



Program of the Conference

**Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy
Theories:
Connecting Old and New Trends**

Organised by Francesco Piraino (Cini Foundation)
Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam), and Egil Asprem (Stockholm
University)

Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, 15-16 November 2019
Centro di Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparete

Friday, 15 November 2019

09:00 - 09:30 Welcome

Francesco Piraino, Director of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities

Marco Pasi, University of Amsterdam

Egil Aprem, Stockholm University

09:30 – 11:00

Aaron French, University of California, Davis, *Esotericism and Conspiracism in WWI*

Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps, Instituut voor Kennisoverdracht (INVK), *Conspiracy Theories in Africa: The Case of the Zambian Satanism Scare*

Barbara De Poli, Ca' Foscari University, *Jesuit fathers, Maronites and Muslim ulama': the role of religious institutions in the spread of the Judeo-masonic conspiracy myth in the Middle East.*

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee break

11:30 – 13:00

Victoria E. Pagán, University of Florida, *Roman Religious Conspiracy Theories*

Andrew F. Wilson, University of Derby, *'My belief in a democratic solution vanished': The millenarian conspiracy politics of far-right extremists*

Avery Morrow, Brown University, *Adapting the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Early 20th Century Japan*

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch

14:30 – 16:30

Adam Klin-Oron, The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute Israel, *Great Deceivers: Secular and Religious Ontologies of Evil among Israeli Flat Earthers*

Emily Pothast, Graduate Theological Union, *Creating Conspiracy Culture: Mass Media, Outrage, and the Other*

Alexandre Toumarkine, INALCO, *Conspiracy Theories' Religious Motives in Turkey and their transformation*

Francesco Piraino, KU Leuven, *Sufism and mainstream conspirationist narratives in Italy*

Saturday, 16 November 2019

09:30 – 11:00

Allison P. Coudert, University of California, Davis, *“New Thought” as an Esoteric Source of Contemporary Conspiracy Theories*

Tomasz Szymański, University of Wrocław, *Conspiracy Theories and Universal Religion: from the French Revolution to the New World Order*

Stephanie Frank, Columbia College Chicago, *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories*

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee break

11:30 – 13:00

Niklas Nenzén, Mid Sweden University, *‘Going to the ends of the earth to unmask conspiracy’: radical scepticism in the modern gnostic narratives of Lectorium Rosicrucianum*

Andrew McKenzie-McHarg, Cambridge University, *From Heresy to Conspiracy. Shifting Vocabularies of Vilification as a Testing Ground for Notions of Secularization*

Yuri Stoyanov, University of London, *From Heresiology to Religious Conspiracy Constructs in Modern Eastern Orthodox Cultures*

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch

14:30 - 16:00

Plenary Session

Abstracts

Aaron French, University of California, *Esotericism and Conspiracism in WWI*

At the outbreak of World War I, Rudolf Steiner began closing his co-ed masonic lodges, citing conspiracies against Germany by “black magicians,” who were using such lodges to bolster the Entente Powers. During a lecture in Stuttgart, he told audiences “this war is a conspiracy against German spiritual life.” Some scholars (Staudenmaier 2010) have characterized Steiner’s views as a “conspiracist interpretation of the war.” Was there any basis for Steiner’s claims? Or was he falling a victim to conspiratorial and nationalistic paranoia? Owen Davies (2018) has detailed how the First World War was, in fact, awash in supernatural and occult imaginations. British Theosophist A.P. Sinnett wrote about the Great War in terms of a cosmic battle between good and evil, or white and black lodges, a battle going all the way back to Atlantis. The evil of the black lodge had been confined to the astral plane, but the Germans had brought it down to the physical plane through their actions. Sinnett blamed Germany for everything, and in 1915 he wrote that “the fate of the world depends upon the final extermination of that enemy.” The 1916 annual convention of the Theosophical Society announced that the forces of the white lodge were led by France, whereas the forces of the black lodge were led by Germany. Across the Atlantic, as Tobias Churton (2017) has recently documented, Aleister Crowley apparently infiltrated German-sponsored periodicals in New York: the propagandist *The Fatherland* and the literary journal *The International*. Crowley claimed to have written articles aimed at undermining the German image in the eyes of Americans, casting them as irrational, believing in magic, and practicing occultism. This paper traces the nationalist tendencies of these esotericists during WWI, arguing that in times of wartime trauma, esotericism gets enrolled in conspiracism and political conflict.

Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps, Instituut voor Kennisoverdracht (INVK), *Conspiracy Theories in Africa: The Case of the Zambian Satanism Scare*

The Satanism Scare of the 1980s and 1990s in the USA and Europe is one example of a conspiracy theory about religion (Robertson, Aspren and Dyrendal 2019:7). From the late 1990s, and especially between 2005 and 2012, Zambia experienced its own Satanism Scare, in which an alleged group of Satanists was thought to cause misfortune, lack of progress, and the loss of Christian faith. In the first part of this paper I will argue that conspiracy theories form a useful framework to understand the Zambian Satanism Scare. However, this does not necessarily mean that this framework should be used as a globally applicable analytical tool, as I will discuss in the second part.

Like Western conspiracy theories, Satanism in Zambia is, as I will show in the first part of the paper, related to anxieties that spring up in times of rapid social transformation and ontological insecurity.

The discourse of Satanism in Zambia is also, again like Western conspiracy theories, used as an apologetic tool in a debate about (Western) knowledge production.

Does the usefulness of the concept of conspiracy theory for an understanding of Satanism in Zambia mean that it can be used as a global analytical tool? Similar to the sentiment of this conference, West and Sanders (2003) see a clear connection between religion and conspiracy theories. To avoid dichotomies between Western and non-Western, or modern and traditional, types of conspiracy theories, they propose the overarching label “occult cosmologies” (2003:6). Occult cosmologies presume the existence of hidden forces (literally hidden, or hidden in the sense of spiritual) that affect the world. The concept of occult cosmologies overlaps with what Robertson, Asprem and Dyrendal call “conspiracisms” (2019:4). Both West and Sanders, and Robertson, Asprem and Dyrendal include African notions of witchcraft as examples of conspiracy theories/occult cosmologies.

Witchcraft and Zambian Satanism share many characteristics. However, while I am happy to use conspiracy theories as a theoretical framework for Satanism in Zambia, I am hesitant to do so with witchcraft. I want to use this second part of the paper to reflect on this unease. One issue is that West and Sanders’ ‘occult cosmologies’ are hard to distinguish from traditional African notions of religion, or possibly from religion in general. This broadens the concept so much that its academic usefulness seems to become questionable. Another issue is that while witchcraft can be said to be an African thing, Satanism is also informed by a Western, neo-Pentecostal spiritual warfare theology. Possibly this connection to Western systems of thought makes Satanism better suited to a conspiracy theory framework than witchcraft.

Barbara De Poli, Ca' Foscari University, *Jesuit fathers, Maronites and Muslim ulama': the role of religious institutions in the spread of the Judeo-masonic conspiracy myth in the Middle East.*

In the Levant, the first masonic lodges were established in Aleppo, Smyrna and Corfu in the thirties of the 18th century, but freemasonry proliferated in the Ottoman Empire from the second half of the 19th. The first and most aggressive hindrance to its diffusion – even among Muslims - was catholic propaganda, first Jesuit then Maronite, that from Lebanon spread in the Middle East the anti-masonic conspiracy theories inaugurated in France by the French Jesuit *abbé* Augustin Barruel (*Mémoires pour servir l'histoire du jacobinisme*, 1797). The catholic hostility couldn't impede Freemasonry to gain success and to be adopted by Muslim intellectuals and rulers too – included some religious personalities, as the Egyptian *'alim* Muhammad Abduh. Between the 19th and 20th centuries Freemasonry became a very popular institution from Turkey and Iran to Morocco and, beside numerous Lodges attached to European Orders, independent local Gran Orients ruled by Muslims were founded in Egypt and Istanbul. Nevertheless, Zionism and the increasing conflict in Palestine gave new credit to the Judeo-masonic plot myth that

outside the Catholic religious circles (especially Lebanese, with father Louis Cheikho) started contaminating Muslim perception of Freemasonry too. The idea of a Judeo-masonic conspiracy began to be adopted among Muslims, starting with the radical milieus, until a *fatmā* issued by the Grand Mufti of Jordan in 1964, prohibiting joining Masonry because it was a “Jewish creation”, symbolically marked the definitive decline of the institution and the progressive abolition of lodges in almost every country in the region. This paper focuses on the role of religious institutions in disseminating Judeo-masonic conspiracy myths in the Middle East between the 18th and 20th centuries, considering the close relationship between the success of the anti-masonic propaganda and the local political scenarios.

Victoria E. Pagán, University of Florida, *Roman Religious Conspiracy Theories*

In 186 B.C.E., the Roman senate punished 7,000 worshippers of Bacchus for conspiring against the state in what is known as the Bacchanalian conspiracy, a religious association of men and women, elites and non-elites, Romans and non-Romans accused, among other things, of engaging in acts of sexual deviancy. Such a secret co-existence posed a threat to moral decency and social order (Livy 39.8-19).

In July of 64 C.E., the city of Rome burned for five days in a fire that destroyed or damaged ten of the fourteen districts. Initially, rumors spread that Nero ordered the fire and that he fiddled while Rome burned. To deflect blame, Nero in turn persecuted Christians for allegedly starting the fire (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.38-44).

Comparison is instructive. First, both occur in contexts of rapid social change and political tension and are clearly instruments of the hegemonic powers of the Republic and Empire, which stigmatized and subjugated marginalized groups. Second, they demonstrate the effectiveness of the malleability of conspiracy theory that allows for an easy replacement and substitution for genuine political engagement. Third, they derive in part from the fundamental attribution error, which allowed Romans to create their own comforting realities.

These conspiracy theories are naturalized in the sources so as to convey an implicit ideology; in this they are no different from other types of narratives that make social, economic, or political inequality palatable. However, if we resist the temptation to assign natural justifications to what are in fact historical intentions, then we begin to see a logic so consistent with familiar hermeneutic patterns that it does not matter whether Bacchic worshippers were plotting to overthrow the state, or whether Christians started the fire or not: the core of the conspiracy theory resides in the collective ethos of its Roman producers and consumers across time.

Andrew F. Wilson, University of Derby, *My belief in a democratic solution vanished': The millenarian conspiracy politics of far-right extremists*

On 15th March 2019, far right terrorist Brenton Harrison Tarrant used semi-automatic firearms to attack worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. He left 50 dead and 51 injured. His weapons and equipment were emblazoned with white supremacist symbols and slogans as well as anti-Muslim tropes. Before the attack he used the internet to disseminate a manifesto that drew on Renaud Camus' *'le grand remplacement'*, and David Lane's 'white genocide'. Both are conspiracy theories in which 'the West' becomes colonised by the non-white peoples of the world. An Australian, living in New Zealand, he drew on a bricolage, composite notion of ethno-nationalist belonging combined with these conspiracy theories to justify his terrorism.

This paper will address the dangerous combination of ethno-nationalism, conspiracy theory, and millenarianism. By unpacking the tropes and symbols used by Tarrant and other extremists of the far right it will argue that their ideologies are united within an imagined virtual nation. This nation is composed of an aggregate of myths of white supremacist cultural identity and sustained in online communities by conspiracy theories and millenarian longing. Emilio Gentile recognised the religious symbolism and rituals drawn upon in the field of political activity. His concept of 'political religion' will be combined with Charlotte Ward and David Voas' concept 'conspirituality' in a theoretical framework used to analyse the sacral dimension of conspiracy theories that contribute to current ethno-nationalist far right discourse. The paper will suggest that by understanding this extremist position as a quasi-religious phenomenon it can be more successfully countered than if it were treated as a purely 'political' one.

Avery Morrow, Brown University, *Adapting the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Early 20th Century Japan*

Prior research on Japanese use of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion has focused on how it played a role in constructing Japanese images of Jews and Judaism. However, the Protocols were also influential in Japan for establishing the narrative of global conspiracy. Between 1920 and 1950, the Protocols were not merely read literally, but were also remixed and reconstituted into innovative and unusual conspiracy narratives by various religious groups. A religious leader named Asano Wasaburō imagined himself as spearheading a divine global counter-conspiracy to defeat the Judeo-Masons, while a charismatic spiritualist, Katsutoki Sakai, decided the Protocols was a forgery scapegoating the Jews to conceal the existence of a true global conspiracy. Still another group, Hikari Kyōkai, dropped the language of Jews and Judaism entirely and reframed the global conspiracy as a Manichaeian battle between the spiritual forces of Japan and foreignness. A clear distinction can be made between the Protocols' image of Judaism,

which was examined with epistemological rigor in Japan and widely viewed with skepticism, and its image of global conspiracy, which was adapted freely and creatively without serious concern for epistemology.

Adam Klin-Oron, the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute Israel, *Great Deceivers: Secular and Religious Ontologies of Evil among Israeli Flat Earthers*

In late 2018, a public group called "The Flat Earth Community" was established on the Hebrew version of Facebook. By May 2019 it had over 3,000 members and an average of 30 posts per day. One of the most popular topics concerns the motivations behind the spread of the "invented sphere theory", as they call it. The explanations provided always assume a hidden agenda led by a powerful, hidden and worldwide cabal – but they diverge into two streams, a secular and a religious one. The secular explanation for motivations sees the heliocentric model, and the nature and composition of the cabal, as almost incidental: it is the enormity of the lie that matters, producing people who blindly trust authority because they are taught that their senses lie to them: "Living in a flat world means trusting myself. Living on an invented revolving sphere means being a slave." The religious explanation sees heliocentrism as the crux of the matter, determined by who composes the cabal and the specific belief that the Earth revolves around the sun: the dupe is led by pagan Nazi Satan worshippers who orchestrated a plot for massive veneration of the sun. "In order to make us idol worshipper without noticing or opposing [... they made] paganism masquerade as science."

This paper plots the different worldviews, folk-histories and theologies painted by these two explanations. The secular explanation's narrative begins in the renaissance and is populated by so-called scientists – in reality, it is claimed, Free Masons – such as Kepler, Galileo and Newton. The religious explanation's narrative begins in ancient Egypt, with the worship of Ra, but quickly skips ahead to proto-Nazism while mentioning religious and quasi-religious groups and figures such as Theosophy, the Thule Society, Alice Bailey and Jörg Lanz. While the epistemological thrust of both the secular and religious arguments is an extremely individualistic and deeply suspicious form of empiricism (trust only yourself and your own senses), their ontologies of evil differ: a world dominated by the rich and powerful in the former, and by the deeply religious in the latter. Thus, while both offer solutions of re-education ("deprogramming") that are supposed to help people "open their eyes", those espousing the religious explanation, while they themselves may be practicing orthodox Jews, call for complete banishment of religious powers from the public sphere.

Emily Pothast, Graduate Theological Union, *Creating Conspiracy Culture: Mass Media, Outrage, and the Other*

In 1475, the entire Jewish community of Trent was accused of the murder of a two-year-old Christian boy named Simon. Confessions of ritual murder were obtained under torture, and several members of the community were executed. News of this episode quickly went ‘viral’ due to the international reach of the newly invented printing press, fanning preexisting flames of antisemitism and fostering a vengeful sense of moralizing outrage. (The *Nuremberg Chronicle*, one of the most significant and widely distributed printed books of the 15th century, contains a gruesome half-folio woodcut illustrating the imagined act.)

This paper examines the discourse surrounding Simon of Trent and other instances of religiously charged ‘othering’ during the first century of the printing press, exploring the relationship between these discourses and contemporary internet-based conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate, whose proponents claimed that 2016 US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was operating a ritual child abuse ring out of a Washington D.C. pizza parlor.

Alexandre Toumarkine, INALCO, *Conspiracy Theories’ Religious Motives in Turkey and their transformation*

The Young Turk Revolution (July 1908) led to the overthrow of Sultan Abdülhamid the Second in 1909, and the proclamation of the Turkish Republic (October 1923) was followed by a series of groundbreaking reforms that radically transformed society. Both political changes occurred in an abrupt, sudden and unexpected way. In order to give them sense, they were received and explained through conspiracy theories among conservative Muslims as well as those circles still bound to the imperial Ottoman regime. This pattern could be linked to the counter-revolutionary ideology that appeared on the aftermath of the French or Russian Revolutions. It tried to explain political changes by referring to a pretended manipulative role of European Powers, a belief widely shared even by those who were supporting these changes. More specifically, it provided its proponents with religious motives claiming that Jews and especially the Dönme of Salonica, were responsible both for the 1908 Young Turk Revolution and the birth of the Turkish Republic. The Dönme were heirs to a tiny community of Jews converted to Islam that appeared in the 17th century following the conversion of Sabbatai Zevi, a self-proclaimed Messiah. This pattern provides a longstanding frame for those opposed to Kemalism during the first decades of the Republic and was widespread among those who support Islamist as well as far-right activism (incidentally boosted by antisemitic literature produced in Arab countries). Conspiracy theories expanded in Turkey during the last decades in a tremendous way. The coming to power of Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, didn’t put an end to this trend. On the contrary, the ruling party developed its own set of Conspiracy motives around the idea of a hidden Mastermind (Üst Akıl) manipulating international politics and preventing Turkey from becoming a powerful country, destabilizing the ruling party and its leader, Tayyip Erdoğan by various means. Although the identity of

this Mastermind is never disclosed, its religious origins are clearly traced back to the age-old struggle of the Jews for world supremacy.

Allison P. Coudert, University of California, *“New Thought” as an Esoteric Source of Contemporary Conspiracy Theories*

While there are many social and political factors that account for the prevalence of conspiracy theories in contemporary mainstream culture, it is the purpose of this paper to investigate the religious and esoteric roots of this phenomenon in the emergence of New Thought in the 19th century. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century certain strands of science, especially in the fields of psychology and parapsychology, came together with religious currents to convince a growing number of people—among whom were Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James—that they could use their visionary and imaginative powers to create and experience alternate worlds. As god created the universe through pure thought, so, to a lesser degree, could humans, created in god’s image. This conviction has become so commonplace in contemporary self-help literature that we forget its origin in the earlier New Thought movements. New Thought attracted individuals from all classes and ethnicities. Marcus Garvey and Father Divine created black versions of New Thought, which, in Father Divine’s case, integrated Whites and African Americans. In 1952 Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* sold more copies in the US than any nonfiction book except the Bible. Most people are not aware that Donald Trump’s family attended Norman Vincent Peale’s Church in New York City or realize how Trump’s commitment to “alternative facts” reflects New Thought influences.

Tomasz Szymański, University of Wrocław, *Conspiracy Theories and Universal Religion: from the French Revolution to the New World Order*

The presentation aims to consider the aspiration to establish a universal religion as a recurring topic of Masonic conspiracy theories, from the late 18th century to the present. Already during the French Revolution, Le Franc (*Le Voile levé pour les curieux*, 1791) creates a conspiracy theory according to which the goal of freemasonry is to replace Christianity with a natural religion. Later, for a long time, the topic does not seem to inspire authors of conspiracy theories. Freemasonry is portrayed as a habitat of all heresies, it becomes the ‘synagogue of Satan’, striving together with the Jews to take over the world. But only after the Second Vatican Council, when ecumenism and interreligious dialogue develop, the establishment of a new universal religion ‘becomes’ again one of the goals of the hidden activities of Freemasonry. This thread appears for example in Pierre Virion writings in the 60’s. A few years ago

Louis-Hubert Remy in his commentary on Aimé Pallière's book *Le Sanctuaire inconnu*, showed Noahidism as the universal religion that is now replacing the authentic Catholic one under the influence of hidden forces. Nowadays the Internet is teeming with recordings exposing the conspiracy led by the Illuminati to bring the New World Order and create a new global religion. Although 'Religion in which all Men agree' is one of the key elements of the *Anderson's Constitutions*, and Freemasons have developed various concepts of universal religion throughout history, the authors of conspiracy theories, if they refer to them at all, arbitrarily combine diverse references and adjust facts to their vision. In the imaginary of conspiracy theories (P.-A. Taguieff) the occult forces of the conspiracy (in that case Freemasonry), are shown as one united and powerful organization 'pulling the strings' and having one goal (in that case religious), which justifies all the means. However, this mythical idea seems to be closer to literary fiction and Balzac's novels than to reality.

Stephanie Frank, Columbia College Chicago, *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories*

Typically, thinking about conspiracy theories vis-à-vis religion centers on the way that conspiracy theories tend to replicate certain recurring features of religious thought—its totalizing impulse, for instance, or its Gnosticism, or its apocalypticism. But I wonder what we might see if we framed the question in a way that acknowledged that "religion" as a category is distinctly a product of the early modern era. In particular, I am interested in the way the rise of the nation-state—associated with the separation of the domains of 'religion' and 'politics'—inflected the shape of conspiracy theories. As an entrée to this question, I would like to look at conspiracy theories in early eighteenth-century France. Even more specifically, I would like to look at two conspiracy theories that centered on the events of 1730-1731: the Jesuit conspiracy alleged in the case of Catherine Cadière, a young woman purportedly seduced by her confessor, and the allegations of Jansenist perfidy swirling around the *convulsionnaires* in the cemetery at Saint-Médard in Paris.

I have argued elsewhere that the media fascination with the Cadière case evinces a concern with transparency—foreshadowing, of course, the Enlightenment and indeed certain currents of French politics up until the present day. But in this paper, rather than the question of transparency and obstruction, to borrow Starobinski's famous phrase, I would like instead to focus on a different dimension of the Cadière affair: the notion of competing loyalties. In particular, the popular press was very occupied with the theory that Cadière's Jesuit confessor, Girard, was an agent of the papacy—plying and corrupting impressionable young women in order to subvert a France that was just beginning to recognize itself as such.

At practically the same time, in Paris, Jansenists were congregating at a Parisian cemetery and falling to the ground in seizures, claiming to embody the dire straits of the French Church. Historians

reflexively construct the Jesuits in opposition to the Jansenists, and the organization of the Jansenists made them less susceptible to charges of ultramontanist—especially after *Unigenitus* in 1713. But theological and institutional differences notwithstanding, we can see broad similarities in the popular press' reaction to the convulsionnaires—in particular, outrage at the thought that anyone but the king could embody the French state. That is to say, in the distinction between religion and politics that was still being negotiated, politics had laid claim to a certain sort of embodied representation—and anyone who challenged the state's monopoly on that sort of representation was to be regarded as traitorous.

My paper will look at the events of 1730-1731—and conspiratorial representations of them—as indicative of a historical moment in which 'religion' and 'politics' were being distinguished from each other, thus opening up the possibility that the former might be subverting the latter.

Niklas Nenzén, Mid Sweden University, *'Going to the ends of the earth to unmask conspiracy': radical scepticism in the modern gnostic narratives of Lectorium Rosicrucianum*

Lectorium Rosicrucianum (LR) is an international Rosicrucian New Religious Movements group originating 1935 in the Netherlands. In several texts of the LR's charismatic leaders Jan van Rijckenborgh (1896–1968) and Catharose de Petri (1902–1990) conspiracy theories typical of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries millennialism are narrated. The context of narration is Manichean, both in the general sense of ascribing explanatory value and a salvific scheme to a totalizing metaphysic of good and evil, and in a revisionary sense of LR expressedly trying to restore a perennialist Gnostic-Manichean gnosis.

The focus of this paper is van Rijckenborgh's book *Demasqué* (1956), where he foresees that an international society consisting of living as well as dead spiritual leaders operating under the guise of syncretist-ecumenical ambitions, will impose on mankind a global regime of theocratic fascism by feigning Christ's return in an elaborate media spectacle.

I argue that the LR's conspiracism can be understood as mythical, and that it uses conspiratory mythemes to 1) substantiate "impossible" knowledge claims, 2) benefit from literary fiction and 3) appeal to underlying cognitive commons. (Lincoln, 1989, Doniger 1998, Kripal 2010, 2011.) I further analyze how conspiratorial prophecy supplements rational argumentation with artistic figuration to criticize both the present situation and earlier clairvoyant researchers (Heindel, Steiner, Blavatsky, Bailey). By re-casting mythemes of early 17th century Rosicrucianism and antique Gnosticism, the LR also recognizes latent variants of their own idiosyncratic neo-Gnostic doctrine of radical ontological scepticism in modern artistic movements like symbolism and expressionism. Promoting modern gnostic building-blocks like the feeling of "something else", a lost unity, an ontological deficiency, the unreality of the world thus relies on a "style over ideological content" outlook. I propose that LR's conspiracism addresses a

theological problem of representation, mystical apophasis, where narratives too are “incomplete” and therefore emically problematic to believe in literally.

Andrew McKenzie-McHarg, Cambridge University, *From Heresy to Conspiracy. Shifting Vocabularies of Vilification as a Testing Ground for Notions of Secularization*

On occasion, an intervention in one discourse illuminates the contours of a far older one. In 1950 the *New York Times* printed an opinion piece by the philosopher Sidney Hook with the title: “Heresy, Yes – But Conspiracy, No.” The piece bears the unmistakable imprint of the specific early-cold-war moment in which it was formulated; aware of a need to determine to what degree a liberal democracy should tolerate pro-Communist agitation, Hook appealed to his fellow citizens to heed the difference between the acceptable dissent voiced by the heretic and the unacceptable sabotage attempted by the conspirator. According to Hook, the “failure to recognize the distinction between heresy and conspiracy is fatal to a liberal civilization.” Yet this distinction should not be treated as a given. Rather, more sustained inquiry reveals how the possibility of invoking an opposition of heresy and conspiracy, as Hook did in 1950, is premised upon a long backstory involving numerous cultural preconditions and historical contingencies.

A first postulate might take its cues from the well-known statement made by the German jurist Carl Schmitt in 1922 that “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,” and thereby imagine a shift from a religious vocabulary of heresy to a political one of conspiracy. The implication that conspiracy is the secularized form of heresy – a statement requiring, at the very least, significant qualifications – suggests in turn an allegiance to the thesis of secularization that from Max Weber onward has become a repeated point of reference and frequent framework of interpretation for historians and social scientists.

Yet rather than treat secularization as an automatic and ineluctable process, the paper will be sensitive to the precise circumstances in which the place of religion was reevaluated and transformed as European society transitioned from its early modern to its modern form. A survey of religious and political polemics in the early modern period reveals a bewildering array of actors – Socinians, Arminians, Pietists, Jesuits, Jansenists, *philosophes*, Freemasons, and many others – who were targeted by suspicions that were originally grounded in notions of religious heterodoxy and that were then recast in ways that abandoned key aspects of the heresiological tradition and experimented instead with notions of plots, schemes, cabals and conspiracies. There were, however, also concepts that travelled in the opposite direction. The paper will contain a case study drawing upon the applicant’s current research into the notion of the unknown superiors—such was the term used to denote the shadowy figures who reputedly presided over certain secret societies. Originally formulated within the context of conspiracist speculation

about the origins of these societies, the paper will demonstrate how the question of their identity came to be infused with esoteric content. The case-study thus offers an opportunity to test and revise presumptions that have informed the inherited understanding of secularization but that are long overdue for re-assessment.

Yuri Stoyanov, University of London, *From Heresiology to Religious Conspiracy Constructs in Modern Eastern Orthodox Cultures*

The proposed paper intends to explore the instrumentalization of traditional heresiology in modern Eastern Orthodox cultures in the creation and elaboration of new conspiratorial interpretative frameworks, designed to rationalize and confront the secularizing outcomes of Western modernity and the effects of globalization. One of the distinct post-secular trends in majority-Eastern Orthodox cultures has been to resurrect medieval Orthodox heresiological constructs and clichés (applied to late antique Gnostic currents and Manichaeism as well as medieval heterodox and dissenting groups) and synthesize them with the influential late-eighteenth/nineteenth-centuries conspiratorial narratives and discourses (including those focused on the French Revolution, Jacobins, Freemasonry, the Illuminati and so on). The resultant composite conspiratorial theses combine traditional heresiological constructs (with a neo-medievalist tinge), abbé Barruel-style grand pseudo-historical narratives (reconstructing spurious sectarian genealogies through the centuries), Occidentophobia, anti-secularism, Masonophobia, forceful polemics against New Religious Movements, and New Age spirituality and practices, as well as various facets of modern esotericism. Such conspiracy theorizing and publications have been generated by elite clerical figures, religious public intellectuals and Orthodox grass-root networks and associations in the Levant, Russia, South-Eastern Europe and Orthodox diasporic communities in Western Europe and Northern America. Accompanied occasionally by radical religious utopianism and apocalyptic prophecies of imminent eschatological events, they represent a striking examples of modern conspiracy theories and narratives which re-apply and refashion medieval heresiological ideas and imagery to create new grand historical narratives of an age-old religious conspiracy aiming at subverting and disestablishing “normative” Christianity and its ecclesial structures.