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Truth, “Conspiracy Theorists”, and Theories: An Ethnographic Study of “Truth-Seeking” in Contemporary Britain

Nicholas R. E. Toseland

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of a culture comprised of real-life “conspiracy theorists” living in contemporary Britain, based on fieldwork undertaken in 2014-2016. Within much popular and academic discourse, “conspiracy theorist” is a pejorative label that invokes a delusional person who subscribes to distortive, dangerous, and disempowering ideas; these assumptions are justified by viewing such ideas as unwarranted knowledge-claims. This thesis challenges these assumptions by turning instead to a cultural context in which such ideas are fully warranted, using a multi-sited method of participant observation and interviewing to provide a qualitative study of the so-called “Truth Movement”. While this “movement” is shown to lack formal status or structure, I argue that the (un-)likeminded affiliates of this uneasy collective are united by a shared orientation of “truth-seeking”. Across three separate sites, “truth-seekers” wrestle with common ideas, discovering empowering truths amidst a wider world they commonly perceive as conspired by a hidden, malign elite. Interviews reveal what this world looks like from the insider perspective, including the “waking up” narratives of conversion into this subjectively-plausible alternative outlook. In the chapter focussing on alternative health, I argue that “conspiracy theories”, and potential solutions, are embodied in everyday experiences and practices. I investigate the significance of “false-flag” theories about the 9/11 attacks for modern truth-seekers. The internal conflicts of the truth movement are explored in the more contentious fields of the “flat earth” theories, and “freeman” theories about the legal system, where I argue that these topics reveal the essential attraction of contemporary “conspiracy theory”: the recurring affirmation of the sacred character of humankind.

**Truth, “Conspiracy Theorists”, and Theories: An
Ethnographic Study of “Truth-Seeking” in
Contemporary Britain**

Nicholas R. E. Toseland

Doctor of Philosophy

The Department of Theology and Religion

Thesis Submitted to Durham University

2018

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Declaration

The material submitted for this Thesis has not been submitted elsewhere or for any other degree. The Copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published in any format without the author's prior written consent. All information derived from this thesis must be acknowledged appropriately. The author may be contacted at nretoseland@gmail.com.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Matthew Guest and Dr Jonathan Miles-Watson, for their support and advice over the course of researching this thesis. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my previous supervisor, Dr Charlotte Hardman. Without her encouragement to take on original research projects, I may never have considered pursuing post-graduate scholarship. I also thank the rest of the Theology and Religion faculty at Durham University, with special thanks to Professor Douglas Davies for his many years of mentoring and friendship.

Special thanks must go to my dear friend Les Grainger, for those endless chats, come rain or shine, and to Anna Blackman for her invaluable support during the writing-up process.

I also express my deepest thanks to the truth-seekers I met and spoke with during my project. Thank you all so much for your hospitality and for giving up your time to talk to me, especially all those agreed to be interviewed; they were utterly fascinating, and, almost without exception, several hours long. I truly had some remarkable and invaluable experiences during my fieldwork, and I will be forever grateful that you allowed me to try to capture the essence of truth-seeking through this ethnography

I also wholeheartedly thank my immediate family for all their patient support. I especially want to mention my father, whose belief and enthusiasm for my studies were always a source of inspiration – I may have come a long way since you first printed out the *Wikipedia* entry on the Illuminati those years ago, but it was you who first attempted to teach me the value of empathy, and of a world beyond simple “goodies” and “baddies”. I will also forever be grateful for the love and support shown to me these past years by my granny, who imparted upon me both a love of learning, and a learning of love; you looked after me more than you knew. I dedicate this thesis to both of your memories.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Background

My academic interest in people who believe in conspiracy theories began when a close friend sent me a series of uncharacteristic text messages during 2012. He urged me to check out how many pyramids were in the designs for the Olympic Stadium and asked whether I found the one-eyed mascots out-of-place. Our mutual friends in our hometown were taken aback by his sudden interest in conspiracy theories; his sincere revelations about satanic symbolism pervading popular culture, for instance, were met outright dismissal and ridicule. He soon became the butt of all jokes.

When I met up with my friend in private, he wanted to start from the beginning. Rather than laugh, however, I found myself fascinated with his new-found concerns, even scribbling down notes to the tune of a trans-historical drama whose apocalyptic tenor resounded across present-day reality. These so-called “conspiracy theories” were addressing matters about good and evil, existential worth, and the true nature of society’s primary institutions of media, education, economics, politics, science, healthcare, and religion. As a young scholar in the study of religions, I recognised that my friend was asking questions of the ultimate, raising issues that transcended the here-and-now, articulating what sounded like an innovative living faith.

A mutual close friend did not share my fascination with our friend’s burgeoning interest but was actually rather worried. “You’ve studied cults and stuff,” he said in serious tones, asking, “do you think we should be worried?” That, I thought, was a most interesting question, leading me to study “conspiracism”, a worldview dominated by “conspiracy theories”, in my dissertation for my Master’s degree in Religion and Society. I argued that “conspiracism” is best understood as a *religious* phenomenon that corresponds with Geertz’s understanding of what constitutes ‘a religion’:

a system of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating a general order of existence and clothing these conceptualisations in such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.¹

During the course of this research project, I became aware that my friend’s “awakening” was less uncommon or fringe than I had first assumed. That summer I was volunteering at the Christian youth festival Soul Survivor. Many young people in attendance spoke of the Illuminati, particularly in conjunction with celebrities, or of hidden messages in Disney films. A 20-year-old volunteer told me that she and her housemates would refrain from even saying the word Illuminati aloud; upon seeing a suspicious event on the news, they would infer their involvement by turning

¹ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Fontana Press, 1973), p. 90.

to each other and blinking twice. In their household the hidden orchestrators were known simply as the “blink, blink”.

When I talked about my research with my sister, a youth worker in London, she told me that the schools and youth-groups she ran were awash with similar talk of a secret cabal controlling society known as the Illuminati. She regarded these notions as spurious and detrimental to her own efforts at evangelising her Christian faith. It was such a popular, consuming conversation topic that she found it often disrupted talking-based activities. When I inquired about possibilities for further research, she forbade me from researching her young people, fearing that a university-affiliated researcher asking questions about the “Illuminati” – regardless of my actual research aims – might indirectly confirm their suspicions.

In Autumn 2013, I asked a barman in Digbeth, Birmingham, if customers ever spoke about the Illuminati; the streets nearby were adorned with graffitied pyramids with a single eye. “Oh yeah, mate,” he replied without hesitation, “it’s everywhere. Especially whenever anything big happens, it’s everywhere.”

There is some quantitative data that likewise suggests conspiracy theory’s popularity in modern Britain. In 2011 the BBC conducted a poll for an edition of their documentary series *Conspiracy Files* marking the anniversary of 9/11. Some 14% not only disbelieved the official story that Al-Qaeda were responsible but believed that the American government were culpable for the attacks.² This figure rose to 1-in-4 among 16-24-year-olds. This suggests that a sizeable minority of Britons subscribe to a conspiracy narrative behind this highly significant event of the early 21st century. More recently, a 2016 YouGov Poll found that 13% of British people believed that ‘regardless of who is officially in charge [...] there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together’.³ If this weighted figure is extrapolated, approximately 8.5 million people living in the UK subscribe to a core tenet of conspiracy theory, namely that there exists a personified hidden hand which manipulates this-worldly reality.

My Master’s research was limited methodologically by time constraints and a small sample size of interviews. Furthermore, I felt I was only scratching the surface by interviewing “conspiracy theorists” outside of contexts where these beliefs are held to be reasonable; I had not properly apprehended the emic perspective. This present study extends my focus beyond a handful of individual “conspiracy theorists” by providing an ethnographic account of the social dimension

²‘Why the 9/11 conspiracies have changed’, *BBC News* (29th August 2011) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14572054>> [Accessed 3/5/2017]. The question asked, ‘attacks were made on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11th 2001, commonly known as 9/11. It is generally accepted that these attacks were carried out by 'Al Qaeda'. However some people have suggested there was a wider conspiracy that included the American Government. Do you, yourself, believe that there was a wider conspiracy, or not?’

³YouGov, *Conspiracies*, (2016)

<https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/z8polkeuc6/Copy%20of%20YGCambriidgeResults_160214_Conspiracies.pdf> [Accessed 5/5/2017] p.7.

of “conspiracy theorising” in contemporary Britain. It focuses on a culture populated with “conspiracy theorists” and “conspiracy theories”.

1.2. The Pejorative Force of “Conspiracy Theory” and “Conspiracy Theorist”

I have so far couched the operative terms “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” in inverted commas for good reason: they are both pejorative terms, rejected by the very people they describe. This is a view widely shared among the “conspiracy theorists” I have studied. For instance, one interviewee said this about the term “conspiracy theorist”:

It’s basically been used to ridicule people because they can’t understand what they are talking about. People would call me mad, but that’s because they can’t understand what I am saying to them, so to *them* there is something wrong with me. They call me mad, so they can put a label on me, so in their head they are comfortable with identifying me. “I can understand *madness*. It’s [just] insane!” [...] The words “conspiracy theorist” is the way somebody chooses to put you in a box so they can feel comfortable.

Another “conspiracy theorist” I interviewed spoke similarly about the term “conspiracy theory”:

The phrase “conspiracy theory” came out of the JFK assassination. It was a derogatory statement that anybody who doesn’t believe [in the official narrative] is a conspiracy theorist, which basically means “an idiot”. [The] Tavistock [Institute] was doing this during World War One; they put out the phrase “isolationist”. Anybody who doesn’t want to join up is an isolationist, unpatriotic. [...] It’s an insult, it’s meant to demean and belittle you, it makes your heckles rise so you go “grrr”, which is the first rule of any shifty debate: put the other person on the bad foot.

These insider perspectives are supported by the analysis of academics Husting and Orr, who demonstrate how the phrases are used within popular news media and the academic press – two key areas of public discourse. By labelling someone a “conspiracy theorist”, or their beliefs a “conspiracy theory”, ‘I strategically exclude you from the sphere where public speech, debate, and conflict occur’.⁴ Within mainstream media, this ‘discursive machinery’ operates through explicit direct associations with other pejorative terms, including ‘wingnut, paranoid, loony, and primitive’.⁵ In other articles, plainly nonsensical claims were labelled “conspiracy theory” in passing; elsewhere, more plausible claims were indirectly undermined ‘by equating it with another [“conspiracy theory”] taken or implied to be patently absurd’.⁶

Following the authors’ method, I used LexisNexis to search for uses in British newspapers to find repeat results. Speaking personally, in common parlance the jump from “conspiracy theory/ist”

⁴ Gina Husting & Michael Orr, ‘Dangerous Machinery: “Conspiracy Theorist” as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion’, *Symbolic Interaction*, 30.2, (2011), p. 127.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

to discredited “tin-foil hats” was automatic, inferring an unreasonable falsehood. The previous interviewee’s claim that the CIA popularised the term to purposefully discredit certain ideas is true, noted also by certain academics; the fact that I feel the need to prove the words of someone who I introduced as a “conspiracy theorist” by recourse to a *non-* “conspiracy theorist” source rather underlines the term’s negative connotations.⁷

1.2.1 “Conspiracy Theories” and “Conspiracy Theorists”: Distortive, Dangerous, and Disabling

Husting and Orr trace the negative popular usage back to academic treatments that associate “conspiracy theory” with a failed epistemology, and a “conspiracy theorist” with pathological paranoia.⁸ These two mutually supportive assumptions construct “conspiracy theorists” and “conspiracy theories” in terms of *unwarranted* knowledge-claims that are *distortive* of reality, a *dangerous* presence within society, and, relatedly, as *disabling* for those who subscribe to them.

The regard of “conspiracy theory” as an unwarranted category of knowledge can be traced back to the term’s first appearance in Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 2*.⁹ ‘The conspiracy theory of society’, Popper wrote in 1938, explains social phenomena based on the assumption that ‘whatever happens in society – especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike – is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups’.¹⁰ Popper saw the contemporaneous popularity of ‘conspiracy theory’ as ‘a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition’. Thus, as Robertson notes, ‘the connection [of conspiracy theory] to religion was there from the start’; but this is a negative one. Like religion, Popper thought this explanatory scheme to be irrational. Like other ‘total ideologies’ including psychologism, historicism, and Marxism, it wrongly assumes that human institutions and traditions ‘are all consciously designed, and explicable in terms of needs, hopes or motives’.¹¹ Since “conspiracy theory” aims to uncover precisely such hidden determinants, for Popper it resembles ‘the very opposite of the true aim of the social sciences’.¹² Objective and rational social science limits itself to the more modest task of ‘the discovery and explanation of the less obvious dependencies within the social sphere’.¹³ Defined thusly, “conspiracy theory” constitutes a deformed science that lies outside of objectivity’s remit.

⁷ For instance, David Robertson, ‘Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Alternative and Emergent Religions’, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 19.2 (2015), pp. 5-16.

⁸ Husting and Orr, pp. 138-141; see also the recent literature review of academic perspectives regarding “conspiracy theory” in Robertson, ‘Conspiracy Theories’. Robertson similarly recognises the problematic nature of these loaded terms.

⁹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Vol. 2*. (London: Routledge, 1945), pp. 104-5. That this is the first academic usage of the term “conspiracy theory” is noted in Robertson, ‘Conspiracy Theories’, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103. His outline of the ‘empirical scientific method’ can be found in pp. 240-244.

¹² Popper, *Open Society*, p. 104.

¹³ *Ibid.*

The ‘striking fact’ disproving “conspiracy theory” is Popper’s assertion that ‘conspirators rarely consummate their conspiracy’.¹⁴ It is unwarranted because it selectively ignores the many failed conspiracies that would problematise the associated worldview. Later scholars following in Popper’s line of thought share his view of history. Daniel Pipes, for instance, defines “conspiracy theory” out of existence when he asserts that ‘a conspiracy theory is the fear of a non-existent conspiracy’.¹⁵ Pipes acknowledges that conspiracies do sometimes occur: ‘*conspiracy* refers to an act, *conspiracy theory* to a perception’.¹⁶ It is left to historians (like Pipes), says Pipes, to discern fact from fiction, or, to use his subheading, to deploy a sensible means of ‘distinguishing fantasy from reality’.¹⁷ Similarly for David Aaronovitch, another academic historian, ‘conspiracy theories are theories that, among other things, offend my understanding of how things happen by positing as a norm how they do not happen’.¹⁸ For thinkers of this opinion, to label something a “conspiracy theory” is to call it an implausible distortion of the true historical record.

Determining where to draw the line of reasonableness is no easy task. When philosopher Brian Keeley tries to distinguish ‘*unwarranted* conspiracy theories’ from actual conspiracies – such as the Iran-Contra affair and Watergate – he notes the former’s use of ‘errant data’.¹⁹ However, this applies also to his proven conspiracies. He considers whether ‘unfalsifiability’ is characteristic of unwarranted conspiracy theories, but notes that in proven, thus *warranted*, conspiracy theories, such as the Watergate scandal, there genuinely existed ‘powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter’.²⁰ In cases like these, the “conspiracy theory” was unfalsifiable but true. Instead, Keeley argues that the best determination of unwarrantedness is whether a theory requires a ‘pervasive scepticism of people and public institutions’ for faithful assent.

When one spends time with real-life “conspiracy theorists” who subscribe to such “unwarranted” ideas, the scepticism directed at official sources of truth is counterbalanced by an open-mindedness towards alternative knowledge-claims; furthermore, many think public institutions make both false *and* true claims. This disqualification of unwarranted conspiracy theory obscures the fact that “conspiracy theory” mantra – “trust no-one” – forms part of a larger process of trust realignment. From the “conspiracy theorist” perspective, Keeley and the academics mentioned

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁵ Pipes, p. 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Pipes, p. 9. See Chapter Seven for an ethnographic exploration of these ideas; see also Nigel James’s critique questioning his authority for discerning between imagined and real conspiracies in ‘Militias, the Patriot Movement, and the Internet’, in *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences*, ed. by Jane Parish and Martin Parker (Oxford: Sociological Review, 2001), pp. 78-82.

¹⁸ David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: the Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 7.

¹⁹ Brian L. Keeley, ‘Of Conspiracy Theorists’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96.3 (1999), pp. 109-126.

²⁰ Keeley, ‘Of Conspiracy Theories’, p. 121.

above themselves show signs of a pervasive scepticism against people (“conspiracy theorists/truth-seekers”) and certain institutions (such as the alternative media).

The second pejorative sense of the terms associates “conspiracy theorists” and “conspiracy theory” with paranoia. This is in part a logical consequence of the assumption that “conspiracy theories” are epistemologically unsound and unwarranted, suggesting that there is something mentally inferior, abnormal, or irrational about their believers. This effect of pathologizing the person so labelled can be traced back to political commentator Richard Hofstadter’s highly influential essay entitled *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*: ‘I call it the paranoid style because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind’.²¹ Manifesting in such diverse places as the anti-masonic movement or the anti-Catholic movement, the popular left-wing press or the contemporaneous right-wing press, the central preconception of ‘the paranoid style [is] the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character’.²² Hofstadter sees specific cases as manifestations of unwarranted paranoia; believers instead take ‘a curious leap of imagination’ to arrive at this standpoint from the incomplete record of available facts.²³ His use of the word “paranoid” matters most; despite him ‘not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes’, the connotations have proven unavoidable.²⁴ Thus, although what worries him most is precisely ‘the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people’, his use of the word “paranoid”, in conjunction with the unwarranted content, renders such people, wholesale, as *less* normal.²⁵

Pipe similarly avoids the *clinical* sense of “paranoid” by acknowledging the attractiveness of ‘conspiracism’ to ‘the most alert and intelligent [of] minds’.²⁶ On the other hand, by calling “conspiracy theory” ‘not the finest [of] mental creations but its dregs’, the “conspiracy theorists” who produce and consume them are made to appear mentally reproachable.²⁷ In the same vein, by positing ‘common sense’ as one of the chief means of distinguishing historical ‘fact’ from conspiracy ‘fiction’, if “conspiracy theorists” are not then clinically paranoid, they inferentially possess *uncommon*, or abnormal, sense.²⁸

In David Kay’s more recent study of the 9/11 Truth Movement in America, he repeats many of these psychological aspersions. Kay asserts that ‘conspiracism is not so much a psychological

²¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), p. 3.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶ Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

ailment *in and of itself* as it is a symptom of a mind in flight from reality'.²⁹ In other words, “truthers” (i.e. modern “conspiracy theorists”, see below) might not be mentally ill but they exhibit the same delusional tendencies. In his seven-fold typology of the ‘varieties of conspiracist’, only the ‘clinical conspiracist’ refers to the ‘small minority of Truthers I encountered [that] seemed out-and-out insane’.³⁰ But the other types – ‘the crank’, ‘the failed historian’, ‘the damaged survivor’, ‘the cosmic voyager’, ‘the evangelical doomsayer’, and ‘the firebrand’ – hardly conjure up a picture of psychological health.³¹

These academic detractors of “conspiracy theory” feel fully justified in their choice of negative terminology; “conspiracy theories” are *dangerous* to society. Hofstadter acknowledges that ‘the term “paranoid style” is pejorative, and it is meant to be’, perceiving it as *dangerous*, having ‘a greater affinity for bad causes than for good’.³² This standpoint is well-represented in later secondary literature that focusses on specific historical episodes, especially the way that power elites have harnessed “conspiracy theory” to justify abominable acts, exemplified in treatments that look at Hitler’s use of conspiracy theory to mobilise a nation against a non-existent Jewish threat.³³ For Pipes, the ‘poisonous discourse’ of conspiracy theory ‘causes people to fear and hate what does not harm them, while not fearing or hating what does harm them’, leading ultimately towards violence, totalitarianism, mass murder, extremism, and wars.³⁴ The danger these thinkers all fear is that *unwarranted* “conspiracy theory” becomes elevated to the status of established fact whereby false claims about a specific people or group become realised in governmental policy, justifying horrific actions that would otherwise be unthinkable.

The other danger that academics identify affects “conspiracy theorists” themselves, disabling them. Hofstadter writes that the conspiracy theory believer ‘suffers doubly’; both from the extant horrors of this world, and the nightmarish, projected ‘fantasies’ alongside.³⁵ In a more recent treatment, political theorist Mark Fenster continues in this vein, asserting that ‘above all conspiracy theory is a theory of power [...] a rather *disabling* theory of power’.³⁶ Not only does ‘conspiracism’ have a propensity for being a harmful tool when embraced by those with political power, but for those lower down the political structure, it merely paralyses individuals who embrace it. ‘It fails’, he concludes, ‘as a political and cultural practice’, because it fails to inform us practically how *to move forward*, ‘unable [...] to organise people in a world divided by

²⁹ David Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America’s Growing Conspiracist Underground* (New York: Harper, 2009), p. 150.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-187.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-203.

³² Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, p. 5.

³³ See Pipes, pp. 84-89.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-181.

³⁵ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, p. 40.

³⁶ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 2nd edn (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) p. xv.

complex divisions based on class, race, gender, sexuality, and other social antagonisms'.³⁷ "Conspiracy theories" would thus seem to produce disempowered selves by selling "conspiracy theorists" a worldview of hopelessness and despair.

1.2.2 An Unwarranted Generalisation?

The dangers of such treatments whether from academia, news media, or popular culture, is that by portraying "conspiracy theories" as being essentially mistaken and *unwarranted* knowledge-claims, "conspiracy theorists" are defined wholesale as irrational persons who are potentially dangerous to society. When academic theorists use the "conspiracy theory/ist" label uncritically, they themselves begin to resemble "conspiracy theorists" in the ways defined above. Objectivity gives way to well-meaning partisanship, and, even if these semantics are justifiable given potential dangers, the generalisations require rather curious leaps in imagination. Thus, ironically, Hofstadter's observation that practitioners of the 'paranoid style' paradoxically imitate 'the enemy' stipulated in their paranoid discourse applies, to some extent, both ways.³⁸

If we think of other social movements and phenomena, whether religious or secular, such hostile treatments characterise the negative studies of "cults". A social scientific study of an evangelical church, or a political movement, for instance, would rarely focus chiefly on a small minority of psychologically impaired believers and cast aspersions over the whole, nor would studies focussing on knowledge-producing institutions of the academy. Such studies would be remarkably limited in scope, and tell us little about the belief-system and its institutions as a whole.

Let me be clear that I am not attempting to act as an apologist for the research population; this thesis is *not* claiming that these issues are totally absent from the "conspiracy theories" and "conspiracy theorists" that form my object of study. For instance, the dangers and distortions of anti-Semitism that are much remarked upon in the secondary literature dealing with contemporary "conspiracy theory" crop up in the data. However, this thesis reveals the way that these problems are actually identified by insiders *within* the network, many of whom share the distaste of outside commentators. Only by grounding the research process in actual contexts where "conspiracy theories" are perceived *as* warranted, and "conspiracy theorists" as rational actors, can we more fully understand the reality of these potential dangers. Likewise, by approaching some of these ideas as warranted rather than unwarranted, I am not commenting on their ultimate truthfulness, but grappling with the reality that knowledge-claims have a subjective criteria of plausibility.

In positioning this thesis as an investigation into real-life "conspiracy theorists", focussing on the social dimensions of "conspiracy theorising" in contemporary Britain, I face a difficult dilemma. These terms have powerful pejorative connotations that signal irrationality and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-6.

³⁸ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, p. 32.

paranoia. It is an unfortunate quandary for me-as-researcher, since the academic establishment, the media, popular culture, *and* the research population, are all familiar with these terms; indeed, I *am* presenting an ethnography of a social network populated by people who subscribe to, or are interested in, theories that posit insidious conspiracies lurking behind this-worldly events and processes. Furthermore, my research process began with these terms, and I refer to them in my interview consent forms; a primary prerequisite for my informants was some manner of identification as a “conspiracy theorist” (with inverted commas) although their attitudes towards this label were generally negative. Thus, despite my reservations about using these terms, it is impossible, and methodologically reproachable, not to engage directly with them, since the rationale of my study design is grounded firmly in what I perceive to be a void in scholarship focussing on these very people who are labelled so often, from various quarters, as “conspiracy theorists”. Thus, to deflect from misperceptions of inconsistency, or, worse, hypocrisy, I retain usage of inverted commas throughout. My thesis proceeds from the observation that real-life “conspiracy theorists” identify as rational, positive, and empowered. Indeed, the participants of this study problematise many of the ideas met above. Given the prolonged contact with an ideology that supposedly leaves people afraid and disempowered, they seemed curiously upbeat.³⁹

1.3. An Alternative Approach: Conspiracy Narratives as Religious Phenomena

An emerging field of study relates “conspiracy theory” to religion. In his recent review of this literature, Robertson distinguishes three separate approaches. First, you have conspiracy narratives *about* religion(s). Examples include conspiracy narratives about Judaism, the Witch Hunts in America and Europe, and the Satanic Ritual Abuse panic in the 1990s.⁴⁰ The second approach examines conspiracy narratives *in* religion(s), ‘examining how conspiracy narratives are mobilized within specific religious groups’.⁴¹ This is less distinct than Robertson appreciates, since, as he points out, conspiracy narratives *about* religion(s) can be found *within*

³⁹ Given the prominent role of risk within alternative knowledge, as discussed in Chapter Three, this assumption is understandable. For example, the emic notion of “Agenda 21” predicts the mass extermination of 90% of the global population.

⁴⁰ For conspiracy narratives about Judaism and ‘the blood libel’, see Alan Dundes, ed., *The Blood Libel Legend: a casebook in anti-Semitic Folklore* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); for modern examples among some Islamic groups, see Neil J. Kressel, “*The Sons of Pigs and Apes*”: *Muslim Anti-Semitism and the Conspiracy of Silence* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2012) pp. 34-40, 102-3; for examples of conspiracy narratives *about* Muslims in contemporary North America, see pp. 134-139; for conspiracy narratives and the Witch-Hunts in 16-17th centuries, see Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (London: Pimlico, 1975), and against Jews and perceived Christian heresies, see Norman Cohn, *In Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Paladin, 1957; repr. 1970); for narratives about Satanists see Jeffrey Turner, ‘Satanic Cult Rumors as Contemporary Legend’, in *Western Folklore*, 49.1 (1990), pp. 51-81; James T Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley, eds., *The Satanism Scare* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991); for a historical treatment tracing Satanic Ritual Abuse panic back to narratives about Christians in the Roman Empire, see David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Ritual Abuse in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Robertson, ‘Conspiracy Theories’, p. 8.

religion(s). Examples of the previous type, such as Norman Cohn’s studies of sectarian millenarianism, depict religious groups that mobilise conspiracy narratives about other religious groups.⁴² As an example of this type Robertson takes ‘conspirituality’, a blending of “conspiracy theory” and “spirituality”, as an example of conspiracy narratives *within* New Age religiosity, but from another perspective it is simultaneously an instance of conspiracy narratives *about* religion(s). Robertson notes that studies focussing upon new religious movements have ‘almost universally focussed upon marginal groups viewed as extremist’ and whose actions have often led to violence. Another weakness of thinking about conspiracy narratives *within* religion(s) pertains to the range of groups that count as ‘religion(s)’; if we understand conspiracy narratives *as* a religious phenomenon – i.e. performing a function typically associated with religion – then any group mobilising this kind of discourse can be understood as possessing a religious dimension.

A third approach proceeds by taking ‘conspiracy narratives *as* religion, that is, as a way of thinking or acting with commonalities to religious thought and behaviours, such as theodicy, millennialism and esoteric claims to higher knowledge’.⁴³ For example, Asbjørn Dyrendal shows that discourses of conspiracy theory and esotericism share a teleological hermeneutic, that can transform the individual via special knowledge, or gnosis. Robertson also points to Brian Keeley, for whom the main similarity with religion is that ‘conspiracy theorists are [...] some of the last believers in an ordered universe’.⁴⁴ As a way of thinking about humanity’s place in the social universe, conspiracy narratives resemble religious myths in their rejection of cosmic randomness or arbitrariness. We can also add Lewis and Kahn’s analysis of David Icke, which understands his work as theodicy;⁴⁵ and Robertson’s study of Icke’s same thesis as a New Age theodicy.⁴⁶ Michael Barkun sees American conspiracy theorists as engaged in ‘improvisational millennialism’, creatively combining religious and secular (including popular culture) sources.⁴⁷ In Robertson’s later work on discourses combining conspiracy narratives, New Age ideas, and ufology, “conspiracy theory” gains its legitimacy via strategies that Robertson understands as being broadly “religious”.⁴⁸

“Conspiracy Theorists” as “Truth-seekers”: “Conspiracy Theory” as “Alternative Knowledge”

⁴² Cohn, *Europe’s Inner-demons*.

⁴³ Robertson, ‘Conspiracy Theories’, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Brian L. Keeley, ‘God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory’, *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, 4.2 (2007), pp. 135-149; see also Keeley, ‘Of Conspiracy Theories’, pp. 109-126.

⁴⁵ Tyson Lewis and Richard Kahn, ‘The Reptoid Hypothesis: Utopian and Dystopian Representational Motifs in David Icke’s Alien Conspiracy Theories’, *Utopian Studies*, 16.1 (2005), pp. 45-74.

⁴⁶ David G. Robertson, ‘David Icke’s Reptilian Thesis and the Development of New Age Theodicy’, *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, 4.1 (2013), pp. 27-47.

⁴⁷ Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, pp. 10-11, 16-21.

⁴⁸ These strategies that Robertson identifies do not fit with Popper’s depiction of the scientific method, above. David G. Robertson, *UFOs, conspiracy theories and the new age: millennial Conspiracism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

My own approach relates directly to the three senses discussed above. First, instead of approaching “conspiracy theory” from a normative lens as a type of unwarranted discourse, I am interested in precisely those contexts where it is perceived as warranted discourse. Second, by engaging with cultural settings where alternative knowledge is experienced as reasonable, I avoid pathologizing the people I am researching. Unusual behaviours and beliefs stop signalling abnormality; rather, they can be understood in terms of a set of shared norms and values. Third, I want to test the potential dangers posed by “conspiracy theory” against an ethnographic record. What are the personal and social implications of alternative knowledge in these contexts?

My approach is underpinned by two methodological principles that Manuel Castells uses in his sociological analysis of social movements. First, ‘they must be understood in their own terms: namely, *they are what they say they are*’.⁴⁹ Second, ‘from an analytic perspective, there are no “bad” and “good” social movements’.⁵⁰ This is especially important given the emotive subject matter of conspiracy discourse, and the potential implications for society. These principles enable a meaningful, comparative analysis of social movements – Castells suggests an approach that focuses on their ‘identity’, ‘adversary’, and ‘societal goal’ – that remains “true” to their actual self-understandings.⁵¹

1.4. Working Definitions of Key Terms

This thesis provides an ethnographic portrait of a multi-sited social network found in contemporary Britain which is sometimes called the “truth movement”, “spiritual movement”, “alternative movement”, “freedom movement”, or, simply, “the movement”. Its self-affiliated individuals might think of themselves as “truth-seekers” or “truthers”, “free-thinkers” or “freeman”, “aware”, “awake”, “sovereign”, “conscious” or “sane” – frequently a combination of the above – but would all, to some extent, albeit usually with objections or qualifications, identify as “conspiracy theorists”.

This thesis supplies a wide range of emic and etic terms that better describe a range of phenomena associated with “conspiracy theories/theorists” that avoid the pejorative sense of the latter. In Chapter One, we meet “truth-seekers” who together constitute a “truth movement” centred around “alternative knowledge”. In Chapter Four, we talk about “conspiracy theories” as “counter-narratives”. In Chapter Five we meet “freemen”. My object of study is the so-called “truth movement”, which is understood as a loose and fluid network of individuals who sometimes refer to themselves as “truth-seekers” (and are sometimes labelled derogatorily by outsiders as “truthers”). These real-life “conspiracy theorists” are portrayed as religious seekers who draw upon interconnected bodies of alternative knowledge as meaning-making resources that restore

⁴⁹ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004) p.73.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

moral meaning to social reality, and moral integrity to the individual truth-seeker. These terms will be unpacked in detail in the main body of the ethnography in Chapter One.

My initial research focus was concerned with what are popularly referred to as “conspiracy theories” and the so-called “conspiracy theorists” who subscribed to them. Given that such claims are regarded by the mainstream, and academics, as essentially mistaken, on what grounds do some people subscribe to them? Furthermore, how are individuals able to sustain this counter-cultural belief in the face of hostility? What does the world look like from this alternative, deviant perspective?

My object of study – the culture of real-life “conspiracy theorists” - is conceived as an “alternative knowledge network” whose constitutive actors are connected by interrelated streams of “alternative knowledge”. This knowledge is plural; highlighting the pluralistic, dynamic state of the respective *bodies* of (alternative) knowledge. In this thesis, ‘knowledge refers to any and every set of ideas accepted by one or another social group or society of people, ideas pertaining to what they accept as real’.⁵² “Conspiracy theory” can be taken to mean a belief in a conspiracy ‘that may or may not be true’. This definition emphasises the relativity of knowledge claims in their socially-constructed character.

However, conspiracy narratives are more like knowledge than belief, because it professes to be founded upon a rational, empirical epistemology that lays claim to scientific status, rather than faith-claims upon revelatory sources. I call *these* bodies of knowledge “alternative” to distinguish them from “mainstream” knowledge. This distinction is in accordance with the emic perspective of the truth-seekers. I will here follow Daniel Pipes’s working definitions: ‘*mainstream* refers to socially sanctioned ideas and institutions, ones that enjoy the patronage of the government and leading private institutions’.⁵³ By calling this knowledge “alternative” I refer to Pipes’s related definition of ‘fringe’ as ‘those elements [of culture] that do not [enjoy such patronage]’.⁵⁴

The focus of this study is the *culture* of truth-seeking. By “culture”, I refer to Geertz’s definition of ‘culture’ as ‘an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life’.⁵⁵ This is a broad definition; “culture” lies at the heart of anthropological inquiry; it might be a slippery concept, but I would argue that this is to its merit as an object of inquiry. I thus refer to a loose conception of the values, norms, and ideas that govern social life.

⁵² E. Doyle McCarthy, *Knowledge as Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996; repr. 2006), p. 2.

⁵³ Pipes, p. 29.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Geertz, *Interpretation*, p. 89.

Special attention must be given to the term “conspiracy theory”. While individual theories can differ in several respects, sociologist Michael Barkun provides a helpful typology that categorises “conspiracy theories” according to their *scale*.⁵⁶ ‘Event conspiracies’ are the smallest, regarded as ‘responsible for a limited, discrete event or set of events’, e.g. the Kennedy assassination being covertly carried out by state-sponsored forces. ‘Systemic conspiracies’ are more complex and can involve an entire social system. In order to achieve ‘broad goals’ (national, regional, and/or global domination) ‘a single, evil organization implements a plan to infiltrate and subvert existing institutions’. Barkun uses alleged plots by Jews, Masons, Catholic Church or theories centred on communism or international capitalists as his examples of this type. The most complex are ‘*superconspiracies*’, ‘conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are linked together hierarchically [...] [headed by] a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors’. Relative to the preceding types, superconspiracies are metanarratives that can accommodate event and systemic conspiracies in such a way that a single conspiratorial universe becomes populated by increasing numbers of actors and a more complex, multi-faceted, centralised plot.

The “conspiracy theory” that features in this present study most closely resembles the superconspiracy type. Many theories stipulate covert forces infiltrating and subverting the social system, but no single organisation is labelled as the chief party. This ethnography also focuses on what might appear, at first, to be event conspiracies (such as Chapter Six’s “false-flag” theories that explain terrorist attacks as being state-sponsored); but these might also be considered as systemic conspiracies (with infiltration/control of mainstream media or the military, for example), and, simultaneously, as an integral part of the superconspiracy that many truth-seekers perceive. While event conspiracies can be debated at a dinner party, and people can subscribe to such ideas about isolated events, Barkun understands superconspiracies as ‘so broad that they constitute the worldviews of those who hold them’.⁵⁷ This thesis is focussing on persons with this level of attachment to conspiracist ideas, for whom conspiracy narratives narrate their everyday experiences of living in the world.

An individual might believe in an event conspiracy, such as the John F. Kennedy Assassination, without being convinced that the culprits are attempting to establish an apocalyptic New World Order. Superconspiracies, however, always imply a myriad of singular events, committed by a number of evil organisations, oriented by means of a single centralised plot; here, the same assassination event intimates a far larger, more complex plot. Most “conspiracy theories” thus exist at all three levels of Barkun’s typology, the form taken depending upon the sensibilities of each “conspiracy theorist”. This fluidity of scale is reflected in several psychological studies that

⁵⁶ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (London: University of California Press, 2006), p. 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

have demonstrated that exposure to event conspiracies leads subsequently to a much greater chance of subscribing to wholesale conspiratorial thinking.⁵⁸

I will explore Barkun's characterisation of the crux of the 'conspiracist worldview' in more detail in Chapter Three, but it is worth noting here: 'nothing happens by accident', 'nothing is as it seems', and 'everything is connected'.⁵⁹

Importantly, this ethnography can only provide a snapshot of this so-called "truth movement" which is, in turn, a case study of sorts in "conspiracy theorist" culture. Above all, it is limited by my selection of field-sites, interviewees, and items of discourse. However, the research questions that guided my project design demanded in-depth, qualitative research of this social network, with the price of such an approach being the surrender of firm generalisability.

1.5. Thesis Outline

The primary aim of this thesis is to provide an ethnographic account of "conspiracy theorist" culture within contemporary Britain. Chapter One presents a sociological portrait of the Truth Movement, depicting it as an 'alternative knowledge network' that closely resembles sociologist Colin Campbell's description of 'a cultic milieu'.⁶⁰ I describe the flows of people, practices, and beliefs/knowledge that together constitute the life-blood of this so-called movement, asking: to what extent can the so-called Truth Movement be considered an actual movement? I will draw out the different streams of 'alternative knowledge' besides "conspiracy theory" that are found within the truth-seeking milieu, including "New Age" spirituality.

In the second chapter I redirect attention onto the individual truth-seekers who are co-creators of this emergent movement. It is interested in the process by which individuals "wake up" to the illusory nature of reality and undergo individuated careers of truth-seeking; in etic terms, it asks how people "convert" to a worldview dominated by "conspiracy theories". This chapter gives voice to the diverse journeys of truth-seekers as they both construct, and maintain, an alternative outlook on life, marrying emic perspectives with those of the sociology of knowledge. I argue that the role played by anomie regarding mainstream culture represents only half of the true story; the establishment of an alternative nomos rooted in self-identity completes the picture. Furthermore, while the truth movement serves as an essential resource for truth-seekers, many individuals actually "wake up" a second time, a development opaque from the outside.

At this point I have established the truth movement as an alternative knowledge network comprised of truth-seekers undergoing individuated careers of meaning-making that serve to

⁵⁸ For instance, see Ted Goertzl, 'Belief in Conspiracy Theories', *Political Psychology*, 15.4 (1994), 731-742. Methodological atheism follows naturally from defining "conspiracy theory" as a non-existent theory.

⁵⁹ Barkun, *Culture*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁰ Colin Campbell, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization', *Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, 5 (1972), pp. 119-136

sacralise a sense of self-identity. The remaining chapters look at the ways that different currents of alternative knowledge are embodied in the everyday world of its participants. In this way, the individuals and ideas that comprise the truth movement are properly contextualised within social reality.

Chapter Three deals with the broad area of health. The different conspiracy narratives met in the field might present conflicting scenarios in substantive terms, but alternative knowledge always relates to human well-being. This chapter gives an overview of the two major narratives that are mobilised across subject areas, the economic model, and the Agenda 21 model. It addresses the question of empowerment, responding to those academic commentators who portray “conspiracy theorists” as disempowered agents. I argue that alternative knowledge goes beyond merely diagnosing problems to providing appropriate solutions. These therapies become intelligible, and effective, only by stepping within a practitioner’s plausibility structure; this is shown to combine elements of Eastern, Western, and “New Age” medicine in subjective praxes of empowerment.

Chapter Four takes us to the domain of the political. Here I will engage critically with the term “conspiracy theory” as used in this context, moving towards the more accurate term of ‘false-flag counter-narrative’, using the popular example of 9/11. This chapter establishes the alternative nature of such narratives as relating to their explicit challenging of the official versions of events. Within the cultural context of the truth movement, I show the huge significance accorded to events like 9/11 and 7/7, arguing that these constitute ‘paradigmatic scenes’ within a truth-seeker’s lifeworld.

A major stress of my thesis is the disunity that characterises the truth movement as an uneasy collective. How this conflict is borne out at the socio-cultural level of the truth movement is a major topic of both the False-Flag chapter, and the following chapter that focusses upon “Flat Earth” counter-narratives. This branch of alternative knowledge was the most contentious I met during fieldwork; but these apparently bizarre claims are again made intelligible by way of analysing the constitutive bricolage of knowledge-making claims; furthermore, the disharmony caused by these ideas is shown also to serve important social functions that contribute positively to the truth-seeking journeys of their subscribers and debunkers alike. The chief area of dispute relates to areas of alternative knowledge that postulate the existence of extra-terrestrial lifeforms. The domain of scientific knowledge is here in focus, showing that the legitimacy attributed to would-be authorities of knowledge relates back to the theme of a meaningful self-identity.

In the last chapter I turn to the domain of law. I follow the Freeman-on-the-Land perspective from the general meeting groups, to a dedicated meeting group, and finally to a day in court. This is an area of alternative knowledge where the social consequences are potentially severe and unforgiving, as truth-seekers encounter dominant institutions whose outlook appears to be incommensurable. The purpose of this chapter is once again to make this branch of alternative

knowledge intelligible to an unfamiliar audience by delineating the plausibility structure that guides the freeman project. Listening to the meanings that truth-seekers themselves attribute to the ideas and practices that comprise this channel, I recast them as practitioners of ‘civil spirituality’. This applies across all the domains of alternative knowledge; it brings together the themes of identity sacralisation with truth-seekers accounts, or counter-narratives, of social reality.

Before I proceed to the main body of the thesis I will first review the methodology I employed to study this culture of real-life “conspiracy theorists”.

Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1. Introduction

This chapter will set out the overall design of my study and establish some guiding principles for the ethnographic approach to qualitative research. I will also set out my research paradigm of social constructivism. Then, I will discuss the different methods of inquiry I have used to gather my data; my period of ethnographic fieldwork was conducted across several sites, from 2014-2016, and included interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. Here I describe the physical and virtual sites I regularly attended. Finally, I think reflexively about my own role and background as a researcher, reflecting on the limitations of my chosen methods, the validity of my findings, and the research ethics of my project.

2.2. Thesis Aims and Research Questions

In Chapter One I describe how I came across references to a wider collective of like-minded individuals, referred to as “the Truth Movement”. My study intended to produce an ethnography of these so-called “conspiracy theorists” in contemporary Britain, particularly focussing on the social dimension. Incorporating the emphasis that grounded theory puts to the iterative, abductive character of qualitative ethnographic inquiry, I allowed my early fieldwork findings to inform the design of the study. In particular I allowed the sense of a notional collective to guide my study design as I focussed my efforts at producing an ethnography of the Truth Movement within contemporary England.

Although “conspiracy theory” remains a dominant focus of this thesis, the social network that formed my research object was comprised of individuals and groups who were interested in other areas of ‘alternative knowledge’ besides “conspiracy theory”. Thus, this thesis incorporates a sociology of (alternative) knowledge with an anthropology of (alternative) knowledge by focussing on the type of social organisation that has arisen from a shared interest in alternative knowledge, with a special interest shown towards conspiracy narratives. Three interrelated questions emerged from this:

- 1) To what extent can the so-called Truth Movement be considered an actual movement?
- 2) On what basis do truth-seekers subscribe to alternative knowledge?
- 3) What are the personal and social consequences of holding these views for an individual truth-seeker?

As Fenster argued, conspiracy narratives become partially disabling; the wider sets of ideas and practices stipulated by *other* branches of alternative knowledge complement “conspiracy theory” by occupying a similarly heterodox position – thus sharing an alternative plausibility

structure – and by enabling a positive praxis of self-empowerment. This provided me with a further research question:

4) What is the role of spirituality within the truth movement and its relationship with conspiracy narratives?

2.3. Research Framework

2.3.1 Social Constructivism

My framework that guided my ethnographic research was that of social constructivism, a perspective that views reality as socially constructed. There is no fixed definition, but it sees knowledge as historically and culturally specific; it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated'.⁶¹ These 'negotiated' understandings about the world 'sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others'.⁶²

It is one thing to observe the recurring use of a discursive symbol; it is quite another to understand the meanings by which the group in question understands them, and/or whether these meanings might be contested, and by whom, and in which situation. In a symbolic world, appearances can be deceptive; for Clifford Geertz, ethnography consists of 'thick description' that 'sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones'.⁶³ I. M. Lewis likens the ethnographic fieldworker to 'a kind of cross-cultural private eye, relentlessly pursuing clues to lay bare the soul of his foreign hosts'.⁶⁴ 'Soul' is not meant in any theological sense, but in terms of a social constructivist perspective: humans both shape, and are shaped by, their social environment. A person's innermost sense of self – their identity – is thus understood as a cultural artefact.

Within the philosophical paradigm of social constructivism, I lean more towards the influence of symbolic interactionism. This school of thought accepts the first principle of constructivists – that humans are shaped by their social worlds – but gives more stress to the other side of the dialectic – that humans *shape* their social worlds. When people talk they communicate with a system of symbols we call language; the meanings of words are not bestowed idiosyncratically but are derived from social consensus. This works up to a point. People can purposefully invert these meanings, use irony, or "invent" neologisms. In this sense, people do not simply utilise a system of symbols, but they actively and consciously interact with it. Symbolic interactionism is an attractive paradigm because it avoids implying that individuals are passively caught up in a

⁶¹ Vivien Burr, *An Introduction to Social Constructionism* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 2-5.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 16.

⁶⁴ I. M. Lewis, *Social Anthropology in Perspective* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 25-26.

deterministic social system.⁶⁵ It is well-suited to my research project because it avoids pathologizing my informants by avoiding a normative bias; an “alternative” outlook is seen simply as the result of particular patterns of interaction with sets of symbols.

The constructivist paradigm also has important implications for issues of ultimate “truth”. A phenomenon’s ultimate ontological status eludes the constructivist, who is instead concerned with its social origins and consequences. In contrast, the positivist tradition holds ‘there is a reality out there to be studied, captured, and understood’.⁶⁶ The historical studies that argue that “conspiracy theories” make false claims proceed via this paradigm; historians attempt to construct (at least partial) truths about what *really* happened in history. In contrast, to a social science working from a constructivist perspective, a claim is “true” to the extent that the social group in question *perceive* it to be true. An example from my fieldwork would be when someone told me they served on the Council of Atlantis in a previous life. Not only am I unable to verify this claim, but, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, what matters are the personal and social consequences of *my informant’s* phenomenal “fact” of identifying as a former Atlantean elder. True to ethnography’s aims, this line of inquiry requires access to the insider’s perspective, rather than knowing the history of Atlantis.

2.3.2 Etic and Emic

The distinction between ‘etic’/’emic’ descriptions is pertinent here: etic descriptions or analyses are “‘alien” in view, with criteria external to the system’; they talk about a given culture in terms derived from another, looking *down upon it* from a distance.⁶⁷ An ‘emic’ perspective is internal to the culture it describes, with criteria chosen from within the system. They represent to us the view of someone familiar with the system and who knows how to function within it himself.⁶⁸

‘Emic’ descriptions are horizontal in that they understand a given system in its own terms. Achieving an ideal state of intersubjectivity would amount to free access to the emic perspective; in real terms, however, *total* intersubjectivity would amount to “going native” with no hope of return.⁶⁹ The researcher must cross the bridge back to the etic perspective – which, of course, is emic unto the academic system – to offer meaningful analyses to his readership.

⁶⁵ Joel M. Charon, *Symbolic Interactionism: an introduction, an interpretation, and integration* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 14.

⁶⁶ Denzin, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Kenneth L. Pike, *Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behaviour*, in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Russel T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 28-29.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Social*, p. 28. ‘Subjectivity and personal involvement are part of the price the social anthropologist pays for his most cherished and characteristic research strategy which, within the limits we have indicated, we can succinctly describe as ‘going native’.

I want to give voice *to* the truth-seekers; I want also to say something *about* the truth-seekers. The perspectives of other academics constitute other etic descriptions. As a result, ethnographers leap between phenomenal universes, aiming to arrive at an *informed etic* standpoint. Existing studies (especially the polemical treatments) have subdued and distorted emic perspectives belonging to “conspiracy theorists”; I have endeavoured to preserve the emic voices, distinguishing clearly between these and the etic understandings of others and myself. This is the rationale behind the extent of interview data included within this ethnography. This is a research population that feels misunderstood by academics, partially submerged by virtue of their non-academical status, and exhibits suspiciousness towards mainstream academic understandings.⁷⁰ Truth-seekers, that is, a group of people who value “conspiracy theories” as authentic knowledge, constitute a ‘*hard to reach* population’.⁷¹ For instance, Andy Thomas, author of *The Truth Agenda*, who I interviewed as part of my research, writes about an appearing on an episode of the BBC 1’s *The One Show* focussing on “conspiracy theories”, alongside two other ‘ambassadors from the world of mysteries research’ (including another interviewee from this study, Marcus Allen).⁷² A far-reaching discussion lasting two hours was edited into ‘barely *half* a minute’, leaving out the ‘more important themes’ to afford enough time for ‘the studio presenters for condescending dismissal’.⁷³ Experiences like this contribute to feelings of mistrust towards the research process, discouraging future participation.⁷⁴ Although I highlighted several social scientific studies that recognise the pejorative, and offer more neutral analyses, these have, without exception, neglected the voice of grassroots “conspiracy theorists”, excluding the very population they purport to study.⁷⁵ Whereas Barkun uses the writings of David Icke as primary material, I use him as a springboard for my study of people influenced *by* Icke, a means of contextualising these emic voices.

This study redresses the imbalance by focussing on the people, and not solely the products, involved with conspiracy discourse. Furthermore, I purposefully refer to a mixture of voices in terms of consumers and producers of discourse. In the interests of space, it seems wise to restate emic rather than etic opinions, though I utilise etic theories in my analysis all the same. I hope

⁷⁰ See Chapter Eight on the Flat Earth theory for an example of scepticism directed at mainstream science. David Icke is vocal in his disdain towards academia, recommending, ‘Don’t go until the system is changed, and save yourself from being saddled with extreme levels of perception programming and debt’. David Icke, *Remember Who You Are: Remember ‘where’ you ‘come’ from* (Rhyde: David Icke Books Ltd, 2012), p. 342.

⁷¹ Nicole K. Jeffrey, Melisa Coubak, and Sara E. Crann, ‘Finding the Hidden Participants: Solutions for Recruiting Hidden, Hard-to-Reach, and Vulnerable Populations’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 14.5 (2015), doi: 10.1177/1609406915621420.

⁷² Andy Thomas, *The Truth Agenda: Making Sense of Unexplained Mysteries, Global Cover-Ups & Visions for a New Era* (Forest Row: Vital Signs Publishing, 2013), p. 11.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Jeffrey et. Al, ‘Hidden Informants’.

⁷⁵ It is easier to list the exceptions to this observation. Fenster comes closest when reporting attending “Phenomicon: America’s Most Dangerous Convention”, but offers little more than a (generalised) description of attendees’ appearances, with isolated quotes that are actually taken from other studies, p. 155-157.

future studies of related phenomena – whether future manifestations of the cultic milieu or new forms of organisation arising around a shared interest in “conspiracy theory” and/or other types of alternative knowledge – might make use of my careful selection of emic data that I have chosen to include in this ethnography.

2.3.3 A “Playful” Approach to Truth: Methodological Ludism

This leads us onto a related methodological consideration that is essential for social scientific studies of religious phenomena: whether to adopt a position of methodological atheism, agnosticism or theism, in relation to the worldview held by the social group under investigation. This positioning is significant for a project because it influences the eventual analysis. When studying a religion one meets with believers’ statements about a meta-empirical reality; what ontological status should the researcher bestow upon this emergent world? Methodological atheism denies its ontological reality, leading to ‘reductionist’ explanations. This approach fits psychological studies of ‘conspiracy theories’ and ‘conspiracy theorists’.⁷⁶ Methodological theism, on the other hand, accepts their reality, leading to ‘religionist’ explanations. Studies in this approach are *confessional* in nature, written for a theist audience. For this reason, academic treatments of “conspiracy theory” are non-existent; David Icke writes from this perspective. Methodological agnosticism is the most common position for a scholar of religion because the empirical method inherently precludes ‘direct access to the non-empirical’.⁷⁷ An empiricist venturing an opinion about something deemed *meta*-empirical would not be acting scientifically; it would, in any case, be *bad* science.

Although methodological agnosticism would therefore seem to be the sensible choice, it is problematised in this context for two reasons. First, where does one draw the line between empirical and meta-empirical? From a truth-seeker’s perspective, the efficacy of water molecules as a transmitter of “positive” and “negative” energy capable of affecting human consciousness is allegedly proven by the scientific experiments of Dr Emoto who claims to proceed via the empirical method.⁷⁸ However, these notions appear to involve several meta-empirical statements. In a different case, counter-narratives around 9/11 pay much attention to the collapse of WT7, the third tower. This claim is empirical in the sense that it can be tested against video recordings; but what about the manner in which it fell looking like a controlled demolition? This appears meta-empirical, in that the recreation of an accurate test to measure the claim’s veracity is practically impossible. What about claims that government agents

⁷⁶ For example, see Swami, Viren, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, and Adrian Furnham, ‘Unanswered Questions: A Preliminary Investigation of Personality and Individual Difference Predictors of 9/11 Conspiracist Beliefs’, *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 24 (2010), 882-93; for an earlier treatment based on this approach, see Goertzl, pp. 731-732. Methodological atheism follows naturally from defining “conspiracy theory” as a non-existent theory.

⁷⁷ Wouter Hanegraaff, ‘Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism’, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 7.2 (1995), p. 101.

⁷⁸ See Chapter Five.

infiltrate and disrupt anti-establishment movements? This is more difficult; particular instances would require freedom of information requests, but there is ample evidence of these kinds of practices being employed in the modern era.

The reasonable position is methodological agnosticism; this must be applied *consistently* across a wide range of statements, some of which, in theory, are empirical and testable. I need to be clear, here, because this position is likely to frustrate both academics, and truth-seekers, alike: academics (and “conspiracy theory” debunkers and sceptics more generally) might perceive my agnosticism towards even such things as FET as cause for concern for my own competency as a rational person-cum-researcher, or mistake my elucidation of the alternative plausibility structure for acquiescence; truth-seekers, conversely, might grow angry at my reluctance to “connect the dots” between the various theories by pointing the finger at a conspiratorial source, or, indeed, for calling counter-narratives plausible without calling them true.

A second problem with methodological agnosticism arose during fieldwork when I tried to apply it to my activities as a participant observer. In order to access the emic perspective, it is necessary to suspend temporarily one’s disbelief. When listening to a speaker I was aiming to hear with the ears of a truth-seeker, not those of a methodological agnostic anthropologist of religion. It is not that truth-seekers necessarily listen to talks any less critically than myself (see Chapter Five), but rather that the purposes of their listening are obviously different. For instance, truth-seekers were not scribbling down notes into a field-journal regarding exciting emergent cross-overs with the kind of “New Age” spirituality that I had been taught about during an undergraduate degree in Theology and Religion. As my fieldwork progressed, agnosticism became difficult to maintain; but in those moments of wondering aloud I gathered the richest data.

The emotional aspects of alternative knowledge are as important as the cognitive; one can only describe them “thickly” if one allows the alternative knowledge to breath naturally. In real terms, therefore, I would describe my approach as conforming to Droogers’s notion of ‘methodological ludism’ (derived from the Latin *ludic*, meaning “playful”); ‘the qualitative method of [participant observation] can be characterised as playful’.⁷⁹ In stepping back and forth between perspectives – between moments of participation in the emic culture and moments of detached observation or digestion of experience according to an etic framework – the researcher effectively engages in role-playing, ‘playing with *emic* and *etic* roles’.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ André Droogers, ‘Methodological Ludism’, in *Methods for the Study of Religious Change: From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies*, ed. by André Droogers and Anton van Harskamp (Sheffield: Equinow, 2014), p.67.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

2.4. Research Methods

2.4.1 Ethnography

From its Malinowskian beginnings, the goal of ethnography is to reveal ‘the culture of a given group as the individuals in the group see it’.⁸¹ According to Prus, the ethnographer’s ‘objective is to achieve intersubjectivity with those one studies; to access the viewpoints and experiences of the other and become intimately familiar with these people’s situations, deliberations, activities, interchanges, and the like’.⁸² An ethnographer’s best methods of inquiry are therefore those that enable access to the insider perspective, crossing the threshold to the closest approximation of the emic gaze.

Ethnographic studies have spawned multiple approaches in the field that reflect a research methodology that incorporates historical developments in the conceptualisation of researcher/researched.⁸³ Etymologically, ‘ethnography’ derives from two Greek words: *ethnos*, meaning “a people” or “foreigner”, and *graphos*, meaning “writing”.⁸⁴ An ethnography, therefore, is a written portrait about a people. As a qualitative research method, it attempts to reach beyond a social group’s surface-appearances or aesthetics, interested in the meanings behind behaviour and thought rather than their quantitative significance.

2.4.2 Multi-Sited Method

In line with the aim at cultural immersion, ethnography was traditionally conducted within a single site in a foreign culture. Malinowski, the great pioneer of field-based research, delineates the ‘proper conditions for ethnographic work’: namely, ‘to live without other white men, right among the natives’.⁸⁵ For Malinowski, accessing the emic perspective requires techniques of severing ties with the emic perspective of one’s host culture. Instead, ‘close contact with the natives [...] can be achieved by camping right in their village’, enabling one to observe ‘natural intercourse’.⁸⁶ More poetically (though retrospectively, most precisely), after some initial strangeness, or even distress, the ethnographer ‘soon adopts quite a natural course quite in harmony with his surroundings’.⁸⁷

My study, would appear therefore to go against these recommendations. A multi-sited method would appear to flout this principle, since multiple sites meant different systems of relationships

⁸¹ Maria J. Mayan, *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009), p. 38.

⁸² Prus, *Doing Ethnography*, p. 16.

⁸³ For a good overview of the historical changes to ethnography, see Martin D. Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), pp. 19-35.

⁸⁴ Maria J. Mayan, *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009), p. 132.

⁸⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the western Pacific: an account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 1922), p. 6.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

between each, disrupting close contact with the phenomena in question. However, due to dramatic changes seen with the advent of the ‘Information Age’, an epoch defined by the transformation of geographic space, as described by sociologist Manuel Castells, the former primacy of the ‘space of places’ has given way to the ‘space of flows’.⁸⁸ With the advent of communicative information technologies, ‘networks of interaction’ are no longer bound by ‘the boundaries of territorial contiguity’; according to Castells, networks have become the basic organisational unit in this informational, late-modern age.⁸⁹ In light of this, my ethnography cannot limit itself to only one physical group at a single site but rather explores the horizontal exchanges of information that span over spatially disparate – even to the point of seeming separate – yet inter- and intra-connected parts. This is the approach adopted in Mathew Wood’s ethnography of (so-called) New Age spiritualities.⁹⁰ Due to the trans-local nature of the Truth Movement, such an approach seems necessarily appropriate. This notional collective is difficult to pin down; its questionable status as a “movement” is explored in detail in Chapter One and probed further through the subsequent chapters. Due to its web-like nature, the ethnographic methods advocated by George E. Marcus of a ‘multi-sited’ or ‘mobile’ ethnography were suitable.

Instead of picking a single physical site, Marcus says that a multi-sited or mobile ethnography might follow ‘the thing’, ‘the people’, ‘the metaphor’, ‘the plot, story, or allegory’, ‘the life or biography’, or ‘the conflict’.⁹¹ I begin Chapter One by recalling how I first heard terms including “Truth Movement”, “Alternative Movement”, and “Freedom Movement”, to describe the unofficial and informal sense of an alternative knowledge *collective*. By following the flows of ideas, people, and metaphors that together comprise this collective according to the emic standpoint, I am afforded the necessary flexibility and mobility to describe the social phenomenon under question. Furthermore, for Marcus, ‘the global is an emergent dimension of arguing about the connection among sites in a multi-sited ethnography’.⁹² Not only is the “Truth Movement” ‘global’ in a composite sense of spanning across numerous trans-local sites, but the world system(s) in which these groups are situated can best be apprehended by studying multiple sites, heeding multiple emic voices. In this sense, a multi-sited/mobile ethnography (versus single-sited) allows me to describe more accurately how the world system actually

⁸⁸ Manuel Castells, ‘Grassrooting the Space of Flows’, *Urban Georgraphy*, 20.4 (1999), pp. 294-302; Manuel Castells, ‘Toward a Sociology of the Network Society’, *Contemporary Sociology*, 29.5 (2000), pp. 693-699; Manuel Castells, ‘The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616 (2008), pp. 78-93.

⁸⁹ Castells, ‘Space of Flows’, p. 295.

⁹⁰ Mathew Wood, *Power, Possession and the New Age* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)

⁹¹ George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 90-98.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

manifests itself in the experience of other truth-seekers who themselves traverse an alternative knowledge network comprised of countless physical and digital sites.

This approach is inherently dynamic. The topography is informed and moulded by experiences in the field, thus incorporating, to some extent, the lessons of grounded theory approach.

Anthropologist Okely, who works using fieldwork, found that ‘the vast majority of anthropologists I interviewed revealed that they had changed their research focus or even locality after arriving in the field’.⁹³ As an antidote to positivism foreclosing the possibilities of a genuinely abductive study, she advocates ‘free association’, as taken from psychoanalytic practice, which ‘entails being open to whatever comes into the person’s mind, namely, random ideas and images, through a non-directed process for constructive analysis’.⁹⁴ It is not about relinquishing every preconception – such a business would be impossible, and a denial of the reflexive turn which sees the researcher’s assumptions as embedded in the research process itself – but, rather, ‘this prior baggage should be used creatively’.⁹⁵ She advocates the related notion of ‘free passage’, which means ‘being open to what occurs, rather than sticking relentlessly to pre-planned and rationalised controls’.⁹⁶

2.4.3 Participant Observation

The loss of total immersion into a single community, as in Malinowski’s sense, reflects the lived reality of truth-seekers living in contemporary Britain. Physical groups meet weekly or fortnightly; there is no permanent, separate village. Therefore, my method emulates the normal experience of a truth-seeker. Physical immersion discounts *informational immersion*; the flows of information that truth-seekers consume manifest in the non-physical, digital world of the Internet, and other trans-local communication technologies. Materials that were recommended by multiple truth-seekers were incorporated into my fieldwork, such as podcasts, books, videos, and websites. Over time, I observed how different individuals would specialise within one or two areas of alternative knowledge of their own choosing. In my role as participant, I began to do the same; through a praxis of personal research in private, I interacted differently with the public talks.

From the perspective of the constructivist paradigm, social reality, regardless of its ultimate ontological status, is experienced as “real” through phenomenal experiences in consciousness. Therefore, ‘if as social scientists we want to understand what is going on, we have no option but to use ourselves as “a medium”’.⁹⁷ An ethnographic researcher not only observes social phenomena, but, in order to observe emic understandings first-hand, participates *within* these

⁹³ Okely, ‘Free Association’, p. 32.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁹⁷ Eileen Barker, “The Scientific Study of Religion? You must be joking!” in *Cults in Context*, ed. by Lorne Dawson (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), p. 6.

social phenomena. The way of building an anthropology of an alternative knowledge network was an immersion into a lived sociology of knowledge; in reality, a sociology of knowledge is not the stuff of idle abstractions, but something forged from experiential encounters with a phenomenal social reality. The things that people “know” become embodied in themselves and the world around them.⁹⁸

As I spent time in the field, at different sites, with different people, listening to different ideas, I observed what goes on around me using every sense available. Group activities such as listening to speakers are inherently participatory because this is what truth-seekers do. *How* to listen in a participatory way was more difficult, as inferred above, but I learnt over time that truth-seekers would consider three broad points: 1) How trustworthy is the speaker? 2) What does this tell me about the world? 3) What does this tell me about myself?

Other ways to participate involved adopting the private practices of truth-seekers. For example, many truth-seekers stay away from mainstream media sources; some have thrown away their television. I greatly reduced the amount of time I would watch television, and instead started listening to podcasts, and watching documentaries/films online, as recommended by truth-seekers. When I *did* watch television, or read mainstream printed newspapers, I found that I interpreted the material differently; my participation as a truth-seeker extended to “normal” activities.

Some forms of participation were unique to certain streams of knowledge; I took opportunities to investigate these as they arose naturally in the field. Within health, for example, I adopted the patterns of consumption followed by truth-seekers, such as avoiding processed foods and tap-water, and eating organic foods and drinking mineral water instead. Meanwhile, I was inspired by a regular attendee who went foraging for natural herbal medicines to do the same. Separately, to participate in alternative law meant attending a dedicated discussion group, and later attending a court case involving a member. A mobile ethnography enabled me the freedom to chase opportunities as they arose; to prevent myself from chasing too many events across too many topics, and to ensure the phenomena under investigation remained grounded in my research object, I only participated in events that were advertised in at least one group and attended by members of a group, and which participants would openly associate with the notional “truth movement”.

2.4.4. Interviews

Interviews were an integral way of accessing the emic perspective. In total, I conducted semi-structured with thirty participants. They were semi-structured insofar as I *always* asked two recurrent questions: to what extent do you consider the so-called “Truth Movement” to be an

⁹⁸ See Chapter Three for the embodied risk society.

actual movement? How did you get from where you *were*, to where you are today?⁹⁹ The shortest interview was twenty minutes; the longest lasted almost four hours. As I noticed themes emerging from the data as I reviewed fieldnotes and listened back and transcribed the interviews, I developed relevant lines of exploratory questions.

I was careful to curtail the influence of me-as-interviewer, especially leading questions.¹⁰⁰ I therefore stressed to participants beforehand that they were free to challenge my questions and/or terminology (which I tried to avoid supplying myself), and that, in all instances, there were no “right”/“wrong” answers. In this sense, I combined directed and non-directive questioning.¹⁰¹

2.4.5 Discourse and Documents

These formed a natural part of my role as a participant observer. On the one hand, participating as a truth-seeker involved reading books and articles, and watching films and documentaries. On the other hand, my ethnography was concerned principally with the *theorists*, rather than the *theories*. I am not attempting to produce a detailed exegesis on the books that people read; I am more interested in how the people interact with these books. Therefore, because lots of truth-seekers had read at least one David Icke book, I did the same. I do not offer an extensive analysis of his works, but I point to the well-known concepts of his creation that truth-seekers utilise themselves.

2.4.6 Netnography

The Internet is of crucial importance to the Truth Movement and therefore deserved the attention of a ‘netnography’.¹⁰² The same principles behind offline ethnography apply here: ‘netnography is participant—observational research based in online fieldwork’.¹⁰³ I am blending the methods of ethnography and netnography to study a social group that exists both online *and* offline; an important question is whether the Truth Movement is an example of ‘online community’ or ‘community online’. Ward and Voas claim that ‘conspirituality’ is a prime example of ‘online

⁹⁹ I copied this question from a podcast called Shamanic Freedom Radio, asked by the host to each week’s guest. It is purposefully vague, and I would tell the person that they were free to answer it however they chose. If they did not understand the wording, I would rephrase as follows: “How did you come to attend the group/workshop where I first met you?” I selected it because it was open-ended enough to avoid leading answers, and as a question met in the field I thought it worked well with emic usage. For the archive of past podcasts from 2009-present (2019) see Niall Murphy, ‘Shamanic Freedom Radio’ (2019), <<https://shamanicfreedomradio.podomatic.com/archive/rss2.xml>> [accessed 20/01/19].

¹⁰⁰ ‘While their dangers must be borne in mind, they can be extremely useful in testing hypotheses and trying to penetrate fronts’. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (London: Psychology Press, 1995).

¹⁰¹ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Principles*, pp. 151-155.

¹⁰² See Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (London: Sage, 2010); Derya Kulavuz-Onal and Camilla Vasquez, ‘Reconceptualising fieldwork in a netnography of an online community of English language teachers’, *Ethnography and Education*, 8.2 (2013), pp. 224-238.

¹⁰³ Kozinets, *Netnography*, p. 63.

religion' (i.e. a form of online religious community) this question needs clarification.¹⁰⁴ In light of my research, and in line with my conclusions in Chapter One concerning the structural makeup of the “movement”, the online community/community online dichotomy is unhelpful because the primacy of online/offline forms of community vary between different truth-seekers. I present the ethnography as an offline culture even though the ties between the network’s nodes and actors exist online. To be sure, there might exist many truth-seekers whose interactions with the Truth Movement take place *only* online, who not only garner all their information from virtual channels, but are vested in a web of relationships in an ‘online community’ that *never* meets offline. The truth-seekers I met in person, however, obviously attend physical sites; and *these* form the subjects of this present study. Rather than treat the virtual as a distinct sphere, I rather see it as an aspect of the everyday, and thus it took a back seat in this study except where a truth-seeker would naturally use it, i.e. during personal research.

2.5. The Research Process

2.5.1. Sample Selection: *Field Sites*

The traditional mode of conducting ethnography involves studying a single site or locale, typically within a cultural formation that is separate from the researcher’s native culture.¹⁰⁵ This version of ethnography has been rendered problematic for research directed upon cultures that exist within/alongside the latter’s own society, and for those forms that spread across multiple locales.

New Horizons

New Horizons claims to be the longest-running group of ‘free-thinking’ in the UK, now entering its sixteenth year. Its topics reflect the breadth of a cultic milieu, advertised as including the following: “‘conspiracy theories’...true or not; the global economy; hidden news; complementary health; alternative history; self-empowerment; alternative science & technology; the paranormal; ancient mysteries; the legal rights of the individual’; and many, many more!’. Again, we see that conspiracy theories are discussed within a programme inclusive of many themes not immediately of a conspiratorial nature. Running weekly its format remains relatively unchanged: there is a guest speaker who has a two-hour slot with a fifteen-minute break for tea and coffee, included in the £3 entrance fee. There is room for socialising conversationally before and after the talk. There is a chance for questions at the end if time allows.

The current organisers are the fourth set of leaders taking charge of booking speakers and maintaining the group in a pragmatic sense. Different leaders have brought the group into different directions resulting in different *emphases* within the field of alternative knowledges. The current leaders moved away from an increasingly exclusive focus on “spiritual” topics (examples include

¹⁰⁴ Ward and Voas, ‘Conspirituality’.

¹⁰⁵ Malinowski, *Argonauts*, pp. 6ff.

more weeks devoted to healings and channellings) and onto more this-worldly topics such as the legal rights of the individual. This apparently saved the number of attendees from a dwindling dozen to anything from forty to over one hundred depending on the topic. Studying this site over time will allow me to see which topics attract the largest audiences; how different topics are received by individuals with different interests in the milieu.

Conferences by other organisations within the ‘cultic milieu’ are advertised during the break, such as the Alternative View Conference, the British Constitution Group, or exo-politics/paranormal conferences such as Probe. This group is also connected with another New Horizons group in Preston, sharing speakers and attendees for some talks. The alternative media is represented by distributors of the UK Column. There are also DVDs sold for non-profit (proceeds are put back into the group’s kitty), arranged thematically in a way reflecting the variety of themes in the programme (New World Order, alternative money, alternative health, free energy, etc.), which represents just one link between the private and public dimension of truth-seeking for free-thinkers visiting that site. These communication links show this group to be connected to a larger and wider non-institutional collectivity, forming the focus of the project.

Truthjuice Birmingham

Truthjuice Birmingham is ‘a fortnightly event bringing you the very best in esoteric knowledge’. The organisation “Truthjuice” has cells all over the country, from Todmorden to London to Gloucestershire to Glasgow. Allegedly, its founders attended New Horizons in St-Anne’s and this actually inspired them to set up a means for other groups to emerge nationally, all devoted to forms of ‘free-thinking’ that disseminated truths for local communities. In previous years they had come together for summer gatherings lasting a whole weekend, although this did not run in 2014 due to financial issues. Some of the groups appearing on their umbrella website no longer meet up regularly, and one group Truthjuice Liverpool, came to reject the name and reform with a much greater emphasis on more outwardly “spiritual” concerns. On the other hand, a new Truthjuice cell started in East Anglia during my fieldwork. Birmingham represents the strongest cell of Truthjuice in the UK running today, attracting audiences of thirty to one hundred people (averaging at around forty).

The format is similar to that of New Horizons, having bi-weekly speakers whose presentations are centred within much longer periods of socialising. Its webpage features this description:

‘From a plethora of inspirational speakers. We are actively building a community of like minded “Freethinkers” to share ideas and resources. The central theme of all our talks is greater financial, spiritual, mental and physical health for all our visitors. This is not just a great opportunity to hear respected speakers who are experts in their field, but also a great chance to interact with like minded people!!!’.

The communications network again features UK Column, Nexus Magazine, and advertises some same, some different, events from New Horizons. There are also many leaflets produced by religious groups including the Aetherius Society and Theosophical Society available on the front desk. Besides the talk given by a visiting speaker, there are vendors selling assorted local, organic produce; colloidal silver and magnesium supplements; crystals; and an anti-oxidizing green tea called kombucha. These features taken together support the claim that this group belongs to a 'cultic milieu'. Visiting this group over time benefited the project by introducing a comparative dimension in terms of how topics were received by different groups.

Truthjuice Hull

The third group I visited regularly is a Truthjuice cell meeting fortnightly in Hull. This was also well-attended. The format is the same as the other two groups, and it hosts speakers in a similar range of topics. They too advertise UK Column, Nexus Magazine, and distribute DVDs, but do not have the health-related things available at Birmingham.

2.5.2. Data Analysis

The data that I produced through my combined practices of participant observation and interviews is the raw matter out of which I describe the Truth Movement and answer my research questions. I used the computer programme NVIVO to digitise my fieldnotes, and to transcribe my interviews, mostly during the period of fieldwork in which I produced more data. I engaged in content analysis of both a manifest and latent type.¹⁰⁶ Manifest content refers to specific ideas and words as expressed in the data-as-text. Latent content analysis looks at the underlying meanings behind passages and excerpts; 'it allows coding of participants' intent within context'.¹⁰⁷ 'Coding' is a technique of arranging data in a meaningful way, out of which categories begin to form. I used the constant comparative method as a way of continually thinking about these categories, and allowing themes to arise from the data, which I would then have in mind when reviewing the data subsequently.

2.5.3. Ethical considerations

Studying human beings requires an ethical sensitivity to ensure that research participants are protected, and any concerns are dealt with sensitively. I was careful to stick to the principle of informed consent and ensure that participants fully understood the nature of my project as a social scientific piece of research.¹⁰⁸ I gave each interviewee an information/consent form (Appendix A) and gave them opportunity to ask any questions. I tried to be as open with attendees I met during meeting as possible and made no attempt to conceal my role as a researcher but did so sensitively so as not to disrupt group conversations. I openly took fieldnotes. I approached the

¹⁰⁶ Mayan *Qualitative*, pp. 93-94.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Hammersley and Atkinson, pp. 264-266.

organisers of the groups in person before including any ethnographic data in this study. I sought permission to record talks although many were already posted on YouTube. I quickly became well-known among regular attendees who took warmly to the project. Some truth-seekers became “friends” on Facebook, but I decided against using data gathered online because information there seemed private in a sense.

The worldview of many truth-seekers included beliefs about powerful and malevolent forces that wish to harm humanity and remain hidden. I therefore anticipated that most would prefer to hide their identity; it was surprising how few interviewees asked to be anonymised in the write-up when asked. I have been careful not to include surnames of any informants except for those truth-seekers who publish books or do public presentations under their full name. The groups, events, and organisations that I have mentioned by name are all advertised publicly. I decided not to profile interviewees or attendees at the groups, or seek to gather survey data, early on in my project after one truth-seeker expressed concerns that this might be valuable to would-be infiltrators; this resonated with the qualitative focus of my study design which was concerned with truth-seeker culture rather than more quantitative demographics.

I stored data as responsibly as possible by using private field-journals and a password-protected computer. I specifically asked for permission to store interview data for the duration of the project, and whether I could store anonymised data for further research.

Chapter Three: A “Conspiracy Theories” Primer

‘Research these subjects at any length and to any depth and you will know that there are two worlds, the seen and the unseen, operating in the same ‘space’ while masquerading as one. First there is the world that humanity in general experiences as the seen. [...] This world doesn’t really exist in any form except in theory and the structure of government and ‘democracy’ in all its expressions is there to control the population, not to hold itself to account.’ David Icke.¹⁰⁹

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter I want to introduce readers to the “conspiracy theory” genre of discourse, in order to supply those who are unfamiliar a base level of understanding. I will not here refer to my ethnographic data but to secondary sources which represent a range of both an emic and etic perspectives. In Chapter One, I already reviewed the different approaches taken by etic treatments, paying particular attention to analyses of “conspiracy theory” that strike a decisively pejorative tone. In this chapter, I will unpack the essential characteristics of a conspiracist worldview by paying close attention to Michael Barkun, a sociologist who, in many ways, represents the social scientific or symbolic interactionist answer to the Richard Hofstadter school of thought which approaches conspiracy theorists primarily as a threat to society.

This work refers also to my earlier MA thesis entitled *The Religious Phenomenon of “Conspiracism”*: Conspiracy Theorists and Theories in Contemporary Britain.¹¹⁰ This earlier study supplied me with important background knowledge which I brought with me, cognitively speaking, to my fieldwork. In order that the reader might be better equipped to read my ethnography, I will use independent researcher David Icke as a case study on the basis that his work was well-known among the truth-seekers who feature in this ethnography. One truth-seeker tellingly referred to him as the “kindergarten of the occult” – that is, a common early step in a truth-seeker’s programme of personal research. In Chapter Four we meet truth-seekers for whom Icke played a pivotal, foundational role in them “waking up” to the existence of a superconspiracy. On the other hand, Icke’s writings in no way represent dogma. They are often subject to scrutiny, with certain aspects openly rejected by truth-seekers on an individual basis. Some ideas, such as his “Reptilian thesis” – holding that the ruling elites are secretly extra-dimensional shape-shifting entities, sometimes assuming a reptile-like form – seemed to be rejected by every truth-seeker I met with during my fieldwork period.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ David Icke, *The Perception Deception: Or...It’s ALL bollocks – yes, ALL of it* (Isle of Wight: David Icke Books Ltd, 2013)

¹¹⁰ Nicholas R. E. Toseland, ‘The Religious Phenomenon of ‘Conspiracism’: Conspiracy Theories and Theorists in Contemporary Britain’ (unpublished MA thesis. Durham University, 2012).

¹¹¹ Some of Icke’s sympathisers argue that he consciously includes some erroneous and incredulous ideas in order to make himself seem less of a threat to the powers-that-be, a mixture of self-preservation and strategic thinking to enable him to impart some truth to the disbelieving masses. At the other end of the spectrum are those who take the opposite perspective, and view Icke as an agent working on behalf of the

Despite these emic criticisms, Icke's vision of the world is a good example of Barkun's large-scale 'superconspiracy' type of "conspiracy theory", or the worldview I previously labelled as 'conspiracism'.¹¹² Such a worldview rests upon a distinctive set of assumptions about the nature of reality that most people recognise in (so-called) "conspiracy theory". Barkun identifies three principles 'found in virtually every conspiracy theory': 'nothing happens by accident'; 'nothing is as it seems'; and 'everything is connected'.¹¹³ I will first outline the underlying plot behind Icke's thought, before looking at each principle in turn. I will add to these the overarching moral dimension whereby the conspiratorial melodrama is understood as a battle between good and evil.

3.2 David Icke's Superconspiracy: The Plot

At the start of *Children of the Matrix*, published in June 2001, David Icke includes a preliminary introductory chapter entitled 'The Plot', summarising and expanding upon the book's subtitle: *How an interdimensional race has controlled the world for thousands of years – and still does*.¹¹⁴ Beginning in "pre-history", Icke reports that there existed a number of highly advanced societies, chief among them Lemuria, who owed their ability to build 'fantastic and unexplainable' structures like the Great Pyramid, and their very civilisation, to knowledge imparted by 'extraterrestrials of many varieties'.¹¹⁵ They were perceived as gods by the primitive humans. In time, these would-be gods interbred with each other, and the people of Earth. The most important of these are the offspring of the reptilians and the Nordic extraterrestrials – these reptilian-Nordic hybrids lay claim to "royal" bloodlines, placed in positions of ruling royal family. After a great cataclysm destroyed Lemuria approximately 12,000 years ago, these bloodlines continued to rule over the subsequent civilisations in Sumer, Egypt, Babylon, the Indus Valley; eventually, they comprised the royal and aristocratic families of Europe; in turn, they spread further afield through European colonisation, imprinting an ancient design upon the "New" World. The headquarters 'for the secret society network or Illuminati' (see below) changed from Babylon in ancient times, to Rome, where they founded first the Roman Empire, and later 'the Roman [Catholic] Church'.¹¹⁶ When the European empires like Great Britain's began to collapse, the newly independent nations remained under Illuminati control, who had 'merely exchanged overt control for the far more effective covert

powers-that-be, including just enough truth to appear credible to his unsuspecting readers while leading them down fruitless avenues of investigation.

¹¹² Barkun, p. 6; Toseland, 'Conspiracism'.

¹¹³ Barkun, pp. 3-4.

¹¹⁴ David Icke, *Children of the Matrix: How an Interdimensional Race has Controlled the Planet for Thousands of Years – and Still Does* (Isle of Wight: David Icke Books Ltd, 2001), pp. xxi-xxiii.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

control'.¹¹⁷ The bloodlines and secret society network remained intact. Icke ends his 'summary of what has happened and is happening' by bringing his plot firmly into the present:

Ever since they have continued to control events in these former colonies as part of a long-planned agenda for the complete centralised control of the planet through a world-government, central bank, currency, army, and a micro-chipped population connected to a global computer. This is the very governmental structure that is now staring us in the face.¹¹⁸

This final quote summarises the superconspiracy that Icke's work meticulously attempts to unpack and prove; in the subsequent main body of the book, Icke guides the reader to 'now consider the evidence in detail...'.¹¹⁹ All roads lead back to Rome – not literally, but figuratively, in the sense of leading back 'to the summit of the conspiratorial hierarchy', where 'a distant but all-powerful evil force [is] manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors'.¹²⁰ This is a transhistorical vision of a secret cabal controlling socio-political reality, and, with it, the lives of people all over the globe.

3.3 The Essence of a Conspired World

3.3.1 Nothing happens by accident: Design, Control, and Power

Conspiracy narratives rejects world affairs as being purely natural or random, and instead view social reality as orchestrated by insidious forces for malevolent ends. Within the epicentre of Icke's superconspiracy lies the notion that socio-political reality is conspired. History is believed to be orchestrated, with present-day reality sharing the same stage, following in the same key. As Barkun puts it, 'a conspiracist worldview implies a universe governed by design rather than by randomness'.¹²¹ The events and processes that comprise socio-political reality are marching steadily to a pre-designed, purposeful beat; this-worldly phenomena are thus perceived as calculated, or as occurring within a calculated framework. Thus, the world is not simply designed, but, more specifically, reality is viewed as being *controlled*.

Centred upon the theme of a controlled reality, conspiracy narratives are sensitive to the functioning of power within human society. Specifically, they attempt to trace all manner of ways in which an individual's life is subject to the external power of hidden controllers. As Fenster observes, conspiracy theories, above all else, are 'theories of power'.¹²² Conspiracy narratives understand the power relations that tie together the social universe' components as

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Barkun, p. 6.

¹²⁰ Barkun, p. 6.

¹²¹ Barkun, p. 3.

¹²² As noted in the Introduction, Fenster regards "conspiracy theory" as 'a rather disabling theory of power' for the individual who subscribe to them. I will assess this assertion in the ethnographic portion of the thesis, revisiting it in the Conclusion.

being the result of design. To think about *power* is to think about external *control*, stripping away the liberty and power of those being controlled.

Icke uses the image of a pyramid to spatially represent his account of the global Control System. The model that the Archons/controllers are imposing features a single World Government controlling the entire globe, with a central bank, currency, army, and microchipped populace.¹²³ This gradual lurch into what is sometimes referred to in emic terms as the ‘New World Order’ envisages a ‘global dictatorship’ that enjoys total political dominance.¹²⁴ The next rung down is the European Union, the American Union, the Pacific Union, and African Union. Below these come Nation States and Regions. All of these answer to the single world government. Finally, ‘THE PEOPLE’ sit at the bottom of the pyramid, numerically superior but left bereft of political agency.¹²⁵

Another conspiratorial image favoured by Icke is ‘the Round Table Network’.¹²⁶ The supranational ‘satellite organisations’ that comprise this grouping are the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Council on Foreign Relations, the United Nations, the Bilderberg Group, the Club of Rome, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and the Trilateral Commission. Icke arranges these organisations spatially in a diagram that resembles a pentagram. Perhaps in order to preserve this striking image (which resonates with the moral dimension of conspiracism explained below) he adds the World Health Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. All of these, together, are part of the greater web, ‘all agencies of the planned world government’.¹²⁷ This network is potentially limitless (see below, 3.3.2). The point here is that conspiracist interpretations of the socio-political landscape link official organisational bodies that exercise power over people to a single, secret body of controlling forces. This is a social universe governed by design through forces rooted firmly in the here-and-now.

Using the language of “control”, superconspiracies posit an underlying *purpose* behind this-worldly occurrences beneath a mere veneer of spontaneity and free will. This *teleological* side of conspiracist speculations, central to a superconspiracy, is taken to be an essential component of conspiracy narratives by Kevin A. Whitesides.¹²⁸ The precise purpose is not always clear – something might be a form of distraction, and/or a means of physically weakening the population, and/or a means of sowing emotional/spiritual discord – but the general purpose, always, is to further this state of control.¹²⁹

¹²³ Icke, *Perception*, p. 229.

¹²⁴ Icke, *Perception*, p. 230.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

¹²⁶ Icke, *Remember*, p. 164.

¹²⁷ Icke, *Remember*, p. 165.

¹²⁸ Whitesides, ‘Conspiracist Teleology’, pp. 30-48, see especially p. 43.

¹²⁹ Toseland, ‘Conspiracism’, p. 19.

3.3.2 Nefarious Purposes: Evil versus Good

A fundamental characteristic of superconspiracies such as Icke's is the attribution of nefarious, evil motivations to the controlling forces. This is an essential qualification of the design/control dimension; the controllers do not exercise power beneficently but for their own benefit at the expense of humankind. As 'the Plot' neatly illustrated, these controllers are depicted as either wholly Other, or, in the case of the ruling classes of humans, the descendants of non-human lineage. For Barkun, 'the essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil'.¹³⁰ In this light, superconspiracies constitute a moral commentary about the nature of power relations. The subject in a conspiracy theory – that is, the conspiring agent – desires power to exert control that will have a negative impact; the end-goal, and its motive, is evil. The people who are resisting their control – the so-called "conspiracy theorists" themselves – therefore lay claim to a status of moral goodness. This fundamentally moral dimension separates "conspiracy theory" from other kinds of theorising about the world, such as the more detached, dispassionate observations made in the natural and social sciences. In this sense, conspiracy narratives always invoke a world in which people are never simply the subject of power relations – and never stand to benefit – but are instead always subjugated by them in one form or another. While academic treatments of power might possess a moral direction – and more generally should include ethical considerations, as in this present study – this is not their *primary* purpose, whereas conspiracy narratives are *primarily* concerned with delineating evil in some shape or form.

This moral dimension is well reflected in the secondary literature. Treatments linking "conspiracy theory" with millennialism emphasise their shared moralistic outlook with an implicit bias towards moral dualism.¹³¹ Barkun places this dualistic outlook of good versus evil at the heart of his analyses, likening conspiracism to millennialism since they are both 'Manichaeic, in the sense that they cast the world in terms of a struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, and hold that this polarization will persist until the end of history, when evil is finally, definitively defeated'.¹³² Icke's ideas are typical of conspiracy discourse in that they focus mostly upon manifestations of evil, since they narrate socio-political reality, which is so heavily controlled by evil forces.

3.3.3 Nothing is as it seems: Illusion and Secrecy

At the heart of David Icke's superconspiracy is an assertion about the illusory nature of mainstream definitions of reality. This is illustrated by the title and subtitle of his 2013 book,

¹³⁰ Barkun, p. 3.

¹³¹ Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart, 'Anxieties of Influence: Conspiracy Culture and Therapeutic Culture in Millennial America', in *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, ed. by Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 282.

¹³² Barkun, p. 2; I also characterised conspiracism in terms of Manichaeic apocalypticism, Toseland, 'Conspiracism', pp. 18-19.

The Perception Deception: Or...It's ALL bollocks....yes, ALL of it. ‘The world is clinically insane and we urgently need to understand this simple truth’.¹³³ Icke argues for the illusory nature of reality by insisting that we live in a ‘holographic reality’ that ‘is manifested through the decoding processes of the human Body-Mind computer’.¹³⁴ In such a reality, illusion reigns, and even the senses are susceptible to manipulation.

This brings out a defining characteristic of all “conspiracy theories”: they always posit the existence of a secret.¹³⁵ They may reveal this secret to some extent – the great secret that reality is not as it seems – but they can never disclose everything. Jean and John Comaroff argue that ‘if conspiracy is the automatic explanatory trope of our age its conceptual grounding lies in its obverse, in *transparency*’.¹³⁶ The contemporary age is simultaneously preoccupied by ‘conspiracy and transparency [...] with the lightness and darkness of being’; yet these constitute an intrinsically self-perpetuating pair of obsessions, for ‘changing patterns of illumination cast new shadows and, with them, *new domains of darkness beyond their arcs of light*’.¹³⁷ A conspiracist worldview is one centred upon the existence of a secret, but, in trying to reveal its details in all their intricacy, they continually reaffirm the secretive nature of reality.

This secret also involves extraneous dimensions of reality that are known to the controlling forces and held back from the general population. Sanders and West reflect this defining trait of contemporary conspiracy discourse through their adoption of the term ‘occult cosmologies’ in preference to ‘conspiracy theories’, ‘defining these as systems of belief in a world animated by secret, mysterious, and/or unseen powers’.¹³⁸ Not only do unseen organisational forces and social processes shape the present – phenomenal insofar as these are social phenomena situated in the empirical world – but they interact with concealed levels of reality. Icke makes such of the brain-washing potential of this-worldly propaganda, but also refers to processes of ‘energy extraction’ through mass rituals.¹³⁹

The organisational bodies that Icke names in his (ever-expanding) Round Table are all official. But since secrecy is paramount, these groups are believed to be disguising their true evil purposes. The best way to put this recurring theme of official organizations operating in accordance to a sinister, secret purpose is by adopting an emic phrase I heard throughout my

¹³³ Icke, *Perception*, p. 9.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹³⁵ Barkun, 4-5.

¹³⁶ Jean Comaroff & John Comaroff, ‘Transparent Fictions; or, The Conspiracies of a Liberal Imagination: An Afterword’, in *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, ed. by Harry G. West and Todd Saunders (London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 289.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 288. Emphasis added.

¹³⁸ Todd Sanders and Harry G. West, ‘Power Revealed and Concealed’, in *Transparency and Suspicion: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, ed. by Harry G. West & Todd Sanders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 6.

¹³⁹ I look at this particular aspect of Icke’s work in more detail in Nicholas R. E. Toseland, ‘An Occult Royal Wedding: Public State Ceremonials as Rituals of Civil Irreligion’, *Implicit Religion* (forthcoming 2019).

fieldwork: conspiracy plots are “hidden in plain sight”. Indeed, in a world where nothing is as it seems, official parties, even those that are ostensibly transparent, are entirely culpable of hiding sinister purposes in accordance with a greater evil plot. Indeed, some of these organisations, or at least the majority of their employees, might themselves be totally unaware of the hidden truth. It is worth emphasising, however, that in the eyes of Icke, and those who subscribe to a superconspiracy, this plot of self-evident, with everything *exactly* as it seems.

3.3.3 Everything is connected: Mapping the Superconspiracy

We have seen already how conspiracy beliefs incorporate many of the key institutions that make up a (supposedly) democratic society including government, media, education, health, and military. The central assertion that a group is covertly controlling society stipulates an entire apparatus of control with potentially limitless parts; not only present events, but entire processes such as globalisation or transhumanism, are conspired machinations. According to a conspiracy worldview, all such things are connected by a singular force – power – which is read as a symptom of control. Thus, anything that exerts power over people has a potential role in the secret master plot that Icke has uncovered. Furthermore, systems of knowledge that address the nature of power itself become relevant as tools of exposition. In this way, Icke is able to connect various scientific theories about the nature of reality with notions of Satanism, astronomy, astrology, prophecy, alternative fields of medicine, and many more.

Barkun describes conspiracy theorists as ‘ideological omnivores’ who, distrustful of conventional understandings of reality (since society is wholesale under the conspirator’s sway), turn to ‘stigmatised knowledge claims’ as containing suppressed, and thus significant, sources of knowledge.¹⁴⁰ Taking conspiracism to be a form of millennialism, he thus understands “conspiracy theorists” such as Icke as ‘improvisational millennialists’ who draw upon a variety of sources, rather than being bound to any single tradition, in order to plot the greater conspiracy.

This is something that the thesis elucidates in the following chapters. In Andy Thomas’s *The Truth Agenda*, Part One ‘lays the groundwork concerning mysteries and conspiracy theories’, ending with a chapter entitled ‘Grand Conspiracies’; but note that this follows four preceding chapters entitled ‘Making Sense of Our World’, ‘Mysteries Ancient and Modern’, ‘UFOs’, and ‘Miracles and Prophecies’.¹⁴¹ Conspiracy theory is both a distinct genre of discourse in its own right, focussing upon the themes of power and evil hidden in socio-political reality past and present, but its inherent connectiveness binds it together with other genres that can be considered as distinct in their own right. This present study is important because it moves beyond an analysis of “conspiracy theory” that is limited by preconceived *etic* qualifications of

¹⁴⁰ Barkun, pp 29-30.

¹⁴¹ Thomas, *Truth Agenda*, pp. 19-99.

the subject matter, and onto the way that “conspiracy theory” is potentially boundless when approaches from an emic mindset. Barkun’s designation of an all-consuming conspiracism as ‘superconspiracy’ can be seen as particularly apt at capturing this theme, since the prefix ‘super’ means ‘above’ or ‘beyond’, invoking the way that superconspiracies go beyond what many regard as being “conspiracy theory”.

Despite the potential limitlessness of conspiracy theory, we find several recurring topics within Icke’s work, and other authors who are inspired by his work, and/or address a similar audience. In Thomas’s ‘Grand Conspiracies’ chapter, his initial summary of the ‘conspiracy view’ echoes Icke’s 2001 version of the plot, namely that a secret network of influencers-cum-manipulators, ‘now often referred to as ‘The Illuminati’, covertly control social reality according to ‘a secret agenda with occultist leanings that has *their* best interests at heart and not ours’.¹⁴² Subsequent sections introduce notions that the Illuminati is weakening humankind through vaccinations, controls on foods and medicines, and other means like HAARP (see Chapter Six); the notion of depopulation programme, sometimes referred to as Agenda 21 (see Chapters Four and Six); the emergence of an Orwellian dystopia through the formation of a centralised ‘One World Government’/‘New World Order’; the notion of a controlled economic superstructure; and the notion of a microchipped population. Turning specifically to Icke, Thomas notes that some of his ideas are ‘contentious’ – chiefly the inclusion of ‘extra-terrestrial reptilian beings’ at the apex of control – but nevertheless reviews the supporting evidence for the existence of elite bloodlines, interconnections through international secret societies like Freemasonry, and the yearly gatherings of political elites at the Bohemian Grove ritual or the Bilderberg Group. Much of this run-through is both speculative but based on established fact, such as a look at how ‘The Nephilim’ feature in Genesis 6:1-4.

In some treatments of “conspiracy theory”, the connectivity characteristic is sometimes talked about as its ability to absorb other ideas; in more critical studies, this is denoted as its ‘non-falsifiability’.¹⁴³ Interestingly, this characteristic is implicit in emic accounts. Icke, for instance, talks about the ‘blueprint of control’; Thomas similarly mentions ‘the unfortunate blueprint that many of our governments seem to be working to, *Illuminati or no Illuminati*’.¹⁴⁴ This qualification is significant because it reminds us that although Icke’s superconspiracy seems to begin by asserting the existence of the Illuminati, the underlying principles – that nothing is as it seems, that nothing happens by accident, and that everything is connected – supersede this more particular notion. Readers of Icke are thus able to reject what *appear* as key components of his superconspiracy (for example, extra-terrestrial involvement in pre-history, and/or the Nephilim

¹⁴² Thomas, *Truth Agenda*, p. 68. I discuss the label ‘Illuminati’ in the ethnography, pp. 58-59.

¹⁴³ Barkun, p. 6; Keeley, p. 121.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas, *Truth Agenda*, p. 78.

specifically, and/or the holographic universe, and/or the involvement of Saturn) while sharing the underlying essentialities that comprise a conspiracist worldview.

3.4 Concluding Comments

“Conspiracy theories” reveal hidden systems of control within society that are designed by evil forces. A first principle of conspiracy discourse has been summarised as being extraordinarily sensitive to power relations within society, particularly relating to rulers and the ruled, and the consequences of this power relationship for an individual’s liberty and well-being. A second element of “conspiracy theory” is a moralistic dimension in which the alleged conspirators are held to be evil (or assisting evil) while the person revealing the secret plot – maligned as a “conspiracy theorist” – lays claim to moral goodness. A third preoccupation is with secrecy, which functions as an integral component of alleged conspiratorial operations. Secrecy implies a need to hide the real motivations of these exercises of power. Given such secrecy, where potentially anything is not as it appears, everything is connected. With these considerations in mind, I arrive at my working definition of a worldview governed by a superconspiracy: the rejection of world affairs as purely natural or innocent, instead seeing reality as controlled by one or more groups for malign, evil purposes.

This characterisation has been applied to Icke’s work as a means of unpacking these underlying themes while also introducing the reader to some of the key ideas which truth-seekers encounter. These characteristics resemble ‘ideal types’, with ‘the merit of clear understandability and lack of ambiguity’.¹⁴⁵ In reality, however, they do not capture the lived reality of those inhabiting a reality animated by conspiratorial forces; all the truth-seekers I met understood that accidents *do* happen; some things *are* as they seem; and, certainly, not *everything* is connected to a central plot. If the world was perceived according to exactly these principles, then hope for a better world would be all but extinguished. Indeed, a chief concern of the ethnography is to explore the lived reality of truth-seekers to better understand why they are so often (though not always) so *hopeful* in the face of such a seemingly nightmarish reality.

The picture given by this preliminary review of emic and etic literature on “conspiracy theory” represent the finished products of conspiracy discourse. In this light, Pipes justifiably asserts that ‘accepting [conspiracism] requires a radical shift in perception’.¹⁴⁶ Radical, perhaps, but neither instantaneous nor inexplicable; in fact, a bustling social network is responsible for maintaining the plausibility of this conspiracist outlook, and the perceptual leap owes much to the patterns of behaviour, with corresponding moods, attitudes, and emotions, which prosper

¹⁴⁵ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1942), p. 92.

¹⁴⁶ Pipes, p. 23.

within the “conspiracy theory” culture that I took as my research focus. This ethnography will now expand upon these preliminary descriptions of conspiracy theory by supplying emic materials which will enable an informed set of etic analyses to complete the picture. Conspiracy theories are indeed, above all, theories about power relationships existing between self and society; but how do these theories impact the daily lives of those who subscribe to them? What does culture look like in contexts where narratives of suspicion – suggesting that not everything is as it seems, that nothing happens by accident, and that everything might be connected – form the bedrock of individual’s perception of reality? What does contemporary Britain look like for those who agree with David Icke’s assertion that, ultimately, ‘it’s ALL bollocks...yes, ALL of it’?

Chapter Four: To What Extent Does the “Truth Movement” Resemble an Actual Movement?

One of my key informants associated with Truthjuice Hull invited me to his home. He only said he had ‘important updates’ to share with me.¹⁴⁷ I arrived in the late evening to be greeted by an outwardly excited Alan. Two instant black coffees were made. When I asked how he found the festival he had attended the previous week, Alan sighed and smiled. “Nick,” he said, “I found my tribe.”¹⁴⁸

4.1. Introduction

When I began my research, I was interested primarily in the social dimension of “conspiracy theorising” in contemporary Britain. The ellipses are important; ‘conspiracy theorist’ is a highly pejorative term which, when levelled against someone, ‘symbolically excludes you from the imagined community of reasonable interlocutors’.¹⁴⁹ With this in mind one can still say rightly that there are still vast numbers of so-called “conspiracy theorists” living in Britain today, that is, individuals who reject world affairs as purely natural or innocent, and subscribe instead to explanations that posit the hand of some malevolent hidden agent. More broadly, it is fair to say that vast numbers of people living in Britain today have an active interest in conspiracy theories. These people, putting labels aside, are the subject of my research: what is life like for those who subscribe such ideas? Do individuals interact and come together to form a collective enterprise? How does this wider social framework and the individuals that populate it influence each other?

I had not initially given much thought to there being a collective noun, or group name, in emic usage. This changed during my first preliminary field visit to a meeting in Manchester organised by Critical Mass Radio.¹⁵⁰ The first speaker referred to “a group, a movement, call it what you will, the research movement, the truth movement”, and asked the audience, “any other names?” He was met at first with silence. “Well that sort of sums up what I’m on about.” “The freeman movement?” someone offered hesitantly. “Awakened?” said someone else. “That was the word I

¹⁴⁷ Chronologically speaking, this was a couple of months after the trial mentioned in Chapter Nine.

¹⁴⁸ From fieldnotes.

¹⁴⁹ Husting and Orr, p. 127.

¹⁵⁰ Critical Mass Radio was online radio broadcast from the North West of England. Having listened for a few weeks I knew the various hosts were speaking from a conspiracists worldview. The hub broke apart over my research due partly to internal disagreements but people published materials under the same name on YouTube. The describe their work on the ‘About’ section of their Youtube channel thus: ‘WHAT THEY DON’T WANT YOU TO KNOW. We are Critical Mass Radio. The world is a dangerous place, not because of those that do evil but for those who watch and do nothing! The mainstream media will not allow free speech. Critical Mass Radio is based in the UK. Our shows include Out Of The Matrix Show, The Razors Edge Show, The UN-PENNED SHOW. The Earth Needs Rebels, Changing Consciousness. We are a free thinking voice, independent, non profit, commercial free media outlet. We discuss all topics, looking in depth with expert guests and exploring solutions. Vaccine damages, chemtrails, child stealing by the state, Agenda 21, consciousness changing, false flag terrorism, 7/7 London bombings, social injustice, spiritual matters, hemp, parents injustice, 2012, common purpose, lawful rebellion, television, radio.’ Critical Mass Show, ‘Description’ (n.d.) <<https://www.youtube.com/user/CriticalMassShow/about>> [accessed 20/01/19].

was expecting to hear. *You all know what I'm talking about but I struggle to put it into words*".¹⁵¹ His talk spanned almost three hours, with a break between two parts. The topics were as extensive as Critical Mass Radio's self-description – finance, geometry, religion (namely Druidry and parts of the Nag Hammadi), meteorology, mathematics, and others – but he linked them together to reveal a hidden unity behind material reality. The speaker thought only through recognising reality's occult dimensions would the "movement" be able to change the world for the better. He understood alchemy as an applied shamanic practice in tune with these hidden forces, before asserting, *"that's what the truth movement needs to do!"*. He intended to return to the important question of "what are we [i.e. the so-called "movement"] to do?" in greater detail, but ran ironically out of time. He proposed briefly a spiral model of organisation that has no leader; to engender a "critical mass" of "awakened" individuals it must discover "the question" that, once posed, would mobilise the still-sleeping masses.

I later met with this speaker to discuss my research, where he helped formulate a key research question. The sociological nature of this so-called movement was something that had fascinated him for many years; he was delighted that it would be investigated from an academic perspective (though surprised that it was granted funding). He offered to get me in touch with a well-known presenter and interviewer on 'alternative' topics (formerly with Edge Media TV) for an interview. He wondered how to describe the project briefly enough to fit into a text message; after a pause for thought, he formulated the question to ask, 'To what extent can the (so-called) "truth movement" be considered an actual movement?'

This chapter aims at answering this question. It is made difficult by the ephemeral nature of this so-called movement; it has neither official leader, roster, dogma, or agreed-upon title. Accordingly, some informants preferred not to speak of an extant "movement" at all. Whether individuals recognised a *movement* or not, many of them portrayed it in negative terms or, without exception, were cognisant of the milieu's inherent problems and issues. Nevertheless, this rich variety of perspectives affirms one basic truth: the sense of a wider social group attached to individuals' journeys of "truth-seeking" is an emergent, and subjective, phenomenal reality. This chapter, then, is charged with describing the dynamics of a movement that is simultaneously extant while not, in another sense, existing.

Based on my informants' accounts and my own experiences in the field I will argue that the so-called "truth movement" is best understood as a social network whose affiliates undergo private quests aimed at uncovering the true nature of public reality. It lacks formal organisation, leadership, official roster, or any codified body of dogma. Instead it is made up of many individual truth-seekers who differ greatly in terms of specific beliefs and practices. The smallest units within the network are individuals; sometimes these convene regularly and form social groups in

¹⁵¹ Emphasis added.

both the physical and online worlds. Different parts of the network – both groups and individuals – become intermittently divided against one another, with groups and projects continually arising and dissolving, due to a dynamic mix of internal and external tensions. Uniting the affiliates of this uneasy milieu is a shared career of religious seeking wherein individuals continually build worldviews by drawing upon common resources within a shared informational matrix. Despite the high value placed upon subjectivity there are identifiable convergences of beliefs which serves as a mediating framework that orients the meaning-making journeys of individuals. This can be demonstrated by the shared symbols that circulate the network, whether a collective appreciation for sacred geometry signs, or the very language employed to describe common phenomena.

4.2. The (so-called) Truth Movement as Movement?

In terms of the extent to which we might consider this ‘a movement’, let us turn to Gerlach and Hine’s classic definition:

a group of people who are organized for, ideologically motivated by, and committed to a purpose which implements some form of personal or social change; who are actively engaged in the recruitment of others; and whose influence is spreading in opposition to the established order within which it originated.¹⁵²

Many of these features can fairly be applied to the truth movement: multiple individuals are committed to both personal and social change and share a common vision of an ideal (or at least more ideal) world; there are conscious strategies in place for disseminating this ideology; and it can certainly be argued from an insider perspective that its ideas have partially spread into the mainstream. On the other hand, this latter point can be argued the other way insofar as the 9/11 Truth Movement has not achieved total public disclosure, and therefore remains counter-cultural, or marginal, in terms of social standing of its ideas and organisation. Significantly, the truth movement resembles a ‘SPIN’ – a segmented, polycentric, interactive network – without a centralised organisational structure.¹⁵³ There is no fixed purpose; and yet, as we have seen and shall see, there is an *emergent* sense of purpose that is shared among its self-recognised affiliates.

Another potential objection relates to whether it is right to say that truth-seekers are *organised* for their purpose. Given the weight attached to self-authority, alongside explicit disavowals of some centralised, top-down power base, this might seem especially spurious. Ian Crane, who organises an annual ‘Alternative View’ conference and repeat speaker across the groups, felt:

It was never *really* a *movement*. It was more of a philosophy; I mean, I never applied that tag to myself, you know, I never said I’m part of the truth movement, it was really just...*something*, intangible; but I mean clearly there were *players*, there were people who

¹⁵² Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia H. Hine, *People, Power, Change: Movements of Social Transformation* (New York: The Bobs-Merrill Company, 1970), p. xvi.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

were up there, and there's no question that up until 2000-and-erm-six, and, erm, seven, we were more about, simply, trying to raise awareness.

4.2.1 The (9/11) Truth Movement that Stopped Existing

The term “movement” seems problematic, especially in the light of the scholarly debate surrounding the so-called New Age Movement.¹⁵⁴ Without wanting to replicate this act of academic imperialism – creating a “movement” out of thin air – the notion of a “truth movement” is still an *emic* term, albeit one that is hotly contested. The contemporaneous “truth movement” referred to by truth-seekers during meetings, conversations, and interviews, was not created *ex nihilo*; it shares important genealogical links with the Britain's *former* 9/11 Truth Movement. As I was told on multiple occasions, *this* “movement” “voted itself out of existence at a meeting in Birmingham”, back in 2008. And yet the phrase “truth movement” surfaced across all three groups I observed, during conversations, and interviews, throughout my fieldwork in 2014-16.

I interviewed several truth-seekers who were a part of an earlier group that centred around 9/11. They all remembered an encouraging beginning to these early group efforts. For instance, one said that “When the 9/11 groups all kicked off, there was an attempt at having a unified front”. This met with some degree of success, unifying around the common agreement that “the official narrative can't be right and we need to get the bottom of it”. As the first DVDs came into circulation – pointing out apparent anomalies in mainstream version of 9/11 – greater numbers of people “started to come round to groups like ours”. Another interviewee recalled what happened over time:

As first, it was really quite focussed, but Ian Crane [the then-chairman of the 9/11 Truth Movement group in London] [...] said early on this ain't going to work, he said what's going to happen is we'll be infiltrated – don't know if you agree with that or not – but in effect, it was true. He said, “We're going to get more and more kind-of-different views, and they're not going to be able to hold it together,” and *he said*, quite early on, because he was chairman of the UK 9/11 Truth, for a while, so he resigned, and just said I'm going to do my own grassroots stuff, I think what we all need to do is work independently because we'll be less vulnerable to attack from the inside that way.

Infiltration

Suspicious about infiltrators are, and were, common across truth movement groups regardless of place or time. Their presence at meetings is a taken-for-granted assumption. Such thoughts are contagious, and at various points during fieldwork I grew wary that there might be some truth

¹⁵⁴ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 7-19.

here (especially after fresh details of covert police activity entered the official public record).¹⁵⁵ Since truth-seekers oppose the establishment, they think it reasonable to assume that counter-insurgent agents would indeed take an active interest in monitoring and/or disrupting their efforts. For Andy, however, whatever the *truth* of these suspicions – he “could never be *absolutely* sure” – the negative effects associated with infiltration, like disruption, were self-evident and seemed a likely scenario.¹⁵⁶ This revealed that the group were discussing information significant enough to warrant establishment opposition, but, therefore, a different strategy was required to uncover and disseminate the truth without extrinsic disruptions.

Andy “kept going” to the group’s periodical meetups, but with these suspicions in mind, “I thought maybe it’s *better* not to become an official organisation across the country, and sure enough, very quickly, the arguments started”. In a separate interview, another attendee of an early 9/11 group remembered things similarly, reflecting afterwards that “the trouble with the truth movement is it keeps atomising itself with rows, keeps blasting itself to bits with terrible rows”. Another remembered how “the male egos would clash but these two [women] would hold it together, and I think that’s very much the secret of its success”. Even then, arguments about competing narratives of 9/11 proved difficult to contain.¹⁵⁷ Briefly, “when the 9/11 groups all kicked off, there was an attempt at having a unified front”, made possible by a shared commitment to the central idea that “the official narrative can’t be right, and we need to get the bottom of it”. However, “it didn’t last all that long, for the usual reason, which I met in the crop circle world when the Centre of Crop Circles Studies started, which is that you cannot keep so many varied views under one umbrella”.

Infiltration narratives are an interesting way to talk about Britain’s earlier “truth movement” circa 2005-8. They admit that the group’s efforts were not entirely successful, relating this to the disruption caused by competing perspectives among different pockets of individuals. However, by suggesting that at least *some* of this discord is manufactured, the problems that this oral history poses for contemporaneous efforts are, in theory, avoidable. One problem was the emergence of different factions by championing polarising ideas, such as the infamous “no planes” theories; for

¹⁵⁵ For example, one former undercover spy became a whistleblower in early 2015, revealing that covert police spied on at least five trade unions. Rob Evans, ‘Ex-undercover officer reveals that covert police unit spied on trade union members – full statement’, *The Guardian* (13/3/2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/undercover-with-paul-lewis-and-rob-evans/2015/mar/13/ex-undercover-officer-reveals-that-covert-police-unit-spied-on-trade-union-members-full-statement>> [Accessed 7/8/2016]. Even more alarming to truth-seekers were claims made by a number of women that undercover police had deceptively entered into long-term relationships (AKA “honey traps”) with them, in one case – frequently cited as an example of ‘insane’ behaviour by apparent “public servants” – having children together. ‘Undercover police: Deception overseen by state’, *BBC News* (20/11/2015) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34882540>> [Accessed 9/9/2017].

¹⁵⁶ One can draw a comparison with Evans-Pritchard’s description of witchcraft explaining unfortunate events, Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*, pp. 63-83. Here, infiltrators are an occult force used to rationalise unfortunate events.

¹⁵⁷ Similar disputes still occur in the later truth movement; they are revisited in Chapter Six on “false-flag” counter-narratives.

one interviewee, this was a prime example of “stuff that seemed very offensive to the more scientific-minded people who were trying to find more real-world explanations”. Within the oral history, fingers were pointed at specific individuals (who shall remain nameless upon request from interviewees) being responsible for causing these arguments, possibly as infiltrators. “Now some say some of these people were sent there deliberately to disrupt it. I’m sure the Intelligence Services *would*, and would at least have someone there monitoring it, particularly with David Sheylar[...] an ex-MI6 [operative].” In the ongoing wake of these “nasty” divisive arguments, the semblance of a united front dissipated:

A: That then basically split the different truth groups, and there are some groups that still derive from it.

N: Some groups more alternative, some more rationalist? I don’t know if that’s the right word, but –

A: Well, it diversified into kinds of elements, with more scientific, and more esoteric, and idealised ways of looking at it – so is there a truth movement? Yes, in the loosest sense of the word I think there is, not in any organised sense any more, and maybe that’s not a bad thing because I think the groups [...] in trying to hold themselves together as a united front, they just end up at war, and I think Ian [Crane] was right about that, everyone’s just got to do their own thing, in whatever way they think’s “right”.

Fragmentation and Continuation

The 9/11 Truth Movement might have stopped being a self-contained organisation in the truest sense, but, evidently, it never stopped existing either. Instead, the groups and individuals who identify with the term have diversified, over time, beyond the original concern with 9/11. From the perspective of a speaker who presented at Birmingham and Hull, “what calls itself the “truth movement” comes from the 9/11 event”. But “once [George W.] Bush stopped being president it became hard to hold it together – you can’t just talk about 9/11 anymore because that’s in the past”. In the years following 2001, events like the 2008 recession were thought to provoke a reaction among a wider segment of the British public. “People started to wonder, “Who is in control? Is someone deliberately manufacturing the story?” And yeah, they are.” Some of these questioning persons are thought to be those who now attend groups like Truthjuice and New Horizons, and who today contribute to “a movement that’s very widely-based, looking at money, common law, and that’s enough interests to bring people along”. For instance, when I interviewed Rob, the organiser the New Horizons meeting group, he responded to the question first by reiterating the web-like nature of the movement.

N: What extent is [the truth movement] a “movement”?

R: It's loose. It's not nebulous, it's loose, so, so loose. It's just all the people who individually on their own would read an article or speak to someone, or see something that pisses them off, or fills them with anger, or fills them with amazement; and they'll ask a few questions of it, they'll [have a] chance meeting with somebody else, or an article, or someone will give them a magazine, there might be an Uncensored magazine,¹⁵⁸ a health magazine, because there's a lot obviously with the pharmaceutical industry. [...] Some others might read a Nexus magazine, and they'll see a link in it, on [the] internet, [and think] 'what's on the link', and [then] say, 'that's interesting'. [They] find another link, and they'll go there and say, 'ah, that's interesting, look at this there', and go 'fucking hell, look at *this!* That's *interesting*', and they'll find something on a subject they find fascinating – so, that would be one person who entered into the truth movement.

The mark of affiliation, in Rob's eyes, arises from a conscious effort to question aspects of reality and to search for answers; there are no hard determinants. This excerpt neatly captures the process of secondary socialisation into an alternative view of the world in which the truth-seeker "wakes up".¹⁵⁹ From Rob's perspective, the "movement" is not nebulous in the sense of being fractured, but rather conceptualised as a 'loose' but coherent whole, interconnected by a flow of people who share, in turn, in common flows of practice (i.e. asking questions about reality) and in flows of belief (i.e. arriving at similar answers). Rob is therefore describing a network as understood by Wood, made up of people connected by flows of belief and practice.¹⁶⁰ To understand the emergent movement, let us now look at the individuals who comprise it.

4.2.2. Introducing the Truth-Seekers

The emic term referring to the individual – "one person who entered into the truth movement" – that I encountered most often was "truth-seeker". An alternative way to analyse this notional collective is to focus on the smallest constitutive unit: the individual. While interviewees often talked about a web of groups (see above), many of the emic descriptions – often from the same interviewee – of the "truth movement", amounted to depictions of "truth-seekers". Prior to conceiving of a wider collective, Sally first identified with the group as an individual:

N: One other question - I've heard the phrase 'the truth movement' around. When did you first hear that phrase? Can you remember, vaguely?

S: Well, the thing is, when I first went to Truthjuice, [I heard] free-thinkers, truth-seekers, I thought - that's exactly what I am.

N: So truth-seeker is a label you identify with positively, if there was one.

¹⁵⁸ For their website with links to past issues, and other media, see *UNCENSORED* (2017) <<http://uncensored.co.nz/>> [Accessed 5/6/2017].

¹⁵⁹ See Chapter Five.

¹⁶⁰ Wood, p. 7.

S: Yeah - a truth-seeker, because you can't go against the truth, that is that, it is what it is. A different term within emic usage has leaked out into popular and academic treatments, namely 'truther'. This noun was added to the Oxford English Dictionary as late as December 2015; meanwhile it only appeared in the Oxford Dictionary, which records *current* English, as late as 2011, in an update including such emergent novelties as "pulled pork", "textspeak", and "cyberbullying".¹⁶¹ These entries both highlight the label's depreciative quality when applied to someone, using examples drawn from press media or other extrinsic accounts.¹⁶² In this respect, "truther" retains the pejorative implications of the term "conspiracy theorist", serving as a 'transpersonal strategy of exclusion'.¹⁶³ If 'conspiracy theorist' suggests a person who subscribes to unproven and fanciful conspiracy theories over more reasonable alternatives, then "truther" suggests someone who rabidly believes that they possess the truth, in an absolute way, with particular connection to 9/11 "conspiracy theories".¹⁶⁴ After an interviewee commented on the negativity of the term "conspiracy theorist", I said that I had heard people refer to themselves instead as "truth-seekers". She said:

I do use that terminology [i.e. truth-seeker]. I do say that, because then it alters their concept of things. [Otherwise] they think 'loony bins', crazy people that do crazy things, but that's not the case. It is a lot of people trying to find the truth, and understand why the world is so against them, and they have a thirst for knowledge; they're just curious; they want to know.

Combined with the brief excerpt from Rob's account, this is an apt description of the individual "truth-seeker", representing the smallest unit in the truth network. The prefix is appropriately vague (or, indeed, loose) to account for the great assortment of 'truths' that different seekers focus upon, discuss, and sometimes link together. It balances inclusivity (of truths) and exclusivity (against falsehood). Indeed, 'truth' is a highly emotive term whose antonyms loom large in the mental image it conjures up, namely 'falsity', 'lies', and 'fiction'. Consequentially we might say

¹⁶¹ Recent Updates', *Oxford English Dictionary* (December, 2015) <<http://public.oed.com/the-oed-today/recent-updates-to-the-oed/december-2015-update/new-words-list-december-2015/>> [Accessed 2/3/2016]; 'Truther', *Oxford English Dictionary* (December, 2015)

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/425723?redirectedFrom=truther#eid330799645>> [Accessed 2/3/2016].

¹⁶¹ One Oxford Dictionaries 'example sentence' reads, 'They may have no more credibility than the 9/11 truthers or those who denied the moon landings, but they certainly have more reach'. 'Wake up and smell ODO's latest additions!', *Oxford Dictionaries* (February, 2011)

<<http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2011/02/wake-up-smell-new-words/>> [Accessed 2/3/2016].

¹⁶² One Oxford Dictionaries 'example sentence' reads, 'They may have no more credibility than the 9/11 truthers or those who denied the moon landings, but they certainly have more reach'. 'Wake up and smell ODO's latest additions!', *Oxford Dictionaries* (February, 2011)

<<http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2011/02/wake-up-smell-new-words/>> [Accessed 2/3/2016].

¹⁶³ See Introduction. It is worth noting that this is the preferred term in Jonathan Kay's sensationalist account of the 9/11 Truth Movement in the United States, entitled *Amongst the Truthers*.

¹⁶⁴ I will adopt 'truth-seeker' as my preferred term because it is adopted as a positive self-referential term, and it encapsulates the ideal-typical identity.

that ‘truth-seeker’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ throw up oppositional associations, something that will become important when we talk about how truth-seekers are oriented to the wider world. Furthermore, by referring to the object of their curiosity, their “thirst for *knowledge*”, as “*truth*”, they allow all manner of interpretations to be made, facilitating a wide assortment of allegiances. It is worth noting the enormous differences if we were to substitute another term for the object of the search, whether “justice”, “freedom”, “knowledge”, or a more theological term, such as “god”. While the former three terms are sometimes adequate, the search is always made to compensate for all the lies they have first been tricked into believing. When I asked one truth-seeker what she meant by “truth movement”, she replied, “Well, it’s the *not-lies* movement really”.

4.2.3 “Free-Thinking” Seekers

Part of what makes this “movement” difficult to define is that it allows for a plurality of opinions, so no formal manifesto can be derived. Indeed, this tendency towards free-thinking is retained in the alternative emic term that Simone identified with: a “free-thinker”. One meets this term across all three meeting groups. At New Horizons, Blackpool, for example, the banner outside the hall reads, ‘A friendly meeting-place for free-thinkers!’, matching the digital banner of their website.¹⁶⁵ According to the organisers, “free-thinking” is a suitable term because of its inherent descriptiveness; it expresses the value placed upon being critically open-minded. The unintended link is with Freethought, a bounded tradition which developed in the 17th Century as ‘a movement with a tradition and a philosophical base’, chiefly ‘in opposition to organized religion’.¹⁶⁶ The link is more with Freethought *sensu lato*, where “free-thinking” is considered ‘merely thought that is free, usually free from the dogmatic assumptions of religion’.¹⁶⁷ According to Stein, ‘members of the freethought movement of course believe in free thought. In fact that is their most central belief. However, these freethinkers also believe in the use of reason, in the value of ethics, and in the elimination of superstitions of all kinds from the minds of men’.¹⁶⁸ This is an apt description of what modern-day truth-seekers mean when they claim to be “free-thinkers”. The crucial difference relates to the kinds of knowledge that they regard as dogmatic or superstitious, challenging the epistemic authority of other knowledge-producing institutions. The mainstream media, for example, is perceived to be as influential, and dogmatic, as any religious orthodoxy; scientific orthodoxy is treated likewise.

The shared value placed around “free-thinking” is one way that truth-seekers seem to differentiate between insiders and outsiders. In Robertson’s descriptive analysis of the Freethought tradition, the central principle posits ‘an actual difference in *degree of employment of the faculty of*

¹⁶⁵ See the group’s website, *New Horizons* <<http://www.newhorizonsstannes.com/index.htm>> [Accessed 14/12/2017].

¹⁶⁶ Gordon Stein, ‘Freethought’, in *Encyclopaedia of Unbelief*, ed. by Gordon Stein (New York: Prometheus Books, 1985), pp. 247-8.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

criticism. The proposition is that some men think more “freely” than others in that they are (a) not terrorised by any veto on criticism, and (b) not hampered, or less hampered, by ignorant pre-suppositions. In both cases there is a real discrimination’.¹⁶⁹ Following Robertson, if free thought involves the ‘conscious reaction’ of conventional (religious) doctrines, “free-thinkers” are those individuals who engage in ‘the actual practice of such thinking’.¹⁷⁰ The meeting groups consist of public discursive performances that challenge the dogma of today, giving individuals an opportunity to recognise themselves as “free-thinkers” by extending an invitation to partake in public practices of “free-thinking”.

Truth-seekers are individuals who champion these values of “free-thinking” and practice them in a social setting of like-minded individuals. I prefer the term “truth-seeker” to “freethinker” partly to avoid the historical links to 17th-Century Freethought that are absent from the emic perspective, with its emphasis upon primarily *religious* dogma. Furthermore, the suffix “-seekers” is a more rounded term that better expresses the ‘actual practice of such [free-] thinking’ – the *search* for authentic knowledge, of which *thinking* is but a vital component rather than the sum of practices therein.

Seekers

The *truth-seekers* also tie in with etic depictions of religious ‘seekers’; this orientation towards meaning-making can be applied fruitfully to the affiliates of the truth network. Colin Campbell argued that the various persons and institutions that together make up ‘the cultural underground of society’, this cultic milieu, are united by their ‘common ideology of seekership’. He followed Lofland and Stark in defining “seekers” as ‘persons [...] searching for some satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve their discontents [...] defining conventional religious institutions and beliefs as inadequate’.¹⁷¹ Scholars like Steven Sutcliffe see this orientation of seekership as an ‘example of an elementary form [of religion], this time of a disposition to search’.¹⁷² Just as Sutcliffe sees ‘new age seekership’ (i.e. New Age *sensu lato*) as an exemplary form of seekership, I would argue that truth-seekers provide another contemporaneous example. Like the New Age “movement”, the so-called “truth movement” emerges from the public interactions between persons, groups, and institutions that enable private careers of seekership.

Carroll and Wolf contrast “seekers” with “dwellers”, for whom ‘the sacred is fixed, and spirituality is cultivated through habitual practise within a familiar world of a particular

¹⁶⁹ John M. Robertson, *Short History of Freethought, Vol. 1*.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷¹ Colin Campbell, ‘The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization’, *Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain Vol. 5*, (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 123; see the influential original account by John Lofland and Rodney Stark, ‘Becoming a World-Saver’, *American Sociological Review*, 30 (1965), pp. 862-875 (p. 870).

¹⁷² Steven Sutcliffe, ‘New Age, world religions and elementary forms’, in *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 17-34 (p. 30).

tradition'.¹⁷³ A similar contrast exists in emic usage, which sees truth-seekers as those who have “woken up” to the deceptive reality, distinguished from the “sheeple”, which refers to the masses who remain blind and uncritically obedient to the powers-that-be. Relative to the free-thinking truth-seekers, sheeple are essentially captive-thinkers. This derogatory term goes some way to redress the negative portrayals of truth-seekers made by the “unawake” by devaluing conformity to “mainstream” normativity; in this way, truth-seekers derive a positive identity as counter-cultural “seekers”.

Within the truth movement, however, truth-seekers see themselves as distinct not only from the sheeple, but from the hidden agencies postulated in the shared ideational currents. Richard Cumbers – an alternative health practitioner who spoke at two Truthjuice groups and attended a summer festival called *Tribal Consciousness Gathering* – clearly articulated this *tripartite* scheme when I queried who he meant by “we” during our interview. He distinguishes between three types of persons: the sane, the unsane, and the insane.

I would say the "we" are the people who are actually conscious and who want to change [the world] for the better, or at least give people the choice so they can choose themselves. I would categorise it as this: you've [also] got the *insane* on this planet, and the *unsane*. The *unsane*, maybe 30 years ago was about 98/99% of the planet, now it's 90% of the people. Then you've got the *sane* and that might now be 5-9%, people who have actually become the sanity turning the game – [who say:] this can't carry on, we've had enough. [...] It's pretty [...] bloody obvious to anyone who's sane! And you've got to come to that sanity. And you get the 1%, or 2% maybe, who are *insane*. These are the psychopaths who need an asylum. So the insane have no empathy with anybody, they even fight amongst themselves. So you realise that like a virus or parasite, if we don't actually go to the cause, the root cause, which is the insane doing it, and we're allowing them to do it. In other words, we have to convert the *unsane*, give them a choice, wake them up with changing their health [for example], so they can make proper decisions. Most of them are walking along with a visor on.

4.2.4 The Sane, the Unsane, and the Insane

This excerpt helps illuminate how truth-seekers understand themselves in relation to wider society. The truth-seekers are ‘sane’ in that they have discerned that the wider world is a madhouse with a veneer of sanity. For these persons, society’s dominant value-system is perceived to be the callous creation of an insane minority. Most humans are not themselves complicit in the machinations of the insane, but are instead unaware – or ‘un-sane’ – victims. These persons are “dwellers” in insanity who have not *yet* “come to that sanity”, but they, *like truth-seekers*, have the capacity to overcome the madness. In this sense, groups like Truthjuice

¹⁷³ J. W. Carroll & W. C. Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), p. 39.

and New Horizons are bastions of sanity. I have included this typology of persons because it shows that a basic disposition of “seeking” is a way that truth-seekers identify the “we” of the truth movement. To put it in its negative form: truth-seekers are simply persons who have taken the conscious decision not to dwell in the ways of the world. The unifying potential of ‘seekership’ stems from its *non-prescriptive* nature, allowing for this rejection of the mainstream to manifest itself in a myriad of forms.

Illumism

It is interesting to note that truth-seekers share an important commonality with their perceived enemy: both the ‘sane’ and the ‘insane’ are, in a way, enlightened. This commonality is obscured by a popular name attributed to the shadowy elites, “the Illuminati”, which literally means “the enlightened ones”. The more general term, ‘illumism’, can refer to:

any doctrine that professes the enlightenment or illumination of the human mind, whether by immediate divine revelation or through the inspired use of reason. The term is applied particularly to the mystical groups of the *Alumbrados* and *Illumines*, as well as to the very different philosophy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, whose religious expression is exemplified in the Bavarian *Illuminati*.¹⁷⁴

Illumism, in this wider sense, describes the truth movement rather well. It might even be preferable to “free thought” insofar as *parts* of the wider truth movement base their knowledge-claims upon transcendental sources, including appeals to the Bible (as with some Flat Earthers, see Chapter Five) and different forms of channelling.¹⁷⁵ It is therefore ironic that the name most commonly attributed to humanity’s controllers is the *Illuminati*, especially within popular culture portrayals of contemporary conspiracy theory.

Some truth-seekers find the term’s popularisation suspicious, reasoning that whatever has been allowed into the public domain is probably disinformation. Others accept the historical record and see the contemporary Illuminati as the ancestors rather than the permutation. Despite these disputations, the term still served emic usage as a shorthand way of referring to the notion of a hidden controlling agency (though it is usually followed by some variant of the phrase: “[...], or whatever”). Truth-seekers and their imagined opponents are both enlightened as to the *true* nature of reality: that an extraneous dimension exists beyond the phenomenal realm of the visible and material as mediated by mainstream institutions of knowledge. Hofstadter was therefore correct in observing that conspiracy theorists (in his language, practitioners of ‘the paranoid style’)

¹⁷⁴ John Ferguson, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 85.

¹⁷⁵ However common, these are exceptional instances. For instance, many truth-seekers are suspicious of Icke’s use of channelled knowledge-claims. But see the section on ‘crossovers with neo-paganisms’ for an instance of truth-seeking being encouraged to intuitively channel messages from the universe; the issue lies with notions of a “higher power” existing externally.

eventually imitate their supposed opponents; but truth-seekers do so knowingly, and with a difference. Whereas the insane are thought to deploy their knowledge to humanity's detriment, truth-seekers do so sanely, for humanity's benefit.

On the other hand, there is such diversity amongst truth-seekers that one meets with a myriad of different visions. Sticking with Richard's terminology, if truth-seekers are the sane, then there are several schools of sensible thought. The sane are just as prone to factional infighting as the insane legions of the "Illuminati". (In this sense, again, the popular notion of the 'Illuminati' accords with actual emic notions comes down to a linguistic technicality: translated literally, Illuminati means "enlightened ones", plural). For the insane and sane alike, ignorance might not be bliss, but enlightenment is anything but harmonious from a sociological point of view; the main thing that unites individual truth-seekers is a common point of departure from the mainstream point of view; a shift from unknowing to one of consciousness.

S: Truth-seekers vary dramatically, but you can kind of fit them into the same category because they're all open to the truth and they want the truth, no matter how diverse or at what level of spirituality or how their minds are developing. You can get a dyslexic person who's a truth seeker and you can get one who's into conjuring up UFOs in the sky through meditation and drumming. So even though they are very diverse they are all truth seekers.

N: And there's any feeling that between -

S: You can totally feel that - *they seem to know everything that you know. You can openly discuss, you don't have to explain, they just know a lot of things because they are seeking truth as well.*¹⁷⁶

Although truth-seekers are a diverse collective which engage with apparently separate flows of belief and practice, they share a common consciousness of alterity. There might be differences of opinion, but other truths-seekers are still understood as belonging to the same "sane" moral community. The fierce debates and disagreements on certain topics obscure the *phenomenal* sense of underlying togetherness; truth-seekers share in a conscious search for truth, no longer "dwellers" in what is commonly conceived to be mainstream culture, perceiving themselves as *outsiders* to the notional social centre.

We can put this observation in terms derived from the sociology of knowledge. For Berger, modernising societies become increasingly complex, leading to a pluralistic context which 'confronts the individual with an ever-changing kaleidoscope of social experiences and meanings'.¹⁷⁷ As a result, 'the individual seeks to find his 'foothold' in reality in himself rather than outside himself', as the sacred canopy is 'seriously threatened by pluralization [as] different

¹⁷⁶ Emphasis added.

¹⁷⁷ Peter L. Berger, *The Homeless Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 75.

sectors of social life now come to be governed by widely discrepant meanings and meaning systems'.¹⁷⁸ In such a highly differentiated and institutionally segregated situation in which individuals are forced to play many different roles, 'most plausibility structures are partial and therefore tenuous'.¹⁷⁹ Individuals instead seek out others who are like themselves, forming 'secondary institutions' of 'like-minded' individuals; here, for all its apparent lack of organisation, the "truth movement" is a milieu of *un*-likeminded individuals who are united by a common departure from the orthodoxies that regulate and integrate the insane mainstream.

A distinction used by scholars on the 'New Age' to differentiate between *sensu stricto* ('restricted') and *sensu lato* (i.e. in a wide sense) is helpful here.¹⁸⁰ The former *sensu stricto* refers to 1950s UFO-cult groups who expected the dawn of the Aquarian Age, influenced heavily by the Theosophical system of Alice A. Bailey ('who is also generally credited with having introduced the term "New Age"').¹⁸¹ The New Age *sensu lato*, on the other hand, is not bound by this millenarian outlook, and is a term instead that refers to the perception of 'a broad similarity between a wide variety of "alternative" ideas and pursuits. These terms are used to differentiate between two different historical formations that go by the same name, while highlighting some of their shared continuities. Here, the former 9/11 Truth Movement constitutes the *sensu stricto*, where the goal to reveal the hidden truths behind the 9/11 attacks enjoyed absolute centrality. The so-called "truth movement" which constitutes this ethnography's object of study effectively resembles the 9/11 Truth Movement *sensu lato*. As we will see, the expression refers to a wider variety of ideas and practices, but which nevertheless continue to advance values sympathetic to those of the former, disbanded, pre-2008 formation.¹⁸²

It should be noted that the similarities between these two formations go beyond aesthetics, themes, and personnel. The dissolution of the 9/11 Truth Movement *sensu stricto* was told multiple times because it functions like a fable for the later movement, its failings and difficulties becoming incorporated within the organisational logic of the truth movement. The apparent lack of formal organisation in today's network is therefore reconstituted as a positive characteristic that prevents a repeat of some of the possible dangers that arose from the oral history of the former movement *sensu stricto*.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

¹⁷⁹ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1971), p. 60.

¹⁸⁰ For example, see Steven Sutcliffe and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, 'Introduction: "All Mixed Up" – thinking about religion in relation to new age spiritualities', in *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, ed. by Steven Sutcliffe and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus (Durham: Acumen, 2013), pp. 4-6; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 97.

¹⁸¹ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 94-97.

¹⁸² The continuing role of 9/11 to the truth movement *sensu lato* is addressed in Chapter Three; suffice to say, the continuities justify the continuing use of the "truth movement" title.

4.3. A Site for the Cultic Milieu

Having already established the genealogical historical context of the so-called “truth movement” – by highlighting that, in one sense, it ostensibly disbanded – I will now refer to fieldwork data that documents this “movement” as a living phenomenon. I will begin by describing an evening which I take to be broadly representative of the presentations given across all three physical groups, thereby grounding the subsequent analysis in the lived context of fieldwork.

4.3.1. Truthjuice Hull, Open Mic Night

In November 2014, Truthjuice Hull held an open mic night. It was my first open mic event at this venue, but I went with high expectations of a fascinating evening due to previous experiences of the same format in Birmingham and Blackpool. Instead of hearing one speaker for two hours, on a topic which may or may not appeal to my personal interests, you might hear four or five speakers, addressing different topics with interrelating tropes and themes, representing grassroots’ research.

The venue was a vast working man’s club; more specifically it was the large room towards the back, forcing you to navigate through the great ballroom (which hosted ballroom dancing, or bingo, for an elderly crowd), and a games room with a snooker table and television screens for sport, and finally a corridor. The logistics meant that while it was a public event, open to all, only those people who had purposefully come and paid the £4 (discounted to £2 for self-identified “low earners”) would be present for the talks. The man at the desk advertised some new (copied) DVDs that were being sold for fifty pence each. I bought “‘Abraham-Hicks’ Collection’, “a more spiritual one,” he told me, and a UK Column one with Roger Hayes’s name on the front – which I knew, already, would be described as a more “political one”, with UK Column a staple part of the ‘alternative media’ which had a month’s worth of their daily YouTube news report looking at present-day corruption and events.¹⁸³ The event was well-attended with around forty people present, albeit less so than the previous week, which featured a well-known speaker called Andy Johnson giving a lecture entitled ‘Chemtrails – what is in our skies?’.

The introduction was made by the unofficial organiser, who welcomed everyone, and gave a brief introduction to seven talks lined up; she made further mention of an upcoming “expolitics” conference for any who might have been interested.¹⁸⁴ The first speaker was a middle-aged man talking about psychedelics, giving his first-ever presentation. The main point was that

¹⁸³ “Abraham-Hicks” talks about the ‘Law of Attraction’, where one’s positive intentions can change the external world around you. See the official website, Abraham Hicks Publications, ‘Law of Attraction – Official Site’ (2019) <http://www.abraham-hicks.com/lawofattractionsource/about_abraham.php> [accessed 31/12/17]. For more on UK Column, including past materials in a range of media formats, see their website at UK Column (2018) <<http://www.ukcolumn.org/>> [accessed 31/12/17].

The UK Column also publish a quarterly printed newspaper that is disseminated (for either £1 or a more affordable contribution) across all my fieldsites in Birmingham, Hull, and Blackpool.

¹⁸⁴ I will briefly outline each talk, from fieldnotes.

psychedelics amount to much more than the hysterical and doom-laden hype that he thought was put out by the mainstream. It was largely a descriptive account from personal experience from when he went to stay in Peru for a 6-week initiation by a local shaman into their psychedelic rituals, using Ayahuasca. He was drawn to go because of a long interest in psychedelics rather than the cultural experience but, with the places on the shorter course booked up, he did the longer course that included learning traditions and “extra bits”. He spoke of “a presence” that appeared differently to people according to their personal, privately-held beliefs; for some it was God, or the devil, or as aliens; to him it was ambivalent, old, formless, genderless, but “possessing knowledge”.¹⁸⁵ He noted that those who take it seem to receive a message to spread further the use of ayahuasca; and to re-connect with the natural world – “*that* is ayahuasca’s message”. He recommended that everybody take “dragon’s blood”, an indigenous tree-sap available on Amazon, which is very healthy, especially for indigestion. In the following questions it turned out he would never take it again, since it was not blindly euphoric, as such, but almost *too* powerful, and extremely nauseating; he would stick to his magic mushrooms.

The second talk was introduced as about ‘the Bible and UFOs’. This speaker’s opening statement was that the Bible is not like the churches make out; it is not literal but allegorical. I noted that it was not the most systematic talk, but I personally enjoyed it greatly due to my background in theology, relishing the ways in which he sought to dig deeper into the Bible to uncover what it might really be saying.¹⁸⁶ He spoke about the bit on Revelation that mentions the number 666, ‘which the church tells you is bad’, but he had subsequently read ‘the whole verse’; in fact, he said, the number is said only to be important, to be *solved*, and he further noted that this number is very important within ideas about sound frequency today. He then jumped to Genesis 1, and asked who God is speaking to? Furthermore, God uses the 1st person plural pronoun “us” – who are they? The “Annunaki”, perhaps, or the “Nephilim”; or a mixture of them all? He was in no position to say for sure.¹⁸⁷ As he began to talk about the tabernacle’s spatial arrangements, and designs, being to do with “energies”, a member of the audience interrupted him, stating that it had technology “like with the Mayans”. David said he ‘wasn’t sure’, that he ‘hadn’t read it’, rather than any principled rejection or refutation. Someone else in the crowd said it was a portable tent, and this David agreed with. He moved onto ‘the flying scroll’ in Zechariah, wondering what this

¹⁸⁵ In brackets, here, in fieldnotes: ‘the truth-seeker’s ideal divinity?’

¹⁸⁶ I spoke to him outside over a cigarette at the half-time interval, and had great sympathy with his experiences at church where he became disillusioned when he perceived incongruities in the Church’s position on certain portions of scriptures, switching between allegorical and literal treatments. Specifically, he brought them a verse from Proverbs that glorified the suffering of labour, and they said ‘it wasn’t scriptural’. For him, this response was both suspicious and intolerable, and he left the congregation. On reflection, if you are not familiar with biblical hermeneutics such a response smacks of double-speak.

¹⁸⁷ Note that the ‘Annunaki’ feature in David Icke’s works; the ‘Nephilim’ is a Hebrew word found in Gen. 6.4, and Numbers 13.33, but also feature heavily in Zechariah Sitchin’s works, as the extra-terrestrial “fallen ones” or ancient astronauts. See the full series of his works, Zechariah Sitchin, *The 12th Planet: Book One of the Earth Chronicles* (New York: Harper, 1976).

might refer to, before closing his talk by reiterating his central point: that we need to be wary of the bible because it is allegorical.

In the questions following, a woman talked further about some other astro-theological allegories; she claimed that the *twelve* zodiacs refer to the *twelve* disciples and that the “three wise men” actually refer to a solar constellation; or that the entire bible sequence might be understood in terms of the procession of the equinoxes. This latter point provoked disagreement from other audience members about this, including what the Zodiac even means; one kept on repeating, “it’s about the procession of the equinoxes!”

The host for the evening brought the exchange to an abrupt end, and the third talk began, on the subject of ‘Big Pharma: What’s going on’.¹⁸⁸ This talk focussed on the dangers inherent in the dominant biomedical approach that places too much trust in pharmaceutical drugs. The question the speaker raised for discussion was *why* attendees thought this was going on: the speaker saw this as a heartless and immoral economic conspiracy, but motivated primarily by money; or was this part of an extra-economic *agenda*? Someone shouted out “Agenda 21” and half of the audience appeared to nod and murmur in agreement.¹⁸⁹

The fourth speaker was a woman talking about her personal experience of curing her lymphoma using cannabis oil. She first heard a speaker talk on the subject at a Truthjuice event; she spoke to him afterwards, and he gave her some cannabis oil “the size of a seed” – taking it, the pain went away immediately, after months of trying larger and larger amounts of morphine to little effect. She noted that this anti-*pain* aspect had not been mentioned in the initial talk explicitly. She was also on chemotherapy, telling the group that she had kids, and had to be seen to be trying everything to cure herself, despite her own reservations about the treatment. After using this three times daily, from January to July, she received the “all clear”; the audience cheered and applauded. Someone asked what I thought was an interesting question, whether this was placebo, or faith-healing. The woman said yes, quite possibly; but the pain being remedied so instantaneously remained as the imponderable. The topic of hemp came up, somewhat predictably given how often it arises during informal conversations, with the idea that it is suppressed since it can do everything from making rope, to building houses, so naturally it is kept from the populace by whichever powers-that-be.

After the interval – time enough for someone to buy a drink, have a cigarette, and talk generally about alternative topics – we would hear three more talks.¹⁹⁰ First, the “white genocide project”, about the effects of mass immigration in white countries and on the motivations of the politicians

¹⁸⁸ This talk is mentioned in the chapter on health.

¹⁸⁹ Again, see health chapter for more detail on Agenda 21.

¹⁹⁰ Discussed in more detail in a later section.

behind that.¹⁹¹ The organiser predicted that it might provoke a bit of a discussion, “have an argument about that, a bit of argy-barg”. The final talk was thankfully on ‘how to be happy’, by the self-confessed “happiest man in the world”; he would come to tell us that he had come across the concept of “synchronicity” in the work of David Icke, but only later, after a spiritual experience, could he see for himself all the connections permeating the everyday.¹⁹²

Amidst the wide range of subjects already addressed, however, the penultimate talk returns us to the chief focus of this chapter: “how we can stop people fighting each other; how to stop infighting within *the truth movement*”. The audience laughed at this announcement, at the ironic appropriateness that this topic would follow the disputes that many of “us” – “we” the truth movement – anticipated in the preceding talk on white genocide theory. Far away from Manchester, I found myself among another audience that were intuitively familiar with this so-called “truth movement”. Let us now take stock and return to this chapter’s central question: to what extent, then, can *this* so-called “truth movement” be considered a movement?

4.3.2 The Cultic Milieu

The “truth movement” met above can be described as a modern institutional of the ‘cultic milieu’, a phrase sociologist Colin Campbell used to describe ‘the cultural underground of society’.¹⁹³ At a general level, there is a striking resemblance between many of the emic articulations of what they mean by their contemporaneous “truth movement” and this theoretical construct from 1972, which ‘includes all deviant belief-systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground’.¹⁹⁴ The examples with which Campbell describes its substantive content are virtually indistinguishable from the topical programmes of the meetings groups, which, today, discuss knowledge relating to ‘the worlds of the occult and magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure’.¹⁹⁵ The only missing ingredients are the words “conspiracy theory” – but as this thesis makes clear, the conspiracy theories met in the field are composites of precisely these areas mentioned above.¹⁹⁶ Alternatively, we can say that where areas such as ‘nature cure’

¹⁹¹ This is the same speaker who later spoke on the topic of the Flat Earth at the same venue. He was already considered a somewhat controversial character; there was much anticipation for the talk shared in the smoking area at half-time.

¹⁹² “Synchronicity” is a belief in the teleological inter-connectedness of life that linear understandings of temporality. Etymologically, the term derives from the classical Greek “sync” and “chronos”. The theory can be formally traced back to C. J. Jung to express ‘meaningful coincidences’ and is associated with ‘New Age science’ through the contribution of F. David Peat. See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁹³ Campbell, ‘Cultic Milieu’, p. 122.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ For example, conspiracy theories about 9/11 – which I analyse as ‘false-flag’ counter-narratives in Chapter Four – often involve ‘heretical science’, exotic technologies, and occult forces.

are presented, for instance the cannabis oil talk in the open mic night, they are framed within a conspiracy narrative.

Let us think about the meeting group in Hull. At its simplest, this is a space for presentations about topics that are deemed in some way significant by the person presenting them, and by the people in attendance. The audience listens to what the presenter says and with an opportunity to ask questions or challenge the speaker; sometimes the questioner is simply commenting on the topic and contributing their own insight, that they deem relevant and significant, to the shared public arena. The presentations are the result of personal reflection by the speakers on a given topic, a mix of experiential and intellectual anecdote; they are not based upon self-contained traditions of ideas, nor claim to derive from a single extant, coherent tradition. Rather, they were comprised of ideas considered not simply *non-mainstream* but *contrary to* mainstream interpretations of the subject matter they considered.¹⁹⁷ The overall format is replicated in the other meeting groups.

Relative to the 9/11 Truth Movement, *this* manifestation of the so-called “truth movement” has a range of interests that have diversified beyond the discussion of “conspiracy theories”.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, when I asked the co-organiser of New Horizons what *she* meant by a “truth movement”, she replied, after a thoughtful pause, “it’s just areas of suppressed news really”. The New Horizons website includes a banner which advertises their programme as follows: “‘Conspiracy Theories’ – true or not? – The Global Economy – Hidden News – Complementary Health – Self-empowerment – Alternative Science & Technology – The Paranormal – Ancient Mysteries – the Legal Rights of the Individual...& much more!”¹⁹⁹ While outsiders might construe these same areas as simply ‘fringe’ or ‘marginal’ elements of culture, for truth-seekers, viewing mainstream culture as an *unnatural product* of hidden agencies, whatever is deemed to be heterodox or even unorthodox – ‘stigmatized knowledge’ – offers a potential glimpse of a non-mediated reality.²⁰⁰ Within a world permeated by mysteries and deceptions, these physical meeting groups are perceived as bastions of truth by virtue of their counter-cultural focus on *alternative* knowledge.

4.3.3 Identity Formation and Belonging: Networks and Webs

The groups and individuals that comprise the modern truth movement can be understood as a network even though they seem to exist independently. Indeed, no verbal mention was made of the other meetings groups that I visited regularly. However, despite this fact – alongside their being geographically distant, comprised of attendees, and organisers, with little in the way of direct, personal connections, and lacking inter-group coordination – they can be conceptualised

¹⁹⁷ I have already defined ‘mainstream’ in the Introduction which matches the emic sense from the open mic evening.

¹⁹⁸ ‘Conspiracy theories’ as defined in the Introduction, namely, ‘theories about a conspiracy that may or may not be true’.

¹⁹⁹ *New Horizons*.

²⁰⁰ Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 27.

as a ‘network’ in the sense adopted by sociologist Mathew Wood sensitive to ‘the considerable flows in people, practices, and belief between a number of different groups and events within a relatively limited geographical area’.²⁰¹

The groups in Hull, Birmingham, and Blackpool, are all physical assemblies of people who share an interest in alternative knowledge streams, social spaces for people to publicly discuss counter-cultural ideas. Just like the cultic milieu as described by Campbell, the truth movement has porous and moveable boundaries, as the following excerpt makes clear.

N: So where does [the truth movement] start and where does it end?

K: It doesn’t.

N: Ok, so to be precise, you mentioned the anti-fracking stuff, for you, is that a part, or sort of a wing, of the truth movement?

K: Yeah, because everything is connected once you’ve joined all the dots, yeah. It’s really organic, it’s massively organic; it’s the same ideology; but it’s really organic, you can’t say where it all starts, or ends, or where it began really, it’s like a fucking web, you know, which is good, because there’s no structure to it, it’s really anarchistic, because groups are coming together, but they’re not joining together and making a great big conglomerate business, you know, people are coming together because they’ve got groups, the groups [have] got the same goals, so why not work together, but there isn’t an essentialised place that decisions are made; there’s no leaders; there’s no – it’s really anarchistic. N: There’s no central- K: there’s no 0800- number you can call, for the truth movement [laughs] [...] it’s not based anywhere.

This is a brilliant description of the organisational framework of the truth movement. Kirsty’s choice of the word “web” also recalls Dominic Corrywright’s notion of ‘the web’ to describe the forms of organisation found in New Age *sensu lato*.²⁰² The truth movement is especially web-like in the ‘inter-connectedness’ of its constitutive phenomena; the flows of people, ideas, and practices seem to melt into one another.²⁰³ People who have never met, read different books by different thinkers, attend groups with a different focus, are all interconnected. A second similarity is that within the truth movement, ‘there is no necessary single point of entry’.²⁰⁴ People “wake up” in a variety of ways (see Chapter Five). For example, one truth-seeker’s interest in alternative knowledge might begin in crop circles, later start attending their local meeting group, and then

²⁰¹ Wood, *Power*, p. 7.

²⁰² Dominic Corrywright, *Theoretical and Empirical Investigations into New Age Spiritualities* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2003).

²⁰³ i.e. One idea (e.g. holistic universe) might be connected to a number of practices (e.g. meditation, research into the holistic universe, diet, etc.); these practices might be communal and public and connect people (e.g. through conversations at meetings, online forums, etc.); these people are simultaneously connected by other, related ideas (e.g. holographic universe, theories about synchronicity, etc.).

²⁰⁴ Corrywright, pp. 80.

develop into a focus on freeman ideas (see Chapter Six). Another truth-seeker initially comes across the latter ideas online, later read a David Icke book, and subsequently adopt meditation practices. Both individuals become conscious that they are a part of a wider “truth movement” (or become included in someone else’s conception) at different points, through a unique mix of practices. The decentralisation that characterises the web model implies that a truth-seeker stands always at the centre *and* the margins of the truth movement. The inability to draw hard borders means that for many truth-seekers, the “truth movement” is both vast *and* small:

K: As you progress through this, everyone becomes connected. The truth movement is like a hub, like a village, you know, you think of the truth movement as this big massive [thing] *but* – there’s not that many people in it, *but*, it’s always been relatively small groups of people that have changed anything.

N: Do you feel it feels bigger?

K: No, it feels like a village to me. But yeah, totally. [...] If you move around in it then it’s your world, and it does feel small, it really does, because you basically know what’s going on everywhere, pretty much; [you have] an idea, you know, of the mood. So yeah, it is really small, because if you counted the truth movement as groups, and people who are actively doing stuff, that’d be small, but then, I’m pretty sure we’ve still got 1000s, 100s of 1000s, of individuals out there who have got their own truth movement going on, you know, realising for themselves, but not going into, getting immersed, into the [social dimension]; so yeah, I think it’s big in that way, but small in the way that when people do get involved they fucking proper get involved.

This excerpt helps us understand how the tangible sense of a movement emerges in the absence of any centralised organisation. Campbell’s account of the cultic milieu mentions the periodic formations of institutions that continually rise and fall; but if we look at the cultic milieu through the eyes of the people who a part of it, the degree of organisation depends on one’s position within the total web.

4.3.4 Public Enactment and Private Belonging

In the absence of any centralised programme of action, there arise identifiable episodes of momentary organisation arranged to achieve more specific goals. One interviewee talked about a successful prevention of the repossession of Tom Crawford’s residence. Lisa recalls, “there’s been two attempts [to repossess] Tom’s house and wow – wow! – the energy; the energy from those days was incredible, absolutely incredible. The feeling that you get from being at something like that, like the second one, there was like 800 people there in Nottingham, and bloody freezing it was, January it was!” Bailiffs arrived but apparently turned away when they saw the size of the crowd. On a separate occasion, I went to a gathering organised for outside the courts to support

Tom Crawford which I saw advertised on Facebook; at least one-hundred came, including regulars from Truthjuice Birmingham; it was an emotional, energetic day; the ephemeral sense of a collective was made physically palpable. Events like these function as public opportunities for collective action against a commonly-defined enemy; they serve as public enactments of a common ideology in which truth-seekers come face-to-face with the notional collective.

Events like these, alongside the regular meeting-groups which inspire similar levels of emotional response – the phenomenal experience of immersion in something that transcends the four walls, bar, and projector – produce a social bond among their participants, ‘dealing with affectual forms of solidarity in small groups’.²⁰⁵ Recalling the earlier connections drawn between modern “conspiracy theory” and the millenarian movements studied by Cohn, ‘Bund’ refers to ‘the loose, non-institutional; nature, at least initially, of such associations’ that is accompanied by high levels of commitment; Bund are ‘wholly conscious phenomena’ derived from ‘mutual sentiment and feeling’.²⁰⁶ This combination of non-institutionalisation with a phenomenal sense of togetherness contributes to their ‘unstable nature [...] likely to be fleeting and somewhat ephemeral’.²⁰⁷ But when the physical event is over, the conscious experience of association is longer-lasting, and the *desire* to re-experience the ‘affective-emotional solidarity of the Bund’ remains. Interestingly, Hetherington calls the Bund ‘synonymous’ with Turner’s ‘communitas’.²⁰⁸ The Bund concept reminds us that although organisations seem to exist materially individual associating with something public, in the social arena, organisations exist also *within* individual consciousness. This sense of a small-scale, inter-personal network of a finite number of ‘immersed’ individuals also conveys a sense of potential limitlessness. This is partly related to the open-ended social structures that characterise much of the cultic milieu but relates also to the substantive contents, the way that presentations engage with distinguishable streams of ‘alternative knowledge’. Fenster notes that ‘conspiracy theories presuppose the existence of a research community’.²⁰⁹ To meet with a local group of like-minded individuals *actualises* this notional community.

²⁰⁵ Kevin Hetherington, ‘The Contemporary Significance of Schmalenbach’s Concept of the Bund’, *Sociological Review*, 14.1 (1994), p. 1.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp., 3, 9.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁰⁸ i.e. the is ‘synonymous’ with what is meant by Bund that former describes the ‘modality of relationship’ that arises between persons who share ‘a “moment in and out of time,” and in and out of secular social structure, for individuals in a ‘liminal’ state, ‘betwixt and between’ mainstream definitions of reality, a sense of brotherliness coheres this similarly displaced persons; where this is made *conscious* – partly achieved by the antinomian, counter-cultural *content* of truth movement discourse – a sense of union becomes palpable. Similar to Turner’s rites of passage, the meeting-groups are a liminal space, ‘at the edges of structure, in marginality’, filled with potential “truths” which in fact *challenge* that structure, transgressing ‘the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships [...] accompanied by [an] experience of unprecedented potency’. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: structure and anti-structure* (New York: Cornell, 1977), p. 96ff.

²⁰⁹ Fenster, *Conspiracy*, p. 158.

4.3.5 Mysticism and Interconnectedness: An Invisible Church of Truth-seeking

Central to Campbell's account of the cultic milieu is Ernst Troeltsch's understanding of Christian mysticism, or 'spiritual religion' that Troeltsch contrasts with ecclesiastical, i.e. church-based, Protestantism.²¹⁰ While religious experiences are common across other sect-movements, this is a distinct *type* of religion is focussed expressly upon direct experience of God conceiving of a 'Divine Seed' within the individual quite apart from any necessary ecclesiastical basis.²¹¹ At its heart is a 'radical individualism' that 'lays no stress at all on the relation between individuals', unlike a sect, 'but only upon the relations between the soul and God'.²¹² The institutional forms that arise from this distinct orientation is a 'fellowship peculiar to this kind of "spiritual religion": the idea of the Invisible Church'.²¹³ This is arguably the perfect organisational model for a movement of truth-seekers because it is in harmony with the ethos of individualism so highly valued by truth-seekers.

The important thing, here, is to note that the apparent *disorganisation* of the decentralised web-like truth movement is actually conducive to the realisation of its tentative ideology, namely opening minds. This recalls Evans-Pritchard's attempts to relate a society's religious beliefs with its social structure. In Nuer culture, 'unlike the other spirits God has no prophets or sanctuaries or earthly forms. [...] The somewhat amorphous, though monotheistic, character of Nuer religion is in harmony with the absence of a developed and politically important priesthood'.²¹⁴ The interconnectedness amidst diversity found at the level of ideas is accompanied by an inter-connected but diverse system of social networks. There is no sense of a priesthood in the sense of discussing God *but* the universe itself is afforded a god-like character. This is attributed not a monotheistic but a monistic character, one that is fundamentally amorphous when talking about the holistic paradigm applied to the mythology of matter. Similarly, the truth movement's *ideology* is again amorphous but characterised by a ubiquitous but variegated desire to see humanity "woken up". For individual truth-seekers, this ideology is reflected in the concern for personal experiences of the truth, and the inner, divine seed.

4.4 Conspiracy Unbound: Strands of Influence

In reality, many truth-seekers come to inhabit perhaps not a single tradition but certainly become familiar with a set of traditions, even if these were not initially sought. In accordance with Troeltsch's understanding of religious mysticism, many truth-seekers perceive a kind of 'Divine Seed' or 'Divine Spark' within themselves that connects with an amorphous *truth* that resides

²¹⁰ Ernst Troeltsch, *Social teaching of the Christian Churches*, II (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), pp. 729 ff.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 738.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 743.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 745.

²¹⁴ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Some Features of Nuer Religion', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 81.1 (1951).

throughout the holistic universe, but suppressed by co-opted societal powers.²¹⁵ However fragmented or uncertain – or indeed, profane – the conspired social world may appear, the perceiving self attains a sacred status; the “insane” alone do not. This conception of a sacred selfhood manifests differently in different areas of the truth movement. In freeman ideology, liberty is an intrinsic right of a “flesh-and-blood” person; the flat earth theory argues against a heliocentric model of the universe because it propagates a (false) myth of human meaninglessness against the truth of a sacred species in the sacred centre of the universe.²¹⁶ I turn now to looking at the cross-overs with what is termed ‘esoteric’, ‘occult’, and/or ‘New Age’ in both the secondary literature, and from the emic perspective.²¹⁷

4.4.1. The New Age

The spirit of the New Age movement is expressed clearly by Heelas in terms of ‘self-spirituality’.²¹⁸ This can be alternatively construed by the terms ‘expressive spirituality’ or ‘expressive humanism’.²¹⁹

Chryssides notes suggestions that ‘the ‘New Age’ phenomenon itself has disappeared’, since its present-day manifestations are arguably so commercial that they support the capitalist ideology that New Age originally opposed.²²⁰ Writing in 2007, he adds that the pronounced apocalyptic expectations accompanying the utopian claims of a dawning Age of Aquarius have dissipated, citing David Spangler’s reassessment of the New Age as ‘an idea, not [...] an event’. Elements of this millenarian New Age *sensu stricto* echo in the truth movement *sensu lato*, such as the claims that were made concerning the more recent millennial expectations concerning 2012. Thomas Sheridan remembers this period as a “fever-pitch” period of time. These impulses seem to come and go; during my fieldwork, there were few outbreaks of outright, millenarian expectation, but in the notions of Agenda 21 (see Chapter Three) there is arguably a latent undercurrent of fatalistic apocalypticism. The similarities between two periods of apocalyptic intensity among the cultic milieu come across in Andy Thomas’s Interview. In the early 90s Andy

²¹⁵ Troeltsch, p. 738-741.

²¹⁶ See Eliade, House, Cosmos chapter.

²¹⁷ Despite the existence of an interconnected alternative knowledge network, I am careful not to construe “the alternative” as a bounded field in its own right. This seems pertinent not only in respect of portrayals of the New Age, but also in light of Aspren and Granholm’s warning against conceiving of ‘the esoteric’ or ‘the occult’ as ‘a self-contained and coherent tradition’, viewing these as social constructions. The authors see this as a blurring of emic and etic perspectives since many students of the esoteric would first come across ideas associated with this “tradition” as an academic observer and outsider. These terms are rather descriptors, two among many, for a host of phenomena that together make up the vast repertoire of the cultural underground. Egil Aspren and Kennet Granholm, ‘Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition’, in *Contemporary Esotericism*, (Sheffield, Equinox: 2012), p. 36.

²¹⁸ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

²¹⁹ Paul Heelas, ‘Sources of Significance beyond church and chapel’, in *Beyond New Age*, ed. by Sutcliffe and Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 237-254.

²²⁰ George D. Chryssides, ‘Defining New Age’, in *Handbook of New Age*, ed. by Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 12.

joined a ‘new-agey’ healing circle after meeting healers and psychics through social contacts at a crop circle discussion group, joining the social network. He remembered, “there was a lot of psychic messages about earth changes coming through”, adding, “[it] still happens, and it’s funny that it’s reviving again now, it goes through cycles”.

Asprem and Dyrendal argue that this coming-together of New Age spirituality and conspiracy theory is neither ‘surprising’ nor ‘new’, but have often come together within traditions tied to Western esotericism.²²¹ They share Ward and Voas’s mistake in describing the socio-religious phenomenon of ‘con-spirituality’ – undeniably the substantive makeup of the truth network – as a ‘web community’, not in the organisational sense discussed above, but in the sense of existing primarily in cyberspace.²²² Indeed, *this* aspect of the truth movement, as an expression of the cultic milieu, certainly *is* novel insofar as it stems from modern developments in communications technology.

Hanegraaff sums up the varieties of New Age religiosity into ‘a few, clearly-demarcated categories’, which ‘may be further divided into sub-categories’: channelling; healing and spiritual growth; holistic science; neopaganisms (‘all those modern movements which are based on the conviction that what Christianity has traditionally denounced as idolatry and superstition actually represented a profound and meaningful religious worldview [...] [that] can and should be revitalised in our modern world’); and the ‘world-reforming idealism’ of ‘New Age in a restricted sense’, associated with the millenarian expectations in the late 1970s of the coming New Age of Aquarius.²²³ Of these, channelling is the most obvious absentee from the truth-seeking programme.²²⁴

4.4.2 Neo-Paganisms

Jorgenson’s qualitative study of neopagans in the United States depicts a sub-culture with ‘a bewildering array of innovations, a proliferation of literature, and a host of new associations, solidified by social networks and activities forming an elaborate “cultic milieu”’. Seekers navigate the wide range of spiritual paths constituting this milieu, guided by ‘a highly pluralistic, nonexclusive religious ideology involving special concerns for nature and gender’, supported by ‘very loosely organised but intimate groups which ordinarily stress tremendous individual freedom’. Eclecticism tends towards an inherent monistic principle, drawing upon ‘religions

²²¹ Egil Asprem & Asbjørn Dyrendal, ‘Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?’, in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2015), pp. 367-382.

²²² Not at all to be confused with Corrywright’s formulation of new age community existing as a web; see below.

²²³ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism’, in *Handbook of the New Age*, ed. by Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 32, 36.

²²⁴ For a comprehensive list, see New Horizons, ‘Previous Speakers’ <http://www.newhorizonsstannes.com/past_talks.htm> [accessed 31/12/17].

[that] generally emphasize the occult unity of everything'.²²⁵ The differences between these two might only shift the chief concerns to consist of socio-politics, personal growth, and nature. These similarities can largely be explained by features inherent to cultic milieu socio-religious formations, chief among them an 'ideological individualism' which is counter-intuitively conducive to the solidarity of groups and networks composing this cultic milieu.

Beyond the structural similarities, there are clear cross-overs at a substantive level. Concern for nature and gender is evident in the speaker programmes across the meeting-groups. The question must be asked, however, whether this is indicative of pagan ideas, or a latent environmentalism. Anthropologist Bron Taylor confuses the matter when he characterises the 'most common perception' animating radical environmentalism as "pagan", namely,

a spirituality involving one or more of two perceptions: (1) the Earth itself is alive and sacred, a perception that for many could properly be labelled as Pantheism (a word derived by conflating the Greek word *pan* meaning "all" and *theos* meaning "god," or "all is god."); and (2) that the world is filled with non-human intelligences – often thought to be capable of communicating and communing with humans – who are worthy of reverence. These perceptions, often labelled "animism" (from the Latin for "soul"), describe the belief that various entities in nature have souls or spirits.²²⁶

One can find these two perceptions throughout much of the truth movement, far beyond its more obviously 'pagan' elements. Pantheism can be applied fruitfully to areas such as sacred geometry, and to the holistic science underpinning ideas about the quantum nature of reality. In many ways we find present in the truth movement a form of unbound paganism that stretches beyond the Earth and into the wider universe. Animism, meanwhile, is one way to characterise beliefs in extra-terrestrial contact, faeries, spiritualism, and many others; it can be applied to any belief-system that postulates a communicative immaterial dimension. From the etic perspective, then, we can identify continuities stretching across thematically distinct areas along these lines; this helps explain the inherent interconnectedness of different ideas as encountered by the emic perspective, whereby individuals can engage with both 'pagan' and non-pagan beliefs seamlessly.

One example of 'pagan' knowledge within the truth movement from my fieldwork refers to animal spirit guides. Thomas Janak, a practising neo-shaman from the Birmingham suburb of Erdington, spoke at two different groups, and both times asked audience members to think back to recent encounters with animals. The memories recounted were then interpreted as meaningful encounters with benevolent spirits who communicated esoteric advice; Thomas acted as

²²⁵ Danny L. Jorgensen and Scott E. Russell, 'American NeoPaganism: The Participants' Social Identities', in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 38.3 (1999), p. 327.

²²⁶ Bron Taylor, 'Diggers, Wolves, Ents, Elves and Expanding Universes', in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, ed. by Jeffrey Kaplan and Helene Lööw (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2002), pp. 26-74 (p. 32).

interpreter in public displays of client/practitioner relations. During these interactive sessions, attendees learned new ways of interpreting past experiences; what previously was only “road-kill” became impregnated, posthumously, with supra-sensible significance.²²⁷ An animist outlook that sees Nature as a symbolic but meaningful resource is situationally invoked; like in Bird-David’s classic account of animism as ‘relational epistemology’, not every part of nature is teeming with spirits, but only those parts with which that the individual feels a relational connection. Audience members become half-client/half-practitioner as they are taught to interact with the natural world in a different way. The world is now potentially ripe with what Evans-Pritchard called ‘mystical notions’, ‘patterns in thought that attribute to phenomena supra-sensible qualities which, or part of which, are not derived from observation or cannot be logically inferred from it, and which they do not possess’.²²⁸

Unlike some other environmentalists, truth-seekers generally reject theories about human-influenced climate change, and the limited availability of ‘peak oil’. Nevertheless, this does not preclude their sincere concern and interest in their natural environments. As one informant put it, ‘ever notice that people “deeply concerned about climate change” have absolutely no contact with the natural world?’. Practices like foraging (for natural remedies and foods) and growing organic food are repeated items at open mic evenings at the meeting-groups. These individuals might reject some of the dominant scientific narratives that motivate the environmental movement, but they still forge a deep connection with nature at a personal level. Anti-fracking concerns were prominent during my time of fieldwork; talks by Ian Crane on the subject attracted large crowds. Notably, talks about the environment (including topics mentioned above) do not generally *begin* by affirming the sacred nature of the Earth but are instead more people-centred, expounded primarily in terms of the threat they pose to humans. For example, the anti-fracking movement emphasises the dangers of earth-quakes and water pollution to humans, rather than an affront to Gaia or mother-Earth. Of course, any truth-seekers that *do* recognise nature as sacred are able to incorporate this private assumption in their reception of whichever idea is being discussed.

4.4.3 Occulture

The pool of ideas from which truth-seekers draw their ideas (or, to phrase the same point differently, the culture of ideas in which they participate through mutual patterns of consumption and production) can be conceptualised with Christopher Partridge’s notion of ‘occulture’.²²⁹ The alternative knowledge that comprises occulture as existing as a great plurality that exists phenomenologically as an inter-connected web with no fixed beginning nor end; a “body” of

²²⁷ Janak said that contemporary Britain has “shut out” Nature so effectively that road-kill sightings are one way the spirit world still speaks to us since “things are drawn to our attention for a reason”. Similarly, if one “accidentally” dropped a card, it meant the card had picked *you*.

²²⁸ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937) p. 12.

²²⁹ Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vols. I-II (London: T&T Clark, 2005)

knowledge is constructed by the truth-seeker, who can, in theory, draw upon *any* aspect of occulture in their search for “truth”. Indeed, it is this orientation towards *truth*, in an illusory world conspired by hidden agencies, that acts as the keel in the vast occultural reservoir. Some truth-seekers regard certain portions of occulture as containing hints of truths, but others represent ‘disinformation’ or are ‘a distraction’; “Flat Earth” theories (see Chapter Five) are a good example of the subjectively contested and variable value bestowed upon different strands of the occultural web by different truth-seekers.

Partridge refines rather than refutes Campbell’s thesis, suggesting that ‘occult’ is a better adjective than ‘mystical’ for Campbell’s purposes.²³⁰ The latter fails as an umbrella term partly because of the baggage that ‘mystical’ has acquired in theology and popular culture. He prefers ‘occult’ as from Stark and Bainbridge’s *Future of Religion*, but, unlike these authors, his ‘occulture’ ‘transcends subcultures’.²³¹ For Partridge, ‘occulture includes those often *hidden, rejected* and *oppositional* beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices, many of which are identified by Campbell as belonging to the cultic/mystical milieu and by Stark and Bainbridge as belonging to the occult subculture’.²³²

I agree that ‘cultic’ is lacking. The notion of ‘occulture’ as a cultural phenomenon is a fascinating one that eschews the tendency to bracket off cultures, as if there was a dominant culture and several sub-cultures at the level of individual experience. The truth movement – as exemplified by the three speaker-groups – is a manifestation of occulture. However, I would take issue with the word ‘occult’ because of its popular connotations with the nefarious and uncanny. With the Truth Movement, the actions of the hidden controllers are often described as ‘occult’, whereas the activities of the truth seekers – even as they strive to uncover hidden truths and rediscover lost knowledge – are almost never described as ‘occult’. The term I would prefer – in conjunction with the sense of an amorphous ‘milieu’ – is ‘alternative’. This is a more favourable term because of its greater inclusivity; it is an emic term; it can usefully describe the different kinds of discourse; and it emphasises the chief sources of unity, its oppositional nature, thereby pointing also to the inner-tensions produced by the interlocking arms of heterodoxies.

The occulture thesis departs from the cultic milieu thesis in asserting that the cultural underground has gone *above* ground; as Partridge puts it, ‘occulture is ordinary’.²³³ The ideas and practices that comprise the cultic milieu are no longer exclusive to the underground, but have increasingly seeped into the mainstream, partially through popular culture – the occult is no longer hidden but

²³⁰ Partridge, *Re-Enchantment*, I, pp. 62-68.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²³² Partridge, *Re-enchantment*, I, p. 61.

²³³ Alternatively, the ‘compound [...] “occulture” suggests a democratized occult, an open esotericism’. Christopher Partridge, ‘Occulture is Ordinary’, in ed. by K. Granholm & E. Asprem, *Contemporary Esotericism* (Sheffield, Equinox: 2012), 113-133, p. 119.

a staple part of culture. The truth movement, however, is consciously and deliberately oppositional; those aspects of occulture that have effectively “gone mainstream” are sometimes thought to be suspect. For example, the fact that the “Flat Earth” theory was adopted by a number of well-known celebrities made it doubly suspect in the eyes of most truth-seekers. Nevertheless, popular culture is a rich vein of ideas for truth-seekers; it is generally those aspects that best accord with their sense of deviance that are most acceptable, such as films like *V For Vendetta*, or *The Matrix*.²³⁴ Overall, it is best to describe truth-seekers’ relationship with the popular streams of occulture as ambivalent and down to subjective appropriation on the part of individual truth seekers. From the perspective of truth-seekers, however, the alternative and subversive character of occult is reclaimed; those areas of occulture that *have* gone mainstream have done so against the designs of the conspirers.

The close relationship between phenomena of truth-seeking and, say, radical environmentalism, stems from this shared culture. In this section I want to draw out some of the cross-overs with other phenomena that could also be construed as existing independently. Together, these comprise the reservoir of ideas from which careers of truth-seeking are forged. At a substantive level, what unites the diverse range of subjects that make up the shared informational matrix? Although I argue in Chapter Seven (looking in detail at False-Flag Counter-Narratives) that the centrality of 9/11 distinguishes the truth movement from other counter-cultural formations, there are important ties to other historical traditions.

4.4.4 Esotericism

There are substantive ties to groups associated with the Western esotericism, for example talks by a member of the Anthroposophy society, and a separate talk on the life of Rudolf Steiner at an open mic night in Birmingham. At St. Anne’s, one speaker said that the collective sense of a “truth movement” or “alternative movement” was comprised of audience members acting as individual repositories of knowledge. He likened them to the historical, bounded-traditions of the Cathars and Gnostics not through a direct, tangible genealogy, but on the basis of their shared concern with knowledge deemed heretical in the context of their respective host societies.

4.5 A “Con-spirituality” Spectrum: Congruence and Conflict

In reality many truth-seekers come to inhabit perhaps not a single tradition but certainly become familiar with a set of traditions, even if these were initially sought after. As Stringer notes, only ‘the Christian model [...] underpins and drives this need to think of religion as systematic’.²³⁵ Moving away from a world religion model, he argues instead towards an apprehension of the

²³⁴ *The Matrix*. Dir. The Wachowski Brothers. 1999. DVD; *V for Vendetta*. Dir. James McTeigue. 2005. DVD.

²³⁵ Stringer, p. 14.

elementary forms that religion takes in people's lives; this has echoes of Redfield's distinction between 'little' and 'great' traditions.

The mixing of conspiracy theory with spirituality was identified by academics Ward and Voas, who label a confluence of two forms of 'holistic thought' – 'a hybrid of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality' – as 'conspirituality'.²³⁶ Throughout my fieldwork I was noting this confluence before becoming aware of their paper; my study firmly supports their thesis. The culture of truth-seeking is saturated in the *lingua franca* of 'self-spirituality' as identified by Paul Heelas.²³⁷ Substantive overlaps include ideas and practices such as past-life regression, meditation, sacred geometry, and crystal healing, which all circulate freely within the truth movement.

The authors will be delighted to know that their distinction was reproduced almost verbatim at the emic level. At the open mic night, the talk about 'Infighting in the Truth Movement' – made to appear paramount given the ongoing debate-cum-argument in the wake of the 'white genocide' talk – explained the internal tensions in terms of a spectrum of approach: the *information/conspiracy* pole on the one hand, and the *spiritual* pole on the other. The confluence of conspiracy theory with holistic spirituality is not only recognised by the movement but features as part of its discourse during attempts to mollify the network's self-destructive tendencies. The more *informational* truth-seekers tend to regard the *spiritual* truth-seekers of "burying their head in the sand" of "love and light", accusing them of a failure of nerve when encountering the darker information. The *spiritual* truth-seekers accuse them in turn of being so fixated upon the unfolding conspiracy that they give no thought nor attempt to a solution; in fact, by disseminating a dark courage they are accused of potentially reproducing the nightmarish reality at a grassroots level. Given the influence of holistic sciences – *especially* towards the 'holistic' pole – the 'power of attraction' can work *both* ways, affecting people negatively as well as positively.

In a later interview we conducted, she said, "You've got two splits in the truth movement – people telling you the positive truths, and people telling you what's being done to us". Ultimately, what was required was believed to be a balance of the two. As one informant eloquently warned me when I first told him about my research into truth-seeking, "It's important to know about the nightmare, but not to live it". The co-presence of conspiracy theory with spirituality should not be understood solely from a functional point of view; their inter-mingling stems more from the sociological nature of the cultic milieu as whole, which, as argued, legitimises and facilitates cross-fertilization of alternative ideas more generally. The infighting produced between the extremes of the informational/spiritual spectrum is a recurrent theme but long-serving members – without exception according to my own findings – seemed to learn how to appropriate a balance

²³⁶ Charlotte Ward & David Voas, 'The Emergence of Conspirituality' in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 26.4 (2011), pp. 103.

²³⁷ Heelas, *New Age*, p. 18.

between the two. The knowledge-claims within the truth movement are generally amenable to a spiritual *or* informational interpretation based upon the sensibilities or preferences of the truth-seeker listening to them; those ideas that are not, are unsuccessful.

This spectrum provides another distinctive characteristic of ideas one finds within the truth movement that are not regarded as “outside” ideas: they have elements of the informational *and* spiritual pole. That is, ideas that are regarded as ‘New Age’ are dismissed unless they are construed as being *useful*; likewise, information that is wholly abstract from individual

Referring back to Campbell’s cultic milieu theory, the differences between the two becomes less clear in light of the ‘instrumental/expressive’ axis applied to the ideas. The rebellion seeks to liberate hearts; in terms of Needham’s dual sovereignty, it shifts spiritual authority, leaving the temporal authority untouched.²³⁸ Burying one’s head in the proverbial sand is arguably an instrumentalist response to the expressivist counter-narratives unearthed by the informational pole. On the other hand, the *practices* of the informational pole, such as submitting Freedom of Information Requests, also constitute instrumentalist manifestations of ideas.

There is a sense of pragmatism about this programme of social change. Although truth-seekers view reality as distorted by conspired illusions and deceptions, they exist within the world and intend to make the most of their lives. In this respect the orientation closely resembles Hanegraaft’s depiction of New Age *sensu lato* phenomena as exhibiting ‘weak this-worldliness’, where ‘the world may well be an illusion, but [...] a *meaningful* illusion, one that should be used and worked with constructively rather than simply escaped from or dispelled’.²³⁹ For example, David Icke theorises extensively about the matrix-like nature of a holographic, virtual reality. He does not reach a state of total solipsism, however, but urges people to hijack this inter-connected holistic reality by vibrating at a “love frequency”. Likewise, although the monetary system is viewed as part of the total apparatus of control, truth-seekers hold that it can still be used profitably for self-fulfilment, once it is reconstituted by a new internal perception.²⁴⁰ The freeman strategies in the courtroom (see Chapter Nine) represent another form of reconstituted *maya*, in this case *using* legalese to re-establish their very legal rights that the illusory system first stripped away.

4.5.1 Conflicting Knowledge in the Same Key: Truth-Seeking as an Ethic of Conviction

Campbell’s ‘cultic milieu’ theory postulates there existing a *single* cultural underground where a society’s deviant ideas coalesce and become inter-connected.²⁴¹ Campbell explains this

²³⁸ Rodney Needham, ‘Dual Sovereignty’, in *Reconnaissances* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

²³⁹ Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 115.

²⁴⁰ Some truth-seekers I met spoke about money in terms of the electric universe and insisted that “currency” is good or bad depending on the energetic signatures of the people involved in a particular transaction.

²⁴¹ Campbell, ‘Cultic Milieu’, p. 256.

togetherness by referring back to Troeltsch's category of mysticism. Taking a different tack, Kaplow and Lööwe disconnect the cultic milieu from its original moorings in mysticism and apply it instead to anti-globalisation demonstrations in Seattle; these authors explain the protest's co-presence of such 'strange bedfellows' as white supremacist and environmentalist groups in terms of a sense of anti-establishment deviance that characterises its constitutive social parts.²⁴² These authors provide an example of the way that alternative ideas, beliefs, and practices appear naturally to cross-fertilise, sometimes leading to conflicts, but other times to cross-party support. I emphasise the position afforded to Troeltsch in Campbell's original account because deviancy alone neither captures nor explains the coherence of a truth movement that so openly discusses the internal conflicts between its spiritual and conspiratorial manifestations.

Truth-seekers are united both by a spirit of opposition, with a sense of brotherliness arising among a band forged from resisting a common foe together, but also to the perception of a divine seed within the individual, the primacy of personal experience over secondary authorities, and an eclectic plurality of paths to experience this inner-divinity. Throughout my fieldwork, I was repeatedly struck by the sense of a certain type of mood that arose during the presentation groups. Times of public disagreement did not dispel but confirmed this impression of an overarching 'religious mood' that impressed itself upon me, embodied by truth-seekers, and latent within discourse.²⁴³ In Max Weber's exploration of the relationship between a religion's (or non-religion) attitude towards salvation, and their behavioural attitudes towards life, the 'religious mood' (*Gesinnungsethik*) is of pivotal importance. We earlier saw how Evans-Pritchard related a group's belief to social structure, and how Troeltsch linked different Christian theologies with different institutional arrangements; Weber invites us to consider the interlink that exists between a people's understanding and their moral sensibilities and behaviours. *Gesinnungsethik* is a difficult word to translate into English directly, but some have used 'ethics of conviction' as a way to express its affective, attitudinal, behavioural, and moral sense.²⁴⁴

Emic descriptions of a wider truth-seeker collective articulate a perception of a common sentiment linking the adherents together. At the open mic event, even though a talk lamenting internal infighting was interrupted by an argument between two attendees about an earlier presentation, I could sense an overarching mood shared among attendees that it was *good* that

²⁴² Jeffrey Kaplan and Helene Lööw, 'Introduction', in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, ed. by Jeffrey Kaplan and Helene Lööw (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2002), pp. 1-11.

²⁴³ Weber, *Sociology*, pp. 194-5.

²⁴⁴ Johan Verstraeten, 'The Tension Between 'Gesinnungsethik' and 'Verantwortungsethik': A Critical Interpretation of the Position of Max Weber in 'Politik als Beruf', *Ethical Perspectives* 2.3 (1995), pp. 180-187 (p. 186 fn. 1); Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society: New Translations on Politics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 30.

such a robust was allowed to take place, especially about so sensitive a topic as racial genes; but at the same time, *the enemy was “out there”*, so to speak. Infighting within the truth movement is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the high levels of individualism that characterise the truth movement. When *everybody* perceives the divine spark to lie within personal consciousness – or when multiple people believe in sovereignty and *act* like sovereigns (see Chapter Nine for this articulation of achieving the ideal vision of selfhood) – the results can be understandably chaotic. Returning to Weber’s sociology, we might think about attitudes towards salvation within the truth movement. Without a godhead, truth-seeking at first appears silent; but by positing a fallen, dystopic world, individuals need saving from the deception of the would-be controllers through special knowledge (gnosis), and, furthermore, they need saving from the many dangers lurking within. While disagreements do occur these amount to mere details within a shared conviction that the world is conspired but alternative knowledge unlocks full human potential; in such instances, to quote Weber, ‘the mere assertion of intellectual propositions falls to the lowest level of faith whenever an ethic is based on a religious mood and is oriented to ultimate ends’.²⁴⁵ The ends refer to the acquisition of gnosis or salvific knowledge, to a state of wakefulness; the lack of a transcendental frame of reference is compensated by ideas of eternity existing within the phenomenal universe found in many of the influential strands of esotericism and spirituality reviewed above.

Although it is difficult to label this prevailing mood, the most accurate designation would be a disposition that is antithetical to indifference or apathy. Truth-seekers are not the only people who perceive high levels of corruption within wider society but they number among the more passionate. Sometimes, this passion bubbles over into anger. Indeed, “to live the nightmare” is to allow one’s mood to be dictated by negativity; to “bury one’s head in the sand”, conversely, is to become apathetic to these same nightmares. The truth-seeker’s ethic of conviction calls for a middle path, harnessing both the wells of passionate anger that spring from the outward-facing conspiracy pole with a concern for holistic self-transformation from the more inner-directed spiritual pole. We can again draw parallels with Troeltsch’s spiritual and mystical religion; Campbell expresses its ‘primary aim’, expressed outwardly in a spirit of individualism, ‘as personal holiness, perfection, or deification, and the consequent concentration upon inwardness and fulfilment of the individual’s spiritual potential’.²⁴⁶ In accordance with their understanding of a conspired world, truth-seeking necessitates looking outwards at the same time as looking inwards. It is precisely this longer-lasting ethic of conviction (as opposed to shorter moods) that has cohered the truth movement despite these conflicts and past failures of individual groups.

²⁴⁵ Weber, *Sociology*, pp. 194-5.

²⁴⁶ Colin Campbell, ‘Clarifying the Cult’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 28.3 (1977), pp. 375-389 (p. 383).

4.6 The Truth Movement as a Trans-Local Alternative Knowledge Network

The “truth movement” refers not only to flows of grassroots truth-seekers but also to a flow of people that co-participate in network of knowledge production. Defining mainstream institutions, including its *media* sphere, as inadequate, truth-seekers produce and consume an ‘alternative’ media in its place. This is a phenomenal construct with indeterminate boundaries, an emergent network of media outlets which are perceived to deviate from the mainstream by articulating a ‘sane’ narrative instead. Rob described a collective of knowledge-producing truth-seekers:

R: He might go on a forum, he might go to a meeting, he might get up off his arse and go to a meeting, actual action; some sit behind their keyboards, turn out a bit [of] shit – a lot do. Some turn out good stuff, some bloggers out there do, and there’s controversial stuff out there that’s maybe not fully researched. I don’t know all what it is. [...]

N: So all these different areas, is it that they’re connecting, that they’re leading [?] –

R: - They start linking up. You get the big hitters like UK Column – a lot of people go on their website – they [then] see the likes of Clive de Carle and the health stuff, and Ian Crane on fracking stuff and political stuff, and obviously, you watched Brian Gerrish on child abuse, “Common Purpose”, [and] social services, and all that sort of stuff. And he reaches a big audience. Now some of these people are predisposed to the likes of David Icke, he’s opened their eyes – too much here and there! [laughs] I don’t know, but he’s done some really good work. And noisy bastards like Alex Jones, who’s done [...] some really good work. I’m not sure about all of it but [I] like most of what I’ve heard. So *that’s* what I see as the Truth Movement.

Although the strong influence of the ‘big names’ comes across, ultimately it is organisers like Rob, and grassroots truth-seekers, who grant them their authority. For example, Thomas Sheridan is a popular speaker across the groups whose focus on psychopaths have become an eminent way of talking about the insane elites. He was an artist and writer prior to encountering the truth movement and became loosely affiliated with it only after a radio-show appearance on *Red Ice Radio*, a popular podcast series within the alternative milieu.²⁴⁷ These public appearances are unpaid; the “appearance fee” at the weekly meeting groups is modest, enough to cover petrol.

4.6.1 Consumers and Producers of Alternative Knowledge-Scapes

Rob’s description includes both consumers and producers of alternative information as being inside the truth movement. The line between the two is unregulated; it is presented as a matter

²⁴⁷ See their website for links to past podcast episodes 2006-2017. *Red Ice*, ‘Red Ice Radio’, <<https://redice.tv/red-ice-radio>> [accessed 31/12/17].

of choice for individuals to communicate and broadcast their private efforts. The impression remains that truth-seekers should do something more than consume resources; even an online forum, or a face-to-face meeting, constitutes preferable level of commitment. By adding their own personal research into the public sphere individuals contribute to the collective efforts of sifting through facts and fictions in the combined quest for comprehension and justice.

This excerpt suggests that truth-seeking – here defined as individuals’ personal research practices – has an essential social dimension on two levels. The first is indirect: the information sources themselves have authors, who have necessarily taken recourse to a selection of other sources with other authors. As a result, to undertake private research is to engage with an emergent research community and to evaluate the information found there; this might well focus more upon the author than on the discourse itself. The second is far more direct: while research might begin in private and solitude it might lead some seekers into *public* research with other people, encountering the truth movement as a physical research community.

“Free-thinking”, then, as practiced by an individual truth-seeker, is an inherently *social* enterprise. In the above excerpt, although attending a physical meeting, like becoming an active producer and/or disseminator of information, is presented as an optional extra, the very consumption of information necessities engaging with this extant network. The suppliers very rarely hide behind pseudonyms but instead attach their faces and names; subsequently, the “big hitters” might mean little to an outsider, but these names are well-known among truth-seekers, key parts of the discursive arena that truth-seekers enter through personal research, and by attending physical meeting-groups. The sense of belonging that the meeting groups offer derives from having shared influences and being able to demonstrate this in conversation.

They constitute ‘non-formative authorities’, like those mentioned by Mathew Wood, in that individuals encounter multiple authorities whose influence is thereby relativized.²⁴⁸ Their influence can sometimes be profound, despite the absence of any face-to-face encounters until an appearance at an event. From my observations, the “big hitters” *do* make a formative impact upon the worldview of would-be truth-seekers. Icke exemplifies the strong bonds that can sometimes be developed between author and readership. To read his vision is to share his vision and his fight with the powers-that-be; the ‘big hitters’ reveal truths that jolt you awake by turning your world upside down. One’s worldview is rendered obsolete as the parts of the world readily in view begin to change. A daily news update from the BBC 6 p.m. news presents a world that is unrecognisable to followers of UK Column.

One way to conceptualise this network of alternative media is suggested by Appadurai’s understanding of the different cultural flows that make up the ‘complex, overlapping,

²⁴⁸ Wood, p. 243.

disjunctive order’ of the ‘new global cultural economy’.²⁴⁹ Characterising processes of globalisation in terms of a pervasive but uneven tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization, these are fought across five ‘perspectival constructs’: ethnoscaples, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes. By mediascapes, Appadurai refers both to the means of producing and disseminating information, and ‘to the images of the world created by these media’. People all around the world inhabit realities, then, that are informed by these ‘large and complex repertoires’ of ‘image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality [...] out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places’.²⁵⁰ The “big hitters” Rob mentions are co-producers of an “alternative” mediascape; their differences are partially obscured by their common point of departure from the allegedly homogenous “mainstream” mediascape. The “big hitters” use similar technologies of production and dissemination, using the Internet (especially YouTube and Facebook to a lesser extent), books, podcasts, and public talks.

The enormous differences between neighbours in a local community stem from the availability of conflicting mediascapes; the similarities across geographically distant truth-seeking groups can be explained by the influence of the “alternative” mediascape, which constitutes an uneasy but interconnected whole. This sense of mood is again part of the continuity between the private and public domains of truth-seeking: key assumptions framed by similar moods denote a shared worldview that focuses on similar spheres of life. For example, if one were to browse the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section of a Nexus magazine, in perfect isolation, then one would be met with many of the same topics of conversation, and with similar conclusions, as encountered at the weekly speaker-groups in Blackpool, Birmingham, and Hull, such as 9/11 discrepancies, faked moon photographs, and mind control.²⁵¹ Uniting these is the ethic of moral conviction, a common disposition of intellectual inquiry about the state of society, and how it negatively impacts its citizenry, while desirous of remedies that might bring about some form of self-empowerment.

²⁴⁹ Arjun Appadurai, ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’ in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 7 (1990), pp. 295-310.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

²⁵¹ ‘Letters to the Editor...’, *Nexus*, 22.2 (2015), pp. 4-5. The examples mentioned above are all from this issue but reflect the general trend that alternative topics are treated similarly, combining seriousness with suspicion in an attempt to discover more about the (conspired) world, and remedial personal strategies. In October 2014 the letters address ‘Sunlight, Vitamin D & Electromagnetic Radiation’, a supportive letter about homeopathy versus ‘mainstream science’s dismissal’, a letter requesting an article on the origin of black magic, the MMR Vaccine-Autism link, a letter expressing scepticism about a grand UFO coverup in light of Wikileaks revelations’ silence on the matter, and, lastly, a reflection on the link between DMT and the pineal gland. ‘Letters to the Editor...’, *Nexus*, 21.6 (2014), pp. 4-5. The ethic of conviction that pervades the emergent truth movement is further reflected in the Editorials, for example: ‘We live in an era where the rulers fight to control what you believe, using technology that would have made Goebbels drool. We live in an era where independent thought is now a radical act in itself.’ Duncan M. Roads, ‘Editorial’, *Nexus* 22.1 (2014), p. 2.

4.7 Concluding Comments: Provisional Definitions and Characteristics

In conclusion, the “truth movement” is a coming-together of alternative ideas from which truth-seekers construct not only an identity as a truth-seeker, but the very sense of a wider collective. In the following chapter, I would look at what it means from the perspective of the individual “to join” the truth movement; what does it mean to “wake up” to a truth-seeker identity. Does a movement organise and promote a set of beliefs and practices, or does a sense of a collective arise from shared patterns of belief and practice? The truth movement is largely an instance of the latter, but, as we have seen, the groups and individuals that comprise the emergent movement undoubtedly influence one another.

Based on informants’ accounts and my own experiences in the field I would argue that the so-called “truth movement” is best understood as a social network whose affiliates undergo private quests aimed at uncovering the true nature of public reality. It lacks formal organisation, leadership, official roster, or any codified body of dogma. Instead it is made up of many individual truth-seekers who differ greatly in terms of specific beliefs and practices. The smallest elements comprising the network are individuals; sometimes these convene regularly and form social groups spanning across physical and virtual worlds. Different segments of the network (i.e. clusters of individuals) become intermittently divided against one another. Groups and projects continually arise and dissolve due to this dynamic mix of internal and external tensions.²⁵² Uniting the affiliates of this uneasy milieu is their shared orientation of seekership whereby individuals continually build worldviews by drawing upon resources derived from a common informational matrix.

These careers of meaning-making interact and impact upon one another in a variety of ways. Despite the high value placed upon subjectivity there are identifiable convergences of beliefs which serves as a mediating framework that orients the meaning-making journeys of individuals. This can be demonstrated by the shared symbols that circulate the network, whether a collective appreciation for sacred geometry signs, or the very language employed to describe common phenomena. In Turner’s terms, the freedom for subjective interpretation as to their precise meaning can be seen by the overall prominence of ‘instrumental’ rather than ‘dominant’ symbols with fixed meanings for all.²⁵³

Let us close our discussion with an excerpt that links together the different emic understandings of the “truth movement” that we have met. Rob had already conceptualised the so-called “movement” in terms of individual, grassroots truth-seekers, before talking at length about the

²⁵² See the False Flag and Flat Earth Chapters for in-depth examples.

²⁵³ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (London: Cornell Paperbacks, 1970), pp. 30-32.

trans-local knowledge network comprised of “big hitters”, and I wanted to clarify that we were still talking about the same physical speaker-group in which we were currently sitting:

N: The ones at the top, or everything there? I mean, just the speakers you mention at the end? Or is *this* [gesturing around the hall] sort of part of the truth [movement] – [interrupted]

R: Yeah, of *course* it is! It’s just dead loose. It just happened that people here there and everywhere just linked up with a few speakers. [...] So part of the truth movement is that there is no fixed centre, it’s formed up of individuals, some here, some there, individuals dotted everywhere. [...] Loads of people develop an interest and go out and seek people; and those people will share it with other people; and some people will react like I did when I first heard it, you just want to hit someone over the head, and say, “what have you done? That’s shit!”, and that’s the resistance to it; but *that*’s the truth movement!

The “truth movement” exists phenomenally as an emergent collective with which multiple individuals identify; but it could also be argued that the “truth movement” is so very ephemeral – with no official roster, leader, dogma, or site(s) – that it resembles a movement in name alone. It is an emergent property within the consciousness of individual truth-seekers arising from the social bonds created in the collective pursuit of truth. At the same time, it constitutes a trans-local forum of truth-seeking, exposing truth-seekers to various channels comprising the cultic milieu; these occultural resources are framed by conspiracy narratives that suggest mainstream culture is conspired. As such, the knowledge circulating the movement is afforded special significance for individual living. Its regular and period physical assemblies continually re-establish the movement as a property of consciousness, enabling truth-seekers to identify as a collective of unlikeminded persons. Based on informants’ accounts alongside my own experiences in the field, I argue towards a resolution of these positions: the truth movement’s vitality is rooted in the very disorganisation that logically precludes it from realising the status of a fully-fledged movement.

Chapter Five: “Waking Up”: The Making(s) of a Truth-seeker

‘The waters breaking in my sense of reality were freeing me from the prison-perceptions of this world of illusion and suddenly I could see what most others could not. When that happens there can be no other scenario than to be ridiculed and condemned and branded as insane when the word they are looking for is ‘different’. [...] I was said to be having a ‘breakdown’ [...] but in truth I was having a *breakthrough*. So many people worldwide are going through the breakthrough process today and I want to give them encouragement and reassurance from my own extreme experience: You are not going crazy. You are going *sane*.’

David Icke.²⁵⁴

“I think when you go through this [awakening experience] you gain that spiritual connection that we had when we were born, but our conditioning, our life’s conditioning, our society takes it away from us from the minute we’re born, it’s stolen away, and our spiritual awakening, I believe, is that reconnection, the realisation, that there’s more to life than we think there is.”

John, Truth-seeker.

5.1 Introduction: “Waking Up” as a Conversion Process

During my interviews, I would ask every respondent the same, deliberately open-ended, question: ‘*How did you get from where you were, to where you are, today?*’ The information I was trying to elicit was a self-narrativization of their truth-seeking journey, from a position of relative unawareness, to one of relative illumination: their subjective experience of “waking up”. Every truth-seeker had a different starting-point, with each journey comprised of a unique series of subjective experiences; but the common destination was a state of illumination. Truth-seekers are people who have “woken up” to the illusory, harmful, and designed nature of mainstream definitions of reality. This emic phrase is significant because I heard it across all my field-sites, referring to something potentially universal among truth-seekers. The phrase itself derives from the film *The Matrix* (which Partridge regards as a staple of contemporary occulture) where, near the beginning, the protagonist, Neo, receives a message on his computer: “Wake up, Neo”.²⁵⁵ This is the beginning of Neo’s realisation that everything he thought he knew about the world was illusory, the first step in the realisation of his destiny to “wake up” the blinkered masses from the prison-like Matrix. The significance of *The Matrix* to the truth movement is reflected in Icke’s work (if not a direct cause), not only in his choice of title in *Children of the Matrix*, but in an

²⁵⁴ Icke, *Perception Deception*, p. 7.

²⁵⁵ Christopher Partridge, ‘Occulture and Everyday Enchantment’, in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. by J. R. Lewis and I. B. Tøllefsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 315-332; *The Matrix*.

introductory section he quotes the scene where Morpheus shatters Neo's worldview by imparting the truth about reality.²⁵⁶ Following Neo's example, to "wake up" means recognising and rejecting society's truths as falsehoods; truth-seekers then re-educate themselves with reference to an alternative knowledge network. As such, "waking up" refers both to a past-day shift in consciousness, and an on-going, universe-maintaining practice. Given these opening remarks, why, and how, does a minority of individuals come to inhabit such a worldview? Furthermore, how do they sustain this alternative worldview against the normalising machinery of the hegemonic mainstream?

5.2 A "Waking Up" Case Study

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, truth-seekers do not simply occupy one world among many of equal weighting: by consciously rejecting the status quo, they inhabit a *deviant* lifeworld. Peter Berger provides us with a sociological framework that best appreciates this subversive nature of a truth-seeker's awakening. In the language adopted by sociologist Peter Berger, to "wake up" is, firstly, to reject the *dominant* 'meaningful order, or nomos, [...] imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals', and, secondly, to occupy a *counter-definition* – an *alternative nomos* – of the same social reality.²⁵⁷ This is sociologically remarkable since it seemingly refers to a fundamental rejection of societally-dominant knowledge and values.

Berger argues that deviant ideas are subject to processes of nihilation (or 'negative legitimation') where 'deviant phenomena [are] [...] given a negative ontological status [...] [:] a not-to-be-taken-seriously cognitive status'.²⁵⁸ Through primary socialisation, the dominant nomos comes to be experienced 'as a body of generally valid truths about reality, any radical deviance from the institutional order appears as a departure from reality. Such deviance may be designated as moral depravity, mental disease, or just plain ignorance'.²⁵⁹ As demonstrated in the Introduction, truth-seekers – labelled pejoratively (if not entirely inaccurately) as "conspiracy theorists" – are no strangers to such ridicule; truth-seekers often "wake up" to an accompaniment of derisive laughter. Thus, although the emic perspective holds that truth-seekers wake up from an un-sane

²⁵⁶ Icke, *Children of the Matrix*, p. xviii. A slightly abridged version of Icke's entire quotation: 'Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain but you feel it. You felt it your entire life. That there's something very wrong with the world. You don't know what it is - but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about? [...] The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. [...] It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth. What truth? That you are a slave Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage. Born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch - a prison for your mind. Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is - you have to see it for yourself...'

²⁵⁷ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a social theory of religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 19. "Nomos" is derived from the classical Greek term, meaning 'law'; Berger retains this etymology with "meaningful order".

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁵⁹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1966; repr. 1991), p. 83.

state, to a sane one, the etic perspective, grounded within the legitimations of the rejected nomos, sees truth-seekers acting *insanely*.

The succinct narrative shared by David, below, introduces the major recurring themes (highlighted in bold):²⁶⁰

N: The question is – and I nicked this off *Alchemy Radio* - I don't know if you've listened to it, it's a podcast – anyway, at the start of every interview he says, 'How did you get from where you were to where you are today?' And that's all he asks. So that's as broad, and as long a time frame, as you –

D: Yeah, I know what you're saying. [Pauses] Erm, I remember, my first memory I think was when I was 2 or 3, basically anyway. **And all my life, I've always had a sense of mysticisms, of something's not quite right**, there's more to this than – [waves hand around]. I ended up asking myself why am I even asking myself these questions, and I thought that maybe instinctively I knew something's not quite right. And as I've gone through life it's only seemed that there *is* something, and certain things like UFO, extra-terrestrial experiences I've had. As I grew up even though I was aware something else was going on, I still tried to pass off certain things as 'oh, maybe it was just a dream'. But time and time again as I got older, as I grew up and got older, I found out more and more [that] life's just too weird. The way it turns out there's always so much more. **But I, as I grew up, I eventually figured out my whole life has been directed in certain ways, even controlled, and maybe that's what the experiences I had when I was really young were about. Kind of planting, erm, certain things in my life for me to make certain decisions at certain times for my life to go in [a] certain way.**

N: Erm, was that put there by – [changing tack] – as in positive things or very negative?

D: At first I thought they were negative, definitely felt it. I had [a] typical religious experience. I had one when I was a kid – I found a thing, a wolf-type of thing, that used to look at me from the bedroom window. I was frozen in bed and my head was turned, [I] couldn't shut my eyes, so something was in control of me, and I couldn't move, and all this thing would do was stare at me for ages; and I remember being scared, but, like, the next day at school – because this went on for a while – I started to think it looks like a monster, but is it going to eat me up? It didn't seem like it. And eventually I thought maybe it's a sign or something, like a message, and typical of messages like that it seemed like, yeah, they are scary at first, but overall, there is something positive out of it. And what positive I took from that is: that wolf, although [it] scared me, kept me aware that

²⁶⁰ My interviewees' accounts of their personal journeys into, or through, the alternative knowledge network, tended to last between one and three hours, and were often permeated with digressions. Subjective reality is far messier than the models constructed according to external, academic criteria.

there really is something else there, something spiritual, something else beyond this world. I suppose it infused and ensured that in me as I grew up.

N: Yeah, having an experience that was, erm, unusual (D: Yeah), I guess out of the ordinary, in a way, but not running scared from it straight away.

D: In the end, yeah. Scared at first, but yeah eventually [not scared], but now it's kind of mystical, spooky, but in a nice way.

N: Yeah, yeah.

D: And I've had so many other things, I've had experiences where I've connected, and, erm, yeah. Eventually, I thought "I'm going to have to look into this, start studying more and more", because I've had a couple of relationships and each time they lost their mothers; each time we split up it was exactly the same, where I was sensing there was something wrong with the nature, or between the nature, of men and women, and I didn't understand what that means. I kind of explained things good [i.e. well] at times [to these other people] [...] but rather than admit that I was right, they would just choose an argument about something else, as I've seen some people do. Basically, I knew something was *really* weird, and so I gained more insight into life itself. And, eventually, I thought that that's it then. *My brother died, committed suicide, but there was more going on. And just the way the world is in general, the twin towers, and all those things, that just don't add up.* And the fact that if you want to get a job, if you're willing to work, you just get the piss taken out of you – you work too much, paid too little, pay too much tax; and I started asking what's that for, this tax? *I just started seeing more and more into these details and started realising it really is one big con, one big trick.* [...] *And yeah, I started studying more and more.* I wanted to set up my own talks like this, but eventually I found out [about] this group Truthjuice, and I thought, well, I don't have to [now], and I've been coming here ever since. And getting involved more in various groups, like I'm a member of the freeman [group], I suppose [The] People's Assembly [Against Austerity], [and] a part of a political group that calls itself Red Labour.²⁶¹

N: Red Labour?

D: Yeah, I'm a member of them. And they're about sticking to the old values of Labour. Basically, yeah, I've just done whatever I can, not just to better myself, and learn what I need to, but to improve life in general as much [and] however I can, [for] as many people

²⁶¹ The freeman group refers to the fortnightly freeman-centric discussion group held nearby, see Chapter Six; The People's Assembly Against Austerity is a British social movement which protested against the (then-Conservative) British Government's austerity policies, with regional groups across the UK; Red Labour is another social movement which 'advocate[s] a clear socialist policy orientation in the Labour Party'. *Red Labour* (2016) <<https://redlabour2016.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 5/6/2017].

as possible, I know that now, from what I've learned these past few years, we're all on the earth, like on our own little mission in a way; but it all connects to something greater, to a greater meaning. I think basically the bottom line is it's all about deep love – learning to understand life in its entirety, good and bad; but learning how to strengthen our spirits, within whatever, so we become, so we achieve our true potential, which is a pure, balanced, happy life. [...] And this life on Earth, it seems like it's designed for lessons – lessons of love, because I think it takes coming through this world even to learn things like who the members of your family are, to learn who your mother is, because you learn who you really love, who your friends are; and I think it's one, incredible journey, that we're all on [...] and at the end of this process, it's leading up to the next evolution. [...] I think with what we're learning now, talking about, it's going to lead us to higher dimensions. If we don't have in this life, then I'm sure in the life to come after, we'll have the life we want, in a balanced way forever. When you think about life, it's not really about necessarily the achievement or success, it's the things that success brings, it's happiness, security, contentment, the possibility to live with the people who you really care about, in a happy way, rather than struggling through life, working. "I'd like to spend time with so-and-so but I can't, because I've just finished work, I'm hungry, and I've got loads of washing to do at home, and I'm back at work in morning." *That's no life. I'm finally seeing that. Individuals have, I suppose, woken up, but I think now the whole human race is waking up, each in their own way, each from their own angle, but in a way that's a good thing because everyone's got things they can bring to the table, so to speak.*

N: What role do groups like this have to play in doing that, do you think?

D: Oh yeah, by communicating and sharing each other's knowledge and experiences, can help us *figure out* the experiences on a deeper level. You know, I've got plenty of experiences I still struggle to explain – I can explain some of them now whereas before when I was a kid I couldn't put my words anywhere. Yeah, that's another thing, communicating – it's not just learning other people's experiences, it's learning about your own, and how to even explain them, and to understand them on a deeper level, as well as what to do, and how to act in order to understand your own experiences, whether through meditation, or just coming and socialising. Like I say there's friends, good friends, looking after each other, the buddy-buddy system.²⁶² It's not necessarily in a selfish way, but when, like, you look after me, I can look after you. There's another saying: if

²⁶² The "buddy-buddy" system is a symbiotic arrangement between persons where they behave like close friends [i.e. "buddies"].

everybody shares, we all have more; do you know what I mean? Really, there's something to that.

The crux of waking up comes through clearly: to “wake up” is (1) to become conscious of the illusory nature of mainstream definitions of reality, *and* (2) to re-define reality differently, in a more meaningful way. The recurrent themes are as follows: a pre-awakened sense that something is wrong with the world; an intellectual phase of studying alternative knowledge; shifts in affective ties with other people; experiences of a mystical or paranormal nature; and a recognition of the unfinished status of the personal quest for truth.

As for how these elements actually work together in transforming an “unsane” member of mainstream society into a “sane” truth-seeker, we find ambiguities even within a single waking up narrative.²⁶³ For instance, let us pursue the question of the active/passive status of the convert. David links his awakening to a lifelong sense that there is something *more* to the world than its surface appearance suggests, thus portraying himself as a truth-seeker at an intuitive level. His mystical experiences, however, suggest an active, external, and transcendent universe, which communicates with him as a passive recipient; but only later does he *actively* interpret these experiences' true meanings. He also recalls non-mystical, this-worldly experiences as happening around him; but these experiences, coupled with the mystical ones, engendered an *active* phase of studying, where he makes sense of his past and present-day experiences, concluding that, at some level, these may have happened *to* him. The role played by *intrinsic* versus *extrinsic* influences thus remains unclear.

5.3 “Waking Up” Motifs

This case study illustrates the way that waking up narratives combine a number of the different ‘conversion motifs’ identified by Lofland and Skonovd.²⁶⁴ No single model can capture the differences within, and across, different religious traditions, since ‘holistic, subjective conversions actually vary in a number of acute qualitatively different ways’.²⁶⁵ The authors instead propose a series of motifs which tend to dominate individual accounts, capturing ‘those aspects of a conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person “doing” or “undergoing” personal transformation – aspects that provide a tone to the event, its pointedness in time, its positive or negative affective content, and the like’.²⁶⁶ Of the six types thus identified

²⁶³ For the tripartite “sane”/“unsane”/“insane” typology of persons, see Chapter Four.

²⁶⁴ John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, ‘Conversion Motifs’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20.4 (1981), pp. 373-385.

²⁶⁵ Lofland and Skonovd, ‘Motifs’, p. 374. Examples of a ‘singular’ model include the processual model proposed by Lofland and Stark; an alternative stage model is proposed by social psychologist Rambo, which, while a ‘process of change over time, generally exhibiting a sequence of processes’, recognises ‘a going back and forth between stages’. Rambo himself likes the motifs approach because they recognise ‘there is a range of types of conversion, and no one type is normative’. Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 16-17. That is not to deny their heuristic usefulness.

²⁶⁶ Lofland and Skonovd, ‘Motifs’, p. 374.

– intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive (see figure below) – the first four characterise the conversion narratives articulated by my own informants.²⁶⁷

**CHART 1
CONVERSION MOTIFS**

		Conversion Motifs					
		1. Intellectual	2. Mystical	3. Experimental	4. Affectional	5. Revivalist	6. Coercive
Major Variations	1. Degree of Social Pressure	low or none	none or little	low	medium	high	high
	2. Temporal Duration	medium	short	long	long	short	long
	3. Level of Affective Arousal	medium	high	low	medium	high	high
	4. Affective Content	illumination	awe, love, fear	curiosity	affection	love (& fear)	fear (& love)
	5. Belief-Participation Sequence	belief-participation	belief-participation	participation-belief	participation-belief	participation-belief	participation-belief

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5.3.1. Revivalist and Coercive

Revivalist conversions, ‘whose central feature consists of profound experiences which occur within the context of an emotionally aroused crowd’, are absent from my findings, partly reflecting this motif’s empirical foundation in Christian movements. Given the stress on an individualistic epistemology, where personal intuition trumps any external authority, this absence is unsurprising in this context. On the level of *universe-maintenance*, however, the public gatherings sometimes give way to emotive presentations where people might find themselves “reawakened”. For example, one presentation on a technological healing device called a “Pain Genie” adopted the tone of a faith healing event, delivering extraordinary, or indeed profound, experiences to a large audience in a charged social setting through live demonstrations. David Icke’s huge events at Wembley Arena could conceivably fit into this category; the crucial difference, within the context of conversion, is that would-be truth-seekers seem always to have begun their private quest prior to these public evenings, a point borne out by the number of informants for whom a David Icke *book* acted as the “first domino” in their worldview-shattering journey.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ I did not meet a single truth-seeker who had woken up during a live performance of any of the Big Hitters discussed in Chapter One.

Coercive conversions are totally absent from the waking up narratives. As with revivalist types, the high degree of social pressure contradicts the individualistic ethos of the emergent truth movement; the coercive type goes further by painting a picture of a wholly passive convert. The sociological nature of the truth movement contradicts any notion of truth-seekers being “brainwashed” within a closed-off community that physically limits contact with non-members, socialising them into a strict hierarchy. The negative impression made by newly awakened truth-seekers on pre-existing relations brings up interesting similarities with the discredited brainwashing thesis, however, primarily because the truth-seeker worldview is socially-deviant. Brainwashing hypotheses represent attempts at “explaining away” different worldviews by pathologizing the people who inhabit them.²⁷⁰

The absence of these two motifs should be unsurprising (based upon the socio-structural makeup discussed in Chapter One) because they portray the convert as a passive agent. If we pay close attention to the subjective, holistic self-narratives offered by actual truth-seekers, we find always a mix of the intellectual, experimental, and affective types; the mystical type also appears frequently, but can involve either *personal* experiences, or *indirect* experiences, drawn upon *vicariously* via other people/sources. The mystical motif is not absent, then, but simply transposed into a key more fitting with the allegedly rationalistic basis of ‘waking up’. I will now move through each of these four trajectories and explore how they are apparent within the narratives of truth-seekers I have spoken to.

5.3.2. Intellectual Trajectories: Interpretive Drift

The intellectual motif is fundamental to *all* waking up narratives. This typically involves a period of “personal research”, where mental efforts lead to an illuminated – or awakened – consciousness. Kimberly recalled her process of illumination as an intellectual awakening.²⁷¹ We are left in little doubt as to her own perception of an inner change over an extended period with variable levels of intensity:

K: This is a good one – it’s a bit freaky, well, it freaked me out. [Until I was] thirty-years-old, I believed in God – you know, the Bible, and all of that business, because I [was] brought up in religious schools, and everything else. And I was, erm – so basically, I’ve done a complete 180 [-degree turnaround], you know, my thinking, and what it was before, because I was presented [with] something that I couldn’t ignore; I just couldn’t ignore it! So, I was involved in this religious organisation, funnily enough called “The Truth”. And there was a bus driver called Nev, and I think it was definitely

²⁷⁰ Thus ‘nihilation’ in Berger’s terminology; for arguments against the brainwashing hypothesis, see Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); and James T. Richardson, ‘A Critique of “Brainwashing” Claims about New Religious Movements’, in *Cults in Context*, ed. by Lorne L. Lawson (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), pp. 217-228

²⁷¹ This was in direct response to the open-ended question, above. Where I transcribe “blah blah blah” I am transcribing her literally.

after 9/11, because when that happened I got like a couple of people, you know, saying weird things to me, and I thought, “Hmmm” [nonplussed, because] I thought it was terrorists – *I still weren't really thinking properly*.²⁷² So [...] Nev the bus-driver started going on about 9/11 and the David Icke book – I think it was *Alice in Wonderland and the Twin Towers*. So up until this point I'd had zero contact with anything alternative, at all, never – just tootling along, la-la-la – that's why I can empathise a lot with people now who don't see it, because I know what it feels like not to see it. [...] *You just don't fucking know, unless something comes along to change that*.²⁷³ So it was a really innocuous situation, with this book, so, I kept it in my head and I thought, “Hmmm, I'll go and get the book.” [I'd] still never heard of David Icke, never heard a fucking thing apart from the usual rumours that he's a loony that said he was the son of god, blah blah blah. But I didn't let that put me off because I thought I do want to know more about what went on in 9/11 and everything else. So I went into Waterstones in Hull and at this point I still didn't know a thing, and I couldn't get the *Alice in Wonderland* book. But the book that *was* on the shelf was – a David Icke book – was *Children of the Matrix*. So I thought, fuck it, I'll get *one* of them, because I'd gone into the bookshop. So I paid for it, took it home, still knowing nothing, and it was weird because when I got back I started reading it, and I think Chapter Three was [about] religion, but Chapters One and Two were basically breaking down what's wrong with the world; who's actually controlling the world, you know, from this viewpoint, but when I read it, it really resonated with me, and I was like, “*Fucking hell!*”. Because even though I didn't know anything, I still had this funny feeling, this thought that I couldn't get rid of, that there wasn't something quite right about everything, but I just used to ignore it and push it to the back of my mind. And so I got to Chapter Three, ‘Religion’, and basically it just deconstructs religion and says, you know, maybe Jesus didn't exist. It basically challenged my worldview right there and then. And I remember to this day I was sat there and I was like that – [looking shocked] – so I stood up, slammed the book shut, and threw it on the floor, and kicked it under the coffee table, and sat back down again. And I was like [in a panicked voice], “*Fucking hell, fucking hell!*” because, like, what I'd read, I couldn't un-read. And because I'm, like, quite intelligent, I could understand what he was getting at. But I slammed it, and shut it, and threw it under the coffee table. And then I think it was [after] a few days I thought, ‘Shit, shit, shit’, you know, it's like a deciding point, what shall I do? Shall I stay where I am and try and forget what I've read, or shall I get the book and read the rest? [laughs] [...] So – I got the book out, and I just read the rest of it, and from that point in time it progressed because I totally lost my faith and that was awful – God dying, you know when you

²⁷² Emphasis added.

²⁷³ Emphasis added.

have a faith and it's your worldview and then "pfft" – gone – so it took me a couple of years, really, to get over that. But from reading that book, really, I didn't stop reading, and then after reading that book, I thought, what else is going on, what else is a lie? So I progressively started looking at it and then one of the first major things I came across was 9/11 – looked at that – realised that was a lie, and then I started looking – and obviously when you start looking you start following your nose, you know, because everything's connected now, I understand, you know, with what's going on. So I started looking at vaccines, and manipulated wars, the education system -

N: Was this all in *Children of the Matrix*?

K: No, this was wider, because I thought I don't just – I read that [first] book and I thought 'fucking hell, shit, I better go check this checks out anywhere else', because I thought, you know, it's a bit far-out, but, when I started checking it from other sources it all started coming together and making sense.

This is a near-perfect example of a dominant intellectual motif. The works of David Icke are a common entry point into alternative knowledge. As one truth-seeker put it, "Icke's basically the kindergarten for the occult"; truth-seekers invariably progress beyond Icke onto other, lesser-known writers, with their own sets of focuses. As new behaviours are taken up regularly, such as reading alternative books, a different orientation to the self, others, and the world, is gradually brought about.

To refine this analogy we might say that Icke is the kindergarten for *adult learners* of the occult. Truth-seekers do not begin with a child-like blank slate, but have already been socialised, to some degree, into the dominant understandings of the self and the world. Waking up can therefore be understood as a process of *re-educating* the self. If education consists of a series of illuminating ideas that are picked up at different points in time, then it constitutes also a long-term process. Without an institutionalised time-frame or any formal pedagogical programme, the business of demarcating its total duration is a difficult one; hence the rather vague designation of a "medium" temporal duration by Lofland and Snovgrad.²⁷⁴ In reality, an intellectual conversion combines quasi-instantaneous encounters (as with Kirsty's purchase of a single book, whose first three chapters dismantled her pre-existing worldview) with a drawn-out phase of ongoing research (her subsequent personal research).

The intellectual mode's 'affective arousal' is similarly variegated depending upon the truth-seeker, and which part of their personal research is in focus. 'Medium' captures only half-heartedly this variable, and furthermore conceals the interesting way that ideas and emotions spring from the same well. Kirsty's awakening epitomises the intellectual mode of conversion but

²⁷⁴ See above.

exhibits such high levels of affective arousal that her intellectual illumination is almost mystical in tone. It only took Kirsty a few chapters, and a few days, to deconstruct her previous worldview; but the reconstruction of an alternative worldview would take much longer, drawing from multiple sources to reveal a freshly inter-connected, meaningful world. This phase has no official title but “personal research” is a common and useful emic designation. It is directed by the individual’s personal interests.²⁷⁵

Another intellectual waking up narrative comes from Jo, who can also pinpoint her awakening to reading a single book. This trick of chance is made fateful in the act of retelling her total subjective biography.²⁷⁶

J: I looked for a singles holiday, where I could meet like-minded people who weren’t on the pull.²⁷⁷ So I found this thing called solitaire holidays, and I’d always fancied India. And when I got there it was the first experience I’d had in freedom for a long time. I almost left my job as a director then, and decided to stick it out a bit longer after that. [...] And when I went to Africa, I didn’t realise – I’d gone in July and thought it would be sunny, but it was rainy season. First week was [spent] by the pool, second week was doing safaris and stuff. When I was sat by the pool there was nothing to do, so I went into this bookshop and found a book on hypnotherapy; it was about past-lives. So that triggered a curiosity in me: can hypnosis get your consciousness to go to a past life; is it real, is it true, can you be hypnotised, etc. So when I came back I booked myself on a hypnotherapy course. So I did that while I was still sales director; so I went on this hypnotherapy course. I started to step-down career-wise because I lost my – I chose to step away from my board position and went to just a normal director, still well-paid, but I was doing my hypnotherapy alongside it, because I wasn’t quite brave enough to get into the real world, if you like, and leave it. [...] I think with hypnosis, because you’re looking at consciousness, it started to awaken me to what *is* consciousness, what is spirituality. When you say you’re a hypnotherapist people think you’re a spiritualist instantly, and I say it’s not the same thing, yeah, because it’s more therapeutic. But there is a link, because you can’t start delving down into consciousness without understanding what the soul and spirit is, there’s an energy source, you’re talking energy, the labels really that we put on energy. The way I see it now is that we’re an energy source beamed into a biological computer, that has its own levels of intelligence, a bit like the programmes that are

²⁷⁵ This recalls my central argument, namely that waking-up involves both an apprehension of the illusory nature of the world, alongside fresh attempts at rediscovering, or re-searching, the hidden truth; it retains the dominant sense that a praxis of truth-seeking is principally an intellectual pursuit, as a sort of an enlightened, albeit technically rogue, academic inquiry; and, finally, ‘personal research’ refers to a period of activity (rather than any instantaneous and/or passive event).

²⁷⁶ In response to the opening question: ‘Where did you get from where you *were*, to where you *are* today?’. Take note of the interpretive drift process, which will be addressed shortly, whereby Jo integrates different lessons (or experiences) from her personal research to form a sophisticated plausibility structure.

²⁷⁷ “On the pull” is slang for looking for a partner and/or sexual liaison.

running, but our energy is the centre of us which I now believe is the soul core which is attached to the DNA like a hologram. So the starting point was when you look at consciousness and past-lives, and you realise that energy never dies, it just transfers, and it just started to open my mind up to quantum physics. You start to understand then energy, how it works, and then you start looking at how atoms work; somebody pointed out to me a book called *The Field* by Lynn McTaggart. And basically she interviewed quantum physicist[s], and wrote this book called *The Field* which is about a zero-point field, so effectively this space that is between us isn't just space; it's full of energy. It's just how everything vibrates and resonates, and whatever resonance we're physically at, determines what we experience. It's a bit like a radio signal – you *tune into* where[ever] you're resonating. So, everything that we experience pretty much in *this* reality right now, we're resonating at a lower vibration, so when you say lower vibrations it's things like fear, anger, jealousy, powerlessness, all those kinds of things.

At this point, Jo might have become a hypnotherapist uninterested in ideas about the *Illuminati*, but she watched conspiracy documentary *The Obama Deception*, and found her new insights into energetic connectivity strangely applicable.²⁷⁸

J: If we are in a state of fear we don't have full control over our abilities. Going back to *The Field*, this was a “penny drop” moment for me, because there's a chapter where Lynn McTaggart describes how they had these people in a concealed room where the energy was all sealed off – I can't remember the type of energy – and they had psychic people outside the room attempting to change things which could be measured: heart-rate, temperature, blood pressure. So the law of physics as we understand it now said that we should not be able to interfere because it was all sealed off; they could interfere, they could affect blood pressure and temperature, but what was really interesting was that those in a state of fear were easier to manipulate than those in a state of love. So, go back to 9/11 now – so I'm learning this stuff, didn't know anything about 9/11 being an inside job or anything, and I saw this one programme, and it's probably only three years I've been [pause] aware of this; I started to become aware and conscious about spirituality, but I wasn't aware of the “Illuminati” and all the stuff like 9/11 – I saw this programme called the Obama Deception, and it was talking about the Bilderberg group, and they were saying how 9/11 was used to get everyone into a state of fear so they were accepting of everything. Having just read *The Field* and understanding the concept of humanity in fear, I started to make the link; because I'm quite strategic in my thinking, that's probably why I probably moved up the chain quite quickly, I think strategically, I think about the

²⁷⁸ *The Obama Deception*. Dir. Alex Jones. 2009. DVD.

bigger picture, I can step outside and join up all the dots and think of the strategy. So, I got it quite quickly. So my learning curve has been a really fast track for all this Illuminati stuff, all this conspiracy, so I then got this insatiable appetite to start to investigate. *I didn't want to believe it; I was like everybody else: I had cognitive dissonance.* I didn't want to believe that a government that was, you know, *we* in Britain were as brain-washed as the Americans about Obama, and the American people, because we see all the movies, we've got this bond with them, we stick together, and we were almost caught up in this bullshit patriotism.

Eventually after three years of her quest, she is now able to explain her worldview cogently:

Because there's this *battle* going on for consciousness, a battle for energy, to keep the energy low so the illuminated ones, as they call themselves, got this knowledge, they don't want us to have access to this knowledge, because in our DNA, apparently, the knowledge is already there. We have the history of the universe within our DNA. And as we go to a place of compassion, love, joy, happiness, help others, live a selfless life, we actually activate the knowledge we already have inside of us; we don't need any bible, or any religious text, or any library; apparently we've got access to it because our collective's got the knowledge. So as we start to awaken we start to tune into past life history, our soul code, our memories in our DNA. So if you think about this, imagine this is true and the human race starts to connect with who they really are, these energetic god-creators that are made in god's image, the people who have been manipulating and controlling us lose their power overnight. It literally will be that fast, yeah, and they know it. So they have used their knowledge about energy, their knowledge about sacred geometry, their knowledge about numerology – all this five years ago [and] I would have thought, 'astrology: rubbish; numerology, sacred geometry: what's that? I don't like maths' – *that* would have been my answer to it all! But when you actually start to look at all these highly intelligent scientists linking it to Tesla's technology, or linking it to Einstein's stuff, and when you actually start looking at this code in nature, this Fibonacci sequence, it's in everything, it's in absolutely everything. And the power – it's like lunacy, linked to the moon, a full moon. They do their ritualistic stuff, or do events, or launch businesses at certain dates, at certain times, at certain places, because they understand the energy that's held in those places, at those ley-lines, at those centres. The ritual stuff – there's so much symbolism around the planet that we've just accepted. The queen's face is on money; it's called currency because it's an energy exchange. We've just given it value, it's a piece of paper, but currency is actually the exchange, and they've very cleverly put their symbolism on it, and we've just accepted it. You go into a town hall and there's all these shields, and numbers, and shapes. And all these public building are built on these certain places. And because we haven't had this knowledge we haven't

paid it any credence whatsoever, but they've used it, like the pentagon, it's a sacred shape, there's just so much!

The quest has culminated in an explanatory scheme that incorporates a wide range of significata from the externalised world. In Berger's terms, she has internalised a highly-advanced plausibility structure. The appeal is to intellectual credibility, confirmed by direct experience. Nor is this dry, abstract knowledge, but, rather, it is salvific; to "wake up" is portrayed here not only in intellectual terms, but in holistic terms that relate transformations in body, mind, and spirit, to an emergent sense of destiny.²⁷⁹ Substantive issues aside, "waking up" is here portrayed in primarily intellectual terms, as a long-term cumulative process facilitated through a regime of mental and bodily practices – reading books, articles, listening to speakers, going on courses, practicing hypnotherapy, and, later, conducting past-life regression workshops. Overall, these all constitute a programme of personal research.

Although the intellectual motif arguably dominates these self-narratives, this dimension is inextricably interconnected to the affective, and mystical, motifs. The resources listed above are all social, or partly-social, in their nature, connecting Jo to an interconnected body of alternative knowledges. As I argued in the previous chapter, intellectual engagement with David Icke leads to a personal identification with the author's own struggles against mainstream definitions of reality; processes of 'charismatisation', inherently about forming personal, affective ties with influential others, can be identified in both accounts. Kirsty's interview further reveals the world-shattering impact of the intellectual, and the importance of the democratisation of knowledge. At a phenomenological level, there are similarities with 'mystical' types of experience as discussed by William James, especially in their noetic, worldview-shattering character; the chief difference between these two motifs is the active/passive status of the experiential subject.²⁸⁰ If we accept that *both* motifs apply, in part, to different dimensions of the *same* subjective awakening, then we can resolve this apparent contradiction by saying that *active* intellectual engagement ushers in other, passivistic side-effects.

Interpretive Drift

As I have argued elsewhere, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann's study of how 'more or less normal' people come to adopt, as 'magicians', a belief in magical forces and the efficacy of personal rites, is pertinent to understanding how people occupy a societally-deviant worldview animated by conspiracies and occult forces.²⁸¹ She argues that a shift in someone's beliefs is less orderly, rational, or sudden, than is generally assumed. Far from any 'curious leap' from one

²⁷⁹ Modes of alternative knowledge *embodiment* – in the material universe, and through bodily practices – are discussed further in Chapter Three.

²⁸⁰ See the discussion on the mystical motif, below.

²⁸¹ See Toseland, 'Conspiracism', pp. 19-21; T. M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 307-323.

worldview to a different one, her notion of ‘interpretive drift’ recognises that beliefs change gradually over time, depending on how individuals interact with the world around them.

The real issue is not that magicians become comfortable practicing an irrational activity, but that when someone becomes a specialist, he finds his practice progressively more persuasive through the very process of interpreting and making sense of his involvement; this changing understanding may become progressively more opaque to outsiders.²⁸²

To make sense of these types of personal transformations that occur over time, involving a period of personal study, and where the *finished product* appears to be at total odds with the starting point, her notion of interpretive drift is presented within a chapter subtitled ‘the slow shift towards belief’. Indeed, she identifies ‘no singly persuasive incident’, no catalyst that ‘pivots this shift into another sort of normalcy’; ‘rather: the once-non-magician begins to do what magicians do, and begins to find magical ideas persuasive because he begins to notice and respond to events in different ways’.²⁸³ The personal transformation that follows occurs across three interlocked levels: first, ‘systemic changes in the very structure of interpretation’, as the new magician acquires fresh knowledge about the world, she meets with new, ‘particular assumptions about the constitution of her world’. This dimension of change proceeds systematically insofar as ‘the patterns he sees in events have progressively more resonance with the increasing breadth of intellectual knowledge – and at the same time the richness of these categories allows more subtle discrimination’. Less systematic are the ‘experiential changes’, brought about by adopted practices such as magical rituals; these ‘make her feel quite unlike her normal self’, and must be ‘interpreted and rationalised’. These ‘rationalisations’ effectively coalesce to form ‘some kind of intellectual account, suitable to their socio-intellectual context, which allows [the magician] self-consciously to assert and argue for the ideas they identify with the practice’. Stressing the messy interdependency of these levels of interpretive drift, she writes, ‘the experiences give the magical ideas content: the magical ideas make sense of the experience’.

Interpretive drift applies to numerous practices prevalent within the truth movement. Truth-seekers become self-conscious of a new identity when they apply areas of alternative knowledge. For instance, sacred geometry is advocated as a practice; warnings about fluoridated water do not simply repeat scientific papers but assume the form of practical advice. The very act of researching alternative knowledge, whether online or offline, provokes an emotional reaction. Engaging in ‘personal research’ can be compared with practising ‘magical rituals’; ‘alternative knowledge’ or ‘counter-narratives’ (or “conspiracy theories”) serve as explanatory devices that can make sense of the experiential fruits of this research; the stomach-churning, frightening, exhilarating – in short, *emotive* – revelations that are encountered, first-hand, in this cognitive

²⁸² Luhrmann, *Witch's*, pp. 7-8

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 311, 312.

endeavour, are therein explained and justified. Truth-seekers often report a sense of exhilaration as they uncover hidden truths, with an insatiable appetite for more. To paraphrase Luhmann: personal research unearths fresh horizons of experience; alternative knowledge makes sense of this experience.

5.3.3. Affectional Motif: Online and Offline

The next section will look at the change in truth-seekers' interpersonal bonds, and how this pertains to the "waking up" process. The affectional motif holds 'that personal attachments or strong liking for practicing believers is central to the conversion process'.²⁸⁴ In terms of the secondary literature, this motif engages with 'social influence theory', a sociological perspective that explores the role played by social networks.²⁸⁵ Lofland and Stark's early processual model stresses the important role played by affective ties. In their three final stages, they first posit the establishment of (positive) *intra*-group affectional ties; second, conversion requires the neutralisation of any (negative) *extra*-group ties that might dissuade the potential convert from joining the group.²⁸⁶ Third, 'intensive interaction' within this transformed matrix of social relations is the final stage, necessary for a (mere) *verbal* convert to become a fully-committed *total* convert.²⁸⁷ In 1980, Snow *et al.* revisited and reaffirmed this conversion hypothesis, concluding that pre-existing or emergent links to a movement's members, alongside 'the absence of countervailing networks', 'are of equal, and perhaps greater, importance than dispositional susceptibilities'.²⁸⁸

Beyond the restricted field of conversion studies, of course, the role played by social networks – and the special role played by significant others – in influencing someone's belief-system, has a long history. To pick just one, well-known example, we have Durkheim's notion of *homo duplex*, ever-informing the sociological and anthropological perspectives.²⁸⁹ Keeping with the theoretical basis of this study, Peter Berger's sociology of knowledge is rooted in the idea that the company we keep influences how we perceive the world around us. For Berger, the sophisticated legitimations constructed by the experts and custodians of symbolic universes pale in significance against the role by everyday conversation. Understanding "conversion" as a mode of *secondary socialisation* that replaces the *nomos* internalised during *primary socialisation*, Berger prefers the term 'alteration', which 'involves a reorganization of the conversational apparatus. The partners in significant conversation change. And in conversation with the new significant others subjective

²⁸⁴ Lofland and Skonovd, 'Motifs', p. 380.

²⁸⁵ William Sims Bainbridge, 'The Sociology of Conversion', pp. 182-184; Robbins, *Cults, Coverts & Charisma*, pp. 85-88.

²⁸⁶ Lofland and Stark, 'World-Saver', pp. 172-174.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ David Snow, Louis A. Zurcher, Jr., Sheldon Edland-Olson, 'Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment', *American Sociological Review*, 45 (1980), p.798.

²⁸⁹ Emile Durkheim, 'The Dualism of Human Nature' in ed. by Kurt H. Wolff, *Essay on Sociology and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 325-340.

reality is transformed'.²⁹⁰ This does not detract from the intellectual nature of “waking up” at the subjective level, but rather it paints a more holistic model combining these two motifs: ‘successful alteration has to include both social and conceptual conditions, the social, of course, serving as the matrix of the conceptual’.²⁹¹

Berger is careful to note that the chief role played by affective ties relates to universe-maintenance. He allows for “Damascus-style” conversion experiences that ‘may antedate affiliation with the community’.²⁹² Further, the chief threats to someone’s *nomos* go beyond conversational exposure to disorienting, alternative *nomoi*; as we shall see below, *anomie*, ‘that radical separation from the social world [...] [where] in extreme cases, he loses his sense of reality and identity’, can also result from experiences ‘more narrowly biographical, such as the loss of significant others by death, divorce, or physical separation’.²⁹³ The factors contributing to a truth-seeker’s re-appropriation of *nomos* – or, the “causes” of some initial experience that first stimulate the wider process of “waking up” – therefore exceed the purely affectional;

To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality.²⁹⁴

There is much empirical evidence from my fieldwork that confirms Berger’s perspective concerning universe-maintenance. In Kirsty’s self-narrative, she later reflects on the wider impact of her initial intellectual awakening experience:

K: But it is really lonely, you know, when you’re doing this sort of stuff; because now, even the year we’re in now, where we are now, I think that I’d be onto a loser if I went out and tried to speak to the neighbours about, you know, 9/11 being an inside job, and conspiracy theories, and politics. I think people are not stupid, they just need to be engaged on a level that’s not going to be scary, because it’s really fucking scary, you know, if you believed everything about how the world’s controlled, contrived, and manipulated, and has been for eons. It’s hard to take it.

N: Were there bits where you were reading it yourself and it got hard to take in?

K: Oh God yeah, my head was a mess. I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t eat, all my family thought I was crazy. My dad disowned me, my sister disowned me, they still don’t speak to me now, so that’s another side-effect of being alternative.

²⁹⁰ Berger, *Social Construction*, p. 178.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, pp. 21-22.

²⁹⁴ Berger, *Social Construction*, pp. 177-178.

N: And is that a result of –

K: Yeah, a direct result. Because my Dad said ‘why can’t you just be normal, you can’t believe everything you hear on the internet, and blah-de-blah’, and I’m like, ‘Dad, you know, I’ve got actual evidence for this, you know, can prove stuff like wall street financing second world war on both sides, things like that, and then we got to the point where we’d be having this conversation and I’d say, look, we’re not really getting anywhere, you show me what you’ve got, and I’ll show you what I’ve got, and we’ll come back and have a conversation, but it would never really happen, because he would be like, well I’m not reading any of that rubbish.

We have here a clear illustration of the neutralisation of extra-cult affiliations, with both significant family members, and, again by virtue of how alternative knowledge is perceived negatively, conversations with neighbours. Interestingly, according to Kirsty’s self-narrative her family actively disowned *her* rather than the reverse. Far from encouraging her to return to her former, socially-acceptable worldview, such hostility propels individuals further along the “waking up” process. Ironically, attempts at dissuasion thus achieve an isolating effect, one previously associated with strategies of ‘coercive persuasion’, or in the “brainwashing” strategies that some attribute to new religious movements they might regard as “cults”.²⁹⁵ Likewise, her father’s demands for her to become “normal” appeal to criteria of reason and respectability that Kirsty has now abandoned, isolating her further in a Kierkegaardian mismatch of misunderstandings.

The shifts in intra-, and then extra-, group ties seem here to appear in reverse order. Personal research has typically a private beginning, absent of *physical* affective ties. Sharing this outlook with significant others – mandated by the salvific nature of the revelatory knowledge – frequently results in hostility. The development of *intra*-truth movement ties typically happens later, often through a serendipitous encounter with the physical meeting-group. I asked Oz, a regular attendee at Birmingham Truthjuice, how he first came to attend the group:

O: It was a flyer, that I must have picked up in Mosely somewhere, and it said on it “Truthjuice”. [I thought,] “Ah, *Truthjuice*, eh? I’ll go over there and see what they know about truth,” dun-de-dun-dun-dun, and I get there and I go, “Oh, alright, it looks like they *do* know truth, they are awake”, it’s alright, do you know what I mean?

This was the first time he had met like-minded people in the physical world, as opposed to online. Asked what that felt like, he replied: “That was OK, because now I was like: at least I know that there are other people who actually see and think like I do.” He contrasted this with his experiences as a builder at his building site, where he found it impossible to bring up subjects like

²⁹⁵ Ronald Enroth, ‘The Seduction Syndrome’, in *Cults in Context*, ed. by Lorne Dawson (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), p. 210.

9/11 despite his impulse to do so. Even though “when you’re awake you can protect yourself, and inform others,” the still-asleep masses remain resolutely uninterested or dismissive. Consequently, the dissemination of alternative knowledge is primarily an intra-group practice.

With Simone, attending Birmingham’s Truthjuice brought with it a new circle of friends. Previously, she had a “few friends” but the people she met at Truthjuice “totally understood” her and became her “closest friends”. Feeling “more at home there”, she thought, “yeah, it’s definitely my crowd of people”. It is not simply a matter of dispensing with one set of friends and replacing them but discovering people with whom a qualitatively-different sort of friendship becomes possible. Alongside the same *ideas* being respectively ‘hot’ or ‘cold’, in the sense of being worthwhile to discuss, within her new circle of friends, *values* are also shared.²⁹⁶ Anthropologist Douglas Davies extrapolates the relationship between ‘ideas’, ‘emotions’, ‘values’, ‘beliefs’, and ‘identity’.²⁹⁷ Ideas that are charged with emotion become values; values that contribute to a person’s identity are like beliefs. Where beliefs, values, and identity are oriented towards notions of ‘destiny’, these are what we commonly understand as being *religious*.²⁹⁸ The bonds forged with like-minded truth-seekers exist across all levels; differences in opinion on particular subjects in terms of their constitutive ideas are balanced by a common set of emotional responses and shared values; in the eyes of the world, or the truth movement, truth-seekers share in a common identity, whether anomic or liberated respectively. The strength behind truth-seeker relationships lies in ongoing, mutual reaffirmations of this identity, legitimising the shared, alternative nomos; this is contrasted with the strenuous hostility that characterises extra-movement relations. Instead of having to explain or defend themselves, truth-seekers can finally discuss the world with people who already ‘understand’ their point of view using a ‘common language’.²⁹⁹ As Berger writes, ‘insipient counter-definitions of reality and identity are present as soon as any such individuals congregate in socially durable groups. [...] A counter-reality may now begin to be objectivated in the marginal group of the unsuccessfully socialised’.³⁰⁰

In a group conversation, James, felt “hurt” that his friends thought him to be “mad”, when he starts talking about all this “truth stuff”. As a result, he felt alienated from the “non-awake”, defined as “those stuck in the work-and-TV loop”. Another truth-seeker reassured James not to “feel bad” about the opinions of such people since life is a “personal journey”. I myself experienced a sense of estrangement on a personal level during the course of my fieldwork, when

²⁹⁶ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), pp. 199-200.

²⁹⁷ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017 [1997]), p. 6.

²⁹⁸ In this sense, the identities, values, and beliefs that are fostered by truth-seekers can be understood as being having a religious function regardless of particular attitudes towards some supernatural divinity. The ‘destiny’ in this context refers to the clear sense of purpose that arises from the autobiographical excerpts throughout the thesis.

²⁹⁹ Berger, *Construction*, p. 173.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

I would post links to items of alternative knowledge on my personal Facebook account. Public comments, alongside private words, by acquaintances unfamiliar with my research topic expressed concern, bafflement, or ridicule. I subsequently learnt to appreciate spending time with truth-seekers with whom I could discuss theories (for example) without fear of rebuke.³⁰¹ When truth-seekers assemble in physical groups, shared experiences of estrangement from the un-awakened fosters a compensatory sense of intra-group togetherness.

The unsuccessfully socialised socialise one another into a new reality filled with new significata. For example, at truth-seeker gatherings conversation often turns to the weather – not (only) in the meteorologically-inclined spirit of Englishness but borne from suspicions about the true causes of the clouds, namely so-called “chem-trails” left in the wake of aircraft. I felt these conversations were initially remarkable, but they soon became a staple of conversation. Over time, on a blue-skied day, I noticed these jet-trails automatically; as a participant observer, I had become socialised into an altered physical universe, my senses attuned to phenomena that had previously been “hidden in plain sight”. Truth-seekers tune one another into patterns of perception, re-objectifying the phenomenal world.

Online

The affective dimension of truth-seeking pertains to the online world as well as the private world. In fact, the virtual social networks provide an important gateway into the physical groups, since the latter are advertised, or recommended, online. In my fieldwork, for example, I discovered the three physical meeting-groups online; while attending these, I would hear about other offline opportunities such as workshops and conferences. Mary’s self-narrative problematises the idea that online personal research is a purely intellectual affair

M: After I got the chronic fatigue [...] I was stuck at home, and bored, and I found Rich Planet, and it was like he’s talking about all this stuff, and then I got on Facebook, and found a few people on Facebook, and then I really got into everything big-style then because now it’s like there are lots of people who think this way! I’m not the odd one out any more, except in my social group, where I’m still the odd one out – but I think I’m no longer alone, in my oddities.

N: So it was the internet that brought you into contact with a lot of like-minded individuals?

³⁰¹ For example, when I mentioned homeopathy to most “normal” people it was usually dismissed instantaneously (and sneeringly) as quackery; I would find myself defending its practitioners as sane individuals; this would, in turn, often result in what felt like ridicule put in my direction, and exasperation on my part for a perceived close-mindedness, or at least unwillingness to discuss anything except a reductionist dismissal. When the same subject would surface among truth-seekers this would provoke a refreshingly open-ended discussion.

M: Yeah. Oh yeah. I wouldn't know half of them – it's Facebook really that's done most of it, you get to know one person, then you've got *their* "friend list", and someone's saying, "yeah, I think that as well."

Social media has an inherent *social* dimension.³⁰² Lisa's continuing use of Facebook to build up a network of like-minded acquaintances is a common use of a tool that many distrust simultaneously. We might say that their world-rejection is tempered by strategic instances of accommodation, exemplified by the Internet.³⁰³

L: I don't know what people have told you about Facebook, love it or hate it – some people just say it's controlled, it's monitored (which it is) and they just dismiss it completely, won't even go anywhere near it. The way I look at it is [...] I've got 7,000 friends over two accounts on Facebook, around the world.

N: Are these people you know through your radio shows?

L: No, no, no, it's just like-minded people that – you go on and you see they've liked people you've liked, who've got the same ideas, and you like the same [kind] of thing, who kind of like have realised something's not quite right; it's like a chain reaction of people who *get* something's not right, so you sort of head towards them first, as opposed to people who are just going to post pictures of cakes all day, or the latest dress or whatever, you know. So I can't stand any of that, but these people post good stuff, and there's some amazing people there, on different levels who know so much stuff, and I just say, use *their* tools, [i.e.] whoever is controlling Facebook; we use it, and we connect with other people and I believe [here] in energy again, and I think even if it's non-direct energy [with] people you don't meet, I think there's a big thing about energy, or even just casting a seed towards someone and that gets passed to someone else [...] it's bringing people together.

Stockholm Syndrome

In terms of the interpretive drift towards wakefulness, one important rationalisation that makes sense of shifts in affective ties is the "Stockholm Syndrome". This well-known experiment in social psychology suggests that captives can develop strong, positive attachments to their captor, as a survival strategy. Believing human society and its citizenry to be in a long-term state of near-total captivity, this theory transposes the hostility shown by un-awakened others into further evidence for the super-conspiracy, while simultaneously pathologizing anyone who supports a return to the status quo. This establishes a moralistic discontinuity between the different classes of persons; although the un-awakened are portrayed as quasi-delusional, they are the innocent,

³⁰² See Daniel Miller, *Tales from Facebook* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), pp. 164-204.

³⁰³ Similarities can be drawn with religious fundamentalisms that ostensibly reject modernity, but nevertheless utilise its technological fruits to disseminate this very message.

unsane victims of the *insane* oppressors. The Stockholm Syndrome is attractive because it has long been popularised among a wide public, and its conclusions are straightforward enough to understand. Furthermore, it is not the stuff of arcane esoterica, but a ready-to-hand scientific experiment which utilises the authority of the scientific method to explain, and to assuage, the social implications of adopting an alternative worldview.³⁰⁴

Thinking back to the intellectualist motif, Stockholm Syndrome also addresses the personal feelings of bewilderment, or even loss, that accompany a shift in nation-state allegiances; the emotional reaction to having a sense of ‘patriotism’ stripped of its plausibility can be compared, phenomenologically, to falling out of love with a dear but unfaithful spouse.³⁰⁵ Finally, it helps some truth-seekers to rationalise the apparent discontinuity between their pre-awakened and awakened identity; rather than inauthentic, their former self was merely yet another innocent victim of the powerful forces in play.

Summary

In conclusion, the affectional dimension is more important than much emic discourse suggests. Epistemological individualism might be celebrated both publicly and privately, but this downplays the paramount role played by the social network in nurturing, validating, and, chiefly, *maintaining* the truth-seeker worldview and identity. Furthermore, the multifaceted role played by affective ties applies to *all* truth-seekers, since *all* truth-seekers engage in personal research practices; both of these combine in interpretive drift, bringing about a new experiential reality that is legitimated by like-minded, “anomic” compatriots.

5.3.4. The Mystical Motif: Experiencing the Anomalous

As we have seen in the preceding self-narrative excerpts, personal experience is paramount. Besides intellectual and affective types of experience we can also bring in the category of “mystical” experiences, labelled as such by some informants. Lofland and Skonovd follow largely in William James’s understanding of ‘mystical’ experiences.³⁰⁶ James depicts the experiential subject as passive, ‘as if he were grasped and help by a superior power’; the states of consciousness produced are ineffable, ‘more like states of feelings than states of intellect’; they are also ‘noetic’, i.e. ‘states of knowledge’ that produce ‘illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance’; and, although they are ‘transient’, or impermanent, states of consciousness, ‘as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime’.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ This points to the *partial* rejection of the nomos internalised during primary socialisation; this crucial nuance is explored further in the FET Chapter.

³⁰⁵ A good example of this would be “false-flag” counter-narratives told about one’s own country. During fieldwork, I found that counter-narratives about Britain’s 7/7 attacks caused a far higher emotional reaction than 9/11, since it forced me to think about my *own* elected government’s possible involvement in mass public deception.

³⁰⁶ Lofland and Snokovd, *Motifs*, pp. 377-378.

³⁰⁷ James, *Varieties*, pp. 367-368.

Two crucial points emerge from focussing on the mystical motif. First, *anomalous experiences often precede contact with either the ideas or personnel connected with alternative knowledge*. Sometimes these seem relatively undramatic; conversely, as with Paul, below, they represent a total break with what is supposedly normal experience. Second, *the later re-interpretation of these same anomalous experiences establishes the plausibility of a universe populated by hidden forces at work in the individual's past- and present-day life*. Anomalous experiences also ascribe an individual's subjective identity with significance.³⁰⁸ In this way, "mystical" experiences play a part in weakening the grip of the dominant nomos, and, later, in maintaining this alternative universe.

Precedential Experiences

Substantively, the anomalous experiences *preceding* "waking up" were unique to each individual; on the other hand, there are two recurring themes. First, we have experiences of spirit/demon possessions, leading to an exorcism. Second, I heard multiple references to UFO (unidentified flying object) sightings. While the latter supports David Robertson's argument that UFOs have become the dominant discursive symbol within New Age/alternative spiritualities, the recurrence of the former problematises this notion. I would suggest that an increase in UFO-oriented experiences reflect processes of secondary socialisation into UFO-oriented alternative knowledge groups. Let us begin with the anomalous experiences of Gary, a retired systems manager. The two anomalous experiences mentioned below develop naturally from one another:

G: After I'd had this early possession episode, when I was 21, and I was working for telephones at the time, I went to a certain house off Prince's Avenue in Hull, and it was number 13, and it was on my mind at the time this experience I had, and I went to put a telephone into someone's house, and I'm running the cable, and setting up the telephone, and test it, and I noticed it he had all books round this big room, book-cases all around with shelves stacked with books, mainly about the moon, phases of the moon, sort of thing, and I thought, do I approach him with a question that I've been nearly possessed. [...] [Eventually] I said, "Ah, well, are you a witch then?" And he said, "Yes." I told him about my experience, he said, yeah, you were very lucky, you were *nearly* possessed, you must have had some energy, or something, protecting me, which I thought was interesting, because of how I felt about the whole situation. Anyhow I told him about it,

³⁰⁸ Instead of referring to *mystical* experiences, I prefer "*anomalous*" experiences, as in Brown's excellent study of conversion to Spiritualism, as a more inclusive category that can incorporate 'mystical' and 'paranormal' experiences alike. See Brown, Thomas Kingsley, 'Mystical Experiences, American Culture, and Conversion to Christian Spiritualism', in ed. by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier, *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 133-145. This term works especially well with the continued use of Berger's terminology (see above); he would further include *any* experience that threatens nomos, extending well beyond the mystical; he takes death as the 'marginal situation *par excellence* for the individual', Berger, *Social Construction*, p. 119.

he told me I was very lucky, because a lot of people do get possessed, more than you think, and most religions have exorcist people who can hopefully get rid of the possession, and it's very easy to get possessed because I can see how it works, you're giving up your soul and somebody's taking over, and that's the last thing you want, so you have to be very careful, so you mustn't just dabble in it. Because my experience came about from the Ouiji board. *There was four people doing it at the same time as me, the only reason I had the experience was because, as usual, I wanted to know what was going on. So I asked to know really what was going on in the world, and that's what happened.*³⁰⁹ Evidently, I fell to the ground – I didn't know about this because I was out of it – turning a different shape and colour and had a big long tongue coming out my mouth – if you believe that, because I've got to take other people's word for it for what they saw – and I come round, very traumatically. Anyhow, I related all this to this guy, and he said yeah, you've been very lucky; that's my one experience. And there's things I've done in the past which I knew I shouldn't go and do – nothing *bad* - but I've ended up a cropper, one way or another, had an accident, and I knew, because my whole body was shaking, and if I get those feelings now I just go and do something else [laughs].

From this excerpt, we should note how anomalous experiences occur multiple times in Gary's life. According to his own subjective awareness, this is related to an in-built, natural curiosity, as to what was *really* 'going on in the world'. The subsequent encounter with the witch had the effect of legitimising this experience, keeping with the universe-maintaining nature of confirmatory social interaction; but this later encounter, while not in itself explicitly paranormal in nature (relative to the first), retains the sense of anomalous experience. The true significance of these experiences came out after I asked Gary, "What was the first topic, if you like, that you first started researching?"

G: Well, I had a psychic experience – well I had a few when I was younger now I realise what they was; and there was one particular thing when I was 21 when I nearly got possessed, so that sort of set me on finding out what was going on, why am I - I kept asking myself "why am I here?" I had a feeling there was a reason for me to be here, so I started studying all sorts of things, psychic [subjects], as well as UFOs. I used to go to UFO meetings what, 35-years ago. I stopped going to them because, what it was, the people in control of the UFO meetings were not giving us all the information that the group was asking for.

His unique experiences are thus integrated into his truth-seeking biography as a determining force. The primacy of personal research is here reaffirmed; of much less importance to his "waking up" are his social engagements; despite breaking these off, and only coming to Truthjuice many years

³⁰⁹ Emphasis added.

later, his interim reading of writers including Erich Von Daniken and Zecharia Sitchin, had continued to feed the curiosity residing deep within his mind – opened partly, so it seems, by his early experiential anomalies.³¹⁰

Another truth-seeker, Dennis, shared a self-narrative deserves a stand-alone book with a film adaptation alongside.³¹¹ His narrativized journey involved an entire *series* of experiences. Those most-emphasised were paranormal in the sense of being extraordinary events.³¹² He spoke at length about personal encounters with the police, which he perceived as unjust. (These were neither mystical nor paranormal but were still anomalous; they represented efforts on his part to stress continuity within his identity as someone who challenges immoral authorities.) Similarly, he spoke about a time where he went to live at a Unification Church centre; this was short-lived because he “asked too many questions,” and was asked subsequently to leave. Experimenting with religious groups outside of the mainstream is characteristic of seekers; his dissatisfaction with alternatives such as the Moonies stresses how his attitude towards authority effectively prevented him from satisfactorily joining with a group that demanded high levels of integration and regulation from its members.

The passive/active classification depends largely upon which part of his journey is in focus. He explicitly paints himself as an active, conscious *quester*; on the other hand, in a subsequent exorcism experience he comes across as wholly passive, wrestling with external, dark forces. This dual role might be said to characterise the *experimental* motif insofar as active choices are made to explore or engage with a new tradition, thinker, or practice; but in the respective anomalous experiences – “anomalous” in contrast with those of previous “experiments” – a certain passivity dominates the individual. In this respect, the experimental motif characterises a truth-seeker much like a pilgrim, and “waking up” as a sort of pilgrimage in the way discussed by Turner.³¹³

In other narratives, such as Phil’s, we meet with more of a “Damascus-style” anomalous experience that is highly transformative, sending him on an experimental/intellectual pilgrimage to understand what had happened. Three years previously, Phil had seen a private psychotherapist about “sexual issues” who thought he had “probably suffered a nervous breakdown” months ago and was dealing with mild depression. He began seeing a therapist and

³¹⁰ Both of these authors have many works, but these were two that I was suggested to read. Erich von Daniken, *Chariots of the Gods: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (New York: Berkley Books, 1999); Zechariah Sitchin, *The 12th Planet: Book One of the Earth Chronicles* (New York: Harper, 1976)

³¹¹ In the interests of space, I will limit myself to an outline in my own words.

³¹² This emphasis was perhaps due to my outward excitement at the more fantastical elements of the story, especially parts of the exorcism story, within my role as interviewer.

³¹³ ‘Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage. The pilgrim physically traverses a mystical way; the mystic sets forth on an interior spiritual pilgrimage. For the former, concreteness and historicity dominate; for the latter, a phased interior process leads to a goal beyond conceptualization.’ See Victor Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 33-34.

talked about a host of unresolved issues including the death of a close friend, worries about his children, suffering during bad floods, marriage difficulties, “so everything culminated in what was called this depression”. Phil was given eighteen months redundancy from a 35-year job, and his therapist suggested Phil might take up counselling himself, “which I was surprised at because nobody had ever seen before these characteristics in me [...] so I thought there must be something in it.” Phil’s life was looking up. “I was seeing a girl for two years, and everything was, had been, fantastic, I was happier, I was lifting out, I was also on anti-depressants which, I think, maybe helped me a little bit – I’m not convinced, but, looking back, they maybe did.”

Then, in 2012, things changed again. “I’d been experiencing some unusual, erm, feelings in my body, feelings of electricity, feelings of my nerve endings on fire; maybe, adrenaline, but, I felt unsettled because I’ve never felt it before – I used to have to go outside and take deep breaths, and I didn’t know what it was”. After receiving a text from a friend Phil didn’t know what to do with his life:

“I had a realisation, and the realisation was, simply, that all through my life I’d been a caring person, a good person, and I’ve let people hang over me, let people pull me back, and I’ve never been allowed to be myself, by these people, whether it’s been my wife, my partner, whoever; and the realisation was it wasn’t them, this realisation really that I’d let them do it so it was my responsibility. And at that point I didn’t realise what had happened, the realisation, but on that night I felt different. I spoke to my partner that night, that I’d had an unusual afternoon because I started to cry at work, broke down, went to the medical centre after this realisation, and these feelings in my body were on fire, and the people at the medical centre couldn’t do anything for me, didn’t know what it was, just told me to do some breathing exercises, and then the next night my partner came down, and she looked into my eyes and said, “Where’s [Phil] gone?” and that was a bit of a strange thing to say even though I did feel different. And that night, we went to bed, here at my house, sleeping apart, which is unusual, and during the night, something happened. And I felt, during the night, and I don’t know if it was 4 in the morning, or 6 in the morning, but I felt as though there was somebody holding both my arms and both my legs and I was pulled apart, I felt as though I were broken in two, I felt as though I imagined me in two halves with a jagged piece down the middle – something happened that night so profound, and amazing, I’ve no idea what it was. My partner in the morning, I told her, and she didn’t understand. And I was crying, and she said, well I’ve got to go now, just, you know, so she went, and throughout that morning I had one or two more realisations with lots of tears, but something told me that this was the end of my depression, and that something amazing had happened, and I just didn’t feel myself any more. So a lot of the time, that morning, I was curled up in a ball like a baby, on my bed, in the foetal position – which is something to remember further on in this little story –

and my partner woke me up at dinner time and I told her about what had happened in the morning, and she said she was worried, I'm coming round, and she came round quickly, and saw the state I was in, and she said I'm ringing the doctor, you're having a breakdown. And I said, look, this isn't a breakdown, this is something amazing, and [...] she said, ah, I've had enough of this, you never listen to me, and she went off. I got up, had a cup of tea and a shower, and felt fantastic.

A few days later, Phil went back to his therapist and told her what had happened.

She had a big grin on her face, and she *knew* what I was saying was right, and she *knew* that I'd come out of my depression, like that, in the flick of a switch. ***But she didn't give me any answers like why, or how it happened, it was then just for me, then, to look into, so, the following week I looked into it and started looking at different things, and I started to read about spiritual awakening, spiritual emergency; I came up with terms like dark night of the soul, individuation, lots of different things to describe the same profound experience.*** And one of the main ones I came across was called kundalini awakening, which basically is a Hindu version where it says there's energies based at the bottom of the spine, but at some point, after some, it can be brought on by deep meditation over lots of years, or by some realisation where these energies are released from the base of the spine. It's said that they go up the spine and they clean the chakras as they go up and it's then supposed to go up to the top of the head at the crown chakra and exit that way. I'm not sure about that, there's no evidence that we have chakras, but I know that something profound happened, and I was cleansed. [...] And over the two years, looking back, and all my research, it's happened to many people. People are – what it's called is – waking up. And I've done lots of research into religion, into what some people may call god – I don't like the word god because it reminds me of a man in the clouds – but, I'm aware that there's something bigger and better now. I've been a sceptic all my life; I've been a man of science, reason, and logic, but everything's been blown away now because [I experienced] an awakening; I think it's simply being aware or experiencing connection to source, and, over the two years I've learned that much, and I've talked, and I've talked to other people; other people have maybe experienced similar and didn't understand it, but I've dug so deep. [...] *I think when you go through this you gain that spiritual connection that we had when we were born, but our conditioning, our life's conditioning, our society takes it away from us from the minute we're born, it's stolen away, and our spiritual awakening, I believe, is that reconnection, the realisation, that there's more to life than we think there is.* [...] I've spoke to two or three vicars over the last fifteen/eighteen months to get answers but I'm finding that however much they give their input I've got my own answers now, and I don't believe you need any religion, any churches, or anything, to feel connected to whatever's up there, I think it's a natural thing,

I feel that the majority of religions are actually going in reverse, and put you in a state of fear, which keeps you away from it. What the awakening brings is a loss of fear totally, which is fantastic; and it's a great time to be alive for me, it really is. [...] So from bottom to the top, in five years, the first two years I was unaware, [but] the last three years, really, it's gone from about six months from May to November was the recovery period; the awakening was the freedom from the stress and anxiety and depression; and the last two years have been the research, and moving-on, the knowledge. Sometimes I feel like I've been given a gift; I think we're all possibly healers to a certain extent.

As Phil himself points out, this resembles an ideal case of James's 'dark night of the soul'. As James points out, these might be more common than modern man generally assumes.³¹⁴ Once again, the "realisation" precedes the phase of personal research, described as both an emotive and fundamentally cognitive event. In the mystical experience, the 'sick soul' is made whole, and Phil "gets over" his diagnosis of depression, a fact acknowledged, but not explained, by his therapist, and by extension the entire science of psychiatry. His explanatory quest explored different vistas, but he found that 'the teaching is already inside'. Interestingly, he understands his 'spiritual awakening' as 'that reconnection, the realisation, that there's more to life than we think there is'. Two years later, and his life is profoundly different, from a new partner, to a whole new profession and source of income:

What I'm going to do because of all the experience I've had the last year, helping people, I'm going to use what I've learnt, what I believe, and what I know, to put that into practice, to help others. I've got to make some income soon because my redundancy won't last much longer, so I have to do that; ten-twelve hours a week, that's all I need; and instead of being a therapist or a councillor, I'm calling myself a mindfulness consultant, because the definition of a consultant is somebody who's an expert in a field who sometimes may charge you for their services; whereas a therapist or a consultant is someone who's in charge, maybe looking down on you, behaving right.

Anomalous Experiences

Just as Grace Davie speaks of 'vicarious religion' or 'armchair religiosity', referring to persistent levels of belief in the absence of formal ties of belonging and/or religious participation, we can

³¹⁴ As William James puts, in scintillating, lucid prose, 'The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic's visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact. Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. If you protest, my friend, wait till you arrive there yourself! To believe in the carnivorous reptiles of geologic times is hard for our imagination – they seem too much like mere museum specimens. Yet there is no tooth in any one of those museum-skulls that did not daily through long years of the foretime hold fast to the body struggling in despair of some fated living victim.' See *Varieties*, pp. 169-170.

speak, here, about vicarious experiences of the anomalous.³¹⁵ The affective dimension comes back into play when we include within this category *vicarious* anomalous experiences. Not every truth-seeker has attended a Past-Life regression workshop, for example, but most have heard descriptions of such practices while attending a physical meeting-group, or during private research; few truth-seekers have channelled messages from extra-terrestrial intelligences, but the attendees of New Horizons hear such messages second-hand, retold publicly by those with the ears to listen. A pertinent example from alternative health is the positive claims made by survivors of cancer regarding the healing power of cannabis oil; without any *personal* experience, these second-hand accounts act vicariously to shatter the so-called orthodoxy, establishing, or maintaining, the plausibility of alternative health's emergent heterodoxy. Testimonies of anomalous experiences form an important part of many well-known, and unknown, speakers alike, from David Icke to Kathy Rowan.

It is vital to recognise that the possibilities of the everyday world are expanded in accordance with the diverse coordinates of truth-seeker discourse. Dreams might be perceived in a different light; personal encounters with wild animals have a newfound significance; the same number might start appearing at an improbably large number of places. When such experiences cease to be mere coincidence or ordinary, but are perceived as significant and *extra-ordinary*, we can assert more confidently that a shift in subjective consciousness has taken place; the individual has now “woken up” to the extent of discerning previously-hidden significata in the here-and-now. This phenomenon of experiencing a personal, ongoing inter-connectivity with the universe is often referred to by truth-seekers as ‘synchronicity’.³¹⁶

Two important consequence of the availability of vicarious anomalous experiences follow. First, this encourages an ethos of tolerance towards a plurality of divergent phenomena. Rather than hear about only UFO-oriented experiences, attendees of the physical meeting-groups also hear about psychic encounters with covert governmental agencies, about extra-dimensional beings met during psychedelic pilgrimages, or about visitations from angels. A truth-seeker with personal experience of other-worldly beings met during an exorcism will tend not to exclude second-hand experiences that are situated within other phenomena, but rather integrate them into their personal framework, their truth. A second point is that this arrangement caters for individuals who might describe themselves, with Max Weber, as being ‘absolutely unmusical in matters religious’.³¹⁷ For all those individuals who – for whatever reason, to avoid plunging head-first into deterministic models of individual psychology – do not experience James’s mystical experiences, the a-nomos-

³¹⁵ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), esp. pp. 112-114; *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2015), pp. 81 ff.

³¹⁶ See Chapter One.

³¹⁷ This famous quote is from a letter Weber wrote to Ferdinand Tönnies, quoted in Guenther Roth and Wolfgang Schluchter, *Max Weber's Vision of History: Ethics and Methods* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984), pp. 82-83, fn. 44.

ing effect is achieved as a by-product of socialisation. The social network thus provides truth-seekers with new relationships and new experiences, both of which combine to reframe the surrounding universe.

We find the role played by anomalous experiences as proceeding across three distinct levels. We first saw “Damascus-style” experiences that radically upheave someone’s sense of reality, a James-like (or Icke-like) “dark night of the soul”. We then saw the way in which truth-seekers seem to experience anomalous experiences (that is, anomalous according to the criteria of the rejected nomos) more frequently as they continue to ‘wake up’; this constitutes both evidence *for* a “prior” waking-up experience, and achieves a universe-maintaining function. Sometimes, these experiences are less idiosyncratic, and instead seem to arise in episodic waves which suggest the social influence of the truth-seeking network; for example, Facebook-users talk about strange sensations at particular times of astrological change, like solar eclipses or summer/winter solstices, or, as in September 2015, many truth-seekers began seeing the number 23 recur in dreams, talks, and day-to-day life; this was interpreted as a quasi-noetic, extraordinary occurrence. Finally, the role played by anomalous experiences continues at a vicarious level, through the sharing of anomalous experiences, and the incorporation of the anomalous into alternative knowledge theories more generally. In all three instances, anomalous experiences open an individual’s mind to a wider range of possibilities than the formal logic of the mainstream definitions of reality – the dominant nomos – will admit.

5.3.5. Experimental Motif: Cognitive Integrity

On one level, the experimental motif has been a feature of each and every “waking up” story. Personal research is a type of practice that can radically undermine the pre-existing nomos; continuous and/or later research, or “experimenting” with seeing the world through an alternative lens, further has the universe-maintaining effect. If one conceives of the intellectual motif as a praxis of thought, then it is intrinsically experimental.

This motif emerges as especially dominant, however, with those truth-seekers who (pre-dominantly) feature as guest speakers. In other words, it is the contrast between those who primarily consume, or produce, alternative knowledge. The boundary is blurred because of open mic nights (during which anyone, in theory, can get up and address the room), and the lack of any formal hierarchy, but one can fairly point to a class of actors who deliver talks, write material, conduct radio shows, and other such activities of dissemination. These are the “big hitters” of Chapter One.

The big names were usually unknown before they entered the truth-seeking milieu. Their entry was accidental rather than calculated. Marcus Allan is the chief distributor of *Nexus* magazine in the UK. He got the job through a serendipitous stroke of fortune rather than any long-lasting ambition in that particular direction. As time passed, he attended countless events and conferences

to publicise *Nexus* and read countless editions of this alternative magazine. Comparisons can be drawn with *Planete* magazine, as discussed by Eliade.³¹⁸ Over the years Marcus met with as many new friends as he did ideas, sharing a taste for alternative ideas – and certainly a more general distrust and cynicism towards dominant political parties and solutions – with his wife. He has built up a strong friendship with Andy Thomas, author of *Conspiracy Theories: The Facts, the Theories, the Evidence* and *The Truth Agenda*. Marcus spoke of several favoured areas of personal interest, including non-mainstream archaeology (such as theories around ancient pyramids) and the Apollo moon landings, delivering a presentation at Truthjuice Birmingham on the latter topic during my fieldwork.

Andy, meanwhile, reported something similar.

So I got involved with what might be called the whole conspiracy thing – truth-seeking as some like to say – and spiritual stuff too, got involved with psychics over the years [...] and it just opened up and went from logical step to logical step. And just getting more and more drawn in, getting invited to speak at a number of events.

Neil was invited to appear on a podcast radio series called *Red Ice Radio*, and it was from there that his connection with the milieu grew over time. During our interview, he sounded much like regular truth-seekers.

I was always like interested in stuff like the Loch Ness monster, and, you know, just anything a bit weird. And I heard about the illuminati – I can't even remember where I heard about the illuminati from, to be quite honest with you – in fact I got into mind control stuff a bit before that because I saw the Manchurian Candidate film, and so I was kinda interested in that, and fascination with JFK, you know all that sort of stuff like that. And then, basically, I forget where I heard about the Illuminati, it was probably someone like Alex Jones or someone like that, to be honest, and so I started having a bit of a look at that, and it just sort of snow-balled from there. How I actually got into doing it professionally – will not [professionally], you know what I mean – was purely by accident really.³¹⁹ I was basically trying to bribe a mate of mine into joining a band, and Rich Planet³²⁰ had an, erm, you could send your music, and I thought – I used to watch it – ah, it'd be pretty cool if I got some music on there, and also basically if I put some music on

³¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1976), pp. 8-11. Eliade's conclusions as to the popularity of this 1950s 'melange of popular science, occultism, astrology, science fiction, and spiritual techniques' apply well to both *Nexus* and the wider pool of truth-seeker topics of discourse: 'In sum, it propagated a *saving* science: scientific information which was at the same time soteriological. Man was no longer estranged and useless in an absurd world, into which he had come by accident and to no purpose', p. 11.

³¹⁹ This is a very telling self-correction that points to the way that Neil's role does not generate him a professional income but affords him some of the elitist status of a professional class.

³²⁰ This online show is well-known among truth-seekers and hosted by Richard Hall. See his website, *RichPlanet TV* <<http://www.richplanet.net/>> [accessed 31/12/17]. His tour date in Blackpool was attended by several members of the nearby meeting group.

there I can say to my mate look, you twat, get up off your arse and sing for this band I'm trying to get together. So I put some Aldous Huxley samples on it, him talking about mind control, at Berkley University, and Richard just got in touch and said this is really interesting, what's all this about, we just banged a couple of emails backwards and forwards, and I think he was just stuck for guests at that point so he just says look, why don't you come on and try and pop your show on or whatever, and so I went up and did – like the idea was just to do an hour, and I just prepared loads and loads of material and I just thought shit, you know, I don't know what I'm doing with this, so I just got like reams and reams and reams of information, and just managed to knock it out, and we did like a two-hour show, and it just sort of snowballed from there, because like people kinda liked it, and so I got onto a couple of radio shows, and once you've been on a couple of things people get in touch with you, and ask you to do live appearances, and things like that.

Like Andy, we see a “snowball” effect of involvement. There is a mix of passivity and active choice. Neil subsequently spoke at some of the biggest events connected to the truth movement in England today like the Alternative View Conference. He became a public expert – a lecturer – in an area of private interest by virtue of delivering a public talk; his role as a radio guest, and as a guest speaker, were mutually legitimising.

These individuals tend to be more sceptical about the movement's prospects than the regular attendees. Those who build a network of social relationships go from a professional interest to a personal one; the affective ties effectively elevate a business interest to a much deeper one that affects an entire worldview. It could be argued that their professional stake in the truth-seeking enterprise provides them with the motivation to become more involved within the milieu; it is then a matter of cognitive integrity that impels them to integrate the plausibility structure prevalent in the social arena of discourse within their internal outlook. Rather, relationships are forged, and these affective ties serve an instrumental role in integrating speakers into the truth-seeking milieu.

This can be analysed as a process of alleviating what social psychologist Leon Festinger calls ‘cognitive dissonance’.³²¹ He argues that when individuals hold two or more conflicting cognitions – ideas, opinions, or beliefs – this produces a state of psychological discomfort. Festinger identifies three means by which the individual can alleviate this condition: they might change the offending cognition(s) or associated behaviour(s); they can find a different social

³²¹ For a full account of the theory see Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957); for the initial introduction and test of the hypothesis see Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (London: Pinter & Martin Ltd., 2008 [1956]); see also Bosco Byungeun Bae, ‘The Textures of ‘Belief’: An interdisciplinary study towards a social scientific epistemology’ (Doctoral Thesis. Durham University, 2015), <<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11289/>>

environment where the tension is lessened or relieved; or by adopting new ideas that promote consonance between the previously dissonant cognitive elements.³²²

Not all ideational conflicts are equally disturbing. Festinger says that the ‘magnitude’ of the dissonance increases with the importance attached to cognitions, and the value relation between the conflicting elements or clusters of elements. Ideas that are valued highly, infused with emotion, and have a bearing upon an individual identity, are thus liable to cause greater degrees of discomfort.³²³ Truth-seekers who devote enormous energies, resources, and time to a particular area of alternative knowledge become emotionally invested in these ideas through their ongoing research pursuits.³²⁴ Those who enter through the “snowball effect” find themselves immersed in a social environment where alternative knowledge is valued more highly than mainstream knowledge, becoming familiar with other theorists who share this perspective. As their own work becomes received with keen interest and praise, it is easier to accept that their audience is misunderstood by the world at large, possessing rational faculties, and that your research therefore contains authentic knowledge, than it is to conclude that you, the expert, is essentially mistaken, along with this audience. The cognitive integrity of truth-seekers, despite being called into question by outsiders, owes much to the social network.

The theory of cognitive dissonance can be applied to both converts into truth-seeking, and a way of explaining the way in which “conspiracy theorists” disregard evidence contrary to the superconspiracy they perceive. Furthermore, this theory holds currency *within* the truth movement as an emic explanation for the inability of “the sheeple” to accept the truth to which truth-seekers have “woken up”. As Jo said in her self-narrative (p. 82), “I *had* cognitive dissonance”. The very theory of cognitive dissonance is incorporated within the mechanisms for alleviating experiences of dissonance, explaining away any potential dissonance by insisting upon that the offending cognitions are merely the result of cognitive dissonance by those who view the world differently. When I reported this to both “sides”, the truth-seekers and academics found it similarly interesting, even humorous; I would note, here, that humour constitutes one way of devaluing the possible stipulations of this observation. In both cases, cognitive integrity involved is affirmed.

As a participant observer shifting between the insider and outsider perspectives, I can attest to *both* invocations of cognitive dissonance: while my academic colleagues would appear to subconsciously devalue certain pieces of information in discussions about 9/11 in a way that supported the official narrative, truth-seekers likewise showed a tendency to avoid contact with media channels that would challenge their worldview. Interestingly, both of these parties viewed

³²² Festinger et al., *Prophecy*, pp. 26; Festinger, *Cognitive Dissonance*, pp. 19-20.

³²³ I here refer back to Davies, *Death*, p.6; see page 102, this thesis.

³²⁴ Not unlike how academic researches become invested in their research projects, or individuals who become allied with their profession.

their respective medias as reasonable, and, by perceiving offending media channels as being unreasonable or controlled, their potential for causing cognitive dissonance is greatly reduced.

5.4 Already Half-Awake? The Role Played by Pre-existing Conditions

5.4.1 Tension and Deprivation: A Phenomenal Placebo

In this section, I want to explore the potential role played by what Lofland and Stark call ‘predisposing conditions [...] [:] attributes of persons *prior* to their contact with the cult’.³²⁵ Although my opening question explicitly invited interviewees to draw a contrast between a former a current state, I was struck by the high number of truth-seekers I interviewed that reported feelings “alternative”, or “a bit different”, from childhood or adolescence.

The authors’ first such pre-disposing condition is that converts ‘at least *perceived* [...] considerable tension [...] best characterised as a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up’. Lofland and Stark say that this is a necessary pre-condition because it provides the ‘disposition to act’ to resolve these personal discontents. Lofland and Stark’s note that their pre-converts all ‘felt themselves *frustrated* in their rather diverse aspirations’; exhausted by their immediate, pre-existing resources, converts are those who reach beyond themselves to fresh sources of satisfaction.

Waking-up narratives involve ‘deprivation’ as Glock defines it, including, at different points in the story, times where the teller ‘may be, or feel[s], disadvantaged in comparison either to other individuals or groups or to an internalized set of standards’.³²⁶ Glock expands this discussion by thinking about different identifiable types of ‘deprivation’. He distinguishes between two groups: economic deprivation, social deprivation (‘considerations of [social] prestige and acceptance’), and organismic deprivation (‘mental or physical health’); and ethical deprivation (‘when the individual comes to feel that the dominant values of society no longer provide him with a meaningful way of organising his life’) and psychic deprivation (‘akin to ethical deprivation [...] but in this case philosophy is sought for its own sake rather than as a source of ethical prescriptions as to how to behave in relation to others’). Economic, social, and organismic pertain to the first half of his definition, where ‘the individual does not measure up to society’s standards’; ‘in ethical and psychological deprivation, on the other hand, the individual feels that he is not living up to his own standards’.³²⁷

Across the interview excerpts in this chapter, we find evidence of all these types of deprivation; most self-narratives include a combination of multiple types. In particular, most self-narratives

³²⁵ Lofland and Stark, ‘World-Saver’, p. 162.

³²⁶ Charles Y. Glock, ‘The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religion Groups’, in *Cults in Context*, ed. by Lorne Dawson (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), pp. 147-158 (p. 149).

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

emphasise one of the latter two types of intellectual deprivation, often from a young age. Frank, for example, began his truth-seeking journey by looking into Common law during a time of personal crisis:

F: For me, it's when I lost the right to see my kids. I thought I've done nothing wrong here, I've been labelled this, and I can't see my kids, and I'm extremely dangerous, got no convictions or anything, and at the same time Bob Geldof was going through it, and I thought if he can't do it, what chance have I got? So I thought why is it so corrupt? Why? Why were they letting her have all the say, and I weren't allowed the say? Why weren't they listening to what the kids were saying? What the fuck's all this about? I were finding out more about social services, and how they're freely taking kids away from families and stuff.

Here, his seemingly unfair treatment by the law within an emotive context leads to a phase of active, personal research. This alleged injustice is experienced as social deprivation, relative to his ex-partner; this engendered a phase of active personal research into society's legal institutions, which were found void of moral coherence or plausibility.

Common features in stories involve the death of a significant other, separation from a partner, or the loss of a job. Paul's self-narrative depicts a similar period of upheaval in his life leading to a difficult struggle against forces beyond his control. It might be argued that some of the mystical stories suggest schizophrenia; in some cases, like Phil's, the informant themselves identify the condition as being partly medical. Although there might here be a kernel of truth here regarding certain cases, this cannot be generalised across all instances of waking up. Rather, alternative knowledge serve as ways for individuals to rethink their medicalised identity in different terms, sacralising a new one. In this sense, the truth-seeking milieu provides not only theodicies about wider society (with Robertson, Lewis and Kahn) but remedial theodicies about the self.³²⁸

Truth-seekers learn to perceive deprivation in a *positive* light, *after* the event in reflection, and as part of a meaning-making system that makes sense of these frequently repeated patterns of crisis-like experience. We might talk about a *double-theodicy* at play here that make sense of feelings of deprivation: firstly, experiencing deprivation is an important *consequence* of "waking up", insofar as truth-seekers are illuminated to the hidden dangers that permeate an infiltrated society. Talking about headaches caused by harmful food additives, for example, is a rhetorical indicator of a *convert*, rather than *pre-convert*. Second, crisis experiences serve a positive function in their capacity for illumination.

³²⁸ One could argue that the act of redefining their condition reverses the domination of the medical fraternity over their prospective patients, in the way argued by Foucault. This will be explored further in Chapter Three.

Glock stimulates our discussion of deprivation further by reflecting on the difference between religious and secular responses to these perceived conditions.³²⁹ For the three states referring to deprivation relative to others, *religious* responses ‘are likely to compensate for feelings of deprivation’, whereas *secular* responses, ‘where they are successful, are more likely to eliminate the causes, and therefore also the feelings’. For the two intellectual types of deprivation, ‘a religious resolution may be as efficacious as a secular one in overcoming the deprivation directly’.

Rambo’s ‘crisis’ stage is phenomenally equivalent, noting that this can be viewed negatively by psychoanalysts as a ‘deficiency motivation, generated from fear, loneliness, or desperation’, or in a positive light, typically by researchers who examine ‘psychologically “healthy” people’, as ‘fulfilment motivation’.³³⁰ Andy reflected: “Everybody who has got any form of spirituality has been through the mill. You know, they’ve had a bad time, they’ve been through emotional problems, things like that, it’s all ups and down, don’t forget.” A little later I pursued this line of inquiry further:

N: But you were saying spiritual people have often had some sort of dark night.

A: Yeah, yeah, I’ve had so many you wouldn’t believe. If somebody did a film of my life they would just put it as science fiction, couldn’t comprehend it as the truth for a minute where somebody possibly survived it. It was shit, yeah. I was in – when I married, in a real nice house I practically built; 65 square metre workshop; loads of cars, bikes, I had a brand new aeroplane, had everything; and I just had one text message off my ex, ‘it’s all over, I want a divorce’ – I got the text message while I was at work – got back she’d gone – next thing I know I’m getting caught trying to get things out the house, blah blah blah, a couple of weeks after that I eventually left, and then she just moved a new bloke in she’s been seeing behind my back, you know what I mean? He was in my house, with my wife, in my bed; and what can you do about it? You know what I mean, that was gutting; and then my daughter, I found out, had just been arrested and was going on trial for murder, and then a couple of days after that the dog I’d had for 16 years died; and then I was having to go through the court case, find someplace to live; ah, shit, you’ve got no idea. And just one of those things happening to a normal person in their life, it’d be devastating, and it’d take them 30 years to get over it, you’d never forget, blah blah blah, to me it was every couple of days, bang, bang, bang, relentless. And I got to a point where I was just hardened to it, it didn’t matter tragic or whatever, whatever happened to me there was no emotion linked to it whatsoever because I was already so fucked up I couldn’t be fucked up any more. [...] It was after that when I started working on the cold fusion stuff, so to me, that was my vacuum, and everything rushed in to fill that, and I’ve

³²⁹ Glock, p. 150.

³³⁰ Rambo, *Conversion*, p. 52.

not been right since [chuckles]. That's talking on the spiritual level about it. I mean everybody has their ups and downs. Just look at [Kirsty], an enlightened person with a beautiful soul, but what a tough life she's had, you know what I mean. All the people I know who have got anything like an enlightened soul have had *terribly* rough lives.

His experience of deprivation, then, in terms of personal misfortune, can be understood in a similar way to the anomalous experiences of the preceding section. In these autobiographical narratives, we hear ways in which personal lives were *dismembered* in the sense of being taken apart; these periods are, now, *remembered*, in the sense of being *put back together*, but in accordance with a secure identity as a truth-seeker.

From Deprivation to Superplausibility

The truth-seeker worldview stipulates a *deprived world* more generally. Notions of a worldwide super-conspiracy provide an ontology which is further rooted in its own deprivation thesis. As with Heelas's characterisation of the New Age, to unleash one's inner potential involves the recognition, on some level, of existing in a state of unfulfillment, in a societal context that quashes the 'Higher Self'.³³¹ Although it might be a stretch to assert that *pre-existing* feelings of deprivation are *necessary* for someone to undergo the "waking process", such sentiment greatly assists the process. One trend is that truth-seekers feel deprivation within one sphere, but this spreads as different talks address other areas of common experience. Experiences of relative deprivation in one area of life instigate personal research into that area, which leads onto secondary socialisation into a scheme positing *absolute* deprivation within others.

One might even argue that deprivation is a necessary pre-condition of salvation more generally. In James's classic account, for example, he attributes to conversion the power of unifying a previously divided self.

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.³³²

To be converted, then, is to overcome one's essential deprivation. James's understanding of conversion in terms akin to a unification of a divided identity, whereby the phenomenal 'soul' finds 'its proper habitat and center', anticipates sociologist Hans Mol's functionalist theory of 'religion' as the means by which human beings find a secure footing in inner identity amidst a

³³¹ Heelas, *New Age Movement*, p. 28.

³³² James, p. 194.

chaotic outer world: the ‘sacralisation’ of ‘identity’.³³³ Mol’s theory of religion explores why humans have a relatively stable attitude towards the world and sense of identity amid an uncertain, chaotic world. His theory is pertinent to this ethnography since it portrays religion as a process. This is a special kind of secondary socialisation, since ‘the sacralisation process [...] goes beyond mere institutionalisation of patterns since it encourages qualities of untouchability and awe, and wraps systems of meaning and motivation in ‘don’t touch’ sentiments’.³³⁴ The uncomfortable period of cognitive dissonance discussed above takes place as a former identity is *desacralized*, and while the ‘don’t touch’ sentiments of this new emergent identity are still being established.

This sense of overcoming a state of deprivation can be understood as essentially soteriological. The development of a sacralised identity built *against* “another” identity resembles many religious traditions the saving power of conversion is bestowed by way of contrast with a former, unsaved identity. Douglas Davies understands ‘conversion experiences [...] as a discovery procedure following a period of questioning and bafflement before new understanding comes of its own accord’.³³⁵ Such periods of questioning, bafflement, and discovery have been well-documented by the emic accounts included in this chapter, as have *experiences* of new understanding, wrapped in emotions, whether through intellectual, experimental, or experiential pursuits. To “wake up” to undergo ‘an advanced form of meaning-making, not just in terms of rational meaning, but also a meaning pervaded by emotion and embodied in a person’s sensory life’.³³⁶ In viewing “waking up” as a ‘process of reflective change’, we can understand “waking up” as a form of salvation, bestowing what Davies calls ‘superplausibility’ upon this emotion-laded understanding relative to prior understandings of self and the world, regardless of whether the feelings of former deprivation have been exaggerated this new, sacralised understanding.³³⁷ For truth-seekers, to wake up is to comprehend a former state of slumber, and a continuing state of struggle against an unfair, conspiring world, in a world that, in spite of its apparently illusory nature, could barely feel more compelling, more authentic, and more “real”.

5.5. “Waking Up” to a (so-called) Truth Movement: A Second Awakening

One curiosity arising from my data is the preponderance of criticism directed towards the truth movement by the very people who attend its meetings, including both those who consume, and

³³³Hans J. Mol, *Identity and the Sacred* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 5-6. Note that Mol’s theory combines a functionalist approach to religion with the personal, i.e. religion has a function not only conducive to the stability of the group or society, but for the existential stability of an *individual* in an inherently unstable outer flux. See Adam J. Powell, ‘Functionalism or Fallacy: Re-locating Hans Mol’s Identity Theory’, *Italian Sociological Review*, 7.1 (2017), 63-85 (doi: 10.13136/isr.v7i1.1491), p. 67.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Douglas J. Davies, ‘Superplausibility in Life and Death’, in ed. by Anna Davidsson Bremborg, Göran Gustafsson, and Gunilla Karlsson Hallonsten, *Religionssociologi I brytningstider* (Lund: Lund University, 2009), p. 15.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

produce, theories of alternative knowledge. Apostates from the truth-seeker milieu tended to be most critical – sometimes verging on damning – but regular attendees mix their positive reflections with negativities alongside. Often, “waking up” involves a *second* awakening; this reflects core truth-seeking values. This *double-awakening* is described brilliantly by Thomas Sheridan:

There’s two types of awakening. There’s the first awakening these people will have, where they realise the world of politics, finance, and government, and media, is all bollocks. It’s full of propaganda. That’s the first one. *The second one is when they realise the truth movement is full of shit as well.* And then they realise that the only solution is to take the stuff from it that works for them, and live a good life, with that knowledge.

This second awakening is much more prevalent than even insiders tend to think. Criticism is common and multi-directional; concerns were shared about the monetary dimension of alternative knowledge, the hit-and-miss nature of the speaker/subject menu at meeting-groups, and the apparent failings of once-hyped projects such as Icke’s ‘The People’s Voice’ online tele-audio station or alternative banking systems such as WeRe Bank.³³⁸ The prevalence of accusations of persons acting as covert agents, or “shills”, partly recalls the ‘suspiciousness’ identified by Hofstadter, an outward sign of paranoia.³³⁹ In a more positive light, these are examples of institutional reflexivity that embraces the primary values of the alternative milieu – that of taking nothing at face value.

Alternatively, we can see this in terms of Fowler’s six-fold designation of different stages of faith.³⁴⁰ ‘Faith’, in Fowler’s usage, ‘is [not] reduced to belief in creedal statements and doctrinal formulations’. Rather, ‘faith is understood as trust in another and as loyalty to a transcendent center of value and power. [...] Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions’.³⁴¹ Fowler’s well-known study probes the way that faith – in reality, rather than the idealised, theological concept – changes, developmentally, over the course of an individual’s life-course. He distinguishes between six stages of faith that correspond to different eras in the life-cycle; Stage 5, for instance, is ‘unusual before mid-life’.³⁴²

³³⁸ For a good account of the formation and dissolution of The People’s Voice, see David G. Robertson, ‘The People’s Voice, part one’ (December 17, 2014), <<https://davidgrobertson.wordpress.com/2014/12/17/the-peoples-voice-part-1/>> [accessed 18/03/17] and ‘The People’s Voice, part two’ (December 21, 2014) <<https://davidgrobertson.wordpress.com/2014/12/21/the-peoples-voice-part-2/>> [accessed 18/03/17]. Robertson thinks that ‘the history of The People’s Voice exemplifies the fractiousness of the Cultic Milieu perfectly’, concluding, ‘It was doomed to failure from the start because all of the players involved a) have a tendency towards thinking in terms of in-groups and out-groups, and b) see a hidden hand behind everything, what I call “occluded malevolent agencies”’.

³³⁹ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, p. 3.

³⁴⁰ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 198.

Of crucial importance is his contention that not everyone progresses through every stage; Stage 6, for example, is ‘exceedingly rare’.³⁴³

For truth-seekers, their primary orientation is towards an individuated conceptualisation of “the truth”; although the relatively-common belief in an active, enchanted universe points towards an immanent power, values of authenticity and freedom are idealistic, and thus transcend the *this-worldly* context of the here-and-now. The clash between personal truths – whether intuited, the result of private anomalous experiences, or part of someone’s pre-existing beliefs – and proffered public theories/truths (some speakers proffer theories *as* truths; see later chapters) threatens to catalyse the shift for stage 4’s individuated-reflective faith whenever the disjunction in question cannot easily be resolved. Intra-group gossip might discredit well-known speakers, forcing individuals to re-evaluate their estimations. Personal reflections on the unfinished nature of the personal quest might make individuals acknowledge the shifting, elusive nature of “the truth”; an earnest *search* for truth might not ever *find* the truth, especially since fresh revelations and hidden details are discovered anew. In this sense, the second awakening might be viewed as the next stage in the production of a properly sacralised identity, that is, able to cope with the vicissitudes of life. Mol contends that ‘religion always appears to modify or stabilize the differentiations it has been unable to prevent’.³⁴⁴ Viewing “waking up” as part of a long, ongoing process of truth-seeking, I draw attention to the way that it takes time to develop an identity as a truth-seeker, that it involves a combination of factors that span the affective, the intellectual, the behavioural, and the existential, and, finally, that the truth-seeker identity might appear to change over time, it is always rooted within a particular repertoire of moods and motivations.

5.5.1 From “Troofers” to “Truth-Seekers

The shift towards reflexive criticality can be understood in emic terms as the transition from unsane, to “troofer”, to truth-seeker. As discussed in the previous chapter, “troofers” refer to those who reject the dominant nomos and subsequently inhabit, uncritically, a worldview informed by alternative sources. They thus represent an inauthentic awakening by persons who fail *to practice* the very liberation of consciousness that their new sources of information talk about. This resembles the split between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity, with troofers exhibiting the latter type. The pejorative nature of the “troofer” designation illustrates the way that this development of personhood is celebrated and valued; to be a *true* truth-seeker, in other words, *is to become critical of the truth movement*.

Troofers are thought to be detrimental to the spread of the message, because they think, uncritically, that the truth can be disseminated via forceful fanaticism. Truth-seekers, on the other

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

hand, perceive “waking up” as an internal process, by virtue of their own experiences of the total process:

My basic philosophy is that you cannot tell somebody “the truth”. You cannot. The truth has to be realised, it has to come from deep within you, and there’s that realisation. Really, the biggest shock, is that everything you thought you knew is a crock of crap. [...] It’s that decision, then, that you’re actually going to make an effort to re-educate yourself. But it has to come from the individual, it’s no good asking someone else to trigger it.

The vital importance of the intellectual mode of active personal research comes through again. Individuals can move inside the truth movement; individuals can then move away from the movement. In both cases we find evidence of identity sacralisation, primarily one as a *seeker*. The “second awakening” – or a general penchant for criticism – serves *to confirm* this status by reaffirming a dissatisfaction with institutional supports *including* the secondary institution of alternative knowledge.

5.7 Concluding Comments

“Waking up”, then, is a *multi-linear* process. It accords better with Rambo’s multi-directional stage model than the sequential one of Lofland and Stark, although many of the relative stages identified by the latter match the data presented here. In terms of the conversion motifs, the self-narratives are *all* comprised of intellectual, affectional, mystical, and experimental components; the dominance of the intellectual reflects the rationalistic basis for truth-seeker discourse. The journey is one from a position of primary socialisation into society’s nomos – even if this has not always been firmly established for idiosyncratic reasons – into a state of anomie, where social reality is perceived to be *unreality*. The social mechanisms of universe-maintenance reaffirm this (un)truth whilst simultaneously establishing a counter-definition of reality – an alternative nomos, comprised of a subjective understanding of the total body of alternative knowledge – in the online and/or offline company of other (un)likeminded, awakened selves.

Chapter Six: Heterodox Health: Self-Healing in an Unhealthy World

Death does not come now at the end of life: it is there from the start, calling for constant surveillance and forbidding even a momentary relaxation of vigil. Death is watching (and is to be watched) when we work, eat, love, rest. Through its many deputies, death presides over life.³⁴⁵

6.1 Introduction

Visually and materially dominant, health matters to affiliates of the truth movement; issues relating to human health are of vital importance. When the variegated elements making up this broad field are catalogued and analysed major themes of the cultic milieu are brought into focus. The subject of health brings together the ideational (in the form of conspiracy narratives and notions of a holistic universe), the phenomenological (in the form of individual and collective experiences of the world), and human action (in the practical responses rooted in the material world).

In this chapter I want to explore the assortment of beliefs and practice I have met amongst the truthers relating to this diverse field. Completely untrained as a biomedical physician, and line with the social constructivist approach to knowledge, I avoid questions of objective medical truth. My perspective as an ethnographer indeed differs from that of ‘the traditional medical perspective [where] lay beliefs are at best unreliable and at worst irrational’; rather, as an anthropologist, I wish to demonstrate ‘their coherence and validity in terms of the purposes they fulfil for the person who holds them’.³⁴⁶ Health practices that appear at first to be disparate or even contradictory (such as foraging for hedgerow medicine considered alongside the use of scalar technology to unblock the energy channels flowing through the body’s meridian lines) will be reconciled in light of fieldwork and analysis. As will be explored below, the validity of these alternative practices derives partly from the perceived invalidity (in numerous ways) of medical orthodoxy, the subject of all health-related conspiracy theories.

This chapter will proceed through two broad sections, exploring the ideational sphere followed by the responses mandated by these ideas, making the organisational logic apparent. In the first section I will first look to the conspiracy theories, or counter-narratives, applied to Britain’s dominant medical establishment. These will then be contextualised within a much wider counter-narrative that extends beyond medicine and incorporates many facets of social life perceived as harmful. Following these negative beliefs concerning the perceived orthodoxy I will introduce the positive content; the ‘new physics’ and the truth movement’s reconceptualisation of the human body and relationship with health and illness. The second half looks to the responses, firstly at the

³⁴⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Immortality, Mortality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 139.

³⁴⁶ Gareth Williams and Jennie Popay, ‘Lay knowledge and the privilege of experience’, in ed. by Gabe, Kelleher and Williams, *Challenging Medicine* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 122.

level of individual practices in terms of patterns of consumption and self-healing, and then at the field of holistic therapists who constitute a vital, and revealing, networked cohort of individual practitioners.

6.1.1 Field Sites

The importance of health, thematically-speaking, is suggested by the aesthetic makeup of many of the fieldwork sites. Upon entering Truthjuice Birmingham, for example, you arrive at a table covered in over forty pamphlets and cards. Many advertise holistic healers and practitioners, meditation groups, sound therapists, or past-life regression workshops; others warn you about the dangers of fluoridated water, electromagnetic radiation, genetically modified foods, or SMART metres. Adjacent is Heidi's table with a wide assortment of dried herbs, including comfrey, St John's wort, ash, and mugwort. Further along are bottles of colloidal silver for sale for the treatment of infections that Roger makes at his home. Looking down across the seating area to the far-side of the room is David's colourful organic fruit and vegetables stall, selling tomatoes, onions, carrots, potatoes, garlic, ginger, and chillies. Next to him Jeremy sells home-made kombucha from a great vat, a fermented green tea popular with many attendees for its sweet taste and health benefits. The only stall not ostensibly related to human health would be Giles's homemade jewellery; however, if you were to talk to him, he might well tell you about the healing properties of the different gems, crystals, and geometrical patterns.

At the Birmingham group alone, several presentations were themselves dedicated specifically, and explicitly, to matters of health. These included SMART meters, water and hydration, overcoming the harmful effects of the ego through meditation, a talk entitled 'Survive or Thrive – It's Your Choice!' teaching about nutrition, and a demonstration of an energy medicine device called the Pain Genie. The preponderance of the subject of health, visually-speaking, is not incidental. Its very pervasiveness means that it may become unnoticed to a merely tertiary observation, especially where it manifests only implicitly, such as in the selling of organic food and mineral water. Elsewhere it can be argued that the topic of health constitutes a meta-theme linking together other topics, such as in the theories of David Icke, or in apparently distinct, self-contained domains such as "chemtrails".

6.1.2 Frameworks

In the quest for scholarly coherence in the field of health and illness it is necessary to bring analytical frameworks to break down this immense topic. Vaskilampi provides a sociological framework that captures the 'two fundamental elements of all medical systems': the ideational sphere referring to the 'cognitive and ideological belief system involving for instance perceptions of etiology, natural course of illness, [...] and meaningful explanations for illness', contrasted

with ‘an organisational system involving social relations and legal positions’.³⁴⁷ The question of whether the networked field of health, existing across the truth movement, should be labelled as ‘alternative’, ‘folk’, ‘heterodox’ or ‘orthodox’ (or many other labels besides) in relation to medical orthodoxy is secondary to the presence of these two fundamental elements. Indeed, by demonstrating some degree of coherence in both of these aspects right across the diverse field, coherence and (sociological) viability *as* a field in its own right can be established, from the perspective of a participant observer.

A second framework to which I refer is much less broadly social scientific (since the framework above, notwithstanding the contextual qualification, could be applied to any social institution in theory) and is instead concerned solely with medical systems. According to Vuori,

every medical system has four components: theories concerning the causes of diseases (etiology); theories about the disease process (pathology); the treatment of diseases (therapy); and resources available for treatment (materia medica, i.e. drugs, devices, persons).³⁴⁸

This fourfold distinction allows for more precise comparisons between different systems. This is made pertinent by the context of contemporary Britain set within a globalising world, where multiple medical realities compete in a pluralistic setting.³⁴⁹ This has arguably always been the case through history but, as will become apparent below, truth-seekers navigate this web by making judgement based upon these four different elements. It further allows us to distinguish the key differences and similarities between Britain’s orthodox medical establishment – embodied chiefly in the National Health Service – and its heterodox or unorthodox competitors found in the contemporaneous cultic milieu. Both frameworks help translate emic concepts into the more widely understandable language of etic terms so that, following Samuel, in an excellent adage to the anthropological vision, ‘new things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new’.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁷ Carol McCormack, ‘Introduction’, p. ii; Tuula Vaskilampi, ‘Culture and Folk Medicine’, in *Folk Medicine and Health Culture: Role of Folk Medicine in Modern Health Care: Proceedings of the Nordic Research Symposium 27-28 August 1981 Kuopio Finland*, ed. by Tuula Vaskilampi and Carol P. McCormack (Kuopio: The University of Kuopio, 1982), p. 2. Note that ‘etiology’ and ‘aetiology’ are the American and British English spellings respectively.

³⁴⁸ Hannu Vuori, ‘WHO and Traditional Medicine’, in *Folk Medicine and Health Culture: Role of Folk Medicine in Modern Health Care: Proceedings of the Nordic Research Symposium 27-28 August 1981 Kuopio Finland*, ed. by Tuula Vaskilampi and Carol P. McCormack, (Kuopio: The University of Kuopio, 1982), pp. 181-182.

³⁴⁹ See Hell Johannessen and Imre Lazar, eds, *Multiple Medical Realities: Patients and Healers in Biomedical, Alternative and Traditional Medicine*, (New York: Berghahn, 2006).

³⁵⁰ Samuel Johnson, quoted in I. M. Lewis, *Social Anthropology in Perspective* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 6.

6.2 Negative Portrayals

6.2.1 Biomedical Approaches: What Aren't the Doctors Telling You?

The beliefs and practices I became familiar with during fieldwork were extremely varied in nature but, stretching across all of them, was their opposition to a perceived medical orthodoxy, which took the form of a biomedical or allopathic approach to medicine and healthcare. Negative portrayals of the biomedical establishment in the United Kingdom were prevalent. The health-related constituents of the truth movement are held up as *alternative* relative to them. It is important to begin with the negative portrayals of orthodox medicine because although not all truth-seekers practice the alternatives nor articulate the concomitant counter-conceptualisations, all have met and agree (to some extent) with these conspiracy theories regarding the mainstream approach to healthcare.

Profit Motive

The most common conspiracy attached to the biomedical establishment accuses it of valuing profits over healthcare. This directly conflicts with the supposedly benevolent aim of medical professionals, holding that the Hippocratic Oath is continually broken at a systemic level. In its most extreme form, the clients of the NHS become 'cash-cows' whose illnesses benefit those parties who are high up within the bureaucratic, economic framework that undergirds the late-modern medical establishment. According to truth-seekers, while the mainstream accuses alternative practitioners of profiteering dishonestly through the selling of redundant snake-oil "remedies", orthodox practitioners are guilty of selling snake *venom* that slowly works at killing people, at a staggering financial cost to the victims.

Most often the finger is pointed at the pharmaceutical industry who make a lot of money in spite of the fact that the population appears to be becoming sicker, not healthier, as time moves on. Lisa, a Liverpool-born woman in her late 40s, stated that:

L: I think people are struggling more than ever. I think – everyone's getting more ill, when you look at the cancer – I mean, this is the whole thing for me, if it's so obvious that this society was getting better then why are more and more people getting cancer, and dying early, why? Why is it going up – it used to be one in three, and now it's one in two [...]. Why is it happening if we're a progressive, getting-better society that's all about health and the future, and technological advancements; why are we getting more sick? Because we're eating shite, we're not living healthily, we're not exercising, we're not at one with nature; the pharmaceutical industry's making a bloody fortune, left right and centre, everyone's on [...] statins from the age of 40, it's just a sick, sick, sick society. [...]

Her perception was typical of many truth-seekers I spoke with in highlighting the contradiction apparent in a technologically advancing society where the numbers of people contracting cancer is on the increase. Lisa went on to state how she believed cancer to be “partially” induced by “all the crap we eat”, vowing that she would never have chemotherapy as “it kills *everything*”. “Besides,” she added, “there’s something that caused the cancer in the first place that you probably haven’t changed”. The suggestion here is that rather than acting as a cure, chemo- and radiotherapy fail in etiology (not tackling the underlying causes, merely the symptoms); the treatment is itself held to be harmful, very much in the sense of snake venom; and the *materia medica*, in the form of the drugs being used, are not only harmful but ingenuously expensive. Overall, and at the heart of ruminations over medical orthodoxy, the establishment is itself accused of acting pathologically, having a diseasing, and deleterious effect on its clients.

Chemotherapy was often targeted as an insidious treatment that did far more harm than good and the NHS held as its main sponsor on behalf of corporations who profit enormously from it behind closed doors. One truth-seeker believed each round of treatment cost £40,000, adding, “you do the maths.” On two occasions (in Birmingham and in Hull) a cancer survivor spoke emotionally of their experiences of chemotherapy and the physical costs this treatment brought with it; their recovery was attributed to the alternative therapies, specifically cannabis/hemp oil, that they took alongside, and made aware of through the Internet and a friend’s advice. Numerous respondents had experienced bereavement after exhausting and expensive treatments of chemotherapy which were unable to save that person but nevertheless generated someone, somewhere, a huge amount of money. Similarly, other pharmaceuticals such as statins or anti-depressants are familiar to an enormous percentage of truth-seekers, directly or indirectly, but many doubt their efficacy and see the pharmaceutical industry as financial beneficiaries.

Problem, Reaction, Solution

For some truth-seekers, these biomedical conspiracy theories revolve primarily around profiteering. However, while for some this economics-based conspiracy fits the available evidence and is, in itself, nefarious enough, the conspiracy – following the oft-quoted mantra/conspiratorial litmus test of ‘hidden in plain sight’, i.e. accepted uncritically by the vast majority as a (mere yet immutable) part of social reality – is precisely this capitalistic license to profit regardless of the efficacy of the expensive techniques and treatments used. As academic Beth Singler notes, in an article headed ‘Big Bad Pharma’ based upon research on parents of autistic children who blame vaccinations for the onset of the condition, ‘biomedical conspiracy theories about Big Pharma [...] go further than describing questionable capitalist ethics; they

generate accusations of vainglorious, Frankenstein-like attacks on nature, and manipulations of social behaviour'.³⁵¹ Lisa exemplified this understanding arguing that:

L: ... in essence, to a large extent they cause the illness in the first place, it's like problem-reaction-solution again, the old David Icke theory, they cause it in the first place, then you have to go to them to get it fixed, and then they give you more crap to try and fix it, for which they want more money off you. It's like a vicious cycle, you give money and you're just not getting any better. The way I look at it is, we are literally just cattle [...] there's no empathy [...]. Now I have empathy for cattle because I love animals, but, to them, we're just useless eaters, as they call us. And it's a very depressing picture.

In this instance the medical establishment is accused not of playing God (in the sense of Dr Frankenstein) but as spreading a long-lasting, slow-acting plague upon an unsuspecting population. The invocation of Icke's problem-reaction-solution as a hermeneutic device in the face of (ever-increasing) human illness again places the blame firmly at the feet of our supposed guardians. This 'false-flag' is staged upon the site of individuals' bodies.³⁵² It affects everyone; the ubiquity of disease and illness, and the medical professions charged with remedying it, means that these are not singular spectacles but universal in nature. Misfortune becomes suspect.

Power and Professionalisation

Here we meet with the difficult question, which will crop up continually throughout this ethnography, of who exactly "they" are in relation to "us", the people – the cattle. As truth-seekers argue, the medical professionals themselves are for the large part unaware of their involvement in what is perceived to be a systemic, institutional failing that catches well-meaning individuals in its own organisational, higher logic. The pharmaceutical industry is believed to have co-opted the medical establishment for its own gains. I asked Richard Cumbers, an alternative therapist who promotes a range of alternatives including energy medicine, about his "experiences of the mainstream medical establishment".

It is a difficult one because there are more younger doctors who are openly conscious, and [...] most doctors mean well, but are highly ignorant. [...] You talk to them and you see the sheer programming, very narrow tracks, very narrow bounds of what they see is possible and real. It goes right through their life. A lot of them are actually university professors, spouting the same things *they* learnt from other professors, which was wrong

³⁵¹ Beth Singler, 'Big Bad Pharma: The Indigo Child Concept and Biomedical Conspiracy Theories', in *Nova Religio*, 19.2, p. 20.

³⁵² See the FFCN Chapter for more on problem-reaction-solution. Briefly, this tripartite scheme is a straightforward one: 1) create a problem; 2) shepherd the population's perception of this problem that you have created into a directed response; and 3) provide the solution that assuages the manufactured reaction to the problem that you created in the first place.

and flawed. [...] Unfortunately, most doctors, even if they mean well, even if they are using their intelligence as opposed to their intellect, reading reports, seeing that drugs done this [bad thing], [but] even the way the drugs are presented are highly misleading. They are largely, a lot of them, highly arrogant. ‘I know it all, who are you? Who are you? Everyone holds me in high esteem because I’ve got my white coat on. I help people; what do you do?’ So I think it is highly frustrating – they have little time to see people, big self-importance, big salaries. Arrogance.

This passage articulates a critique of the professionalisation of medical practice, which is held as counter-productive to the actual generation of helpful knowledge and practice. The distinction between intelligence and intellect is especially poignant and questions the authority and legitimacy that springs from schooling as against an unprejudiced quality inherent to all. The powerful symbol of the “white coat” is associated with an impersonal, inauthentic legitimacy, one unrecognised by many truth-seekers; associated instead with the pathologies of an establishment gone wrong. Alternative practitioners subscribe to an organisational logic that contrasts sharply with this portrayal, where empathy, always held to be missing from the biomedical approach, supersedes (hollow) legal recognition. In this sense, excessive professionalisation has a disempowering effect, while alternative practitioners help re-empower individuals with regards to healthcare.

6.2.2. An Unhealthy Environment: A Toxic World Producing Deficient Selves

As evidenced, negative beliefs are applied directly to the orthodox medical establishment, however, for truth-seekers the body is assaulted on many fronts, far beyond the hospital walls. In the truth-seeker worldview, threats to human wellbeing pervade the sphere of the everyday. In this section I will begin to develop a symbolic interactionist understanding where individuals become sensitised to an assortment of risks inherent in the dystopic “progress” of late-modern society. These hazards include toxins added to the water (primarily fluoride, as well as chlorine) and allegedly toxic heavy metals present in state-sponsored vaccinations. Alongside those mentioned above, these threats are at the centre of much discourse, written and oral, within the truth movement. This notional “we” of the truth movement refers not simply to those who possess knowledge of these threats – for this would also include “them”, humanity’s conscious oppressors – but rather to “their” knowledgeable victims.

Deficiency and Toxicity

It is worth noting an important distinction found in emic usage that separates the various threats into two kinds: deficiency and toxicity. Deficiency relates primarily to issues of nutrition. This is held up as a subject that mainstream medicine neglects in large part, which focusses instead on symptoms of diseases resulting from poor education in this area. Often under fire here, is the production of GMO foods with lower levels of nutrients than their natural, organic counterparts.

Deficiency relates largely to issues of nutrition. This is held up as a subject that mainstream medicine neglects in large part, which focusses instead on symptoms of diseases resulting from poor education in this area. One truth-seeker said, “look at American doctors – it costs between one-quarter to half-a-million dollars to get certified; [but] less than a *day* is spent on nutrition”.

Toxicity on the other hand relates to anything that is harmful to human beings (primarily physical but this pertains to mind and spirit, as below). However, in practice, many threats contain elements of both, but the distinction will be helpful in discussing the perceived dangers of food, water, vaccines, and electro-magnetic radiation. My interview with Richard demonstrates this, touching on both toxic and deficient elements:

R: So when you start looking at the vibrations in mercury – how devastating that is for the human body. If one breaks [i.e. mercury used in dental fillings] and you breath it in it would probably kill you. This is good for us, yes? Atomic energy? GMO foods – all the trials show that if you only give GMO foods to rats, mice, rabbits, [then] four generations later there *are* no generations, they’re all dead. Look up Monsanto’s Roundup, the minerals, you get all the diseases of deficiency. Look at the devastation from deck-phones, wi-fi, smart phones. They are wi-fi-ing cities up. I was in a restaurant in London to get a visa to go abroad and there were 44 networks in that café! You are absolutely fried! Look at Barry Trower[‘s] *Silent Weapons for a Quiet World*. They won’t insure people for damage from mobile phones because they must know there is a storm coming. So the problems doctors have, having to face all this, is they are ignorant – in other words ignoring the problem, which they should have the intelligence to look at first-hand, [and] then the issue they have is there are so many effects on the body now – fluorine in the water, chlorine, microwave foods, food with no mineral content, the list goes on and on – these multiple attacks on the body, they have no armoury, nothing to combat that with, apart from looking at symptoms and giving a drug, chopping it off or cutting it out. So as that increases, the multiple effect, I reckon in the next 1-5 years, you are very likely to see hundreds of millions of people dying.

Three particular examples that relate to issues of deficiency and toxicity will now be explored.

Fluoridation

The issue of water is a prominent topic within the truth movement and even serves to defined who identifies with its ideas. The issues is partly related to deficiency, when, for instance, one speaker at an open mic in Birmingham spoke about the importance of being properly hydrated with natural mineral water, but when discussion turns to the fluoride or chlorine in tap-water it relates to toxicity. One of the leaflets available at Truthjuice Birmingham is produced by West Midlands Against Fluoridation (WMAF).

Fluoride is added to our drinking water because the Department of Health believes that it prevents tooth decay. However, the opposite viewpoint, which is promoted in this leaflet, is that it causes permanent damage to teeth, interferes with child development, causing ill health.³⁵³

The leaflet is concerned strictly with physical bodily health, supported by scientific studies available on their website. It makes several further claims: ‘The fluoride added to our water is hazardous toxic waste from the phosphate fertilizer industry (hexafluorosilicic acid)’; the purported reason for its inclusion in drinking water is to target tooth decay in ‘disadvantaged 1-8 year olds’, but, making up only ‘a tiny percentage of this population[,] this is illegal mass medication of the most irresponsible kind’. It mentions that ‘twenty studies from China have reported reduced IQ in children living in areas where the natural fluoride occurred at 1.5ppm per litre of water’, continuing with ‘fluoride is capable of entering most of our body cells where it reduces the production of cell energy’, constituting both an explanation but also a warning to individuals of any age bracket. It has several sections with a comparative, international focus that also localises the threat, for example telling its primarily West Midlands audience, ‘American parents are advised not to prepare baby formula with fluoridated water as this now contains 175 times more fluoride than is found in breast milk [but] West Midlands’ parents are not warned about this danger to their babies’.

In fact, the WMAF go so far as to claim that fluoridation ‘is poisoning us!’. Claiming support from the Medical Directive 2004 and a European Court of Justice 2005 against ‘this very unwise public health practice’, they label fluoride ‘a bio-accumulative, toxic illegal medicine’; since ‘we’re all forced to drink it [...] it’s [therefore] the equivalent of mass medication’.³⁵⁴

In the course my fieldwork the area of Hull became the target of a fresh fluoridation scheme which incited vocal resistance within the Truthjuice group there.³⁵⁵ The organisers were keen to explore this pressing local issue with attendees; one of them gave a talk at an open mic evening. She was well-versed in alternative viewpoints and based her presentation upon data gathered during personal research online. Here, many of the points, above, were articulated (including mentioning WMAF by name to demonstrate a national network of like-minded supportive groups). She included several points that went beyond physical health, including two allegations I heard across

³⁵³ West Midlands Against Fluoridation, leaflet distributed at Truthjuice Birmingham.

³⁵⁴ It should be noted that not all parts of England have fluoridation schemes; those that do include Cumbria, Cheshire, Tyneside, Northumbria, Durham, Humberside, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, the West Midlands and Bedfordshire. *Telegraph Reporter*, ‘The extent of water fluoridation in the UK’, *The Telegraph* (24/2/2015) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/11430233/The-extent-of-water-fluoridation-in-the-UK.html>> [Accessed 9/10/2017].

³⁵⁵ Truthjuice Birmingham did not feature a guest speaker on fluoridation specifically during my fieldwork, but someone at an open mic evening spoke about the importance of water and hydration, encouraging people to avoid the tap-water because of its toxic content and instead to buy bottled water or, ideally, to find a local spring, advocating glass containers over plastic.

other sites in conversational contexts: first, concerning the history of fluoridation programmes, that it was proposed by Hitler in Nazi Germany,³⁵⁶ and that it originated in Soviet prisoner-of-war camps because it supposedly makes people more docile. Second, she shared the viewpoint that fluoride supposedly calcifies in the brain around the pineal gland.³⁵⁷ Referring to an image of a cross-section of the brain, the speaker compared it with the eye of Horus from Egyptian folklore and noted that “it is said” to be the physiological seat of the “third eye”.³⁵⁸ Excessive calcification is thought to suppress an individual’s psychic capacities, preventing them from noetic “waking up” experiences and realising their full potential.

This example demonstrates how, in terms of the medical framework, the disease process inflicted upon people is addressed firstly through public acts of correct diagnosis against the misinformed diagnoses of the medical orthodoxy. We see here already the way that these health hazards affect not only the physical body, but the mind, and spirit, preventing people from realising the “one” truth: humanity is ensnared by a hidden elite in a state of holistic dis-ease. The holistic solutions that follow are warranted precisely by the holistic threat (affecting mind-body-spirit) that the “awakened” truth-seekers can perceive around us.

Vaccinations

Another perceived threat to health are vaccinations. Mass vaccinations are sponsored by several institutions that belong to the establishment, including government, health bodies, charities, and international NGOs. There is a perceived link between the MMR vaccination and cases of autism. More broadly, it is believed that the toxins and drugs contained will disrupt and stultify a child’s innate imaginative, creative and/or spiritual nature; it is one of the first steps in the conspirers’ production of a psychopathic, in the sense of non-empathic and psychically-dead, society. As a result of these beliefs, it is not uncommon for truth-seekers to advocate withholding from any “mandatory” vaccinations.

Here again are also those who subscribe only to economic explanations, supposing financial deals exist between governments, medical agencies, and pharmaceutical companies. The subject of mass outbreaks of new viruses and the production of vaccinations to combat them by international health agencies (often singling out the World Health Organisation (WHO)) is another thread found commonly within the communications milieu of the wider truth movement. Ebola and the

³⁵⁶ This point bore explicit negative connotations; that this went unchallenged would suggest that historical revisionists sympathetic to Hitler were either absent, silent, or a silent minority (I suspect the latter).

³⁵⁷ She did not present this as “fact”, but as a claim she had encountered during research, encouraging people to check it out for themselves.

³⁵⁸ Interestingly, Rene Descartes called the pineal gland the seat of the soul; and Madame Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy, later called the pineal gland the “third eye”. The speaker did not herself make these connections, but it substantiates the link with esoteric traditions. Sheper-Hughes and Lock, p. 6; Gert-Jan Lokhorst, ‘Descartes and the Pineal Gland’, in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/pineal-gland>> [accessed 9/11/17].

more recent Zika viruses are two examples from during my own research. The problem-reaction-solution scheme serves as the hermeneutic; these epidemics were believed to be manufactured as a means of legitimising mass medication with public support. There are further echoes here of the much older conspiracy theory concerning the outbreak of AIDs among black (and homosexual) communities. The key difference or development, from a historical point of view, ties in with fears of depopulation programmes: these vaccinations, laced with toxic heavy metals such as mercury, are alleged to sterilise target populations; these results might manifest only in later generations. However, an alternative explanation for mass epidemics, which relates them back onto the individual and their home-communities, is that they are media creations, deliberated exaggerated – if not altogether invented. They are designed either to incite fear and panic in populations (crucially *at home* and overseas) or to distract them from other developments.

EMF

The final danger relates to electro-magnetic frequencies (EMF). As with the above excerpt from Richard, this risk is associated with an increase in “phone masts bombarding you all over the place”, compared with earlier times. One speaker at Birmingham’s Truthjuice group focussed on the introduction of SMART meters into British homes, that is, communicative technologies that effectively wire households into the internet through the exchange of EMF. As with “diet” soft drinks, the prefix SMART is viewed cynically as a marketing ploy to make this harmful technology attractive to a misinformed general public. The talk linked SMART technology not only to physically harmful radiation, but included also social risks insofar that (previously private) information becomes a valuable, tradeable commodity. The speaker speculated that by connection to an external mainframe a slippery slope is conceivable whereby a household’s energy supply might be controlled externally. An audience member speculated that this could lead to energy rations and penalties targeting “us” rather than “them”.³⁵⁹ The suggested course of action was to resist the installation of SMART meters. When I mentioned this talk about the apparent dangers of SMART meters to an interviewee from the Blackpool group, they replied, “I will not allow them access. They will not get in or replace *my* meter. I am serious. Microwaves [exasperatedly] – I don’t want that! [laughs]”. Microwave ovens were likewise shunned by many truth-seekers I met with because the invisible microwaves are regarded as potentially cancerous and/or liable to deplete the nutritional value of food, therefore contributing to toxicity and deficiency.³⁶⁰ For Richard, the advancements in information technologies represent pressing dangers to body and mind:

From the 70s to now, technology has gone from huge great hulking things you couldn’t move anywhere, to what you hold in your hand, or stick in your ear, [and] Bluetooth. But

³⁵⁹ The audience member also said he had heard about “Agenda 21” and wondered if this was connected to that “idea”, prompting nods and murmurs of agreement among the audience; see below.

³⁶⁰ Very few owned one; many had removed theirs upon hearing about the supposed dangers.

there's the other side of things – all this technology is potentially damaging to your DNA, your brainwaves.

These various threats recall sociologist Ulrich Beck's conceptualisation of a 'risk'-laden society that 'travel on the wind and in the water [...] air to breath, food, clothing, home furnishings'.³⁶¹ Most disturbingly, nowhere seems safe, since 'they pass through all the otherwise strictly controlled protective areas of modernity'.³⁶² Again, civilisation's so-called "progress" is seen as potentially dangerous.³⁶³

6.2.3 Agenda 21

Still focussing on the ideational sphere in its more negative, oppositional form, it is worth discussing the alternative explanations for these attacks on humanity. As already seen, the economic, capitalistic conspiracy is one hermeneutic in circulation. If humans are being continually assaulted by health hazards (with the majority of these threats perceived to be carcinogenic) these appear to be profitable for the biomedical-cum-pharmaceutical industry. However, for many others, this is only the outward expression of much darker, more hidden machinations; money is held to be merely the currency of control. Focussing on the various threats to human health, the other popular explanations for them is firstly that a *weakened* population is easier to control; secondly, taking this overriding logic of parties aiming to control humanity to its most extreme form, these threats are targeting the entire species as a wholesale programme of mass depopulation.

The emic term for this most nefarious conspiracy is "Agenda 21". I first heard this phrase at the first talk I attended on the subject of the "Flat Earth" theory which, in one truthseeker's opinion, it was only "a bit of fun" (see Chapter Six); he contrasted it with the "heavier topics" such as "Agenda 21", warning me, with a chuckle, that it was not the sort of topic you want to research immediately before going to bed. Popularised largely through the widely-read works of David Icke, the term derives from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.³⁶⁴ According to Wikipedia, 'Agenda 21 is a non-binding, voluntarily implemented action plan of the United Nations with regard to sustainable development'.³⁶⁵ For truth-seekers it constitutes the ultimate Trojan horse (as with much

³⁶¹ Beck, Ulrich, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1986), pp. 40-41.

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ For secondary literature see Leo Marx and Bruce Mazlish, eds, *Progress: Fact or Illusion?* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996), especially Leon Eisenberg, 'Medicine and Idea of Progress', pp. 45-64. The authors use quantitative data to demonstrate that strokes and heart attack deaths have fallen but cancer deaths have risen.

³⁶⁴ Icke, *Remember*, pp. 331-332.

³⁶⁵ UNEP, 'The Rio Conference and Montreal Protocol', <<http://www.unep.org/ozonaction/About/TheRioConferencesandMontrealProtocol/tabid/1060466/Default.asp>> [accessed 5/5/2016].

environmentalism, and other programmes originating from the UN). Beginning with a quote from the United Nations Environment Programme's website, Icke writes:

Agenda 21 is 'a comprehensive blueprint of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the UN, governments, and major groups in every area in which humans directly affect the environment'. Hold on, I'll just pass that across my Orwellian Translation Unit . . . back in a sec . . . 'Okay, thank you, bye.' Right, this apparently means that Agenda 21 is about mass depopulation, stealing much of the Earth's surface in the name of protecting it, and imposing a fascist control-structure at all levels that would make humans nothing more than fully-fledged microchipped serfs and slave.³⁶⁶

Agenda 21: Super-Conspiracy

Individuals who engage with sites across the truth movement will, sooner or later, come across this term. As I have encountered it, emphasis is given particularly, if not exclusively, to mass depopulation. It constitutes what Barkun called a 'superconspiracy', 'conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically'.³⁶⁷ The economic hermeneutic, encapsulated in the common personal research guideline to "follow the money", becomes a strategy to determine the (otherwise hidden) power-holders in this more sinister, goal-oriented plot, through which most other conspiracy theories become intelligible. For some truth-seekers, all roads, all plots, all conspiracies, lead to this final act of destruction; and in this apocalyptic scenario 'we' must uncover its interwoven threads to unravel the grand scheme itself, preventing the final calamity by spreading awareness. This focus on the realisation of the end-times, discerned (and all-too-discernible) in the shifting patterns of present-day reality, happens at the phenomenological level; Agenda 21 is being pushed forward if only one has eyes the see.

I must stress that the truth movement's ideational sphere is neither dogmatic nor prescriptive; Agenda 21 serves as a useful reminder of that. Rather, this notion behaves like a non-formative *informational* authority; the weight of such ideas is dependent upon individuals' own positions and relations within their social network.³⁶⁸ At an 'open mic' event at Truthjuice Hull one of the (grassroots) speakers presented on 'big pharma'. He chose this topic because 'health is the most important thing in your life so it's *massive* that you look after yourself'.³⁶⁹ His focus was largely on the acute dangers of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), noting the high level of toxicity deaths. More mundane, but personally more pertinent to my own life experience, were his claims that paracetamol, and other pain killers, hurt the liver. Pharmacology was said to be engaged in a medical war to conquer nature and constituted the Medical Nemesis.³⁷⁰ This was

³⁶⁶ Icke, *Remember*, p. 332.

³⁶⁷ Barkun, *Conspiracy*, p. 6.

³⁶⁸ Wood, p. 243.

³⁶⁹ From fieldnotes. Each talk lasted approximately twenty minutes including questions and/or discussion.

³⁷⁰ Here he presented a picture of Prometheus, explicitly emphasising the sense that humans are attempting to steal fire from the gods and getting/will get punished.

taken from writer Ivan Illich, from “mainstream not conspiracy channels”. The question he posed to the thirty or so people present in the working man’s club in Hull was: is this a nefarious reality, as the speaker thought, stemming from an economic model that is heartless and wrong but motivated by making money; or is this part of an extra-economic *agenda* like ‘Agenda 21’, added an audience member. Roughly half the room seemed to agree with the latter, that these ineffective drugs, and the deaths, were completely intended.

As the presentation gave way to points *debating* or at least *dwelling upon* this question, someone brought up (in support of Agenda 21) ‘The Georgia Guidestones’.³⁷¹ Often brought up in conjunction with the possibility of a depopulation programme, the Guidestones are well-known among truth-seekers (while, significantly for truth-seekers, virtually unheard-of by the British mainstream). Independent researcher Andy Thomas, describes them as follows:³⁷²

In 1979, plans for a mysterious monument at Elbert County, Georgia (USA), [...] were submitted Resembling a Stonehenge-like collection of vertical slabs, carved inscriptions on the stones [...] record a decree of the artist’s aspirations of the world, but are seen by some people as euphemisms to represent the ultimate intentions of the Illuminati. These include references to the formation of a ‘world court’ and utilise phrases implying the necessity for eugenics (‘guide reproduction wisely – improving fitness and diversity’). Most unsettlingly the stones proclaim that humanity should keep its numbers ‘under 500,000,000’. If this recommendation was to be adhered to, it would mean reducing the current population of the world by nine-tenths. [...] Certainly, it seems odd that such a public avocation of mass extermination is allowed to stand unchallenged.³⁷³

For some truth-seekers this is yet another example of the super-conspiracy “hidden in plain sight”, visible to any who have “woken up” to the one truth. For some it simply vindicates their suspicions in the sense of supplying ‘probable cause’ for an extra-economic conspiracy. However, discussions like that at the open mic evening are marked by differences of opinion but are generally amicable.³⁷⁴ This stems partly from the fact that Agenda 21, in both cases, is a counter-narrative whose plausibility arises from stressing certain aspects of this-worldly, material reality – whether the UNEP’s treaty, or a granite monument in Georgia, or citing alleged moments of incongruous madness inherent in the mainstream’s plausibility structure. The over-arching theory might be rejected but the problematic particulars used as evidence stubbornly defy easy

³⁷¹ Wikipedia contributors, ‘Georgia Guidestones’, *Wikipedia* (1/5/2018) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_Guidestones> [accessed 2/5/2018]. This structure is talked about also by other well-known researchers including Icke, *Remember*, p. 338.

³⁷² According to his book jackets, ‘Andy Thomas is one of Britain’s leading authors on unexplained mysteries and global cover-ups’. I talk more about Andy when dealing with the historical and social scientific side of the “official” 9/11 Truth Movement in Chapters Four and Seven.

³⁷³ Andy Thomas, *The Truth Agenda* (Forest Row: Vital Signs, 2013 [2009]), p. 72.

³⁷⁴ The only possible exception to that rule I personally encountered during fieldwork concerned the anti-Semitism versus anti-Zionism debate.

explanation. In any case ‘Agenda 21’ acts as a discursive symbol and truth-seekers understand its meanings even if they do not subscribe to it completely. This reflects the non-dogmatic, individualistic ethos that characterises truth-seeker culture. Notions are shared between people without mandating belief. Rather than a singularly expressed superconspiracy uniting truth-seekers, their ideational sphere bespeaks a shared sense of dutiful opposition to a range of commonly perceived threats.³⁷⁵

6.3. Positive Responses

This section will unpack the positive components of the ideational sphere. Recalling the four substantive elements of a medical system, we have so far seen a critique of the treatment or therapy offered by mainstream biomedicine, and an alternative etiology that focuses upon latent threats in the surrounding environment. Moving beyond these more negative conceptualisations, I will discuss the truth movement’s theories of the disease process (‘pathology’) which are rooted fundamentally in a positive (in the sense of providing answers as against critiquing those already in circulation) reconceptualisation of the human body. These practices of self-regulation are situated within an ideational framework of empowerment. The holistic solutions that follow are warranted precisely by the holistic threat (affecting mind-body-spirit) that the truth-seekers can perceive around us. Thus, in order to situate this, let us first turn towards the perception of the threats and risks that these emergent solutions address.

6.3.1 Everyday Threats: Everyday Solutions

Replacing the ‘status fate in medieval society’, Beck talks about ‘a kind of *risk fate in developed civilization*, into which one is born, which one cannot escape with any amount of achievement’.³⁷⁶ Conspiracy theory renders at least some of the offending risks manageable and solvable through individual practice. The unwanted and inescapable ills of the sick society are diagnosed, thereby bringing into relief programmes of action, menus of resources to mobilise as part of strategies of individuated resistance. While the same cannot be said of all other forms of perceived oppression (such as the way that Truthjuice Birmingham meets with the more social ill of homelessness by giving out sleeping bags and toiletries to their native homeless population), risks to human health are encountered by individuals who, in becoming conscious of the threats, are able to make practical decisions that enable individuals to combat them.

It is worth highlighting the ubiquity of all these different threats. Carried by water, food, and air, the threats pervade the mediums of everyday life. Little wonder that they dominate both semi-formal (talks, websites, and books) and informal (social media and face-to-face conversations) truth-seeker discourse. They function as key symbols through which the greater plot – however

³⁷⁵ I use the word ‘threat’ over one such as ‘risk’ in order to capture the immediacy of the emic perspective; these are not *potentially* dangerous but *purposive* and *immanent* dangers.

³⁷⁶ Beck, *Risk Society*, p. 41.

this overall web of motivation and effect is understood by individual truth-seekers – manifests itself; “conspiracy theories” are not abstractions but embodied in bodily encounters with everyday phenomena. The ideational aspects of health and wellbeing are thus realised in the lens of the phenomenological; they are “hidden in plain sight” in the kitchen, the bathroom, the supermarket, the pub, and, most perversely, inside schools and hospitals. Contrary to Beck’s assertion that practical courses of action ‘hardly exist for the simple reason that the toxins and pollutants are interwoven with the natural basis and the elementary life processes of the industrial world’, a mix of awareness and actions serves to mediate these threats to human health, even though individuals are forced to co-habit with the fruits of technological and economic progress and their concomitant risks alike.³⁷⁷

Having learned to reinterpret Wi-Fi, for example, not as mere convenience but as a threat to holistic well-being, truth-seekers become motivated towards an active journey of personal research into other instances of harmfulness permeating a shared material universe. Conspiracy theory, then, in this integral sphere of being healthy – of being fully human – is less an abstract intellectualism divorced from the here-and-now and more an intimate and personal phenomenological enterprise with ontological ramifications for the entire collective. In my role as participant observer, as I spent time among truth-seekers I experienced first-hand Luhrmann’s notion of ‘interpretive drift’ I linked to the “waking up” process as I became socialised into an increasingly sensitivity to the (extra-)ordinary effects of the everyday.³⁷⁸ In time, these threats became ordinary, and a way of thinking about other ordinary ailments such as headaches – ‘What have I eaten lately? Is there a SMART meter in the building?’

In etic terms, I came to view the truth-seeker perspective as resembling a type of poststructuralist discourse focussing on the ‘body politic’; essentially an elite class is believed to dominate the vast majority, chiefly by controlling the means of production.³⁷⁹ Producers and suppliers of water, food, drugs, and information technologies play a pivotal role in this respect. In contemporary Britain individuals necessarily turn to numerous third parties, often at some remove, for the fulfilment of their basic needs. Crucially, this domination is achieved *and maintained* through a continual mystification of the social order so that the subordinated classes – that is, the victims of the oppression – mistake it for a taken-for-granted, immutable reality. In late-modern society, however, the Marxist focus on the means of production should widen to means of consumption: that is, individuals live lives where their *patterns of consumption* are mediated by the socio-political power-holders. As we turn towards the practical solutions to Agenda 21 that are found

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁸ See Howard Becker’s classic essay on symbolic interaction whereby individuals are socialised by peers into interpreting phenomenal experiences in a certain way. Howard Becker, ‘Becoming a Marijuana User’, *Symbolic Interaction*, ed. by Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967; repr. 1970), pp. 411-422.

³⁷⁹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock, ‘The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology’, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 1.1 (1987), 6-41.

within the truth movement we will see that self-empowerment is still possible by reflexively reclaiming authority over some of these patterns. The body is both the site and agent of battle, within the larger struggle for dominance over the body politic.

6.3.1. The Hidden Potential of the Human Body

At a café in Hull I was interviewing Pippa and Ian.³⁸⁰ The conversation turned to certain individuals who were put on an activist/terrorist watch-list by the authorities:

N: So he was connected with fracking?

I: No. Just a bog standard left-wing guy, never expecting to change the world, but wanting to get involved in a few local issues, see what you could do. I met the guy. Least likely guy you would expect to [be on a list] –

P: People who watch Star Trek and X Files are put on watch lists. Patrick mentioned it.³⁸¹ Someone put it online. In the 80s – you were put on lists!

I: It's much deeper than this. We're only scratching the surface here. But it's the active surface. It's front line. Why do you think it is they have tried to track everyone who is rhesus negative?

N: Blood-type, right? Why? I don't know.

I: Because the DNA is very different from everybody else's.

P: You should speak to <bob> and <bob> who did an interview on *Legalise Freedom Radio* – he was talking about DNA [and] brought a book out.

N: DNA . . . its healing potential? Or what?

I: The full human potential goes way beyond anything we can begin to imagine, and what elements in the establishment know is some of these capabilities are starting to emerge. That's part of why they had this multi-pronged attack, to keep everybody in the black. They know that every human has the potential to achieve their full potential, whatever that might be, whenever they come into this physical realm, and their challenge is to make sure this doesn't happen. Zabriniski [author of *The Grand Chessboard*] acknowledged it a few years ago when he established a one world government fearing a spiritual, political awakening of the masses. Everyone has different talents in the physical and material

³⁸⁰ Pippa is considered to be a front-line activist within the truth movement who has made great gains through freedom of information requests regarding the use of biometric technology in schools. Ian is a “big hitter” within truth-seeking network here in Britain who speaks extensively across different groups, was a founding member of the United Kingdom's former “official” 9/11 Truth group, organises the annual Alternative View conferences, and is the leading activist in the opposition to fracking.

³⁸¹ Patrick is a well-known speaker/radio-host within Truth Movement, from America, who spoke at an Alternative View conference.

realms – write, draw, talk – it’s exactly the same with the *non*-material capabilities – they are all different. The establishment just knows that when those talents start to emerge they’re not going to have the tools to control them. And *they*, it seems, they-who-think-they-are-the-rightful-rulers, don’t have access to these capabilities, which is why they try and find people who *do* display capabilities.

This interview draws attention to the fundamental importance attributed to man’s biology. DNA belongs to the category of physicality, to biological materiality, but is tied intimately to non-material phenomena that humankind have the potential to harness. This mention of blood-type cropped up repeatedly across different theoretical areas, perhaps most popularly (certainly within popular representations of “conspiracy theorists”) in connection with ruling “bloodlines”; blood, ubiquitous to all, serves as a key symbol and metaphor with which to talk about the conspired world. Ian’s assertion that rhesus negative DNA is *different* to other types paints it as more *advanced* than others in evolutionary terms; *all* individuals are believed to possess a capacity for extra-ordinary abilities *except* the psychopathic conspirers. The “front line” of conspiracy narratives then, is humanity’s most immediate environment, the external world embodied organically in the human body itself. This latter theme recurred constantly; the body is the battlefield. Human potentiality is part of the natural human condition, suppressed by an elite who are ontologically *less-than-human*. Truth-seekers thus seek ways to reclaim the extraordinary as an ordinary staple of human existence.

Restoring Deficiency

In my interview with Sally the capacity of the body for self-healing was the subject of much of our conversation.

S: To be honest, you know when people are born – your anatomy is so diverse between families, all your organs look different to someone else’s, and some people – it’s like in my family, depression is really bad. So, people have committed suicide. My daughter’s having a bout of it at the moment. My dad has it, I have it, and it’s a chemical imbalance. Our bodies find it hard to metabolise B vitamins and we need to top that up. So I think more people should put their trust in themselves to look after their own health, go to basics. If I’m getting depression maybe I’m not getting enough B vitamins. You can put that in your own hands and you can help it. There are deficient things in everyone, it’s just locating and pinpointing what they are, and becoming alright with that, and having vitamins so you won’t get depressed so much. I was on Prozac for a very long time and it wasn’t a very nice place. Young people on anti-depressants are more likely to commit suicide, so it’s not really helping. I believe if you are deficient in something, because of my experience with scurvy, and the pain, and everything, because I wasn’t giving my body what it needs. It’s a very important thing. I strongly believe in that so much now

because I've experienced it and I know it works. And the B vitamins as well. [...] You can be fine and "click" it just comes. And when [my daughter] takes the B vitamins it starts to elevate because that's what her body needed, and it's reacting depressive because it's saying, 'I need these B vitamins to be alright'. If you've got a bad back and it's aching, your body is saying it needs whatever.

N: It means it rephrases it. You're not someone –

S: - I'm not sick.

N: You're someone who needs certain vitamins, and that's different [to being sick], you're not defined by it, you are a human being with needs.

S: Your body tells you what it wants. When they say, 'I'm really sick, I've got cancer', whatever, it's the body crying out, saying, I need this now, because we're getting bad because you're not giving us what we need. And lo and behold, when you give your body what it needs, it does repair itself. It's a fantastic machine. It needs far more respect than people give it. When you look after your *body* you look after *you*. If you've got any aches and pains you need to look into it and find out why. Because I went to the doctor's and they didn't do anything. It's important and it can be solved by vitamins. Just changing your diet can cure cancer. And they know this. They'll say it's another conspiracy theory but the pharmaceutical company has power within the drug industry and they're not going to make any profit if we take vitamins. It's in their interest to be against alternative leads or diets, but as long as you do your research you're not putting your health at risk. [...] But if everyone is well, they'll be out of business. But if they keep giving people antidepressants they can't think then, and they're not going to have a very good experience are they? [...] The pharmaceutical company had good intentions initially, but it seems like it's corrupted now. It was more natural at one point. It's interesting because I like to look at things and in the Bible it was saying that, it wasn't witchcraft, it was a Greek word, pharma, and pharmacy, and it was talking about it was the most evil thing and you can't participate in it. So it's a question in the past [too]. It's a sign to say: pharmaceutical companies, don't eat any of it, because it's the worst thing you can possibly do. It's forbidden.

Several key themes emerge from this excerpt. Firstly, there is the idea that the human body can take care of itself if it is not deficient in its lifeblood of vitamins. Diseases are not simply the result of deficiencies but the articulation of them. Having heard their message the individual is able to provide the body with whatever it needs. Depression is not to be solved but listened to. This then comes down to self-education, and the deployment of self-knowledge as learned through personal research. Indeed, in light of the misguided state of the pharmaceutical approach to healthcare, it becomes the individual's own responsibility to realise their body's inherent state

of well-being. While Simone is a self-identified truth-seeker she does not speak in terms that are hard for an outsider to understand, indicating the way that the alternative approach is not unorthodox but merely heterodox, and even then such a classification is dependent on preconceived categories. The authority is not anti-scientific but is rather drawn from an alternative to the perceived *dominant* scientific approach, namely allopathic, instead championing a nutritional treatment that works with the human body.

Secondly, personal experiences of positive change affirmed the belief in the body's own propensity for affecting a state of good health. There is an element of narrativisation present as Simone looks back to her time on Prozac which stands in stark contrast to the vitamin-based therapy. Such stories are powerful for the individual, and come to be shared within the truth movement, affecting a reconceptualisation of the human body by others.

Detoxing Toxicity

This was further confirmed by Dennis. A regular attendee at the Truthjuice, Hull, group for two years at the time, I asked him what he thought was the most valuable thing he had learned from the talks there:

D: The other night we had a guy who had stopped eating for 60 days, just drinking distilled water, and his body didn't weaken at all. Dave Allegedly.³⁸² It was absolutely brilliant. He was drinking distilled water 'cos that's what flushes your system out. He was saying you don't need to eat to live. In the Sumerian, it says the gods didn't need to eat to live. They ate for pleasure. There's a difference. The life force is from the air you breath, the oxygen. This is what Dave Allegedly says, and he proved it – 60 days. Could have continued but social pressure – wife wanted [him] to sit down at the table with the kids. He does eat a bit now, but he doesn't eat much. You should also drink your own pee coz it's purer than tap water. It also sends a message to your body to detox. Your body is full of toxins. That's why people are fat and it's hard to lose weight. It makes sense! I'm not a food lover. I hate food. I sometimes forget to eat. My mate's in hospital – cancer of the stomach and other ailments. He's a year younger than me, 62. I'm 63. I still run up and down the stairs, ladders, still fit. [I] don't eat much sugar or chocolate.

N: I don't understand about urine. Thought it was water plus toxins.

D: No, your toxins come out your poo. That's through your liver. Your kidneys send the water out pure. Drink distilled water 'coz it's got no extra toxins like fluoride. That's what he does. It tells your body to detox. Another thing he did, while on his 60 days, 2 weeks of it he decided to lay down for an hour and go through his gym training cycle, on hour, for two weeks. In the first 2 days he'd lost 7 lbs, then went back up to 5 and

³⁸² The same Dave Allegedly who spoke about the Flat Earth Theory in Birmingham. See Chapter Eight.

stabilised – and he weren't eating, and then he did this and his body built up even though he weren't eating. That's powerful testimony that. This guy is no bull shitter. He'd investigated it thoroughly before he even did it. The bottom line is. . . it costs you for food, it costs you for heating. When I was young, met my wife, I had long hair like yours, wore jeans and moccasins that soaked up the water, and a blue shirt, open to here, and a little blue hat on, and I weren't cold. Mind over matter.

Dave Allegedly's own experiences and practices are shared across the network with the physical meeting-place functioning as a platform. These are both filtered through Dennis's personal experiences that stretch back to when he was much younger, thereby making these valuable and meaningful to him. His present-day dietary habits are vouchsafed as meaningful (or 'sacred' in Mol's sense of acquiring a 'taken-for-granted' quality, or Rappaport's sense of being 'beyond question') by drawing upon the traditional authority of the Sumerian myths.³⁸³ As with Simone, mystical-religious authority is combined with the credibility afforded to the alternative speaker who claimed to talk from his own personal experience (rather than intellectual abstractions associated with biomedical practitioners) alongside enough scientific plausibility.

6.3.4 Diet and Nutrition: Everyday Empowerment

The body's potential is realised against the threat of toxins through a change in dietary and nutritional habits. Both persons perceive such practices to be against the mainstream grain and therefore alternative. In the secondary academic literature dietary and nutritional therapy is not always considered counter-cultural but might instead be categorised as 'popular' rather than 'alternative' medicine.³⁸⁴ The ever-present contrast with allopathic medicine ensures that for truth-seekers such practices fall firmly into the latter category even while the opposite point of view might be sustained. Coward pinpoints a 'fundamental message' underlying 'all the advice in the healthy-living circles [...] – it avaieth nought unless you attend to your diet'.³⁸⁵

The wider turn towards healthy eating has coincided with a greater awareness of potential dangers lurking in diet choices, with the very advent of Beck's risk society, a sociology resting fundamentally upon increasing levels of reflexivity in post-traditional society. Coward claims that 'diet is the privileged arena where the sense of personal responsibility for our health can be worked out. *'No wonder there has been such panic as the facts about the adulteration at source have become widely known'*.³⁸⁶ As new pieces of information about possible risks and/or threats are shared between individuals across social spaces, such as Truthjuice groups, individuals reclaim control over their physical well-being by attending to the everyday concerns of diet. This

³⁸³ Mol, *Identity*, p. 5; Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1999), p. 209.

³⁸⁴ Vaskilimi, 'Introduction', p. viii.

³⁸⁵ Rosalind Coward, 'The Meaning of Health Foods', in *Consumption, Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences Volume 4*, ed. by Daniel Miller, p. 50.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

aspect of truth-seeking resembles the sort of domestic or “hearth-based” religion that Myerhoff talks about that manifests itself through everyday practices in the home, thereby attaining its endurance and vitality as a living faith.³⁸⁷

In Mauss’s terms, this is the production of a certain *habitus* in accordance with a set of counter-cultural understandings of the physical environment.³⁸⁸ Sociologist Max Weber used this same term when talking about the connection between a religion’s conception of the divine and their ideas and practices concerning salvation.³⁸⁹ For truth-seekers, possessed by an ethic of conviction springing from the conviction of conspiracy, salvation rests upon further revealing the conspiracy, and, crucially, remedying its ills; only then is one saved from ignorance and holistic deficiency.

Fundamentally important to the behavioural forms that this *habitus* takes is the ideational focus of “conspiracy theory” to different modes of power relationships, especially infringements on personal liberty and wellbeing. Here, the work of Michel Foucault on power is useful to aid our analysis because he shares their preoccupation with issues of power and domination. Foucault distinguishes four types of knowledge technologies: technologies of production enable us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; technologies of sign systems enable communication via meanings, symbols, or signification; technologies of power ‘determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination’; and technologies of self ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being’, ‘transforming’ themselves in such a way that achieves ‘happiness, purity, wisdom, or immortality’.³⁹⁰ Through altering patterns of consumption, truth-seekers engage in technologies of the self in a way that combats the technologies of power to which they are subjected on an ongoing, daily basis.³⁹¹ The practices that truth-seekers adopt, whether drawn directly from alternative channels or appropriated from the mainstream, have a subversive quality that explicitly challenges the perceived relations of power between self and society, or truth-seeker and controllers. Truth-seekers’ technologies of the self, contextualised by extrinsic technologies of power, thus become technologies of resistance.

Foucault also helps illuminate the way in which these technologies of resistance assume their significance to truth-seekers *because of* their greater sensitivity to forms of domination. Just as Foucault argued that modern developments in medicine did not result in the elimination of disease, but rather, ‘the whole dark underside of disease came to light [...] [when] what was

³⁸⁷ Barbara Myerhoff, “Jewish Comes Up in You from the Roots”, in ed. by Michael Lambek, *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 346-7.

³⁸⁸ Marcel Mauss, ‘Techniques of the Body’, in *Beyond the Body Proper*, ed. by Margaret Locke and Judith Farquhar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 50-68.

³⁸⁹ Weber, *Sociology*, pp. 158-159.

³⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michael Foucault*, ed. by L. H. Martin (London: Tavistock, 1988), p. 18.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

fundamentally invisible is suddenly offered to the brightness of the gaze'.³⁹² By revealing previously unseen dangers, truth-seekers have likewise changed the 'forms of visibility' and brought fresh dangers to light.³⁹³ Similarly, the focus on technologies of power such as Codex Alimentarius reveals a near-perfected system of 'bio-power' that Foucault himself perceived as motive force in the development of modern civilisation.³⁹⁴ Yet the important point is that by perceiving ever-greater forms of domination in society truth-seekers also illuminate further avenues of resistance.

With this in mind, the dispositions of consumption are subtle but of crucial significance as to why truth-seekers do not suffer from the 'disabling' effect of "conspiracy theory" as stipulated by Fenster, and Hofstadter.³⁹⁵ Only towards the end of my numerous interviews did I realise that I was never given or even offered tap-water; the practice had become second-nature to truth-seekers. The nightmarish concept of Agenda 21 considered as a whole, inferring that social reality is pervaded by threats to health and well-being, might understandably be assumed to disable truth-seekers. However, this deadly 'whole', like Bauman says of 'the total and unassailable prospect of death' within modern life, 'has been sliced and fragmented into innumerable small and smaller-still threats to survival'.³⁹⁶ Viewed as such, solutions emerge as a set of practices rooted in individuated patterns of consumption. This is achieved partly through different speakers addressing different aspects of Agenda 21; each week, truth-seekers hear about a selection of threats with concomitant responses.

In my role of participant observer, I therefore stopped drinking tap-water and drank only bottled mineral water. I had never given much thought to drinking water – if anything, I did not drink enough of it – but upon changing to bottled water I experienced a sense of empowerment by knowing that I was drinking pure, "natural" water. Perhaps I was simply more aware that I was better hydrating myself, but the heightened sense of wellbeing was palpable; furthermore, every drink of water reminded me of both the conspiracy narrative *behind* the action and the holistic ideational framework. In this sense, the greater conspiracy manifested in aspects of the physical universe, while its solutions are embodied in the flesh; and again, my body was the battlefield, only now I understood that I had recourse to claim ongoing private victories from lessons gleaned from the wider movement.

³⁹² Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge, 2012 [1975]), pp. 241-242.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

³⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 143.

³⁹⁵ See Introduction; Fenster, p. 6; Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, p. 40.

³⁹⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, 'Postmodern Religion?', in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. by Paul Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 67.

6.4 Spiritual ‘Healing’

Although rooted in physicality truth-seekers repeatedly tie bodily practices to a spiritual dimension. Simone, for example, talked about how “good diet, things of that nature, it enhances your body and people can become spiritual [...] your soul and your body are very close so it’s important to look after yourself.” The domain of the natural is imbued with spiritual potentiality, expressing a holistic ontology. Dennis’s remark of “mind over matter” is not meaningless but a statement of the interconnections existing between the material and immaterial universe. Intentionality amounts to an exercise of power over physical reality.

6.4.1 Science of the New Age

This is one clear example of a cross-over with New Age interest in science, expressing the ‘ubiquitous dictum ‘change your mind; change your reality’ that is the basis for so many New Age practices’.³⁹⁷ Truth-seekers move beyond models of Cartesian dualism in certain respects, notably the ‘fundamental opposition between spirit and matter, mind and body’.³⁹⁸ Like the New Age, however, they reproduce the dualistic distinction between the left/right brain hemispheres, but champion proclivities associated with the right-side such as intuitiveness, subjectivity, and creativity, over the supposedly analytical, objective, and rationalist left-side.³⁹⁹

I encountered the term ‘holism’ rarely in emic usage, but the idea of an interconnected ‘harmonious whole’ between the individual and the cosmos – and certainly the connectedness of mind-body-spirit as expressed in this chapter’s interview excerpts – is prevalent.⁴⁰⁰ Like in the ‘holistic healing’ that Steven Sutcliffe talks about in connection with ‘New Age’ seekers, the emphasis for healing concerns ‘a ‘whole’ person through her or his latent resources’, unlike the allopathic model where the symptoms of disease are treated and the ‘cure’ of the physical, medicalised body is the aim.⁴⁰¹ There are also connections with scientific ideas associated with the New Age such as the ‘New Physics’ and the idea of a ‘holographic universe’.⁴⁰² However, thinkers like Bohm who are associated with these ideas within New Age literature are absent by name from truth movement discourse.⁴⁰³

The truth movement might thus be conceptualised in a manner similar to Albanese’s approach to the New Age whereby ‘the discourse and related action promoted by the New Age have emerged

³⁹⁷ James R. Lewis, ‘Science and the New Age’, in *Handbook of the New Age*, ed. by Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 225.

³⁹⁸ Scheper-Hughes and Locke, p. 8.

³⁹⁹ Scheper-Hughes and Lock, p. 11; cf. Chryssides, ‘Defining New Age’, p. 22.

⁴⁰⁰ Scheper-Hughes and Lock, p. 12.

⁴⁰¹ Steven Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.175.

⁴⁰² Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 62, 149-151.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

as a new healing religion'.⁴⁰⁴ Within the truth movement, we witness the same 'blurring of matter and energy at the subatomic level [...] linked in principle to the occult romanticism of the mesmeric-Swedenborgian habit of mind'.⁴⁰⁵ The emphasis within the truth movement relative to the New Age, however, adds a third dimension and sees the potentiality of the quantum universe through the lens of conspiracy narratives. Many truth-seekers attest to the creative power of conscious will, frequently citing Doctor Emoto's "water experiment" as scientific evidence – sometimes proof – of its efficacy. Popularised through David Icke, Emoto froze water samples with words like "love", "peace", "hate", and "fear" attached; when he viewed the crystals under a microscope, the positive words bore complex patterns that were aesthetically beautiful, whereas the negative words seemed to produce relatively ugly crystals. This oft-quoted experiment lends scientific credibility to the notion of a holistic "frequency universe" where energetic signatures, based upon different states of mindfulness, affect physical matter. This notion has important implications for both positive healing and for negative manipulation; humankind have the power to create heaven *and* hell, here on earth, if they are manipulated to do so. This notion is referred to in the shorthand by the emic term "quantum".⁴⁰⁶

With clear cross-overs with provisions labelled by some scholars as 'New Age', truth-seekers might engage in crystal healing, aromatherapy, reiki, kinesiology, homeopathy, etc. I would argue that they retain their 'New Age' flavour but truth-seekers arrive at them from within the ideational framework stipulating a conspiracy of sorts.

The therapies preferred by truth-seekers might be regarded as 'complementary' medicines – indeed, according to the NHS, 'alternative' medicines are 'complementary' if they are taken alongside orthodox medicines.⁴⁰⁷ However, from the perspective of truth-seekers, their preferred treatments remain 'alternative' and are contrasted *against* allopathic or biomedical or pharmaceutical treatments mentioned (and vilified) in the previous section. This is appropriate for self-defined 'seekers' who define conventional institutions – including establishment behaviours around health – as inadequate. Some such experiential vistas, at a phenomenological level, can be seen to act as an identity marker for those "sane" individuals who affiliate with the truth movement. To bring this chapter to its conclusion, and to link it with the arguments put forward in Chapters Four and Five, I will end with an excerpt from my interview with Richard Cumbers.

⁴⁰⁴ Catherine L. Albanese, 'The Magical Staff: Quantum Healing in the New Age', in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. by James R. Lewis and Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 68-84

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p.73

⁴⁰⁶ The "quantum" nature of reality was regularly deployed as an explanatory framework for the efficacy of energetic phenomena, both positive (such as healing technologies) and negative (such as energy-sapping strategies of control as in 9/11).

⁴⁰⁷ NHS, *Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (2018)

<<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/complementary-and-alternative-medicine/>> [accessed 20/01/18]

I think the “we” is just the people who finally, for whatever reason have actually woken up and have resonated with the truth because there is one truth. So if you look at something and are discerning enough, in other words you are not completely screwed up by GMO foods, micro-wave foods with a lack of minerals, phone masts bombarding you all over the place, low energy light bulbs full of mercury, [or] you fear all the time about the wars the government create all the time [...] and then you realise there is no way you can keep quiet any longer.

Chapter Seven: ‘False-Flag’ “Conspiracy Theories” as Counter-Narratives

All of us have had to pause, reflect, and sometimes change our minds as we studied these problems and considered the views of others. We hope our report will encourage our fellow citizens to study, reflect – and act.

(Chair and Co-Chair of the *9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*)⁴⁰⁸

7.1 Introduction

This chapter will address an important branch of alternative knowledge: “False-flag” counter-narratives. Firstly, I will discuss the specific type of “conspiracy theory” that form the basis of much of this chapter: “false-flag” attacks. These might also be referred to with emic terms including “false-flag terror” “state-sponsored terror”, or simply as an “inside job”. As well as 9/11 and 7/7, other alleged examples of “false-flags” include Lee Rigby’s murder, the Gunpowder Plot, and the Reichstag fire. “False-flag” events are in the past and present; during my fieldwork, for example, the contemporaneous Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris were widely interpreted as a false-flag.

These events in question are what truth-seekers understand as “false-flag” attacks. Academic commentators have often discussed 9/11 as a key example of a “conspiracy theory”.⁴⁰⁹ However, as discussed in the Introduction, this pejorative term is unhelpful. In the context of most terrorist attacks, the official narrative accepted by the mainstream is itself a (warranted) “conspiracy theory”.⁴¹⁰ Instead, I prefer “false-flag” *counter-narratives* (FFCNs).⁴¹¹ I will set out the main characteristics of FFCNs which reflects my choice of terminology. Crucially, they define themselves against the official version, and they always narrate a tale of deception. The events surrounding 9/11 will serve as a case study to lay out the main characteristics of FFCNs.⁴¹²

I will look at the logic behind “false-flag” theories. Rather than labelling them as ‘conspiracy theories’, they are best understood as ‘counter-narratives’ that, from the truth-seeker perspective, are engaged in conspiracy realism. The alternative interpretations of events can be seen to function like living myths, cohering the so-called “truth movement” according to a common interpretation

⁴⁰⁸ Thomas H. Kean, Lee H. Hamilton, et al., *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. xviii.

⁴⁰⁹ For example, Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*; Mark Fenster included an additional chapter in his post-9/11 edition, Fenster, pp. 233-278; Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 205-240.

⁴¹⁰ To truth-seekers, the official narratives generally posits an *unwarranted* “conspiracy theory”.

⁴¹¹ See below.

⁴¹² My analysis is sensitive to the processes through which these ideas derive their legitimacy and plausibility despite them being disregarded as delegitimate fantasies – as distortive, dangerous, and disabling “conspiracy theories” (see the Introduction and Conclusion) by many voices from within the establishment.

of the world, in a narrative that makes important statements about humanity's social, existential, and ontological, reality.

7.1.1 The Significance of “False Flag” Counter-Narratives

Narratives about a state-sponsored coverup are common among the ‘conspiracy theories’ discussed in the academic and popular literature. Many of the most famous conspiracy theories within the popular imagination belong to this category, for example concerns about a coverup by the government and some of its institutions in the JFK and Martin Luther King assassinations. Disclosed CIA documents reveal that these notions were thought so destabilising that the phrase “conspiracy theory” was coined precisely to discredit them.⁴¹³ For Fenster, if these assassinations ‘generated more conspiracy theories and theorists’ than any other events of the 20th Century, then the events of 11th September, 2001 – 9/11 – have earned that title in the 21st Century.⁴¹⁴ As truth-seeker ‘big name’ Andy Thomas puts it, ‘if the shooting of JFK was the ‘mother of all conspiracy theories’, then 9/11 must be the son’.⁴¹⁵ Indeed, seems that citizens of the United States, as well as others across the globe, have come to reflect upon the *Report* quoted above, but drawing alternative conclusions from the commission.

The present-day significance that the 9/11 “conspiracy theories” hold for some truth-seekers active within the British truth movement was revealed in the aftermath of a speech by David Cameron to the U.N. in 2014. He declared that, ‘to defeat ISIL – and organisations like it – we must defeat this ideology in all its forms.’⁴¹⁶ He endorsed a strategy targeting the ‘world view [that] can be used as a justification for [terrorist attacks]. We know this world view.’ Cameron identifies it as ‘the peddling of lies: that 9/11 was a Jewish plot or that the 7/7 London attacks were somehow staged.’ He continues: ‘we must be clear: to defeat the ideology of extremism we need to deal with all forms of extremism – not just violent extremism. [...] We must stop the so-called non-violent extremists from inciting hatred and intolerance in our schools, our universities and yes, even our prisons’. Although he identified ‘the root cause’ as ‘a poisonous ideology of *Islamist* extremism’, many truth-seekers felt like the real targets.

I first heard about Cameron’s speech on a truth-seeker’s weekly podcast, who was horrified at what he had heard. ‘I’m absolutely bugged that I’m going to be thrown into this same category as ISIS or ISIL or IS or whatever the fuck they’re called.’⁴¹⁷ He saw the British and American Establishments as ‘the same part of the problem [...] and if we don’t agree with them wholeheartedly then we are non-violent-extremists, which I guess makes us domestic terrorists’. As for

⁴¹³ Robertson, ‘Conspiracy Theories’.

⁴¹⁴ Fenster, *Conspiracy*, p. ix.

⁴¹⁵ Thomas, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 170.

⁴¹⁶ David Cameron, ‘UN General Assembly Closing Speech’, (25/9/2014)

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-at-the-un-general-assembly-2014>> [accessed 7/9/2015].

⁴¹⁷ The response was often emotive; the ellipses here abridge a lot of swearing.

many other truth-seekers, the examples used by Cameron to define the ‘non-violent extremist’ worldview were contentious: “9/11 stinks, 7/7 stinks, and it does not lump me into the same category as terrorists just because I don’t believe in your shit!”.

A sizeable and significant minority of British citizens speculating about false-flag counter-narratives demands focussed, and non-politicised, attention, as opposed to their dismissal as illegitimate, or simply unimportant, pathologies. These “conspiracy theories” about terrorist attacks constitute *counter-narratives* read against the light of official versions of events. Arguably their continuing popularity is symptomatic of present-day reality and moves toward portraying them as ‘a problem’ that can somehow be ‘solved’ appear somewhat naïve or, at worst, dangerous themselves.⁴¹⁸ To paraphrase a commentator reflecting on the ‘Beat Generation’ of America’s 1950s: parts of society’s attitude towards its conspiracist, dissenting sphere seems to be like that of a magician who will not admit, even to himself, that his own magic brought it forth.⁴¹⁹

7.2 A Preliminary Definition of a FFCN

The key characteristic of a ‘false-flag’ theory is that the alleged perpetrators are not, in fact, primarily responsible for the event in question. If ‘a conspiracy occurs when two or more people collude to abuse power or break the law’, then ‘a conspiracy theory is [simply] a proposal about a conspiracy that may or may not be true’.⁴²⁰ This thesis defines a *false-flag* “conspiracy theory” as a theory about two or more people colluding to abuse their power but conceal this by blaming and/or using other parties to carry out the event. According to one interviewee, the term originally derives from naval warfare where ships might literally hoist a ‘false flag’ (i.e. one belonging to their enemy) to carry out attacks whilst impersonating an enemy. One interviewee informed me that Drake and the privateers were notorious for this very tactic, adding, with a knowing grin, that these ‘state-sponsored pirates’ did so under the blessings of the British Crown.

My understanding of false-flag theories resembles Sunstein and Vermeule’s ‘intuitive’ definition of a ‘conspiracy theory’ as ‘an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role’.⁴²¹ Conspiracy narratives like those about healthcare (see Chapter Three) also involve secret machinations of the powerful. In a false-flag narrative, however, the accused hide behind a false narrative which is presented to the public as the ‘official’ version of events.

⁴¹⁸ At worst I see them as ‘critical paranoia’, Lewis and Kahn, ‘Reptoid hypothesis’. Carl Sunstein epitomises the dangerous treatments insofar as his conclusions are perceived as further evidence for the very conspiracy narrative he disdains.

⁴¹⁹ Quoted in James F. Scott, ‘Beat Literature and the American Teen Cult’, in *American Quarterly*, 14.2 (1962), p. 152. As Olmsted argues, for example, ‘excessive secrecy breeds distrust’, pointing to a lack of governmental transparency regarding ‘deep politics’. See Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, pp. 238-240.

⁴²⁰ Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, p. 3.

⁴²¹ Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, ‘Conspiracy Theories’, *John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics Working Paper*, 387 (2008), pp. 1-29 (p. 4).

Following Gary Krug's lead, I prefer 'counter-narrative' and 'counter-narrativist' as more useful and accurate terms.⁴²² This is not to deny the relevance or validity of other discussions of "conspiracy theory", but rather a way of reframing this area of academic discourse. For instance, as an explanation for a set of events taking place in the public sphere, a counter-narrative is a type of "conspiracy theory" as discussed by philosopher Brian Keeley, in that a FFCN *always* 'runs counter to some received, official, or "obvious" account'.⁴²³ And as many truth-seekers like to points out, the *official* or *mainstream* narrative also posits a conspiracy theory 'that may or may not be true', namely that of Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda.

7.3. The Case Study: 9/11

7.3.1. The Official Narrative

Like most written or verbal discussions about 9/11 I should begin by sketching briefly the official narrative.⁴²⁴ This is not incidental but vital to how counter-narratives work. In David Ray Griffin's critical reception of the *Report*, he begins by retelling the 'official conspiracy theory [...] according to which the attacks of 9/11 were planned and executed solely by al-Qaeda terrorists under the guidance of Osama bin Laden'.⁴²⁵ Four jetliners were hijacked, and, 'piloted by terrorists [...] flown into the World Trade Center (WTC), the Pentagon, and woods in Pennsylvania respectively, killing around 3,000 people'.⁴²⁶ In New York, the North Tower (WTC1) was hit at 8.46, 17 minutes before the South Tower (WTC2) was hit at 9:03. At 9:58, 'the South Tower collapsed in ten seconds [...] into itself'. At 10.28, 'the North Tower began its pancake collapse', killing all FDNY personnel and civilians still left inside. The impacts had caused extensive damage, 'large enough to send down a fireball' so intense and destructive that 'some civilians on upper floors were jumping or falling from the building'. The *Report* indicates that an FDNY chief feared structural damage, most likely disabling fire suppression systems. These fires were so intense that even though 'the outside of each tower was covered by a frame of 14-inch-wide steel columns [and] the centers of the steel columns were 40 inches apart', 'these exterior walls [which] bore most of the weight of the building' lost their structural integrity, causing the building to fall, as the counter-narratives point out, at virtual free-fall speed.⁴²⁷

⁴²² The term 'counter-narrativist' was suggested by Gary Krug in an excellent essay that goes some way in redressing the imbalance in academic treatments of "conspiracy theory". See Gary J. Krug, 'Alternative Authenticities and 9/11: the Cultural Conditions Underlying Conspiracy Theories' in *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society*, ed. by Phillip Vannini and J. Patrick Williams (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 257-273.

⁴²³ Brian L. Keeley, 'Of Conspiracy Theorists', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (1999), pp. 116-7.

⁴²⁴ For example, see Griffin, *Omissions and Distortions*; or Thomas, *Conspiracy*. I follow these truth-seeker sources in referring to the *Report*.

⁴²⁵ David Ray Griffin, *The 9/11 Report: Omission and Distortions* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2005), p. 5.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.

⁴²⁷ *Report*, p. 541 fn. 1; Griffin, *Omissions*, p. 27.

7.3.2. The Counter-Narrative(s)

I mean if - the thing is, Nick, you see that if they can do 9/11 - the thing is 9/11, that's the big one - if they can do 9/11, which they did, they brought down [Building] 7, they brought down Building 7 with explosives. That's it; that's the smoking gun right there! We know that they seem to have got the twin trade towers to fall and fool everybody by collapsing - yeah *planes*, people saying "oh yeah planes, duh" - *no*. I doesn't happen like that, it just doesn't work like that. A plane, a bomber, that gone into the United States empire state building in 1946 or whatever it was, about the war time, and people above it had only just heard a bit of a rumble. But it didn't bring a bloody building down, like that. I know it wasn't [a Boeing] 737 but aluminium can't slice through steel that thick, like it did, but, but then we see the piles of smoke coming out, and there are definitely, as Judy Wood said [in what] is probably one of the most important books ever written, *Where Did the Towers Go?*, nanothermite was found. Now, that shouldn't be there!

The official narrative provides the essential context for all alternative interpretations. FFCNs challenge the official conclusion on a) *who* was culpable (Bin Laden/Al-Qaeda), b) exactly *what* happened (buildings collapsing due to intense fires caused by hijacked passenger planes), and c) *why* the event took place (politically-motivated act of terrorism against the United States).⁴²⁸

In the above quote we see already the intermingling of official critique and alternative explanation that is the hallmark of FFCNs when they are discussed in real life. Once again, the significance of 9/11 is its perceived legitimacy as a counter-narrative.⁴²⁹ The internal logic of a FFCN derives its plausibility primarily by undermining the plausibility of the official narrative. A wide range of alternative interpretations of these narratives circulate the truth movement; although these do sometimes conflict, these seemingly variegated responses retain a common thread of undermining and rejecting the mainstream perspective, significant for truth-seekers and the truth movement as a whole. This will now be explored.

Key Characteristics of FFCN

The 9/11 FFCNs all contest two key elements: *who* was behind the attacks and *why* they committed them.

Counter-narratives retell significant events of the past but set within a narrative that differs from the official account. They question whatever is perceived to be the hegemonic, dominant reading, and offer an alternative account according to partially different significant subjectively encountered within a given event. Counter-narratives are, therefore, fundamentally *deviant* in

⁴²⁸ All the interview excerpts I have selected for this chapter explicitly reject one or more of the *Report's* conclusions.

⁴²⁹ Or in line with the analysis below, 9/11 is an exemplary event, even some thirteen years later, because the official narrative is perceived as implausible.

nature. A recommended book was David Ray Griffin's critical review of the official inquiry, subtitled *Omissions and Distortions*.

The previous excerpt introduces the main way that counter-narratives undermine the official narrative: they focus upon any apparent anomalies found in the official version of events. Bearing in mind its status as a *counter*-narrative, let us call this a focus on errant data, whether missing or not properly accounted for, within official inquiries.⁴³⁰

Omissions and Distortions

Counter-narratives proceed by first making the official narrative appear like a 'conspiracy theory' as defined in the secondary literature. A key book recommended by numerous truth-seekers on the subject of 9/11 is David Ray Griffin's *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*. The Commission Report is thought to be as significant in what it *doesn't* address as what it does. Across the various treatments of 9/11 FFCNs, at the different physical groups and online, certain key anomalies are discussed recurrently.

Chief among these is the collapse of World Trade Centre Building 7. That Building 7, is barely touched upon in the *Report*, seems like a glaring omission tantamount to an acknowledgement that it undermines the officialdom's plausibility, leading it to become suitably referred to as "the third tower". According to Wikipedia, it is the world's 'first and only steel skyscraper in the world to have collapsed due to fire'.⁴³¹ In a YouGov poll in 2013 – the 12th anniversary of the attacks – some 46% of New Yorkers were not aware of a third tower collapsing (and of those aware, only 19% knew its name).⁴³² This statistic (one presumably even lower in the UK) is the source of much suspicion, and frustration, for truth-seekers whose counter-narrative places much significance in the third tower. Beyond public ignorance, however, WT7 is anomalous in its exclusion from the *Report*. This appears not only highly suspicious to truth-seekers, but a source of bemusement. In some ways, because WT7 has never been sufficiently explained to truth-seekers, it is an object of mystery ripe for speculation.

Another piece of significant evidence is felt to be Larry Silverstein's public admission that he told the firefighters to "pull it" with regard to WT7. According to truth-seekers, this term is used in demolitions; according to Silverstein subsequently, he was referring to the firefighters inside, supported by debunkers who claim that "pull it" is not actually part of the demolition lexicon (rebutted by one truth-seeker I spoke to, in turn, by considering Silverstein's knowledge of

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴³¹ Wikipedia Contributors, '7 World Trade Center', *Wikipedia* (23/4/2018) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7_World_Trade_Center> [accessed 29/4/2018].

⁴³² Architects & Engineers for 9/11, *ReThink911* <<http://rethink911.org/news/new-poll-finds-most-americans-open-to-alternative-911-theories/#pagecontent>> [accessed 8/7/2017].

demolition terminology to be as extensive as these misinformed truth-seekers). That this oft-quoted remark is not included in the *Report* is regarded as anomalous as the remarks themselves.

WT7 was made further notorious in the eyes of truth-seekers by the BBC reporting its collapse prematurely. The building in question is visible in the skyline behind the reporter, making for a visually striking meme and PowerPoint slide for counter-narratives that might infer that journalists are merely reading from a script, if not partly culpable themselves. Although the BBC later explained this apparent anomaly as a simple mistake, as recently as September 2017 this incident is mentioned in an article on 9/11Truth.org.⁴³³

This particular anomaly was discussed quasi-humorously within truth-seeker circles as it appeared so obviously anomalous as to be semi-farcical; the puppet-like nature of controlled media is perceived as almost comically obvious by this episode. As I found myself chuckling along with the audience at the tragicomic anomaly (which, if not for the thousands recently deceased in the near-vicinity, would not be out-of-place on a news media “gaffes” reel), it occurred to me that truth-seekers were laughing at the fanciful nature of the mainstream interpretation in much the same way as mainstream critics deride the more outlandish elements of counter-narratives.

This is further reinforced by a parallel example of the 7/7 London bombings, in which anomalies spring from apparent mistakes within the official inquiries. Within the truth movement, much has been made of the fact that the 7.40 a.m. Luton-London train that the terrorists allegedly caught was, in fact, cancelled; one truth-seeker found this out in a piece of personal research by directly by visiting Luton station themselves. “If they haven’t got the trains right”, he said, “then what on earth have they got right?” When errant data such as this eludes official inquiry, and is instead uncovered by the unofficial investigators, this positively reinforces distrust and encourages further digging for other anomalies – and such is the nature of the ‘spectacular’ ‘media event’ these are all too often discovered. This fruit of personal research has echoed right across the network I studied. The particular point about a mistake in train times is simple and memorable, and therefore effective in undermining the official narrative in much the same way as WT7 is for 9/11 FFCNs. Since the official narrative is now the account “on trial”, so to speak, otherwise minor discrepancies can discredit the entire account.

Rumours and Anomalies

I asked a different truth-seeker what, in her opinion, constitutes good evidence when she is undertaking personal research into any given topic. She accepted that this was problematic in the contemporary world, but “where you can see stuff filtering through from a number of different

⁴³³ ‘The conspiracies that won’t go away’, *911Truth.Org* (12/9/2017) <<http://911truth.org/9-11-conspiracy-theories-victim-claims-us-orchestrated-atrocity/>> [accessed 19/12/2017].

quarters, I think that gives it more credence; I mean there's 9/11! If the 9/11 conspiracy theories were all just coming just from the usual bunch, I'd probably be a bit more dubious, but you've got so many people from pilots to firefighters – architects are big ones – the engineers...so many people *independently* pointing out the anomalies. In the end you've got to say, "OK, this is a serious case." I mean to me, 9/11 is incontrovertibly a fraud."

This focus upon anomalies could be construed as the creation of anomalies. Events like 9/11 are particularly amenable to this process because they are large, televised events that involve key public institutions. Barkun notes that conspiracists 'were aided by the ambiguity of the initial media reports, which facilitated the rise of a host of urban legends'.⁴³⁴ Alternative interpretations are therefore rooted in the initial responses of mainstream sources. A parallel can be drawn to the symbolic interactionist perspective on rumour and urban legends, which conceptualises rumour 'as a collective problem-solving procedure in uncertain situations where routine channels of communication break down, do not exist, or cannot be trusted'.⁴³⁵ Counter-narratives not only arise in such contexts, but actively foster them. The act of exposing epistemological flaws in the official narrative is accomplished through making the events of 9/11 seem uncertain. The orthodoxy is itself understood as a rumour, among others, and the choice, then, is a rational one between the available options. The official narrative (which might be perfectly truthful) can be conceptualised as a state-sponsored rumour amid a chorus of dissenting alternatives. Attitudes of trustfulness towards the media and state institutions dictate which "rumours" are most plausible.

When FFCNs are conceptualised as rumours, their circulation is no longer symptomatic of pathology but represent normal responses to uncertain situations. In the Satanic ritual panics of the 1990s, the rumours of ritual abuse that appear implausible to the secular-minded observer are entirely reasonable to an involved observer on-the-ground who derive a cosmology and demonology from a Judaeo-Christian-inspired cultural tradition. To the sociologist, such rumours are intelligible since their differences derive also from the different sets of "facts" that need explaining, e.g. the inclusion of other, allegedly similar, incidents.

Expertise

We hear multiple references to apparent anomalies within an atmosphere of distrust from another interviewee, when I asked him his thoughts about the term "conspiracy theorist". Dave remarked:

Eventually you realise that a lot of the time we've been directly lied to by people with an agenda, that's what's going on. We all know there's a small group of people who have all the power, and that's not by accident, it's deliberate, and they didn't get there by being

⁴³⁴ Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 158.

⁴³⁵ See the important work on rumour by Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: a sociological study of rumor* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1966) and Dan E. Miller, 'Rumor: An Examination of Some Stereotypes', *Symbolic Interaction*, 28.4 (2006), pp. 505-519.

good people either. They got there by doing what's best for them, and thinking how they can manipulate us to get us to do what they want. I mean people might *call* me a "conspiracy theorist", but it's just obviously true. I didn't become active in all this truth stuff – "conspiracy theory" – until after 9/11. I'm a physics teacher, do you know what I mean? Three demolitions. Things cannot collapse at free-fall speed. It can't happen. David Aaronovitch⁴³⁶ can call that lies, but he's a liar, that's what he is. [...] And the fact that everyone buys into it is our collective doom.

By 'active', Dave is referring to him joining one of Britain's early *9/11 Truth* groups, posting regular blogs about alternative knowledge online, and later appearing as a speaker at New Horizons during the course of my fieldwork. The official account of 9/11 is incomprehensible to Dave, not as some "conspiracy theorist", but as a physics teacher claiming to possess expert knowledge. Ian therefore brought up the example of 9/11 because to him it represents a clear-cut, verifiable example of public deception. From his rational standpoint as a teacher Dave can reject the conclusions of academic David Aaronovitch which treats 9/11 conspiracy theories as essentially mistaken.

FFCNs follow a broadly scientific approach. By this I mean three characteristics:

[they] draw upon the vocabulary of the physical sciences of the time; [...] [use] education as the means of enlightenment and of spreading the truth; and [...] [are] 'democratic' in the sense that they held knowledge to be open to and available to all.⁴³⁷

It is by such a scientific approach that anthropologist Timothy Jenkins explains the appeal of (other) scientifically 'unorthodox' or 'alternative' practices including spiritualism, mesmerism, herbalism and vegetarianism.⁴³⁸ Knowledge might not be mainstream, but it nevertheless proceeds as scientific, rational, and, consequentially, authoritative. These characteristics belie the dissemination of FFCN information. We see also the authority of *expertise* invoked throughout. With the three collapses, for example, an appeal is made to "physics", or "metallurgy" (relating to the melting point of steel versus the possible heat from the exploding planes and subsequent fires). As we heard, individuals tend to appeal to those 'expert-systems' in which they have some direct experience or knowledge. However, through the Internet, individuals have access to a myriad of 'expert' opinions applied to the whole range of perceived anomalies; through self-education they themselves can become "experts" in certain areas as a result of their own personal research. According to Giddens, 'an expert is any individual who can successfully lay claim to

⁴³⁶ See the Introduction. Aaronovitch's study of "conspiracy theory", which bears the polemical and abrasive title *Voodoo Histories*, is infamous within the truth movement as an example of alleged close-mindedness in his dismissal of "conspiracy theory" as distortive and dangerous ideas.

⁴³⁷ Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 224.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*

either specific skills or types of knowledge which the layperson does not possess'.⁴³⁹ The guest speakers across the groups viewed themselves, and were viewed by audience members, as experts. The social environment of the evening presentations, 'ritualised' in Bell's sense of 'ritualization strategies', potentially amplified this affective authority.⁴⁴⁰

The internet arguably hails the democratisation of education beyond physical institutions that demand time and money for access; it is used by many as a vehicle for self-education. Counter-narrativists might become experts themselves; or certainly perceive themselves as experts relative to the disinterested "average Joe". False-flag counter-narratives also often utilise the testimonies of eye-witnesses and experts. Available online, these constitute the basic units of the false-flag counter-narrative. By watching these at home on the internet, truth-seekers have access to a kind of vicarious expertise. In my experience, truth-seekers appealed to the *Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth* organisation to support the plausibility of their claims (about the implausibility of the official account). In turn, this group derives its authority from the institutional professional recognition afforded to its members. When truth-seekers tell counter-narratives they therefore feel they are supported by experts.

The same logic applied to other alleged contemporaneous FFCNs. One speaker interpreted the ISIS beheadings as false-flags. Based upon his military experience he reported that 'there wasn't enough blood'.⁴⁴¹ This same point was then later made by numerous other truth-seekers with no ostensible experience in the military, some of whom cited this speaker as their legitimating source. As with the demolition argument, they often combined this indirect expertise with common sense realism by themselves studying the visual record in the form of the videos circulating news media and the internet.

FFCN arguments use scientific vocabulary but also derive a large measure of their plausibility by appealing to common sense. In this sense FFCNs transform an uncertain event into one immediately accessible to the truth-seeker who brings their hermeneutic of suspicion to bear upon reality. When I watched *Loose Change*, for example, I heard metallurgical arguments that ostensibly disprove the official narrative, points I could grasp easily even as a layman.⁴⁴² Given the discrepancy in the melting point of steel, the implication of a 'false-flag' narrative appeals to common sense, i.e. non-expert opinion.

Deviant Knowledge?

Counter-narratives might have sociologically deviant, i.e. alternative, understandings of political reality, but much about them mirrors the very orthodoxy they ostensibly oppose. Their ideas draw

⁴³⁹ Anthony Giddens, 'Living in a Post-Traditional Society', in *Reflexive Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, ed. by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 84.

⁴⁴⁰ Bell, *Ritual Process*, p. 90ff.

⁴⁴¹ This point is made in numerous FFCNs, for example the November 2015 terrorist attack at an Eagles of Death Metal gig in Paris, or the 9/11 United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania.

⁴⁴² *Loose Change: The Final Cut*, dir. Dylan Avery (2007), Online documentary <putlockers.am/watch/Nx4r1Wdz-loose-change-final-cut.html> [accessed 13/05/17].

their legitimacy from institutions recognised by the establishment. Their expertise, it should be pointed out, is formally recognised by the established institutions of education, but their conclusions are nevertheless deviant, sociologically speaking. As a result, the plausibility of FFCNs is not counter-cultural but supported, implicitly, by mainstream knowledge-producing institutions.

Consequently, we can say that both the truth-seeker and debunker lay claim to the status of enlightened, rational, modern subjects. Both narratives claim to be based upon empirical sense-making and proceed down a line of inquiry that purports to empirically and rationally make sense of the available facts. The differences stem from which pieces of evidence are thought to constitute hard or soft data. This is further interwoven with issues of authority, i.e. which bodies of knowledge, which authors, and what sources, can be trusted and are therefore epistemologically privileged. In the context of FFCNs, doubts about veracity or authenticity come to be self-fulfilling insofar as intense scrutiny can make any claim, however truthful, appear less certain. During an interview with Andy Thomas I asked what, in his opinion, constituted good evidence when undertaking personal research into any given topic. He noted that this was a constant concern:

Where you can see stuff filtering through from a number of different quarters, I think that gives it more credence. I mean there's 9/11! If the 9/11 conspiracy theories were all just coming just from the usual bunch, I'd probably be a bit more dubious, but you've got so many people from pilots to firefighters – architects are big ones – the engineers...*so* many people *independently* pointing out the anomalies. In the end you gotta say, “OK, this is a serious case.” I mean to me, 9/11 is incontrovertibly a fraud.

This excerpt again focuses on the apparent anomalies in the official account. Unprompted, Andy chose 9/11 as an exemplary case among counter-narratives generally on account of the plurality of authoritative dissenting voices. Faced with such a range of sources that produce apparent anomalies, the official narrative crumbles completely until it resembles nothing more than a rumour.

Trans-Historical

A fourth characteristic of FFCNS is their trans-historical nature. As with the 9/11 case study, although the focus seems to lie on errant data within the official narrative for a specific event, the narrative is made plausible by appealing to other historic episodes. These might be recent or ancient, domestic or abroad. One presentation I attended in Birmingham on ‘false-flag’ attacks included discussions about The Gunpowder Plot in 1605 (with Guido Fawkes a tool used by the Jesuits), the sinking of luxury liner *Lusitania* in 1915 (instrumental in garnering public support in America for WWI involvement), the Reichstag fire (that Hitler blamed on a communist), the 1967 attack of American vessel *USS Liberty* (by Israeli forces during the Six Day War of 1967 interpreted as a botched attempt at implicating Egyptian forces), the Gulf of Tonkin Incident (where information about a phantom attack accelerated/escalated America’s North-Vietnam war),

and the Charlie Hebdo attacks (to maintain support for France’s involvement in the US-led coalition against ISIS in Syria/Iraq). The cumulative effect of the talk was to make state-sponsored conspiracies feel like a regular occurrence. FFCNs thus become historically *warranted* ideas; the state becomes a plausible, seemingly *likely*, suspect.

Academic treatments of “conspiracy theory” often make note of “proven” past conspiracies but barely dwell upon their significance. As a participant observer, this dimension of FFCNs did most to weaken the plausibility of the official narrative. In David Icke’s section on “false flag” attacks in *The Perception Deception*, he backs up his claims by appealing to a historical clandestine operation run by NATO called Operation Gladio.⁴⁴³ Speaking reflexively, I was initially dubious of these claims, reflecting my own subjective privileging – or, here, handicapping – of certain knowledge sources due to the indirect association with Icke. However, while undergoing personal research into 9/11 FFCNs I discovered that a book by Swiss historian Daniele Ganser entitled *NATO’s Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe* was available at my university library.⁴⁴⁴ Ganser claims:

The Pentagon in Washington together with the CIA, MI6 and NATO in a secret war set up and operated the stay-behind armies as an instrument to manipulate and control the democracies of Western Europe from within, unknown to both European population and parliaments.⁴⁴⁵

This included direct cooperation with right-wing extremist groups in carrying out ‘massacre, torture, coup d’états and other violent acts’, subsequently blamed on communist forces ‘in some countries including at least Belgium, Italy, France, Portugal, Spain, Greece and Turkey’.⁴⁴⁶ That this was only “uncovered” in 1991 seemed incredible. Speaking from my role of participant observer, as I embarked upon personal research by reading Gasner’s account, my knowledge of history was revealed as more fragile than I have previously assumed; the criteria of plausibility had shifted.

Summary

Bringing this section to a conclusion, when one encounters FFCNs within a truth-seeking context, allegations that they are unproven and implausible “conspiracy theories” are reversed and redirected at the official narrative. Official narratives are revealed as anomalous; the “official” conclusions, and the nomos it supports, become contestable. In its own terms, the FFCN (and its attendant assumptions) no longer resemble a poor man’s cognitive mapping; instead, the official narrative appears to be an uncritical response. Recalling the Introduction where “conspiracy

⁴⁴³ Icke, *Perception*, p. 398.

⁴⁴⁴ Daniele Ganser, *NATO’s Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe* (London: Frank Cass, 2005).

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

theories”, such as the FFCNs mentioned by truth-seekers, were regarded as unwarranted, Daniel Pipes proposed ‘common sense’ and ‘a knowledge of history’ as two means of distinguishing ‘fact’ from conspiratorial ‘fantasy’.⁴⁴⁷ FFCNs actually adopt this same approach, themselves advocating common sense and a knowledge of history as a means of discerning truth from the state-sponsored illusion.

During false-flag presentations, online or offline, criticality is directed upon the official narrative, while towards the alternative interpretations (which include the criticisms directed upon the orthodoxy) there is a certain suspension of criticality corresponding to the shift in the burden of proof; within the alternative informational matrix different assumptions have taken-for-granted status. Ultimately, by setting a case in historical precedent, highlighting and addressing perceived anomalies, all within a legitimate approach that combines the authority of scientific rationality, vicarious expertise, and common sense, false-flag counter-narratives undermine the plausibility of the official narrative. This is a *crucial* element of the ‘deviant plausibility structure’ that sustains the alternative interpretations that truth-seekers adopt instead.⁴⁴⁸

7.3.3. Alternative Interpretations

While a group of truth-seekers will generally agree that the official narrative of a suspected false-flag amounts to an untrue conspiracy theory, there will be noticeable differences between the alternative interpretations that replace this discredited orthodoxy. Although united by their essential deviancy, some counter-narratives are more “deviant” than others. It is possible to discern different schools of thought that behave like trans-local factions – the truth-seeker is undoubtedly influenced by the particular theorists and theories they pursue during personal research – but I must stress that each truth-seeker has their own unique view that might draw upon several of these, with subjective emphasis upon the ‘who’, ‘what’, or ‘why’.⁴⁴⁹ I will take ‘**who**’, ‘**what**’, and ‘**why**’ as three interrelated dimensions and again focus mainly on 9/11 to show the diversity of alternative viewpoints amid the fluid truth movement.

Who?

The ‘**who**’ question was given less attention than I expected prior to fieldwork. Common to all FFCNs is the rejection that the apparent perpetrators were *entirely* culpable (i.e. they might be patsies). For example, Bin Laden is not excused entirely but perceived more as a useful tool for the secret service(s). Or in 7/7, the “attackers” thought they were part of a training exercise. In

⁴⁴⁷ Pipes, pp. 38-42.

⁴⁴⁸ For ‘plausibility structures’, see Peter Berger, *Social Reality of Religion, Homeless Mind, Sacred Canopy*. The specific term ‘deviant plausibility structure’ is used by Eileen Barker as she tries to understand the modern phenomenon of Creationist Science. Eileen Barker, ‘In the Beginning: The battle of creationist science against evolutionism’. The ‘for/of social reality’ is a nod to Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 93.

⁴⁴⁹ One could theorise about these similarities/differences in a way comparable to the denominational differences *within* a church.

FFCNs the actual culprits are revealed according to “quo bono”: who benefits? In this way a wide range of primary institutions become suspect, such as the mainstream news media, the political establishment/government, and the intelligence services.

Whenever the ‘who’ *was* addressed arguments could arise. With 9/11 (and the present-day ISIS attacks) there is much debate over whether Mossad, the Israeli Secret Service, was responsible. As with the talk in Chapter One, this would descend quickly into an anti-Zionism/anti-Semitism debate. Israel’s involvement in alleged false-flags is a recurring allegation among truth-seekers. The Bush administration, and Blair’s government, as the British counterpart, is another likely culprit.⁴⁵⁰ Nobody was ever sure if other, secret, parties were ultimately responsible; and in the same vein, nothing prevents these culprits from working together. The US and UK governments appear suspicious, but some truth-seekers allowed for the existence of rogue elements. Indeed, I eventually felt that the ‘who?’ question was left neglected partly to avoid stoking confrontation (since the subject of Israel is a well-known divisive subject), but also due to its unknowability. Far from contradicting the counter-narrative, multiple potential culprits are more plausible within a shared culture in which everything appears potentially interconnected, nothing is as it seems, and nothing happens by accident.⁴⁵¹

However, whilst truth-seekers would discuss several possible culprits, many truth-seekers would avoid making any hard conclusions. The only certainty was that Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda did not act alone. Beyond that, potentially guilty parties were not easily dismissed. There are also esoteric answers that presume that parties ultimately responsible hide themselves effectively. Academic and popular commentators have taken the way that conspiracy theories rely on ever-widening circles of involvement as a sign of their inherent implausibility. From the emic perspective, however, a conspiracy of this scale becomes feasible on these very grounds. Furthermore, when truth-seekers speak about ‘mainstream media’ involvement, or talk about the Bush administration, CIA, or Mossad, they do not presume full-scale involvement. Rogue elements within these organisations might be intricately and intelligently connected.

What?

The ‘**what?**’ question is perhaps the most fascinating of all from an analytical perspective. This has changed over time. According to Nick, for years “the “what” is just the three towers fell and not two. Building 7 came down and not just the two, that is what traditionally the truth movement will talk about”. For many truth-seekers, what happened was a (self-evident) demolition job.

Judy Wood is an important figure (as mentioned in the first excerpt) who changed the scene by asking a straightforward question: Where did the towers go? People who subscribe to Wood’s ideas stress that they ‘turned into dust, 100,000 tonnes of dust; they didn’t *collapse*’. For those

⁴⁵⁰ For ‘why?’, see below.

⁴⁵¹ Barkun, p. 6.

who accept that “dustification” occurred, her explanation is one of the few plausible options available. She focuses on a large energy signature detected in the Atlantic Ocean as a sign that the Towers fell through a calculated manipulation of the “Hutchingson Effect”. Nick was not personally convinced, reflecting, “generally the truth movement in this country didn’t want to go there, didn’t want a thing where beam weaponry brought down the towers, and no planes went into the towers”. According to my fieldwork, however, Wood’s ideas enjoy broad support; she is a well-known name across all three groups and even spoke at New Horizons in 2012 to an allegedly record-breaking audience. This is not because everyone subscribes to her conclusions, but because her contribution to ‘what?’ undermines the official position “in incredible detail and focus, but she doesn’t say anything about who did it or why it was done”. Her insights can therefore be adopted by truth-seekers of many creeds. She also exemplifies the characteristics discussed in the preceding section insofar as “Judy Wood is very visual, she shows a lot of pictures and says “can you *see* what happened?” or “can you see *this?*””. Although Nick rejected the Hutchinson effect, and with it Wood’s theory, he still thought her research was “terribly important”, revealing in scientific terms the mystery of the debris which, for Nick, remained “an incredibly weird phenomenon that nobody can understand. And I think it *is* exotic technology, and I’d like to leave it at that”.

Judy Wood’s research also provided the infamous “no planes” theory its firmest evidence. The invocation of secret technologies draws upon scientific authority (which is further aided by *Doctor* Judy Wood’s academic credentials as a natural scientist) and the truth-seeker’s “alternative” knowledge of history, past and present. The success of Wood’s theory owes much to vagueness on the ‘who?’ and ‘why?’ dimensions, allowing for multiple interpretations. On the other hand, some truth-seekers felt that discussing “exotic technologies” discredits the counter-narrative altogether. Others felt that by complicating the ‘what?’ dimension needless arguments have been incurred when efforts would be better directed at “waking up” the masses to the essential deception at play; for this reason, some believe (though I only ever met a handful) Judy Wood and her supporters are controlled opposition sent in to disrupt and derail the efforts of 9/11 Truth.

Why?

The common answer is simple and extends across all the counter-narratives: the real conspirators abuse power to gain further power.⁴⁵² Although its nature and form vary between narratives, power and control is the ultimate end-goal. More specific reasons, such as “energy extraction” by inducing fear, understood within the framework of the holistic universe, can be seen as goals that symbolise power. To the extent that the ‘how’ is contained in the ‘why’, the tacit ‘why’ is self-

⁴⁵² This emic perspective is in accordance with Fenster’s etic understanding of “conspiracy theories” as being fundamentally to do with power.

referential: FFCNs proceed through deception, and thus, in a sense, *deception* is always the hidden purpose. In all of these ‘why’ explanations, counter-narratives go beyond explaining conspiracies to rectifying them. For example, “energy extraction” depends on people being asleep. In this way, FFCNs posit a metanarrative of awakening: to discuss them is to “awake” to the deception, and they thus behave like discursive symbols of mindful liberation.

One of David Icke’s most prevalent ideas that circulates the truth movement is his formulation of ‘Problem-Reaction-Solution’ (PRS).⁴⁵³ This tripartite scheme is the alleged means by which the power-holders advance their agenda of control: 1) create a problem; 2) shepherd the public’s perception of this problem into ‘a reaction of fear and ‘do something’ by feeding the ‘unquestioning lap-dog media the version of the problem that you want people to believe’; 3) provide solutions which ‘advance your transformation of the world’. PRS is a calculated strategy by which governments can procure the consent of its citizens for otherwise unpopular policies.

For 9/11, the (manufactured) problem is the violent threat of Islamic Extremism; the (manufactured) reaction was one of fear and vengefulness, aided by society’s (controlled) institutions of knowledge-production (the mass media); and the (pre-planned) solution was the subsequent War on Terror. This proceeded both abroad (through direct military action in parts of the Middle East) and domestically (by the increase of preventive security measures). For truth-seekers, this War on Terror was a thinly-veiled War on Liberty; according to the PRS the *real* purpose of the “solution” was to erode civil liberties. The PRS hypothesis constitutes a theoretical “how-to” for (continual) societal domination that accommodates subsequent socio-cultural changes all too comfortably. This explanatory trope is a “cause-and-effect” interpretation of events that problematizes the question of agency: the reactive agent becomes the causal agent. A perceptual template therefore exists that qualifies the present in terms of past and future tidings; a teleology, sensitive to the purpose of events, read primarily by who benefits in terms of power.

When PRS is repeated over time, the second of Icke’s best-known ideas is enacted, the ‘totalitarian tiptoe’ (TT). As suggested by the catchy, alliterative term, society “tiptoes” ever-closer to a scenario of tyrannical domination. Taken together, these ideas offer a comprehensive account of the shifting landscape of geo-politics, viewed immediately from the lens of the local: false-attacks are symptomatic of a pervasive super-conspiracy. Attentive to an emergent New World Order where the elites enjoy total control over the (surviving) population, this steady march is detectable in the fault-lines of an unfolding present-day reality, in the political arena occupying the public sphere, and in perceptions of power materialised, especially surveillance.

The above examples of PRS involve “solutions” that result in greater material control for the elites; they are exoteric theories of power. An alternative explanation, by contrast, proceeds along

⁴⁵³ See Icke, *Remember*, pp. 175-81.

esoteric lines and holds that the real purpose of 9/11 was a form of energy extraction.⁴⁵⁴ Interestingly, these esoteric interpretations of 9/11 do not rely upon the truth-seeker “believing” in, say, the extra-dimensional and extra-terrestrial dimensions suggested by David Icke; instead, they only insist that the hidden controllers believe in them.

Summary

In summary, the central tenets of a false-flag narratives are counter-balanced by a rich variety of answers to these individual, but interrelated, questions. In cases like the “no planes” debate, or that around Israel’s involvement, these differences lead to conflict. Overall, however, there is space for subjective and reflexive engagement with the alternative interpretations available across the network. Some might prefer a *this-worldly* understanding whereby 9/11 was a PRS operation to enable a profitable war overseas; another might subscribe to the energy extraction theory within an esoteric framework. The former group can take the latter’s understanding in metaphorical terms, while the latter appreciates the monetary dimension. Importantly, the answers to ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘why’ are easily applied onto other false-flags.

7.4. The Special Significance of 9/11 and other FFCNs

Although the events of 9/11 and their interpretations provide an illustrative case study for looking at the recurring features of FFCNs more generally, this specific event holds special significance for the truth movement. The continuing significance of 9/11 counter-narratives can be drawn out if we consider them not as ‘conspiracy theories’ but as, substantively, ‘counter-narratives’, and *functionally*, as myths. Within the PRS/TT schemata, Cameron’s UN speech no longer appears to target Islamist extremism. In Orwellian tones, FFCNs are recast as ‘non-violent extremism’, constituting an immoral “thought-crime” against a moralistic nation-state. Some reacted strongly to Cameron’s particular choice of words, unhappy that their variegated perspectives on 9/11 were generalised into “some sort of Jewish plot”. According to speaker and interviewee Neil Sanders:

Loads of people took it incredibly seriously. *Stuff life that tends to unify people, which may be a backfiring tactic.* Or people went to Facebook and identified themselves immediately, saying Cameron was an idiot. By definition you are [thereby] defining yourself as an extremist!

The actual effect of Cameron’s speech was a redoubling of efforts on the part of the counter-narrativists. As a result of having certain ideas, foundational to a truth-seekers identity, labelled as essentially *deviant*, then, true to Cohen’s examination of deviance, ‘they perceive themselves as more deviant, group themselves with others in a similar position, and this leads to more

⁴⁵⁴This notion was discussed in Chapter Two as part of Jo’s awakening, and invokes a holistic worldview whereby mind, body, and spirit is all interconnected through a monist energy principle. I heard several versions of this idea and it is impossible to trace a single source. The ‘energy extraction’ theory synthesises elements of “New Age” holism with the conspiracist idea that society is secretly controlled.

deviance'.⁴⁵⁵ Interestingly, the alternative media seemed to react most strongly to Cameron's speech; the 'moral panic' was harnessed into an opportunity wherein truth-seekers could self-identify themselves as such. In this way, FFCNs are opportunities not only for making sense of the world, but of personal identity that relates the individual to wider society. Social media enables truth-seekers to signal their assent to false-flag interpretations alongside a multitude of like-minded others.

As discussed in Chapter One, the emic expressions "truth movement" (for the wider collective) and "truther" (for an affiliated individual) I heard repeatedly in Britain in 2014-16, originate from the United Kingdom's 9/11 Truth Movement(s). Although the exact wording changes (for example, Ian Crane's website lists him as the 'ex Chair of the UK 9/11 Truth Campaign', but elsewhere the 'UK's 9/11 truth movement') the association with 9/11 is key.⁴⁵⁶ This group/network derived its name, in turn, from the various groups set up in the United States. Academic Mark Fenster mentions a whole host of 'organized, locally situated organisations' that, alongside 'globally distributed Web Pages', from 2004 'galvanised a self-described "truth movement"'.⁴⁵⁷ The most important website was *9/11Truth.org* in that it combined information about 9/11 with links to affiliated local groups. The names of the various organisations show their common focus on "9/11 Truth", such as *Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth*, and *Scholars for 9/11 Truth*.

7.4.1 9/11 and 7/7

The special significance afforded to the 9/11 attacks to the contemporaneous alternative knowledge network in which I conducted fieldwork becomes even clearer when compared with the "7/7" London bombings, 2004. Despite 7/7 being more recent, taking place on "home soil", and involving, presumably, a more immediate threat, British truth-seekers spend far more time discussing 9/11. This is evident in print, for example in Andy Thomas's *Conspiracy Theories*; one chapter, entitled '9/11 and Related Conspiracies', spends only three pages out of twenty-four on 7/7.⁴⁵⁸ In a later book, *The Truth Agenda*, a 38-page chapter on evidence for (and against) the 9/11 counter-narrative specifically contrasts with four pages on the 7/7 anomalies as a subsection within a wider-reaching chapter entitled 'The War on Liberty' (see above).⁴⁵⁹ This trend is further reflected in David Icke's work; Icke wrote an entire book on 9/11, *Alice in Wonderland*. On the other hand, 7/7 is limited to just three pages in his 2012 volume *Remember Who You Are*.

⁴⁵⁵ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils & Moral Panics* (St Albans: Paladin, 1972; repr. 1973), p. 18.

⁴⁵⁶ Ian R. Crane, 'Fool Me Once', *The Crane Report*, <<http://ianrcrane.com/fool%20me%20once.ian%20r%20crane>> [Accessed 9/6/2017]. Visibility 9-11 Welcomes UK Activist Ian Crane', *Visibility 911.org* (7/7/2006) <<http://www.visibility911.org/visibility-9-11-welcomes-uk-activist-ian-crane/>> [Accessed 9/6/2017]

⁴⁵⁷ Fenster, *Conspiracy*, pp. 246-7.

⁴⁵⁸ Thomas, *Conspiracies*, looks at 9/11 in pp. 170-194, compared with 7/7 in pp. 198-200.

⁴⁵⁹ Andy Thomas, *The Truth Agenda*. 9/11 chapter in pp. 143-178; '7/7 anomalies' section found in pp. 197-201.

This trend has some interesting implications. First, it points to the global, international nature of the truth movement. More specifically, it points to the influential role of American culture. Second, 9/11 might be a preferred FFCN over 7/7 in Britain because it generates less distress. Recognising one's own national government as directly responsible for killing citizens is much harder than assuming the Bush administration – a foreign government – was behind an attack on its own citizens. From an autoethnographic perspective, I wondered whether as a British citizen myself my emotional reluctance to accept the British state as culpable contributed to the 7/7 counter-narrative seeming less plausible than its 9/11 counterpart. Regardless, the plausibility of 9/11 was regarded by many truth-seekers as being firmer. For Andy, 7/7 is “hazier” than 9/11.

It took place off camera. With 9/11 you can see for yourself anomalies in the planes hitting buildings and the way the towers fall down, whereas 7/7 is so much based on what you've heard, or trains you didn't catch, videos that have got the wrong time code [...] but it's harder to put your finger on. But I absolutely don't believe we're being told the truth about that either, I think that's clear.

7.4.2 9/11 as Paradigmatic FFCN

The continuing significance of the 9/11 attacks is that they provide the FFCN par excellence for the truth-seeker identity. The primary reason is not, then, the emotional reaction, but that 9/11 is a “better” false-flag with regards to the logic outlines above; it is more able to undermine the mainstream nomos. So many groups and resources were spawned by those who dissented from the official narrative that a virtual industry arose which provided a convincing array of arguments *against* the orthodoxy, and *for* a variety of heterodoxies. The plurality of alternative explanations allows for a “broad church”, so to speak, which enables people to identify with the FFCN according to subjectively-derived criteria of (im)plausibility.

The pervasiveness of FFCNs across the internet and throughout alternative media, and the nature of a globalised news media, makes the 9/11 attacks seem peculiarly immediate to a foreign British audience. Indeed, the truth-seekers can “see [9/11] for themselves” and subject it directly to personal scrutiny; in practice, although the analysis may be led by experts, the truth-seeker is the one who “wakes up”. In speaker and writer Thomas Sheridan's experience, “most of the people in the truth movement today that I meet are people who were young teenagers or children when 9/11 happened.” He interpreted this observation psychoanalytically:

These people who were teenagers or young teenagers the day 9/11 happened, and saw the reaction on their parent's face, have now grown up to be the most hardcore, ardent, “9/11 is an inside job”, people. And there's a psychological reason for this, I figured out. They associate 9/11 as robbing the innocence of their childhood. And if they can only figure out 9/11, then they'll figure out why their childhood was ruined. You see what I'm saying, it's almost a compensatory idea.

This fascinating observation contains a kernel of truth for the entire truth movement. It was brought up across interviews not by people who were desperate “to figure it out”, but by individuals who already *had*. 9/11 FFCNs establish that social reality is not all that it seems; it problematises an individual’s relationship with wider society by suggesting that the political centre seeks power for the benefit of a self-serving, uncivil agenda.

The events of 9/11 constitute what anthropologist Rodney Needham calls ‘paradigmatic scenes’.⁴⁶⁰ Certain episodes combine symbolism with powerful emotional effects; these ‘affecting depictions [...] are direct testimony to deep-flowing concerns which are to be found expressed in religion’. From Christian tradition he identifies Peter’s denial, but he also provides examples of the same ‘profound effect’ in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and Kurosawa’s film *Seven Samurai*. Needham is thus able to step beyond crude distinctions between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ spheres by focussing instead on the underlying vehicles of symbolism and their affective consequences for personal meaning-making. For truth-seekers, I argue that 9/11 represents one such paradigmatic scene. Themes of deception, redemption, knowledge, morality, and citizenship emerge from this timeless scene, one that is revisited, implicitly and explicitly, every time a fresh ‘false-flag’ appears to occur. I take 9/11 to be a paradigmatic scene because it allows for a diversity of interpretations and emphases but revolves around the fundamental notions of a state-sponsored deception and a liberated “awakened” truth-seeker.

7.4.3 FFCNs as Myth

FFCNs appear to perform a similar function to how scholars of religion theorised myth. As we have seen, each FFCN is a rich complex of ideas and values, expressive of the truth-seeker worldview. Bronislaw Malinowski was researching a markedly different cultural context than modern Britain but his conceptualisation of how best to understand the ‘myth’ class of tales is supremely relevant. FFCNs-as-myths are ‘not merely a story told but a reality lived [...] believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies’.⁴⁶¹ FFCNs constitute *living myths*, providing for truth-seekers the same ‘indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man’.⁴⁶² Just as for Malinowski ‘myths’ as more than literary tales, FFCNs are *more* than bullet-pointed “conspiracy theories” but rather embedded, as an active force, within truth-seeking culture. The cultic milieu was changed forever by them.⁴⁶³ This does not mean they were

⁴⁶⁰ Rodney Needham, *Circumstantial Deliveries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 88-89.

⁴⁶¹ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and other essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1948; repr. 1954), p. 100.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴⁶³ This is noted in In Ward and Voas’s conspiratorality thesis they call 9/11 ‘pivotal to the uptake of conspiratorality’, ‘Conspiratorality’, p. 110. In Aprem and Dyrendal’s critical response they neglect to

prescriptively set-in-stone but that, true to a paradigmatic scene, they contain the essential elements of the truth-seeking worldview; 9/11 FFCNs include beliefs, a moral framework (concerning society and the state, i.e., man's immediate environment), and encourages practices of personal research as a moral collective.

As will be explored further in the following chapter on the "Flat Earth" "conspiracy theory", the significance of myth stems from its power to influence identity. Hans Mol understands myth to be 'an implicit or explicit statement about humanity's place in the universe'.⁴⁶⁴ They herald descriptions about humankind's existential and ontological reality. Although many brands of FFCNs are void of supernatural referents, they nevertheless refer to forces and/or powers that transcend someone's immediate control; they speak about a person's position in society. 9/11 and related events involve so many important institutions that knowledge about what did or did happen has far-reaching effects. In particular, Mol draws our attention to the way that individual identity has a 'personal', 'group', and 'social' identity.⁴⁶⁵ In this context, 'group' identity refers to his secondary reference group, while 'social' identity means national identity. Although I will flesh this argument out in Chapter Five, FFCNs provide an essential myth for legitimising personal and group practices of civil spirituality in conscious opposition to the British state.

Summary

When truth-seekers liken the *Report* to a "conspiracy theory" it is not merely rhetorical flourish but illustrative of the defining trait of FFCNs. The weight of the argument is reversed by subjecting the official account to much the same analysis as is often directed upon so-called "conspiracy theories" in mainstream quarters. Now, the mainstream interpretation becomes precisely that, an *interpretation*, a matter of choosing one among others. There is no longer a monopoly on the truth. Instead, truth-seekers meet with a range of alternative interpretations which have the same inner-meaning: the state and its institutions are not what they seem; and for those with the eyes to see, it is possible to unravel the untruths. Furthermore, FFCNs bind their subscribers together under a visible flag of hermeneutical deviancy.

mention this development, which, in light of this ethnography, I view as key to its newness and novelty relative to earlier historical expressions of the cultic milieu.

⁴⁶⁴ Mol, *Identity*, p. 246.

⁴⁶⁵ Hans Mol, 'Introduction', in *Identity and Religion: International, Cross-Cultural Approaches*, ed. by Hans Mol (London: Sage, 1978), pp. 1-17 (p. 10).

Chapter Eight: The Contested Compatibility of the “Flat Earth” Theory

8.1. Introduction: “Flat Earth” Theory

Few ideas encountered during my fieldwork across the truth-seeker network proved to be as controversial, divisive, and yet, above all, pervasive, as those of the “flat earth” theory (FET).⁴⁶⁶ On the surface, this was the least plausible of any area of alternative knowledge. United States president Barack Obama, on the pressing need for serious discussions about practical responses to climate change rather than debating its very existence, declared, “We don’t have time for a meeting of the flat earth society!”⁴⁶⁷ In other words, to dispute the existence of climate change is like suggesting that the earth is flat in the face of centuries of scientific orthodoxy stating otherwise.

Yet there *is* a minority of individuals who contend that the “globe earth” theory (GET) rests upon a foundation of scientific falsehoods and manipulations. For truth-seekers who subscribe to FET – referred to as “flat earthers” – humankind has never crossed into outer space; the earth resembles not a planet but a flat expanse within a dome-like firmament; and this information has been suppressed from the general population of the earth as part of a hidden and malign agenda.

This thesis has stressed throughout that the so-called truth movement constitutes an uneasy collective, conceptualised with Colin Campbell’s ‘cultic milieu’ thesis (see Chapter One). According to Campbell, the varied parts of the network derive their unity from a shared ‘consciousness of deviant status’ arising from ‘a common cause in attacking orthodoxy’.⁴⁶⁸ In Chapters One, Three, and Four, this thesis has engaged with a range of practices and beliefs that are perceived by truth-seekers as alternative to the mainstream. In consequence, Campbell identifies ‘a prevailing orientation of mutual sympathy and support, such that the various cultic movements rarely engage in criticism of each other’.⁴⁶⁹ This chapter wants to test this statement against the ethnographic record of the contemporaneous truth movement, focussing on its reception of FET. It asks why the levels of sympathy and support differed between presentations

⁴⁶⁶ It is worth noting that the other (ideational) chief candidate for controversy was around alleged child abuse in Hampstead Heath was “satanic”, or not. However, this was not a subject of presentations, unlike FET, so I lacked fieldwork data to address this area in the context of this ethnographic study. Another candidate might be assumed to be David Icke’s infamous ‘reptilian thesis’, but, at the emic level, almost nobody I met believed this literally to be the case, and was again not a presentation subject (and in fact, virtually all truth-seekers actually agree with this idea as a metaphor for the psychopathic “reptilian” nature of the insane elites).

⁴⁶⁷ ‘Obama: No time for a meeting of the Flat Earth Society’, *BBC News* (25th June 2013) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-us-canada-23057369/obama-no-time-for-a-meeting-of-the-flat-earth-society>> [accessed 10/10/16].

Note that the Flat Earth Society is actually unconnected with the FET discussed here, with Eric Duvay, a leading contemporaneous FET proponent, explicitly distancing his ideas from the organisation by arguing that they are “controlled opposition”. Eric Dubay, ‘The Flat Earth Society is Controlled Opposition!’ *The Atlantean Conspiracy* <<http://www.atlanteanconspiracy.com/2015/03/flat-earth-society-controlled-op.html>> [accessed 31/12/17].

⁴⁶⁸ Campbell, ‘Cultic Milieu’, p. 122.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

on the same topic. I am equipped to do so because the three groups I attended regularly each had at least one FET presentation between June 2014 and September 2015. Indeed, what appeared at first to be a fringe idea even within the alternative milieu became a “hot topic” of discussion, and dispute, across the entire network, both online and offline.

More directly, Campbell himself mentions FET in his 1972 seminal paper: ‘the true heresies [found in the cultic fringe] are not so much religious beliefs of this kind but beliefs held to be ‘purely’ scientific which are repudiated by scientific orthodoxy; *the flat-earthers*, or the flying saucerians who hold that extra-terrestrial vehicles actually exist.’⁴⁷⁰ In fact, “religious” elements are not entirely absent from proceedings, a point addressed in the final section, but flat-earthers still occupy an *especially* heretical position from the perspective of mainstream scientific orthodoxy, and, to some extent, the truth-seeking heterodoxy alike. FET provides a valuable opportunity of continuing the wider concern of the thesis, namely to demonstrate the plausibility of this area of alternative knowledge – this most grandiose of “conspiracy theories” – to more or less normal individuals, resisting any move to pathologise its subscribers.

In the context of this thesis, my analysis of the FET also broaches several topics raised by earlier chapters. There are strong ties to Chapter Four on FFCNs insofar as FET revolves around a critique of science as a social construction, while simultaneously professing to use the logic, reason, and empiricism associated with science as a method of inquiry. Second, FET builds upon many of the underlying meanings I associated with FFCNs, reaffirming the deceptive nature of mainstream institutions and the fragile susceptibility of individual consciousness to outside manipulation.

In this chapter, I will first describe briefly each of the three meetings I attended. I will then outline the arguments of the third presentation (while referring to cross-overs with the others), to give a clear picture of the substantive components of FET as expounded within its proper social context. I will interlace description with analysis, looking at: the relationship of FET with other branches of alternative knowledge; the epistemological status of scientific and political institutions; and describe and explain some of the different receptions of the FET, questioning what this tells us about the truth movement as a network.

8.2 Changing Receptions to FET

8.2.1 New Horizons, June 2014

At the time of this presentation FET was unestablished as an important topic in the UK except for small numbers of individuals who stumbled across the ideas online. The presentation’s advertisement on their website asked, ‘What is the most laughed at conspiracy group of all time [that] even David Icke laughs at [?]’: ‘The Flat Earth Society’ (this designation was directly linked

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 126. Emphasis added.

to Obama's speech, referred to above).⁴⁷¹ The meeting attracted approximately thirty-five people, who were predominantly between 40-80 years-old. I was told that they would normally expect a greater turnout, but some had actively avoided it, and others wanted allegedly to sabotage the evening.

Whilst conceding that most attendees 'will be in the "the earth is a sphere" camp', it wondered whether 'by the end of the presentation, perhaps, this might change'. This did not seem to come to fruition; attendees were vocal in their scepticism towards a subject that many regarded as 'extreme' or 'controversial' amongst a programme of other alternative topics. The atmosphere was raucous at times, and especially as the evening wore on. The presentation was interrupted regularly by questions, partly invited by the speaker who tried to engage with the audience, and also by particular issues or points contradicting the information proffered by the speaker. The groups of people seated closest to me were constantly turning to the person next to them to check that they were not alone in their scepticism if not total disbelief; virtually the entire audience present that evening laughed at certain elements, embodying both rejection and enjoyment at what was, by all accounts, an entertaining evening.

This atmosphere was overwhelming, preventing one from taking seriously many of the conclusions of the speaker; the exceptions were ideas and theories mentioned that existed independently of FET itself but were cited as supporting evidence (see below). People came to see what the speaker had to offer rather than uncritically accepting the information. I saw no evidence of anyone attempting to debunk him outright with premade counterargument. The audience was openly sceptical, but Lawrence promised "mind-blowing evidence" after the interval, revealed "for the first time", which involved tracing flight patterns of passenger jets. For example, a flight from Cape Town, South Africa to Auckland, New Zealand, could travel directly over 7,329 miles, taking just over fifteen hours. The actual route goes via Dubai, and then Melbourne, travelling 13,615 miles over twenty-seven hours. Reasoning that these companies were interested in profit, this "doesn't add up". But on his "real map of the world" – depicting a flat earth – this tangential route makes a straight line. But when the speaker invited people to debunk parts of his argument, several attendees built upon one another's points without anyone offering him any public support. The audience, including myself, were impressed by the ingenuity of the argument, but nobody admitted to changing their minds; however, several members said they enjoyed the evening, especially the somewhat raucous exchanges between the speaker and attendees.

8.2.2 Truthjuice Hull, May 2015

The second presentation was in May 2015, at an open mic evening at a Truthjuice group in Hull. This presentation lasted only twenty minutes rather than the other's two hours, and the evening

⁴⁷¹ 'Previous Speakers, 2014', <<http://www.newhorizonsstannes.com/2014.htm>> [Accessed 10/10/16].

was attended by around 35 people. By this time FET had become increasingly well-known within the alternative milieu, although for some it was talked about as an object of ridicule or even as a marker of irrationality against their own (merely) heterodox ideas (relative to perceived orthodoxies or the mainstream). It was nevertheless highly anticipated because for many FET represented an untested ocean of mystery, a realm of possibility un-breached even by their own confessedly open-minded natures. Well-known, but largely un-studied, attendees were curious about FET's content and angle alike. Many would welcome any clue as to why such a seemingly farfetched idea had become so pervasive across the online, virtual world (particularly on Facebook).

The speaker was a regular attender and had a history of interest in relatively controversial subjects (at the previous open mic he spoke about political-correctness as a form of deliberate socio-cultural manipulation, taking anti-Semitism and racism as case studies). Emphasis was placed on debunking the prevailing scientific worldview as inaccurate received wisdom that does not stand up to common sense; there were large sections of the talk that dropped any mention of FET and focussed instead upon deconstructing prevailing orthodoxies sometimes somewhat tenuously related, such as the alleged fossil record supporting evolution and the existence of dinosaurs. Again, there were few public signs of anyone assenting to the positive claims of FET, but the wider attacks on elements of the scientific worldview were much better met, e.g. disputing the Apollo 11 moon landings and allegations that NASA was built upon freemasonry and by former Nazi scientists.

Further along into my fieldwork, I felt that the majority enjoyed the presentation overall because it represented a break from some of the darker issues, e.g. political paedophilia. The way that the speaker, Giles, dismissed people's explanatory interjections on specific points as "scientific swamp-gas" really ingratiated the speaker to all those who are forced normally to harbour such scientifically-minded doubts silently in the face of social norms. I found myself laughing-out-loud, with much of the audience, not at FET, but at the humorous expositions of well-known, if often misunderstood, scientific explanations, e.g. the Big Bang. However, in the smoking area, some disputed the usefulness of FET due to its perceived non-instrumentality. As one lady said, 'the Earth might be flat or round, but we've still got to live on it'.

8.2.3 Truthjuice Birmingham, November 2015

I attended the presentation in Birmingham given by a well-known speaker called Dave Allegedly.⁴⁷² It drew a large audience of around 50 people. This was the largest crowd since the

⁴⁷² This is his actual name, changing it some years ago. It is characteristic of the "freeman-on-the-land" stream of the truth movement, which rejects the "legal fictions" of proper names and titles and instead insists on being regarded and treated as the living, breathing, flesh-and-blood human beings that we really are. His is a particularly funny version of this strategy that subverts the social norms in this little way especially given the written correspondence freemen usually send/receive from mainstream authorities.

summer break and among the most popular of the previous year. FET was more widespread now and everyone present had heard of and about its ideas, i.e. the online advert was likely not the first time one heard about FET. The organiser told us he had been searching for ‘the right speaker’ on this topic for some time. In his introduction, the organiser noted that some FET YouTube videos get 20,000 views in a single day and asked rhetorically how this came to be given its apparent ridiculousness; he wondered also whether it was only a one-sided FET stream being promoted.

For the first time I noticed member of the audience who subscribed to large portions of FET, familiar with its arguments from personal research. One man told of his initial hesitation, some months ago, when a friend began talking about FET; he was unsure until he read Chris Duvay’s book on the subject, whereupon he now thought, “There’s a lot in it”, with a grin. A newcomer to the group asked, in my general direction (but to nobody in particular), how we could have total darkness at night on a flat earth. A man seated nearby explained, to the questioner, but really to all those within earshot, that it was only a matter of distance and scale. His instantaneous reply indicated familiarity with the question. The majority did not leave with their minds changed in either direction but by the end of the presentation were impressed nonetheless with the arguments put forward, openly admitting that FET seemed more complex, and far more credible, than they supposed prior to the evening.

Before engaging with the substantive dimension of the presentations, I must stress the continuity that stretches between them. The first speaker, Lawrence Wright, was amongst the very first British researchers to look into FET in any great detail. The other two presentations reproduced every point that he made, though also expanded upon and augmented certain pieces of his evidence, as well as adding a (relatively small) number of new points. Both the speakers in Hull and Birmingham had seen Lawrence’s presentation on YouTube. They were also openly (and heavily) influenced by an American theorist called Eric Duvay (who is the leading “flat-Earther” globally speaking) specifically by an hour-long interview on a weekly podcast called *Higher Side Chats*.⁴⁷³ That each presentation bore such close resemblance to the others might appear quite remarkable given the absence of any formal institutional linkages. This only attests instead to the sheer power, and constancy, of the communications network that undergirds the (multi-sited, global) truth movement. This supports my initial claim that the truth movement might fruitfully be compared with Colin Campbell’s ‘cultic milieu’, a heterogeneous, networked, cultural underground where societally unorthodox ideas coalesce in a shared communications milieu.⁴⁷⁴

Over time, truth-seekers came to refer to FET subscribers as “flat-earthers”. This title is a strategy of othering, pointing to their social function as a yardstick for the rationality and sensibility of

⁴⁷³ Eric Dubay, ‘The Flat Earth Theory & The Masonic Matrix Manipulators’, *The Higher Side Chats* (March 29 2015) < <https://www.thehighersidechats.com/eric-dubay-the-flat-earth-theory/> > [accessed 31/12/17].

⁴⁷⁴ On a methodological note, the pervasiveness of FET across (and beyond) my three chosen sites justified my decision to adopt a multi-sited ethnographic approach.

non-flat-earthers. In the first meeting, for instance, the speaker was laughed almost off the stage. Interestingly, however, over the course of my fieldwork increasing numbers of truth-seekers seemed to take these ideas more seriously. This chapter engages with this shift in attitude towards a specific area of alternative knowledge. The first section documents this shift by providing an ethnographic description of these three talks. In the subsequent analysis, time is one factor among other situational variables.

8.3. The FET Theory in Detail: Conflict and Harmony

8.3.1 Deconstructing the “Globe Earth” Orthodoxy

Dave Allegedly began his presentation by acknowledging that the subject seemed, at first, “a bit weird”. His initial point reversed this feeling by making scientific orthodoxy seem less secure than we are generally led to assume, beginning with a PowerPoint slide entitled ‘the scientific method’. This, he explained, involved making observations about reality, being sensitive to contradictions in existing scientific theories, and testing these theories in the empirical light of observable contradictions. The same slide mentioned “Ockham’s Razor”, a principle stating that the simplest explanation is most probably the correct one. His presentation was going to proceed accordingly, bringing the scientific method to bear on “the scientific worldview”. This, he claimed, was rarely subjected to its own method, resembling instead a received tradition that was accepted uncritically and blindly. Dave’s corresponding guiding notion – “when the impossible has been ruled out, you’re left with the possible” – neatly captures his interpretation of legitimate scientific investigation and echoed the approach of all three presentations. Thinking back to the false-flag theories, this applies also to other areas of alternative knowledge that purports to reclaim scientific sensibility.

Finally, he noted the idea of the “ant effect”: that “there are some things that humankind can’t comprehend”. This felt like a critique of any scientific worldview which makes all-encompassing truth-claims with a veil of certainty far beyond its means; in the same breath, this distanced Dave, and the proponents of FET, from so-called “scientists”. In this context, “scientists” constitute the Other, contrasted with the professed non-experts exiting outside of institutionalised mainstream science. “Remember,” he said, “I’m only Dave from Basil!” On the other hand, the so-called experts, who enjoy establishment esteem and command authority, are those who essentially abuse a distorted scientific method without any reference to its in-built, self-referential humility and scepticism. In this sense, Dave’s version of FET resembles Bruno Latour’s project of demonstrating ‘the social construction of scientific facts’; but from Latour’s perspective, FET is guilty of exceeding the rational basis of the deconstructionist project by uncritically accepting a pervasive criticality, exhibiting ‘an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad

ideological biases'.⁴⁷⁵ In what follows, however, we will see how strategies of 'instant revisionism' that challenge the legitimacy of scientific orthodoxy retain their own claims of plausibility.

This can be seen in a distinction adopted by Paddy in Hull, who contrasted his "five sense reality" with the "theoretical physics" adopted by mainstream scientists.⁴⁷⁶ Part of the rationale behind these types of evening, celebrated by many within the group, is precisely its decision to use non-experts:

What's really great about these evening is there's nothing to stop you from reading two books and getting a power-point together and talking about it, sharing it with people; if you do, it might stimulate someone else in the audience to go out and read some books. You don't have to be an expert about stuff, you don't even have to be the biggest expert in the room, you just have to have the interest in it, and I think the courage to stand up here and make a prat of yourself.

Whereas he grounded his "five sense reality" in the logical, *objective* realm of common sense, the "theoretical physics" advanced by mainstream scientists was considered more suspect, hiding absurdities behind a veneer of respectable jargon.

Indeed, it was the 'aura of factuality' that surrounds our five-sense perceptions that Dave sent first to the dock.⁴⁷⁷ Dave, played two short YouTube videos. The first showed a room with illusory optics that convinced the viewer by playing with scale and perspective in the camera's eye. Dave noted that our perception is informed by a pre-existing worldview which ensures that we look past any errors or flaws in the picture; these become obvious only after the optical trick had been revealed. The second video examined the way that "green screen" technology is utilised in digital-film media to achieve convincing, but again illusory, special effects. Afterwards, Dave asked the audience to consider, "If this is the film industry at one million dollars, imagine what you could do with one-hundred million dollars". In other words, might some of what we assume to be hard reality be, plausibly, a mere trick, played on the highly suggestive mind's eye, assisted by technology?

At this point, the "existing story" – that is, to recall the false-flag theories, the official narrative – was now presented. This was told hastily in a single slide. In a half-deadpan and half-incredulous tone, Dave told us that "we are told" we live on a spherical planet, on a 23.4-degree tilt, spinning at around 1,000 miles per second. In this model, we humans are "a speck of dust" in a great galaxy; I noted this down because it felt significant, and, lo, he returned to it later in his

⁴⁷⁵ Bruno Latour, 'Matters of Fact, Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30.2 (2004), pp. 225-248 (p. 237).

⁴⁷⁶ "Five sense reality" is an appeal to common sense.

⁴⁷⁷ I have adopted this phrase from Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 109.

conclusion. As he outlines this official model I became aware that I had no practical recourse to test any of his claims – though it is all approximately accurate, and no better than a non-scientist (like myself) could formulate using the Internet (which I did after the presentation). Along with the rest of the audience, I was forced to reflect upon these orthodox claims; they indeed seem to lie outside the realm of direct or personal experience. I have accepted them on “good faith”. But in the ritualised setting of the presentation, they were made to seem comical, if not outright ridiculous. As Lawrence asked rhetorically, “We’re supposed to be on a giant ball spinning around at hundreds of kilometres per second; has anyone felt a breeze lately?”

Departing from the strict use of the scientific method, Dave now exposed the socially constructed nature of the orthodoxy by shifting into numerology, an esoteric form of inquiry. Starting at a 90-degree angle, the 23.4-degree tilt leaves a 66.6-degree angle. This observation was met with a curious murmur of familiarity and a few knowing smiles. Furthermore, Dave noted that, rounded up, the Earth travels around the sun at a rate of 18.5 miles per second; he extrapolated this by multiplying 18.5 by 60 meaning that we travel at 1,110 miles per minute; and then, multiplying this figure again by 60 minutes, we therefore travel at 66,600 miles per hour. “Does that number mean anything to you?” he asked rhetorically, now to a louder murmur of assent and a chorus of nodding heads. In fact, the precise meaning of the recurring “666” was never spelt out, but for Dave these coincidental recurrences were understood as “fingerprints” that lead back to human authorship. In line with the negative connotations associated with “666” – which he revisited later – the implication was that the spherical model was not only illusory, but an ill-meaning deception of nefarious origin.

I noted in fieldnotes that Dave explicitly shifted the debate from one between a “flat” versus “spherical” earth, to a “heliocentric” versus a “geocentric” cosmology. He explained what these terms meant; this shift would prove to be important in his later conclusions on the ultimate “why?”. He further weakened the spherical/heliocentric orthodoxy by reminding everyone that this debate was settled only a few centuries ago. Significantly, he claimed that this debate proceeded largely on a philosophical level between “a range of models that could explain the observations”, quoting cosmologist George Ellis to support his claim.⁴⁷⁸ “It’s just been decided this way,” said Dave, and the purported evidence supporting the heliocentric model is therefore deceitful insofar as it is not absolute. By now, not only was the audience engaging with a mystery seemingly invested with human agency, but there were now legitimate grounds for subjective speculation.

⁴⁷⁸ The quote is taken from my fieldnotes, but the speaker drew from George Ellis, ‘On the Philosophy of Cosmology’, Paper presented at Granada Meeting 2011
<http://www.math.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/32/Staff/Emeritus_Professors/Prof_George_Ellis/Overview/philcosm_18_04_2012.pdf> [accessed 10/10/16].

8.3.2 Anticipating the Rebuttals: Mobilisation of Sympathetic Theories

Now that Dave had weakened the orthodoxy, he now looked at perhaps the strongest piece of contrary evidence: pictures depicting a spherical Earth taken from space. In the absence of direct “five senses” experience of a spherical Earth, *indirect* experience in the form of photos and videos fill the evidential void. However, as Dave had already claimed, these media are just as culpable of manipulation as the five senses through which we apprehend them. This line of argument is crucial to the plausibility of FET, and, in turn, the implausibility of GET: it claims that humanity has never been to space. All contrary evidence is a manipulated illusion. For example, Dave claimed that the *alleged* photos of earth are in fact artists’ renditions, exemplifying this by a short visit to NASA’s so-called space gallery. The classic ‘marble earth’ photo, “the only one you ever see in your mind’s eye”, was claimed to bear signs of Photoshop manipulation, specifically through the alleged stamping of clouds which were made visible when Dave downloaded the picture and started zooming in.

Dave devoted a lot of time to debunking other corollary space-travel phenomena. In each case, the logic resembles the FFCN strategy of focussing upon apparent anomalies detectable in the orthodoxy. This section proceeded topic-by-topic and mobilised alternative knowledge-claims with which many truth-seekers were already familiar. He claimed that: the Apollo 11 moon landings never happened by referring to flaws in photographic record (such as anomalous shadows), and played a YouTube clip that appears to show someone creating the illusion of a ball earth by combining sticky materials with a light source outside of a grounded jet window; rockets never actually leave the Earth’s atmosphere, by tracing the flight-path during televised launches as “entirely horizontal when you take into account perspective”; “space” shuttles are mere jets, historically unequipped to deal with the alleged radiation from space, citing recent difficulties in how to pass safely through the Van Halen radiation belt; the Mars Rover photos were taken in the Gobi desert, zooming in on photos where rocks seem to resemble desert rats; the Apollo 8 “earth-rise” shots were faked, since “it’s not big enough [...] they made a school-boy mistake on that one”; alleged space-walks actually take place on Earth, mimicking zero gravity by filming underwater, showing another YouTube video of Chinese astronauts where inexplicable air bubbles appear visible, and citing a NASA announcement that they now fit space-suits with snorkels; the International Space Station (ISS) does not exist as we are led to believe, showing a video clip of an ISS astronaut speaking on a video link replying to an American child’s question on how he became an astronaut, “I did it by working hard in a little place called [x] which is across the United States from where we are speaking to you today”; satellites do not exist but are instead the stuff of science fiction, claiming they were neither invented nor patented, but conceptualised instead by the author Arthur C. Clarke, and asking, furthermore, why they are never visible in NASA photos that allegedly show planet Earth despite there being allegedly between 25,000-50,000 in the Earth’s thermosphere.

From my perspective, persuasiveness varied amongst these many points. More convincing were those claims that had themselves been the focal point of previous presentations. The overall effect, however, was to undermine the plausibility of the orthodox claims of space-travel. This strategy of mobilising theories that the audience was sympathetic towards was employed by all three speakers; but where Lawrence was continually interrupted, and Paddy was limited by time constraints, Dave was able to explore each point with reference to multiple secondary sources. By the time he reached the half-time interval, the audience was agreeing with much of his argument which only *indirectly* supported FET. Typical of all areas of alternative knowledge, the point of convergence was scepticism regarding the orthodoxy. While many of the above claims might be readily rebuked, within the confines of the meeting this was hardly possible; through sheer persistence, the barrage of alternative knowledge claims, accompanied by nodding heads, achieved a momentary suspension of criticality.

8.3.3 Alternative Knowledge of a “Flat Earth”

While the strength of FET derives principally from its focus upon alleged weaknesses in GET, it contends that the Earth exists within a geocentric universe. The flat Earth can be visualised by sticking a pin into a globe at the north-pole and unravelling the world around it; the North Pole is now at the centre, and Antarctica is a great circular border. Significantly, this alternate model accords with other experiential phenomena. For example, what we understand by “north” still points towards the North Pole, with “south” pointing away from it. The alternative model accounts for day and night by positing the Sun as roughly 3.1 million miles away, measuring only 34 miles across, and by travelling in a circular motion around a circular equator, the tropics are also maintained. Dave claimed that any circumvention you can draw on a spherical Earth, you can draw on a flat Earth (though he noted that this model has no South Pole). All three speakers claimed that the United Nations logo is a visual representation of this very model; this observation is another instance of mobilising sympathetic ideas since the UN is a common culprit in supra-national conspiracy theories. Lawrence noted the UN logo, but Paddy and Dave went further, noting that it is divided into 33 segments, which is related to the (secret) 33rd degree of freemasonry.⁴⁷⁹ The culprits behind the GET – qualifying his earlier “fingerprints” comment – have freemasonic links.

Many of the pejorative jokes that some truth-seekers like to tell about “Flat Earthers” refer to them sailing off the edge of the world. This is inaccurate, since FET claims the world is bordered by a huge “ice wall”, varying between 200-300 or more feet tall, that is commonly, but mistakenly, referred to as Antarctica. Again, this key component of FET heterodoxy features in

⁴⁷⁹ For example, see the YouTube video posted by Haychex, ‘The Secret of the 33rd Degree of Freemasonry & Illuminati Bloodlines’ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUTJIsEGJLA>> [Accessed 31/12/17]. At 2:44 mins it has the UN logo with the caption: ‘The elite are trying to fulfil this prophecy to reign in a one world government’.

other conspiracy theories, such as theories about a “hollow Earth”.⁴⁸⁰ This aspect was largely neglected in Blackpool – contributing to the sense of incompleteness which detracted from its credulity – but mentioned in Hull, where the speaker added, “it is manned by all the militaries of the world and it’s [i.e. FET] why you’re not allowed to go there”.⁴⁸¹ In Birmingham, however, this aspect was dealt with at length. Citing an argument put forward by Eric Dubay, we were told that Captain Cook sailed 60,000 miles searching for an inlet, which matches the theoretical circumference of the flat earth (the circumference of the spherical earth being 24,901 miles).⁴⁸² Dave also noted that the Treaty of Antarctica was signed after a 1954 television interview by Admiral Richard Byrd in which he spoke of an abundance of natural resources discovered in his early expedition; the true motives of this treaty, putting it effectively off-limits until 2041, is marred by suspicion. Shrouded in mystery, Antarctica is a prime candidate for heterodox speculation; like Judy Wood’s “Hutchinson Effect”, or claims about fluoridation, its deployment cannot easily be dismissed critically since it is a subject with which audience members have no *direct* experience.

Dave’s penultimate section asked, “How have they done this?” Here, he drew upon lines of thought supported by truth-seekers. The answer was “indoctrination” from childhood through various forms of media and education. Then he linked with other streams of thought that posit the existence of a super-conspiracy by “one big club”. The freemasonic links were revisited with emphasis on NASA’s alleged connections to freemasonry. Other presentations on NASA that I had attended made this same connection, always challenging their claim to be a scientific institution interested in producing rational, impersonal knowledge about space. Changing tack, he discredited this state-backed institution by talking about Operation Paperclip.⁴⁸³ This truth-seeker staple holds that after WWII many scientists working for Nazi Germany were repatriated to the United States. NASA (jokingly said to be an anagram for “never a straight answer”) is thereby demonstrated to be an organisation whose origins involve Nazi and freemasonic collusion, and, being state-sponsored, is an agent of an immoral state.⁴⁸⁴ At this point he made explicit the argument underlying the first section, claiming that our experience of space – the actual evidence which serves as the tacit foundation of the taken-for-granted orthodox worldview – is mediated by NASA and other space agencies, always with large governmental sponsorship. I am struck by a form of ‘institutional reflexivity’, in the sense discussed by Giddens, but one

⁴⁸⁰ Note that the “hollow Earth” theory was barely discussed during my fieldwork, mentioned only by truth-seekers who were sceptical of FET and saw “hollow Earth” as a more plausible precursor (though without actually subscribing to the latter).

⁴⁸¹ Fieldnotes.

⁴⁸² For a recent film summarising Dubay’s claims see ‘History of the Flat Earth’, Truth Center, *YouTube* (December 17 2017) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcZMPqvKi5E>> [accessed 31/12/17].

⁴⁸³ Given the myth underlying FFCNs, connections with the state are perceived as a source of delegitimisation in themselves.

⁴⁸⁴ As suggested by the FFCNs myths in Chapter Four.

emanating from the grassroots, calling into question the institutions, systems and experts that produce scientific knowledge.⁴⁸⁵

8.3.4 Conflicting Heterodoxies

It was only now in his talk that Dave finally drew out his actual model. While much of the presentation involved the application of a scientific method he now drew momentarily upon the Bible as his primary source, specifically the idea of ‘a firmament’. “After looking into all this, I’ve come back to the Bible”, he admitted, adding, “I’m still not used to quoting this”. He said that there are “many models in this flat earth “movement” – that I’m not a part of – I lean more towards a dome”. Like Lawrence, he quoted the King James Translation of Genesis 1:7 (‘And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament, from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so’), and Psalm 104:5 (‘He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved’). The denial of space travel through rational argument already supported the impermeable nature of this firmament; the Bible verses were significant not because the Bible is received as divine revelation in a Judaeo-Christian manner, but as further pieces of confirmatory evidence. While on the one hand truth-seekers are bricoleurs that see potential signs of the truth across all cultural artefacts, effectively dissolving the distinction between high and low culture, on the other, the Bible still commands a privileged position as the sacred text of the religion most familiar to truth-seekers from Britain. Moreover, this is suggestive of the continuing influence of Christianity upon the same occultural reservoir to which the other supporting theories belong.⁴⁸⁶ The firmament was made plausible, however, only by citing another scientific case study; all three speakers cited the same Russian drilling experiment that has allegedly been unable to drill further than 20 kilometres beneath the earth after some 20 years. In this way, the dominant epistemology remains rational despite the use of the Bible as site of confirmatory evidence.

This reflects the secular ethos of the alternative knowledge network based physically in contemporary Britain. The presence of these ideas, however, attest to the global nature of the network in its digital capacity; notably, it points to the strong influence of Christian millenarianism and its interconnections with conspiracy narratives. Partridge demonstrates that ‘while the Christian millenarianist subcultures are highly critical of ‘the New Age’, ‘the occult’, popular music, and much else, they nevertheless *absorb and contribute to the occultural reservoir*.’⁴⁸⁷ These Christian ideas are encountered online in times of private personal research; they are then disseminated through physical presentations, times of public personal research. This becomes more evident in the final section which sees FET as an alternative expression of creationism/intelligent design but with a stronger emphasis on an accompanying conspiracy

⁴⁸⁵ Giddens, *Reflexive Modernization*, pp. 185-186.

⁴⁸⁶ Partridge, *Re-Enchantment*, II, p. 2.

⁴⁸⁷ Partridge, *Re-Enchantment*, II, p. 315.

narrative. The relocation of these Christian ideas into our present context severs them from their original theological connotations. When Lawrence cited the same Bible passages in support, the audience's clear scepticism was due to his failure to support these points with secular arguments.

At this point in Birmingham, somebody asked, "What about aliens then?" "I'm saying no aliens", Dave replied, but he allowed for the existence of "extra-dimensional demons". This is further accreditation of Christian influence. It also recalled a debate I had heard previously within ufology streams in the truth movement as to whether aliens might be understood as demons, or vice versa.⁴⁸⁸ While the two are not mutually exclusive for everyone, many truth-seekers subscribe to a single interpretation attributable to both phenomena.⁴⁸⁹ Although the difference here seems to stretch beyond terminology, Dave's allowance for "extra-dimensional demons" allowed authenticity to the questioner's experience.

Within FET discourse there are many, such as Lawrence, who believe the chief motivation behind the GET illusion is to allow for the existence of extra-terrestrials, and to thereby rebrand demons – understood as evil in a dualistic sense – as benign aliens. An audience member remarked loudly and suggestively that Pope Francis recently "gave aliens a good reception". A similar alternative is dubbed Operation Bluebeam, which anticipates a *fake* alien invasion. This amounts to a FFCN/PRS of cosmic proportion, whereby the conspiring elites could "save" humanity by bringing about a one-world government, thus achieving the apocalyptic New World Order.

Significantly, however, someone felt the "no aliens" claim went too far. He was "with you on everything so far, but I've seen the lights, I've experienced aliens". Perhaps wisely, Dave did not argue with him.⁴⁹⁰ *This* part infringed on his own cosmological conclusions based partly upon personal experience.⁴⁹¹ The tolerance and sympathy present at meetings was thus limited by the incongruence of certain ideas based upon personal experiences to the contrary. For those truth-seekers who are personally invested in ufology, and whose identity is made sacred according to myths, rituals, and beliefs that involve extra-terrestrials, FET falls upon deaf ears. Note that although counter-narratives such as the faked-Apollo 11 moon landings were used by Dave to support FET, these narratives do not necessarily preclude the idea of space travel.⁴⁹² The public

⁴⁸⁸ I have also heard the paranormal claim that aliens are actually a type of ghost, and vice versa.

⁴⁸⁹ The way that people understand these two phenomena as expressing one is an example of Mol's notion of 'objectification' whereby the 'variegated elements' of existence are incorporated into a single 'transcendental frame of reference [...] in a more orderly, more consistent, and more timeless way'. Mol, *Identity*, p. 206.

⁴⁹⁰ Lawrence argued directly with his audience. Although debate is encouraged, and fiery clashes between truth-seekers are not uncommon on certain topics, when the *speaker* engages in such a fashion, it seems to detract from their authority.

⁴⁹¹ Similarly, one attendee complained that he had *seen* the International Space Station with his own eyes and would therefore not doubt its existence, even if, based on suspicions concerning NASA that he shared with the speaker, he doubted its "true purpose".

⁴⁹² Some truth-seekers believe that the Apollo landings were faked, but *real* missions were carried out in secret.

success of alternative knowledge-claims thus depends on their being malleable enough to accommodate a range of personal experiences and frameworks.

8.4. The Significance of the Flat Earth Theory: Restoring Humankind's Sacred Status

At the end of his talk Dave finally revealed the real significance of FET. As a participant observer, I felt first-hand the qualitative shift in the mood as he spelled this out with apparent sincerity; even after some three hours from the doors opening, the audience seemed to hang upon his every word. Although he was a “rabid atheist from thirteen”, his personal research into this topic had lead him naturally to numerous “profound topics” and changed him into “believing in a creator”. The heart of the GET deception – the ‘why?’ – is a pervasive conspiracy to deny the sacred character of humankind by rendering us as “only another speck in a meaningless universe” and thereby “making us out as intrinsically worthless”. Humanity is robbed of ultimate meaning through a project that espoused what Dave called “the atheistic universe”.

Fuck the detractors, this is the most important information of all for the Truth Movement. If we knew how sacred we all were, the elites couldn't get away with it – they do because we feel ultimately insignificant. If we think we're the supreme creation of the creator, then the world can be a sacred place.

I would argue that it is *this* element of FET that changes sympathetic individuals from being simply curious and distrustful of parts of scientific orthodoxy to really *committing* to these ideas, allowing them to become invested with sincere emotions arising from existential questions of *what it is to be human*. Sociologist Eileen Barker understands the attraction of Creationist science as relating to its rejection of the ‘uncertainty, materialism, and secularism’ of normal science.⁴⁹³ FET as a scientific heresy, then, makes profound claims of a religious nature. As we have seen, the FET project derives its legitimacy, somewhat paradoxically, by adopting the guise and professed role of the scientific community. As with Barker, ‘those rejecting the values and consequences of a scientific world-view are nonetheless children of the age of science’.⁴⁹⁴ In this way, although FET seems to belong firmly to the scientific side of Campbell's religion/science axis, even where it borrows from ostensibly religious symbol systems, with respect to the instrumental/expressive axis this distinction breaks down. In other words, FET serves an *instrumental* purpose for truth-seekers insofar as it *expresses* truths about the human condition.

From this perspective, FET functions in a religious manner by affirming the fundamental truth-seeker principle that humans are intrinsically special. Humanity's sacred status can be

⁴⁹³ Eileen Barker, ‘In the Beginning: Battle of Creationist Science against Evolutionism’, in *Sociological Review Monograph Series: On the Margins of Science: the Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge*, ed. by Roy Wallis (Keele: University of Keele, 1979), pp. 179-200 (p. 183).

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

understood as an ‘Ultimate Sacred Postulate’ among truth-seekers. Anthropologist Roy Rappaport understands Ultimate Sacred Postulates as running ‘deeper than logic and beyond logic’s reach, upon which cosmological structure can be founded’.⁴⁹⁵ ‘Cosmological axioms’, by contrast, ‘serve as the *logical* basis from which both specific rules of conduct and the properties of social life can be derived’.⁴⁹⁶ We can think about many of the complexes of ideas that were mobilised within FET – from the Apollo landings to deduced intimations of an occult dimension – as resembling cosmological axioms; they are logical, cognitive constructs, that focus upon this-worldly phenomena that also involve societal institutions. The notion that humankind possesses a special significance that is suppressed by hidden agencies, on the other hand, is a tacit assertion within all of them. Indeed, Ultimate Sacred Postulates are ‘typically devoid of material significata’ which serves to protect them, unlike lesser axioms, ‘from the vicissitudes and exigencies of social life’.⁴⁹⁷ There is no set of data, no photograph, nor personal experience that can say otherwise. In this respect, alternative knowledge of all kinds in some way sacralises humankind’s sanctity.⁴⁹⁸

Ultimate Sacred Postulates ‘*sanctify*, which is to say *certify*, the entire system of understandings in accordance with which people conduct their lives’.⁴⁹⁹ The authority of personal experience, and reason, derives from the sacred status afforded to the individual. The FET is a cosmological axiom that uses logic and argumentation based in the physical, phenomenal world; in the Birmingham talk this articulated the transcendental truth of humankind’s special nature. The existence of extra-terrestrials, whether appealing to direct experiences or appealing to photographic evidence, similarly behaves like a cosmological axiom in its appeal to logic; but the implicit significance of ‘abduction spirituality’ (as Christopher Partridge terms it) is the transcendental truth of humankind’s cosmic significance. These two conflicting axioms clash – one denying space travel outright, the other rooted in extra-terrestrial visitations – but both approximate the same ultimate claim of humankind’s special nature within a world they perceive as denying this sacred character.

We can also draw useful comparisons with creationism. Insofar as GET deception is sustained through all those institutions that espouse scientific materialism, the “enemy”, so to speak, is guilty of reductionism. Interestingly, they are accused of mishandling the scientific method; these institutions of science have blinkered themselves by “theoretical physics” to the point that they trade only in “swamp gas”, by which is meant fanciful theories that use the language of science but bear little resemblance to the reality their purport to describe. If humankind’s

⁴⁹⁵ Rappaport, p. 265.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 265, 271.

⁴⁹⁸ This assertion will be revisited in my conclusion.

⁴⁹⁹ Rappaport, p. 265.

sacredness is the fundamental postulate, then, in these terms, the reductionist tendencies of the scientific worldview thus become an ultimately self-effacing ideology.

The relative failure of Lawrence Wright's presentation, on the other hand, can be explained by his conceptualisation of different ideas. The argument based upon the flight patterns of passenger jets open to dispute because it was grounded in refutable logic. Whereas Dave mobilised the notion of Operation Bluebeam as one point among many, when Lawrence used it to answer the *ultimate* 'why?' of FET he was left open to logical rebuke. By invoking the Ultimate Sacred Postulate, on the other hand, Dave orchestrated a chorus of assent. Although Rappaport's theory relies upon ritual contexts, by conceptualising the meeting group as a *ritualised* setting this line of thought works well.⁵⁰⁰ In this way, and contrary to Dave's stated intention of utilising 'the scientific method', we can understand a "successful" presentation by the extent to which the Ultimate Sacred Postulate is asserted. Returning to this chapter's original focus on Campbell's theory of the cultic milieu, the limits to, and the conditions for, interpersonal 'tolerance and sympathy' are set by this principle.

Furthermore, the centrality of Troeltsch's Christian mysticism within Campbell's account fits into this model insofar as truth-seekers are enjoined by alternative knowledge that affirms the divine seed within the individual.⁵⁰¹ Indeed, for truth-seekers, the *true* heresies within the truth movement are not measured solely in terms of their "religious" and/or "scientific" nature, but those areas of knowledge that deny, or even merely neglect to affirm, humankind's *sacred* nature. For truth-seekers who are much more interested in conspiracy narratives than ideas about spirituality (in terms of the spectrum the speaker mentioned in Chapter One, Section Five), the "truth" that mainstream definitions of reality are conspired represents an affront to individual liberty; they too are concerned with the special nature of humankind, one suppressed by the hidden conspirers.

The hostility that so many truth-seekers directed towards FET stems from their perception that it fails this test; Dave, however, was able to spell this out more clearly. For truth-seekers invested in an alternative set of cosmological axioms, such as the existence and visitations of extra-terrestrials, FET represented a problem by threatening to undermine their logical base, their plausibility structure, which would, in turn, undermine their sacralised sense of identity. Partly for this reason, the speakers, and the theories, were rejected. For some, it proved mainstream critics correct by associating truth-seekers and the emergent movement with a symbol of irrationality. Only by stressing its instrumental consequences for self-sacralisation was FET made into more than an extension of the critique of mainstream science, or an exercise in mobilising sympathetic theories, and thus able to compensate for this damaging potential.

⁵⁰⁰ Such as adopting Bell's ritualization strategies, p. 90.

⁵⁰¹ Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, p. 742-745.

In another sense, the arguments caused show that the truth movement, a contemporaneous expression of the cultic milieu, has departed from the ideal-type of mysticism proposed by Troeltsch. While on the one hand, the arguments point to the sort of ‘radical individualism’ and ‘loose and provisional’ community he talks about, it displays signs of ‘scientific rationalism’ all the same.⁵⁰²The additional affective element addressing a damaged idea of self-hood appeals to the many individuals who do not subscribe to the ET scenario. Furthermore, it makes the motivation behind upholding the spherical earth conspiracy match the motivation behind the superconspiracy itself – the ultimate degradation, of some kind, of the human/individual mind, body, and spirit, and the holistic universe to which it belongs.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*

Chapter Nine: Freeman-on-the-Land in Contemporary Britain: Alternative Law, Individual Sovereignty, and Civil Spirituality

“How many freeman-on-the-land does it take it change a lightbulb?”

“I don’t know, Niall, how many does it take?”

“Am I legally obliged to answer that question? [!]” (Host of *Shamanic Freedom Radio*, interview with Thomas Sheridan, Part II)

9.1 Introduction

As mentioned, in Colin Campbell’s original account of the cultic milieu in Britain it makes mention of various categories of what I would term ‘alternative knowledge’. Having looked thus far at health, FFCNs, and FET, a further additional field of alternative knowledge becomes apparent when discussing truth-seekers and the emergent truth movement: that of *alternative law*. In emic terms this might be referred to as “freeman-on-the-land”, the “freeman movement”, or (the umbrella term) “Common Law”.⁵⁰³

Alongside certain other strands of alternative knowledge that I have engaged with, FMOTL ideas have surfaced recently within mainstream and popular media. Most visibly this has taken the form of billboards that appeared at numerous locations across Britain alerting people to ‘THE TRUTH [about] LEGAL NAME FRAUD [:] IT’S ILLEGAL TO USE A LEGAL NAME’.⁵⁰⁴ Local newspapers were left baffled, and the story was eventually picked up by the BBC, where it reached the fourth highest read story on the website. The BBC’s journalist tells how ‘the first time I saw the 10ft by 20ft billboard near my flat in Kilburn, north-west London, I stopped and stared, completely baffled. What was a legal name, exactly? Surely to say it was illegal was an obvious contradiction? And who on earth was behind the advert?’⁵⁰⁵ Following his examination, and presumably along with many of his readers, he concludes that ‘next time I pass that billboard near my flat, I won’t feel any less perplexed’.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰³ I will use these terms interchangeably depending on the excerpt(s) being discussed. Freeman-on-the-land is sometimes known as freeman-*of*-the-land; I will abbreviate this to FMOTL.

⁵⁰⁴ See Figure 1 below. These include Birmingham, Swindon, Dundee, Essex, Gloucester, Grimsby, Guildford, Lincoln, Liverpool, Plymouth, Reading, Southport, Teesside, Truro, and some, as I saw in person, along the A66.

⁵⁰⁵ Jon Kelly, ‘The Mystery of the ‘legal name fraud’ billboards’, *BBC News Magazine* (11 June 2016), <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-36499750>> [accessed 11/10/2017].

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Figure 1.

The mystery of the 'legal name fraud' billboards

By Jon Kelly
BBC News Magazine

© 11 June 2016 | Magazine

Share



Scores of posters have appeared around the UK warning of "legal name fraud". What does this mean and who is paying for the adverts?

Given the time constraints facing journalists I find his continuing bafflement understandable; of the many areas of alternative knowledge I have engaged with through participant observation, conducting interviews, attending talks, and reading written primary sources, for several years, FMOTL was among the most challenging to properly understand. This chapter outlines the key concepts underlying FMOTL, exploring the way that this outwardly “informational” stream, that manifests in standoffs against society’s mainstream legal institution, and ideas about civil society, is rooted in identity construction with an essentially “spiritual” element.

I will begin by sharing a descriptive account of a day in a court where one key informant, Alan, who was charged with not paying his council tax. Although this will serve initially to add to any confusion, it is important to see freeman ideas actualised within their active context.⁵⁰⁷ I will then unpack three key areas: the distinction between legality and lawfulness; the concept of ‘legal fictions’ against flesh-and-blood persons; and the idea that the state, and its legal institutions, (therefore) acts both unlawfully and illegally. Finally, I will propose an analytical approach that sees FMOTL as an expression of ‘civil spirituality’ as a reworking of Robert Bellah’s earlier notion of ‘civil religion’.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁷ It was only when I actually attended a court hearing, with a follow-up interview, that I finally appreciated the freeman perspective. As such, it represents valuable data for understanding a misunderstood set of phenomena.

⁵⁰⁸ I will argue that civil *spirituality* avoids the pitfalls encountered by Bellah given his intended meaning, explored below. See a reprint of his original article with an introductory comment, entitled ‘Civil Religion in America’, in Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); and for subsequent treatments see Robert Bellah, *Broken Covenant*:

9.2. The Court Day: A Victorious Loss?

I arrived at the court building to find four others standing alongside Alan in the lobby downstairs. The date and time had been announced at the previous freeman meeting, held fortnightly in the “plotting room” of The Olde White Harte pub in Hull. Its name was adopted since the English Civil War when town officials met there to discuss supporting the Royalists or Cromwell; declaring for the crown, the city was a Royalist armoury in the north besieged for several years before finally falling whereupon said officials were rounded up and hanged. Andy wanted as many to attend at possible, both to support him, and to witness his putting the freeman principles – much discussed over the past four months of meetings – into practice. He had with him his oath he had written that pledged himself under “Common Law”, or “God’s Law”, as opposed to the “Statutory Law” which had summoned him here that day for not paying his council tax. (It was perhaps fitting, I noted later on, that I was running slightly late due to my own efforts to avoid a parking ticket that would be issued under this same latter type of law.) The oath had the signatures of twelve of his peers (including mine) and was claimed to change things dramatically when he presented it to the court officer before the hearing.

We went through the metal detectors at the security entrance and took seats in the waiting room upstairs. Away from the plotting room, and only metres away from ‘the lion’s den’ (the courtroom) itself, I felt suddenly uncomfortable, afraid that Alan might lose his case and find himself sentenced to jail-time. This was the second year he had refused to pay. While I was sure that Alan himself believed sincerely in the authority of the freshly written and signed oath, and I could sympathise with his argument against paying taxes that contributed to a military that he did not consent to, I was hardly convinced that the court would accept it as a legitimate defence.

Although he did not admit it, Alan seemed tense. Karen, an attendee at Truthjuice and the Freeman group, began (re-)telling the anecdotal story of when a group of freemen had stormed a court at Birkenhead and tried to make a citizen’s arrest on the judge for failing in his duty of keeping justice (thus guilty of perjury by impersonating a judge) which culminated in him fleeing down the street. I had heard this story on numerous occasions; we had all seen the *YouTube* video.⁵⁰⁹ Rather than buoy spirits this tale had the opposite effect - Andy shared his annoyance, and frustration, that so few had come to the courtroom, since there were too few to make a citizen’s arrest; you needed twelve, he said.

American Civil Religion in Time of Trial (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Robert N. Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond, eds, *Varieties of Civil Religion*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

⁵⁰⁹ This video was recommended during the FMOTL meetings in Hull, but I also heard it mentioned at my other fieldsites. Martial Ant, ‘Freemen Arrest A Judge. Birkenhead UK (part 1)’, *YouTube* (2011) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoKOSFCy6OA>> [accessed 7/10/2017] and ‘Freemen Arrest A Judge. Birkenhead UK (part 2)’, *YouTube* (2011) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7E6PwpLE8Q>> [accessed 7/10/2017].

The court officer came to speak to Andy about his plea, and he gave her his oath (his “affidavit”)⁵¹⁰ and various papers apparently detailing his defence in full. Karen repeatedly asked her what her name was, which the woman refused to reveal, becoming clearly quite irritated. She took the documents away, and I noted that there was not much time for them to be read properly, if at all, by whomever was presiding over the trial.

The court was running ten or fifteen minutes late before we were told we could enter, and we all exchanged smiles. I wished Andy luck and he thanked me but told me that none was needed. He went to sit in the defendant’s dock, and the rest of us at the public bench at the back. The room was large and formal, with some regalia such as the royal coat-of-arms above the bench at the opposite side of the room. “All rise for the magistrates of the court”, someone announced, whereupon everybody stood except for the six of us – I had been told not to stand as to do so would accept the court’s jurisdiction and authority. There was no discernible reaction but, nevertheless, I had feelings of nervousness, excitement, defiance, and solidarity next to the seated freemen.

The three magistrates took their seats on the bench towering above Andy’s station, and the rest of the court room. The prosecutor for the council remained standing. Proceedings begun swiftly, and the prosecutor and the chief magistrate spoke to one another about the charges being made, and the offence committed. Nobody looked at Andy. They spoke to one another in a formal way using language not easily understandable to myself.

Eventually Andy was allowed to speak, though only *after* he had been found guilty-as-charged for not paying council tax. It all happened so fast. Personally, I *felt* small, and he *looked* small; I felt very afraid for him. Faltering at first he asked them if they had read his “oath”, and they said they had read “his documents”, but said little else. He demanded a trial by jury which was refused due to the nature of the offence. He then said that he would not pay council tax because he refused to fund terrorism (now picking up his courage) and, furthermore, accused the council prosecutor of working for a terrorist organisation in the form of the British State. She appeared visibly surprised, even outraged. Changing tack, a now-animate Alan then turned to his right and asked the magistrates if they were standing under their oaths of office (as with the Birkenhead incident, if they were not, then they were committing perjury, guilty of impersonating a judge; if they were, then they had fallen short in their pledge of serving justice). They did not reply. He asked them a second time, louder, if they were standing under oath. They did not reply. He asked them a third time, louder still, if they were standing under oath, at which point they abruptly stood up and left the court. Alan, along with ourselves, was now asked to vacate the court room but he refused since the magistrates were “not standing under oath”. Repeatedly he was asked to leave the courtroom but stayed along with the five of us on the

⁵¹⁰ i.e. a sworn oath; explained in more detail below.

public bench. The security from downstairs entered and again asked him to leave, telling him that if he failed to do so he would be charged with trespassing on public property and they would be forced to call the police. “Good”, he said, because he *wanted* to speak to the police “to report a crime”; there were three individuals who were guilty of perjury for they refused to stand under oath, a far more serious crime than trespassing! Karen exclaimed that police would not come since this was a civil matter and this was a private, not public, courtroom, merely rented by the council which existed as a private corporation.

A standoff ensued. I was afraid we would indeed be arrested for trespassing (especially when the security guards began talking down their walkie-talkies) and began wondering how I should handle the situation. This was valuable fieldwork and I was here as a researcher and wanted to see how this would turn out; I did not want to abandon the others, for there were important relationships at stake here from a research perspective. On a personal level I felt solidarity with both Alan and the group, doubtful that the police would be sympathetic to the motivations behind any alleged crime. I suggested to the group that if Alan wanted to report the crime, then perhaps it would be best to do so on his own terms, and not when police came to arrest us all for trespassing. There was pause as the group seemed to consider this for a few moments – but as all eyes turned to Alan, it was dismissed. Andy wanted to speak to them here, now, and did not “feel like moving”.

For at least forty-five minutes we sat in the courtroom. Andy spoke at length to the young security guard about what was happening, about the reality of the legal system (i.e. the freeman perspective), and how statutory law is a money-making sham. Karen and the others meanwhile spoke with a man who turned out to be a public prosecutor who had watched from the public bench. She asked him whether he knew that council tax was formerly known as the poll tax. He did, and he said he sympathised with what they were doing, but that taxes pay for services that we all use, including things like the pavements. Andy overheard this and remarked that he would happily walk down an unpaved trail, but he was never given the choice. He never consented to pavements.

After almost an hour in total it was mutually decided (by the truth-seekers) that we should leave. The police never came (despite their station being around the corner). As time wore on the security guards’ apparent calls to them were increasingly met with good-humoured derision. The younger security guard was smiling. There were shakings of hands between parties present – the security, property manager, the off-duty public prosecutor – in what felt like good will. After the hold-up, the waiting area was now crammed full of people awaiting their own hearing versus the council. There were no police present outside. Unlike at the close of his actual hearing, Andy was “buzzing”, and the feeling across the group felt like one of triumph. Most of us were glad to light a cigarette now we were outside. As a researcher, the risk of staying paid

off; Karen agreed to be interviewed about the truth movement in the near future, and I also arranged to visit Andy at his house the following day for an interview.

9.2.1 Perception of the Trial

I had mixed feelings after the court case. On the one hand, Andy's defence had ultimately failed and he had lost the case, while the council prosecutor had won and determined that he was legally obligated to pay his council tax. On the other hand, however, Andy had walked out free with no jail-time mentioned, something that we had all feared; this was despite both his history and his oral refusal to pay this or any subsequent taxes or fines. He had experiences with bailiffs in the past and claimed that they lacked both the authority and the means, even after this judgement, to seize goods from him, basing this on his experiences of the previous twelve months. From my perspective I had to admit it was curious that the magistrates abruptly left the court upon his third request that they 'stand under oath'.

On reflection, I reasoned that Andy's reaction was unexpected, unorthodox, and unsettling for them, and that they feared further disruption by engaging directly with his questions. Perhaps they had also heard the story of Birkenhead mere minutes before proceedings began. I was surprised and perplexed that the police never came, especially given calls apparently being made to them, and since the court's proceedings were indeed made late due to the commotion; I can offer no firm, alternative to Karen's explanation. Finally, despite *losing* the case, it indeed felt like *we* had *won*. The feelings of triumph were irresistible as we were escorted out on our (ultimately) voluntary exit, and grew more palpable as we stood outside together, grinning at one another; and nor did they dissipate as I digested what I had witnessed on my drive away from the scene of what Alan saw as the magistrates' crime. In the interviews that followed, I learned that Andy's perception of the same events were very different; I will now explore this and the plausibility structure it occupies.

9.3 Key Characteristics of the Freeman-on-the-Land

To appreciate fully the preceding account of the court case, one must look at the characteristics which dominant the FMOTL discourse. The three key areas that unlock the FMOTL perspective are as follows: that the common law is the whole of the law; the creation of a fictitious 'straw-man' contrasted with an individual's true ontological standing as a 'free-man'; and that the State itself is perceived as an unlawful entity. Based on these three core concepts, Andy's perspective of the trial was rather different to my own; for Andy, the experience was part of a 'war', between 'good and evil'. 'That's where my drive and ambition [comes from]. So [when] I went in that court, you could tell I really meant what I was saying. It's because it's true. I know it's the truth. They know I'm speaking the truth.' He therefore saw the trial as a victory. Reminiscing the next day Alan felt that his defiance instantly secured the desired footing:

A: At the start it was ‘would you stand up?’ ‘No’. And that was the end of the conversation as far as I was concerned. I mean from that point on I’ve whooped their arse really. Absolutely. I demoralised them. I feel real bad about what I did to the lass from the council [the council prosecutor].

Indeed, much of our conversation about the trial centred not upon *his* crimes but about the court’s:

A: Well they’ve done it to themselves, haven’t they? I mean, in front of witnesses[!]; under the royal seal[!]; what they’re saying in court; they refuse to stand under oath three times, and I’m stood there demanding my right under common law for a trial by jury – that is just, shit, how can you not?![!] When you’re pretending to be a court, you’re supposed to be a court, so when someone demands their rights there, when you look at law, it’s the first thing in law; the great thing about Britain is everybody is free and got a right to trial by jury, that is the law, everybody knows that. How can they sit there and refuse to do that when they’re saying they’re a court? That is misconduct of office to the highest degree. In front of a *real* court they would get mullered, sent to prison for it. It’s misrepresenting the Queen. It’s treasonous to the Queen, because they’ve sworn their oath to the queen, who is basically a free woman because she’s sworn to god. They’ll be scared of it, by the time we’ve written a letter explaining what our course of action could be; they’re going to freak out, absolutely freak out. In slavery laws, right [;] there’s no contract between me, the council, the government, anybody, I never signed anything. Everything is on contract. So [...] they’re forcing me to do something that creates money for them, basically work to pay a fine, but I’ve got no contract with them, so I’m not legally bound, that is slavery, and there’s so many acts of slavery they’re breaking it’s staggering, it’d be about *twelve* charges of slavery they could be brought up on! Never mind misconduct in public office, which is the blatant shit they’ve shot themselves in the foot with, that one. They had no documentation whatsoever, you know, they wouldn’t even tell me their names, I mean what sort of open court is that? It’s just a farce, it’s a private meeting, and they’re like a private company, and they’re just lying.

These concepts will now be explored in detail in relation to Andy’s account of the trial and their significance for truth-seekers.

9.3.1 The Common Law

In the above excerpt we meet with the integral concept of ‘common law’. From this standing the trial fell so far short of justice that Alan viewed it as a criminal operation. FMOTL is

inextricably bound up with a commitment to the ‘Common Law’.⁵¹¹ This is contrasted with ‘statutory law’, an oft-heard emic term referring to the particularistic rules and laws that are passed by governments, or other earthly agencies, including the obligation to pay fines (including parking tickets or speeding offences), and taxes (including council tax, as with Alan, or the television license). The rejection of statutory law, understood in this way, is where the everyday issues surrounding FMOTL arise. Compared with statutory law, it appears at first glance to be a slippery notion. Veronica: of the Chapman family,⁵¹² author of *Freedom is more than a Seven-Letter Word*, states it baldly when she asserts that, ‘in short, Common Law ‘is’. It just ‘is’. It is there’.⁵¹³ Although ‘it doesn’t really matter what any dictionary says’, she nevertheless supplies us with a helpful definition, taken from ‘Osborn’s Concise Law Dictionary (10th Edition)’:

That part of the law of England formulated, developed and administered by the old common law courts based originally on the common customs of the country, and unwritten. It is opposed to equity (the body of rules administered by the Court of Chancery); to statute law (the law laid down in Acts of Parliament); to special law (the law administered in special courts such as ecclesiastical law and the law merchant); and to the civil law (the law of Rome). It is “the commonsense of the community, crystallised and formulated by our forefathers”. It is not local law, nor the result of legislation.⁵¹⁴

This *positive* commitment to Common law often evades the media representations that (understandably) focus mainly on the *negative* rejection of various societal laws. Common law acts as an unwritten code of conduct which stands in stark contrast with the professionalised, formalised, and written laws that forms the basis of the modern legal system used in Britain. The emic ‘Statutory law’ is used as an umbrella term that refers to equity, special, civil, *and* statute law, as found in this definition, felt to be (merely) man-made and arbitrary. By contrast, Common law, like common-sense, is held up as intrinsic to humanity and its societies.

Its principles are formulated slightly differently according to whichever freeman you might speak with but is most commonly expressed (as in my interview with a different informant called Thomas) that ‘you let people get on with it, you give them a wide margin within the idea of not causing harm, loss, or injury’. In this vein, Chapman states that ‘Common Law (commonsense) says the way to live peacefully is to: ‘1) Not breach the peace; 2) Cause no-one

⁵¹¹ Capitalised, or not, as consistent with written emic discourse.

⁵¹² “Veronica: of the Chapman family” is her chosen name, differentiated from her “legal fiction”. Her book is an important account of FMOTL ideas, highly recommended by many within the truth movement. Veronica: of the Chapman Family, *Freedom: Is More Than Just A Seven-Letter Word*, 2nd edn (Milton Keynes: TamaRe House, 2010).

⁵¹³ Chapman, *Freedom*, p. 48.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.* Italics in original.

else any harm; 3) Cause no-one else any loss; 4) Not use mischief in your promises and agreements'.⁵¹⁵ These Common law principles express the whole of the law; conversely, therefore, if there is no harm, loss, or injury, *there is no crime*. It is from *this* perspective that paying council tax (for example) is not regarded as a *lawful obligation*.

As demanded by Alan both during and after his trial, basic to Common law is the belief in the right to a trial by jury. Since statutory offences are tried not by juries, but by judges/magistrates, these *legal* operations are *unlawful* in the eyes of freemen. As Thomas told me:

So there's the principle, to a trial by jury, [and] it's written implicitly in the Common law. So if you're going to be on trial, who are you going to trust to get at the truth, a jury of your peers, or a state-appointed lackey, or a panel of judges? So you'd want that, therefore you'd allow someone else to have it, so you have a right to a trial by jury, so as I say rights are intrinsic in God's law because of the "do as you would be done by" principle.

As can be seen, the right to trial by jury is extrapolated from an understanding of the intrinsic rights derived from 'God's law' rather than from the human law. Detailing the interrelated nature of God's law and Common law, Thomas goes on to explain that:

The rights therefore come from God; [whereas] what they call rights in their system, "human rights", are not rights at all. They are things, they are notional privileges given to you that can be taken away by that society. So what they've said is "you're a slave" (though they don't quite say that to you), but [they've] given you these privileges, but these privileges, if push comes to shove, [they] can take them away from you, rather than being intrinsic rights [they] can't remove. The only thing you can use to stop a right is a higher right, it's simple, [and] the only way you can beat a principle is with a higher principle. To destroy the first principle itself you need a higher principle reigning, basically.

The occasional reference of Common law as God's Law betrays the Judaeo-Christian heritage of the Anglo-American context where FMOTL is found, including Canada, America, and Australia.⁵¹⁶ This stream of alternative knowledge has its roots in the "militia movement" of America.⁵¹⁷ This language does not imply a strictly Christian fundamentalism but is used instead as a rhetorical device to establish a dualism positing the inauthentic, man-made, and arbitrary laws and rights, on the one hand, against those seen as transcending the societal world, seen as intrinsic, immutable, and absolute. This sharp dualism is further expressed in the emic

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁶ The ideas have spread across the Anglo-American countries through the internet. A comparative, historiographical study is required here, but beyond the scope of the present ethnographic project.

⁵¹⁷ Castells, *Identity*, pp 90-95.

distinction between “alienable rights” (for example the “human rights” that Thomas labels as mere ‘notional privileges’), and “inalienable rights” (such as, fundamentally, the right to live *freely*, unbound by man-made statutes and powers, so long as the individual respects the basic tenets of Common law, above). The former is *unlawfully* presented as the ‘higher principle’ to trump the sacred code of Common law; it is the duty of Britain’s citizenry to rectify this subversion by invoking the extant authority of the latter.

9.3.2 Magna Carta as Expressing the Highest Principle

This written text is integral to the intelligibility and rationality of the FMOTL position and reflects the (relative) timelessness attributed to Common law, as insinuated by Thomas:

I was at Runnymede on December 12th 2012, and realised it was the place of the Bible, [where] they crossed something called the Red Sea. When you actually read it you realise it’s the “reed sea” – a sea to them was just a large body of water. We are talking about the “Reed Lake”. Runnymede is full of *reeds*. Kipling wrote a poem – “What say the reeds of Runnymede”, a perfect metaphor for the Common Law – the wind blows the reeds almost over. As soon as the wind stops the reeds come back up again. This is exactly like the Common Law; it will bounce back up again.

The date of this anecdote is significant because it places this contemplative realisation at the time of the supposed Mayan prophecies. For truth-seekers this signified not the end of the world, but rather the birth-date of a new creation, of an apocalyptic awakening of a new consciousness.⁵¹⁸ Set within this framework, however, this awakening is a *reawakening*, a harkening back to a nostalgic period of justice, as when Magna Carta supposedly ruled the land.

The legitimacy of Common law stems from the Magna Carta treaty of 1215 AD, which is steeped in traditional, and mystical, authority. Magna Carta has assumed a sacred status within FMOTL, its authority beyond question or reproach.⁵¹⁹ It is a document referred to constantly within freeman circles, and frequently invoked as a primary, foundational document in a freeman’s defence in a court of law. Magna Carta’s importance is illustrated by its inclusion in Veronica: Chapman’s widely-read book among truth-seekers interested in Common Law, referenced repeatedly in the main body of text. Belying the FMOTL stance towards this document is her brief introduction where she invokes the authority of tradition:

⁵¹⁸ This is in accordance with the Ward and Voas’s conspiratorality thesis; also see Whitesides’s paper for a more detailed account of how millenarian speculations regarding the Maya Long Count calendar were received within New Age and conspiratorial narratives, ‘2012 Millennialism Becomes Conspiracist Teleology: Overlapping Alternatives in the Late Twentieth Century Cultic Milieu’, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 19(2) 30-48.

⁵¹⁹ Rappaport, p. 209; Mol, *Identity*, p. 5. This serves as the British equivalent of the Bill of Rights valued by the Patriot Movement in America.

It contains within its wording to the effect that it cannot be superseded. It stands behind all other Law, specifically Statute Law. The reason is simply that there was no such thing as ‘Parliament’ when this Treaty was enacted between the Nobility (at the time) and the Monarch (at the time – King John). As a consequence any Parliamentary Statute is bound by it. Any Statute that attempts to supersede it is null & void in Law.⁵²⁰

In terms of an etic analysis of the sacralised Magna Carta I am reminded of Eliade’s notion of the cosmogonic myth.⁵²¹ This document – or its spirit as understood above – is hailed as the codification of the sacred beginnings of the British law. This state of affairs is idealised as perfect, a state of affairs that must periodically be renewed, and is renewed, experientially, when individuals read *and practice* the treaty, for example Alan’s actions within the court-room. The full weight of today’s ‘formalist juristic rationalism’ that legitimates and authorises the contemporary dominance of ‘bureaucratic rule’ as perceived in statutory law, is no match for the sacred traditionalism invoked by this historical document.⁵²² The cosmogonic myth, codified in Magna Carta, supplies FMOTL with a textual authority that lends credence and substance to an otherwise ephemeral Common law.

The article cited most frequently is number sixty-one, where it authorises ‘lawful rebellion’. This article thus establishes a fundamental difference between *lawfulness* and *legality*; this distinction is the crucible upon which this most essential dualism of FMOTL rests. As such, it is worth quoting in full:⁵²³

And if [the barons] do not correct the transgression [against the peace and liberties which we have granted and confirmed by this present charter] [...] those twenty-five barons together with the community of the whole land shall distrain and distress us in every way they can [...] until, in their opinion, amends have been made. [...] And we will procure nothing from anyone, either personally or through anyone else, whereby any of these concessions and liberties might be revoked or diminished.⁵²⁴

The immediately apparent contradiction implied by the *lawfulness* of actions deemed *illegal* (and vice versa) is resolved in this oft-quoted passage. If the people’s liberties are disturbed by statutory law, then (otherwise) illegal actions are wholly *lawful*, and in the spirit of Magna Carta. When Alan refused to pay council tax, or when Karen did her own “direct action” in the courts and refused to pay a fine, they are, from their perspective, *lawfully rebelling* against an *unlawful* system of statutes.

⁵²⁰ Chapman, *Freedom*, p. 149.

⁵²¹ Mircea Eliade, ‘Cosmogonic Myth and ‘Sacred History’’, *Religious Studies*, 2.2 (1967), pp. 171-183.

⁵²² Max Weber, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1948; repr. 1995), p. 299.

⁵²³ Despite being a British citizen born and raised in England, I had never read the Magna Carta prior to my fieldwork; I assume that I am not atypical in this respect.

⁵²⁴ Quoted in Chapman, p. 160.

While the overall spirit of the document is held widely to guarantee the freedom of Britain's citizenry, it is used to legitimise a wide host of beliefs. While it serves to authorise a subjectivist orientation towards (Common) law more generally, it is also amenable to subjective interpretations that address an individual's private concerns. For example, with Alan, it expresses a handy egalitarianism, since "in the Magna Carta, English law, it states that all free men and women are entitled to the same everyone else has. So if you haven't registered to vote, but you need to go on benefits, that doesn't affect your right as a free-man."

9.3.3 "They did my straw-man": "Legal Fiction" versus "Flesh-and-Blood" Persons

In my interview with Thomas, he asserted that "the Magna Carta gives you two choices: you become a freeman under Common Law, or you become a slave to the system". Here we meet with another dualistic conceptualisation, that between being who you really are (a freeman under Common Law) or a less-than-human slave to their system, the 'legal fiction' they have created in order to bypass the ontological reality of Common Law. According to Alan his freeman strategy caught the court off-guard, ensuring him a kind of victory:

Now, they didn't know I was going as a freeman – that really caught them out because I lost my title and my rank, [as] in all their paperwork for me, so that fucked them over straight away. Basically they did my straw-man; they can't touch me so they put it on my straw-man. When the bills comes it will be to *Mr*, and I'll just write on the back of the envelope 'not known at this address', because I don't have the title *Mr*. So I've just changed my identity to what I really am. I've been hiding all these years.

Here he introduces a most important dualism within his own identity – between his "straw-man" (or "legal fiction") and his *true* identity that resides within. To understand this, it is important to remember that for truth-seekers, the Common Law is the whole of the law, and statutory law is therefore null and void. Unless an individual violates the former's basic principles they are otherwise free; any infringement of this *inalienable* right to freedom is therefore considered *unlawful*.

Developing this further, the only man-made laws that (free) humans are obligated to follow are those to which they *consent*. This is vitally important for understanding the way in which FMOTL talks extensively about contracts, contractual relationships, and furthermore explicates the initially bewildering proposition found on the billboards: that it is somehow illegal to use a legal name. Freeman believe that 'consent makes the Law'.⁵²⁵ If no contract is made between two parties, with a wet signature, then there is no contractual relationship existing between them. This is why Alan mentioned slavery laws in his portrayal of the trial.⁵²⁶ This argument is

⁵²⁵ Chapman, *Freedom*, p. 50.

⁵²⁶ "Slavery laws, right [;] there's no contract between me, the council, the government, anybody, I never signed anything. Everything is on contract. So if they're forcing me to do something that creates money

applied most often in cases involving private parking firms where individuals have never contracted to the rules stipulating a fine, and believe instead that their right for freedom of movement/travel (which is article 30 of Magna Carta) supersedes this statutory claim; it is perceived as *unlawful* in the sense of contradicting Common Law, and further there is perceived to be no legal contract. This is the case between individuals and private corporations according to Common Law; but why, then, is the Government able to claim taxes from its citizenry in the absence of any written contract?

The answer lies in beliefs about Birth Certificates. The idea here is that when a parent *registers* their child with the state, they are *contracting* the child to the British state, which really exists as a *corporation*. The British state is believed to be no different to any other registered company, and is merely “pulling the wool over everybody’s eyes” when it assumes the status of some sort of transcendent entity bound up with illusory ‘higher principles’. A helpful pedagogic analogy I heard in the field held that someone’s Birth Certificate acts in exactly the same way as a Vehicle Registration Form. The latter makes the individual the *registered keeper* of the car (while the DVLA is perceived as the true owner, hence its ability to seize vehicles; the right of ownership was *transferred away* as soon as the individual made the mistake of registering it and entering contract with the corporation in question). Likewise, a Birth Certificate makes the individual the *registered keeper of their body*, which the State assumes true ownership for. This forms the basis for the contractual relationship between the individual and society.

When truth-seekers wake up to the alternative reality of Common Law, the contract is rendered null and void; some freemen write to the authorities and state these facts. There is no wet signature; only the parents, and not the individual, consented to State ownership. Where Andy talked triumphantly about the court not expecting him to enter as a freeman – and that they actually served his “straw-man” the sentence along with any other fines – he is invoking this most important FTOML dualism: one between the flesh-and-blood living person, on the one hand, which refers to the “real” self, the living consciousness who *truly* inhabits their body; the “legal fiction” person, on the other hand, is a synthetic, manufactured identity which is essentially conjured up by the State through this piece of trickery with the Birth Certificate.

This ‘flesh-and-blood human being’ – the ‘*freeman*’ – is an identity restored by swearing an oath called an affidavit (which means a statement of truth) before God, that places you under Common Law. This process caused me much confusion during my fieldwork and eventually I asked Thomas during interview:

for them, basically work to pay a fine, but I’ve got no contract with them, so I’m not legally bound, that is slavery.” Interview excerpt.

N: I wanted to ask you about affidavit, and quite what does it mean when you make an affidavit that places you under Common Law and how that places you outside of statutory law?

D: Because an affidavit's sworn before god, there's no question where you are; you're under Common Law because you've said god. Anything else like a notice can still be construed as being under their law. This is what they've done, in fact they've even done it more and more; to start with, when the freeman stuff started, they were accepting normal notices but now they don't seem to accept them, [instead] you have to swear things under oath. But of course once you've sworn under oath you're under god, so there's no dispute, you're under god's law.

Formerly freemen believed that you merely had to send a 'notice' into courts in order to be exempt from the contract that placed you under statutory law. When ever-increasing numbers of freemen found this strategy to fail, and potentially faced jail-time, this practice developed into one of swearing 'before god'.⁵²⁷ This was the "secret weapon" with which Andy walked into court that day; and his tactic of refusing to pay the fine because it is not against *him*, but against the 'legal fiction' that the government *created* in order to bypass Common Law, is therein made intelligible.

From the freeman perspective this shift into being a fully-fledged freeman, enabled by swearing their oath to lie responsibly under Common Law, is experientially true, with affective consequences. After agreeing that he felt more "empowered" in the two-and-a-half years since he had "woken up", Andy stated that this was in no small part due to coming across FMOTL ideas:

A: It allows me to be what I am naturally in society, rather than having to hide under a fictitious character which has been provided by the matrix. So as a conscious being they try to convince you that you are that name on your birth certificate, so they've got you at the last level of slavery. As a conscious being you remove that and they've got nothing on you.⁵²⁸

Based on many conversations with freemen I would argue that identity formation is pertinent here, especially set within a context where they might previously have felt "less-than-human", as unrecognised conscious beings.⁵²⁹ As with the title of Veronica Chapman's book, *Freedom*

⁵²⁷ Here, again, we have the equation between Common Law and God's Law contrasted with man-made statutory law.

⁵²⁸ He continues, "You are just as natural as a horse or a deer, so why aren't they charging *them* council tax? Because they don't have a title on them. If they could get a birth certificate on every cow in the country, all the farmers would be renting their cows off the government!"

⁵²⁹ There are echoes here of the conspiratorial counter-narratives that surround the pharmaceutical industry, where human beings are treated without dignity as mere cattle, either for the generation of money by the power-holders, or for malign supra-natural purposes.

is more than a seven-letter word, an individual is more than a name. This is not merely theoretical but, through writing and sending an affidavit to the authorities that seem to despise you, a new identity is actively brought about. By directly challenging the earthly power-holders, freemen gain access to an empowered sense of self. The ideal of “freemanship” is to navigate through life according to a ‘subjective-life’ engagement with the non-codified Common Law, as against a ‘life-as’ model of living as “a slave to the system” (in Thomas’s words), according to an extrinsic and prescribed mode of particularistic living.⁵³⁰ Alan clearly rejects what he considers to be “religion” but his standpoint is undeniably informed by ideas that he himself labels as being *counter-culturally* non-material and non-secular.

If we refer back to Campbell’s notion that the ‘cultic milieu’ is composed of both expressivist and instrumentalist elements, FMOTL clearly combines both elements; but “direct action” seems grounded in the latter.⁵³¹ The battleground here is the courtroom and legal proceedings, a context that readily conjures up experiences of inter-personal struggle between warring parties; the conspiracy theory, here, is embodied in the state-sponsored judicial system.

A: I hate this council tax thing because I have to stand up in public and draw attention to myself. Beverley is a proper neo-con, conservative stronghold. I look at it, being a spiritualist and battling against them, and lawful rebellion, etc. – it’s like being a black German Jew in 1939 in the Austrian alps.

N: You feel persecuted?

A: Yes! I am totally right in the middle of the enemy. I live amongst them. 18,000 people work at Beverley council offices that run the East Ridings, and when you look at these estates all around Beverley, 95% of the people on the estates are in their house because they work for the council, left feeding off this system that’s screwing everybody over. As far as fighting the enemy goes I’m right in the middle of one of their major capital cities

Although Andy might appear to be a very forthright or even zealous individual, he identifies as “naturally a quiet person”. One might argue that he has been forced to occasional moments of “battle” because he feels like there is no other choice. Importantly, here, one should note that Alan considers his leanings towards a spiritual outlook on life to be the main contributing factor

⁵³⁰ Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 2-5. This model is especially pertinent to my research into FMOTL and the wider “Truth Movement” since many individuals who are therein involved have contact with (so-called) “New Age” groups, whether in the past and/or in the present. See “Con-spirituality” paper for one account of the links between New Age and contemporary “conspiracy theory”.

⁵³¹ Campbell, ‘Cultic Milieu’, p. 124; “Direct action” is an emic term that emphasises nicely the way in which the purely theoretical content is actualised through a set of practices.

to this persecution, over and above the alleged criminality of his actions. He states that, “I’ve formed a spiritual point of view and they fucking hate me”.

The spiritual element is paramount to understanding the inner-motivation surrounding FMOTL but is completely missed by media treatments of the phenomenon. Although FMOTL is rooted in knowledge and practices concerning the legal system, to the majority of its adherents, as we have already seen pertaining to issues around identity, there is a spiritual dimension with ramifications that rebound far beyond the courtroom or legal judgement. Yet the spiritual partially defies any strict systematisation according to an etic perspective, partially because each individual comes from their own perspective and, although they share common sources of information, there is no formal nor dogmatic “hymn-sheet” as such. Furthermore, the language used is “borrowed” from other religious contexts, with the meaning changed.

Nevertheless, there are indeed common affirmations of a freeman being a ‘son of god’ or ‘spiritual’. This actually goes against the criticisms directed at it by other truth-seekers who sometimes see FMOTL as missing the all-important spiritual dimension found in other elements of the (so-called) “truth movement” due to their constant battling with this-worldly enemies in the latter’s own “turf”. Another conversation with Alan demonstrated this clearly:

A: I really do believe we are in a battle, a spiritual battle. I am a spiritualist and son of god before anything. *That’s* what makes me a freeman. It comes from the heart, you’ve got to believe that, you’ve got to have the spiritual side. I hate religion, it’s not to do with religion. I spit on it, it’s the devil’s work. I don’t like using words like ‘God’ or ‘Devil’ but you have to so other people understand what you are trying to talk about. Language is very shit. Religion goes against everything I say and believe. It’s opposite. Black/white. Religion/spirituality – complete opposites.

N: I have done a course on spirituality. People are taught religion as “religion”, less on “spirituality”. One guy I like [Heelas] talks about “life-as” religion, and “subjective life”. “Life-as” is where an external framework rules – religion with a capital R. Spirituality – subjective life – were you trust your own inner feeling, you don’t conform necessarily with an external code – *that* is spirituality.

A: That’s Freemanship. That’s precisely what it is. Freemanship is spirituality – it’s true of god, justice, the right, doing good. Freemanship is the way people can acknowledge and recognise freedom, an endless environment – and I think it’s the only way you can do it. To be a proper freeman you’ve got to believe it. It’s about being a son of god, that’s what makes you free.

The framework I introduced here from Heelas and Woodhead, as mentioned in my analysis above, helps us to understand better this split between the flesh-and-blood individual and the

legal fiction; it was also met with assent by my interviewee. We should also note the most highly valued aspect of selfhood for the FMOTL: *sovereignty*. This term is widely used to describe the idealised state of identity that one should aim for, and further serves to qualify their subjectivist outlook towards societal rules and statutes. The principle of sovereignty might even be construed as the ‘ultimate sacred postulate’ of FMOTL; to recap this notion introduced in the FET chapter, ‘ultimate sacred postulate’ lies beyond all questioning and acts as the gravity around which all beliefs and practices derive their order and meaning.⁵³² Here, again, the sacred nature of humankind is affirmed; Magna Carta upholds the sovereignty of the individual. The legal fiction is so reproached precisely because it is *not* sovereign; it is a mere name, and the conscious human being transcends the unlawful, legal limitations that are artfully placed upon a person existing only as a name. In a sense, a truly *sovereign* individual has reflexively become aware of the social construction of socio-legal reality, and can bring about their ontological freedom by recognising this and acting accordingly.

9.3.4 The State as Unlawful: “A criminal conspiracy against mankind”

The idea that the State and its institutions are unlawful has surfaced repeatedly in the excerpts already shared above. The perception of the State as an immoral entity contributes to the construction of the very “other” against which the rightness of FOTML is measured by insiders. Furthermore, this notion of an ongoing war of good versus evil is not drawn from divine revelation but instead is justified by a selective engagement with the contours of hard reality, grounded in the here-and-now, including the FFCN myths of an immoral state. We saw already the way that Alan accused the council prosecutor of collecting taxes to aid and abet what he described as terrorism. The previous sections should have already helped make this perspective intelligible; while the State might decide the *legality* of affairs, this is an entirely separate issue from the *lawfulness* of its actions, especially when perceived as a *private corporation*.

Following a conversation about the (negative) role of monetarism in contemporary Britain, Thomas further explores, and justifies, the difference between legality and lawfulness:

T: [...] In a more violent society people are free to abuse each other, then we could criminalise abuse, but the actual act of criminalising somebody who’s not causing harm, loss, or injury, is far worse for the common good, as we can see.

N: So I suppose you have monetarism on the one hand, and criminalisation on the other.

T: Well the whole thing is criminal because they’re not supporting Common Law. The only lawful role of government is to protect us from each other, to stop people forming

⁵³² Rappaport, pp. 263-275. ‘The Ultimate Sacred Postulates crowning [...] hierarchies of understanding are devoid of concreteness, low in social specificity, and taken to be eternal, immutable, ultimately efficacious, absolutely authoritative, fundamental rather than contingent or instrumental and, of course, intrinsically sacred’, p. 275.

mobs to suppress people's genuine rights under common law, the government has a role there, obviously, the government should be providing us with a police force and an army to stop that happening. Unfortunately, they have recruited [for] us, not so much police, but they're supposed to be *law* officers, sworn officers of the law, but they've become known as police, or "policy men". So they'll engage you under the Common Law, under their common law right as sworn officers of the law to engage you, and *then* they'll go under the policy law stuff to try and nick you. But I've done all the research on this, as I say - legality is not law, simple as that. Everything shows that, and there's a good reason for this, because we see what governments do, whether it's the Soviet Union, or the Nazis, they will abuse basic human rights; but what they do within their system is legal! The rounding up of people and putting them into concentration camps in the 1930s in Germany was legal under their law. So what they're doing now, it's all legal, yeah, but you can do anything legally.

Thomas uses well-known historical examples to say that societal *legality* is ultimately arbitrary as against the timeless authority of true (Common) *law*. There are many more examples in my primary data echoing this same idea; it is a common topic of conversation around a cigarette at (informal and formal) FMOTL gatherings. Later in my interview with Thomas this topic surfaced again when I sought to clarify the legal/lawful distinction:

N: But you wouldn't say then that the *laws* of society, the legal side, are they not intrinsically part of what you have to follow, since you've been born into that society, or not?

T: Well it depends, obviously. It depends on the society that you're living in. If you are living in a society where they are respecting people's rights, then [yes]; so the society I initially grew up in, from the 1960s onwards, there was some evidence that it was one nation, we understood the rule of law, there was almost full employment, people could be educated according to their ability not how much they could pay, they had free healthcare, and so on. That was *that* kind of society. But we've had that stripped away from us now. The society we have *now* is a society involved in unlawful war. Society doesn't bring war criminals to justice, society doesn't investigate a case where a whistle-blower is openly murdered, David Kelly.⁵³³ [...] So coming at the point, no, you have no duty to any society that doesn't support the law, that's the point, you have duty to a society that genuinely [is] helping to protect the rights and so on, of course you've got a duty to that society, but society as it is currently constituted, speaking from my own experience, no, you have no duty to that society; quite the opposite, you have a

⁵³³ David Kelly cast doubt upon aspects of the government's reasons for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 when doubting the claims that a weapon could reach the UK within 45 minutes, off-record to a journalist.

duty to bring down that society. And because it's a criminal conspiracy if you pay a single penny into it you are still part of that criminal conspiracy. If the IRA come round and put £10 in a bucket and they go away and commit an attack, in the eyes of the British government I am supporting the IRA, I am part of the attack. Well I argue the exact same principle with the British state, anybody paying taxes, or indeed mortgages to the banks – that is again part of the funding of this stuff – is part of a criminal conspiracy against mankind.

Besides further illustrating the main themes I have already discussed, one important point here is the sense of nostalgia with which Thomas looks back at the Britain he remembers from his youth. There is a righteous sense that contemporary Britain has lost its way, morally and *lawfully*, and that its citizenry need to call it back to its rightful state. I want to develop this notion more fully in the next section by revisiting Robert N. Bellah's conceptualisation of a *prophetic* 'civil religion', arguing that the FMOTL phenomenon constitutes a form of 'civil spirituality'.

9.4. Freeman-on-the-Land as Civil Spirituality

Rather than advance the disjunction between positive emic perspectives and negative media portrayals, I propose this idea of 'civil spirituality' as one way of framing FMOTL that remains faithful to the emic perspectives explored in this chapter. The term 'civil religion' has proven to be a controversial one, amenable to very different interpretations.⁵³⁴ After Robert N. Bellah used it in a 1966 conference paper entitled 'Civil Religion in America', a great debate ensued about his meaning; years later, when forced to once again clarify his position, he noted he had 'never been allowed to forget [it]'.⁵³⁵ In his original essay, he argued for the existence of a 'public religious dimension [...] expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion'.⁵³⁶ Some of his readers wildly misunderstood his intentions; he was forced to 'defend [...] against the accusation of supporting an idolatrous worship of the American nation' in a later reprint of his original article, clarifying the 'central tradition of American civil religion not as a form of national self-worship but as a subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend it and in terms of which it should be judged'.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁴ For a good account of the varied use of the concept, leading sometimes to conflict in the way described below, see the following papers by Carrol J. Bourg, 'A Symposium on Civil Religion', *Sociological Analysis*, 37.2 (1976), pp. 141-149; Robert N. Bellah, 'Response to the Panel on Civil Religion', *Sociological Analysis*, 37.2 (1976), pp. 153-159; Richard Fenn, 'Bellah and the New Orthodoxy', *Sociological Analysis*, 37.2 (1976); Robert N. Bellah, 'Comment on "Bellah and the New Orthodoxy"', *Sociological Analysis*, 37.2 (1976b); and Philip E. Hammond, 'The Sociology of American Civil Religion: A Bibliographic Essay', *Sociological Analysis*, 37.2 (1976), pp. 165-182.

⁵³⁵ Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, p. 165.

⁵³⁶ Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966; repr. 1970), p. 171.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168; In his 1976 response to Fenn's paper, Bellah restates that 'American civil religion has never been primarily an ideology intended to reinforce the authority of the state or to cast a halo over its

The contention arises from the existence of two markedly different definitional versions. Bellah's version exemplifies the 'liberal' definition, which can be contrasted against the conservative' conceptualisation.⁵³⁸ The former appeals to broad values such as social justice and liberty, civil rights, disarmament, and ecology, and is brought to bear *upon* the country; here, a nation's 'civil religion' bears a regulatory function and emanates from the outside of the political sphere. By contrast, the conservative form 'is inclined to celebrate and affirm the belief that America has a divinely appointed role in the world, is more likely to uphold 'traditional' moral values and appeals to a generally uncritical acceptance of the correctness and goodness of American values and their influence in the world.'⁵³⁹

As Wuthnow observes, in the liberal version the nation is called *to become* sacred, while for the conservative version the nation *is already* sacred.⁵⁴⁰ Hammond astutely traces this split as between those treatments who follow Rousseau in articulating a (conservative) civil religion that is top-down, dictated from above, and those who follow the Durkheimian tradition and see it as an emergent social phenomenon intrinsic to any society.⁵⁴¹ Returning to Bellah, Aldridge puts it neatly, observing that he 'turns Rousseau's analysis on its head. Instead of being dictated from the top, civil religion emerges from the grassroots [...] as a pervasive religious dimension of American political life existing independently of the churches.'⁵⁴² The prophetic nature of Bellah's civil religion is evidenced further by his choice of the Vietnam War protests, and Martin Luther King, as exemplars: people with a vision of what America *should* be like, measured against the contemporaneous state of affairs, who draw instead upon higher principles that they associate with civility; and who act accordingly *against* various state-sponsored individuals and institutions (who implicitly draw upon the conservative form of 'civil religion') in different forms of protest.

The misinterpretations of Bellah's work might derive partially from his use of the word 'religion'. One can sense an awareness of the inherent difficulties of his preferred terminology even in his original argument, as when he notes that, 'this religion – *for there seems no other word for it* – while not antithetical to and indeed sharing much in common with Christianity, was neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian'.⁵⁴³ While some of the difficulties certainly derive from the term's associations with Christianity and America's churches, as

institutions [...] [but] has been quite explicitly oriented to a level of reality that transcends the state and institutions'. Bellah, 'Comment', p. 167.

⁵³⁸ Gerard Parsons, *Perspectives on Civil Religion* (San Francisco : Open Library, 2002), p.4.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁰ Robert Wuthnow, *The restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 255.

⁵⁴¹ Robert N. Bellah and Philip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (Guernsey: Everyman, 1913; repr. 1993), pp. 298-309.

⁵⁴² Alan Aldridge, *Religion in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 144-145.

⁵⁴³ Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, p. 175. Emphasis added.

inferred here, it also implies a mode of church-like religiosity. Indeed, there *is* another word for it, one that better fits with a *grassroots* faith, and with a *vernacular* civic sensibility concerned with the state of the nation: *spirituality*. As in the interview excerpt with Alan when I could not help but bring up Heelas and Woodhead's notion of 'subjective life' versus 'life-as' orientations, FMOTL idealises a subjectivist orientation of living lawfully, but one that is inextricably bound up with normative ideas of contemporary Britain.⁵⁴⁴ A further reason I prefer 'civil spirituality' over 'civil religion' is again illustrated in that same excerpt: freemen universally detest "religion", even as they draw upon higher principles in a manner that scholars might indeed label "religious"; civil *spirituality* thus avoids the pitfalls of distorting, or offending, the emic perspective, while retaining the contributions made to understanding FMOTL by applying this etic framework.

FMOTL draws upon 'a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals' (to echo Bellah) that all pertain to the nation-state or civil sphere. In the previous section we saw its prophetic character in the way that contemporary Britain is compared with Nazi Germany as being immoral and corrupt; its legal system is incompatible with the emic vision of lawfulness. The symbolic resources include the Queen, the Royal Seal, and even depict Magna Carta as an authoritative written constitution. Considered as such, this document constitutes a myth of origin that sacralises Britain by connecting with abstract values of liberty and social justice. Finally, the individual exemplars of FMOTL principles include whistle-blowers (and the Queen, due to her portrayal as standing outside of the political sphere, bound up instead with 'God's law') who actively and prophetically indict a corrupt nation state. Within this framework FMOTL "direct actions" in the courts constitute symbolic acts of ("lawful") rebellion that articulate and actualise an alternative vision of Britain in the here-and-now.

9.5. Truth-Seeker Criticisms of FMOTL

Although the so-called "truth movement" exists under a banner raised against a common foe, we have seen how its affiliates have different views regarding each one of its many ideational and practical spheres. FMOTL is another good example of this. The emic criticisms are especially valuable as they come from individuals with first-hand experience of FMOTL ideas, and their consequences for practitioners. This interview excerpt with a truth-seeker captures many of the emic criticisms directed at FMOTL in this interview excerpt:

I think [FMOTL] is bullshit really. I think it's a dangerous path people go down. I know people who have lost everything because they have gone down it, because they believe this idea – they are taking on the machine. It's like me going into a science lab and telling them what I think based on what I read on a Steven Hawking book. If you understand the consequences, and a lot of them didn't, and this is not an exaggeration,

⁵⁴⁴ Heelas and Woodhead, p. 5.

every single person I know who went down that freeman or no-name route, without exception, it was a catastrophic disaster for them. They lost their homes, many relationships broke up because the wife got sick of the bailiffs knocking on the door at 4 in the morning, lack of sense of security; other things on a minor level. “You don’t owe anybody money”: that’s nonsense! “Drop the debt” kind of thing. People had spent years building up their credit, but they can’t get a loan for a house or a car because their name is muck. They did not understand, because lot of them were young and they didn’t understand the financial markets either, just how dangerous this game they were playing really was.

Neil, who has spoken at several of the groups I have visited on topics relating to MK-ULTRA and mind control, has a particularly chilling story about the dangers of trying the freeman techniques in a real-life court where people do not understand the principles.

I’ve never seen the freeman movement work. It’s all powerful sods who have all the money, [saying], “If I use the right combination of words they are powerless”. I don’t think they care. I’ve seen it not work to the point someone died with it not working. It is very prominent in the [truth] movement – he advised this geezer, in my presence, to do the freeman on the land bullshit, on some pissy little charge, wasn’t a big deal, and he did the whole deal, but hadn’t done his homework. He tried it and the judge said, “Poor bastard, doesn’t know his own name”, and sectioned him. Within a week he had died of an overdose of tranquilisers. They take it seriously.

This tale reminds us of the high stakes of such an approach; the freeman perspective can appear so divorced from the official legal understanding and institution that accusations of insanity or madness are reasonable. Although I am unable to quantify the number of Freemen in Britain there is a need for legal professionals to become more aware of this alternative perspective to avoid a repeat of an event such as this one. Two divergent worldviews come head-to-head in the courtroom; but it is the judge who holds the power, ultimately, with this-worldly means at their disposal to enforce their legal system through physical force. ‘What is factually untrue may, without difficulty, be considered an ontologically acceptable truth, and this a social face, by people in specific religious contexts.’⁵⁴⁵ The domination of subjective and relative truths by the institutionalised power of the legal system – by societal “facts” – is understandable and, in another sense, inescapable, but casualties are produced along the way. Examples like these are touted by some as exemplifying the dangers of FMOTL but for others such persecution merely testifies to the perceived corruption of legal professionals who side with inauthentic legality over just lawfulness, partially in efforts to suppress the ontological truth of the matter.

⁵⁴⁵ Mikael Rothstein, ‘Scientology, scripture, and sacred tradition’, in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. by Lewis and Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 18.

The second criticism in this excerpt worth picking up refers to individuals who personally benefit from the freeman movement. Such accusations of monetary gain on the part of legal gurus are not uncommon, even within freeman circles such as the group meeting in Hull. One good example is the website ‘getoutofdebtfree.org’. Although two different speakers, affiliated with the site, recommended people go there to find free templates for letters to send to debt collectors (of all kinds) to annul the amount owed, on closer inspection one is forced to subscribe to their members section for a nominal fee. Roger Hayes, meanwhile, founder of the British Constitution Movement which deals in FMOTL ideas including Common Law courts, has been accused of taking people’s donations, and conference fees, to fund his own ‘dishonourable’ lifestyle; ‘taking people’s money and drinking red wine every night’, according to Frank, who claimed this both during a New Horizons talk and an interview setting. On the other hand, as with alternative health treatments, the involvement of money does not necessarily imply disingenuousness. Gurus still need to eat. Yet the fact remains that many of the individuals who make monetary donations or subscriptions to these services are often desperate, and at a time of need; they typically come from low-income backgrounds; they often have low levels of formal education; and many initially turn to FMOTL resources precisely because they cannot afford (at least perceivably) professional legal services, and see this as an affordable alternative that promises a “magic bullet” for their current predicament. There is certainly a case to be made that certain freemen gurus are profiteering from the most vulnerable in society, ironically mirroring the very claims made against demonised agents of mainstream society.

9.6 Provisional Conclusions

Let us return to the billboards that left so many journalists and passers-by perplexed with which I began this exploration of the contemporaneous FMOTL phenomenon. The fraud of “legal names” refers to the state’s ability to prescribe a system of rules and regulations upon a human being by reducing them to the legal entity denoted by their proper name. Meanwhile, the *truth* is that an individual’s true identity as a living, breathing, and *conscious* being transcends this mere legal fiction. A “freeman” refers to all those who have seen through this perceived fraudulent system, and who freely choose to submit themselves to Common law, and who stand outside of the limitations of statutory law. While the latter is held up as arbitrary, man-made, and, importantly, *legal*, Common law is absolute, inherent, and *lawful*. According to FMOTL, legality and lawfulness are entirely separate.

Since Statutory law runs against the spirit of individual liberty that freemen argue is enshrined in Magna Carta, it, along with its mechanism of using legal names, is considered *unlawful*. However, the billboards go further, saying that ‘it’s *illegal* to use a legal name’; this is because of the value FMOTL places in issues of *consent*, and the belief that the Birth Certificate is (mis-)used as a legal document, therefore used *illegally*. The notion of the illegality of the legal

name, then, borrows from certain principles (i.e. contract) of the very system of law that FMOTL directly protests against.

It is partly due to the *legalistic* aspects of FMOTL being much more easily visible (given the courtroom context where direct action takes place) that the *spiritual* dimension has hitherto been so thoroughly overlooked. The battle-lines drawn and inhabited by freemen are traced back in time to a nostalgic ideal of true justice, and the almost-other-worldly ‘higher principles’ transcend and defy the ‘formalist juristic rationalism’ that dominates contemporary Britain’s legal institutions. From my own observations there is an interplay between feelings of power and powerlessness: individuals find themselves disempowered by a legal system that they perceive as wrongfully infringing upon their liberty, helpless against a system of law whose customs seem purposefully unintelligible and complicated as a way of trapping the very people the system is supposed to serve; the FMOTL perspective supplies an alternative identity, a phenomenological reality that can empower these same individuals. This ontological awakening often comes at a cost, however, in the form of legal judgements made against truth-seekers who use FMOTL ideas in the courts. Whether these are monetary punishments, or involve jail-time, this clash of worldviews results in the great and tragic irony of FMOTL: its potential for empowerment is created by an apparently counter-cultural message of liberty; but it results, instead, in the forced surrender of personal liberties to this-worldly powers. Perceived as a spiritual war, as “good” versus “evil”, individual losses do not signal an end, or even a time of defeat, but instead a redoubling of efforts as the lawfulness of FMOTL’s rebellion, and the unlawfulness of the legal fraud, is freshly underscored.

Chapter Ten: Conclusions

“Through the media, through chem-trails, scalar waves [...] they send these lower vibration waves from smart meters, mobile phones, mobile phone towers. It’s been an intentional strategy to attack us energetically from every possible angle [to] keep us collectively at a lower vibration. So in fear, or as close to fear as they can. [...] You’ve got this simultaneous arising right now of dark and light together. It feels really dark but the light is being shone now on the darkness after thousands of years behind closed doors. We’ve refused to look at it. [...] Some people refuse to look at this paedophilia stuff because it’s scary. Some people won’t even consider that 9/11 is an inside job because they are giving their power away. They just don’t want to believe their worldview can be completely shattered.”

(Truth-seeker, interview.)

For an anthropologist, the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them on the one hand – its model *of* aspect – and of rooted, no less distinctive “mental” dispositions – its model *for* aspect – on the other.

(Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*)⁵⁴⁶

10.1 The Truth Movement: A Network of “Truth-Seeking”

This thesis endeavoured to produce an ethnographic portrait of a culture comprised of individuals who subscribe to understandings and attitudes about life that could be labelled as “conspiracy theories”, that is, ideas that reject world affairs as purely natural and innocent but as part of the nefarious designs of conspiring parties who are secretly in control. In the Introduction, I suggested that mainstream media and an influential cohort of academic commentators labelled these ideas as distortive, disabling, and dangerous. The pejorative force of the term is justified by a set of assumptions that view “conspiracy theory” as *unwarranted* knowledge. They are held to *distort* reality; they pose a *danger* to wider society; and they pose a danger to the individuals who hold them by promoting feelings of disempowerment, effectively *disabling* the “conspiracy theorists”.

Rather than take such notions at face-value, this thesis has attempted to view the world from the other side of the looking glass. This thesis sought a cultural context in which these ideas are viewed as *warranted* knowledge, engaging with people who have a personal stake in such ideas, from which emerges a sense of identity that is at odds with the popular portrayal above. In order to do so, this thesis employed the ethnographic method of participant observation in an attempt to see the world from the perspective of the “conspiracy theorist”.

⁵⁴⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation*, p. 123.

Rather than write about this submerged population based upon the norms and values of mainstream culture, I searched instead for an opening into an alternative culture that shares the same country. Some of the key primary institutions of hegemonic culture that together constitute the dominant *nomos* have been addressed in each chapter within different avenues of truth-seeking. This thesis has provided a snapshot into a culture that exists outside of the mainstream and attempted to provide insight into the living reality of flesh-and-blood truth-seekers in England, 2014-2016.

10.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

Within this ethnographic study four key research questions emerged, which this thesis has sought to answer. These shall now be addressed in turn.

1) To what extent can the so-called “truth movement” be considered an actual movement?

This question arose in the field from early fieldwork encounters within the network I studied, as detailed in Chapter One. The “truth movement” is one emic term that I encountered in the field among other variants expressive of a wider collective of truth-seekers. That there is no single answer to this question but rather a plurality; the so-called “truth movement” is an emergent sense of a collective that is best described as an aspect of individual consciousness; it is a fundamentally subjective construct.

Chapter One showed that different truth-seekers supplied conflicting answers that converged around notions of fluidity, pointing to a web-like construct whose boundaries were demarcated according to the intuited feelings of the individual who would brandish the term. This notional collective is organisationally ephemeral and decentralised and is comprised of an assortment of sites that meet regularly but are geographically segmented. Despite this, the fact remains that among the sites and persons who recognised the term – asserting that there existed *something* that could be referred to as the truth movement – there are discernible flows of people, beliefs, and practices that serve to cohere this uneasy and disorganised wider collective at the phenomenal level. In this sense, this thesis has demonstrated that the truth movement constitutes a ‘network’ in the way defined by Wood, comprised of ‘considerable flows in people, practices, and belief between a number of different groups and events’. However, unlike in Wood’s study, my multi-sited ethnography extended beyond ‘a relatively limited geographical area’.⁵⁴⁷

In terms of people, the attendees (unlike myself in my role as a multi-sited ethnographer) only went to one regular meeting group, but I attended one-off events by following a flow of attendees (such as the Tom Crawford protest, Chapter One). The speakers, however, often

⁵⁴⁷ Wood, *Power*, p. 7.

presented at more than one site, and/or multiple times at one of them. Ian Crane, for example, spoke at each of the three groups at least once during the eighteen months.

The flows of practices are of vital importance in assessing whether the myriad of truth-seekers constitute an actual movement. Early in my project, in a field-journal reflection on Wood's study, I wrote, 'Wood spends a lot of his book discussing the *practices*, especially practices that others seldom might have written on – there *are* no obvious practices here [flowing between physical sites] bar, once more, *personal research*'.⁵⁴⁸ However as time progressed the flows of practices became increasingly evident. In Chapter Five we saw how everyday practices that function as private rituals to combat environmental risks are shared throughout the emergent network; the tendency not to drink or offer me tap-water was widespread.

The flows of belief were more clearly identifiable. With the example above, truth-seekers perceive a common set of dangers. Although truth-seekers have been shown to disagree about particular subjects, they share a flow of *disbelief* regarding mainstream definitions of reality. For example, we saw conflicting versions on who/what/why regarding 9/11, but underpinning all is a rejection of the same "official" account. Across each site, WT7 features always as the "smoking gun", truth-seekers themselves often using that particular turn of phrase. Likewise, although not all truth-seekers thought that FMOTL was a practical course of action, Common Law was widely valued, and statutory law was regarded as state-sponsored deception.

A further significant role is played by the language that is shared across these separate sites. One of the most prominent is the phrase "waking up". If, during a talk or conversation, somebody talks about having "woken up", or expresses a desire to see others "wake up", then truth-seekers – that is, those who have "woken up" to the conspired nature of reality – know intuitively what is meant. Likewise, referring to the masses as "sheeple" encourages a sense of superiority among truth-seekers in that they have courage and wilfulness to break the mould, seeing and acting within the world differently. References to "sovereignty" have a clear meaning to those within the truth movement, alluding to a personal state of resistance against the would-be world controllers. It is important to note certain phrases that were absent from emic voices; for instance, "the Illuminati" is a label used rarely, or spoken in a way that retains inverted commas, referring instead to a force whose identity most truth-seekers assume will remain permanently hidden. The terms "conspiracy theory" or "conspiracy theorist" are used with a strong sense of irony, subverting the pejorative connotations of the terms through an explicit sense of self-awareness. Truth-seekers prefer instead to talk simply about "information" (or "disinformation" for ideas disseminated by the controllers) and often avoid using any labels for themselves. The sense of personal identity that I refer to in this thesis as being a "truth-seeker" is as much an emergent property of processes of personal and social research into

⁵⁴⁸ Field journal.

alternative knowledge stipulating a conspired world as the “truth movement” is itself at the level of group identity. Indeed, it is testament to the power of this common language that a sense of togetherness is so tangible in the absence of, and aversion to, formal organisation. Hearing somebody refer to “Building Seven” (of 9/11) or “Agenda 21” is a clear sign that this person has “woken up”, especially in the context of everyday life in the mainstream, away from the so-called truth movement, where all such references are conspicuously absent.

Above all, the orientation of *truth-seeking*, as a distinctive ethic of conviction, flowed across all sites and persons in this ethnography, i.e. a shared conviction that mainstream reality was illusory, and a passion to hear alternative knowledge to effect personal change. In this sense, the unity of the truth-movement derives from its shared sense of deviance and an organisational conduciveness to a praxis of seekership; while the disunity that prevents this arises from the deregulation that allows for the shared ethos of ‘radical individualism’.⁵⁴⁹ From an analytic point of view, we might thus speak of the so-called truth movement as *an invisible alternative knowledge network of truth-seeking*.

2) On what basis do truth-seekers subscribe to alternative knowledge?

This thesis has argued that truth-seekers subscribe to alternative knowledge principally because they recognise it as *warranted* knowledge. The streams of knowledge explored in detail in Chapters Three to Six are all shown to be plausible to those truth-seekers who embark upon programmes of personal research into the given topic. This relates also to the nature of “conspiracy theories” as *alternative* knowledge when they are reconsidered as *counter-narratives* that undermine knowledge-claims that are perceived as warranted within mainstream culture. Certainly, this thesis has shown that truth-seekers are not pathological or psychologically impaired, but instead approach and challenge mainstream knowledge as rational actors. Truth-seekers not only adopt the language of science when thinking about informational topics such as FET, but also in instances dealing with ostensibly “spiritual” subjects such as spiritual health.

Alternative knowledge can also be approached as a type of discourse that is reasonable in that it draws upon ideas and practices of occulture. Partridge uses the concept to explain the plausibility of worldviews that posit such an enchanted universe on the grounds that occulture is *ordinary*, readily available to people through popular culture, and disseminated easily through information technologies.⁵⁵⁰ Alternative knowledge is thus not merely the preserve of truth-seekers but can be seen as belonging to a wider matrix of ideas that are considered reasonable by large numbers of people within society when not labelled specifically as “conspiracy theory”.

⁵⁴⁹ The shared sense of ‘deviance’ corresponds with Campbell’s account of the cultic milieu; the ‘radical individualism’ corresponds with Troeltsch’s account of “spiritual religion”.

⁵⁵⁰ Partridge, ‘Everyday Enchantment’.

As a participant observer adopting the social constructivist perspective – viewing knowledge as socially constructed – I soon appreciated certain parallels between the deconstructionist standpoint and that of a truth-seeker. For instance, I noted in Chapter Five that the truth-seeker preoccupation with hidden power relations is not unlike that of Foucault. The key difference is *which* bodies of knowledge are scrutinised. I have emphasised throughout how often truth-seekers (as opposed to “troofers”) *do* criticise certain bodies of alternative knowledge. Indeed, the plausibility structure undergirding a truth-seeker’s worldview stems not only from a rational critique of mainstream knowledge, but by critiquing certain areas of alternative knowledge. The limits to this critical outlook relate to those areas of alternative knowledge that are integral for an individual’s sense of personal identity. Since the truth movement is non-prescriptive, loyalties are not to the group, but to the principle of *truth-seeking* itself, hence a high valuation placed upon open-mindedness and a willingness to “connect the dots”. Here emerges another potential parallel with social scientists, for just as it is easier to deconstruct certain bodies of knowledge (and easier still, particular knowledge claims) than the principle of social constructivism itself, so too are truth-seekers able to reflect critically upon isolated streams of alternative knowledge but are less inclined to reject the entire paradigm of a conspired world since this is now intimately connected with personal notions of identity.

The “waking up” narratives in Chapter Two were accompanied in all cases by a time of intellectual reflection; at the same time, anomalous experiences were shown to play a vital role in establishing the plausibility of alternative knowledge. These, in turn, sensitise truth-seekers to further experiences which produce a universe-maintaining effect. Furthermore, “waking up” refers to a *former* state of ignorance; in Mol’s terms, truth-seekers desacralize one identity – one that appears not to be firmly established initially, at least by comparison – and *continually* sacralise another in its place. The processes in between the two stages can be emotionally challenging. Although we should treat pre-truth-seeking memories in “waking up” narratives with some caution, many suggest that the former state was insecure. In Mol’s terms, this implies that their former identity was lacking in its ability to make reality intelligible according to a comprehensive schemata (objectification), arouse emotional attachment (commitment), provide meaningful patterns of behaviour (ritual) and a way of narrativizing the flow of personal experience with respect to an individual’s place in the socio-political universe (myth). The second awakening can be viewed as a function of the sacralisation process theorised by Mol insofar as it insures the truth-seeker’s personal identity against the danger of disinformation by learning to treat sources of information with the same critical zeal that was first directed only at mainstream knowledge sources. Furthermore, the second awakening decouples the truth-seeker from affiliation with the truth movement, who is then able entertain criticism about the movement without his personal identity becoming threatened. When truth-seeking is seen in terms of identity, then the products of conspiracy discourse are so plausible because they become entwined with everyday practices (ritual), cause an emotional reaction (commitment),

articulate clearly a vision of humankind's place in reality (myth), and provide a scheme to take account of a complex modern world (objectification).

Individuals subscribe to alternative knowledge not only because it appears plausible when it is approached as a type of discourse, true or false, but because they become emotionally invested in certain ideas insofar as they contribute to this function of identity sacralisation. Truth-seekers not only find conspiracy narratives plausible, but, having “woken up”, *superplausible*, since they now inhabit a conspiratorial melodrama (when properly articulated, as we saw with successful variants of FET in Chapter Eight) through which their phenomenal experiences are now ‘framed by a narrative of a personalized kind’.⁵⁵¹ Compared with a former identity as an uneasy member of the “sheeple”, according to numerous “waking up” narratives, truth-seekers inhabit a far more meaningful universe, with their understanding of the world seeming to be a *closer* approximation to reality in the outer *and* inner world. Personal research is an ongoing enterprise that might be considered as a ritualised way of interacting with everyday phenomena; the plausibility stems from *participation* in these forms of alternative knowledge which comes to be embodied in the immanent, phenomenal universe. In this sense, “conspiracy theories” are not idle tales, nor detached speculation about reality, but promise to deliver the individual from a state of ignorance and insecurity to one of illumination and self-empowerment. As truth-seekers learn to perceive the world differently, gathering fresh insight, they are ‘saved’ from this former state of slumber.

3) What are the personal and social consequences of subscribing to “conspiracy theories” for an individual truth-seeker?

When an individual becomes personally invested in “conspiracy theories” they often provoke a negative reaction from members of mainstream culture who view such ideas as unwarranted. One example is my friend mentioned in the Introduction who indirectly led me to pursue this study; the truth-seeker in Chapter Two who became estranged from family members in consequence of her newfound ideas is representative of a large number of truth-seekers whose voices remain unheard in the study. Reports of subsequent isolation are common.

The “waking up” narratives do not end there. This thesis has stressed the social nature of truth-seeking, and the physical sites of the truth movement make manifest the research community implied by the body of knowledge comprised, in part, by such “conspiracy theories”. The internet is one site where truth-seekers come into contact with other individuals pursuing truth that inhabit a shared universe of alterity relative to the mainstream. The role played by the physical groups, however, is much greater, allowing individuals also the opportunity to interact in a context where a praxis of truth-seeking is highly valued. On the basis of my research, I

⁵⁵¹ Davies, ‘Superplausibility’, pp. 13-15, 26.

would argue that physical meeting groups like those I have studied are of great importance to the emotional lives of truth-seekers.

The truth-seekers that feature in this study are those who have personal ties with other truth-seekers and the truth movement. For the reasons listed above, coupled with emic reports of the dangers of “waking up” in isolation, liable to “fall too far down the rabbit hole”, I would argue that the social network plays an important role in the emotional wellbeing of truth-seekers. I strongly recommend further research into such isolated individuals as a valuable to learn more about the affective consequences of subscribing to a conspiracist worldview among this potentially vulnerable population of truth-seekers, notwithstanding the methodological difficulties in designing such a study.

My method of participant observation over an extended period has given me insight into the affective consequences of truth-seeking. I personally experienced some of the negative feelings that arise from being isolated from the so-called movement when my fieldwork was finished; it took time to adjust back to the mainstream. Compared with the intensity of emotions that characterises truth-seekers’ engagement with the world, and thus their conversations *about* the world, or tales of strange portent-like dreams, or reports of new practices (see below), the “normal” world seemed boring, meaningless, and, at times, ignorant. Indeed, one of the personal consequences of immersing myself in truth-seeking was the sense of living in a more meaningful world. On the other hand, this meaning at times lurched into a nightmarish reality, as I wrestled, for instance, with the idea that the British State might willingly sacrifice innocent citizens to further a covert agenda of control; furthermore, when I encountered Agenda 21 and the myriad ways in which covert forces were supposedly weakening the population – including myself, friends, and family – this caused tangible psychological discomfort. Speaking personally from my own emotional engagement, perhaps the most sinister parts of my “personal research” concerned biomedicine and pharmacology, causing me to become distrustful of the medical establishment, wary of alleged dangers of vaccinations (despite reading evidence to the contrary), and suspicious that my Grandmother was not receiving adequate support from the NHS by design. That I felt such strong emotions as a result of my participant observation despite maintaining close relationships with friends, family, and academic colleagues from outside the truth movement, and consciously guarding against the dangers of going native (especially prevalent with methodological ludism), suggests how pervasive and powerful such feelings might be for those without a professional stake in the mainstream world.

The allegedly disabling or disempowering effects of “conspiracy theories” have been encountered in this thesis but shown to be neutralised by the *practices* of truth-seeking, for example the change in patterns of consumption. My personal feelings of anxiety provoked by some of the darker materials were alleviated by adopting simple practices like avoiding tap-water. Key sources of empowerment are the practices and ideas that attest to the sacred nature

of humankind; within truth-seeker culture, the norms and values of mainstream culture are viewed as having a disempowering effect. Instead, one should be aware of the sense of empowerment that arises from discussing “conspiracy theory” within a safe social space, partially remedying its negative implications by these communal acts of diagnosing the sources of disempowerment. In this sense, “conspiracy theories” thus have both a negative *and* positive affective force.

4) *What is the role of spirituality within the truth movement and its relationship with conspiracy narratives?*

This thesis has provided an ethnographic case study of ‘conspirituality’ as identified by Ward and Voas, as a confluence of New Age *sensu lato* and a conspiracist worldview.⁵⁵² Contrary to their original thesis, however, this ethnography has shown that although ideas and practices associated with New Age spirituality have mixed with conspiracy narratives in the *offline* world.⁵⁵³

At an ideational level, a holistic universe populated by holistic persons corresponds with the worldview suggested by conspiracy narratives wherein everything *might* be connected, anything *might* not be as it first appears, and experience *might* not be random. Rather than view conspiracy narratives as a theodicy for the New Age, notions of holism lend plausibility to many of the conspiracy narratives described in this ethnography.⁵⁵⁴ This thesis has suggested that many conspiracy narratives about ostensibly non-spiritual matters incorporate one or more notions associated with spirituality. At the same time, when notions about spirituality are discussed in truth-seeker meetings, they invoke a conspiracist worldview as their context. All programmes of self-transformation that harness spirituality function as ways of combatting conspiracies. Since truth-seekers oppose external authorities, spirituality is especially attractive; in providing a ‘subjective-life’ response (or something at least using the language of subjectivity), spiritual techniques elevate truth-seekers to a position of self-authority. This sense of spirituality was seen especially strongly in Chapter Nine on FMOTL, with the seemingly this-worldly focus on battling state institutions becoming underlined with a spirit of civil spirituality.

The interconnections between ideas associated with both conspiracy theory and spirituality make sense because both can be viewed as part of Britain’s contemporary occulture, promoting a spirit of enchantment within an ostensibly disenchanted, secular culture. Individuals who become interested in either conspiracy theory or spirituality are thus likely to find the other type of discourse more plausible, or at least sympathetic and/or amenable to this position. Truth-

⁵⁵² Ward and Voas, ‘Conspirituality’, p. 103.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 116. They state that it ‘might constitute a genuine ‘unofficial’ online religion [...] as opposed to religion online’.

⁵⁵⁴ Such as argued by Robertson, ‘David Icke’.

seekers approach the occultural reservoir within the mood of truth-seeking, drawing from it either techniques for personal or spiritual growth, or knowledge about the world that provides the essential framework for the efficacy of such techniques.

Perhaps the defining trait of a truth-seeker, relative to other expressions of the cultic milieu, is the conscious utilisation of ideas that incorporate *both* of the conspiracy/spirituality dualities to *some* extent. Truth-seeking, in the final analysis, resembles a praxis of research that looks simultaneously out into the surrounding disempowering world and inwards towards the development and sanctity of an empowered personal identity.

10.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The limitations of this study relate largely to the methods employed. This study has been qualitative in its focus in order to shed light on the emic perspective behind this alternative culture. Quantitative research, potentially with the same groups, would be able to shed further light on this living network of people and ideas.

Since the truth movement is such a deregulated network, and a subjective aspect of consciousness, the conclusions I have reached through participant observation are likely to differ from truth-seekers whose career of truth-seeking took them on an alternative route of discovery. The combination of intellectual and experiential vistas seem to follow on from one another, allowing room for what some truth-seekers have called synchronicity. My point is that other participant observers – both truth-seekers and future academic researchers grasping after their own truths about truth-seekers – will inevitably tread a different path.

The crossroads and key informants that featured in my journey through part of the truth-seeker web led me to study FMOTL in great depth, for instance. But other vistas opened up to me as well; the truth movement indeed feels somewhat boundless, small in one sense (i.e. limited to a number of field sites) but pregnant with what felt like endless possibilities. This study is limited both by the path I trod and the influences of the truth-seekers I met, and, to some extent, in my selection of data to include. I have fascinating data on past-life regression workshops, a weekend course using a handheld energy medicine device called a Pain Genie, a summer camping festival in Wales called *Tribal Gathering*, a conference on ufology and exo-politics, and much, much more. The cultic milieu is thriving with potential for further research, especially through the greater visibility of occulture in the contemporary world online; but this study has affirmed its continuing vitality in the offline world. I approached this network of truth-seeking as part of efforts to locate a culture in which “conspiracy theories” were thriving and found myself thrust into a world imbued with ideas associated with the New Age; it would be interesting to retain a mobile/multi-sited method but reverse this by entering into other webs within the cultic milieu and see whether similar conspiracy narratives arise within areas ostensibly about other things. This is all the more interesting in today’s world where “fake

news” was Collins Dictionary’s 2017 Word of the Year.⁵⁵⁵ It is therefore tempting also to revisit the truth-seekers in a post-Brexit, post-Trump, “post-truth” world where the boundary between the alternative and the mainstream has become far harder to discern.

⁵⁵⁵ ‘Word of the year’, *Collins Dictionary* (2017) <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/woty>> [accessed on 30/04/18].

Information and Consent Form

I am a doctoral researcher from Durham University talking to people about their attitudes to life, in particular things that some people might call “conspiracy theories”. I am using social scientific methods by engaging with actual people rather than only using books, or other secondary sources as my starting point. I want to ask questions such as: what it is like to have “alternative” beliefs to the mainstream in today’s Britain, and to what extent can the ‘truth movement’ be considered an actual movement?

I want to interview individuals and audio record these interviews – the recordings will be kept in a safe and secure location that only I have access to. I will change the names of participants to ensure anonymity to protect any potentially sensitive information. I can try to protect the identity of groups if that is cause for concern. At the end of the project, and with your express permission, I will keep the anonymised data to use in my own future work. I can try to protect the identity of groups if that is a cause for concern.

Please sign this form if you have read and understood the nature of the project and are willing to participate in my study. If you have any further questions before signing, do not hesitate to ask them now. If you would like to withdraw from the project at any point in any way, you are free to do so, and your interviews will not be used in any way.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information (above) for the project	
2. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask any questions.	
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.	
4. I want my identity to be protected by being anonymised in the written thesis.	
5. I understand that interviews may be audio/video recorded and that the recordings will be stored securely.	
6. I am happy for anonymised data to be used in future publications (by this researcher).	
7. I agree to the publication of verbatim quotes.	
8. I am happy for anonymised transcripts of interviews to be made available to other researchers upon request after the project.	
9. I agree to take part in the above project.	

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Name of Researcher:

Signature:

Date:

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