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The Emergence of Conspirituality

CHARLOTTE WARD & DAVID VOAS

ABSTRACT *The female-dominated New Age (with its positive focus on self) and the male-dominated realm of conspiracy theory (with its negative focus on global politics) may seem antithetical. There is a synthesis of the two, however, that we call 'conspirituality'. We define, describe, and analyse this hybrid system of belief; it has been noticed before without receiving much scholarly attention. Conspirituality is a rapidly growing web movement expressing an ideology fuelled by political disillusionment and the popularity of alternative worldviews. It has international celebrities, bestsellers, radio and TV stations. It offers a broad politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age: 1) a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order, and 2) humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness. Proponents believe that the best strategy for dealing with the threat of a totalitarian 'new world order' is to act in accordance with an awakened 'new paradigm' worldview.*

Introduction

The growth of industry, cities, and administrative structures has led to the separation and specialisation of social institutions. Individuals themselves occupy distinct roles (in the family, workplace, and community) that may no longer overlap. This social and personal fragmentation has caused conventional religion to become disconnected from everyday life. Alternative ideologies are available, however, offering holistic worldviews that contest the political pragmatism, economic rationalism, scientific empiricism, and social dislocation characteristic of the modern age. Examples include the Romantic movement that began in the late eighteenth century and the counter-culture of the 1960s.

In this article we focus on two forms of holistic thought that are increasingly prevalent in the contemporary period. One is what has variously been labelled the New Age, alternative spirituality or the holistic milieu (Heelas and Woodhead). These groups embrace the idea of a person as an integrated whole, with mind, body, and spirit subject to a common set of principles. The second ideology is conspiracy theory. Here one finds a denial of contingency, the discovery of patterns in events that might otherwise seem to be random, and the attribution of agency to hidden forces (Aaronovitch).

A hybrid of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality has appeared on the internet. The existence of such a synthesis has previously been noted in passing (Barkun; Goodrick-Clarke), but no detailed account has yet been given of what, for the sake of convenience, we call 'conspirituality'.¹

Barkun identifies three principles found in nearly every conspiracy theory: a) nothing happens by accident, b) nothing is as it seems, c) everything is connected. Similar principles are fundamental to much New Age thought and alternative spirituality. These worldviews make public and personal life respectively seem less subject to random forces and therein lies part of their appeal.

Notwithstanding these shared principles, there is a wide gulf between the ordinary understandings of conspiracy theory and the holistic milieu. The former is male-dominated, often conservative, generally pessimistic, and typically concerned with current affairs. The latter is predominantly female, liberal, self-consciously optimistic, and largely focused on the self and personal relationships. It is therefore far from obvious how a confluence of these two streams could be produced.

We argue that conspиритuality is a politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age:

- (1) A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order (Fenster).
- (2) Humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened 'new paradigm' worldview.

Conspиритuality is a web movement with diffuse leadership and constantly shifting areas of interest. In the nature of the case it is difficult to estimate its influence, but it seems clear that many millions of people have been exposed to this material, a substantial number of whom apparently subscribe to its tenets.

In what follows we describe conspиритuality and its formation, starting by examining the parent sectors and then considering their merger. We focus on the US and the UK. While our aim is primarily descriptive—to point to the existence of an important branch of contemporary spirituality that is little recognized—we also offer some hypotheses concerning its origins, current appeal, and future prospects.

Methods

Because conspиритuality appears to be an internet-based movement with a relatively modest presence in 'real life', web ethnography is the method of choice. The first author gathered information over three years of participant observation, both online and at lectures and conferences. Web sites were continuously tracked and developments noted. Hyperlinks connecting web sites permit a type of snowball sampling, supplemented by web searches to identify sites that are not well connected with others dealing with related topics. As many web links and leads as possible were followed up. We believe that we gained a comprehensive overview of the area as it relates to the US and UK.

Given the considerable range of providers (of ideas, advice, and leadership) available, there is naturally a concern that the examples mentioned below may not be representative of the movement as a whole. We have endeavoured to use

one or more of the following criteria in choosing which to cite: a) demonstrable commitment to the movement's core convictions; b) high levels of popularity, which could be confirmed by independent means; c) extent of cross-referencing by other recognized providers; d) suitability to illustrate particular points.

The exclusive focus on British and American English language sites and hence on issues of Anglo-American concern is a potential source of bias. Conspirituality is a global movement; we are aware of sites in other languages and providers from other cultures but were unable to assess their content and scope.

References to web sites are provided to document the phenomena described. Background information from other sources can also be helpful and Wikipedia entries are included in the secondary material. In so doing we are simply offering the view from the ground. What matters in this context is not what experts regard as the best or most accurate profile of a particular personality (for example), but what ordinary web users find when they search for information.

New Age Spirituality

How one defines the New Age is not important for present purposes, but we will adopt Melton's characterisation (as summarised here by Barkun):

[The New Age] includes the following elements: mystical individual transformation; an awareness of new, non-material realities; "the imposition of (a) personal vision onto society"; and belief in universally invisible but pervasive forms of energy. (Melton qtd in Barkun 32)

Hanegraaff has mapped the boundaries of the New Age and the Kendal Project quantified it (Heelas and Woodhead), but the web continues to expand it. Recent additions extending the idea that humanity is shifting consciousness are 'lightworkers', 'starseeds', and 'indigo children'.² (These terms describe different types of predestination, special talents or psychic abilities.)

The New Age remains largely feminine (Houtman and Aupers; Heelas and Woodhead). Although some aspects of New Age thought and practice—for example, those related to ET channellings or political change—have some kinship with conspiracy theory, the New Age seems largely incompatible with that realm. As an illustration it is worth considering Diana Cooper, successful within the sectors of channelling, healing and "personal growth" (Hanegraaff 42). Cooper,³ "visited by angels" since the 1980s, has written 23 books, founded World Angel Awareness Day and a school⁴ that, by 2006, had trained over 400 teachers—mainly women⁵—to "spread the light of angels". Channelling, healing, and meditations feature prominently on her web site. Subscribers are taught that to meet energy head-on generates resistance and that what is resisted persists; negative focus attracts or energises negativity; criticism mirrors critics' flaws; pointing the finger promotes 'polarity'.

On politics, Cooper's web site advises, "Give no energy to fear, darkness and mass hysteria. Instead focus on the good, the wise and great, so that it expands."⁶ She writes that "there is a huge backlog of resistance to progressive policies (like the gun lobby)", but "There are things that we can do to offer grace to clear the karma of America". On Obama's election, she says, "The wave of excitement in the US and throughout the world sent a wave of energy out,

which pushed Earth onto its ascension pathway." She states that she does not belong to any religion but acknowledges them all. As for conspiracy theory,

We have all chosen to incarnate at an exciting time when civilization as we know it is ending and the new being founded. There will be changes and you can look at these as frightening or an opportunity for service and growth. . . . Be careful what you read on the internet. If it is spreading doubt and fear move on to a site of love and light.

The New Age Belief in a Shift in Consciousness

Much has been written about New Age beliefs in a shift (Kemp 190; Hanegraaff 107) and about the New Age's 'globalisation' and its methods (Rothstein; Holloway). Marilyn Ferguson's book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* contributed to the popularisation of beliefs in a 'new paradigm' and New Age organisations such as the Club of Budapest⁷ and the Wrekin Trust⁸ claim to examine evidence of a shift. Global communications, too, reinforce perceptions that a shift is occurring, as audiences can listen on the web to Madonna discussing her "spiritual awakening",⁹ Rabbi Michael Laitman—whose web site currently ranks within the top thousand most popular Israeli sites—urging humanity to awaken via Kabbalah¹⁰ or New Ager Eckhart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey (who have declared their intention to awaken people *en masse* through their partnership¹¹) saying to millions of Oprah viewers, "There's a shift happening in humanity, a shift in consciousness, happening now".

This rhetoric is echoed by others outside the New Age. The New Spiritual Progressives,¹² a peaceful activist movement, say that

In every faith there is a struggle happening right now between those who hear God speaking as the force of power and domination and those who hear God speaking as the force of healing, transformation, love and generosity.¹³

Political film maker Velcrow Ripper says on his 2008 documentary *Fierce Light*:

Sparked by what Gandhi called "soul force", and Martin Luther King called "love in action", millions are discovering the power of taking positive, peaceful action that comes from the heart, driven by the understanding that we're all in this together. *Fierce Light* captures this inspiring zeitgeist, which is being called the largest global movement in history.¹⁴

Conspiracy Theory

The term 'conspiracy theorist' tends to be used pejoratively. Since the advent of the worldwide web, however, the realm of conspiracy theory has gained shape, prominence, and even respectability. Unlike the spiritual milieu, this remains a largely male enclave of political and scientific foci. Few good quantitative studies have been conducted, but "American conspiracy theorists seem to be primarily a white phenomenon; and primarily a white male phenomenon" (Ramsay 36). Of the 40 or so notable theorists who were listed on Tinwiki,¹⁵ only one is female. In that respect, this area is typical of political activism: "that women generally have lower levels of interest in politics than men is a well rehearsed political fact"

(Campbell and Winters 53). Activism should not be confused with ideology or casual participation, however. Just as voter turnout is similar among men and women, belief in conspiracy theories divides evenly between the sexes (Goertzel 733).

An examination of the history of conspiracy theory suggests that in recent decades it has contained four main sectors, all of which overlap and continue to develop:

(1) speculation about specific episodes

Was Diana, Princess of Wales, assassinated? Was 9/11 an 'inside job'? Barkun (6) calls these "event conspiracies". Most people are exposed to these theories (even through the conventional media) and are likely to speculate to some degree: the main difference between now and 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated, is the web.

(2) bio- and geo-conspiracies

The terms 'bio-conspiracies' and 'geo-conspiracies' are used here to describe the large areas of conspiracist belief surrounding manipulation of the natural world. The following examples are far from exhaustive: have diseases been manufactured? Have cancer cures and free energy technologies been suppressed? Is water fluoridation dangerous? Are we given the truth about genetic engineering? Is weather manipulation possible? Most people come across these ideas in the conventional media and from hearing about movements such as the campaign against the use of the artificial sweetener aspartame.

(3) *X-Files*-type conspiracy theory (Ramsay 28)

In Britain and the US, the 1950s saw the formation of UFO groups and the expansion of counter-cultures such as science fiction fandom. Ramsay usefully describes subsequent major influences by decade: in the 1960s, the publication of books such as *Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain*; in the 1970s, the appearance of celebrity psychics, writer Erich von Däniken, and the film *Close Encounters*; in the 1980s, fascination with channelling, mind control, and alien abduction. (Many of these interests overlap with the New Age.) Since then conventional media and the web have further popularised and expanded these topics.

(4) the radical right's belief in a shadow government/New World Order (NWO).

Barkun (6) categorises this sector as systemic or super-conspiracy. In recent decades, political activists in America, such as Pat Robertson and Lyndon Larouche, have publicly espoused belief in a sinister 'New World Order' (Robertson; Pipes). The idea that secret societies of 'Illuminati' are conspiring to establish a NWO stretch back to at least 1797, when John Robinson's book *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe* was published in Britain. Before the arrival of the web, this sector appeared to be dominated in the Western world by the (American) Christian Patriot¹⁶ movement and the Militia, the core of which formed in the 1970s. It consists of right wing or Christian/cult groups preparing for Armageddon or protecting themselves against the NWO, spurred by event conspiracies such as the destruction of the

Branch Davidian compound at Waco in 1993. The Militia's popularity has peaked¹⁷ and the Patriot movement has grown:

The most distinctive feature of militia groups is that they are armed, sometimes with war weapons. [...] Their membership is overwhelmingly white, Christian and predominantly male. [...] the patriots, while including traditional racist, anti-Semitic hate groups, have a much broader ideological constituency, and this is exactly one of the reasons for their new success. Namely, the ability to reach out across the ideological spectrum to unite all sources of disaffection against the federal government. (Castells 91)

But as the web facilitates the spread of information, the Christian right may be losing any monopoly it once might have held, or appeared to hold, over NWO theories. Web videos of Louis Farrakhan addressing the Nation of Islam and Muammar Gaddafi addressing the UN on conspiracist topics are easily accessible; Muslim¹⁸ and Jewish¹⁹ NWO conspiracist web sites are springing up and other religions are also represented.

Within much of this 'radical right' sector of conspiracy theory, New Age spirituality is seen as a Satanic or 'Luciferic' threat.²⁰ Recent areas of concern include Oprah Winfrey's partnership publicising New Age teachings with spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle:²¹ Tolle's pacific assertions that the global situation arose from the collective mind's insanity enraged those who felt he was promoting inaction in the face of the enemy²² and Winfrey's backing of Obama confirmed to some that all three are Illuminati insiders.²³ Longer standing concerns include New Age channellers being demon-possessed or having voices beamed into their heads by government mind-control projects.²⁴

The Emergence of Conspirituality

Despite the shared views mentioned above that nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected (Barkun 4), the New Age and conspiracy theory seem to have little in common. It is therefore a surprise to discover that hybrid worldviews have developed and seem to be thriving. British author and activist David Icke anticipated conspirituality in 1996:

When I meet people who are investigating the conspiracy but are not into the spiritual, I find people full of paranoia, full of fear ... because they can't see the spiritual solutions. ... When I meet so many people in the New Age area ... I often find people who, so often, think that if you address the negative, then that's really bad. You must only address the positive. ... But if you don't address the negative, either the negative gets more negative or stays as it is. What you don't do is change it.²⁵

Conspirituality appears to be a means by which political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism. It curbs the belligerence of conspiracy theory and the self-absorption of the New Age. The following examples illustrate this counterpoise. The first, taken from a 2007 online course in 'transformation', has a New Age weighting:

If you are not aware of the deep politics and hidden agendas taking place behind the scenes on this planet, you may find parts of the educational information to be somewhat disturbing. Please don't despair about this ...

even the dark or negative forces out there are all a part of the cosmic dance. If we ignore or abandon these forces, we reject a part of ourselves, as we are all interconnected. The course provides lots of support and inspiration on how we are already transforming these challenging places in our lives and world.²⁶

The second is weighted towards conspiracy theory. It was taken from the Zeitgeist Movement,²⁷ a web site promoting global activism²⁸ connected to *Zeitgeist the Movie*,²⁹ a 2007 web movie.³⁰ *Zeitgeist* alleges, among other things, that organised religion is about social control and that 9/11 was an inside job. The producers claim that the movie has been viewed 100 million times.³¹

The elite power systems are little affected in the long run by traditional protest and political movements. We must move beyond these 'establishment rebellions' and work with a tool much more powerful: We will stop supporting the system, while constantly advocating knowledge, peace, unity and compassion. We cannot "fight the system". Hate, anger and the 'war' mentality are failed means for change, for they perpetuate the same tools the corrupt, established power systems use to maintain control to begin with. [...] This could be called a 'spiritual' awakening.³²

Conspirativity appeared on the web in the mid 1990s. It had offline precursors: some members of the 1960s³³ and 1970s counter-culture, the New Age, and other movements undoubtedly shared its two core convictions. In 1987, the print-based NEXUS Magazine started publishing articles on spirituality and conspiracist topics; the editor writes:

NEXUS recognises that humanity is undergoing a massive transformation. With this in mind, NEXUS seeks to provide 'hard-to-get' information so as to assist people through these changes. NEXUS is not linked to any religious, philosophical or political ideology or organisation.³⁴

Goodrick-Clarke cites NEXUS as an example of how "the 'alternative' movement, with its suspicion of powerful government, big business and orthodox medicine, has proved susceptible to conspiracy theories" (289). From NEXUS's statement, we may conclude that the 'alternative' movement, which Goodrick-Clarke defines as holding "alternative concerns with health, environment and right livelihood" (289), has also proved susceptible to ideas of a 'shift' and may thus be providing audiences for conspirativity. We examine these audiences later.

The First Generation—before 2001

Conspirativity's formation divides into two stages or generations. First-generation providers started work offline in the early to mid-1990s and then moved online to develop web sites in parallel with offline activity. Successful first-generation providers include David Icke, David Wilcock, and Steven Greer.

David Icke's web site, registered in 1996, ranks in the top 10,000³⁵ most popular global sites (by comparison, according to Alexa, an independent web monitoring service, in August 2009, *Hello!* magazine ranked 20,724, *The Guardian* newspaper 278, and the UK Labour Party 186,270). Icke's 20 books blend conspiracy theory with spirituality. He is notorious for alleging that a shadow government harbours the bloodlines of an ancient race of reptilian extraterrestrials. The solution is for audiences to raise their consciousness and awaken to love as a unifying,

transcendent force. Icke writes extensively about his spiritual awakenings and says, "We are on the cusp of an incredible global change" (x).

American David Wilcock, who established his web site in 1998, describes himself as a "professional lecturer, filmmaker and researcher of ancient civilizations, consciousness science and new paradigms of matter and energy".³⁶ Wilcock's web video lecture, "The 2012 Enigma", was rated Google's Number One Viewed in December 2008³⁷ and his site ranks in the top 50,000 most popular global web sites. He writes that the shadow government is losing its grip; audiences should prepare for a mass awakening in 2012, after which the regime will founder. Wilcock writes about his spiritual awakenings and contact with extraterrestrials and says,

The energetic transformation of our entire solar system is now under way, and we are already feeling the effects. . . I am amazed at how many people blatantly worship the negative elite with their fear. . . As long as we hate, fear, loathe and distrust them, we are ensuring they still have a job acting as the projection of our own hatred, fear, loathing and distrust. . . of ourselves.³⁸

American UFO researcher Steven Greer claims to have reached "over a billion people"³⁹ via conventional media and that he has briefed the Obama administration⁴⁰ and others on the truth about UFOs. Greer organised the Disclosure Project, a 2001 initiative presenting evidence of UFOs, ETs, and 'black projects'.⁴¹ He writes that a 'rabid dog' shadow government, keeping secrets even from presidents and CIA directors, has suppressed free energy technology. Greer talks about his spiritual awakening and contact with extraterrestrials. In 2006, he wrote (42, 234):

We live in a world where people polarise around either an impractical New Age spirituality and pacifism or a traditional "us versus them, let's kill everybody we don't understand" mindset. . . A certain sinister manipulation is evident to many people. I don't have the luxury of putting all that information aside and thinking that it's a conspiracy theory. I know it to be true. . . These covert special interests want to unite and control the world through fear, rather than uniting the world through peace and hope. . . We live in a time of these extremes: very dark and very bright. We live in the time of transformative change.

Many factors influenced audience receptivity to first-generation conspiratoriality. By 1998, 82% of Americans felt the need to experience spiritual growth (Gallup and Lindsay), while "extremely large numbers" (Barkun 91) had been exposed to New World Order conspiracy theories and believed the government was withholding the truth about UFOs. Conspiratoriality web radio stations such as News for the Soul (established in 1997) and Red Ice Creations (formed in 2001) had sprung up to publicise providers. In the UK, journalists such as Jon Ronson were humanising conspiracy theorists, New Agers, and other alternative thinkers with good-natured documentaries.

The events of 11 September 2001 were pivotal to the uptake of conspiratoriality. Many people who had never held conspiratorial beliefs rationalised the tragedy as an 'inside job' designed to propagate war: in 2003, one third of Germans under thirty believed that the US government was behind 9/11 (Knight) and at least one opinion poll in 2006 suggested that more than a third of Americans believed the same.⁴² By 2007, Texas Congressman Ron Paul⁴³ and film director Aaron Russo⁴⁴ were publicising the 'New World Order'. In 2008, Japanese MP Yukihiro Fujita⁴⁵

lobbied the Diet on this matter and in 2009, actor Charlie Sheen called upon Obama to reopen the 9/11 investigations.⁴⁶ Millions of people find sense in these theories.

The Second Generation—from 2002

We identify 2002 as the year second-generation conspirituality started. This was not just because the events of 9/11 and increasing political disillusionment were generating extra demand: by 2002, the web and access to it and its sub-cultures were sufficiently developed to accommodate conspirituality's expansion. Web-site building had been simplified and the blogosphere (the network of blogs on the internet) was growing.

The 2003 war in Iraq generated still more demand: worldwide, millions marched 'for peace' rather than 'against war'. By 2004, theories about apocalyptic events in 2012 were spreading, further uniting New Agers anticipating a shift with conspiracy theorists and others believing a variety of scenarios. In 2005, more than 2,000 people attended a talk by David Icke in London. In November 2010, conspiracist radio presenter Alex Jones's site ranked in the top 500 most popular websites.⁴⁷ Providers now use Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks. It is said that an Obama avatar was recently spotted wearing a New World Order T-shirt in the web-based virtual world of Second Life. The web continues to develop and support alternative viewpoints.

John Perkins is an example of a second-generation conspirituality provider. His 2004 autobiography *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*⁴⁸ was on the NY Times bestseller lists for 70 weeks.⁴⁹ Perkins exposes the shadowy US 'elite corporatocracy', for which he once worked to destabilise smaller countries economically. He suggests that corporate networks could be transformed to positive purposes, stressing that many shadow government employees are 'human, with children and grandchildren' and, despite the financial rewards, 'desperate' for the excuses protestors offer to do the right thing.⁵⁰ Perkins, who experienced a 'personal epiphany' on visiting Ground Zero, states:

We have entered one of the most important periods in human history, the Time of Prophecies. We have the opportunity to lift ourselves to new levels of consciousness. This time was foretold over the past centuries around the world. Now it is up to us—you and me—to make it happen.⁵¹

A shamanic practitioner, Perkins has written books on 'personal and global transformation'.⁵²

Project Camelot,⁵³ another second-generation provider, offers a platform for shadow government whistle-blowers. Its site reports ten million unique hits since it formed in 2006. Run by a two-person team consisting of Bill Ryan and Kerry Cassidy, Project Camelot displays a collection of video interviews offering different views on the shadow government and the shift, including interviews with Icke, Wilcock, and Greer. More than 1,300 site visitors have signed its 'pledge' to end secrecy,⁵⁴ a brief count indicates a ratio of three men to one woman. This probably reflects conspirituality's wider gender ratio.

Conspirituality has spread from being a scattering of single, first-generation providers to a large chain. It is now part of the spiritual supermarket: clients shop around, settling upon the outlets whose interpretations of the two core convictions best suit their own opinions and tastes.

Key Themes

Change, or transformation, is a key theme conspиритuality has adapted from its parent sectors. Clients seek to expose—depose—a shadow government. Ideas that others are becoming ‘awake and aware’, or shifting in consciousness, lend encouragement. Humanity is shifting into a new paradigm. People are ‘awakening to the truth’ (we are all connected); ‘remembering who we really are’ (infinitely powerful spiritual beings); ‘seeing the illusion’ (our projections); ‘saying no to tyranny’ (assuming personal responsibility—the shadow government exists because we allow it to). Stories of spiritual awakenings, some dramatic, others gradual or momentary, are commonplace. The awakening process, being subjective, is impossible to define accurately, but providers and clients agree that this is ‘a time of transformation’.

Some awakenings—such as David Icke’s⁵⁵—involve ‘seeing’ the shadow government. These can go through two stages:⁵⁶ coming to terms with the situation and realising one’s responsibility to help change it. But the continuing existence of war and inequality demonstrates that traditional means of change—via political protest, for example—have proved ineffective. These, along with denial of the truth (that things need to change) belong to the ‘old paradigm’.

Central to the ‘new paradigm’ is ‘becoming the change you wish to see in the world’ (a quotation by Mahatma Gandhi frequently encountered): the inner self must change before the outer world can. ‘Spiritually conscious’ ideals include self-responsibility and independent thought—detaching from the ‘mind control matrix’ by giving up TV and chemical additives, rejecting consumerism, and anticipating earth changes. Non-violent action includes spreading information, engaging in non-cooperation and peaceful resistance.

The forms of non-violent activism are highly varied. A UK example specific to conspиритuality is ‘The Love Police’, a group that tours London with a megaphone, drawing public attention to situations considered repressive and hugging people as they are moved on. Videos are posted on YouTube. Another example is ‘The People’s United Community’ (TPUC), which advocates ‘lawful rebellion’ on the basis of a clause in the Magna Carta allowing citizens to ignore the law if they feel they are being unjustly governed. TPUC states that it is neither for nor against politics or religion, it stands for “the truth of love and the love of truth”.⁵⁷

Unification is another key theme. Social networking sites such as Facebook are used in conjunction with the global alternative and conventional media to publicise campaigns. The New Age concept of ‘Oneness’ is frequently encountered: Icke says that he loves the shadow government because “we are all One” (490). Hip hop artist KRS-One raps,

You can love your neighbourhood without loving poverty ... there’s no reason to fear the New World Order ... but first you got to unify, stop this negativity, control your creativity.⁵⁸

Non-violent revolutions demand unity. Providers claim safety in numbers—high public profiles confer protection. People must ‘join the dots to see the truth’—the shadow government is too well-hidden to see without combined research.

Revealing 'truth' is an additional theme that runs through the movement. Providers and audiences ascribe power to truth. They support whistle-blowers, campaign for governments to end secrecy, and expose and publicise suppressed evidence. KRS One says the shadow government "can't do nothing to a person who stands with the truth ... so stop the violence, stop hating yourself, seek peace, restore women to their rightful place".⁵⁹

Matt Bellamy, lead singer of the internationally successful band 'Muse', is influenced by Icke and other providers and is credited in turn as an inspiration by best-selling author Stephenie Meyer. Bellamy says that love-based resistance "in the Gandhi sense" is the most powerful, but having to resist "kicking a few shop windows in" is frustrating.⁶⁰ In interviews he says he is an 'atheist'; nonetheless lyrics from his track *Uprising*, from Muse's number one (September 2009) album *The Resistance* encapsulate conspirituality:

Interchanging mind control
Come let the revolution take its toll
If you could flick a switch and open your third eye
You'd see that
We should never be afraid to die
(so come on)

Criticisms of Conspirituality

Barkun (96) suggests that the radical right's NWO theories reached the mainstream via UFO literature and expresses a concern that the left might adopt them. Goodrick-Clarke, too, suggests that "The US militias, conspiracy cults, and New Age cultural pessimism represent varied strands of popular radicalism that are deeply hostile towards liberalism in modern politics and society" (289). He writes, "The endemic spread of conspiracy theories in the New Age milieu is a disturbing phenomenon" (299) and argues that the degeneration of New Age "open anti-authoritarian egalitarian" outlooks into anxious myths "of hostile elites and hidden threats" is down to "cultural pessimism" and political disillusionment. This trend, he fears, could lead to neo-Nazism. (ibid)

Conspirituality providers and audiences would argue that racism and anti-Semitism are part of the old paradigm, not the new. David Icke says,

We need to drop the ludicrous, childish labels of Jew and Gentile and Muslim and all this illusory crap and come together in the name of peace and justice for all. There is not a Jewish injustice or a Palestinian injustice, there is simply injustice.⁶¹

Proponents of conspirituality might, however, admit to cultural pessimism and political disillusionment. As public distaste at war continues to grow—according to 2009 polls, two in three Britons want British troops to leave Afghanistan and one in three want them out immediately⁶²—for many, mass consciousness seems to be shifting and non-violent new paradigm solutions are the best way forward.

Conspirituality's Appeal

Conspirituality obviously appeals to clients who already believe in, or suspect, the existence of a shadow government and a shift. As Goodrick-Clarke suggests, some of these clients will originate from within the 'alternative' movement. To build on his definition we may look to the notion of 'Cultural Creatives' (Ray and Anderson)—people who are spiritually and politically idealistic and imaginative. Ray and Anderson claim that 50 million American adults fall into this category. Moreover,

60% of Americans identify with two or more themes of the new social movements: Greens, Women's Lib, Civil Rights, Peace, Jobs and Social Justice, Gay Lib, the Planetary problematique, Complementary and Alternative Medicine, etc. (Ray 56).⁶³

Conspirituality could appeal to some Cultural Creatives.⁶⁴ The counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s may be an attractive model: Icke promotes music from that era on his web site and discusses his ayahuasca awakening; KRS One lectures internationally about the history of the hip hop movement; Wilcock writes about Woodstock. The extremes of conspirituality will deter many, but the middle ground is extensive: mass audiences bought *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*, downloaded *Zeitgeist the Movie*, and listen to Muse.

Providers have credentials and appear credible to many, despite promoting beliefs that often seem bizarre to non-subscribers. They are trustworthy accomplices, having succeeded in acceptable 'real world' careers. David Icke was a professional footballer, BBC sports commentator, and Green party politician, while Bill Ryan of Project Camelot was a management consultant and his counterpart Kerry Cassidy a film maker. Steven Greer worked as the director of the A&E department of a North Carolina hospital. Jacques Fresco, inventor of *Zeitgeist the Movie* and movement, is an architect. John Perkins was a government official.

Conspirituality's wide and free subversive range accommodates many voices and much of interest. A research paper about David Icke says:

Icke has tapped into the utopian longings of the masses in a potentially liberatory way. Right-wing fanatics, leftist conspiracy buffs, New Agers, college students, and an increasingly dissatisfied and questioning public the world over have found something deeply provocative in Icke that cannot simply be explained away as manifestations of a collective false-consciousness, clinical paranoia, or, as Freud would say, group hypnosis. (Lewis and Kahn 70)

Conspirituality's success also lies in its flexibility. There is no requirement to 'join'—involvement is free and user led: to listen to a programme regularly, revisit a What's New page or attend a conference implies affiliation—as loose or as committed as the client decides, to a wider group. Providers extort people to do their own research. There is no pressure to do anything but accept, reject or adapt information according to the client's belief threshold. It accommodates all grades and shades of belief: David Icke gives voice to anti-New Age writings and Jean Hudon, director of the Earth Rainbow Network,⁶⁵ promotes New Age channelling, yet both remain within the conspirituality category. The flexibility of definition that surrounds its two core convictions is such that most subscribers

are able to agree—and to agree to differ. Costs are minimal and the entertainment value is high, as the possibilities of the web are maximised.

The events of 9/11 exposed many to conspiritoriality. As rumours that it was an inside job undertaken to start a War on Terror spread via the web⁶⁶—and continue to spread—some will have found providers, such as Icke who received publicity for his predictions that the shadow government would undertake a ‘false flag’ operation around 2001 to provoke a war with Islam, more appealing than conventional political commentators or the radical right. Surfers would have shopped around. Those who encountered conspiritoriality, but had not previously held New Age beliefs in a shift, might have focused instead on providers’ political interpretations or transposed ideas of a shift into concerns about ‘earth changes’ or ‘waking up to what was going on’. They might also have been attracted, at a time of crisis, by the optimism intrinsic to core conviction 2 (concerning a mass shift in consciousness).

Conspiracist beliefs are now commonplace.⁶⁷ Cynicism about the conventional media has increased: 59% of Americans under thirty rely on the internet for news rather than television⁶⁸ and 64% of American internet news users believe the mainstream is biased.⁶⁹ Even so, the conventional media accommodate conspiricism:⁷⁰ Harper notes a growth in popular conspiracist literature. Michael Moore’s ‘politically charged’⁷¹ 2004 film *Fahrenheit 9/11* went on general release and won an award at the Cannes Film Festival. In 2009, Fox News interviewed academics about the presence of nano-thermite in the dust at Ground Zero,⁷² *Guardian* readers followed the harassment of a reporter covering the Athens Bilderberg meeting,⁷³ and reports of crop circles and declassified UFO information were widely circulated.

Thus, with interest in conspiracist topics, web news, and spirituality growing, the future looks bright for conspiritoriality. If the holistic milieu grows, this sector is likely to benefit:

Many New Age authors are decidedly ambivalent about the role played by human action in the coming of the New Age ... many New Agers apparently realise that this view may easily breed passivity, and therefore emphasize the importance of the human contribution. (Hanegraaff 250)

Discussion

The formation of conspiritoriality offers much of theoretical interest. We suggest some perspectives for further investigation. Barkun’s notion of ‘improvisational millennialist’ belief systems may help explain how the New Age and conspiracy sectors could merge:

Such odd conceptual structures are apt to contain elements from more than one religious tradition, together with ideas from the New Age, occultism, science and radical politics. These combinations do not appear “natural” since the elements often come from seemingly unrelated domains, such as conspiracy theories and fringe science, or from domains that appear to be in opposition, such as fundamentalist religion and the New Age. (32)

Barkun quotes Stephen O’Leary, noting that “The discourses of conspiracy and apocalypse ... are linked by a common function: each develops symbolic resources that enable societies to address and define the problem of evil” (10);

millennialism describes the mechanism for the defeat of evil which conspiracy theory has located.

Barkun extends Campbell's concept of the cultic milieu to include five varieties of 'stigmatized knowledge' (forgotten, superseded, ignored, rejected, suppressed) that, he suggests, constitute the appeal of conspiracy theory. They might also constitute for some the appeal of certain sectors of the New Age—for example, Theosophy—and all of conspiratorship.

Conspiratorship could be called a web movement, as the web is central to its importation of political and spiritual ideology into the mainstream. Providers such as Project Camelot and *Zeitgeist the Movie* originated on the web; their presence outside it is only just starting to grow. The concept and dynamics of a 'web movement' do not seem to have been explored by scholars, but it is clear that the internet greatly assists the diffusion of innovation (Rogers). Innovators have updated or simplified existing super-systemic conspiracy or New Age models to be disseminated by opinion leaders. As web sites became easier to access and build, transmission and adoption were facilitated. The virtual social networks created by web users make it possible to spread ideas very widely and very quickly.

When exploring religion online, Larsen talks about 'outsider' surfers who particularly like to use the web, seeing themselves as a minority or having experienced discrimination. Helland observes that "the Internet accommodates those religions and groups who wish to be religious outside the control of an organised religious institution" (23). Conspiratorship might constitute a genuine 'unofficial' online religion (Helland; McGuire), as opposed to religion online. Its 'clergy' would abhor this definition, but mystery, revelation, and prophecy are intrinsic to it.

Conspiratorship could also be seen to fit into Wallis's 'world-accommodating' category of religious movement: the world-affirming, cultic New Age and the world-rejecting, sectarian conspiracy milieux have merged into a world-accommodating—arguably mainstream—hybrid. Its providers display aspects of charismatic authority (Weber), for example, claiming to have exclusive access to secrets from whistle-blowers or through contact with extraterrestrials.

In terms of social semiotics, language is a leveller. Terms such as 'NWO', 'oligarchy', 'shadow government', 'negative global elite', 'Illuminati', 'corporatocracy', 'military industrial complex', and so on are interchanged to convey the user's view or taste. By virtue of the vocabulary they use, a teenage rap musician interested in spirituality shares common ground with someone who believes that 9/11 was an inside job. The multiple meanings of these terms provide practical benefits: flexibility of definition confers inclusiveness. For example, the terms 'shift' and 'waking up' can refer to psycho-spiritual or socio-political processes, relative or objective. Conspiratorship unites its supporters despite their differences, permitting self-determination within a wider movement.

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NOTES

1. Clients might reject the label 'conspirituality', seeing their political beliefs as factual rather than 'paranoid' (Hofstadter) and disliking New Age associations, but this movement is large enough to warrant a name. Conspirituality, a word invented by a 'spiritually conscious, politically charged' Canadian hip hop group, describes it succinctly.
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