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Conspiracy Theories and Religion: Reframing Conspiracy Theories as *Bliks*

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories have largely been framed by the academy as a stigmatised form of knowledge. Yet recent scholarship has included calls to take conspiracy theories more seriously as an area of study with a desire to judge them on their own merits rather than an a priori dismissal of them as a class of explanation. This paper argues that the debates within the philosophy of religion, long overlooked by scholars of conspiracy theories, can help sow the seeds for re-examining our understanding of conspiracy theories in a more balanced and nuanced way. The nature of religious belief is elemental to understanding the epistemological foundations of the conspiracy theorising worldview amidst what we may call 'conspiratorial ambiguity'. Specifically, R.M. Hare's concept of *bliks*, which are unfalsifiable but meaningful worldviews, offers a way forward to reframe our approach towards the theory of conspiracy theories.

Keywords: *blik*; conspiracy theory; epistemology; language games; religious faith

> Yet I should hesitate to say that the difference between us was the difference between contradictory assertions … for my *blik* is compatible with any finite number of such tests. (R.M. Hare)
>
> When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't. (William Temple)

1. Introduction

"The truth is out there." The words of a seeker of God or a conspiracy theorist? Ever since the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1–9), when the Lord Himself conspired with His heavenly court to outwit the human conspirators of Shinar,[1] the links between religion and conspiracy theories have been obvious though rarely commented upon. Although the academy has long studied the worldview of the former, the attention of

[1]My interpretation follows that of the greatest of classical Jewish bible exegetes, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040–1105), known by the acronym, Rashi, who noted that God spoke in the plural when considering His plan to confound those building the tower: "Come, let *us* descend and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (Genesis 11: 7). Based on the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin 39b, Rashi commented: "Come, let *us* descend" – "He [God] took counsel with His [heavenly] tribunal."

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scholars on the outlook of the latter has gained momentum only recently. Further still, the comparisons and contrasts between religion and conspiracy theorists are only just beginning to emerge (Keeley 1999, 2007; Barkun 2006; Robertson 2016; Dyrendal *et al.* 2018).

Despite the popularity of conspiracy theories with the public,[2] the scholarly approach can be said to have adopted a widespread "default scepticism" towards them (Delaplante 2011). David Coady surmises that scholarship "is often associated with rationality" in contrast with conspiracy theories, which "are often thought as paradigmatically irrational" (Coady 2006: 1). Of course, the academy has long treated religion in the same way, with Norman Malcolm having observed that:

> academic philosophers are far more prone to challenge the credentials of religions than of science … [because] by and large religion is to university people an alien form of life. They do not participate in it and do not understand what it is all about. (Malcolm 2000: 122)

Like religion, therefore, conspiracy theories have largely been framed as a stigmatised form of knowledge: from Richard Hofstadter's forceful description of conspiracies as a "paranoid style of politics" (Hofstadter 1964) to Niall Ferguson's dismissal of those who profess such "knowledge" as "aggrieved outsiders" who "invariably misunderstand and misrepresent the way that networks operate" (Ferguson 2017: xix). As a result, conspiracy theories are almost always referred to in a pejorative manner (Goertzel 2010: 493). As Charles Pigden wrote:

> The conventional wisdom on conspiracy theories is that they ought not to be believed. To call something 'a conspiracy theory' is to suggest that it is intellectually suspect; to call someone 'a conspiracy theorist' is to suggest that he is irrational, paranoid or perverse. (Pigden 2007: 219)

Yet scholars such as David Coady counter that "conspiracy theories do not deserve their bad reputation" with many in academia "excessively unwilling to believe conspiracy theories" (Coady 2006: 9). Indeed, the recent spate of interest in conspiracy theories has been characterised by scholars wishing to take them seriously as an area of study and a desire to judge them on their own merits rather than an a priori dismissal of them as a class of explanation (see, for example, Dentith 2018*a*). Ironically, it is Karl Popper's influential criticisms of conspiracy theory's alleged epistemic vices that sow the seeds for re-examining our understanding of conspiracy theories in a more balanced and nuanced way. As I will detail below, Popper's work on falsification and the problem of demarcation inspired debate among philosophers of religion about the nature of religious belief, most notably a celebrated symposium in 1950 where Antony Flew, R.M. Hare and Basil Mitchell offered their understandings of religious beliefs through the use of parables. I argue that their debate, still overlooked by scholars on conspiracy theories, is elemental to understanding the epistemological foundations of the conspiracy theorising worldview amidst what we may call 'conspiratorial ambiguity', with R.M.

[2]It may even be said that we live in a 'golden age' for conspiracy theories. Seismic and largely surprising political upheavals in 2016, such as Donald Trump's presidential election victory and the Brexit vote to leave the European Union, have led some commentators to suggest that "conspiracy theories seem to have become part of politics' new normal" (Miller *et al.* 2016). Beliefs in conspiracy theories are pervasive, as recent surveys show that "over half of the American population consistently endorse some kind of conspiratorial narrative about a current political event or phenomenon" (Oliver and Wood 2014: 953).

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Hare's concept of *bliks* offering a way forward to reframe our approach towards the theory of conspiracy theories.

2. Religious and conspiracy theorist worldviews

Michael Barkun (2006: 3–4) wrote of a "conspiracist worldview" which sees "a universe governed by design rather than by randomness".[3] For the purposes of this article, I am less interested in conspiracy theories as specific phenomena (what Wittgenstein might have called the "surface grammar" of conspiracy theorising, understanding their specific claims) than I am in the general conspiracy theorising worldview or a person's *disposition* towards conspiracy theories (the "depth grammar" of conspiracy theorising, which explains their functions). Just as Popper criticised the "conspiracy theory of society" (2002*a*: 165), I would like to draw on Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor's (2010) conceptual split between "generalism" and "particularism", as I attempt to reframe conspiracy theories as a class to help understand them as a worldview just as one may understand religious belief as a worldview.[4] Just as followers of a religion are part of a tradition and practice, so too are conspiracy theorists participating in what Johan Byford has called a "tradition of explanation" (cited in Stokes 2018: 28), and it is this worldview that needs greater understanding. As Stokes himself warns, we lose sight of the "broader epistemological stance toward society" if we only analyse conspiracy theory in formal, particularist terms (Stokes 2018: 28). I therefore take issue with M.R.X. Dentith's characterisation of "generalists" as viewing conspiracy theories as "typically irrational" (2018*a*: 13) with "particularists" willing to judge specific conspiracies as "rational" depending on the evidence. Rather, drawing on the rich literature in the philosophy of religion, I concur with Malcolm that:

> [t]he obsessive concern with the proofs reveal the assumption that in order for religious belief to be intellectually respectable it *ought* to have a rational justification. *That* is the misunderstanding. It is like the idea that we are not justified in relying on memory until memory has been proved reliable. (Malcolm 2000: 121–2)

The "groundlessness" of the conspiracy theorising worldview means that as an epistemological reading of society, it requires no rational justification. Indeed, framing the debate in this rational vs non-rational context misses the essence of what conspiracy theories are and why people hold them. Although individual conspiracy theories may well be assessed on their particular merits, conspiracy theories as a general disposition or worldview should be understood as a different category.

Typically, therefore, the conspiracy theorising worldview involves three key features: the belief that nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and that everything is connected (Barkun 2006: 3–4). It is a truism that Barkun's three-part definition is typical of the monotheistic religious mindset too. Three normative sources suffice

[3]Please note that I use the more neutral "conspiracy theorist" and "conspiracy theorising" than the loaded "conspiracist" term, which is often used in the pejorative sense (see, for example, Pipes 1997; Dentith 2018*b*: 329).

[4]Hare (cited in Pecorino 2001) prefaced his idea on *bliks* with the following proviso: "I wish to make it clear that I shall not try to defend Christianity in particular, but religion in general – not because I do not believe in Christianity, but because you cannot understand what Christianity is, until you have understood what religion is." Similarly, I am arguing that once we can understand the *bliks* people have about conspiracy theories as a general concept, we can then think more clearly about the particular conspiracy theorists themselves and the claims they make about specific events.

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from the Abrahamic faiths that invite reflection on the believer's relationship with an omnipotent God.

First, Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith, includes:

> Principle 1: I believe with complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is the Creator and Guide for all created beings. He alone made, makes, and will make all that is created.
>
> Principle 12: I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he tarry in waiting, in spite of that, I will still wait expectantly for him each day that he will come.

Second, the Nicene Creed in the Christian tradition states:

> We believe in one God,
> the Father, the Almighty,
> maker of heaven and earth,
> of all that is, seen and unseen.
> …
> Through him all things were made.
> For us and for our salvation
> he came down from heaven.

Third, the Qur'an 2: 164 declares:

> Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and earth, and the alternation of the night and the day, and the [great] ships which sail through the sea with that which benefits people, and what Allah has sent down from the heavens of rain, giving life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness and dispersing therein every [kind of] moving creature, and [His] directing of the winds and the clouds controlled between the heaven and the earth are signs for a people who use reason.

As these seminal religious texts demonstrate, theists not only believe in God as Creator but also in God as Redeemer who bestows His providence upon the world. As Brian L. Keeley concludes: "God's alleged mysterious ways are not unlike the alleged secret and mysterious activities common to secular conspiracy theories" (Keeley 2007: 146). A classic biblical example of conspiracy is the unholy wager the Lord makes with Satan concerning the righteous Job. God and Satan conspire in order to test Job and see if he will remain "blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (1: 8) even if all is taken away from him. Interestingly, it never occurs to the author that Job might assume "bad luck" or "coincidence" to explain his downfall. As Martin Buber (cited in Glatzer 2002: 57–8) put it, "That everything comes from God is beyond doubt and question …" showcasing the religious mindset as exemplified by Job, the most loyal of God's servants. And yet it is clear that such a mindset continues to manifest itself through continued religious faith that sees the hand of God through the unfolding of history. Similarly, the conspiracy theorist worldview seeks out the connections in order to make sense of the otherwise inexplicable. Stokes (2018: 28) offers the helpful example of the "false flag with crisis actors" narrative which is speedily deployed in the wake of any mass casualty event in the United States. Evidence isn't sought before the expression of a "prior commitment to a particular explanatory framework" (Stokes 2018: 28). On the contrary, friendly 'facts' are subsequently interpreted to fit into the a

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priori worldview of the conspiracy theorist. So too for God's servant, Job, and his friends, all that occurs is a result of the Lord's providence: "Shall we also accept the good from God, and not accept the evil?" (Job 2: 10).

Moreover, Douglas *et al.* (2017: 538) offer the following taxonomy which "serves as a useful heuristic to classify the motives associated with conspiracy belief". Conspiracy theorising arises from epistemic, existential, and social motives, providing attractive explanations to make sense of the world and one's place in it. Epistemically, conspiracy theories serve to "protect cherished beliefs", with evidence suggesting that conspiracy theories resonate "among people who habitually seek meaning and patterns in the environment, including believers in paranormal phenomena" (Douglas *et al.* 2017: 539). Conspiracy theories also stem from existential motives, serving "the need for people to feel safe and secure in their environment" (Douglas *et al.* 2017: 539). Finally, conspiracy theorising explanations help fulfil "the [social] desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group" (Douglas *et al.* 2017: 539). The application of this heuristic to understand the epistemic, existential, and social motives of the religious believer is stark, revealing "family resemblances" long overlooked. Indeed, in surveying the American public's fascination with conspiracy theories, Oliver and Wood reveal:

> [M]any predominant belief systems in the United States, be they Christian narratives about God and Satan … or left-wing narratives about neoliberalism …, draw heavily upon the idea of unseen, intentional forces shaping contemporary events. (Oliver and Wood 2014: 964)

Yet a key difference in how we perceive beliefs in religion and conspiracy theories has been a mere accident of history: whereas religious beliefs and culture – whether centred on God or Satan – have been at the front and centre of human existence since time immemorial, the conspiracy theorising worldview has been pushed to the margins of society and simply not taken seriously.[5]

At the same time, Hugo Drochon (2013), as part of Cambridge University's 'Conspiracy and Democracy' research project, explored the notion that "conspiracy theories today play the role that religion may have played in past societies". The "gap" between our understanding of the world and God's infinite powers may well have been replaced in epistemic, existential, and social terms, by trying to make sense of the government or the state in the face of famine or other catastrophes. Just like followers of religion seeking to make sense of divine mysteries, David G. Robertson (2017: 4) points out that conspiracy theorists have a "propensity to draw on a broader range of epistemic sources than is accepted by the epistemic authorities", including "channelled information, intuition, tradition and (despite etic claims to the contrary) scientific reason, as well as giving undue weight to individual testimony and linking small pieces of circumstantial evidence across time, space, and context".

This is why conspiracy theories are simultaneously heartening and terrifying, just as religion always was. As Drochon (2013) puts it: "If religion no longer plays the role it played in past societies, then perhaps those who were liable to think in those ways have moved on to conspiracy theories as a way of making sense of the world." This was indeed the view posited by Popper himself in his analysis of the "mistaken theory 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

[5]A similar fate has befallen modern religions such as "cargo cults" (see, for example, Christopher Hitchens' (2008) account of Cargo Cults in Chapter 11 of *God is Not Great*.

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powerful individuals and groups" (Popper 2003: 104). Popper refers to this phenomenon as a "secularisation of the religious superstition":

> The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups – sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from – such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists. (Popper 2003: 104–5)

Popper has been seen as chief among the critics of the "conspiracy theory of society" (Popper 2002*a*: 165) for two main reasons. First, in his highly influential writing on the subject he rejected conspiratorial thought as "a theory which I think implies exactly the opposite of the true aim of the social sciences" (Popper 2002*a*: 165). Whilst accepting that "the conspiracy theory of society" was widespread, Popper argued that it has "very little truth in it" (Popper 2002*a*: 166). This is because "one of the striking things about social life is that nothing ever comes off exactly as intended" (Popper 2002*a*: 166). It can be said that "Popper and his disciples sought to replace the 'conspiracy theory of society' with 'the cock-up theory of society'" (Coady 2006: 5). As Popper wrote:

> I think that the people who approach the social sciences with a readymade conspiracy theory thereby deny themselves the possibility of ever understanding what the task of the social sciences is, for they assume that we can explain practically everything in society by asking who wanted it, whereas the real task of the social sciences is to explain those things which nobody wants. (Popper 2002*a*: 167)

In this vein, Keeley (1999: 117) described conspiracy theories as "unwarranted" when the chief tool in their arsenal was the reliance on "errant data", an intellectual vice that tainted their theory:

> What conspiracy theories get wrong, however, is that the existence of errant data alone is not a significant problem with a theory. Given the imperfect nature of our human understanding of the world, we should expect that even the best possible theory would not explain all the available data. (Keeley 1999: 120)

Second, Popper's classic work on "the problem of demarcation" (Popper 2002*b*: 51) was instrumental in highlighting another intellectual vice in the worldview of the conspiracy theorist. Aiming to draw a line between scientific truth claims and pseudo-science or even metaphysical propositions, Popper argued that it was the "criterion of falsifiability" that would provide the solution to the problem of demarcation "for it says that statements or systems of statements, in order to be ranked as scientific, must be capable of conflicting with possible, or conceivable, observations" (Popper 2002*b*: 51).

Popper himself (2002*b*: 48) passed Einstein's theory of gravity as having "clearly satisfied the criterion of falsifiability" for "[e]ven if our measuring instruments at the time did not allow us to pronounce on the results of the tests with complete assurance, there was clearly a possibility of refuting the theory". In contrast, he failed astrology, Marxism and the two psycho-analytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler. Whilst Popper (2002*b*: 48–9) saw the latter two approaches as "simply non-testable, irrefutable", the first two escaped refutation and falsification, thus destroying their testability. Astrologers simply "predict things so vaguely that the predictions can hardly fail: that they become irrefutable". Meanwhile, followers of Marx "re-interpreted both the theory

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and the evidence in order to make them agree … and by this stratagem they destroyed its much advertised claim to scientific status."[6]

So too, conspiracy theories are seen as intellectually tainted because of this vice of unfalsifiability. As Delaplante (2011) has observed, conspiracy theorists are often guilty of 'self-sealing', for "[w]henever the theory is poked by some bit of countervailing evidence, it seals itself by reinterpreting that evidence as consistent with the theory after all". Critics of conspiracy theory argue that this is done precisely because "conspiracy theorists are dogmatically attached to an ideological worldview that is immune to rational criticism" (Delaplante 2011).

However, a more nuanced reading of conspiracy theories suggests that they cannot be dismissed a priori. To borrow a phrase from John Hick, a philosopher of religion, 'epistemic distance' exists between the truth and the public at large, and conspiracy theories arise precisely where there is a knowledge gap – real or perceived.[7] Where 'epistemic distance' is greatest, such as in a totalitarian state, conspiracy theories will thrive, such as in the Middle East. Yet as Edward Snowden's leaking of the National Security Agency's mass surveillance programme in 2013 reminded us, even in democracies, where full transparency is unviable nor necessarily desirable due to national security considerations, 'conspiratorial ambiguity' will naturally result as the full truth becomes unattainable. As Keeley reasons:

> unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter. Falsifiability is a perfectly fine criterion in the case of natural science when the target of investigation is neutral with respect to our queries, but it seems much less appropriate in the case of the phenomena covered by conspiracy theories. (Keeley 1999: 121)

We know that governments and powerful corporations have sought to cover up conspiratorial behaviour, sometimes resorting to extreme and even illegal measures. Thus the suggestion that conspiracy theories can be dismissed on epistemic grounds due to their alleged unfalsifiability is too simplistic, highlighting the unique challenge conspiracy theory presents. With an eye on conspiracies such as Watergate and Iran-Contra, Keeley warns that, "[s]trictly hewing to the dogma of falsifiability in these cases would have led to a rejection of conspiracy theories at too early a point in the investigations, and may have left the conspiracies undiscovered" (Keeley 1999: 121). This leaves the sceptical position open to the intellectual vice of naivety and related moral vice of an excessive willingness to obey those in authority. In seeking to avoid these vices on the extremes, Coady has sought to "level the epistemological

[6]Popper points out that Marx himself, e.g. in his analysis of the character of the "coming social revolution", gave testable predictions, which were ultimately falsified (Popper 2003: 368). Moreover, Popper observed (2002*a*: 167, note 3) that although later Marxists saw Marx as having "revealed the tremendous importance of the capitalist conspiracy for the understanding of society", Marx was actually "one of the first critics of the conspiracy theory [of society]" as he was "one of the first to analyse the unintended consequences of voluntary actions of people acting in certain social situations". Marx thus concluded "that the capitalist is as much caught in the network of the social situation (or the 'social system') as is the worker". However, Popper saw Marx's followers guilty of "put[ting] a popular conspiracy theory of society which is no better than Goebbels' myth of the Learned Elders of Zion".

[7]Of course, Hick himself (2007) used the phrase to describe the necessary knowledge gap between humans and God to allow for free will to seek God with faith. Nevertheless, the comparison still stands: there is a necessary knowledge gap between government and the people, even in democracies, which gives rise to a plethora of understandings and attitudes towards the truth of any given matter.

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playing field" and promote the virtue of 'realism' in a more 'balanced' approach to conspiracy theories where we should be "wary of any a priori attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff" (Coady 2006: 10). Even so, the very term 'conspiracy theory' remains a loaded and controversial one. By revisiting the conspiracy theorising worldview, this study seeks to reframe our understanding of conspiracies as a competing *blik* that makes sense of the world in contest with other *bliks*.

3. The explorers, the garden, and the celestial city[8]

Antony Flew drew on John Wisdom's 1944 tale in his article, 'Gods', to tell the following parable:

> Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible, to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" (cited in Pecorino 2001)

[8]As mentioned above, the Symposium also included the following 'Parable of the Partisan' by Basil Mitchell:

> In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a Stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance – indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him. They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, "He is on our side." Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handling over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, "He is on our side." He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, "The Stranger knows best." Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, "Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?" But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain, "Well, if *that's* what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better."

Although Mitchell's parable is deeply insightful about religious faith, not least in thinking about the problem of evil, the framing of belief around an initial 'religious experience', which sets the scene for the partisan remaining loyal to the Stranger, is not relevant for our less metaphysical conspiracy theory of society. To be sure, real world experiences of paranoia or feeling an 'outsider' may well help inform one's attitude towards conspiracy theories, nevertheless, I will show that Hare's characterisation of *bliks* incorporates such worldviews.

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Flew's characterisation of the Believer accords well with Barkun's description of the conspiracy theorising worldview discussed above which sees "a universe governed by design rather than by randomness". Again, just as the conspiracy theorist has a worldview that nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and that everything is connected, so too does Flew's Believer.

Interestingly, the original tale is of "[t]wo people return[ing] to their long-neglected garden" (Wisdom 1944: 191) and Wisdom insightfully portrays the consequence of the differing worldviews of the Sceptic and Believer as follows:

> And with this difference in what they say about the gardener goes a difference in how they feel toward the garden, in spite of the fact that neither expects anything of it which the other does not expect. (Wisdom 1944: 192)

Although Wisdom suggests that both worldviews are "reasonable", Flew takes us in a different direction, focusing on the epistemic vices of the Believer who, like the conspiracy theorist, is said to rely too much on errant data and makes claims that cannot be falsified. Just as Popper's astrologer and Marxist move the goal posts in order to escape refutation and testability, so too does Flew's Believer and, by extension, the conspiracy theorist, so that their original hypothesis "may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications" (Flew cited in Pecorino 2001).

Flew himself accepts that it is not only religious believers who rationalise their belief in God by this "process of qualification", but that it occurs in other walks of life. Following Popper, it is clear that conspiracy theorists are similarly charged "Sceptics" of irrationally holding on to their beliefs in the face of 'official' or 'mainstream' evidence, such as 9/11 truthers. As Flew (in Pecorino 2001) concludes: "Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding 'there wasn't a God after all.'" Again, one can simply replace "religious people" with "conspiracy theorists" and make the similar charge that no evidence would be admitted for conceding "there wasn't a conspiracy after all".

However, those more sympathetic to the conspiracy theorising worldview can immediately point to the ambiguity in the parable as Wisdom himself did in the original tale where the gardeners find both weeds and a "a few of the old plants surprisingly vigorous". Drawing on Hick's characterisation of the universe as "religiously ambiguous" (Hick 2004: 240; Hick 2018), we may move away from Flew's conclusions and suggest that so too history has shown us that events are "conspiratorially ambiguous". This is not only to say that history is interpreted in different ways from a variety of worldviews and perspectives but that we should concede that sometimes one may never really find out what the truth is. As Hick himself described religious truths as beyond human capability to "see it is as it fully is", so too does Ferguson (2017: 9), himself a critic of conspiracy theories, concede that historians studying secret networks and conspiracies "struggle with the problem that networks rarely maintain readily accessible archives" and so the gatekeepers of knowledge may well hamper our ability to get to the truth. In both matters of religion and conspiracy therefore, we can see an "epistemic distance", as Hick (2007: 281) calls it, that separates us from the truth we are seeking.

In contrast to Flew's scepticism, Hick offered his own 'Parable of the Celestial City':

> Two men are travelling together along a road. One of them believes that it leads to the Celestial City, the other that it leads nowhere. But since this is the only road there is, both must travel it. Neither has been this way before, therefore neither

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> is able to say what they will find around each corner. During their journey they meet with moments of refreshment and delight, and with moments of hardship and danger. All the time one of them thinks of his journey as a pilgrimage to the Celestial City … The other, however, believes none of this, and sees their journey as an unavoidable and aimless ramble … Yet, when they turn the last corner, it will be apparent that one of them has been right all the time and the other wrong. (Cited in Mitchell 1971: 59–60)

In religious terms, only the Believer may rely on what Hick (1988: 177–8) calls "eschatological verification" as he turns the last corner and moves on to the next world.[9] Similarly, the conspiracy theorist may argue that without full transparency and open access to all the evidence, it is a reasonable stance to be sceptical of the official story, as Coady argues:

> It may be that in an ideal society official stories would carry an epistemic authority such that it would almost always be rational to believe them. But that is not our society, nor I suspect, is it any society that has ever been or ever will be. (Coady 2007: 199)

Of course, totalitarian regimes hide much from the public to help secure their hold onto power. Yet even the most transparent of democratic governments require secrecy in the interests of national security, inevitably creating an "epistemic distance" between the people and the truth. The conspiracy theorist may therefore also rely on "eschatological verification" when the current power structures give way or where access to the truth is somehow gained, perhaps by an insider leak or the opening of archives: think Watergate or the downfall of Saddam Hussein. For such reasons, Lee Basham concludes that:

> the proper epistemic reaction to many contemporary conspiracy theories is (at best) a studied agnosticism. Typically, we are not in any position to seriously credit or discredit these conspiratorial possibilities. (Basham 2006: 72)

R.M. Hare (cited in Pecorino 2001) points to another crucial flaw in Flew's parable that is particularly pertinent to conspiracy theories: "The explorers do not *mind* about their garden; they discuss it with interest, but not with concern." The lack of care and personal involvement of the protagonists simply doesn't match up with the concern of sincere religious believers and conspiracy theorists. If Coady is right and a conspiracy theorist is "a person who is unusually willing to investigate a conspiracy" (Coady 2007: 195) then such people are well-known for their activism, for better or for worse. It is difficult to deny that their conspiracy theorising really does help to shape their worldview.

And it is because the conspiracy theory of society is a worldview that we may argue that just as Flew misunderstood the "grammar" of the religious believer, so too has the debate surrounding conspiracy theory misunderstood "*the kind of evidence* needed to settle the issue" (Phillips 2000: 108). For religious believers, Flew's characterisation of

[9]Similarly, in his discussion on providence and conspiracy theories, Keeley (2018: 83–4) also takes up Hick's concept of eschatological verificationism, noting that just as the religious believer may be vindicated upon death, so too may the secular conspiracy theorist be proven correct with evidence coming to light at a later point. Whilst I agree with Keeley's comparison, my focus is on the "epistemic distance" that characterises our reality up until this end point, which results in creating space for what I call 'conspiratorial ambiguity'.

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the Believer's position smacks of "epistemic imperialism" (Alston 1993), applying a standard of scientific fact to a non-factual question. As D.Z. Phillips observed:

> When the positivist claims that there is no God because God cannot be located, the believer does not object on the grounds that the investigation has not been thorough enough, but on the grounds that the investigation fails to understand the grammar of what is being investigated.
>
> … To say the concept of divine reality does not share this grammar is to reject the possibility of talking about God in the way in which one talks about matters of fact. (Phillips 2000: 108–9)

Thus when Popper and others dismiss conspiracy theorists as irrational, it may be said that they fail to realise that conspiracy theories do not share the grammar of positivists in the way that the latter talk about matters of fact. As Wittgenstein put it, they play a different 'language game', which philosophers would do well to examine from within the context from which they derive their meaning. It is in this spirit that we may move on to Hare's own 'Parable of the Lunatic' where he coins the term *blik*, which I argue captures the essence of the conspiracy theorising worldview.

4. The lunatic

> A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, "You see, he doesn't really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?" But the lunatic replies, "Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it I tell you." However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same. (Hare cited in Pecorino 2001)

Hare's parable also accords with Barkun's definition of the conspiracy theorising worldview: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. Although Flew's test would fail the "lunatic" as there is nothing the dons or his friends could do to falsify his belief, Hare shows that Flew misses the point: although unfalsifiable, the belief is still meaningful. As Hare explains, the fact that we call him a "lunatic" and ourselves "sane" shows the differing and impactful worldviews we have. Unlike the detached if curious explorers though, the lunatic, his friends and the dons have a real interest in such a belief: the lunatic refuses to go to lectures, the friends aim to provide evidence and counter-arguments, and the dons would understandably want to see the back of the lunatic who makes them feel dreadfully uncomfortable. These differing worldviews of the protagonists are *bliks*: meaningful if unfalsifiable beliefs about the world around us. They are the 'mental spectacles', to borrow Charles Dickens' phrase in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, through which we view the world around us, framing what we see and how to interpret the phenomena we witness. Such *bliks* are therefore prescriptive in nature, as the holder "minds very much about what goes on in the garden in which I find myself" (cited in Pecorino 2001), impacting one's view on the reliability of the gatekeepers of knowledge and the evidence they produce. This has been witnessed in the ongoing hostile debate surrounding Brexit, which has been coloured by the widespread appeal of conspiracy theories regarding politically charged issues among the British public. Polling conducted by the YouGov-Cambridge Programme

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(Rogers de Waal 2015) indicates that 55% of the British public believe that the UK Government is hiding the truth about the number of immigrants living here and 52% fear that EU officials are seeking to take over all law-making powers in the UK. Faith in democracy seems further undermined with most of the British public (51%) thinking that, despite being officially a democracy, Britain is really run by a few people with power (Moore 2016), suggesting a rise in support for more populist politicians on both the right and left of the political spectrum.

Crucially, as Hare goes on to observe, one cannot counter a *blik*, an unfalsifiable belief about the world, with facts or evidence. *Bliks* frame how we see the world and "without a *blik* there can be no explanation; for it is by our *bliks* that we decide what is and what is not an explanation". This is true whether we have a *blik* that God exists or does not exist or, indeed, if we have a conspiracy theorising worldview or not. As Norman Malcolm suggests, we will not be able to understand religious beliefs by thinking that a belief in God's existence is expressed on the basis of evidence. On the contrary, Wittgenstein observed that, "Doubt comes after belief" (cited in Malcolm 2000: 115). Rather, it is something believers say to capture how they view the world and themselves in a certain way formed by "groundless beliefs" (in Malcolm 2000: 115). This presents another enhancement on Flew's parable of the explorers as *both* the Sceptic and Believer are holding fast to their beliefs despite the apparent "religious ambiguity". So too, *bliks* take into account the 'conspiratorial ambiguity' and so provide an understandable rationale for why people are disposed to differing *bliks*.

In terms of conspiracy theories, Coady (2007) provides a spectrum of worldviews, or what we may now call *bliks*, that frame one's approach towards explaining world events. From conspiracy theorists at one end of the spectrum to 'coincidence theorists' at the other, who fail or are unwilling to connect the dots, no matter how suggestive an underlying pattern of the unfolding events. There are also 'institutional theorists', who point to structural forces, such as government and the market, steering events. Simply put, one cannot view the world without an a priori structure, a *blik*, which itself has a dogmatic element. Yet all three *bliks* have the potential to suffer from epistemic vices, with each side invariably labelling the other as "naïve", for example. Yet the specific issue at hand may well determine which *blik* is reasonable or sane. As many commentators on conspiracy theories have noted, there is no clear point of demarcation. Amidst such difficulties, Keeley conceded that there are conspiracy theories which, despite having the characteristics of unwarranted conspiracy theories (UCTs),[10] are still warranted. For Keeley, the philosophical difficulty of conspiracy theories is that "[t]here is no criterion or set of criteria that provide a priori grounds for distinguishing warranted conspiracy theories from UCTs" (Keeley 1999: 118). For example, "[b]oth Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affair meet all of these criteria, yet belief in these conspiracies seem prima facie warranted" (Keeley 1999: 118), and ultimately turned out to be true. UCTs, therefore, should "warrant a degree of scepticism, rather than outright dismissal" (Keeley 1999: 118).

[10]Keeley (1999: 117) defines UCTs as having the following characteristics:

1. explanations that run counter to some received, official, or 'obvious' account
2. the true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious
3. UCTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events
4. the truths behind events explained by conspiracy theories are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known figures
5. the chief tool of the conspiracy theorist is what I shall call errant data.

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For such reasons, Keeley highlights the "difficulties for finding analytic criteria for distinguishing good from bad conspiracy theories" (Keeley 1999: 112). As Goertzel puts it:

> Many of these [conspiracy] theories are clearly absurd, but some have a veneer of possibility. How can we distinguish between the amusing eccentrics, the honestly misguided, the avaricious litigants and the serious sceptics questioning a premature consensus? (Goertzel 2010: 494)

From the unwarranted conspiracy theorists of Holocaust deniers and flat earth theorists on one end of the spectrum to the validated Watergate and Iran-Contra conspiracy theorists on the other, there is no a priori stance we may take that can rule in or rule out every conspiracy claim. At a deeper level, Hare points out, no amount of evidence will remove a person's *blik* regarding conspiracy theories as long as one's *blik* "is compatible with any finite number of such tests" (cited in Pecorino 2001).[11]

We may draw on the contrast Wittgenstein makes in his 'Lectures on Religious Belief' (1938) between two people debating whether they had heard an aeroplane and another disagreement on whether there will be a Last Judgement. In the former, the disputants are in the same 'language game' and so "fairly near" in that they can simply settle the matter on which they are contradicting each other, perhaps through some investigation. Yet on the Last Judgement, the disputants are "on an entirely different plane" as they have different "world pictures" and so one would be missing the point entirely to say that they are simply disagreeing about a future point of fact. Rather, they are playing a different 'language game' and so there is an "enormous gulf" between them. As they converse, they are offering "reminders" to each other, giving a sense of a different world picture. Thus, discussing the facts, the 'surface grammar' of the claim made, avoids the real issue at stake here. As Wittgenstein (1938) writes: "Asking him [the believer] is not enough. He will probably say he has proof. But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for all in his life." So too, for those who "profess not to believe in any sort of religion", Hare (cited in Pecorino 2001) argues, "[t]he reason why they find it so easy to think that they are not religious, is that they have never got into the frame of mind of one who suffers from the doubts to which religion is the answer". Although we may not go so far to suggest that conspiracies regulate all in the conspiracy theorist's life as religion does for the believer, nevertheless, the conspiracy theorising worldview creates a different 'form of life' and serves a real function for him, whether in terms of his politics, relationships and approach to authority. A person's *blik* shapes his interpretation of the world and the events occurring within it. As Wittgenstein put it:

> a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's a belief, it's really a way of living, or a way of

[11]Drawing on Hare's *blik* about the safety of his car, my wife and many others have a *blik* about planes falling out of the sky. She is petrified every time she "has to" fly and meets every reasoned argument, supported by statistics, with derision. She simply repeats "MH370 and MH17", fairly making the point that planes do indeed (if rarely) fall out of the sky and so, again, making her *blik* "compatible with any finite number of such tests". Yet her *blik* is in marked contrast with mine and our children who have faith that this huge machine will somehow take off, fly and land safely. While her *blik* makes us a little nervous in the air, it certainly doesn't override our own *blik* about the wonders of flying.

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> assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of this interpretation. (Wittgenstein 1994: 64)

Similarly, in explaining how *bliks* provide our foundational knowledge about the world, Hare offers the following example, which certainly fits in with the worldview of Coady's 'coincidence theorist', albeit in religious terms:

> Suppose we believed that everything that happened, happened by pure chance. This would not of course be an assertion; for it is compatible with anything happening or not happening, and so, incidentally, is its contradictory. But if we had this belief, we should not be able to explain or predict or plan anything. Thus, although we should not be asserting anything different from those of a more normal belief, there would be a great difference between us; and this is the sort of difference that there is between those who really believe in God and those who really disbelieve in him. (Hare, cited in Pecorino 2001)

Thus rather than justifying differing 'forms of life', we need to understand what is distinctive about them. Having a different world picture of conspiracies, such as an institutional or coincidental theorist, in Coady's terms, means they have no shared ground to dispute as they are all playing different language games and so live a different 'form of life'. Their contrasting *bliks* of 'depth grammars' lead them to alternative – though not necessarily contradictory – approaches to conspiracy theories. They are simply playing different games.

Wittgenstein's approach laid him open to the attack of fideism, that religions cannot be examined and criticised externally. Such criticism is often laid at the door of conspiracy theories too. Indeed, Hare offers no insight into how we may counter an "insane" *blik*, although some people obviously do change their worldview. Rather, he humorously defers to David Hume who turned to backgammon "to take his mind off the problem" (cited in Pecorino 2001). This is because one's *bliks*, acting as 'mental spectacles', are the foundational pillars of one's outlook on life, whether religious or conspiratorial: "as Hume saw, without a *blik* there can be no explanation; for it is by our *blik* that we decide what is and what is not an explanation". As Hare suggests, the fideism canard regarding conspiracy theories, like Flew's attack on religion, misses the point: Wittgenstein is observing how people think about 'forms of life' just as we may observe how people think about conspiracy theories and the different language games being played.

Even so, Phillips does offer a way forward:

> Religion has something to say about aspects of human existence which are quite intelligible without reference to religion: birth, death, joy, misery, despair, hope, fortune, and misfortune. The connection between these and religion is not contingent. A host of religious beliefs could not be what they are without them. The force of religious beliefs depends, in part, on what is outside religion.
>
> (Phillips 1993: 69)

Religious worldviews, just like conspiracy theorising ones, cannot live in a vacuum. If one's *blik* is "insane" in light of such human experiences, we will – perhaps – turn away from it. *Bliks* are not invitations to stop thinking, rather they sharpen our thoughts and help us recognise the paradigm in which we think. In terms of conspiracy theories, we can now make the link between the conspiracy theorist mindset or *blik* and the specific conspiracy theory at hand. Due to 'conspiratorial ambiguity', it would be absurd to

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a priori reject the conspiracy theorising worldview. Yet this doesn't mean everything can and should be explained in terms of conspiracy. We may thus differentiate between what H.J.N. Horsburgh (1956) called "pure *bliks*" which serve as a broad framework for understanding how the world functions, and "impure *bliks*", which are narrow claims about specific phenomena. On the one hand, Horsburgh accepts that the former is "absolutely unfalsifiable" (Horsburgh 1956: 257) as the claim made cannot be proved or disproved. For example, there is enough 'conspiratorial ambiguity' to allow for the continued debate between the 'conspiracy theory of society' and 'the cock-up theory of society'. On the other hand, Horsburgh argues that impure *bliks* are only "artificially unfalsifiable" for although the claim can be contradicted, it is the believer who won't allow his *blik* to be falsified, twisting the facts and relying on qualifications and auxiliary hypotheses. Thus whatever evidence we produce, the lunatic will change his story to fit in with his hypothesis that the dons are out to kill him. He therefore falls into Popper's falsification trap, much in the same way that astrologers and Marxists are said to. In turn, as "pure *bliks*", even sceptics, such as Keeley, accept that a simple dismissal of conspiracy theories would be naïve in the extreme:

> Conspiracy theories, as a general category, are not necessarily wrong. In fact, as the cases of Watergate and the Iran-Contra affair illustrate, small groups of powerful individuals do occasionally seek to affect the course of history, and with some non-trivial degree of success. Moreover, the available, competing explanations – both official and otherwise – occasionally represent duelling conspiracy theories. (Keeley 1999: 110–11)

Quite simply, some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true and others false. And so, based on the historical evidence, Pigden has argued that, "it is perfectly reasonable to look for conspiracies in the explanation of events … Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. It is a case of suck it and see" (Pigden 2006: 19).

5. Reflections

The value of Hare seeing religious beliefs as *bliks* is captured by his quote of Psalm 75: 3: "The earth is weak and all the inhabiters thereof: I bear up the pillars of it." With some poetic licence, Hare argues that human knowledge is fragile and transient, while our *bliks* "bear up the pillars" of all we know and believe. Just as God is beyond falsification, so too are our *bliks*. Although focusing on religious faith, Hare himself extends *bliks* to all aspects of our thinking, including moral *bliks*, such as reward and punishment. This essay now employs *bliks* in the task of understanding the nature of conspiracy theories, recognising, as Hare (cited in Pecorino 2001) argued, "that our whole commerce with the world depends upon our *bliks* about the world; and that differences between *bliks* about the world cannot be settled by observation of what happens in the world".

Thus John Henry Newman, one of the most (in)famous of religious believers (depending on your own *blik*!), wrote of his faith: "I believe in design because I believe in God; not in God because I see design" (Newman 1870). As Newman readily accepted, friendly 'facts' within the design argument for God's existence are invoked by many religious believers. However, such 'evidence' lacks the empirical strength to actually push one over the edge from non-belief to religious belief. This notion was echoed by Karl Barth, who similarly rejected Anselm's ontological argument as a philosophical proof of God's existence. Rather, "the whole movement of Anselm's thought takes place within the structure of belief and prayer" as Anselm's meditation on God

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is for the person with pre-existing faith (Williams 1970: 142). 'Fides quaerens intellectum' or 'faith seeking understanding' as a theological method, stretches from Augustine through to Anselm and Barth. By appreciating that such 'proofs' of God's existence take place firmly on the believer's ground, we can identify such religious faith as *bliks*.[12]

Yet Newman (1870) went further by suggesting that the focus on such evidence fails to capture the very crux of faith itself: "Design teaches me power, skill and goodness – not sanctity, not mercy, not a future judgement, which three are the essence of religion." By reframing the epistemological foundations of conspiracy theories, we can see that much of the debate surrounding conspiracy theories and their theorisers miss the mark in a similar manner. In the spirit of Phillips's sound advice that "[t]he role of philosophy in this context is not to justify, but to understand" (Phillips 2000: 111), I suggest that just as Flew mischaracterised religious beliefs as assertions about facts, so too do current debates about conspiracy theorisers start out on the wrong foot.

Whether one believes that conspiracy theories are a result of "crippled epistemologies" (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 204) and bad thinking (Cassam 2015) or, quite the reverse, that "it *is* intellectually vicious *not* to be a conspiracy theorist" (Pigden 2017: 123), such a debate is played out on the wrong plane as it misses the underlying *blik* or foundational knowledge which shapes a person's worldview surrounding conspiracies, whether as theoriser or sceptic. To be sure, Pigden's ecumenical understanding of conspiracy theories, that "there is nothing inherently suspect about conspiracy theories as such" (Pigden 2017: 123), is more helpful in showing the bankruptcy of "a principled scepticism about conspiracy theories per se" (Pigden 2017: 124). Nevertheless, even he is locked into the secondary, particularist debate over whether conspiracy theories are a result of epistemic vice or virtue, concluding that "the virtuous policy is to proportion belief to the evidence" (Pigden 2017: 131).

For example, if we take the conspiracies surrounding climate change denial or scepticism, there is intuitive support for the idea that such conspiracy theorisers indeed suffer from bad thinking and intellectual vices such as gullibility, carelessness and close-mindedness (Cassam 2015). The "cures" for such "crippled epistemologies" therefore tend to focus on education as "most people lack direct or personal information about the explanations for terrible events" (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 226). Kahan *et al.* (2012: 732) labelled this approach the 'science comprehension thesis' (SCT), which holds that, "[a]s members of the public do not know what scientists know, or think the way scientists think, they predictably fail to take climate change as seriously as scientists believe they should". Yet Kahan *et al.* demonstrated that climate change sceptics are no less scientifically literate than climate realists. Indeed, where the sceptic *blik* exists, additional "education" will only serve to reinforce such a worldview (Kahan *et al.* 2012: 732). Rather, the data supported the 'cultural cognitive thesis' (CCT), which posits that "individuals, as a result of a complex of psychological mechanisms, tend to form perceptions of societal risks that cohere with values characteristic of groups with which they identify" (Kahan *et al.* 2012: 732). Rather than "bad thinking", CCT showed that the range of approaches towards climate change were intuitive, highlighting the difference

[12]Such an approach is strongly rooted in the Jewish tradition too. See, for example, the Talmudic tractate Bava Batra 75a, where Rabbi Yochanan, a leading sage, reprimands a student for making his faith contingent upon empirical evidence: "Worthless man, if you had not seen, you would not have believed." As Aharon Lichtenstein (2004: 367) observed, "[I]ntellectual assent is normative and essential; but, at the personal level, it is generally not the key. In the final analysis, the primary source of faith is faith itself."

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between the sceptical individualistic worldview on the one hand and the congenial communitarian worldview on the other. Due to the motivated heuristic (see, for example, Chen *et al.* 1999), people on both sides of the aisle will "fit their interpretations of scientific evidence to their competing cultural philosophies" and so better education will only serve to justify one's own *blik*.[13] Rather than debating how to educate for "intellectual virtues", Kahan *et al.* warn that the debate can only be won at the level of worldviews or *bliks* as we may call them:

> As citizens understandably tend to conform their beliefs about societal risk to beliefs that predominate among their peers, communicators should endeavour to create a deliberative climate in which accepting the best available science does not threaten any group's values. (Kahan *et al.* 2012: 734)

Note how such debates over conspiracy theories mirror the arguments of the New Atheists[14] and their critics over religious faith. The combative atheists also sought to denigrate religious beliefs in terms of their followers' epistemic vices in contrast to the epistemic virtues of scientific thinking. But as Jonathan Haidt (2012: 291) showed in terms of religious psychology, such criticisms failed to capture the essence of religion by focusing on the narrow (and secondary) question of "false beliefs and faulty reasoning of individual believers." Rather, Haidt (2012: 291) argued, we should focus on the broader (and primary) issue of "automatic (intuitive) processes of people embedded in social groups that are striving to create a moral community". The secondary debate is based on a misreading of religion and where it came from: whereas the New Atheist model is based on "the Platonic rationalist view of the mind", the psychological evidence supports the "Humean view in which reason … is a servant of the intuitions."[15] To understand religious and conspiratorial worldviews, therefore, we must discuss them at the level of our *bliks*, our intuitions, rather than focus on whether conspiracy theorisers are bad thinkers or not. As Haidt (2012: 61) concludes: "Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second." This is why debates between sceptics and believers about the veracity of conspiracies or religious beliefs are "merely so much labour and effort lost", in the words of Kant (1999: A602 / B630). Whether you take part in such a discussion or witness it being played out on Twitter or among friends, it is clear that "reasons are the tail wagged by the intuitive dog" (Haidt 2012: 57). Again, Hume provided the insight into this problem:

> And as reasoning is not the source, whence either disputant derives his tenets; it is in vain to expect, that any logic, which speaks not to the affections, will ever engage him to embrace sounder principles. (Hume cited in Haidt 2012: 57)

In this vein, the very term, *blik*, as a catch-all and neutral neologism that captures people's unfalsifiable but meaningful beliefs, meets Coady's challenge to "come up with a single expression to cover" (2007: 203) the differing approaches towards conspiracy theories –

[13]For this reason, Steven Pinker (2018: 382) argued that by taking up the environmental cause, Al Gore "may have done the movement more harm than good, because as a former Democrat vice-president and presidential nominee he stamped climate change with a left-wing seal". Pinker thus echoes Kahan's guidance that climate realists would be better off "[r]ecruiting conservative and libertarian commentators who have been convinced by the evidence and are willing to share their concern … than recruiting more scientists to speak more slowly and more loudly".

[14]Led by Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens.

[15]Haidt (2012: 58) makes use of the rider (controlled processes) on an elephant (automatic procresses) metaphor, whereby the rider evolved to serve the elephant.

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irrational or not. This will not only help depoliticise the debate, but also shift the focus towards understanding the differing worldviews surrounding conspiracy theories.[16]

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