

Conspirituality Reconsidered:  
How surprising and how new is the confluence of spirituality and  
conspiracy theory?

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**Abstract**

Those who have followed the development of online new religiosity over the past decade will not have failed to notice that conspiracy theories and “New Age” ideas are thriving together. But how new and how surprising is the phenomenon of “conspirituality”? In the present article, we challenge the thesis put forward by Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) that a confluence of spirituality and conspiracism has emerged in the past two decades as a form of New Age theodicy. Instead, we argue on theoretical grounds that conspirituality can be viewed as a predictable result of structural elements in the cultic milieu, and on historical grounds that its roots stretch deep into the history of Western esotericism. Together, these two considerations allow us not only to suggest that conspirituality is old and predictable, but also to identify a large potential for further research to contribute to the study of conspiracy culture and to enable a new line of comparative research in religious studies.

**Key words:** conspirituality; cultic milieu; conspiracy theories; rejected knowledge; esotericism.

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### Introduction

Charlotte Ward and David Voas have proposed the appealing term “conspirituality” for picking out an apparently novel and surprising phenomenon: the merging of alternative spirituality with conspiracy theories (Ward and Voas). The term has intuitive appeal, notable in its media reception, and it has also generated some new research. Most notably, David Robertson connects the emergence of conspirituality with the need for theodicy in New Age millennialism following disappointments after the 1987 “Harmonic Convergence” event, thus appearing to support the novelty of the phenomenon by recourse to a specific theological development in the recent history of religion (Robertson; cf. Melton, “Beyond Millennialism”). We agree that conspirituality is a potentially useful analytic category; however, we challenge two of the key points in its current conceptualization: that conspirituality is a *novel* phenomenon, and that it is a particularly *surprising* one. Instead of denoting a surprising development in recent religious history, we suggest that conspirituality is better conceptualized as a predictable outcome of structurally central processes in the cultic milieu (Campbell; Barkun), the origins of which are intertwined with the history of Western esotericism.<sup>1</sup> The illusion that conspirituality is a surprising phenomenon thus stems from a too casual engagement with relevant explanatory contexts, and a problematic use of prototype definitions of “New Age” and “conspiracy theory”.

In the first part of the article we outline the theoretical problems we see with the concept of conspиритuality, and suggest ways to remedy them. While this makes plausible our claim that there is nothing unexpected or exceptional about conspиритuality, the second part of our argument seeks to demonstrate that there is nothing novel about it either. The history of esotericism and modern occultism gives access to a wealth of close negotiations of religious practice, identity politics, esoteric knowledge, and theories about conspiracies both sinister and benign. We argue that this historical context is an overlooked dimension not only for understanding conspиритuality, but for the formation of Western conspiracist narratives more broadly.

### **1. Surprising Bedfellows? The Explanatory Contexts of Conspиритuality**

Contemporary “conspиритuality” has been defined as a “hybrid system of belief”, a “hybrid worldview” and a “politico-spiritual philosophy”. The hybridity manifests in conspиритuality’s two core “convictions”, that “a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order”, and that “[h]umanity is undergoing a “paradigm shift” in consciousness”. Conspiracy theory presents a problem in the form of a worldly evil to be overcome, while “New Age spirituality” provides the soteriological solution: to act in accordance with an awakened “new paradigm worldview” and usher in a global change in consciousness (Ward and Voas 104). Proponents of this conspиритual worldview include David Wilcock, Stephen Greer, and the Project Camelot team, but the prototypical exponent that the authors have in mind is clearly David Icke (Ward and Voas 109-111; cf. Robertson). Icke’s prototypical status is evident from the

central role he and people inspired by him play in the section illustrating “key themes” in conspiracist discourse (Ward and Voas 112-113).

The combination of two cultural elements, presumably culled from distinct social milieus with separate and antithetical ideological goals, makes conspiratorism a particularly surprising phenomenon, according to Ward and Voas. While conspiracist milieus are predominantly male, politically right-wing, concerned with current affairs, and pessimistic in their outlook on the world, New Age is described as predominantly female, politically liberal, concerned with spiritual development, health and wellbeing, and optimistic in its outlook on the world (Ward and Voas 105-108). Couched in these conjoined demographical and ideological terms, a merger of the two categories does indeed seem surprising. However, to construct “New Age” and “conspiracy theory” in these terms is deeply problematic. We suggest that the apparently surprising character of conspiratorism is due to a problematic confusion of sociological and ideological features. The phenomenon appears much less surprising when re-embedded in the already well-developed conceptual framework of the “cultic milieu” (Campbell; Barkun) and “occulture” (Partridge, *Re-Enchantment*).

### **On the Conceptual Problems with “New Age” and “Conspiracy Theory”**

The conceptual problems with defining New Age are well known (e.g. Gilhus and Sutcliffe). For a short while it was a native term identifiable as an identity marker on the emic level. In the scholarly literature, it has been used to distinguish a certain *milieu*, a form of millennialist *worldview*, a family of non-institutionalized, loosely related new religious ideas and practices, a manifestation of “cognitively optimal” folk religion (Hammer, “Cognitively

optimal”), or any combination of the above. In short there are a number of social, doctrinal, and historical dimensions by which one could delineate “New Age” as an analytical type. This conceptual complexity means that the term must be used with care and deliberation. Ward and Voas appear to use it in at least two different senses, and to *shift between* these at crucial points in their argument. When defining conspirituality, the core focus is on the millennialist aspect of a paradigm shift and a coming awakened new age. If we follow Hanegraaff’s useful distinction, this is New Age in the “strict sense”. It is not to be confused with New Age in the *broad* sense, which Hanegraaff takes to denote the entire cultic milieu in a certain historical phase of development when it had become “aware of itself” and pursued a more unified agenda of “culture criticism” (Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*). However, when discussing the *social* profile of New Age as a milieu, Ward and Voas shift from their *sensu stricto* identification of New Age millennialism to describing the “movement” *sensu lato*: following Melton’s loose ostensive definition, New Age is taken to include the whole gamut of channeling, belief in energies, non-material realities, personal transformation, healing, meditation and psychic powers (Melton, *Encyclopedic Handbook*; Ward and Voas 105). It is on this basis that demographic factors such as gender and political orientation are introduced. This inference is problematic on methodological grounds, because *sensu stricto* millennialist New Agers and *sensu lato* “spiritual supermarket”/holistic milieu New Agers may not be the same people – at best, the former is a limited subset of the latter. Establishing a demographic profile from studies on New Age in the broad sense when focusing specifically on doctrinal content associated with the stricter sense is therefore a disingenuous move.

A similar point can be made with regard to the conspiracist elements. The one feature of conspiracism used to construct conspirituality is a “belief that” secret, powerful, malicious groups are in control of developments on the global stage. But in order to demonstrate the novelty and surprise of these ideas merging with New Age millennialism, Ward and Voas once more turn to social features that are typical of those groups and milieus that appear to have been overrepresented on the “belief in conspiracies” statistics in the United States for the past half decade. Following the Hofstadter school’s bias towards studying the “paranoid style” of the American right, the prototypical conspiracy believer (for Ward and Voas) is a right-wing, male militia leader and survivalist, armed and ready to fight the federal Antichrist. There is, however, a case to be made that the connection between conspiracism and right-wing groups is the result of a historically contingent social and discursive formation rather than an intrinsic aspect of “belief in conspiracies”. While conspiracism certainly fills important ideological functions in the militia movement, conspiracy theories are found in a number of different ideological constellations, on the left as well as the right (e.g. Berlet). The ideological goals to which articulated conspiracy theories are deployed in fact appear to vary significantly with changing political realities in the surrounding society (Uscinski et.al.). The complexity is also born out on the level of demographics: recent studies looking (among other things) at the gender distribution of “belief in” specific conspiracy narratives have found them to be very similar, with, if anything, a slight overrepresentation of women rather than men<sup>2</sup> – contradicting Ward and Voas’ prototype.

What is at stake here is a confusion of three different levels of explanation: the *disposition for* conspiratorial thinking (which appears to be

broadly distributed; e.g. Uscinski & Parent 5-6; Raab et.al.), the concrete *articulation of* conspiratorial narratives in specific political and ideological milieus, and the different social, political, and ideological profile of those milieus where conspiratorial ideas are articulated and spread. If the observation had been that self-defining New Agers are taking to arms and joining the militia (a merger on the social group level), or that the militia now arranges workshops in mindfulness, astrology, and consciousness expansion among their strategies to halt the NWO, this would, arguably, constitute a genuine surprise. But that is not what “conspirituality” was used to signify. Rather, Ward and Voas hold that *ideas* which have been associated with these distinct milieus are currently being blended and promoted by spokespersons in a “web movement with diffuse leadership and constantly shifting areas of interest” (Ward and Voas 104). This phenomenon, of conspiratorial representations being articulated in different social sites and travelling across sites, is much less surprising, and it also has deeper historical antecedents, as we shall soon see.

### **Conspirituality and the Structural Elements of the Cultic Milieu**

If our goal is to understand the background of the current, conspiracy-prone scene within alternative spirituality, we should reconfigure the terms and embed them in a theoretical context that make the apparently surprising less so. Luckily, there is no dearth of enlightening discussions.<sup>3</sup>

With reference to Michael Barkun’s important work on millennialism and conspiracy theory, Ward and Voas acknowledge the existence of doctrinal “principles” that help account for the merger, and note a “kinship with conspiracy theory” among New Agers interested in “political change” (105).

These leads should be taken more seriously. As noted already, the New Age *sensu lato* (Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion* 98) can be seen as a phase in the development within a broader historical set of discourses and practices related to “the cultic milieu” (Campbell). The cultic milieu was itself construed in the tradition of Ernst Troeltsch’s notion of “mystical religion” (Troeltsch; cf. Partridge *Re-Enchantment* 1: 19-21). Its primary orientation is toward personal, “mystical” experience, and thus doctrinal elements and organizational structure are loose and in flux (Campbell). Following Campbell, this wider milieu constitutes a supportive environment from which new, mostly short-lived organizations and movements continually sprout. “Mysticism” in Troeltsch’s sense is but one of its key elements; the milieu is also deeply (and perhaps primarily, as Campbell suggests) involved with what James Webb (*Flight*) called “rejected knowledge”. The cultic milieu is flooded with “all deviant belief systems” (Campbell 122) and their attendant practices. Moreover, the communication channels within the milieu tend to be as open and fluid as the content that flows through them. The resulting lack of an overarching institutionalized orthodoxy enables individuals to “travel rapidly through a variety of movements and beliefs” (123), thus bridging with ease what may appear on the surface as distinct discourses and practices. Political, spiritual, and (pseudo)scientific discourses all have a home here, and they easily mix. Joined by a common opposition to “Establishment” discourses rather than by positively shared doctrinal content, conspiracy theory affords a common language binding the discourses together.

Christopher Partridge summarizes the social dimension of the cultic milieu as “a complex mixture of diffuse spirituality, amorphous networks, and



structured groups and organizations” (Partridge, *Re-Enchantment* 1: 66).

Partridge also supplies valuable criticism and refinement of Campbell’s thesis with his concept of “occulture”. The “mélange of beliefs, practices, traditions and organizations” (67) covered by Campbell constitute, he argues, a conglomerate of subcultures and their shared reservoir of ideas and practices, “those often *hidden, rejected, and oppositional* beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism” and so forth (68).

Occulture is, moreover, a site of cultural experimentation and entrepreneurship as well as of creative consumption, with cultural representations flowing both into and out of popular culture. Particularly over the last few decades, this interplay between the cultic milieu and popular culture has facilitated an increasing mainstreaming leading to the *ordinariness* of occulture (Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary”<sup>4</sup>). This dynamic also holds for what Partridge calls *dark* occulture: occultural demonologies that includes sinister conspiracy theories and catastrophic millennialist visions. On this view, the particular web movement that Ward and Voas seek to characterize in terms of “conspirituality” may have more to do with the ongoing process of *mainstreaming* dark occulture through e.g. movies, YouTube, social media, music videos, TV-series, and computer games, than with the conjoining of conspiracist elements with spirituality as such. It is not so much the confluence of alternative spirituality and conspiracy theory that is novel as the particular modes in which this “conspirituality” is expressed.

Similarly to Partridge, but with a specific focus on the political and the conspiratorial, Michael Barkun has argued for extending “the cultic milieu to encompass a broader range of phenomena” (Barkun 26) beyond “religion”: “the

very logic of the concept of the cultic milieu suggests that under certain circumstances a person's religion becomes indistinguishable from political ideology and the occult" (26). These circumstances are clearly expressed in the embrace of what Barkun, generalizing Webb's concept of "rejected knowledge", calls "stigmatized knowledge claims": "claims to truth that the claimant regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error" (26).

Barkun differentiates several types of stigmatized knowledge, but what he calls "suppressed knowledge" takes precedence:

The suppressed knowledge category tends to absorb the others, because believers assume that when their own ideas about knowledge conflict with some orthodoxy, the forces of orthodoxy will necessarily try to perpetuate error out of self-interest or some other evil motive. The consequence is to attribute all forms of knowledge stigmatization to the machinations of a conspiracy. (27)

Conspiracy thinking is thus *built into* stigmatized knowledge claims as a standard secondary elaboration when faced with lack of acceptance or outright opposition from the "center" of orthodoxy (already by definition viewed as oppressive). Given that "Occulture" is rife with political, economic, and religious visions (e.g. free energy, "natural" cures for all illnesses, spiritual awakening leading to an economic, moral and spiritual Utopia) in opposition to authorized knowledge, conspiracy theory will always be at hand to "explain why all stigmatized knowledge claims have been marginalized" (27).

Barkun's term for the scene where this is acted out is "improvisational millennialism" (18-23). It underlines the *millennialist* aspect of conspiracy culture, its fervent hopes and fears of immediate threats, with the heightened states of "semiotic arousal" and the strategies for dealing with cognitive dissonance in the aftermath of disappointments (e.g. Landes 52-59). It also highlights the fluidity of "ideology", the borrowing from any source seen as relevant for the occasion, resulting in idiosyncratic combinations of elements from different religious and political traditions. Barkun also lays bare the historical conditions under which improvisational millennialism has developed, emphasizing its tendency to draw on occultural ideas and recruit a set of basic cognitive strategies.

In summarizing, then, previous research and theorizing in the relevant field has supplied us with empirical insight into "new age religion" that 1) already is involved in oppositional discourses and practices, 2) already includes practical demonologies, 3) already holds negative attitudes towards authorities, and 4) where utopian visions may trigger theodicy in the face of failure and authorities who will not authorize their stigmatized knowledge claims. Moreover, these sociological considerations of the shared cultural environment of conspiracism and "alternative spirituality" is congruent with several lines of psychological findings as well: research into personality predictors for both "New Age belief" and conspiratorial ideation tend to point towards the same cluster of usual suspects, such as schizotypy, fantasy proneness, and thin boundaries (e.g. Farias and Granqvist; Saucier and Skrzypinska; Darwin et al.). While a high score on schizotypy will by definition include paranormal beliefs, other studies find that reporting "paranormal experiences" can itself be a

predictor of conspiratorial ideation (Swami et al., “Alien Psychology”). It is also well established that belief in one conspiracy theory predicts belief in *other* conspiracy theories (e.g. Bruder et al.; Swami et al., “Conspiracist ideation”), and that a recognizable cognitive style appears to sustain such clustering (e.g. Lewandowsky et al.). When Ward and Voas (104) additionally use Barkun’s three defining traits of conspiracy theories – nothing happens by accident, nothing is what it seems, and everything is connected – as the baseline of the “holistic” thinking that “New Age” and “conspiracy theory” have in common, there ought really be no surprise at the confluence of conspiracy theories and spiritual agendas. As we shall now continue to argue, it is all the less surprising for being an old, well-established phenomenon of some importance.

## **2. Esotericism as Historical Context for Conspiritoriality**

Conspiritoriality has been construed as a predominantly Internet based phenomenon. While Ward and Voas make casual reference to “offline precursors” in the 1960s- and 1970s counterculture,<sup>5</sup> the only precursor explicitly mentioned is the *NEXUS Magazine* (founded 1987) – which we view as an important node in the dissemination networks of the cultic milieu. Rather than seeing the conspiracist items in *NEXUS* as a precursor to a phenomenon that later became much more prevalent, however, the theoretical discussion above allows us to see conspiritoriality as emerging from structural elements of the cultic milieu itself. While Campbell already hinted to this when noting that the unity of the cultic milieu is found not in its substantial content but in its shared suspicion of “orthodoxies” – whether religious, scientific, or political – both Campbell and Barkun limit their focus to the cultic “underground” of the late

twentieth century. We suggest that the dynamics of the cultic milieu have been in operation much longer, particularly as part of “esotericism”. In the present section we argue that Western esotericism is a crucial historical context for conspiratoriality. The relevance of esotericism is of a double nature. First, the historical processes that produced the very emergence of “esotericism” as a cultural category<sup>6</sup> are also interlinked with the articulation of key conspiracist narratives (cf. Dyrendal and Aspren). In this sense, conspiracism and esotericism are joined at the hip. Secondly, and in more proximate history, esotericism has been a hotbed for conspiracy theorizing, and its attendant publications and networks central vehicles for the transmission of conspiracist motifs. There is a historical continuity between the occultist milieus of the nineteenth century and the cultic milieu of the second half of the twentieth, which spurred the theorizing of Campbell, Barkun, Partridge and others. We will treat each of these two points in turn, with emphasis on the latter.

### **Esotericism as a Formative Context for Conspiracist Narratives**

Esotericism is by now generally recognized as one, important historical factor in the development of Western “alternative spirituality” (Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*; Aspren and Granholm, *Contemporary Esotericism*). Seeing that “esotericism” is certainly not “a tradition”, but rather a contentious historical category that covers very diverse and complex cultural developments (see e.g. Bergunder), this is a statement that must be read with care. There does, however, seem to be a system to the madness, and it is in reference to this system that we make the first of our claims. In his recent work, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (*Esotericism*) has provided a genealogy of “esotericism” as a

historiographic category, tracing its origins through consecutive episodes of identity politics in European intellectual history. At the core of these processes is the creation of “ancient wisdom narratives” in late antiquity, which later crystallized in the Christian neoplatonism of the Renaissance. In what has been called a “Platonic Orientalism”,<sup>7</sup> neoplatonists tended to trace the origin of “True Wisdom” back to “ancient sages” such as Zoroaster, Orpheus, or Hermes Trismegistus. This strategy later permitted Renaissance philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Lodovico Lazzarelli and others to harmonize Platonizing philosophy and attendant practices of theurgy with a Christian narrative by stressing the eternal, perennial wisdom underlying the true faith. It was, however, always an enterprise fraught with danger of being deemed heresy. This is precisely what happened during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation: the ancient sages and their Christian-neoplatonist spokesmen were now cast as demonically inspired pagan infiltrators, exerting a corrupting influence on the Christian religion from within (Hanegraaff, *Esotericism* 90-100). The genealogy of pristine wisdom became a genealogy of evil and corruption. With the onset of the Enlightenment, these inverted ancient wisdom narratives were disembedded from their theological context and cast instead in terms of bad philosophy and erroneous science: the Renaissance “history of truth” became the Enlightenment’s “history of error”; the ancient sages became ancient fools (130-136; cf. Aspren & Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms” 34-35). The upshot of Hanegraaff’s argument, then, is that the stigmatization of knowledge associated with the perceived corrupting influence of pagans and the *Urdummheit* of the ancients carved out the cultural space which is now referred to as “Western esotericism”: the great heresiological

works of theologians such as Jacob Thomasius and Ehregott Daniel Colberg, and later the Enlightenment encyclopedias of folly, cover precisely the sort of “authorities” and currents that the self-defined occultists of the nineteenth century would come to identify with, and that scholars of esotericism would now take as belonging to the “related currents” that they study. In the emerging occultist movement, the sages became once more the sources of “tradition”, but a sort of tradition that was now already cast as oppositional, underground, and even dangerous. “Ancient wisdom” was remade in modernity as “rejected knowledge”. Knowledge previously considered merely lost was now deemed suppressed. Thus, a central cluster of tropes and claims that belong to Barkun’s “stigmatized knowledge” have their historical origin in the currents of “esotericism”.

The dynamics of rejected knowledge that thus came into play has allowed self-defining occultists to understand themselves as standing in opposition to an Establishment working against the true, liberating wisdom of the ancients (cf. Webb, *Flight*). Following the logic of stigmatized knowledge, the workings of this Establishment – whether deemed to be the church, the state, or emerging scientific institutions – could easily be cast in conspiratorial terms. But it also allowed spokespersons who did *not* self-identify with the world of occult rejected knowledge to take over the inverted wisdom narratives of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and thus, as we shall soon see, to view the occultists as internal enemies, working to corrupt the true faith, upset public morals, and spread false knowledge through secret societies and clandestine networks. This interlocked dynamic of occultist self-understandings and a public stigma on occultism has been exceptionally productive in generating conspiracist

motifs. The increasingly common exposés of esoteric initiatory societies that saw themselves as guardians of primordial wisdom (see Roberts) were easily accommodated to this script and indeed seemed to provide evidence for its conspiratorial claims. Even more effective, though, was the emergence of what we might call *occultist apostasy*: lapsed members of occult orders and organizations who were able to embody the very inversion of occultist self-understandings into conspiracist narratives of secret groups possessing arcane knowledge, occult powers, and dangerously transgressive schemes. As we show later, occultist apostates have been incredibly influential in providing narratives that connect a spiritual struggle with secret plots of global political significance.

### **Conspiracism and Conspirativity in Occultist Milieus**

The occultist press of the nineteenth century exhibits many of the same traits as the cultic milieu of the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the cultic milieu, which has been associated with the post-war “counterculture”, literary scholar Mark Morrison argues that the occult press constituted a “counter-public sphere” (Morrison). Following our argument that the structural dynamics of the cultic milieu tends to generate conspirativity, and insofar as the occult press may be seen as an earlier historical phase of the cultic milieu, we should expect conspiratorial elements to be abundant in this earlier dataset as well. And indeed, modern esoteric currents, from Anthroposophy and Theosophy to Martinism and Traditionalism, are no strangers to conspiracism (cf. Introvigne). Conspiracy claims about vivisectionism, the medical profession, scientists, the Jesuits, the Jews and rivaling secret brotherhoods all circulated in nineteenth century occult milieus and continued into the twentieth. In fact, modern versions of anti-Semitic



conspiracy theories not only emerged around the same time as the nineteenth century occult revival in France – they were sometimes formulated by and disseminated through the very same networks, responding, as James Webb has argued, to the same social and cultural concerns (Webb *Occult Establishment* 214-215). The case of Eduard Drumont (1844–1917) is instructive: author of *La France juive* (1888) and founder of the Antisemitic League of France, the godfather of French anti-Semitic conspiracy theory was also a practitioner of palmistry and occult herbalism who was firmly embedded in the occult networks of the time (see Silverman). There were also links between Drumont’s nationalist newspaper, *Libre Parole*, and the French occult press. Drumont’s finance editor, Gaston Méry (1866–1909), was the editor in chief of the occult periodical *Echo du Merveilleux* (1897–1914), to which Drumont contributed several articles (see Webb, *Occult Establishment* 215-216; cf. Silverman). The discourse developing around these publishing outlets is not simply a locus for “hard” political conspiracy theory, but mirrors the concerns of later conspiratorism as it mixes an esoteric, spiritual striving with a conspiratorial understanding of encroaching evil: The first editorial of *Echo du Merveilleux*, for example, argued that the source of late nineteenth-century’s *angst* lay in a “social peril”, which “the Church and Science had been unable to conquer, and which might only be destroyed ... through a new idealism and anti-materialism” (Silverman 160). The agents of this “social peril” were an international conspiracy of Jews, and the problem was to be dealt with in a “holistic”, spiritual manner through a shift in mentality and philosophical outlook from “materialism” to “idealism”. Spirituality and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, then, were already joined together from the inception in French occultist milieus of the *fin de siècle*.

Transnational occult networks have also been important for the dissemination of central conspiratorial motifs across Europe. The basic text of what was later to become the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* appears to have been brought from France to Russia by Yuliana Glinka, who, besides being an unsuccessful agent of the Russian secret police, was also a Theosophist with connections to Blavatsky's circle (e.g. Cohn; Webb *Occult Establishment* 219, 222-3). In Fascist Italy, it was the esotericist and Traditionalist Julius Evola (1898-1974) who wrote the introduction to the 1938 edition of the *Protocols*. Such examples could be embellished further (see below); they suggest not only that conspiratoriality has deeper roots in esoteric milieus, but that even influential examples of "political conspiracy theory" have been shaped and disseminated precisely through the networks that produce it. On this perspective, conspiratoriality does not necessarily signify the *merger* of two formerly distinct cultural spheres, but may indicate the *common origin* of elements that have only later (and only partially) been separated from each other through ideological and situational elaboration in specific interest groups (e.g. political parties, militia groups, governments, religious movements). In other words, we should not only be studying how "improvisational millennialism" in the cultic milieu is producing blends of representations borrowed from separate and presumably stable spheres (Barkun), but also how elements are transmitted *from* that milieu into existing institutions, and how they become involved in new group formations.

Finally, the conspiracism of esoteric spokespersons is often not directed at sinister "Others" external to the milieu itself. Traditionalism (see Sedgwick) offers a curious insight into how dynamics internal to esotericism can produce

conspiracy theories about rivaling esoteric groups. The Traditionalist concept of “counter-initiation”, central to René Guénon’s (1886–1951) perennialism, proved an effective way of branding other esotericists whom one disapproved of as agents for the conspiracy of the degenerate modern world. Here we see conspiracy theories propounded by one group of esotericists featuring another group as the “black brethren”.<sup>9</sup> This stratagem is not uncommon: In a similar vein, occultists skeptical of spiritualism had long warned against the possibility that mediums were secretly being exploited by a conspiracy of advanced magicians for sinister ends (e.g. Hardinge Britten; cf. Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment* 197-199). Annie Besant (1847–1933), president of the Theosophical Society and a leading proponent of “anti-Establishment” discourses such as feminism, vegetarianism and anticolonialism, accused the founder of Anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), of being in the pocket of the Jesuits (Webb, *Occult Establishment* 228). Steiner, on his part, saw the sinister workings of Ahriman’s black brotherhood at work behind a broad range of contemporary political and social events (Steiner; Dyrendal 204-206).

### ***“Positive conspiracies”, Inversion, and Occult Apostasy***

The social structure of occult initiatory societies affords conspiratorial ideations. In addition to the obvious practice of secrecy in many occult groups of the period, the notion of “hidden masters” is particularly interesting in this respect (cf. Pasi 117-118; Hammer *Claiming Knowledge* 380-393). This notion has been central to esoteric discourse at least since the Rosicrucian manifestos of the early 1600s, through high-degree freemasonry and neo-Templarism, to the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In Theosophy

as well as in the Golden Dawn, the notion that secret masters operated behind the scenes of history, pulling the right strings to orchestrate events was an absolutely essential part of their worldviews and even their social structure. Access to the secret chiefs was a source of charismatic authority, and thus a frequent locus of dispute in these movements. Quarrel over who had access to the authentic masters was one of the core issues in the split of the Golden Dawn in the early twentieth century, and in the Theosophical context, Alice Bailey's (1880–1949) claim to communicate with the Tibetan master Djwhal Khul precipitated her expulsion from the Society (cf. Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge* 384-386).

The notion of hidden or ascended masters already implies a sort of “positive conspiracy theory”, explaining world-historical events through the secret machinations of a grand but ultimately *benevolent* conspiracy of which one's own organization is part. Manly P. Hall's *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (1928) is a schoolbook example of this trope in the twentieth century. But a simple act of inversion or transvaluation – e.g. by outsiders who do not share the goals of the alleged masters – is all it takes to turn this narrative into a *sinister* conspiracy theory. The history of esotericism is ripe with examples of this dynamic. Saint-Yves de Alveydre's (1842–1877) vision of the subterranean city of Agartha and its political system of “synarchy” illustrates it well: Saint-Yves saw the Agarthian synarchists engaged in a secret plot to install a utopian esoteric theocracy – a notion that was taken over by Nicholas and Helena Roerich's utopian quest for bringing Shamhala to Earth with a new geopolitical center in Central Asia (Osterrider; Znamenski). But the narrative also worked as fuel for conspiracy theories about hidden bad guys – whether behind the Vichy

government, the European Union, or something much grander.<sup>10</sup> Alice Bailey's secret master-inspired prophecy that the Great White Brotherhood would establish a world government of enlightened and peaceful rule after the Second World War has enjoyed a similar fate among those fearing a New World Order.<sup>11</sup>

One mechanism through which this sort of inversion takes place is *occultist apostasy*. Christina M. Stoddard is an illustrative and influential example of this phenomenon. For several years Stoddard was a leading member of the Stella Matutina, one of the most influential magical Orders springing out of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn following its schisms at the beginning of the twentieth century (cf. Webb *Occult establishment* 225-226). After leaving the Order, Stoddard produced an influential classic of conspiracy lore, *Light Bearers of Darkness* (1930), written under the pseudonym Inquire Within. Here she concocted the idea that all magical, occult and fraternal groups she could possibly think of were "consciously or unconsciously" connected to a clandestine and nefarious group of "Judeo-Masonry", which was, incidentally, also behind the Third International. The book's virulent anti-Semitism did not go unopposed in the milieu, as it was harshly criticized by the editor of *The Occult Review*, Ralph Shirley. However, Shirley's distaste for anti-Semitism was not followed by a rejection of conspiracism as such, for the editor announced support of the more general "suspicion that the ranks of occultism are secretly working for disintegration and revolution" (see Webb, *Occult Establishment* 220).

Looking at conspirituality in these earlier occultist milieus also provides us with historical evidence for challenging some of the demographic assumptions made by Ward and Voas on the basis of the contemporary scene. Consider, for example, the conspirituality thesis' separation of conspiracism and

spirituality in terms of gender and political sympathies. Put in this broader historical perspective we find, intriguingly, that three of the most significant conspiracy theorists of the inter-war era were women with fascist leanings, engaged in various respects and to different degrees in occult networks. In addition to Stoddard, we must mention Nesta Helen Webster and Edith Starr Miller (Lady Queenborough). While Stoddard was an occult apostate who fuelled and developed existing narratives through her witness, Webster (1876-1960) is *the* central narrator of grand conspiracy theories in the English-speaking world in this period. She was responsible for re-introducing the Illuminati to conspiracy discourse, reviving the post-Revolutionary conspiracy theories of Abbé Augustin Barruel (1741–1820) and John Robison (1739–1805). She was also central in the promotion of *The Protocols* in England. The super-conspiracy that she invented included, as one title indicated, a wide range of *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*, the list of which still supplies reference for contemporary conspiracy theorists. While no wholesale occultist, there is evidence of a general social involvement on Webster's part with occult milieus and the myriad ideas circulating in them. Some of these ideas, and perhaps the deeper cognitive habits that made them appealing, appear to be significant for her conspiracism as well; Webster was apparently drawn towards the world of conspiratorial history through a past life experience (Thurlow 38), writing that she found reincarnation "the most probable clue to the mystery of those vague memories" (Webster, *Spacious* 172). Other possibilities she was willing to consider include ancestral memories, telepathy, and communication by spirit presences (Lee 137, n.52). Early contact with Theosophy, including a personal meeting with Annie Besant, from which Webster, however, claimed to have left

unimpressed (Webster *Spacious* 88), indicate that she had access to the social networks in which occult, conspiratorial, and generally stigmatized and rejected knowledge circulated with ease. This places Webster as another example of someone whose process towards grand conspiracy theory is routed through the dynamics of the cultic milieu.

Webster's writings influenced Christina Stoddard, but also Lady Queenborough (Edith Starr Miller) – another female right-wing author of esoteric conspiracy lore. Miller's *Occult Theocracy* (1933) largely repeated and expanded on Webster's claims. While we know little about Miller's involvement with occult circles, she did possess some good contacts in it that served as her informants. For example, Miller admits to being "indebted to Brigadier-General R. B. D. Blakeney" for giving her access to invaluable secret documents (Miller, unpaginated appendix). Blakeney was active in theosophical networks, being a member of G. R. S. Mead's Quest Society and of Charles Leadbeater's Liberal Catholic Church (ibid.). Starr Miller was also familiar with Alice Bailey's writings on esoteric initiations, drawing on her *Initiation Human and Solar* (1922), but treating it as if it were an exposé (Miller 226-229). Thus we have yet another example of a conspiracist author drawing on esotericist self-understandings while inverting their value to produce evidence of a sinister conspiracy in place of a benevolent hierarchy of "enlightened masters".

The "secret history" genre of conspiracy literature that Webster, Stoddard, and Miller illustrate creates genealogies of subversive secrecy, in which one occult society is linked to another in chains stretching back from the O.T.O. and the Golden Dawn through the Rosicrucians and the Illuminati, to the Knights Templar, the Cathars, and the Gnostics. We hope to have demonstrated

the existence of this plotline in nineteenth and early twentieth century occultism, and hinted at its discursive origins in the deeper historical layers of Western esotericism. The logic of the lineages goes back to the “ancient wisdom narratives” of late antiquity, and the Renaissance’s grand “histories of truth” (Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*). These lineages became a central part of esoteric discourses in the Renaissance, but came to be associated with heresy during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Heresiologists found a ready-made historical template, and in the aftermath, self-declared esotericists and anti-esotericists alike have been able to use roughly the same chains of ancient sages, secret societies, and “subversive sects” for opposing goals, adding new bits and pieces to serve the political aims of the season (cf. Dyrendal and Asprem; Asprem and Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms” 34-35).

### **3. Conclusion: Conspiritoriality as a Comparative Category**

Conspiritoriality, we have argued, is neither new nor surprising. If we view it as a result of structural elements in the cultic milieu, rising from its interest in stigmatized knowledge, promotion of mystical seekership, and suspicion of “Establishment” discourses, we expect to find conspiritoriality across a much broader historical and cultural span, in all contexts where it makes sense to talk about a cultic milieu. We hope to have demonstrated the usefulness of this move by exploring conspiritoriality in the context of Western esotericism, and particularly in the milieus of nineteenth and early-twentieth century occultism. The historical inquiry we have conducted strongly suggest that esotericism is an important and understudied context not only for the confluence of conspiracy theories and spirituality, but for understanding the formation of specific



conspiratorial narratives in the broader conspiracy culture as well. We have pointed to three specific processes that we think are key to this development, namely occultist apostasy, the inversion of emic historiographies, and a deeper discursive generative process involving the formation and rejection of “ancient wisdom narratives”.

One consequence of conceptualizing conspирuality as a cultural type pertinent to the cultic milieu rather than the name of a specific conglomeration of New Age millennialism and conspiratorial elements is that the concept enables us to do fruitful comparative work. The scope of comparison it opens up depends on how we settle the discussion of the scope of the cultic milieu and occulture – an issue on which there is still some disagreement (e.g. Kaplan and Löow; Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary”; “Occulture and Art”). The thrust of our own argument is that a *historicization* of the cultic milieu allows us to talk about, e.g., the networks of late-nineteenth century “occultism” and early-twenty-first century “occulture” as specific historical instantiations of the milieu – sharing the same general dynamic, but with their own particular substantial orientations. We hope that future studies will explore this comparative potential further. In line with the renewed interest in comparison in the study of esotericism (Asprem, “Beyond the West”), conspирuality could enable further *diachronic* comparisons of the type we have hinted to here, which might tell us more about the relation between the post-War cultic milieu, the occult milieus of the *fin de siècle*, and the social media-powered occulture of today. But also *synchronic* comparisons should be encouraged: one problem with the study of contemporary esotericism and religion as well as of conspiracy theory is precisely the limited cultural and geographical scope of most studies. By

conceptualizing conspirituality as a critical analytic category, we have the opportunity to look at the much broader interplay of religion, conspiracy theory, and relationships between authorized and stigmatized, self-consciously “underground” discourses in a global perspective. Doing so carries potential for unlocking cultural dynamics on the intersection of religion, politics, and knowledge that should have significance for the discipline of religious studies at large.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*; Aspren and Granholm, *Contemporary Esotericism*

<sup>2</sup> Swami et al.; Darwin, Neave, and Holmes; Bruder et al.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Campbell; Barkun; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion; Esotericism*; Partridge *Re-Enchantment*.

<sup>4</sup> There is a much longer history to this mainstreaming process, as suggested in Introvigne.

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the only references provided to this highly important historical moment is a Wikipedia entry.

<sup>6</sup> On this see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*; Aspren, *Disenchantment* 542-551.

<sup>7</sup> See Burns; Walbridge.

<sup>8</sup> See the analysis in Morrisson; cf. Webb, *Flight*.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Pasi 117-136; esp. 129-136; cf. Sedgwick.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Picknett; Picknett and Prince; cf. Godwin *Arktos*.

<sup>11</sup> The claim that Alice Bailey's Lucis Trust (originally "Lucifer Trust", as conspiracists love to point out) and her proto-New Age doctrines are at the heart of the United Nations system and the New World Order's secret agenda has proliferated on the Internet, as a Google search will easily reveal. Examples are legion, but see, e.g. "Alice Bailey 10 points for NWO", YouTube user russ wadell, March 3, 2010, URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_OVZcSWepR4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OVZcSWepR4) (accessed July 22, 2014).