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'A chain of deep-laid and premeditated villainy': The Roman Catholic Culture of Conspiracy from the Abbé de Barruel to Radical Traditionalism[1]

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Abstract

The flurry of recent interest in what scholars have dubbed 'conspirituality' has focused attention on the intersection between conspiracy theories and the overlapping subcultures of New Age, alternative, and esoteric spirituality. These important insights have also highlighted the extensive histories of cultures of conspiracy which exist within larger religious traditions and the related question of why adherents of specific varieties of religion appear to be highly susceptible to strains of conspiracist thinking. To further illustrate the ubiquity of conspiracy theory in contemporary spirituality, this article offers a historical overview of the intricate culture of conspiracy which has developed in the Roman Catholic Church since at least the French Revolution by outlining its five major permutations: anti-Masonry, antisemitism, anti-communism, anti-Satanism and anti-modernism. This article demonstrates the centrality of conspiracy theories in how a sizeable portion of Roman Catholics have responded to what they perceive as the threatening aspects of modernity as well as the renewed popularity of conspiracy theories within a Roman Catholic spiritual milieu during Pope Francis's papacy.

Keywords

conspirituality; conspiracy theory; Roman Catholicism; antisemitism; anti-communism; anti-Masonry; Satanism; Modernism.

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Introduction: Ubi est Romam?

Since its adoption by Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) the term 'conspirituality' has been predominantly utilized by scholars as a broad designation for the clear overlap which exists between various New Age, alternative and esoteric spiritual milieus and conspiracy theory (e.g., Asprem and Dyrendal 2015, 2018; Dyrendal 2013). While Ward and Voas suggested that the emergence of 'conspirituality' was a relatively recent phenomenon, this subsequent scholarship has pointed to its deeper historical roots. As the Norwegian scholars Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2015: 368) have noted, 'the history of esotericism and modern occultism gives access to a wealth of close negotiations of religious practice, identity politics, esoteric knowledge, and theories about conspiracies—both sinister and benign'. They opine further that 'esotericism has been a hotbed for conspiracy theorizing and its attendant publications and networks have been central vehicles for the transmission of conspiracist motifs' (373). Asprem and Dyrendal's work goes on to trace a historical genealogy from the nineteenth-century occult milieu to the cultic milieu of the twentieth century and shows some of the ways in which these networks helped to disseminate various conspiracist ideas.

While this specific esoteric milieu is not the primary subject of this article, these historical insights are important for showing that 'conspirituality', conceptualized in a more expansive sense as the disposition for conspiratorial/conspiracist thinking and its articulation within various spiritual traditions, is not something confined to the contemporary New Age, alternative or esoteric milieus, but rather something also found in and linked up with larger and older spiritual traditions and religious institutions. This sheer ubiquity of conspiracy theorizing across religions has been perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the breadth of contributions to the recent and laudable achievement that is the *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (Dyrendal, Robertson and Asprem 2018). However, this volume contained a notable omission. There is no substantive analysis of the extensively documented phenomenon which this article calls the Roman Catholic culture of conspiracy—a culture which in various ways developed in tandem with esoteric conspirituality and shared with it a considerable overlap of key personalities, publications and networks (e.g., James 1981; Kreis 2012, 2017; Taguieff 2005).

As I will outline below, many of the most enduring conspiracy theory tropes find their proximate origins within a nineteenth-century

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Francophone milieu where Roman Catholicism's historical hegemony was giving way to the eroding forces of modernity. As the French historian Emmanuel Kreis (2012; cf. Taguieff 2005: 33) has rightly observed:

> During the 19th century and especially after the 1850s, conspiracist discourse, carried first by Catholic circles, gradually spread throughout French society and multiplied *ad infinitum*: Jewish, clerical, Protestant, occultist, spiritualist, nihilist, English, German etc. During this period, the main conspiracist texts were drawn up, which would inspire later authors, while certain propagandists began to theorize their discourses. (2012: 15)[2]

While *actual* conspiracies existed within, about and against the Catholic Church during this period—sometimes even involving specific groups discussed below—these were always of limited scope and impact. As such it is the wider conspiracist discourse—marked by a belief that political events have been 'dominated and controlled by the ill-intentioned and conspiratorial machinations of a group whose aims and values are profoundly opposed to those of the rest of society' (Cubitt 1993: 1)—which became common currency amongst Catholics over the nineteenth century and into the present which is the primary focus of this article. Indeed, from the period commencing with (at latest) the French Revolution, the logic of conspiracy theory has frequently been utilized by Catholic writers as a means of making sense of the unsettling impact of modernity, genuine (or perceived) societal hostility toward the Church, and the real (or imagined) misfortunes of the Church in various social contexts.

To address this lacuna in contemporary Anglophone discussions,[3] this article provides a primarily historical introduction and thematic typology of some of the core components of the Roman Catholic culture of conspiracy as it has developed from the period of the French Revolution into the present. First, I examine the roots of modern conspiracy theory by discussing the work of the French Abbé Augustin de Barruel (1741–1820) and its legacy in setting the tone for the subsequent Catholic strand of conspiracy theory. Second, I provide a thematic typology of the

2. 'Duran le xixe siècle et surtout après les années 1850, les discours conspirationnistes, portés en premier lieu par les milieux catholiques, gagnent progressivement l'ensemble de la société française et se multiplient à l'infini: complot juif, clerical, protestant, occultiste, spirite, nihiliste, anglaise, allemande, etc. À cette période s'élaborent les principaux textes conspirationnistes dont s'inspireront les auteurs postérieurs, tandis que certain propagandistes commencent à théoriser leur discours' (2012: 15).

3. As indicated above, this material has been treated extensively by French scholars, most notably James, Kreis and Taguieff.

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five primary contours of Catholic conspiracy culture and an inventory of some of their key features.

The Catholic Origins of Modern Conspiracy Theory?

In the aftermath of the Revolution of 1789, especially with the upsurge in anticlerical and anti-religious sentiment over the 1790s, many clergy initially sympathetic to the cause of the revolution, as well as defenders of the *ancien régime*, began to depict the Freemasons and other secret or quasi-secret societies as responsible (e.g., Roberts 2008 [1974]; Oberhauser 2020). Theses pamphleteers, in the spirit of earlier Catholic heresiologists, began to catalogue a vast and genealogical link between various sects and secret societies—in some cases leading back to antiquity, though more often than not including the Knights Templar—with all modern secret societies seen as having their roots with the Templars and culminating in the declaration of the French First Republic in 1792. The Templar logic often informing these works was that the French Revolution and subsequent misfortunes of the Church in France were the long-planned vengeance of Jacques de Molay (c. 1240–1314), the infamous last Grand Master of the Templars burnt at the stake in 1314 (e.g., Partner 1982; Roberts 2008 [1974]).

While numerous writings could be produced here, chronologically probably the first to include the Freemasons in particular in this genealogy of anti-Christian sects was a work by the Eudiste priest, the Abbé Jacques-François Lefranc (1739–1792), *Le voile levé pour les curieux ou les secrets de la Révolution révelés à l'aide de la franc-maçonnerie* ('The Veil Lifted for the Curious, or, The Secrets of the Revolution: Revealed with the Help of Freemasonry') which first appeared in 1791. In this book, Lefranc traced the alleged origins of the Freemasons to Protestantism, in particular radical Socinian heretics, and highlighted the similarities between Republican ideas as these were crystallizing in the National Assembly and those already present in the Lodge, especially those of liberty, equality and fraternity. Lefranc followed this book—and this is important for subsequent development of Catholic conspiracy culture in its extension to occult groups (see below)—in 1792 with a second book entitled *Conjuration contre la religion catholique et les souverains, dont le projet, conçu en France, doit s'exécuter dans l'univers entier, ouvrage utile à tous les Français* ('Conjuration against the Catholic Religion and the Sovereigns, whose project, conceived in France, must be carried out throughout the whole universe, a useful work for all French people'). This work expanded the number of esoteric groups allegedly conspiring

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against throne and altar to include the Martinists, Bavarian Illuminati and the Rosicrucians. While Lefranc's works were largely an assemblage of nonsense, they created a pseudo-lineage for Freemasonry which could include various occult-tinged groups and thus both 'established' the intimate relationship between the fraternal principles of the Lodge and those of the French Republic, while also emphasizing the 'occult' aspects of Masonic conspiracy. These two aspects of Lefranc's work, which were transmitted largely through his more successful contemporary the Abbé de Barruel, left an enduring legacy that has informed Catholic suspicions of Freemasonry into the present. As the historian J. M. Roberts pointedly concludes, 'the inaccuracies and implausibilities of Lefranc's account (of which much more could be cited) need not trouble us. What is significant here is the falling into place of many details later to be repeated by the demonologists of the next century and a half' (2008 [1974]: 186).

Intemperate and conspiracist language aside, Lefranc had good reason to be opposed to the Revolution and its treatment of the clergy, particularly as it worsened into the early 1790s as more fanatical elements among the republicans blamed external military defeat on non-juring clergy who were increasingly depicted as internal enemies. Lefranc and others paid dearly for their opposition. When he refused to swear allegiance to the Civil Constitution he was imprisoned in Paris and in September 1792, alongside at least 230 other priests, massacred by a revolutionary mob—an event known as 'the September Massacres' (see Aston 2000; McManners 1970) This was just one of the many violent atrocities committed against clerics by anticlerical republican revolutionaries across Europe and Latin America over the next century and a half which worked to exacerbate subsequent counterrevolutionary and reactionary tendencies among Catholics and their willingness to see conspiracies even when these were not present (see also, e.g., Stark 2017; Sánchez 1972).

Lefranc's books initiated a wider trend amongst counterrevolutionary figures who sought in a developing meta-conspiracy theory of secret societies—including the (by this time defunct) Bavarian Illuminati, various so-called Rosicrucians, and particularly various forms of orthodox and unorthodox Freemasonry—the architects of the Revolution and the persecution it wrought on the Church. (Jansenists and Calvinists were also thrown in for good measure!) Chief among these, and the most influential, was Lefranc's associate the Abbé Augustin de Barruel, a former Jesuit and one-time Freemason who escaped France following the September 1792 massacres and sought sanctuary in Britain. Over

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the period between 1797–1798, Barruel penned his monumental *Memoire pour sevir a l'histoire du jacobinisme* ('Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism'), a work that sought to demonstrate in excruciating detail how the Revolution was the byproduct of a deep historical triple-conspiracy against the church, the crown, and society. This text, in Roberts's estimation, became 'the bible of secret society mythology and the indispensable foundation of future anti-masonic writing' (2008 [1974]: 204). The detail with which Barruel brought together all the disparate strands of the purported conspiracy beggars belief but he manages to include in his discussion the Philosophes, Jacobins, Freemasons, and the Illuminati—all of whom were part of a single revolutionary sect. Barruel's chief premises, however, are worth quoting as they indicate something of his monomania on this topic and are perhaps the clearest statement of the logic of conspiracy theorizing which was to eventually take hold in reactionary Catholic circles. Writing in his preface Barruel set forth his agenda:

> We shall show that with which it is incumbent on all nations and their chiefs to be acquainted: we shall demonstrate that, even to the most horrid deeds perpetrated during the French Revolution, everything was foreseen and resolved on, was combined and premeditated: that they were the offspring of deep-thought villainy, since they had been prepared and produced by men, who alone held the clue of those plots and conspiracies, lurking in the secret meetings where they had been conceived, and only watching the favorable moment of bursting forth.
>
> Though the events of each day may not appear to have been combined, there nevertheless existed a secret agent and secret cause, giving rise to each event, and turning each circumstance to the long-sought-for end. Though circumstances may often have afforded the pretense or the occasion, yet the grand cause of the revolution, its leading features, its atrocious crimes, will still remain one continued chain of deep-laid and premeditated villainy. (1995 [1798]: 3)

Much more could be said about Barruel's work (e.g., Cubitt 1991; Dickie 2020; Hofman 1988; McMahon 2002; Talar 2014), but it suffices to say here that it set the tone for subsequent conspiracy theorizing in French Catholic circles. Conspiracist logic became a marked feature of nineteenth-century French Catholicism which, particularly in reactionary circles, has persisted into the present. Moreover, this French context established the baseline for the Catholic culture of conspiracy as it has manifested elsewhere over the same period. Before expanding on this below, however, it is worth briefly looking at how this appeared at the very apogee of Catholic teaching—the office of the papacy.

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As the social and political fortunes of the Church in Europe waxed and waned over the nineteenth century, the stance of successive pontiffs became increasingly beleaguered and their view of the world more paranoid, jaundiced and apocalyptic. As their temporal power waned, culminating in the final loss of the Papal States in 1870, the papacy's spiritual claims expanded with the growth of ultramontanism, reaching an apogee in the Vatican I declaration on papal infallibility *Pastor aeternus* in 1870 (see Atkin and Tallett 2003; Chadwick 1998; Duffy 2006). Sensing the changing political currents in favor of parliamentary democracies, and refusing to accept the Italian *Risorgimento*, during this period it would not be incorrect to say that a conspiracist view of history became central in how successive popes, beginning ostensibly with Gregory XVI (Bartolemeo Cappellari, 1765–1846) in *Mirari vos* (1832), interpreted modernity and the emergence of modern democratic and 'liberal' European nation states and institutions (e.g., Atkin and Tallett 2003; Chadwick 1998; Vidler 1974). For example, in *Mirari vos*—Pope Gregory's opening salvo against liberalism, religious indifferentism, liberty of conscience, freedom of the press, and the separation of Church and State—the pontiff spoke clearly of a 'great conspiracy of impious men' (1832: 8) who were attempting to tear down and destroy the church and society itself. He further opined that, 'this great mass of calamities had its inception in the heretical societies and sects in which all that is sacrilegious, infamous, and blasphemous has gathered as bilge water in a ship's hold, a congealed mass of all filth' (1832: 5).

One can readily point to the recurrence of these kinds of conspiracist language and themes in a series of encyclicals beginning with Pius IX's (Giovanni Ferretti, 1792–1878) *Qui pluribus* (1846) and including the infamous *Quanta cura* (1864), its accompanying *Syllabus errorum*, and the series of anti-Masonic encyclicals which followed over succeeding decades (e.g., *Multiplices inter* in 1865). Taking the form of a jeremiad of perceived errors, these encyclicals traced a heresiological genealogy of modernity which overlapped with and reinforced the anti-secret society demonology developing in tandem with ultramontanism over the same period. Beginning ostensibly during the eventful papacy of Leo XIII (Vincenzo Pecci, 1810–1903) the Church began to make a reluctant and faltering peace with modern notions of democracy, adopting its policy of *Ralliement* in France and addressing what was called the social question with the ground-breaking encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891). This shift, however, did not detract from the paranoid tone of many papal encyclicals, especially those in which Pope Leo denounced Freemasonry—especially *Humanum genus* (1884).

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This combative stance toward the perceived errors of modernity, moreover, followed the papacy into the twentieth century. In 1907, the denunciatory tone of Pope Pius X's (Giuseppe Sarto, 1835–1914) encyclicals *Lamentabili sane* and *Pascendi Dominici gregis* continued to exhibit more than a hint of this kind of thinking. In the latter, the pontiff suggested that 'the agents of error' were to be found 'in the very midst and heart of the church' and 'pursuing their pernicious scheme by a thousand paths' (1907: 2–3). (Similar language continued in anti-communist encyclicals well into the mid-twentieth century—discussed below.) For Pius X, the reified construct of 'modernism'—which the pope aligned with various intellectual and social trends already condemned by his predecessors, including Freemasonry, socialism and Rationalism—was the 'synthesis of all heresies' (1907: 39). As Eamon Duffy perceptively commented, 'there was more than a whiff of fantasy and conspiracy theory behind all this' (2006: 327), and the resultant anti-Modernist witch-hunts conducted by Umberto Benigni's (1862–1934) secretive organization the *Sodalitium Pianum* (also known as *La Sapinière*), and local 'vigilance committees' set up in various regions, did more than a little to encourage an atmosphere of denunciation and paranoia—especially in France (e.g., Aubert et al. 1981).

While, as Duffy suggests, these types of papal declarations contained a considerably conspiracist tone, it was especially in the French counter-revolutionary and reactionary milieu that followed Barruel that the wider paranoid tendencies of ultramontane anti-modernists were developed and refined—often alongside the burgeoning of an increasingly belligerent Catholic press, which from the papacy of Pius IX became an important medium for the growth and crystallization of the ultramontane party (see esp. Chadwick 1998). Over the long nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, Catholic conspiracy culture developed from these French roots into what I suggest are five interwoven contours which are still identifiable today and currently undergoing something of a resurgence in sectors of the Church.

The Five Contours of the Catholic Culture of Conspiracy

Anti-Masonry

Beginning long before the French revolution, Catholics already suspected the so-called 'sect of the Freemasons' of untoward behaviour and sought their suppression along with many governments across Europe (e.g., Ferrer-Benimeli 2006, 2014; Franklin 2006; Mellor 1964, 1976).

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Indeed, a whole series of anti-Masonic papal encyclicals had been issued commencing with the papal bull *In eminenti* (1738) of Pope Clement XII (Lorenzo Corsini, 1652–1740). After the French Revolution, however, many Catholics on the emerging right of European politics followed writers like Lefranc and Barruel in seeing the Masons and other secret societies as behind both the overthrow of throne and altar in France and the fermenting of revolution and anti-Catholic sentiment across Europe. The Masonic Lodge—with its secret meetings and naturalistic values of liberty, equality and fraternity—was seen as embodying the spirit of revolution as this took hold of Europe over the nineteenth century, in a way similar to how communism was viewed by the papacy in the twentieth.

While Catholic beliefs about Masonic hostility and machinations against the Church were not entirely baseless—the links between European Freemasonry and anticlericalism are well-documented, especially during the French Third Republic (e.g., Cubitt 1996; Doherty 2020a; McManners 1972; Sánchez 1972)—most of the writings cited by Catholic conspiracy theorists about the Masons, for example the so-called 'Permanent Instruction of the *Alta Vendita*' first published by Jacques Crétineau-Joly (1803–1875) in 1859 and cited by contemporary Catholic conspiracists like Taylor Marshall (2019) and John Vennari (2017 [1999]), are almost certainly crude forgeries which, even if authentic, were only tangentially linked to Masonry. Secret society lore, however, worked to blur distinctions between generally conspiratorial and revolutionary groups like the Italian Carbonari or occult-tinged forms of fringe Masonry and more mainstream Freemasonry—a tendency that reoccurs frequently with reference to the other forms of Catholic conspiracism discussed below. Moreover, in the rare cases where actual Masonic conspiracies can be identified—as in the infamous *Affaire des fiches*, where the French Ministry of War and the Grand Orient worked together to block the promotion of Catholic officers on political grounds (see Introvigne 2018; Larkin 1974; Porch 1981)—these tend to be overlooked by Catholic conspiracy theorists in favour of the more sensationalist and speculative.

Over the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century anti-Masonic initiatives became a staple of French, and increasingly European and Latin American, Catholic publishing, with widely circulated dedicated periodicals like the monthly review *La franc-maçonnerie démasqueé* (commencing in 1884), founded by Bishop of Grenoble Amand-Joseph Fava (1826–1899), or as a recurrent theme in the originally Assumptionist paper (and its regional editions) *La Croix* (from 1880) and the Jesuit *La Civiltà Cattolica* (from 1850). These kinds of periodicals continued

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well into the twentieth century, not least the *Revue internationale des Sociétés Secrètes* which began appearing in 1912 and took an increasing interest in various French (and wider European) occult groups—helping to reinforce the kind of Catholic conspiracist culture which achieved a resurgence after Vatican II. Moreover, these publications also highlighted the networks in which conspiracist ideas spread and the ongoing ideological links and connections which existed (and continue to exist) between reactionary Catholics and the political right, most notably the *Action Française* and its various successors (e.g., Arnal 1985; Stoekl 2006). While space does not permit further analysis here, a clear and well-documented Catholic anti-Masonic lineage can certainly be traced between a series of conspiracist clerics whose collective lives and overlapping careers spanned much of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, including, though not restricted to, Nicolas Deschamps (1797–1872), Monsignor Henri Delassus (1836–1921), Monsignor Ernest Jouin (1844–1932), and Emmanuel Barbier (1851–1925), and most importantly for the contemporary sphere, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905–1991), all of whom contributed to various strands of the wider Catholic conspiracist heritage.

The papacy, moreover, fed the growing anti-Masonic ferment with a series of encyclicals denouncing Freemasonry in various regions across Europe. In 1873, for example, Pius IX issued his encyclical *Etsi Multa*, addressing the situation of the church in Italy, Germany and Switzerland. Here Pius spoke of a wide-ranging 'war against the Catholic Church', waged by 'sects, whether called Mason or some other name', who together formed 'the synagogue of Satan… which draws up its forces, advances its standards, and joins battled against the Church of Christ' (1873: 28). This language of the 'synagogue of Satan' was to be augmented by Pope Leo XIII, whose encyclical *Humanum genus* (1884) provided the impetus for the infamous Taxil hoax (discussed below), where he spoke of the 'studious endeavour of the Freemasons to destroy the chief foundations of justice and honesty' and work for 'the ignominious and disgraceful ruin of the human race' (24). Such papal denunciations, moreover, continued well into the twentieth century. In 1958, Pope Pius XII informed an international congress that Freemasonry was the 'common parent' of 'scientific atheism, dialectic materialism, rationalism and secularism' and thus responsible for 'the modern decline of religious faith' (quoted in von Bieberstein 1977: 8). More recently, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Declaration on Masonic Associations* (1983) confirmed that 'the Church's negative judgement in regard to Masonic associations remains unchanged since their principles

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have always been considered irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church'.

Antisemitism

Emerging from this same European context is Catholic antisemitism. Though antisemitism has deep historical roots going back to Graeco-Roman antiquity, in this article I will focus on modern manifestations of antisemitism. While the Roman Catholic attitude toward the Jews has shifted considerably over recent decades, particularly post-Vatican II, it suffices to say that Roman Catholic reactionary circles and individual writers—who saw the emancipated Jews of Europe as the chief beneficiaries of democratic polities and blamed them for their economic woes—have been responsible for some of the most egregious antisemitic documents of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (e.g., Byrnes 1951; Cohn 2005 [1967]; Katz 1970; Kertzer 2001; Poliakov 1984; Wistrich 1991; von Bieberstein 1977). Jewish support and involvement with Republican factions during the French Third Republic led to an intense growth in antisemitism amongst conservative Catholics opposed to the regime and its often-anticlerical policies and these sentiments grew exponentially through a series of controversies culminating in the Dreyfus Affair—so much so that historian Eugen Weber (1986) could quip that 'Anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century France was as French as croissants' (130) (see also Millman 1992). As time wore on Catholic antisemitic literature abounded not only in the Francophone sphere, for instance the Abbé Emmanuel Chabauty's (1827–1914) 1882 screed, *Les Juifs, Nos Maitres!* but also in other places, not least in the immoderate but highly influential ravings of American radio priest Fr. Charles Coughlin during the 1930s (see esp. Cohn 2005 [1967]). Indeed, it was in French occultist and reactionary Catholic circles that the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* most readily circulated, with Monsignor Jouin publishing the first French edition in the *Revue internationale des sociétés secretes* and it was in these same circles the *Protocols* continue to find some of their most adamant supporters. Throughout the twentieth century the so-called Judaeo-Masonic complot became the key plank of Catholic conspiracy culture and continues to have its advocates into the present—particularly amongst what have been labelled as Radical Traditionalists (or 'Rad Trads') (e.g., Doherty 2014; Weitzman 2013, 2017).

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Anticommunism

Catholic anticommunism, often linked in conspiracist Catholic minds with the Judaeo-Masonic complot, has been another plank of Catholic conspiracy culture, as Monsignor Jouin was known to quip, 'Israel is the King, the Mason is his chamberlain and the Bolshevik his executioner'[4] (quoted in James 1981: 158). Catholic anticommunism harks back to the nineteenth century, but became particularly acute in the Anglosphere during the Cold War with claims by writers like the ex-communist Bella Dodd (1904–1969) before the US House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953 that the communists had infiltrated the Catholic priesthood (Dodd 1954). While, as with the Freemasons, there were genuine conspiracies by communists against the Church (and indeed against governments) over this period which naturally arose as part of a wider political conflict (e.g., Chadwick 1993; Hanson 1987), much Catholic anticommunist writing, like that of Dodd, was informed less by actual political events and more by a type of cultural exegesis which identified communism behind every piece of outside hostility or internal dissent within the Church. These ideas were bolstered over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as numerous papal encyclicals appeared condemning communism and highlighting its incompatibility with Catholicism—for example Pius XI's (Ambrogio Ratti, 1857–1939) *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) which utilized familiar denunciatory language like '[the] all too imminent danger… is bolshevistic and atheistic Communism, which aims at upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization' (3). During the Cold War, and across the globe, Catholics were often at the forefront of anticommunist campaigns, and these could on occasion take on a very conspiracist hue (e.g., Duncan 2001; Fitzgerald 2003; Powers 2004). While much of this anticommunist enthusiasm manifested itself in party political campaigning and lobbying, in some cases Catholic anticommunists engaged in their own counter-conspiracies (e.g., Aarons and Grenville 2017), much of which took a more traditionally conspiracist tinge. Catholic anticommunist conspiracy theories, for instance, became inextricably entwined with Marian apparitions like that at Fatima in 1917 and a series of post-war European apparitions—largely unapproved by the Church—in which the Virgin Mary purportedly warned about the threat of atheistic communism and the need to consecrate Russia

4. 'Israël est le roi, le Maçon est son chamberllan et le Bolshéviste son bourreau' (James 1981: 158).

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to her Immaculate Heart (e.g., Zimdars-Swartz 1991). (Indeed, one of the many bizarre incidents of the Cold War involved the CIA funding of Fr. Patrick Peyton's Family Rosary Crusade as a bulwark against communism, see Wilford 2008). Into the present, groups like the late Fr. Nicholas Gruner's Fatima Crusaders have perpetuated this deep-seated Catholic anticommunism of the Cold War era and intertwined it with other conspiracy theories, including anti-Masonic, antisemitic and anti-Modernist ideas (see Barkun 2013; Cuneo 1997a, 1997b).

Anti-Satanism

Catholic anti-Satanic (or anti-occult) conspiracy theories emerged out of both Catholic reactions to the occult revival during the French Third Republic and from earlier tropes in antisemitic and anti-Masonic lore—both the Masons and the Jews have been seen at various times as fundamentally 'Satanic'. In terms of foundational texts, it would be difficult to go beyond the French ultramontanist and writer on the occult, Roger Gougenot des Mousseaux (1805–1876), and his book *Le Juif, le judaïsme et la judaïsation des peoples chrétiens* (1869), which established the notion of the 'Satanic' Kabbalistic Jew. Norman Cohn (2005 [1967]) described this book as 'the Bible of modern antisemitism', though it is equally important for the way in which it linked conspiracist ideas about the Jews and Masons to what Cohn further described as 'a secret demonic religion, a systematic cult of evil, established by the Devil at the very beginning of the world' (46). Gougenot des Mousseaux's work earned himself a papal knighthood from Pius IX, who, beginning with *Etsi Multa* (1873), referred in an increasingly literal way to the Freemasons as the 'synagogue of Satan', and hinted at a much darker and more primordial agenda lurking behind the doors of the Lodge. These speculations about the Satanic nature of Freemasonry (and by implication its Jewish allies) continued under Pope Leo XIII (see esp. *Humanum genus*) and reached their culmination in the Taxil hoax of the 1890s.

This literary 'mystification' saw anticlerical former Freemason Gabriel Jogand-Pagès (1854–1907), better known as Léo Taxil, feign conversion to Catholicism and perpetrate a vast hoax regarding wild satanic happenings linked with the Masonic Lodge, ultimately fooling no less a figure than Pope Leo XIII (e.g., Introvigne 2018; Doherty 2020a). Ever since, a kind of Catholic paranoia about the existence of allegedly host-stealing and infant sacrificing Satanists has persisted, drawing on a range of sources including the vast materials produced during and subsequent to the 'Taxil hoax', the popular writings of Joris-Karl Huysmans

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(1848–1907), through twentieth-century writers like the clerical impersonator Montague Summers (1880–1948)—a man who popularized a modern image of Satanism through his publications on witchcraft and translation of medieval and early modern demonological texts—up to the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Doherty 2020a, 2020b; Introvigne 2018; Rudwin 1931). More recently the idea of a 'Satanic conspiracy of evil' (Doherty 2020c: 86) has become a staple in the popularity of exorcism films, and Catholics have become one of the many groups proving particularly susceptible to the ideas of QAnon (e.g., Lafferty 2020).

Anti-Modernism

Finally, again often linked up in various ways with strands of anti-Masonic, antisemitic and anticommunist conspiracy theories, is Catholic anti-Modernism. Here one can trace a clear line from early twentieth-century opposition to so-called 'Modernism' as what Pope Pius X famously dubbed the 'synthesis of all heresies' to the reaction amongst Catholic traditionalists to what they saw as the 'modernist' tendencies of theological experts at Vatican II—a conspiracy which they see encompassing basically every major Catholic theologian of the twentieth century including, among others: Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx (e.g., Bourmaud 2006; Faggioli 2012a; Lefebvre 1986; Marshall 2019; Talar 1999, 2007, 2010). In its more extreme forms, it also includes every pope going back to Pope John XXIII (Angelo Roncalli, 1881–1963). Without going into its theological foundations, which are based in a particularly rigid school of Thomism (e.g., Daly 1980), traditionalist conspiracy theories claim that often under malign influences—both human and demonic—these theologians have systematically undermined the Catholic Church and have proven influential in how conservative sectors of the Church have interpreted the history and influence of Vatican II (see esp. Faggioli 2012b). To get a feel for this, one simply needs to read anything emerging out of the Society of St. Pius X—though perhaps the fullest statement of it is found in the French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre's collected seminary conferences published under the title *They Have Uncrowned Him* (1988), subtitled 'From liberalism to apostasy: the conciliar tragedy', where in one fell swoop he manages to bring together almost every strand of Catholic conspiracism (sans explicit anti-Satanism) into one breathless narrative.

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Conclusion

What each of these five major targets of Catholic culture of conspiracy had in common—with perhaps the exception of the largely imaginary Satanists—was their support of the emergence of liberal democracy in the face of the authoritarian ultramontanism of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popes and their resistance to change (e.g., McSweeney 1980). They were, in a word, all representatives of modernity in varying ways and it was predominantly this allegiance which elicited, and continues to elicit, hostility in largely reactionary Catholic circles who are yet to make peace with the modern world and continue to view the world through a dualistic lens which pits the Church against a diabolically inspired and ever-shifting meta-conspiracy. Indeed, as Cubitt (1991) observed of the nineteenth-century manifestation of these conspiracist tendencies, 'The modern world appeared as the scene of a desperate struggle between irreducibly antithetical spiritual entities—Christianity and the Revolution—whose vital forces were concentrated respectively in the Catholic church and in the network of secret societies dominated by Freemasonry' (129). While one may have predicted that the vestiges of this kind of thought would have been swept away in the enthusiasm of the *aggiornamento* envisioned by Vatican II, quite the opposite has occurred. As political scientists Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg (2017) recently observed, 'Vatican II resulted in a marginalization of extremist views within the church, but its advent revived conspiracy theories, which had the merit of providing infinitely malleable material that transcended the ideological currents themselves' (158). This is hardly surprising, indeed, there is a considerable overlap between the types of pre-Vatican II Catholic integralism (French, *intégrisme*) described above and post-Vatican II traditionalism, particularly in France (e.g., Camus and Lebourg 2017; Doherty 2014; van der Krogt 1992). Nevertheless, while the Catholic culture of conspiracy remains a largely reactive phenomenon confined to the fringes of the Church (and various schismatic groups beyond its pale), it has not proven unable to evolve and it remains, in Camus and Lebourg's (2017) estimation, 'a fringe culture to be sure, but one with a large capacity to redeploy and aggregate various themes and diverse political projects' (158).

This demonstrable malleability of Catholic conspiracist tropes, moreover, helps to partially explain its recent resurgence under Pope Francis (Jorge Bergoglio, b. 1936). The involvement of key contemporary Radical Traditionalists (so-called 'Rad Trads'), like popular YouTuber Taylor Marshall, in the recent phenomenon of 'Catholics for Trump',

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which mobilized Catholic sentiment for Donald Trump against the Catholic Joe Biden, or the way in which disgraced Archbishop and critic of Pope Francis, Carlo Maria Viganò has become embroiled in QAnon, are in large part simply a redeployment of pre-existing themes (see Durkin 2020; Joyce 2020). Indeed, very little in Marshall's book *Infiltration: The Plot to Destroy the Church from Within* (2019) cannot be found in other Catholic conspiracist works described in this article, which adopt a conspiratorial view of events both at and following Vatican II (e.g., Bourmaud 2006; de Mattei 2012). Similarly, Viganò's infamous open letter to Donald Trump in June 2020—which Trump retweeted to his supporters with the tag 'So honored by Archbishop Viganò's incredible letter to me. I hope everyone, religious or not, reads it!'—clearly recycles and updates elements of the dualistic world view of Catholic culture of conspiracy outlined above:

> They [the Bishops of the Deep Church] are subservient to the deep state, to globalism, to aligned thought, to the New World Order which they invoke ever more frequently in the name of a universal brotherhood which has nothing Christian about it, but which evokes the Masonic ideals of those want [sic] to dominate the world by driving God out of the courts, out of schools, out of families, and perhaps even out of churches. (Viganò 2020)

It is unsurprising that in the small interval of time since Viganò's letter he has gone on to embrace various additional conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 and the 'Great Reset' (see *LifesiteNews* 2020–2021). With the arrival of social media, moreover, the 'Rad Trads' have emerged as a vocal and powerful presence in the online sphere. Even if their numbers are probably relatively small, their brand of what one observer dubbed 'iMagisterium' (Lewis 2019) has already proven formidable, as the online 'flame war' conducted against Bishop Robert Barron by supporters of Taylor Marshall in July 2020 clearly demonstrates (Joyce 2020). Moreover, Pope Francis's recent Motu Proprio *Traditionis Custodes* (2021), placing renewed restrictions on the Latin Mass, will likely only work to encourage the persistence of conspiracist narratives amongst the already radicalized traditionalist online (and indeed offline) subculture. All this suggests that the Catholic culture of conspiracy is far from spent and requires further study.

In terms of the wider study of conspirituality, this article has demonstrated that many of the key themes and tropes found amongst contemporary conspiracists have deep and abiding roots within a Roman Catholic milieu and that the study of this religious context helps us to better understand their proximate historical origins. While it might be

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overstating the case to say that conspirituality has Catholic roots, if conspirituality is conceptualized in the more expansive way hinted at above—that is, as the disposition for conspiratorial/conspiracist thinking and its articulation within various spiritual traditions—there is sufficient overlap between the Catholic Church and its culture of conspiracy and the historical manifestation of conspirituality in an esoteric milieu to suggest that one might prove to be a bridge or conduit to the other and that as such we should probably not conceptually restrict the term 'conspirituality' to a New Age, alternative or esoteric milieu. Indeed, there is some evidence that new constellations are already forming which combine traditional Catholic conspiracy culture with 'conspirituality' understood *stricto sensu* (e.g., Kahl and Doherty 2016). Against a wider historical backdrop this is to be expected and charting this type of cross-fertilization of conspiracist ideas is a worthy aim for future research.

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