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ESOTERICISM AND ANTISEMITISM – WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Zbyněk Tarant – University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic

The recent years have been marked by an increased debate surrounding the so-called “fake-news”. Surveys show growth in conspiracist patterns of thought in the general society both inside the Czech Republic,¹ which is the home country of this paper’s author, but similar trends are also reported from the United Kingdom and other places.² The Czech Jewish community named “conspiracy theories” as the most important source of antisemitism in its last two reports from 2015 and 2019.³ Yet both in the Czech Republic and abroad, the debate is often narrowed down either to the theories of political science, or issues of “propaganda” and “manipulation” without proper comprehension of the genuine quasi-religious nature of conspiracy myths.

Wouter J. Hanegraaf understands esotericism as a “*knowledge rejected by both religious authorities and scientists*”.⁴ The rather vague term currently provides an umbrella for a wide spectrum of religious and quasi-religious beliefs, practices and movements – Astrology, Homeopathy, Wicca, Satanism, New Age, Occultism, Theosophy, etc. The feeling of rejection from both “mainstream religion” and “mainstream science” pushes the esotericists further away into their own social and subcultural niche, today often referred to as the “alternative scene”. There, they feel safe from both scientific positivism and religious dogmatism, yet they are also exposed to ideas of other inhabitants of the same scene. Even a quick survey of the contemporary esoterica websites in the Czech Republic reveals a surprising mixture of peaceful and humanistic spirituality together with violent and politically charged conspiracy theories – Bilderberg, Illuminati, New World Order, Zionist conspiracy, vaccines, Chemtrails, Reptilians, Satanist conspiracy... In the Czech Republic, this trend is so significant that some of the esoterica websites have found themselves listed as “pro-

1 “Mediální gramotnost je v Česku nízká – pouze čtvrtina dospělé populace v ní dosahuje uspokojivé úrovně,” *STEM/MARK*, available at: <https://www.stemmark.cz/medialni-gramotnost-je-v-cesku-nizka-pouze-ctvrtina-dospele-populace-v-ni-dosahuje-uspokojive-urovne/>.

2 “Brexit and Trump voters more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, survey study shows,” *University of Cambridge*, November 23, 2018, available at: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/brexit-and-trump-voters-more-likely-to-believe-in-conspiracy-theories-survey-study-shows>.

3 “Výroční zpráva o projevech antisemitismu za rok 2015,” *Federation of the Jewish Communities in the CR*, available at: <https://www.fzo.cz/wp-content/uploads/Výroční%3%AD-zpráva-o-projevech-antisemitismu-v-České-republice-za-rok-2015.pdf>.

4 Hanegraaf, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge In Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press 2014). See also: Výroční zpráva o projevech antisemitismu v ČR za rok 2019. *Federation of the Jewish Communities in the CR* 3 June 2020, available at: <https://www.fzo.cz/4241/vyrocní-zpráva-o-projevech-antisemitismu-v-cr-za-rok-2019/>

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Kremlin fake-news” by various democracy watchdogs. For example, research in publicly available databases (Who.is records, Czech Business Registry) reveals that one of the most influential antisemitic websites in the Czech language, titled New World Order Opposition, is run by a professional astrologist.⁵ There is one established and maintained by an individual, who claims to be a “professional spiritual medium”,⁶ while another operates from a “Studio of esoteric sciences”.⁷

The other key term for understanding these trends is “conspiracism”. It was coined by Frank P. Mintz, who used in the 1980s in his research of the American far-right group *Liberty Lobby*.⁸ However, the phenomenon it describes is almost as old as humanity itself and has an important quasi-religious dimension. Conspiracism is a belief that almost any significant historical, political and cultural phenomena can be explained by the existence of a supreme, omnipotent conspiracy of small group of initiated individuals. Conspiracism manifests itself in the form of conspiracy myths (a.k.a. “conspiracy theories”). The very definition of esotericism as a hidden knowledge, which is available only to some “inner circle” (*esoterikós*) of knowledgeable initiated individuals, happens to be the core of almost all conspiracist myths. When building arguments, their methodology uses the entire spectrum of “forbidden knowledge” – alchemy, astrology or numerology (such as when claiming that certain numbers associated with historical events are somehow supposed to have meanings in secret teachings of the Freemasonry or the Kabbalah). When responding to outside criticism, esoterica, such as in the case of “alternative medicine”, tends to also resort to conspiracy myths, accusing the “mainstream”, “Globalists”, “Big Pharma” etc. of trying to destroy or deny their “forbidden knowledge” out of alleged economical or political motivations. The image of an all-seeing eye atop a pyramid, often attributed to the Illuminati, is the very expression of the esoteric nature of conspiracy myths. Not only that it refers to older symbols of Theosophy (which took it from Catholic depictions of the Divine Trinity), it also depicts the belief that the “truth” is hidden from the masses (the base of the pyramid) and one can get closer to the top of the pyramid by means of initiation (i.e.: studying the “alternative facts”). Names of the conspiracist outlets, such as “Hidden Truth”, “Anti-Illuminati”, “Matrix-2001” can be explained as expressions of an anti-System ideology based in concepts of political science, but at the same time, they refer to esoteric notions of initiation and uncovering hidden truths.

5 New World Order Opposition, available at: <http://www.nwoo.org>. The website is run by an astrologist, Jan Korál.

6 Ondřej Brož operates the website www.iluminace.com and also serves as a host in online radio, titled “Free Transmitter” (Svobodný vysílač), which had, among others, serialized the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

7 Website www.matrix-2001.cz is run by Jaroslav Chvátal, who runs it under the umbrella of “Studio of Esoteric Sciences” in Prague.

8 Frank P. Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right – Race, Conspiracy, and Culture* (Westport: Greenwood 1985).

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Like many religious and quasi-religious traditions, the history of Western esotericism is multifaceted. While it can provide positive, enriching spiritual guidance and inspire an entire generation of pacifist activism, its opposition to the “dictatorship” of critical thought can also turn it into a compound of violent ideology. Esoteric conspiracism deliberately rejects the “oppression” of rationality and calls to embrace the secrets and mysteries. Hence the alternative term “mysteriology” was used to describe the conspiracist publications long before the contemporary term “fake news” was formulated. We have seen recently in the case of arson attacks against the 5G towers, which were motivated by a belief that they are responsible for the spread of Covid-19, that even in the 21st century, conspiracism can inspire a violent revolt motivated by spiritual concerns.⁹ Belief that 5G cellular networks could somehow create a new virus inside our bodies surely does not make any sense from a scientific standpoint, but it makes complete sense in a realm where “energy” and “vibrations” are understood metaphysically and not according to the strict laws of thermodynamics.

Esotericism and conspiracism coexist, overlap and influence one another. However, this also means that esotericism is extremely gullible to almost any intentionally fabricated conspiracy myth, which could explain how it is possible for the “peaceful” spiritual currents to embrace antisemitic conspiracist myths. It is because deep at its core, such conspiracy myths are just another form of “alternative knowledge”, which fits well into the already established beliefs about the mystical powers of the Jews.

Esotericism, enter antisemitism...

In fact, the connection between esotericism and political extremism is not new. The role of Arisophism and *völkisch* esotericism in the Nazi ideology is, after all, very well documented¹⁰ and it was not the only case. The relationship of Anthroposophy to Nazism remains a subject of fierce debate.¹¹ The founder of the New Age and originator of the idea of the “Age of Aquarius”, Luce Bailey, was herself expelled from the Theosophical society for her genocidal, anti-Jewish beliefs.¹² The Russian forgery of the so-called Protocols of the Elders of Zion in 1895 uses story elements inspired by esotericism and mysticism to increase its persuasiveness and takes inspiration in that from a German *völkish* writer and plagiarizer Herman Gödsche.

9 Hern, Alex. 5G conspiracy theories fuel attacks on telecoms workers. *The Guardian* 7 May 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/may/07/5g-conspiracy-theories-attacks-telecoms-covid>

10 Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (New York: NYU Press 1993).

11 Staudenmeier, Peter. *Between Occultism and Nazism – Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Brill 2014).

12 Levy, Richard S. (ed.): *Antisemitism - A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc. 2005), Band 1, see the entries: “Aquarius, Age of” (p. 30), “Invocation, The Great” (p. 351-352), “Jewish Force”. (p. 375).

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Next time, when reading Alex Jones's InfoWars and David Icke's blogs or seeing David Dees' cartoons,¹³ let us take a minute to appreciate that quasi-religious aspect – the conspiracist multiverse, in which intelligent aliens – be it “Reptillians” or “Announaki” to name just two of David Icke's most famous constructs – go at great lengths to interfere into the menial daily affairs of the terrestrials.¹⁴ Let us stop for a minute to realize that whatever our thoughts about these “psychedelic” myths are, their recipients tend to believe them and modify their important daily decisions according to them. Let us also note the fact that such beliefs can be hardly labeled “left-wing” or “right-wing”. Not only the Nazis, but also the Communist Soviet Union, despite its teaching of “scientific materialism” was fascinated by occultism and psychotronics,¹⁵ dreaming about “supernatural weapons” and telepathic “intelligence gathering”. Even today, Putin's Chief of Staff claims to be in possession of a mysterious future-telling device, called “nooscope”.¹⁶ Alexander Dugin, often dubbed as the ideologue of contemporary Russia, builds his geopolitical doctrines in a belief about the clash of two “occult conspiracies”, replacing the notions of “left-wing” and “right-wing” by a dichotomy of two mystical groups: “Atlantians” and “Euroasians”.

The resurgence of esoteric conspiracism presents a new set of challenges for us as researchers of antisemitism. Political science and sociology alone cannot grasp the complexity of this phenomenon and must be further complemented by the approach of religious studies. Conspiracism cannot be narrowed down to a mere political movement. It is not a plain social movement, nor is it a subculture in the anthropological sense. We may have to think about it in terms of New Religious Movements. For this purpose, let us invite more religious scientists, who deal with New Religious Movements into our research groups, panels and conferences. Let us stop cringing about the rather psychedelic nature of esotericism and start taking the phenomenon with all the seriousness it requires. *“The temptation to ignore [David] Icke, or to contemptuously dismiss him as a crazy charlatan, should be resisted, because antisemitism and its off-shoots have never been rational.”*¹⁷ Everything we know about radicalization among young Muslims, may come in handy, when studying the reasons, why do Europeans of all ages take the risks of traveling into the Eastern Ukrainian conflict zones.¹⁸ One of the most serious revelations in my own research of online

13 *David Dees Illustration*, available at: <https://www.ddees.com>.

14 Gardner, Mark. David Icke's ages old New Age antisemitism. Community Security Trust, available at: <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2017/01/05/david-ickes-ages-old-new-age-antisemitism>

15 Rosenthal, Bernice Glatzer (ed.). *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Cornell University Press 1997).

16 Ivshina, Olga. Nooscope mystery: The strange device of Putin's new man Anton Vaino. *BBC* 19 August 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37109169>.

17 Gardner, Mark. David Icke's ages old New Age antisemitism. Community Security Trust, available at: <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2017/01/05/david-ickes-ages-old-new-age-antisemitism>

18 UNIAN: Czech Republic probing almost 20 citizens for fighting against Ukraine in Donbas, *Kiyv Post* 2 July 2019, available at: <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/unian-czech-republic-probing-almost-20-citizens-for-fighting-against-ukraine-in-donbas.html>

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antisemitism in the Czech Republic, was the close relationship between the Czech antisemitic outlets, esoterica websites and pro-Kremlin paramilitary groups.¹⁹ At the same time, let us approach contemporary esotericism with open minds and study the exact factors, which turn the often peaceful and apolitical individual spirituality into an organized, violent political ideology.

19 Tarant, Zbyněk. “From Donetsk to Tel-Aviv: Czech Antisemitic Movements Respond to the Russian-Ukrainian War,” in *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism: The Dynamics of Delegitimization*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2019), p. 414-453. See also: Tarant, Zbyněk: “Vladimir Putin’s ‘War on Fascism’ and the Russian Links to Far-Right and Antisemitic Parties in Europe” In: Kahman, Bodo; Grimm Marc et al.: *Antisemitismus im 21. Jahrhundert – Virulenz einer alten Feindschaft in Zeiten von Islamismus und Terror (Europäisch-jüdische Studien – Beiträge 36)*. (Brusel/Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg 2018), p.: 389-410. For the issue of uses and abuses of antisemitism in the Russian-Ukrainian war, see: Sokol, Sam. *Putin's Hybrid War and the Jews: Antisemitism, Propaganda, and the Displacement of Ukrainian Jewry* (Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy 2020).