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ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES A SURROGATE FOR GOD?

Abstract

In recent decades, the decline of traditional religion in the West has been matched by a rise in the visibility of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories seem to fulfil some of the psychological needs addressed by religion, such as imposing a sense of order and agency upon the seemingly random and capricious world. Some of the same underlying psychological dispositions, such as cognitive style and probabilistic reasoning ability, appear to give rise to both. Moreover, many conspiracy beliefs have parallels in content and structure to religious beliefs: some propose an Edenic existence that was ended only by the interference of a conspiring group, while others anticipate an apocalyptic catastrophe that will be either brought about or welcomed by a cabal eager to see the end of civilization as we know it. These patterns have led some scholars to question whether conspiracy theories are, in some sense, a replacement for religious belief in an increasingly secular society. In this chapter, we present an initial examination of this question from a primarily psychological perspective, examining the parallels between conspiratorial and religious belief systems and discussing the extent to which they complement and contradict one another.

Psychologists have taken a scientific interest in religion since at least the early 20th century, when William James's publication of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) made the case for investigating religious experiences as one might study any other human experience. Interest in conspiracy theories is rather more recent; only in the wake of the John F. Kennedy assassination did psychologists begin to investigate why people differ in the degree to which they think the world is run by secretive conspiracies (Hamsher, Geller, & Rotter 1968). Well before the systematic study of the psychology of conspiracy theories

began, though, there was speculation that conspiracy theories and religions might have similar psychological causes - that conspiracy theories can be thought of as a sort of secular religion. Popper (1945: 294), writing on grand conspiracy theories in which all significant events are secretly planned by unseen agents of near-omnipotent power, noted that there is little epistemic difference between such conspirators and "the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War." According to this perspective, conspiracy theories are therefore "the secularization of a religious superstition" - a surrogate, perhaps, for God.

The idea of conspiracy theories as a sort of religion (or a replacement for religion) has proven influential (Coady 2006; Franks, Bangerter, & Bauer 2013). While there have been few attempts to synthesise the psychology of conspiracy with the psychology of religion, there are indeed some instructive parallels between the two. Research on the psychological phenomenon of compensatory control indicates that beliefs in conspiracy theories (Whitson & Galinsky 2008) and religious beliefs (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash 2010) are both strengthened by threatening events that prompt uncertainty. In this sense, they are both thought to function as a way of affirming that the world is a place that can be known and controlled. Both types of belief may also be related to judgements of the world as a fundamentally just or unjust place, where people either do (or do not) get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Rubin & Peplau 1975). Religious belief and conspiracy belief are both more likely among people with certain patterns of cognitive style and reasoning ability (Brotherton & French 2014; Gervais & Norenzayan 2012). Finally, researchers have speculated that both successful religious beliefs and successful conspiracy theories possess the quality of minimal counterintuitivity - of being just unusual enough to be memorable without being so unusual as to be completely implausible (Franks et al. 2013). This is visible in both the thematic parallels between conspirators and more supernatural agents and in the

symbiotic relationship between the content of religion and conspiracy theories. In general, both types of belief seem to occur among similar people and in similar situations, and to involve broadly similar content, though they also diverge in some important ways.

Detection of patterns and agency

Both religious belief and belief in conspiracy theories are thought to emanate from a general human tendency toward detecting patterns and agency in nature. That is, people are hard-wired to look for instances of cause and effect in the world, or to detect the influence of other actors when seeking to explain events around them (Kelley 1973; Douglas *et al.* 2016). By this account, when a threatening event has no obvious cause, or an ostensible cause that is not psychologically satisfying in some way, people attribute it to the intervention of supernatural beings or to a conspiracy of near-supernatural power (McCauley & Jacques 1973; Leman & Cinnirella 2007, 2013). For example, when the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami devastated Indonesia and the surrounding nations, there was no shortage of claims that the disaster was caused by something other than unpredictable shifting of the Earth's tectonic plates. Some explained the disaster as an act of punishment by a vengeful God (Paul & Nadiruzza 2013), while others claimed that the Indian, Israeli, or U.S. governments conspired to cause the tsunami via underwater nuclear detonations or advanced electromagnetic weaponry (Sheaffer 2005). In 2011, when an earthquake in Japan precipitated another tsunami and a large-scale nuclear disaster, both divinity and conspiracy were again invoked to explain what others saw as a random tragedy (Dwyer 2011; Huff 2011). In both of these cases, a disaster produced by the inscrutable forces of nature was instead attributed to an invisible, powerful agent acting deliberately on a particular motive. William James, the first psychologist to study religion, wrote of an earthquake which he could not help but perceive as the product of deliberate agency:

"Animus and intent were never more present in any human action, nor did any human

activity ever more definitely point back to a living agent as its source and origin. All whom

I consulted on the point agreed as to this feature in their experience. 'It expressed

intention', 'It was vicious', 'It was bent on destruction', 'It wanted to show its power', or

what not. To me, it wanted simply to manifest the full meaning of its name. But what was

this 'It'? To some, apparently, a vague demonic power; to me an individualized being ...

One informant interpreted it as the end of the world and the beginning of the final

judgment. This was a lady in a San Francisco hotel, who did not think of its being an

earthquake till after she had got into the street and some one had explained it to her. She

told me that the theological interpretation had kept fear from her mind, and made her take

the shaking calmly. For 'science', when the tensions in the earth's crust reach the breaking-

point, and strata fall into an altered equilibrium, earthquake is simply the collective *name* of

all the cracks and shakings and disturbances that happen. They *are* the earthquake. But for

me the earthquake was the *cause* of the disturbances, and the perception of it as a living

agent was irresistible. It had an overpowering dramatic convincingness. I realize now better

than ever how inevitable were men's earlier mythologic versions of such catastrophes, and

how artificial and against the grain of our spontaneous perceiving are the later habits into

which science educates us.' (1983, p. 332-333)

For James, the impulse to perceive agency in nature is an instinctive human reaction. The

scientific mindset of seeing events like earthquakes as random, undirected, and goalless is

unnatural and unintuitive. The tendency to perceive humanlike, goal-directed agency where

none exists is known as *agenticity*, and it is an extension of a larger phenomenon known as

patternicity (Shermer 2009), the detection of patterns in noise. Obvious examples of

patternicity include seeing faces in the Martian landscape or grilled cheese sandwiches -

although people might know on an intellectual level that mountains and burn marks form

according to deterministic physical processes and these images are illusory, they nevertheless

recognise patterns and form judgements based on them. Psychologists have long speculated

about why agenticity and patternicity are such a common element of the human experience

(Atran & Norenzayan 2004). Some (for instance, Shermer 2009) suggest that it is an evolutionary adaptation - that people are better off making Type I errors (false positives) than Type II errors (false negatives). The cost of a false positive might be quite small (for instance, being startled by an oddly-shaped bush that looks like a predator) while the cost of a false negative might be quite high (for instance, dismissing a predator as simply an oddly-shaped bush and being caught off-guard by it). Patternicity, the reasoning goes, is therefore adaptive. The same logic can be invoked to explain our tendency toward agenticity. As Popper (1946) acknowledged, conspiracies happen very frequently on an interpersonal scale - it is not controversial to say that two or more people might conspire to bully or harass someone, or to gain an unfair advantage over others. As social animals, it pays for humans to be vigilant against conspiracies and to look out for instances of others cheating the system, colluding to gain an advantage, or otherwise violating social norms of fair play. Suspicion can be useful and rational, and the ability to perceive the same agency behind seemingly unconnected events can pay major dividends. In general, under this account, it is better to see patterns in noise than to miss real patterns. Patternicity and agenticity therefore both result from a signal-detection bias with a long evolutionary history.

Compensatory control

Whatever people's innate bias toward detecting patterns and agency might be, recent work has shown that it can be manipulated in the laboratory. In an influential series of experiments, Whitson and Galinsky (2008) demonstrated that the tendency toward patternicity can be raised or lowered by inducing a feeling of having or lacking control. People who are made to feel a lack of control over their lives are more likely to see illusory images in collections of random dots, to come up with superstitious explanations for events, and to explain ambiguous social situations by speculating about hidden conspiracies. The authors argued that this

induced increase in patternicity is a form of *compensatory control* (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky 2009): when someone's sense of control over their life is threatened, they try to compensate for it by affirming a sense of order elsewhere. Turning to an omnipresent God, reaffirming one's belief in public institutions, affirming deeply held values, and spotting conspiracies, patterns, and superstitions all help to restore a lost sense of control by making the world seem orderly and knowable. If an earthquake is the result of tectonic plates shifting along inscrutably, there is not much that can be done about it. If instead the earthquake was caused by human agents, however powerful, perhaps they can be stopped somehow. In agreement with the compensatory control account of conspiracy theory belief, research shows that people with an external locus of control - that is, a general sense of lacking control over their own lives - are more likely than others to believe in conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Hamsher et al. 1968). However, as with much research on individual differences in conspiracy theory belief, the causal direction is not clear - it is possible that people might shift from a relatively internal locus of control to a relatively external one as a result of coming to believe that the world is ruled by nefarious conspiracies.

Religion also serves a compensatory control function; recent work has shown that religious conviction is boosted by events that threaten a sense of personal control (Kay et al. 2010). To continue the earthquake example, if an earthquake is the result of God's wrath, then perhaps God can be propitiated, or at least his wrath can be predicted. This would increase feelings of control and provide a palliative for a sense of external control or helplessness. Though religious belief is clearly relevant for feelings of control, the relationship is not straightforward, and seems to be moderated by a number of interacting demographic variables, as well as the type of religion in question. The 'collaborative' approach to religious belief emphasises a mutual working relationship between the believer and God, while the 'deferring' approach involves the believer relinquishing feelings of

personal responsibility to God entirely (Pargament et al. 1988). Finally, the 'spiritual surrender' approach involves selectively surrendering control over seemingly uncontrollable situations to God, while maintaining personal responsibility most of the time. This third approach is positively associated with feelings of control (Cole & Pargament 1999; Fiori et al. 2006), and internal control is particularly associated with religious belief among older adults (Fiori et al. 2006).

In general, then, compensatory control processes provide a palliative function for a feeling of lacking control by affirming the existence of powerful external forces that transcend the self. We have seen that these external forces can include both conspiracies and supernatural beings. However, one particularly well-studied form of compensatory control involves an external force that is less nebulous, mysterious, or mystical than those reviewed above. *System justification* describes the tendency to affirm the values of the social system one is a part of, be it religious, economic, or political. System justification is a general psychological tendency, but paradoxically, it is particularly pronounced among people who belong to disadvantaged groups. Women, the poor, and ethnic minorities tend to display stronger system justification motives than men, the rich or the middle class, and ethnic majorities (for a review, see Jost & Banaji 2004). In this way, the system justification motive acts as a counterweight to the motive to improve one's own lot in life, or to advocate for the advancement of one's own social group.

Research into the cognitive correlates of system justification (Jost et al. 2013) indicates that it shares many of its social-psychological motives with religiosity. Both religion and system justification make people happier with social conditions that are largely out of their control, and more religious people tend to be more conservative and authoritarian (Leak & Randall 1995), and to believe more strongly in a just world (Rubin & Peplau 1975). Some systems of religious belief and some conspiracy theories can be seen as methods of system

justification, as part of a larger drive toward compensatory control. Conspiracy theories about global warming are a prime example of this: the system justification motive increases resistance to the scientific consensus on climate change (Douglas & Sutton 2015; Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith 2010). That is not the whole story of conspiracy theories, of course, nor is religion simply a way of justifying the systems around us. That much is abundantly clear, both from the conspiracy theories that provide a counter-narrative to larger social systems which are seen as rotten, unfair, and morally bankrupt (Sapountzis & Condor 2013), and from systems of religious practice such as liberation theology.

The above explanations make some degree of intuitive sense, but some caution is warranted. While the moderating role of compensatory control in pattern recognition has been confirmed by a recent meta-analysis (Landau, Kay, & Whitson 2015), it is not unequivocally clear that beliefs in conspiracy theories are best understood as an expression of patternicity. Recent research has shown no evidence of a correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and the tendency to perceive intentional patterns in sequences of coin flips (Dieguez, Wagner-Egger, & Gauvrit 2015).

Reasoning ability and cognitive style

An important individual difference variable linked to patternicity and agenticity is the ability to engage in probabilistic reasoning. When presented with a set of events, someone might see their conjunction as a coincidence, or they might interpret it as evidence of a causal connection. Just as compensatory control changes how people distinguish order from randomness, their capacity for probabilistic reasoning influences how they judge whether something is coincidental. A classic example of this is thinking about someone and then immediately receiving a telephone call from them. This is a very common experience, and is often ascribed to paranormal causes (Schmidt, Erath, Ivanova, & Wallach 2009). Likewise, a

particular pattern of stock trading before a terrorist attack might be seen as either business as usual or as evidence of stock market manipulation based on foreknowledge of the attack. Evidence from psychological studies suggests that performance on probabilistic reasoning tasks is negatively correlated with beliefs in conspiracy theories (Brotherton & French 2014), and that general reasoning ability is negatively correlated with religiosity (Hergovich & Arendasy 2005). Under this explanation, then, some people tend to systematically underestimate the chance of random events occurring in conjunction with one another - for instance, they find it extremely unlikely that they would happen to receive a phone call from someone just after thinking about them, when it might in fact be moderately likely. These people then attribute those coincidental events to a common cause, which is often supernatural or conspiratorial in nature, leading to increased paranormal, superstitious, or conspiracy beliefs.

If this is so, it would match a great deal of primary sources on the process by which producers of conspiracy theories come up with new explanations for events. Conspiracist luminaries like Alex Jones, Jim Marrs, David Icke, and any number of Youtube superstars speak of connecting the dots, and of seeing the links between supposedly separate pieces of information that bring them all together into a cohesive whole (Brotherton 2015). Psychologists refer to this big-picture style of thinking as *holistic*. Holistic thinking is concerned with the interrelationships between the various elements of something, seeing the bigger picture rather than the individual components of it. The complement of holistic thinking is *analytic* thinking, which is concerned with careful examination and consideration of the individual parts of a larger whole. While everyone engages in both holistic and analytic thinking, people tend to favour one or the other to varying extents, and this can have profound effects on the ways in which people think about the world. People who think more analytically in general tend to be more skeptical of conspiracy theories, and inducing analytic

thinking in a laboratory setting can reduce belief in conspiracy theories as well (Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran, & Furnham 2014). Similarly, many investigations have linked holistic thinking with religious belief (Pennycook, Shane, Barr, Koehler, & Fugelsang 2013): just as conspiracy thinking can be attenuated by analytic thinking, so too can religious belief (Gervais & Norenzayan 2012). With its sensitivity to context, tendency to take a broad view of matters, and sometime disregard contradictory details (also viewable in belief in conspiracy theories; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton 2012; Irwin, Dagnall, & Drinkwater 2015), it makes sense that holistic cognition would be associated with abnormal, transcendent, or paranormal beliefs.

In line with this general characterisation, holistic thinkers tend to be higher in trait schizotypy (Wolfradt *et al.*1999). Schizotypy is a continuum of everyday psychological experience that ranges from normality to psychosis, and everyone is located somewhere along it. While people lower in schizotypy are likely to be relatively conventional, people on the higher range of the schizotypal spectrum are more likely to have anomalous (paranormal or religious) experiences and to believe unusual things, like conspiracy theories or unconventional spiritualities (Barron et al. 2014; Bruder et al. 2013; Dagnall et al. 2014; Darwin, Neave, & Holmes 2011). In general, then, there is abundant evidence that both conspiracy theory belief and religious belief are fostered by a particular set of cognitive and perceptual characteristics.

Belief in a just world

Conspiracy theory belief may also be fostered by people's perceptions of the justness of the world around them. According to the *Just World Hypothesis* in psychology (Lerner 1980; Lerner & Lerner 1981) people have a strong motivation to view the world as just, orderly, safe, and predictable. People are uncomfortable believing that the world is random and that

bad things happen for no reason at all. In a just world, people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. According to Lerner, there are important reasons why people hold this belief. To make plans and achieve their goals, people need to feel that their actions will have predictable outcomes. They also need to believe that the actions of others will lead to similarly predictable outcomes. Therefore if someone suffers in a just world, it is quite likely that they deserved it. By convincing themselves that the world is just, people will therefore derogate victims of rape, murder and other injustices because in a just world, these things would not happen unless the victims were responsible in some way (Callan, Ellard & Nicol 2006; Dalbert 2009; Sutton et al. 2008; Testé & Perrin 2013). Just world beliefs feature prominently in morality tales that people have grown up with, where good is rewarded and evildoers get their just deserts. The belief in a just world is therefore constantly reinforced.

This belief is a common feature of many religious doctrines. For example, in Buddhism and Hinduism, the concept of 'karma' holds that the actions of an individual influence the future of that individual. So, if people do good deeds they will be rewarded in life, but their bad actions may return to haunt them. Indeed in Hinduism, a person's status (caste) in life is assumed to be the result of their virtues or sins from a previous existence. In Christianity, people are judged for their deeds on earth once they have died and come to face their god. Further, the belief that an all-powerful god orders the world both encourages and supports just world beliefs. It is easier to explain that something bad happened to a person because they were a 'sinner' than to try to explain it in other ways. In empirical support of the link between belief in a just world and religious belief, Rubin and Peplau (1975) found that people who have a tendency to believe in a just world also tend to be more religious.

The belief in a just world would, however, appear to be at odds with belief in conspiracy theories. In a just world, why would secret powers be able to get away with their misdeeds when they ought to be punished? On the contrary, recent research suggests that

conspiracy beliefs may actually serve to justify the status quo (Jolley, Douglas & Sutton, in preparation). By attributing negative actions to a small group of malevolent individuals, the perception that society, as a whole, is fair (operationalised in this research by the related concept of system justification; Jost & Banaji 1994), can be upheld. Research is needed to establish the precise role of just world belief in this process, but it is likely that the fundamental need to see the world as just would be associated with conspiracy beliefs that depict negative events in society as the responsibility of malicious and unjust groups rather than the justness of the world itself.

Just world beliefs may also influence what people do as a result of exposure to conspiracy theories. For example, Jolley and Douglas (2014a,b) have shown that conspiracy theories lead people to be more apathetic in several domains. Specifically, exposure to conspiracy theories leads to lower intentions to vote, vaccinate, and take action to reduce one's carbon footprint. Rubin and Peplau (1975) showed that believers in a just world, like believers in conspiracy theories, tend to feel less of a need to engage in activities to change society or alleviate the plight of social victims. It may therefore be the case that conspiracy belief and just world belief are closely tied together and determine what people care to do about societal problems. It is also possible to link these ideas to religious belief. That is, if people believe that a god will fix the ills of society, then they do not have to do anything themselves and can remain indifferent to attempts to establish justice. Ironically, therefore, both belief in a just world and conspiracy belief may take the place of commitment to justice and may even impede justice.

Thematic parallels and concordant worldviews

The parallels between religion and conspiracy theories go beyond the psychological explanations that have been deployed to account for them. Conspiracy theories sometimes

have a strong religious component, and some religious beliefs are explicitly conspiracist in nature. Thematic parallels are unsurprising, but psychologically important. Like any idea, a conspiracy theory is more likely to be accepted when it fits into an established worldview, or when it otherwise agrees with what we already believe. Devout Christians are likely to reject *Da Vinci Code* type conspiracy theories about the early Catholic church tampering with the Biblical canon, while people who are less traditionally religious and more aligned with New Age spirituality find these theories considerably more plausible (Newheiser et al. 2011). Given that religious beliefs lend themselves well to the development of broad worldviews, it is unsurprising that many successful conspiracy theories build upon a foundation of religious belief, or draw upon religious symbolism in more subtle ways.

For instance, in the United States, Evangelical Christian beliefs about the End Times frequently incorporate a global government as a vehicle for the rise of the Antichrist (Barkun 2013; Patterson 1998). Evangelical concern about a Satanic global government usurping the powers of individual nation-states was historically associated with anti-communist activism, as global communism was thought to be the ultimate instrument of the Antichrist's plan for world domination. Since the end of the Cold War, evangelical concern about global government has shifted from an explicitly anti-Soviet mentality to more general fears about the so-called 'New World Order,' and has given rise to organised political opposition to barcodes, RFID chips, and national identification numbers as potential 'Marks of the Beast' (Sullivan 2012). The spread of evangelical New World Order theories has been aided by popular Christian films and TV series which incorporate conspiratorial themes and imagery in their portrayal of the apocalypse. An instructive example is the book and film series *Left Behind* (LaHaye & Jenkins 1995), which merges John Birch-style anti-Soviet paranoia with post-Cold War worries about a leftist New World Order. For LaHaye and Jenkins, the Satanic global government will be a politically correct New Age empire known as the 'Global

Community.' Echoing the debt owed by mid-century American eschatological thought to the writings of the John Birch Society (and rather anachronistically, for a series set at the turn of the millennium), it will be brought about by a financial conspiracy masterminded by an analogue of John D. Rockefeller. Tellingly, the series retains the Cold War-era evangelical orthodoxy that the End Times will start with a failed Russian attempt at invading Israel.

Many conspiracy theories which do not incorporate overt religious content nevertheless show their intellectual debt to particular religious or mythological ideas. 'Superconspiracies' - conspiracy worldviews which incorporate many individual theories into a larger plot (Barkun 2013) - are often tinged with a sense of urgency, under the reasoning that the conspirators' plan is finally coming to fruition and that they will soon unleash their ultimate plan for world domination. Conspiracy media figures such as Alex Jones constantly warn of the impending victory of the conspirators (Jones 2015), and explicitly apocalyptic theories like those about the Nibiru cataclysm (Reyes & Smith 2014) are entirely concerned with the idea of an oncoming apocalypse. While David Icke is widely known for his thesis that the world is run by shape-shifting reptilian beings from another dimension, less well-known is his interpretation of the Abrahamic creation myth, in which humanity and Earth existed in a state of balance and harmony before the interference of evil reptiles caused a catastrophic fall from grace (Icke 2012). For Icke, rather than a garden, paradise was an implausible celestial configuration in which Earth orbited Saturn, which was a second sun at the time; rather than humanity being exiled from Eden for its sins, the interference of the reptilians (who arrived in the solar system in their spacecraft, the hollow Moon) resulted in Earth being thrown about in a game of celestial billiards (cf. Sagan 1979) until it came to rest in its current orbit. Now, the adversary waits in the shadows, but very soon it will unmask itself and seize power using a genocidal, communistic world government.

Putting aside the considerable influences from other sources (both the esoteric, like Immanuel Velikovsky's ideas of planetary-scale catastrophism and Erich von Daniken's ancient astronaut theories, and the popular, like Icke's ongoing references to the *Matrix* trilogy and the influence of *Star Wars* in his assertion that the Moon is actually an evil space station; Icke 2013), Icke's mythos is immediately understandable as a new twist on a very old story. It diverges considerably from Christian orthodoxy, but there are clear parallels: an Edenic existence was destroyed by the influence of a reptilian outsider who then lurks in the shadows, biding its time and causing chaos. Icke's eschatology also borrows heavily from the more conventional New World Order theories espoused by American evangelical Christians (cf. Robertson 2013). For those with a background rooted in western Christian culture, the material is familiar, yet different enough to stand out as memorable.

Minimal counterintuitiveness

An important concept in the cognitive science of religion is that of minimal counterintuitiveness, or MCI (Boyer 1994). If something is MCI, it is easier to remember than something that is entirely intuitive or maximally counterintuitive (for a critical review, see Purzycki & Willard 2015). Something is classified as MCI if it violates one or two deep ontological intuitions about the fundamental properties of the basic category of objects it belongs to, such as ANIMAL, TOOL, PLANT, or PERSON (Barrett 2008). For instance, a very basic intuition about plants - one thought to be more or less innate - is that they do not possess the capacity for speech. As such, a singing tree would be MCI because it violates the "no speech" property of the PLANT category. Further violations of deep intuitions may render the object maximally counterintuitive - for instance, if the tree not only sings, but also does calculus, eats hamburgers, and can turn invisible, its counterintuitiveness is no longer minimal. A related concept, and one that is easy to conflate with MCI, is counter-

schematicity. Something can be classified as counter-schematic if it does not violate deep ontological intuitions about a basic object category, but instead violates relatively shallow cultural or learned expectations about the category it belongs to. A dog with scales would be counter-schematic because we know that dogs are furry rather than scaly, but it would not be MCI because it does not violate our most basic intuitions about the ANIMAL category (that animals move around on their own, cannot pass through solid objects, etc.).

Minimal counterintuitiveness and counter-schematicity are important concepts here because of their relevance to the memorability and spread of religious narratives and other cultural artefacts. A number of researchers (e.g. Atran & Norenzayan, 2004) have argued that many figures in religious narratives, such as gods, spirits, and saints, are MCI. A ghost, for instance, can be thought of as an MCI variation on the PERSON category (as it breaches the assumption of corporeality). Much work in the cognitive science of religion concerns the finding that MCI concepts are easier to remember than fully intuitive, maximally counterintuitive, or simply counter-schematic ones; this has been proposed as a possible reason for the spread and persistence of many religious beliefs (Boyer 1994; Sperber 1996). This memory effect has also been deployed to account for the popularity of conspiracy theories. In particular, Franks et al. (2013) proposed that all conspiracy theories are at least minimally counterintuitive. Specifically, the suspected conspirators are seen as unusually, perhaps supernaturally competent within a certain domain. For Franks et al., the success of a conspiracy theory is a function of its minimal counterintuitiveness. However, it is unclear whether conspiracy theories are generally MCI in the sense that they violate basic ontological assumptions about fundamental categories of objects in the world (like a tree that can sing), or are simply counter-schematic, in the sense that they violate our expectations but do not run counter to very deep assumptions about the nature of basic object categories (like a scaly dog, or, indeed, a scaly human).

Ultimately, the difference between an MCI concept and a counter-schematic concept may be one of degree (Purzycki & Willard 2015). While there seems to be a memory advantage for MCI over counter-schematic concepts (Johnson et al. 2010), Purzycki (2010, 2011) demonstrated that concepts that are at once MCI and counter-schematic are more memorable than concepts that are only one or neither, and that counter-schematic concepts tend to be perceived as funnier than MCI ones. In the current Western context, conspiracy theories are almost invariably counter-schematic; they generally present themselves in opposition to a dominant system of belief that is actually a pawn of the conspirators, and lend themselves to a provocatively different worldview from what is in the mainstream (Wood et al. 2012, 2013). While a conspiracy theory garners the most agreement when it is generally in line with someone's broader belief systems (Newheiser et al. 2011), a divergence from mainstream worldviews generally adds something counter-schematic. For instance, the existence of a world-controlling conspiracy is not far removed from the already largely invisible deliberations of elected governments and diplomats. Likewise, many conspiracy theories posit secretive, advanced technologies that are many decades ahead of current public understanding (Begich 1995) - weather control and other science-fiction weaponry are certainly counter-schematic when applied to real life.

There is much work still to be done in this area. Even in the context of religion, where the MCI concept originates, it is not clear to what extent the increased memorability of MCI concepts translates into increased transmission or spread (Purzycki & Willard, 2015). More specifically, it is not clear to what degree conspiracy theories tend to be intuitive, maximally counterintuitive, MCI, counter-schematic, or some combination. While Franks et al. (2013) are certainly correct that conspiring agents are sometimes ascribed supernatural or near-supernatural powers, it is not clear that this is always or even usually the case, or that when it does happen that it constitutes an MCI property rather than a simply counter-schematic one.

Moreover, Franks et al. (2013) gave the example of David Icke's shape-shifting reptilian aliens as a *maximally* counterintuitive concept, but they may be one of the few examples of genuinely *minimally* counterintuitive conspirators, as they are essentially humans with one or two major breaches of the PERSON category (noncorporeality or the ability to take on different physical forms, depending on which revision of Icke's lizard thesis is at issue) and several counter-schematic properties (extreme malevolence, extraterrestrial origin, technological advancement, and scaliness).

The social dimension of belief

Finally, we turn from the content of beliefs to the functions they serve. In an incisive exploration of the parallels between conspiracy theories and religious beliefs, Franks et al. (2013) highlighted one aspect in which the two diverge considerably: the role of social interaction and community. While both conspiracy theories and religious beliefs have a clear social dimension, the communitarian aspects of religion are much more salient. Religious practices, particularly attendance, are associated with greater social connectedness and better health outcomes (George, Ellison, & Larson 2002). Conspiracy theories might mobilise a group or motivate them to collective action over some perceived injustice, but they do not, in general, provide a clear social structure around which communities are built. There is no research as yet on the relationship between conspiracy belief and social connectedness, but very few conspiracy theories have a codified system of ritual or practice that would necessitate community participation and foster social connectedness in the same way that systems of religious belief and practice do. Moreover, while religiosity is generally positively associated with civic participation and prosocial behaviour (Smidt 1999; though see Schwadel 2005), belief in (or at least exposure to) conspiracy theories seems to show the opposite effect (Jolley & Douglas 2014a,b).

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed several lines of evidence which indicate an isomorphism between conspiracy theories and religious beliefs. Their psychological antecedents are similar: they can both help to restore a lost sense of control in various ways, and are both associated with holistic thinking and schizotypy rather than analytic thinking and probabilistic reasoning. Both conspiracy theories and religious beliefs can serve to impose order upon the world in broad strokes, providing a context that resolves troubling ambiguity and gives meaning to things that might otherwise seem disconnected and meaningless in isolation. On the cultural side, the conspiracist and religious worldviews draw upon one another, with conspiracy theories informing emerging religious doctrines and religious mythology providing a source of raw material for conspiracist speculation. Yet conspiracy theories and religious beliefs tend to diverge on key points: they may appear to have opposite relationships with the idea that the world is just, and have a very different social dimension - while social cohesion and shared ritual are a primary feature of religious belief systems, the same cannot be said of most conspiracy theories. In general, from a psychological perspective, similar motivations underlie both conspiracy belief and religious belief, and there are overlaps in the content and style of both belief systems, but they are different enough not to be psychologically interchangeable.

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