

An Alternative Theodicy? Conspiracies Theories as a Theological Problem

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Abstract: When religion and science lose their cultural significance, efficacy or attractivity in explaining the tragedy of natural disasters, an alternative proposal arises, that of conspiracy theories. This article seeks to interpret the contemporary popularity of conspiracy thinking as a kind of alternative theodicy and a serious challenge for Christian theology. For this purpose, the article presents an overview of current discussions regarding the relation between religion and conspiracy theories, with particular emphasis on the theological dimension of the problem. An examination of affinities and differences between science, religious explanation and conspiracy mentality helps to better understand the roots and main features of conspiracism in the contemporary world. It also allows us to revisit an old accusation that finds traditional religion culpable of susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking. This view can be contrasted with another perspectives which links the culture of conspiracy with new and esoteric spiritual movements or with modern rationalism or postmodern culture of suspicion. All these considerations show the limitations of simplified dialectics of religion and rationality and highlight some essential characteristics of a theological reflection on natural disasters and theodicy. The issues discussed bring up some ideas regarding the credibility of Christianity and point to the possible contribution of theology in the current discussion on conspiracism.

Keywords: problem of evil, conspiracism, theology, beliefs, epistemology, religion, credibility of christian faith.

Contribution: This article reviews an interdisciplinary discussion on the relation between religion and conspiracy theories, comparing philosophical, sociological and psychological perspectives that are not typically discussed together. On this basis, it seeks to offer some novelty to theological readings of conspiracism, the subject that remains almost nonexistent in theological reflection and in the dialogue between faith and science.

Use of AI: AI was not used in any way in the preparation or production of this article.

Introduction

Theological, philosophical, and scientific methods for coping with natural disasters and evil is not a new problem, nevertheless, recent years have revealed new limitations of scientific and theological ways of satisfying human doubts and sorrows regarding these crises. It seems that neither theological consolation nor scientific explanation can quell the anxiety of an increasing number of people facing catastrophes and suffering. There is, however, a third approach to the problem rising in western societies: the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Subjects of this third approach include tsunamis, California wildfires, floods in the Central Europe and perhaps most discussed, the COVID pandemic. In all of these cases, the answer to the question “why’ is found in the idea of conspiracy.

In the last few decades, conspiracy theories have been analysed numerous times from a historical, psychological and social science point of view. It has also become a serious philosophical problem. Furthermore, there have been certain attempts to situate conspiracism in the theodicean frame of reference, as an answer to tragic events. Some authors have attempted to describe the complex relationship between science, religion and conspiracy theories (CTs) in the context of evil and suffering (Hernáiz 2011; Robertson, Asprem, and Dyrendal 2018, 38–39; Bubert and Krischer 2023a). CTs could be seen “as mythologies of evil revealing secret knowledge about the origins and nature of evils befalling humanity and Nature” (Dyrendal 2013, 220).

Unfortunately, even if the comparison of those three sources of meaning or heuristic techniques seems plausible, it still requires further development. The main reason is that theology remains irrelevant in CT discussions and religion is mainly studied as a social phenomenon, a specific psychological characteristic or a particular epistemology, and not as a doctrine or worldview that can be taken seriously (Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem 2018; Piraino, Pasi, and Asprem 2023). On the other hand, theology itself does not comment CT problem.

I will therefore try to outline the theological challenges that arise from conspiracy explanations of disturbing events. If we perceive CTs as a kind of alternative theodicy, it could help identify characteristic features of theological answers to evil. At the same time, theology and religion must confront the popular accusations of contributing to the proliferation of CTs or being identical to CTs themselves. This problem warrants a discussion on what conspiracism reveals about Christian thinking, and vice versa – how theology could help understand conspiracy mentality. It could also be interesting to see what such a comparison shows about theodicy and the problem of evil.

The paper contains four parts. It starts with a review from the popular perspective on close familiarity between conspiracism and religion. The second chapter discusses the role of more esoteric religiosity. The third chapter comments on the modern roots and contexts of the problem and finally, a theological reflection is proposed in the paper's conclusion.

The abundance of multidisciplinary studies on the problem of CTs and religion forces us to limit this analysis to a few dominant and recent trends that focus on natural evil and Christianity. This also requires a synthesis of different perspectives and methodologies and the necessary generalisation of more nuanced social research findings.

In studies on conspiracism the mere issue of its definition is intensively debated. Conscious of this difficulty, it seems appropriate to work with an intuitive concept of a narrative which is alternative to the official and dominant explanation, and tries to rationalise negative events by postulating the existence of secret plots of powerful and sinister groups. Worth noting is the fact that conspiracism redefines the usual boundaries of traditional theodicy. Natural disasters habitually

interpreted as a natural or physical evil now become moral evil, claimed to be caused by deliberate acts of human agents.

1. Legacy or substitute of religion

Since modern social sciences started to investigate the nature of CTs, the dominant assumption seems to perceive conspiracy mentality as an atavistic, magical, irrational, and weird phenomenon. The most famous expression of this tendency remains Karl Popper's statement about "the secularization of a religious superstition" as a hermeneutic key to CTs. For the philosopher, mysterious plots are nothing less than a new incarnation of capricious ancient gods with their arbitral evilness and cruelty. It signifies a next stage in the naïve search for a secret agency and pursuit for someone to be guilty (Popper 1971, 95). Despite criticism, Popper remains a symbol for the view of CTs as a surrogate or consequence of religious beliefs¹.

1.1. An overview of similarities

What does this identify? In this chapter, two main perspectives regarding the parallels between religion and CTs are presented

From the first point of view, it is simply the same psychological, social and intellectual profile of the believers in religion and conspiracies. In simple terms, as some positivist or rationalist mentality could suggest, religion is the matter of obscurantism, credulity, susceptibility to authorities and lack of critical thinking. This perception seems to be presupposed in the numerous sociological and psychological analyses on the positive correlation between religiosity, lower education or far-right convictions and trust in the CTs. Sometimes, an additional psychological factor is present, such as the paranoid or narcissistic personality, which

¹ For example, it's characteristic that in spite of quite a subtle approach to the problem, Bubert and Krischer (2023a) still reduce theological explanations of epidemy to the idea of divine punishment, as if the unique difference with regard to conspiracy consists in a replacement of arbitrary and dangerous agent that causes the catastrophe.

claims that the entire world is conspiring against them. On the other hand, it is also low self-esteem which makes people more susceptible to accept knowledge shown as secret and accessible only for some selected individuals. Many analyses' suggest the positive correlation between the adherence to CTs and factors such as fundamentalism, conservatism, religiosity, lower education and antidemocratic or populist convictions (Stasielowicz 2022; Stockemer and Bordeleau 2025; Jabkowski, Domaradzki, and Baranowski 2025).

Consequentially, even if it is not expressed explicitly in social research, there is a prevailing impression that CTs should be regarded in strong opposition to knowledge, rationality and education. Therefore, with the passage of time and the development of humanity, conspiracy beliefs survive principally among the poor, religious, uneducated and the lower classes. From this point of view, a relationship between better education, the disappearance of religion and extinction of CTs appears to be obvious.

The second way of perceiving the affinities between conspiracism and religion is more sophisticated. It is not only a simple constatation of their statistical coincidence, but an inquiry of its causes (Keeley 2007; 2018; Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer 2013; Wood and Douglas 2018; Hidalgo 2022, 147–49; Frenken, Bilewicz, and Imhoff 2023, 140–42; Ide 2024, 39–68, 109–17; Hesse and Weidemann 2025, 1–9).

In light of these arguments, it seems that an essential ingredient of both worldviews is a kind of fundamental and prerational attitude to reality or a basic act of faith. The most important cause is an invalid, 'crippled' epistemology. The followers of both conspiracy and religion are expected to accept some beliefs without sufficient evidence and argumentation. They contest the apparent, superficial reality suggesting that there is something beyond it. A tendency to propose arbitrary selections of data ignoring information that does not fit is considered another common feature. Any lack of knowledge and events which still do not have a satisfactory explanation feed both religious and conspirational reasoning. It could be said that conspiracy is a variation of the theological "God of gaps" concept due to the particular addressing of explicatory gaps.

Another suggested similarity concerns convictions unable to be proved, with no criteria of falsification and with a complex system of mitigating all counterarguments via circular reasoning and fallacies. Every counterargument can be transformed into an additional proof which only makes the theory more sophisticated. There is a strong mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecies and a serious tendency for confirmation bias. All the explanatory challenges and any kind of proof against the existence of conspirators could be identified simply as a confirmation of how malicious and smart they are. According to some scholars working on CTs, the same logic is employed in religion. How Providence acts in the world appears similarly mysterious and forces believers to elaborate comparable justifications for the inscrutable expression of God's will. It is only in a distant, eschatological-like future that it may become clear who was right.

One could add a series of further comparisons. Firstly, it is the same compensatory need of justice, security and meaning in regards to disasters and evil which is precisely the subject of theodicy. Secondly, some authors mention a tendency to detect illusory patterns or causal relations in the world and so-called "hypersensitive agency detection", an excessive inclination to interpret events as provoked by an intelligent agent. This is yet another way to argue for significant correlations between the idea of Providence and conspiracy, as they share the same idea of secret, undetectable and omnipresent agency as well as intuition about a fundamental holistic order of the universe in which there is no room for chance, and everything is connected. Finally, it may be stated that what is at stake is the question of belonging – being part of a community with its own sources of knowledge, an internal system of authorities and a feeling of access to the hidden meaning that escapes the less-aware majority.

1.2. Some possible reservations

We have seen a brief overview of some theories that describe conspiracism as a close relative or at least a deformed offshoot of religion. Even if this picture should be nuanced, it still serves to detect a real tendency in social sciences and culture. This interpretation requires serious investigation.

The first doubt is of methodological nature. It seems difficult to confirm such an interpretation in a sociological or psychological way without falling into excessive generalisations. Results depend on many variants, and statistical coincidence differs from causal relation. We must limit ourselves to some examples. Firstly, even when diversity of religious beliefs is ignored, there is a difference in the attitude to CTs between traditional, more organised religions and an imprecise idea of spirituality or non-institutionalized religiosity; between people who practise and those who only declare religious identity. Secondly, an interesting factor is the presumed idea of God. It could be suggested that people believing in a rigorous and punishing Divinity are more susceptible to CTs than devotees of a merciful and loving God. Another variable is fundamentalism, which is also difficult to define² (Łowicki et al. 2022; Schwaiger et al. 2023; Bubert and Krischer 2023b; Jedinger and Siegers 2024; Frenken, Bilewicz, and Imhoff 2023, 149–52; Zawistowska et al. 2025).

In reality, what should be taken into account is the possibility to accept such general and vague concepts of religion and CTs in order to propose any universal and rigorous theory. That is why some criticise this methodological generalisation of religion and CTs because it seems to be linked to serious prejudices. The wide category of CTs is a useful label to stigmatise some groups of people by defining them in quasi-medical or psychological terms as that of a ‘conspiracist mindset’ or paranoiacs. It may also be used as a powerful political tool in regards to social classes, a way to obtain recognition and delegitimize opponents or just as a way to silence some serious concerns. Furthermore, the concept of religion applied to the comparison with CTs is usually limited to negative elements. In this sense, categorising some worldviews as religious or conspiratorial can perform the same function: to deprive a certain discourse of legitimacy in participating in public debate and to absolve oneself from taking given beliefs seriously. Such a mechanism has a political, but also an academic application (Aupers 2012, 22–25; Dentith 2018; Aupers and Harambam

² For instance, according to Jedinger and Siegers (2024, 394, 403), a dogmatic, fundamentalist atheist who interprets religious doctrines in a very literal way can be more inclined to believe in CTs than a moderate believer of an organised religion.

2018, 49–51; Hagen 2018; Robertson 2022; Hesse and Weidemann 2025, 9–18).

The cultural diagnosis can be amplified with historical perspective. Bubert and Krischer (2023a) argue against the simplified linear relation between science, religion and CT. In many cases, CTs arise when the religious explanation is no longer satisfactory. Furthermore, curious examples of epidemiological discoveries in the late Middle Ages or pseudo-scientific components of XIX age's racism show that selected scientific data could help CT believers provide technical explanations for how the plot works. For instance, without a basic understanding of how the epidemic spreads, there are no instruments to accuse someone.

Indeed, the majority of contemporary CTs are rooted in some scientific or science-fiction imagination and employ certain technological details to gain more credibility. The recent issue of vaccination is a good example of this and the syncretic way the CTs use science sounds similar to the same process visible in new religious movements (Rapport 2016). One may respond (correctly) that this is a selective usage of arbitrarily chosen ideas and the science cannot be found culpable. If this is the case, why are comparable reservations not raised when discussing religion? Is this not rather an exploitation of certain aspects of religion than an actual affinity with it?

These are reasons to doubt the unambiguous and direct link between religion and CT. Nevertheless, such a comparison is still useful regarding our problem. It diagnoses certain human anxieties, questions and needs that science cannot fulfil, and which are usually associated with religion. At the same time, it accurately shows how CTs parasitise on certain aspects of religiosity.

2. Conspiracism and the new religious movements

We have mentioned some differences between various kinds of religious identities and their connections with CTs. Some scholars focus on new religious movement and offer a perspective which could be explanatory for theodicy and the problem of evil (Taguieff 2005, 187–224; Ward and

Voas 2011; Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer 2013, 3–4; Dyrendal 2013; 2016; Aspren and Dyrendal 2018; Robertson, Aspren, and Dyrendal 2018, 38–41; Aspren and Dyrendal 2015; Robertson and Dyrendal 2018; Aupers and Harambam 2018, 58–63). Regardless of the details of terminology concerning New Age, esoterism or new religious movements, there are some interesting theological ideas present behind the problem.

Despite all the differences, what kind of affinity could be mentioned between CTs and new, esoteric religions?

The fundamental idea of an essential connection between all beings and spiritual, hardly detectable agency seems to penetrate both phenomena. This radical unity of the social and physical world and, a continuity between nature and human beings also creates a fertile context for conspiracy mentality according to which “nothing happens by chance”.

On the other hand, new religious movements tend to impose a fundamental questioning of apparent reality. The truth is hidden; it is necessary to remove the veil in order to discover a deeper level of reality. Such an attitude supports a strong distrust regarding traditional institutions or authorities and invites development of an alternative web of gurus or prophets. The importance of charismatic, “prophetic” leaders in contrast to traditional religious or scientific establishment is a distinctive mark of CTs and new spiritualities. It also creates identity based on following a separate, stigmatized point of view and a sense of belonging to privileged sources of knowledge. Consequently, we can mention a singular way of how this adherence is pictured. It is something more than normal religious conversion. It is rather a kind of illumination, revelation, awakening, a new horizon of perception and another state of consciousness. A young man must give up the naïve, childish way of thinking, challenge authority and discover the brutal reality. Finally, it is a price to be paid for being initiated as all who know the truth are destined to rejection and to live a hard life of nonconformism. This process has something in common with traditional rites of passage and a symbolic death of the old self (Cueille 2020, 205–22).

Another category common to both realities is the way history is interpreted. While the traditional religions tend to mitigate exaggerated

eschatological comprehension of given moments of human history, the CTs and new spiritualities are rather inclined to radical interpretations. Sometimes they are millenarist in an optimistic sense, such as in the first forms of the “New Age” movement. More often however, particularly in the case of CTs, there is a strong apocalyptic and profoundly pessimistic atmosphere. The final confrontation with the complot is approaching, time is running out and possibilities of acting against the conspiracy are evermore limited because of the growing power of the conspirators. Such pressure easily justifies a kind of moral panic or lower argumentation standards.

Finally, we come across what could be discussed is a gnostic or Manichean component implied in such worldviews. Firstly, there is a radical difference between a group of conscious or enlightened individuals who have penetrated the truth and the blind, naïve or manipulated masses with their superficial way of thinking. Secondly, according to the basic dualistic intuition, the world is essentially corrupted, dominated by evil and radically divided between bad and good (Ide 2024, 169).

Discussing the problem of theodicy, it should be observed that according to esoteric spirituality, evil appears as a natural part of the system and the personal moral responsibility is instead secondary. What is at stake is the comprehension of the universe and living in a more conscious way. In this way, it is possible to follow the main idea of Taguieff (2005) and Stawiszyński (2024) who situate a contemporary popularity of esoterism as seeking meaning when traditional religious and scientific worldviews have been rejected. From the Christian point of view, the main feature of new religious movements is the fact that personal divinity and a classical concept of providence tend to be replaced by more pantheistic or immanent spirituality. To generalise, one may discuss if the connection between CTs and new religions is not the shift from personal confidence in God to impersonal knowledge of the universe and some spiritual or magical techniques for making evil less painful. In this sense, one could indeed speak of a superstitious dimension of CTs. Finally, the alternative, non-mainstream, syncretic and if one may say so, heretical nature of CTs describe not only their relation to traditional religiosity but also to science.

3. Conspiracy theories and the modern mind

But what if the religious identification of CTs is not the only one? There is in fact another, extremely interesting perspective which is, to some extent, the opposite. What if CTs are not the last remains of archaic, prescientific and superstitious mentality, but the ultimate expression of modernity – a kind of “hypermodernity” as Cueille (2020) suggests? As odd as this proposition may sound, it is discussed by many authors and seems worthy of attention.

Firstly, is it entirely true to say that the progress of science and education alongside decay of religion eliminate CTs? A simple look at secular western society is enough to doubt this. Some thinkers like Taguieff (2005; Stawiszyński (2021) or Han (2022, 71 -92; 2023, 9, 59) suggest an opposing view, They say that it is exactly the decadence of traditional religious values and narratives, also in the context of theodicy, which gives space to CTs. The modern scientific worldview has dethroned religion but has failed to establish a new sense of reality. Human beings, although capable of obtaining an abundance of detailed data, find themselves helpless when faced with the purpose of the universe, their own lives and that of suffering. All that remains is a cold and blind world of scientific determinism. When traditional authorities fail and the promise of rationalism does not satisfy human desires, CTs and esoterism become attractive answers in this cultural milieu and a way to rationalise bad things that happen. The declared disenchantment of the world brought us the situation in which any kind of new re-enchantment is desperately sought (Aupers 2012, 30). Taguieff (2005) argues that the failure of the grand promises of modern rationalism results in the return of the irrational and the mythical in their eclectic and degenerate forms. Stawiszyński (2024) discusses the legacy of new atheism as a great deception: the fight against religion has not produced more rationality in society. On the contrary, the erosion of Christianity has opened the door to conspiracy, sectarian and irrational mentality. The positivist dream of rationality replacing religion has failed (Aupers 2012, 25).

Secondly, there is a more general discussion on the root of conspiracy thinking and its relation to the Enlightenment, modern and postmodern cultural milieu (Taguieff 2005; Aupers 2012; Cueille 2020; Aupers and Harambam 2018).

The first question deals with the accusation of holism, causal-thinking, or agency detection. Is it a real description of a naïve and religious mind or rather an accurate characteristic of modern, scientific or positivist mentality? Trust in reason and confidence in the ability to find explanations for everything that happens sounds rather rationalist than fideistic. In the same context can be seen a tendency of some scientists to adopt a prophetic, quasi-religious tone, attempting to apply scientific authority to broader human experiences, including moral or political issues. On the other hand, a kind of ‘esoteric’ or elitist temptation is also present in science (Navarro 2016).

The second approach is more complex. It deals with the fundamental distrust of institutions and authorities. As Aupers (2012, 24) affirms “In contemporary culture, trusting authorities and believing ‘official’ stories formulated by the state, politicians or the media are easily dismissed as a sign of naivety”.

The desire to examine reality on one’s own without blind obedience to authority is a very modern attitude. Nevertheless, the optimism on human intelligence is only part of its origin. Another is dominating suspiciousness. It started with rational scepticism, but quickly gained another dimension to transform into radical epistemological individualism which rejects all authority and pretends to check all the information by its own, personal investigation (Guillon 2019; Navarro 2024). Furthermore, since Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, the main enterprise of human sciences is to contest the dominant, imposed or official narrative. “Reality is not what it seems” and “Who benefits from this?”, the mocked slogans of CT believers are also accurate mottos of modern philosophy, sociology or psychology. The postmodern reflection on the problem of knowledge, power, and authority is the next point of this dynamic. The search for real intentions or hidden explanations become the paradigm of the modern mind when it comes to study cultural, social, political and psychological problems.

This sensibility has also dominated the arts and even popular culture. The importance of Kafka as the representative writer of our age is not by chance, similarly as the permanence of so many iconic works like *X-files* or *Matrix* (Delouvé and Dieguez 2021, 27–59). As Boltanski (2014) suggests, the popularity of spy and detective stories, dated back to the XIX century, can be interpreted as a significant expression of the *Zeitgeist*. The fundamental suspicion about the official, alleged or apparent perception of reality is combined with a strong confidence in one's own epistemic ability and equally radical scepticism about the authorities, institutions and official knowledge. Similarly, the medical and psychological elaboration of the idea of paranoia fits well in this specific, cultural context because it may also involve complex interpretations combining apparently unrelated facts. Once again, the typical conspiracist image of “connecting the dots” seems to have a strong relation with popular detective iconography. To follow a CT is nothing more than a kind of inquiry, realised alone and against the dominating theory.

Detecting a paradoxical heritage of modern suspiciousness is also another form of demystifying reality and challenging the usual narrative, which is another level of suspicion and questioning. Nevertheless, it sounds plausible to think of CTs not only as a serious lack of rationality, but also as a pathologic excessiveness of critical thinking, that is something hyper- or postmodern, not necessarily premodern and archaic. From this point of view, it is not the religion but the modernity which supplies conditions favourable for CTs: paranoidly sceptical thinking, rejection of authority, and undermining traditional ways of coping with natural evil. In addition, the contestation of official institutions and traditional authorities affects the state, science and the Church in the same way, leading to the emergence of alternative and suspicious narratives and the destruction of social networks.

4. A theological perspective

Is Christian theology able to offer any further comprehension of CTs? Although theological literature dealing with the subject is limited, it seems reasonable to mention some possible perspectives.

The first one is associated with the fundamental presumption of CTs which is very different from the theological one. According to CTs, evil is powerful, well-organised, gifted with prodigious intelligence and able to construct amazingly complex plans and structures. The conspiracies sound like an echo of the popular image of villains as demonic geniuses with a fascination for their own intellectual skills. However, from the Christian point of view, this vision is erroneous because of the privation theory of evil and the strong tradition of perceiving sin as a matter of chaos and anarchy; rather an absence of good than an underground state or parallel society. Another element of Christian reflection on evil is the internal hostility, hatred and satanic hubris which made nefarious collaboration impossible (Ide 2024, 89–91). For Christianity, evil is rather “banal” according to Arendt’s sense; not almighty nor fascinating (Kiehl 2016, 51–93). The Christian tradition uses expressions such as “mystery of evil” or *mysterium iniquitatis* because of the lack of rationality and disorder. It doesn’t suggest any sophisticated complexity of sin.

It could be interesting to compare how the metaphor of a “cipher” is used in theology and CTs. For Christianity, isolated occurrences of evil are a serious challenge but what is mysterious is their meaning in the whole providential plan which is still good and rational. Deciphering the sense of evil is about understanding its place in history ruled by a loving God. It is a difficult task, but it does not question the fundamental hope of the meaning of reality (Journet 1963, 214–89). The situation is different in the case of CTs where the activity of decoding leads to rejection of official or traditional explanation and results in a radically different interpretation of the whole reality. Christian theodicy tries to make sense of a given tragedy by situating it in the complete vision of history which is essentially positive. A CT believer, however, starts from difficult events presuming that anomalies such as the COVID pandemic or a tsunami reveal wicked

machinations and become hermeneutical keys to ‘real history’. They are treated as moments in which hidden structures are revealed. This would mean that tragedies perform a revelatory function and permit us to build an alternative vision of history.

Those observations could sound absurd for people who reject metaphysical concepts of evil. Nevertheless, the consequences of this assumption are serious. In contrast to conspiracy mentality, Christianity preserves hope and optimism. The world is not entirely corrupted, nor dualistically divided between the forces of good and evil. Evil is associated with lies and falsehood, but at the same time, Christians believe that after Christ, the conspiracy of evil was exposed and no longer has power over them. In this context, one could quote Rene Girard’s intuition: “the things hidden since the foundation of the world” are no more unknown. The mechanisms of violence have been uncovered (Girard 1987).

That is why from the Christian perspective CTs deny hope and assume a Manichean vision of humanity, refuting a fundamental confidence and charity between human beings (Ide 2024, 96–99, 157–70). CTs could be interpreted as the highest form of gossip which destroys social relations, damages reputation and creates an atmosphere of suspicion. The fundamental trust (*fides*) that allows society to exist as a whole being undermined. (Arbuckle 2022).

In fact, the problem is a moral one. Even if theology indicates the existence of so-called structures of sins, it also emphasizes the necessity of personal conversion. Of course, it seems that the explication of natural evil as a divine punishment suffers strong theological criticism. Nevertheless, the question of personal responsibility and interpreting the crisis as an opportunity for spiritual renovation belongs to the core of the Christian message. At the same time, CTs tend to exclude the individual responsibility, sometimes by scapegoating or by some kind of determinism. There are always others to blame (Ide 2024, 149–50).

Another fundamental issue is the epistemological one. Christian anthropology and theology of revelation provoke questions about the accessibility of knowledge. Even if we accept the idea that CTs and Christianity share the intuition that there is something beyond perceived reality, the consequences differ. Conspiracy mentality presumes that this

mystery could be fully discovered by personal effort, while for a Christian, the right attitude towards the universe is acceptance of these mysteries and obscurity of parts of God's plan (Pollack and Hillenbrand 2023, 463–64). The first consequence of this is a kind of gnostic elitism of CT and a more egalitarian perspective of Christianity. Furthermore, the Christian faith does not find it impossible to accept ignorance, the complexity of the world, temporal lack of knowledge on causes of the events or the presence of chance as something which does not contradict Providence (Ide 2024, 134–47).

The experience of COVID showed this difference clearly. The main idea of Christian reflection concerned a lesson in humility and a realisation that, contrary to modern technocratic thinking, humanity does not understand or control everything. Meanwhile conspiracism concentrated on the fundamental refusal to accept the unknown, the mysterious and any personal culpability. CTs revoke the idea of mystery and contingency as a normal part of human life (Taguieff 2005, 84–90; Han 2022, 85–86). It is possible to know and to control, but the question is who possesses and conceals the authentic explanation. Finally, the shared concern here is that of human capability. While theology notes its limitations, conspiracy thinking defends the omnipotence of secret groups and their own cognitive ability (Hernáiz 2011, 42). In this way, CTs do not seem to be a theodicy in the classical sense because what is being defended is not the goodness of God, but a human ability to control nature and to explain every tragic event. These mechanism could be compared to ancient Greek mythology which used to blame all evil on the gods and fate in order to defend a positive view of human beings (Moeller 2019, 71–81).

Finally, there is another issue worth noting. Particularly Catholic ecclesiology and theology of Revelation, with its concept of tradition and Magisterium, stress the legitimate and even necessary function of epistemic authority. Against epistemic individualism, truth is discovered in the community, through dialogue and not alone. To some extent, the message we receive is trustworthy because of the ecclesiastical framework of its transmission. Christianity is a faith of trust: to God who reveals the Truth, to the Church and to man, always able to convert. This is a fundamental assumption of theological epistemology but also an

increasingly defective element of the scientific worldview. The tension between radical epistemic individualism and the claim of experts or scientific consensus seems to be the main root of CTs. A theological consideration on the foundations of tradition, authority and community shows how the problem of basic epistemic trust is urgent and insoluble in a radical, sceptical and individualist world. Therefore, the problem of authority and basic trust could be a shared concern of science and religion (Polanyi 1946).

Conclusion

From the wider perspective, the theodicy and explanation of evil is a matter of the meaning of life and truth. It is the question of who can be trusted when the world starts to collapse. Natural disasters and all kinds of evil test the foundation of worldviews and their ability to face difficult situations.

In this context, CTs pose a challenge for both religion and science and could be examined as a competitive heuristic or epistemic strategy which establishes alternative sources of meaning. An individualistic scepticism, a Manichean pessimism and a syncretism constitute the most problematic features of this theodicy. Its answer to the problem of evil is simplistic and determined by a tendency to blame others. If science, according to its methodological limitations, asks about causes and effects of disasters, people search for the meaning. CTs address such questions by not commenting on the meaning but on guilt, in a way that absolves the believers themselves of responsibility offering some consolation.

In this context, a Christian perspective could still be attractive. The meaning of evil is something more than the culpability of our enemies. A critical discussion with CTs provokes reflection upon the credibility of Christian faith. Firstly, there is an invitation to purify or eliminate some conspiratory ideas that parasite on religious thinking and preaching but also to show how faith can immunise against CTs or give a critical response to them. Secondly, the challenge of CTs is an opportunity both for science and religion to revisit their mutual relationship because the real winner

of their conflict is precisely conspiracism. Fourthly, a comparison of the theodicean and epistemic elements of CTs permit the emphasis of crucial elements of the Christian worldview and its attractiveness. Finally, this sort of ‘competition’ for the best answer on the problem of evil reveals the limitations of science in its radically positivist variant. However, this subject is too significant and deeply inscribed in the human heart to be neglected. When it is left unattended, when traditional responses are negated, what remains is an empty space exposed to more dangerous and destructive phenomena.

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