Conspirituality as Religious Conspiracism

Recent Developments of a Research Field

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Introduction

The term "conspirituality" was introduced into academic use in 2011[1] (Ward/Voas 2011), connecting conspiracy beliefs and alternative spirituality. It was gradually adopted over the following years and is currently used in a burgeoning field of research.

The term has an intuitive appeal by the way two words are combined into a seemingly clear meaning. However, that clarity of meaning is misleading. First, the intuition that spirituality has to be "alternative" and that spirituality is something other than "religion" is not necessarily shared. These can also be seen as fluid and overlapping discourses, with identities flowing between the positions depending on the situation. Why should conspirituality not cover religion in general? Second, even as a defined term, conspirituality has always been lacking in precision. When precision has been promised, it has been misleading. This started with the original formulation, where definition and practical use diverged. This may have been fortunate, since the definition would have narrowly focused on only one part of a field, whereas a broader outlook yields a better understanding of both the empirical field and underlying factors. I have, with Egil Asprem, already argued for opening the definition chronologically and typologically (e.g. Asprem/Dyrendal 2015, 2018). I currently lean towards thinking it should be opened further or dropped. The argument can be summarised roughly as follows:

1 The first confirmed academic use I have found is earlier, but it seems to be a one-time substitute for, or perhaps misspelling of, "conspiratorial" (in Zavitz-Gocan 2008: 5).

1. Conspirituality in the original definition is too restrictive. It is in fact not adhered to by even those who cite it as their understanding of the term. Moreover, while what does influence ongoing research has some good, practical uses, there are lingering problematic influences to be addressed. What goes by the name "conspirituality" is better understood *broadly*, as multi-scenic religious conspiracism, and participating in discourses and practices relating to "religion" and conspiracy.
2. If we are more interested in general explanations than specific ideological content, it becomes quite clear that participants in alternative spirituality and institutionalised religions often embrace conspiracy theories for the same reasons. There is some content-specificity and there may be some specific dynamics to the scenes encompassed by the early conceptualizations of conspirituality. However, many of these are subsumed by more general dynamics. Many of the mechanisms driving conspiracy thinking are general. This includes those driving the overlap between conspiracy thinking and the cultural practices deemed religious. This should mean that they are widely shared between different religious identities and across social and mediatised scenes.
3. Practice fields, which are central to constructing, adopting, and disseminating conspiracy narratives, often transcend religious boundaries. Practice fields are arenas where we can study the relational aspect of adopting or dismissing conspiracy beliefs. The fields sometimes have "globalised" reach, but they are also local and contextual and need deeper local and historical explanations in addition to the general mechanisms.

This chapter delves further into these issues. I stress commonalities and alliances, but the point is not to say these are all there is, it is to remind us to not forget them. The examples tend to follow my own interest in the more extreme and problematic, without intending to ignore the everyday and common.

1. From conspirituality 1.0 to religious dimensions of conspiracism

Conspirituality was first described by its scene and its types and origins of content (Ward/Voas 2011). The *scene* was construed as "the Internet", specifically the part of the internet where certain types of content meet. The *types* of content were defined as a combination of political thought on the one hand and spiritual philosophy on the other. The socio-cultural origins were, relatedly, New

Age culture and conspiracy culture, presented as newly and partially merging. From conspiracy culture came the conviction that (1) "a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order", while New Age contributed to (2) the conviction that "[h]umanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened 'new paradigm' worldview" (Ward/Voas 2011: 104).

This immediately raised some problems. With regard to the scene, there are important dynamics and developments relating to the internet, but divorcing online from offline behavior and sociality is simplistic. A sole focus on the internet (2.0) era also restricts our sense and understanding of historical continuities (Asprem/Dyrendal 2015). With regard to the origins and content, New Age is a complex term with multiple uses. This is where the definition in practice was abandoned from the start. The definition focuses on ideology and the millennial aspect of the New Age movement, or "New Age sensu stricto" (Hanegraaff 1996). When looking at social movement and demographic, already Charlotte Ward and David Voas changed focus to the broader New Age movement (*sensu lato*) (cf. Asprem/Dyrendal 2015: 369). When adding the broader to the narrow understanding, the millennialist theoreticians and related movements are joined by those within the wide variety of "alternative" beliefs and practice fields. The latter may then be included whether or not they partake in the millennialist expectations, and obviously also through their situated behaviors offline. Since participation in the broader fields of practice encompassed in New Age *sensu lato* is not exclusive, the identification of participants can differ from New Age.

Using the term "conspirituality" to cover conspiracism related to alternative practices and beliefs has become commonplace. The immediate and intuitive appeal of the term is that it calls up an image of vaguely defined spirituality immersed in conspiracy thinking, or adopting conspiracy theories strategically. This makes the term pliable. Anthropological work by Giovanna Parmigiani (2021, 2023) and Susannah Crockford (2021) presents conspirituality among a variety of alternative spiritualities in southern Italy and Arizona. They consciously deviate from the original definition they cite but they make no attempt at an alternative definition, leaving the reconstruction of the operationalised term to the interested reader. This is also true for valuable, semi-academic work by the men behind the popular *Conspirituality podcast*. They adopted both the term and the definition from Ward and Voas but their actual interests are much broader, both in the podcast and in their book (Beres et al. 2023). In fact, many of their empirical examples of conspirituality do

not address conspiracy beliefs. Their treatment of these cases instead focus on sets of practices, values, and beliefs that in certain situations encourage conspiracy beliefs. Conspirituality thus becomes contiguous to the broader set of practices within the scene of alternative spirituality, tied to the structure of the field and their place within a globalised, late capitalist socio-economic structure. The analysis is congruent with that of Crockford (2021).[2]

At what point does the overlap between religion and conspiracy belief become analytically interesting? Is it only at the larger degrees of overlap? As Asprem and I (2015) noted, we should never be surprised that we find conspiracy thinking in any given scene. Speculating about conspiracy, often on thin empirical grounds and motivated by identity protection, is not in itself a sign of abnormality. Suspecting others of hidden collaboration is normal and a thoroughly human behavior. Sometimes it is a fleeting expression of distrust and leaves little mark, at other times it can stabilise into a pattern of behavior. This relates in some way to the difference between using conspirituality for New Age in the strict and the loose sense. The strict sense, with a large contribution of conspiracism, seems more interesting. Ben Zeller (2024: 187) presents conspirituality as a form of spirituality where conspiracy thinking is *the* central pillar of belief; it permeates the religious worldview and practices so the spiritualities are based on conspiracy thinking. Brief flirtations with conspiracy theories from some actors within a scene are not in any way analytically uninteresting, but one could reasonably argue along these lines that the issue becomes more pressing if conspiracy thinking becomes central and lasting. However, it might be difficult to understand the situation Zeller describes if one has paid little to no interest to the everyday and normal.

This illustrates some of the differences and at times constructive vagueness in how analysts use conspirituality as a term even within the broader, contemporary New Age field. It does not become less so when we open up the field for other historical periods and for historically related (and less related) forms of religion. Asprem and I (2015, 2018) have suggested this should be a priority, as it allows us to do comparative work and formulate both general observations and more specific local ones. We started by pointing out that the overlap between conspiracism and alternative spiritualities was nothing new. Rather, it was a recurring phenomenon in the history of esotericism. We also noted

2 In the podcast, conspirituality is constructively extended to analyse events and practices in Roman Catholic and conservative Protestant circles as well as multiple other scenes.

that the motifs of conspiracy culture are full of references from and to esotericism. Indeed, conspiracy theories could constructively be seen as a form of esoteric discourse (Dyrendal 2013), and central, underlying factors driving conspiracy beliefs and "esotericism" are similar (Asprem/Dyrendal 2018: 218–227; cf. Dyrendal et al. 2017; Dyrendal/Tøllefsen 2023).

This way of approaching conspirituality originally adopted some of the initial focus points of Ward and Voas, stressing esoteric authors and groups as precursors to New Age. Later historical and comparative work has moved the field further, ranging geographically across the globe and historically from "the Bacchanalian conspiracy" (Pagán 2023) to the present. Sometimes this work is adopting conspirituality as a general term but often dropping the term for broader descriptions like the "religious dimensions of conspiracy theories" (Piraino et al. 2023).

2. Alliances and connections

Putting the focus on the "religious dimensions of conspiracy theories" allows for the employment of the language of "conspiracy theories as religion", emphasizing the content of narratives and/or beliefs. More generally, it employs the category of religion as the proper class of interest. This centers our attention differently than using a conspirituality term associated primarily with New Age. The latter can, as we shall see, make us overlook actual associations in the field, relating to both religion and spirituality as intersecting discursive resources, to hybrid social identities and to social relations in the field.

In an earlier analysis of the Norwegian conspiritual scene (Dyrendal 2015), I traced a history through a cultic milieu that had little use for the State Church (and vice versa). I also saw a tendency for the conspiritual scene to gradually divorce from the broader alternative milieu. In the aftermath of Anders Behring Breivik's mass murders in 2011, conspiracism was marginalised within the scene. This development had already been underway and, subsequently, we observed conspiracists increase activities in their own, separate, autonomous venues. It looked like a new movement was taking shape. However, connections to many alternative scenes remained. The dynamics driving conspiracy theorizing within the scenes were still active but conspiracist activities in the devoted media and physical meeting spaces slowed – until Covid.

Already during the early phases of Covid-19, it became clear that while conspirituality- entrepreneurs had their own devotees and spaces, the attraction

of conspiracy theories reached the alternative milieu more broadly, but also outside of it. Gathering-places online brought together "New Agers", conservative Christians, and secularists alike.[3] When the protests moved into physical spaces, the same could be observed: in Norway we saw adherents of charismatic Christian nationalism and alternative spiritualities gathered under the same banners to hear the same speeches (Dyrendal 2023). So did non- and anti-religious neo-Nazis, anarchic freemen-on-the-land, and old Maoists – with people belonging to neither extreme.

These alliances were nothing new, and with the concept of "conspiracism" as worldview, partially explained by a generalised conspiracy mentality, nor was it particularly surprising. I had seen it before, but in the search for mechanisms at work in a narrowly defined, alternative spirituality-derived conspirituality, I neglected to reflect sufficiently on what I had been observing – for instance, that central conspiritual scenes always also attracted some conservative Christians.[4] They were not only active commenters. At one point, one of the editors and most prolific writers of the main outlet for alternative conspirituality was a Nordic Israelite.[5] Others presented as having "their own kind of Christianity" combined with, for instance, a strongly conspiracist anti-Catholicism. Looking at more specifically Christian spaces where conspiracism flourished, there were always also several overlapping elements.

To return to the general point, we know that spirituality and religion are hybrid discourses and situational, often mixed identities: even as categories of self-identification in surveys, "religious" and "spiritual", partially overlap. Sometimes the area of overlap is large, sometimes smaller.[6] In surveys (Bainbridge 2004; cf. Tidelius 2024: 57), as in literature and interviews, we tend to find that many people draw their beliefs and practices from multiple sources

3 Thus illustrating some of the problems with these categories (cf. Cotter 2020).

4 It also always attracted some Nazis. Some of these did belong to some alternative scene. Others always jumped on any train that seemed to be moving and could be nudged in their direction. The Maoists were, to my knowledge, new with Covid. They had generally kept to their own scenes.

5 Nordic Israelism is a form of Christianity portraying the Nordic peoples as the "Lost Tribes" of Israel.

6 While I have seen reports of scales that differentiate well (e.g. Nasel/Haynes 2005), these are mostly on the level of highly specific beliefs. They may only cover the most prototypical and "conservative" members of specific identities. On the opposite side of the issue, I found that another established scale failed to differentiate between spiritual and religious in a Norwegian sample (Dyrendal/Hestad 2021).

(Partridge 2005). Certainly, there are clusters of actors that are higher in "orthodoxy" and share less in common with other positions in the religious fields. However, insisting that these varieties of, for example, Christianity or New Age are the main story, as the "purer" types, distracts from actual variety and hybridity. It can also mask some of the dynamics that create bridges between single actors and groups (e.g. Bawidamann 2024).

3. Interrelations and bridges

The bridges and bridging mechanisms are central to how content and epistemic capital can spread across group boundaries and reduce their importance. Some of these interrelations have been easy to overlook, others have been noted because they have been considered to be "surprising". There is an existing body of research on some of these relations, how and where they are enabled. Some of the content relates to "millennialism", an important mechanism is the embrace of socially "stigmatized knowledge-claims" (Barkun 2003), and important spaces for presenting them exist in popular (oc)culture (Partridge 2005, 2013).

Millennialism is often associated with conspiracy beliefs (e.g. Bawidamann, this volume), and it is one of the topics where we see a variety of group- and content-level bridges. We generally recognise that Western millennialism, even in New Age circles, tends to be highly influenced by Christian tropes, and that the Bible is often used as a source of authority. Conversely, the existence, symbols, and narratives of New Age ideas are funnelled into millennialist Christian discourse, albeit mostly confirming catastrophist narratives about a satanically inspired New Age movement. But New Age and Christian millennialism can co-exist within the same spaces. The millennialism of Ward and Voas' (2011) definition was more of a progressive, utopian awakening than a violent and catastrophic one. QAnon's "Great Awakening", tied as it is to violent images of mass executions, would seem a bad fit for their concept of conspirituality. However, while we find an overrepresentation of, for example, conservative Evangelicals among those who adopt this narrative (PRRI 2021), the New Age, "pastel QAnon" types (Bloom/Moskalenko 2022) were there from the start. Ideas could and did flow between religious positions, and people from Evangelical and New Age circles joined in coordinated activities, both online and offline.

What brought them together? Clearly, the parties brought somewhat different narratives and expectations with them. The New Age *sensu lato* that constitutes the larger part of conspirituality practice, as it has been understood generally, is much less invested in millennialist ideation than are Evangelicals, but they do have utopian dreams. Among the clearly apocalyptic QAnon dreams, we can for instance recognise promises about miracle remedies for any illness (e.g. Sommer 2023), as well as for economic destitution (e.g. Rothschild 2021). We may associate these visions with alternative practice fields, but they are not specific to alternative spirituality. They draw rather on socio-economic niches, situations and practices that differentiate badly between "religious belief systems" (cf. McCloud 2017). Like the rest of QAnon, these messages[7] had mixed backgrounds and reached publics with a variety of religious and political identities. This is consonant with Michael Barkun's concept of improvised millennialism (Barkun 2003: 11). Improvised millennialism does not center the analysis on one specific religious identity, but reaches across political and religious ideologies and is more independent of them.

Barkun, by looking broadly at the picture and asking questions about how the field came to be and how it holds together, paints a picture that partially brings together alternative religion, conservative Christians, paracultures (like the UFO community), and hard-right politics. He brought the far-right connection to the front and noted that conspiracy theories joined with other forms of stigmatised knowledge claims on the New Age agenda, opening channels to far-right racist conspiracism (Barkun 1998). Stigmatised knowledge claims and the internal logic as self-protective mechanisms of conspiracism became a central point in his theory of mechanisms tying the conspiracist field together across identities and influences. Other mechanisms related to common use of the media channels through which such claims flow. There were both bridging mechanisms and bridging actors to the far right, as there were with flows between Evangelical Christianity and New Age (Barkun 2003: 54). The flows could be complicated, as in the case of actors like John Todd (Barkun 2003: 55–57), but they were mainly conceived as mainstreaming what had been more marginal. Conspiracy narratives and conspiracist claims were spread to new audiences through channels that were associated with less stigmatised scenes,

7 One may also classify them as grift schemes, as Beres et al. (2023), Rothschild (2021), and Sommers (2023) partially do. There is no contradiction here, only a matter of focus – do we center on the universe of meaning the messages appeal to, or the material functions of their use for certain users – and interpretation.

thus losing public association with them. This increased acceptance of conspiracy claims in networks of people carrying less social stigma, again increasing mainstreaming (Barkun 2003).[8]

We should, however, not blindly adopt the focus on stigmatization. The "New Age" content that interested Barkun was primarily related to the millennialism of New Age *sensu stricto*, while the connection to his five types of stigmatised knowledge (Barkun 2003: 27) included wider domains of knowledge claims extant in New Age *sensu lato*, and beyond. Stigmatization is not necessarily central here (Partridge 2013; cf. Tidelius 2024). We can recognise both that a knowledge claim is rejected by science and knowledge elites, and that it makes little difference to the lifeworld of most people. "Ignored knowledge" claims of folklore (e.g. "folk medicine") may for instance be largely ignored among outsiders rather than actively stigmatised, and believers can be ignorant of others' rejection. "Superseded" knowledge claims like popular astrology may be more of a guilty pleasure for many. But even when something starts as stigmatised, the whole point of Barkun's scheme was that stigma can be removed.

For Barkun, popular culture was one of the most important routes of mainstreaming. This observation was better theorised in Christopher Partridge's notion of occulture and dark occulture (Partridge 2005, 2013). Occulture is, like "the cultic milieu", content, milieu, media, and social processes. Partridge argues that new content tends to flow from invention at the margins, through media processes relating to popular culture into the mainstream. Even *if* the content starts out as oppositional and carries stigma, there is no guarantee that it will continue as oppositional, and mainstreaming will necessarily decrease stigma. Occulture is, Partridge (2013) stresses, ordinary and everyday. This also goes for the "dark occulture" that includes conspiracy theories such as *The Da Vinci Code* (Partridge 2013: 123).[9]

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8 His interest was still primarily extremism, and with episodes like the murder-suicides of the Order of the Solar Temple and the terrorist attacks of Aum Shinrikyo, students of conflict and terrorism awoke more generally to the potential of violence in catastrophic New Age millennialism and noted the pervasive conspiracism in such groups (Barkun 1994; Whitsel 2000). These topics, popular as they are in discourses on "cults", seem to have been partially sidelined by the original concept of conspirituality, but with QAnon and other movements they have made a return (e.g. Maurer 2024).

9 The argument is only partially persuasive. Not all elements of occulture are equally ordinary. Some are adopted not as common meanings, but only as deep (or not so deep) personal meanings (cf. Partridge 2013: 122) for far fewer and are viewed with suspicion

Important as it is to look at popular culture and the flow of narratives and their constituent elements from margin to mainstream – when it occurs – it is not sufficient. There are other mechanisms. One of the pleasures of conspiratorial narratives is participation, taking a "writerly" approach to the content, revealing hidden meanings. Studying packets of meaning that are easily decoded according to established rules in "readerly" texts can be easier. We then follow motifs and narrative snippets through the process of becoming ordinary, but we may miss out on, for example, how the "writerly" processes of decoding become more standardised and common and, importantly, cross what we think of as boundaries. One of the strengths of both Barkun's and Partridge's approaches to the field is that they look beyond simplistic categorization of content as belonging specifically and only to one group. Content flows *throughout* society. People may set up boundaries, but they are permeable. In Western countries, alternative spiritualities tend to be soaked through with Christian culture, and varieties of Christianity engage with "alternative" content in myriad ways. While parts of the alternative milieu are hostile to Christian references, others have some form of Christianity, Christian narratives and modes of interpretation as even their *main* point of reference. On the "other" side, it means that conservative Christians are also exposed to events and content that need to be interpreted, including "occultural" content originating from non-Christian sources. We may observe how this is reinterpreted and packaged to fit within their own milieu, constructing their own occultural content about, for instance, the 2012 apocalypse or other alternative spirituality concerns, content that in turn may be involved in dynamics of interpretation and appropriation within a more alternative part of occulture. This way, interests, narratives, "mythemes", and symbols flow between different spheres. The same goes for interpretations of events in the real world.

4. Causes and mechanisms can be common

Religious conspiracism mixes content in a way that often makes simple distinctions difficult. When we look at the general mechanisms and "causes" of religious conspiracism, we again see that they tend to make it difficult to claim specificity to alternative conspirituality. Since these are complex human and

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or hostility by many others. The point still needs to be considered for particular examples.

social phenomena, the mechanisms or dynamics work at different levels. It is most likely that we will find interesting and specific mechanisms at work within the cultural and socio-economic spheres, where we can do fine-grained, local analyses. These will, obviously, draw on other, more general dynamics that involve the mechanisms of laying the ground for conspiracism more broadly.

We have touched on the socio-cultural level briefly through reference to the early work of Barkun and Partridge. Perspectives such as these can be extended, refined, and reworked to fit specific groups of actors in specific arenas (e.g. Maurer 2024). These will interact with factors at the psychological level in ways that can make the latter difficult to disentangle. While Adam Enders et al. (2023) found psychological characteristics to be more predictive than political and social characteristics, it would seem to be hazardous to isolate anomie, the best predictor in the regression, from the social situation of respondents. Equally clearly, personal and group factors are involved in creating and expressing the *experience* of anomie. Other predictors, such as psychopathy and narcissism, do seem to be more precisely related to individual-level differences. All these factors are commonly found to predict general conspiracy thinking and many specific conspiracy beliefs (e.g. Cichocka et al. 2022; Kay 2021; Uscinski et al. 2022). We also quite naturally see general predictors of both conspiracism and religion (cf. Wood/Douglas 2018).

While still holding out that there should be more specificity with regard to conspirituality, I looked for psychological dispositions that could help explain why people would gravitate towards both esoteric/New Age and conspiracist thinking. We know that conspiracy beliefs and beliefs in paranormal phenomena overlap (e.g. Darwin et al. 2011). At first, I thought this could be an effect of marginalised identity sharing two sets of often marginalised beliefs. However, analyzing data from a large sample of mostly American Neopagans, the Pagan III survey, we found that within-group variation in paranormal beliefs was the only factor approaching conspiracy mentality in explaining variance in a set of specific conspiracy theories (Dyrendal et al. 2017). There were obviously other factors at play. What could the psychological underpinnings be? Starting with the correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and paranormal phenomena, increased pattern recognition, hyperactive agency detection, and intentionality bias are all common to both types of belief (e.g. Wood/Douglas 2018). Another common factor is greater reliance on intuitive or holistic thinking, as opposed to analytic thinking. Miguel Farias and Pehr Granqvist (2006) found that people involved with "New Age" ("broad sense") ideas and practices generally score higher on measures of magical ideation, cognitive looseness,

thin boundaries, and schizotypal personality. These are also factors of conspiracy beliefs. In another study, we found that scores on schizotypal dimensions related to magical thinking predicts both paranormal and conspiracy beliefs (Dyrendal et al. 2021). Positive schizotypy and increased absorption (or "fantasy proneness") should also predict increased levels of unusual *experiences*. In a small study of Nordic yoga practitioners, we did find support for the association between reporting paranormal and spiritual experiences and conspiracy beliefs (Dyrendal/Tøllefsen 2023). This seems to strengthen the claim Asprem and I made that

> participants in alternative spiritual networks characteristic of the cultic milieu may already be slightly more prone than the general population to find a conspiratorial logic in threatening social events – and, significantly, for the *same psychological reasons* that make heterodox belief systems, unusual experiences, and esoteric practices more intuitive and plausible to them than to others. (Asprem/Dyrendal 2018: 226)[10]

However, we argued that the combination of these pathways should be specific, that the

> historical process of exclusionary politics (primarily) in the domain of religion created a socio-cultural niche (the cultic milieu) characterised by varying degrees of perceived "deviance", and psychological processes that creates a selective advantage for certain personality traits in the milieu together produce elective affinities between esoteric and conspiracist ideas. (Asprem/Dyrendal 2018: 227)

I now lean strongly towards thinking that most psychological pathways are more likely to be shared than to be specific. This is not to say there will not be differences, even at this level. Some of the mechanisms may relate more specifically to the social field of "alternative spirituality". For instance, Farias and Granqvist (2006) found that magical ideation, cognitive looseness, thin boundaries, and schizotypal personality were only related to New Agers, not more es-

10 Some of these factors belong to the individual level, but simultaneously relate to social processes. Social marginalization may increase a "common thinking style" related to the (motivated) rejection of "official mechanisms of information-generation and expert opinion". This works well with the finding of Enders et al. (2023) that anomie accounts for the largest part of the variance in conspiracy beliefs.

tablished religion, like those clearly holding a Christian identity. We have little in the way of later comparable research, so it is hard to tell how much of this holds, while we have more on those dimensions that conspiracism and alternative spirituality share with other types of religion (e.g. Wood/Douglas 2018).

A different route into this territory was taken by political psychologists Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood when they constructed their "intuitionism scale" (Oliver/Wood 2018: 80–83). The scale combines scores on apprehension, pessimism, and symbolic thinking scales. These scales load on one factor and the combined intuitionism scale predicted all supernatural, magical, and conspiracy beliefs well. But the "typical" intuitionists were not New Agers – they were practicing, conservative Catholics, and Protestants (Oliver/Wood 2018). Some of the pathways may, as mentioned above, differ. In Oliver and Wood's investigations, women scored higher on intuitionism than they do on "New Age" beliefs, but their intuitionists showed lower need for cognition, higher disgust sensitivity, and were more likely to be raised in strict homes, reflecting their conservative religious backgrounds (Oliver/Wood 2018: 67–86). These may be more particular specific factors and reflect how authoritarianism related to intuitionism in their research (Oliver/Wood 2018: 74f.). Authoritarian attitudes predict many conspiracy beliefs well. They found so as well, but instead of right-wing authoritarianism they used the authoritarian child-rearing scale, reflecting back to the "strict homes" finding.

Some of these factors seem on the surface less likely to replicate in mostly "New Age"-like environments. For one thing, authoritarianism correlated negatively with many paranormal beliefs, and it is an open question whether and to what degree those belonging to the "New Age" show a preference for "conservative" politics, as Oliver and Wood's intuitionists do. In the Pagan III data, scores on social dominance orientation were low, and accordingly conspiracy theories about minorities were also low (Dyrendal et al. 2017). Social dominance orientation was not an important factor in the conspiracy beliefs that were adopted; if anything, it was a factor in which ones were *not* adopted. This is likely different if we examine conservative Evangelicals or similarly conservative religious identities (Dennen/Djupe 2023). At the same time, we see that regular participation in (more moderate) religious community practices serves as protective for certain conspiracy theories (e.g. Hillenbrandt/Pollack 2023). Further research on religion and drivers of conspiracism may show more and important differences between different religious groups, but I currently tend

to think of it as research into strands of religious conspiracism – or just conspiracism.[11]

5. Practice fields and relational dynamics

Where should the research focus be? I see new and interesting results and perspectives all the time. Some of the ones I see as fruitful for further studies relate to conspiracy and religion as situated agency, with a focus on practice and relational dynamics.

In most ways, this is business as usual. The dispositions studied by, among others, Oliver and Wood (2018) obviously interact with social factors. They found, for instance, that scores on intuitionism were higher among those who had least power. The poorer and less educated scored higher on intuitionism, an effect that was fully explained by the experienced stress of financial insecurity. Financial stress added to political alienation, driving conspiracy beliefs (Oliver/Wood 2018: 70–72). If we shift our focus marginally, this should be relevant for the dynamics driving conspiracy beliefs in the context of practices often associated with spirituality. Asprem and I (2018) proposed that motivated reasoning based on both identity protection and actual (often financial) threat should add to (or activate) the general propensity tied to cognitive factors associated with the spirituality scene. This was primarily inspired by alternative health practices, whose proponents we had often observed involved in conspiracism (e.g. Dyrendal 2010). The acceptance of alternative modalities is tied to cognitive factors common to conspiracy theories and spirituality (e.g. Assmann/Betsch 2023; Lindeman 2009), thus it is no surprise that support for alternative health modalities is positively correlated with a conspiracist disposition (e.g. Fournier/Varet 2023; Lamberty/Imhoff 2018; Soveri et al. 2021).

The practice scenes are interesting for several reasons. As particularly Robertson (2016) has stressed, legitimacy depends on acquiring epistemic capital and it must often be acquired in competition with established knowledge regimes. But this epistemic capital can also be transformed into actual capital. With regard to the alternative health scene, large sums of money are involved. At the same time, many practitioners are in a precarious economic

11 Although the concept of "conspiracism" suffers problems similar to "belief system", I think it is still the least bad word for what I have in mind.

situation, with some parts of the field having traits of a multi-level marketing scheme. The religious elements of the scene can be complicated – this brings us to relations and relational dynamics. Participants are many, but most function as "customers". Therapists and important influencers may be more ideological, but even though alternative health modalities and related theories may clearly take part in an "alternative field" in the sense of Bourdieu (cf. Bawidamann 2024), this does not mean that this alternative field is tied to alternative spiritualities to the *exclusion* of other forms of religion or identities. The logic of the field can be dominated by opposition to mainstream medical authorities without extending specifically to religion. The religious make-up of homeopathy users and therapists, sellers and buyers of varieties of supplements, and so on is diverse. Established religions have a long history with alternative healing practices, including the "CAM" (complementary and alternative medicine) field (e.g. Barnes/Sered 2005; Brown 2013). The actors struggle over epistemic capital (cf. Robertson 2016) externally and they may do so internally in internecine debate. It is, however, primarily the external opposition that defines the field. The cultic milieu dynamic means that there tends to be much room for internal differences of discursive positions, at least as long as their primary attacks are against outsiders, such as "the elites". The internal differences in message are more likely to segment the field into adjacent actors – that is, different customer groups may be given different messages, sometimes (but not always) from "their own" influencers.

The latter dynamic should not be underestimated. Practice scenes like the alternative health scene are central to conspirituality whether viewed as restricted to conspiracism involved with alternative spirituality or more broadly as religious conspiracism. The "theologies" of the practice scenes are many and elaborate, the market of users and therapists is large and diverse, and with so much time and money spent there is also a lot of personal and social identity bound up in it. But this is not to say that identities *will* become fluid. Some have multiple, partially overlapping ingroups, others have fewer. While conspiritual content is often shared, those having a clear identity seem to operate more side-by-side than integrated, as temporary allies (cf. Dyrendal/Tøllefsen 2023).

The case of pastel QAnon (Argentino 2023) and alternative health can be illustrative. Marc-André Argentino found four categories of "pastel QAnon" content: multi-level marketing QAnon; esoteric QAnon; lifestyle influencer QAnon; and alternative healing QAnon (Argentino 2023: 86). All of these types were mainly situated within a broader alternative health and lifestyle

segment. The influencer accounts were established before they adopted conspiracist content, typically during the pandemic. They gained rather than lost following in the periods after adoption. In general, this also led to monetary gain (Argentino 2023: 96), pointing to the twin dynamic of increased attention and economic gain as (extra) motivational factors. These dynamics are, of course, general. While the aesthetic was different and the pastel QAnon accounts tended not to quote the Bible or be openly involved in apocalyptic prophecies, the *conspiracy* content overlapped with what was presented in far-right and Evangelical circles (Argentino 2023). Looking at the far right and influencers espousing Christian identities, we also note that these were involved in some of the same discourses and practices, with infamous conspiracy theorist Alex Jones' large-scale sale of dietary supplements being just one telling example (e.g. Beres et al. 2023: 153). Attracting customers from mostly different spaces with somewhat converging messages, we saw "coalitions of distrust" (Birchall/Knight 2023: 114–147). Although they might not have prayed together outside it, inside the sphere of their conspiracy theorizing, conspiracist influencers and grass-roots activists of different backgrounds could converse with each other, plan together, protest, and march together. However, as Claire Birchall and Peter Knight found in the yoga scene, they were for the most part acting adjacent to, rather than integrated in, a larger community: "the different foci of the groups remain distinct even while they share the same physical or digital space" (Birchall/Knight 2023: 144).

6. Final remarks

Relations and their dynamics are best studied in contexts where people actually interact, like practice scenes and the discourses around them. We may, however, also look at them more broadly. One of the understudied dynamics seems to be the one between groups of believers and non-believers and their social contexts. One set of such relations would be that between highly engaged anti-conspiracism actors and believers, not least their relative impacts on those scoring more in the middle. This is related to both alternative spirituality and conservative Christian to the degree in which they have a history of engaging in "alternative sciences". On social media and other spaces, conspiracy theories have long been part of pseudoscience wars, a fight between skeptics sceptics and believers in both religious and religiously neutral pseudoscience. They are, at least at times, engaging in oppositional identity con-

struction similar to other forms of culture war, and these wars by design leak into public debate.[12] Well before but especially during Covid, I made a note of something that seemed like a parallel constitution and solidification of social identities. Each party identified positions as either "woo" or "skeptics", with, for example, skeptics not accepting of new atheism being labelled "not true skeptics", on the one hand, and those arguing for "spirituality without conspirituality" being dubbed "secret skeptics", on the other. Each looked to convert eligible in-group members. During Covid the public ceased to see this as primarily amusing and the vaccine hesitant, conspiracists, and Covid deniers were largely presented as public enemies. What did this conflict do in terms of mobilising among strong conspiracists and their likely recruiting arena? To what extent did it harden identities and sharpen conflict over time? For which audience and/or group was the effect more lasting and effective?

The question about how long engagement and belief lasts is one related to shifting focus towards development. We have perhaps tended to focus on whether religion is predictive or protective, on growth and establishment, and ignore development over time with regard to the possibility of rise and fall. Arguably, the trajectories are at least as interesting as the outcomes. Unlike the popular impression of conspiracy theories being a one-way street, some people change focus and the popularity of any one theory can be fleeting. Religious identity can be a factor we can observe both qualitatively and in quantitative research. For instance, during the first phase of Covid-19 in Denmark, identification as "spiritual" predicted increased conspiracy belief in a "plandemic" but this relation disappeared later in the pandemic (Jacobsen et al. 2021). At one point, conspiracy belief overlapped more with a "spiritual" identity but it no longer did at a later date. Other observations indicate that, at the same time, the conspiracy belief became more entrenched among a vocal minority in the same milieu. These phases, dynamics, and processes should receive more attention. Do conspiracy beliefs in communities exhibit common patterns? For instance, do the dissemination and adoption of particular conspiracy theories in receptive environments exhibit traits similar to those of rumor panics (e.g. Ellis 1990) and millennial waves (Landes 2011)? It seems to me that one way of

12 I speak here also as former participant. I was editor, international contact, and spokesperson for the Norwegian Skeptics society for 25 years and participated extensively in public debate. The Skeptic's movement is an international phenomenon of rationalist organizations and activist groups fighting pseudoscience and misinformation, particularly that related to "alternative" knowledge-claims.

understanding what I see as wave-like traits in development over time is to focus on how the firmer believers and their associated media serve as reservoirs of interpretation and persuasion for later events. In Landes' millennialism vocabulary they are the (marginal) "roosters" continually crying out for the world to awaken (2011: 37–61), and their personal fate may or may not change when other factors make people more receptive. This type of question will involve historicising the study of religious conspiracism (e.g. Piraino et al. 2023). The development of influencers and their audiences is a worthy and complicated field to study. Understanding the link between people, particular scenes, their structure, ideology, social and economic networks, the affordances of the platforms, and development of and relative (lack of) success for conspiracist content demands studies of development over time.

Keeping conspirituality as the intersection of conspiracism and alternative spirituality has some obvious upsides with regard to keeping its immediate and intuitive associations. It also helps to narrow the field of study. However, it can help reify theoretical distinctions and hide from us some of the very real relations in the field and some general dynamics driving these relations. Looking more holistically at the relation between conspiracism and religion helps us to generate, for example, hypotheses about mechanisms driving the connections, and to ask other questions about the social dynamics between different groups. For this reason I tentatively proffer that we concentrate on "religious conspiracism", whether we call it that or keep conspirituality as the term of preference. But if the latter, we should not exaggerate similarities to the extent of seeing this broad-spectrum version of conspirituality as indivisible but use it to help us to also see distinctions in causes, processes, and outcomes.

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