

How Do We Discern **CONSPIRACY**

THEORIES ?

Martin Dojčár (ed.)

Trnava University 2022

HOW DO WE DISCERN CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

Martin Dojčár (ed.)

Peer-reviewed conference proceedings from the international scientific conference organized by the Faculty of Education at Trnava University, the Department of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, and the Hussite Theological Faculty at Charles University in Prague on September 29, 2022, at the Trnava University in Trnava, Slovakia.

TRNAVA 2022

Acknowledgement

Conference proceedings is a partial outcome of the research project
KEGA no. 016TTU-4/2021 *Spirituality Accompaniment Program*
for University Teachers

Reviewers

Prof. ThDr. Jozef Jarab, PhD.

dr hab. Marek Rembierz, prof. UŚ

First edition

Publisher © Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Education, 2022

Editor © Martin Dojčár

Authors © Vladimír Bahna, Martin Dojčár, Janette Gubricová, Cyril Hišem,
Kateřina Hlaváčová, Denisa Jakubíková, Pavol Kosnáč, Gemma Simmonds,
Radovan Šoltés, Ivana Šuhajdová, Zdeněk Vojtišek

Cover © MgA. Štefan Blažo, PhD.

Print and typography Tlačiareň IRIS, s.r.o.

ISBN 978-80-568-0512-1 (print)

ISBN 978-80-568-0513-8 (online)

DOI 10.31262/978-80-568-0513-8/2022

CONTENT

<i>Martin Dojčár</i> Foreword	5
<i>Vladimír Bahna</i> Narrativity of Conspiracy Theories	7
<i>Zdeněk Vojtíšek</i> Conspiracism and Religion	27
<i>Pavol Kosnáč</i> Conspiracy Theories as Individual Attempts to Make Sense of a Complex World: What We Can Learn from Slovak and Middle Eastern Practice	37
<i>Kateřina Hlaváčová</i> Conspiracy Theories in Modern Europe: Jewish Plot, Secret Societies, and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion	57
<i>Cyril Hišem</i> Conspiracies in the History of Christianity	84
<i>Radovan Šoltés</i> Discernment of Interior Movements According to St. Ignatius of Loyola and Working with Conspiracy-Specific Stimuli	99
<i>Gemma Simmonds</i> Conspiracy Theories and Ignatian Discernment	116
<i>Janette Gubricová, Martin Dojčár, Ivana Šuhajdová, Denisa Jakubíková</i> Obstacles to the Socialization of Foreign Children in Primary School Conditions as a Potential Source for the Emergence of Conspiracies	126

FOREWORD

Martin Dojčár

Conspiracy theories are among the most vivid sociopathological phenomena of our times. As sociocultural challenges of such an urgent kind, they require a thoughtful response from experts, state authorities and civil society.

The publication you are holding in your hands offers such a thoughtful response from experts who gathered at the international conference “How do we discern conspiracy theories?” to discuss and propose qualified suggestions for addressing conspiracism in various areas of social life, including the state administration, the education system, the third sector, churches and religious societies.

The original contribution of the conference can be considered the operationalization of the notion of discernment: *Discernment is proposed as a key notion for approaching conspiracies from a prophylactic point of view.*

In its religious context, the notion of discernment is closely linked to spirituality and finds its prominent application in spiritual accompaniment as developed throughout the history of Christianity. Regarding this spiritual background, an additional goal of the conference was set, that is, to identify the meaning of the concept of discernment in its traditional religious contexts, particularly the one of Ignatian spirituality, and to outline its prophylactic implementation in social and educational practice. This goal was directly addressed by papers of Radovan Šoltés and Gemma Simmonds.

Conspiracy theories are basically stories. In his introductory paper, therefore, Vladimír Bahna explains their popularity precisely based on narrativity and tellability.

Furthermore, since the term *conspiracism* denotes a complex phenomenon, which is at the same time “somehow related to religion,” as

Zdeněk Vojtíšek points out, a good portion of contributors to these proceedings decided to approach it specifically in the relation to religion. Pavol Kosnáč further investigates religious motifs of conspiracism and demonstrates them in two current cases from the Middle East and Slovakia.

As a kind of cultural constant, conspiracy theories are far from being solely a modern phenomenon. In their studies, Kateřina Hlaváčová and Cyril Hišem provide us with historic surveys into the development of modern conspiracism both in Europe and Western Christianity, examining a few selected motifs of conspiracy culture, which are still vital in contemporary conspiracy theories.

And finally, the prophylactic and educational approaches to conspiracism, addressed in the context of integration and socialization of migrant children into regular classes in Slovak primary schools, were covered by Janette Gubricová, Martin Dojčár, Ivana Šuhajdová, and Denisa Jakubíková.

The conference proceedings make public these and other valuable research outcomes of experts from the international conference titled “How do we discern conspiracy theories?”, which was organized by the Department of Educational Studies at the Faculty of Education, Trnava University, along with the Department of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, and the Hussite Theological Faculty at Charles University in Prague. The conference was held on September 29, 2022, at the Trnava University in Trnava, Slovakia, and was realized as a part of the research project KEGA no. 016TTU-4/2021 *Spirituality Accompaniment Program for University Teachers*.

NARRATIVITY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Vladimír Bahna

Abstract

Psychological research shows that belief in conspiracy theories is related to the rejection of coincidence by an inclination towards explanations that offer intentional action as the cause. This association increases significantly in the context of experiencing uncertainty, lack of control, feelings of threat, and powerlessness. In this respect, conspiracy theories are similar to many supernatural explanations. They are stories. That is representations of events that are populated by actors whose actions and motivations offer ultimate causality. Supernatural and conspiratorial beliefs, though each in a different way, attribute extraordinary competencies and powers to some protagonists that enable the creation of causally coherent stories. As narratives, conspiracy theories, compared to their non-conspiratorial alternatives, are at an advantage in that they please the intuitions which human mind uses to represent social reality while at the same time they address true or believed social conflicts, animosities, or tensions. The author of this paper proposes that it is the narrativity and tellability of conspiracy theories that explain part of their successful social spread and popularity.

Key words

Conspiracy theories, narratives, narrativity, tellability, supernatural explanations

Introduction

This paper proposes that the social success of conspiracy theories relates to their narrative properties. Even though conspiracy theories are increasingly coming to the forefront of scholarly interest, they are not a phenomenon exclusive to our times; quite the

contrary. Psychological research supports this claim, as it shows that conspiracy ideation is linked to evolutionarily old systems adapted to navigate us through social life.

First, let me briefly define what I mean by conspiracy theories. To do this, it may be useful to look at two things. First, what is the content of conspiracy theories, i.e., what kind of information do they convey? Second, what is their social dynamics or how do they spread in society? The content of conspiracy theories is already apparent from what they are called. They are ideas that pose secret conspiracies to be the cause of various phenomena, i.e., the planned and covert actions of groups of people and organizations aimed at harming or controlling the public (e.g., Abalakina-Paap *et al.*, 1999; Wood *et al.*, 2012). They thus adamantly believe information about a potential threat while pointing the finger at who is causing it. The second aspect of basket-case theories arises from the scholars often describing them as a type of rumor (Panczová 2017; Mercier 2020). This means that, while they claim truth, they are insufficient to assess it, and, in terms of social dynamics, they are characterized by a rapid and spontaneous spread from individual to individual. Here I will try to explain how the conspiratorial content and the spontaneity and ease of social transmission are related.

Research on conspiracy theories has long pointed to a connection with supernatural and religious beliefs. First, religion itself is often the subject of conspiracy theories, leading to the postulation that the masterminds behind conspiracies are influential religious organizations (the Pope and the Vatican), religious minorities (Jews, schismatic groups) and real or imagined occult or ritual groups (Satanists, Freemasons). Second, conspiratorial reasoning and beliefs appear directly in religions, where historical events and social conflicts are often interpreted in the light of supernatural explanations as plots of evil forces against the sacred order, where social reality mixes with demonology, etc. This kind of reasoning is found, for example, in the apocalyptic beliefs of millennialist movements, in cases of so-called “moral panics”, but also in the beliefs of witchcraft and supernatural explanations of misfortune. The third layer perceives conspiracy theories as a kind of religion (and *vice versa*) in terms of the

similarities at the level of psychological mechanisms and social functions (Robertson, Dyrendal, and Asprem 2018). Philosopher Karl Popper considered conspiracy theories to be the functional equivalent of religion, where, in both cases, there is an inclination to attribute undesirable events to all-powerful forces (Popper 1945). Contemporary research points to many similarities between conspiracy theories and religious beliefs at the epistemological, psychological, and social levels. Conspiracy theories and religious beliefs have interesting psychological parallels, but there are also many differences between the two categories. Nevertheless, despite these differences, the parallel is informative in helping to understand and explain the forms and functions of both conspiratorial and religious beliefs (Wood and Douglas 2018).

1 Psychology of Conspiracy Theories

One of the central psychological similarities between conspiracy theories and supernatural explanations is that their adoption can lead to a saturation of psychological needs that stem from uncertainty, lack of control and insecurity concerning epistemic, existential and social motives (Wood and Douglas 2018; K. M. Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2019). The psychological processes that compensate for feeling a lack of control do so by triggering inclinations towards beliefs about the existence of external forces that transcend oneself. Research shows that either individual dispositions in the perception of uncertainty (van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013), a recall of memories of situations in which one experienced a lack of control (Whitson and Galinsky 2008; van Prooijen and Acker 2015) or perceived threats to a social status quo (Jolley, Douglas, and Sutton 2018) increase conspiratorial thinking. Many correlational studies have shown a relationship between emotions associated with threat and uncertainty and belief in conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999; Grzesiak-Feldman 2013; Newheiser, Farias, and Tausch 2011; van Prooijen 2016). A similar relationship can be found between the increase/decrease of religiosity and existential (Baimel *et*

al. 2022; Orman 2019; Herman 2007; Norris and Inglehart 2015). Belief in external forces, whether in the form of powerful conspirators or supernatural entities, thus has a palliative effect on associated negative feelings of insecurity and anxiety (Wood and Douglas 2018). Psychologists argue that, when threatened and lacking control, people turn to available causally closed explanations, such as those offered by conspiracy theories or beliefs in supernatural beings, to compensate for this state and to gain a sense of security and control. Humans seem to be generally predisposed to an aversion to uncertainty and, with the logic “[b]etter the devil you know than the world you don’t,” prefer to expect the worse rather than staying in uncertainty (Moulding *et al.* 2016; Wu *et al.* 2021). Whether they do so as “intuitive prosecutors” or “intuitive theologians” is context dependent but also mediated by the same psychological mechanisms (Tetlock 2002).

This desire to compensate for uncertainty is found to be mediated through systematic biases of various cognitive mechanisms. Adherence to conspiracy theories has been shown to be associated with cognitive biases such as illusory pattern perception (van Prooijen, Douglas, and De Inocencio 2018), anthropomorphism (Imhoff and Bruder 2014), over-attribution of agency as the cause (Douglas *et al.* 2016), heightened attributions of intentionality (Brotherton and French 2015) and the need for cognitive closure (Marchlewska, Cichocka, and Kossowska 2018). The major consequence of these biases is that people do not accept accidents as explanations and prefer to seek intentions.

The emergence and purpose of these biases, however, is not a manifestation of cognitive disorders or some kind of mental deficiency; on the contrary, it is actually functional. Their existence is generally considered to be a universal feature of human minds, an adaptation to specific evolutionarily important situations (Johnson *et al.* 2013).

In relation to conspiracy theories, it is therefore important to view them in the context of conditions that lead to triggering, or to an increase of expression of, these biases, which are uncertainty, lack of control and threat. The penetration of findings from scientific research conspiracy theories into the public discourse regularly brings

about a united misinterpretation, namely that the belief in conspiracy theories is due to some mental pathology or low intellect. This often points to findings that show that people who believe in conspiracy theories have lower levels of education. While it is true that high levels of education relate to the ability to think analytically, which is related to the rejection of conspiracy theories, it is also true that the level of education is significantly correlated with various sociological indicators such as social status, economic security, and access to health care. Thus, low education is highly correlated with life situations associated with experiencing higher levels of uncertainty, existential insecurity, and lack of control.

The cognitive biases and compensatory mechanisms associated with conspiracy theories are being put in the context of so-called dual-processing theories (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). These psychological theories argue that the human mind works in two divergent modes or systems: System 1 is impulsive, intuitive, automatic, stereotypical, and emotional, while System 2 is slow, consciously controlled, reflective and analytical. The former is seen as an adaptation due to the need for quick decisions in evolutionary relevant situations, and uncertainty is one of the crucial conditions under which we switch to System 1 (Kahneman 2011; Sherman, Gawronski, and Trope 2014). Thus, it is suggested that belief in conspiracy theories is mostly driven by System 1.

2 The Narrative Mind and the Narrativity of Conspiracy Theories

I want to draw attention to one specific theory that has been developed in cognitive narratology which follows a similar logic of dual-processing but is usually not mentioned within the dual-processing debates. Jerome Bruner speaks of two modes of cognitive functioning, each ordering experience and constructing reality in a different way: the narrative and the argumentative or paradigmatic mode. The narrative mode focuses on human (or human-like) intentions and the consequences that follow from them, engaging with the

meanings that are ascribed to experiences through stories. In contrast, the argumentative mode is concerned with general causes and their estimation, using procedures to test their truth (Bruner 1986). This view is common in cognitive narratology, where it is claimed that thinking in narratives is the fundamental and intuitive way of thinking about even the most elementary of situations. It is not a special type of mind dedicated to literacy. Quite the contrary: most of our experiences, our cognition and our reasoning are organized as stories. Humans are universally capable of creating stories, listening to them with interest, and deciding whether they make sense. In short, we think in structures made up of stories, and our minds integrate stories into a wide field of activities, using them as a strategy for solving problems in many contexts (Bruner 1986; Turner 1998; Herman 2003; Scalise Sugiyama 2001; Boyd 2009).

One of the common characteristics of both religious and conspiratorial representations that I want to address in this article is that they have the form of narratives. The argument I want to put forward here is that the success of conspiracy theories that we as scholars observe and seek to explain stems from their competition for human attention, memorization, and further reproduction with their non-conspiratorial alternatives. In the competition for psychological capacities whose ultimate consequence is social distribution, conspiracy theories succeed at least partially because they are good narratives.

The terms narrative and story are often used rather intuitively and interchangeably. However, in narratology, they tend however to be defined as different but hierarchically embedded concepts. The prevailing view is that a narrative is anything that represents a story, whether it is oral, textual, visual or performative; that is, a narrative is a communicative act that represents a story, and a story is a specific kind of content that distinguishes narrative from other communicative acts (Jahn 2017, chap. N2.1.2; Ryan 2007, 26). The narrative thus needs to be defined by its content – the story. The most basic feature of a story is that they consist of a sequence of real or fictional events arranged in a chronological sequence which are causally linked. However, the most defining feature of stories is that the

events they consist of involve human or human-like protagonists, either as the initiators of the events or as those who are affected by the events. Therefore, a story must contain actors capable of intentional action and must take into account their motivations and goals, such that the events in the story are the result of the intentional actions of these actors (Jahn 2017; Ryan 2007; Stein and Policastro 1984). In other words, a story is a representation of different states of the world that are temporally consequential and causally connected as a result of the intentional actions of people or people-like actors with an impact on other people or people-like actors. Leading narratologists, such as Marie-Laure Ryan or David Herman, argue that narrativity is not strictly a binary property but rather a degree to which a representation approximates the prototypical form of a narrative. The most comprehensive definition of a narrative is still a matter of endless debate, but it's actually not that important. Particular narratives don't have to fulfil all of the elements of the definition. However, what is crucial is that we can judge from a comparative perspective which narrative is a better narrative and possess more narrativity (Ryan 2007; Herman 2002). Such a fuzzy definition of narratives is helpful when we consider that the difference between narrative and argumentative modes of thinking is seen rather as a continuum (with divergent ends) than a sharp switch between distinct modes.

Various cognitive biases, including those I mentioned being associated with conspiracy theories, can be seen to address different aspects of stories. In constructing or acquiring representations of the world, these biases shift our representations towards higher narrativity. For example, the need for cognitive closure leads us to postulate connections and causation between events and objects (Kruglanski and Fishman 2009), even where there are none. Anthropomorphism and hyperactive agency detection lead us to postulate intentional agents even when there are none, and to attribute human-like agency to objects and animals (Barrett 2004; Guthrie 1995). Biased attribution of intentionality leads us to see intentional action rather than accidents (Rosset 2008), and so-called teleological reasoning leads us to believe that things and events have function and purpose (Kelemen 2012). Attributional errors, in turn, lead us to

look for non-accidental external causes of events (Ross 1977), etc.

In evolutionary psychology, it is argued that much of humanity's cognitive capacities, related cognitive biases and overall intelligence evolved to cope with challenges of life in complex groups – to anticipate cooperation or hostility in the actions, intentions, and goals of other conspecifics. This social intelligence hypothesis posits that the evolution of the human mind was driven by solving problems of social life that had implications for survival, reproduction, and status in the group. Life in complex societies, such as human ones, needs the ability to infer the intentions and motivations of others, and such a social skill is of the highest priority. Much of the intellectual capacity of primates, and especially humans, is used to resolve social relationships and conflicts; only secondarily is it used for other purposes (Humphrey 1976; Dunbar 1996; Ermer *et al.* 2006). One of the most important systems of human social cognition is the so-called Theory of Mind (also called intuitive psychology or mentalizing). This is the cognitive system responsible for the creation of beliefs (intuitive theories) about the mental states of others (Baron-Cohen 1995; Apperly 2011). Intentions, beliefs, desires, and the plans of others are the object of our own thoughts and are essential to understanding even the simplest of social interactions. In short, the theory of mind enables us to predict and explain the behavior of others. Returning to the definition of narratives, most narratologists agree that a key feature of narratives is that they are about the actions and intentions of the agents creating the plot of stories. It is argued that narratives that comprehensively engage the theory of the mind system and push it to its limits, to higher levels of intentionality, are intuitively more attractive (Zunshine 2006; Dunbar 2004). The ability to understand high-order intentionality is vital to understanding and anticipating deception. That is precisely what conspiracy theories play with. In order to understand any conspiracy, people must not just represent the malevolent intentions of alleged conspirators but also must represent the alleged conspirators as they represent the victims or the public having false beliefs.

Classical structuralist narratology attempts to reveal the invariant structure of narratives, a kind of narrative grammar, with a central

focus on what roles the various characters in the story play (Greimas 1987; Greimas and Porter 1977; Prince 1973). The simplest delineation of the narrative structure at the most elementary level defines two basic role categories: the agents, the initiators of actions, and the patients, those affected by the actions (Bremond 1980). Classical narratology through the sixties to eighties was heavily inspired by linguistics, and in this case by so-called “semantic or thematic roles.” However, contemporary cognitive narratologies, in line with the social intelligence or social brain hypothesis, point out that the relationship between narratives and language is not just a convenient theoretical inspiration but is also psychologically and evolutionarily anchored. This means that it is rather the language that has the structure of stories than the other way around, and our tendency to understand the world in terms of stories is where linguistic grammar originates (Turner 1998).

Intuitively satisfying explanations; therefore, being inclined to populate events with protagonists in an agent/patient relationship. A consequence of this is that once we identify someone or ourselves as, for example, a “victim” (patient), and even if it is just a potential victim (i.e., someone who is vulnerable and/or powerless), our intuitive need to construct causally coherent narratives compels us to look for an action that led to this situation not, the potential agent (the perpetrator) but also for their intentions and motivations to explain such actions (Tetlock 2002; McClure, Hilton, and Sutton 2007). This way of thinking is not something that only comes to the fore in the context of modern conspiracy theories, as the need to identify responsibility and attribute guilt to explain unfortunate events is well established in anthropological research (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Douglas 1992).

In conspiracy theories, the causal relationship between agents and patients is often privileged or prioritized over physical causality. Those who have ever observed the argumentative strategies of conspiracy theory believers may notice how fluidly and flexibly they deal with the technicalities of the explanations they offer. They often and with ease advocate multiple or even contradictory alternatives and move between them without hesitation. For instance, in

the well-known conspiracy theory of the 9/11 attacks, the proponents argue that the airplanes did not even crash into WTC and that the crash was just a video manipulation. Alternatively, if they admit that the airplanes did crash, the planes were supposedly not hijacked but purposely assigned for that role. At last, in case the airplanes were indeed hijacked, the Al-Qaida terrorists were just cleverly manipulated into that role to cower the truth. Similarly, believers in the COVID-19 conspiracy theory have been able to move from arguments that the disease does not exist to claims that it does exist but is not caused by a virus but rather by G5 transmitters. Just to later switch to claims that regardless of whether the disease is harmless or deadly, the official treatments and interventions are ineffective or even more harmful than the virus and the true thing to worry about. The very means of the malevolent actions proposed by conspiracy theories seem to be for those who believe in them far less important than the designation of the perpetrators and victims. What remains stable in these conspiratorial explanations are the protagonists, the agents and patients of the story, and their intentions and goals. In most conspiracy theories, the means of the malevolent actions are underspecified or even totally absent. The causal competencies of the conspirators are implicitly justified by their alleged power, their unlimited resources, technological supremacy, or just by the very size of the conspiratorial network.

This is not dissimilar to witchcraft beliefs. A textbook example is a case recorded by Evens-Pritchard. When a termite-eaten shelter fell on the inhabitants of an Azande village, the locals were fully aware of the natural cause of the collapse of the structure, termites, yet insisted that it was the result of the magical action of a witch. The shelter could have fallen at any time. What needed to be explained was why it fell at that particular moment when particular people were there (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Natural causes of events, although accepted, are often not considered sufficient or complete. This shows that, in the narrative representation of an event, in order to causally close it into a story, if someone occupies the role of a patient, people seek the intentions of the protagonist as the ultimate cause.

3 Tellability of Conspiracy Theories

The idea of the narrative mind is not only based on arguments that we use stories to represent social reality, that is, interactions, cooperation and conflict between individuals and groups, but also that stories are a central form of our communication. Social interactions mostly do not leave any physical trace that could be observed by those who were not directly involved. Storytelling and understanding of narratives are, therefore, a key development of the human species. Narratives enable the mediation of social experience and modulate the prestige and status of individuals and groups without the need for immediate personal interaction. Humans spend an essential part of their lives telling stories and are skilled at both understanding and producing them. Crucially, however, storytelling is not just a space in which social life is mirrored but an arena where social life is created, regulated and manipulated (Dunbar 2014; 1996). It is, therefore, of great importance to consider what will or will not be narrated, as well as when and to whom.

Tellability is a notion used in narratology that refers to features that make a story worth telling, its “noteworthiness.” It has often been hard to disentangle from narrativity, and both concepts partially overlap. Tellability depends on the storytellers’ judgment about what is to be significant, surprising, and worthy of being reported in specific contexts. It can refer to many aspects of a story, like the breaching of a canonical or expected development that transforms a plain incident into a tellable event. As the concept of reliability was significantly elaborated in conversational storytelling or narrative pragmatics, it is considered that tellability of a story can rely on purely contextual parameters and, in a conversation, is often negotiated through discursive interaction (Ryan 2005; Baroni 2014).

The definition of conspiracy theories implies that they are social since they seek to illuminate events in the world in terms of social conflict. They assume the existence of an external group that is the source of the threat and, at the same time, define that this group is not only trying to harm an individual but a broader community (an

ethnic group, a political party, a social class, etc.). It is also known that conspiracy theories are often popular in groups that are involved in conflict with each other (Pipes 1997) or spread in groups in which there has been some change that has affected the group as a whole. Joseph Uscinski and his colleagues showed that conspiracy theories are for “losers,” but not from a pejorative but a descriptive perspective. What they meant is that such theories are popular in groups in which there has been a deterioration in some conditions, e.g., voters of parties that lost elections, have experienced a decrease in economic wealth or for whom the availability of health care or education has decreased, etc. (Uscinski, Parent, and Torres 2011). Thus, conspiracy theories seem to spread among individuals who share certain common characteristics and reflect the beliefs, values or needs of that group. Psychologists point out that conspiratorial thinking is related to two social motivations. First is the desire to maintain in-group identity when the group is threatened by external forces. That is, people worry about possible conspiracies when they feel connected to, and thus care about, the potential victims of conspiracies. Second, it is protection from an external group suspected of hostility and possessing some threatening characteristic, such as power or negative stereotypes attached to it, both of which reinforce suspicion of these groups (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017; Douglas and Leite 2017). It is obvious that the tellability of conspiracy theories changes depending on the social context, and hence their social dynamics vary in different groups.

Hugo Mercier (Mercier 2020; Mercier and Altay 2022) points out one important thing, and that is that conspiracy theory, rumors or disinformation, in most cases, are not held as intuitive beliefs but reflected beliefs, with people holding them for precautionary rather than pragmatic reasons, rarely ever motivating action derived from their content. What he means by that is that people’s responses to conspiracy theories often do not correspond with the seriousness of the accusations made by the conspiracy theory. For example, a well-known conspiracy theory called “Pizza Gate” claims that a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC, was in fact, a camouflage hiding a human trafficking organization for a network of pedophiles

led by prominent politicians. Mercier argues that, if people were to believe this theory on an intuitive level, their reactions would have to be different from simply giving the restaurant the lowest rating or some anonymous harassment on social media. And while there has been only one incident to match the seriousness of the accusations where a person believing in this theory intervened, unfortunately, with direct action and gunfire, polls show that a considerable portion of the American population believes “Pizza Gate” to be real. Mercier is not trying to trivialize the tragic consequences of conspiracy theories, but he points out that, for a big part, conspiracy theories spread without people “believing” them on a deep intuitive level. Conspiracy theories and rumors, he argues, are similar to supernatural beliefs inasmuch as only a small proportion of them have practical implications for everyday life. He reasons that if our intuitive psychology were so gullible, it would directly contradict its presupposed functional origin as an evolutionary adaptation. On the contrary, he shows that, in practical problems and everyday situations, humans are very good at detecting false rumors precisely on the basis of our intuitive psychology. Mercier claims that, while conspiracy theories in their content correspond to our innate intuitions (which have been elaborated on above), and make them attention-grabbing and relevant, we still process them mostly in a reflective rational manner (Mercier 2020; Mercier and Altay 2022). While this may seem like a paradox, rationality does not necessarily entail truthfulness. Together with Dan Sperber, Mercier has pointed out that, in the context of the evolution of human social intelligence, the primary function of reflective reasoning is not the acquisition of information about the nature of the world, but to serve our needs to persuade others and to gain social benefits, like recognition, acceptance or status, or to avoid social punishment (Mercier and Sperber 2019). The reason for the adoption and communication of conspiracy theories, or their ostentatious public advocacy (similarly to religious and supernatural beliefs), is often not the need to understand the world but to negotiate oneself through one’s own social reality. The adherence to beliefs that are completely irrelevant to everyday life (e.g., whether or not humans have been to the moon) or factually

false (e.g., that the British Queen is an alien lizard) can be the result of rational deliberation in the context of coalitional psychology: considering actual and potential alliances between people; expectation regarding the actions and reactions of those people; evaluating initiation or engagement in those relationships.

Conclusions

Extensive psychological research on conspiracy theories shows what cognitive and emotional mechanisms are involved in their adoption and in what psychologically specific situations this happens. In this paper, I have attempted to invert the perspective somewhat and focus on why it is conspiracy theories, as a specific kind of representation of the world, that saturate the psychological needs stemming from these cognitive and emotional mechanisms. The exceptional cognitive abilities of humans, compared to other animal species, are thought to be largely the result of evolutionary adaptations specialized in dealing with complex social interactions in complex human societies. One consequence is that in situations where we experience threat, uncertainty, or lack of control, we tend to precautionarily view events in the world as social events that have their initiators (agents) and recipients (patients). Stories are precisely the kind of mental representations that our minds use to represent social interactions and conspiratorial and supernatural explanations of events, then, are precisely the kinds of representations that, by postulating super-powerful entities, can produce causally coherent stories.

The human capacity to generate stories and share them with our community, however, serves not only informative purposes but is itself a social act. The narratives we communicate in our social environment are, at the same time, the very tools we use to create, confirm, or manipulate social reality. Edward Evans-Pritchard pointed it out already in the first half of the 20th century. Supernatural explanations of misfortune and accusations of witchcraft do not necessarily clash with naturalistic explanations, for they address the social

reality and relationships rather than the nature of events they explicitly describe (Evans-Pritchard 1937). In this sense, conspiracy theories are in many ways similar to supernatural explanations.

Acknowledgement

The study was created with the support of the grant APVV-20-0334 *'This is not true, but it could be': Conspiracy theories and hoaxes in the modern development of Slovakia in the European context.*

References

- Abalakina-Paap, Marina, Walter G. Stephan, Traci Craig, and W. Larry Gregory. 1999. "Beliefs in Conspiracies." *Political Psychology* 20 (3): 637–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00160>.
- Apperly, Ian. 2011. *Mindreaders: The Cognitive Basis of Theory of Mind*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press.
- Baimel, Adam, Coren Apicella, Quentin Atkinson, Alex Bolyanatz, Emma Cohen, Carla Handley, Joseph Henrich, et al. 2022. "Material Insecurity Predicts Greater Commitment to Moralistic and Less Commitment to Local Deities: A Cross-Cultural Investigation." *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 12 (1–2): 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2021.2006287>.
- Baron-Cohen, Sasha. 1995. *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Baroni, Raphael. 2014. "Tellability." In *Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Wolf Schmid, 836–45. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110316469.836>.
- Barrett, Justin L. 2004. *Why Would Anyone Believe in God*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Boyd, Brian. 2009. *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. London, UK: Belknap Press.
- Bremond, Claude. 1980. "The Logic of Narrative Possibilities." *New Literary History* 11 (3): 387–411.
- Brotherton, Robert, and Christopher C. French. 2015. "Intention Seekers: Conspiracist Ideation and Biased Attributions of Intentionality." *PLoS ONE* 10 (5): 14–24. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0124125>.

- Bruner, Jerome. 1986. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Douglas, Karen M., and Ana C. Leite. 2017. "Suspicion in the Workplace: Organizational Conspiracy Theories and Work-Related Outcomes." *British Journal of Psychology* 108 (3): 486–506. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12212>.
- Douglas, Karen M., Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka. 2019. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Looking beyond Gullibility." In *The Social Psychology of Gullibility. Conspiracy Theories, Fake News and Irrational Beliefs*, edited by Joseph Forgas and Roy Baumeister, 61–76. London, UK: Routledge.
- Douglas, Mary. 1992. *Risk and Blame*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Dunbar, Robin I. M. 1996. *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dunbar, Robin I. M. 2004. *The Human Story: A New History of Mankind's Evolution*. London, UK: Faber and Faber.
- Dunbar, Robin I. M. 2014. "How Conversations around Campfires Came to Be." *PNAS* 111 (39): 14013–14. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1416382111>.
- Ermer, Elsa, Scott A. Guerin, Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, and Michael B. Miller. 2006. "Theory of Mind Broad and Narrow: Reasoning about Social Exchange Engages ToM Areas, Precautionary Reasoning Does Not." *Social Neuroscience* 1 (3–4): 196–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470910600989771>.
- Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien. 1987. "Actants, Actors, and Figures." In *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, 106–20. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien, and Catherine Porter. 1977. "Elements of a Narrative Grammar." *Diacritics* 7 (1): 23–40.
- Grzesiak-Feldman, Monika. 2013. "The Effect of High-Anxiety Situations on Conspiracy Thinking." *Current Psychology* 32 (1): 100–118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-013-9165-6>.
- Guthrie, Stewart Elliott. 1995. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Herman, David. 2002. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Herman, David. 2003. "Stories as a Tool for Thinking." In *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, edited by David Herman, 163–92. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Herman, David. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521856965>.
- Humphrey, N. K. 1976. "The Social Function of Intellect." In *Growing Points in Ethology*, edited by P. P. G. Bateson and R. A. Hinde, 303–17. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Imhoff, Roland, and Martin Bruder. 2014. "Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude." *European Journal of Personality* 28 (1), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930>.
- Jahn, Manfred. 2017. *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative*. Cologne: University of Cologne.
- Johnson, Dominic D. P., Daniel T. Blumstein, James H. Fowler, and Martie G. Haselton. 2013. "The Evolution of Error: Error Management, Cognitive Constraints, and Adaptive Decision-Making Biases." *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 28 (8): 474–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2013.05.014>.
- Jolley, Daniel, Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton. 2018. "Blaming a Few Bad Apples to Save a Threatened Barrel: The System-Justifying Function of Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology* 39 (2): 465–478. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12404>.
- Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Kelemen, Deborah. 2012. "Teleological Minds: How Natural Intuitions about Agency and Purpose Influence Learning about Evolution." *Evolution Challenges: Integrating Research and Practice in Teaching and Learning about Evolution*, 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199730421.003.0004>.
- Kruglanski, Arie W., and Shira Fishman. 2009. "Need for Cognitive Closure." In *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior*, edited by Mark R. Leary and Rick H. Loyre, 343–53. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Marchlewska, Marta, Aleksandra Cichočka, and Małgorzata Kossowska. 2018. "Addicted to Answers: Need for Cognitive Closure and the Endorsement of Conspiracy Beliefs." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (2): 109–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2308>.
- McClure, John L., Denis J. Hilton, and Roger M. Sutton. 2007. "Judgments of Voluntary and Physical Causes in Causal Chain." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 37 (5): 879–901. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.394>.
- Mercier, Hugo. 2020. *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mercier, Hugo, and Sacha Altay. 2022. "Do Cultural Misperceptions Cause Costly Behavior?" In *The Cognitive Science of Belief: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, edited by Julien Musolino, Joseph Sommer, and Pernille Hemmer, 193–208. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009001021>.
- Mercier, Hugo, and Dan Sperber. 2019. *The Enigma of Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moulding, Richard, Simon Nix-Carnell, Alexandra Schnabel, Maja Nedeljkovic, Emma E. Burnside, Aaron F. Lentini, and Nazia Mehzabin. 2016. "Better the Devil You Know than a World You Don't? Intolerance of Uncertainty and Worldview Explanations for Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Personality and Individual Differences* 98: 345–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.04.060>.

- Newheiser, Anna Kaisa, Miguel Farias, and Nicole Tausch. 2011. "The Functional Nature of Conspiracy Beliefs: Examining the Underpinnings of Belief in the Da Vinci Code Conspiracy." *Personality and Individual Differences* 51 (8): 1007–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.08.011>.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2015. "Are High Levels of Existential Security Conducive to Secularization? A Response to Our Critics." In *The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, edited by Stanley D. Brunn, 3389–3408. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9376-6>.
- Orman, Wafa Hakim. 2019. "Religiosity and Financial Crises in the United States." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58 (1): 20–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12566>.
- Panczová, Zuzana. 2017. *Konšpiračné teórie: témy, historické kontexty a argumentačné stratégie*. Bratislava: Veda.
- Pipes, Daniel. 1997. *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*. New York, NY: Simon & Schusters.
- Popper, Karl. 1945. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Prince, Gerald. 1973. *A Grammar of Stories*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Prooijen, Jan Willem van. 2016. "Sometimes Inclusion Breeds Suspicion: Self-Uncertainty and Belongingness Predict Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 46 (3): 267–79. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2157>.
- Prooijen, Jan Willem van, and Michele Acker. 2015. "The Influence of Control on Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Conceptual and Applied Extensions." *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 29 (5): 753–61. <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3161>.
- Prooijen, Jan Willem van, and Karen M. Douglas. 2017. "Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations." *Memory Studies* 10 (3): 323–333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615>.
- Prooijen, Jan Willem van, and Karen M. Douglas. 2018. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Basic Principles of an Emerging Research Domain." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (7): 897–908. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2530>.
- Prooijen, Jan Willem van, Karen M. Douglas, and Clara De Inocencio. 2018. "Connecting the Dots: Illusory Pattern Perception Predicts Belief in Conspiracies and the Supernatural." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (3): 320–35. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2331>.
- Prooijen, Jan Willem van, and Nils B. Jostmann. 2013. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Influence of Uncertainty and Perceived Morality." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43 (1): 109–115. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1922>.

- Robertson, David G., Asbjørn Dyrendal, and Egil Asprem. 2018. "Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion." In *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, edited by Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem. Brill.
- Ross, Lee 1977. "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process." In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, edited by L. Berkowitz, 173–220. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Rosset, Evelyn. 2008. "It's No Accident: Our Bias for Intentional Explanations." *Cognition* 108: 771–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2008.07.001>.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2005. "Tellability." In *Rutledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, 589–91. London, UK: Routledge.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2007. "Towards a Definition of Narrative." In *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, edited by David Herman, 22–35. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Scalise Sugiyama, Michelle. 2001. "Food, Foragers, and Folklore: The Role of Narrative in Human Subsistence." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 22 (4): 221–40. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138\(01\)00063-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138(01)00063-0).
- Sherman, Jeffrey W., Bertram Gawronski, and Yaacov Trope, eds. 2014. *Dual-Process Theories of the Social Mind*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Stein, Nancy L., and Margaret Policastro. 1984. "The Concept of a Story." In *Learning and Comprehension of a Text*, edited by Heinz Mandl, Nancy L. Stein, and Tom Trabasso, 113–55. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Tetlock, Philip E. 2002. "Social Functionalist Frameworks for Judgment and Choice: Intuitive Politicians, Theologians, and Prosecutors." *Psychological Review* 109 (3): 451–71. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.451>.
- Turner, Mark. 1998. *The Literary Mind*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195126679.001.0001>.
- Uscinski, Joseph E., Joseph M. Parent, and Bethany Torres. 2011. "Conspiracy Theories Are for Losers." In *APSA 2011 Annual Meeting Paper*.
- Whitson, Jennifer A., and Adam D. Galinsky. 2008. "Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception." *Science* 322 (5898): 115–17. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1159845>.
- Wood, Michael J., Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton. 2012. "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3 (6): 767–773. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611434786>.
- Wood, Michael J., and Karen M. Douglas. 2018. "Are Conspiracy Theories a Surrogate for God?" In *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, edited by Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem. Brill.

- Wu, Shuyi, Sai Sun, Julia A. Camilleri, Simon B. Eickhoff, and Rongjun Yu. 2021. "Better the Devil You Know than the Devil You Don't: Neural Processing of Risk and Ambiguity." *NeuroImage* 236. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2021.118109>.
- Zunshine, Lisa. 2006. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.

Mgr. Vladimír Bahna, PhD.

*Research fellow at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology
Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia
E-mail: vladimir.bahna@savba.sk*

CONSPIRACISM AND RELIGION

Zdeněk Vojtíšek

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a concept that, according to the author, can convey an understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracism, especially in its contemporary forms. Basically, conspiracism is regarded as religious phenomenon that can influence spirituality of an individual. Spirituality is seen from the psychological point of view as one of components of personality. In this paper, a model of spirituality consisting of seven dimensions is offered in order to show that conspiracism can “enter” spirituality in each of its dimension. Two types of spirituality are presented: consistent and fragmentary. Conspiracism can become part of both of them and even form the whole of consistent spirituality.

Key words

Conspiracism, spirituality, model of spirituality, conspiracy theories

Introduction

This paper is motivated by the conviction that an appropriate conceptualization of social phenomena, based on a clear treatment of appropriately chosen and defined terms, is essential for understanding them. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to offer a concept that, according to the author, can convey an understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracism, especially in its contemporary forms. In doing so, the author draws on his earlier works as well as long-term observation. The purpose of this paper does not allow to document the features of conspiracism in individual groups, communities, and networks of conspiracists, and therefore the paper stays with general statements.

In this paper, the term “conspiracism” denotes a complex phenomenon: it is, on the one hand, a belief in the deliberately hidden core of historical and social phenomena, i.e., the existence of a conspiracy that keeps this core secret from other people. On the other hand, it is not just a belief: its consequence is usually an effort to reveal the (alleged) hidden core of phenomena and the hidden connections between them. The term “conspiracism” therefore also implies actions that result from this conviction, in particular, expressing the opposition to the (perhaps alleged) conspirator or conspirators through the exposure of their (alleged) conspiracies. On the basis of these beliefs and actions, one can be described as a “conspiracist”.

This basic definition refrains from judging the real existence of hidden core and hidden connections, as well as from judging the real existence of conspirators and the validity of conspiracy narratives. Thus, for example, when speaking of “forming a conspiracy narrative”, it should be noted that a conspiracist would speak of the same as of “uncovering conspiracies”. In addition to that, it should be admitted that some of conspiracy narratives may actually describe conspiracies. The terms “conspiracism” and “conspiracist” allow for a semantic distinction from the terms “conspiracy” and “conspirator”.

The essence of the concept offered in this paper is to address the relationship between conspiracism and religion. The fact that conspiracism is somehow related to religion is perceived by most social scientists. From experience, we know that conspiracism is woven into the very essence of worldview of members of various religions or is even directly derived from their religious worldviews. On the other hand, there are not a few conspiracists who distance themselves from any religious tradition and claim to be atheists. Their conspiracy narratives do not appeal to or are not derived from any supernatural authority, and thus remain in seemingly secular realm. For some of them, however, it is clear that conspiracism plays a similar role in their lives as religion plays for religious people.

In the first part of the paper, features of conspiracism that clearly point to the field of religion are briefly stated. In the second part, a model of spirituality is offered as a suitable way of viewing religion, especially in contemporary postmodern societies that exhibit a high

degree of individualism and a low level of trust in institutions, and thus in religious institutions as well. In the third part, this model is applied to conspiracism.

1 Conspiracism as a Religious Phenomenon

Conspiracism can be part of an individual person's view on the world and society, or it can even be the central point around which this view is constructed. In this view, the common perception of reality is not valid: historical events and social processes are in reality different from the way they appear. The socially preferred and supported perception of reality is therefore incomplete or even false. The conspiracists are convinced that the really decisive forces and factors operate – metaphorically speaking – behind the scenes of this world. This implies that events and processes have different agents than they normally appear to have. This perception of reality behind the curtain can be in essence described as *revelation*.

To accept this view on the world and society and to adopt it means a turning point in life. It can be gradual or sudden and take form of a religious experience of enlightenment, awakening, *conversion*, etc. In any case, it means a change in value orientation and, as a result, a change in life priorities and a change in lifestyle. It may also result in a change in social ties and thus a weakening or abandonment of the existing social network and integration into another.

Conversion also means a change in the evaluation of one's own social position. The common perception of social stratification is replaced by a perception of society that is essentially divided into three groups: the conspirators and their allies, the elite of knowledgeable, and the others who have not received the revelation yet. In their self-image, the conspirators belong to the *elite*, that means to those, who have avoided the traps of the conspirators by their own diligence, who are not content with the common, easily available information and its usual interpretations, or who have been able to resist the brainwashing organized by the conspirators. In the eyes of the conspiracists, the majority have partly chosen the path of

ignorance themselves, but partly they are deliberately kept in ignorance. In any case, the conspiracists feel themselves to be superior to this majority and often make their opposition to the opinion of the majority clear.

Conspiracism is characterized not only by belonging to an elite based on revelation, but also by belonging to a network community that transmits conspiracy narratives and their interpretations and applications. Although these loose communities have no clear boundaries and no membership, a hierarchy tends to be created within them. In this hierarchy, figures with new, up-to-date narratives and explanations, who have the function of *prophets* or *seers*, and leading figures are the most visible. Some of the leaders may take on the characteristics of a savior, even transcendently appointed and equipped.

Conversion and new status require constant confirmation. It can come from further uncovering hidden facts and connections, reading between the lines, picking up on signals, or other ways of *recognizing signs* of conspiracy or conspiracies. Signs come from a perceived other, essentially transcendent space in which causal connections are different from those commonly experienced. The possibility of coincidence is, on the other hand, severely limited.

Conspiracism is typically connected with *millennialism*: conspiracists count on the early arrival of a blissful future, that will be opened to humanity if it gets rid of the conspirators, or on catastrophic or apocalyptic events if the conspirators carry out their evil intentions. Conspiracists are usually preparing (practically or at least in their minds) for a struggle of planetary proportions in which the future direction of humanity will be determined.

Another way how to confirm the conversion may be successful efforts to open the eyes of those who are supposed to be the unwitting victims of conspiracies. Showing great interest in other people and commitment in trying to convince them, conspiracists naturally tend to be *missionary active*.

Conspiracy narratives have a distinct *moral dimension*: the intentions of the conspirators may differ (wealth, power, a violent solution to the problem of overpopulation, etc.), but they are in any case

morally indefensible. On the contrary, exposing the conspiracies and preventing their consequences may be seen as the moral maxim. In this way, a struggle between the forces of evil and good arises, in which the enemy is demonized and in which compromise is morally difficult to accept. The world view of conspirators tends to be dualistic and the struggle against the conspirators tends to be total.

This struggle against the conspirators and the rescue of their victims can become the meaning and purpose of life. Dualism and totalism do not allow only partial engagement but require using all strength. In this way, conspiracism can become a *mission* and its fulfilling can be perceived as a matter of the conscience. The possible falsification of conspiracy theory would threaten the very core of the conspiracist's personality. The conspiracy narrative is therefore religious and not scientific, as the term "theory" would suggest, although it may have the external features of scientific discourse, such as footnotes, references to authorities, or even polemic within a certain framework.

2 Model of Spirituality

By spirituality we understand the component of personality through which a person perceives the transcendence, and through which is this perception manifested and developed. In other words, spirituality is the sensor through which the sacredness can be perceived, and at the same time the instrument by which the awareness of sacredness can be treated. By transcendent realities we mean both beings and forces that transcend the natural human environment ("this world") and phenomena that transcend the individual human being (genus, nation, humanity, nature, the planet Earth, etc.).

Spirituality as a component of personality responds to impulses that come basically from three sources. Religious traditions are the main source for spirituality. Individuals draw from the accumulated deposit of these traditions, consciously or unconsciously, either independently or through a religious institution. An individual can use also selected and isolated elements of these traditions without

perceiving their traditional religious context. He or she can even reject their religious nature and any connection with religion. In such a situation, the paradoxical term “non-religious spirituality” makes sense. Phenomena, that are obviously not religious in nature, but which can have a function quite equivalent to religious sources, can be named as the second source for spirituality. They typically come from the realm of politics and nationalisms, art, science, sport, ecological activism, and many other spheres of social life. Spirituality can also be stimulated by personal perceptions of the sacred, most often through experiences associated with natural phenomena, works of art or landmark and watershed life events. These impulses form the third source for spirituality.

To provide a clearer idea of spirituality, we can name its seven dimensions, or – figuratively speaking – seven gates through which impulses enter this component of the personality and through which the spirituality can be manifested and developed. In the first place the cognitive dimension of spirituality can be mentioned. It is the dimension of the assumptions with which a person perceives and understands his environment, that means assumptions about transcendent realities, the world, man himself, etc. This view on the world can be followed by rituals; they can express a relationship to transcendent realities, as they can repeat and recall significant events and reveal the presumed order of the world. This second, ritual dimension of spirituality can be experienced collectively and individually. The ethical norms, that constitute the third dimension of spirituality, are also somehow connected to the cognitive dimension: it is the connection with the cognitive dimension that makes spiritual ethics superior to ordinary laws and conventions.

The fourth dimension of spirituality, mythological or narrative, can also be related to the previous three dimensions. Stories that stimulate spirituality can contribute to the creation of cosmological, anthropological, and other concepts, can motivate ceremonies, and their positive or negative heroes can strengthen ethical feelings and show the practical consequences of ethical behavior. Spirituality is usually developed mainly by the stories of saints, miracle workers, heroes, or their parables or sayings. The fifth dimension of

spirituality is the experiential dimension. The experience will also often bring a change in a person's value scale, and thus be reflected in the ethical dimension. It is usually accompanied by the story of someone who has had a similar experience before, or the experience itself becomes the core of a new sacred narrative. And although, of course, a religious experience can occur completely unexpectedly and spontaneously, more of them are created through ritual activity, for example, when reading a sacred text, praying, meditating, taking a psychedelic substance, singing, drumming, etc. Therefore, we should also perceive this experiential dimension of spirituality in context other dimensions.

Awareness of this context is also desirable when considering the sixth dimension of spirituality. It is the dimension of community, and its spiritual power arises from sharing of doctrine, ritual, ethics, stories, and experiences with other people. And it is not just about sharing: shared rituals or experiences can be experienced on a qualitatively different level. It is in this way that community transcends the mere gathering of individuals. The seventh dimension of spirituality in our model is art and artistic production. Spirituality can be inspired not only by the perception of art created with spiritual intent, but essentially – similar to narrations – by any art to which an individual “opens up” spiritually. Spiritual creativity can also be collective, and this dimension can thus be strengthened by the awareness of belonging to a community.

In describing the model of spirituality with its seven dimensions, we have emphasized the interconnectedness, even the mutual dependence, of each dimension. Spirituality thus appears as a complex part of an individual's inner life.

The model can serve to differentiate the spirituality into two basic types (which may be useful especially when observing contemporary spirituality). The first type can be called *consistent spirituality*. It is nourished by one main source. Its components in each dimension therefore correspond to each other and form a whole that gives the impression of a closed religious system prepared for the individual person by an external authority. This type of spirituality is usually seen as belonging to a religious tradition and/or religious institution.

A consistent spirituality, however, can also draw on non-religious sources, which become the functional equivalent of religion (so-called implicit religion). Although this type of spirituality has one dominant source, it is not at all excluded that it also responds to impulses from other religious traditions, from (other) non-religious sources and, of course, from sources of personal experience.

The second type of spirituality, on the other hand, draws on a variety of sources, without any one being dominant. They are formed into a meaningful whole quite individually, as if from within. Into this spirituality enter impulses from religious, non-religious and personal sources on the basis of individual choice, without the influence (let alone the supervision) of one dominant religious institution. Such a *fragmentary spirituality* can, to the outside observer, resemble a patchwork, a fabric newly stitched together from pieces of various older fabrics; varied and diverse, yet holding together and providing meaning and benefit to its user. The bearer of such spirituality usually distances himself from all traditions, and even from the very notion of “religion”. The fundamental importance in this spirituality is given to free and pragmatic choice of what is to enrich individual’s spirituality.

3 Conspiracism and the Model of Spirituality

The various elements of conspiracism can influence a person’s spirituality in perhaps all its dimensions. Conspiracism seems to work most strongly in the narrative dimension, which is also evident in the common conception that “conspiracy theories” are the basis for it. It is probably through conspiracy narratives that other dimensions of spirituality are mostly reinforced. In contrast to the narrative dimension of spirituality, conspiracism addresses the ritual dimension only in a very limited way: maybe only the “research”, which the conspiracist usually conducts with the help of the Internet, could be considered a ritual of its kind.

Conspiracism can enrich the cognitive dimension of spirituality with a new vision of reality (revelation): in this vision, for example,

it becomes clear that nothing is as it seemed in the previous superficial vision. This new vision enables the conspiracist to find meaning and plan even in events that are unrelated in the ordinary view on the world. Conspiracist can develop this dimension by seeking and finding facts and interpretations that serve as evidence of conspiracies and as signs of a coming historical turning point. The cognitive dimension of spirituality can thus contain an all-including and an all-explaining view on the world. The assumption of a coming historical turning point provides the view on the world with a perspective for the future and hope for living in an ideal society.

The beginning of the process of enriching the cognitive dimension with elements of conspiracism can be marked by the experience of conversion. The present and anticipated future struggle with conspirators can bring a strong ethical impulse to spirituality and motivate to commitment and to dedication to a higher purpose. The exposure of truth and the struggle for truth, especially against a stronger and more powerful enemy, can become a very strong impulse entering the ethical dimension of individual's spirituality. Conspiracy narratives can therefore often provide answers to questions of meaning or suffering.

The shared task of standing on the side of the good and seeking to uncover the truth can strengthen solidarity and mutual support and enrich the community dimension of the spirituality. Both missionary efforts and the effort to express one's opposition to the majority, can unleash the creativity of conspiracists. Pieces of art passively received or actively created can stimulate their spirituality. The potential of this dimension can be easily seen in protest gatherings and in visual and cinematic art.

Thanks to its ability to address almost all dimensions, conspiracism can provide impulses in both type of spirituality. It can be present in consistent spirituality of, for example, conservative Evangelicals, Marian Catholics, fundamentalist Muslims, some groups of yogis, etc. It is even able to form a consistent spirituality in total and become an implicit religion. However, elements of conspiracism often form the fragmentary spirituality of the followers of the New Age movement and so-called non-religious spirituality. In the case

of implicit religion and non-religious spirituality, conspiracism can become an important part of the personality of people who do not claim allegiance to any religious tradition and/or institution or who even reject religion.

Conclusion

The purpose of my paper is to offer an approach to religious life that is able to integrate the phenomenon of conspiracism. The approach, that distinguishes only between “believers” and “non-believers” or that understands religion only as belonging to a religious institution, can hardly conceptualize the phenomenon in a useful and meaningful way. Through the model of spirituality, it is possible to observe the three basic roles in which conspiracism finds itself: as part of a consistent spirituality, as implicit religion when it itself creates a consistent spirituality, and as part of a fragmentary spirituality.

References

Barkun, Michael. 2003. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Pipes, Daniel. 1997. *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Smart, Ninian. 1996. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Vojtíšek, Zdeněk. 2016. “Konspirátoři a konspiracisté.” *Dingir* 19 (2): 49–51.

Vojtíšek, Zdeněk. 2022. “Spiritualita člověka v duchovní péči.” In *Cesty k lidem: kapitoly z duchovní péče*, edited by Ondřej Macek. Prague: Karolinum.

Doc. PhDr. Zdeněk Vojtíšek, Ph.D.

Head of the Department of Religious Studies

Hussite Theological Faculty

Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

E-mail: vojtiesek@htf.cuni.cz

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS INDIVIDUAL ATTEMPTS TO MAKE SENSE OF A COMPLEX WORLD: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM SLOVAK AND MIDDLE EASTERN PRACTICE

Pavol Kosnáč

Abstract

Conspiracy theories are explanations that contain a conspiracy as their central component. A popular example are theories such as the first moon landing was a hoax staged by NASA, or the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center were orchestrated by the US government. Most cognitive scientists consider conspiracy theories to be relatively harmless in most cases, since unsubstantiated belief in conspiracies is common in both historical and contemporary cultures and may stem from innate human tendencies to gossip and build group cohesion and collective identity. Unfortunately, in some cases, conspiracy theories may contribute to large-scale societal damage and even inspire terrorist attacks, as it is described in this paper using Middle East and Slovakia as case studies.

Key words

Conspiracy theories, conspiracy mindset, COVID-19, Tepláreň shooting, Middle East

“Word on the Arab Street is that Barack Obama signed a nuclear deal with Iran so that he can extract concessions over Syria in return for Iran being allowed to control Iraq and for which it has to rein in the Houthis in Yemen to pacify the Saudis and simultaneously

restrain Kurdish ambitions thus easing Turkey's anxiety about Kurdish independence as an incentive for it to cooperate regionally allowing both Saudi Arabia and Turkey to come on board with Obama's plan for Israel/Palestine which will also appease Egypt allowing it to play a bigger role in Libya to control the southern shores of the Mediterranean reducing migrant flows into Europe to ease the pressure on Greece and Italy for which Europe agrees to soften its stance against Russia allowing for a solution in Ukraine that allows NATO to maintain a presence in the East without threatening Russia which will be rewarded by removing the international sanctions against it allowing it to increase its trade with Europe."

Karl Sharro, Lebanese architect and satirist

Introduction

Conspiracy theories are explanations that contain a conspiracy as their central component. A popular example is, e.g., theories like the first moon landing was a hoax staged by NASA, or the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center were orchestrated not by al-Qaeda but by the US government. Conspiracy theories have long been part of popular culture; and cultural theorists, sociologists and psychologists have had something to say about conspiracy theories and the people who believe them (Pauly 2022).

The term has a negative connotation – it assumes that an appeal to a conspiracy is based on prejudice or insufficient evidence. A conspiracy theory is usually in opposition to the mainstream consensus among the people who are qualified to judge its accuracy – typically scientists (Brotherton 2013).

The spread of conspiracy theories increases during periods of increased anxiety, uncertainty, and various types of crises, such as wars, natural disasters, or economic crises. This fact is proven by the number of conspiracy theories that appeared after the attacks of September 11, 2001, or after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This suggests that conspiracy thinking is driven by

a strong human desire to understand the forces that significantly affect and threaten our lives (Britannica 2022).

The content of conspiracy theories tends to be emotionally charged, and accepting the theory creates an impression of understanding the world, which can provide some mental pleasure. The standards of proof for the claims of conspiracy theories are usually low, and they are often resistant to scientific falsification – that is, the theory is constructed in such a way that it cannot be disproved. Both the evidence against a conspiracy theory and the lack of evidence supporting the theory are often interpreted as proof of its truth, making the conspiracy theory a matter of belief rather than something that can be proven or disproved (Keeley 1999).

The resilience of conspiracy theories can be aided by psychological biases and distrust of official sources, which in practice means distrust of institutions known as vertical cohesion (Britannica 2022).

1 Risks of Conspiracy Mindset

Conspiracy thinking usually has a negligible impact – some people may believe that aliens built the pyramids, or that a UFO landed in Roswell and the government is covering it up, but it has no real impact on their lives. Most cognitive scientists consider conspiracy theories to be relatively harmless in most cases. Indeed, it turns out that unsubstantiated belief in conspiracies is common in both historical and contemporary cultures and may stem from innate human tendencies to slander and build group cohesion and collective identity (Andrade 2020).

Conspiracies about HIV needles in cinema seats can have a slight impact on personal life or the lives of those closest to a person that holds such a belief. Parents that believe that there are needles in the seats won't let children go to the cinema. If such a conspiracy were to escalate, cinemas may lose part of their revenue and lay off some of their employees. This is where we get to the level where the conspiracy can have a more serious impact on people's lives.

We know of cases where conspiracies in the past set-in motion or influenced important historical events. Native soldiers in the service of the British Empire in India rebelled against the British Crown when a story spread that the British were deliberately smearing the wrapping paper of their gunpowder rations with cow fat, which is a sacrilege for the local Hindu population. A century later, one of the reasons for the rise of the NSDAP, the political party that brought Adolf Hitler to power, was the conspiracy theory that Germany did not lose the First World War, but it was the betrayal of German politicians who sold Germany in 1918, despite the generals being able to still win the war. One of the results of nurturing this sentiment for an entire generation, from 1918 to 1938, was the militarization of Germany and the Second World War.

Therefore, conspiracies can be innocent bizarre ideas, other times fixed delusional beliefs, which have a relatively negligible effect on the lives of individuals (no cinema), but also destructive ideas shared by the masses, which have a global negative impact.

2 Psychological Dimension

Belief in conspiracy theories has been growing, especially in recent decades. There is no one theory explaining it, a number of factors are responsible for the increase. Among the most likely are the penetration of conspiracy theories into pop culture and the media, and above all the rise of social networks, where they are spread all the more effectively because they are shared among people who know and trust each other. The interpersonal exchange of information has an even stronger dimension, as trust in institutions is declining in many countries. The erosion of trust in traditional authorities such as the state, the church, the media, or science, which had an impact on the classification of information into trustworthy and untrustworthy, means that society is losing traditional guarantors of trustworthiness (World Value Survey 2022).

Tab.1 Trust in institutions (World Value Survey Wave 3, 4 and 7; European Values Study 2017)

WVS 1990-94 / WVS 1995-98 / EVS 2017 / WVS 2022	CZECH Rep. %	SLOVAKIA %	POLAND %
Churches	39.4/31.7/16.5/32.4	50.2/57.3/49.3/50.4	82.4/65.9/55.2/NA
Army	39,8/42,2/44,3/51.1	37,2/65,7/70,8/57,9	62,3/75,1/68,9/NA
Press	45,9/42,6/18,6/42.9	36,7/41,4/39/34,1	43,6/43,1/25,6/NA
Police	34,1/43,4/54,4/69.3	27,3/39/53,7/52,4	27,9/51,3/59,9/NA
Judicial system	45,6/28,4/37,2/59.8	37,6/40,9/33,9/38,7	44,3/48,3/35/NA
Parliament	47,9/19,8/13,3/35.1	35,4/29/39/19,4	72,8/31,1/19,3/NA
Government	NA/29,8/17,6/33.3	NA/41,5/30,4/21,3	NA/36,2/23,1/NA
Universities	NA/NA/NA/75.6	NA/NA/NA/71,7	NA/NA/NA/NA
Banks	NA/NA/NA/63.6	NA/NA/NA/58,9	NA/NA/NA/NA
EU	NA/43,7/24,9/47.7	NA/49,8/52,8/48,5	NA/47,4/45,5/NA
NATO	41,6/NA/NA/51.5	20,4/NA/NA/37,9	NA/NA/NA/NA

Today, the legitimacy of institutions is weakened both by various local events in individual countries (from various scandals in politics and the church to failures of science and the politicization of the media), and by global trends, such as an increasingly complex world in which it is increasingly difficult to navigate, an accelerating lifestyle, when many don't have years or months to react to social change and cultural same as technological innovation, but sometimes days or hours. Our brains are simply not developed for this level of complexity and speed. This causes an increase in stress and uncertainty that every person tries to deal with (Raab *et al.* 2013).

The solutions are different – e.g., start to simply ignore some parts of reality, or start to continuously educate yourself. Regardless of how much we try, it is impossible to contain all the knowledge about society and the world in which we live. We experience reality with even greater stress in modern times, also because today there are no great overarching stories, co called umbrella narratives, that explained the world – Christianity no longer has the explanatory power

on a societal level as it did in the past, the great ideologies of the 20th century such as fascism and communism have failed, and science by definition cannot stand for this position due to the nature of its own self-limitation (it deals only with objectively measurable phenomena), even if many try to force it into that position.

So if even today's greatest experts on most things outside of their area of expertise have to rely on some type of authority because it's simply impossible to know everything the rest of us are supposed to do?

This brings us to the key problem of conspiracy theories. If no one can know everything, it is crucial for a modern complex society to identify which authorities to listen to and which not to. Conspiracy theories complicate this situation, as they bring systematic suspicion of untrustworthiness and bad intention or ulterior motives to the already complicated issue of authorities. The problem is all the more that since the authorities are also people, this dimension cannot be excluded, but usually decreases with the number of people who would have to be part of the conspiracy to be able to lie and manipulate entire communities, states, or even the entire world. A relatively reliable authority, such as the majority scientific consensus, is thus questioned not based on facts, i.e., that the given authority does not have sufficient competence or is wrong, but on the basis that it has bad intentions. A typical example is the conspiracy of scientists when it comes to issues of climate change or the roundness of the earth. Most people will find it absurd that all the climatologists in the world have conspired to manipulate the data in favor of some kind of "green agenda," or that all the geographers, satellite designers, pilots and astronauts have conspired to lie to the public that the earth is actually flat (the so-called flat earth theory). But some people accept this reasoning, and thus the trust in this authority is broken, not because the scientists are incompetent, but because of the conviction that they have ulterior motives and are trying to manipulate common people. The fact that the scale of the conspiracy is absurd, and millions of people around the world who have nothing in common, but a field of science would have to agree, does not disturb them, since this belief was accepted on emotional level, on trust.

Despite the rise of belief in conspiracy theories in the West, the world's champions of conspiracies are probably the inhabitants of the Middle East. The following chapter describes a situation where conspiracy theories have become a common component of mentality, which is something that threatens Europe today as well if the credibility of institutions will be challenged even more. The following subchapter is largely adapted, with the permission of the author and editor, from the publication *Communicating the Sacred* (Hubina and Chan 2022).

3 Conspiracy Mindset, Resentment, and Victimhood: The Perfect Storm in the Middle East

What contributes to the vitality of conspiracy thinking in the Middle East, in addition to many socio-economic, historical, and political factors and the reality of occasional real-life conspiracies, is the fact that the state (Baker 2015) and its officials (Hasan 2014) often actively promote conspiracy theories. They thus contribute to the growing domestic conspiracy tradition (Grey 2010). Examples include elementary school textbooks from Saudi Arabia or Palestine that cited *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a 19th century forgery, as authentic texts (Hadith and Islamic Culture 2006; State of Palestine Ministry of Education 2004).

Large number of inhabitants of Middle East and North Africa believe that there is a grand blueprint for recent history and present reality drawn by a grand power and what everyone is now living through is an outcome of political machination. Those responsible used to be the British and the French, now it's mostly USA and Israel. These powers pre-planned the course of history and weaker actors have no choice but to follow this plan. Our ancestors had no choice, and we are in a similar situation. That means we bear little responsibility for the past, the present, and accordingly – the future. This is a comprised version of reasoning that has been observed by researchers, journalists and other observers that have experience with the Middle Eastern and North African Islamic and Arab world over

the decades. As Mehdi Hasan puts it – many Muslims often have a “soft spot” for hoaxes and conspiracies (El-Bendary 2011).

The former leader of Libyan Arab Republic Muammar Gaddafi’s accusation he made at the UN General Assembly in 2009 asserting that the swine flu virus was not an infectious disease, but a military attack by the “developed world,” is a case in point (De Olazabal 2015). Pew Research Forum’s research shows how widespread is this conspiracy mindset and how it filters the perception of even well-established events:

“Nearly a decade after September 11, 2001, skepticism about the events of that day persists among Muslim publics. When asked whether they think groups of Arabs carried out the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., most Muslims in the nations surveyed say they do not believe this. There is no Muslim public in which even 30% accept that Arabs conducted the attacks. Indeed, Muslims in Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey are less likely to accept this today than in 2006.” (Pew Research 2011).

This deeply rooted and preeminent belief that conspiracy is everywhere fulfils the definition of conspiracism as a world-view component – a belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding of history. Since it is so widespread, it is an important cultural characteristics of MENA region which, as research suggests, can have a significant negative impact on decision-making, civic engagement, acceptance of established scientific principles (Viren 2012), and sometimes even promote racist attitudes and political violence (van der Linden 2015).

Studies that look into reasons for radicalization and support for violence consistently show that “rational choice analysis of intergroup conflict is not sufficient; emotions are important” (McCauley 2009). Muslim majority in Middle East and North Africa considers itself helpless victims rather than independent actors. This sentiment is shared in non-MENA Muslim-majority countries as well, especially in relation to the resurgence of political Islam and Muslim victimhood. Victimhood and resentment are key feelings on the “Arab street,” as Sharro calls it. Especially resentment against the West and the United States, as the Gallup Poll shows Gallup conclusion

is that their stem from the feeling of humiliation and being under siege from outside, again mostly from the West. Part of the humiliation is a memory of glorious romanticized Islamic past of the celebrated heroes and great empires that produced civilization full of knowledge and culture. Many believe that they were robbed of this prosperity by the Western powers that subjugated Muslims and that USA is continuing to do that through neo-colonialism of cultural imperialism, aided by corrupted local rulers. Pakistani politician Imran Khan, when asked why his fellow citizens were so keen on conspiracy theories, answered: “They’re lied to all the time by their leaders. If a society is used to listening to lies all the time... everything becomes a conspiracy.” Outside powers same as other MENA countries can be also blamed – the region is a playground of sectarian interests, where each community has its external backer. This makes the area a perfect incubator of conspiracy theories. People simplify complex social issues into emotionally charged tale of good and evil and assign the blame to a group to which the theorist does not belong to, absolving himself of moral or political responsibility (Esposito 2007; Kull 2009; Byford 2011).

As Jovan Byford puts it: “Most importantly, conspiracy theories, because they can never bring about resolution, invariably breed resentment, anger, bitterness, and more conspiracy theories.” (Byford 2016).

I will allow myself an observation based more on experiences of researchers, observers and applied sciences without laying claim to objectivity, though many factors mentioned above do support it. In psychotherapeutic praxis there is a common observation of domino effect in midst of which is resentment. This resentment chain starts with suffering, an unavoidable occurrence in a life of mankind. Suffering begets bitterness and resentfulness; unreflected resentfulness causes victimhood which begets vengefulness. From psychological point of view, that is to certain extent MENA summed up today. Resentment is a perfect environment for an organization like ISIS. Scholars studying ethnic violence and other mass-scale atrocities identify resentment as one of their main roots (Petersen 2002).

Resentment runs deep in many Muslim communities. When living in Iraq and northern India between 2015 and 2017, I spent time with Muslim families, both refugees and locals. We became good friends. I always admired their ability to maintain and upkeep family history. An important part of family history that was always vividly recalled was its grievances. I was amazed how a lady born in 1980s, or a gentleman born in 1960s, could in so much detail talk about injustices done to their ancestors decades or centuries ago. Some could tell me the facts like name and age of a perpetrator that killed or wronged their family member in 16th century. This is not a characteristic typical only for Muslims, same stories go around Yazidi cooks in Sinjar mountains or tents of Chaldean and Shabak refugees in camps around Erbil and Duhok. But it seems that Muslim resentment is manifesting much more in today's political environment than that of the other groups. Comedians Dylan Moran and Conan O'Brien capture the problem well, speaking about the cultural and family memory of their native Ireland: "Bitterness is preserved... polished... piled and refined over the centuries... passed on through the generations" (Moran and O'Brien 2018). Dominique Moisi observes similar tendencies in his book *The Geopolitics of Emotions*. He uses the example of Mumbai bombing. When one of the hostages that was facing execution asked the gunmen why they are doing it, since he didn't do anything to them, he got an answer: "Remember Babri Masjid? Remember Godhra?", referencing a 16th century Mughal Mosque that was destroyed by Hindu radicals in 1962, and religious riots in 2002 that ended in an anti-Muslim pogrom. The incident is a testimony to the endurance of grievances and the power of symbols, despite attackers not being alive when the former happened and being not connected in any way to the latter, apart from being Muslim living in Indian sub-continent (Moisi 2009).

4 Conspiracy Theories: An Example from Slovakia's Present

In Europe and Slovakia, the situation is significantly better than in the Middle East. States are functional, trust in institutions is decreasing, but still exists, most people pay taxes, and although they do not trust political parties and the government, they still largely trust courts and universities, churches, and banks (World Value Survey 2022). Thus, the social system is under pressure, but it works, and it provides a solid standard of living and security, at least compared to the rest of the world. Slovaks are not used to devastating natural disasters, human losses in wars or school shootings.

For these reasons, it was shocking for many when a home-grown terrorist of the new generation emerged in Slovakia, attacking a LGBTI bar and killing two people.

On October 12, 2022, approximately five hours before the shooting, the perpetrator – Juraj Krajčík – published a 65-page manifesto with racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic content calling for violence against Jews and LGBTI persons on Twitter under the nickname NTMA0315. Shortly after 6:35 p.m., he stood in the alcove of the entrance to the Nervosa restaurant, and at 7:09 p.m. he started shooting at people who were sitting at a table in front of the Tepláreň café on Zámocká street in Bratislava. As part of his attack, he shot 2 people and injured one. After his act, which lasted less than 30 seconds, he ran away. After the attack, he came home to his parents, where he traded one gun for another. The parents became aware of their son's deed but did not report this fact to the police. At 7:12 p.m., a report of a shooting was received on the emergency line 112. The first police officers arrived at the scene about four minutes after the crime was committed. The police launched a large-scale search operation after the attack, and police departments in Bratislava, Trnava, Nitra, and Trenčín were put on alert. At 10:32 p.m., the perpetrator was identified – it helped that the perpetrator was communicating on Twitter and 4chan shortly after midnight. The perpetrator was found dead the following day in the morning near the building

of the Ministry of Education near Jaskov rad. The probable cause of death is a gunshot wound to the head – a suspected suicide. The shooting was reclassified as a terrorist attack on October 17, 2022.

When trying to understand the attacker's motivation, it is useful to turn to his social media, known facts from his past, and his manifesto. As Miroslav Mareš commented, in the manifesto tradition "it is one of the tougher manifestos, even from the point of view of ideological focus, it is openly clear neo-Nazism written in striking language. On the ideological side, the main line is also very hard anti-Semitism, and it also attacks the LGBTI community" (Mareš 2022).

According to Krajčík, who has written the manifesto, which author of this article has access to, the whole world is enslaved by the Zionist occupation government, "ruled by a cabal of insidious Jewish rats and their treacherous allies." With one center in the USA and the other in Russia (it even lists powerful people close to Vladimir Putin – eighteen of the twenty named are Jews).

Although these two centers are fighting each other, they have the same goal – the enslavement of the white race. "What they need is a docile mass of humanoid cattle who will obey without question, who will work without question, and who will consume the latest products without question."

He also called the pandemic a tool of Zionist domination – especially anti-pandemic measures and vaccination. According to him, these were intended to serve the Jewish elites to test the white population to what extent it was amenable to restrictions – what percentage of people would submit immediately, what percentage would rebel after mild coercion.

According to him, the only solution to the correction of society and the liberation of the white race is the definitive extermination of Jews "from the newborn to the oldest rabbi". "The Holocaust never happened. But if they did, they deserved it. Shame the job wasn't finished. Now it's up to us to fix this little bug. Six million was just a prologue, next time 20.7 million!"

According to Krajčik, the Jews have several crimes on their hands:

- occupation of political positions by “traitors” – non-Jews who serve Zionist Occupied Government (“ZOG”),
- nepotism,
- mass imports of foreign races into European countries,
- organization and dissemination of anything related to LGBT rights,
- creating pornography,
- inserting their ideology into the education system,
- control of mass media,
- control of the entertainment industry,
- control of social networks,
- control of the banking industry,
- control of the pharmaceutical industry,
- spread of communist, Marxist, and progressive ideologies.

Targets of the attack as states – the killer considers the following states/acts to be the targets of his attack:

1. Total destruction of the ZOG, with the collapse of the USA, Russia, and China.
2. Physical removal of all non-white races from our territories.
3. The total extermination of all Jews (which he calls the “real holocaust”).
4. Ensuring European superiority.
5. Acceleration of the decline of the rotten system, so it can be cleansed and rebuild (the key component of the accelerationist violent extremism).
6. Closing the “pressure valves” (podcasts, radio, elections, and political parties).
7. Normalization of violence, racial hatred, doxing, dehumanization, and jokes about killing enemies.

Those are extreme beliefs by any cotemporary standards, advocating mass violence. Mareš is correctly describing it as one of the most straightforward white-supremacist extremist manifestos produced on the violent extremist scene.

The killer was born in July 2003, he was 19 years old at the time of the attack. He attended school for exceptionally gifted children, which implies increased intellectual abilities. He once transferred to another school because he was apparently bullied (according to publicized information, this happened in 2017). His father allegedly refused any psychological counselling for his son, saying it would cast shame over their family.

He considers the period of his 16th year to be an important turning point in his life when he was interested in real crimes and came across the mass attacks of Brenton Tarrant and John Earnest. He himself states that following these attacks, the publication of Tarrant's manifesto and the subsequent contact with the 8chan/4chan portal community was for him the next key development. On these portals, he allegedly "learned so much that it completely changed his view of the world". We can assume that these communities were one of the few social groups where he felt accepted. At the end of the manifesto, he thanks and mentions these people and groups a lot.

From the killer's past, it can also be deduced that he was well-versed in extremists' literature, published books, manifestos, history, and videos – to such an extent that towards the end of the manifesto he significantly places himself in the role of a teacher of those who will come after him, when they see the "truth" of his message.

The killer considered reading Earnest and Tarrant's manifestos and visiting 8chan as a turning point in his life, after which he was "never the same." Nevertheless, he states that he lacked courage, was a coward, and was always looking for excuses to justify his own inaction. He saw the fight against ZOG as his duty, which he neglected, as a result of which he blamed himself for "procrastinating" because he did not attack. This could only contribute to his deteriorated self-image. According to his own words, it bothered him that he was still indecisive and passive. He states that at least once in his life he must take a stand, which sounds like a need to satisfy a previous "procrastination". If the murderer considered himself incapable of taking a stand for most of his life, there could be a mechanism of over-compensation, when a person needs to compensate his accumulated

frustration with a disproportionately large gesture as a way of satisfaction.

In the final part of the manifesto, he identifies himself as a person who has been down but was able to pull himself back up, survived and overcame several difficult moments in his past, although he downplays their severity. He says that he stopped fearing death, which was his final goal. After overcoming this fear, he became determined to die for a higher idea. He considered himself the ideal person for this type of work, as he had no girlfriend, wife, children, or close friends – he was alone. That has possibly added to his feeling of exclusivity and exceptionality. According to Erikson, a pioneer of developmental psychology, young men in the age of the killer are looking for something in which they would be better than others, and a group where he would be perceived as having a unique value to contribute. The killer found this uniqueness precisely in the fact that he had no broad social groups and therefore nothing to lose. At the same time, the extremist online community was the one of the few spaces where he felt accepted. And not just accepted, but also perceived as a hero by himself.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are mostly relatively harmless information noises, which are a secondary manifestation of democracy, free access to information, when incorrect analysis often occurs. It is also a manifestation of individualism, when there is an effort to create one's own, original view of the world that takes into account the unique experience of the individual, or a simplified view of the world, when a person tries to find his way in an increasingly complex world in an age of declining trust in authorities. From harmless manifestations to ideas that complicate the lives of individuals or their loved ones to massive violence and societal damage, the path usually leads depending on whether the given theory indicates an enemy who one can blame for the negative phenomena in one's lives. This is one of the main ways to distinguish a bizarre or eccentric idea from a potentially dangerous one.

The factor of spread of the theory is relevant, but not always important. Some conspiracies are believed by half of the country and do not cause significant damage, some are only believed by a fraction of the population, which inspires sophisticated and targeted violence by a few individuals once in a while, and the atmosphere in society can change significantly.

The sub-chapter on the Middle East and North Africa shows what happens to a society when institutional and interpersonal trust breaks down and mixes with generational grievances, low self-reflection, irresponsible elites, tribal behavior of politicians, large social differences, and corruption. If we also add objective global trends, such as modern technology and the rise of individualism, which conflicts with the communal values of a large part of the population, an explosive cocktail of mistrust and uncertainty is created in which conspiracy theories flourish and can cause immense social damage that will be repaired for generations. Older generations can partially remember a similar situation in Europe even after World War II, but Europe has not experienced such a strong combination of factors as the Middle East is experiencing today in its modern history. This subsection serves as a demonstration that we are still doing well in Europe, and it is worth trying to maintain the legitimacy and trust of the institutions we have, regardless of our personal sympathies with them. Sometimes the contrast helps to appreciate what we have, however imperfect it is.

Despite a significantly better situation, Slovakia was not able to avoid tragedies caused precisely by the collapse of trust in institutions and the spread of conspiracy theories. During the COVID-19 pandemic, part of the deaths are due to the spread of conspiracies that discouraged people from getting vaccinated. In the last sub-chapter, the case of the first Slovak accelerationist terrorist Juraj Krajčík was also described, who radicalized himself online in the conspiracy community on the 8chan web portal and accepted as his conspiracy theory about the Jewish world government and the so-called “ZOG” – the *Zionist-occupied government* in world power centers such as Washington and Moscow and linked several other conspiracy theories to it. The most famous of which were the theories that COVID-19 is a way

for the Jewish rulers to test how far they can go in restricting the freedom of the world's population, and above all the "Great Replacement" theory about trying to dilute or replace the white race with immigrants. One of his heroes was also a proponent of this theory – the mosque shooter from New Zealand – Brenton Tarrant. As he wrote in his manifesto, the only way to stop ZOG is mass violence, and he believed that his actions would inspire others. His faith eventually manifested itself in the murder of two young people from the LGBTI community, whom he perceived as allies of the Jewish rulers and one of the manifestations of the neoliberal, progressive world, to which he harbored strong opposition.

Conspiracy theories should not be overestimated – they were here and will be – but neither should they be underestimated. Ideas have consequences, and strongly emotionally charged theories like ZOG have a certain magnetism. Especially if they connect with a (sort of) inclusive internet community that harbors hatred for a section of society but is also able to offer acceptance to people seeking identity and explanation. The most effective way to prevent most such radicalizations is to have a well-governed society where there are limited reasons for citizens to lose trust in institutions, and a society that is able to respond to the needs of the diverse members of its society – including young men with high intellect, relationship problems, high aggressiveness and desire for admiration. It is not possible to prevent every attack, similar tragedies take place in many countries that are much better off in terms of inclusion or standard of living. The individual characteristics of the attackers can be generalized, as well as social factors that increase the risk of pathological behavior and the antisocial impact of conspiracy theories, but there will always be exceptions and there will always be a certain part of society dissatisfied with its lot and looking for who is responsible. The general social effort should therefore be mainly to create an environment where conspiracy theories will be a manifestation of individual eccentricity, and not alternative worldviews looking for a culprit. And when we fail, an effective help and support of the victims.

Acknowledgement

Author would like to express his gratitude towards Hugo Gloss and especially Filip Janči, who have offered valuable consultations and analysis into the 2022 October 12th attack in Tepláreň and background of the killer.

References

Andrade, Gabriel. 2020. "Medical Conspiracy Theories: Cognitive Science and Implications for Ethics." *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 23 (3): 505–518. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-020-09951-6>.

Baker, Aryn. "Why Iran Believes the Militant Group ISIS Is an American Plot." *Time*, July 19, 2014. <http://time.com/2992269/isis-is-an-american-plot-says-iran/>.

Britannica. 2022. *Conspiracy Theory*. Accessed November 20, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/conspiracy-theory>.

Brotherton, Robert. 2013. "Towards a Definition of 'Conspiracy Theory'." *PsyPAG Quarterly* 88: 9–14.

Byford, Jovan. 2011. "Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction." Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230349216>.

Byford, Jovan. 2016. "As a psychologist who specialises in conspiracy theorists, this is what I can tell you about Donald Trump's bizarre beliefs." *The Independent*, October 10, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-debate-conspiracy-theories-women-rigged-elections-psychologist-bizarre-a7353886.html>.

De Olazábal, Itxaso D. 2015. "The (not so) crazy story of conspiracy theories in the Middle East." *YourMiddleEast*, April 2, 2015. http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/the-not-so-crazy-story-of-conspiracy-theories-in-the-middle-east_31107.

El-Bendary, Mohamed. 2011. *The 'Ugly American' in the Arab Mind: Why Do Arabs Resent America?* Washington, DC: Potomac Books.

Esposito, John L., and Dalia Mogahed. 2007. *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.

Gray, Matthew. 2010. *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hadith and Islamic Culture: Tenth Grade (Boys). Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. 2005–2006.

Hasan, Mehdi. "Inside Jobs and Israeli Stooges: Why is the Muslim World

in Thrall to Conspiracy Theories?” *New Statesman*, September 5, 2014. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/health/2018/02/why-case-dr-hadiza-bawar-garba-makes-doctors-so-nervous>.

Hubina, Miloš, and Francis S. M. Chan, eds. 2022. *Communicating the Sacred: Varieties of Religious Marketing*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Keeley, Brian L. 1999. “Of Conspiracy Theories.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 96 (3): 109–126. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659>.

Kull, Steven. 2009. *International Survey Capability*. Accessed November 20, 2022. <http://www.start.umd.edu/research-projects/international-survey-capability>.

Mareš, Miroslav. 2022. “Odborník na extrémizmus: vinu nenesie celá slovenská spoločnosť: Juraj K. sa cítil ako globálny bojovník.” *Postoj*, October 15, 2022. <https://www.postoj.sk/116478/vinu-nenesie-cela-slovenska-spolocnost-juraj-k-sa-citil-ako-globalny-bojovnik>.

Moisi, Dominique. 2009. *The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Reshaping the World*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Moran, Dyan, Conan O’Brien, and Dylan Moran. “On The Difference Between U.S. And U.K. Audiences.” *YouTube*, March 20, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ln5Ad1YaxM0>.

Pauly, Marc. 2022. “Conspiracy Theories.” In *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed November 20, 2022. <https://iep.utm.edu/conspiracy-theories/>.

Petersen, Roger D. 2002. *Understanding Ethnic Violence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511840661>.

McCauley, Clark. 2011. “Tracking Sympathy and Support of Muslims for Terrorism in Muslim Countries and in the United Kingdom.” Accessed November 20, 2022. <http://www.start.umd.edu/research-projects/tracking-sympathy-and-support-muslims-terrorism-muslim-countries-and-united>.

“Muslim-Western Tensions Persist.” *Pew Research Center*, July 21, 2011. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/21/muslim-western-tensions-persist/>.

Raab, Marius, et al. 2013. “Thirty Shades of Truth: Conspiracy Theories as Stories of Individuation, not of Pathological Delusion.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4: 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00406>.

Sharro, Karl. 2015. “The Confused Person’s Guide to the Iran Deal.” *The Atlantic*, July 20, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/07/guide-iran-nuclear-deal-satire/398933/>.

The State of Palestine Ministry of Education. 2004. *Modern and Contemporary World History*. Ramalla-Al-Bireh.

van der Linden, Sander. 2015. “The Conspiracy-Effect: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories (about Global Warming) Decrease Pro-Social Behavior and Science Acceptance.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 87: 171–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.07.045>.

Viren. 2012. "Social Psychological Origins of Conspiracy Theories: The Case of the Jewish Conspiracy Theory in Malaysia." *Frontiers in Psychology* 3: 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00280>.

World Value Survey. 2022. *Wave 7*. Accessed November 20, 2022. <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>.

Mgr. Pavol Kosnáč, MSt.

Director at the DEKK Institute

Bratislava, Slovakia

E-mail: pavol.kosnac@dekk.sk

CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN MODERN EUROPE: JEWISH PLOT, SECRET SOCIETIES, AND *THE PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF ZION*

Kateřina Hlaváčová

Abstract

This study presents a short survey into the development of modern conspiracism in Europe, examining a few selected motifs of conspiracy culture which are still vital in contemporary conspiracy theories, and which, in modern times, acquired a coherent framework in conspiracy literature presenting the idea of a global plot. The peak of this systematization is then embodied by the infamous early twentieth-century pamphlet *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Key words

Conspiracy theory, Jews, Freemasonry, Illuminati, secret society

Introduction

Are conspiracy theories a modern phenomenon? Or have these interpretations of the world been around ever since the dawn of civilization? The American historian Gordon S. Wood (*1933) points out that already at the end of the 18th century, conspiratorial interpretations represented a legitimate understanding of reality even among intellectual and political elites. He claims that conspiratorial thinking “represented an enlightened stage in Western man’s long struggle to comprehend his social reality. It flowed from the scientific promise of the Enlightenment and represented an effort, perhaps in retrospect a last desperate effort, to hold men personally and morally responsible for their actions,” putting them, instead of God, at the

helm of world events (Wood 1982, 411–414). From the mid-twentieth century onwards, conspiracism came to be understood as a phenomenon existing on the margins of the society, among the less educated or those lacking in political power (Hofstadter 1996). Yet even during the Enlightenment period, we may encounter criticism of the belief in omnipresent plots, which, at that time, usually concerned the events of the French Revolution (1789–1799). The criticism of the conspiratorial interpretation of the world is not new, but the discourses in which we talk about and understand “conspiracy theories” have changed, along with the people who believe in them (Byford 2011, 38).

The assumption of conspiracy as means of understanding the world and the society was popular in ancient, medieval, and modern times. However, in the modern era, technologies of book print, the press, modern media, and finally, the internet, have played an important role not only in making these ideas more approachable (and thus subsequently more popular) but also in transmitting complex, all-encompassing conspiracy narratives. In this short study, we will examine some of the most influential examples of conspiracy literature and pamphlets. Some of their authors were presumably driven by genuine fear and belief in the actual existence of malevolent and dangerous plots, while others meant for their works to serve as a tool of political propaganda. In this regard, the (in)famous pamphlet *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* stands as the pinnacle in the systematization of global conspiracy theories. To understand the origins of the ideas presented by the pamphlet, I will attempt to pinpoint some of the crucial stages in the modern development of conspiratorial thinking in Europe, focusing on the ever-present role of Jews, the Enlightenment, secret societies, and the French Revolution as they were later depicted in conspiratorial manuscripts and pamphlets that greatly influenced the composition of the *Protocols*.

1 Eternal Conspirators: The Jews

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion serve as the epitome of modern conspiracy theory, but at the same time, they synthesize many then-current themes, motifs, and old conspiratorial ideas formed within the Christian world, in which Jews have often appeared as conspirators – i.e., those who participate in conspiracies. The idea of a Jewish plot, as described in the *Protocols* or earlier conspiracy texts and pamphlets, is certainly not of modern origins but has evolved over the centuries. Before examining the context of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution as essential preconditions for the current form of Western conspiracism, we will briefly delve into the circumstances and causes that led to the emergence of anti-Jewish conspiratorial ideas.

To a great extent, the suspicion concerning Jewish conspiracy arose from the tensions between Judaism and Christianity, but still, some of it goes back to pre-Christian times (Cohn 2005, 25–45; Woolf 2012, 50). What used to be a religious conflict, often set in an apocalyptic context, has morphed into an otherwise “legitimized” suspicion, hatred, and fear of the supposed power of the Jews and their conspiratorial actions. This dread has often served as a justification for Jewish persecutions, which, since antiquity, have occurred not only for religious – and, in modern times, racial reasons – but also for social, political, or economic motivations. It is, therefore, impossible to draw a clear line between the ancient and medieval periods and the modern era, or between anti-Judaism and antisemitism. Whereas in antiquity and the Middle Ages, religious and social causes were perhaps more prominent, in concurrently “secularized” western society, religious symbolism retreats and gives way to political antisemitism, although it does not disappear entirely, and instead endows anti-Jewish rhetoric with a certain depth of transcendent gravity. This is exemplified by the Nazi propaganda, with its posters carrying slogans such as “He who knows the Jew knows the Devil” (Bronner 2018, 26).

The British historian Norman Cohn (1915–2007), one of the first scholars who thoroughly dealt with the *Protocols* in his well-known

Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (1967), begins his work with a reference to the centuries-long quarrel between Jews and Christians. In the *Protocols*, Cohn says, “the remnants of ancient demonological terrors are blended with anxieties and resentments which are typically modern” (Cohn 1996, 27). Already in antiquity, Jews were suspected of nefarious intentions, but it was with the advent of organized Christianity that they began to be viewed as creatures evil by nature. In the early formative years of the Church, the competitive nature of the conflict between the then-still-new religious movement and Judaism as the mother religion of Christianity exacerbated the negative relations beyond differences in doctrine. From a doctrinal point of view, a fundamental schism arose from the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who exempted all Christians of Gentile origin from Jewish laws and commands, especially the circumcision (see Romans 2:17–29; 3:21–31; 7:1–11; Galatians 3:6–14; 4:1–6; Colossians 3:9–11 or 1 Timothy 1:8–11). In addition, the idea of a new “true” Israel (*Verus Israel*) was emerging among the Gentile Christians. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the defeat of the Jews in wars with the Romans, and the overthrow of the kingdom of Judah were viewed as a proof that God had turned away from His chosen people. Some Church Fathers articulated the strained relationship in their texts and sermons. John Chrysostom, for instance, criticized “Judaizing Christians” who participated in Jewish festivals, Sabbaths, or pilgrimages, and those who underwent circumcision. In his efforts to prevent the erosion of the Christian community and to discourage potential converts in Antioch, he formulated eight homiletics known as the *Adversus Judaeos* (“Against the Jews”). In them, he referred to the synagogue as “a temple of demons... a cave of devils... an abyss and a ravine of damnation” (Blumenkranz 2007, 720), and portrayed the Jews as ruthless murderers possessed by evil spirits. Around that time, the negative attitude towards Jews also manifested in Augustine of Hippo, who spoke of them as initially chosen sons of God who had turned into sons of the Devil. Other Church Fathers also taught that “Antichrist will be a Jew, and the Jews will be his most devoted followers” (Cohn 2005, 25). Gradually, the conspiratorial idea of

Jews having diabolical forces began to take shape (Arava-Novotná 2010, 6; Messadié 2000, 120; Bronner 2018, 30–35).

After making Christianity the state religion in the 4th century, the religious-social criticism from the pagan Roman Empire was replaced by accusations of Pharisaical stubbornness and pride, qualities which, according to some Christians, were behind the rejection of the gift of grace and the murder and dismissal of Jesus as the Messiah. Although the idea of “deicide” never made its way into the official doctrine of the Catholic Church, this theological position strongly influenced Christian anti-Judaism. However, it needs to be noted that there have always been different views and attitudes towards Jews within the Christian world. The official theology of the Church was usually less anti-Jewish than the popular conspiratorial and demonizing notions circulating among the lay people, and in general, the coexistence of Jews and Christians during the first millennium was characterized by a relative peace (Arava-Novotná 2010, 8–9; Landes 2000, 143). But for some, the Jewish unwillingness to accept God’s grace, or rather, the decision not to accept the gift of grace and the salvation mediated by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, became established as a prerequisite for further evildoing, for “this could only derive from their evil nature, and that interpretation ultimately entered the collective unconscious of the gentile world” (Bronner 2018, 31–33, 37). This approach later reoccurred during the Reformation. For Luther, Jews and their religious life embodied a denial of all fundamental pillars of the Reformation, and he deemed them untrustworthy. Not only did Jews reject God’s gifts, but as legalists, they sought to achieve salvation through deeds. And since the gospel and its message cannot be wrong, those who do not hear it or reject it are (Molnár 2007, 237–238, 306–308). According to other radical theological interpretations, Jews who have no place for the Son of God in their religion must have been chosen not by God, but by the Devil, from whom they have also been given the objective to destroy Christianity (Bronner 2018, 34–36).

At the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries, the first crusades, usually accompanied by looting and pogroms, also contributed to the further development of anti-Jewish conspiracism. Between the First

(1096–1099) and Second Crusade (1147–1150), two of the oldest anti-Jewish myths were reinforced: the myth of ritual murder (also known as the blood libel) and the myth of Jewish conspiracy. In the past, the myth of ritual murder was not associated with the Jews alone, but it represented an old belief that put various groups in an undesired spotlight. For the Romans, it was the sect of Christians, and later, for the Christians, it was the Jews, members of heretical sects, or witches. Finally, in modern times, the notion of ritual murder was associated with, for example, the Satanists (Arava-Novotná 2010, 11–12, 16–7; Chazan 2009, 54; Vojtíšek 2016, 43–44). Ritual murder as a product of Jewish conspiracy was one of the critical moments of conspiracy imagery that emerged in Russia, following the murder of the Tsar family in Yekaterinburg in 1918, and after the fall of the Soviet Union, the idea regained its popularity among Russian conspiracists (Shnirelman 2019, 87–101). In western countries, especially in the USA, this notion has occurred as the so-called “Satanic panic” in the 70s and 80s (Vojtíšek 2016, 41–48). Nowadays, it has reemerged in connection with the popular conspiracy theories Pizagate and QAnon.

Further growth of conspiratorial thinking together with the idea of a secret Jewish government took place in the 14th century Europe in the context of more millennial disappointments, religious wars with Muslims, or the catastrophic outcome of the Black Death epidemic, which wiped out one third of the European population at the time (Arava-Novotná 2010, 15; Resnick 2012, 135; Landes 2000, 143). Accusations were directed towards Jews, lepers, and witches who were said to have conspired with the Devil and contaminated the water in wells with magical poisonous powders in order to bring death upon the Christian population. At this time, the “conspiracy panic” was also directed against movements and individuals whose views and teachings were considered heretical by the Church and believed to attract God’s wrath. This was also when the idea of a council of Jewish rabbis, which was supposed to be located somewhere in what was then Muslim Spain from where they organized religious wars using black magic, emerged (Cohn 1996, 26; Ginzburg 2003, 51–53, 62–64, 69).

2 Secret Knowledge and Secret Societies

The notion of extraordinary, mysterious, and hidden knowledge is another essential motif of Western conspiracy discourse, which we find both in association with the Jews, and later, in relation to secret societies. According to the historian and rabbi Jeffrey Woolf, “the idea that the Jews possess a secret lore is intimately connected with the question of the attitude of the Church first to the Talmud and rabbinic literature and later to Jewish mysticism, or Qabalah” (Woolf 2012, 51). In the 12th century, Christian scholars noticed an evolution within the teaching of Jews. It ceased to be merely a matter of following the norms given by the biblical text and transformed into rabbinic and Talmudic Judaism. This challenged not only the Augustinian concept of the Jews witnessing the Christian truth with hardened hearts, but also the idea of how Christians should react to Jewish works and teaching, dividing them into those who rejected it as inspired by the Devil and those who were more willing to find pieces of the truth in it (Woolf 2012, 51–53).

In the modern era, the notion of the secret “esoteric” knowledge of conspirators also intensified in relation to the mythologies of secret societies that began to emerge during the 17th and especially at the beginning of the 18th century. For the Church, esotericism represented a potential danger of holding heretical ideas, especially when the society and the Church were divided by confessional disputes. During the Enlightenment period, secret societies such as the Freemasons functioned as safe platforms for dialogue over new ideas of religious toleration, science, and education for everyone that would determine one’s status in a society based on skills and intellect. However, these ideas sometimes clashed with the teachings of the Church and the power claims of the monarchy (Jacob and Crow 2014, 102). The second half of the 18th century was characterized by an almost obsessive fear of the presence of unknown agents equipped with powerful secrets. This fright was further supported by the fact that various secret societies claimed they possess such knowledge (Weber 1999, 87–88, 99; Oberhauser 2020, 560; Byford 2011, 40).

3 Rosicrucians, Freemasons, and Illuminati

The 18th century was a time of extraordinary social changes, crowned by the French Revolution, which marked a radical transformation of European society. Many scholars of conspiracism consider this period pivotal in the formation of modern conspiracy culture because it witnessed a “boom” of more comprehensive conspiratorial interpretations of the world that still make a vital part of conspiracy theories today (Fenster 2008, 18; Byford 2011, 40–46; Webman 2011, 9–11). While some cherished the hope for a better future associated with progressive ideas of liberalism, democracy, and secularism, others had to face the erosion of the *ancien régime*, its tradition of feudalism and absolutist monarchy – the world order which many believed to be established by God (Cohn, 27; it was also the case of Sergei Nilus, who made the *Protocols* popular in Russia within the apocalyptic discourse; Hagemeister 2012, 80–83; Byford 2011, 50). The dynamism of the period was also later reflected in the *Protocols* (1919, 24):

“At the time when people considered rulers as an incarnation of the will of God, they subjected themselves without murmur to the autocracy of the sovereigns; but as soon as we inspired them with the thought of their personal rights, they began to regard the rulers as ordinary mortals. The holy anointment fell from the heads of sovereigns in the opinion of the people; and when we deprived them of their belief in God, then authority was thrown into the street, where it became public property and was seized by us.”

Jews, Masons, Jacobins, *philosophes*, Illuminati, Protestants, and others were accused of subverting the traditional order and values of the society, often within an apocalyptic framework. It needs to be mentioned, though, that during the French Revolution, assumptions of secret plots were also present among some revolutionaries, who were suspicious of hidden forces trying to overturn the hard-fought victories (Hofman 1993, 27; Oberhauser, 556).

3.1 Rosicrucians

The process of “institutionalization” of the esoteric tradition nurtured associations regarding real or imagined secret societies. These were then incorporated into the conspiratorial discourse of the opponents of the revolution as well as other conspiracy narratives. In the context of modern conspiracism, an early example of the fear of secret societies can be associated with the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross (or also Rosicrucians). Rosicrucianism grew out of the seedbed of Renaissance humanism, also drawing on apocalyptic and utopian ideals within Lutheranism at the end of the 16th century. This period is also considered to be a time of significant development of modern Hermeticism, or what we today call “Western esotericism”. The publication of the Rosicrucian manifestos in the early 17th century marks the beginning of the perception of “secret societies as custodians of Western esotericism” (Bogdan 2014, 285, 286; Stuckrad 2005, 113, 116).

At this time, the belief in the existence of Rosicrucian secret society was based on several anonymously published texts (first *Fama Fraternitatis* in 1614) that convey a legend about Christian von Rosenkreutz, who traveled around the Middle East and North Africa to collect knowledge of esoteric nature. After his return to Europe, he founded the Fraternity of Rosy Cross, a society that, according to the texts, was supposed to remain in secrecy until 1614, the year of the publication of Rosicrucian manifestos. More importantly, these texts also describe Rosicrucian teachings in a mysterious and metaphorical way as based on alchemy, the Paracelsian philosophy of nature, and reformed Protestantism. Soon after the first manuscripts appeared, the society began to fear new occult sects that were believed to be of undoubtedly “demonic origin” and supposedly plotting against the Church and the monarchy. The Rosicrucians, who were primarily interested in alchemy and aimed for a “General Reformation”, were likened to sectarians, and their minds were considered to be darkened and confused by the influence of occult doctrines and mysteries. People believed that Rosicrucian existence and

teachings might provoke “great disturbance” among peasants, as was the case, for example, with the sect of Anabaptists, influenced by the teachings of Martin Luther, and its short-lived but brutal uprising in Münster. Some critics claimed that the source of Rosicrucian ideas and teachings “is not God or scripture but the father and founder of all lies and false prophets, the Devil” (Smith 2014, 420, 416–417; Stuckrad 2005, 113–114; Nakonečný 2009, 355). Paradoxically, there is no proof that any organized group of Rosicrucians existed until the mid-18th century (Bogdan 2014, 285; Stuckrad 2005, 115–116).

3.2 Freemasons

At the time when the first Rosicrucian societies were being formed by those interested in the ideas described in the original 17th century manuscripts, there was indeed a connection to Masonic lodges, whose members were often affiliates of other “secret” societies. Also, in the English-speaking world, the first textual allusions to the existence of the society of Rosy Cross and Freemasons appear in the same document – *The Muses Threnodie* (1638). However, discussions about the direct influence of Rosicrucianism on Freemasonry did not occur until 1725 (for more, see Bogdan 2014, 285, 287–290, and Knoop, Jones, and Hamer 1945). A discussion among scholars as well as Freemasons also debates the accuracy of the term “secret society” in association with Freemasonry, with some suggesting that a better term would be “a society with secrets” or other alternatives (e. g., focusing on the initiatory nature of Masonic rituals, Bogdan comes with the term “initiatory society”, see Bogdan 2014, 280–285). The meaning of the word “secrecy” represents a broader question within the Western esotericism discourse, in which the term “secret” can be used in different manners and contexts (Byford 2011, 41).

Still, the Freemasons have created an elaborate and mysterious mythology surrounding their origins. They often understand themselves as preservers of an old “secret tradition” and rituals, by which they have strongly fostered the imagination of conspiracists ever

since the 18th century up until nowadays. Since the official foundation of Freemasonry, there have been myths and legends about the ancient origins of the Freemasons, who were, according to themselves as well as their opponents, supposed to hold a special, esoteric knowledge. The tales passed down in lodges trace their ancestors far back in time to the Knights Templar, the chief architect of King Solomon's temple Hiram Abiff, Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoreans, the priests of Osiris, druids, or even to the first man, Adam. However, Freemasonry did not officially come into being until 1717, when five older lodges of England merged into the Grand Lodge of London. From there, Freemasonry soon spread to other European countries as well as New England. However, there are materials such as older mason texts, correspondences, or diaries, that set the roots of Freemasonry to at least the 14th century. The year 1717 marks not only the establishment of Freemasonry, but also a new form of organization and hierarchy that was later embraced by other secret societies and hermetic orders. This kind of organization, as we will see later, has imprinted into how conspiracy theorists design the conspiratorial web of meaning. Despite the ideology of "equality and merit", the Freemasons are hierarchically organized based on the level of each individual's path toward "enlightenment". However, the hierarchical order only supports the public idea of a secret group with supposedly ancient origins that harbors hidden knowledge available only to those who are in the highest ranks of the organization. Moreover, the group could inconspicuously create and then promote new ideologies harmful to the good social order, the government, and the Church. As Freemasonry grew and expanded across Europe, the anti-Masonic opposition also intensified, and the Church and governments were concerned by the esoteric nature of lodges raising questions about what was going on behind their closed doors (Oberhauser 2020, 559; Stuckrad 2005, 116–118; Snoek and Bogdan 2014, 13–18; Nakonečný 2009, 469–471; Benimeli 2014, 139; Jacob and Crow 2014, 100–102).

An important yet still not unequivocally answered question is the real influence of Freemasonry on the permeation of Enlightenment ideas and, ultimately, on the events of the revolution. The

Freemasons, deeply influenced by Rosicrucianism, focused mainly on personal transformation and self-development, but they were also, given the intellectual ferment of the time, involved in politics. Freemasonry has always been a pluralistic, internally differentiated movement when it comes to its organization and thought. Outwardly, Masonic lodges presented themselves as politically neutral, but many Freemasons shared the ideas of the French Revolution, which coincided with their efforts to create “a unified human society consisting of morally mature individuals” (Nakonečný 2009, 470). Many Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers were members of Masonic lodges, but there were also vigorous opponents of the revolution and advocates of monarchism among Freemasons (even king Ludvig XIV was a Freemason). The ideological plurality within Freemasonry is one of the arguments against the assumption of some conspiracists regarding the existence of one unified will as the sole source of radical society-wide changes in the 18th century. A more common view then recognizes Freemasonry as a movement that “served primarily as an early incubator of larger trends in an age of rapid, sometimes traumatic intellectual, political, and social change” (Jacob and Crow 2014, 113). Still, the fear of the propagation of disruptive ideas within closed Masonic lodges served as a justification for the persecution of the Freemasons and the banning or monitoring of the lodges’ activity (Stuckrad 2005, 117; Nakonečný 2009, 469, 471; Cohn 2005, 30–31; Oberhauser 2020, 560).

Shortly after the foundation of the first lodges in England and France, some argued that Masons aimed to abolish religion, especially Christianity. In April 1738, Pope Clement XII (1652–1740, pontificate 1730–1740) issued the first anti-Masonic bull, *In eminenti apostolatus*, in which he draws attention to the existence of some “societies, or conventicles”, or “Freemasons” which are bound by an oath that prohibits them from revealing things they do in secrecy. The pope expressed his suspicions regarding these groups, claiming that “if they were not doing evil, they would not have so great a hatred of the light” (Papal Encyclicals Online). To him, they represented a potential danger of harmful influence on innocent souls, and for these reasons, they shall be prohibited. Suspicion of heresy was

also reinforced by the fact that Freemasons admitted men from different (non-Catholic) religious traditions if they believed in one God (Oberhauser 2020, 559–560; Benimeli 2014, 139–140).

This has become a common ground for the critique made by governments around Europe and churches regardless of confession. Other anti-Masonic documents issued by the Church followed. In the Catholic world of the 19th century, Freemasonry was associated with liberalism and powers that threaten the union of the Throne and the Altar, making the suspicion of the conspiracy against the church and state the primary point of understanding Freemasonry. The peak of the anti-Masonic struggle on the part of the Catholic Church took place during the papacies of Pius IX (1792–1878, pontificate 1846–1878) and Leo XIII (1810–1903, pontificate 1878–1903), tainted by the interpretation of the French Revolution as promoted by famous conspiracy theory formulated by August Barruel (Benimeli 2014, 142–143). In the encyclical *Humanum genus* (1884) of Leo XIII (who also issued the last anti-Masonic bull *Annum Ingressi* in 1902), the pope refers to the Freemasons as helpers of “the kingdom of Satan” who “are planning the destruction of holy Church” by organizing “the utter overthrow of that whole religious and political order of the world which the Christian teaching has produced, and the substitution of a new state of things in accordance with their ideas, of which the foundations and laws shall be drawn from mere naturalism” (Papal Encyclicals Online). It needs to be noted that the Freemasons, nudged by the campaign against them, also expressed a strident anti-Catholic stance and explicit criticism of the Catholic Church and state totalitarianism, simultaneously promoting anticlericalism, liberalism, and humanism (Benimeli 2014, 142–143; Snoek and Bogdan 2014, 26; Nakonečný 2009, 472; Hofman 1993, 28).

A serious significance was also given to the testimonies of former Masons – most notably, those made by a notorious con man Léo Taxil (1854–1907), who claimed that Masonic lodges are, in fact, a “Satanic organization” and took a stand during the anti-Masonic congress in Trent in 1896. Later, he admitted that his statements were fabricated, but Catholic Church leaders had already used his claims for their fight against the Freemasons (Nakonečný 2009, 472; Benimeli

2014, 143; Oberhauser 2020, 559). An attempt for reconciliation did not occur until Vatican II (1962–1965), but even then, the pope claimed that the council was a result of the infiltration of Freemasons within the highest ranks of the Roman Curia (Snoek and Bogdan 2014, 28; Nakonečný 2009, 470–473; Benimeli 2014, 144, 152). While the prestige of Freemasonry was not as high in the Catholic countries, in England and New England, the movement was especially prominent and many government officials or presidents were members of the Masonic lodges (Benimeli 2014, 142). Still, that did not prevent conspiracy theories about the Freemasons flourishing there. In the United States, a strong 19th century wave of anti-Masonic conspiracy theories even led to the foundation of the Anti-Masonic party in 1828 (Snoek and Bogdan 2014, 26).

3.3 *Illuminati*

In 1776, a secret society with links to the Freemasons, the Illuminati, was founded in Bavaria by Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830), a German philosopher of Jewish origin and a professor of canon law at the University of Ingolstadt. Under Weishaupt's leadership, the Illuminati aimed for a radical application of the ideas associated with the revolution, naturally opposing the Jesuits. According to Illuminati texts, to reach these goals, it was first necessary to create a secret structure consisting of capable men who would be placed in important administrative positions across the country. From the Freemasons, the Illuminati took the system of degrees, with cadets delving deeper into the society's secret knowledge with each level they acquired. Because of this system as well as their particularly strong anti-Jesuit attitudes, the Illuminati were massively persecuted and eventually banned as early as 1785. Shortly after the foundation of the order, some suggested that the Illuminati were in league with Satan, and by the end of the 18th century, many anti-Illuminati books were released in Germany. During their short existence, the Illuminati collected approximately two thousand members (others claim no more than a thousand), including German Enlightenment

intellectuals and high-ranked Freemasons. Although the original order was never restored, it has survived in the popular imagination of conspiracy culture to this day (Stuckrad 2005, 117–118; Oberhauser 2020, 560; Nakonečný 2009, 179; Cohn 2005, 30; Byford 2011, 40–41).

4 *Memoirs* by Augustin Barruel

The French Revolution produced several texts that interpret the period through the premise of conspiracy, including an essential ideological source for the *Protocols*, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (“Memoirs showing the history of Jacobinism”). The voluminous book, written by Abbé Augustin Barruel (1741–1820), a French Jesuit priest, was first published in France in 1797 and soon became notoriously known among scholars. It was one of the first comprehensive texts formulating the idea of a massive conspiracy against Christians placed in a concrete historical context. In his four-volume work, Barruel argues that the French Revolution, the execution of the king, and the Jacobin terror regime came as a result of the conspiracy of *philosophes* and secret societies to overthrow the king, destroy the aristocracy and the Catholic Church in France, and establish their own republic with the ultimate goal – creating a world government. He describes this conspiracy as “one continuous chain of cunning, art and seduction” (Barruel 1996, 363), and lists a number of secret societies and other conspirators: the *philosophes*, the Freemasons, the German Order of Illuminati (or, in his words, “enemies of the human race, sons of Satan”) led by Weishaupt, and finally, the Jacobin Club as the apex of the cabal. He traces the ideas of the revolution to the Manicheans, which he sees as the forerunners of the Knights Templar and Freemasons (Cohn 2005, 30–31; Hofman 1993, 28; Snoek and Bogdan 2014, 28).

Immediately after its publication, the text reached great success among the opponents of the revolution both in France and other parts of Europe and was translated into several languages. The *Memoirs* sparked debates about the influence of Enlightenment

philosophers and secret societies on the events of the revolution and intensified the opposition of the Catholic Church against the Freemasons. For example, the British conservative pro-monarchist politician and philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–1797) paid his respects to Barruel. In his admiring letter, based on his own alleged experiences, he confirms the authenticity of the imagined conspiracy. Barruel saw France as the leading power of Europe, but, concurrently, as susceptible to falling into illusion. He believed that for these reasons, the conspirators chose France for the start their organized rebellion, and from there, they hoped to proceed to other countries (Oberhauser 2020, 555, 557; Benimeli 2014, 142; Hofman 1993, 28–29; Byford 2011, 40).

His model of conspiracy does not only explain the revolution in conspiratorial terms, but it also represents what is later typical for grandiose narratives of global conspiracy (or “superconspiracy”, as Michael Barkun calls it), in which all significant events in human history are mutually connected (Barkun 2003, 6). In his vision of the plot, he includes virtually all the important events that took place in France, Europe, and even in Russia during the second half of the 18th century. A network of Masonic lodges throughout Europe was to act as a communication channel through which the conspirators could quickly and efficiently agree on the details of the plan. In promoting their ideology, they used the power of the press – which they controlled and reduced “to a new kind of slavery” – and the influence of prominent and publicly recognized intellectuals. The degree to which individual conspirators were familiar with the plan varied according to their position in the conspiratorial hierarchy. To make sure they maintain unexposed, they communicated in secret language, codes, and symbols. While the Freemasons represent the organizational structure of the conspiracy, the Illuminati and the *philosophes*, who are at the highest level of Barruel’s conspiracy hierarchy, were described as the inventors of the plan. In the last volume, he summarizes the whole plot under the Jacobins, who “represented the union of philosophes, Freemasons, and Illuminati” (Hofman 1993, 33–41).

However, it did not take long before Barruel was rejected and criticized by many of his contemporaries, even those who opposed the

revolution. The criticism was directed especially at the content of the subsequent volumes, pointing to the lack of evidence and the excessive paranoia that was searching for traces of evil in every corner of France rather than looking for the causes of the revolution in the government and its inability to solve the long-term crises faced by the country in the 18th century. Objections came even from hardcore opponents of the revolution, such as the French conservative philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), who was a member of the Freemasons. He rejected Barruel’s vision of conspiracy, unwilling to believe that the Illuminati order could wield such power to overthrow the “old regime” which was led by the Church and the monarchy. Instead, he saw the revolution as God’s punishment for deviating from the true faith. From his perspective, the revolution and the Enlightenment philosophers were merely instruments of divine providence. Another of his arguments against the supposed omnipotence of the conspirators was the fact that Barruel was free to write and publish his texts. Another French philosopher and opponent of the revolution from the conservative pro-monarchy camp, Louis de Bonald (1754–1840), also expressed his disagreement. Although he considered the conspiracy as one of the possible factors of the revolution, like de Maistre, he did not believe it to be the leading or only cause. He claimed that the rise of intellectual, religious, and economic individualism caused a “multitude of individual wills” to work against each other, thus making the existence of one organized network capable of bringing about such a massive event unlikely (Hofman 1993, 30–31, 55). According to modern historians, Barruel’s vision of conspiracy stands as an unsubstantiated historical fiction, but, as the American historian Amos Hofman points out, his work is nonetheless of significant historical value because it represents “the first systematic attempt to discuss the role of conspiracy in a revolution” (Hofman 1993, 32; Oberhauser 2020, 559).

Almost simultaneously, in 1797, another book explaining the conspiratorial causes of the revolution was published in England: *Proofs of conspiracy against all religions and governments of Europe, carried on in the secret meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and the Reading Societies* by the British physicist and mathematician John Robison

(1739–1805) from the University of Edinburgh. As a matter of fact, it was supposed to be Robison who functioned as the ideological source for Barruel. Given the immense international influence of both works, Barruel and Robison are considered “fathers of the conspiracy tradition” (Byford 2011, 40, 45).

5 Judeo-Masonry

Initially, Barruel avoids accusing Jews of being involved in the conspiracy, even though the idea was not completely alien to him. The potentiality of a dangerous and immensely wealthy “Judaic sect”, which supposedly founded and controlled Freemasonry (even though Jews were not admitted into Masonic lodges before the 1730s) and the Order of Illuminati, is introduced to Barruel through the so-called “Simonini letter”, which he received in 1806. We have very little information about its sender, who signed himself as Jean-Baptiste Simonini of Florence. This mysterious person, about whom we know only that he was an army officer in the Sardinian army, claimed that he had infiltrated the Italian Jewish community and had obtained information about the plan of the Jews to take over Europe. In the last stage of their plan, they “would be masters of the world, they would abolish all other sects and establish rule of their own sect, they would turn Christian churches into many synagogues and reduce remaining Christians to a state of absolute slavery” (Cohn 2005, 33; Oberhauser 2020, 563–564; Snoek and Bogdan 2014, 25).

Simonini’s letter is one of the earliest examples of the idea of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy, although the concept of the cabal of Jews, Illuminati, and Freemasons circulated in Germany even before as a part of the anti-Illuminati campaign. Probably not by coincidence, the letter also appeared during the time that Napoleon tried to resolve the Jewish question in France and called for the “Grand Sanhedrin” (named after the ancient Jewish court), causing thus even greater suspicion about the Jewish influence on European politics. Barruel feared that the publication of the letter might provoke hatred against Jews, and he let it circulate only within selected

influential groups in France. Shortly before his death in 1820, however, he included the idea of a Jewish plot into the original version of the *Memoirs* and came up with an outline of an elaborate Judeo-Masonic hierarchy, controlled by a “sovereign council of twenty-one [note: conspirators]”, at least nine of whom were supposed to be Jews. The highest authority was vested in an “inner council of three” which was elected by the sovereign council, and which chose from its midst the Grand Master, the Supreme of the conspiracy (Cohn 2005, 31–36; Byford 2011, 47).

6 Herman Goedsche’s *Biarritz*

The myth of Judeo-Masonic conspiracy was not highly popular until the mid-nineteenth century, when a strong wave of antisemitism emerged in Europe. One of the arguments for the involvement of Jews in the conspiracy was that Jews in France, and subsequently in other European countries, were granted full citizenship and were among those who apparently profited from the revolution, which was followed by the emancipation in the second half of the 19th century (Jacob and Crow 2014, 102; Cohn 2005, 37; Byford 2011, 47, 49). At this time, several conspiracy pamphlets and other texts began to appear, legitimizing but also often contradicting each other, a feature common in the modern conspiracy culture. Popular and frequently repeated phrases were “unknown leaders”, “unknown forces”, “oath of secrecy”, and so on.

Another important conspiracy text that significantly influenced the content of the *Protocols* is the novel *Biarritz*, written and published in Germany in 1868 by the anti-Jewish-minded Prussian “agent provocateur” and author Hermann Goedsche (1815–1878). Goedsche published most of his works under pseudonyms, and in this case, he chose the name sir John Retcliffe. The chapter *Auf dem Judenkirchhof in Prag* (“In the Jewish Cemetery in Prague”) talks about a meeting of representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel, the “sons of the Golden Calf”, who are led by the Devil, and who, under the cover of darkness, agreed on the final plan to take over the entire

world and enslave (pro)nations (Cohn 2005, 37–41; Bronner 2018, 61, 67). The means by which they wanted to achieve this are not too different from what is later described in the *Protocols*, or from what we (in a slightly modified and actualized form) also encounter in present-day conspiracy theories: an absolute control over the global wealth, the media and the judiciary, manipulation of the working class, an erosion of the Christian Church through the ideologies of liberalism, skepticism, and anticlericalism, etc. Taken out of its original fictional context, this chapter soon became popular, no longer as fiction, but as an authentic record of the secret meeting of Jewish elders. It was translated into numerous languages and attracted readers across Europe, even in Czarist Russia. In 1872 it was published in St. Petersburg with a commentary speculating the credibility of the text, but in 1881, the meeting at the Prague cemetery was printed in the French *Le Contemporain* (the same magazine that in 1878 published Simonini's letter) as an authentic record of a single speech of the chief rabbi. The story of the secret meeting of Jews took on a life of its own as "The Rabbi's Speech", it became popular among French and German far-right and anti-Semitic movements, and later also served as proof of the authenticity of the *Protocols* (Cohn 1996, 41–44; Oberhauser 2020, 564; Byford 2011, 50–51).

7 The Protocols of the Elders of Zion

In the 19th century, Germany and France became the leading producers of antisemitic propaganda (e. g., the work of a French journalist Roger Gougenet des Mousseaux, *Le Juif, le judaïsme et la judaïsation des peuples*, which, published in 1869, which also preceded and influenced the *Protocols*). The hate towards Jews, however, also flourished in Russia, the country with the world's largest Jewish minority at that time. In Russia, Jews were much less assimilated, but at the same time, the government was pressured to grant them equal rights. This resolved in an endeavor to get rid of as many Jews as possible through administrative restrictions and pogroms. Meanwhile, anti-Jewish conspiracy pamphlets have also

served as successful tools in the ideological struggle between Russian liberalists and conservatives, the latter of which supported the Tsar and Orthodoxy. In contrast to Germany, Russian resentment towards Jews has always been primarily based on religious causes. Jews were not persecuted as representatives of another race, but as those who rejected the “true faith”. This narrative still continues to be prevalent in Russia. The potentiality of Jewish conspiracy presented a threat that could subvert the Russian monarchy, and thus evoked concern in many monarchists, including Tsar Nikolai II Alexandrovich (1868–1918) and his wife Alexandra Feodorovna (1872–1918) themselves. For “the abolition of privileges; in other words, the very essence of the aristocracy of the GOYS, which was the only protection of peoples and countries against us” is part of the plan of the conspirators, so that they can, “on the ruins of natural and hereditary aristocracy”, built an aristocracy of their own, as the *Protocols* informed almost twenty years before the Bolshevik Revolution (*The Protocols* 1920, 16; Bronner 2018, 48; Cohn 2005, 57–58; Byford 2011, 48, 49).

The pamphlet was first released in St. Petersburg as a series of articles in the ultra-right magazine *Znamya* (“Battalion”), affiliated with the radical right-wing movement the Black Hundreds. Published in 1903, the text soon became vastly popular. At first, it gained attention within the Russian monarchist and nationalist milieu, but it was only after the First World War and the October Revolution that the pamphlet achieved massive success. Comparably to the French revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution and the fear of Judeo-Bolshevism brought about a hysteria of secret plots and espionage around Europe (Girard 2020, 569–570; Cohn 2005, 118–119). Translations into English were produced almost simultaneously in the US and the UK in the early 1920s. One of the most influential translations in England was provided by the British-born Russian immigrant George Shanks (1896–1957), published under the title *The Jewish Peril* in January or February 1920 in London. In Great Britain, the idea of a Jewish conspiracy was nothing new. In the destabilized post-war society, the fear of Bolsheviks and anarchists transformed into Judeo-Bolshevism. A similar phenomenon can be observed in

Germany, where some believed in the alliance of Jews and Germans (“Ashkenazi – German”), considering Bolsheviks to be Jewish agents of Germans and perceiving the revolution as a Jewish–German invasion of Russia. This thought was formulated in the *Heel of the Jews* (1918), which described the Jewish ambition to control international finance (“international finance is Jewish finance, and Jewish finance is German finance”) all while preaching socialism. Moreover, the conspiracy culture in England was greatly influenced by the work of the famous conspiracy theorist and writer Nesta Webster (1876–1960), who provided a broader context for understanding the *Protocols* by reviving and directly connecting older conspiracy theories about the French revolution, secret societies and Jews (Byford 2011, 53–54; Cohn 2005, 164–166).

Fear of Judeo-Bolshevism also manifested its reach, for example, in the British statesman Winston S. Churchill (1874–1965). In his article (February 1920), he associated Jews with the international conspiracy and blamed them for organizing revolutions in France and Russia as well as for creating the Bolshevik ideology. For Churchill, the inner conflict between good and evil is common to all men, but it manifests itself the most in Jews. In his view, Jews are a race of extremes in which genius combines with malice. He divides Jews between those who are loyal citizens of the country they live in, for which they can do much good, and those who participate in the international conspiracy that has been slowly growing since the time of Adam Weishaupt. He describes the conspiracy as involved in “the tragedy of the French Revolution... and now at last this band of extraordinary personalities from the underworld of the great cities of Europe and America have gripped the Russian people by the hair of their heads and have become practically the undisputed masters of that enormous empire” (Churchill 1920). Shortly thereafter, in 1921, British newspaper *The Times* published articles denouncing the *Protocols* as a hoax and a forgery (a compilation of Maurice Joly’s *Dialogue aux enfers* and previous antisemitic and conspiracy pamphlets, especially *Biarritz*), a fact later supported by the Berne trial in 1935 (Girard 2020, 571; Cohn 2005, 164–166, 171; Byford 2011, 50–51, 55).

The fear of the Bolshevik conspiracy and potential explosions of other revolutions spread throughout Europe. In Western countries, it was mainly conservative parties and occasionally the press that caught on. Conspiracy theories about Bolshevism and communism found their place also within the right wing in France in the 1920s, but the fear of the Bolshevik plot was even more prominent in Central and Eastern Europe, where it was merged with strong antisemitism. The fear of Jewish conspiracy caused brutal violence against the Jews during the Russian Civil War in Russia (1917–1923), and in Poland, Jews were believed to want to undermine the foundation of the Polish nation, which resulted in collective violence against Polish Jews (Girard 2020, 570–571; Byford 2011, 51).

Attempts at criticizing the *Protocols* proved partly counterproductive because criticism only further spreads awareness of the text's existence. The pamphlet was particularly powerful in Germany during the Weimar Republic (1918–1933), where the notion of a communist conspiracy combined with antisemitism, and the communist plot was considered to be only a part of a wider Jewish conspiracy. This concept was promoted by nationalist groups and the idea of a conspiracy, as found in the *Protocols*, became embedded in the Nazi propaganda. Consequently, the *Protocols* truly became “a warrant for genocide” of six million Jews, as the title of Norman Cohn's work suggests. Even though some Nazi leaders were skeptical about the existence of the plot, Hitler himself was convinced of the *Protocols*' authenticity and he even mentions the pamphlet in *Mein Kampf*. According to Hitler, the presence of a Jewish conspiracy was responsible for the defeat of Germany in the First World War, the economic crisis, the rise of Bolshevism, and their desire to take over the world. Outside of Russia, the popularity of the *Protocols* diminished after World War II, but it did not disappear completely, and neither did its sometimes forgotten or unrecognized influence (Girard 2020, 571; Byford 2011, 55; Hitler 1939, 240).

Conclusion

This brief survey presents a patchwork of mostly previously well-known facts. Its aim is to summarize critical moments of modern conspiracy culture development and help us understand the origins of some conspiratorial imaginations as well as possible motivations of their authors. Ever since the beginning of times, conspiracism within the borders of the Christian world has been strongly influenced by the conflicting relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The ongoing process of the Western conspiracy culture formation was inflated by stories about secret occult orders and dark rituals, and influenced by the Renaissance boom of esoteric tradition, followed by the emergence of several real or imagined secret societies in the 17th and 18th centuries, which supposedly claimed to possess valuable yet mysterious knowledge.

We have presented some of the most influential texts that served as vehicles and promoters of mostly pre-existent conspiracy myths and motifs, but which organized these concepts into a systematic form, thanks to which such ideas disseminated even more. The *Protocols* did not establish modern conspiracism, but they represents a crucial moment in the development of conspiracy narratives about the global cabal. Although many other conspiracy texts and pamphlets have been published since then, expanding on many of the conspiracy ideas and details, there is probably no text that has surpassed its influence so far, despite its proven falsity and plagiarism. An embodiment of old mythology of secret plots, the *Protocols* have gained an indisputable authority among conspiracy theorists, revealing “suppressed knowledge” (Barkun 2003, 27) that – like in the secret societies of Masons, Illuminati, and Jews – is passed on by those who seek to discover the truth which has been intentionally hidden since time immemorial.

References

- Arava-Novotná, Lena. 2010. *Nová doba, stará zloba: soudobý antisemitismus v historickém kontextu*. Pilsen: University of West Bohemia.
- Barruel, Augustin. 1995. *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*. Fraser: Real-View-Books.
- Barkun, A. Michael. 2003. *Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Blumenkranz, Bernhard. 2007. "Church Fathers." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Detroit, MI, New York, NY: Thomson Gale.
- Benimeli, José A. Ferrer. 2014. "Freemasonry and the Catholic Church." In *Handbook of Freemasonry*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. M. Snoek, 139–154. Leiden: Brill.
- Bogdan, Henrik. 2014. "Freemasonry and Western Esotericism." In *Handbook of Freemasonry*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. M. Snoek, 278–305. Leiden: Brill.
- Bronner, E. Stephen. 2018. *A Rumor about the Jews: Conspiracy, Anti-Semitism, and the Protocols of Zion*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Byford, Jovan. 2011. *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chanes, A. Jerome. 2004. *Antisemitism: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Churchill, S. Winston. 1920. "Zionism versus Bolshevism: A Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People." *Sunday Herald*, February 8, 1920.
- Cohn, Norman. 2005. *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. London, UK: Serif.
- Fenster, Mark. 2008. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Girard, Pascal. 2020. "Conspiracy Theories in Europe During the Twentieth Century." In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 569–581. London, UK, New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hagemester, Michael. 2012. "The Antichrist as an Imminent Political Possibility." In *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, edited by Richard Landes and Steven T. Kart, 79–91. New York, NY, London, UK: New York University Press.
- Hitler, Adolf. 1939. *Mein Kampf*. Translated by James Vincent Murphy. London, UK, New York, NY: Hurst & Blackett.
- Hofman, Amos. 1993. "Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion: Barruel's Theory of Conspiracy." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1): 22–60.
- Hofstadter, Richard. 1996. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Jacob, Margaret, and Matthew Crow. 2014. "Freemasonry and the Enlightenment." In *Handbook of Freemasonry*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. M. Snoek, 100–116. Leiden: Brill.
- Knoop, Douglas, G. P. Jones, and Douglas Hamer. 1945. *Early Masonic Pamphlets*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Landes, Richard. 2000. "The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000: Augustinian Historiography, Medieval and Modern." *Speculum* 75 (1): 97–145.
- Messadié, Gerald. 2000. *Obečné dějiny antisemitismu: od starověku po dvacáté století*. Prague: Práh.
- Molnár, Amedeo. 2007. *Na rozhraní věků*. Prague: Kalich.
- Oberhauser, Claus. 2020. "Freemasons, Illuminati and Jews." In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 555–568. London, UK, New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nakonečný, Milan. 2009. *Lexikon magie*. Prague: Argo.
- Papal Encyclicals Online. "Humanum Genus: On Freemasonry." Accessed October 20, 2022. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/113human.htm>.
- Papal Encyclicals Online. "In eminenti: Papal Bull Dealing with the Condemnation of Freemasonry." Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/clem12/c12inemengl.htm>.
- Shnirelman, Victor. 2019. "The Russian Orthodoxy and a Conspiracy Theory: A Contemporary Discourse." *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 32 (1): 87–101.
- Smith, Bradford W. 2014. "Resisting the Rosicrucians: Theories on the Occult Origins of the Thirty Years' War." *Church History and Religious Culture* 94 (4): 413–443.
- Snoek, A. M. Jan, and Henrik Bogdan. 2014. "The History of Freemasonry: An Overview." In *Handbook of Freemasonry*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. M. Snoek, 13–32. Leiden: Brill.
- Stuckrad, Kocku von, and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. 2005. *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*. London, UK: Equinox.
- The Protocols and World Revolution: Including a Translation and Analysis of The Protocols of the Meetings of the Zionist Men of Wisdom*. 1920. Boston, MA: Small, Maynard & Co.
- Vojtíšek, Zdeněk. 2016. "Antisatanistická panika a současný konspiracismus." *Theologická revue* 3: 41–48.
- Weber, Eugen. 1999. *Apokalypsy: prorocství, kultury a chiliastické představy v průběhu staletí*. Prague: NLN.
- Webman, Esther. 2011. "Introduction – Hate and Absurdity: The Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." In *The Global Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century Old Myth*, edited by Esther Webman, 1–24. London, UK, New York, NY: Routledge.

- Wood, Gordon S. 1982. "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (3): 402–41.
- Woolf, R. Jeffrey. 2012. "The Devil's Hoofs: The Medieval Roots of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." In *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on the Protocols*, edited by Richard Landes and Steven T. Kart, 49–55. New York, NY, London, UK: New York University Press.

Mgr. et Mgr. Kateřina Hlaváčová

Department of Religious Studies

Hussite Theological Faculty

Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

E-mail: hlavakat@gmail.com

CONSPIRACIES IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

Cyril Hišem

Abstract

Christianity was gradually formed and defined by separating itself from Judaism and paganism. Religious services were not publicly accessible at that time which caused many forms of social prejudices and conspiracies. The tolerance of Christianity ended with the introduction of a new universal cult of the emperor, which the Christians rejected and were willing to submit to persecution and death instead. The Christian response to all suspicions and conspiracies was the birth of Christian apologetics. In the 9th century, iconoclasm was at its peak, and many paintings and statues were destroyed. As a result, eastern theologians wrote many defensive treatises to defend images. During the search for a relationship between the papacy and the empire, a number of forgeries were created to defend individual positions. In the Middle Ages, the problem of conspiracies was addressed by the Church with the Inquisition. In modern times, the Jesuits became involved in these accusations, and in the 20th century, Nazism and communism also persecuted the Church. The Church continues to fight against conspiracies today.

Key words

Conspiracy theories, Christianity, Church history

Using real-life examples, the paper points to the history of Christianity-related conspiracies in chronological order. The paper also points out the relationship between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. If the conspiracy theories had never arisen, or if they had been eliminated in time, the world and Christianity would have probably gone in different direction.

Ancient times, the period when Christianity was getting its shape, but also a time of great persecution. Christianity, in its infancy, did

not appear worthy of persecution on the part of the Roman Empire, as the Roman law was based on the principle of *deorum ini-uriae, deis curae* (“insults to the gods must be left to the gods”). Along with the existence of religious pluralism and tolerance, the empire enforced rules that ensured its cultural and social stability (Klíčová 2009, 11–31; Johnson 1999, 36–7).

Christianity, originating from the social and cultural principles of Judaism and paganism, borrowing also from particularism and universalism, has come a long journey. From impulsive and unsystematic enthusiastic efforts Christianity became a legal-territorial model assimilating new cultural norms. The revelation brought people answers to the fundamental problems of a man (questions about the existence of one and true God, the immortality of the soul, the meaning of life, the question of ultimate justice). The Gospel was presented as a way towards equality (gender, origin, status) promoting the right to life, love for one’s neighbor and mercy. It was met with suspicion, misunderstanding, resistance, uncertainty, and also had to stand face to face syncretism and the cult of the emperor (a follow-up on the oriental cults of heroes and eastern mysteries) as enforced by the state (*populus*) (Kumor 2000, 24–27). Rome copied the Greek model of empire, including the idea of a natural order of things, cosmic order and mythical order. Christianity borrowed philosophical forms, rational justification of faith and its defense from the Greeks (Liberati and Bourbon 1996; Merdinger 2009; Lenčič 2009, 8–20).

The first changes came in the 2nd century, when Christians broke free from Judaism and ceased to be perceived as a Jewish sect. Under the Emperor Nero (37–68), they were *accused of hatred towards the human race* (they avoided social life, refused to participate in public events, had an aversion to theaters, circus and games, did not offer sacrifices on the altars of pagan gods – they were perceived as godless atheists, disloyal to the emperor and the enemies of the empire – they refused to worship his image – a sign of the emperor’s divine origin).

At that time, Christian services were not accessible to the general public, which caused all sorts of panicky social prejudices

(accusations of cannibalism, bloodlust, invoking a being with a donkey's head). The emperor Trajan issued in 112 a rescript, under which it was forbidden to persecute Christians. However, if a Christian was reported, he had to be punished. The only way a Christian could redeem himself was to publicly worship Roman gods. Later, this rule acquired the status of a general norm in the empire.

The Roman Empire considered Christians' unwillingness to worship the Roman cult to be the main issue. Ancient states considered religion a public institution to which all its citizens had to adhere, at least outwardly. The empire personified the certainty of the legal order and the pagan state cult. The tolerance the empire showed Christianity was practically over with the introduction of the Roman imperial cult. The unknown and mysterious Church aroused both sympathy and contempt. The empire made it a point to make it difficult for the Church to hold public services, and forbade the Church to hold synods, seized liturgical objects and property, sacrificed believers to the gods and removed Christians from public offices. Given the accusations of incest and cannibalism among Christian groups, most historians agree that it was a pseudo-interpretation of the Christian liturgy and its terminology that led to this popular belief. Christians were also accused of illegally gathering in a prohibited organization. In his *Apologetics*, Tertullian reproaches the persecutors for labeling Christians as perpetrators of all sorts of crimes, enemies of gods, emperors, laws, customs, and the nature itself. Christians distinguished themselves primarily by avoiding idolatry and impurity (Barnes 2009, 217–223).

The answer of Christians to all suspicions and conspiracies was the Christian apologetics, pioneered by the first apologists (Justin, Tatian, Athenagoras, Minucius Felix, Tertullian), who wrote their works adhering to the rules of Greek sophistry and ancient rhetoric. This written form of defense of the Christian faith heralded a new literary type – apologetic speeches, dialogues, speculative conversations, and religious reflections, although the rhetorical, philological, or stylistic aspects were only secondary to the defense of faith as the primary purpose of apologies. The apologist Justin Martyr († around 165 in Rome), as the first theologian, introduced philosophy and aspects

of civic life into the interpretation of the Gospel to fight for freedom of religion for Christians. In his *Apologetics II*, he defends Christians as those who believe that their sacrifice will change the mind of their persecutors and free them from their own delusions and hatred. He refers to charisms as signs of credibility as follows: “Many of our Christians around the world and in your city, in the name of Jesus Christ, suffered under Pontius Pilate, are freeing people from demons that conjurers, magicians and sorcerers could not free them from.” In an apology intended for Jews who reproached Christians for not observing the sanctification of the Sabbath and the rite of circumcision, Justin asks about the reasons for their complicity in false accusations against Christians. He describes the charisms of Christians as God’s gifts of the Spirit and recalls the power of the name of Jesus in Christian exorcisms and the miracles they perform (Sarka 2012).

Motives of apologetics: accusing Christians of sacrificing live children, celebrating orgies, bloodlust, donkey worship, atheism. Apologists tried to refute these accusations and defend the faith in such a way as to preserve the *disciplina arcana*. At the same time, they tried to avoid fideism and rationalism. The addressees were Jews, pagans, heretics and schismatics. Gnostic writings included their own gospels, letters of the apostles of the apocalypse, hymns, and psalms, as well as theological works. In addition to apologetic writings, the Church also defended itself by excluding Gnostics from the community, sometimes even the Gnostics themselves decided to do so. Later, Gnostics decided to create their own communities (Mordel 2001; Heer 2000; Genčurová 2012, 18–27).

Theological definition of the faith of the Church. Already in the first centuries, it was necessary to define facts beyond human knowledge from the theological point of view. The early Church placed great emphasis on the content of faith, which is also reflected in the old baptismal creeds: the Apostles’ Creed; Nicene-Constantinople Creed and Athanasian Creed (Chovanec 2016, 7–8). The Church had to clearly distinguish itself from individual heretical “branches” and conspiracies as follows.

Gnosticism. The Demiurge, as the second god, is the creator of the material world and the originator of everything happening in

it (including evil), because contact with matter is incompatible with the perfection of the true God.

Emanationism. The highest transcendental being is the Absolute, from which the first hypostasis emanates (pours out) – the intellect; then from it the second hypostasis – the soul (both of the world and of man); finally, the third, least perfect hypostasis – matter).

Pantheism. Identified God with the world and considered the world to be the embodiment of divinity.

Naturalism. Nature is the only reality, the only being. There is no spiritual principle distinct from nature that is superior to it; there is no Creator God or any realm of ideas.

Materialism. Considers matter or any other physically provable and objectively existing entity to be the basic principle of reality; at the same time, the materialism understands everything spiritual to be secondary. Everything that exists is either matter itself or is dependent on matter for its existence. God does not exist (Chovanec 2016, 44–45).

These misguided schools of thought and conspiracies have often been revived in modern times and used in the formation of societal systems. They led to even more cruel and extensive questioning and persecution of Christians, fueled by the onset of science and technical and economic progress.

In the following period, the Christian West focused on the evangelization of new nations, while the East was already involved in trinitarian and Christological disputes over the course of which several church communities (Syria, Persia, Egypt, Abyssinia, Armenia) separated from the Church. After 313 AD, the Church shifted its attention towards its internal development (theological definition of religious truths, general councils, territorial church organization). Theology taken upon itself a very difficult task – to distinguish God’s truth from the doctrinal errors and conspiracies of the time, establish the principles of creating traditions, the scope and content of the canon. Although the persecution stopped, individual philosophers and philosophical schools began to study paganism and its relationship with Christianity. In their works, they focused on Christian love, ignorance and stupidity of Christian doctrine, relationship

to possessions, death, contempt for patriotism, personal (morally clean) life. Against the Christian God stood the Supreme God, creator and protector of the world, Holy scriptures dismissed as a pamphlet, the apostles called ignorant, and Christ the head of a band of robbers.

After the persecution subsided, cult places and other property were returned to the Church. The Church was, once again, able to carry out both missionary and catechetical activities in the empire, as it was recognized as a legal person with the right to property. It was also allowed to carry out political activities. The Church mainly focus on activities in the field of protecting freedom of conscience and the creation of a new moral code. Its activities helped improve the position of slaves in the society, the equality of men and women, advocated for the prohibition of killing and selling children, organizing gladiator matches, burning signs on the face. The clergy was freed from civil and personal obligations and was granted inheritance rights, as well as the right to receive property bequests and donations on behalf of the Church and financial support, laws against celibacy were revoked, bishops were granted state judicial power. The emperor continued to be tolerant towards the state pagan cult and retained the title, office, and suit of the highest pagan priest in the empire – *pontifex maximus* (Hišem 2012, 140–169, 212–213, 376, 400).

Iconoclasm. The Christian Orient, which followed up on the original cultural traditions and spiritual heritage, had a rich iconography practice. In its infancy, the Church manifested itself externally mainly through symbols, partly out of respect for Jewish practice and its strict prohibition of depicting God, and partly out of fear of supporting intra-church heresies.

The Islamic teaching and practice, a syncretic religion incorporating, among other things, certain fragments of Christian teaching, also observed a strict prohibition of depicting the deity. The military and religious clashes with the East culminated in the 8th century in Christian Byzantium in the so-called iconoclastic struggle. The Muslims destroyed the images of Christ and the Mother of God, saints and angels as the works of human hands. The fight itself began at the instigation of Emperor Leo III (717–741 AD), who issued

a proclamation to the people based on the Old Testament book Exodus 20:4, in which he prohibited the worship of images. Since the Eastern emperors were striving for autocracy (imperial rank combined with high priesthood), iconoclasm helped them to revive the practice of the old Roman and Oriental deities. During this period, many works of art, including sculptures and paintings were destroyed, although the monasteries in particular resisted despite brutal persecutions. To protect these images, many defensive treatises were created by Eastern theologians (St. John of Damascus), who came up with the theory of images to feed off against accusations of idolatry. In his work, he presented images as referrals to the prototypes they represent. The emperor asked the pope to implement this teaching also in the western Roman part of the empire, but the pope stood up to defend this cult. The split in the church led to the iconoclastic pseudo-synod in 754 AD in Constantinople, convened by Emperor Constantine V, where the cult of images was dismissed as the work of the devil. The issued decrees were to end this struggle, the paintings were to be burned, the frescoes and paintings painted over with lime, and the relics of the saints were to be destroyed. Instead of holy images, paintings of plants and animals were to be exhibited. All who practiced this cult were persecuted, monasteries were demolished or rebuilt into barracks, baths or public service facilities, monks were forced to break religious vows or massacred. Officials in high positions in the empire and officers were also subject to execution. Pope Stephen III rejected this synod at the Lateran Synod of 769 AD.

The fight was finally ended at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 AD with the participation of Pope Hadrian I. The pope condemned the previous pseudo-synod, rejected the teaching of iconoclastic patriarchs and bishops, explained the doctrine of veneration of images, ordered property seized by the empire to be returned to the Church and adopted 22 canons of a disciplinary nature. The Frankish emperor Charles the Great ignored the Council and, as an impartial person in this matter, issued the so-called Carolingian minuscule, which allowed images to be placed in churches as decorations, but were not to be the object of a special cult. The Holy script, sacred vessels, relics,

and a cross deserved special respect. In the East, the council resolutions became state law, although the fight broke out occasionally until 843 AD, when the public worship of images was allowed again at the Synod of Constantinople (Damašský 2012; Bagin 1990; Dluhoš 2007; Dolinský 1995; Kumor 2001; Hišem 2013, 70–75, 83, 90–91, 352).

The relationship of the Pope and the Emperor. Although the office of the Pope was already created in the early days of the Church, its authority gained in seriousness in the Middle Ages when the political situation in Europe stabilized. The Papacy and the Empire were considered the pillars of the universalism of the Christian society. The popes gradually acquired their own political autonomy, and their power grew along with the support of important bishops of the newly created Frankish Empire under the Charles the Great, the successor to the Roman Empire (collapsed around 476 AD). *Gelasius's principle of the two swords* – the sacred authority of the priesthood and the royal power, was supposed to prevent serious conflicts (Hišem 2013, 54, 312, 319, 328–329).

The process of centralization of papal power in Rome was supported and strengthened by the state power in the Middle Ages. The political framework created the universality of both powers, the Roman Curia was being built. The Pope continued to be an elected figure. The popes of the 9th century were figures superior to the secular power due to its lack of centralization.

In the 9th century, a number of legal *forgeries* began to appear. Contemporary historians place the center of these forgeries in the territory of northeastern France. Particularly important for the Church are the sources of ecclesiastical law, which form a collection of so-called canons *The Decretals of the Pseudo-Isidore*. It is a compilation of the Gallic version of the *Hispanic Collection (Collection Hispana)*, to which forged regulations have been attached, making the invented new norms seem more authentic. The author of the collection worked under the pseudonym Isidor Mercator. This name is given to a scholar or a group of scholars (apparently monks) whose work is included in the works of most canonists under the common term “forgeries from the pseudo-Isidorian workshop.” Since ancient times,

collections of ecclesiastical law have been compiled by adding new documents to older ones. In this case, the basis of the collection is the *Collection Hispana*, into which the compiler inserted his own regulations. The combination of genuine and fake gives the whole work credibility and seriousness. The fakelegal principles presented were not unknown in their time, but the compiler elevated them to the status of a law. This was neither the first nor the last work that came out of this workshop. Pseudo-Isidore used material on each pope in the *Liber pontificalis* (circa 530 AD), including schematically arranged biographies of Roman bishops, along with other important information of the time to make up new “findings”. The collection was initially limited in scope, therefore providing compilers with additional options for various free interpretations (Vladár 2017, 78–83; Bagin 1990; Dolinský 1995).

The moral life of the clergy and the people showed many shortcomings and signs of moral declines, loss of respect for authority, lack of security, violence, cruelty, usury, disputes, tendencies to pomposity and desire for a life of flattery. Although the priesthood was numerous, the care of souls was poor, and the life of the clergy was also not exemplary. At that time, various pamphlets circulated, including ones full of conspiracies with prophetic and apocalyptic nature demanding a radical reform of the entire society. Wandering preachers were very popular, especially from mendicant orders (Hišem 2013, 179–182, 191, 233–235, 255, 279–281, 285, 301, 341, 510–516, 522–524, 539–540, 560, 577, 581).

Ordeals served as a means of proof in God’s judgments. Their roots traced back to the practice of prehistoric nations and found their way into the Germanic law. Since the people were very religious in those days, fond of various religious practices mixing the original pagan traditions and conspiracies, the Church tried to give them a Christian framework or to reject them as pagan. Although the popes rejected ordeals at first, they eventually acquired a liturgical framework. They were accompanied by prayers and preceded by the mass. They gradually disappeared over the 13th century, although not completely – they continued even in the following centuries as part of the trials of witches during the Inquisition.

The most used methods: court, drawing lots, trial by fire, water, consecrated piece of bread, with the corpse of the murdered, with the cross. Since fist law, the law of the stronger, was still practiced, the Church in the 10th century introduced the right of asylum, ordered a mandatory ceasefire during Advent and Great Lent and every week from Wednesday to Monday. Its violation was punished by ecclesiastical and secular law. Through council resolutions in the 12th century, it was extended to the entire Christian territory (Bagin 1990).

Inquisition. The infamous Inquisition was a judicial procedure introduced in the Middle Ages. The sects operating in the East, included the Cathars and Waldensians and several apocalyptic sects operated in the West. The teachings of these sects gave rise to various conspiracies. Through the Inquisition, the Church tried to solve its problems. Muslims and Jews did not fall under its jurisdiction, as they were not baptized. Its main aim was to defend the faith and fight heretics. Because of its secretive nature, the Inquisition was suspected of abusing its authority. The actions of secular leaders did not help. Not only religious activists were considered heretics, but also political revolutionaries who attacked the foundations of Christian society and disrupted its order were considered enemies.

Inquisitorial tribunals were established all over Europe and were led by bishops. The bishops then entrusted the most educated priests in the field of law and theology to preside over the trials. Thus, the Inquisition was one of the ecclesiastical means to enforce law and, in fact, represented a more moderate form of law-enforcement than the then-secular courts. But even the inquisitors themselves were subject to abuse. As early as the 12th century, the state and the Church agreed on joint action in the fight against heresies. The canonical collections *Decretum Gratiani* stated that the Church could ask the state for help and cooperation in the fight against heretics (and also in salvation of their souls) and their forced return to the Church. In the decree *Ad abolendam*, the Pope explicitly stated that if a person is caught in heresy, he will be handed over to the secular power to determine the appropriate punishment; if it is a priest, he will be deposed, and his spiritual activities will be suspended. The first laws against heretics were issued by Emperor Barbarossa in 1183, the

death penalty by burning was introduced in Aragon in 1197.

The death by burning became statutory punishment for heresy. For the first time, the presumption of innocence and the right to defense were introduced during the inquisitional trials. The tortured were provided with medical assistance so as not to die during the torture.

Under King Philip IV (1307–1314) the Inquisition abolished the order of the Templars. French King Philip IV accused the Templars of heresy and immoral behavior on their expeditions. He had the French Templars captured and their property and privileges taken away from them. The property served to secure their expeditions, although the property was officially assigned to the administration of another crusading order – the Johannites. Despite the protest of the pope, the king insisted on inquisition. When the pope finally gave in, the Templar grandmaster was imprisoned and later burned. The king came out of the whole situation as a *bonus zelus*. Over the centuries, the Templars have become enshrouded in mysteries, including the one that they found the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy Land. There are conspiracies that the order transformed into a secret organization that has survived in various forms to the present day (Blaschke 2006; Bradford 1996).

New Age: Jesuits. The history of the Society of Jesus is tied with the Roman bishop. It was founded by Ignatius of Loyola and six companions, with the approval of Pope Paul III. The society is engaged in evangelization and missions and is closely tied with the pope. Historians cite various conspiracies of political, ideological, and economic nature regarding the abolition of the order. For years, Pope Clement XIV was exposed to strong pressure from the Catholic countries, in particular the Spanish, French, and Portuguese. The most important Catholic governments of the time demanded the “death” of the Jesuits. They considered the Society of Jesus to be an obstacle to the exercise of royal power and social order, which they wanted to perfect to the image of the Enlightenment ideals, meaning that the Church would become a part of this order and be fully dependent on civil power. However, after 41 years, when the papacy was freed from under the “protection” of the Catholic powers, the Society of

Jesus was rehabilitated (*Archivár jezuitskej kúrie o pohnutom úseku dejín Spoločnosti Ježišovej*; Brodrick 1986; Šuppa 2003; Krapka and Mikula 1990; Čornejová 1995).

All periods of persecution, from Jesus Christ to the present day, have been accompanied by various conspiracy theories and false accusations. It was no different even in the 20th century when the Church was accused of various isms.

Nazism and the Church. Religion was considered just a transitory phenomenon during the war, Christianity was perceived as a continuation of Judaism, Christian denominations as the most important factors in preserving the national character – political tactics in creating a new society of a chosen German and Nordic racial type – Hitler's German Empire, introduction of secularism. Catholic organizations were abolished, and their property seized, withdrawal of financial contributions to religious institutions, prohibition of association, monasteries closed, clergy imprisoned and sent to in concentration camps, staged trials for immorality, press, education and churches under government control, foreign news censored. Initially, the anti-religious measures were disguised, later on managed directly by the party in the open. The Holocaust is a separate matter.

Communism and the Church. Political trials based on pseudo-accusations – high treason, conspiracies against the republic, demanding more power over the society, military treason, espionage in favor of the Vatican. Liturgical acts replaced by pseudo-rites, civil holidays introduced. Church events banned, atheization of the society (authorities, education), priest seminaries cancelled or under state control. Religious orders, seen by many as the main obstacle to the process of socialism-building, were abolished (Chalupecký 2003, 26–34; *Církevní komise ÚV KSČ 1949–1951: edice dokumentů I*; Dlužoš 2010; Dlužoš 2003; Dolinský 1999; Dubovský 1998; Dubovský 2001; Ďurica 2001; Letz 2007).

John Paul I. The year 1978 was the year of three popes. The last time the Church witnessed such a rapid sequence of events was in 1605, when Leo XI died four weeks after being elected. Four centuries ago, the three popes, Clement VIII, Leo XI, and Paul V succeeded each other in just one year. In August 1978, Paul VI dies after a long

illness and after only thirty-three days in the office, John Paul I dies of heart attack. These two consecutive deaths opened the door to the pontificate of John Paul II, one of the great popes in the history of the Church.

The sudden death of the pope John Paul I attracted more attention than his surprising election or his short papacy. This death, surrounded by all kinds of rumors, raised suspicions of some kind of conspiracy. Numerous conspiracy theories, which even novelists would not be ashamed of, have not stopped circulating even after years of his death. However, the truth is that the Venetian patriarch was riddled with illnesses. He himself did not expect that the conclave could choose him as the successor of Paul VI. From the very beginning, the new pope kept repeating that this mission goes beyond his powers. It was not just a phrase or feigned humility. In his first homily after taking office, he said the following: “Filled with understandable astonishment and awe, but at the same time with immense trust in the powerful grace of God and accompanied by the fervent prayers of the Church, I hereby accept the office and shall become Peter’s successor on the Roman throne and bear the yoke that Christ wanted to place on our frail shoulders.” Under the burden of the entrusted task, his heart gave up (Franzen 1995; *Rok troch pápežov*).

The world will always suffer from violence, lack of warmth, light, food, love, and chase after possessions and high offices. The world will always have its pseudo-Jerusalem, alluring huge crowds with its shine, only to disappoint them afterwards. While some have not yet dealt with the past, others already want to live in their future dreams, they will step on each other’s heels and push each other until they realize that it is better to step out of line and take their lives into their own hands.

Christians fight with spiritual weapons – traditional forms of repentance – fasting, prayer, almsgiving, works of corporal and spiritual mercy, advice of the Holy Spirit. That is their gospel. The Catholic tradition is very rich in various manifestations of Christian love, despite mockery, accusations, persecutions, and exclusions. After all, the teachings of Jesus and his disciples that the kingdom of God is not of this world is more up to date than ever before.

References

- Archivár jezuitskej kúrie o pohnutom úseku dejín Spoločnosti Ježišovej. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cislocianku=20140811017>.
- Bagin, Anton. 1990. *Cirkevné dejiny: stredovek*. Bratislava: Cirkevné vydavateľstvo.
- Barnes, Thomas. 2009. "Pohanská percepcie kresťanství." In *Rané kresťanství: počátky a vývoj cirkve do roku 600*, edited by Jan Hazzlett, 217–223. Brno: CDK.
- Blaschke, Jorge. 2006. *Záhadný stredovek: tajné dejiny klášterů, konvent, řeholních a vojenských řádů*. Prague: Mladá fronta.
- Bradford, Ernle. 1996. *Řádoví rytíři*. Prague: Zvon.
- Bridge, Antony. 2000. *Křížové výpravy*. Brno: Centa.
- Brodrick, James. 1986. *Počiatky jezuitov*. Cambridge: Priatelia Dobrej knihy.
- Církevní komise ÚV KSČ 1949–1951: edice dokumentů I*. 1994. Brno: Doplněk.
- Cottier, George. 1999. "Inkvizícia a jej problémy." In *Inkvizícia*. Habovka: Rkfú.
- Čornejová, Ivana. 1995. *Tovaryšstvo Ježíšovo: jezuité v Čechách*. Prague: Mladá fronta.
- Damašský, Ján. 2012. *Řeči na obranu obrazů*. Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart.
- Dirnbeck, Josef. 2001. *Die Inquisition: Eine Chronik des Schreckens*. München: Pattloch.
- Dlugoš, František. 2007. *Historia ecclesiae Christi: stredovek*. Levoča: MTM.
- Dlugoš, František. 2010. *Katolícka cirkev v okovách*. Ružomberok: Verbum.
- Dlugoš, František. 2003. *Prenasledovanie veriacich Spišskej diecézy v rokoch 1948–1989*. Spišská Kapitula: Nadácia Kňazského seminára biskupa Jána Vojtašáka.
- Dolinský, Juraj. 1999. *Cirkev a štát na Slovensku v rokoch 1918–1945*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.
- Dolinský, Juraj. 1995. *Dejiny cirkvi: stredovek*. Bratislava: Trnavská univerzita.
- Dubovský, Ján Milan. 1998. *Akcia Kláštorý: komunistický režim na Slovensku v boji proti mužským reholiam v rokoch 1949–1952*. Martin: Matica slovenská.
- Dubovský, Ján Milan. 2001. *Akcia Rehoľníčky*. Martin: Matica slovenská.
- Ďurica, Milan. 2001. *Katolícka cirkev na Slovensku 1938–1945*. Trnava: SSV.
- Franzen, August. 1995. *Malé cirkevné dejiny*. Prague: Zvon.
- Genčurová, Gabriela. 2012. "Staroveká židovská a kresťanská náboženská vzdelanosť. Prvé obdobie kresťanského staroveku." In *Dejiny Cirkvi v staroveku*. Košice: VMV.
- Heer, Friedrich. 2000. *Evropské duchovní dějiny*. Prague: Vyšehrad.
- Hišem, Cyril. 2012. *Cirkevné dejiny: starovek*. Prešov: VMV.

- Chalupecký, Ivan. 2003. "Pramenná báza k výskumu represálií komunistického režimu na Slovensku." In *Štyri desaťročia represálií komunistického režimu na Slovensku*. Prešov: VMV.
- Chovanec, Marián. 2016. *Teológia: náuka o jedinom a trojosobnom Bohu*. Badín: Kňazský seminár sv. Františka Xaverského.
- Johnson, Paul. 1999. *Dějiny křesťanství*. Brno: CDK.
- Klíčová, Marcela. 2009. *Vzestup křesťanství: dějiny prvních pěti století církve*. Prague: Návrat domů.
- Koma, Štefan. 1999. "Církevná inkvizícia." In *Inkvizícia*. Habovka: Rkfú.
- Kladivo na čarodějnice*. 2006. Prague: Levné knihy.
- Krapka, Emil, and Vojtech Mikula, eds. 1990. *Dejiny Spoločnosti Ježišovej na Slovensku*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.
- Kumor, Boleslav. 2000. *Církevné dejiny: kresťanský starovek*. Levoča: Polypress.
- Kumor, Boleslav. 2001. *Církevné dejiny: raný kresťanský stredovek*. Levoča: Polypress.
- Lenciš, Štefan. 2009. *Staroveký Rím a Grécko*. Košice: Viena.
- Letz, Róbert, ed. 2007. *Dokumenty k procesu s katolíckymi biskupmi Jánom Vojaššák, Michalom Buzalkom a Pavlom Gojdičom*. Bratislava: ÚPN.
- Liberati, Anna Maria, and Fabio Bourbon. 1996. *Staroveký Rím*. Cestlice: Rebo.
- Merdinger, Jane. 2009. "Svět Římského impéria." In *Rané křesťanství: počátky a vývoj církve do roku 600*, edited by Jan Hazzlett. Brno: CDK.
- Molnár, Amedeo. 1991. *Valdenští*. Prague: Kalich.
- Mordel, Štefan. 2001. *Patrológia*. Spišské Podhradie: Kňazský seminár biskupa Jána Vojaššáka.
- Mráček, Pavel K. 2006. *Upalování čarodějnic a inkvizice: mýtus nebo skutečnost*. Olomouc: Matice cyrilometodějská.
- Rok troch pápežov: úvod*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.dobrakniha.sk/image/ukazky/ukazka-2897.pdf>.
- Sarka, Róbert. 2012. "Justínova apologetika svedectva: z dejín apologetiky." *Teologické texty* 3 (2012).
- Šuppa, Jozef, ed. 2003. *Jezuiti*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.
- Vladár, Vojtech. 2017. *Procesné uplatňovanie exceptio spolii v období stredoveku: procesné prostriedky a inštitúty rímskeho a kánonického práva*. Prague: Leges.

Prof. ThDr. Cyril Hišem, PhD.

Department of Philosophy and History

Faculty of Theology

The Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia

E-mail: cyril.hisem@ku.sk

DISCERNMENT OF INTERIOR MOVEMENTS ACCORDING TO ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA AND WORKING WITH CONSPIRACY-SPECIFIC STIMULI

Radovan Šoltés

Abstract

The paper analyses some basic principles of conspiracy thinking with an emphasis on the link between emotionality and rational thinking. It also points out to possible solutions related to shielding ourselves from any information and emotions that conspiracy-specific stimuli arouse in us. The paper focuses on the emotional aspect that is closely linked with conspiracy thinking. It also attempts to provide solutions to working with emotionally manipulating type of information based on the reflection of working with our thoughts and emotions as presented by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his rules for discernment.

Key words

Conspiracy theories, spiritual discernment, Ignatius of Loyola

Introduction

Conspiracy theories have become a firm part of our world to the extent that an ordinary person finds it extremely difficult to distinguish between what is true and what is indeed misleading information based on conspiracy. This paper focuses on the emotional aspect that is closely linked with conspiracy thinking. Reflecting upon working with thoughts and emotions in the rules for discernment presented by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the paper attempts to provide

some ways of strengthening one's resistance to non-critical and emotionally manipulative types of information that are commonly presented by conspiracy theories.

1 Basic Definition of Conspiracy Thinking

Zuzana Panczová defines conspiracy theory as “an unfounded, unverified or unaccepted piece of information that warns against dangerous plot or conspiracy” (Panczová 2017, 14). From the perspective of psychology, conspiracy theory is a complex of different contexts that explains why this is the case. Cyril Höschl argues that there is growing evidence suggesting an innate inclination or tendency to “trust”, which implies a tendency to believe that we are controlled by a higher power. This may be one of the preconditions of our perception of causality and that plays a crucial role in conspiracy theories and conspiracy thinking (Höschl 2016, 80).

Many problems and worries go beyond our abilities to grasp and avert negative situations and that, naturally, creates insecurity. In this sense, conspiracy thinking is nourished by our inclination towards certain irrationality, mysticism and mostly paranoia that is linked to our tendency to understand the complex world applying black and white thinking. The common feature of both the creators of conspiracy theories and their consumers is therefore paranoia, the unwillingness to accept vague and ambiguously structured phenomena, searching for a culprit at any cost and establishing causality where there is none (Höschl 2016, 119–120). It is a certain way of interpreting the world and events (primarily those negative, uncertain, and threatening) that are beyond our control.

Conspiracism is a type of mentality that evokes convictions about fictitious conspiracies that people spread either due to a lack of education and critical thinking or purposefully, in order to provoke negative attitudes (Panczová 2017, 17). Surely, the effectiveness of any conspiracy information also depends on the personality of those responsible for dissemination and on social context of the recipient (Panczová 2011, 15).

The basis for this type of thinking seems to be the emotional background, which is naturally activated when confronted with threatening, insecure, and problematic situation. It is, therefore, a combination of cognitive explanation and emotional gratification (Panczová 2017, 19). Identifying the cause of a negative phenomenon with a concrete aggressor, commonly a group can in fact help to reduce the emotional tension that has been triggered by a real uncertain situation or a negative interpretation about that situation in which the conspiracy theory target finds him/herself.

2 The Emotion-Reason Relationship in Decision Making

Emotions are essentially innate control systems that tell us what to do when we do not want to preoccupy ourselves with what needs to be done. Emotions are always at the background of our actions, and we are aware of them and perceive them as feelings. For instance, emotions are a sign of our current state, whereas feelings are a more complex evaluation with an overlap to the future. While emotions seem to be more related to our bodily experience on the subconscious level with the ability to set out organism into some kind of movement, feelings belong to a conscious level (Honzák 2020, 29–37).

It is important to realize that emotions first occur on the unconscious level. This can cause considerable problems in our lives, for instance, when acting impulsively. Surely, we are not mere emotional beings; we are rational beings, too. Our reason has a significant impact on our actions. At times, however, it is difficult to say which one dominates. I may think that I have made a rational decision but in reality, I got carried away by emotions. Reason is closely linked to the emotional world of our brain. When assessing emotionally relevant data, our brains *automatically* include our wants and dreams and desires. Our internal computations, which we believe to be objective, are not really the computations that a detached computer would make but rather they are implicitly colored by who we are and what we are after (Mlodinow 2012, 207).

In his research, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt focused on the emotion-reason relationship and showed that reason is not as independent of emotions as one might think. Our mind is divided into two parts. The first part involves automatic and subconscious processes, and the other part involves controlled processes. The former is related to emotions and the latter to reason. Haidt (2013, 52n) likens these kinds to the image of an “elephant” (automatic processes) and “rider” (controlled processes). The “elephant” represents an emotional aspect, and the “rider” represents reason. The question arises as to who controls whom? It seems, as Haidt notes, that it is not the “rider” who would smoothly guide the “elephant”. What the “rider” does are only corrections. Even if we try to be reasonable and in control, our emotional impulses are there to affect our judgment. The bottom line is that human minds, like animal minds, are constantly reacting intuitively to everything they perceive, and basing their responses on those reactions. Within the first second of seeing, hearing, or meeting another person, the “elephant” has already begun to lean toward or away, and that lean influences what you think and do next. Intuitions come first (Haidt 2013, 70).

Controlling our “elephant” is a strenuous undertaking and one that needs practice. If we underestimate it, we may end up going where the “elephant” leads us and only in hindsight, we will seek rational justifications for every path and turn in our lives. As humans, we are rather resourceful beings, and as such, we are quite capable of satisfying ourselves and those around us with this self-deception. The “rider” can see farther into the future, and the “rider” can learn valuable information by talking to other “riders” or by reading maps, but the “rider” cannot order the “elephant” against its will. It can help us and gradually control the “elephant”, but that requires certain knowledge (Haidt 2005, 17).

The “elephant” plays a crucial role in our judgements but is neither dumb nor despotic. In threatening and dangerous situations, the “elephant” reacts very quickly and can save our lives. Nevertheless, when we are faced with some situation, our “elephant” does not hesitate and begins to lean immediately. The “rider”, who is trying to, under any circumstances, anticipate the “elephant’s” next move,

begins looking around for a way to support this “elephant’s” move. We make our first judgments rapidly, and we are dreadful at seeking out evidence that might disconfirm those initial judgments, claims Haidt. Intuition comes first and the reasoning usually comes to the fore later. Its purpose is to influence others (Haidt 2013, 55).

We are not enclosed in the emotional world, the same way “snails are in their shells”. Yet, working on our emotional life is not easy. That is why the tradition accentuates that wisdom lies in *knowing oneself*. This was also a point of departure for St. Ignatius of Loyola in the understanding of his own inner world so that he was able to translate this introspection into the rules for discernment of movements.

3 Ignatius’ Discernment of Movements as an Instrument for Dealing with Emotionally Charged Stimuli

In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman shows the origin of emotional stimuli that can evolve further and literally engulf us. When a stimulus comes, it triggers the emotional reaction in our brain that mostly precedes the rational evaluation of the stimulus. It takes the rational mind a moment longer to register the situation and respond to it. Our emotional reactions, however, do not arise solely based on the external emotional stimuli, but also follow our thoughts and wishes. Daydreaming can cheer us up, while melancholy thoughts make us sad and reflective. As a result, the evoked feelings will enforce the creation of new thoughts and scenarios leading to us being engulfed in a *spiral* (Goleman 1995, 293–294).

3.1 Experiences with Discernment in Ignatius’ Conversion

A similar “spiral” emerged in Ignatius’ experience of certain events in his life, which he eventually translated into rules for discernment of movements explicated in his book *The Spiritual Exercises*. The first

significant event is the period of his conversion, which was linked to the trauma caused by a serious wound he sustained in the battle while defending the fortress of the town of Pamplona against the French troops in 1521. Agile and vital Ignatius found himself bed ridden for weeks on end. It shook him both physically and mentally. Suddenly, Ignatius spent hours upon hours in silence that were interrupted by thinking and dreaming about his future career. His only distraction were two books he was reading, a Life of Christ and a book on the lives of the saints. This silence made him conscious of something strange that was happening inside of him and what he would later call the “movements of the soul.” The alternating reading and daydreaming of careers aroused different emotions in Ignatius and provoked different responses. Ignatius noticed that and began to reflect upon the causes for these “movements.” This led to his conversion (Ignatius of Loyola 1992, 23).

Ignatius felt an ardent desire of imitating saints’ lives and serving God. He set out on a pilgrimage deeply convinced of adopting the lifestyle of saints from the book he was reading. Ignatius, referring to himself in the autobiography in the third person (the pilgrim n/a), wrote: “Thus, no longer so much concerned to do satisfaction for his sins, but to please and placate God, he decided to do great penances. When he remembered some penance that the saints had done, he determined to do the same and even more... Without considering any more particular circumstance, his every intention was to do these great external works because the saints had done so for the glory of God.” (Ignatius of Loyola 1992, 30).

Upon these travels, Ignatius encountered a situation he recalled in his autobiography. It is also closely related to the topic of our paper. As Ignatius was going on his way, he met a Moor, and they went on talking together. They began to talk about a theological topic concerning the immaculate conception of Virgin Mary. The Moor expressed some doubts and gave many reasons for his refusing of the “immaculate conception.” Ignatius wrote: “In support of this he cited the natural reasons that suggested themselves to him. The pilgrim, in spite of the many reasons he gave him could not dissuade him from his opinion.” (Ignatius of Loyola 1992, 30). The Moor went

on ahead, but the conversation was far from over for Ignatius. “Various emotions came over him and caused discontent in his soul, as it seemed to him that he had not done his duty. This also aroused his indignation against the Moor, for he thought that he had done wrong in allowing the Moor to say such things about Our Lady and that he was obliged to defend her honor. A desire came over him to go in search of the Moor and strike him with his dagger for what he had said. He struggled with this conflict of desires for a long time, uncertain to the end as to what he was obliged to do... Tired of examining what would be best to do and not finding any guiding principle, he decided as follows, to let the mule go with the reins slack as far as the place where the road separated. If the mule took the village road, he would seek out the Moor and strike him.” (Ignatius of Loyola 1992, 30–31).

Here, one can clearly see that if passion engulfs the mind, it can hardly be controlled through rational thinking. The rational mind becomes the servant of passion, and a vicious circle is created. Ignatius aptly recalled that he was *tired of examining* and finding no solution. In the end, it turned up well for the Moor and Ignatius did not act on his intention. This story reveals Ignatius’ internal conflict that, paradoxically, arose from his naïve piety. Despite his great desire of serving God in every way, Ignatius described this period as the “blindness of the soul” – “nor did he know what humility was or charity or patience or discretion to regulate and measure these virtues.” (Ignatius of Loyola 1992, 30).

Ignatius’ story illustrates where one can be taken with thinking that begins to strengthen the emotion. Ignatius made use of this personal experience and incorporated it in his rules for discernment, which reflect what happens at our emotional level when affected by various stimuli. Feelings and emotions are not *a priori* bad, though. In fact, they are morally neutral. Their being good or evil depends on how they are used. We cannot do without our feelings and emotions, but we must educate them accordingly. This is done by knowing the purpose of our existence and training in virtue that helps us attain that purpose (Swieżavski 1998, 145, 150).

3.2 Rules for Discernment of Movements

The rules for discernment essentially serve to make sense of the inner world of the exercitant. Saint Ignatius was well aware of a person experiencing various movements of the soul during the exercises. Thus, discerning is an inseparable element of spiritual exercises. The Desert Fathers already acknowledged this phenomenon. Among hermits, one learns the rules for discerning alongside the master. This involves understanding different spiritual stimuli that enter our lives through our thoughts with which we can work. It is important to distinguish between what comes from “outside” and what is a product of our own thinking. In many ways, the spiritual movements found in the tradition of the Desert Fathers are identical with the rules of Saint Ignatius who systematized them in a more profound manner.

Saint Ignatius lists twenty-two rules, but we cannot analyze each of them here in detail. We will focus on those that are relevant to the topic of this paper.

First, it is necessary to clarify that for Ignatius, “movements” are not limited to mere prompting of the good and evil spirits, as commonly presented in simplistic interpretations of spiritual discernment. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius (2021, no. 32) presupposes three kinds of thoughts in a person: “one my own, which springs from my mere liberty and will; and two others, which come from without, one from the good spirit, and the other from the bad.”

When Ignatius speaks of good and evil spirits, he refers to everything that moves the person from within and from outside and prompts his or her response. Therefore, the notion of “spirit” is not associated only with the Holy Spirit, angels, or demons. Ignatius uses the term *evil spirit* to designate everything that leads to evil, even if it appears to be good. These are signs of any forces working in opposition to the Holy Spirit. It is not necessary to know whether these movements and forces have been prompted by one’s own personal evil spiritual being. Some people, however, find it easier to resist knowing that some temptation and desolation comes from the

evil spirit (Vateha and Csontos 1999, 37). Therefore, Ignatius often refers to the evil spirit as the mortal enemy of human nature (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 136). He understands human nature in a theological sense. According to the tradition of the Fathers, human nature participates in the Divine life. To live in harmony with one's human nature means to pursue the ideal of spiritual life. It is in human nature to enter into communion with God and transcend oneself towards Him (Mikluščák 1996, 24).

Based on his personal experience, St. Ignatius distinguishes two types of movements and refers to them as *consolation* and *desolation*. They can be of rational and emotional nature. They play a crucial role in the process of discernment. One ought to pay attention to their intensity, to the moment they arise, subside, and arise again. It is essential to consider a variety of one's own thoughts and regularity with which the movements appear and to what they prompt us (Grün 2013, 51).

For Ignatius (2021, no. 317), *desolation* is, for instance, “darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is the opposite of desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation.” It is a state of some emotional abandonment, feelings of helplessness and despair. The sense of spiritual desolation and loneliness is a very painful state.

Consolation, on the other hand, is a state when “an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be because of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God. Finally, I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's

soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord” (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 316).

Naturally, these contradictory types of movements tend to affect our decision-making. It might be erroneous, especially when we are in an intense emotional state. Therefore, St. Ignatius accentuates that in *time of desolation* (e.g., crisis, frustration, displeasure, sadness, fear of the future, depression, despair, etc.) one should never make changes; but “remain firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided us the day before the desolation, or in the decision to which we adhered in the preceding consolation. For just as in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels. Following his counsels, we can never find the way to a right decision” (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 318).

Saint Ignatius asserts that the union of the good spirit and consolation is conditioned by the goal, which is wellbeing of a person. One can also experience consolation concerning our subjective projections and dreams. When consoled in this way we might perceive our projections as a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit and form various resolutions and opinions that are of emotional nature. When the emotion has subsided, we are unable to keep the resolution, which oftentimes, may have not even been good for us at the first place (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 314, 336).

It is indeed some kind of an analysis of our psyche in the state of peace or discomfort. *Peace* can be defined as a state in which our emotions and reason are in harmony, working together towards one common goal. On the other hand, *discomfort* arises when emotions and reason are in conflict working towards separate goals (Rupnik 2001, 77n). Surely, discomfort can sometimes be caused by contradictory thoughts. However, it is essential to know that we all have a natural tendency to seek peace and in doing so, we may be prompted by movements that might not bring forth goodness, but they remove the inner conflict. It is commonly referred to as *rationalization of will*, when we create a rational argument that justifies our actions, as mentioned above. Surely, the human being is very resourceful and always finds enough arguments to justify his or her decision or action.

Ignatius' rules are concerned with the emotional world and feelings that affect our actions and decisions. The twelfth rule about the hysterical woman fits rather well with the topic of our paper (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 325):

“The enemy conducts himself as a *woman*. He is a weakling before a show of strength, and a tyrant if he has his will. It is characteristic of a woman in a quarrel with a man to lose courage and take to flight if the man shows that he is determined and fearless. However, if the man loses courage and begins to flee, the anger, vindictiveness, and rage of the woman surge up and know no bounds. In the same way, the enemy becomes weak, loses courage, and turns to flight with his seductions as soon as one leading a spiritual life faces his temptations boldly, and does exactly the opposite of what he suggests. However, if one begins to be afraid and to lose courage in temptations, no wild animal on earth can be more fierce than the enemy of our human nature. He will carry out his perverse intentions with consummate malice.”

Naturally, this image is not a universal evaluation of women. To some extent, it reveals the mentality of that time when typical masculine values were pushed to the forefront. More important is the *principle* that Ignatius attempts to introduce through this image. By nature, a woman is physically weaker than a man is and therefore unable to use brute force to achieve her ends. Instead, she must rely on her wits. Since the woman is physically weaker, this disadvantage is compensated with her screaming, crying, tears, emotional outbursts, etc., and this can have a significant impact even on the physically stronger man (Green 2001, 145). Nevertheless, important is the *principle* that the woman symbolizes and not that fact that it concerns a woman as a person.

According to Ignatius, the enemy uses wit and coercion on an *emotional* (desolation) and *rational* (doubts, mistrust, etc.) plane. This rule accentuates that temptation has no power over one's freedom

but can affect it the more one enters into a “dialogue” with temptation. The more one yields to temptation, the more one loses the power to solve problems. The archetypal image of Eve in the Eden comes in handy here. Eve did not confront the enemy, but listened to his words, which lead her to doubt and transgress the prohibition (Gn 3:1–6). The story, however, does not and cannot end here, for Eve is inseparable from Adam. Thus, Adam is drawn into the story and his passivity is, at the same time, the consent to being carried away by the movement that is stronger than the rational assessment of the situation. This biblical motif brings more light into the interpretation of the Ignatius’ rule. The woman – *Eve* – represents the *principle* that is incorporated into the masculine principle – *Adam*. The inner equilibrium of both man and woman will be “ideal” only when both principles, rationality and emotionality, are well balanced. “Woman” does not represent a person, but the *emotional movement*, which, if stronger than the reason, makes one lose the capacity for freedom and discerning what is good and right. Emotions turn to passions and passions become an undirected affection that consumes the person (Fessard 2004, 315).

Ignatius offers a solution in *agere contra* – to act against what the negative stimulus or desolation prompts us to do (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 318). Based on his experience, Ignatius asserts that this will cause the movements and thoughts, which distract us from what is important and good, subside.

It does not have to concern only the *negative* experience on an emotional level (desolation). This can be easily identified since we do not feel well during these times. It becomes more difficult when strong positive emotions (consolation) that might not always guide us towards the right decision are involved. Thus, the proverbial “hysterical woman” might represent a natural positive movement that need not guide us to the good goal. In fact, one may form a wrong decision in time of the strong consolation as well as in time of desolation. When the consolation has passed, one discovers that he or she is unable to abide by that decision (e.g., rash decisions). It is the natural consolation which has a psychological and not a supernatural cause (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 336).

Therefore, Ignatius (2021, no. 333) formulates another important rule:

“We must carefully observe the whole course of our thoughts. If the beginning and middle and end of the course of thoughts are wholly good and directed to what is entirely right, it is a sign that they are from the good angel. But the course of thoughts suggested to us may terminate in something evil, or distracting, or less good than the soul had formerly proposed to do. Again, it may end in what weakens the soul, or disquiets it; or by destroying the peace, tranquility, and quiet which it had before, it may cause disturbance to the soul. These things are a clear sign that the thoughts are proceeding from the evil spirit, the enemy of our progress and eternal salvation.”

Distinguishing the beginning, middle and end of the course of a thought requires a careful outlook and patience in scrutinizing our actions and thought scenarios through which we develop an idea about the world and ourselves. For instance, we may have a good intention in the beginning, but we will carry it out using wrong means. Similarly, the “end of the course of a thought” may not always be explicitly bad. Sometimes it may just be distracting. At other times, it can lead us to desolation and uncertainty (Green 2001, 168–171).

Desolation or doubt can be associated with something that may not look bad or problematic at first. It may even look like the best solution. However, if we were to make a decision in such a frame of mind, it would not yield the expected “fruit”. In other words, if we reacted immediately to any stimulus that may seem attractive and may not even be immoral, we would not make a good decision. Especially in times of crisis associated with long-term problems or unfulfilled expectations we tend to identify our illusions about reality with reality itself. Therefore, examining (discerning) the circumstances, causes and consequences of thoughts and movements is the key task in searching for goodness and truth.

4 Ways of Working with Distracting Thoughts and Stimuli

Ignatius' rules only confirm what modern psychology is just discovering: the relationship between reason and emotions is complicated and the emotional side is remarkably influential. Human freedom involves an option to choose the response, but one needs to practice discernment, though. It is a matter of lessening the intensity of any negative feeling that might arise from certain stimulus (be it external or thought-provoked) that may gradually weaken once we become aware of it or redirect our attention to another thought or stimulus. This can be an effective tool when working with conspiracy-based stimuli and information which tend to affect our emotions, evoke negative feelings and, at the same time, suggest a solution that stems from turning attention to the alleged cause of the problem.

Therefore, it is recommended to actively prevent situations that trigger unwanted emotional states. This can be done through self-reflection and attempts to weaken the stimulus by redirecting attention. This is not at all easy and it requires practice. The very act of distancing ourselves from the experience reduces tension and we become more able to reassess the situation and avoid unfolding of the emotional spiral. There are five points outlining the process of working with such stimuli:

Observe the stimuli. We must be conscious of the emotions and associated thoughts that arise within us. For instance, we can pay attention to feelings brought up by certain information. We should not suppress these feelings. Instead, we should become aware of them. If we get used to observing our emotions and distracting thoughts from a distance, before we base our decision on them, we notice that they slowly die out. This way, however, we do not eliminate the emotion, but we decrease its charge.

Avoid inner monologue. Oftentimes, our experience conditions us to start an inner dialogue and respond to a stimulus that we then expand internally. We need to learn to actively resist the compulsive thoughts that want us develop scenarios that are often just a mere projection and illusion of our mind. We need to train ourselves in

healthy skepticism towards our tendencies to confuse illusory ideas about the world with the real world.

“Challenge” the cause of the stimulus. For instance, I tell myself: “Why do I think that I see this correctly? Could I be wrong? Did I not overlook anything? Do I really know the context?” Here, one can apply the Ignatius’ rule “agere contra” and the exercise that revolves around weighing and writing down the arguments “for” and “against” and comparing them (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 178–183). Such verbalization in the text can be instrumental in rational examination of the true reasons behind our decisions.

Distraction. Distraction is not suppression. It could be a form of relaxation, for instance, a breathing exercise, walk or another activity that simply *redirect* thoughts from the stimulus that bothers us to another issue.

Reflection. At this point, Ignatius accentuates *the searching one’s conscience* that should not be a moralistic self-control, but an exercise in discerning. It requires the courage to examine what in life is troubling us, bothering us and what distracts us from a mature life.

Conclusion

We are of the opinion that solving problems linked to conspiracy-specific information involves certain assumptions, which include a clear goal and purpose for one’s own existence with a focus on the essential good of the person. Otherwise, any efforts to refute the conspiracy information that the subject came to believe will be ineffective, as aptly described by the psychologist Leo Festinger in his theory of *cognitive dissonance*. If, according to Festinger, there are two contradictory thoughts we are preoccupied with, *we are not feeling well*. In fact, dissonance creates *anxiety* and *discomfort* in us. The subject then tends to perceive any new information with disgust. The subject might radically reject or question it, diminish its significance, or even ignore it altogether. Affect enters into judgement. Therefore, the subject tends to underestimate, distort, or ignore new (or even contradictory) information or evidence, and to overestimate one’s

own attitudes and already acquired information (Nakonečný 1999, 114–115).

In the introduction to the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius accentuates working with all “inordinate attachments” (Ignatius of Loyola 2021, no. 1) that often determine our way of thinking and decision-making. The change in our thinking is unlikely unless we begin to work with these “attachments” and expose their illusory and misleading nature.

Acknowledgement

This study is a partial outcome of the research project KEGA no. 016TTU-4/2021 *Spirituality Accompaniment Program for University Teachers*.

References

- Alcover, Norbert. 2007. *Impulzy k duchovnímu životu: osmidenní exercicie podle Ignáce z Loyoly*. Olomouc: Refugium.
- Atanáš. 1996. *Život sv. Antona Poustevníka*. Velehrad: Refugium.
- Fessard, Gaston. 2004. *Dialektika Duchovních cvičení Ignáce z Loyoly*. Olomouc: Centrum Aletti.
- Goleman, Daniel. 1995. *Emotional intelligence*. New York, NY: Bantam Book.
- Green, Thomas H. 2001. *Kúkoľ medzi pšenickou*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.
- Grün, Anselm. 2013. *Nebe začína v tobě: moudrost otců pouště*. Prague: Portál.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2013. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2005. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Höschl, Cyril. 2016. *České kruzítko*. Prague: Galén.
- Ignatius of Loyola. 2021. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. New Translation Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph by Louis J. Puhl, SJ. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press.
- Ignatius of Loyola. 1992. *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Lonsdale, David. 2003. *Oči k vidění, uši k slyšení: úvod do ignaciánské spirituality*. Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství.

- Mikluščák, Pavel. 1996. *Kristológia II*. Spišské podhradie: CMBF UK.
- Mlodinow, Leonard. 2012. *Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Nakonečný, Milan. 1999. *Sociální psychologie*. Prague: Academia.
- Panczová, Zuzana. 2017. *Konšpiračné teórie: témy, historické kontexty a argumentačné stratégie*. Bratislava: Veda.
- Panczová, Zuzana. 2011. "Konšpiračné teórie a ich argumentačné stratégie ako príklad ideologických diskurzov." *Slovenský národopis* 59 (1): 8–28.
- Rupnik, Marko I. 2001. *O duchovním otcovství a rozlišování*. Velehrad: Refugium.
- Swieżawski, Stefan. 1998. *Nový výklad sv. Tomáše*. Brno: Cesta.
- Šoltés, Radovan. 2017. *Propaganda, manipulácia a logické klamy: o hraniciach a možnostiach nášho usudzovania a rozhodovania*. Prešov: GTF PU.
- Vateha, Jozef, and Ladislav Csontos. 1999. *Rozlišovanie duchov*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.

Doc. ThDr. Radovan Šoltés, PhD.

*Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Greek-Catholic Theological Faculty
University of Prešov in Prešov, Slovakia
E-mail: radovan.soltes@unipo.sk*

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT

Gemma Simmonds

Abstract

The conspiracy theories and ideologies behind QAnon and similar propagators of fake news pose a threat to the common good. It is important that people make full use of the weapons that exist within their theological and spiritual traditions to combat this threat. The Rules for Discernment of Spirits found in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola throw light on how we might effectively deal with the dangers of the QAnon phenomenon.

Key words

Ignatian discernment, conspiracy theory, disordered attachments, QAnon

This morning I received the following communication from an American Catholic organization called Faith in Public Life (2022): “White Christian nationalism – an ideology heretical to authentic faith – represents a... danger to building a multi-faith, multiracial democracy... We are increasingly alarmed by the signs of the times. Threats of political violence and dehumanizing rhetoric toward elected officials have increased in recent years... Our faith tradition teaches that every person deserves equal access to participate fully in our democracy... Democracies are fragile. In recent years... demagogues and nationalists in the United States and around the world have attacked the very existence of pluralistic societies. It’s now time for a renewed commitment to the common good that makes full, equal participation in political life a moral priority.”

This communication suggests why conspiracy theories and the ideologies behind them pose such a threat to the common good, and

why it is important that Catholics make full use of the weapons that exist within their theological and spiritual tradition to combat this threat. From the perspective of Christian spirituality, and in particular the spiritual tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola, I will be bringing the Rules for Discernment from Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* into conversation with the dynamics behind contemporary conspiracy theories, focusing particularly on QAnon as an example of a major contemporary conspiracy theory which has similarities to a religious cult. The Ignatian Rules for Discernment throw light on how we might effectively deal with the dangers of the QAnon phenomenon.

The following outline of QAnon, its origins, purpose, and effects, are mainly taken from Conner and MacMurray (2021) and Suber and Ware (2021). Current research and studies into conspiracy theories suggest that QAnon, which has millions of followers, has transitioned into something similar to a social movement or new religion. It functions in many of the same ways as religion, binding its adherents together to give them a sense of common identity, purpose, and mission. Many of these are people who feel isolated and marginalized from a society whose institutions have failed them and whose political and economic strategies have left them voiceless, powerless, and trapped in poverty. Psychologists specialising in conspiracy theories point to the intense satisfaction that lies in belonging to a group in possession of a superior knowledge that will ultimately be vindicated through the destruction of secret enemies perceived as oppressing them. QAnon has its ideological roots in earlier conspiracy theories. Its followers are a tight-knit group whose slogan "Where We Go One, We Go All" emphasises community and a common voice and purpose. They have embraced long-standing anti-Semitic tropes, claiming that Jewish interests are secretly controlling the world, echoing *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the anti-Semitic blood libels of the pogroms in Europe during the Middle Ages. Their apocalyptic warnings of the coming "Storm" in which all evildoers will be punished, share similarities with various Millenarianist movements down the ages. Q, the leader of QAnon, enjoys prophetic and quasi-divine status and is seen as a source of wisdom that is beyond question. Q is seen as imparting a special understanding of reality

or secret source of knowledge, echoing the claims of some Gnostic groups in the early centuries of Christianity. This knowledge is hidden from those too blind to see. Growing QAnon communities have been identified in more than 25 countries, finding their greatest popularity among white supremacists and militia extremists.

QAnon followers' belief that the world must be saved rests on their conviction that Satanic paedophile elites are controlling the United States, especially the Democratic Party and Hollywood. They are alleged to be kidnapping, trafficking and even cannibalistically consuming thousands of children via a network of pizza restaurants. The aim behind this is to extract their life force, known as adrenochrome and to use it to rejuvenate themselves. Naming its salvific quest "Save the Children", QAnon uses religious and quasi-religious metaphors, seeing its aim as bringing "darkness to light" in an epic struggle of good over evil. It specifically inverts Christ's own metaphor of sheep but in a negative connotation to describe as "sheeple" those who continue to believe in science, political institutions, and other "mainstream" sources of information. These sources and the institutions behind them are thought in fact to be deliberately manipulating the population so as to maintain political and social elites in power. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies in the United States, "QAnon's most threatening capability is its dissemination of online disinformation through its diverse and transnational ecosystem of supporters... QAnon has demonstrated it can adapt its messaging to changing times and turn any world event into a conspiracy, any person into a target." (Suber and Ware 2021).

QAnon supporters are also known for their support of Donald Trump, as the charismatic leader ordained by God to wage war against the Satanist, paedophile, cannibalistic elites and provoke the apocalyptic event known as "The Storm" whose aim is to expose these evil elites, bring them to justice and purge them from society. The storming of the Washington Capitol by QAnon supporters in 2020 was thus justified as a patriotic and holy mission to protect children around the world.

A quotation variously attributed to the twentieth-century English Catholic writer and apologist G. K. Chesterton, or to one of his

commentators, the Belgian Emile Cammaerts, claims, “When [note: people] choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything.” (The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton 2012).

As people become increasingly distanced from a framework of critical theological and philosophical thinking that might enable them to distinguish truth from paranoid fantasy, it is likely that they will become more prone to believing in anything that is propagated by the anonymous sources of pseudo-wisdom within the Internet. It might be counter-argued that mainstream religious belief systems have also from time to time provoked and tolerated extremist and bizarre beliefs and superstitions. This may be a fair comment, but these beliefs point rather to the tendency within the human psyche to seek justification for an individual’s deep unease within society or fear of the future rather than to any desire on the part of *bona fide* religious systems actively to promote bizarre and fantastical disaster scenarios.

At the beginning of his *Spiritual Exercises* St. Ignatius of Loyola describes them as “every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul” (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 1).

Ignatius saw inordinate or disordered attachments lying principally in an unrestrained desire for material riches, high reputation and worldly success which can lead to the dehumanisation of the human person and a disconnection from moral boundaries. Nevertheless, disordered attachments can also be to non-material things such as political or ideological opinions or belief systems which lie outside the discipline of rational thought, and which ultimately lead to violence against those targeted as enemies. As well as praying and reflecting imaginatively on Scripture and using any other form of prayer that feels helpful, the person making the Exercises is encouraged to “make use of the acts of the intellect in reasoning” (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 3). For Ignatius, faith does not require us to leave our brains outside the door of the church. The chief purpose of ridding ourselves of inordinate attachments is to gain spiritual freedom. Ignatius is anxious to

ensure that retreatants are not unduly influenced in any way by the one who accompanies them, warning the director that they “ought not to urge the exercitant more to... one state of life or way of living... than to another” but, “as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, [note: s/he] should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord” (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 15).

The dynamic of the *Spiritual Exercises* follows a logical and psychologically holistic trajectory. It leads the retreatant to a deeper and more honest self-knowledge as well as a more intimate experiential knowledge of the love and forgiveness of God. The actual text of the *Exercises* is principally a guidebook for the person accompanying another during this time of intensive spiritual retreat so that they can make good life choices and follow them through in a way that is consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Ignatius is not only a master of the spiritual life, but he also has considerable knowledge of the human psyche. His description of the interior struggle between good and evil is articulated in terms of the late mediaeval mindset and speaks of good and evil spirits, but it still connects with important aspects of our post-modern consciousness.

Towards the end of the book Ignatius sets out his Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. He describes the difference between a soul which finds itself in consolation and one which finds itself in desolation. “It is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus, he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing.” (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 315).

In many ways this offers a vivid description of the mindset of many QAnon followers. QAnon thrives on anxiety and fallacious reasoning. Conspiracy theories generally flourish at times of greater public anxiety and the Covid pandemic and current economic crisis are breeding grounds for anxiety. Ignatius further characterises desolation as, “darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love” (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 317).

Where hope for the present and future are in short supply it is easy for turmoil of spirit and disturbance of people's equilibrium to flourish. The prevalence of conspiracy theories acts as a sort of barometer both for the individual psyche and the public consciousness. Ignatius' vivid description of the wiles of Satan, though they may sound somewhat fanciful and mediaeval to our ears, act as an effective mirror in which to see how those propagating their myths in QAnon operate. "Our enemy may also be compared in his manner of acting to a false lover. He seeks to remain hidden and does not want to be discovered." (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 326).

It is characteristic of the evil spirit to remain anonymous and hidden. Satan works best under the radar, as it were. The anonymity of QAnon sites and the impossibility of identifying the sources of most information there make it a pointless task to try and refute the allegations and claims made by its leaders. Ignatius continues, "The conduct of our enemy may also be compared to the tactics of a leader intent upon seizing and plundering a position he desires. A commander and leader of an army will encamp, explore the fortifications and defences of the stronghold, and attack at the weakest point. In the same way, the enemy of our human nature investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal, and moral. Where he finds the defences of eternal salvation weakest and most deficient, there he attacks and tries to take us by storm." (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 327). It would be easy to dismiss all QAnon followers as intellectually weak and socially, morally, and psychologically deficient. This is too facile a way of rejecting what is a very widespread movement. The erosion of belief in traditional and institutional forms of authority and sources of information is characteristic of our present era. The expansion of information on the Internet was intended originally to make people better informed. What it has done in many cases is to make them more confused and more susceptible to being manipulated since many people lack a critical mental framework in which to contextualise claims and accusations that exist only to make them more anxious and paranoid.

Ignatius' Rules for Discernment come in two parts. The first part is aimed at those who are beginners in the spiritual life, whereas

part two is aimed at those who are more experienced. Ignatius elaborates still further on the contrasting manner of God and Satan in approaching the soul. God tends to work quietly and unobtrusively, he claims, like a drop of water falling onto a sponge, whereas disturbance of mind and heart are characteristic of the evil one. Even when a person is struggling in the process of conversion to a good life, it is characteristic of God to bring confidence and peace. Ignatius comments that, "It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against... happiness and consolation by proposing fallacious reasonings, subtleties, and continual deceptions."

Continual deception is the trademark of conspiracy theories. This deception, according to Ignatius, can include masquerading under the appearance of good, "It is a mark of the evil spirit to assume the appearance of an angel of light. He begins by suggesting thoughts that are suited to a devout soul and ends by suggesting his own... he will endeavour little by little to end by drawing the soul into his hidden snares and evil designs." (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 332).

Satan, as portrayed by Ignatius, leaves a trail behind him like a snail, and reflection can reveal the trail, where it originated and where it is leading. It is thus that we gain knowledge of our own thought processes and the impulses or compulsions which cause us to act in ways that prevent our flourishing and living according to God's desire for our good. It is characteristic of QAnon that it is impossible to know clearly where a claim has begun, what effect it is having and where it might be leading to. It is when we can identify the origin, purpose, and destiny of a particular claim, that we can begin to discover what lies behind it. In the theory behind the Ignatian discernment of spirits, protection against the evil spirit comes from a clear understanding of one's own motivations, as well as those of others. Self-knowledge and an honest assessment of the impulses that are the root cause of our feelings, desires and actions is essential for making good choices, both in terms of major decisions and in terms of our daily living. Guided by a desire to know, love, and serve God through our response to the world and all it contains, we become the good and flourishing self that God intended us to be through knowing both our strengths and weaknesses and where we might be

susceptible to deception. Ignatius writes, “We must carefully observe the whole course of our thoughts. If the beginning and middle and end of the course of thoughts are wholly good and directed to what is entirely right, it is a sign that they are from the good angel. But the course of thoughts suggested to us may terminate in something evil, or distracting, or less good than the soul had formerly proposed to do. Again, it may end in what weakens the soul, or disquiets it; or by destroying the peace, tranquility, and quiet which it had before, it may cause disturbance to the soul. These things are a clear sign that the thoughts are proceeding from the evil spirit, the enemy of our progress and eternal salvation.” (Ignatius of Loyola, no. 333).

The Internet is largely unregulated and is thus a breeding ground precisely for the “fallacious reasonings, subtleties, and continual deceptions” described by Ignatius. If we look at QAnon’s methods, they work remarkably like those of Satan as described in the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. They are especially effective among those who, lacking any other well-informed and coherent spiritual framework, (and extreme forms of Christian fundamentalism would be included in this description) are inclined to “believe in anything”, in Chesterton’s words. It is clear that the principal aim of conspiracy theory websites is to incite fear, anxiety and paranoia. The anonymity of the web offers protection for the authors of conspiracy theories from exposure to proven data and verifiable fact. Followers are urged to “do their own research”. This ensures that authoritative contrary voices do not disturb the fictional construction of reality that is being urged across the Internet.

The modern phenomenon of the influencer is the direct opposite of the person envisaged by Ignatius as accompanying a retreatant. Among the followers of Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, there should be no influencing one way or the other, but a respect, “as a balance at equilibrium” for the diverse and quiet ways of God who does not need to do violence to our minds in order to draw us close. Many QAnon supporters have lost faith and hope in a political system that has largely ignored or abandoned them. The fatal weakness in the systems built by those seen as a privileged and self-serving elite lies in this abandonment, since it leaves those at the bottom

of the ladder susceptible to belief in extreme theories which explain why they are entrapped and unlikely to find a way out, even in the Land of Opportunity. Another fatal weakness lies also in the recent history of the Christian churches and the lamentable performance of many of their leaders with regard to safeguarding and the abuse of power. We are living through a crisis of leadership within both our civil and ecclesial settings. When people lose faith in their leaders, whether religious or secular, they tend to reinvent leadership elsewhere, investing authority on those who have clear explanations for why the world is so confusing and hostile to their needs and interests.

QAnon has attracted many proponents of violent action, but not all of its adherents are thugs. The paedophile scandal within the Christian churches has left many fearful and deeply wounded in their capacity to have faith in spiritual as well as political institutions. If supporters come to believe that children truly are at risk, then they become an open target for the “angels of darkness” taking on the appearance of an angel of light. Discernment of spirits is not a magic formula for working out the truth. It relies on a balanced mind and heart but also on reliable factual data and a well-informed conscience. QAnon offers a version of the truth that appeals to many, including those who are not economically and socially on the margins. Across the world, the Covid pandemic brought about levels of state interference in public life unseen since wartime in most democratic countries. This provoked a reaction among many who feared that civil liberties were being infringed, never to recover. In sectors already highly suspicious of the interference of governments and other authoritative voices within the scientific and mainstream media communities, it was not a quantum leap to go from social and political disaffection to taking on outright conspiracy theories wholesale.

To propose the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius as the remedy for belief in conspiracy theories may seem naïve and almost as bizarre as the theories themselves. The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits give us a very effective key for understanding the dynamic behind membership of such movements as QAnon. They also offer a helpful direction in which to go towards engaging with people who are

at risk of allowing their judgement to be misdirected by the theories that such movements propose. It is not even necessary to frame these in a specifically religious idiom if that is in and of itself problematic. There is a psychological and philosophical coherence to Ignatius's teaching that makes sense outside a religious context. What Ignatius also gives us is a framework for our own critical assessment of conspiracy theories. However, we might wish to articulate our own understanding of this phenomenon, beyond the specific idioms used by a sixteenth-century author, there can be no doubt of the toxic origin, purpose and potential destiny of conspiracy theories and their threat to social, moral, and political order. We need to take them seriously and we need the tools to help us analyse and take action against them. St. Ignatius seems a good place to start.

References

- Conner, Christopher T., and Nicholas MacMurray. 2022. "The Perfect Storm: A Subcultural Analysis of the QAnon Movement." *Critical Sociology* 48 (6): 1049–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211105863>.
- Faith in Public Life. *Catholics Speak Out for Democracy and Our Freedoms*. Accessed September 27, 2022. https://fpl.actionkit.com/sign/catholic-democracy_fall22/.
- Ignatius of Loyola. *Spiritual Exercises*. Translated by Louis J. Puhl, SJ. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://spex.ignatianspirituality.com/PuhlTranslation.html>.
- Suber, James, and Jacob Ware. 2021. *Examining Extremism: QAnon*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-qanon>.
- The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton. 2012. *When Man Ceases to Worship God*. Accessed September 17, 2022. https://www.chesterton.org/ceases-to-worship/?__cf_chl_rt_tk=U_eDeaAhf5lbf0xf2miIBkbNLRX.UvqSsIkiFRXDl-JE-1664583762-0-gaNycGzNBz0.

Gemma Simmonds, Ph.D., CJ

*Director of Religious Life Institute
The Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology
Cambridge, United Kingdom*

OBSTACLES TO THE SOCIALIZATION OF FOREIGN CHILDREN IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CONDITIONS AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE FOR THE EMERGENCE OF CONSPIRACIES

Janette Gubricová, Martin Dojčár, Ivana Šuhajdová,
Denisa Jakubíková

Abstract

We are currently witnessing significant migration processes that impact the territories of the European Union. They are influenced by various factors such as poverty, security disruption due to war, or other forms of violence. Slovakia is often not the final destination for migrants. However, recently, especially in the context of the search for a better life, as well as in the context of the war in the neighboring country – Ukraine, we are experiencing a more frequent occurrence of migrants who are looking for a safe haven. An important group of migrants is children. Slovak education is facing the task of integration and socialization of these children into regular classes. This is a big challenge not only for the teachers but also for the pupils themselves.

The research indicates that the attitude of teachers toward children is understanding and accommodating. The biggest obstacle in the process of successful integration is the language. Both for students and teachers. Educators highlighted the lack of information about situations in Ukraine related to the integration of children from Ukraine. Several respondents obtained them only from the media, which they assessed as insufficient. The lack of information can lead to potential conspiracies in the school environment.

Key words

Migration, children of migrants, integration, primary school, conspiracies

Introduction

Searching for a better life, escaping from political exploitation, wars, and racism (Štefančík and Lenč 2012), but also work, study, and family reunion represent only a few reasons for migration (Drál 2011). An important group among migrating individuals is represented by children. The integration of foreigners into the community represents a challenge not only for society but also for schools. Currently, many primary schools are involved in the process of integrating children of migrants who are running away not only from the war in Ukraine but also due to poverty and bad political conditions in the migrants' home countries. Although the phenomenon of migration in Slovakia is not entirely new, the integration of migrant children into the school environment can bring various new situations that need to be dealt with.

We aimed to investigate the process of integration of foreign children in the primary school's environment. We were interested in finding out about possible risks and barriers to the integration of children into primary school classes and whether the mentioned process of integration of children of foreigners can create a potential risk of conspiracies in the school environment.

1 Definition of Basic Terms

The International Organization for Migration (IOM 2020) defines a migrant as a person who leaves one country or region to settle in another country. Migration in society is a recurring phenomenon. Different situations and circumstances in the world have an impact on the intensity of migration waves. According to Drál *et al.* (2011), migrants settle abroad for a short time, long term, or permanently. At the time of emigration, they often do not know how long they will stay abroad and whether they will ever return to their home country. This type of migration is referred to by Drál *et al.* (2011) as a *voluntary migration*. On the other hand, many migrants leave their home

countries involuntarily – fleeing political, religious, or ethnic persecution, war conflict, or natural disaster. They seek refuge in other countries and request international protection.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM 2020) defines migration as *the movement of one person or a group of people, either across country borders or within a state*. Population movement includes any type of movement, regardless of its length, structure, and cause, including the migration of refugees, evicted people, economic migrants, and people moving for other purposes, such as family reunions. IOM (2020) breaks down migration as follows:

- international migration – a movement of people across state borders, associated with a permanent or temporary change of permanent residency,
- internal migration – a movement of people within the state where they are permanent residents,
- voluntary migration – free movement of people or a group of people due to employment, education, or family reunion,
- forced migration – this migration involves the involuntary transfer of people or groups of people for political, religious, or ethnic reasons, due to war conflicts or natural disasters,
- legal migration – crossing borders within the laws of a state, i.e., with a valid passport, visa, or other permits,
- illegal migration – this is a violation of the immigration laws of the country of entry, i.e., without a valid passport, visa, or permits that are required,
- long-term migration – this is the transfer of a person to another country for at least one year,
- short-term migration – this migration lasts more than three months and less than one year, excluding holidays, visits, business trips, educational trips, visits to medical facilities, or religious processions.

The intensity of migration plays an important role in the migration process. The consequences of migration also depend on it. According to several authors (e.g., Wöhlcke 2001; Coleman 1992), these can be manifested in the demographic, economic, cultural, social,

and security areas, in both, a positive and a negative sense. Enhancing various forms of xenophobia is among the most visible negative aspects of international migrations, as Martin Dojčár points out regarding *religiophobia* (Dojčár 2017, 7–11). Act no. 404/2011 Coll. on the residency of foreigners in the Slovak Republic defines the term foreigner. In the mentioned document, the term foreigner is understood as anyone who is not a citizen of the Slovak Republic. Foreigners can also be citizens of a member state of the EU, the European Economic Area, and the Swiss Confederation, or nationals of the so-called third countries outside the EU/EEA. From the mentioned context, the term foreigner can be considered a broader term than the term migrant.

2 Integration of Foreign Children into Primary School

Migration has an impact on various areas of life. Education is one of them. Drál *et al* (2011, 11) refers to children of migrants as “those who have migrated or are migrating together with their families, or children unaccompanied by their legal representatives or carriers”. Janette Gubricová and Bibiana Damergi (2017) report an interesting occurrence with Syrian migrants at the time of the outbreak of war in Syria. The authors mention that it was mainly boys who ran away without family or an adult. The girls migrated only accompanied by their families. This fact can also affect the integration process of migrant children in schools.

The process of integration of foreign children into the Slovak school system is regulated by Slovak school legislation. The definition of children of foreigners in Slovakia is more specifically regulated by Act no. 245/2008 Coll. on education and training (hereinafter referred to as the Education Act 2008). According to the provisions of §146 par. 1 “children of foreigners are children of citizens of another state, asylum applicants, Slovaks living abroad, as well as applicants for asylum or subsidiary protection and unaccompanied minors.” According to the document, they are provided with “Training and education, accommodation and school meals under the same

conditions as citizens of the Slovak Republic” (Education Act 2008, par. 3). Children (foreigners) are “placed in an appropriate year by the headteacher according to the level of their previous education and their language knowledge... Due to limited language knowledge, the child can be conditionally placed in the appropriate grade according to age, for a maximum of one school year” (Education Act 2008, par. 4).

Due to the current legislation, we will use the term foreigner for our research, under which we will also include a specific group – migrant children. As the number of migrants gradually increases in Slovakia, so does the number of their children attending primary school. In the academic year 2002/2003, 613 children of foreigners attended primary schools in Slovakia (Žačková and Vladová 2005). In 2015/2016, 1,942 foreign children attended primary schools, which represented less than 4.5% of the total number of students attending primary schools that year (Gubricová and Damergi 2017). In the academic year 2022/23, it was 12,277 children of foreigners. This represents 2.54% of the total number of primary school students (CVTIR 2022).

The integration of children of foreigners is a difficult process. According to Stanat and Gayle (in Gubricová and Damergi 2017), children of foreigners must be integrated into the educational process in a world where their previous experiences do not apply. Words, gestures, or behavior can have a different meaning. They may evoke different reactions than what they were used to. On the other hand, they gain cultural capital knowledge that they need to live in the host society and for their integration. The school is not only a place to gain knowledge, but it serves the purpose of a socialization institution.

Ivana Šuhajdová (2018) states that when integrating minority children, including foreigners, it is necessary to ensure their participation in school activities. Integrated children must have the opportunity not only to receive but also to be able to bring their contributions. This process can be affected by various obstacles both on the part of the children of foreigners and on the part of the children of the majority. In social inclusion, the unpreparedness of the environment into which the foreign student enters can often be a risk.

It may be the unpreparedness of the majority of children, but also the teachers. In such situations, minority children may be at risk of various forms of social exclusion or may face various forms of psychological or physical bullying from their classmates (similarly Geršicová 2020, etc.). Barbora Kováčová (2010) points out that the process of integrating minority children should start in kindergartens and then continue in primary schools. Naďa Bizová (2020) indicates the importance of the inclusion of minority children also in informal education.

3 Educators' Experiences with the Integration of Children of Foreigners

The main resource for the implementation of the research was the findings of Janette Gubricová and Bibiana Damergi (2017). They carried out research with teachers aimed at their readiness to work with children of foreigners. The aforementioned research was carried out in 2017, before an increase in the number of foreign children in Slovak schools as a result of the war in Ukraine.

Since 2017, the integration of foreign children into primary schools in Slovakia has changed significantly. Currently, the number of migrant children is increasing due to moving to Slovakia for work or fleeing the war in Ukraine. Therefore, we focused our research on the investigation of obstacles in the integration of migrant children into primary schools in Slovakia.

4 Research Questions and Objectives

Our research aimed to find out how the process of integration of foreign children into primary schools is going on. At the same time, we wanted to identify obstacles in the mentioned integration process and investigate their possible “capacity” for conspiracies in the school environment.

We were interested in:

What experience do educators have with the integration of foreign children in primary school?

The number of foreign children in Slovak schools increases every year (CVTIR 2022), so we wanted to know what countries those children come from and what are the reasons for their migration. We were also interested in the experiences teachers have with children of foreigners. There is a possibility of prejudice against the children of foreigners that educators may have, which was also indicated by the research of Janette Gubricová and Bibiana Damergi (2017), who found out that more than half of the respondents had a mixed or neutral attitude towards foreigners, which was mainly influenced by the media and lack of direct experiences with foreigners.

What specific needs and problems does the process bring?

In their research, Janette Gubricová and Bibiana Damergi (2017) identified insufficient preparation of educators as one of the obstacles to the integration of children of foreigners. Elena Gallová Križerová *et al.* (2011) also drew attention to the problem of communication due to the poor language knowledge of the children of foreigners.

An interview with 12 questions was used as the main tool in our research. The group consisted of 12 tutors (primary teachers and educators) and was based on a deliberate selection. The condition for the inclusion of a teacher in the research group was that a child/children's parents are both foreigners. We approached potential respondents via social networks, later we used snowball sampling. Some respondents provided us with contacts of their colleagues who met our requirements. The age of the participants was between 24 and 54. The respondents came from different regions of Slovakia. Trnava and Bratislava regions had the highest representation. The research was carried out from December 2021 to May 2022.

All standard ethical aspects were observed during our conducted research. Among the most important ones were the preservation of the anonymity of the respondents and their voluntary participation in the research.

5 Analysis of Research Outcomes

In the first part of the research, we focused on finding out what kind of experience educators have with integrating foreign children into primary school. First, the number of children of foreigners was quite low. The situation changed significantly after the military conflict in Ukraine started. We found out that children fleeing the war were integrated into all the schools addressed. Six participants had a child of Ukrainian nationality in their class, and one of the mentioned participants also had an integrated pupil from England in their class. Two participants said that the students in their department were from Russia. Others had children from Greece, Vietnam, Serbia, and Poland, one each. Two Ukrainian children escaped from the war conflict, and the other four children from Ukraine were already integrated into Slovakia before the outbreak of the military conflict. The reason for their stay in Slovakia was their parents' work placement in Slovakia. Other participants also stated the same reason for their stay.

In the next part of the research, we studied what kind of experiences participants have with the integration of children of foreigners.

Both teachers and educators declared that they have personal experience working with migrant children. The respondent R1 stated: "Yes. Specifically with this one student in the afterschool club." The respondent R2 had the experience: "with a seven-year-old Ukrainian girl from my department and a ten-year-old boy. Both children come from Ukraine." Seven respondents (R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, and R10) said that this is their first experience with migrant children. Based on their statements, it is understandably minimal experience with working with children of foreigners. This may be related to the previous finding that there is a very low number of foreign children in primary school classes.

In the second research question, we were interested in specific needs and problems in practice. Among the responses we identified a few categories as follows.

Language barrier.

Several respondents (R3 – R7, R11, R12) mentioned the language barrier as problematic. “To summarize the work with children who speak other languages, the initial problem was the language barrier. However, it got better with time. I had no other problems with these children, they were very clever.” (R6).

The respondent R5 also drew attention to this fact: “The child sometimes does not understand instructions or words.” The respondent R3 stated: “When working with children of foreigners, we use picture cards and labels.” In the given context, an interesting observation was made by the respondent R7, who drew attention to the language barrier not only in communication with the student but also with the parents: “Only the problems related to the mother tongue, as the parents have not fully mastered the Slovak language.”

An interesting finding was that learning a new foreign language was very rewarding for the children of the majority and the teachers (R2). They stated that: “In the very first days, the children were interested where their classmate came from. They learnt something about Ukraine, about their language. The new classmate explained where she came from and why... Children often wanted to hear their classmate’s mother tongue. It enriched me personally as I am not only able to communicate more easily with foreign children, I also make sure that they understand everything I say by using visual aids/ resources for a better understanding.”

Tolerance issues.

The respondent R8 stated that “Working with children from abroad, the most difficult thing is to deal with their full acceptance by society. I think that currently, the biggest problem in society is intolerance towards differences, which, from my point of view, is quite evident among children... For me, this experience was enriching in realizing how important it is to behave (in ways) to set a good example for others and give children motives for kind behavior towards others and effective communication. In my opinion, it gave the children the opportunity to learn to accept differences in life.” R9 confirmed this by stating: “I perceive the difference between the majority and the minority is mostly in exclusion of minority groups at the

beginning, I don't feel that they are accepted, because of cultural differences." The respondent R12, who mentioned the problem of tolerance on the part of a classmate stated: "P. refused to sit next to a classmate from Serbia. When I pointed this out to his father, he asked me not to let him sit with the little Serbian boy. I think the whole family had issues with foreigners."

Broadening children's knowledge.

We find the experience of the respondent R1 interesting. He stated that thanks to the integration of the children of foreigners, the children of the majority were enriched: "In getting to know new customs and traditions, in the creation of the so-called multicultural atmosphere..."

Oversensitive behavior of the child.

The respondent R5 claims that "The child is too sensitive. He is not able to deal with problems. When a problem arises, he often cries." Similarly, the respondent R12 mentioned problems in children's behavior: "The child often cries." The mentioned child was with foreigners fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Problems with blending into the team.

During the integration of a child from Ukraine, the respondent R12 also mentioned problems with blending in: "The child does not want to participate in activities. He rejects his classmates. During the break, he spends time on his mobile phone. He contacts his former classmates through various networks. That's how they make sure they're okay. It's very touching."

Unpreparedness to work with children of foreigners.

When investigating problems with the integration of foreign children, we noticed two responses from participants who drew attention to the fact that "teachers do not know how to work sufficiently with the needs of foreign children," as it is still a "little widespread topic" in Slovak schools (R5). An interesting observation was made by the respondent R12: "Teachers lack information. For example, when the war broke out in Ukraine, we had no information. Only from the media and they differed. We could not take a stand. After the children arrived from Ukraine, they often asked about the war in Ukraine. They had contradictory information from home. Even we

didn't know exactly what was happening there and why. These situations sometimes caused tension in the classroom. It took us a while to get our bearings."

In the next part of the research, we were interested in the specifics of working with children of foreigners. The reasons for migration were reflected in the participants' answers. The children whose reason for staying in Slovakia was their parents' work. Respondents:

- did not mention any specificity of work (R3, R4, R5, R6 and R7),
- the language barrier was mentioned again,
- the respondent R9 claims that working with migrant children was: "different, mainly because I often communicated not only in the Slovak language but mainly in English, something in the Serbian and the Ukrainian languages",
- the pupil's mental disability: "In the case of a ten-year-old boy, the work was different mainly because he also had a mental disability" (R2),
- more precise preparation for the lessons: "Only the fact that I had to prepare extra material for the student in question. Otherwise, I didn't notice anything else, the student is clever and lively" (R10).

The children whose reason for migration was a war conflict. Respondents mentioned:

- the pupil's hypersensitivity: "The child of migrants is more sensitive" (R5),
- the pupil's insecurity and sadness: "At first the pupil was quiet and sad, now he has become bolder, and he has friends" (R11).

Three respondents (R3, R4, and R10) stated that they did not have any problems with the integration of children of foreigners. We asked the respondents about foreign children's cultural needs, religious needs, etc. In response to the application of the respondents, the area of customs and traditions of foreigners was highlighted. However, their points of view differed significantly as described further.

The need for tolerance for foreigners' traditions and customs.

One group of respondents emphasized the need for tolerance. For example, the respondent R1 said: "We cannot take away their

culture, religion, customs, traditions.” Similarly, respondents R2 and R4 think: “Tolerance is very important. In my group of children, I have not noticed any differences between various nationalities. Children are very happy when they can talk about their home country, faith, etc. And other children are very curious and excited to learn something new.”

Doubts about the tolerance for foreigners’ traditions and customs.

The respondent R10 expressed the opinion: “I think that this topic is still somewhat taboo, but if we had many foreigners from different countries in Slovakia, it would be very difficult to adapt to their holidays or cultural traditions.”

Negative attitude towards foreigners’ traditions and customs.

Another group of respondents expressed their rejection of tolerating foreigners’ customs and traditions. For example, the respondent R12 (similarly R11) sees the tolerance of foreigners’ customs and traditions as a threat to their own. “First of all, it is necessary for foreigners to recognize and respect the customs and traditions of our country. After all, they decided to live here. We should not give up our traditions at the expense of creating space for the traditions and religious customs of foreigners, especially when it comes to foreigners from a culturally different environment.”

In the interview part, we were interested in whether educators engage in activities focused on the topic of tolerance. All respondents, except for the respondent R4, stated that they are engaged in activities focused on tolerance, each in their way. The respondent R4 stated: “Not yet. I would like to in the next year. Or as needed. My group is tolerant in this regard.” The respondent R1: “We deal with a topic of tolerance generally. The children need to understand that there are differences between people. However, it does not mean that they are bad, just because they are different.” The respondent R2 stated: “Yes, in the after-school club, we do activities focused on the topic of tolerance toward national, racial, and other differences. I try to make children understand that tolerance for certain differences is essential and necessary. The activities lead to understanding that we are all equal although we differ in certain ways.” The respondent R8 also claims that: “Yes, we deal with the topic.

Regardless of whether it's tolerance between children from different countries or tolerance in other areas, I think it's extremely important." The respondent R10 gave us a great example of activities: "Every year as part of our afterschool club, we learn about different customs and traditions in a way that it is suitable for all pupils. We prepare a *Day of Traditions*. Pupils love this day a lot because they bring different clothes, goodies, tea, and other things from home. It is very interesting to see what different traditions we have in our home country – Slovakia." The respondent R12 said that she supports these activities as part of art activities, where they draw and discuss this topic.

Respondents gave different answers regarding lessons or activities differentiation in the afterschool club when working with children of foreigners.

I do not prepare and differentiate the work.

When asked this question, half of the respondents answered that they do not differentiate work for the children of foreigners. They include them with all the other children. For example, the respondent R4 explained: "No, I did not know in advance that I would have such a child in my class. There is no special training for teachers and educators for such children at our school. We learn as we go. If a child is in KS1, the work is easier. Their habits and routines are not strong yet. They adapt easily."

I partly prepare and differentiate the work.

The respondent R1 explained in his answer that "extra preparation was needed for certain activities... where there was a difference in cultures and traditions. For example, when I was preparing resources about Slovakia, I also prepared something resources about the foreign student's country, and then we worked with both versions." Similarly, the respondent R2 also has various experiences: "When it comes to a seven-year-old girl, I didn't have to differentiate as the girl was able to work with others from the beginning. Only in the first weeks, I sometimes had to explain the meaning of some words."

Special preparation is required.

The respondent R9 claims that he had to differentiate. The respondent R9 adds: "Definitely yes, another language knowledge

was necessary, so I studied outside my working hours. I also had to get more training on multicultural education.” The respondent R10 claims that: “Certainly. I had to differentiate and simplify sentences to avoid misunderstanding and ensure, they wouldn’t be excluded from the group activities.”

Considering the number of tasks that teachers and educators have to deal with, it is necessary to appreciate their interest and initiation in the integration of children of foreigners.

6 Research Outcomes

In our report, we focused on researching the process of integration of foreign children in schools in Slovakia. At the same time, we wanted to identify obstacles in the process of integration and investigate the possibility of conspiracies in the school environment. In the first part of the research, we looked into the current state of the number of foreign children in primary schools in Slovakia. It was interesting to observe how the situation changed rapidly during our research. In December 2021, the presence of foreign children in primary schools was quite rare. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, at least one child from Ukraine was integrated into all the schools we approached. We consider this fact very instructive. It points out the fact of how quickly conditions in schools can change as a result of political changes. Several respondents drew attention to the fact that they feel unprepared to work with children of foreigners (e.g., R5, R12), and that future teachers at the faculties of pedagogy need training in the topics of integration and education of children of foreigners.

In the next part of the research, we studied the respondents’ experiences with the integration of children of foreigners. Most of the respondents stated that their experience of working with children is minimal. Integrating children from Ukraine was the first experience for many of them. Lack of experience could bring a potential risk of conspiracy theories, especially if a teacher with insufficient experience would look up the missing information on the Internet, while

it is impossible to select true, verified information and hoaxes. In the second part of the research, we focused on identifying specific issues and needs when working with children of foreigners. We identified that the main issue of migrant children is the language barrier and communication in the foreign language. This was also stated by the respondent R4: “Nothing is a problem but the language. The boy speaks only Russian with his parents and brother. First few weeks he had to get used to another language. From the beginning, I explained each task or instruction to him independently, a few times. Sometimes he doesn’t understand when I speak in front of the whole class. I always ask him for feedback. Making sure he understood. Based on his response, I choose the next step. Either I use simpler words, or I say them in the indefinite form. It helps him a lot if he sits next to a friend.”

Children of foreigners usually struggle at the beginning, when they are included in the school environment among Slovak children. Another issue is when the child comes home from school, where they speak their mother tongue. Neither the child nor the parents practice the Slovak language, and that is why the adaptation takes longer. *Picture Dictionary for Foreigners* (Rohová 2022), *Grammar for foreigners* (Rohová 2022), and *Foreigner in my Class* (Rohová 2022) are very useful in this regard. Elena Gallová Kriglerová *et al.* (2011) also point out the problem with language acquisition. They found out that, the majority of children of foreigners were enrolled in a lower year group, compared to their home country, based on their language knowledge.

Another problem was the acceptance of a child of foreigners. The respondent R8 states in this regard that “The most difficult thing to deal with is the full acceptance of the minority into society. I think that currently, the biggest problem in society is intolerance towards differences, which, in my opinion, is also very evident among children.”

We also encountered concerns and even intolerance towards the traditions and customs of foreigners in our environment. This attitude may be related to the lack of experience with the integration of foreign children into primary schools. Slovakia does not belong to

the countries that would represent an attractive country for foreigners. However, it can also be related to false/half-true or incomplete information related to foreigners, which is spread by groups of people on social networks, but also in other media. It can also be connected to people's lack of experience in living together with foreigners, or to negative experiences from living together, the essence of which may not be related to the country of origin but to the character of the person.

Therefore, we consider it important to address different topics that are part of multicultural education, e.g., empathy, tolerance, customs, traditions, etc. It can help prevent the spreading of negative moods related to the inclusion of children of foreigners and eliminate the conditions for potential conspiracies. Authors Janette Gubricová and Bibiana Damergi (2017) experienced similar opinions. On the issue of relations with foreigners, several respondents had a mixed or neutral attitude, which was largely influenced by the media and absent direct experiences with foreigners. The question of security was often highlighted in the respondents' answers. Several respondents said that they could not imagine working with the children of foreigners (especially from culturally and religiously different countries). However, the respondents understood the need to help foreigners.

A good example was given by the respondent R1, who claims that "in getting to know new customs and traditions, in creating the so-called multicultural atmosphere" enriches and broadens the horizons of the children of the majority.

The issue of teachers' readiness to work with children of foreigners also seemed to be problematic. Several respondents said that they were not ready for it. A similar finding is reported by Janette Gubricová and Bibiana Damergi (2017). One of the possibilities of obtaining information in the given area is represented by various courses focused on the topics of acceptance, tolerance, racism, communication skills, and dialogue, but also courses related to cultural and religious customs or traditions. Among these, dialogue appears to offer multiple opportunities as a privileged tool for facilitating the integration of migrants as Martin Dojčár argues (2020, 102–108).

Its significance in cultural and religious contexts cannot be stressed enough: dialogue is also a powerful tool for the facilitation of intercultural and interreligious encounters (Dojčár 2019, 2–11).

Another option is the further education of teachers. There we can see room for various courses, workshops, and methodologies focusing on distinguishing between true, verified information and conspiracy theories and hoaxes. Educators could pass on this knowledge to their pupils as a part of the educational process. The opportunity for further education could be one of the effective tools for primary prevention against the spread of conspiracy theories in Slovak schools. The matter of integration of children of foreigners is monitored in Slovak schools very rarely. On the other hand, it is very actual. The mentioned research presents an insight into the matter of the integration of foreign children into primary schools. Considering the small sample of respondents, it cannot be considered illustrative. It outlines the issues of foreign children's integration and points out possible obstacles. It can be a starting point for further research in this matter.

Conclusions

The process of integration of children of foreigners is affected by various matters that have an impact on its success. One of them is represented by educators. They are a key element in setting up and implementing the process of integration of foreign children into the school environment. They have the opportunity to educationally influence the children of the majority as well as the children of foreigners. Both groups of children must be led to mutual respect and understanding for a problem-free classroom environment. Another matter is represented by parents of children of the majority as well as parents of children of foreigners. Parents have a significant influence on their children in the matter of tolerance. Here we can see an opportunity for meetings aimed at getting to know each other's cultures, traditions, and customs, as well as supporting communication with the school, and teachers, but also between parents of students.

This can help with understanding, tolerance, and mutual respect between parents and the children themselves. According to Kristína Liberčanová (2017), this process could help to eliminate the potential spread of prejudices and conspiracies. The third, most important matter is represented by the children themselves. It is necessary to lead children to tolerance and respect between people as a generally valid value, regardless of the presence of foreign children in the classroom. Children should recognize, understand, and apply them in everyday life.

Children of foreigners make a specific group. Several respondents emphasized the need for a nurturing approach to the children of foreigners. There is a story behind each of them. For all of them, it is a new situation, new people, and a new environment to which they must adapt. In this process, they have to overcome various obstacles and it is not always easy. Therefore, it is necessary to pay sufficient attention to the children of foreigners and try to create conditions for them to help them overcome the integration process as successfully as possible.

Acknowledgement

The study is a partial outcome of the research project KEGA no. 017TTU-4/2020.

References

- Act no. 245/2008 Coll. on education and training.
Act no. 404/2011 Coll. on the residency of foreigners in the Slovak Republic.
Bizová, Naďa. 2021. *Inklúzia v neformálnej edukácii*. Trnava: Typi Universitatis Tyrnaviensis.
Centrum vedecko-technických informácií SR [CVTISR]. 2022. *Podpora vedy, výskumu, vývoja, inovácií a vzdelávania 2022: Štatistická ročenka – základné školy*. Accessed April 3, 2022. http://www.cvtisr.sk/cvti-sr-vedecka-kniznica/informacie-o-skolstve/statistiky/statistica-rocenka-publikacia/statistica-rocenka-zakladne-skoly.html?page_id=9601.

- Coleman, David A. 1992. "Does Europe Need Immigrants? Population and Work Force Projections." *International Migration Review* 26 (2): 413–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2547066>.
- Dojčár, Martin. 2019. "An Interview with Ajahn Jotipálo: Meditation Leads to Experiential Understanding That What We Think of As Ourselves is Actually Stressful, Unstable & not Really Ourselves." *Spirituality Studies* 5 (2): 2–11.
- Dojčár, Martin. 2020. "Dialogue as a Personal Tool of Integration of Migrants." *Acta Missiologica* 14 (1): 102–108.
- Dojčár, Martin. 2017. "Religiophobia in the Context of International Migrations." In *Migration: Religions without Borders: European and American Perspectives*, edited by Martin Dojčár, 7–11. Trnava: Faculty of Education, Trnava University.
- Dráľ, Peter et al. 2011. *Vzdelávanie detí cudzincov na Slovensku: potreby a riešenia*. Bratislava: CVEK.
- Gallová Kriglerová, Elena et al. 2009. *Migranti – nový pohľad na staré problémy: multikulturalizmus a kultúrna integrácia migrantov na Slovensku*. Bratislava: CVEK.
- Geršicová, Zuzana. 2020. *Špeciálna pedagogika a inkluzívne vzdelávanie*. Dubnica nad Váhom: DTI.
- Gubricová, Janette, and Damergi, Bibiana. 2017. "Between the Barriers: Readiness of Pedagogical Workers to Work with Migrant Children." In *Migration: Religions without Borders: European and American Perspectives*, edited by Martin Dojčár, 110–129. Trnava: Faculty of Education, Trnava University.
- Guraň, Peter, and Eliška Rusnáková. 2007. *Deti cudzincov žijúcich na území SR*. Košice: Nadácia za toleranciu a proti diskriminácii.
- Medzinárodná organizácia pre migráciu [IOM]. 2022. *Migrácia vo svete a na Slovensku*. Accessed April 12, 2022. <http://www.iom.sk/sk/pre-media/pojmy-o-migracii>.
- Jakubíková, Denisa. 2022. *Sociálna pedagogika v praxi základných škôl*. Trnava: Pedagogická fakulta TU.
- Kováčová, Barbora. 2010. *Inkluzívny proces v materských školách: začlenenie dieťaťa s „odlišnosťami“ do prostredia inkluzívnej materskej školy*. Bratislava: Musica Liturgica.
- Liberčánová, Kristína. 2017. "Diskusný klub vo výchove v rodine." In *Rodina, tolerancia inakosti a kvalita života detí a mládeže: pedagogika na križovatke nových výziev: konvergenie tradícií a inovátorstva vo výchove a vzdelávaní smerujúce ku kvalitnému životu detí a mládeže v reálnom svete*, edited by Zlatica Baakošová, 85–91. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského.
- Rohová, Jana. 2021. *Cudzinec v našej triede*. Bratislava: Raabe.
- Rohová, Jana. 2022. *Gramatika pre cudzincov*. Bratislava: Raabe.
- Rohová, Jana. 2022. *Obrázkový slovník pre cudzincov česko-slovensko-ukrajinsko-ruský*. Bratislava: Raabe.

- Štefančík, Radoslav, and Jozef Lenč. 2012. *Mladí migranti v slovenskej spoločnosti. Medzinárodná migrácia, moslimovia, štát a verejná mienka*. Brno: Tribun EU.
- Šuhajdová, Ivana. 2018. *Ľudský faktor – kľúčová podmienka inklúzie*. Trnava: Typi Universitatis Tyrnaviensis.
- Wöhlcke, Manfred. 2001. "Grenzüberschreitende Migration als Gegenstand der internationalen Politik." *Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 43: 31–39.
- Žáčková, Marta, and Katarína Vladová. 2005. *Deti cudzincov vo výchovno-vzdelávacom procese z hľadiska dodržiavania ľudských práv a práv detí*. Bratislava: Štátny pedagogický ústav.

PaedDr. Janette Gubricová, PhD.

*Department of Educational Studies
Faculty of Education
Trnava University in Trnava, Slovakia
E-mail: janette.gubricova@truni.sk*

Doc. PaedDr. Martin Dojčár, PhD.

*Department of Educational Studies
Faculty of Education
Trnava University in Trnava, Slovakia
E-mail: martin.dojcar@truni.sk*

PhDr. Ivana Šuhajdová, PhD.

*Department of Educational Studies
Faculty of Education
Trnava University in Trnava, Slovakia
E-mail: ivana.suhajdova@truni.sk*

Mgr. Denisa Jakubíková

E-mail: denisajakubikova96@gmail.com

Martin Dojčár (ed.)

HOW DO WE DISCERN CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

First edition, 2022

Editor © doc. PaedDr. Martin Dojčár, PhD.

Cover © MgA. Štefan Blažo, PhD.

Print and typography Tlačiareň IRIS, s.r.o.

Publisher © Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Education, 2022

ISBN 978-80-568-0512-1 (print)

ISBN 978-80-568-0513-8 (online)

Conspiracy theories are among the most vivid sociopathological phenomena of our times. As sociocultural challenges of such an urgent kind, they require a thoughtful response from experts, state authorities and civil society.

The publication you are holding in your hands offers such a thoughtful response from experts who gathered at the international conference “How do we discern conspiracy theories?” to discuss and propose qualified suggestions for addressing conspiracism in various areas of social life, including the state administration, the education system, the third sector, churches and religious societies.

