Apocalyptic Actors and Historical Trajectories in Mythic Discourse of Conspiracism: Apokalyptiset toimijat ja historialliset kehityskulut salaliittoajattelun myyttisissä diskursseissa

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Apocalyptic Actors and Historical Trajectories in Mythic Discourse of Conspiracism

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Abstract

Contemporary conspiracism draws on both long-standing traditions as well as the current cultural and political environment as it constructs mythic knowledge that often includes apocalyptic prophecies. Such knowledge is constantly altered and reinterpreted by the conspiracy activists who

invest in its transmission and reproduction. This article examines how conspiracist mythologies emerge in the use of these activists as mythic discourse that fluidly adapts both to include past sources and to comment on late modern phenomena. Illustrative cases of Christian and popular millennial conspiracist narratives are analyzed in terms of how they construct the actors, organizations, power positions, and historical trajectories of the world. The article highlights how different conspiracist myths share features and stances, influenced by the currents of late modernity, but also contest each other based on what their sources and purposes are, and how they differ on their evaluation of the apocalyptic event's nature.

Keywords

apocalypticism, conspiracism, discourse analysis, late modernity, myth

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Contemporary conspiracism can be identified as a mythic worldview that overlaps with apocalypticism, another worldview that consists of myths according to which an imminent end to the current order is fast approaching. Myths in general comprise of culturally shared existential knowledge concerning both observable and hidden realities. This mythic knowledge is usually communicated as discourse that employs powerful symbols and depicts transcendental events, typically as imaginative narratives. These narratives carry enormous significance as they affectively articulate humanity's relationship with the surrounding world while offering models for the interpretation of all that is unknown or uncertain.

Conspiracism presupposes the existence of a hidden reality that can be revealed by interpreting the world and its events. It thus resembles apocalypticism, "a revelation" of what exists beyond the ordinary. Understood as comprehensive worldviews, both conspiracism and apocalypticism tend to envision the world dualistically as a great battle that leads to a rupture in history. The idea of this rupture suits conspiracism, since the beliefs related to it, both secular and religious, allow the existence of forces that are nearly omnipotent in their ability to steer the course of history and manipulate humanity – they can bring about a monumental change. Additionally, many of the narratives in conspiracism make direct references to the biblical prophecy from the Book of Revelations when interpreting contemporary events. Thus, the conspiracist worldview has both implicit and explicit links to longstanding forms of apocalypticism; it often combines old and new apocalyptic themes and traditions in innovative ways. Furthermore, both apocalypticism and conspiracism orient themselves toward the future, and their narratives posit important temporal trajectories. Future visions give new meanings to what is known and experienced. Even when the conspiracist apocalypse is not structured according to the Book of Revelations, other texts can still be used as blueprints.

The present study advances an argument that contemporary "conspiracy theories" can be analyzed as instances of mythic thought in modernity. Furthermore, conspiracism is not a remnant of a "simplistic," premodern way of thinking – which is how myths are typically understood – lingering on in another age but integral to the cultural logic of modernity, as argued by Aupers (2012) and Landes (2007, 11). The current conspiracist subculture is a viral environment for the dissemination of mythic knowledge inherently tied to late modern trends

of the West that is understood here as a socially constructed and WEIRD (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010) domain rather than a geographical one. In this cultural sphere, conspiracist knowledge comprises a popular mythology that influences both the various factions of the conspiracy milieu and mainstream society, including institutions with which the conspiracy milieu shares an antagonistic relationship. In some societies, it exists as the predominant explanatory model. The following analysis concentrates on how the world approaching the rupture is constructed in various conspiracist discourses and how elements of late modernity are mythicized. This is achieved by looking at the central actors and historical processes that are claimed to bring about the end. My material consists of five narratives from the fields of religious and spiritual conspiracism. The discourses found within these texts reflect larger tendencies and longer traditions of conspiracism, yet they are not uniform: as I demonstrate, stances toward the end differ, and these discourses rest on conflicting ontologies and epistemologies. The similarities and differences illustrate how mythic knowledge is used to engage with, and redefine, late modernity. By framing conspiracism in terms of myth I highlight aspects that have not gained much attention in earlier research: the discourses and narratives that serve to both denote and construct an ever-changing corpus of knowledge. This knowledge connects secular, ideological, and timely issues to unseen, transhistorical processes, and thus exists in the nexus of tradition and modernity. Examining it aids in re-evaluating the concept of myth and how myth can be applied to other essential subjects of this age.

Terms and Concepts

In line with earlier studies, I define "conspiracy theory" as a narrative that argues for the existence of a nefarious plot by a group or multiple groups (Barkun 2003; Butter 2014; Byford 2015; Fenster 2008; van Prooijen 2018). This is the minimal definition that distances itself from the more normative ones (Robertson 2016: 38–39). Conspiracy theories as narratives often display high complexity (Thalmann 2019: 2). They are positioned as *counternarratives* to the official explanation posed by the epistemic authorities while attempting to reveal the true causes and purposes of things via "alternative" sources of knowledge (Bratich 2008: 7; Konda 2019: 10–11; Robertson 2016: 34–39; 2021). This position of "epistemic autonomy" (Harris 2022) implies that there is a reason why the official narrative cannot be trusted. It is

presumed that conspiracy theories are formulated by "conspiracy theorists" who either use them for political and financial gains or believe these narratives to either be literally true or to otherwise reflect reality (Jane and Fleming 2014: 39–43). I will, however, refrain from using the term "conspiracy theory" in the analysis, as it still carries derogatory connotations and, furthermore, because instead of mere narratives I am interested in all discursive ways of transmitting conspiracist knowledge. Similarly, I refer to "conspiracy *activists*," which stresses that not all members of the subculture share an influential position and as strong motives as the visible disseminators.[1] A worldview based on aforementioned features is defined as "conspiracism" (Robertson 2016: 39). Conspiracism approaches social and cultural dynamics in terms of a conflict (Madisson and Ventsel 2021: 9). The described conflict impacts a society or the world significantly – event(s) are connected to larger processes at a global, historical, and often cosmological scale (Hofstadter 1965: 29–30). Popularized conspiratorial ideas circulate in a notable oppositional subculture, a "milieu" (Harambam 2020) where conspiracist logic guides the interpretation of world events. Often, such ideas are integrated into apocalyptic models.

"Apocalypticism" stands for a worldview that advocates the imminent end of the world, while the apocalypse is an event where the destiny of humanity is actualized. "Eschatology" describes a general sense of larger things coming to an end. Thus, apocalyptic narratives describe what likely happens at an eschatological period of time. (O'Leary 1994: 4–6; Stein 2000: ix–xi.) Following Alison McQueen, I see this apocalypticism functioning through ages in both theological and secular forms, envisioning ruptures in the temporal continuity of history (2017: 22–62). Scientific projections concerning the existential danger of climate change, for example, have broadened the domains of apocalyptic discourse. A third concept incorporated in related apocalypticism is "prophecy," defined as an understanding that claims to exceed the limits of usual human knowledge. In popular use, this refers to predicting the future, but past and current events are explained under the rubric of "prophecy" as well. (Harvey and Newcombe 2013: 3–4.)

"Myth" serves as the defining framework of my research. Myths are here considered imaginal models of reality that express shared ideas and beliefs about the relationship

[1] Harambam (2020: 161–174) classifies members of the conspiracy milieu as activists, retreaters, and mediators. In this article, however, the "activism" of disseminating the myth is most relevant.

between humanity and the world. An interconnected network of myths forms a mythological corpus, where no single text can be considered the authentic representation of a mythology. (Doty 2000: 33–37.) In myths, complex social and existential dynamics are explained using extraordinary spatiotemporal sites (places and times) and powerful agents such as gods and heroes (Rowland 1990: 104). Wielding such influence, mythologies can serve ideological purposes (Lincoln 2000). Mythology is a system of "communication, representation, labelling and interpretation" (Frog 2015: 35), and mythic knowledge is often articulated as narratives that utilize symbolic language to transmit traditional and authoritative knowledge. Narrated myths are thus distinguished from other stories on the basis of their cultural significance (Doty 2000: 37–39) or transcendental nature (Losada 2014: 31–33). As Doty notes in the revised edition of *Mythography*, however, the view of a mythology as necessarily consisting of narratives is restrictive: not all mythic knowledge is transmitted that way (2000: 49).[2] Thus, my approach concentrates on how such culturally valuable knowledge is communicated as *mythic discourse*. "Discourse" refers to language in all its semiotic forms as contributing to the formation of social reality, when it is used to present different aspects of the world as "natural, trans-historical facts," not as cultural constructs (Fairclough 2015: 7–8; Hammer 2003: 29). "Mythic discourse," in particular, refers to the imaginative articulation of the unseen or unknown side of reality, and research on mythic discourse stresses how people engage with and reinterpret mythic knowledge (Frog 2015: 11; 2021b: 161–169). The variance within a mythological corpus stems from this constant manipulation of myths and their constitutive elements. Some explanations gain more authority than others, and certain motifs and arguments endure, but the production of diverging ideas in mythic discourse is constant.[3]

I consider the period in question here, "late modernity," to commence at the end of the Second World War, when increasingly interconnected technological systems began evolving on, and adjusting, a global network that had been established in the preceding three centuries of the modern age. "Modernity" itself is a contested term, but gains relevance in the context of myth studies, as it is commonly assumed that modernity is defined by a scientifically

[2] While narration has been the preferred method of their transmission in many cultures, I agree that it is better to consider myths as (complex) models than narratives. Researchers' emphasis on narrativity has likely skewed the data in favor of myths as structured stories, as well (Frog 2021a: 24–26).

[3] The constant reinvention of myth to contest a tradition might be a central feature in how mythic authority is reclaimed time after time, as argued by Falco 2010.

oriented, secular worldview that stands in opposition to a "premodern" age of "irrational myths." Inspecting myths of modernity thus challenges this simple dichotomy while acknowledging that the onset of modernity certainly brought about significant changes. Furthermore, late modernity, called "liquid modernity" by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) and "reflexive modernity" by Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994), is characterized by accelerating advances in scientific, socioeconomic, and technological fields in most of the societies on Earth. All temporal demarcations are ultimately constructs for differing purposes: here, the end of the Second World War is seen as a critical moment with direct ramifications for the evolution of conspiracism that deals explicitly with globalization, complex systems, and rapid technological changes. Additionally, late modernity has spawned new forms of apocalypticism that comment on threats such as the nuclear war, the anthropogenic global warming, and other risks that can lead to the global system's collapse (Beck 1992; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017; Oegema 2021).

Since humanity is always entangled in complex relationships with its environment, I maintain that mythic ways of modelling the world do not exist merely in so called premodern societies. Instead, contemporary times are rife with imaginal conceptualizations of reality.[4] Late modernity's mythicity is brought to the fore here by looking at how the ever-evolving mythological corpus of cospiracism draws its significance from both established traditions and contemporary trends. This can be understood as a two-level signification process, as Mari-Liis Madisson does when arguing that conspiracism fuses mythical, metatextual, and universal meaning-making operations with a descriptive interpretation that aims for "supreme coherence" and complex connectivity, imitating scientific logic (2014: 285–291). Correspondingly, I argue that contemporary conspiracism utilizes distinctly late modern ways of information production to construct culturally valuable mythic knowledge that is transmitted in mythic discourse.

Exemplars of Apocalyptic Conspiracism

[4] Some examples of research on modern mythologies are *Mythologies* by Barthes 1972 and *American Monomyth* by Jewett and Lawrence 1988. See Csapo (2005: 276–290) and Doty (2000: 408–458). Some attempts have been classified as overeager (Rowland 1990).

The material analyzed in this article consists of five conspiracy narratives released within the 2010s. They are united by an assumption that forms the core of late modern knowledge underlying the conspiracist worldview: a powerful group of malefactors controls the world, and we are on the brink of a cataclysm that will alter the course of history profoundly. These narratives are presented as true or plausible accounts of significant events by their interlocutors and belong to a tradition of collective meaning making in the conspiracy milieu. These texts are, in a sense, legacy media, as they are still long, narrative-oriented texts rather than discourse emerging as social media memes or vague references in Twitter. It should be pointed out, however, that broad explanations still matter. This has been proven, for example, by the *Plandemic*-movie (2020) that spread rapidly in the current mediasphere although it presented a lengthy, structured narrative while attempting to expose a COVID-19-conspiracy.

More particularly, I have categorized the selected narratives as two prototypical sets based on the sources that influence their ontological claims: a rough definition would call them "Christian" and "New Age" conspiracist myths. On the surface, these sets adhere to the boundaries that have been taken for granted within conspiracism studies for some decades. Typically, scholars have followed Michael Barkun's threefold categorization of conspiracism into religious, secular, and improvisational millennialism (2003: 9–11).[5] The first and third category have often been separated in the field of Religious Studies: the doctrinal "world religions" have been understood as the historically dominant mode that is now challenged by new "spirituality" which is less dogmatic and more open to influences. Following this grand narrative, Charlotte Ward and David Voas construct *conspirituality* as a new form that has emerged out of the late modern holistic milieu as an alternative to the predominantly Christian, male-oriented, right-wing realm of older conspiracism (2011). Ward and Voas imply that conspiracism's connection to a certain world religion is not as novel or surprising as the link to the New Age milieu – and that Christian conspiracism was the hegemonic

[5] For the purposes of this article, Barkun's category "secular" is ignored. There are, however, instances of secular apocalypticism: for example, "The Great Replacement" myth disseminated primarily by the Western far right. This myth states that the global elite is attempting a covert genocide of the white race. The Great Replacement (which influenced, for example, the Christchurch mass murder of 2019) is an instance of what I would call *eschatological populism*, where the existence of "the people" is constantly threatened. For endangered existence in conspiracism, see Madisson and Ventsel (2021: 110).

counternarrative within the subculture before the advent of the Internet, where conspirituality has appeared as a competing mythology.[6]

The first set consists of two books that are explicitly Christian in their message: David Allen Rivera's *Final Warning* (Rivera 2013, "FW") and James Perloff's *Truth Is a Lonely Warrior* (Perloff 2013, "TIALW"). These books would undoubtedly be labeled religious millennialism by Barkun (2003: 16–18). The writers stress the literal existence of both God and Satan, using the Bible as their main authority. In addition to this premodern source, the apocalyptic narratives that Rivera and Perloff present are derived in many respects from the popular writings of Hal Lindsey and his bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). Lindsey does not put forth an explicit conspiracist myth in their book, but this pop prophecy has served as a blueprint for many others, most influential being Pat Robertson's *New World Order* (1991). Most such views show "premillennialist" tendencies – they argue that Christ's kingdom comes only after the degradation of society and the rise of Antichrist (Fenster 2008: 206). Rivera and Perloff support the biblical base narrative with references to secular sources such as news, fiction, official government documents, study of both mainstream and revisionist history, and (fringe) science. I selected these books as they respond clearly to late modern issues such as environmentalism, popular culture, and paganism by using them to justify the typical pessimist argument in today's premillennialist myths (Fenster 2008: 207–2014).

The second set fits the description of conspirituality as formulated by Ward and Voas and belongs to Barkun's category of improvisational millennialism (2003: 18–29). The narratives analyzed in this article consist of three movies, marketed as documentaries by their producers: *Above Majestic* (Richards 2018, "AM") and *The Cosmic Secret* (Goode and Richards 2019, "TCS") by Corey Goode and David Wilcock, and *Thrive: What on Earth Will it Take?* (Gagné and Gamble 2011, "Thrive") by Foster Gamble. *Above Majestic* concentrates on politics and *The Cosmic Secret* explores a more spiritual realm, but both are united by the core conspiracy and an approaching positive rupture. *Thrive*, included for the sake of its more down-to-earth approach, constructs a grand New World Order myth while stressing a hopeful view of the universe as a self-organizing system, eschewing personalized deities but engaging with ufological discourses. It combines libertarian socioeconomical views and a spiritual

[6] Unlike conspirituality, there is no special term designating Christian conspiracism ("Chrispiracism") as anything extraordinary. For a critique concerning "conspirituality", see Asprem and Dyrendal 2015.

message of hope and healing while appropriating scientific language to support its main thesis. Aforementioned activists would be understood as part of the New Age milieu, yet I find it best to use David G. Robertson's term "popular millennialism," where "popular" refers to the absence of "formal religious institutions and traditions" (2016: 41–42). These narratives combine epistemic sources as distinct as science, ufology, popular culture, premodern mythology, and world religions including Christianity. For popular millennialists, the Bible is only a potentially useful authority that can be employed fluidly when needed, which makes such views less strictly dogmatic and, arguably, more "late modern" than their Christian counterparts. Some of the tropes employed in these movies derive from the pioneer of such conspiracism, David Icke, who appears in *Thrive*. In addition to their content, which modifies the myths of famous conspiracy activists like Icke, I selected these movies as exemplars because they lucidly underline the liquid nature of late modernity (Bauman 2000) and its spirituality by constantly integrating and reimagining current trends in their mythic discourse.

In a sense, my classification of these texts reproduces the contested dichotomy of world religions (represented by Christianity) and "New Age" spirituality, where former is seen as the prototypical model of religion and the latter as a mere deviation from that norm (Gilhus 2013: 35–40). Categorizations from Barkun and Ward and Voas are indeed questionable in this regard, but the following analysis affirms the validity of some parts of this classification.

It is, however, necessary to question other assumptions that the dichotomy carries. There is notable variation within these two categories. For example, although *Thrive*'s mythic discourse relies on eschatological models, it differs from AM and TCS by downplaying the possibility of a single apocalyptic event in the future. Furthermore, the Christian and popular millennial conspiracism might share more features than the categorizations imply. For example, according to Barkun, improvisational (popular) millennialism is "by definition an act of bricolage, wherein disparate elements are drawn together in new combinations" because, unlike dogmatic religions, this form of conspiracism does not have to gravitate around a central source such as the Bible (2003: 10–11). But this feature seems unique only when discussing the *religious* aspects that conspiracism includes. As mentioned above, Christian conspiracist texts are similar bricolages in the way they "improvise" by combining science, historical data, quotations, personal experiences, popular culture references, and so forth. It is possible to base a distinction on how much authority a vital source such as the Bible is granted, but if we then deem only one category bricolage-like, the wider image of

conspiracism is distorted. In the framework of myth theory, and referring to Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage, it would be more fruitful to consider *all* conspiracism as engaging in rich meaning-making processes where mythical expressions are created out of ordinary surroundings (1966: 16–22), nowadays including the ubiquitous media environment.

Eschatological Groups and Organizations

A holistic conspiracist worldview builds on mythic knowledge concerning nearly omnipotent forces that have affected the world for perhaps millennia. The end of the world is the outcome of a battle between these forces, and the adversary is absolutely depraved and ruthless. Indeed, starting from the seminal writings of Richard Hofstadter, many scholars define conspiracism by its strict division between idealized Good and Evil, or Light and Darkness – it is considered a Manichean worldview as it envisions a reality without any moral middle ground. (Barkun 2003: 2; Byford 2015: 82–83; Hofstadter 1965: 29–32; Knight 2002.) While the Manichean divide exists in the transcendental level of reality and defines the deep-structure of the world, the network of actors operating within the conspiracist model is more complex. The ongoing battle consists of these actors from premodern traditions or popular culture embodying late modern institutions of power.

Christian conspiracism constructs a division where the defining battle is between God and Satan. It stresses that Satan has influenced history since the very beginning of humanity: "For 6,000 years, Satanically empowered men have been feverishly working to enslave mankind" to further the goal of corrupting and controlling the Earth (FW: 29). This mythic opposition is reflected in the political order throughout the ages, as "Satan influences global events, and … among his instruments is a powerful organization of men on Earth" (TIALW: 1). A similar opposition is stressed in popular millennial texts, but the most powerful agents are usually beings of advanced alien races, "positive" and "negative" extraterrestrials. The evil ones "really came into control and started to be able to manipulate what was going on on the face of the planet about 6,000 to 7,000 years ago" (AM: 00:28). Multiple factions are engaged in "a temporal war" over positive and negative timelines (TCS: 01:19),[7] which demonstrates the

[7] *Thrive* compares the harmonious universe, "a system that's very dynamic, and it's trying to optimize," and the sinister human elite, a metaphorical tapeworm in the core of the system – "a parasite that's very much manipulating and engorging itself at the expense of the whole" (01:01).

popular millennial flexibility in adapting popular culture tropes. The force of evil is incredibly powerful but small in quantity, which opens up the possibility for its defeat by the general populace that is currently exploited against its better knowledge. The inevitable future "awakening" of mankind is the root of optimism in popular millennialist conspiracism. In *Thrive*, "the crisis has matured to the point of being on the threshold of mass awakening." (02:05), while in TCS, "it is a very exciting future, and it is a future that I am willing to fight for, and that I spend every day of my life to prepare us for" (02:08). In Christian conspiracism, the origin of the adversary guarantees its ultimate defeat, since God is the creator of both the world and Satan, and the final authority over them.

The aforementioned oppositions are certainly mythic and rely on biblical, esoteric, and spiritual traditions, among others. Contemporary conspiracism, however, mythologizes late modernity in its secular aspects as well. Central tenets and features of modernity are redefined in the context of conspiracist knowledge.[8] This is evident when looking at how the actors advancing the apocalypse often share an organized, hierarchical form. In other words, they are institutional, and this institutionality is thoroughly mythicized to include transcendental features and unseen sides.

The mythicizing of organizational structures is reflected in the myriad names given to the enemy. These names are used almost as synonymous. The Establishment, Illuminati, Cabal, Deep State, the New World Order, and the vague "elite" appear quite interchangeably in texts under analysis. Such names have become mythic as they conjure visions of powerful actors who secretly control all global mechanisms. They evoke strong symbolism while simultaneously are hard to define concretely: as arbitrary signifiers they can always be readjusted to include new actors and factions. Some of them are historical (e.g., the Illuminati) while others are inherited from newer cultural domains, such as The Establishment, which became a derogatory umbrella term for criticizing the dominant class among the 1960s' countercultural movements (MacFarlane 2010). Some names are entirely metaphorical and imbued with sinister and occult undertones (the Cabal, Deep State), and the existence of such factions is disputed by mainstream society. In conspiracism, however, the perceived denial that the masses live in provides further evidence for the claim that these

[8] Contemporary conspiracism is, of course, the product of (Western) modernity that has for centuries itself mythicized the idea of progress and efficiency. Further research in the vein of Melley 2000 and Aupers 2012 is needed.

organizations can conceal themselves perfectly. Hidden groups are linked to well defined and publicly acknowledged organizations such as The United Nations, The Bilderberg Group, and The Council on Foreign Relations. This connection between more and less mythic groups entails the reinterpretation of the latter in light of the former. In other words, an association between these groups mythicizes the nature, actions, and goals of public groups while stressing the mythic nature of the "occult" ones.

The threatening nature of organizational structures charted by conspiracism stems in no small amount from the opaque nature of late modern institutions and governance, where security and complexity produce intended as well as unintended secrecy (Melley 2000; Rabo 2020; West and Sanders 2003).[9] Both are constructed as malevolent in mythic discourse. Furthermore, I argue that the power of mythic organizations relies on amazingly effective immoral methods such as violence and extortion. Conspiracism thus mythicizes both the effectiveness and the lack of transparency in organizational structures. Absolute secrecy and faultless performance are the logical yet extreme outcome of bureaucratic optimization that is often strived for in late modern management, but it is only in conspiracism where actors have perfected such processes and produced highly hierarchical structures of abuse and control. In this management system, power is not evenly distributed, and neither are knowledge or culpability. Conspiracist mythology includes detailed descriptions of this multilevel power structure to elaborate how a huge conspiracy can be organized not only to dominate but also to hide said domination: for example, the hierarchy of evil is depicted in the usual conspiracist manner as a pyramid by Perloff in a chapter titled "Satan's control structure." (TIALW: 125).[10] The more we descend in the pyramid, less knowledge and power actors wield, and less responsibility is attached to them (see Barkun 2003: 104–107). The

[9] The Bilderberg Group, for example, surrenders easily to mythicizing as its meetings are kept secret from civilians, while the massive size and bureaucratic structure of the UN dissolve any chance for perfect transparency.

[10] In the pyramid, "at the top is Satan. Through this structure, he exercises control and communicates his plans." Below Satan, there is a "supreme council of 13," and then a "council of 33," below which operates "The Committee of 300" that "rules the world's governments, media, banks, foundations and global corporations"; they in turn exert their influence on everyday culture production. (TIALW: 125.) Pyramid's bottom includes "the cartel's shock troops, most of whom don't know who they're really working for" (TIALW: 130). A similar pyramid structure in *Thrive* describes how people are controlled by the government, who in turn are controlled by corporations led by the financial elite (00:52). This "compartmentalized pyramid" is how control and secrecy can be imposed on all levels (01:23).

absolute top is irredeemable by nature, as it is often depicted as transcendental (Satan or the ETs), while the bottom might be guilty of mere ignorance.

Ultimately, it is the middle to high ranks of the conspiracy, the human "elite," that face most criticism in conspiracist constructions of power. The elite are labelled corrupt, psychotic, or morally and sexually deviant. Existing between the poles of otherworldly wickedness and total ignorance, the elite are constructed as the worst possible option in terms of morality: they are powerful but not ignorant mortals. Knowing the truth and being capable of moral choices they still betray their fellow humans. Even in the more benign popular millennial conspiracy discourse they are treated harshly, while it is acknowledged that they themselves are caught in a violent, abusive structure. According to *Above Majestic*, "The Deep State, or the Cabal, or the New World Order" consists of "very psychopathic individuals that have acquired a lot of money, a lot of technology, and a lot of information over the course of centuries," and getting involved in these societies compromises one's morality. "Ultimately, if you go far enough down this road, you will be invited to participate in things like pedophilia and human sacrifice. And if you don't do it, it's the offer you can't refuse. They may actually even kill you." (00:57.)

The positioning of the human elite shows how conspiracist mythologies envision alternative configurations in power relationships. In mythic discourse, members of the elite are brought down from the top of the social hierarchy by depicting them as pawns of another force, culpable for their crimes yet powerless to free themselves from the abusive system. These upper ranks of the socioeconomic sector are mythicized by bestowing upon them essential features and unanimous motives that ultimately refer to the upcoming end of the world. The "elite" are an integral part of an otherworldly process and signify human fallibility that is then judged at the apocalypse. These mortals are examples of what greed and ignorance can lead one to – and, since certain conspiracy myths posit the downfall of evil during or after the apocalypse, they function as warnings. They are, however, not the force that initiated the conspiracy, and, for the time being, they operate strictly within the bounds of this world. The mythic features of all actors mentioned above instill a sense of quintessential dread in contemporary structures of power.

Power Positions and Transcendence

The organizational structures in conspiracism indicate a complex relationship between humans and otherworldly actors, as evil's hierarchy divides actors into various levels of transhuman power. Efficient but fallible human organizations are often controlled by a force that operates outside of history: either Satan in Christian conspiracism, or the negative extraterrestrials in the popular millennial narrative of Goode and Wilcock.[11]

In addition to God and Satan, Christian conspiracism acknowledges the existence of angels and demons, but they do not play a significant role in the apocalypse. Christian conspiracy narratives under analysis here claim that the plot is mostly advanced by human beings, and their main tool in bringing about the end of the world is modern culture in all its forms. Otherworldly forces have retreated from contemporary times, and transhistorical God and Satan exist far from everyday reality. For example, Perloff argues that Satan does not use demons anymore since knowledge of their existence would undermine materialist (atheist) worldviews, and the triumph of materialism serves Satan's purpose. Demons who "inflict illness and death" have been replaced with The Establishment that operates with "vaccines, as well as fabricated viruses, drugs, and – some would say – water fluoridation and genetically modified foods" (TIALW: 259–260). Curiously, this line of reasoning resembles a conspiracist adaptation of the "disenchantment" or secularization thesis that has been considered characteristic of modernity, as popularized by Max Weber (1930).

The popular millennial vision is more complicated as it aligns itself with the trends of transhumanist philosophy by claiming that human beings are in a process of mental and technological metamorphosis. For example, members of the evil organization called the Cabal "probably don't age anymore," having evolved to superhuman levels, and lines between the human elite and their extraterrestrial masters are blurring. The elite "never get sick," their offspring are "supersmart, superstrong," and while "the rest of us are dying with diseases and malformities," they remain "body-beautiful." (AM: 00:55.) In other words, members of the Cabal have been granted not only tools for world domination but a possibility to become more than human as well. *Thrive* similarly sees humanity "in a very interesting evolutionary phase" (01:52) that can lead to a "utopia where war, illness, and scarcity have been banished" (02:04).

[11] *Thrive* does not describe negative extraterrestrials but proposes that ancient human technology was granted to us by "early pilots from beyond our world." Extraterrestrial intelligence means "civilizations that have reached the point of being sentient … [and] been able to become interstellar or interplanetary." (00:21.)

This idea of metamorphosis underlines a central difference between Christian conspiracism and its popular millennial counterpart: in the former, humans are positioned at a significantly lower level than transhistorical actors in terms of power, while the latter allows the possibility for all humans to transcend and gain extraordinary powers. In Christian conspiracism, the relations are more fixed, and a transcendental position in the hierarchy is beyond humanity's reach. In popular millennial conspiracism, it is argued that whatever evil oppresses us, its power can be surpassed, and humans are able to reach a so far impossible state of health, prosperity, and capability. (For connection with esotericism, see Hanegraaff 2012: 372.) Thus, while the former tends to be suspicious of change and considers established mythic hierarchies as rigid, the latter embraces and mythicizes the modern utopian belief in growth and progress that is available for all, often brought about by technological innovations.

Counterconspiracies

Another difference between Christian and popular millennialist narratives is that while both describe the institutional nature of evil in detail, popular millennial narratives can additionally include a *counterconspiracy* by the forces of good. This evinces faith in late modern reflexivity – in the mythic discourse employed, efficient responses to the perceived threat emerge out of the possibilities granted by related interconnected systems.

Narratives that stress opposition based on secrecy are constructed by reproducing the central features of the evil conspiracy.[12] Goode and Wilcock argue for the existence of an "Earth Alliance" that is "made up of all of these countries that have been fighting against this Cabal for fifty years or so," consisting of "various military groups that had broken away from the Cabal, such as elements of the United States military" (AM: 01:46). Goode claims to belong to a Secret Space Program Alliance, "a very small fraction of the overall Secret Space Program" that aims to "work very quietly and secretly to not only find out the full truth of

[12] Such imitation is also apparent in the QAnon narrative, which is a true hybrid myth combining secular, Christian, and popular millennial content. QAnon states that President Trump worked with a group of highly competent military officers to bring down the "Deep State" that secretly rules the United States government. (Aliapoulios et al. 2021; Robertson and Amarasingam 2022; Garry et al. 2021; Rothschild 2021.)

what was going on but find the way to combat it" (AM: 01:31). Thus, the counterconspiracy shares a hierarchical, organizational structure with the conspiracy itself.

Thrive suggests that benevolent extraterrestrials from an Earth-like planet have influenced humanity to reach its full potential (00:30). This influence is evident in all human culture as codes and patterns "embedded in arts and icons throughout the centuries" (00:04). Furthermore, evolution and universe itself are systemic, self-organizing processes that challenge the elite's conspiracy as they guide humanity to come together (00:10, 02:03). It is only a matter of tapping into this system.

No similar counterconspiracies, however, are described in the Christian texts, where even the Church, God's trusted institution, has been both divided internally by Satan *and* weakened by means of ecumenism that aims for a "One-World Church" controlled by the future Antichrist (TIALW: 214–216; FW: 231–239). On the one hand, this is explained by the message and structure of the Bible: since God's plan has been outlined in the beginning of time, no actual counterconspiracies before the apocalypse are expected. On the other hand, the difference points at the late modern nature of popular millennial conspiracism: it advocates the idea of utopian progress through techno-spiritual means that are supported by global networks and complex interconnections – things that the Christian version typically abhors.

In other words, these conspiracist myths have opposing historical trajectories discussed later. What is crucial here is that all these myths draw apocalyptic conclusions from a global, rapid, and inherently modern shift toward institutionality and higher interconnectivity (see Giddens 1990). While the growing influence of secular or spiritual organizations is a threat in conservative Christian conspiracism (not least because it challenges Christianity), popular millennialism argues for the possibility of hope inherent in the very same change so that it additionally imagines good institutions that unite and operate in secrecy. In *Thrive*, a secular-spiritual evolutionary process, arguably backed by scientific discourses, is a similar change guided by an invisible force. A natural system of primary patterns, which are "fundamental to the creation of the universe at all scales," can help unlock unlimited energy to oppose the New World Order and "transform the quality of life on this planet" (Thrive: 00:14).

To summarize so far: it is typical in contemporary times to assume intricate networks and seamless cooperation between organizations and institutions, while few can be aware of all operative contracts, connections, and ownerships. This idealized notion of mostly uncharted but highly efficient interconnectivity is brought to its extreme in conspiracism where

organizational connections are meaningful but purposefully occluded, groups are granted essentializing features by association, and linked actors share a single goal – often, the apocalypse. By engaging with themes of transparency and perfect management, conspiracist mythology reinvents and reinterprets the ideals and complexities of late modernity. The stances taken, however, are not alike. While the threat of an institutional dystopia looms large and the forces of evil acquire similar features in these two categories of conspiracism,[13] there are differences, for example, in how the complex systems are envisioned, and what exact consequences such systems yield. Christian conspiracism retains a narrative with distanced transcendental actors and fixed hierarchies in which institutions mostly deceive and oppress. Popular millennial conspiracism argues that secret, interconnected organizations advance liberation and transcendence as well; championing technological advancements and expanding collective consciousness can overturn dominant power structures and grant humanity new positions in the hierarchy.

Teleological Instruments

In a sense, conspiracy myths share a *teleological* view: they explain history based on its inevitable outcome(s). The tendency to give significant weight to a "final cause" has been linked to conspiracism in psychology (e.g. Wagner-Egger et al. 2018), but mythic discourses reveal this as well (see also O'Leary 1994: 6). Most apocalyptic processes, religious or otherwise, are future-oriented: past and present are interpreted with a mythic endpoint in mind (Fenster 2008: 229–230). Such endpoints are not unique to conspiracism but often serve to justify conspiracist mythicizing. Conspiracy activists link events and indicate patterns to explain the purposefulness – good or evil – behind history, which is granted cosmic significance, and the activists and their audience are positioned on an apocalyptic timeline. In addition to clearly demarcated past events, teleological interpretations cover a wide range of modern phenomena including the formation of organizations, development of popular culture trends, innovations in technology, and the rise of celebrities – Perloff, for example,

[13] Institutional dystopias and organized forms of evil are also present in secular myths, and they can appear in other contexts as conspiracism. Comparing these forms of organizational suspicions would be a fascinating continuation for this article.

claims that The Beatles were manufactured to advance the agenda of world domination (TIALW: 200–201).

In the Christian version, conspiracist hermeneutics are employed to connect observed reality to the biblical narrative. The end advances rapidly according to the prophetic timeline of the Revelations, and every act that aims at the consolidation of the New World Order leads toward a one-world government lead by Antichrist. Transcendental meaning is granted not only to distinct events (wars, scandals, catastrophes), but also to socioeconomic, political, and cultural shifts. The eschatological framework is flexible, and both supporting evidence and contradictions can be explained in relation to the end which remains inevitable. For Rivera, "it is clear that we are in the Last Days. The signs have been apparent for many years, and they are accelerating and escalating." These signs reveal intention, as "we've been brought to the brink of something catastrophic in its implications." There is a logic to the interpretation of history: it "has been a series of 'disturbances' which have been allowed, because they fit within the confines of God's will for this planet; and 'corrections' which have served to restrain the end of days till God's appointed time." This logic helps understand "the convergence of seemingly isolated incidents, and the underlying cause for them." (FW: 11–13.) Similarly, interpretation can rest on the simple premise of Satan's agenda. Perloff emphasizes two principles: first, "Satan wants to rule the world (purpose of world government)," and second, "[h]e wants to rule it from a throne in Jerusalem (purpose of Zionism) … Understand those principles, and you can understand most world events." (TIALW: 147–148.)

The same interpretive process applies to popular millennialism, but these conspiracy activists rarely submit to a single prophetic text. Rather, they might argue that the amount of correspondence between prophecies in different cultures and religions points to the benign purposefulness behind all history. The good ETs on Earth are constantly "showing us that they will make sure that we stay on track for this positive future that's been promised to us in over thirty-five different ancient cultures around the world" (AM: 00:15). Likewise, "ancient cultures have embedded [a code to unlock unlimited free energy] in the most enduring forms then possible, in stories, in icons, in alphabets, in buildings" (Thrive: 00:15). Religious, political, and technological developments of our time prove how the apocalyptic event is approaching: "It's not a matter of if, but when." (TCS: 02:04) Even secular sources such as science might be used to hint at the inevitability of the apocalyptic change: *Thrive*, for example, appropriates

the language of mathematics and geometrics.[14] Thus, although God is not the absolute power behind all history, popular millennial claims indicate a strong predestination. Human agency plays a role in bringing about the future, but it is dwarfed by the discourse according to which the rupture is inevitable and legitimized by past mythologies.[15]

All exemplary narratives nevertheless construct history as a long march leading to the end of the current order. As a consequence of this pivotal teleological principle, randomness disappears. This is not to say that for conspiracy activists, nothing can happen by chance: rather, in the mythic framework, all *significant* events have been designed for a purpose, and most things can gain mythic significance (see Barkun 2003: 3–4). Whatever has happened by chance is irrelevant for the myth. Indeed, the existence of *chance itself* as a significant factor in history is a manufactured idea according to these myths since an argument in favor of any contingency can be considered another tool of the conspiracy. Perloff demonstrates this: "Satan wanting to deny God's existence was the root motive behind Darwin's theory of evolution. But Satan, at least for now, doesn't want us knowing *he* exists either. Hence Establishment historians dismiss the march of history as accidental, just as Darwin did with the development of life itself." (TIALW: 48, emphasis in original.)

In conspiracism, historical events, actions, ideas (concerning history itself), and various agents are thus best seen as symbolically powerful *instruments* that are employed by the enemy to advance and obscure the plot. In conspiracist mythology, actors and groups have multiple functions: they are depicted as having their own agency in influencing the world but additionally reduced to serving the purposes of others. Media institutions, for example, are actors that shape and control public opinion, but at the same time their nature is ultimately instrumental in bringing about the New World Order. Exposing them as tools of oppression is akin to the "removing of veils," the original meaning of the apocalypse. Knowledge has been

[14] The geometrical pattern known as the Torus serves as an optimistic model for the future, its existence proving that the universe has an "astonishing ability to come to a perfect balance" (Thrive: 00:01). This harmony is contrasted with the imperfection of the current society that is being exploited by totalitarian systems such as the New World Order that "keep us from thriving" (Thrive: 01:09).

[15] In TCS, Wilcock argues that all premodern religions have posited the upcoming cosmic "Ascension event" and concludes: "Isn't it interesting that the same prophecies that Jesus was giving us appear in the Quran, which is the Islamic Bible, quite extensively? They appear in the Old Testament, they appear in Native American spiritual traditions, in Celtic traditions, Druidic traditions. Everyone got this." (01:54.)

valued before, but in conspiracism, the current information ecosystem itself is eschatologically significant.

Diverging Trajectories

Despite sharing many features, conspiracist myths are not uniform in their knowledge concerning the ending world. This is important, because one of the central features of what "modernity" means is its aspiration to model possible future trajectories to sustain progress. While teleological and apocalypse-oriented, Christian and popular millennialist conspiracists differ in discourses related to history and the current state of the world, as their views on *the direction of progress* are almost diametrically opposed. These factors alter the meaning of the apocalypse and the stances the actors take. In typical Christian conspiracism, the force of evil has been engaged in trying to bring about the Antichrist's reign – the New World Order – and is steadily advancing in this goal; the worst is yet to come. In popular millennial conspiracism, evil most likely rules the world already, and the approaching apocalyptic event will signal its defeat: averting this end is presented as evil's main goal. These stances mirror the difference between "messianic" and "katechontic" responses to the apocalypse as described by Michael Dillon: for messianism, the end holds promise and must thus be brought about, while katechontism wishes to delay the moment of rupture and "constrain apocalyptic enthusiasm," perhaps for political goals (Dillon 2011; Rothe 2020: 157–158). These concepts can be applied to explain the strategies of actors in conspiracism as well.

Prophecies both optimist and pessimist usually determine how well the force of evil will succeed. In the Christian myth, evil accomplishes the apocalypse it awaits; in popular millennialism, evil opposes the apocalypse but fails to undo it. In Christian conspiracism the conspiracist activists agree with katechontism, since in principle they attempt to oppose the onset of the New World Order. There is little attempt, however, to downplay the likelihood of the eschatological event. Such conspiracists still place their trust in the ultimate intervention of God and his triumph over Satan after the worst is over: the apocalypse is part of God's plan, and Satan is unwittingly participating in his own downfall. In contrast, popular millennialist conspiracism can be understood as messianism where humanity together represents a single messianic actor. It describes the force of evil as aware of the coming end and engaged in futile katechontic activity. Thus, both stances see katechontism as ineffectual, but the actors

attempting it differ. Similarly, the current state of the world and its path toward the final event are different depending on the myth. *Thrive* seems to be a hybrid case, as it concentrates on both positive and negative outcomes: the future can hold horrors worse than today, "a totalitarian world authority" (01:16) that will eliminate "the majority of the world's population" (01:33), but simultaneously, and contradictory, the evil is impaired by its very nature and will fail to stop humanity's awakening: "It takes tremendous energy, resources and deception to try to dominate the lives of others. In moving toward freedom, on the other hand, we have on our side the evolutionary life force and what Gandhi called Satyagraha, the simple power of truth." (01:44.)

Two aspects of these contradicting historical trajectories stand out in relation to the late modern nature of conspiracism: the role that technology plays, and the integration of contemporary culture and its paradigms into mythological explanations. First, when technology is interpreted in an apocalyptic framework, hopes and concerns related to efficiency, surveillance, and control are mythicized to a great extent. The historical shift into a ubiquitous information society carries both positive and negative prospects, and these are intensified in conspiracism by associating them with otherworldly entities, hidden properties, and prophetic events. High technology becomes instrumental within a broader, transcendental agenda. Second, contemporary cultural phenomena are similarly discussed and ascribed mythic features according to the perceived apocalypse. Discourses dominating mainstream society gain new meanings.

The pessimist trajectory most evident in Christian texts tends to speak of loss following change. First, high technology is constructed as a crucial tool for the consolidation of the New World Order. Such technocriticism is no doubt influenced by the "Mark of the Beast" trope, which has been a central element in Christian conspiracism since the 1970s (Panchenko 2017: 74–75). The Internet, for example, is "the world's greatest spying system" (TIALW: 231), "just one element of Satan's plan for the Last Days, and will be used to carry out his devious End-time scenario" (FW: 49–50). The push toward an electronic society is the beginning of total oppression, since "when their plan is complete, you will be nothing more than a number in a computer" (FW: 528). "[T]he Beast system" includes "unfettered surveillance, and a virtually unlimited storage capacity" (FW: 848). Microchips, ID cards and "intelligence gathering" are key tools of the Establishment, and the Antichrist "will control all commerce" using electronic transactions (TIALW: 229–232.) The Year 2K scare was "a created event to get the world

rewired, to get the world's computers upgraded, and to finish laying the digital groundwork that will usher in the final days of mankind" (FW: 49–50).

Second, contemporary cultural phenomena are similarly discussed in negative terms and mythicized: diverse changes in society are grouped under one eschatological process in a totalizing manner, concentrating on what is taken away. *Final Warning* sees the process toward the New World Order evident in, just to mention a few, the subculture of Wiccans (733–736), same-sex marriage (747), civil rights movement (424–429), and the discussion over gun laws (689). *Truth Is a Lonely Warrior* incriminates multiculturalism (89), environmentalism (139–142), art and entertainment (200–202), and abortion (235). Conspiracy activists tend to claim that traditional values, along with Christianity, are disappearing, and the United States "has been brought down" (FW: 11–13). This discourse is closely related to the "Republican Jeremiad" as discussed by Michael Butter (2014). The collection of trends, ideologies, and movements that evil employs as instruments to achieve these ends in society is enormous. The process is never limited to historical events such as wars, changed laws or implemented policies.

Popular millennial conspiracism is more approving of both technological advancements and sociocultural phenomena. Contemporary issues and trends are referenced and recontextualized to serve a hopeful narrative.[16] High technology is ultimately a tool *against* evil. For example, most problems in society could be solved with advanced energy sources that the enemy has been suppressing – for example, "free energy" that was discovered by Nikola Tesla (AM: 01:56; Thrive: 00:34). Furthermore, the counterconspiracist "SSP Alliance" has been working in secrecy to give "all of these technologies … to all of humanity at once" (AM: 01:31). The Internet is not portrayed as a system of control but a tool for emancipation.[17] Viruses are a far cry from the demonic instruments of death as portrayed in Christian

[16] The enemy has turned public institutions, economic structures, politicians, and the education system into its instruments (AM: 00:30). "An elite group of people and the corporations they run have gained control over not just our energy, food supply, education and health care, but over virtually every aspect of our lives." (Thrive: 00:52.) This domination, however, is not enough to halt positive progress. Advancements in technology and knowledge are thus more miraculous and predestined.

[17] In *The Cosmic Secret*, UFO contactee Barry Littleton discusses the liberating potential of the Internet: extraterrestrial information has so far been blocked, and most humans are unaware of "extreme contact" since "our perception is so molded." The Internet has enabled communication between contactees and lead to more and more people "reaching out" with the outcome that, "what is happening on the planet right now is a shift in consciousness." (01:01.)

conspiracism, since they are envisioned as being secretly engineered to benefit humanity. Viruses have originated in extraterrestrials' "genetic programs" that were "developed to boost or enhance the natural evolution or ascension of the beings on the planet" (TCS: 01:09).

A positive, appropriative approach to contemporary cultural phenomena is evident in the way popular millennial conspiracism adopts terms from other late modern discourses. It sets itself strictly apart from its Christian counterpart by appropriating concepts such as the feminist "patriarchy" to refer to an aspect of the conspiracy that is rooted deeply in the history of Christianity. Wilcock argues that the Church has subjugated femininity, which has led to "the suppression of the feminine by the patriarchy, to hold down the feminine aspect of human spirituality and the feminine perspective that would include itself in governance, in law, in education, in all different aspects of society." (TCS: 01:31) Discourses from postcolonialism[18] and environmentalism,[19] for example, are similarly assimilated into the conspiracist mythology. Conspiracy activists can thus align themselves with late modern critique of (masculine, white, Western) power structures and institutions while recontextualizing the argument in a mythic framework. Patriarchy, colonialism, and exploitation of nature serve as evil's instruments – not feminism, postcolonialism, or environmental activism. While this popular millennialist worldview posits a conspiracy as the ultimate source of all adversities, the issues that are to be solved by this explanation do not originate from the conspiracist domain. Instead, they have been appropriated from mainstream academia and activism, and cause concern even outside the conspiracist milieu.[20]

[18] *Thrive* demands we should "honestly re-examine our past, because it doesn't work to try to build a healthy living system on top of an unhealthy one." Indigenous and civil rights activists are given voice in the documentary. The conquest of North America and "the seizure of the lands of the people, and the slaughter of their women and children" is presented as one of "the most fundamental acts of injustice upon which the country was founded," and as wrongs that are "continued every single day." (01:56) These injustices toward the indigenous peoples reflect the grand injustice of the New World Order – which is an attempt of global colonization and exploitation. Similar indigenous critique of Western systems as oppression is found in TCS (01:24).

[19] There are no fears of an "environmental dictatorship" (TIALW: 139–142) in *Above Majestic* that appropriates ecocritical discourses while acknowledging that a negative trajectory is still possible: "The planet is dying. We have economic collapse. We have mass starvation. We have the largest mass extinctions since the collapse of the dinosaurs. Our ecosphere is collapsing. We see the lack of water. We see ever-increasing global temperatures. And no one really is doing anything about it. The entrenched power structure stays the way it is. We're still burning fossil fuels. We're still not getting access to these amazing technologies." (AM: 02:07)

[20] While issues such as the environmental collapse are not mythic, conclusions drawn from them are tied to the mythology. When Wilcock refers to amazing technologies in the footnote above, the narrative returns to the domain of the myth. Mainstream issues find *the only* real solution in the conspiracist tradition. Hope is

Thus, in popular millennialism, contemporary critique of society can be granted apocalyptic significance not to discredit or demonize such approaches but to employ their discourses in support of the worldview. This appropriation of relevant critical theories, however, clouds the exoticizing and essentializing of cultural Others, women, and the natural world – a common trait in Western esotericism for centuries.

Conspiracist knowledge production thus mythicizes not only crucial historical events but contemporary trends as well. This includes scientific paradigms, technological advancements, and ideological movements. The purpose, however, is quite different in Christian and popular millennial conspiracism. What proves Satan's success in the former, gives hope for humanity in the latter; what the Christian myth shuns, popular millennialism embraces as a potentially useful discourse.

A logical outcome of these differing stances toward the progress of history is that Christian and popular millennial conspiracism are likely to enter an antagonistic relationship. Each includes the other among the instruments that evil employs. A competing belief system, along with a competing conspiracy myth, is held suspect (See Hanegraaff 2012: 148). Christian conspiracism is usually hostile toward popular millennialism, as when Rivera attacks "New Age philosophy" that has "weakened, watered-down, and worn-out the message of the Church" (FW: 747). It is "nothing more than a revival of the ancient Babylonian religion, a dressed-up version and politically-correct form of witchcraft, which they hope to introduce to every aspect of society." The goal of the New Age is not "'the emergence of a new planetary consciousness'" but discrediting Christianity and forming a "one-world religion." (FW: 741.) Popular millennialist conspiracism reciprocally views organized religion as being invented to control humanity, though its origins might be true and valuable. It does not exclude the Bible as an authority but grants it significance only in relation to other prophecies, and this "improvisational" method is indeed an attack on the dogmatism of Christian conspiracism (see Barkun 2003: 22–23). For popular millennialists, Christianity can serve as a tool for both good and evil when it is separated from its institutions, while Christian conspiracism in question sees "New Age" part of the plot. Thus, the stance that popular millennialism takes toward "world religions" is more complex than *vice versa*.

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reinstated with a prophetic claim that the "full disclosure" of technology will lead to a "totally new reality," as humankind becomes "a truly galactic civilization" (AM: 02:08).

Another symmetrically opposed feature is the interpretation of demons and aliens: in the popular millennial narrative, Wilcock claims that benevolent ETs are angelic and negative ETs "would correspond with the demons that we see in many different spiritual traditions" (TCS: 02:00). This implies that the biblical demons have been unrecognized aliens. Perloff and Rivera instead claim that ETs are unreal while demons are real: for Perloff, UFO sightings are a deception (TIALW:269), while Rivera argues, *contra* Wilcock, that UFOs spotted since the 1940s are "actually demonic manifestations" (FW: 47–49).

A central difference between Christian and popular millennial conspiracism thus lies in the direction of the historical process and how this dictates the nature of the current time and the fate of humanity. Christian conspiracy activists construct a timeline where all significant preapocalyptic changes are most likely serving the advancement of the one-world government, while the discourses of popular millennialist conspiracism stress that since humanity has been under the control of an oppressive system for perhaps millennia, the future upheaval holds potential for emancipation. This difference in the underlying worldview can set these conspiracist models in opposition. It also reflects the difference highlighted earlier: popular millennial conspiracism imagines humanity as rising to a transcendental position and actively contributing to the positive outcome, while this outcome rests on God alone in Christian conspiracism.

Conclusions

Conspiracist mythologies subscribe to some vision of an imminent rupture, but the path toward this end varies a great deal and, accordingly, ideas related to how one should interpret the current state of the world, along with its actors and hidden mechanics, are not uniform. This indicates that it is not only the approaching *end* of the world that is discursively different within these forms of conspiracism; the inherent ontological argument concerning what *the world is* differs as well.

This study highlights that texts closer to a typical "religious millennialism" (Barkun 2003) illustrate an ontology where apocalyptic actors have predetermined positions in a universal hierarchy, modern organizations are menacing, and history proceeds linearly toward an unwanted state of things. This justifies skepticism of novelties and entails a negative "hypersemiotic" interpretation concerning new information (Fenster 2008: 95). Significant

events and trends can be read as indications of the New World Order's approach. Changes in society should be opposed or questioned while they are nevertheless unavoidable in the prophetic framework. The fatalistic downward spiral is most evident in the United States in Christian conspiracism that often advocates premillennialism (Butter 2014; Fenster 2008: 207–214; Walker 2013).

Likewise, my textual analysis supports the view that "popular millennial" conspiracism (Robertson 2016) is more eclectic and optimistic: possibilities for both social and individual growth are immense, and good organizations devise complex and efficient counterconspiracies to mimic the evil one. Conspiratorial actors emerge as flexible and able to move between categories or shift power positions according to the eschatology. Contemporary phenomena are engaged with, even celebrated. Instead of taking an antagonistic approach to novelties, this conspiracism utilizes new ideas, movements, and tropes to support its vision. A utopian future is natural and likely, no matter how grim the current situation. This process of interpreting the world according to a conspiracist myth entails a hypersemiosis like Christian conspiracism, but with a range of positive conclusions. The difference in apocalyptic hermeneutics and meaning-making operations stems in part from the sources that authorize mythic knowledge, as pointed out by Barkun as well (2003: 10–11).

Based on these emerging aspects of mythic discourse, my analysis supports the argument that popular millennialist conspiracism is indeed less dogmatic than the one based on a long-standing "world religion," at least in terms of apocalypticism. There is a difference in how much actors can affect their positions in the hierarchy and how hopeful the historical trajectory is. Powerful actors are then seen in the society as distant and confined to certain functions, or as potentially equal and emancipated. This difference corresponds with the underlying belief system and its influential texts.[21] We should nevertheless question dichotomies from earlier conspiracism studies and pay attention to how late modernity influences old prophecies and newer popular millennial myths alike. For example, Christian conspiracy activists can nevertheless propagate grassroots action against the New World Order although, for them, there is little power to affect the outcome. Mythic knowledge is

[21] Similar conflicting discourses have emerged in apocalypse studies as a distinction between "tragic" and "comic" readings of the Revelations (O'Leary 1994: 61–92).

fluid, practical, and easily adaptable to changing times and new (media) environments. All conspiracist myths are acts of bricolage, as liquid as the age they model, even when the world they construct is fixed to a great degree. They remain relevant by reacting to their surroundings. In late modernity, this means the reinterpretation of its central features (such as institutional management structures and environmentalist discourses) in a conspiracist frame. An important aspect of bricolage, not discussed here, is the use of images and videos; audiovisual mythmaking of the 21st century would certainly be an important subject for future research.

The process where the contemporary cultural environment is mythicized to create models of the future for the conspiracy milieu is an important example of how late modernity creates relevant yet traditional symbols to address the essential questions of our age. Mythic discourse – whether it be in climate activism or warnings concerning Artificial Intelligence, for example – evolves by adapting familiar elements from various traditions to new surroundings, and this process threatens the permanence of assigned categories. The logic of modern mythologies can nevertheless be understood by looking at what exactly is mythicized, and what endangered worlds these discourses construct.

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