

CONSPIRACY THEORY RESEARCH

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NOTE TO THE READER: *The following information on various aspects of conspiracy theories is not a formal paper. Rather it is simply a practical compilation of recent research and publications drawn from the bibliographic information listed that examine this unusual phenomenon in today’s culture. It is difficult to overemphasize the magnitude and danger inherent in social media posts, where facts and opinions and deeply held bias are easily mixed and just as easily consumed by its readers. As Christians we are always taught to be discerning of truth. Paul’s admonition in Philippians 4: 8 is never more relevant than it is today, that we should “keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper. Don’t ever stop thinking about what is truly worthwhile and worthy of praise” (Contemporary English Version). — Royce Money*

INTRODUCTION

We live in very interesting times, characterized by a considerable amount of uncertainty. Everywhere we look we are faced with an onslaught of “breaking news,” each one claiming to be the truth. To tell the truth, truth has taken quite a beating recently. All of the elements swirling around us make for a perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories to arise.

Why are good people—even good Christian people—especially some Christian people attracted to these bizarre explanations of reality? The reasons are many, but the strand that runs through them is the desire to make sense out of all the craziness that disrupts our lives. “If only I could figure out what is really happening. . .”

Some experts in the field estimate that about 50% of the American public believes in at least one conspiracy theory, and often more than one.

DEFINITIONS OF CONSPIRACY THEORY OR THEORISTS

1. Human reaction to confusing times— trying to make sense of what is happening in the world. [SA, 6] [And we are presently really, really in confusing times!]
2. “Conspiracy theories flourish when social machinery breaks down and available ways of making sense of the world prove inadequate for what’s going on.” [Psychologist Jovan Byford, as quoted in Spring and Wendling article]
3. It is the illogical connection of seemingly unrelated things and events and people that comprise the conspiracy theory.
4. These conspiracy theories begin with a rejection of authoritative accounts and generally accepted beliefs.
5. The two primary “subjects” of conspiratorial thinking center around politics and religion.
6. It is interesting to note, however, that in the last few months, there has been an effort to connect Covid conspiracies with other themes.

7. Finally, we should in the name of fairness admit that conspiracy theories are all the more maddening for two reasons:
 - a. They often contain an element of fact or truth. *It is the explanation, or the working out of that truth that sometimes results in some type of conspiratorial explanation of what is happening.*
*Think, for instance, about President Nixon and the Watergate political scandal in the 1970s. It started as a theory and over time proved to be true.
*But this process is certainly the exception and not the rule.
 - b. The second nagging little observation is that conspiracy theories are very difficult to disprove, especially to the true believer in them.

HISTORY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

1. Christians stole the body of Jesus
2. Jesus was secretly married to Mary Magdalene, and they had children together
3. Gnostic heresy—first great Christian heresy
4. [Many more]

COMMON PSYCHOLOGICAL FEATURES OF CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

1. Anxiety—E.g., two surveys from the American Psychiatric Association.
 - a. In May 2018, 39% of Americans felt more anxious than they did a year ago.
 - b. In 2017, another national survey revealed that 63% of Americans are extremely worried about the future of the nation; and 59% believed it to be the lowest point in U.S. history that they can remember.
 - c. A year later, another survey revealed that a majority of both Democrats and Republicans believed that “their side” was losing on issues important to them. [Scientific American, March 1, 2019]
 - d. Imagine what all these stats would look like with the current Covid 19 pandemic factored in.
 - e. The point: **existential crises of this proportion are a seedbed for conspiratorial crises to grow.**
2. Lack of trust—mainstream media, certain politicians, other authority figures (including religious leaders)
3. Suspicious mindset
4. Feel as if they have been cheated or left out of life; disenfranchisement.
5. Related to the above, the bearers of a conspiracy theory often feel as if they are special because they are the bearers of news and insights that are not commonly known; they are more informed than others.
6. Conspiracy theories can originate out of a personal crisis, or from collective social setbacks such as the belief that American values are rapidly eroding.
7. They believe that if they can embrace a way of explaining what is happening, they can have a degree of comfort.
 - a. By doing so, they create a scapegoat which to them makes the world more straightforward and controllable. [SA 3]

8. If a person feels alienated or anxious (common characteristics) and also senses that society is in some state of jeopardy, it is a “**double whammy**,” according to Melinda Werner Moyer in a 2019 article in *Scientific American*. [SA]
9. Finally, frequent use of social media, particularly on web sites that feed on conspiratorial messages (sometimes called the “dark web”) is a very troubling problem.
 - a. It is so troubling that some experts who study conspiratorial theories and their effect on individuals and on society say that **unless a person is willing to control or eliminate this type of web use, the user will likely remain trapped in the lies of this viscous habit, with little chance of recovery.**

FURTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

1. They often have political and/or religious themes, although other areas, such as the Covid pandemic, are sometimes included.
2. The theories often revolve around powerful and controversial figures who seek to control the lives and destiny of the rest of the population.
3. They believe that plots are behind many crisis situations and events and are quick to draw these conclusions. Events happening worldwide, they believe, are feeding their emotions, thus making them more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking.
4. Interestingly, in the Bible the book of Revelation seems to be in Christian history a seedbed for conspiratorial theories.
5. Believers in conspiracy theories are often reacting to events that are happening globally, making them more willing to think more conspiratorially.

WHAT IS “QANON”? A CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLE

1. This is going to sound really bizarre, but here goes.
2. QAnon is a conspiracy theory which originated in the fall of 2017 on one of the “dark web” sites.
 - a. An unknown individual, or group of individuals, that go by the name of “Q” dispenses occasional messages on the web [they call them “drops”], which contains cryptic information about a coming confrontation.
 - b. They, or the individual claims (or it is implied) that they are government insiders with access to secret information.
 - c. The confrontation will be between two entities:
 - i. A secret cabal—a small group of plotters whose aim is to overthrow the government—in an adversarial relationship with. . .
 - ii. President Trump and/or some other authority figure
 - d. This secret cabal consists of prominent politicians (e.g., Hillary Clinton, Barak Obama, and some Hollywood elites are often mentioned) who are accused of all sorts of bizarre things, such as being pedophiles and murderers.
 - e. Some of QAnon’s dire predictions have not come true, but that does not seem to bother its adherents. [Perhaps their interpretation of the cryptic message was wrong, or some such explanation.]
 - f. Theories such as this one usually consist of some sort of idea that the world is dominated by a few powerful and very evil people—a popular theme in conspiracy theories.

3. Here is perhaps the most disturbing element of the movement: QAnon is a ***peculiar blending of traditional Christian beliefs with another system that is not Christian in any sense of the word.***
 - a. Q often uses (or rather misuses) Bible verses to encourage its followers.
 - b. This theory seems to attract a small but growing fraction of conservative Christians who tend to embrace a charismatic emphasis or a distinct brand of conservative Christian evangelicalism. Often these are mixed with some dire theory of a cataclysmic end of the world. [That’s a generalization]
 - c. Added to this description can be elements of American exceptionalism and white racial superiority.
 - d. The history of this kind of approach to Christianity has its American roots in the early 19th century premillennialism, which stated that the world was getting more and more evil, prompting the return of Christ—soon. [e.g., the Millerites]
 - e. Added to the mix was another historic movement in America, that of the Dispensationalists, who advocated the idea that the Bible was filled with secrets about the last days and the great battles between evil and good.

TOWARD A SOLUTION

[First, we must note that it is often difficult for us to converse with a person who believes in conspiracy theories because their beliefs often fail the rationality and factual tests.]

1. **Cultivate discernment.**
 - a. It is interesting that a recent poll conducted at the Billy Graham Center Research Institute shows that about half of the evangelicals strongly believe that the mainstream media produces fake news.
 - b. In fact, the more people attend church and are active, the less trusting of news media they are.
 - c. Make no mistake about it—there is plenty of bias and “fake news” to go around these days. But it does not mean all of it is distorted. **Learn to discern and listen to a variety of views.**
2. **Also, we are living in a time of unprecedented attacked on the concept of “truth”. We must discipline ourselves to check it out.**
 - a. “Alternate facts” are not to be confused with **facts**.
 - b. Questioning truth is an old pastime, as the story of Pilate’s questioning of Jesus reminds us.
 - c. Watch for the tactics—clouding the issue, muddying the waters, casting doubt on the facts, resulting in the virtual drowning of truth. [Bridges, BNG]
 - a. Remember this: Most people tend to believe what they hear first, and what they hear often. It is a human tendency that needs to be examined.
 - b. In other words, there is something to the old adage that if you say a lie often enough, people will start believing it.
 - d. The Apostle Paul, in encouraging the Ephesian church (and us today) toward spiritual maturity said, upon reaching a degree of spiritual maturity, ***“We must stop acting like children. We must not let deceitful people trick us by their false teachings, which are like winds that toss us around from place to place. Love***

- should always make us tell the truth. Then we will grow in every way and be more like Christ, the head of the body.*” —Eph. 4:14-15 (Contemporary English Version)
- e. We live in a time where the concept of truth is taking a beating.
 - a. Yet, it is still possible—and necessary—to separate truth from lies.
 - b. It may not be an easy task but it is essential one for us all.
 3. **Don’t be duped by religious language.**
 - a. Just because scriptures are quoted and biblical themes are mentioned by conspiracy theorists and others does not mean it is true and is accurately used.
 - b. Conspiracy theorists are well versed in perverting scripture.
 4. **If you are talking to a conspiracy adherent, point out to the person the logical inconsistencies, but find a way to counter the conspiracy without challenging the person’s identity.**
 - a. Warning: There is such a thing as a “Backfire Effect” if people feel their personal identity is being threatened.
 - b. In such a case, they will often stick with their story or their conspiracy theory, even if they begin to have doubts about it—all to save face.
 5. **Encourage analytic thinking.**
 - a. Ask questions such as:
 - i. What is your evidence?
 - ii. What is the source of your evidence?
 - iii. What is the reasoning that links your evidence back to your claim?
 - iv. Are your sources accurate, credible and relevant?
 - b. Questions like these may at least help eliminate the more bizarre theories.
 6. **A practical thing all of us can do is to get our source of information and news from a variety of sources rather than from a single source.**
 - a. For example, if you watch cable TV, force yourself to watch CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, NCB, CBS, ABC, PBS, and BBC every once in awhile.
 - b. Same thing for a variety of journalistic sources.
 - c. A friend of mine once taught me to read purposefully books and articles from a wide variety of perspectives, so that I might keep my analytic and reasoning skills stimulated. [Sadly, we often find ourselves seeking out only sources that reinforce our already held beliefs.]
 - d. Please remember that as a general rule, *web news is likely to be more biased and less reliable than other news outlets—especially true for those for whom web sources are their only source of information.*
 7. One thing that will not work when talking with a believer in some of these conspiracy theories—Shaming or scolding someone will likely only drive them further into their beliefs.
 8. It might even help to remember “Occam’s Razor”—the “boiled-down” version which says, **“The simplest explanation is most likely the right one.”** We tend to “over-complicate.”
 9. For the Christian leader, perhaps we need to simplify the Gospel, rather than complicate it. “Love God with your heart, soul, mind and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.” ***That’s the essence of the Gospel.***

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