BOOK REVIEW


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The seventeenth volume of the prolific and inspired Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion (BHCR) series focuses on the strange and wonderful world of conspiracy theories, and the complex relation that these theories have with religiosity. If a conspiracy theory is a *deus ex machina* that explains circumstances in a non-verifiable way, then perhaps religion is a conspiracy theory itself? Deftly handled by the editing team of Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson and Egil Asprem, the handbook is divided into three parts—Explanations, Correspondences, and Locations—and under these headings the chapter authors endeavour to cover a myriad of conspiracy theories linked to established religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.), with new religious movements (Aum Shinrikyo), and with popular culture discourse (the Church of the SubGenius, and popular music for example).

Preeminent conspiracist scholar Michael Barkun contributes to this volume by a foreword. Barkun has studied the conspiracist milieu for several decades, commenting insightfully and eventually producing the landmark book *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2003). The opening words of his foreword state “These are boom times for conspiracy theories. They thrive” (p. ix), which can be seen in the influx of Covid-19 related conspiracies that have permeated global culture in 2020 through social media and alternative news sources. Barkun continues that these rogue narratives he started studying in the 1970s have multiplied to the point that they now exist in an ever-growing number of new religious movements and offshoots of mainstream religions.

Part 1—“Explanations”—offers a view into the world of conspiracy theories and attempts to legitimate the study of conspiracy theories within a wider academic discourse. This opens with an article by the editors Dyrendal, Asprem, and Robertson, presenting the argument central to the volume, primarily the question of why this is important. As they state, the term “conspiracy theory” itself is a multifarious entity which presents itself in various ways to various people, thus relegating the term to the outside of typical academic discourse. They state that “the discipline of religious studies has an important role to play in explaining the place of narrating conspiracy in the construction of worldviews” (p. 42). A chapter by Brian L. Keeley, another relatively big name in the sphere of conspiracy theory studies,
is entitled “Is a Belief in Providence the Same as a Belief in Conspiracy?” He argues for the validity of conspiracy theories using the same rationale and justification that is applied to similar types of inherent belief that are considered to be “religious”.

Part 2—“Correspondences”—addresses the theme of the book through an exploration of belief and conspiracy within non-traditional frameworks. Christopher Partridge, for example, sketches the world of the conspiracist through popular music, and how that interplays with a dialogue framed within the religious. He starts his analysis with a series of conspiracy theories that plague popular music, such as the “27 Club” (a series of artists such as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain and Amy Winehouse who all died at the age of twenty-seven), and that Elvis is still alive. Partridge follows the continual interaction between pop music and conspiracist narratives that become attached to music, and also the artists who produce it. In this section, Asprem contributes a chapter on esotericism and conspiracism, and Robertson investigates the “counter-elite” (p. 234) as a source of authority within the conspiracist milieu.

Part 3—“Locations”—is the largest part of the book, encompassing more chapters than the previous two sections combined. This explores the conspiracist world within a multitude of countries around the world. Included in this section are scholars who have broached topics akin to conspiracy such as Carole Cusack, who has researched invented religions. The only reprint in the volume, her chapter is focused on an invented religion, the Church of the SubGenius, and the role that fictional conspiracist ideologies now play, in contrast to new religious movements that employed traditional appeals to authority, tradition and so on. Sven Bretfeld and Iselin Frydenlund contribute chapters on Buddhism, Willow J. Berridge discusses Islam, and Cecilie Endresen’s “A Fantastic People and Its Enemies: An Analysis of an Emerging Albanian Mythology” explores (obviously) Albania. These are but a few chapters, and the rest are well worth reading.

Whether or not you believe in conspiracy theories, or even if you are on the side of scholars who think these sorts of theories and motifs have no place in either academia or religious studies, there is no denying the prevalence and the strength of commitment that is afforded to these ideas from those who believe in them. Similar to Edward Bailey’s concept of implicit religion, these are attachments and beliefs that are held whole-heartedly by myriads of people, often with little to nothing that seems religious guiding them. This Handbook allows for the discussion of these topics to evolve further within our discipline, and hence permits a broader discussion of what constitutes as “religious”. As long as the concept of what is “religious” continues to be unable to be defined by simple categories, the Brill Handbooks series of volumes will continue to be fascinating and enjoyable explorations into emergent paths along which few academics tend to tread. This book is recommended to undergraduate and postgraduate students, academic staff, and interested general readers.