 25 March at 9:00pm

The first Short-answer Online Test will be made available on Blackboard soon after the lecture on Wednesday 24 March. Questions will be confined to the lectures and required readings for lectures 1 to 8. There is no time-limit for completing the test, but your answers must be submitted before 9:00pm Thursday 25 March (NZ time) in order to receive a mark. No more than one to two sentences are required as an answer to each question.

2. Essay Outline

(10% of total assessment)

Due Thursday 15 April at 9:00pm

First read through the instructions below for the Essay (due 13 May).

- a) write a 300-word summary that describes the key elements in the conspiracy theory that your chosen conspiracy theorist promotes.
- b) Provide an annotated bibliography for your chosen conspiracy theorist (including books, websites, other writings, audio, and/or videos). An annotated bibliography should include a list of sources, formatted according to the instructions in the “Style Guide” below. In addition, include a one- to two-sentence summary under each bibliography entry that notes briefly what your conspiracy theorist covers in that source. You should include at least three bibliographical entries in your annotated bibliography. You are free to change or expand the list when you come to write your essay.

Please also make sure that you read through the sections below on “Submitting written work”, “Deadlines, Extensions, and Late Submission”, “Plagiarism”, and “Style Guide” before beginning the Essay Outline.

3. Short-answer Test 2

(10% of total assessment)

Due Thursday 29 April at 9:00pm

The second Short-answer Online Test will be made available on Blackboard soon after the lecture on Wednesday 28 April. Questions will be confined to the lectures and required readings for lectures 9 to 15. There is no time-limit for completing the test, but your answers must be submitted before 9:00pm Thursday 29 April (NZ time) in order to receive a mark. No more than one to two sentences are required as an answer to each question.

4. Essay

(RELS241: 20% of total assessment; RELS341: 30% of total assessment)

Due Thursday 13 May at 9:00pm

Select one of the following conspiracy theorists:

- L.A. Marzulli
- Stephen Quayle
- Tom Horn
- Gary Stearman

Provide a summary that describes the key elements of their conspiracy theory about Nephilim. This may be substantially similar to what you provided in the Essay Outline, or it may change or develop that summary.

Critically examine:

- a) the evidence and logic (or illogic) that your selected conspiracy theorist employs to argue for their theory;
- b) the wider social-political-religious backgrounds that give rise to that conspiracy theory; and
- c) the methods and rhetorical devices used by the conspiracy theorist to promote their conspiracy theory.

Include sequential footnotes to cite all your sources. A summary of the footnote format is available below under “Style Guide”. Make sure you include the specific page numbers (for books and articles) or the specific time (in video/audio) for each of your footnotes.

Include a bibliography of all your sources at the end. This may differ from the sources you earlier included in your Essay Outline, as you further consider your approach to the assignment. A summary of the Bibliography format is available below under “Style Guide”.

For RELS 241 students, your essay should be approximately 2000 words in length. For RELS 341 students, your essay should be approximately 2500 words in length.

5. Final exam (2 hours)

(RELS241: 50% of total assessment; RELS341: 40% of total assessment)

(date and time to be notified by the Exams Office)

Submitting Written Work

All students must submit their work electronically (as a Word or document file, *not* as a pdf) via the “Assignment” feature on Blackboard, by 9:00pm on each due date.

You may email your lecturer the essay outline or essay ONLY if you have trouble accessing Blackboard. You will be responsible for confirming that your work has been uploaded to Blackboard and/or received by me. Before you submit your essay, make a backup copy, either in electronic form or on paper, and keep it in a safe place.

Insert a completed cover sheet as the first page of your assignment. A pro forma cover sheet is available on Blackboard).

Deadlines, Extensions, and Late Submission

Students have full responsibility for the prompt submission of assignments. An extension of the due date may be granted only in HIGHLY exceptional circumstances, usually on medical grounds. In the event of an extension being obtained on medical grounds, a doctor’s certificate verifying the need for an extension should be attached to the assignment when it is submitted. Please note that poor time management is not acceptable as a reason for seeking an extension.

Late submissions may be penalized at a rate of 5% of the assignment marks if one day late, and 5% each additional weekday late thereafter.

Plagiarism

Students should make sure that all work submitted is their own. Your essay outline or essay will be deemed to be plagiarised if you

- copy or paraphrase another person's work and present it as your own;
- let another party copy your work or help them to copy the work of someone else without acknowledgement; or
- use your own work from another situation, such as for the assessment of a different paper or program, without indicating the source

For more advice on the plagiarism policy see <https://www.otago.ac.nz/study/academicintegrity/otago006307.html> and the ‘Study Smart’ section in Blackboard.

The primary way to avoid plagiarism is to ensure that any words you write that rely on another source are properly referenced, and that any direct quotes are placed in quotation marks. This applies to any source, including those on the internet.

Any student found responsible for plagiarism in any piece of work submitted for assessment shall be subject to the University’s student academic misconduct procedures (<https://www.otago.ac.nz/administration/policies/otago116850.html>), which may result in various penalties, including forfeiture of marks for the piece of work submitted, a zero grade for the paper, or in extreme cases exclusion from the University.

Style guide

The Religion Programme has its own *Style Guide* for students, based on the *Chicago Manual of Style*. A copy is available here: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/religion/pdfs/styleguide.pdf>. Please follow it for your assignments, unless you have permission from the lecturer.

You should provide sequential footnotes (not in-line citations, not endnotes) at the bottom of each page, which should be numbered continuously throughout the essay (1, 2, 3, ...). You should also provide a bibliography at the end of your assignments, containing references to every source you have either cited or relied on in your reading for the assignment.

Here is a quick summary of how to format your (1) initial footnotes, (2) second and subsequent footnotes of the same source, and (3) bibliography:

	First footnote	Subsequent footnotes	Bibliography
Book	Zachary Braiterman, <i>(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 35.	Braiterman, <i>(God) After Auschwitz</i> , 35.	Braiterman, Zachary. <i>(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought</i> . Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
Section in book	Jack Wertheimer, “Varieties of Orthodox Jews,” in <i>The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 72.	Wertheimer, “Varieties”, 72.	Wertheimer, Jack. “Varieties of Orthodox Jews.” In <i>The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today</i> , 71-73, 288. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
Chapter in edited book	Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, “Jewish Mysticism,” in <i>The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture</i> , ed. Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 416.	Tirosh-Samuelson, “Jewish Mysticism”, 416.	Tirosh-Samuelson, Hava. “Jewish Mysticism.” In <i>The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture</i> , ed. Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin, 399–423. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
Journal article	Arye Edrei, “Identity, Politics and Halakhah in Modern Israel,” <i>Journal of Modern Jewish Studies</i> 14, no. 1 (2015), 115.	Edrei, “Identity”, 115.	Edrei, Arye. “Identity, Politics and Halakhah in Modern Israel.” <i>Journal of Modern Jewish Studies</i> 14, no. 1 (2015): 109–25.
Webpage	Prophecy Watchers, “L.A. Marzulli: Hidden History of the Giants,” <i>YouTube</i> , 29 Feb 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7VbdAdRmAs	Prophecy Watchers, “L.A. Marzulli”, 4:11.	Prophecy Watchers. “L.A. Marzulli: Hidden History of the Giants.” <i>YouTube</i> . 29 Feb 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7VbdAdRmAs

Marking rubrics

Students will receive written feedback from the instructor. For the Essay Outline and Essay, you will be marked according to the following rubrics:

1. **BASICS:** Did you follow the prompts listed? (e.g. correct length, submitted properly, on time, academic sources, etc.)
2. **POLISH:** Is the piece free of careless errors? (grammar, spelling, citations etc.)
3. **ARGUMENT/STRUCTURE:** Are answers clearly supported and argued, properly addressing the specific questions or requirements?
4. **CONTENT:** Does the piece show evidence of time spent researching and thinking? Does it build upon, critique, advance ideas and content from class and readings?

STUDY GUIDE

RELS 241/341— RELIGION, CONFLICT AND
CONSPIRACY THEORY

This Study Guide provides an introduction to each topic within this course, and should be followed when you are completing your required readings.

PART A: CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

1. Introduction: Conspiracies versus Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories seemed to be everywhere in 2020, spiking with the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated social-distancing restrictions and prescribed lock-downs. Some of these conspiracy theories might seem far-fetched and mostly harmless (e.g., that we are secretly ruled by shape-shifting lizard-shaped aliens; that Donald Trump is a time-traveller). But others have more serious repercussions, like the Great Replacement theory espoused by Anders Breivik in Norway (2011), or by the Christchurch mosque terrorist (2019), or by the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter (2018). Furthermore, some conspiracy theories are in fact true, such as the Iran-Contra affair, in which the US secretly diverted money from Iranian arms sales to fund right-wing Nicaraguan rebels (1985), or the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment, in which the US government conducted medical experiments on African-Americans (1932-1972), or the Sykes-Picot agreement, in which Britain and France conspired to divided up the Middle East between them (1916).

A *conspiracy* is a covert plan by at least two people, usually for evil or nefarious purposes. That's relatively straightforward and largely uncontentious. But the term *conspiracy theory* is widely disputed. (There's even a conspiracy theory that the CIA invented the term *conspiracy theory*.) One reason for the disagreement is that *conspiracy theory* is often used as a dismissive or stigmatising term, a rhetorical way of dismissing certain explanations from public discussion. While we might justifiably want to do that in respect of the more far-fetched conspiracy theories, there are some conspiracy theories that should not be ignored (especially ones that turn out to be true).


Now read:



Robertson, David G. "Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Alternative and Emergent Religions." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 19, no. 2 (2015): 5–9, 12-16.

Accordingly, scholars in the field of conspiracy theories are divided as to which definition of conspiracy theory should prevail: one that is neutral as to its truth or falsity, or one that limits the term to implausible or untrue conspiracies.

Your reading from Jan-Willem Van Prooijen sets out his view of what constitutes the core elements of a conspiracy theory.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem. “What is a Conspiracy Theory?” In <i>The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories.</i>, idem., 5-6. The Psychology of Everything. London: Routledge, 2018.</p>
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2. Conspiracy Theory and Religion


When we think of who believes in conspiracy theories, we might picture a crazy-eyed person wearing a tinfoil hat, or an angry middle-aged man who lives in his parents’ basement, or perhaps someone wearing face-paint and cow-horns. And these descriptions certainly fit with *some* conspiracy theorists. But belief in conspiracy theories is far too widespread through society for such caricatures to be accurate across most cases. Oliver & Wood’s (2014) survey of the American public found, for example, that a majority of the population believe at least one conspiracy theory. Although we don’t know for sure, a survey of New Zealand or other countries may well yield similar results.

Conspiracy theories received a high profile as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, but do we have any reason to think that they are becoming more and more prevalent? Studies by Uscinski & Parent (2014), Andrew McKenzie-McHarg (2018), and Mick West (2018) provide a historical basis for answering this question.


Conspiracy theories may be classified in various ways, such as their subject matter (alien cover-ups, government false-flag operations, medical cover-ups, suspicious deaths, etc). Another useful way of classifying conspiracy theories is according to their scope, which ranges from a local one-off conspiracy, to world-wide conspiracies by secret groups that seek total control. The distinction regarding scale is made in similar ways by Michael Barkun (2003) and Charles J. Stewart (2002). A world-wide conspiracy will often assimilate many of the smaller or local conspiracies, incorporating them into its grand plan.

A number of scholars (e.g., David G. Robertson, Asbjørn Dyrendal, Egil Asprem, Brian L. Keeley, Bradley Franks) have demonstrated ways that the study of conspiracy theories elucidates the study of religion, and vice-versa. The reading from Robertson, Asprem, and Dyrendal (2019) discuss three distinct ways that religion and conspiracy theory interact. (1) conspiracy

theories may be employed *within* a religion (e.g., Evangelical Christian expectations of a coming Satanic global government); (2) conspiracy theories may be created *about* religions, by outsiders (e.g., the conspiracy theory that Muslims are plotting to replace European populations), and (3) conspiracy theorising may function *as* religion or as a “quasi-religious mentality” (Franks, 2013), that is, key elements can be seen to be shared by both conspiracy theories and religions.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Robertson, David G., Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal. “Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion.” In <i>Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion</i>, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson and Egil Asprem, 1–8, 17-18. Leiden: Brill, 2019.</p>
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Religion is notoriously difficult to define, and there are many disagreements in scholarship. Some religion scholars find it useful to adopt the *building blocks* approach, in which religion is a complex phenomenon or system constructed from many constituent parts (e.g., Sosis 2018; Taves 2015; Asprem 2016; Taves and Asprem 2020). These constituent parts overlap significantly with the constituent elements found in conspiracy theories: e.g., taboo (restrictions on certain behaviours), authority via the possession of restricted knowledge, the prominence of explanatory myths, the existence of supernatural or preternatural agents, the provision of meaning-making for life, and purported provision of control over the chaos of life. Although more or less emphasis is given to each of these constitutive parts by various conspiracy theories and religions respectively, and although the particular way in which they are combined determines their distinct overall character, the building blocks approach offers a productive way to shed light on both phenomena.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Sosis, Richard. “The Building Blocks of Religious Systems: Approaching Religion as a Complex Adaptive System.” In <i>Evolution, Development and Complexity: Multiscale Evolutionary Models of Complex Adaptive Systems</i>, ed. Georgi Yordanov Georgiev, John M. Smart, Claudio L. Flores Martinez, Michael E. Price. Springer Proceedings in Complexity, 423-27. Springer, 2018.</p>
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3. Why We Want to Believe (1): The Paranoid Style and Conspiracist Personality Types

There has been a tendency in conspiracy theory studies to emphasize the psychological profile of people who believe in conspiracy theories. This emphasis on psychological tendencies is often blamed on an influential essay by “Americanist” historian Richard Hofstadter entitled “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” The essay was written in 1964, the year after the

assassination of John F. Kennedy (the subject himself of many conspiracy theories). In his essay, Hofstadter criticises the demonizing fervour in American politics, with its witch-hunts, anti-Freemasonry, anti-Catholicism, anti-communism, and—the perennial favourite--antisemitism. Conspiracy theories are a product of a social tendency that Hofstadter likens to paranoia. But to be clear, he’s not talking about the clinical condition, but using the term as a metaphor for a recurring set of characteristics displayed by a sizable segment of US society.

<p>RELS 341 ONLY:</p> 	<p>Hofstadter, Richard. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” In <i>Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays</i>, 3-40. Vintage Books, 1967.</p>
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It wasn’t until the first decade of the twenty-first century that psychological research into the personality traits of conspiracy theorists really took off. Psychological studies have concentrated on personality types that are conducive to a conspiracy theory mindset, such as low agreeableness (or negatively, social antagonism), interpersonal distrust (including paranoia), low self-esteem and external locus of control, neuroticism and anxiety or stress, narcissism, openness to experience, eccentric beliefs, and supernatural beliefs. Although the results of these studies show some recurring tendencies among conspiracy theorists, the results are mixed and often inconclusive.


<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Ehrenreich, John. “Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories: They’re not Stupid.” <i>Slate</i>. 11 January 2021. Read it online: https://slate.com/technology/2021/01/conspiracy-theories-coronavirus-fake-psychology.html</p> <p>Lantian, Anthony, Mike Wood and Biljana Gjoneska. “Personality Traits, Cognitive Styles and Worldviews Associated with Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories.” In <i>Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories</i>, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 155-63. Routledge, 2020.</p>
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4. **Why We Want to Believe (2): Cognitive Style and Cognitive Biases**

A more fruitful approach to understanding conspiracy belief involves the study of cognitive style and cognitive biases. Cognitive style refers to the tendency to think either more analytically or to think more intuitively. Everyone employs both styles of thinking at one time or another, depending on the circumstance and situation. Yet people also tend to default more to one

cognitive style or the other. So some people will default to an intuitive and unconscious cognitive style and others to an analytic and consciously controlled cognitive style. Studies show that there is a significant correlation between, on the one hand, those who prefer an intuitive cognition style and, on the other hand, religious beliefs and conspiracy ideation. Consistent with these findings, belief in conspiracy theories decreases as education levels increase, due in part to increased analytical thought.

A number of cognitive biases also contribute to the formation of conspiracy beliefs. These biases include the illusion of explanatory depth (possessing superficial knowledge of complex causal relations, yet tending to overestimate the quality of one's explanation), the fundamental attribution bias (the tendency to overestimate personal factors, blaming individuals for their personal characteristics, and conversely underestimate situational and contextual factors), the conjunction fallacy (overestimating the probability of co-occurring events), and the proportionality bias (the tendency to imagine that significant events must have large or complex causes), and teleological thinking (the belief that 'everything happens for a reason'). These are cognitive biases shared by most people. But they lead to conspiracy theorizing when combined with certain social or political circumstances.


<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Swami, Viren, et al. "Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories." <i>Cognition</i> 133, no. 3 (2014): 572–85.</p>
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5. Why We Want to Believe (3): Patternicity, Agentivity, and even more Cognitive Biases

Two further cognitive biases are frequently identified as causes of conspiracy theory ideation: illusory pattern detection and hypersensitive agency detection. Illusory pattern detection describes our tendency to find patterns in random facts. This is sometimes termed "pareidolia", a common example of which is our tendency to 'see' shapes of animals or faces in the clouds. Studies show that our mistaken identification of patterns becomes more prevalent when we are under stress or in times of crisis. Hypersensitive agency detection is the related tendency to perceive events as though they were caused by agents, especially human beings, when in fact they are random or natural events.

Some further cognitive biases stem from our concern for self-justification and our need to convince others we are right. These biases explain why it's just so hard to convince someone who has 'gone down the rabbit hole' that they are wrong; our first instinct is to defend our dearly-held beliefs. One such cognitive bias is *confirmation bias*, the tendency to interpret facts in such a way that it supports our existing opinions. The *motivated reasoning bias* means that people will, tendentiously, find rational arguments to provide support for the opinions that they already intuitively prefer. Another cognitive bias is the *hindsight bias*, the tendency to reconstruct our memory of the past in order to fit with current preferences. The *self-justification* bias is the

tendency to rationalize our decisions after the fact, so as to convince ourselves that we made the best decision. Finally, there is a psychological bias to reduce *cognitive dissonance* between our most valued beliefs and contrary evidence, by reinterpreting the beliefs in such a way that the evidence is taken to support those beliefs. As a variety of studies have shown, all of these biases are major generators of conspiracy theories.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Douglas, Karen M., et al. "Someone is pulling the Strings: Hypersensitive Agency Detection and Belief in Conspiracy Theories." <i>Thinking & Reasoning</i> 22, no. 1 (2016): 57-77.</p> <p>French, Chris. "When Predictions Fail: UFO Cults, QAnon and Cognitive Dissonance." <i>The Skeptic</i>. 3 February 2021.</p> <p>Read it online: https://www.skeptic.org.uk/2021/02/when-predictions-fail-ufo-cults-qanon-and-cognitive-dissonance/</p>
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6. Can We Prove Conspiracy Theories Wrong?

For some conspiracy theory scholars, conspiracy theories have qualities which mark them off from other types of causal explanation. Karen Douglas et al (2017), for example, identifies as distinct to conspiracy theories: their speculative nature (often involving the actions of unknown hidden groups or actors); the improbable (almost god-like) ability to co-ordinate multiple actors in the cover-up or carrying out of covert operations, which in complex conspiracy theories like the faked moon landing conspiracy would involve hundreds of thousands of people; and the resistance of conspiracy theories to falsification (in that any fact can be interpreted by a conspiracy theorist in a way that confirms their theory; there is no evidence that could disconfirm the theory). So for example, on 30 December 2020, Billy Te Kahika claimed that the Government were covertly planning a Covid-19 lock-down in mid-January 2021. No lock-down in fact occurred in January 2021. But he took this fact as confirmation of his Covid-19 conspiracy theory, claiming that by publicizing this date, he had forced the Government to back down from its nefarious plans. Te Kahika interpreted facts which on any reasonable grounds proved he was mistaken as though they proved the contrary, that: he was right. It was a textbook case of dissonance reduction, demonstrating that Te Kahika's conspiracy theory was unfalsifiable; no possible facts could prove it wrong in his eyes.

It is not clear, however, that every conspiracy theory is invariably irrational. After all, some conspiracy theories turn out to be true. While those who believed the true conspiracy theory might not necessarily have done so on rational grounds, it may well be the case. Brian L. Keeley accordingly distinguishes true and false conspiracy theories from warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories (conspiracy theories either adequately backed up by the evidence, or not). Keeley sets out the properties for an "unwarranted conspiracy theory" in your reading. The most important of these criteria, in terms of distinguishing the conspiracy theory is what he

calls “errant data”—data which is either unaccounted for by the official theory or which contradicts it. Keeley disagrees that the unfalsifiability of a conspiracy theory makes it irrational. Instead, he finds irrationality in the inconsistent standards of skepticism towards evidence concerning the conspiracy theory and concerning the official account.

Keeley also notes that there is no sure-fire way to distinguish a false from a true conspiracy theory. Rather, evaluation of a conspiracy theory must rest on the particular facts of a specific conspiracy theory.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Keeley, Brian L. “Of Conspiracy Theories.” <i>Journal of Philosophy</i> 96, no. 3 (1999): 109–26.</p>
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PART B:


SOCIAL CONFLICT, CRISIS AND CONTROL

7. Fantasies of Control

When people feel that their security is under threat or that they have lost control in some part of their life, they tend to look for ways to compensate for that uncertainty or loss (Rothbaum, Weisz & Snyder, 1982). This compensatory control often takes a merely symbolic form, such as when many people tried to learn all they could about Covid-19 from websites and news reports, compensating for the threat with possession of knowledge about that threat. Many conspiracy theory researchers have concluded that belief in a conspiracy theory serves to provide such compensation (e.g., van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Sullivan, Landau & Rothschild, 2010). Indeed, this fits with the observation that conspiracy theories tend to spike in times of crisis or rapid change. This increase in the level of belief in conspiracy mirrors findings that religiosity and supernatural beliefs also increase in times of crisis or loss of control (Kay et al, 2009).

Lack of control is experienced not only by the lower classes and minorities, but also by those who simply perceive that they are losing some of the advantages that they previously possessed in society. The subjective feeling of a loss of control, and a relative decrease in control, can be more important than actual loss of control, in relation to attempts at compensation. It is for this reason that Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent state that “conspiracies are for losers”. Believers in conspiracy theories are usually those who experience loss of power or loss of resources to another group, either another group within their society or an external foe. Of particular relevance is the perceived threat to societal values and morals. Conspiracy theories

spread especially where one's worldview feels threatened, one's identity is challenged, or the grounds of one's self-image appear to be unsteady.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Uscinski, Joseph E. & Joseph M. Parent. "Conspiracies are for losers." <i>American Conspiracy Theories</i>, idem., 131-53. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.</p>
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8. The Culture Wars

Given that conspiracy theories are disproportionately accepted and spread by those who are experiencing a shift of power away from them, conspiracy theories are rational to a point. Conspiracy theories are formed when there are real shifts in power or unfairness in society, even if the way the conspiracy theory misunderstands their true cause and blames a scapegoat instead. Conspiracy theorists usually are really "on to something", even if they misapprehend what that something is (Hellinger, 2003; Sapountzis & Condor, 2013). Some conspiracy theory scholars have therefore suggested that conspiracy theories serve a positive function, in questioning the distribution of power in society.

Yet it is far from clear that conspiracy theories really do serve that function in society. Instead, it is objected, they obscure the real issues of wealth and power more than they might expose them (Hofstadter, 1965) and may rather serve to justify the status quo (Jolley, Douglas & Sutton, 2017). Adopting Raymond Williams' (1978) division of societal worldviews into "residual", "hegemonic" and "emerging" ideologies, conspiracy theories typically fit the former, reactionary classification.

This brings us to the nature of the major societal conflict which inspires conspiracy theories today. In the 1990s, James Davison Hunter popularized the term "culture wars" to describe the what he saw as the growing polarization in modern, especially American society. The main divide, as he saw it, was between those who followed orthodox and traditional morals and religious beliefs, and those progressives who promoted new moral imperatives such as racial and gender equality, multiculturalism, and wealth redistribution. The concept of a "culture war" was widely criticised however, as in the 1990s it seemed to reflect a dispute confined mainly to elite circles, and not involving the vast majority of people. But as Mark Davis (2019) argues, today, with the influence of social media and other partisan news sources, the term "culture war" and what it entails has been widely disseminated and adopted by both sides to the conflict.

The line between conservatives and liberals has become more firmly entrenched, and this conflict fuels the spread of conspiracy theories, with their heightened sense of a division between the forces of good and evil. The idea of an "internal enemy" now dominates contemporary conspiracy theories, that enemy usually being the liberal progressive. Yet in addition, other contemporary conspiracy theories are concerned with an "external enemy", people not part of "our" group, e.g, Muslims, Jews, Russian bots.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Davis, Mark. "A new, online culture war? The communication world of Breitbart.com." <i>Communication Research and Practice</i> 5, no. 3 (2019): 241-59.</p>
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9. Flat-Earthism

One way in which the culture wars manifest themselves is in the conservative distrust of science and scientific theories. Conservatism is not the only grounds for the mistrust of science. There is also an opposition to science grounded in the New Age and alternative medicine worldview, associated with the liberal left, and involving opposition to genetically modified foods and vaccinations. For this reason, in recent years, many online yoga practitioners and natural health enthusiasts have been a key vector for the spread of conspiracy theories. We will look at that connection later when discussing David Icke and the Reptilian conspiracy theory. Yet opposition to science is today predominantly found in conservative groups, that is, among both political and religious conservatives.

The belief that the earth is flat, or flat-earthism, is an extreme example of such opposition to science, taking its stance against the liberals and atheists believed to be associated with the scientific worldview. On its own, belief in a flat earth is not belief in a conspiracy. But flat-earthers inevitably have to explain why NASA and thousands of scientists provide us with pictures of a spherical earth. Their conclusion is that this involves a conspiracy on a massive scale, and for evil purposes.

Flat-earthism is defended predominantly by biblical literalists who point out that the Bible presents the shape of the earth as somewhat pancake-shaped. Some prominent flat-earthers are not, however, religious, and both fundamentalist Christians and non-Christians defend their claims by appealing almost exclusively to their empirical experiments and tests of the shape of the earth. Thus there is an attempt to oppose established, mainstream science with what flat-earthers claim is their even more rigorously scientific method. Yet behind their claim of science-based reasons for their position is a culture that distrusts science and in particular the scientific theory of evolution (versus creationism).

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Olshansky, Alex, Robert M. Peaslee, and Asheley R. Landrum. "Flat-Smacked! Converting to Flat Eartherism." <i>Journal of Media and Religion</i> 19, no. 2 (2020): 46–59.</p>
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<p>RELS 341 ONLY:</p> 	<p>Lewandowsky, Stephan, Gilles E. Gignac & Klaus Oberauer. "The role of conspiracist ideation and worldviews in predicting rejection of science." <i>PLoS One</i> 10, no. 8 (2013): e75637.</p>
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10. Climate Change Skepticism

Climate change skepticism, sometimes referred to as climate change denial or global warming skepticism, is the rejection of the scientific consensus that the cause of the increase in average temperatures in recent decades is anthropogenic (“man-made”). As with flat-earthism, this position does not necessarily entail any conspiracy theory. But in practice it does. It is widely alleged that the (largely liberal, even atheistic) scientists have faked their findings.

A number of studies have shown that Conservative Evangelical Christians are more prone to disbelieve that global warming is anthropogenic (Smith & Leiserowitz, 2013; Kilburn, 2014). For some climate change skeptics who are Evangelical Christians, their views are based on the belief that the world cannot be in danger due to the climate, as the Bible spells out another scenario for the end-times apocalypse, one which has nothing to do with rising temperatures on Earth. Other Evangelical skeptics oppose the scientific claim based on a cultural divide between Christians and the Green culture, the latter most vocal in demanding a response to global warming. For many Evangelicals, Greens are associated with neo-paganism and idolatrous nature-worship, and therefore the demonic. Another reason for climate skepticism is that many Evangelicals consider that the attribution of major global change to humans usurps God’s authority and sovereignty.

In addition, the calls for restrictions on industry emissions is associated with an (anti-Christian) socialism, even though it has nothing to do with socialism in reality. Moreover, as Robin Veldman (2019) argues, Evangelical beliefs do not adequately explain Evangelical Christian skepticism about global warming: What we are seeing, argues Veldman, is a conflict based on identity maintenance.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Ricker, Aaron. “Crisis, Conspiracy, and Community in Evangelical Climate Denial.” <i>Journal of the Council for Research on Religion – Montreal, Quebec</i> 2, no. 1 (2020): 72–91.</p>
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<p>RELS 341 ONLY:</p> 	<p>Robin Globus Veldman, “How Evangelical Subcultural Identity Sustains Climate Skepticism.” In <i>The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Action on Climate Change</i>, idem., 114-23. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.</p>
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PART C: RED-PILLED


11. Secrecy and the Deeper Truth


One of the major dynamics of conspiracy theories is that they claim to offer a privileged view of the world, a “deeper truth” not grasped by the majority of people. The idea that one has rare access to “things as they really are” is intoxicating. It is also another “building block” (component) of conspiracy theory ideation that is shared with the building blocks of religion. Many religions claim a spiritual insight that is unavailable to outsiders. Many conspiracy theorists describe the experience of discovering a hidden conspiracy as being “red-pilled”. The phrase is a reference to a famous scene in the film *The Matrix* (1999), in which Morpheus (played by Laurence Fishburne) gives Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) a choice to take either the blue pill in his left hand and stay ignorant of the hidden powers who control the world, or to “take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.” Morpheus, like conspiracy theorists, believe that they can offer others life-changing truths, the ability to see everything in the world differently, if only they open their minds to the “truth” and stop following mainstream or official accounts, like the unenlightened masses or “sheeple”. As you will have noticed, *The Matrix* (borrowing from *Alice in Wonderland*) is also where the phrase “rabbit hole” comes from, which is now used to describe the obsessive depths that some conspiracy theorists reach in researching conspiracy theories.

The experience of being red-pilled is functionally very similar to what religious converts describe in their “conversion experience”, and to understand the transformation of a

conspiracist who has “gone down the rabbit hole”, we might draw on religious scholarship about conversion experiences (as does Bradley Franks et al, 2017). Conversion experiences are often given a personal narrative, which makes it central to a person’s identity. It also connects conspiracy theorists together, who experience a sense of community with like-minded conspiracy theorists, and conversely distance from those who have not “seen the light”, even family and friends.

These personal and social dynamics have also been widely explored in scholarship on secrecy and secret societies and esoteric movements, and how these are attractive to many people, as well as empowering. One of the earliest scholars of secrecy, the sociologist Georg Simmel made the point that a secret excludes the majority of people, and so creates a strong feeling of possession. Thus, boundaries are made between insiders and outsiders, and a hierarchy is usually created among insiders, based on who possesses more of the secret knowledge. Members view themselves as superior to others, and this enhanced status is hard to give up. Being aware of the power dynamics of conspiracy theory culture, and the strong sense of being an exclusive member in an enlightened community with access to (alleged) deeper truths, we can see why conspiracy theories are seemingly immune to inconvenient facts or rational evaluation. There’s just too much personally at stake.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Asprem, Egil and Asbjørn Dyrendal. “Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories.” In <i>Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion</i>, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, 207-16, 218-33. Brill Handbooks of Contemporary Religion 17. Leiden: Brill, 2019.</p>
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<p>RELS 341 ONLY:</p> 	<p>Franks Bradley et al. “Beyond ‘Monologicality’? Exploring Conspiracist Worldviews.” <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> 8, article 861 (2017), 1-16. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.0086</p>
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12. Conspirituality, David Icke, and our secret Reptilian Overlords

Although opinion is divided, it appears that conspiracy theories are more common among conservatives and right-wingers than among liberal or left-wing interests. As discussed earlier, this imbalance is a result of broad shift in society away from more traditionalist, conservative groups, which results in a feeling of loss, and results in seeking compensation via the construction of conspiracy theories. Yet there are also many conspiracy theories on the left.

Especially popular among liberals in particular are conspiracy theories about “big pharma” (the pharmaceutical industry), genetically modified foods, and vaccinations.

Charlotte Ward and David Voas refer to the hybrid of New Age spiritualities (alternative health, channelling, meditation, yoga, etc) and conspiracy theorizing as *conspirituality*. New Age claims of an expected evolution in human consciousness are mixed with claims more popular on the right about an elite secret group controlling the world’s governments. Adherents of conspirituality “awaken to the truth” of both the expected higher level of consciousness and also the nefarious controllers of world governments. Prominent in this left-wing conspiracism is David Icke, the chief proponent of the theory that the world is secretly controlled by aliens who look like reptiles.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Ward, Charlotte and David Voas. “The Emergence of Conspirituality.” <i>Journal of Contemporary Religion</i> 26, no. 1 (2011): 103-21.</p>
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<p>RELS 341 ONLY:</p> 	<p>Asprem, Egil and Asbjørn Dyrendal. “Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?” <i>Journal of Contemporary Religion</i> 30, no. 3 (2015): 367-82.</p>
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13. Illuminati, the John Birch Society and the New World Order

A key feature of conspiracy theories today is an imagined secret enemy, powerful, yet beyond the known official world powers. Evil conspirators are pictured as global in reach and power, and (as opposed to being outsiders: Jews, heretics, Catholics, etc) are operating within our own governments or within large private corporations, controlling them by stealth means. The shift has its origins in suspicions of secret societies in the 18th to 19th centuries, and in the anti-communist movements of the 20th century.

One of these secret societies are the Freemasons, or rather an elite group within the Freemasons of which ordinary members are unaware. In reality, the Masons have their origin in trade guilds of the 14th century, which later expanded to include other occupations and businesses. Due in part to its secret initiations and its interest in the mutual success of its members, Masons were regularly accused of constituting a threat to the power of the government and of being involved


in occult religious practices. The secrecy of Freemasonry's rites do not, however, conceal any conspiratorial plans or occult teachings. They simply provide rituals for including people as members. Symbols are learnt, which teach Masonry's moral imperatives for life, yet these moral principles are not all that different from morals accepted elsewhere in mainstream society. Another secret society, the Bavarian Illuminati, was founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830). The group was established as an elite men's club, for the purpose of opposing superstitions and government abuses of power. The group included prominent members from all over Europe, but was short-lived, banned by governments and ceased to be active from about 1785.

Despite not having existed for over 200 years, The Illuminati still feature prominently in conspiracy theories about a secret cabal controlling the world, two centuries later. Part of the reason for their productive afterlife is that the Illuminati were quickly blamed as the group that orchestrated the French Revolution. They then became victims of the conservative backlash against revolutionary ideas. Another reason for continued suspicion of the Illuminati was that there really were some secret groups associated with Freemasons and perhaps Illuminati who promoted occult ideas such as alchemy, kabbalah, hermeticism, and ceremonial magic, such as the Rosicrucians and esoteric Freemasons. Although not representative of mainstream Freemasons, they did attract some members of society's elite, and likewise attracted conspiracy theories about their secret plans, and about the extent of their clandestine organization.

<p>RELS 341 ONLY:</p> 	<p>Barkun, Michael. "New World Order Conspiracies I: The New World Order and the Illuminati." In <i>A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America</i>. Comparative Studies in Religion and Society, idem., 39-64. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.</p>
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A further development occurred in response to the communist Russian Revolution and also in response to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal or state-provided social welfare (which was similar to what occurred in New Zealand under the first Labour Party and its prime minister, Michael J. Savage). In 1958, businessman Michael W. Welch founded the John Birch Society (JBS) to oppose any government policies which he considered opened the way to communism.

But importantly for the development of modern conspiracy theories, the JBS's aims were broader than mere anti-communism. The JBS also opposed internationalist organisations (especially the United Nations), linking them with the Illuminati, and claiming that their true purpose was a takeover of the world and elimination of individual freedoms. These ideas were very influential, and today are voiced by most conspiracy theorists. While the JBS was not primarily motivated by religion (their primary motivation was free-market libertarianism), its ideas would also be adopted widely by Christian apocalypticists (end-times enthusiasts).

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Stewart, Charles J. “The Master Conspiracy of the John Birch Society: From Communism to the New World Order.” <i>Western Journal of Communication</i> 66, no. 4 (2002): 424-47.</p>
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14. Apocalyptic: The Mother of Modern Conspiracy Theories?

Central to contemporary conspiracy theories is the idea of a “master conspiracy” that embraces all the more minor conspiracy theories (Stewart, 2002). The master conspiracy typically involves a secret and evil group controlling history. Conspiracy theorists see themselves as resisting this evil elite group, while at the same time, proclaiming that they will soon implement global control. This plotline should sound familiar to anyone possessing even a passing acquaintance with the apocalyptic worldview in religion. Apocalyptic literature is widespread in the two largest world religions, Christianity and Islam (which account for over 4 billion people), although more popular for some adherents than others, and its popularity ebbs and flows over time. Apocalyptic refers to the schema of events believed to immediately precede the End Times, culminating in the end of the world as we know it. Briefly, apocalyptic schemas predict a time in which evil will increase on earth, a time in which God or his chosen agents will eventually defeat that evil, to be followed by a final judgement of good and evil humans (and angels), and eternal life for the good humans in either a transformed, utopian world or heaven.

The apocalyptic period of increase in evil has a lot in common with the prediction in “master” conspiracy theories of the establishment of a New World Order or future totalitarian rule by some shadowy cabal of elite men (or, perhaps, reptiles). These conspiracy theories are ultimately derived from religious apocalyptic thought.

To complicate matters, Christian books and talks on apocalyptic prophecy about the future since about the 1970s have blended apocalyptic accounts of the End Times with modern conspiracy theories about secret human groups and institutions who want to take over the world. A significant minority of Conservative Evangelical Christians eagerly try to match current events (e.g., countries joining or leaving the European Union, wars in the Middle East) with the apocalyptic passages in the Bible, in an attempt to prove they are coming true according to “the prophetic timeline”. It is primarily for this reason that many Conservative Evangelical Christians in New Zealand, the US, and other countries have found conspiracy theories conducive to their faith. Although conspiracy theories can sometimes replace Satan and the Antichrist with Bill Gates (or George Soros, or Hillary Clinton) and their evil secret cabals, many contemporary Evangelical Christians simply add them all to the mix of rising evil that they expect to occur in these End Times.

Now read:




von Thaden, Robert. "Apocalyptic America: Buying the End Time." In *Apocalypses in Context: Apocalyptic Currents through History*, ed. Kelly J. Murphy and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, 407-30. 436-40. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016.

15. Billy Te Kahika and the New Zealand Public Party

Billy Te Kahika provides a good example of how Christian apocalypticism and modern New World Order conspiracy theories have merged in recent decades. On 20 March 2020, less than a week after NZ prime minister Jacinda Ardern issued the country's initial restrictions on travel and indoor gatherings, Billy Te Kahika posted something unusual on his social media account, a departure from his usual posts. Known, if at all, as a blues guitarist, and son of the more well-known "Māori Hendrix" Billy Te Kahika snr, Te Kahika had typically used his Facebook page to promote gigs and tours, and only rarely showed any interest in politics. But on 20 March, his Facebook post issued a warning about "globalism & people control", naming organizations such as the "Club of Rome, Bilderbergs, Trilateral Commission, Council on Foreign Relations" as mere fronts for a powerful elite who secretly control the world. From there, journalist David Farrier (2020) documented, as he phrased it, Te Kahika's rapid descent down the rabbit-hole, posting often and almost wholly on conspiracy theories. Barely two months after his first conspiracy-theory post on Facebook, Te Kahika formed the New Zealand Public Party "in response to the blatant injustice and tyranny being hurled upon the New Zealand people by the Labour/NZ First/Green government". Having missed the deadline to register his party for the 2020 Election, Te Kahika negotiated a temporary merger with The Advance New Zealand Party, earlier formed by breakaway National MP Jami-Lee Ross. Despite his late entry into the election race, Advance NZ received just over 1% of the popular vote.

At first, commentators seemed confused, in that Te Kahika was propagating conspiracies about Covid-19 and a coming authoritarian world government that are associated firmly with the right in the US. For Tina Ngata (2020), Te Kahika and the Māori among his supporters were being duped, tools of the US alt-right. Other commentators did not grasp what was driving Te Kahika's sudden entry into politics, and suggested that he was mainly in it for the money (Penfold, 2020; Farrier, 2020). Yet as set out in the conference paper by Galbraith (2020), Billy Te Kahika's conspiracy theories are primarily driven by his belief in a coming One-World Government, a belief which is a familiar mixture of pre-millennial dispensationalist biblical interpretation and New World Order conspiracies.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Galbraith, Deane. “Serious study... of the Bible”: Billy Te Kahika, the New Zealand Public Party, Covid-19, and Biblical Conspiracy Theory.” Paper presented at the Aotearoa-New Zealand Association of Biblical Scholars 2020 Annual Meeting, 1 December 2020, Laidlaw College, Christchurch.</p>
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Te Kahika frequently claims a deep insight into both biblical prophecy and the hidden powers behind world events. He believes that he can see things in biblical prophecies and in world events that others cannot. Thus Te Kahika also serves as a useful example of the seductive quality of pursuing (imagined) deeper, hidden knowledge.

16. Urzeit/Endzeit: Atheist Scientists are Recreating Giants with Demonic DNA


The first book in the Bible contains this short and mysterious account of the birth of “Nephilim” resulting from sexual intercourse between “daughters of men” and “the sons of God”. This event purportedly took place in the remote past, before the worldwide Flood which is said to have killed all humans except for Noah and his family who made a big boat (or “ark”) to escape in. The mysterious account is found in Genesis 6:1-4, which reads, “When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose... The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.”

A growing subgroup of Evangelical Christians today promote the idea that secular scientists are attempting to reconstruct the DNA of these giant Nephilim mentioned in Genesis 6.1-4. Like many biblical scholars, they interpret these Nephilim as the hybrid offspring of humans (“daughters of men”) and fallen angels (“sons of God”). But unlike scholarly approaches to the Bible, they think this account is literally true. A loosely connected network of Evangelical Christians propagates the Nephilim conspiracy in a variety of media, including mainstream Christian publishers, independent publishers, websites, videos, podcasts, independent radio shows, church speaking circuits, Evangelical and Pentecostal prophecy conferences, and their own conferences such as the annual *True Legends* conference. Key figures in the movement include Lynn A. Mazulli, Steve Quayle, Tim Alberino, Thomas Horn, and Gary Stearman.

The core contention of the Nephilim resistance movement is that the reconstruction of Nephilim DNA will corrupt human genes in a way that removes the possibility of salvation, and which will also create the superhuman being known as the Antichrist. Members of the Nephilim resistance support their contentions with esoteric analyses of biblical and Enochic literature and purportedly suppressed archaeological evidence of ancient giants. All of this is supported with references to a ream of other conspiracy theories about the nefarious secret

plans of government. While the Nephilim resistance considers that the genetic corruption of humanity is inevitable, its primary goal in publicizing and opposing the recreation of the Nephilim is to open the eyes of others to their discoveries.


The reading deals with an earlier variant of this conspiracy theory, centred on the apocalyptic fears about the year 2012.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Thomas, Paul. "Meme Splicing Genesis 6:1-4 and the Apocalypse of 2012." <i>Journal of Religion and Popular Culture</i> 24, no. 2 (2012): 310-25.</p>
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PART D: DEMONIZATION

17. Demonization, Heresy & Antisemitism

In this final part, we take a look at another key component of modern conspiracies: the creation of a clear dichotomy between, on one hand, the conspiring and perfidious forces of evil and, on the other hand, those heroes (the conspiracy theorists themselves) who will expose their evil plans. Accordingly, out-grouping and scapegoating is central to the construction of conspiracy theories. It both bolsters in-group identity and demonizes those considered not part of the group.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>van Prooijen, Jan-Willem. "The Social Roots of Conspiracy Theories." In <i>The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories</i>, idem., 51-60. <i>The Psychology of Everything</i>. London: Routledge, 2018.</p>
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RELS 341 ONLY:



Donskis, Leonidas. "The Conspiracy Theory, Demonization of the Other." *Innovation* 11, no. 3 (1998): 349-60.

As we saw in an earlier lecture, scapegoating others can either be aimed at people clearly outside the community (e.g., Russian communists during the Cold War), or it can be aimed at those excluded from the community (e.g., citizens accused of being communists during McCarthyism). The origin of this two-fold enemy lies in the two-fold historical Christian persecution of Jews (outsiders vis-à-vis the Christian community) and heretics (who lived inside the community, but were excluded because the majority thought they were not truly Christian, due to their having different beliefs, deemed "unorthodox").

Although most Jews lived in Europe among Christians and Muslims for more than 1000 years, they were secluded to Jewish quarters and faced many restrictions. Jews were also subject to many conspiracy theories, including the "blood-libel", host desecration, financial schemes, and being the cause of the Black Plague. In addition, Jews were accused of being "in league with the Devil", that is, in a secret pact with Satan. These antisemitic conspiracy theories never seem to go away. They get continually recycled and today form part of many master conspiracy theories.

Now read:




Jovan Byford, "The Myth of the Jewish Conspiracy." In *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*, idem., 47-58. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

18. Holocaust denial

From 1940 to 1945, the worldwide Jewish population fell from 18 million to 12 million. The German Nazi regime systematically killed one-third of all Jews by firing squads, work camps, starvation, and finally by gas chambers.

Holocaust deniers either deny that there was any Nazi plan to kill Jews in Europe, or claim that there was such a plan but the numbers were much lower than 6 million. In both cases, Holocaust deniers blame the victims of the Holocaust themselves, Jews, for exaggerating or inventing the Holocaust. Most Holocaust deniers are motivated by antisemitism (hatred or racist prejudice against Jews), although some are motivated by the belief that the Holocaust was exaggerated in order to cause sympathy for the establishment of the modern State of Israel.

Like many conspiracy theorists, Holocaust deniers sift tendentiously through the evidence, looking for counter-arguments to raise against the actuality or extent of the Holocaust. Deniers often call for debate and claim they just want to discuss things rationally. Like we saw for Flat-earthers, Holocaust denial presents this façade of dispassionate, scientific interest.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Shermer, Michael and Alex Grobman. “Why They Say the Holocaust Never Happened: The Ideological Agenda.” In <i>Denying History: Who says the Holocaust never happened and why do they say it?</i> idem., 80-97, 291-93. University of California Press, 2002.</p>
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19. QAnon: Saving the Children

On 28 October 2017, an anonymous user of the /pol/ section of far-right imageboard 4chan informed other users that Hillary Clinton’s passport was to be flagged, to prevent her fleeing the country, due to plans for her imminent arrest. The anonymous user later became known as “Q Clearance Patriot”, then shortened to Q. The “Q Clearance” is the highest level of clearance for government officials, and it was inferred that Q was close to then-President Trump. Q eventually sent out thousands of posts on 4chan and other forums, which became known to followers as “Q drops”.

The essence of Q’s conspiracy theory was that Trump was in a battle with a vast network of liberal elite who belong to a child-eating or blood-drinking satanic paedophile ring. These liberal elites would soon be rounded up and arrested, in an event dubbed by QAnon followers as “the Storm” or the “Great Awakening”—terms familiar from apocalyptic movements. QAnon followers also believe that every public speech or pronouncement from Trump contains secret messages, to be decoded, and that these encoded messages provide updates on the progress of his war against blood-sucking paedophile Hollywood stars and Democrats.

As odd as this might sound, before the 2020 Presidential Election, 50% of Republican voters believed that elite Democrats were involved in sex-trafficking rings. QAnon is not exclusively American, however, with Q signs seen at protests against Covid-19 restrictions across the world, including in New Zealand. QAnon followers look forward to liberation from the satanist paedophile elite, via a military coup, which will, they believe, inaugurate a utopia on earth.


From February 2020, the QAnon movement spawned a QAnon church operating out of the Omega Kingdom Ministry (OKM), a Pentecostal church organisation. OKM’s church services mixed Bible interpretation with Q drop interpretation. Thus, the QAnon belief that only Trump can defeat the “Deep State” was married to Christian apocalyptic belief that Trump stands in the way of the New World Order which expected to provide the institutional framework for supporting the coming Antichrist. With QAnon, conspiracy theory and religion fade into each other.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Vrzal, Miroslav. “QAnon as a Variation of a Satanic Conspiracy Theory: An Overview.” <i>Theory and Practice in English Studies</i> 9, no. 1–2 (2020): 45-66.</p> <p>Read online: Lavin, Talia. “QAnon, Blood Libel, and the Satanic Panic.” <i>The New Republic</i>. 30 September 2020. https://newrepublic.com/article/159529/qanon-blood-libel-satanic-panic</p>
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20. Satanic Panics


The QAnon conspiracy is only one in a long chain of conspiracies alleging satanic child abuse. The immediate precedent was the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theory. Pizzagate conspiracy theorists claimed that hacked emails from Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager, John Podesta, contained coded messages connecting high-ranking Democrats with a pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong, which they claimed was a front for a child sex-ring. On 4 December 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch (no relation to the founder of the John Birch Society) took his AR-15 rifle to the restaurant and demanded to see the basement where children were hidden. None were found.

The Pizzagate conspiracy theory in turn recycles the “Satanic Panic” conspiracy theories of the 1980s-1990s, which originated in the US, but were also popular in countries like the UK and South Africa. The Satanic Panic conspiracies targeted day-care workers and various rock music bands who had satanic imagery in their music.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Jenkins, Philip. “Satanic Ritual Abuse.” In <i>The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements</i>, ed. James R. Lewis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.</p>
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Yet accusations of satanic child abuse go back much further, as a way of scapegoating society’s Other. The blood libel accusation by Christians against Jews is one such example. In addition, in the early days of Christianity, the Romans spread the conspiracy theory that Christian church services involved cannibalism and drinking blood (perhaps a misrepresentation of the actual Christian practice of the Eucharist). In the nineteenth century, accusations of child sex conspiracies against Catholics in the majority-Protestant US were common, with some published in sensational books and pamphlets. The Salem Witch Trials of the 1690s likewise involved the testimony of children, who accused older women of being witches and of committing sexual and other forms of abuse. This pattern across many times and cultures

suggests that recurring social anxieties underlie such accusations about one's enemies. Psychologist Jim Kline (2017), for example, identifies the changing roles of women and the family in modernity as the root cause of the 1980s-90s Satanic Panics.

<p>RELS 341 ONLY:</p> 	<p>Kline, Jim. "C. G. Jung and Norman Cohn Explain Pizzagate: The Archetypal Dimension of a Conspiracy Theory." <i>Psychological Perspectives</i> 60, no. 2 (2017): 186-95.</p>
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21. White Genocide and the Great Replacement conspiracy (1)

In many ways, the White Genocide and Great Replacement conspiracy theories are dependent on much older conspiracies about immigrants who were distrusted and misunderstood by the dominant culture. At present, these conspiracies are centred on Muslims, who have been widely caricatured as a threat to the Western way of life. Anti-Muslim sentiment (or "Islamophobia") has become especially common since the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, despite the condemnation of those attacks by the vast majority of Muslim authorities, and despite the fact that most Muslims today promote peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims in the absence of direct aggression by non-Muslims. Yet the rising power of oil-rich Middle East countries since the mid-20th century, the migration of workers to Europe after WWII to assist in the rebuilding of Europe, together with widespread official promotion of multiculturalism have combined to create a backlash against Muslims in Western countries. This reactionary response to Muslim populations has even spread to places such as India and China, where they are combined with repressive anti-Muslim laws.

The term *Great Replacement* originated as the title of a book by Renaud Camus (French: *Le Grand Remplacement*) that promotes the far-right conspiracy theory about a global elite conspiring with white Europeans to replace the white population of Europe with non-whites, especially with immigrants from the Muslim populations in the Middle East and Africa. The phrase has been adopted by the far-right, as seen in the Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally in 2017, where far-right protestors carrying tiki-torches chanted, "You will not replace us" and "Jews will not replace us." The reference to "global elite" is a euphemism especially for Jewish bankers, demonstrating that antisemitic tropes have been transferred to Islamophobic ones. The related "white genocide" conspiracy also typically blames Jews for promoting high birth-rates for non-whites and low birth-rates for white Europeans, as well as condemning intermarriage by whites with non-whites, so as to cause the extinction of the "white race".

The Great Replacement conspiracy theory was the primary motivation for the 2011 Norway terrorist attacks by Anders Breivik, which killed 77 people. In a manifesto entitled *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, he blamed Islam, feminism, cultural Marxists, and multiculturalism for the "cultural genocide" he believed was occurring in Europe. Breivik


believed the so-called Eurabia conspiracy theory, a variant of the other two conspiracy theories, which blamed a secret plot by European elites, Jews, and Muslims to turn Europe into an Islamic society. Breivik signed his manifesto “AB Justiciar Knight Commander, cell 8 Knights Templar Europe”, indicating his fantasy of being a modern-day Crusader fighting Muslims.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Fekete, Liz. “The Muslim Conspiracy Theory and the Oslo Massacre.” <i>Race and Class</i> 53, no. 3 (2012): 30-47.</p>
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<p>RELS 341 ONLY:</p> 	<p>Bergmann, Eirikur. “The Eurabia Doctrine.” In <i>Conspiracy and Populism: The Politics of Misinformation</i>, idem., 123-49. Palgrave, 2018.</p>
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22. White Genocide and the Great Replacement conspiracy (2)


On Friday 15 March 2019, a 28-year-old white Australian terrorist attacked two mosques in Christchurch, Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre. He killed 51 people and wounded 40 more, in what was the worst mass shooting in New Zealand. He was motivated also by the White Genocide and Great Replacement conspiracies. As was the case for Breivik, whom he credits as an inspiration, the Christchurch terrorist viewed white genocide as the result of the combination of declining birth rates among white Europeans combined with non-white immigration.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>A. Dirk Moses. “‘White Genocide’ and the Ethics of Public Analysis.” <i>Journal of Genocide Research</i> 21, no. 2 (2019): 201-13.</p>
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23. Fake News! The Legacy of Trumpism


In 1992, Bill Clinton expressed his intention to find out, if he were to be elected President, whether aliens had visited Earth, and whether this was being covered up by the government. In 2014, Clinton admitted on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* that he had asked about alien visitations during his Presidency (1992-2000), including having staff check if aliens were being kept in Area 51. During her run for US President in 2016, Hillary Clinton also promised to find out if the government was involved in an alien cover-up if she were elected President. However, she never got the opportunity.

The Clintons' fascination with alien cover-up conspiracies has nothing on the conspiracy theories which Donald Trump promoted during his (first?) term as US President. Daniel Hellinger compiled a list of the more prominent conspiracy theories after his first 18 months.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Hellinger, Daniel C. "Trumpian Conspiracy Theories." In <i>Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in the Age of Trump</i>, idem., 26-30. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.</p>
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By the end of his term as President, Trump had also promoted the conspiracy theory that the 2020 Election had been rigged, which culminated in a group of his most ardent supporters, including a number of QAnon followers, storming the Capitol in insurrection on 6 January 2021. Trump also promoted various Covid-19 conspiracy theories, including the theory that the virus was first developed in a laboratory in Wuhan, China, and that the numbers of infections in the US had been inflated.


Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum argue that Trump's wilful disregard for providing proof of the conspiracies he promoted marks a new stage in conspiracy theory ideation. The "new conspiracism", as they call it, dispenses with what is the usual preoccupation of conspiracy theorists, that of proving the conspiracy theory, often on the basis of pointing out minor inconsistencies or gaps in the official account ("errant data"). Instead, Trump promotes "conspiracy *without* the theory". Bare accusations about liberal rivals, without evidence, is enough to gain a rapid social media impact—and for the mud to stick. The fact that the conspiracy can be alleged without even bothering with evidence speaks again to the deep divide in the culture wars.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum. "Conspiracy without the Theory." In <i>A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy</i>, idem., 19-41, 179-82. Princeton University Press, 2019.</p>
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24. Is Social Media to blame?


Although the prevalence of conspiracy theories today is often blamed on social media, the studies of the effects of social media on conspiracy theory ideation do not support a straightforward relationship between the two. Social media does have certain documented effects. Social media speeds up the spread of conspiracy theories. Social media also increases the polarization of news sources, limiting exposure to contrary views and, conversely, confirming and reinforcing one's existing worldview due to the repetition of in-group views. Increased exposure positively correlates with increased receptivity to conspiracy theories (Robertson, 2015). Yet conspiracy theories tend to spread within like-minded communities who are already sympathetic to them, not spreading easily to outsiders.

Also important for the spread and reinforcement of conspiracy theories is the prevalence of conspiracy theories in film and on television. The plotline of hundreds of films and television series rests on the exposure of a conspiracy by a persistent and virtuous underdog. Notable examples include *Total Recall* (1990), *The Net* (1995), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), *Men in Black* (1997), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *Arlington Road* (1999), *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), *Homeland* (2011-2015), and *Utopia* (2020). In addition, the 1991 film *JFK* and the 1993-2002 (plus 2016-2018) television series *The X-Files* were both of seminal importance in mainstreaming conspiracy theory culture.

<p>Now read:</p> 	<p>Stano, Simona. "The Internet and the Spread of Conspiracy Content." In <i>Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories</i>, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 483-93. Routledge, 2020.</p>
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25. Concluding lecture: Out of the rabbit hole

In the final lecture, there will be a summary of the course, and consideration of how one might get out of the rabbit hole.

<p>:</p> 	<p>No readings</p>
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