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Introduction to the Special Issue: (Con)spirituality, Science and COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed not only a life-threatening virus globally but also the spread of conspiracy theories about its origins and impacts. This dis/misinformation circulated within many societies and subcultures, and, notably, among wellness influencers and holistic spiritual communities. Jules Evans was the first to highlight this rise of 'conspirituality' in the online magazine *Medium* in April 2020, followed by the popular and ongoing podcast *conspirituality.net*, hosted by Derek Beres, Matthew Remski and Julian Walker. The term, however, was first used almost a decade earlier in a scholarly article by Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) on 'The Emergence of Conspirituality' in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, to describe the nexus of right-wing conspiracy theory and New Age spirituality at the turn of the twenty-first century. Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2015) then disputed this claim in their article 'Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New Is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?' in the same journal. There is now widespread agreement that New Age conspirituality shared similarities with Western esotericism, the 'cultic milieu' (Campbell 1972) and 'occulture' (Partridge 2004), as Asprem and Dyrendal had argued.

This latest wave of (con)spirituality during the COVID-19 pandemic can again be linked to previous iterations, where the two conspiritual convictions that Ward and Voas (2011: 104) observed—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'—are once again central. We observed this phenomenon in Australia in 2020 (Halafoff et al. 2020a) and then began to study it. Our research on '(Con)spirituality, Science and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Australia: Material and Digital Practices' was supported by a Seed Funding and Small Research Grant from the International Research Network for the Study of Science and Belief in Society, based at the University of Birmingham, and funded by the Templeton Religion Trust.[5]

This project investigated the following research questions: How do spiritual persons and groups in Australia engage with science? How have they done so historically? How are they doing so now, during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the benefits and risks of (con)spiritual practices in Australia? What level of threat does conspirituality pose? The findings of our study are contained in two of the articles in this Special Issue, and both are focused on Australia. The first, by Anna Halafoff, Emily Marriott, Ruth Fitzpatrick and Enqi Weng, examines contemporary (con)spirituality and proposes an additional ten conspiritual

5. The (Con)spirituality in Australia Project website, with details of its research team and outputs, can be viewed here: https://www.conspiritualityaus.com.

convictions to the initial two put forward by Ward and Voas (2011). The second, by Alexandra Roginski and Cristina Rocha, explores the long durée in the negotiations of power between biomedicine and alternative forms of healing in Australia, and how they lead to anti-vaccination cultures in the twenty-first century. Roginski and Rocha demonstrate how periods of rapid socio-political and religious transformation—whether of late modernity or the mid- to late nineteenth century—correlate with contests over ways of finding and knowing truth about the body.

We also convened a (Con)spirituality Colloquium[6] in 2020, with scholars and insider-researchers from Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States, including Voas, Beres, Remski and Walker, and contributors to this Special Issue—Mar Griera, Thomas Aechtner and Bernard Doherty. Griera, Jordi Morales, Anna Clot-Garrell and Rafael Cazarín's article presents findings from a big-data analysis of anti-vax movements on Twitter in Spain. Aechtner and Jeremy Farr's article focuses on the complexities of the connections between religion and vaccine hesitancy in Australia. Finally, Bernard Doherty's article provides a historical account of conspiracy theories in Roman Catholicism, outlining the long genealogies of frequently invoked 'bogeymen'—including Freemasons, communists and Satan—who feature in contemporary conspiracist discourse. Other Colloquium presenters, including Voas and David G. Robertson, published pieces in our (Con)spirituality Series on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) *Religion and Ethics* blog.[7]

Our project team chose to bracket the 'con' in conspirituality to emphasize that there is a much wider spectrum of spiritual beliefs and practices than those that may be deceptive cons and/or those that draw on conspiracy theories, in Australia and internationally. Many of these beliefs and practices are non-controversial and have been used as supports during the COVID-19 pandemic (Halafoff et al. 2020b). Spirituality has a rich history in Australia that long predates the rise of philosophies such as Theosophy and Spiritualism during the mid- to late nineteenth century, and turn of the twenty-first-century New Age and holistic spirituality. According to First Nations scholar Vicki Grieves (2009: v), spirituality in Australia includes First Nations 'knowledges that have informed ways of being, and thus wellbeing, since before the time of colonisation, ways that have been subsequently demeaned and devalued'. She stresses that spirituality 'is also deeply appreciated by

6. Video recordings of the (Con)spirituality Colloquium presentations are available here: https://www.conspiritualityaus.com/recordings.

7. The (Con)spirituality ABC *Religion and Ethics Series* blogs are available here: https://www.conspiritualityaus.com/media-and-publications.

non-Aboriginal people who understand and value the different ontologies (understandings of what it means *to be*), epistemologies (as ways of *knowing*) and axiologies (the bases of values and ethics) that Aboriginal philosophy embodies, as potential value to all peoples' (p. v; emphasis original). A significant number of Australians have identified and continue to identify as spiritual, including those who are spiritual but not religious, and those who are religious and spiritual. This includes 38% of Australian teenagers (Singleton et al. 2021).

While conspiracy theories circulated widely within spiritual communities in 2020 and 2021, including among First Nations (Yunkaporta 2022), it is important to note the 'spiritual complexity' (Halafoff et al. 2022) and internal diversity within these movements. Only a minority of those who identify as spiritual or engage in spiritual practices strongly adhere to conspirituality and are vaccine resistant, and only a minority of those adherents pose a significant risk to society, similar to other extremist movements within broader religious and cultural groups. Descriptors such as 'militant wellness' (Gerrand 2020) or 'woo Anon' (Nelson 2021) are therefore problematic, as not all those who are members of wellness or spiritual communities should be potentially tarred with the same conspiratorial brush. It is also vital to better understand the different sub-cultures that have been spreading dis/misinformation during COVID-19 and the overlaps between them. As Griera et al. (2022) discovered in their big-data Twitter analysis published in this Special Issue, conspirituality in wellness and holistic communities has a different lexicon and aesthetic to far-right movements, although there are some disturbing overlaps between them; this has also been observed in Halafoff et al.'s (2022) case study of the conspiritual 'Aussie Warriors'.

Another key finding across the articles in this Special Issue is that while the economic objective and benefits of 'selling (con)spirituality' (Halafoff et al. 2022) have been highlighted, particularly in discourses of dis/misinformation and vaccine refusal (CCDH 2021), this is but one characteristic among many more deeply rooted convictions within (con) spiritual movements. Wellness influencers seek to heal and convert their followers, through clicks and likes, not only for their own financial gain but due to their evangelizing mission. They feel compelled to share what they perceive as enlightened truths and methods with others for wider societal transformation and healing, not just for personal profit (Halafoff et al. 2022). Again, these convictions long predate this latest wave of conspirituality yet are intensified by the commodification and mainstreaming of spirituality in neoliberal societies through social media (Carrette and King 2005; Jain 2014, 2020; Gauthier 2020).

We have also observed that many (con)spiritual beliefs are intertwined with rational and legitimate critiques of neoliberalism, including

concerns regarding its impacts on personal and planetary wellbeing, and a crisis of trust in state and medical authorities (Aechtner and Farr 2022; Roginski and Rocha 2022). So-called holistic, alternative, ecological and healing practices, drawing on Indigenous and Asian knowledge systems, are increasingly being validated by science. Growing environmental awareness *is* in fact posing threats to certain polluting industries and elites, so this global (con)spiritual 'awakening' is not entirely fabricated. Yet, as our Special Issue queries, why has a global coronavirus pandemic, which scientists argue is linked to the encroachment of humans on animal habitats and environmental degradation, resulted in many within spiritual and wellness communities buying into conspiritual rhetoric? Why didn't they seize this moment to intensify their environmental activism, spiritual paths of renunciation and genuine world-repairing activities (Halafoff 2021)?

We argue that the latter approach is much more long-term and difficult, particularly given that it faces greater opposition by neoliberal, far-right and authoritarian actors, who are fuelling conspiritual discourses and vaccine debates to destabilize societies. In addition, people are currently preoccupied with more immediate fears regarding their health, the rising costs of living, and restrictions on personal freedoms, and these have largely marginalized climate-change activism during the first two years of the COVID-19 crisis. This is perhaps the greatest 'con' of neoliberalism and populism, and conspiracists seem largely unaware that they themselves are being played.

We also query to what degree we are all being distracted by sensationalized media and scholarly preoccupation with the potentially dangerous and violent aspects of (con)spirituality, rather than paying more attention to the non-violent and beneficial lived and everyday ways people are turning to spiritual practices such as yoga, conscious dance, meditation, prayer and alternative medicine to support themselves during this crisis and to resist the pressures of neoliberalism. Finally, we note, alongside scholars Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe (2020), that the study of spirituality is not taken as seriously as that of religious diversity and non-religion in academic and socio-political spheres, given its association with women and 'peace, love and mung beans'. As revealed in this Special Issue, the prominence of men and hypermasculine narratives of spiritual warriors in contemporary conspirituality, and its association with violence, are at last forcing scholars and state actors to take it more seriously, although as we have cautioned above this is far from the whole story. More research on spirituality in Australia and globally is certainly required to investigate its significance, risks and benefits in greater detail.

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