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Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion (Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion, Volume: 17)

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The Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion are one of the best sources for both general and specific information on an increasingly wide selection of religion-related subjects. This one, *Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, is no exception. It has 556 pages divided into three parts (Explanations, Correspondences, and Locations) with 23 chapters, as well as a foreword by Michael Barkun, the doyen of studies of conspiracy theories, and a lengthy introduction and an afterword by the editors, all of whom contribute to other chapters in the volume.

While conspiracy theories have been with us throughout history, it is arguable that there has never been a time when so many theories have been so widely disseminated, speeding around the globe via whispers, proclamations, and the full gamut of the social media. Although they vary in their content, many such theories exhibit a number of recurring features, such as a dichotomous worldview and apocalyptic struggles between the forces of good *versus* light, evil *versus* darkness, them *versus* us, logos *versus* chaos, transcendence *versus* immanence, and Christ *versus* the Antichrist.

For scholars, as for politicians, journalists, lawyers, and indeed most of both the educated and the uneducated classes, the blurring of the boundaries between truth and falsehood has presented a significant challenge. How can environmental scientists convince a skeptical public that it is not they who are the conspirators—that the planet really is in danger? How can Democrats convince those who genuinely believe that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was rigged that it was Joe Biden, not Donald Trump, who was the legitimate winner? How can the BBC convince its audience that it, not Fox News, is broadcasting the truth? Why have the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* been accepted as authentic for over a century, with horrendous consequences, even after they have repeatedly been demonstrated to be a forgery? Indeed, many of the chapters in this volume focus on, or at least mention, anti-Semitism in one form or another, with conspiracy theorists claiming that the Jews (and/or Masons) are plotting to take control of the world.

Such questions are not hypothetical musings. While I was preparing this review, the Policy Unit at King's College London released a report indicating that a third (35%) of 4,549 UK adults aged 18 and over did not believe that official stories told the whole truth about UK terror attacks that have happened over the past couple of decades, with one in five (19%) saying they thought that the purported victims were not being truthful about what had happened to them (Duffy 2022).

Although such theories may seem incredible to many of us, Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Suzanne Newcombe remind us that it is important to recognize that, just as to label a minority religion a "cult" is to stigmatize it, so labelling a particular belief as a conspiracy theory is to stigmatize it. This is not to suggest that all theories about reality should be treated as equal; certainly, some of the more extreme conspiracists are not being allowed to propagate their theories without societal backlash. In October 2022, American conspiracy theorist Alex

Jones was ordered “to pay at least \$965 million in damages to numerous families of victims of the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting for falsely claiming that they were actors who faked the tragedy.”¹ The Dutch government has decided to join several other European countries in banning the “British conspiracy theorist David Icke from the Netherlands because he is a threat to public order.”²

As its title might suggest, most of the chapters in the volume discuss the relationship between conspiracy theories and religion. The editors invite us to consider three possibilities: conspiracy theories *in*, conspiracy *as*, and conspiracy *about* religion. Michael Wood and Karen Douglas ask, “Are Conspiracy Theories a Surrogate for God?” Their answer is that they can be in so far as they share a considerable number of characteristics but, Wood and Douglas conclude, “they are different enough not to be psychologically interchangeable” (p. 100). Tao T. Makeeff’s provocative question—one unlikely to have occurred to many of his readers—is: “Was Aristotle an anti-Semitic alien?” The answer, we are told, is to be found by investigating contemporary Greek anti-Semitic conspiracy theories concerning the Epsilon Team (*Epsilon Omada*), “a secret society that is described as having its origins in both ancient Greece and outer space” (p. 362). Epsilonist antisemitism, Makeeff informs us, is significantly influenced by reworkings of the *Protocols*, distributed by Greek Orthodox clergy and “absorbed into a variety of narratives thriving in the cultic milieu” (p. 385).

Although conspiracy theories have clearly been initiated and encouraged by Christian theology—particularly parts that lay weight on the Book of Revelation—they certainly are not confined to Christian circles. Barbara De Poli writes about anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist conspiracisms in the Arab world; Iselin Frydenlund writes about Buddhist Islamophobia; and Sven Bretfeld writes about conspiracy narratives in Sri Lankan Buddhism. Tsuji Ryutaro writes about the role of conspiracy theories in promoting and justifying the Aum Shinrikyo incident, when sarin gas was released in the Tokyo underground. Helen Farley demonstrates the ways in which both Falun Gong and the People’s Republic of China construct conspiracy theories, each party claiming rationality and legitimacy for itself while presenting the “other” as irrational and illegitimate.

Perhaps the three chapters that will be of particular interest to readers of RASCEE are those by Cecilie Endresen, Michael Hagemester, and Victor Shnirelman. Endresen argues that a conspicuous feature of Albanian culture is the prevalence of conspiracy theories, the basic plot being that Albanians are the heirs to the civilization and primordial religion of the pre-classical Pelasgians, and that Pelasgic myths “turn one of the poorest and most powerless populations in Europe into the masters of the universe” (p. 357). Hagemester’s chapter, “The Third Rome against the Third Temple: Apocalypticism and Conspiracism in Post-Soviet Russia,” features the influential use and amplifications of the *Protocols* by Sergei Nilus (1862–1929) and various philosophers, thinkers, monks, priests, and other writers who have elaborated theories of Russian history, “culminating in Marxism and communism as the most complete expression of the kabbalistic, talmudic, Satanical spirit of Judaism” (p. 429).

Shnirelman’s chapter entitled “Alexander Dugin: Between Eschatology, Esotericism, and Conspiracy Theory” concentrates on the shifting ideas of Dugin (b. 1962), who has presented himself variously as a member of the SS Black Order, an occult scientist, an Old Believer, an Eurasianist, a political scientist—and a sociologist (p. 443). At one time, Dugin taught that it was the God-bearing Russian people of Russia, whom he identified with the “Soviet Empire,” who could save the world from the Antichrist (p. 448). Taken together, the contributions by Shnirelman and Hagemester could make Putin’s war on Ukraine and the support that

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/legal/jury-begins-third-day-deliberations-alex-jones-sandy-hook-defamation-trial-2022-10-12/>

² <https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2022/11/dutch-ban-british-conspiracy-theorist-david-icke-from-entering-nl/>

he evidently has from a significant number of his fellow Russians more understandable to western democrats than they might otherwise be.³

Even—perhaps especially—if we reject what we label as conspiracy theories, it could be a mistake not to take them seriously. This volume takes the subject seriously. Trying to understand those who do not think like us is the task of the social scientist and, not least, of the student of religion. This handbook presents us with a number of very real challenges.

The one reservation I have is the size of the print, which is tiny. However, had the font been any larger, I would have had even greater difficulty in lifting the book.

Reference

DUFFY, BOBBY. October 2022. "Truth under attack? Belief in terrorism conspiracy theories among the UK public." The Policy Unit, King's College London. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/truth-under-attack.pdf> (Date of retrieval: 10 November 2022).

³ Dugin has, in fact, been a strong supporter of Putin's attack on Ukraine, and although he was reportedly furious with Putin following the retreat from Kherson, he has been quick to insist "No one has turned their back on Putin, I and all Russian patriots support him unconditionally." USA Today News, 13 November 2022, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2022/11/13/live-ukraine-russia-war-updates/10690364002/>