

CONSPIRACY THEORIES DURING CORONAVIRUS TIMES – THE SAPLINGS OF A NEW GNOSTICISM INSIDE THE CHURCH

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ABSTRACT. Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, we have been bombarded with a constant stream of conspiracy theories and fake news regarding the coronavirus, vaccines, 5G radiation, microchips. Some of these theories have circulated only inside fringe communities on the internet, but most have been transmitted very intensely amongst the faithful, and some have made it up to the highest levels of the Church hierarchy.

The question we would like to address in this article is why do Christians succumb and are so likely to transmit to others such statements, whose falsity is blatantly obvious to anybody with a very basic high-school physics education. It is our opinion that this pro-conspiracy attitude is the syndrome of a very incomplete catechization and of a resurgence of gnostic heretical thinking, encouraged by the new social media communication tools.

We will begin with a brief review of Gnosticism, of what made it so popular at the beginning of the Christian era, and of what brought about its demise. We will then show that the same mechanism that was at work in the Gnostic thinking responsible for the propagation and acceptance of conspiracy theories.

Keywords: Gnosticism, Conspiracy Theories

Gnosticism

The first two centuries after Christ were characterized by the antiquity equivalent of globalization. The centuries before were characterized by wars and by bloodshed and were periods when, with a few lucky exceptions, most of the people were concerned chiefly with survival. However, during the Pax

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Romana² period that commenced during the reign of Augustus³, this changed, and with a few exceptions, the citizenry of the Roman Empire enjoyed a long period of peace⁴.

This period witnessed enhanced commercial links between provinces, which exposed Roman citizens to a large number of previously-unknown products and activities. In particular, on the religious front, a very large number of religions that originated outside the culture of the Roman empire began competing for believers. Furthermore, the increased communication between various regions of the Roman empire brought about new pandemic diseases, the most well-known of which are the Antonine plague and the plague of Cyprian⁵.

This abundance of new religions, new customs, and new unusual events that the Pax-Romana and its subsequent disturbances brought about was not without consequence for the typical inhabitant of the Roman empire. This typical inhabitant had been used to a much more restricted set of customs and religions, most of the time linked directly to the city where he lived. This new plethora of gods and customs was quite destabilizing for old beliefs and worldviews. Indeed, one can argue that the amount of brainpower needed to incorporate and synthesize all this new information was larger than what a typical person could accommodate. However, humans always have the urge to incorporate and synthesize information to form a coherent world view. This is part of our essence as humans.

Given this abundant amount of new information available in the new events, religions, and customs, there were three possible ways in which a normal human, that has a built-in yearning for a coherent worldview, could behave. The first was to retract into what can be labeled as *localism*: reject anything new and foreign, and stick to old religions, customs and products. While this choice was self-consistent, the problem was that adopting it deprived the person of exposure to the marketplace of products and ideas, and hence did not encourage

² Adrian Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana* (London: Orion Publishing Co, 2017).

³ Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford; Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴ *The wisdom of Egypt: Jewish, early Christian, and gnostic essays in honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuisen*, Ancient Judaism & early Christianity, Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 59 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2005). Boris Mouravieff, *Gnosis: Study and Commentaries on the Esoteric Tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy*, ed. Robin Amis (Newburyport, Mass; Robertsbridge: Praxis Institute Press, 1993). Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, „Gnosticismul. Apariție, concepte, organizare, clasificări și influențe”, *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Theologia Orthodoxa*, nr. 1 (2007): 229–52.

⁵ Frederick F. Cartwright și Michael Biddiss, *Disease and History. From Ancient Ties to Covid-19*, 4th ed (London: Lume Books, 2020).

his intellectual, commercial or philosophical flourishing. Furthermore, plague and political instability could not be stopped by city walls, so for many this option was not very feasible.

The second choice was to form a coherent worldview that incorporated all the new information, but dismissed most of it as harmful and soul-damaging. This was more or less the position adopted by Christians, who argued that all the new gods and new religions, together with all the old gods of the Roman pantheon were just demons whose aim was to fool humans. The solution was to reject them off-hand, and to worship the One God who made heaven and earth. This rejection differs from *localism* in that it was exclusionary only on the religious front, but was universalist and all-accepting in the other areas. In Saint Paul's words (Philippians 4:8 (NKJV)), Christians accepted "*whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report ... any virtue ... anything praiseworthy*" but saw all these things as given by God.

Christians took a similar approach to the negative events that shattered the *pax romana*. They viewed plagues and civil unrest both as a punishment for humanity's sins, and as an opportunity "*to shine forth as servants of the One True God: to rejoice, and to embrace the benefit of the occasion; that in thus bravely showing forth our faith, and by suffering endured, going forward to Christ by the narrow way that Christ trod, we may receive the reward of His life and faith according to His own judgment!*"⁶

The third choice was to incorporate all this new information in a coherent worldview by modifying it and by adding to it a unifying narrative. This was the essence of Gnosticism, which tried to create a consistent hierarchy that incorporated all the gods, semi-gods, angels, spirits, and other super-natural beings. Of course, Gnostic Christians had God the Father at the top of this hierarchy, while non-Christian Gnostics had other deities⁷.

Gnosticism was supposed to be a hidden knowledge, which was revealed only to the elected few⁸. Gnosticism had two advantages. First, as we have explained above, it gave its adherent a consistent way dealing with all the new

⁶ Cyprian, *De Mortalitate*. Transl. Ernest Wallis, c. 1885. Online at *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* (<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.v.vii.html>)

⁷ Henry Charles Puech, *En quête de la gnose*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1978).

⁸ See the case of cathars in Middle Ages. Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee, A study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Liviu Vidican-Manci, "Erezia cathară în literatura de specialitate din România. Studiu istorico-critic, (The catharism in the Romanian Historiography)", *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Theologia Orthodoxa*, nr.2 (2009): 41-50.

information he received, all the new religions and customs he encountered, all the new gods, all the political instability, all the plagues, by simply putting them in a certain place inside this hierarchy. This satisfies the need to process, categorize and store new information that all humans have.

The second advantage is that it gave its adherents a very self-flattering opinion of themselves, especially when comparing themselves to the *common* people who did not share the secret gnostic view of the world. Indeed, what is more flattering than to believe that one was chosen to receive some mystical and secret information of which the large majority of the population was not aware, and which allowed one to see the world in a completely new way, which made perfect sense.

There were three problems with gnostic belief. The first was that it was false. Not only false, but not even logically self-consistent⁹, as it allowed any individual Gnostic teacher to add his own teachings and embellishments, and to expand freely on the Gnostic canon, which soon became out-of-control. The second was that as a world-view it had a damaging effect on those who believed in it. Indeed, if one believes the world to be imbued with thousands of layers of supernatural beings, which affect every layer of reality, then the influence one particular person can have on his life and his surrounding is becoming minimal.

Indeed, if people who believe that all good things and all bad things in life are controlled by outside forces, they tend to put much less effort in improving their lot in life, and in improving the life of those around them. Such people have a much higher probability of failing in life, especially in the tough environment of late antiquity.

The third is that there was a discrepancy between the exalted belief of gnostic believers, as enlightened special people who were revealed things that were not accessible to common people, and their increasingly deteriorating lot in life. This was not a problem for the gnostic believers who were independently wealthy, and who could afford to believe whatever they wanted, with little effect on their well-being. However, for the common believer in the gnostic narrative, whose way of viewing the world led to an increased probability of social failure, the contrast between the belief in one's superiority brought about by gnostic revelation and the deteriorating material situation was most likely a source of severe psychological discomfort.

⁹ There exist in contrast many self-consistent belief systems that are false. Self-consistent is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a belief system to be true.

In time, Gnosticism faded away. However, it is interesting to note that, unlike other heresies, it did not fade away because of imperial persecutions or because of some decision of a Church council. As we have argued in this chapter, it did so because of its lack of internal self-consistency and because the psychological comfort it provided by merging all existing beliefs into one framework had a side effect in a very toxic view of reality.

Modern Gnosticism: Conspiracy Theories

Much like Late Antiquity, the present period is characterized by an increased exposure to multiple cultures, religions, customs and tools, as well as accompanying epidemics and social disruption. We can communicate instantly with any person from the other end of the earth, we have access to more books than anybody else who lived more than thirty years ago, and we are constantly exposed to news of all catastrophes and of all amazing things, from wars in Burkina Faso to crocodiles with two heads.

The human brain does not have the capacity of processing this huge amount of information. For most of their history men lived in small communities, had access to information about at most a few hundred other men, and were largely unconcerned about what was happening more than a few hundred kilometers away. Given this flood of new information and unusual events, we find ourselves in a similar situation to that of Late Antiquity.

Much like then, there are three ways in which people tend to cope with these problems. First, there are those who want to close themselves, close boundaries, and close access to outside information. This *bunker mentality* is driven by the desire to retreat to safety, into one's culture, tribe or social group. In the past decade or so an increasing number of people have been renouncing mass and social media, sometimes retreating away from big cities into a pastoral lifestyle. However, this phenomenon is clearly economically unsustainable, and will remain marginal. Living without information can be crippling and, moreover, viruses and bacteria do not respect national and local boundaries especially during pandemics. So isolation and escapism offer serious limitations and rather limited benefits.

The second way is that of religious people, who view everything that happens as allowed by God to happen, most often with a grander purpose. Furthermore, since in Christianity the relation between God and the faithful is patterned on the parent-children paradigm (and not on the master-slave paradigm as in other religions), the Christians tend to see all these events as a manifestation of God's love for them, as allowed by God for their ultimate good,

even if that good cannot be perceived at the time. In the Old Testament this is best illustrated in the story of Job, which the Christians see as the prototype for Christ's life and suffering. The prayers in times of disease that one finds in the Book of Needs¹⁰ similarly illustrate this balancing of human incomprehension and complete trust in God's fatherly mercy and love.

The third way is the Gnostic way: faced with an overwhelming reality, people reprocess it in a grand unified framework that is easy to work with and into which all incoming information can be neatly fit, regardless of how complicated this information is. This is manifested in our days by the belief in conspiracy theories. This belief has exactly the same two advantages and the same three disadvantages as the Much like the Gnostic beliefs discussed in the previous chapter.

The first advantage is that it satisfies the need to process, and categorize new information, by forcibly fitting it into an overarching narrative. There are many ways in which this can be done with the coronavirus epidemics, which depend on the background of the population amongst which the conspiracy theory spreads.

For example, if the overarching narrative is the China-versus-West struggle, the coronavirus was engineered in Chinese labs for the purpose of destroying the West, or was engineered in Western labs and planted in China for the purpose of crippling its economy. On the other hand, if the overarching narrative is the elites-versus-liberty struggle, the coronavirus was created and paid for by Bill Gates or George Soros for the purpose of getting everybody to accept the vaccine which will contain a microchip or nanoparticles that will allow the elites to control all the freedom-loving people. This is the version of the coronavirus conspiracy that has appeared for example in the May 16'th 2020 communiqué of the Holy Synod of the Moldavian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate¹¹ which warns the faithful against *"micro-chipping the population by a vaccine that would introduce in their bodies nanoparticles which interact with 5G radiation and allow men to be controlled at a distance."*

A related but distinct narrative is that of capitalism and new technologies as the source of all evil. In the conspiracy theories that fit this narrative, the coronavirus was created by 5G radiation¹², and its purpose is to reduce the

¹⁰ *Molitfelnic*, (București: EIBMBOR, 2019)

¹¹ Communiqué of the Synod of the Moldavian Orthodox Church regarding the legality of eventual compulsory vaccination as a result of the SARS-COVID-19 virus (May 19, 2020). (*Adresarea privind legalitatea unei eventuale vaccinari obligatorii ca efect al virusului SARS-COVID-19*) <https://mitropolia.md/in-cadrul-lucrarilor-sinodului-bom-au-fost-semnate-doua-adresari-importante-catre-autoritatile-statului/>.

¹² A film promoting this theory was spread among the faithful by perhaps the most well-known and media-prominent nun in the whole Romanian Orthodox Church.

world population. Similarly, there are theories that the future vaccines, created by big-Pharma profit-loving companies are not safe and will be used to kill innocent people for the purpose of increasing the profit of these companies while in the same time reducing world population. A related conspiracy was promoted by the Romanian Academy, which in its August 27 2020 communiqué stated that 5G technology will create an “ocean of radiation” that is dangerous for health and can cause cancer. This communiqué has since been withdrawn.

Of course, once one accepts a narrative for one of these conspiracy theories, all new information about the pandemics is neatly fitted inside this narrative. Wearing a mask was not a very discussed topic at the beginning of the pandemics, so there was no need to fit this into existing conspiracy frameworks. However, as soon as wearing a mask became a public topic, people started to embed it inside their favorite narrative. The mask conspiracy theories that fit in the “elites-versus-liberty” narrative are for example that the small metal bar that one uses to put the mask around the nose is a 5G antenna, whose purpose is to focus 5G radiation and control the microchip that will be implanted in us via the vaccine. Another mask conspiracy theory, that fits into the “western culture versus its enemies” narrative is that the mask is an Islamic symbol of submission and depersonalization, like a burqa, imposed on us by elites who want to replace Christianity with Islam. Yet another mask conspiracy theory, that fits better in the “technology is evil” narrative, is that the plastics used in the mask contain petrochemical substances or nylon microparticles that affect the lungs, or that the mask will reduce brain oxygen levels and kill neurons, making those who wear it become “like a vegetable.”¹³

The second advantage of conspiracy theories, again similar to that of Gnostic beliefs, is that they give one the impression of superiority and special election. People who believe in conspiracies view themselves as paragons of liberty, the bulk of the population as obedient sheep, who are willing to sacrifice their freedom to the government because they believe in a lie. In addition, they feel an urge to convert as many other people as possible to their point of view, by bombarding them with conspiracy messages and videos. This urge is quasi-religious, and is similar to the urge of religious people to convert others to their religion.

The disadvantages of conspiracy belief are again almost identical to the disadvantages of Gnostic religion. The first is of course that it is false. As anybody with an elementary physics education can ascertain, 5G radiation cannot produce cancer-inducing mutations, cannot penetrate more than a few

¹³ One of the most well known Romanian hieromonks from Mount Athos promoted this theory in a video that was widely shared among the faithful.

millimeters inside the body, and it can only heat up the skin, much like a warm bath. Furthermore, a microchip must contain billions of atoms, and hence cannot be nanometer-sized. Moreover, whenever a microchip that controls any cell in the brain will be invented, it will need electricity to function, which one cannot get from inside the human body. Similar arguments can be made about the mask conspiracy theories.

Unfortunately, the falsity of conspiracy beliefs can have net disadvantages for those who accept them. Somebody who believes the coronavirus does not exist will not protect himself and will not go to the hospital when infected, and thus has a much higher chance of dying than others. Similarly, somebody who believes the vaccine contains 5G-controlled microchips will not accept vaccination. If a significant part of society accepts these beliefs and refuses vaccination, this will unnecessarily prolong the duration of the epidemics, and will cause many un-necessary deaths. The best example of such behavior happened in Nigeria, where in 2003 certain tribal leaders convinced their peoples to refuse the polio vaccination because of conspiracy theories that the polio vaccine gives rise to AIDS¹⁴. This vaccination would have eradicated polio in the entire world. This refusal allowed polio to survive in Africa until August 2020, and to spread to several other countries, like Pakistan, where it is still endemic. Thus, the widespread belief in the conspiracy theory is indirectly responsible for the several hundred thousand children who died of polio between 2003 and 2020.

The second disadvantage of conspiracy beliefs is that by ascribing everything that happens to external all-powerful sources, like “the elites” or “Bill Gates” or “the Americans,” conspiracy theories rob their believers of all drive to act for their own improvement or for the improvement of their community. Let’s take for example a student who believes that access to all academic positions is controlled by the Masonry or by Opus Dei. Such a student will believe he has no chance to obtain a position, and hence will not be motivated to work hard to reach the level of competence he needs to successfully compete for such a position. The net result is that his competence will be low and he will fail, which will only reinforce his belief in the conspiracy scenario. This is called “confirmation bias” in psychological language. Thus, believing in conspiracy theories can drive one into a downwards spiral of laziness, resentment and despair, and almost but ensures his failure in everything they do.

¹⁴ Ayodele Samuel Jegede, „What Led to the Nigerian Boycott of the Polio Vaccination Campaign?“, *PLoS Med.* 2007 Mar; 4(3): e73. doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.0040073

As a side note, conspiracy beliefs are very common in many sub-cultures that have a hard time improving their lot. For example, many in minority and immigrant sub-cultures believe that all the gates of social achievement are closed for them and only open for the majority; smaller countries that neighbor big ones who believe all evil comes from the big neighbor; ex-colonized countries believe that the world is skewed in favor of their ex-colonizers, etc. It is commonly claimed that these peoples and cultures adopt conspiracy beliefs because of their inferior results when compared to others. However, the dynamics is not linear, but circular (resembling a dragon eating its tail): conspiracy beliefs lead to downward spirals, which result in failure, which results in more conspiracy beliefs.

This leads to the third negative consequence of conspiracy belief, which is the stark contrast between the flattering way in which its adherents view themselves, as enlightened men who understand the deep mysteries of reality, and their deteriorating lot in life brought about by the type of downward spirals described above. This contrast does not affect so much those who are independently wealthy, but rather those in the middle and lower echelons of society, who have a lot to lose by the continual failing brought about by seeing life a in conspiratorial way. Needless to say, this contrast can be the cause of severe psychological distress.

The way out: the Christian solution

In Late Antiquity, Orthodox Christianity supplanted Gnostic belief. Theology aside, one clear reason for this was that Christianity provided its adherents a much more consistent and a much more fruitful worldview than Gnosticism. Indeed, Christianity did not view reality as controlled by multiple layers of angelic supernatural power, with men at the lowest level, but rather viewed Men as made in the image and likeness of God, endowed by Him with rationality. This rationality gives men the power to rule Creation, and to understand how Creation functions.

Many scholars argue that it precisely for this reason that science appeared in Christian societies, despite the fact that they were less developed technologically than, for example, the Chinese empire. It is only upon accepting the Christian view of man, as gifted with rationality by a God who does not want us to be slaves but sons (Rm, 14-17), that one starts trying to systematize and rationalize one's understanding of nature. And it is this systematization and rationalization that forms the foundation of the scientific approach.

Hence, the Christian understanding of the place of man inside Creation is beneficial for Christians, not only because it is theologically correct, but also because it empowers them to understand and transform the world around them. This makes Christians active and responsible. This is in contrast with Gnosticism, and to other religions where man's lot in life is passive, either because of predetermined or because it is seen to be at the whim of all-powerful deities whose relationship with men is that of masters to slaves, and not that of parents to children.

As we have argued in the previous chapters, both Gnosticism and conspiracy theories are ultimately based on the negation of man's rationality and active role in relationship to his life. The difference is that instead of viewing the world as controlled by myriads of orders of independent supernatural entities, conspiracy theories view the world as controlled by Bill Gates or the Masonry or George Soros. However, both viewpoints discourage men from trying to improve their lot in life and from trying to change the world for the better, transforming them from active into passive agents.

Unfortunately, in the age of the Internet it is much easier to make men abandon their rationality by using carefully crafted media products that induce fear and strong emotions. Roughly-speaking, humans have two brain systems: one can be thought as the "rational" brain and the other can be thought of as the "fight-or-flight" or "reptilian" brain. The later is a more ancient system, and is present in most animals as well, unlike the "rational" brain, which is unique to humans. These emotion-inducing media products activate the "reptilian" brain and short-circuit the rational brain. This has two consequences: the first is the need of the person who accepted the message to send it to as many people as possible. This is a common fight-or-flight reaction, which is found also in animals that warn the other members of their species when a danger is present. This reaction is responsible for the wide sharing of the theories that become "viral."

The second consequence is that once the rational brain is bypassed, humans can accept even the most absurd theories. The reason for this is that the reptilian brain does not care about the notion of "truth" – it only cares about the immediate survival. An example of this is the fact that people get adrenaline spikes and the urge to flee when they see a statue of a tiger in an Australian bush. Even if rationally we know that tigers do not live in Australia, the brain completely ignores this information, and switches immediately into survival "fight-or-flight" mode.

Hence, people who accept to be manipulated into activating their irrational "fight-or-flight" mode are willingly abandoning their God-given rationality, and choose to let themselves led into a false understanding of reality. From a Christian perspective, this abandoning of rationality is a rejection of God's gift and thus constitutes sinful behavior.

There are several solutions for Christians to avoid this. The first is to stop consuming audio or video media where conspiracy information is presented¹⁵. The second is to avoid switching into the irrational, to closely observe one's emotions and constantly ask oneself whether the material being watched is triggering them. This requires a bit more spiritual maturity, but learning it is within one's reach. The third is to reject any information that breeds suspicion. In the *Journal of Happiness*, Father Nicolae Steinhardt argues that the main characteristic of a gentleman is the absence of suspicion, and argues that, in this respect, he sees Christ as the ultimate gentleman. Christians who fall into conspiracy beliefs, who are suspicious of everything that happens, fail to resemble their Master in this very important aspect.

Thus, both Gnosticism and conspiracy beliefs are based on fear and suspicion, combined with a misguided belief that one has a superior understanding of the world, but little power to change it or himself. For many people this leads to lack of motivation followed by inaction followed by failure, which then strengthens these beliefs. Needless to say, Christians must avoid by all means these harmful self-reinforcing false beliefs, and should seek to guard their God-given rationality and accept reality as God chooses to let it unfold. It is thus that Christians cultivate their discernment (διάκρισις), which the Fathers considered as the highest of all virtues.

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¹⁵ If one is concerned that he will miss important information, one possibility is to only use written material; reading is processed through the rational brain, and hence the risk of activating the fight-or-flight mechanism is lower than for visual or audio information.

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