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Selling (Con)spirituality and COVID-19 in Australia: Convictions, Complexity and Countering Dis/misinformation

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Abstract

Conspirituality—the merger of conspiracy theories and spirituality—has attracted significant global media and scholarly attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article expands upon the 'two core' conspiritual

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convictions proposed by Ward and Voas that '1) a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order, and 2) humanity is undergoing a "paradigm shift" in consciousness'. We identify an additional ten key convictions central to (con)spirituality, including those that result in vaccine hesitancy and/or refusal. We chose to bracket the 'con' to problematize the term, and to encompass a wider spectrum of spiritual beliefs and practices, including those that are non-controversial, those that may be deceptive cons, and/or those that draw on conspiracy theories. The article presents an analysis of these twelve (con)spiritual convictions, focusing on a sample of 'Aussie Warriors' selling (con)spirituality, and also on influencers attempting to counter the spread of dis/misinformation within wellness circles. In so doing, the article provides a more nuanced understanding of (con) spirituality and vaccine hesitancy, and a greater knowledge of the benefits and risks of spiritual practices and ideas during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

conspirituality; spirituality; COVID; pandemic; Australia; disinformation; misinformation.

Introduction

The spread of dis/misinformation about COVID-19 has occurred at a rapid pace, in parallel to the virus, in a globalized, marketized and hyper-mediatized world.[5] This has led to heated debates over the origins of the pandemic, the need for lockdowns, and vaccination programmes. Dis/misinformation poses significant risks to society in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, particularly as it can negatively impact vaccination rates and contribute to political radicalization.

Adherents of 'conspirituality' are among the many engaged in the spread of problematic dis/misinformation during the pandemic. The term was first coined by a Canadian rap group in 2009, calling for 'political awakening' (Beres et al. 2020a). Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) were the first to analyse conspirituality in an academic article, arguing that it represented the merger of right-wing conspiracy theory and New Age spirituality at the turn of the twenty-first century. Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2015) critiqued their framework, arguing that conspirituality was not new or surprising, as it had its roots in Western esotericism, what Colin Campbell (1972) called the 'cultic

5. Disinformation is the deliberate and deceptive spread of false information. Misinformation is the spread of false information without malicious intent. Both are relevant to (con)spirituality.

milieu', and what Christopher Partridge (2004) described as 'occulture'. They argued that conspirituality has much in common with other 'deviant' religious and spiritual movements, 'both sinister and benign', which are orientated 'toward personal, "mystical" experience' and oppose dominant culture (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015: 368, 370 citing Campbell 1972). A year later, David Robertson (2016) analysed the phenomenon of the New Age and 'millennial conspiricism' in more detail, and Jules Evans (2020a) revisited the term in view of the rise of dis/misinformation in spiritual and wellness circles during the COVID-19 pandemic. The podcast *conspirituality.net*, focusing on 'converging right-wing conspiracy theories and faux-progressive wellness utopianism' (Beres et al. 2020a), launched shortly after. Its founders, Derek Beres, Matthew Remski and Julian Walker, have conducted 98 in-depth discussions on the topic between May 2020 and April 2022 (Beres at al. 2020b).

Due to the internal complexity of responses within spiritual and wellness movements to the COVID-19 pandemic, we chose to bracket the 'con' in (con)spirituality to problematize the term. Much of the holistic spirituality/wellness movement's questioning of modernity is critical, informed and non-violent, working toward more sustainable ways of living and healing, often in response to legitimate concerns. At the same time, there are members within these communities who engage in deceptive cons, some of which involve conspiracy theories. These individuals spread dis/misinformation online that poses significant risks to society, sometimes for financial gain. They have at times aligned with the QAnon movement, which has been identified as a 'domestic terror threat' in the US (Gallagher et al. 2020: 3). Other influencers actively counter conspirituality through social media.

While most recent media analysis and scholarly research related to conspirituality has focused on the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe, this article focuses on (con)spirituality in Australia, given the significant numbers of Australians who identify as spiritual (Singleton et al. 2021), engage in (con)spirituality (Essential Research 2020; Gallagher et al. 2020; C. Wilson 2020; S. Wilson 2020) and are vaccine hesitant and/or resistant (Aechtner 2021; Wiley et al. 2020). Consequently, and a decade on from Ward and Voas (2011), we set out to examine the (con)spiritual milieu in Australia during COVID-19 and to answer the following research questions: What are the core convictions of contemporary (con)spiritualists? How are spiritual persons engaging with science? What level of threat to public safety does (con)spirituality pose, and how can these threats best be countered?

In this article, we expand the 'two core' conspiritual convictions proposed by Ward and Voas (2011: 104) that '1) a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order, and 2) humanity is undergoing a "paradigm shift" in consciousness'. We begin with a brief background of (con)spirituality and COVID-19 in Australia, including the history of spirituality, and more recently, lockdowns, protests and (con)spiritual influencers. We then propose an additional ten key convictions central to (con)spirituality, identified in a thematic analysis of previously published scholarship and recent opinion pieces and podcasts by scholars and/or insiders. We apply our framework of these 12 (con)spiritual convictions to Australian (con)spiritual discourses that simultaneously promote and counter conspiritual ideas. This part of our study focuses on a content analysis of a publicly broadcast and shared YouTube livestream featuring four male conspiritualists (three Australian and one Canadian), recorded at the height of Australia's first wave of the coronavirus in August 2020. We provide quotes from this case study to illustrate our 12 (con)spiritual convictions. While our analysis is focused on (con)spirituality during COVID-19 in Australia, we argue that our (con)spirituality framework may provide a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, which can assist with developing strategies for countering the spread of dis/misinformation, and also vaccine hesitancy and/or refusal, within spiritual and wellness communities in and beyond Australia.[6]

(Con)spirituality and COVID-19 in Australia

Interest in spirituality and/or in conspiracy theories in Australia, and their merger, is not a new phenomenon. The First Nations of Australia have diverse and complex spiritual traditions. Waves of migrants from Europe and Asia brought many religious and spiritual beliefs and practices when they settled around Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Theosophy and Spiritualism were also popular among Australians at the turn of the twentieth century (Bouma and Halafoff 2017).[7]

6. Like Evans, Beres, Remski and Walker, two authors of this article, Anna Halafoff and Ruth Fitzpatrick, identify as members of spiritual communities in Australia, so are also insiders within the broader spiritual milieu. However, the only data reported on here is from published media and scholarly articles, and a publicly broadcast and shared videos, not from any personal or private material shared by individuals or groups.

7. As Roginski and Rocha note in this Special Issue, spiritual ideas circulated widely, including in the highest echelons of Australian society, during this period.

The mid- to late twentieth-century acceleration of processes of globalization and neoliberal marketization, and the popularity of the 1960s counter-culture movement that drew heavily on Asian philosophy and spirituality, laid the foundations for the New Age spiritual movement of the 1990s internationally (Carrette and King 2005; Gauthier 2020; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Jain 2020). More recently, the number of people declaring themselves to have 'No Religion' has been significantly increasing, particularly in Western societies. Concurrently, there has been exponential growth in the number of people identifying as Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) (Bramadat 2017; Singleton et al. 2021). Inger Furseth's (2018a, 2018b) recent research on 'religious complexity' argues that 'seemingly contradictory trends' of 'religious decline, growth, and change' are happening concurrently in Nordic and Western societies (Furseth 2018a: 16). These include a decline in Christian affiliation, and a growth in religious diversity, alternative spirituality and the 'public visibility of religion' (Furseth 2018b: 292–93).

In the Australian context, the latest national census reported that 30% selected 'No Religion' (ABS 2017). In a nationally representative survey of young Australians, aged 13–18, 22% reported being 'Spiritual but not Religious', 16% 'Religious and Spiritual', 22% had practised yoga, 30% had practised meditation, 30% believed in reincarnation, and 50% in karma (Singleton et al. 2021). Interest in, and identification with, spirituality in Australia is substantive. Before the pandemic, sizeable numbers of Australians had already turned to alternative therapies as they were disillusioned with Western medicine's ability to heal chronic illness; seeking more egalitarian relationships between doctors and patients; and had lost faith in modernity, science and technology to solve pressing global issues (Rocha 2009). During the first year of COVID-19 lockdowns, it was then not surprising that many individuals and communities took up online spiritual practices, such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness, prayer and conscious dance, as coping mechanisms (ABC 2021c; Halafoff et al. 2020a).

Of more concern is the uptake of conspiracy theories in Australia among spiritual communities, also known as the 'woo-woo industry', and the widespread sharing of dis/misinformation through social media. Online videos of David Icke, the most popular conspiritualist (Harambam and Aupers 2021; Ward and Voas 2011), and of the documentaries *Plandemic I* and *II* circulated in Australia in April and May 2020 (Enserink and Cohen 2020). In a national poll, held in May 2020 of over 1,000 Australian respondents, 13% in total (of which 20% were 18–34 year-olds) thought that COVID-19 was not dangerous and was

being used to force people to be vaccinated, and that Bill Gates played a role in creating and spreading the virus (Essential Report 2020 cited in Thomas and Zhang 2020).

In addition, while some spiritual communities have long criticized vaccination, the pandemic intensified their global anti-vax activism (Beres et al. 2020f, 2020h, 2021; Evans 2020a, 2020b; Halafoff et al. 2020b). In a survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in June 2021, 73% of Australians agreed or strongly agreed, and 11% of people disagreed or strongly disagreed, 'that they would get a COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available and is recommended for them' (ABS 2020; Knaus 2020). Nonetheless, 11% was still a concerning statistic as vaccine hesitancy represented one of the most significant challenges to public health in the midst of this crisis (Berman 2020; Islam et al. 2021).

Australia was also listed as one of the top-four countries contributing to QAnon[8] discussions on Twitter in July 2020 (Gallagher et al. 2020: 5). Some (con)spiritual views within wellness communities align with those of QAnon, resulting in the descriptor 'Woo-Anon' (Nelson 2021). Media commentary by scholars and public intellectuals has at times conflated QAnon with (con)spirituality, or at least argued that those within wellness communities are particularly vulnerable to radicalization by QAnon (Halafoff et al. 2020b; Khalil 2020; Ross 2020), given the presence of 'QAnon talking points' of '#SaveTheChildren', 'paedophiles' and the 'Great Awakening' (Napier-Raman 2020) in conspiritual discourses. This phenomenon has been described as 'militant wellness' (Gerrand 2020 citing Beres et al. 2020g). However, as Mar Griera et al. note in this Special Issue, they are separate and only at times overlapping movements, which have distinct lexicons and aesthetics. This is discussed in more detail below.

Conspiritual Protests and Influencers

Protests against 5G, Bill Gates, government surveillance, vaccines and mask mandates, by those calling to reclaim freedom and sovereignty, arose in response to lockdowns around Australia.[9] Attendees included QAnon supporters and those with (con)spiritual views, and their num-

8. The origins of QAnon date back to the 2016 US electoral campaign. QAnon discourses, calling for a 'Great Awakening', proliferated online in the lead up to the 2020 US election and the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 (LaFrance 2020; Pape 2021; Sen and Zadrozny 2020).

9. The initial Australian lockdown, as a nationwide response, occurred in March 2020, with most states relaxing restrictions in May 2020. Melbourne, the capital city

bers increased in 2020–2021 (Ross 2020; C. Wilson 2020). The first recorded protests, in Melbourne and Sydney in May 2020, attracted less than 100 people each (Fowler 2020; McGowan 2020). By July 2021 much larger-scale protests attracted thousands in Melbourne (1,000), Sydney (3,500), Brisbane (7,500) and Cairns (300) (ABC 2021b).

Australian conspiracists have engaged with international conspiracists and increased their followers and gained their own notoriety by circulating these ideas. These celebrities and influencers have popularized conspiritual theories (Bruns et al. 2020). Pete Evans and Fanos Panayides are among the most prominent Australian conspiritualists (Bruns et al. 2020). Evans, previously a celebrity chef, has long used social media to spread alternative ideas about Paleo and Keto diets, 'cancer cures' and vaccinations (BBC 2021). With a substantive following on social media pre-pandemic, when he began to use his platforms to peddle information about the coronavirus, his posts spread through Australia's wellness communities. They included many debunked theories regarding the virus's severity, 5G networks, mask-wearing, vaccines, and alternative technology to cure COVID-19, from which Evans potentially stood to profit (ABC 2020; BBC 2021; Thomas and Zhang 2020). He was fined $25,000 by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for 'spruiking a $15,000 bio-charger lamp' (Taylor 2020), and another $80,000 in May 2021, for 'repeated breaches of advertising rules around health products' (ABC 2021a). In addition, his promotion of conspiracies associated with the far-right raised concerns around the 'danger of a highly politicised radicalisation' among wellness communities (Bruns et al. 2020: 27). Eventually his problematic views caused him to be deplatformed from Facebook (with 1.5 million followers) and Instagram (278,000 followers) in December 2020 and February 2021 respectively (BBC 2021).

Fanos Panayides, a former security guard trainer and reality TV contestant, made his way into the limelight after becoming the 'self-appointed leader of the anti-lockdown movement' by creating a Facebook group '99% Unite' (with 60,000 members in August 2020) (Taylor 2020). This became 'one of the biggest hubs of resistance' against coronavirus responses (C. Wilson 2020). Based in Melbourne, which experienced the harshest lockdowns in Australia, Panayides was the organizer of the first Melbourne protest, and he along with Evans were flagged as 'highly visible spreaders' of conspiracies in 2020 (Bruns et al. 2020: 27;

of Victoria, experienced its second lockdown beginning in July 2020 and lasting 17 weeks, one of the harshest and longest lockdowns in the world.

C. Wilson 2020). This eventually led to Panayides being removed from Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, as well as being charged for inciting people to protest against lockdowns (Mills 2021).

In addition, other figures within the Australian wellness movement based in Northern New South Wales (NSW), notably alternative health practitioners Neil Pascoe, also known as Nate Max, and Tom Barnett, gained notoriety within conspirituality circles through their public video posts; participating in Panayides's public Mind Liberation Conversations, Nate Max TV (with 2,900 YouTube subscribers in February 2022) and/or on the New Earth Project's (NEP) online platforms. The NEP is a global network, founded by British conspiritualist Sacha Stone, claiming to 'empower a conscious humanity to reclaim its sovereign birthright'. The NEP regularly hosted online discussions in 2020, including three NEP episodes that were focused on Australia, livestreamed in August and September of 2020 (NEP 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The first featured Australians Panayides and Renee Mechelle, an Australian vegan activist and conspiracist, and the second included Pascoe/Max, Melbourne-based Dr Marc Cohen founder of the Extreme Wellness Institute, Northern NSW-based Meryl Dorey founder of the Australian Vaccination-risks Network and anti-vaxxer Wayne Baird. Stone first referred to Pascoe/Max as a 'fellow warrior' in this second NEP episode.

The third, NEP Episode 56, titled 'Aussie Warriors Update' hosted by Imani Mamalution and Stone again featured Panayides and Pascoe/Max, along with Australian conspiracist Dave Oneegs (DaveO) and Jarmbi Miles, an Australian Indigenous activist and spiritual teacher. In this episode, Stone described Pascoe/Max as 'a thought pioneer and visionary of human potential… who helps folks see through the agenda', and Panayides as 'a poster boy for all that's righteous'. Imani also explained that 'the vison behind' the NEP's then upcoming global online event, 'Drawing the Line in the Sand', was 'activated' by 'the intensity of what's been happening there in Australia'. The NEP and Stone's global reach also raised the profile of the 'Aussie Warriors' within and beyond Australia (Nate Max TV 2020; New Earth Festival 2020).

At the same time, prominent influencers in the wellness industry in Australia, such as Sarah Wilson, author of *I Quit Sugar*, made public statements challenging conspiracist views and encouraging members of wellness communities to be vaccinated for the public good (Halafoff et al. 2020b; S. Wilson 2020). This reflects international trends, as US and global wellness influencers and expert insiders, such as Seane Corn, Jules Evans and the conspirituality.net team, have also publicly

critiqued conspiracists and their theories (Beres et al. 2020a, 2020b; Evans 2020a).

(Con)spiritual Convictions and the 'Aussie Warriors'

As noted above, Ward and Voas (2011: 104) identified 'two core convictions' among conspiracists—of a secret group controlling a New World Order, and a New Age 'paradigm shift'. Our study of previously published literature, opinion pieces and podcasts has identified ten additional (con)spiritual convictions underpinning (con)spiritual movements. The section below presents this total of 12 convictions and illustrates them with quotes and content drawn from our qualitative thematic media analysis of a public YouTube conversation among three 'Aussie Warriors',[10] host Panayides with guests Pascoe/Max and Barnett, and also featuring Jason Christoff, a well-known Canadian health, wellness and fitness coach and COVID-denier. This discussion was originally scheduled as a live broadcast on Panayides' Facebook channel. Titled *Live with Neil Pascoe, Jason Christoff and Tom Barnett*, it was livestreamed and recorded on 14 August 2020 at the height of Victoria's second lockdown.

We chose this YouTube conversation as our case study given it was hosted by Australian conspiracist Panayides and was focused mainly on the Australian (con)spiritual context espoused in Pascoe/Max and Barnett's views. Of the four men, Pascoe/Max and Barnett best fit the category of conspiritualists, given that they both live in Northern NSW, which is well-known as an alternative holistic/spiritual community; are in the alternative health/wellness industry; and share conspiratorial views. While Pascoe/Max very much dominated this livestream conversation, Barnett also has a high profile in Australian (con)spiritual circles (with 35,400 YouTube subscribers). Panayides, while not as firmly embedded in conspirituality, facilitated and participated in high-profile conspiritual conversations during this period in Australia on his own Facebook page, his 99% Unite platform and also for the NEP. We include some statements from Christoff as well. Not all four men share the same views, and we report their statements individually below. This variance further illustrates the internal diversity within glocal (local and global) conspiracist and (con)spiritual movements.

10. We use the NEP's term 'Aussie Warriors' throughout the case study as it refers to Australian conspiritualists featured on the NEP platform but can also be applied to other Australian conspiritualists associated with them, such as Tom Barnett. Pascoe/Max re-posted the NEP's 'Aussie Warriors' episode to his YouTube Platform Nate Max TV, thus lending further legitimacy to the use of the term.

1. Paradigm Shift

As Ward and Voas (2011: 104) argue, a core conviction of (con)spiritualists is that humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness. Individual and collective agency is required to facilitate this shift, and those who choose or are chosen to reveal the 'truth' will usher in a great spiritual awakening of the New Age. This view expresses a form of collective (but selective) soteriology, a deeply optimistic spiritual narrative that provides a positive, ecstatic and utopic vision for the betterment of life on earth (Evans 2020a; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Robertson 2016; Ward and Voas 2011). It is prophetic, working toward a new future, yet concurrently returns humanity and life to its true, underlying, natural state, inspired by ancient, pristine wisdom narratives, drawn from Indigenous, Pagan and Asian traditions (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015 citing Hanegraaff 2006; Halafoff 2021; Harambam and Aupers 2021).

This is evident in the YouTube discussion. Panayides asks his panellists: 'What are we trying to build awareness on?'. Pascoe/Max responds by describing a global awakening, drawing on Indigenous traditions, in his utopic vision:

> We're looking into native cultures, into their traditions and being connected to earth, and plant medicine, and going beyond the unseen realms… People are clearing the heavy metals, the toxins out of their bodies. They're getting into meditation and yoga. They're realizing that we need nature to survive. There's a big awareness that technology is making us sick… my whole goal is about… focusing a lot more of our energy on creating a new world… with free energy… with a monetary system or a trading system that actually benefits everyone… We can build heaven on earth right here.

2. New World Order

The second key conviction shaping conspirituality is that 'a secret group', an Illuminati, and/or all-powerful elite, or cabal, is covertly controlling politics and society in an effort to establish a (dystopian) New World Order (NWO) (Ward and Voas 2011: 104; Evans 2020a, 2020b). This worldview is more generally associated with the radical right, yet gained momentum in alternative communities in the 1980–1990s New Age (Robertson 2016). For example, David Icke alleges 'that a shadow government harbours the bloodlines of an ancient race of reptilian extraterrestrials' (Ward and Voas 2011: 110). This apocalyptic, 'millennial conspiracism' (Robertson 2016: 6; Barkun 2006) and political

disillusionment further intensified in response to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre, the Iraq war and the Mayan 2012 end times prophesy (Ward and Voas 2011).

This conviction looms as one of the largest throughout the Warriors' livestream, and the discourse includes several references to paedophilia and a 'deep state' cabal. Christoff is the first to label the 'COVID agenda' as 'manufacture[d]… to control the world population' by an elite '20,000 people'. Panayides and Pascoe/Max agree, and Pascoe/Max exclaims, in an anti-Semitic tirade, that it's 'actually the CIA, it's Israeli intelligence, it's Mossad… it's the Zionists' behind this, and that 'the only thing that's stopping us', from building 'heaven on earth', 'is… a bunch of paedophile Satanist puppets who are controlling things from the top'.

3. 'Cosmic War' and Spiritual Warriors

These competing worldviews—of the evil New World Order vs. the enlightened New Age—reveal dynamics underlying many 'cosmic wars' long fought by religious movements, resulting at times in violence and terrorism (Juergensmeyer 2003). Most religions justify violence when threatened and the need to fight holy wars, aided by cosmic forces. Religious and spiritual traditions are replete with narratives of persecuted spiritual warriors perfecting themselves through self-disciplinary practices, taking up arms and being ultimately victorious. Their enemies are often dehumanized and ascribed with demonic features. Moreover, the spiritual warrior's convictions are not easily abandoned (Appleby 2000; Juergensmeyer 2003).

Pascoe/Max proclaims how, 'I'd like to do it another way, but we're in a war now' with 'half humans', 'a spiritual war' with 'the cabal… deep state' that is 'taking your time, your energy, your vital life force, your chi, and your soul's essence'. He calls the listeners to rise up against the elites:

> Seriously get out in the streets… what are you going to fight for? Our planet, our freedom, our sovereignty?… Fight for the earth man… Fight for all of us… Fight for the next generation… all we have to do is take out about 20,000 losers and that's not very hard, honestly. We outnumber them by a lot.

Later in the livestream, Pascoe/Max states that 'alpha males' do not have the 'balls' to take on the system, and that the Aussie Warriors, by contrast, are doing so. Panayides agrees that traditionally it has always been men 'who predominantly would go to war' and women 'who would

look after the children'. Both Barnett and Max subsequently encourage the audience to 'start making babies. If you're aware', 'conscious babies'.

4. Opposition to Mainstream Culture

(Con)spiritual individuals and movements also identify themselves in opposition not just to elite authorities but to the mainstream more generally, including mainstream media, religious, medical, agricultural, scientific and political institutions, and the dominant culture of capitalism (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Bramadat 2017; Campbell 1972; Gauthier 2020; Harambam and Aupers 2021; Parmigiani 2021; Ward and Voas 2011). While these critiques of modernity and reason have historical antecedents in Romanticism and Western esotericism and occultism (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015), they intensified during the 1960s counter-culture movement, evident in the proliferation of new religious and spiritual movements, and again in the 1990s New Age. In this way they form a '*dissensus*'—'both cognitive and affective'—of those who exclude themselves from the 'common sense' of the majority (Parmigiani 2021: 511 quoting Rancière 1999: 123), relying more on post-secular, experiential, 'ways of knowing' than rational beliefs (Harambam and Aupers 2021; Parmigiani 2021).

This is evident in statements such as Pascoe/Max's view that the 'COVID scamdemic' is not real, and 'only really held together by the mainstream news… and fear'. He says that '[r]eligion's part of it, the banking system, the slavery systems… the education system… the indoctrination system, the medical system… the population system… the military'. In addition, toward the end of the programme, Panayides pleads for people to listen to their intuition rather than scientific or other expert advice: 'if your internal guidance system's telling you that hang on something's wrong here, it shouldn't matter how credible the source is that… you're listening to. That should be your, your indication'.

5. Exceptionalism and Exclusivity

What (con)spiritualists also share with many other religious extremist movements are their exclusive religious and spiritual narratives which frame them as being exceptional and privy to the real, hidden, one and only truth and as more enlightened than mainstream society (Evans 2020b; Halafoff et al. 2020b; Juergensmeyer 2003). (Con)spiritual truth is magical and secret, revealed to a select few (Beres et al. 2021). Ward and Voas (2011: 116) cite Michael Barkun's (2006) notion

of 'stigmatized knowledge' that is 'forgotten, superseded, ignored, rejected, suppressed'. Belief in this hidden and stigmatized truth can also be paranoic and narcissistic, leading conspiritualists to further self-aggrandizement (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Evans 2020a, 2020b; Partridge 2004).

The panel was originally scheduled for Facebook live, but according to Panayides had to be shifted to YouTube as 'Facebook, did not like that collaboration' with Christoff. This resulted in an initial jocular exchange among the men regarding being 'censored by the censorers [sic]'. Pascoe/Max states: 'They don't want you knowing that you are a god, and you are a creator being. They don't want you getting into the core of who you are'. Barnett similarly argues that the 'internal knowing that we are more than what we were ever told and that we can do this' is 'coming from a place of inherent godly power'. This narrative plays well into conspiritual convictions of a New World Order, controlling information, and that the real, secret/sacred truth of their godliness, which the Aussie Warriors are revealing, is being suppressed.

6. Privilege

A related and under-explored aspect of (con)spirituality is the white privilege within these movements, with their emphasis on strong and healthy white bodies and immune systems, and belief in abundance (Jain 2020). Contemporary spirituality emphasizes positive thinking for personal wellness and economic gains, yet individuals cannot simply think themselves out of this COVID-19 crisis. This has resulted in mass 'spiritual bypassing' (Welwood 2002), where spiritual narratives are used to avoid difficult issues, in this case the reality and severity of the pandemic. This phenomenon is evident among more privileged, and often white, individuals and groups who are far less likely to be impacted by the coronavirus than the less privileged and more vulnerable, often people of colour (ABC 2021c; Beres et al. 2020c, 2020d, 2020e; Evans 2020b; Halafoff et al. 2020b).

Given relatively low COVID-19 case numbers across Australia in the first year of the pandemic, compared to the UK, USA and Europe, and because many spiritual communities in Australia are in regional locations with low density populations, they were not as directly impacted by the crisis. This all helps to explain how Pascoe/Max can pontificate that:

> If you walk out in the streets for this COVID scamdemic, the only remnants [sic] of that there's a pandemic going on is… idiots wearing masks, and people standing away from each other… The rest is on the news. There's empty hospitals, there's fake death certificates… The list goes on and on and on. So if you use your eyes, your ears, your mouth, and your senses, you walk outside and you're like, 'what pandemic'?

7. Authenticity and Autonomy

Contemporary consumerism and spirituality are both founded on a quest for authenticity and individual expressivity, dating back to Romanticism's emphasis on personal freedom and anti-authoritarianism, and intensifying during the 1960s counter-culture movement and the growth of neoliberalism (Campbell 1987; Gauthier 2020; Taylor 1989, 1991). This helps to explain the commodification of spirituality, as individuals express themselves through brands and lifestyle-related purchases (Carrette and King 2005; Gauthier 2020; Jain 2020), and also why conspiritualists are particularly irate about coronavirus restrictions that limit their personal autonomy and liberty (Halafoff et al. 2020b; S. Wilson 2020).

Pascoe/Max's final comments speak of the need for sovereignty, for spreading awareness, and co-creation of a new reality:

> … let's co-create, co-create, co-create… The first step is, you need to know you're being mind-controlled, and then, you need to know how to break the mind control, and how to start living for yourself and doing your own things, making your own decisions, and being a sovereign being…

8. 'Spiritual Tribes'

While spiritual movements are centred on personal quests for individual authenticity and autonomy, they are fundamentally social. They provide a sense of meaning and belonging to groups of people whose shared worldviews, lifestyles, convictions, and commitment to societal transformation, are expressed through codes of language and certain aesthetics and brands. Such social norms include adherents and exclude others (Ammerman 2013; Gauthier 2020; Jain 2020; Parmigiani 2021). These 'spiritual tribes'[11] (Ammerman 2013) participate in online and

11. We acknowledge that 'tribe' is a problematic term, with regards to cultural appropriation by spiritual communities of Indigenous traditions. We have chosen to refer to Ammerman's research on 'spiritual tribes' given its insights on the collective nature of contemporary spirituality but have used quotation marks whenever we use this phrase to indicate its problematic nature, and prefer the term 'spiritual movements'.

offline rituals and practices, challenging the common misconception of a private, individualized and non-political spirituality (Ammerman 2013; Jain 2020; McGuire 2008; Parmigiani 2021). 'Spiritual tribes', according to Nancy Ammerman (2013: 293), are significant drivers 'for power, agency, and action' and also of conformity. According to Giovanna Parmigiani (2021: 506–509) 'they are connected (virtually or in 'real life') by networks of belonging', that share aesthetic norms, are participatory and performative, and seek validation through visibility and approval.

Aussie Warriors Pascoe/Max and Barnett's views, as evident from the comments in the livestream quoted above, are those of a 'spiritual tribe', with coded language, shared beliefs, values and aesthetics, taking on a spiritual battle, for the betterment of the world, against the global elites and mainstream. Barnett explains how he thinks that 'the reason people like to see… us guys talk… is that it gives them the solidarity that there are so many others out there… and believing that we are much more powerful'.

9. Vaccine Hesitancy and/or Refusal

A crisis of trust in governments, 'Big Pharma' and Western medicine is also central to vaccine hesitancy, refusal and anti-vax campaigning (Aechtner 2021; Bramadat 2017). Such views align with the conspiritual convictions of a global elite imposing a New World Order, supressing negative information about vaccines and restricting medical autonomy, and the need to fight against it (Aechtner 2021). This is further expressed and enabled through 'the proliferation of scientific and pseudoscientific diagnostic and support websites' (Bramadat 2017: 42) which wellness communities trust, more than they do medical and governmental institutions. Another important conviction held by many spiritual subcultures is a holistic 'lay theory of immunity' (Dubé et al. 2013: 1768), where the immune system is viewed as central to overall health and wellbeing and is sacralized (Beres et al. 2021; Kata 2010). Following this argument, a natural diet and lifestyle should be sufficient to ensure good health, and vaccines, like antibiotics, are seen to disrupt and disturb the development of immunity and gut flora rather than support it (Dubé et al. 2013; Wiley et al. 2020).

The panellists often speak of the sacralization of the body and need for purification throughout the livestream, with adherence to a healthy lifestyle as central to 'waking up'. Pascoe/Max says: 'We're being poisoned with our food, the air we breathe, the toxicity in our drinking

water, the phone tower frequency… it's a very big plan'. Fitness coach Christoff urges listeners to give up junk food and coffee. Later in the programme, he describes how vaccination programmes, with 'needles full of poison', will result in mass deaths that will be blamed on COVID, which, as noted above, he claims does not even exist.

10. Influencing by Evangelizing

A key conviction of the Aussie Warriors is the evangelizing need to spread the truth of their mission, to breed, grow and strengthen their 'spiritual tribe', and to widen its influence through hyper-mediatization, the glocal interconnectivity of media platforms and its embedded prevalence in everyday lives. Hyper-mediatization and marketization, primarily through social media, coupled with a growing distrust of mainstream media and authority, has also led to a flourishing of new charismatic authorities, celebrities and internet influencers, who have amassed followers around their brands and are shaping global discourses (Beres et al. 2020b; Campbell and Evolvi 2020; Evans 2020b; Gauthier 2020; Hjarvard 2013; Jain 2020; Ward and Voas 2011). Authority in social media spaces can be self-determined and self-created with 'communicative competency' (Cheong 2016: 84). Everyday personalities also easily attain celebrity status through these media processes (Marshall 2016). As Partridge (2013 cited in Asprem and Dyrendal 2015) stated, occulture is increasingly being popularized, given its emphasis on entrepreneurship, creativity and consumption. This has been accelerated through social media.

Panayides states that 'this time' of 'apocalypse' is being quickened by the speed of information, that has 'reached an all-new high'. Pascoe/Max stresses how 'consciousness has gone like this [brings hands upwards]… [it's] rising so quickly'. He instructs the listeners that: 'The best thing you guys can do out there is share this to as many people as you can'.

11. Selling (Con)spirituality

Many in the wellness industry are precariously employed and have suffered significant financial losses during the pandemic from the cancellation of classes and retreats (Evans 2020b; S. Wilson 2020). Others, including these Aussie Warriors, have tried to monetize themselves (with varying degrees of success) through attaining celebrity status as influencers by peddling conspiracy theories via social media, boosting their status, visibility and ability to market products (CCDH 2021a; Evans

2020b; Guerin 2021; Halafoff et al. 2020b; Nelson 2021). Integrated closely with the global anti-vaccine industry, trading in conspiracy theories and associated goods and services has itself become an industry (Byford 2011; Parmigiani 2021), attracting attention through clicks and likes, and generating significant economic capital by providing new income streams (CCDH 2021b; Satija and Sun 2019). These self-proclaimed experts mobilize social media for 'self-branding' (Driessens 2012: 647) and to 'expand their zone of self-display' (Couldry 2010: 82), and then profit from this attention.

12. Sciencey-Spirituality

Before the pandemic, our preliminary research on spirituality in Australia revealed a new trend of 'sciencey-spirituality', in which spiritual movements and individuals were increasingly drawing on scientific research and pseudo-scientific 'evidence' to bolster their claims of efficacy (Halafoff et al. 2020b). This is evident in initiatives such as the Mind and Life Institute, that seeks to bridge science with contemplative wisdom, and the Netflix series *Goop* on Gwyneth Paltrow's wellness empire. Even David Icke appeals selectively to scientific authority to legitimize his conspiritual ideas (Harambam and Aupers 2021). There is a long and problematic colonial history of reshaping certain, and particularly Asian, spiritual and religious traditions as more rational, and compatible with science and modernity (Gandhi and Wolff 2017), and this has intensified in recent years. This growth of 'sciencey-spirituality' also seems to be attracting more men to spiritual movements. At the same time, as contemporary spirituality and wellness are co-opting science to help substantiate and sell their ideas, (con)spiritualists critique scientific authority (Harambam and Aupers 2021), and particularly COVID-19 vaccination efforts imposed by the state.

Both critiquing and co-opting science is evident in Pascoe/Max's statements. On one hand he states that, 'Bill Gates' vaccine, science, any of these websites like Facebook, Instagram, social media, they're getting absolutely decimated by smart people who are understanding the narrative'. By contrast, later in the programme Max calls for 'a global meditation' as he has his 'chi master sorted', and 'because that's something that works, it's scientifically proven' that 'we can co-create a new reality' and that 'we can win this'.

Conclusions: Spiritual Complexity and Countering Conspirituality

Our study primarily reveals a *spiritual complexity* within spiritual and wellness communities, and within (con)spirituality, that is central to understanding the internal dynamics within them and for countering the problematic dis/misinformation spread by them. The two original (con)spiritual convictions proposed by Ward and Voas (2011), of a *paradigm shift and New World Order*, are evident within the COVID-19 wave of (con)spirituality in Australia, as demonstrated by the Aussie Warriors' broadcast. We have also identified an additional ten convictions, illustrated with examples from the Aussie Warriors' discourse, to further emphasize the complex and at times contradictory dynamics within (con)spiritual movements.

In summary, the clash between those ushering in the New Age and those wielding the New World Order results in *'cosmic war' and spiritual warriors* defending and strengthening their '*spiritual tribes*' in *opposition to mainstream culture*. They do so emboldened by narratives of *exceptionalism and exclusivity*, of secret and suppressed 'ways of knowing' drawing on ancient, utopic wisdom, oriented to both the past *and* future. They also exhibit *privilege* in their spiritual bypassing of the reality and suffering of the pandemic. (Con)spiritualists prioritize *authenticity and autonomy*, experiences, gut feelings and intuition over rational, scientific facts. This all fuels their *vaccine hesitancy and/or refusal*, where vaccines are seen as toxins poisoning their pristine bodies. They spend considerable time *influencing by evangelizing* others, particularly on social media, to see things the (con)spiritualist's one and only right way, *selling (con)spirituality* in a marketized and hyper-mediatized world to raise their statuses and for financial gain. They also increasingly engage in a *sciencey-spirituality*, that both co-opts *and* critiques science and technology, to strengthen and spread their claims, how and when it suits them. Sciencey-spirituality and essentialized gender norms and hypermasculine narratives calling men to spiritual war seem also to be elevating men as leaders within, and drawing more men into, conspirituality.

This complexity is not unique to (con)spirituality, but is akin to trends observable in contemporary religion in late modernity (Furseth 2018a, 2018b; McGuire 2008). The internal spiritual complexities, contradictions, dichotomies and diversity within (con)spirituality, evident in the 12 (con)spiritual convictions, is what this article seeks specifically to stress. Moreover, these 12 convictions may be applied to the study of

(con)spirituality during future crises and/or in different contexts, and they may well be revised or further developed in such cases.

While the profound impact of the global market and economic factors within (con)spirituality need to be acknowledged, and particularly the capacity of conspiritualists to profit at a time of economic downturn faced by many in wellness industries as a result of COVID-19, we question the likelihood that most (con)spiritualists and wellness influencers are primarily or solely motivated by financial reasons, as has been widely argued, but rather that this conviction to sell (con)spirituality is blended with the other strongly held (con)spiritual convictions, as illustrated by the Aussie Warriors' discussion above.

It is also overly simplistic for scholars and state actors to tar all spiritual and wellness communities with the same 'Woo-Anon' or 'militant wellness' brush of going down the irrational rabbit holes of QAnon prophesies and anti-vax sentiments for profit. As Griera et al. note in this Special Issue, while there are disturbing overlaps, the aesthetic and lexicon of QAnon are quite different to that of the wellbeing movement. Highly problematic aspects and overlaps with QAnon, such as beliefs in a reptilian, Satanic cabal of paedophiles, are disturbingly present within (con)spirituality, as evident in the quotations from the Aussie Warriors above, but these beliefs long predate QAnon, and are also intertwined with quite rational and legitimate concerns regarding environmental degradation and climate change. Moreover, if we can better understand the complexities and dynamics within (con)spirituality, including vaccine criticism, hesitancy and refusal, we may better be able to counter its dangerous aspects. Rather than simply dismiss all who participate in alternative practices as 'woo-woo', it seems that a better way forward would be to work with counter conspiritualists, wellness influencers and celebrities, who are willing to address and challenge QAnon, the far-right and other conspiritual elements within their communities (Evans 2020a; S. Wilson 2020). These figures often respect scientific evidence that the benefits of vaccination outweigh its risks and are likely to have a more positive effect on encouraging vaccine uptake in spiritual and wellness communities than medical and state authorities who evoke mistrust among them.

We conclude that the large number of those declaring themselves to be spiritual in Australia are likely to have been exposed to conspiritual and anti-vax views, both on and offline, but that, as with many social movements, those with extreme and dangerous views are more likely to be a small but still disturbing minority. It is, therefore, important not to conflate broader spiritual communities with conspirituality, and instead

aim to better understand the internal diversity and complexity within (con)spirituality, including its underlying and at times legitimate critiques of modernity, as well as the processes of radicalization occurring within these communities. By doing so, it may be possible to address the threats posed by conspirituality during this pandemic in and beyond Australia more effectively, in partnership with spiritual communities and wellness influencers.

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