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The Rising Religion of Conspiracy Theory

The past two centuries have been characterized by rapid technological advancements in nearly every field. These advancements have led the global community to be more tightly bound than ever before. Yet, despite all of technology's contributions to mankind there still remain those who view the spread of industry and globalization as an assault on the liberty of the individual. In his essay "Industrial Society and its Future" Theodore Kaczynski translates his frustrations with technology into a plan of action characterized by direct violence against social structures in an attempt to slowly topple them and restore power to the individual.

Rather than read Kaczynski's essay on a general level as the "individual fighting the collective" one may also read it on a more specific level as "*Kaczynski* fighting the collective". The difference between the two levels of specificity is that the first focuses exclusively on Kaczynski's claim, while the latter focuses more on the author and looks for alternative reasons why Kaczynski would make his claims. By examining the possible reasons for Kaczynski's claims on a more personal level, it is possible to better understand the effect such beliefs have on an individual and why one might believe in them- irregardless of their validity. Although Kaczynski's beliefs and those similar to them may share little in common with many established religions, the mental benefits which they both offer their adherents are indeed quite similar.

If the name Kaczynski sounds familiar it is most likely not due to his essay but rather his actions. For close to two decades Ted Kaczynski sent mail bombs to university professors and airline executives across the nation in attempt to gradually wear down the process of globalization and industrialization. In “Industrial Society and Its Future” Kaczynski describes the frustration which led him to become the “Unabomber” as based upon a sense of powerlessness. Kaczynski later defines powerlessness more precisely as the lack of freedom. He states that: “Freedom means being in control...of the life-and-death issues of one’s existence. One does not have freedom if anyone else...has power over one” [Kaczynski par. 94]. Kaczynski’s definition of “powerlessness” still seems quite broad as he views even moderate control of one’s affairs by an outside force as a state of “powerlessness” for the individual.

In his essay “Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy”, Timothy Melley explores this feeling of loss of power to a greater force. Termed “agency panic”, such thinking arises as a way to comprehend the gap between individual desires and submission to greater societal institutions such as the government. Such institutions are viewed to favor the collective good over that of the individual. Melley states: “(Agency panic) begins in a discovery of social controls that cannot be reconciled with the liberal view of individuals as wholly autonomous and rational entities” [Melley 65]. The rivalry between the individual and a greater controlling force which may not share the same goals can lead the individual to regard the institution as more controlling and more malicious than it actually is. Such is the case with Kaczynski. The inability to accept the control of this higher institution leads people like Kaczynski who suffer from agency panic to “anxiety, melodrama, or panic” [Melley 65]. As societal institutions grow in

strength and numbers, Kaczynski feels ever more insignificant in his ability to change the course of his very own life.

Kaczynski attributes his feeling of powerlessness not just to himself, but to all of society as well. He states that: “There has been a consistent tendency, going back at least to the Industrial Revolution for technology to strengthen the system at a high cost to individual freedom and local autonomy” [Kaczynski par. 111]. While Kaczynski identifies industrialization as the root cause of his problems, upon researching Kaczynski Alston Chase concluded that Kaczynski’s feeling of powerlessness is more likely due to a personal sense of insecurity. As someone who was perhaps always an outsider, and subject to horrible “scientific” experiments in college, “Kaczynski began to put together a system to explain his unhappiness and anger” [Chase 63]. Chase views Kaczynski’s theory and actions as the products of someone who seeks to make order out of chaos.

While Kaczynski may be a rationalist in the sense that he feels the need to explain everything in a seemingly logical manner, this still does not account for his lack of morals. In his essay Kaczynski promotes an idea which will likely cost millions of lives, yet his concern for them is minimal if at all present. Kaczynski openly states: “As for the negative consequences of eliminating industrial society—well, you can’t have your cake and eat it too. To gain one thing you have to sacrifice another” [par 185]. Chase attributes this lack of concern not only to a troubled childhood, but also as the result of the values (or lack there of) which society and universities were promoting at the time which Kaczynski attended university at Harvard in the late end of the 1950’s. Resistance to implement new national education reforms which stressed Judeo-Christian values left many young and impressionable students such as Kaczynski with disdain towards the

very values they were supposed to be taught. Chase posits that combined with an overemphasis on logic, this led to the conclusion that logic does not support morality. Kaczynski's need to make order out of chaos is then one which operates outside the realm of morality and decency and whose sole concern is to find a greater reason for a given course of events.

In reaction to agency panic and his need to make order out of seemingly random events, Kaczynski developed a worldview which linked various non-related institutions by their supposedly shared goal of corrupting the individual. Alasdair Spark writes that Kaczynski's need to find meaning in randomness is motivated by: "attempts to re-conjure a lost totality...(since) the one thing more frightening than thinking that all events are controlled, is thinking that non are" [Spark 57]. For Kaczynski and others like him scientific and pseudoscientific reasoning is then used as a stabilizing force to lend meaning to the meaningless- since disorder, randomness, and a lack of purpose in events seem too hard for him to accept.

While Kaczynski uses science to provide meaning to events, for millennia people have been turning to a more supernatural explanation of events in the form of religion. People often turn to religion to explain their hardships and help them deal with chaos and a feeling of a loss of control over their lives. Confidence in some greater supernatural force often provides people with the courage to face matters in much the same way which conspiracy thinking allows people an excuse for why reality is not as they would like it. Religion often lends its adherents the insight that what they are experiencing has some greater purpose and that at some point things will work out if only they respond in a certain way (i.e. prayer, charity, or repentance). Yet, a strong proponent of science like

Kaczynski is likely to dismiss any account of supernatural phenomena or a divine force in favor of some more logical and tangible reason for his hardships- even if improbable.

In the modern world religion is often seen as a relic of the past laced with superstition and the unreal. Science is labeled logical and religion illogical and obsolete. Yet, there still exists those in society who seek a greater explanation for why reality does not mirror their ambitions. These people wish to know that horrible things that may have happened to them have a reason and purpose. Though religion does this, they view it as a nonviable option, and seek to find more “scientific” reasons for their trauma.

In his article “Mainstreaming Conspiracy Theories” Robert Alan Goldberg suggests that: “Conspiracy thinking (such as Kaczynski’s) gives hope, unity, and purpose in a world that often seems beyond the reach of the powerless” [Goldberg 260].

Conspiracy theories do this by offering much the same benefits which religion does, such as the knowledge that an event happened for a reason beyond the control of the adherent. This alleviates the blame from the adherent and places it on some force that may be perceived to be targeting him. Also similar to religion, conspiracy theories offer their adherents a means of recourse. However, rather than methods such as charity, prayer, and repentance, conspiracy theories such as Kaczynski’s offer their adherents a tangible target responsible for their problems- one which can be abolished.

In examining the effects of belief in conspiracy theories amongst its adherents, Ingrid Walker Fields notes that: “Conspiracy theory has become a metaphor representing feelings of disenfranchisement...we wish to believe that someone, some group, is responsible for the way things are” [Fields 158]. This too is a key characteristic of religion. As Karl Marx famously noted, “religion is the opiate of the masses”. Here too

conspiracy theories seem to meet the standard of religion in terms of its effect on its adherents.

As similar as the effects of belief in conspiracy theories are to the effects of belief in religion amongst their respective adherents, conspiracy theories and religion remain quite different. Although there exists highly regarded texts within the realm of conspiracy theory, they often exist either as physical “proof” of some plot or else as logical “proofs” as to why something is not as it seems. In either case, their source can ultimately be traced to human beings, and as such there remains no greater authority to set basic rules or standards of truth. While most Western religions teach of their being one or even multiple Gods who control everything without aid from anyone, conspiracy theories often point to a group of rulers, or one ruler who utilizes others. For conspiracy theorists there is no concept of the divine and as such, no divine path or standard of life. While Religion offers a path to follow, conspiracy theories offer an excuse for why one may be off course.

It may seem inconceivable or even audacious to compare such established philosophies as Confucianism and Christianity to the alternate theories of reality proposed by conspiracy theorists, yet the effects on their respective adherents remain quite similar. Though conspiracy theories lack the divine source which religion claims, they still grant “hope, unity, and purpose” to their adherents by empowering them with an account of reality which alleviates their adherents of full accountability for their situation in life. The past few centuries have witnessed the decline of religious belief in the West, while the past few decades have witnessed a growing trend in the belief in some sort of conspiracy theory. This, coupled with the notion that belief in both religion and

conspiracy theories has similar effects on their adherents, leads one to consider whether conspiracy theory might soon come to replace religion in the twenty-first century.

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