

Creating Conspirituality

Knowledge and Empowerment on the
David Icke Discussion Forum

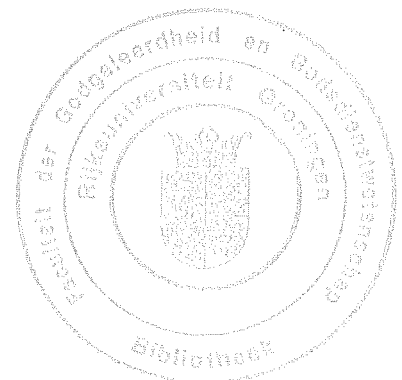
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Preface

Before I started the project of which this written piece is the final result, I was told that a master thesis is both “just a big paper” and “your worst nightmare.” Graduated students told me that I would love and hate my thesis at the same time. I found out they were right. Having written many papers and essays over the course of my study, as well as a bachelor thesis, I considered myself well prepared and ready to take on a project that would be my master thesis. But nothing could prepare me for a project that took me more than 1.5 year to finish and of which the result would cover almost 150 pages. Choosing a subject with which I was relatively familiar, conspiracy theories on the Internet, I soon found out that there is a significant difference between reading about conspiracy theories on discussion forums for entertainment, and studying this phenomenon with academic tools. Despite the ever-growing literature on online research methods, its approaches are as diffuse as the Internet itself. Despite the ever-growing academic interest in conspiracy theories, comprehensive studies to this phenomenon are still limited with regard to their material as well as their interpretations. And on top of these limitations, the topic I became most interested in, namely the spiritual side of conspiracy theories, has hardly been researched in an academic setting. On many levels, this academic undertaking felt like a pioneer study. I had to familiarize myself with the methods, modes of analysis, and previous research on the subject, while at the same time employing these academic approaches to the field under scrutiny. Because of the versatility of the subject I have chosen I was forced to elaborate on the academic discussions in various fields of research. Where possible, I limited myself to the basic consensus on the topic. When consensus is not yet established these topics required a more elaborated discussion, such as the approaches to conspiracy theories and the concept of esotericism. Besides the need for a discussion of the literature, in order to answer my research question it was also necessary to provide lengthy quotes from the discussion forum as well as a detailed analysis of what was said. These necessities were the primary cause of prolonged duration of my research and the thesis’ length.

Despite the countless lonely hours I spent in front of the computer to write down all my observations and interpretations, this thesis could not have come to its final form without help from outside. I am in great debt to my first advisor, Prof. Dr. Kocku von Stuckrad of the

University of Groningen, who accompanied me throughout my entire journey. With unmatched patience he coped with my frustrations from the lack of results, my missed deadlines and my rescheduled appointments, while indefatigably pointed me to literature and theories that have helped me dealing with the materials, even though I stubbornly put them aside, only to realize later that he indeed was correct. Furthermore, I would like to express great gratitude to my second advisor, Dr. Stef Aupers from the Erasmus University Rotterdam, whose enthusiasm for the subject and critical approach to my writings motivated me to keep going. Finally, I would like to thank Riannon for keeping me sane during my endeavor. My conversations with her on the subject of my thesis always resulted into fresh ideas to explore and her intelligent and critical remarks to my writing have greatly improved this thesis. I could not have done it without the everlasting faith of these people as well as my friends and family.

1. Introduction

On 27 July 2012 London opened the 30th Olympic Games with a spectacular ceremony titled “Isles of Wonder,” which marked the welcoming of over 1500 athletes from over 200 countries. While the news media was overwhelmingly enthusiastic about this event, some media reports covered a disturbing message delivered by the controversial speaker David Icke. Icke claimed that the opening ceremony was not just some warm and innocent welcome to the athletes, but actually a “secret Satanic ritual disguised as a celebration of Britain and sports.”¹ In an article on his own website, davidicke.com, he explains that the opening ceremony is full of symbols that function to direct the attention of the viewer.² Attention, according to Icke, is relation to symbolism through an electromagnetic field, and this electromagnetic field is used by a hidden Elite to control the masses. In short, the symbols used in the opening ceremony (the “ritual”) suck up energy from its viewers and participants and gives it to the malevolent satanic Elite, who, according to tabloid newspaper Daily Mirror, happen to be satanic shape-shifting reptilians from another dimension.³

While Icke’s interpretation of the 30th Olympic Games opening ceremony seems very far-fetched, or even ridiculous in some ways, these kinds of claims do not ordinarily come out of the blue. When we look at the articles above, especially the report from the Daily Mirror, including the comment section provided by the website, two observations can be made. First, they point to the existence of a hidden underground of knowledge and worldviews that is rarely covered by the mainstream media. Indeed, the comments section of the Daily Mirror report on David Icke’s accusations shows a surprisingly large amount of commentators that seem to agree with Icke’s theories or sympathize with his work, and discredit the writer of the article for his stigmatizing tone of voice. This raises questions not only about the content of Icke’s accusations, but also about the extent to which this underground worldview that mixes real-world events with notions of secret cabals, ritualistic practices, extraterrestrial beings, and mind control, is shared by a

¹ http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=10824089 (All links in this thesis have been accessed on 23 January 2013).

² <http://www.davidicke.com/headlines/69689-olympic-focus-tonight-at-9pm-uk-time-and-all-next-week->

³ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/david-icke-claims-london-2012-1199641>

substantial audience. Second, we can see that David Icke combines several fringe ideas, namely the existence of a secret cabal with some unknown malevolent intentions, and the idea that these malevolent intentions are not just on an economic or social level, but on a spiritual level as well. The articles about this event, including the one written by David Icke himself, therefore hint at the existence of a mixture of ideas that sprang from the world of conspiracy theories and from the milieu of spirituality.

This mixture of conspiracy theories and spirituality is not only prevalent in the ideas of David Icke himself, but also in the many people involved in this “subculture” of fringe knowledge. Anyone who would do a quick online search on David Icke would end up on his own website, davidicke.com, which harbors Icke’s many articles on an incredibly broad range of topics, but also fosters an online discussion forum where ordinary people can debate his and other ideas: davidicke.com/forum. The David Icke forum hosts over an astonishing 100,000 different discussions divided by over 30 categories, ranging from “Satanism” to the “Nature of Reality” and from “Secret Societies” to “Astrology.”⁴ Judging from the kind of categories that sort the various discussions we can see how the accusations made by David Icke about the London Olympics show similarities with the topics discussed on the forum. It becomes apparent that there is a connection between conspiracy theories and spiritual notions. When spiritual topics like “channeling,” “psychic abilities,” and “paranormal” can be discussed alongside topics that dominate conspiracy theories like “Illuminati,” “9/11,” “New World Order” and “Big Brother” an assumption is made that these topics in some way or another can be related to one another. In addition, the forum shows that the accusations made by David Icke do not simply come out of the blue. As far-fetched as they may sound, they indicate the existence of a worldview, or a collection of worldviews, that forms a breeding ground for ideas like Icke’s and in which accusations like Icke’s resonate. This collection of worldviews that forms the foundation of Icke’s accusations and similar claims springs from the aforementioned mixture of conspiracy theories and spirituality. This is conceptualized by Ward and Voas (2011) in the portmanteau ‘conspirituality’.

⁴ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/>, I will provide for a detailed description of the architecture of the David Icke forum further below.

1.1 Research questions

How is it possible that ideas from two seemingly incommensurable worldviews are able to blend to create new ideas and perspectives for observations? And why do people seem ready to accept these kinds of knowledge claims as valid and relevant to understand the world around them? In order for knowledge claims of any sort to be accepted as knowledge by a given community it has to have a legitimizing force, something that the participants of that community share that provides for the possibility of validating a certain knowledge claim. As I will show below, knowledge is not neutral. On the contrary, knowledge stands in close relationship with power. Adopting one's own legitimizing strategies can empower a knowledge community in a substantial way. To address this relationship I will formulate my research question as follows: *What is the role of the legitimation strategies adopted by the participants of the David Icke forum for their sense of empowerment?* This question can be divided into two main questions: first, what kind of legitimation strategies do the participants of the David Icke forum adopt? Second, to what extent do these legitimation strategies form a source of empowerment for them? In order to sufficiently answer these questions I will distinguish the various strategies used by the participants on the forum.

As I will elaborate in detail further below, it appears that the kinds of strategies used by the participants are remarkably similar to the kinds of legitimization strategies used by spokespersons of what has been called the esoteric tradition.⁵ Olav Hammer (2001), who did extensive research on these strategies, discriminates three main categories of legitimizing strategies: connecting knowledge claims in a scientific perspective; relating knowledge to personal experience; and relating specific knowledge claims to a certain (esoteric) tradition in such a way that these knowledge claims become part of an ancient wisdom or *philosophia perennis*. Since there is a significant overlap between the strategies used in the esoteric tradition and the participants on the forum, I will use these categories as a blueprint for the examination of the creation of conspiritual knowledge by the participants on the David Icke forum. The details and the background of this perspective will be discussed in detail at the end of Chapter 2.

⁵ Throughout this entire thesis, I understand "the esoteric tradition" to be the Western post-Enlightenment esoteric traditions similar to Hammer's "Modern Esoteric Tradition" (see below), which he understands as the range of "post-Enlightenment positions from Blavatsky to the New Age" (7).

By focusing on strategies, I enter the discursive side of knowledge claims. Knowledge claims are not just simply accepted regardless of the form in which it is presented. Certain knowledge communities have their own rules about what counts as knowledge. A discipline that recognizes and identifies these rules and analyzes how knowledge is created and made effective is the sociology of knowledge.

1.2 Sociology of knowledge

Rooted in linguistic theory, structuralism and post-structuralism, the sociology of knowledge seeks to understand knowledge as a culture, as a means to create social practices and objects and to constitute new meanings. The sociology of knowledge is not concerned with the accuracy in which knowledge refers to a “reality,” but, to put it in Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) words: “[it] must concern itself with whatever passes for ‘knowledge’ in a given society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such ‘knowledge.’ In so far as all human ‘knowledge’ is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the processes by which this is done” (13). The primary objective of the sociology of knowledge can therefore be said to be “*the analysis of the social construction of reality*” (Ibid.). Both knowledge and reality are socially generated: they exist as real and meaningful to us. Knowledge, in this sense, “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” (McCarthy 1996, 2).

While Berger and Luckmann were interested in the social construction of every-day knowledge, the German sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim and the American sociologist C. Wright Mills focused on the consequences of knowledge in politics and people’s public and private lives. As E. Doyle McCarthy (1996) explains, “toward this goal, the sociology of knowledge seeks to uncover the collective bases from which groups and institutions exercise and compete for authority” (3). In McCarthy’s understanding, knowledges (he uses the plural) are not neutral, nor is the inquiry with which one gains knowledges. Various groups and individuals act with and against each other in a variety of contexts in a struggle to change or maintain their world around them. This reveals that “currents of thought are *strategic*; they originate in group existence and collective action” (ibid.). In this understanding, the sociology of knowledge “examines how objects of public attention arise, how social problems come to be defined and the

functions particular knowledges play in this process” (ibid.). Ultimately, the role of knowledge in this struggle for power and authority is this: *whose knowledge should decide?*

The understanding of knowledge creation as a struggle for authority and power is significant in a groundbreaking trend witnessed by Nikita Basov and Oleksandra Nenko (2012), namely *the process of democratization of knowledge creation*. While knowledge creation has been a privilege of a narrow circle of Elite, be it scientists or religious virtuosi, recently this privilege has been broken open in a process of the “democratization of the ability to purposefully create new socially significant knowledge, and thus be an intellectual” (ix). This process of democratization made it possible for all people who are involved with intensive cognitive activities to generate socially significant knowledge. Basov and Nenko identify the Internet as a fruitful place because it “allows actors of various types to express and discuss different opinions in blogs, forums, and through other services, without discrimination” (ibid.). The process of democratization signifies the loss of hegemony on knowledge creation traditionally provided by scientists who had the authority to define the characteristics of legitimate knowledge and non-legitimate knowledge. With the authority of scientists contested regarding the definitions of knowledge (but not, as I will show in Chapter 3, with regard to the way in which knowledge is framed) the possibility for other experts to create relevant knowledge is rising. Hence, it becomes relevant for sociologists of knowledge to research these various ways in which knowledge is created, the ways in which knowledge is legitimized, and the social significance of knowledge in the light of power relations.

1.3 Preliminary definitions

This work relies heavily on concepts that are unfortunately hard to define. Although terms like “conspiracy,” “spirituality,” and “empowerment” are used regularly, they usually remain ill defined. In the case of “conspiracy theory,” this is partly due to the pejorative implications of the term. For instance, ideas about the 9/11 attacks are often dubbed “conspiracy theories” because the majority of the public does not accept them as truth, while the Watergate scandal is believed to be the result of proper “investigative journalism” (Knight, 2000). Michael Barkun (2003) identifies three major principles in conspiracy thinking, namely that 1) nothing happens by accident, 2) everything is connected, and 3) nothing is as it seems. He defines the belief in conspiracies as “the belief that an organization of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly

to achieve some malevolent end” (3). This definition focuses on the role of secrecy in the creation of conspiracy theories as well as the activities that are believed to be taking place. For our present purpose, however, I regard conspiracy theories primarily as a form of knowledge.

From this perspective, I understand conspiracy theories to be *a body of knowledge, ideas and theories regarding hidden acts, plans and intentions of organizations of individuals or groups with malevolent motivations*. In this understanding of conspiracy theories, the actual content of the conspiracy theories is secondary. Since there are countless variations of conspiracy theories it would be impossible to create a definition that would cover all these theories. Instead, by focusing on conspiracy theories as a body of knowledge about activities that are not publicly knowable but which are believed to be malevolent, we can distinguish features of conspiracy theories. First of all, it is a body of knowledge that, in the understanding of the sociology of knowledge, is in competition for power and authority with other forms of knowledge. This makes it possible to research the rhetorical strategies used by people within these theories to convince their public of the validity of their knowledge. Second, the kind of knowledge that conspiracy theories claim to deal with is hidden knowledge, knowledge that should be revealed to the general public. Von Stuckrad (2010) explains that the activity of revealing this hidden knowledge, or secrets, harbors symbolic capital. Exposing secrets is not just about the content of the secret, but about the *function* of secrecy, which is linked to power and empowerment. Secrets are a form of communication; a dialectic of concealment and revelation that establishes a power relationship between the revealer and the recipients. As von Stuckrad explains: “The chief effects of secrecy are on the recipients of the secret, not on those from whom it is putatively withheld. The social capital of a secret is attractive for people outside the group only if the fact is known that there is a secret to be told” (57). Thirdly, the fact that the conspiracy theorists believe in the malevolent intentions of the conspirators creates an Other, in contrast to which the conspiracy theorists can define themselves. At the end of this thesis, I will discuss the consequences of this Othering for the sense of empowerment of the conspiracy theorists.

The second concept we have to address is “spirituality.” Like conspiracy theories, this concept is quite elusive. But contrary to the concept of conspiracy theories, the definition problem of spirituality is mainly due to the fact that spirituality is a very broad category. Spirituality can deal with animistic religions as well as established ones, with magic and rituals,

but also with ideas from the esoteric tradition. Since I will elaborate in paragraph 2.2 on what I understand to be relevant about spirituality in the present context, I will here supply a brief working definition. I will use the definition of Kieran Flanagan (2007), who understands spirituality as “a term that betokens matters of the spiritual world, issues of animism, ecstasy, magic and spells [which] bears on the recognition and pursuit of matters of ultimate concern that lie beyond the limits of the corporeal and the social” (1). In this definition, whatever is spiritual is juxtaposed against whatever is corporeal. As we will see in the analysis of the forum discussions, the subjects under investigations are legion; therefore, a broad definition will have to suffice.

Since we have established a definition of conspiracy theories and spirituality, we can now turn to a working definition for the hybrid conspирituality. Ward and Voas, who coined the term, understand conspирituality as follows:

conspирituality is a politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age: (1) A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order. (2) Humanity is undergoing a ‘paradigm shift’ in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened ‘new paradigm’ worldview. (Ward and Voas, 2011, 104)

While this definition works for Ward and Voas, who focus more on the paramount dogma of “conscious shift” prevalent of the New Age Movement, for the purpose of this thesis a broader definition is required. Essentially, the definition of conspирituality I propose here is a combination of the presented definitions of spirituality and conspiracy theories, namely: *a body of knowledge, ideas and theories regarding hidden acts, plans and intentions of organizations of individuals or groups with malevolent motivations, which bears on the recognition and pursuit of matters of ultimate concern that lie beyond the limits of the corporeal and the social.* This definition focuses on a combination of the aforementioned understanding of the individual concepts. Thus, conspирituality deals with the body of knowledge regarding spiritual aspects of conspiracy theories and conspiracy aspects of spirituality, which is, specifically, knowledge about hidden malevolent activities that lie beyond the limits of the corporeal and the social.

By framing conspirituality this way it becomes clear why Icke's position on the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games is a position that cannot be framed in either conspiracy theory or spirituality. If Icke's accusations would be explained in the context of conspiracy theories alone, i.e. as a way of the hidden Elite organization to brainwash the audience of the ceremony, it would miss the important spiritual element of the "satanic ritual," which is pre-eminently a spiritually loaded notion. Vice versa, if Icke's warning would be interpreted exclusively in spiritual terms, it would miss the conspiracy element of a hidden Elite that deliberately tries to influence people in a malevolent way. In order to do justice to the hybridity of the two worldviews the concept of "conspirituality" is therefore highly useful.

Finally, since the sociology of knowledge perceives the creation of knowledge in close relationship to power relations it is important to briefly explain the concept of empowerment and its relation to knowledge. In the context of my thesis, I understand empowerment as *a concept that in general refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to access and use their personal or collective authority, power, and influence in relations with other people, institution and society* (see Punie 2011, 9). Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their lives, in their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they define as important. Page and Czuba (1999) distinguish three major components of empowerment. In the first place, empowerment is multi-dimensional, i.e. it operates in sociological, economic, political, psychological and other dimensions. Second, empowerment occurs at various levels: the individual, the group and the community. Third, empowerment is a social process because it occurs in relationship with others. With regard to the relationship between knowledge and power, Patricia Collins (1991) explains that "knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance" (221). In the context of Black feminist theories on the experienced reality of African-American women, she reminds us of the important connections between knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment: "Offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering. But revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications" (222). While the oppression of Black women in American society is far more pressing than the imagined oppression of people in conspirituality culture, Barkun (2003) explains that there is a widespread belief that the kinds

of knowledge dealt with in conspirituality culture is perceived as oppressed by mainstream orthodoxy. In that sense, the assumed oppression of knowledge in conspirituality culture can lead to an imagined sense of empowerment when knowledge claims are legitimized according to their own approved strategies.

In order to operationalize these concepts we have to take two important issues into account. The first issue deals with finding a practical way to systematically find relevant discussions, while the second issue is more concerned with analyzing the data and interpreting the outcome in the larger frame of empowering potentials. The next two paragraphs are concerned with the source of my data, and they provide a more detailed elaboration of the methods that I found most appropriate to gather and interpret the data sets.

1.4 Davidicke.com/forum

To conduct my research on the legitimatizing strategies in conspirituality culture I chose to use the David Icke forum as primary source for data. As I have stated above, the David Icke forum is of considerable size. It hosts over 200,000 different discussions with a total of almost 4 million individual posts, divided amongst more than 30 different categories. The forum has more than 74,000 registered members.⁶ The David Icke forum is one of the places on the Internet where people who share an interest in conspiracy theories and conspiritual ideas can come together to share and discuss their ideas. The architecture of a website determines the limitations and possibilities for members to participate (Wright & Street 2007). The David Icke forum is created with a standard phpBB discussion forum package and hosts a multi-threaded environment.⁷ While there are no requirements to visit the forum and read the discussions, active participation (i.e. posting messages) requires creating a registered account. Creating this account means the user has to agree with the forum's "Terms and Conditions," a set of rules and rights about behavior on the forum and legal considerations.⁸ These rules and regulations provide an initial threshold against people with bad intentions. Nevertheless, whenever someone is posting illegal

⁶ This information stems from general statistics found on www.davidicke.com/forum. While it states that it has 74,237 registered members, it cannot be determined how many of those members are actually active as contributors.

⁷ phpBB is an Internet forum package and stands for PHP Bulletin Board (with PHP standing for the program-language in which it is written). According to their own website, phpBB is one of the most widely used open source forum packages and it allows for moderation, administration, unread message tracking and private messaging. <https://www.phpbb.com/about/>.

⁸ <http://www.davidicke.com/component/content/article/64271>.

or inappropriate content, it is the job of the forum moderators to manage these issues. The forum provides the list of staff (moderators, administrators and advisors) for anyone to see.⁹ Finally, it should be noted that not every discussion can be read by non-registered visitors. Most of the discussions are freely available, but the subforums “Forum Projects / Meetings / Members ‘Stuff’,” “Conspiratainment” and “Rant Room” are only available for logged-in members. Furthermore, it is possible for members to upgrade their account to a “Premium Membership,” which grants access to the video library and newsletter archives¹⁰ but also to closed subforums “Premier Subscribers Features” and “David Icke Video-Casts.” It was not possible for me to find out how many primary subscriptions the forum has, but for conducting my research this primary subscription was not relevant.

1.5 Method

The Internet as new medium of communication radically changed social networking, discursive practices and the way in which we express ourselves (Mann and Steward 200; Boyd and Ellison 2008; Barr 2011). The public nature of online discursive practices and the increasing availability of Internet connections in the world mean that an increasing amount of individuals have contributed to online activities such as blogs, discussion forums, news groups and social media (McKenna and Pole 2008). Various social researchers have indicated that the Internet can be used as a medium to generate data by means of surveys, e-mail and sampling (Lee *et al.* 2008). Here Internet is perceived as a medium or a tool to direct contact between the researchers and the participants. Contrary, a rapid increase in the number of people who use the Internet to generate their own data through means of blogs and discussion forums has been observed (McKenna and Pole 2008).

The perception that the Internet is more than a tool for researchers to reach people, but is also a field by itself that provides the means for individuals to participate in online activities and interaction, and thus provide data that can be analyzed by the researchers, is relatively recent (McKenna and Pole 2008; Barr 2011). This opens up the option to consider online social action as primary source for qualitative research. Doing qualitative research on discussion forums poses various methodological issues for the researcher. Barr (2011) identifies two main methodological

⁹ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showgroups.php>.

¹⁰ <http://www.davidicke.com/amember/signup.php>.

issues with regard to researcher online discussion forums: the problem of the researcher's presence and the problem of ethics. I will discuss them separately and review my own approach in this research.

1.5.1 Lurking

The first methodological issue is related to the question about what exactly happens on online discussion forums. As Mann and Stewart (2000) observe, ethnomethodological approaches of social research are "broadly concerned with how people construct their own definition of a social situation [through means of] ordinary, mundane, naturally occurring talk" (86). While researchers can take on different approaches concerning online discussion forums, the attitude of "lurking," with which the researcher is not participating or noticed in any way, but is merely observing, is an attractive one on discussion forums because it offers the opportunity to explore discourses unaffected by the researcher's presence (Joinson 1999). As attractive as it may seem, Mann and Stewart (2000) argue that the researcher should be cautious when interpreting online discussions while lurking, because contrary to observing face-to-face interaction, "the time taken, and the delays between turn-taking can shape the mood of the interaction. This information is often lost in the analysis" (87).

Despite the lack of appreciation for the shared temporal and spatial meaning of such interaction, it depends on the focus of the researcher whether or not this appreciation is relevant. While I admit that it would provide a certain depth to the understanding of online communities and how time can shape moods and emotions in online discussions, for my focus such an appreciation was not essential. Throughout my research I merely observed (lurked) the discussions I selected as primary data. Although I did make an account at some point, I never participated in any activities on the David Icke forum.

1.5.2 Ethics

The second methodological issue is related to ethics. As Eynon *et al.* (2008, 24) observe, doing research in online environments requires a different attitude toward data and the individuals who create this data than in traditional research settings. In traditional research settings, the participants are often aware of the presence of the researcher and have at least some ideas about the motivations and the research objectives of the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

This results in an ethical consideration from the part of the researcher with regard to information about the research objectives, the privacy of the participants, potential harm that the research can do to the group under scrutiny, and the danger of exploiting the participants, i.e. giving them nothing in return (Spradley 1980, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). Doing research online, especially in the case of lurking behavior, requires revisiting the standpoints of the research concerning some of these ethical issues. Barr (2011) identifies one of the most important issues as the tension between what is both a public and a private sphere: “discussion forums, social networking sites and blogs are by definition open spaces for discourse, and yet the fact that conversations often develop within a community and individuals are often anonymised affords some level of privacy” (16). In the case of discussion forums, Paccagnella (1997) has observed that members and users generally perceive them as being in the public domain, freely available for anyone with an Internet connection. Moreover, by posting a message on a public discussion forum, “there is an implied license to read, or even archive, the information it contains” (Mann & Stewart 2000).

From this latter perspective I conducted my research on the David Icke forum. First of all, the discussions I selected as primary data are discussions that can be read by anyone. No account is needed for reading those discussions, although active participation does require an account. Therefore, since the discussions were readable by anyone, I did not feel the need to contact the forum manager or any of the participants whose discussions I used as primary data. While some researchers on discussion forums find it necessary to anonymize the discussion forum they used because they are dealing with sensitive issues (Riley *et al.* 2009), in the case of the David Icke forum no such sensitive issues were being debated. I did however, use the common practice in ethnographical research of anonymizing the participants (Spradley 1980, Mann & Stewart 2000, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). While it would be easy for anyone who wants to know more about the participants to just look up the links to the discussions used in this research, refraining from using usernames in this research creates at least a sense of a threshold. Whenever I quote a participant, I quote him or her verbatim. This includes spelling errors and punctuation. If, for some reason, I found it necessary to change the quote, I will mention this

explicitly. Finally, I refer to the participants generally as being of male sex, unless the username explicitly makes clear it is a female.¹¹

1.5.3 Selecting the data

Since the concept of conspirituality deals with the relationship between conspiracy theories and spirituality, I decided to look for forum discussion in which the establishment of this relationship can be expected. Instead of browsing through the forums myself, I used a more systematic way to filter the enormous amount of data into a corpus that is large enough to make for a valid case study while remaining small enough to be manageable. The most systematic way that the website provided me with was the “advanced search” option. Through this option I was not only able to search for specific terms throughout the forums, but also to determine certain details about the search, such as amount of replies, date of latest comment and which forum-sections I wanted to search in. For every search term I kept the search options equal, which led to threads containing the search term having 1) 10 or more replies with a maximum of 60 replies per thread, of which 2) the last reply had to be posted within six months from the day of searching, and the results had to be 3) ordered by amount of posts in ascending order. I created eight individual search terms, namely: 1) Spiritual, 2) Esoteric, 3) Occult, 4) Ritual, 5) Conspiracy, 6) Elite, 7) Secret, 8) TPTB (an often used abbreviation that stands for ‘The Powers That Be’, meaning the hidden Elite).

Search terms 1-4 are more focused on spirituality while 5-8 are dealing with conspiracy theories. These search terms are based on my preliminary understanding of spirituality and conspiracy theories, as well as earlier observations of the interchangeability of these concepts. Thus, in finding discussion on spiritual subjects one can expect terms like “spiritual,” “esoteric,” “occult,” and “ritual” because these terms are often used in a spiritual context (see, for example, the way in which David Icke describes the Olympic Ceremony above). Likewise, the terms 5-8 can be reasonably expected when dealing with conspiracy theories, because conspiracy theories deal with a “conspiracy” of the “Elite” or “TPTB” which involve a “secret” agenda. In order to discover discussions that deal conspirituality these search terms were appropriate.

¹¹ This attitude is based on the spoof ‘Rules of the Internet’, in which rule number 29 indicates that ‘In the Internet all girls are men and all children are undercover FBI agents’. As soon as no other identity marker for signifying a participant’s sex is present, this rule applies. <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/30662>.

Then I selected the specific subforums that deal with either conspiracy theories or spirituality in some form. I selected these subforums based on presumed content, but because of the vastness of the forum it would be unmanageable to search each subforum by hand, especially the big ones like the “General” subforum. I may have missed some important discussions because of this selection, but as we will see, the method I used to select the threads was sufficient enough to provide a large enough corpus. I selected the following subforums for my search: a) Symbolism / Mind Control / Subliminal Programming, b) Big Brother / Microchipping / Problem-Reaction Solution, c) New World Order / Global Government, d) Earth Changes / Global Warming / Chemtrails / Weather Warfare, e) Illuminati / Secret Societies, f) Political Manipulation / Cover-Ups / False Flags, g) 9/11, h) Satanism / Child abuse / Cults / Esoteric / Astral Entities & Spirit Possession, i) Psychic Ability / Channelling / Remote Viewing / Dreams, j) Meditation / Human Consciousness / Spirituality / Ascension / 2012 Mayan Calendar, k) Astrology / Mysticism / Tarot / Numerology / The Occult / Alchemy.

Again, like the search terms, a-g relate strongly with conspiracy theories, while h-k deal in their presumed topics mostly with spiritual matters. The actual search for conspiratorial threads went as follows: I took one of the search terms from the spiritual side (1-4) and used it to search through the conspiracy subforums (a-g). I put all the threads with a reply-count between 10 and 60 into a database and provided them with a label stating with which search term they were found. Then I went to the next search terms and repeated the process until I finished with all the spiritual search terms, labelling threads that came up more than once with more than one search term. In order to see if the threads that were selected also said something about conspiracy theories, I searched these subforums with the conspiracy search terms as well. But instead of putting new threads in the database I just labelled the existing threads in the database with the specific search terms.

For instance, when I used the search term “Spiritual” I came across a thread called “No Reptilian Eye” in the subforum “Symbolism / Mind Control / Subliminal Programming.” I copied the link to the thread into the database, included the name of the thread and the keyword “Spiritual.” When I searched with “Esoteric,” the same thread showed up, indicating that people used the word “spiritual” and “esoteric” somewhere in the thread. Instead of copying the thread again, I just labelled the thread with “Esoteric” too. And so on.

I repeated the entire process with the conspiracy search terms (5-8) in the spiritual subforums (h-k) and thus gained a sufficient database of over a hundred threads. To limit this database down to a more manageable amount of threads I selected the ones with three or more labels from the spiritual subforums, and with four or more from the conspiracy subforums, because the conspiracy subforums, being more in number, contained substantially more results. Therefore, in order to keep it balanced I created two different selections. In the end this method resulted in a corpus of 39 individual threads. These 39 threads formed the foundation of my research. A complete list of the threads used as primary data can be found in the appendix.

1.5.4 Analysis

In order to analyze the selected corpus of data, I used Hammer's (2001) tripartite distinction of discursive strategies used by spokespersons of the esoteric tradition as a blueprint. Without letting myself be led by his own analysis of his material, his distinction made it possible for me to systematically categorize most of the posts made by the participants. In order to do that, I read all the selected discussions and put comments that related to the categories of science, personal experience, and the conspiritual narrative into separate files. After that I was able to analyze these comments separately using standardized methods of analyzing field notes, as described by Spradley (1980). Thus, by creating domains and taxonomies I was able to find general themes, topics, and ways in which participants relate to the three aforementioned categories.

By employing discourse analysis in the context of socially constructed knowledge systems (Berger & Luckmann 1966, McCarthy 1996) I was able to recreate different ways in which the participants legitimize their knowledge claims in relationship to broader cultural and institutional discourses. This method of analysis enables an appreciation of the highly discursive nature of knowledge creation through online engagement, while "relating these locally managed positions to the background normative conceptions that organize such accounts" (Riley 2009, 352). Discourse analysis seeks to discover ideologies in language. As Verschueren (2011) explains, ideology is "associated with underlying patterns of meaning, frames of interpretation, world views, or forms of everyday thinking and explanation" (7). In discourse analysis, it is assumed that "the ways in which beliefs, ideas, or opinions are discursively used, i.e. their forms of expression as well as the rhetorical purposes they serve, are just as important for ideology as

the contents of thinking” (Verschuere 2011, 7). Ideological patterns can therefore be revealed through the examination of language use.

Because this thesis deals with the creation of legitimate knowledge, I will use the term legitimizing strategies rather than ideology. However, as we will see, strategies of legitimizing knowledge often implicate certain ideological strains. With Hammer’s tripartite division in mind I analyzed the language use of the participants by focusing on the use of specific words or sentences that can be expected in Hammer’s categories mentioned in paragraph 1.1. For instance, words like “evidence,” “research,” and “energy” relate to scientism, while “I remember” and “I’ve seen” signify a personal narrative. Furthermore, I examined the way in which other participants valued these significant statements and why they did so. By examining the ways in which knowledge claims were framed as well as valued I was able to distil legitimizing strategies as well as underlying ideas that create a source for empowerment for the participants.

1.6 David Icke: a conspiratorial guru

For those unfamiliar with David Icke’s ideas and how they influence the merging of conspiracy theories and spirituality into a conspiratorial worldview I will now elaborate on his personal life and his main ideas, as well as those of other important conspiratorial spokespersons. David Icke (born in 1952), the self-proclaimed “most controversial speaker in the world” may be one of the most influential individuals on the subject of conspiratorial theories. This one-time British soccer player turned BBC sports personality turned UK Green Party spokesman is now one of the most prominent figures propagating an all-encompassing worldview of conspiratoriality. His work transgresses a mere fringe status, with lectures in over 25 countries, a website that received over 600,000 hits in its first year alone (Lewis & Kahn, 2005) and eighteen publications of which his most recognized publication, *The Biggest Secret*, has already gone through six re-printings since its first publication in 1999.

His conspiratorial journey began in 1990 when Icke consulted a psychic healer to alleviate the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis. This healer proclaimed Icke through the medium of spiritual messages as “a healer who is here to heal the earth and he will be world famous.” A year later he visited Peru where he underwent an intense experience during which “Energy was pouring from my hands with fantastic power [...] My feet continued to burn and vibrate for some

24 hours.” After this experience he left the BBC and the Green Party to start a new career as a writer and lecturer. (noot 16, cf. Barkun 103).

After his spiritual conversion in 1991 Icke wrote sixteen books in which he elaborated his all-encompassing conspiracy theory. Up until 1999 his work did not significantly differ from other conspiracy literature. It deals with general New World Order conspiracy theories, in which a vast network of secret societies, to which Icke refers as “The Brotherhood,” manipulates the world population to keep us from reaching the condition of full freedom. At the apex of this network stand the Illuminati, who keep the world into slavery due to a “global financial system” and “mind control techniques.” Although Icke refers in *The Robots’ Rebellion* (1994) to the anti-Semitic publication of *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*,¹² he has been careful to suggest that the *Protocols* were written by the Illuminati, instead of the Jews. Although *The Robots’ Rebellion* only briefly touches upon extraterrestrials, his work ... *And the Truth Shall Set You Free* (1995) explicitly links The Brotherhood with extraterrestrial beings. The “Global Elite” controls the world via a vast network of secret societies and non-secret organizations, such as banks, religious organizations, the educational sector, media and intelligence agencies. This is nothing out of the ordinary was it not for his idea that the Global Elite is controlled by the so-called “Prison Warders,” a group of extraterrestrials with unknown origin: “A pyramidal structure of human beings have been created under the influence and design of the extraterrestrial Prison Warders and their overall master, the Luciferic Consciousness. They control the human clique at the top of the pyramid, which I have dubbed the Global Elite.”¹³

It was this book that freed the way for Icke’s following publication, *The Biggest Secret: The Book That Will Change the World* (1999) in which he elaborates what Lewis and Kahn

¹² The *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* is an anti-Semitic text that has been very influential throughout the world. The *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th Edition (2011) describes the *Protocols* as follows: “Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a fraudulent document that reported the alleged proceedings of a conference of Jews in the late 19th cent., at which they discussed plans to overthrow Christianity through subversion and sabotage and to control the world. The Protocols first appeared in their entirety in Russia in 1905. They were widely disseminated in the 1920s and became a classic defense for anti-Semitism. First published in the United States in 1920, the Protocols were championed by Henry Ford in his newspaper, the Dearborn Independent, and cited throughout the 1930s by some anti-Roosevelt and fascist groups. As early as 1921, the English journalist Philip Graves exposed the similarity between the Protocols and a political satire by Maurice Joly, *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* (1864). Subsequent investigation showed the original document to be a forgery written by members of the Russian secret police.” (1)

¹³ David Icke, ... *And the Truth Shall Set You Free* (Bridge of Love Publications, 2005).

(2005) have dubbed “The Reptoid Hypothesis”. Barkun (2003) summarized this hypothesis as follows:

The extraterrestrials come from the constellation Draco. They are reptilians who walk erect and may appear ‘humanoid’ on casual inspection. They live not only on the planets from which they came but under the earth itself, in a hidden world of caverns and tunnels. There may be, wrote Icke, both ‘native’ reptilians and ‘outer space’ reptilians on earth at the same time. They control the Global Elite and Brotherhood by a combination of methods. They have crossbred with human beings, creating creatures that look human but are inwardly reptilian. These ‘hybrids’ are ‘possessed’ by their ‘fullblood’ reptilian masters. The hybrid ‘bloodlines’ continually interbreed, moreover, so that the Brotherhood is not simply nonhuman but is also the product of intentionally manipulated unions.’ (105)

Following the reptoid hypothesis laid out in *The Biggest Secret*, his follow-up work, *Children of the Matrix* (2001) expands the relationship between conspiracy theories and spirituality. The reptilians are not just after total enslaving of the human population in itself, but they need negative human emotions such as fear to thrive. To ensure their regular dose of human negative emotions, the reptilians initiated numerous blood rituals and human sacrifices during which the human victims release a large amount of negative energy, which is then absorbed by the reptilians, waiting in the fourth dimension. Their “hybrid” counterparts on earth retain, according to Icke, many of the central reptoid traits, such as “top-down control, emotionless ‘cold-blooded’ attitudes, an obsession with ritualistic behavior, and so on” (*Children* 275). Throughout history, many great leaders have been hybrids, such as Egyptian pharaohs, Sumerian kings, but also American presidents such as George Washington and George W. Bush, as well as the Queen Mother.

To ensure their human form, the hybrids have to participate in the aforementioned rituals as well, leading to accusations of world leaders participating in ritualistic sacrifices and pedophilic activities that include kidnapping, hedonistic drug parties and brutal murders. Through the manipulation of mass media and Internet sources, the activities of the reptilians, hybrids and humans involved in this global conspiracy remain hidden. However, humans have the option to liberate themselves from this global tyranny. At the end of *Children* Icke suggests a

program which has much in common with New Age programs. Icke argues that we must realize that all of our different narratives come from the different position we have within the overall energy field. On a deeper level we are connected through this energy field. Lewis and Kahn (2005) summarize this position as follows:

Rather than subjectively fragmented and biological finite beings lost in a sea of 'cosmic accidents', Icke asserts that we are all part of a unifying, trans-dimensional force: love. This force unifies all life in the galaxy. In fact, Icke argues: 'We are the reptilians and the 'demons' and, at the same time, we are those who they manipulate because we are all the same 'I' (*Children* 424). [...] Icke is clear that liberation consists of understanding that humans and reptoids are ultimately one within a unified energy field, and that we must learn to love the abject, horrific, and demonic 'other' as part of our own humanity. (53-54)

Even though Icke is the coiner of the "reptoid hypothesis" and one of the main spokesmen in the conspiritual milieu, his ideas did not emerge out of the blue. Already in the 1980s NEXUS Magazine started publishing articles on spirituality and conspiracy topics, stating that "NEXUS recognizes that humanity is undergoing a massive transformation. With this in mind, NEXUS seeks to provide 'hard-to-get' information so as to assist people through these changes."¹⁴ It was, however, mainly due to the emergence of the Internet that conspirituality could thrive as a separate genre within the cultic milieu.

Based on the 9/11 attacks and the fact that the web and access to it became increasingly larger and easier, Ward and Voas distinguish between First Generation conspirituality (before 2001) and Second Generation conspirituality (from 2002). The first started offline in the early and mid-1990s and gradually moved online. Apart from David Icke, conspirituality researcher David Wilcock, known from his web-lecture "The 2012 Enigma" and his top 50,000 ranking website DivineCosmos.com,¹⁵ is a key player in the First Generation conspirituality providers.

¹⁴ Wikipedia, 'Nexus Magazine,' available through [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nexus_\(magazine\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nexus_(magazine)) (cf. Ward and Voas, 'Conspirituality,' 109.).

¹⁵ Alexa web monitoring service, 'Divide Cosmos,' available at <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/divinecosmos.com> (August 24 2011).

He writes that the secret shadow government is losing its grip and humanity should prepare for the mass 2012 awakening after which the shadow government will perish.¹⁶

Not only did the 9/11 attacks do much to increase the popularity of alternative versions of the cause of the attack, and many people who never held conspiracist beliefs rationalized the attacks as an “inside job,” especially since the war in Afghanistan and Iraq in the following years. The rise of the Internet also did much to generate the Second Generation conspirituality providers. Among these Ward and Voas mention the shamanic practitioner John Perkins, whose 2004 autobiography *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* was on the NY Times bestseller list for 70 weeks, and Project Camelot, an online platform for shadow government whistle-blowers run by Bill Ryan and Kerry Cassidy.¹⁷ The size and popularity of these people and their websites, including all the smaller websites and discussion-forums, lead Ward and Voas to conclude that “[c]onspirituality has spread from being a scattering of single, first-generation providers to a large chain. It is now part of the spiritual supermarket: clients show around, settling upon the outlets whose interpretations of the two core convictions best suit their own opinions and taste” (111). This shows that the conspiritual worldview of David Icke and others is a force to acknowledge. When mainstream explanations of events are no longer accepted at face value, alternative versions proposed by conspirituality spokespersons become increasingly more relevant in the understanding of the world around us. These ideas are no longer on the fringe of our society, but accepted by various layers of the population:

Icke has tapped into the utopian longings of the masses in a potentially liberatory way. Right-wing fanatics, leftist conspiracy buffs, New Agers, college students, and an increasingly dissatisfied and questioning public the world over have found something deeply provocative in Icke that cannot simply be explained away as manifestations of a collective false-consciousness, clinical paranoia, or, as Freud would say, group hypnosis. (Lewis & Kahn, 67)

1.7 Overview

Since we have now established the primary foundations of this thesis, I will devote the following pages to a more in depth discussion about the nature of the relationship between conspiracy

¹⁶ Divine Cosmos, ‘US Airways ‘333’ Miracle Bigger Than We Think,’ available at <http://divinecosmos.com/start-here/davids-blog/424-us-airways-333-miracle-bigger-than-we-think> (August 24 2011).

¹⁷ <http://projectcamelotportal.com/> (August 24 2011).

theories and spirituality. I will begin the next section with a discussion on conspiracy theories, a topic that has been much misunderstood and misjudged by scholars in the past, but approached with increasing interest by recent scholarship. After that I will discuss the common understanding of spirituality in the context of the New Age milieu that goes beyond the mere definition of the concept mentioned above. From this I will provide a thorough understanding of the concept of conspирituality. Even before the term “conspирituality” was coined, researchers have hinted at the hybridity of conspiracy theories and spirituality. I will discuss possible explanations or perspectives in which this merging has been perceived, most notably the idea of the *cultic milieu*, a term coined by Colin Campbell in 1972, and two concepts created by Michael Barkun (2003), *stigmatized knowledge*, and *improvisational millennialism*. I will show how these theories point out important aspects of conspирituality but nevertheless have their shortcomings. These shortcomings can be overcome by perceiving conspирituality in a different fashion: by interpreting it in the context of *esotericism*. With von Stuckrad’s understanding of the esoteric as a discourse and Olav Hammer’s discursive strategies of the esoteric tradition as a blueprint, I will free the way for my own research on the David Icke forums. I will provide an in depth analysis of my material in the context of Olav Hammer’s discursive strategies. I will begin with the way in which science seems to function as a significant other to legitimize knowledge claims made by participants on the forum. After that I will look at the role that personal experience plays in this process. Finally, I will look at the way in which the narrative of conspирituality functions as a way to legitimize knowledge claims by creating a dualistic worldview of “good” and “evil” that serves as a framework with which historical and contemporary events, groups and individuals are categorized. Each chapter ends with the potential empowering effect of these legitimizing strategies on the participants. After I have discussed my own findings, I will put them in a grander perspective of knowledge and power, by arguing that the way in which knowledge claims are legitimized point to certain broader forms of empowerment.

Much can and should be said about conspiracy theories and their merging with spiritual notions. The scope of this research is not nearly large enough to constitute the vastness and the diversity of the conspирitual worldview. On many levels, this research is just a piece of a gigantic puzzle of which many other pieces are yet to be revealed. Nevertheless, whatever this research

may reveal, my biggest hope is that it shows the importance of research to this particular field, and the relevance of increasing our understanding about this alternative form of knowledge.

2. Understanding conspirituality

This chapter deals with the theoretical understanding of the relationship between conspiracy culture and spirituality. Much research has been done on various forms of spirituality and the esoteric tradition from which it sprang, which made it a well-accepted form of religious belief and research topic in both contemporary Western society as well as academia. Conspiracy culture, however, is much less researched, and research done on conspiracy culture remains often critical towards this phenomenon. I believe there are two reasons for this. The first has to do with the visibility of conspiracy culture. Unlike spirituality and the New Age milieu, conspiracy culture is less visible in the everyday offline world. Apart from some demonstrations for the reopening of the investigation of the 9/11 attacks, there are, to my knowledge, no groups that actively promote regular gatherings to discuss the New World Order and only sporadically are leaflets being distributed questioning the existence of aliens and the Illuminati. This stands in sharp contrast to the countless groups and even festivals dealing with the whole range of spirituality and New Age ideas, from local Mindfulness, shamanic and meditation groups to the internationally known and celebrated Burning Man festival. Before the existence of the Internet, conspiracy culture remained largely a phenomenon of magazines and books, gaining considerable popularity among radical Christian groups and militia groups in the US, as well as the broader countercultural movement in the US and Europe in the 1960s. It was only after the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 that conspiracy thinking reached a broader, more mainstream audience. Peter Knight (2000) writes:

The assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963 has inspired more conspiracy thinking in America than any other event in the twentieth century. From official government enquiries to amateur websites, and from Hollywood films to literary novels, those seven seconds of mayhem in Dealey Plaza have been relentlessly examined for clues not just to a plot to kill the president, but to the hidden agenda of the last four decades of American history. (76)

Even though conspiracy culture remains largely invisible in the offline world, with the rising importance of the Internet in contemporary daily life, the culture has found its platform.

Countless of websites and discussion forums deal with the New World Order, the Illuminati, UFO cover-ups, the 2012 phenomenon, the death of Princess Diana, the 9/11 attacks and many more related topics. Often these websites leak their info onto mainstream news sites and news forums like the Dutch Nujij.nl. With the rise in academic interest in the Internet as social space, it seems reasonable to assume that conspiracy culture will be a respected research topic in near-future academia.

The second reason why conspiracy culture is only marginally and often critically researched is that the term “conspiracy theories” tends to be used pejoratively (Ward & Voas 2011, see also Knight 2000). Especially the earlier researchers and commentators on conspiracy culture were particularly negative towards this phenomenon, describing it as “paranoia” (Hofstadter, 1966), “primitive and quaint,” and “mental aberrations” (Wood 1982). These harsh critiques of conspiracy culture, on which I will elaborate further below, made serious sociological research on conspiracy culture unappealing. It was only after the enormous popularity of the *X-files* series in the mid-90s that conspiracy thinking became more accepted by mainstream culture and therefore more interesting as a research topic for academics (see for instance: Knight 2000, 24-32).

In order to gain a better understanding of the current debates on conspiracy culture I will begin this theoretical chapter with an investigation of the various viewpoints towards conspiracy culture, in which I will divide the literature into two “camps:” one that stands in the tradition of Hofstadter which sees conspiracy culture as a pathology and potentially dangerous to society, and one that tries to investigate conspiracy culture in a less moralizing way by trying to understand where it comes from, how it developed and what its characteristics are. After that I will discuss the most relevant literature on spirituality and the New Age milieu. Because there is so much research being done on this subject, I will mainly focus on gross characteristics instead of diving into an in depth debate on various strands of this religious phenomenon. Following this exposition I will dive into the relationship between conspiracy culture and spirituality, for which I will use the term “conspirituality,” a term coined by Ward and Voas (2011). I will elaborate on this relationship and look at different theories that have been coined to explain why conspirituality exists, most notably Colin Campbell’s (1972) cultic milieu and Barkun’s (2003) stigmatized knowledge and improvisational millennialism. As I will show, these perspectives

leave open some very important questions regarding the way in which participants in the milieu of conspirituality negotiate their boundaries while at the same time leave room for development of their perspective. To address these issues I will end this chapter with proposing a new perspective on conspirituality by employing ideas from the scholarly perspectives on esotericism.

2.1 Conspiracy theories: a literary overview

As stated above, in this section I will divide the academic literature on conspiracy culture into two camps: one that explicitly takes a critical standpoint towards conspiracy theories and reject them on the basis of their irrationality, and one that tries to see conspiracy theories in the broader context of contemporary society and try to understand them in this regard. The latter standpoint seems less moralizing towards conspiracy culture. I consider myself part of the latter group, because I see more potential in trying to understand the appeal to conspiracy theories and to put this into broader theoretical perspectives than to dismiss them as simple “mental aberrations.” In the words of Peter Knight: “Understanding why normal people believe weird things is harder but ultimately more fruitful than trying to disprove those weird beliefs by dogmatic insistence on the proper version of events” (Knight, 2000: 13). By the end of this section, I hope it becomes clear that this perspective is indeed more fruitful than the skeptical.

One of the first and most influential scholarly essays on conspiracy culture is the 1964 essay by the historian Richard Hofstadter “The Paranoid Style of American Politics.” In this essay Hofstadter characterizes conspiracy culture as an expression of right-winged paranoia towards politics that undermine the traditional American values (Hofstadter, 1964: 23). When talking about paranoia, Hofstadter reassures the reader that he uses the “clinical term” of paranoia for the “non-clinical” belief in conspiracy theories. He writes:

When I speak of the paranoid style, [...] it is, above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself. Webster defines paranoia, the clinical entity, as a chronic mental disorder characterized by systematic delusions of persecution and of one’s own greatness. In the paranoid style, as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy. But there is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: [...] the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the

spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others (Ibid.: 4)

Daniel Pipes' *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From*, published in 1997 and Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M Post's *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* published in the same year explain conspiracy culture in the same fashion as Hofstadter. Although both works distinguish between clinical paranoia and political paranoia, the authors of both books seem to have trouble with the distinction between the political and the personal. Pipes, for instance, discussing the use of the conspiracy narrative in the "thrill-seeking" popular culture, concludes his first chapter with the words: "Unconstrained, conspiracism leads to doubts about everything, bringing life itself under suspicion. [...] Thus does thrill-seeking twist itself into absolute nihilism" (Pipes 1997). For Pipes, dealing with conspiracy theories ultimately leads to questions about ones existence, and therefore to a nihilistic look at the world. In an even stronger fashion, Robins and Post discuss the belief in conspiracy theories from a psychoanalytic perspective, thus blurring the distinction between personal and political paranoia even more. By discussing significant proponents of the twentieth century, like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Idi Amin as well as some significant American figures such as Nixon, McCarthy and Malcolm X, they come to the conclusion that every one of them suffered from a form of paranoia, be it "the quintessential political disease" or "paranoid personality disorder." According to their views, one of the principal psychological mechanisms involved is projection. Paranoids cannot come to terms with their own badness, therefore they project this repression onto an imaginary enemy. "Violently angry and afraid of their own aggression, paranoids defend against their rage by viewing themselves as the victims of persecutors. In effect, the paranoid's impulse to persecute and tyrannize others is denied and projected on to phantom enemies who then become imaginary persecutors who must be hunted down and either subjugated or destroyed" (Webster, 1998).

For Robins and Post, believing in conspiracy theories has a clear psycho-pathological origin. This explanation, however, has serious implications for the way in which conspiracy theorists can be judged. Richard Webster explains: "The principal objection to this approach is that if denial and projection are indeed pathological defense mechanisms, then these signs of 'madness' are exhibited by a great many people whom most would consider eminently sane"

(Ibid.). Furthermore, defining belief in conspiracy theories as a psycho-pathology does not explain why a great deal of people in contemporary society is more or less involved in a form of conspiracy thinking. On the contrary, it sets them apart from the rest of society (whoever that might be) by not simply stating that they are misguided, but claiming that they suffer from a mental disease and are to be pitied and in need for help. In short, explaining conspiracy theorists away by condemning them as paranoid will not lead to an understanding of a phenomenon that becomes more widespread and sophisticated in popular culture. Instead, Knight argues that

[f]ar from being a projection onto the outside world of repressed inner conflicts, then, much conspiracy culture might instead be understood as an attempt to make sense, albeit in a distorted fashion, of the deeper conflicts which reside not in the psyche but in society. It might be sometimes more useful to look for inner demons in the Pentagon than in people's minds.' (Knight, 2000: 18)

If conspiracy culture can be seen as an attempt to make sense of the deeper conflicts in society, as Knight suggests, would it be more fruitful to look at the characteristics of modern society and see to what extent they give rise to conspiracy thinking? In his richly detailed analysis of conspiracy culture in modern society, Knight bends over backwards to show that the conspiracy theorist's credo that "everything is connected" is not so different from other discourses that adopt the same principle, such as ecology, epidemiology, risk theory, complexity theory, theories of globalization and "even poststructuralist literary theories about intertextuality" (Ibid.: 205). Knight asks the question:

Is the conspiracy theorist's insistence on a hidden cause and connection behind seemingly random events a sign of a narrow-minded inability to understand the challenges of these new paradigms to traditional notions of agency and causality? Or is the conspiracy theorist's paranoia [...] the 'leading edge' of a discovery that seems to be changing the way we think about the world, from ecology to economics?' (Ibid.: 205)

Knight argues that assumption of conspiracy theories that "everything is connected" is also to be found in contemporary theories that deal with complex systems and globalization, but also in

popular culture like *The X-files* and the bestselling novels by Don DeLillo. The central idea of chaos and complexity theory is that “the more elements that are connected into a system – be it an eco system or a computer system – the more likely that it will begin to organize itself into new and unexpected patterns of complex behavior” (213). Examples in nature of these systems are beehives, ant nests, and bird flocks, but theorists have argued that the global economic system and the Internet behave according to the same rules. Two features of these systems are that the normal chain of cause and effect are no longer at work, and they are to a great extent uncontrollable. And yet, they “act *as if* there were a plotting intelligence behind [them]” (215). This is what inspires conspiracy theorists to ask the skeptic: “if there isn’t a conspiracy, then how do you explain why it looks as of there is one?” Even if conspiracy theories are flawed, nonconspiratorial accounts are equally inadequate (216).

Popular culture plays with this notion of seemingly centralized power. In his discussion on *The X-files*, Knight argues that in the beginning “*The X-files* promises to reveal a traditional humanist conspiracy of top-down control,” but as the series continue “the more it seems to paint a Foucauldian portrait of decentered power which is everywhere in the system but in no particular location. [...] The ultimate source of power is never revealed” (220-1). In a similar fashion, Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld* plays with the change of the “secure paranoia” during the Cold War, in which people knew who the enemy was, into “insecure paranoia” in which the enemy is unclear and often to be found in our very own society. Often, characters in the novel express a “nostalgic yearning, which is less for the constrictions of the containment culture of the 1950s than for the more manageable certainties of Cold War anxiety. In comparison with the insecure paranoia that DeLillo presents as an effect of the Kennedy assassination’s effect, the secure paranoia of the Cold War years takes on a comforting solidity” (228-9). Without going into detail about this insecure paranoia, it seems clear from Knight’s argument that both popular culture and new theories about contemporary society fuel feelings of paranoia and therefore the creation of conspiracy theories.

Knight ultimately sketches a model of contemporary society in which “for many more people in the mainstream the possibility of conspiracy thinking is always hovering in the background, more a process of endless self-ironizing suspicion than a fixed, ideological product” (244). As insightful as Knight’s account on conspiracy culture may be, he tends to rely to heavily

on cultural artifacts such as book and movies. Although his choice of sources seems fair: DeLillo as a best-selling author and *The X-files* as one of the most popular series of the 90s, since the coming of the Internet the amount of sources infinitely multiplied. Often, when looking at the conspiracy theories offered on the Internet, one finds a more “fixed” look at certain conspiracy theories than Knight wants us to believe. Journalist Jonathan Kay, for instance, in his recently published book *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America’s Growing Conspiracist Underground* (2011) uncovered the main talking points by investigating the 9/11 Truth Movement’s websites. He shows that there seems to be a coherent narrative to which the main body of the 9/11 Truth Movement complies: among the nine mentioned talking points are: 1) “9/11 was a secret plot led by Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz as an excuse to launch imperial wars of conquest and seize the world’s dwindling oil and natural gas supplies;” 2) “NORAD was intentionally made to ‘stand dow’ on 9/11 so that the hijacked planes could reach their destinations;” and 3) “Preplanted bombs brought down the World Trade Center buildings after they’d been hit by aircraft” (7). This tendency towards some sort of coherence in the conspiracy narrative of 9/11 shows that in the course of time conspiracy theories indeed can take the form of ideological products. Although I agree with Knight that conspiracy culture sets the mood in which concrete conspiracy theories can form and gain their momentum, judging from the tendency that conspiracy narratives become more coherent and fixed this leaves less room for the fluidity of these narratives than Knight presupposes.

Another scholar who looked at the characteristics of contemporary society which give rise to conspiracy thinking is the Dutch sociologist Stef Aupers. In his article “‘Trust no one.’ Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture’ (2012) Aupers’ main goal is to show that conspiracy theories are not the anti-thesis of modernity. “Quite the contrary”, Aupers argues, “it is a radical and generalized manifestation of distrust that is deeply embedded in the cultural logic of modernity and is, ultimately, produced by ongoing processes of modernization in contemporary society” (23). Aupers distinguishes between three forms of insecurity people in contemporary modern societies deal with: 1) Epistemological insecurity deals with the insecurity about what is true and how we can come to truth, a question which is inherent in science. But when the status of hard scientific facts erodes due to the revelation of inconsistencies in scientific findings, Aupers argues, people may look for alternative explanations since the “will to truth” is

still prevalent in modern societies. 2) Ontological insecurity emerges when it becomes unclear how certain systems and institutions in society work. When systems and institutions become institutionalized they operate according to their own rational and laws, and for people outside of these systems it seems like they have no control over them. From this, the question “who *is* in control” is a natural reaction and can quickly follow by the question “if I’m not in control, how can I be sure that I’m not controlled?” to “How can I be sure that everything I know is true?” Conspiracy theories operate as “‘cognitive maps’ to represent systems that have become way too complex to represent” (29). 3) Existential insecurity is part of modern society ever since the decline of organized religion, something that Weber described as “disenchantment of the world.” In a disenchanted world, science can only describe what the world looks like, but cannot add meaning to these descriptions. This leads to an existential insecurity that people try to overcome by searching for meaning elsewhere. For conspiracy theorists, Aupers argues, meaning is applied to the mysterious forces of modern society: “invisible, yet immensely powerful forces are operative *behind* the cultural screens, *underneath* and *beyond* the empirical surface of modern life. Such a worldview generates meaning; it reverses the Weberian ‘disenchantment of the world’ since the (cultural) world is not ‘as it is’ – “processes” do *not* “simply happen” but *do* “signify” *something*” (30, emphases in original). These three forms of insecurity are brought forth by modern society, and “have proven to be formative in the cultural production of contemporary conspiracy culture” (31). This leads Aupers to conclude that “conspiracy culture is above all about the construction of ultimate meaning that is resistant to the meaning-eroding forces of modernity” (32).

Aupers’ analysis of conspiracy culture in contemporary society is a laudable attempt to make way for a disinterested empirical study of conspiracy culture as a phenomenon in its own right. As he and Knight show, the forces of contemporary society are such that finding meaning in conspiracy theories seems to be a reasonable and fruitful attempt. As insightful both accounts may be, however, they remain largely theoretical. Actual empirical studies remain scarce, and in order to understand conspiracy culture, there is much need for quantitative and qualitative studies based on data from conspiracy culture itself. One of the first studies that is entirely based on accounts from this culture is Barkun’s *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2003). Based on literature from the conspiracy culture itself, Barkun

shows his reader and overview of the major conspiracy theories and their primary advocates. To his merit, Barkun does not limit himself to “worldly” conspiracy theories such as theories about the Illuminati, the Freemasons or government organizations, but incorporates UFO conspiracy theories and religious millennialism. Introducing the concept of “improvisational millennialism,” which is “distinctive for its independence from any single ideological tradition” (18), and which I will discuss in detail below, Barkun argues that

conspiracism [...] developed over the last decade of the twentieth century into the connective tissue binding together a heterogeneous assortment of beliefs and ideas. They concern an alleged shadow government, the secret circles of religious and fraternal organizations, a hidden world beneath our feet, and the machinations of alien intelligence. The elements can be arranged in innumerable permutations. Because all that is visible is deception, one permutation may seem as likely as any other. All claim empirical truth, but none trusts conventional canons of evidence. (184)

Besides introducing a new concept which may be useful to characterize the fluidity of conspiracy culture, Barkun also identifies common principles of the conspiracy worldview, namely 1) nothing happens by accident; 2) nothing is as it seems; and 3) everything is connected (3-4). Furthermore, he describes three types of conspiracy theories: 1) *event conspiracies* that deals with conspiracy theories around specific events like the Kennedy assassination; 2) *systemic conspiracies* that deals with theories about secret organizations that try to take of a country or even the whole world, like the Illuminati; and 3) *superconspiracies* that assumes that all the smaller event- and systemic conspiracies are linked together into one gigantic conspiracy. Barkun identifies David Icke as someone who deals with these superconspiracies (6). As self-evident as these distinctions may be to anyone dealing with conspiracy culture in one way or another, Barkun’s study shows that much can be gained by taking conspiracy culture seriously as a culture in its own right and basing research on this phenomenon on literature that actually influences and in a way defines conspiracy culture. It is also because of the fact that Barkun does not limit himself to secular or political conspiracy theories but extends his research towards UFO-theories and spirituality that he is able to introduce the fluidity of ideas from these different segments.

Since participants of conspiracy culture use the Internet as their primary medium to share ideas, it gives rise to the possibility of doing web ethnography and thus gain new insights into how conspiracy culture actually works. In a recent article by Charlotte Ward and David Voas titled “The Emergence of Conspirituality,” which will be discussed in more detail below, the authors base their analysis on “three years of participant observation, both online and at lectures and conferences.” Furthermore, “web sites were continuously tracked and developments noted. Hyperlinks connecting web sites permit a type of snowball sampling, supplemented by web searches to identify sites that are not well connected with others dealing with related topics” (Ward & Voas 2011, 104). This kind of qualitative research would gain considerable insights into the kitchen of conspiracy culture, and with the growing interest and development in online qualitative research methods I am sure that research on conspiracy culture will increase and that this widespread phenomenon gets the attention and recognition it deserves.

I have spend a considerable amount of energy to explain why it is more useful to treat conspiracy culture as a culture in its own right, without condemning it as being irrational or pathological. I can only hope this argument resonates in the academic milieu and that it leads towards a more sophisticated debate on what conspiracy culture is and how it can provide meaning in a society that seems to become more complex by the day. In the next section, I will investigate the more established research on New Age spirituality.

2.2 *New Age spirituality*

Contrary to conspiracy theories, academic research on New Age spirituality is well established. For present purpose, I will not get into current debates concerning New Age spirituality. Instead, I will discuss some common characteristics of New Age spirituality.¹⁸ Olav Hammer distinguishes ten shared implicit assumptions of contemporary New Age spirituality:

1. The entire cosmos is not so much a vast set of material objects as a great, interconnected web of meaning.
2. The underlying ‘stuff’ of the cosmos is therefore not matter but something intangible, perhaps identifiable as consciousness or energy.
3. We humans contain a spark of this energy or consciousness within us, a resource that we can tap into in order to change reality and

¹⁸ For the present purpose I will not discuss the evolution of the New Age Movement. Excellent elaborations of this evolution can be found in Hanegraaff’s entry on New Age in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005) and Lucas’ respective entry in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America* (2010).

create our own world. 4. The human being is thus not only a material body, but also comprises a mind and a spiritual element. When ill, one needs to address all of those elements rather than merely treat isolated physical symptoms. 5. Each of us is embarked on a journey of spiritual development, a development that will not stop at the death of the physical body but will continue over many lives. 6. There are better ways to get to understand the world we live in and our own place in it than via the intellect. Perhaps we can gain spiritual insight in flashes of intuition. Perhaps there are prophetic states in which we can access knowledge from various highly developed beings, or from a divine part of our selves. A variety of techniques such as astrology or the tarot can also have this function. 7. Similar insights into the workings of the cosmos and into our own selves were granted to a number of ancient cultures, ranging from Egypt and India to the native Americas. 8. Such insights are confirmed by the most recent developments of Western science, especially quantum mechanics. 9. Spirituality is not a matter of accepting doctrines formulated by others, but rather a highly individual quest, that can (and perhaps should) be based primarily on personal experience. 10. We can either as individuals or collectively change the world into a better place by adopting such a spiritual vision. (Hammer 2006, 1313-4)

From these basic assumptions it is possible to find three common characteristics of New Age spirituality, namely *holism*, *esotericism* and *individualism*.

When we look at the assumptions above, especially 1 through 4, it appears that these assumptions talk about a unifying principle. Whether this principle is called “consciousness” or “energy,” it assumes an holistic worldview. As Hanegraaff argues, holism in New Age does not refer to a specific, circumscribed worldview, but it rather an oppositional term against dualistic and reductionistic worldviews of the old culture which New Age seeks to replace. Holism seeks to replace the dualistic ideas like the separation between Creator and creation, the separation of matter and spirit and the division of humans and nature, and reductionistic ideas like the reduction of spirit to matter and the tendency to treat organic wholes as mechanisms that can be reduced to their smaller components and then explained in terms of the latter (Hanegraaff 1996, 119). Two forms of holistic thinking exist: 1. All manifestations can be reduced to one “ultimate source,” which is often perceived as God (120). All living things contain a spark of energy or consciousness from the ultimate source that not only connects us to this source but also connects us to all other living things. 2. Everything in the world is interrelated, which denies the presence of an ultimate source but instead argues that everything is connected with everything else

without a focal point or something that has a privileged status (128). Holism is a worldview that over the years influenced all kinds of other perspectives outside of the New Age movement, such as ecological awareness, the idea of “global networking” and Holistic Health, with its attention to the healing of body *and* mind, an idea which becomes more and more adopted by modern medicine (Baer, 2003).

The second characteristic of New Age spirituality is the focus on esoteric knowledge. As I will show below, the concept of esotericism is central to my understanding of the relationship between conspiracy theories and spirituality. I will therefore discuss this concept in further detail in paragraph 2.4. Lest to say that esotericism deals with hidden knowledge that can give deeper insights into reality and gives, as von Stuckrad argues, a certain status to the initiated (von Stuckrad 2010). Under influence of the forces of modernity, esotericism became thoroughly secularized, which means that “all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of Esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world” (Hanegraaff 1996, 422). This can be seen, for instance, by the way in which traditional esoteric knowledge, (i.e. Gnosticism, Kabala, various Eastern religious traditions and the like) fused with modern secular knowledge (e.g. quantum physics and psychology, see Hammer 2001, most notably 236-303). This does not mean that there is not a spiritual side to it, but that belief in dogmatic metaphysical claims about gods or spirits became less important than the practical use of the spiritual implications in daily, secular life (Hanegraaff 2005, 6497-8).

Finally, there appears to be a very strong sense of individualism and self-responsibility in New Age spirituality. As we can see above at point 9, participants are invited to go on an individual spiritual quest that should be based primary on own experiences. This is what Paul Heelas calls “Self-spirituality” (Heelas 1996). The basic premises of Self-spirituality are that “Everyone is God. Everyone” (Shirley MacLaine, cited in Heelas 1996, 2), which means that the individual has the power in her- or himself to realise her or his infinite potential, and that it is up to the individual to make contact with the spirituality that lies within every person. New Age spirituality is therefore strictly focused on the individual and her or his personal development, and there is no authoritative dogma or idea that the New Ager has to submit to, other than her or his own individual experiences and preferences. The spiritual market place hosts countless of

concepts, practises and ideas from all over the world, and throughout the entirety of known history (Hanegraaff 2005). Native American practices, Ancient Egyptian ideas, Eastern philosophies and Polynesian rituals can be adopted by the New Ager and fit into a coherent worldview. Of course, as Hammer notes, “these are lifted out of their original contexts and are radically reinterpreted in order to fit the pre-existing overall pattern and specific preoccupations of the New Age” (Hammer 2006, 1314). In this way, the “palette of discourses and practices” can be “used as a toolkit from which each individual New Ager can pick and choose.” And this practice is encouraged by the “modern assumption that our personal opinions and experiences are more important than the suggestions of any authority” (1314).

From the discussion above it can be concluded that although New Age is a very diffuse phenomenon where all kinds of ideas are merged and reinterpreted, common characteristics of New Age ideas can be identified, as well as common features of their belief-system. At first sight, the positive, self-fulfilling New Age spirituality may seem at odds with the negative, cynical attitude of conspiracy theories. But as I will show in the next section, conspiracy theories and New Age spirituality seem to have common characteristics that make the unlikely wedding between these two worldviews possible.

2.3 Conspirituality

As explained in the introduction I will use Ward and Voas’ term “conspirituality” to describe the merging of conspiracy theories and spirituality. Ward and Voas describe conspiracy theories as ‘male-dominated, often conservative, generally pessimistic, and typically concerned with current affairs’ (Ward & Voas 2011, 104). Spirituality, on the other hand, is “predominantly female, liberal, self-consciously optimistic, and largely focused on the self and personal relationships” (104). Although seemingly surprised at finding a relationship between these apparently very different worldviews, Ward and Voas identify two core convictions of the politico-spiritual philosophy of conspirituality: 1) “a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order;” and 2) “Humanity is undergoing a ‘paradigm shift’ in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened ‘new paradigm’ worldview” (104). By examining the emergence of conspirituality throughout the twentieth century, Ward and Voas are able to identify three key themes in conspirituality (112-3):

- 1) Change, or transformation, by becoming aware of the shadow government and its goal to keep people from realising the truth, namely that “we are infinitely powerful spiritual beings that are all connected.” There is a strong focus on personal responsibility, which shines through the frequently quoted credo from Mahatma Ghandi: “becoming the change you wish to see in the world.” The inner world must change before the outer world can. Independent thought and claiming self-responsibility by resisting the Elite’s mind control is the way to become truly free.
- 2) Unification by social network sites to unify the participants in the “non-violent revolution,” but also by incorporating the New Age concept of “Oneness” and joining the “different dots to see the truth.” Unification through the idea of “everything is connected.”
- 3) Revealing truth by support whistle-blowers and exposition of so called suppressed knowledge.

Ward and Voas go on explaining why conspirituality has such an appeal in contemporary society. Contemporary society is, they argue, inhabited by so called “Cultural Creatives,” people who identify with two or more themes of new social movements (Ray & Anderson 2001). It could be so that conspiracy theories and spirituality are appealing to these Cultural Creatives. Furthermore, conspirituality is very flexible. It incorporate a wide range of ideas and participants are free to reject, accept and adapt information according to their convictions. Finally, the events of 9/11 greatly increased the interest in conspiracy theories, since many believe it was an “inside job.” Since most of these conspiracy theories are to be found on the Internet, where also many spiritual ideas dwell, it comes at no surprise that people who may be interested in a specific conspiracy theory come across other ideas as well.

With their article Ward and Voas made explicit the relationship between conspiracy theories and spirituality. This relationship, however, has already been noted by some scholars earlier, and put into a grander perspective of countercultural movements and fringe knowledge. In what follows, I will deal with some of the major available theories that explicitly or implicitly deal with this relationship. I will start this elaboration with Colin Campbell’s 1972 essay “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization” in which he introduces the concept of the *cultic milieu*. After that I will use two concepts coined by Michael Barkun in his book *A Culture of*

Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America, published in 2003. The concepts under investigation are *stigmatized knowledge* and *improvisational millennialism*. These concepts provide descriptions of a field where the merging of conspiracy theories and spirituality becomes possible. But as I will show, questions remain unanswered with regard to the understanding of how this merging is actually being done. To overcome these shortcomings I will introduce a new perspective on conspиритuality, namely one that stems from scholarly research on esotericism.

2.3.1 *Cultic milieu*

Already in 1972 Colin Campbell noticed that the sociological study of cults relies too heavily on theories of sectarianism. By that he means that studies of cultic phenomena “accumulate case studies prior to the establishment of suitable typologies and the generation of hypotheses concerning origin, maintenance, and extinction of the various types” (Campbell 1972, 120). Since cults tend to have undefined boundaries, fluctuating belief systems and are very loosely organized, they present a sharp contrast with sects, which often have the exact opposite characteristics. Campbell therefore provides an alternative approach toward the cultic phenomenon:

Given that cultic groups have a tendency to be ephemeral and highly unstable, it is a fact that new ones are being born just as fast as old ones die. There is a continual process of cult formation and collapse which parallels the high turnover of membership at the individual level. Clearly, therefore, cults must exist within a milieu which, of not conducive to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general. Such a generally supportive cultic milieu is continually giving birth to new cults, absorbing the debris of the dead ones and creating new generations of cult-prone individuals to maintain the high levels of membership turnover. Thus, whereas cults are by definition a largely transitory phenomenon, the cultic milieu is, by contrast, a constant feature of society. It could therefore prove more viable and illuminating to take the cultic milieu and not the individual cult as the focus of sociological concern. (121)

Despite the variations of worldviews within the cultic milieu, Campbell argues that it operates as a single entity. He identifies three sources for this unity. 1. The different worldviews within the

cultic milieu share a common position as being devious in relation to dominant cultural orthodoxies. Despite their differences they rarely engage in criticism towards each other but “have a common cause in attacking orthodoxy and defending individual liberty of belief and practice” (121). 2. The way in which people within the cultic milieu communicate (e.g. magazines, periodicals, lectures) makes a mixture of different worldviews possible. Particular groups within the cultic milieu often refer to other groups by means of book-reviews or advertisements which make it possible for individuals to move rapidly through the entire spectrum of the milieu. 3. Within the cultic milieu there is a “common ideology of seekership which both arises from and in turn reinforces the consciousness of deviant status, the receptive and syncretistic orientation and the interpenetrative communication structure” (122). The belief that everyone has their own spiritual quest and that there are multiple ways to find enlightenment creates a spiritual market where individuals can pick and choose at will, creating diversity but also unity, since everyone within the cultic milieu accepts this ideology of seekership.

Campbell focuses exclusively on religious groups, but his theory of the cultic milieu also provides a good background to understand the emergence of the relationship between conspiracy theories and New Age spirituality. Within the theory of the cultic milieu, it can be argued that because of the flexible nature of the cultic milieu and the easy spreading of information from different worldviews throughout the milieu, as well as the ideology of seekership, underground ideas like conspiracy theories and New Age spirituality can easily become mixed into a new worldview of conspirituality. But as well as this perspective may understand the emergence of conspirituality, two problems need to be addressed. First of all, the concept of the cultic milieu describes a field of alternative views and pays attention to common characteristics of these views in order to understand why cults as institutions keep emerging and disappearing and why different worldviews seem so easily combined. However, it does not address the actual “act of combining,” or the process of negotiation of different worldviews. The interesting aspect of the merging of conspiracy theories with spirituality is not just the fact that they merge, but how it is done. How do people within the cultic milieu negotiate their different worldviews into a new combination of seemingly incompatible features? The concept of the cultic milieu, as useful as it may be to describe an aspect of society, fails to take into account the process of negotiation. Not just between worldviews *within* the cultic milieu, but also adaptation to and adoption of aspects

of the dominant discourse. In other words, a focus on the way in which different discourses are negotiated and changing would greatly improve the understanding of the structure of the cultic milieu.

Gardell (2002) provides an excellent example of the way in which two opposing groups, black and white separatists, come together over the issue of racial separation and form an alliance against a common enemy, the white liberals. He argues convincingly that alternative worldviews in the cultic milieu do not just come together because they happen to be traveling within the same milieu, but that there is a process of negotiation both between different worldviews within the cultic milieu and between the cultic milieu and the orthodoxies. Secondly, even though Campbell rightly emphasizes the relationship between the cultic milieu and the dominant culture, it is difficult to see how concepts from within the cultic milieu become more accepted by mainstream culture. In contemporary society it seems accepted, for instance, to practice Reiki, or do acupuncture sessions, or yoga, i.e. all kinds of practices that have their origin in the cultic milieu but became more and more accepted by mainstream culture. From the perspective of the cultic milieu it remains unclear how this is possible, since the alternative ideas tends to shun mainstream culture. Adopting the cultic milieu as the primary concept of understanding cannot satisfyingly solve these problems.

2.3.2 *Stigmatized knowledge claims*

Michael Barkun (2003) provides another possible understanding of the merging of conspiracy theories and spirituality. In *A Culture of Conspiracy* Barkun argues that Campbell's essay focuses too strongly on religious movements, which limits the view on the mixture of religious and non-religious ideas. Indeed, in Campbell we may find a connection between non-religious and religious ideas, but they are described from the viewpoint of the religious. Thus, Barkun suggests that we need to take a broader view on "outsider ideas" to see how it is possible for them to merge (Barkun 2003, 26-7). He does that by introducing the idea of *stigmatized knowledge claims*. By stigmatized knowledge Barkun means "claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error – universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like" (26-7). Meant as an addition to the concept of the cultic milieu and one of the primary sources of improvisational millennialism, a term also introduced by Barkun and which I

will discuss further below, Barkun identifies five varieties of stigmatized knowledge claims: 1) knowledge that became *forgotten* over time, such as ancient wisdom possessed by the inhabitants of Atlantis; 2) knowledge that became *superseded* because they were proved to be false, such as alchemy; 3) knowledge that is *ignored* because of their low prestige, such as folk-medicine; 4) knowledge that is *rejected* from the outset, such as UFO abductions; and 5) knowledge that is claimed to be *suppressed* by the authorities because of the fear of the public opinion if that knowledge came out in the open, such as the alien origins of UFOs or suppressed cancer cures (27).

Suppressed knowledge holds a special place in conspiracy theories since on the one hand conspiracy theories themselves are believed to be knowledge deliberately suppressed to keep the truth from being known, and on the other hand it functions as an explanation why all forms of stigmatized knowledge are being suppressed: the conspirators have used their powers to keep the truth hidden. Conspiracy theories therefore “function both as a part of the suppressed knowledge as a basis for stigmatization” (27). This double function of conspiracy theories creates a loophole in conspiracy thinking that is hard to escape from. Besides that, most of the stigmatized knowledge claims rely heavily on asserted empirical foundations: “those who make the claims explicitly or by implication challenge others to test their facts against evidence” (28). This is especially so in the realm of conspiracy theories (more then, for instance, knowledge claims that are being channelled from spiritual entities through human intermediaries). Their own “version of empiricism” has, according to Barkun, two peculiar characteristics: firstly, stigmatization is in itself evidence of truth. Instead of stigmatization problematizing the truth claim, it provides credibility, because it implies that some malign force is trying to withhold the truth. This is the reason why beliefs in the cultic milieu circulate freely and can be adopted and disposed of as will: “The belief must be true *because* it is stigmatized” (28). Secondly, the literature of stigmatized knowledge greatly mimics mainstream scholarship, usually by incorporation of many references, citations and a large bibliographical apparatus. This gives the knowledge claim an aura of validation.

Barkun's account of stigmatized knowledge seems a useful one. Indeed, looking at the many conspiracy websites it often seems as if they are able to incorporate any kind of stigmatized knowledge claim. Of course, David Icke is notorious for creating a superconspiracy

theory in which all kinds of stigmatized knowledge claims are incorporated into one big scheme against humanity. Judging from the topics on his website, it seems that every kind of stigmatized knowledge is welcome in the world of the cultic milieu. There are, however, a few questions that remain unanswered by the idea of stigmatized knowledge claims. The first one has to do with its assumptions: Barkun assumes that because a knowledge claim is stigmatized, it can easily merge with other stigmatized knowledge claims because the very fact of it being stigmatized provides a basis for that mixture. This leads to the conclusion that anything goes, as long as it is stigmatized. Surely, a lot of connections have been made between different forms of stigmatized knowledge, such as occult Nazism (Kaplan 2002), right winged environmentalism (Löow 2002) and religio-political movements (Kürti 2002). At the same time, however, it is hard to find evidence of a mixture between Holocaust-revivalists and crypto-zoologists, or anti-cult movements and shamanism. Surely these mixtures could happen, but not *just because* they both rely on stigmatized knowledge. As we saw with the discussion on the cultic milieu, there are more motivations and mechanisms at work in the mixture of different forms of knowledge than just the fact that they are stigmatized.

The second problem is coined by Barkun himself, but ignored in its solution. After discussing the way in which conspiracy theories validate their claims, Barkun notes the apparent paradoxical fact that “conspiracy theories insist on being judged by the very same canons of proof that are used in the world they despise and distrust, the world of academia and the intelligentsia. For all its claims to populism, conspiracy theory yearns to be admitted to the precincts where it imagines the conspirators themselves dwell” (Barkun 2003, 29). But how can it be that conspiracy theorists reject mainstream knowledge of the conspirators but still try to find acknowledgement of their stigmatized knowledge claims by that same group? Here we encounter a defect in the understanding of the relationship between conspiracy theories and spirituality by means of stigmatized knowledge claims: even though there is the assumed “third party” of mainstream knowledge that defines stigmatized knowledge, the idea of stigmatized knowledge claims as Barkun propagates ignores the possibility that stigmatized knowledge is not just a common ground for alternative versions of reality to mix but is also in constant debate with mainstream forms of knowledge. By adopting the methods and the critical attitude of mainstream science, for instance, conspiracy theorists and others moving in the milieu of alternative ideas

actively try to make their ideas more accepted by the mainstream audience. This would also explain why conspiracy theorists are not *just* sceptical towards mainstream media, but actively *use* media coverage of certain events as evidence for their theories. In this respect, stigmatized knowledge may form a common ground for different ideas to merge, but not without some sort of active relationship with mainstream knowledge.

2.3.3 *Improvisational millennialism*

As mentioned above, stigmatized knowledge claims are the main source of what Barkun calls *improvisational millennialism*. Although Barkun does not give a clear definition of improvisational millennialism, he describes it as being “by definition an act of bricolage, wherein disparate elements are drawn together in new combinations. An improvisational millenarian belief system might therefore draw simultaneously on Eastern and Western religion, New Age ideas and esotericism, and radical politics, without any sense that the resulting *mélange* contains incompatible elements” (Barkun 2003, 11). Traditionally, millennialist ideas are rooted in either religion or political ideologies. Christianity, for instance, has a very strong idea about the end of time, in which the saved will “reign with Christ a thousand years” until the Last Judgement (Rev. 20:4). Secular, often politically motivated, millennialism can be found among Nazism and Marxism and various forms of nationalism, all of which promise an heaven on earth for a particular group. Like their religious counterparts, secular millennialist ideologies also have a very strong sense of good and evil, something which became evident during the Cold War, in which the forces of light (“the free world”) battled against the forces of darkness (“the evil empire”), with the prospect of nuclear destruction ahead. With the end of the Cold War secular millennialist ideas became less visible, although Barkun still identifies them in small, ethnic nationalist groups in the Balkan and South Asia, racist movements in Europe and antiglobalization rhetoric (16-8).

Two common denominators of the traditional millenarian ideas is that each one’s “adherents consciously place it within a well-defined tradition [...] and each is centered on a body of canonical literature or teaching” (10). By contrast, improvisational millennialism lacks both of these denominators. It can freely adopt millennialist and non-millennialist ideas from a whole spectrum of ideas and incorporate it into a more or less coherent but ever-changing worldview. Two conditions have to be present in order for improvisational millennialism to

thrive: the first is that there has to be a wide range of potential material easily accessible. The second is that the existing authority structure has to be sufficiently weakened so that new combination of ideas can be formed and exist (39). It is obvious that with the rise of new technologies, most importantly the Internet, and the decreasing status of authorities such as we already have seen with the earlier discussion of the article by Stef Aupers (2012), contemporary society meets the necessary conditions for improvisational millennialism. And indeed, in discussing conspiracy gurus like Alex Jones, David Icke and Jim Keith, it becomes clear that these people tend to use information from all kinds of segments, neatly weave them into all-encompassing conspiracy theories with strong millennial ideas. Of course, as Barkun notes, not all conspiracy theorists have millennial expectations, neither is it a prerequisite for millennialism to have a very strong and elaborated idea about conspiracy theories. However, they often go together, since “the choice is between the despair of the virtuous weak, condemned to fighting rearguard actions that can do little more than delay the conspiracy’s victory, and the hope of the millennialist who may appear weak at the moment but is confident of ultimate triumph” (183). In other words, the bleak perspective of the conspiracy theorist begs for a millennial relief.

The question is now to what extent the concept of improvisational millennialism is adequate to understand the emergence of conspirituality. On first sight this seems to be the case. The sceptical, negative worldview of the conspiracy theorist seems very receptive for the positive worldview of New Age spirituality. As we have seen above, one of the key themes of conspirituality is “change” or “transformation,” which happens when people are “awakening to the truth,” be it the uncovering of the conspiracy *and* realizing the spiritual solution. By being able to use the whole range of ideas on the spiritual marketplace it comes at no surprise that the spiritual solution covers a whole range of ideas, from individual spiritual ascension to salvation by “higher beings” (i.e. aliens). Improvisational millennialism seems indeed an adequate way to describe this diverse phenomenon.

There is, however, a problem that we already discussed when we discussed the cultic milieu, and that is that improvisational millennialism assumes that “anything goes,” or “anything can go.” If people can choose from the whole range of stigmatized knowledge to create their own millennial story, this implies that any kind of story can be meaningful. The question is not whether this is theoretically possible, but whether this is actually happening. When we would

map the existing millennial ideas that rely to a certain extent on conspiracy theories, one would probably find that the range of ideas is limited, and that what kind of ideas are accepted and what kinds are rejected is negotiated by the conspiracy theorists themselves. The problem that the concept of improvisational millennialism does not address is the conditions of the field of conspiracy theories and spirituality that makes certain forms of millennialism accepted and others rejected. The concept of improvisational millennialism actively ignores the debate within the field about which ideas are being incorporated and which ideas discarded.

As we have seen, the concepts of the *cultic milieu*, *stigmatized knowledge* and *improvisational millennialism* all pay attention to the fluidity of different ideas within the diverse milieu of alternative ideas. They are apt to acknowledge the diverse combinations of ideas, but seem to turn a blind eye to the actual formation of these ideas and their relationship to the dominant discourse. In order to be able to appreciate the fluidity of conspiracy theories and spirituality without losing sight of the discursive side of conspirituality I will now turn to an alternative understanding of the relationship between conspiracy theories and spirituality: one that is rooted in the a discursive understanding of esotericism.

2.4 Understanding conspirituality through the discourse of the esoteric

The term “esoteric” or “esotericism” is problematic in the sense that there is no agreement on the meaning of the word. Although lexically “esoteric” refers to something “inside” or “within,” the amount of content about what is inside of what is small. As we have seen above, esoteric knowledge is a vital part of New Age spirituality, but in order to understand and appreciate esotericism in a broader perspective, it is necessary to discuss the various scholarly perceptions of the concept in academic literature.

In dealing with the subject, esotericism is usually perceived as an inherently religious phenomenon. Edward Tiryakian for instance explains in an article published in *American Journal of Sociology* in 1972 that esotericism can be understood as a “religiophilosophic belief system that refers to the more comprehensive cognitive mappings of nature and the cosmos, the epistemological and ontological reflections of ultimate reality, which mappings constitute a stock of knowledge that provides the ground for occult procedures” (Tiryakian 1972, 499). He furthermore recognizes that this type of knowledge explicitly deals with the *secret* knowledge of the reality of things, and that its recipients be demonstrated worthy of receiving it, often through

processes of initiation into secret societies. Tiryakian stresses the relationship between secret knowledge and the way in which this knowledge is (un)available to the general public. Moreover, he goes as far as stating that esoteric knowledge is only available through initiation into secret societies. With the rise in popularity of the New Age movement since the 1970s we know that much of the esoteric knowledge is now publicly accessible through bookstores and the Internet, and that initiation into secret societies is not a requirement for having access to forms of esoteric knowledge (Faivre 1992, xii).

Two decades later the French scholar Antoine Faivre proposed the very influential idea that esotericism should not be seen as a coherent doctrine, but as a “pattern of thought” (Faivre 1992).¹⁹ His understanding of esoteric knowledge has been praised for its ability to systematically compare various traditions with one another. This made possible that esotericism was not just seen with the eyes of the Enlightenment and rational science, but became recognized as a form of thought that had a sufficient influence on the development of religious and philosophical thought in modern times. Von Stuckrad however, points out that the “Faivre paradigm” is biased in the sense that it is based on a relatively narrow range of esoteric thoughts. He argues: “Because Faivre mainly drew on Renaissance Hermeticism, philosophy of nature, Christian Kabbalah and Protestant theosophy to generate his taxonomy, some areas are excluded from research, which might actually be decisive for a comprehensive survey” (Von Stuckrad

¹⁹ Faivre (1992) identifies four basic characteristics of the esoteric pattern of thought that are complemented by two further characteristics that frequently occur but are not indispensable with the definition. These characteristics are as follows: 1) *Correspondences*: All parts of the visible and invisible universe are connected through symbolic and/or real correspondences. These connections should not be understood as causal, but symbolically, waiting to be decoded, and is understood through the Hermetic axiom “so above, so below.” Correspondences exist not only between visible and invisible nature, but also throughout history and revealed texts. 2) *Living nature*: The idea that the cosmos is a complex, plural and hierarchical entity that is continuously animated by a living energy or soul. This philosophy of nature runs throughout European history, influencing holistic and monistic ideas. 3) *Imagination and mediation*: This characteristic of esoteric knowledge indicates that one has to have a certain feeling (“organ of the soul”) for symbolism and correspondences, and that esoteric knowledge is preferably mediated through the means of spiritual authorities. This is necessary to “penetrate Nature’s hieroglyphs.” 4) *The experience of transmutation*: Faivre describes his final intrinsic characteristic as dealing with the experience of the esoteric. Esoteric knowledge is not just the intellectual activity about the nature of the cosmos, but rather an understanding that transmutes the human being. Corresponding with the alchemic notion of transmutation, in which there is a change of state, illumination offers a change of spiritual state which can be described as a “second birth.” 5) *The practice of concordance*: One of the secondary characteristics is that from the end of the fifteenth century onward there arose a tendency to point out similarities between various esoteric traditions in search of an all-encompassing gnosis, which was supposed to be rooted in ancient times and from which all religious and spiritual traditions sprang. 6) *Transmission*: The second secondary characteristic says that esoteric knowledge can be transmitted from master to disciple through a process of initiation, which creates a certain kind of validity of the knowledge transmitted.

2005, 5). These areas include Jewish and Islamic esotericism, Buddhism, and esoteric knowledge from the ancient and medieval world. Moreover, as Hanegraaff (2007) points out, Faivre's definition is in the process of being replaced since there appears to be a "widespread disaffection in contemporary intellectual life with the grand narratives of modernity and their ideological underpinnings" (108). He argues that western esotericism becomes less and less seen as some sort of coherent "tradition" or "counter-culture" that is being defined against "mainstream" currents in Western society, such as science, Christianity, and rationalism. At the same time Faivre's definition is unable to account for processes of secularization of western esoteric thought and historical change in general (109).

While in most qualitative research there has been a focus on the relationship between emic and etic perspectives, this has not always been the case in the study of esotericism. Recently this issue was brought up by Versluis (2002). He argues against Hanegraaff's sharp distinction between the emic "religionist" perspective of esotericism, by which is meant the viewpoint from within a particular religious perspective, and the etic "empiricist," who is always open to critique from fellow scholars who challenge the validity of her interpretations. Although Versluis values Hanegraaff's contributions to the establishment of esotericism as a field of academic scholarship, he realizes that without a recognition of the emic perspective of esoteric knowledge one could miss some of the essential points in the discourse of esotericism. Instead, Versluis proposes a "sympathetic empiricist" position which he understands as

an intermediate position that incorporates the best of both emic and etic approaches. In the field of Western esotericism, as in that of religious studies more generally, it is important to balance on the one hand the virtues of scholarship that strives to achieve a standard of objectivity, and on the other hand the virtues of an approach that seeks to sympathetically understand one's subject, to understand it from the inside out, so to speak. (Versluis)

In a similar fashion, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke proposes that the study of esotericism in terms of cultural constructions fundamentally lacks a "hermeneutic interpretation of spirit and spirituality as an independent ontological reality" (Goodrick-Clarke 2008, 12). He argues that "[b]y seeking to define the esoteric in terms of human behavior and culture, it becomes a reflective cultural category rather than a philosophical or spiritual insight, which remains the essential component

of any claims to real or absolute knowledge” (13). Goodrick-Clarke’s main argument is that ideas of correspondences, an ensouled nature, and the transmutations of people who have been initiated into this esoteric reality spring from the higher reality that esotericism addresses. To Goodrick-Clarke this suggests that suggest that “this is an enduring tradition which, though subject to some degree of social legitimacy and cultural coloration, actually reflects an autonomous and essential aspect of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos” (13). He sees this autonomous and essential aspect as a primary drive, not only in identifiable esoteric traditions but also as an inspiring force behind science and art. For Goodrick-Clarke, esoteric thought is a “renascent cultural and spiritual energy” that plays an essential element of renewal in historical processes.

Both Goodrick-Clarke and Versluis argue in favour of the emic perspective of the esoteric, but Goodrick-Clarke more so than Versluis seems to be in favour of Faivre’s perspective of esotericism. Like Faivre, however, Goodrick-Clarke’s understanding of esotericism shows a lack of interest in non-Western esoteric traditions, which begs the question of whether this force of renewal is present in non-Western historical processes.²⁰ A position that tries to overcome this focus on the characteristics of Western esotericism is Kocku von Stuckrad’s idea of ‘the esoteric’ as an element of discourse. Von Stuckrad reasons from a discursive point of view, in which bodies of knowledge and traditions are not static and unchanging, but perceived in the light of contemporary challenges. Discourses are, in this sense, “the social organisation of tradition, opinion and knowledge” (Von Stuckrad 2005, 6). From common challenges and interests can spring certain corresponding discussions with similar social and political implications. This is what Von Stuckrad calls “fields of discourse.” These fields of discourse are not bounded by specific traditions, but can overlap multiple religious identities. For instance, one can find similarities in the fields of discourse on religious extremism, in which one can find strikingly similar questions and challenges.²¹ Bodies of knowledge and interpretations of traditions are therefore under influence of these fields of

²⁰ To be fair, Goodrick-Clarke’s work on esotericism is titled *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, which makes it understandable that he does not address non-Western esoteric traditions. This still means, however, that his understanding of the power of esoteric thought in the renewal of historical processes is primarily based on the influences of Western esotericism on the course of Western history.

²¹ Mark Juegensmeyer (2003), for instance, identifies common characteristics of extremists from different religions.

discourse, and by studying these discourses one can find similarities and connections that otherwise would be overlooked.

Von Stuckrad argues that “esotericism” does not exist as an independent object, but exists only in the heads of the scholars who use that concept to analyze processes in European cultural history. Instead, he proposes that we should talk about “the esoteric,” because “the esoteric is an element of cultural processes, while the mention of esotericism suggests that there is a coherent doctrine or a clearly identified body of tradition” (10). In this sense, the esoteric becomes an *element of discourse* that can be found within a broad range of cultural traditions, such as religion, science, art and literature. Von Stuckrad identifies this element of discourse as follows: “the pivotal point of all esoteric traditions are *claims* to ‘real’ or absolute knowledge and the *means* of making this knowledge available” (10). While the contents of the knowledge claims differ depending on the specific tradition, the means through which these knowledge claims come to being relate to the dialectic of the hidden and revealed. “What makes a discourse esoteric,” Von Stuckrad argues, “is the rhetoric of a hidden truth, which can be unveiled in a specific way and established contrary to other interpretations of the universe and history – often that of the institutionalized majority” (10).

How does this discursive understanding of the esoteric help us capture the notion of conspirituality? As we have seen above, conspiracy theories and spirituality both draw heavily on the idea that there is a body of knowledge that remains hidden from the public eye. It therefore comes at no surprise that conspirituality builds forth on this kind of knowledge. Ward and Voas identified three key themes in conspirituality: Change/transformation, unification and revealing truth. If we look at these themes from the perspective of an esoteric discourse we can see that these three themes connect through their relationship with the “hidden.” Thus, realizing the truth about our spiritual origin which is repressed by the Elite will trigger our potential to transform our being, and therefore the world in which we live; the search for “Oneness” or unification through “connecting the dots” of earthly and spiritual relations that are not publicly available but have to be revealed through different means of making these connections available; and the support provided by the community for whistle blowers who reveal truths that should not be publicly accessible and often relate to “repressed knowledge.” From this we can see that the rhetoric of conspirituality seems to relate to an overarching idea of hidden knowledge that must

be revealed and understood, and, preferably, put into practice. This kind of rhetoric creates the foundation of the esoteric discourse, and therefore it will be fruitful to consider conspirituality from this perspective. Moreover, approaching conspirituality from the perspective of the esoteric discourse would make it possible to consider the various discursive strategies that people operating in the field use to validate their knowledge claims.

In his book *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (2001), Olav Hammer focuses not so much on the content of the doctrines and knowledge claims of what he calls the Modern Esoteric Tradition, but on the way its spokespersons try to persuade their potential audience. Based on the assumption that “just as there is an explicit or implicit epistemology underlying factual claims in non-religious contexts, there is also an emic epistemology of religion, a set of methods and sources of knowledge that spokespersons from within that tradition regard as legitimate” (2001, 42), Hammer argues that few modern religious texts rely on pure fideism, but require a “minimal form of evidentialism.” What exactly counts as valid arguments and evidence depends on the emic epistemology under examination, and uncovering these discursive strategies is a way to discover how knowledge is created and debated in a specific (religious) tradition, and how spokespersons and their audience can negotiate its authority.

Olav Hammer identifies three major discursive strategies that are being used in the Modern Esoteric Tradition. First, there is a great appeal to tradition. Spokespersons in the Modern Esoteric Tradition create their ideas in relation to traditions from different times and places, but disembed them in such a way that their own ideas seem to be a continuation of these traditions. Moreover, in relating their ideas to various traditions they create a grand narrative in which various traditions are mere reflections of an ageless wisdom, a *philosophia perennis*. In conspirituality, this discursive strategy is often framed in a sense that the ageless wisdom has been repressed by the powers that be, for several malevolent reasons, thus creating a deeply dualistic perception of the world. Second, they adopt a strategy that is based on an appeal to a scientific and rational worldview. Although some esoteric knowledge is claimed to come from a higher power through means of, for instance, channeling, the way this knowledge is framed is often related to a scientific point of view. For example, spokespersons in the Modern Esoteric Tradition like to adopt scientific terminology such as “energy,” “vibrations,” “dimensions” and

even the term “science” itself. At the same time, alternative science or ‘fringe science’ investigates ‘unexplainable’ phenomena with a scientific mindset but from an assumption that these phenomena could also be understood through non-materialistic explanations. Finally, esoteric knowledge such as astrology or numerology often make use of rational mathematical calculations in which numbers and calculations have a hidden meaning. The third discursive strategy makes an appeal to experience. Spokespersons on the one hand create narratives of their personal experience that led to the discovery of hidden knowledge, while at the same time argue that their readers should not take their word at face value, but should “look into their heart” for the truth of their claims. In the milieu of conspirituality the second and third strategy is often combined in the credo “do your own research.”

I have argued above that the concepts of the *cultic milieu*, *improvisational millennialism* and *stigmatized knowledge* are all adequate in their descriptions of the field from which conspirituality is able to emerge, but show insufficiencies when it comes to understanding how exactly ideas from the spiritual milieu and the field of conspiracy theories are able to blend to form a conspiritual worldview. By turning to the academic field of esotericism and perceiving conspirituality as an esoteric discourse for reasons mentioned above, it becomes possible to understand the way in which knowledge in the conspiritual worldview is created and sustained. Moreover, we become able to understand why ideas from conspiracy theories and spirituality are merging so easily despite their apparent differences. For the following three chapters I will turn to my own research on the David Icke forum. Using Hammer’s categories I show how the participants on the David Icke forum legitimize knowledge claims that are rooted in both the field of conspiracy theories as well as the spiritual worldview.

3. Legitimation through science

The influence of modern science on the way many people perceive the world is difficult to overlook. From the so-called Scientific Revolution until now, science has established itself as the main source of knowledge about the universe and everything we know. While scientists worked tirelessly to discover how things work, popularizers of science such as Stephen Hawking, Carl Sagan and Richard Dawkins not only made sure these discoveries were available to the general public, they also advocated science as a superior form of knowledge contrary to, for instance, religious knowledge. It comes therefore as no surprise that alternative forms of knowledge try to relate to the status of science in one way or another. Throughout the post-Enlightenment age, numerous spokespersons for alternative forms of knowledge made various attempts to position themselves in negotiation with the materialistic scientific worldview (Barbour 1998). Thus, defenses like the *God of gaps* arguments jump into the gaps of scientific knowledge, and claim that because science has not been able to provide for an answer to these gaps, divine intervention can be a legitimate alternative possibility. Another solution could be that science and alternative worldviews are incommensurable, and that therefore alternative truth claims are immune to scientific inquiry. Science, in this view, deals solely with the material world, while spirituality for instance deals with spiritual dimensions where laws of science do not hold. Another type of negotiation is simply to submit science and reason to the power of revelation. Finally, there is a type of solution in which alternative worldviews find a source of legitimacy in scientific inquiry, albeit under certain conditions, namely the scientific viewpoint.

The concept of scientism has been previously used by researchers of the esoteric tradition (York 1995, Hammer 2001) and is defined by Olav Hammer as follows:

Scientism is the active positioning of one's own claims in relation to the manifestations of any academic scientific discipline, including, but not limited to, the use of technical devices, scientific terminology, mathematical calculations, theories, references and stylistic features – without, however, the use of methods generally approved within the scientific community, and without

subsequent social acceptance of these manifestations by the mainstream of the scientific community through e.g. peer reviewed publication in academic journals. (Hammer 2001, 206)

Scientism is therefore a concept that places itself mainly in opposition to mainstream science. Such understanding of science and scientism may consequently raise questions about that way in which science itself and its methods should be perceived, whether or not science says something about the “real,” or how scientific knowledge is created by means other than its methods, for instance through the authority of established scientists or current scientific paradigms. Questions like these, however, go beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, the concept of scientism recognizes the power of the mainstream scientific discourse and therefore the power of scientific arguments as a discursive strategy.

Members on the David Icke forum often adopt a discursive strategy based on science by providing roughly three kinds of scientific arguments: arguments based on (scientific) rationality, clothing an argument in scientific language, and connecting their ideas to established scientific disciplines.

As we shall see, participants on the David Icke forum use a discursive strategy that is based on the rationalistic worldview founded in science. They go through great pains to show that their claims are based on solid evidence and that the connections they make are to be accepted by anyone who does “proper research.” Not every claim is accepted at face value and more evidence is required to make a claim accepted by the rest. From what we will see, the participants often show themselves to be incredibly rationalistic. Another strategy the participants adopt is clothing their arguments with a terminology borrowed from the scientific community in order to increase the validity of their claims. For instance, they consequently call their personal investigations “research” and their findings “observations.” When the debate tends to relate to spiritual matters are being debated they use scientific terms like “energy” and “vibration.” Finally, when scientism enters the debate, there appears to be a strong appeal to already established scientific theories and disciplines, most notably natural sciences and psychology. However they do not attempt to re-create an entirely new form of alternative science, but primarily use knowledge from established sciences to validate their arguments. I will begin with an elaboration of the different ways in which the participants use scientific arguments to validate their knowledge claims in discussions on the David Icke forum. At the end

of this chapter (paragraph 3.4) I will analyze this data in the broader relationship between legitimation strategies and empowerment and discuss how references to science can work as an empowering force for the participants.

3.1 Scientific rationality

One of the primary rhetorical strategies the participants of the David Icke forum adopt is an appeal to rationality. Here, I understand rationality as an appeal to critical thinking. Most of the participants are hesitant to take a knowledge claim at face value, and will question knowledge claims that they find doubtful. In what follows we will examine two kinds of appeal to rationality. First, we will look into the way in which the participants debate knowledge claims that are based on evidence. Without going through every kind of evidence that the participants use to legitimize their knowledge claims, the examples provided will show that the participants are critical towards certain knowledge claims, and do not accept anything at face value. Second, rationality is used in the process of creating one of the primary sources of knowledge: connections. As we will see, participants try to connect people and events to make a certain knowledge claim, often by using numerological evidence or by showing relations between seemingly unrelated events. By adopting these strategies, the participants show that they perceive their practice as objective as possible, basing their knowledge claims primarily on factual evidence.

3.1.1 Providing evidence

Knowledge claims are not easily accepted without some form of evidence. While the nature of this evidence may vary, for instance links to other websites or videos, knowledge claims have to have some form of accompanying proof in order for it to be considered legitimate by the other participants on the forum. Participants that do claims of knowledge and fail to provide any back up sources are asked to provide evidence, or their knowledge claims are simply rejected by the other participants. For instance, in a discussion about the possible relation between Freemasonry and the IRA one participant claims that: “Nearly all members of the IRA were or are Freemasons. All members of the Mau-Mau were Freemasons. It is partly owing to the link with Cuba, where all the 1959 revolutionaries were Freemasons.”²² A fellow participant is quickly to

²² ‘Orange Order/UVF’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=186548>.

reply with “Any proof?” while later on other participants judge his knowledge claims as “absolute rubbish,” “complete balls” and even “this has got to rank in my top 3 all time codswallopers.” Another forum participant takes side with the participant that did the knowledge claim, blaming them for not providing evidence by saying “I see the Brothers above offer no back up with their statements per usual...” Although at the end of the discussion not much evidence for either side is produced, the discussion shows that participants place higher value on knowledge claims based on apparent evidence. Not doing so makes the knowledge claim vulnerable to attacks and ridicule. Similarly, knowledge claims solely based on “hearsay” and “rumors” are judged negatively. For instance, in one discussion the author Hunter S. Thompson is accused of various malevolent acts, such as making snuff films and pedophilia. While some participants reinforce each other by examining the movie based on Thompson’s novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and exclaiming what they know about Thompson’s connections to the Elite, one participant goes against this tendency by proclaiming that:

Hunter was one of the greatest writers and voices AGAINST tptb that we've ever had. The whole Gosch/Franklin/Bohemian Grove thing is basically just hearsay, and it conveniently came out after he was killed. He was working on exposing a lot of the things that people are accusing him of, and I even remember seeing a few articles where people mention that he was working on UNCOVERING A PEDOPHILE RING IN WASHINGTON.

[...]

People are very quick to judge a dead man who can't defend himself. The only proof anyone can offer of his alleged satanic/tptb/pedophile connections are hearsay. That's all. I suggest the people who are attacking him go out and read some of his works, watch the documentaries and get to know the man and his actions before believing something you hear/read on the internet.²³

This comment suggests that hearsay and rumors are not easily accepted as evidence. While for a great part it seems that other participants are reinforcing each other in believing that Thompson was part of the malevolent conspiracy, the comment by this participant changed the nature of the debate a little. As one participant replies: ‘If he was mind controlled or MKed, he sure managed

²³ ‘Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=183206>.

to keep his sanity in a way that most of us could only dream of doing. Just my opinion. Regardless, I find the things surrounding his death suspicious but I don't have enough information to be sure'. This comment suggests that while he still thinks there are suspicious things surrounding Thompson, the chances of him being mind-controlled are slim, and more information about his person is needed to come to a balanced conclusion. Comments suggesting that knowledge claims are based on rumors and hearsay can change the nature of a discussion, and therefore the legitimacy of these knowledge claims.

3.1.2 "Connecting the dots"

Besides providing and judging evidence of certain knowledge claims as an act of rational inquiry, participants on the forum also use rationality as a basis of creating connections between certain events, or at least give it an aura of rationality when doing so. Hammer points out that spokespersons of the esoteric tradition point out that their inquiries are rational because they connect it to rational enterprises. For instance, astrology is rational because it can be subjected to statistical calculations (Hammer, 243). In a similar fashion, participants on the forum claim the connections they make are rational, or at least suggest that their arguments are based on enterprises that are considered rational. Numerology is one of the ways in which participants try to connect events or find meaning in particular events. A typical numerological argument looks like this:

By undertaking circular permutations of the number composing the mysterious number 153, this gives place to six possible combinations: 153, 315, 513 and 351, 135, 513. And:

$$153+315+513=999$$

$$351+135+513=999$$

The number 999 is the reverse of 666, the number of the Beast of the Revelation (Apocalypse). This arithmetical strangeness demonstrates that the "power" of the Beast, 666, will be reversed by 153, characteristic number of the Christ, to give as result 999, symbol of the application of the divine justice. Thus Satan will be chained for 1000 years, $999 + 1$.

The number 666 to the power 5 gives 131,030,122,140,576. And $131+030+122+140+576 = 999$.²⁴

²⁴ '11-9-11 and 11-11-11' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=189285>.

Here we see not only that some numbers have mystical properties, but also that by using rational mathematical methods it is possible to discover hidden mystical purposes behind certain numbers. Indeed, as one of the participants explains the importance of numerology: “because we *Know* they practice occult numerology. I like to think that when we post dire predictions about specific dates, that it fouls the waters for them in their rites of Magick”²⁵ Numerology is therefore one way to relate apparently unconnected events or find significance in certain dates by connecting mysticism with rational inquiry.

Connecting events or ideas can also invoke critique when the nature of these connections are weak, or even considered false. Similar to the request for evidence, when participants are convinced that certain connections are doubtful, they will request a stronger case. When a stronger case is not presented this particular knowledge claim can be discarded. Sometimes, however, when connections are to be found dubious by one member it can be backed up by another member. For instance, in a discussion about the etymological significance of the number 11, in which the original poster (Participant 1) argues that “Eleven” is made up of “El,” the Hebrew name for God, and “even.” He finds it strange because eleven is an odd number. What follows is an interesting discussion:

Participant 1: “Is Eleven an even number or an odd number? It's an odd number right? So why does it have 'even' in it's name following the El (God) connotation?”

Participant 2: ““c.1200, elleovene, from O.E. endleofan, lit. **"one left" (over ten)**" The word is a compound of "lif" (left, leave behind) and "ain" (one).”

Participant 1: “Well it looks blatantly obvious to me that 'El' has a God/divine connotation. I've got eyes, I can see it's in Angel names and is used mainly in words that donate power or a higher level. Election, Electricity, Elation, Elevate, Elevation”

Participant 2: “Like it was blatantly obvious that the word "eleven" had some sort of significance?”

Participant 1: “I've seen 11:11 enough in my life to know it's got a hell of a big significance.”

Participant 3: “agreed there are no coincidences”

²⁵ Ibidem.

Participant 1: "El is placed at the beginning or end of a word to denote the divinity/deity connection. I don't care what your Etymological dictionary might say, my blinkers are off, I can use my eyes to see what's going on with the use of words and letters in our language."

Participant 2: "'c.1200, elleovene, from O.E. endleofan, lit. "one left" (over ten)" The word is a compound of "lif" (left, leave behind) and "ain" (one). Eleven finds its root in "lifain"."

Participant 3: "i checked the link and i cannot see any significance in it."²⁶

This discussion shows that even though rationality is one of the primary ways in which participants judge other's knowledge claims, it does not always stand as the decisive method. As we will see below, there are other kinds of legitimizing strategies that can be put forth to legitimize a knowledge claim, such as an appeal to personal experience or the dualistic conspiritual worldview. In the case above it seems that an appeal to these alternative strategies can make an argument immune to the critique of rationality. Furthermore, while Participant 2 tries to appeal to etymology as a form of rational enquiry to explain the origin of the number 11, this appeal falls upon deaf ears. Instead, it is the assumption of the practice of numerology that seems to be decisive in determining the hidden meaning of the number 11. While it remains unclear exactly why etymology is regarded less valuable than numerology, it is possible that etymology is too "mainstream." As we will see in Chapter 3, mainstream sources are regarded as suspicious in the process of legitimizing knowledge claims.

The participants on the David Icke forum use rationality in various ways. First, they use it to criticize people who claim certain knowledge but then fail to provide substantial evidence to back up that knowledge claim. In a scientific rational mindset, claims have to have some sense in evidential reality in order to be accepted as knowledge. Thus, participants are apt to provide links to other websites and Youtube movies to provide evidence for their knowledge claims. On the other hand, their peers criticize participants who fail to provide evidence for their claims, especially when the knowledge claims seem to be far-fetched. Furthermore, an appeal to rational inquiry is used in the process of connecting various elements together. Using numerology as a primary example, it is possible for participants to discover hidden meanings in dates and events by connecting the numbers relevant to that event. While the actual meaning behind these numbers may not be grounded in rationality, the way that the participants are

²⁶ 'The number Eleven' <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=174553>.

dealing with them, in the form of calculations, is a thorough rational enterprise. Although rationality is one of the primary ways for participants to validate knowledge claims, other ways of validation, such as an appeal to personal experience or the dual worldview of conspирuality, may serve as an equally legitimate way of validating knowledge claims. This shows us that even though rationality is an important validating requirement, it does not have to be convincing to others.

3.2 Scientistic terminology

The second kind of scientistic argument we will look into is the use of language and terminology borrowed from the mainstream scientific community. Roughly two kinds of scientistic language can be identified: language that relates to the scientific method of inquiry, and language that is based on scientific content. It should be noted that the terms discussed below are not the only ones used in the forum discussions. Participants use terms borrowed from various kinds of academic disciplines. The terms discussed below, however, are used frequently by the participants and therefore serve as a good example of how scientific terms are being used as well as the various purposes they serve.

3.2.1 Methodological scientism

The first kind of scientistic argument is based on the terminology of scientific methods. Participants on the David Icke forum are constantly on the lookout for potential relations and connections between events or people, and try to come up with a potential explanation for these relations. As we have seen above, most of the participants consider these discoveries as factual statements about the current worldly and spiritual affairs, and their focus on rationality and evidence makes them regard the process that leads to their knowledge claims as a very serious enterprise. The process of inquiry and the consequential claims based on what they perceive as rationality and evidence can therefore be considered as a science-like business. Hence, it can be expected that the participants use terms borrowed from the scientific enterprise to describe their own activities. Terms like “research,” “observations,” “proof,” and “evidence” are frequently used to portray the process of coming to certain knowledge claims. I will now review how the participants use these terms to validate their inquiry.

3.2.1.1 Research

The term “research” is often used to describe the process of coming to certain knowledge claims. In fact, one of the credos of conspiracy culture is “do your own research,” signifying not only that knowledge claims should never be accepted at face value but always be validated by personal inquiry (I will discuss this in detail further below), but also that this process that leads to knowledge claims is one that should be done thoroughly, like proper research behooves.

There are multiple ways in which the idea of doing research is used by the participants. In the first place, participants use the term *research* to signify the process to which they come to their knowledge claims. Although this research process is never openly explained, the mere fact that they feel the need to explicitly state that their knowledge claims are based on research signifies the importance of this statement to the validity of their knowledge claims. Consider the following two examples:

- 1) “from my research [the eye on the top of the pyramid on the dollar bill] is the Christ Consciousness (non religious) from the deities and teachings from before such as Jesus, Mohammed, Krishna, Osiris, Ra etc.”²⁷
- 2) “I have always understood from my research that El means God. It is no coincidence that our written language carries many meanings, interpretations and symbolism. The most prominent being: ISRAEL > IS RA EL > ISIS RA EL.”²⁸

When the term “research” is used in this way, it is primarily to validate the participant’s own claim. “Research,” however, can also be used to signify that the participant’s conclusions could be reached if the research is done properly. This rhetorical use is shown, for instance, in the following: “Anyone who has researched this will know of the importance of trans-humanism to the Illuminati agenda, as they eventually wish to merge with robots to give themselves immortality and super-intelligence.”²⁹ When “research” is used in this way, it points to the idea that proper research would lead to the same conclusion and that *mutatis mutandis* different conclusions would mean that the research has not been done right.

This kind of rhetoric leaves very little room for debate or alternative views, since the conclusions are often already set, and whenever these conclusions are challenged, it is easy for

²⁷ ‘No reptilian eye’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=182441>.

²⁸ ‘The number Eleven’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=174553> (adapted for readability).

²⁹ ‘Kylie Minoque’s Aphrodite’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=173733>.

the defending participant to fall back on the accusation of improper research. Indeed, the second way in which participants use the term “research” is when they wish to put another participant’s claim into doubt. An easy way to do this is to suggest that the other person has not done proper research on the subject, and that they would come to different conclusions if they did. For instance, in a discussion about the way in which Hollywood movies depict satanic rituals the following dispute takes place between two members of the forum:

Participant 1: “Of course rituals in movies that are depicted are only snippets of what goes on. They wouldn't be able to film simulations of everything that happens because they would get at least an X rating. How do I know you ask, about what goes on? My intuition. And I am familiar with the forces of evil, as I've done battle with demons.”

Participant 2: “What are you babbling about? The forces of evil? There's nothing evil about satanism.... But then, you're basing your views on things you've seen in horror films, not the real world... Maybe your intuition could guide you towards some actual research.”

Participant 1: “No, I'm basing my views on the research I've done concerning child sacrifice, "SRA" (satanic ritual abuse). It's all just a google search away if you're motivated enough to move your mouse a few inches and click a few buttons.”

Participant 2: “Haha, the research is a Google click away, huh? Well thanks, but I've seen it all before. Your argument seems to be that I'm not in agreement with you because I haven't read the same things as you have ... That is far from the case. I've researched SRA since the early 80s ... So thanks, but I don't really need to sift through all that alarmist Christian nonsense again. But, at least we've established one thing: You get your knowledge on the subject from the internet. I was schooled by people who were in turn taught by those before them; going back in an unbroken line.”³⁰

In this discussion the term “research” is used in various rhetorical ways that show the importance of the term in claiming validity. Firstly, research is put against intuition as a source of knowledge. In the New Age milieu, the use of a person’s intuition is often considered a valid way of judging the truth of a certain knowledge claim. We can see that Participant 1 starts by claiming that he came to his conclusions by using his intuition. Participant 2, however, disagrees with his conclusions and suggests that if he should do some actual research on this subject, he

³⁰ ‘List of Satanic movies’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=185956>.

would come to different conclusions. In his defense we see that Participant 1 shifts the process of coming to his conclusions from “intuition” to “research,” thus using the rhetoric power of the word to claim validity of his side of the argument. He suggests that Participant 2 could find all the information she needs on the Internet. In her defense, Participant 1 suggests that his research is less thoroughly than her own research, and therefore less valid, since he got his information from the Internet, while she has not only done research since the 80s but also received information from an insiders’ network. This discussion may seem like a banal measuring of sizes, but shows very blatantly how various depths of research have a greater power of validity. Intuition is overruled by “proper” research, but research based on Internet sources is overruled by research based on books and insider’s knowledge.

The third way of using the term “research” is in relation to a personal or common goal of achieving in depth knowledge about a subject. For instance, participants may find hints of evidence pointing out a certain conspiracy or suspicious relationship, but it requires more evidence to claim these hints as facts. For instance, one of the participants posts a picture of a letter written by George Washington and claims that it provides evidence for the spreading of the Masonic ideologies throughout the United States. He ends his post with “Pretty much everything I mentioned above is conventional history and well accepted by historians. While none of that proves anything, I would say it more than warrants additional research and investigation.”³¹ When “research” is used in this sense, it not only points out the common assumption that one should not simply accept the research done and accepted by mainstream historians, but that research is something that should be done individually. As we have seen already, there is a strong connection between research and the individual. Research is not something you let other people do for you, but something that you have to do yourself in order to obtain informed knowledge. One of the participants formulates this goal in a discussion with someone who demands ‘proof’ that a secret cabal exists:

Always better to do your own research by whatever methods you have available to you my friend,
but be careful what you believe as there is alot of information out there that is simply just rubbish,

³¹ ‘Give me REAL Proof’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=176831>.

the only way to solve this is to make your own informed decisions with whatever information you find, hope this helps.³²

The first two ways that “research” is used were for a large part rhetorical in nature. Participants pointed out that they either went through the process of doing a thorough investigation on the subject under discussion, or accusing the other of not having done so. The third way in which ‘research’ is used, however, points out to a deeper layer of the understanding of the term ‘research’ by the participants. Conspiracy culture and the New Age milieu that form this mixture of conspirituality are both suspicious towards mainstream orthodoxy. Not only do they create alternative versions of history and contemporary events, they also create methods of inquiry of this alternative knowledge that is in general not accepted by the mainstream orthodoxy. By calling this inquiry “research” the participants, however, show that the knowledge they acquire is something that stems from an in-depth process and is therefore to be taken seriously. The fact that they do not take conclusions accepted by mainstream scholars at face value but are encouraged to investigate on their own empowers them to take on this quest against the mainstream orthodoxy. Without clothing these investigations in scientific terms like “research,” and as we will see below, “observations,” “proof,” and “evidence,” participants on the forum and in conspirituality culture in general would lose some of their sense of doing something worthwhile as individuals, and therefore would lose some of their sense of empowerment.

3.2.1.2 *Evidence, proof, and observations*

Besides the strong emphasis on research, there are other terms borrowed from the scientific community that are being used in a scientific way. While ‘research’ points out how the participants review the process of finding knowledge, the terms I will discuss in this section points out how the participants review their actual findings.

One of the primary denominators of pieces of information that backs up a certain knowledge claim is the word *evidence*. Like in the scientific use of the word, evidence is needed for a certain knowledge claim to be accepted by the rest of the community. As we have seen above, the participants on the forum are often sceptical towards someone else’s knowledge

³² Ibidem.

claim, unless some form of evidence is provided, and even if this requirement is met, it does not ensure a general acceptance. Participants are therefore not only in their actions apt to provide additional information that led them to their knowledge claims, but also to point out explicitly that this information should be considered as *evidence*. As such, the participants use the term to point out that it is the evidence itself that lead them to accept a certain knowledge claim, and that anyone who would look at the evidence would come to the same conclusion. Such an interpretation of the term “evidence” is provided in a discussion about the hidden malevolent intentions of the Freemasons. In this discussion, a participant is providing information arguing for the hidden purpose of the Freemason, but other participants fail to acknowledge his position. He complains: “What I fail to understand, is why all the naysayers are nit-picking the text of what I write while (it appears) none of them are looking at the links of evidence being offered in each of my comments. The evidence is clear. The links are all good. Has anyone researched the links I've given?”³³

This comment shows that this particular member assumes that because others do not agree with what he is saying, they did not pay attention to the evidence he provided for his position. If they had research the evidence, they would have agreed with him. This kind of interpretation of the term “evidence” is fairly common on this discussion forum. To provide another example: “What about the evidence that the USSR and Marxism was a tool of Western powers (or the Illuminati if you prefer)? How can you then claim it to be a genuine attempt at communism?”³⁴ This comment assumes a similar position as the one provided above. The evidence provided in a discussion determines the kinds of positions that are allowed as long as the evidence is not refuted. Moreover, as these comments suggest, by explicitly stating that whatever information is “evidence” for a certain knowledge claim, the participant is in his right to hold his knowledge claim and try to enforce them upon other participants until the evidence is refuted or counterevidence is provided. The term “evidence” can therefore serve as a tool to guide the discussion.

The term “evidence” functions in a similar fashion even when there is no actual evidence provided in the form of links to other websites, books, or videos. By stating that a certain

³³ ‘Can a mason ‘retire’ from the craft?’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=175114>.

³⁴ ‘Socialism vs Capitalism’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=189580>.

knowledge claim that the participant holds is based on evidence, an implicit assumption is made that his knowledge claims stem from thorough research of the facts. By claiming that it is based on evidence the participant automatically claims a certain level of validity, even though the evidence in question is not provided as such. For instance, in a discussion about the 9/11 attacks, one participant states: “Call me crazy if you will, but that is where the evidence points and I am not afraid to say it. 9-11 was a Satanic event and get this: Its not a tragedy for them.”³⁵ When the term “evidence” is used as such it serves as legitimation of the participant’s point of view in a rhetorical way. This becomes especially apparent because this particular statement is introduced by the sentence “I cannot tell you how I know it but I do know it.” By expressing up front his unwillingness to provide the concrete evidence on which his knowledge claim is based, but later on explicitly states that his knowledge claim is based on “evidence,” he thereby legitimizes his knowledge claim despite the lack of actual evidence. While we have seen above that in general other participants are willing to debate knowledge claims if insufficient evidence is provided, the participants in this particular discussion seem less sceptical when his comment is, for instance, met with “if what you say is true, that would open a new door...”

In using the term “evidence” to signify their information it shows that the participants were not beforehand willing to accept the conclusions to which the evidence pointed, but since they could not deny the evidence, they had to accept its conclusions as well. This rhetorical distance to the theories of which the evidence is provided is also visible when the participants use the word *observation* to describe their findings.

Although significantly less in usage, some of the participants are keen on pointing out that they do not wish to provide “truths,” but merely point out what they “observe.” For instance, after a long comment about the esoteric meaning of the All-Seeing Eye in various cultures throughout various times, one member concludes his story with: “In no way do I claim these to be truths. They are observations. The mysteries did not intend for its esoteric significance to be revealed in simple explanations. I just hope that I can help contribute to the discussion.”³⁶ The way in which the term “observation” is used points a similar interpretation of the term “evidence” provided above, namely that when other participants “observe” the same “observations” as the speaking participant they would come to similar conclusions. Although its

³⁵ ‘911 First Responders excluded anniversary ceremony’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=181186>.

³⁶ ‘One eye symbolism thread!’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=175464>.

use is less coercive as the rhetorical use of “evidence,” the term “observation” assumes a certain level of objectivity, or at least a certain level of distance towards the conclusions to which these “observations” refer. The final sentence reinforces this idea, since the participant wishes not to coerce certain ideas upon the other members, but simply “help to contribute to the discussion” by sharing his observations. The way in which this is formulated suggests that the participant wants to honor the commonly shared idea that one should always formulate conclusions based on one’s own research, and all he can do is share his observations to contribute to other people’s research.

While the terms “evidence” and “observation” are used to force the other participants to accept certain knowledge claims if the evidence and observations are accepted, a reference to the word *proof* often signifies a reversal of this order. The words “evidence” and “proof” are being used interchangeably. However, “evidence” seems to suggest that a knowledge claim is not yet commonly accepted and has therefore be made plausible by providing evidence, while “proof” often refers to a knowledge claim that can or should be accepted because it has been “proven.” This can be seen in a discussion about a show performed by Kylie Minoque in which she uses a lot of references to mythical ideas. At the end of the discussion one of the participants conclude with: “This is yet more proof of the ancient pagan gods remain worshipped by the Illuminati.”³⁷ When “proof” is used in this sense, it serves as an affirmation of knowledge that has been assumed beforehand, while at the same time it functions to make a knowledge claim seem definite. This latter function becomes more apparent in a discussion in which the participant who starts the discussion demands “real proof that the Illuminati exists.” In this discussion, this participant starts with a few requirements the other participants have to meet in order for him to accept the knowledge claim that the Illuminati exists and operate as a secret cabal. He even goes as far as to say: “If you can present me, or to everyone here I should say, true hard proof of such a things existence, then I will help lead the resistance.”³⁸ The participant’s understanding of the word “proof” is therefore something that shows that the knowledge claim in question is undoubtedly true.

Some of the participants accept the challenge and show him certain kinds of evidence that make it plausible that a secret cabal exists, others take on the debate about the way in which his

³⁷ ‘Kylie Minoque’s Aphrodite’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=173733>.

³⁸ ‘Give me REAL Proof’

demand is phrased. For instance, one of the participants accuses him of hypocrisy since some of his own claims, in particular one that states that Wall Street bankers are drug addicts, do not meet his own standard of proof. The accusing participant, who then accuses him of distracting the discussion, notices this:

Derailling the thread because I'm pointing out your failure to meet your own standards of proof about Wall Street workers being raging cokeheads? If you can't provide watertight proof about something as uncontroversial as that, why do you expect anybody else to be able to serve up watertight proof for you about a global secret society?³⁹

The use of the term “proof” here strengthens the idea that “proof” refers to something definite that cannot be refuted without disregarding the “proof” provided. What this comment also shows is how this participant views the term “proof,” namely, that “watertight proof” cannot be provided, since the idea of a global secret society is even more controversial than “Wall Street workers being raging cokeheads.” “Proof” is therefore a term that is less convincing in its rhetorical use than “evidence,” especially when someone is asking or demanding proof of a certain knowledge claim. This is well illustrated by a later comment by the same forum member:

Because 'proof' is something that only idiots or trolls ask for. Evidence is a different story. And anyone can find evidence for most of the major issues discussed on this forum - nobody starts a thread requesting that other people serve it up to them unless they're attention-seeking timewasters and energy-drainers.⁴⁰

In this comment, the difference between “evidence” and “proof” becomes apparent. Like I have suggested above, when the word “evidence” is used it points to pieces of factual knowledge that could lead to a certain concluding knowledge claim. On the contrary, “proof” is regarded as something that has to back up a certain knowledge claim beforehand. In other words, in the minds of the participants “evidence” leads to valid knowledge claims, while “proof” suggests that the validity of certain knowledge claims is put into question.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

Similar to the term “research,” scientific terminology based on the nature of the information provided to the participants of the David Icke forum serves to claim a certain sense of legitimacy. By using scientific terms like “evidence” and “observation” a rhetorical distance is created between the findings and the knowledge claims to which they refer. It creates the impression that the participants do not want these conclusions per se, but cannot do anything other than to accept these conclusions based on the evidence that they have found. By sharing this evidence with other participants it is expected that others will do the same. “Proof,” in this sense, functions largely to control the flow of knowledge claims, because knowledge claims cannot just be provided in itself. There is a certain level of factual requirement needed for others to accept knowledge claims. Asking for “proof” can therefore be regarded as one of those controlling mechanisms. On the other hand, once a certain knowledge claim is declared to be proven, the knowledge claim to which it refers can be accepted without much debate.

Methodological scientism provides us with a good idea about how knowledge claims are framed with regard to the way in which the process to those knowledge claims is perceived in the eyes of the participants. While in mainstream science this process has to meet far more precise requirements, especially in the natural sciences, the fact that the participants borrow the terminology of the process of knowledge creation in mainstream sciences shows that they consider their own knowledge enterprise as similarly thorough.

3.2.2 Content-based scientism

The second kind of use of scientific terminology is based on scientific content, with a special focus on terminology borrowed from the natural sciences. While methodological scientism clothed the discussions in an aura of thorough investigations, content-based scientism significantly changes the meaning of scientific terminology to fit it into their own particular worldview. In a discussion about the significance of the dates of 11 September 2011 (11-9-11) and 11 November 2011 (11-11-11) the following discussion between three participants take place:

Participant 1: ““The Powers That Be” like to link terrorist atrocities energetically by using numbers, for example there was exactly 911 days in between the 9/11 event and the Madrid train bombings.....”

Participant 2: "Like to link events energetically? What does that even mean?"

Participant 1: "If you link 2 negative events together energetically, then the effects of the negative energy in the latest event will become magnified, because the emotional energy attached to the first event will also be drawn into the emotional energy created by the latest negative event."The Powers That Be" are using magic against us to throw the 3rd dimension of duality out of balance to lower the vibrational energies...."

Participant 2: "It means that it is the *energies* (spirit, chi, call it what you will) which seem to shape our experiences in this world...imho. Theres more going on here than what we *see* (plato and others before him were trying to discover the code, the secret formula...so this isnt just a davidicke-forum crazy idea). The energy is connected to human consciousness... the one-consciousness, which I think is their focus... The elitists seem to know how to manipulate this energy and harness the powers to **focus intent on certain numbers, ideas or events**. Dont forget that all numbers and colours, and even thoughts or *being*, is vibration.....they are maniuplating the **vibrations**... Manipulating you to think that everything is predictable and that nothing is going to change. I think they are attempting to lock us into the old paradigm whilst these (astronomical) changes occur."⁴¹

This discussion shows how terminological scientism comes into play and which terms the participants are fond of using. *Energy* is one such commonly used term. In the sense as it is used above, it appears to refer to an invisible "vital force" or "life force," which can be positive or negative. Negative events like the 9/11 attacks are in this case magical acts exercised to bring about this negative energy through human emotions. In that sense, the participants also use the scientific concept of atomic polarity in their argument, since energy can be either positive or negative in itself, not just in its use. While they use the scientific term *energy* to describe a spiritual force, which Participant 2 makes explicit by symonimizing it with "spirit" and "chi," it is also explicitly related to the New Age term "one-consciousness."

Another term that is borrowed from science is *vibration*. Like "energy," *vibration* is used in relation to "life-force" in general, but more specifically to things, events, and even "being" itself. Similar to the concept of "energy," *vibrations* can be manipulated through means of magic used by the Power That Be "to throw the 3rd dimension of duality out of balance," often to bring

⁴¹ '11-9-11 and 11-11-11', <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=189285> (I have modified the layout for readability, but left typos and emphases).

its victims to a lower state of vibration. As Hammer explains, the idea of vibrational states is important in the esoteric tradition since it is believed that spiritual evolution is directly connected to attaining a higher vibrational state (Hammer 2001, 239). In terms of conspirituality the participant argue that the Elite therefore seeks to lower the vibrational state of human beings in order to hinder their spiritual evolution.

Finally, a scientific term that is frequently used in a scientific way by the participant is the term *dimension*. While it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly is meant by “dimension,” it is possible to distill various uses of the word. As we can see in the quoted discussion above, the term “dimension” is used to signify the ordinary understanding of the word, namely the three dimensions in which we live, including the fourth dimension of time. A second use of the term is shown in the following comment: “I know things happen on all different dimensions but if it was a glimpse of this earth future then I would say not to worry because its all over in a matter of seconds.”⁴² Here it seems that the member is referring to “dimension” as an alternative universe. With the popularization of theoretical physics, most notably string theory, came the idea of the potential existence of parallel universes, as well as the idea of higher dimensions of experience.

In New Age spirituality, “higher dimensions” often refer to a more advance position on the ladder of spiritual evolution. With the merging of spirituality with conspiracy theories, especially through the works of David Icke, it became possible for beings that existed in this higher dimension to be malevolent as well. As one of the participants explains:

Those people who died on [9/11] had their souls sucked by reptilians. The why of it? After these reptilians lost their bodies in the [fall], they started to acting in the fourth dimension... I remember David Icke said one time about the reptilian necessity of receiving animal and human sacrifices to keep their hidden way.⁴³

As is the case with the three most used terms of the forums, the participants hardly ever provide a precise definition of the terms. Contrary to mainstream science that requires definitions of their key terminology, scientific usage is often considerably vaguer. However, there seems to be a common understanding of these terms, for instance about the term “energy” that often refers to

⁴² Rockefeller Reveals 9/11 FRAUD to Aaron Russo' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=177493>.

⁴³ Ibidem.

“life-force,” but this understanding is mostly metaphorically. This metaphorical aspect of their scientific terminology provides for a certain flexibility of the meaning and interpretation of the terms, while at the same time maintains a sense of consistency.

When it comes to the framing of commonly shared ideas about the world and the universe in general, conspiratorism owes much to the scientific community for its terminology, but also to the esoteric tradition for using this terminology and changing it into a metaphorical understanding. By means of these terms, it became possible for conspiracy theories to merge with ideas from the New Age milieu into a worldview in which malevolent forces are not just earthly, but “interdimensional” as well, raising new opportunities for the participants to consider alternative ways to battle the forces of evil on different planes.

In the discussion of the scientific way in which the participants on the forum incorporate scientific terminology we have seen that they do this for various reasons. First, it works as a way to claim legitimacy because it clothes their knowledge claims into an aura of thorough investigation, which makes the claimer less subjected to criticism. Second, it functions as a way to discredit other people’s knowledge claims by pointing out that their investigation is not as thoroughly as it should be, or based on wrong assumptions or methods. Thirdly, the rhetorical force of scientism seems attractive for the participants because it connects their ideas with already established ideas in science through means of using similar language. Finally, it seems that scientism provides a way for the participants to empower their own position by relating it to academic disciplines that have been defining common understanding throughout the last century. Participants on the forum relate their own knowledge claims to science not only by using similar terminology, but also by explicitly connecting it to various scientific disciplines such as the natural sciences and psychology.

3.3 Scientific theories

The third kind of scientific argument the participants use to claim legitimacy of their knowledge claims is shown in the way these knowledge claims are connected with already established and known scientific theories and concepts. As we will see, in the process of connecting these scientific theories and concepts with their own knowledge claims the participants are often

tempted to change the understanding of these scientific ideas to fit it into their own, while establishing an aura of authentic scientific understanding.

3.3.1 *Natural sciences*

One of the most prominent ways in which the participants relate their ideas to scientific theories is by connecting them to various concepts of natural sciences. In this section, I will discuss two key scientific disciplines that serve as a background for legitimizing conspiritual knowledge claims: astrophysics/astronomy and biology. In a discussion on the 2012 event the participant who starts the thread makes an elaborated argument about why there will be a great even happening on the 21st of December 2012.⁴⁴ Besides using sources from ancient civilizations, such as the Maya's and the ancient Egyptians, and contemporary cultures such as the Hopi Indians, he also incorporates scientific arguments. Consider, for example, the following argument:

On 21 Dec 2012 there will be a **cosmic alignment** between the Earth, Sun, The star cluster Pleiades and the center of the Milky Way Galaxy. [...] So, from the astronomical point of view, in 2012 our star will be in alignment with the center galactic point. [...] On **21 Dec 2012, 11:11 AM Universal Time** (also known as **Zero Time Point**), our Sun and our planet will be at perfect alignment with the Galactic center. On the same day, if we consider that everything stays "by default" or on the same track, our Sun will be at its solar maximum, and the ecliptic of our solar system will intersect with the Galactic plane, which also is called the "**Galactic Equator**" of the Milky Way!⁴⁵

Here we see how the participant is using references to astronomy to back up the claim that the Maya's end time prediction is rooted in scientific knowledge about the Galaxy. Not only will Earth be in an alignment with the center of the Galaxy, but also the sun will be at its maximum power, causing all kinds of destructing events. Later on, the participant uses arguments based on physics to surround his argument with an aura of science:

⁴⁴ '2012 Nexus Event' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=44268>.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, emphases in original.

Physicists find evidence for **highest energy photons** ever detected from Milky Way's equator. Physicist at nearly a dozen research institution including **New York University**, have discovered evidence for very high energy gamma rays emitting from the Milky Way marking the highest energies ever detected from the **galactic equator**. **Previous satellite experiments have seen gamma-ray emissions along the galactic equator reaching up to energies of only 30 billion electron-volts**. What does that mean? Well imagine this, our suns particle energy is around **500 thousand electron volts**. What they found being emitting from the galactic core is up to **7 million times the energy of our sun and travelling near the speed of light**.

Conclusion:

We are going to align with the galactic equator and be able to view the galactic core entirely through the dark rift opening on December 21, 2012 as astronomically predicted by the Maya.⁴⁶

These two examples show how participants on the David Icke forum incorporate ideas from physics and astronomy into their own theories. While nowhere in the posts made by this participant we find a reference to scientific articles that claim what the participant claims, the reference to scientific ideas functions to clothe the argument that the world is going to change significantly on the 21st of December 2012 in an aura of genuine science.

In a similar fashion, ideas from biology are used to legitimize certain knowledge claims. In a discussion on the relationship between the subconscious and the conscious mind, one participant connects ideas from the practice of meditation to biological ideas about the pineal gland. He argues:

If you meditate and look into the space between your eyes whilst relaxing (easier said than done) you will awaken your third eye/ activate your pineal gland. Your pineal gland lies at the centre of your brain. When activated it fills with water and polarises becoming in essence an electro magnet at the centre of your brain. Your brain is an organic organ which generates electromagnetic neural activity which is perceived in thought patterns which govern behaviour. When your pineal gland activates it acts as an anchor at the centre of your brain and balances

⁴⁶ Ibidem, emphases in original.

neural activity...if you are predominantly "right brain" you will start to develop "left brain" functioning and visa versa.⁴⁷

Here we see how the practice of meditation is believed to be connected with biological functions such as neural activities in the brain and "left" and "right" brain functions. The pineal gland is here synonymous with the "third eye," an important concept in New Age because it symbolizes enlightenment and deep spiritual insights.⁴⁸

As we have seen above, the participants tend to combine spiritual ideas with ideas already established in various scientific disciplines. Whether they are dealing with the merits of meditation or figuring out the end times, natural sciences seem to be an attractive reference to provide a sustainable argument. Before we put these scientific claims in a bigger perspective, I will discuss another scientific discipline that seems to be an attractive source of information: psychology.

3.3.2 *Psychology*

Another way in which the participants on the David Icke forum try to relate their knowledge claims to established scientific disciplines is by relating them to psychological ideas. Similar to natural sciences, psychology seems to serve as one of the key scientific disciplines through which participants on the forums try to legitimate their own knowledge claims. In discussing their knowledge claims the participants claim a higher level of validity by connecting their ideas with various well-known psychological ideas. For instance, when participants discuss the symbol of "One Eye" in the media, one participant wonders whether these symbols are actually harmful and how this takes place. A fellow participant replies by relating the brainwashing influence of symbols to psychological theories:

Participant 1: "Not to sound ignorant but our kids are going to see eyes regardless of what the media spews out. How is the eye going to brainwash them? I get the concept of repetition through symbols I just don't see how the individual ones are dangerous or harmful or conclusive to these theories at all."

⁴⁷ 'Subconscious & Conscious' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=181031>.

⁴⁸ See for instance C.W. Leadbeater *The Chakras* (Wheaton, Ill: Theosophical Publishing House 1927).

Participant 2: "As to them being brainwashed, I think it has somewhat. If you study the work of people like Carl Jung you will find that symbols such as the 'one eye' are archetypal symbols, these are symbols which are ingrained within the human mind. As such, they have a very profound affect on the human subconscious. People will find themselves drawn to these symbols without knowing why.

I find the subject particularly interesting because to me it is proof of secret society infiltration of the entertainment industry. It is literally in your face every day; you can barely walk down the street or watch television without coming across occult symbology. It takes a very high level of cognitive dissonance to dismiss the repetitive use of these symbols as a coincidence but many people still do.

A lot of people who study the global control system focus on things like banking and military structures as a means of control. To me, the control of the media is just as, if not more, important as a means of controlling people. Guiding peoples' thoughts in subtle ways through the media is one of the chief ways people are influenced. The use of archetypal symbols to influence the minds of particularly young people is an important part of this. People like Edward Bernays, psychologist and nephew of Sigmund Freud, made an enormous impact on the world with their incorporation of psychoanalytical theories into media and advertising."⁴⁹

In the reply by Participant 2 to the question posed by Participant 1 we can see how conspiracy theories are being connected to various psychological theories. First a relationship is made between the ideas of archetypes by psychologist Carl Gustav Jung and the "One Eye" symbol. According to Participant 2's interpretation of Jung, the human subconscious mind is easily attracted to archetypal images, and these images therefore serve as a perfect tool for brainwashing methods. Since mass media has the ability to reach people all over the world almost every hour of the day it seems like the perfect medium for spreading these images and brainwash the majority of the population. This idea is reinforced at the end by the mentioning of a psychologist who incorporated psycho-analytical theories into media and advertising. The second reference to psychological theories is the mentioning of cognitive dissonance. The idea of cognitive dissonance was first coined in 1956 by Leon Festinger in *When Prophecy Fails* and signifies a state of discomfort caused by holding conflicting beliefs. Participant 2 refers to this state of mind because according to him the symbolism of the "One Eye" and other occult

⁴⁹ 'One eye symbolism thread!'

symbolism is so pervasively present that it is hard to believe that most people still consider it coincidental.

Another way in which the participants relate their ideas to psychology is when they debate topics related to the conscious and the subconscious. Relating heavily on the concept of the unconscious found in traditional psychoanalysis (the term “subconscious” is unrightfully ascribed to psychoanalysis, because they use the term “unconscious” instead), the participants discuss the way in which consciousness and the subconscious are related to each other, often with a reference to a form of collective consciousness. For instance, one of the members puts this idea into the following “formula”: “your conscious + your subconscious = my conscious + my subconscious = totality of consciousness.”⁵⁰ He continues to argue that

We all share the same consciousness - what makes us different from one another is the mix of what we are conscious of and not. What I am conscious of you may be unconscious of - but it is ALL there inside everyONE. We are everything experiencing a limited perception of our Self through forgetting what we truly are!⁵¹

The idea of the connection of every individual to the collective unconscious is an idea developed by Carl Jung. His idea of the collective unconscious is that there exists a second psychic system, next to the personal unconsciousness that owes its nature to personal experiences, that is collective, universal and impersonal and consists of pre-existent forms, or archetypes, that have never been in consciousness, but can only become conscious secondarily. Since it has never been conscious, the existence of the collective unconscious is inherited.⁵² While Jung carefully points out that only certain aspects of conscious and unconscious existence have their origins in the collective unconscious, the participants on the forum understand the collective unconscious as something that inhabits all knowledge and all experience. More importantly, everyone has access to this shared knowledge and experience by connecting to the collective unconscious with certain techniques. One of the members formulates this as follows:

⁵⁰ ‘Subconscious & Conscious’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=181031>.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Jung, ‘The Concept of the Collective Unconscious’ p. 42-3.

We contain everything, it is our brain activity which STOPS us perceiving everything. Scientists found that when LSD or DMT are administered the so called "mystical" experiences were accompanied with a drop off in the brains activity - the secret is letting go to the flow - meditation is a great way to learn how to do this more and more deeply.⁵³

In this comment we can see the connection that is being created between the psychological idea of the collective unconscious and the holistic idea of Oneness, with the addition of the way to connect to this One collective unconscious: meditation.

As we have seen, the participants on the David Icke forum often try to incorporate scientific theories and concepts to their own knowledge claims. Whether these ideas stem from natural sciences or psychology, the connection seems to serve as a strategy to legitimize their own ideas. With regard to references to natural sciences, we have seen that the participant's own ideas are closely connected to scientific ideas. Thus, the apocalyptic event that is believed to be happening by the end of 2012 is related to astronomical explanations as well as ideas from astrophysics. The esoteric notion of the "third eye" is, in its turn, connected to the biological functions of the pineal gland. Connecting spiritual ideas to physiological and astronomical notions therefore provides for a scientific veil that makes the spiritual claim seem more legitimate. With the assumption in mind that the authority of scientific knowledge is well established in today's Western society (Daum 2009), connecting knowledge claims with scientific disciplines makes them harder to refute.

Ideas that find their origin in psychology are often related to the knowledge claims of the participants when these knowledge claims deal with the way in which the Elite tries to manipulate the minds of the common people. Whether they are debating brainwashing techniques of the mainstream media by relating it to the psychoanalytical idea of the influence of the archetype images, or using Festinger's idea of cognitive dissonance to explain why the majority of the people do not see what they see, the participants of the forum find in psychology ways to justify their ideas and legitimize their knowledge claims. On the other hand, psychological ideas like the collective unconscious serve to justify the exploration of the human potential, for instance by suggesting what the collective unconscious is, how we can benefit from

⁵³ 'Subconscious & Conscious'.

it and how we can connect with the collective unconscious. The connection with established scientific theories and concepts is therefore a powerful tool to legitimize the participants' knowledge claims.

3.4 Concluding remarks: empowerment through science

In this chapter I have explored how scientific arguments are used to legitimate certain knowledge claims. Arguments based on rationality form the base of criticism, for instance when a participant makes a claim for which he cannot provide enough convincing evidence. At the same time, rationality is used to establish certain knowledge claims by connecting events with mystical assumptions, most notably through the practice of numerology. Furthermore, I have explained how a range of terminology borrowed from the scientific community is used to cloth knowledge claims in an aura of thoroughness and factuality, both methodologically and with regard to content. Finally, I looked at the way in which scientific theories, most notably theories from natural sciences and psychology, blend with the participant's ideas, and how this mixture of science and conspирituality works to legitimate certain knowledge claims. Science, therefore, proves to be a very fruitful source of legitimacy.

What is it with science that makes it so attractive for the participants to relate many of their arguments to it? Some scholars have noted that science has slowly but persistently overshadowed the role of religion in contemporary Western society (Lynch & Woolgar 1990, Feyerabend 1999, Pušnik 2010) and that scientists, who speak in the name of science, are perceived by the general public to be trustworthy sources of information (Van Dijk 1993). Science, therefore, has a persistent authority to not only inform us about the state of being in the Universe, but also on how one should gain such knowledge. The authoritative voice of science is therefore attractive for others to incorporate into their system of ideas (Hammer 2001). As we have seen in this chapter, the participants on the David Icke forum do exactly that. By connecting their own ideas to the scientific enterprise, they give these ideas a similar authority as were they actually scientific. Likewise, by claiming to adopt a similar way of arguing, they show that they are critical towards knowledge claims and do not take anything for granted. Most importantly, as

we have seen in the second section of this chapter, they cloth their investigation and findings in scientific terms, so that it seems that their knowledge claims did not come out of the blue, but are actually supported by thorough investigations.

This has profound implications for the way in which they perceive themselves in the grander scheme of things. Scientific terminology, and especially terms that relate to scientific method, provides the participants with a set of terms by which they can show the seriousness of their investigations. Since conspirituality culture is suspicious of mainstream orthodoxy they have to provide for a sustainable alternative. In doing so, however, their knowledge claims also have to maintain a sense of truthfulness. By adopting a terminology similar to an enterprise that represents a certain authority concerning knowledge, they can create a similar aura of authority. The fact that they do not take conclusions accepted by mainstream scholars at face value but are encouraged to investigate on their own empowers them to take on this quest against the mainstream orthodoxy. Without clothing these investigations in scientific terms like “research,” “observations,” “proof,” and “evidence,” participants on the forum and in conspirituality culture in general would lose some of their sense of doing something worthwhile as individuals, and therefore would lose some of their sense of empowerment. Science, therefore, does not only work as a fruitful frame of reference by which knowledge can be legitimized, but also ensures the participants a certain status as thorough and objective researchers.

4. Legitimation through personal experience

As we have seen above, one of the central tenets of conspирituality is “do your own research.” In the discussion about legitimating knowledge claims through scientific arguments I have argued about the role of the term “research” in this phrase. The following chapter deals with the central role of personal experience in this phrase

The esoteric tradition has an ambivalent relationship with personal experiences. As Hammer (2001) explains, hierarchical movements such as the Theosophical Society rest greatly on the experiences of the primary spokesperson of the movement, Helena Blavatsky. It leaves little room for personal experiences of the members. Instead, narratives of experience of individuals are there to confirm the miraculous powers of Blavatsky. This authoritative approach to religious experience changed with Rudolph Steiner and anthroposophy. Although Steiner’s views on the cosmological myths were authoritative, he emphasized that his views could be verified by his followers through personal experience. He actually provides detailed methods on how to obtain these spiritual insights. Hammer comments that no follower of Steiner has ever mastered his method and therefore not achieved spiritual experience. Although the various elements of Steiner’s method are aimed at making experience conform to his cosmology, Steiner’s idea of sharing the method of attaining spiritual experiences freed the way for later New Age spokespersons to explore ways of democratizing personal experience. Personal experience is an important element of New Age beliefs (Heelas 1996, Bloch 1998, Aupers & van Otterloo 2000, Sutcliff & Bowman 2000). Claims about the nature of the universe and mankind can not only be regarded as valid if they stem from a privileged personal experience or revelation, but also if the information provided simply rings true for the audience. This democratization of personal experience provides a dilemma for an esoteric spokesperson since it requires them to convince the audience that their personal experience are more valid than others (Hammer 2001). At the same time, as Hammer (2010) observes, while individuals in the New Age movement express the significance of autonomous individual experiences, expressions of New Age religion tend to be remarkably homogeneous. This is explained by the mechanism in the New Age milieu where the actual doctrines of the milieu are limited, but the amount of personal experiences vast. The explanation of a particular personal experience is therefore

rapidly related to New Age tenets, while alternative explanations such as naturalistic explanations are considered to be less relevant. Thus, Hammer (2010) concludes: “Explanation and experience are discussed as if they were two sides of the same coin, and will thereby reinforce each other [...] something as seemingly personal as a first-hand experience becomes a privileged way of transmitting socially constructed explanations” (63).

David Icke, the primary spokesperson of conspirituality, uses the reliance on personal experience only scarcely. He does, however, attribute the origin of his research to a mystical experience he had in Peru when he visited a psychic healer who told him that he “would be a healer who is here to heal the earth and he will be world famous.” Years later when he visited Peru again he had an experience in which “Energy was pouring from my hands with fantastic power [...] My feet continued to burn and vibrate for some 24 hours.” While this experience may have influenced him to start his career as a writer and a lecturer, the content of this revelation has not been the primary focus of the content of his work. Nevertheless, it would not be surprising if this narrative appealed to many of the New Age audience he has attracted over the years. As we will see, the participants of the David Icke forum reiterate the importance of personal experience in the New Age movement and David Icke’s motivating experience in their discussions. The goal of this chapter is to explore the various ways in which narratives of personal experience are used to legitimize knowledge claims and whether these strategies are successful in doing so.

This section will deal with three kinds of narratives of personal experience. First, we will look at the narratives told from a first person perspective. Participants on the David Icke forum often back up their knowledge claims with personal experiences, or base their knowledge claims entirely on a first person perspective in which they provide a privileged insight into knowledge that has been revealed to them. Second, we will look at third person narratives. With certain knowledge claims, the participants find it appropriate to discuss interviews given by people who experienced something first hand. These third person narratives are, as we will see, judged differently than the first person narratives. I will also touch upon the discussion about the relationship between first person and third person narratives. Finally, I will discuss the second person narrative, which deals with tips and tricks on how to gain certain experiences and what these experiences ultimately lead to. As we will see, this second person experience lies at the heart of the credo “do your own research.”

4.1 First person narratives

The participants on the David Icke forum often relate certain knowledge claims to their own personal experience or base knowledge claims on their personal experience. In this section, I will discuss the most common forms of legitimizing knowledge claims based on personal experience. I will start by exploring how the personal enters the debate and how it relates to knowledge claims. I will then look at the way in which narratives of the personal claim certain knowledge and how the other members of the forum judge these privileged experiences. To be sure, while there are various ways in which participants can express experiences from their personal lives, I will only look at the way in which these narratives serve a legitimizing purpose, that is, if they relate discursively to a certain knowledge claim.

4.1.2 Personal experience as legitimizing force

In a medium that is created for individuals to voice their own opinions it can be expected that the opinions in the David Icke forum do not just stem from external sources or distancing rational arguments, but also from personal narratives of experiences. Although many kinds of arguments are provided to defend or attack a certain viewpoint, narratives of experience are strongly present in the debates. From my data, I distinguished two kinds of ways in which narratives of personal experience contribute as a legitimizing force: 1) personal experiences can be used as a confirmation of a proposed knowledge claim; and 2) a reference to personal experience can be used to claim a voice of authority. The first more commonly used legitimation method can be seen in a discussion about something called “synchromysticism.” Synchromysticism is described as a non-academic (*sic*) “movement” that connects the religious tendency to look for meaning and signs, the animistic relationship with Nature and the schizophrenic inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Without going into details, the creator of the thread quotes an author by the name of J. Kephias who argues that watching and making movies are a way for people who are “alienated from all three areas of experience to pursue a meaningful relationship with their unconscious, while remaining a functional part of society.”⁵⁴ The discussion is about the existence of a meaningful relationship between movies and events in real

⁵⁴ ‘Schizophrenia, Synchromysticism, & Movie-Going’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=184306>

life. One of the participants confirms this statement because he witnessed this relationship first hand when he was younger:

Many times I have seen something strange on tv that works perfectly with something going on in my life.

I remember getting the shit kicked out of me by a group of assholes at school once (bigger guys) and when I got home was linked to a site about the columbine massacre from the yahoo daily news feed thing. The story described it as an act of rebellion against jocks (meat heads, the kind that I just got dominated by) and it got some evil thoughts rolling around in my head.

This is just one instance, movies, books, and news seem to constantly fuel whatever dark thought gives my reality an easy exit. Almost like something is pushing me towards a violent and bloody end.

This testimony shows that narratives of personal experience do not necessarily have to harbor knowledge claims in themselves, but can function primarily to confirm the validity of the knowledge claim. The participant who provided his story shows the rest of the participants that synchronisticism is real because it can be experienced.

Similar narratives of experience can be seen in a discussion about the dates 9-11-(20)11 and 11-11-(20)11, which are argued to harbor a special event, although none of the participants can say what kind of event will take place. The significance of the date becomes clear to a participants who admits: “have been seeing 11:11 on my clock, pager, TV, phone, car clock, laptop clock at very frequent rates since 911. I believe something may happen this date.”⁵⁵ After this comment, other participants reply with similar stories about seeing the number 11 at random places or events. Akin to the personal narrative of the former example, these narratives are used to confirm the knowledge claim that something is going to happen on the 9th or the 11th of November 2011. Moreover, by confirming the experience of the first participant who mentioned it, it creates a relationship between the participants who all have had the same experience. This could increase the validity of the experience, since it is shared by many, and therefore the

⁵⁵ '11-9-11 and 11-11-11' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=189285>.

significance of the knowledge claim. This way of connecting with other participants or even people from outside of the discussion forum will be discussed further below.

The second way in which participants on the David Icke forum use personal experience as a legitimizing force is when they claim a voice of authority by means of their experience. In this form, the narrative of personal experience does not focus on the content of the knowledge claim, but is used as a leverage in and of itself. The experience itself provides the person with certain knowledge and the authority to regard it as true. For example, in a discussion about the question of whether or not Freemasons can ever retire from their craft, some of the participants claim to be a Freemason or that they affiliated with the group. When they do not agree with another participant who claimed no such insider's status, they enforce their argument with a reference to their insider's knowledge, or discredit their opponent's arguments on the basis of lacking that insider's knowledge:

I am still amazed that people who have never been a freemason, and as they say themself, have no intention of ever getting involved in the craft, somehow know everything about the craft, and in fact know more then people who are masons, they know the higher secrets, but we [Freemasons] arent told anything about them.⁵⁶

This particular argument discredits the claims made by another participant about higher initiated Freemasons and their devotion to a malevolent being. Since the very foundation of his argument is under attack, he is forced to provide the reason for his knowledge claims. Apart from his believe in the theories of David Icke and Jordan Maxwell, he mentions that a lot of his family members were "worshipful Masters" in various lodges, and that he gained his knowledge through this exposure to them: "Through the lifetime of exposure to this 'club', (I'm 64 years old) I have seen and heard enough to know what David Icke is talking about is 'spot-on'. When I discovered David's work in the mid nineties, I had already seen fifty years of the goings-on that David speaks of." He furthermore admits that one of his grandfathers was a highly ranked Freemason, and his exposure to him leads him to believe that highly ranked Freemasons are "selling their soul to the Great Architect."

⁵⁶ 'Can a mason 'retire' from the craft?' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=175114>.

The participant with whom he is debating is, however, not willing to accept these conclusions at face value and questions the apparent lack of willingness of his grandfather to talk about the content of masonic position and beliefs. At this point the other participant seems to get frustrated and accuses his opponent of being unwilling to discuss Icke's point of view, and after a little back-and-forth bickering the discussion stops.

While the discussion did not reach a conclusion with regard to the content of the topic, it becomes clear that when two opposing views are facing each other, the advocates of these views can refer to their own personal experiences to claim their view as authoritative. Both participants try to legitimize their position by referring to experiences in their personal lives. The discussion remains unsolved, but it shows how narratives of personal experience create an aura of authority that is difficult to refute.

4.1.2 Privileged experience

Personal experiences are not only used to legitimize pre-stated knowledge claims, but can also function as a source of knowledge. Similar to the act of channeling, divination and receiving visions in the esoteric and other religious tradition, some of the participants claim to have received knowledge through privilege experience such as dreams, visions or visits by extraterrestrial beings. While many spokespersons in the esoteric tradition claim to have received knowledge from a non-earthly source, it is not a common phenomenon for participants on the forum to make authoritative claims based on revelations. When such claims are made, both the source of the claims and the reception by the other participants vary.

For instance, in a discussion about an interview in which a member of the Elite, Nick Rockefeller, reveals the plans made by the Elite to control the world's population, one of the members claims to have received additional information through her dreams. She says:

I say ALL PEOPLE from EVERY NATION needs to START PLANNING NOW in my last dream I was told of the fake news of the norwegian and there were talks in the narative sense in the background of the FAKE DISCLOSING OF THIS EVENT I was also hearing much talk about the next catastrophe attached to viral and germ warfare WE ARE ALL IN TROUBLE 2 new illnesses

will come out of the wood works my friends and in my dream 11-11-11 people would become devastated by these illnesses cropping up.⁵⁷

This participant claims that information about the truth surrounding worldly events such as the Norwegian shooting and future catastrophes came to her in a dream. In the course of the discussion she frequently refers to dreams as the source of her information about future events. She explains in detail how there will be famines and floods in the near future, and predicts an earthquake in the following months. Interestingly, she ends one of the posts with the comment that “they were all just dreams I have a hard time with my mind about them because I am a skeptical person by nature.” This comment seems to relativize her knowledge claims, but then she continues with her appeal to her emotions during those visions: “but then again it was just the feelings I got during them were something else, not to mention the sites I saw were just too incredible to just dismiss completely.” The way in which this sentence is phrased hints at the commonly shared idea in New Age that when something feels true it must be true, regardless of the fact that the source was “just a dream.”

The reception of her information is generally positive, since other members of the forum wish to know more about the content of her dreams, for instance about certain dates of catastrophes. Another participant wants to know if she has a link to all of her dream posts. Yet another member suggests that she needs her own thread in which she can elaborate on her dreams.

While the discussion above received mostly positive responses, this is not always the case. In one of the discussions a participant opens with a conversation he claimed to have had with two beings that appeared in his living room when he was meditating. It starts as follows:

Q: Who are you?

A: We are friends.

Q: What are you doing?

A: We study every dimensional background of science and lifeforms on earth and any place we desire in this or any other universe.

Q: Well than explain how the evolution of mankind started.

⁵⁷ ‘Rockefeller reveals 9/11 FRAUD to Aaron Russo’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=177493>

A: Mankind developed from larvae.

Q: So we morphed so to speak slowly into a butterfly?

A: You morphed into a mindcontrolled transformed lifeform.

Q: Is that the reason why the term *MK Butterfly* exists?

A: No.

Q: We got this stepford discussions and a lot people start attacking other peoples conclusions and I don't want to see that so could we all just get you're conclusions about this subject if you know something about it?⁵⁸

What follows is an elaborated explanation about the way in which humans are enslaved because they think too much and do not follow their heart. This makes them vulnerable to manipulation by the malevolent reptilians and hybrid people who operate in Hollywood. Furthermore, the author claims that most of the people around us have been replaced by mechanical duplicates, but we are unaware of that because we have a reduced mental state. Eventually, "the humans with love in their energetic grid will stay on earth. The humans with dark energy will leave this planets version and start a existence which fits more their darkness." Much of this elaboration is imbued with terms coming from David Icke's cosmological theories, such as reptilians, greys, and shapeshifting.

While the knowledge claim based on this extraterrestrial visit does not pose anything that has not already been proposed by more authoritative spokespersons such as David Icke, the fact that it is repackaged in this narrative of revealed knowledge acts as a way to claim authority over the knowledge claim, especially since the content of the revealed knowledge relates to a discussion actually held somewhere else on the forum. Although revealed messages like these are no strange phenomenon in the esoteric tradition, most of the participants on the forum react skeptically to this narrative, with replies such as "This thread requires a hefty *facepalm*," and "Can't you get medication for this sort of thing?" Others mock his visit with comments such as "Did you ask for the Lottery numbers for the weekend? If they're interdimensional travellers with such vast knowledge, then I'd think coming up with Saturday's numbers should be a piece of piss." Despite the negative comments, some participants regard the information provided as true or question the nature of the beings themselves: "how do you know these beings were not lying

⁵⁸ 'My interview with strange beings in my livingroom' <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=186752>.

to you, you can't trust what they say to you." While the exact reason for accepting or discarding the narrative is not specified by the participants, it seems plausible that the participants who react negatively do this primarily because of the way the information is transmitted (i.e. by extraterrestrial beings), while the participants who see truth in the experience judge this primarily on the basis of the content of the message. This can be seen when one of the approving participants, for instance, says that the content of the message "looks quite good and explanatory."

Privileged experiences such as dreams and revelations may not be the primary way in which the participants claim and legitimize knowledge. They do, however, stem from the rich tradition of knowledge claims transmitted through revelations, divinations, and channeling commonly found in various religious traditions throughout the ages. The source of the revelations as well as their relevance to the establishment of a certain tradition may change over time; they still seem to be an attractive way to transmit knowledge otherwise unavailable to the people. As we have seen, people react differently to revealed knowledge. Knowledge based on private revelations by extraterrestrial entities is being judged more harshly than knowledge based on dreams. While it remains unclear from the discussions why this is, a possibility is that it is easier to accept knowledge based on dreams, since dreams are a more accessible source for other people to relate to. Contact with extraterrestrial beings, on the other hand, is a much more rarely shared experience and therefore harder to accept, since it requires both a willingness to accept the knowledge that is proposed in the narrative, and also a belief that knowledge can be acquired through communication with extraterrestrial beings. Since the belief in contact with extraterrestrial beings is not a shared conviction on the forum, it seems less likely that the other participants accept knowledge claims based on such contact.

From what we have seen above, first person narratives serve various functions in the quest of legitimizing knowledge claims. They serve as a way to confirm a certain knowledge claim by suggesting that this knowledge is not just some theory or ideology, but that it has a foundation in the experienced reality. By means of narrating such an experience the other participants become aware of this foundation and therefore the validity of the knowledge claim becomes stronger. Secondly, first person narratives function as a foundation for knowledge claims. As we have seen, dreams and acclaimed visits by non-earthly beings can be used as such

foundations. It depends on the frames of reference of the other participants as to how these privileged experiences are judged. Finally, using narratives of experience as a source of knowledge creates an authoritative voice, since it is impossible to deny another person's experience by itself. Whether or not the other participants recognize this authority depends on the content of the message. As Hammer (2001) explains: "the democratic ideal implies that even information channeled from the loftiest intergalactic source should only be accepted if it rings true to the individual who receives the information" (340). In the case of a discussion forum it is up to the recipients of the narrative of personal experience to judge the truthfulness of the narrative.

4.2 Third person narratives

The second way in which the participants view personal narratives as a legitimizing force for claiming knowledge is when they use third person narratives. In the esoteric tradition, third person narratives are often used by the spokespersons as examples of the efficacy of their ideas and practices. They are written down as testimonies of anonymous people who came to the practice in question and performed its rituals or were healed through its specific forces. As Hammer (2001) explains, third person narratives serve on the one hand to establish the spokesperson's worldview by providing concrete examples that can form the foundation of a discussion of the various elements of this worldview. On the other hand, they are used in such a way that they create a sense of personhood. In short, this means that narratives of esoteric practices such as divinations are created to establish an idea of a stable and genuine core of the individual personality, a true self, which is reflected in these divinations. The divinations then serve as a way to discover this core (351 ff.).

The participants on the forum are not in a position to claim third person narratives in the same way that spokespersons in the esoteric tradition do, for the basic reason that there is no mentioning of practices or rituals that require third person testimonies. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify third person narratives as a way of legitimizing knowledge claims. In this context, I understand third person narratives as those stories and testimonies from people who are not explicitly part of the forum community. These outsider's testimonies are brought in or re-posted in full by the participants on the forum often to support a certain knowledge claim, or to invoke a debate.

One of such third person testimony that is used by the participants are videos of interviews held by people who have personally experienced something that is of relevance to the participants. For instance, one of the discussions about the relationship between celebrities in the 1960s and the CIA mind control program MKULTRA starts with a series of interviews held by one of the insiders. It is introduced as follows: “Here are a series of very interesting videos. An insider being interviewed about the 60s era celebrities and MKultra. Worth a good listen!” Although the links to the interview are not working by the time of research, from the comment it⁵⁹ can be distilled that it shows a connection between the military background of most of the 1960s musicians, making them suspicious of collaborating with the US government to control the growing unrest amongst young people in that era.⁶⁰ As one of the participants summarizes:

‘With this first batch of hippie seeds planted, TPTB waited for the sprouts which would soon blossom into those influential rock gods of the 60’s, who would then go out spread the Gospel of Cool to the younguns via the very mass-communication/brainwashing juggernaut that was the vast and powerful radio/TV/film/press network that TPTB owned and operated.’⁶¹

Because the videos do not work at the time of research, it remains unclear to me who this insider is. Nevertheless, the other participants are very positive about the interview, judging it as “interesting,” “awesome,” and “really good” and show appreciation by saying that they learned new things by watching the interview. Some participants refer to the interviewer Dave McGowan as a humorous person who is able to “punch a hole into every story” and wish that he would publish his ideas one day.

Granted that the videos actually contain said interview, and I have no reason to doubt this, it becomes clear that the participants regard this interview and the information provided as valuable for their own ideas. None of the participants put the claims into doubt, but instead appreciate the knowledge and confirm them with their own findings and opinions. Judging from the comments, it can be said that third person testimonies function best to affirm already

⁵⁹ ‘Laurel Canyon Celebrities MKultra’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=171006>.

⁶⁰ Although the actual interview has been taken off of Youtube, Youtube hosts a video by the same maker, Dave McGowan, that explains the main content of the Laurel Canyon conspiracy: ‘Murder and Mystery in Laurel Canyon – by David McGowan and Zeph Daniel’ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMwQMMQP98>

⁶¹ ‘Laurel Canyon Celebrities MKultra’.

established ideas or confirm the participant's view that unsuccessful countercultural movements like the hippie movement were unsuccessful because of interference of the Elite. Indeed, one of the participants implicitly expresses this idea by saying that "it seems the hippy and anti war movements were completely controlled from the start. Something to keep in mind when thinking about the 'truth' movement."⁶² Although ideas like these seem to jeopardize the position of the participants themselves (who is to say that their ideas are not controlled by the Elite either?) the possibility of this consequence is not discussed. Instead it seems that they try to distance themselves from the countercultural hippie movement because it was unsuccessful, leaving them as the movement who actually knows what is going on.

Similar to the discussion about first person narratives, third person narratives function as a confirmation of ideas that are already part of the body of knowledge available to the participants, or, if the particular knowledge was not already available, serve to confirm the worldview in which this particular knowledge fits. This raises questions about the relationship between first and third person narratives. Whenever a participant refers to their personal experience as a legitimation of a knowledge claim, it becomes a third person narrative for the other participants. In that sense, first and third person narratives reinforce each other. This reinforcement can be seen in the positive reception of the interview. By sharing outsider's perspectives in the forms of interviews and by telling their own stories it shows the participants that they are not alone in the conviction that their knowledge accurately describes reality. This in turn strengthens the participants in their idea that their perception of the worldly events is meaningful, and fuels their desire to show others how they can reach similar experiences about the nature of reality. The participants put a lot of effort into sharing information with others and showing where they can potentially find useful information. This is, of course, to let people experience for themselves that their knowledge claims bear a sense of truth.

⁶² The "truth movement" is a collective name for people who doubt the official story of the 9/11 attacks and provide alternative versions of the story, often incorporating conspiracy theories of different levels; ranging from the idea that the US government let it happen to a hidden elite used it as a ritual to gain spiritual power. See for instance the following discussion on the David Icke forum: 'Who did 9/11? The poll' <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=187233>.

4.3 Second person narratives

In the previous section we have already seen how personal narratives can aid in legitimizing knowledge claims. Despite differing content, forms, and their reception by other readers, the overlapping characteristic of these narratives is that these were all privileged experiences, i.e. experiences from certain individuals that were shared with the rest of the participants. This section covers a somewhat different perspective on the involvement of narratives of experience in the process of legitimizing knowledge, namely the democratization of privileged experiences. In Hammer's exposé of the esoteric tradition, he argues that various spokespersons in this tradition took it upon themselves to provide their followers with instructions on how to gain spiritual insights similar to that of the spokesperson. Rudolph Steiner, founder of the Anthroposophical Society, for instance, believed that certain spiritual senses could be trained to receive knowledge from higher worlds. The right technical procedure would enable the neophyte to enter the path toward spiritual insight. Steiner saw revelation not as a divine gift but as a product of correct technical procedures. Together with the notion that everyone can be their own guru, these ideas are nowadays central tenets in the New Age movement. The idea that anyone can experience what esoteric spokespersons have experienced opened up the hierarchical model of esoteric traditions, such as the Theosophical Society, toward a more democratic ideal: "a ritual is adopted, a doctrine followed only if it feels true" (Hammer 2001, 416). Examples mentioned by Hammer of this process of democratization of experience can be seen in the work of Sanaya Roman and Duane Packer's *Opening to Channel*, a self-help book that teaches its readers to channel messages from higher beings, or Ted Andrews' *How to See and Read the Aura*, which provides an example of methods that teach the reader how to gain paranormal powers. These examples show us that anybody is capable of gaining the privileged experiences of paranormal powers and spiritual insights.

Privileged experiences are democratized, meaning that privileged experiences are not just for the initiated, but for everyone to experience. As we have seen above, sharing of personal experiences can create a sense of "meaningful connections" between the participants and a desire to enable other participants to experience these connections. It comes therefore as no surprise that this democratization of personal experiences plays a part in legitimizing knowledge claims.

In what follows, I will deal with the way in which these second person narratives play a part in legitimizing knowledge claims.

4.3.1 Sharing knowledge

Contrary to the esoteric spokespersons mentioned above, the participants do not create a substantial method of how to attain knowledge and experiences of an alternative reality. Despite the lack of such a method, it is possible to distinguish ways in which the participants attempt to give hints to others on how to understand worldly and spiritual events. One of those hints is in the way in which knowledge is shared. Most of the experiences mentioned on the forum are relevant with regard to a certain knowledge claim, but while experiences cannot be reproduced, it is assumed that perceiving one's own experiences in the context of a conspiritual framework can recreate similar experiences. A good example of this somewhat abstract notion can be found in a discussion on the "One Eye Symbolism."⁶³ In this discussion it is proposed that the symbol of the one eye is very important in Illuminati symbolism, and that it can be seen all over the media through images of celebrities covering one eye with a hand. The discussion is not so much about the theory behind the One Eye symbolism (the original post contains a reference to the Eye of Horus), but rather a place to gather examples from the media such as pictures of celebrities, album covers and company logos containing the One Eye symbol. The way in which this kind of evidence is shared is aimed to make people aware of the vast amount of images containing one eye. By providing an array of pictures containing one eye and connecting it with the premise that it is an Illuminati symbol other participants may become aware of this pervasive symbol too. This in turn creates the experience of seeing this symbol everywhere and supports the knowledge claim that the Illuminati is trying to control the minds of the people. A similar example can be found in a discussion on "subliminal messages," which deals with hidden sexual images in advertisement and movies.⁶⁴

Another way of establishing a conspiritual framework is by sharing documentaries and movies from Youtube that provide a more elaborated argument than can usually be established through means of texts on the forum. There is, for instance, a discussion thread based on a two-hour documentary called "The Esoteric Agenda," which reveals the hidden esoteric agenda that

⁶³ 'One eye symbolism theat!' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=175464>.

⁶⁴ 'Collecting: Subliminals': <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=88377>.

lies behind worldly events staged by the hidden Elite.⁶⁵ It is introduced as follows: Through all my years of research I have never seen a documentary pull everything together so beautifully, such as this one.” First of all, the participant who posted this documentary claims to speak from experience by mentioning her “years of research.” It can be expected that she is already familiar with most of the conspiritual content. From that authority she responds to the video that it is “beautifully pulled together.” This suggests that other people can trust the quality of the video based on the claimed expertise of the poster. At the same time it also suggests that other participants can reach a similar amount of expertise as the poster by watching the video, and in a way experience what she has experienced by unveiling this knowledge.

4.3.2 Practical advice

Besides sharing certain sources of knowledge, the participants also occasionally give each other advice on practical matters. For instance, in a discussion about a 17th century book on demonology, the *Lesser Key of Solomon* by Clavicula Salomonis, one of the participants posts images of various magical sigils that, in occult practices connected with this book, correspond to various demons.⁶⁶ One of the participants wonders if it is safe to post sigils on a forum for everyone to read, since they can affect the subconscious. Two others confirm this statement and warn the person who posted the images to “watch out with that. They could have a strong effect on people.” The participant who posted the images reassures his critics by saying that “anyone can find them with a quick google search, I dont think reading a thread for few minutes will have any effect, it all depends what you want to project on them, and how far someone wants to take it and for what purpose.” Moreover, he argues that sigils and other forms of symbolism are used by media and companies to control the minds of the public. He posts the logos of about 30 companies to substantiate his claim.

Another example that shows that participants give each other practical advice on certain subjects can be found in a discussion about “elemental spirits,” when the participant who started the discussion wants to know more about these elemental spirits.⁶⁷ After some recommendations

⁶⁵ ‘The Hidden Agenda MUST SEE Documentary!!!’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=57365>.
The original documentary can be found at

http://www.moviesfoundonline.com/esoteric_agenda.php?comments_page=11#comments_anchor.

⁶⁶ ‘The Lesser Key of Solomon’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=178579>.

⁶⁷ ‘“Elemental spirits”?’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=190376>.

on books and websites one of the participants mentions another entity closely familiar with elementals: “elementaries.” This triggers another participant who sends out a warning: “Elementaries? I most certainly do not encourage anyone do mingle with Elementaries. [...] They are basically the disembodied shells of highly lustful beings still desiring physical sensations well after their physical shells have longed gone.” The discussion progresses in a question-and-answer dialogue about the nature of elementaries and what they can do. He advises to “leave them alone, because once you have one attached to you they can give you a hard time. Even adepts who have been trained in protective skills are not fully immune to these beings.”⁶⁸

These examples show that participants are apt to give advice on practical matters relating to the spiritual world, to ensure safe behavior when dealing with these issues. Even more so than with sharing knowledge and giving advice on sources, sharing practical advice presumes a certain amount of faith in the knowledgeability of the advisor. Thus, questions about the power of sigils assume that sigils have a power that should be approached with care. Similarly, advice on how to deal with elementaries assumes a belief in the existence of these entities. Practical advice therefore confirms the underlying knowledge claims to which the advice refers, and helps to establish the legitimacy of these knowledge claims.

4.3.3 Awakening

But what is there to experience in the first place? Why are participants trying to create similar experience in other people? How can researching the advice and knowledge claims made by fellow forum participants change the perspective of the researcher? Forum members occasionally mention this ultimate goal of researching conspiracy theories and spiritual knowledge. They call it “waking up” or “awakening.” Waking up, in the context of conspiracy theories, refers to the realization that there is in fact a global cabal that tries to rule the world by various means, of which mind control, information control, and the creation of a global government are important steps in the process. To be awakened means to see through the veil of mind control and disinformation by the mass media and the government. It also means that one can discern oneself from ordinary people, who occasionally are referred to as “sheeple,” a portmanteau of “sheep” and “people,” i.e. people who blindly follow the masses controlled by the hidden Elite.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

The David Icke forum has a separate section for people who are awakened and wish to put their new knowledge into practice. This section is not part of my standardized data-set because it does not deal primarily with legitimizing knowledge, but with practical advices and ideas about the process of awakening. Within my data set, however, there is one participant who describes the process of waking up in a discussion about the origin of the number 11. He says:

I used to be like [the other member], I'd try to find reason and logic in everything. I finally realised that I had to open my mind to the idea that I couldn't possibly fathom how advanced, intelligent and old those in charge are. Everything around us is a construct, it's generated and pulled over our eyes. Something like creating a language like English to have hidden meaning and ritualistic uses to a person may seem impossible but once you get out of the habit of thinking small scale you come to realise everything is possible.⁶⁹

In this testimony the participant opposes the exclusive use of reason and logic as a mean of legitimating knowledge. He proclaims that thinking this way inhibits the possibility of discovering hidden truths and possibilities to perceive the world as it is. He describes reality to the ordinary person as a veil that is created and pulled over our eyes. Awakening means that the veil is removed and one can see the amazing possibilities in this world with regard to the potency of those in charge.

Second person narratives serve to aid in this process of awakening. By learning from other people who proclaim to be “awakened” and following the credo of “do your own research” on various conspiracy theories and spiritual matters, it is believed that people will eventually come to realize the truth behind worldly events, and thus “wake up” to a new reality. Since it is not accepted in conspiracy culture to coerce someone into believing something, there is a strong focus on “do you own research.” This, of course, does not mean that conspirituality researchers cannot aid each other in their research.

4.4 Concluding remarks: empowerment through personal experience

⁶⁹ ‘The Number Eleven’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=174553>.

As I have mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, narratives of personal experience lie at the heart of the conspiritual tenet of “do your own research.” Knowledge is not only legitimate when it is logical or plausible, but also when it can be experienced in the actual world. The narratives in the first, second and third person help to establish the idea that the proposed knowledge claims are not only just knowledge claims, but refer to something that has a foundation in experienced reality. First and third person narratives help to establish this idea by sharing experiences of like-minded peers with the rest of the participants, while second person narratives shows others how to gain similar experiences. At the same time, personal experiences give the participants a voice of authority. While other participants can contest this authority for various reasons, the fact that they have experienced it is often not put into doubt (the exception may be the case of the alien visit, where most participants serious doubts about the truthfulness of the account). Most importantly, narratives of personal experiences create a sense of connection. Participants who possess conspiritual knowledge refer to themselves as “awake,” while the rest of the world is still “sleeping.” From this perspective, first and third person narratives can be perceived as examples of what can be experienced once one is awoken, while second person narratives fulfill the role of advising people on how to “wake up.” In this context, practical advice is given to those who already have a certain amount of foreknowledge and therefore know how to properly apply the advice.

Legitimizing knowledge through means of sharing experiences and aiding other in this process creates a sense of community. Participants who regard themselves as awakened share something that differentiates them from those who have not experienced it yet, or (in the case of the “sheeple,”) never will. While it lies beyond the scope of this research to look into the ways in which the participants actually see themselves as a part of a community, knowledge claims legitimated by personal experiences at least creates some sort of knowledge community. Communities, even if they are based on an understanding of personal experience, can create a form of belonging and empowerment (Bloch 2000). The way in which community, personal experience and empowerment are related to each other will be discussed in the final chapter. In the next chapter I will show how the participants on the David Icke forum legitimate their knowledge claims by framing it in an “Us versus Them” dichotomy. As we will see, imagining a

dualistic worldview in which the participants are the good guys that stand up against the bad guys can strengthen a knowledge community.

5. Legitimation through dualism

In the former chapters we have seen how the participants on the David Icke forum use arguments from science and personal experience to legitimate their knowledge claims. I have argued that both strategies create a sense of empowerment: the scientific arguments by creating an aura of thoroughness and rationality and the narratives of personal experience by suggesting a sense of community of the “awakened.” This chapter deals with the way in which the participants on the David Icke forum construct a dualistic worldview through which they interpret historical and contemporary events. This dualistic worldview then functions as a way for the participants to legitimize their knowledge claims.

In his exegesis on the esoteric tradition, Olav Hammer explains that esoteric spokespersons attempt to create a tradition of their own, in which they show that their specific ideas have been around for centuries, albeit in different forms. For example, esoteric spokespersons incorporate ideas from ancient Egypt, India, Tibet or even imagined historical places such as Atlantis into their worldview, claiming that these ideas are not new, but an actual recovery of already existing ideas. In the esoteric tradition, the ideas that sprang from these individual places are not regarded as functioning within their respective knowledge system, but understood as “stations in the transmission of an ageless wisdom, a *philosophia perennis* that has been accessible to the initiates of all times and places” (Hammer, 2001, 170). The reference to ancient traditions does not only suggest that modern esoteric ideas have ancient origins but also ‘buttress the claim that there is a common core to all religions’ (171). The diversity of religions is explained in terms of corruption in the process of passing down this common core from initiated sages to the common people. There exists, therefore, an esoteric religion, which represents the *philosophia perennis*, and an exoteric religion in the form of superficial rituals, belief systems, and practices.

Contrary to the esoteric tradition, in which relating knowledge claims to ancient traditions and the *philosophia perennis* can claim their legitimacy, the conspiratorial worldview is deeply dualistic. Here, knowledge claims are considered legitimate when they are argued in light of this dualism. In the dualistic worldview of conspiratorship the universe is divided into an absolute “good” and an absolute “evil.” In this worldview, the hidden Elite represents “evil” and

their spiritual counterparts, while “good” is represented by those who are awakened, be it on the level of conspiracy theories or on the level of spirituality. Arguing from the premise that reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckman 1991 [1966]) we can assume that in the dualistic worldview of conspirituality the notions of “good” and “evil” are constructed frames through which conspiritualists categorize events, individuals and groups. And if good and evil are constructed, so are the entities that represent good and evil, i.e. the “enemies” and the “heroes.”

As Nietzsche observed more than a century ago: “Dagegen stelle man sich “den Feind” vor [...] und hier gerade ist seine That, seine Schöpfung: er hat “den bösen Feind” concipirt, “den Bösen”, und zwar als Grundbegriff, von dem aus er sich als Nachbild und Gegenstück nun auch noch einen “Guten” ausdenkt – sich selbst!...” (2007 [1886] 273-4). According to Nietzsche, the “people of resentment” construct an image of their enemies, attribute certain characteristics to them and base their image of the “good,” themselves, onto this image by attributing contrary characteristics to it. Through this radical dualistic worldview every aspect of human life, religion, and history can be interpreted by means of these conflicting forces. As it analyzes events and traditions through this perspective, it also identifies certain agents that actively contributed to either the “good” or the “evil” side.

As we will see below, the participants are involved in the reinterpretation of traditions using this narrative of duality. This narrative views historical events in a similar light as the contemporary world, namely as a world which is divided into the mind-controlled majority, and the people who have “woken up” and see the world as it really is. This chapter will deal with the way in which certain knowledge claims are incorporated in this conspiritual duality. While it would be impossible to recreate the entire conspiritual narrative, it will become apparent that historical events, religious and non-religious traditions, and certain individuals have their place in the imagined narrative of the world. As we will see, the dichotomous conspiritual narrative gives the individual participants a place in the grander story of the world. By the end of this chapter we will also see how this narrative has some very sinister implications.

5.1 Dualistic historical imagination

The dual worldview of “good” and “evil” places the participants who tell them not only in the context of their own time and place, but also within a certain historical narrative. These historical narratives are aimed at showing how contemporary struggles have been around for a long time,

thus placing the protagonists in a context of an age-long battle with imagined negative forces. Often participants on the David Icke forum relate to historical events to show that malevolent forces have been around for centuries or even millennia, or trace back certain interpretations of contemporary events to ancient traditions, thus creating an ongoing historical line from the beginning of mankind to the present. This section will deal with some of these historical references and the way in which they are relevant to legitimating knowledge claims regarding the interpretation of contemporary events and symbols.

In the perception of the participants on the David Icke forum, conspiracy theories are not something that has been around only recently. The conspiratorial nature of events can be traced to almost every significant event in human history. One of the participants acknowledges this when he argues about hidden meaning in the English language:

Whoever is in charge of this world has been so for thousands if not millions of years and is more intelligent than you could ever come to imagine. Language and the evolution of it is child's play to them. English was created in my opinion by tptb [The Power That Be] to be the primary language on the planet and as such it was made how they wanted it with hidden and secret meanings but most of it is right there in your face and people don't even see it.⁷⁰

In a discussion on the identity of Jack the Ripper, various participants suggest that the murderer can be traced to the British Royalty and was initiated in secret societies such as the Freemasons or the Rosicrucians. While even Aleister Crowley is accused of being part of a homosexual pedophile ring together with members of –again– British Royalty.⁷¹ While in the latter case a reference to the dichotomous conspiracy narrative is not used to legitimate certain knowledge claims, this is indeed the case in the former example. Other references to duality in history as a legitimating force can be found in a discussion on the reality of the Illuminati and whether their power spread beyond their original locality, Bavaria. One participant posts a photograph of a letter supposedly written by George Washington that mentions the spreading of the Bavarian Illuminati into the United States. The participant comments:

⁷⁰ 'The Number Eleven' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=174553>.

⁷¹ 'Jack the Ripper murders' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=48101>.

President George Washington acknowledged that Weishaupt's Illuminati spread into the US, and that specifically, their ideologies may have spread due to individuals within freemasonry (but not lodges themselves) and influenced the founding of the Democratic Party. There is also evidence out there that the Rothschild banking family had close relationships with some of the members in the Bavarian Illuminati. People didn't just start saying "Illuminati" for no reason...⁷²

In this argument it is not just the image of the letter, but also the reference to the larger narrative of conspiracy that helps to legitimate the knowledge claim. If it is believed that throughout history there have been events that are influenced by hidden forces with their own agenda, such as the establishment of the United States, it is easier to accept certain kinds of evidence as testimonies to that idea. In that sense, the conspiracy narrative and specific kinds of evidence reinforce each other in the process of legitimizing a certain knowledge claim.

It is not just historical events that are interpreted with a dualistic worldview. In some discussions, participants refer to the historical use of symbols that are still prevalent in contemporary society. In a discussion on a concert by pop singer Kylie Minogue one of the participants describes the show's set and props as a reflection of ancient fertility rites. The date of the show is interpreted as coincide with the summer solstice: "The live performance has been planned to coincide with the Mid Summer solstice, airing between the 19th and the 21st. The show consisted of Kylie singing dressed as the ancient Greek goddess of love, sexuality and beauty, surrounded by her minions."⁷³ The participant then explains how the image of the goddess affects our subconscious minds by creating a flow of energy in the form of attention. This energy is supposed to be used by the Illuminati for unmentioned reasons:

Aphrodite was also considered the Goddess of fertility. Fertility rituals are heavily associated with midsummer in the ancient polytheistic religions and folklore. Are the people watching Kylie Minogue's performance being tricked into taking part in some kind of Summer solstice fertility ritual? As the saying goes 'energy flows where attention goes', are the Illuminati using these out-in-the-open rituals to gather our spiritual energy for something?

⁷² 'Give me REAL Proof' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=176831>.

⁷³ 'Kylie Monigue's Aphrodite' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=173733>.

In this example we can see how participants on the David Icke forum perceive religious and spiritual imagery. According to this line of reasoning, exterior forms of religious imagery and rituals can differ according to time and space, but still contain an essential form and function. In this case, direct lines are drawn between fertility rites and images of goddesses in different ancient cultures and connected to similar forms in contemporary popular culture. Thus, it is assumed that the function of these rituals and accompanying imagery has remained the same throughout time and across different cultures. The participant concludes: "This is yet more proof of the ancient pagan gods remain worshiped by the Illuminati." In a similar fashion, a discussion on the presence of the "One Eye" symbol in contemporary popular culture leads one of the participants to elaborate on the symbolic use of the One Eye symbol in different cultures:

The All-seeing Eye on the back of the U.S. Dollar Bill, called the Great Seal of the United States contains much esoteric symbolism. Due to space and time I will point out that the pyramid contains 72 blocks which is symbolic of the numerical amount of the Great Name of God (IHVH). The name is also arranged in a pyramid while each character is given a numerical amount. God (Jehovah) is said to have revealed His name to Moses as "I am that I am." The Zoroastrian god Ahuramazda is also said to have revealed his name in one of the 21 Yashts as "ahmi yat ahmi." As mentioned in the quote by Albert Pike, the All-seeing eye is an emblem of Osiris. As indicated on the back of the U.S. Dollar bill the All-seeing Eye is found atop thirteen (13) layered pyramid. The Persians observed the the thirteenth day of the calendar of Ahuramazda as Tistar; Sirius.⁷⁴

This quote shows that some symbols found in contemporary society have a special esoteric meaning, a meaning that can be found by looking at different cultures throughout history. In discussing the significance of the All-seeing Eye throughout history, the participant connects several cultures: contemporary United States, Judaic culture, Zoroastrian culture, ancient Egypt and ancient Persian culture. Although the meaning of this symbol may have differed in various cultural contexts, it is interpreted as a testimony of a symbolic essence that transgresses cultural and temporal boundaries. This way of interpreting borrows from the esoteric tradition mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. Where the esoteric tradition finds a *philosophia perennis* in

⁷⁴ 'One eye symbolism threat!' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=175464>.

different forms of religion, conspirituality culture finds evidence of hidden symbolism that has been used throughout history by a hidden Elite, and is still used in contemporary society.

The participants of the David Icke forum use the idea of a hidden history as a legitimizing force to back up certain knowledge claims. By imagining a history in which symbols and events are not necessarily culturally bound, but testimonies to the idea of a timeless struggle between the Elite and the oppressed, the participants create a narrative in which they can place themselves in a grander historical perspective. In this historical perspective, forces of good and forces of evil can be identified. In the next two sections I will deal with two ways in which these forces become immanent, namely in the form of (religious) traditions and actual (groups of) people.

5.2 *Dualistic traditions*

The narrative of conspirituality is deeply dichotomous. The participants see themselves as part of an ongoing struggle between a malevolent Elite whose influence can be traced throughout history. In this struggle they identify various forces of good and evil. In this section, I will deal with the way in which this struggle is reflected in various forms of traditions. While these traditions do not have to be religious per se, as we will see, they are often affiliated to a spiritual idea or related to a spiritual spokesperson.

Because of its focus on duality, the conspiritual worldview of the participants on the David Icke forum relies less on the idea of a *philosophia perennis* than the esoteric tradition. One of the dichotomies that can be identified is privatized spirituality that opposes organized religion. In this dichotomy, organized religion is perceived as oppressive to the individual mind, while private spirituality is regarded as a journey towards self-exploration and liberation. A discussion titled “The Mind must be destroyed” starts with a quote from spiritual guru Osho, who proclaims that discipline has been misunderstood as something that should be taught by others, while it is really something that is within the individual. He calls out to “destroy the mind” so individuals can grow as creative beings.⁷⁵ After a few thoughts by various participants, another participant posts a direct quote from Helena Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* and does not add any comments. The following discussion between three participants takes place. Participant 2 quoted Blavatsky:

⁷⁵ ‘The Mind must be destroyed’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=176252>.

Participant 1: "You needed to quote Blavatsky as she went to India and Tibet where she received her teachings. I wouldn't give a damn for her ascended masters and their teachings. Humanity needs to be imprisoned by religions."

Participant 2: "Imprisoned? Really?"

Participant 1: "REALLY!!! If you understand that but you need to stop being a follower."

Participant 2: "A follower of what?"

Participant 1: "You quoted itwithout any questioning or your own thoughts."

Participant 2: "I use a quote and suddenly I am a "follower?" I won't waste my time explaining myself here, so I will respectfully ignore your accusations. The irony in this all is that you yourself posted a video from Osho, does that make you a "follower" who accepted it "without any questioning or your own thoughts.""

Participant 1: "Haven't you noticed that I wrote that it was only speech of worth listening? I always laugh when I listen to it. I wouldn't waste my time to listen to his other talks. I freed my mind from religions and spiritual beliefs."

Participant 3 to Participant 2: "Anything. You should never blindly follow any group of humans. Collect your own evidence and form your own theories. It's ok to believe in Christ and his teachings or whatever your religious thing is, just don't blindly agree with what your religious group tells you to believe. To have faith in a human or group of humans is to surrender all free thought and control over your life and mind."

Participant 2: "Who ever said I was a follower of anything."

Participant 3: "I suppose I could have misjudged you by your posts, if so just ignore what I said."⁷⁶

From this excerpt we can identify two important features in the dichotomous interpretation of religious traditions. First, we see that participant 1 blames participant 2 for being a follower of Blavatski because he quoted her without providing his own thoughts on the matter, while participant 1, who quoted Osho earlier in the discussion, proclaims he is not a follower of Osho because he just mentions it as something that is "worth listening" to. This shows that although advising others on relevant ideas by well-known spokespersons, it is important to show that participants have their own thoughts on the matter and are not "blindly following" this

⁷⁶ Ibidem.

spokesperson. Second, the discussion reveals how the participants view organized religion. Participant 3 argues that it is not inherently bad to follow the teachings of a religious figure, as long as one does not blindly follow whatever the group of followers believes. This comment shows that this participant perceives believers in an organized religion as people who blindly follow the group and do not think for themselves, while at the same time it suggests that organized religion is functioning to do exactly that. This view is perpendicular to the view proposed in the same comment, namely that one should take from traditions whatever is useful to form one's own theories. Quoting spiritual leaders can therefore be useful, as long as it is not blindly regarded as truth. It should also be noted that the first comment in the discussion above mentions that people "need to be imprisoned by religion." While participant 2 meets this idea with surprise, it seems to relate to the idea of awakening mentioned in the former chapter. There we have seen that awakening is understood as being able to see through the veil that the Elite have brought up to control the masses. In the understanding of the participant, as he suggests later in the discussion, religion is such a veil. People who are awake do not need religion to tell them what to believe, but can figure this out by themselves by doing their own research.

Another way in which the participants perceive the dichotomous division between "good" and "evil" traditions can be found in a discussion on the question if Freemasons can retire from the craft. In this discussion, one participant proclaims that Freemasons can retire from the craft as long as their souls are not under contract by the "Great Architect."⁷⁷ After a couple of critical remarks he explains:

The point of my first comment (#9) was to make a distinction between the local lodge, and the influence of the global elite (i.e., those highly initiated members at the top of the pyramid) on such local lodges through a designed manipulation of an - ages old - agenda. Of course a 'good-ol'boy' mason (whippin' it up) at his local lodge, will have no clue of what the wizards and magicians at the highest level of secrecy are up to.

This comment makes a distinction within the Freemasonry between people who are there for their own interest, the low-level Freemasons, and people who are actually running the world, the

⁷⁷ 'Can a mason 'retire' from the craft?' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=175114>.

high-level Freemasons. Although usually Freemasons are perceived as malevolent in general, when pushed, participants may be willing to add nuance to that statement. In this case we can see that traditions, even though perceived as malevolent in general, can have their “good” side and their “evil” side. In the case of the Freemasons, the low-level Freemasons are considered to be relatively harmless, while high-level Freemasons are actually ruling the world. The participant explains that high-ranked Freemasons have to be watched with suspicion because “they are all designed to support a Luciferian agenda. Once one has become a highly initiated member well into the ranks of the secrecy, one has no way to get out. The 'contract' is then hyperdimensional.” The underlying assumption of such an evaluation of high- and low-ranking Freemasons is that high-level Freemasons are not malevolent because they are high-level, but because they have to “sign a contract” with a higher being. This contract then binds the individual to the agenda of this higher being, which is malevolent, and thus takes away the freedom of the individual.

Here we see a similarity with the judgment of organized religion versus personalized spirituality: whatever takes away the freedom of the individual to explore according to personal needs is perceived as malevolent, such as organized religion or the binding factor of Freemasonry, while whatever sustains an attitude of criticism and self-development, such as Freemasonry for personal reasons and doing your own research, is regarded as positive. The attitude towards tradition is therefore dichotomized according to the degree of coercion or blind acceptance of an idea or belief. The participant in the latter example is ironically reminded of that idea when another participant proclaims the following: “The basis of your criticism seems to be that they are taking what they are told as gospel without personal research. However, most of your criticism seems to be on the basis of david Icke's research and not your own. Can i ask what research you have carried out independently of Icke's work?”⁷⁸ While this question remains unanswered, it shows the importance being critical towards any source, including sources that can be regarded as arguing in favor of their position.

This section has made it apparent that in the process of legitimizing certain knowledge claims by relating it to their dualistic worldview, it is important for participants to show that they have their own thoughts on the matter. The rest of the participants do not easily accept quotes from spokespersons or the admittance that your personal opinions rely on the opinions of certain

⁷⁸ Ibidem.

spokesperson. In order to legitimate knowledge claims it is therefore important to be critical and show that you have your own voice. As we have seen throughout this thesis, participants on the David Icke forum do appreciate references to certain spokespersons. While one has to remain critical, references to various sources of information to back up certain knowledge claims is a valid practice. In the next section, I will discuss how the participants validate various sources of information and how they fit in the dual narrative of conspirituality.

5.3 Dualistic sources

A dichotomous worldview does not only divide ideas into “good” and “evil,” but also people or groups of people who are perceived as propagating these ideas. When certain sources are known to spread malevolent ideas these sources cannot be trusted as a valid source of information. Vice versa, if certain sources are kind to the “good” side of the dichotomous worldview they can be trusted to provide useful information. This section deals with the attempt to qualify the various sources that the participants refer to when validating their knowledge claim. I will discuss two kinds of sources: sources that are not affiliated with one particular individual or identified group of individuals, such as the Internet and mainstream media, and sources that are identified as individuals, such as conspirituality spokespersons and various celebrities. As we will see, the various sources to which the participants have access all have their place in the dichotomous worldview of conspirituality.

The first dichotomy regarding sources of information has on the one hand the collection of official media: newspapers, television and radio, the so-called mainstream media. While the mainstream media is supposed to be the main source of information regarding events in the world, the participants of the David Icke forum approach the mainstream media with suspicion. Most of them believe that the mainstream media is hiding the true agenda behind certain events or expose only a very limited amount of facts. Consider, for instance, the following comments in a discussion on the murder of an eight-year-old boy in New York City: “This is just the tip of the ice burg that was exposed to the media, for whatever hidden purpose. Kids are kidnapped, raped, and murdered all the time. The only time you ever hear about it is when they want you to hear about it or they don't care if you hear about it.”⁷⁹ And later on, in reply on a participant who

⁷⁹ ‘NYC boy killed after he asked for help’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=176004>.

refers to bad news coverage as a way to create negative energy: “Yeah, I never trust the media's intentions. I think you make a really excellent point about the negative energy. Just like how the media loves to exploit other cases of murdered children.”⁸⁰

The participants distrust media coverage of certain events, especially when they are tragedies like murders or kidnappings. They assume that the media is not covering aspects of the story that are important to the public. These aspects are, of course, the interpretation of certain events in a grander scheme of malevolent oppression by the Elite. While the judgment of the mainstream media is relatively tame in the examples above, other examples shows that the mainstream media is not just lacking the full story, but feed the public blatant lies. This is especially the case with the official story of the 9/11 attacks. In a discussion on the 9/11 First Responders exclusion from the 10th annual anniversary of the attacks one participant characterizes the 9/11 media coverage of this event as follows: “Its so fun to watch the [mainstream media] retell their carefully scripted lies. A lie that is told enough times becomes the truth. Looks like America learned something from Nazi Germany. It would almost be laughable if it wasn't so sad.”⁸¹ Here the mainstream media is accused of telling a “scripted” narrative. This suggests that the mainstream media is an extension of the Elite, who wrote the “script” that the mainstream media is supposed to retell. The participant compares this “script” with the Nazi Germany propaganda machine, making the mainstream media compellingly malevolent. The examples above therefore suggest that the mainstream media is under control of the Elite and works similarly to a dictatorial propaganda machine. This positioning of mainstream sources into the “evil” camp makes it difficult to trust information that springs from these mainstream sources.

Similar to the mainstream media, sources coming from Hollywood are equally distrusted, albeit in a different fashion. One discussion, for instance, deals with movies that depict satanic rituals and beliefs. It is presumed that these movies in some way reflect what is actually going on in hidden Satanist cliques:

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ ‘911 First Responders Excluded Anniversary Ceremony’
<http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=181186>.

There have been some films that depict Satanic rituals and events that are eerily evocative of what happens in real life. [...] One thing I've noticed in these kinds of films is that there is always some sort of deviation from reality, in that the Satanic cults are portrayed as inept, struggling with infighting or an internal power struggle, which of course is a fabrication. The reality is that this global conspiracy is as unified in ideology and cohesive in practice as can be imagined. Hollywood lies to the public by illustrating these groups as being somehow disjointed and vulnerable from within, which couldn't be further from the truth.⁸²

The participant believes that satanic rituals in movies are a representation of actual satanic rituals performed by the Elite. The idea that facts and fiction are blended has been identified as a characteristic of conspiracy culture (Knight 2001, Barkun 2003). While we see a representation of this idea in the provided example, the participant also nuances this blending by admitting that the depiction of satanic cults in Hollywood movies is not fully accurate. He mentions that the internal struggles of these Hollywood cults are far from the reality of the actual satanic Elite, who are perceived as unified and cohesive. Although facts and fiction do not necessarily have to blend on a one-on-one occasion, it shows that Hollywood, like the mainstream media, is imagined to be an extension of the hidden Elite.

Because the participants distrust the mainstream sources, they have to find alternative sources of information. Before the Internet-era, conspiracy beliefs were largely spread through alternative magazines and local radio broadcasts (Goodrick-Clarke 2001). Nowadays, the Internet is the primary workspace of conspiracy culture (Ward & Voas 2011). Judging by the fact that countless websites are devoted to various conspiracy theories and matters of spiritual concern, the Internet provides a medium in which alternative sources of information can flourish (Warf & Grimes 1997). Indeed, when we look at the way in which participants use external sources to back up their knowledge claims, they are almost exclusively online sources. These sources range from documentaries found on the online streaming service Youtube, to references to websites that belong to certain relevant spokespersons. While my data does not contain explicit validating comments regarding the Internet as a medium, the fact that most of the participants use references to external online sources without noticeable reservations shows that

⁸² 'List of Satanic movies' <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=185956>.

they regard the Internet as a medium that can be trusted to provide relevant and truthful information. In other words, while the mainstream media is working towards the goals of the Elite, the Internet is regarded as a medium that is largely untamed by the Elite.

Besides the dichotomizing aspect of impersonal sources like mainstream media, Hollywood and the Internet, the participants also apply this aspect to certain individuals. On the negative side of the spectrum we find mostly individuals who are affiliated with the music industry and Hollywood. For instance, in a discussion on the prevalence of the One Eye symbolism in contemporary culture the participants post pictures of celebrities such as Rihanna, Lady Gaga, George Michael, Bono, Jay-Z and Phil Collins covering one of their eyes.⁸³ This implies that the participants consider them part of the conspiracy, or at least under influence of them. The assumption that celebrities are pushing forth the Elite's agenda is confirmed in another discussion. This discussion questions whether all celebrities are under control or working for the Elite. One participant replies:

I don't think there are too many people in Hollywood that are part of the "star" system that *aren't* being controlled in one way or the other. Mind controlled, addicted to drugs, addicted to sex, addicted to fame, locked into contracts they have no way of breaking..... there are lots of ways of controlling these people who are used to dictate fashion or get us to watch TV and go to movies. Hollywood uses most of them to sell sex, and *for* sex. I would wager a *very* small percentage aren't painted with the same brush.⁸⁴

This comment is telling for the way in which celebrities are perceived: they are both culprit and victim of the Elite's agenda. They are regarded as *de facto* transmitters of the mind-control practices of the Elite, and therefore cannot be trusted to provide accurate information other than when it comes to using images of them to validate a knowledge claim regarding their loyalty to the Elite.

Contrary, the positive side of the spectrum is inhabited with conspiratorial spokespersons such as David Icke and Jordan Maxwell, to whom participants frequently refer when claiming

⁸³ 'One eye symbolism threat!' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=175464>.

⁸⁴ 'So who is NOT a butterfly?' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=175493> (italics in original).

certain knowledge.⁸⁵ As we have seen in the former section, participants are encouraged to provide their own views when references to spokespersons are used and questioned when it seems that they are just copying the views of these spokespersons. Nevertheless, the participants recognize the quality of these spokespersons. For instance, when a participant refers to conspiracy theorist David McGowan in one of the discussions, another participant speaks laudably about him: “Dave also did an interview on his other series. He's got a great sense of humor, and punches holes in the official story.” And: “McGowan is the man. His style of writing, analyzing and piecing together an array of factoids and oft not known tidbits of information is truly amazing. I can't get enough of his articles. Hopefully one day he'll compile all of his LC works into one published volume.”⁸⁶

Similarly, spokespersons of spirituality are also used as a positive reference for information. As we have seen above, the ideas of Osho and Blavatsky have been referred to as useful, as well as mythical religious leaders such as the Buddha and Jesus Christ.⁸⁷ However, the attitude towards these spokespersons corresponds with the way in which references to spiritual or religious traditions are dealt with. Like traditions, spokespersons should not be followed blindly, and a critical attitude towards whatever they say is encouraged.

Paradoxically, on the positive side of the spectrum, we also find identified members of the Elite, such as Nicholas Rockefeller, who, according to director and political activist Aaron Russo, admitted the existence of certain conspiracy theories in an interview with him.⁸⁸ Similarly, participants are apt to quote from the memoirs of David Rockefeller, who is also identified as part of the Elite:

Don't take anyone's word for it here. Just take *their* word for it.. *"Some even believe we [the Rockefeller family] are part of a secret cabal working against the best interests of the US, characterizing my family and me as 'internationalists' and of conspiring with others around the world to build a more integrated global political and economic structure - One World. If that's*

⁸⁵ See for instance ‘The number 11’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=174553> and ‘Can a mason ‘retire’ from the craft?’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=175114>.

⁸⁶ ‘Laurel Canyon Celebrities MKUltra’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=171006>.

⁸⁷ ‘The Mind must be destroyed’ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=176252>.

⁸⁸ ‘Rockefeller Reveals 9/11 FRAUD to Aaron Russo’ <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=17749>. See full interview here: <http://video.google.co.uk/videoplay?docid=5420753830426590918>.

the charge, I STAND GUILTY, and I am proud of it." - David Rockefeller, in his autobiographical 'Memoirs'.⁸⁹

Even though the members of the Elite are regarded as the enemies of the participants, whenever they speak up about their actual agenda the participants can use this information as a reliable source because it comes from the Elite themselves. Even though participants accept these expressions as legitimate it is very likely that they only do so because it affirms their already established idea of a hidden conspiracy. If a member of the Elite would deny the accusations it is unlikely that the participants would take that denial for granted.

As I have tried to show in this section, sources of information are incorporated into the dichotomous worldview of conspirituality. Sources that benefit the Elite's agenda are either perceived to be controlled by the Elite with regard to whatever is shown to the public, or actively participate in advancing the Elite's agenda by means of mind-controlling the audience. These sources can therefore not be trusted to provide accurate information, but can, on the other hand, be used as a source of information about certain conspiracies, especially those that deal with symbolism. Contrary, sources of information that can be trusted can be found on the Internet and at conspiritual spokespersons. While it is less likely that the Elite controls this information, it is still encouraged to be critical towards this information and to gather your own conclusion based on additional information.⁹⁰

5.4 Concluding remarks: empowerment through dualism

In this section I have showed how the participants create a dualistic worldview that serves as a framework in which certain knowledge claims about events, symbols, individuals and groups have their place as part of dualistic worldview of "good" or "evil." From the examples it becomes apparent that the participant attributes certain characteristics to both camps. Thus, the "good" side is critical, open-minded, curious, and most important, free from controlling influences. On the other side, "evil" is perceived as oppressive, controlling, binding, and superficial in its pursuit to earthly pleasures. Add to those characteristics the fact that most of the discussions involve similar ideas on spiritual matters, as we have seen in the comment on

⁸⁹ 'Give me REAL Proof' <http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=176831> (Italics in original).

⁹⁰ 'Give me REAL Proof' <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=176831>.

Freemasons who have to “sell their soul” to a supernatural being, and it appears that the participant create a “Manichaeian” worldview divided between the evil Elite and the good Awakened, in which both parties are embodied in opposing spiritual forces. Historical and contemporary events are not anymore perceived as individual cases, but as outbursts of this ongoing battle between forces that are larger than life (Hutter 2006). In an insightful article on anti-Semitism, David Norman Smith (1996) argues that in the history of anti-Semitism, Jews are not simply persecuted on the basis of what they did or who they were, but perceived as an embodiment of demonic forces that need to be eliminated whether or not Jews were actually around to pose a threat. He writes, partly quoting Maurice Samuel (1988 [1940]):

Yet there is a world of difference [...] between mere anti-Jewishness ("a dislike of Jews based on contact, direct or indirect," which is just "an ordinary variety" of ethnic or religious bias) and the "primitive terror and folkloristic mental helplessness" of the true antisemite. There is, in "obsessional exaggeration," a "mad disparity" between realities and conclusions. Jews are not, for antisemites, just one more unwelcome group. "They are," rather, "aboriginal evil," and so "for the salvation of humanity, . . . there must be a total obliteration of the Jews". (216-7)

This perception of Jews as the embodiment of evil goes beyond mere hatred for Jews or xenophobia. Historian of anti-Semitism Gavin I. Langmuir (1990) observes that there exists a more radical belief that Jews form a group with demonic traits. He characterizes this belief with the neologism “chimera” which he identifies as follows:

The ancient use of ‘chimera’ to refer to a fabulous monster emphasizes the central characteristic of the phenomenon I wish to distinguish from xenophobia. In contrast with xenophobic assertions, chimerical assertions present fantasies, figments of imagination, monsters that, although syntactically dressed in the clothes of real humans, have never been seen and are projections of mental processes unconnected with the real people of the outgroup. Chimerical assertions have no “kernel of truth.” This is the contrast which distinguishes the hostility that produced Auschwitz from that manifested against Jews in ancient Alexandria. (334)

What is crucial about the chimera concept is that the accusations towards the Jews, in the case of Langmuir, have never been empirically observed (328). Thus, accusations of Jews committing ritual murders not only lack any substantial evidence, but also lack empirical observations by the accusers themselves (334). Furthermore, chimerical assertions refer to “all real individuals who can somehow be identified as members of the outgroup” (336).

Using this concept of chimera it becomes apparent that in the Manichaeic worldview of the participants the Elite fulfills the requirements of the chimerical assertions: their malevolent actions have never been empirically observed by any of the participants. Thus, accusations of Satanic rituals, selling one’s soul to a higher being, using rituals in public media to suck out energy from its consumers, and mind-controlling the majority of the population occupy the imagined acts of the Elite, even though they have never been actually observed. Since the mainstream media and Hollywood are perceived as extensions of the Elite, as we have seen above, the participants assume to a great extent that mainstream media and celebrities are willingly or unwillingly part of these malevolent acts by either covering it up or deliberately participate in them.

Where then, in this worldview, stand the participants? Against the enemy with overwhelming powers that control the majority of the world stands the Hero. “In many a battle” so explains Christoph Auffarth (2006), “he must stand forth to fight the Evil One, who, in his diverse and always new shapes, difficult to recognize” (533). When the world of conspиритuality perceives the evil forces in a Manichaeic way, as such, that the objects of demonization are imagined to have supernatural powers and are capable of the most vile acts imaginable, standing up against this kind of evil is easily perceived as an act of heroism. The hero embodies what the enemy tries to destroy, in this case freedom from corrupting influences. While it would be an exaggeration to perceive the acts of the participants as battling the forces of evil, by incorporating their knowledge claims into a grand dualistic narrative, repeating for themselves and others what their virtues are, and reminding others when they fail to oblige to these virtues, they create an atmosphere in which the oppression by the evil Elite does not seem inevitable. As long as there are a few people “awake” there is still hope for a “de(con)struction of conventional moral illusions” (Aho 1994, 180). Thus, incorporating the Manichaeic duality into the interpretation of history as an ongoing battle between good and evil, which includes various

religious traditions and their spokespersons as sources of inspiration, grants the participants of the David Icke forum a place in the reading of the world. Moreover, by constantly reminding themselves and others of the virtues they have to imbue – critical, open-minded, free – they can write themselves as the heroes of the great narrative of the world.

6. Conclusion: Knowledge and Empowerment on the David Icke forum

6.1 Hammer's categories and the fluidity of the esoteric discourse

In the former chapters I have explained extensively how the participants on the David Icke forum adopt various legitimizing strategies to support their knowledge claims. Using Hammers categories based on his research of the “Modern Esoteric Tradition” I have shown that conspirituality to a large extent use similar forms of legitimizing strategies. Despite these similarities, there are also differences between the way in which knowledge claims are legitimized in the esoteric tradition and in the conspirituality culture on the David Icke forum. Before we come to a final discussion about the empowering effect of knowledge, I will discuss some of these differences.

In chapter 3 I dealt with the way in which the participants on the David Icke forum clothe their arguments in a rhetoric of scientism, where arguments based on scientific rationality, scientific terminology, and scientific theories provide an accepted way to legitimize conspiritual knowledge. In his discussion about the relationship between the esoteric tradition and science Hammer argues that the former tries to spiritualize the latter by rejecting the materialistic premise of science. By adopting a holistic perspective that includes alternative methods, such as analogical thinking, intuition and imagination, introducing values, and other media than “matter,” such as “thought”, the esoteric tradition seeks to broaden the perspective of science without losing its rhetorical power (321 ff.). When the participants on the David Icke forum adopt a rhetoric of scientism they seem to stay within the rationalistic boundaries of science and the discursive power of its terminology and its theories. Although terms like “energy” and “dimension” do have an extended meaning beyond the scientific use, the spiritualization of these terms seems limited.

Chapter 4 dealt with the different roles of personal narratives in legitimizing knowledge claims. The first, second, and third person narratives described by Hammer are also visible on the David Icke forum. In my analysis, the first and second person narratives seem to function similarly as observed by Hammer, i.e. that they respectively back up or provide knowledge

claims and discuss ways in which other participants can gain similar experiences. In the esoteric tradition, the third person narratives serve as testimonies to the powers of esoteric spokesperson or the accuracy of their methods. On the David Icke forum these third person narratives have a different function, namely to provide outsider's perspectives in specific topics, e.g. in the form of interviews on Youtube. Often these outsider's perspectives are used as either a source of knowledge claims or as a way to legitimize knowledge claims. Moreover, as first person narratives are told, they can become third person narratives for others, thus reinforcing each other in their effectiveness to legitimize knowledge claims. Because of Hammer's focus on spokespersons of the esoteric tradition, this latter point escapes him. As I will discuss later, the relationship between first and third person narratives is important when we deal with the empowering sense of community that is build through sharing personal experiences.

Finally, Chapter 5 discussed the legitimizing force of the dualistic conspiritual worldview. Here, the deviation from Hammer's categories became most apparent. Hammer does not talk about a dualistic worldview. Instead, he sees in the esoteric tradition a constant reference to ancient and exotic traditions that serve to legitimize certain knowledge claims by stating that these knowledge claims are part of a perennial wisdom that has been observed by earlier traditions but corrupted over time. The conspiritual worldview also refers back to history and ancient traditions to legitimize certain knowledge claims, but maintain a dualistic worldview of "good" and "evil", thus viewing the entire narrative of the world as an ongoing battle between good and evil.

Because conspirituality is rooted in the discourse of the esoteric, we have seen common themes in the way in which spokespersons of the esoteric tradition legitimize their knowledge claims and how this is done by the participants of the David Icke forum. Despite the similarities, the participants on the David Icke forum seem to focus more on the rationality of their arguments, methodological correctness, and the dualistic worldview than the spokespersons of the esoteric tradition. By understanding conspirituality as part of the esoteric discourse I have shown that the legitimizing strategies illustrate a certain amount of continuity with those already used by the spokespersons of the esoteric tradition, but also that the esoteric discourse is able to inhabit a variety of ideas depending on the content of the discourse. This shows that the discourse of the esoteric is fluid and malleable with respect to the content of the discourse.

6.2 The empowering effect of knowledge creation

As I have shown throughout the former chapters, the ways in which knowledge is created and legitimized by the participants of the David Icke forum has implications on other levels of experience. The level that has been my main focus is the level of power relations. The previous chapters have shown that various legitimation strategies can form a source of empowerment. Scientific arguments, personal narratives and the dualistic worldview all help to establish a sense of empowerment for the participants of the David Icke forum. These legitimation strategies provide for a source of empowerment on various levels. Empowerment occurs on the level of the individual through the focus on “do your own research” and second person narratives. Further, it operates by creating an imagined community of the “awakened.” Finally, legitimation strategies empower the participants by placing them in a dual worldview of good and evil, in which they can play the part of the heroes of the narrative.

6.2.1 Democratization of knowledge: empowerment of the individual

One of the tenets that is frequently repeated by the participants on the David Icke forum is “do your own research.” Users are encouraged to gather their own information and form their own conclusions about possible explanations of certain events. While I have mentioned this tenet frequently throughout the course of the thesis, I have not yet touched upon the implications of this encouraging aphorism. First, “do your own research” implies that the participants on the forum are of such intelligence that they are capable of doing their own research and form their own conclusions. It puts the burden on the individual to collect and interpret his own data, but at the same time assures him that he is able to do so. While conspiritual spokespersons such as David Icke have a certain authority to frame knowledge claims into a conspiritual worldview, their words should not be taken at face value but should be investigated and criticized by others. As we have seen in the discussion of the role of religious traditions in Chapter 5, one participant is blamed for blindly accepting the conclusions presented by David Icke. Not being critical towards knowledge claims of people who have a certain authority goes against the value system of the participants. “Do your own research” empowers the individual participant to trust his own abilities for critical thinking and forming his own conclusions. By “blindly” repeating what other spokespersons say or quoting people without personal commentaries participants go against this form of individual empowerment.

Second, “do your own research” implies that one does not need traditional knowledge institutions, such as science or religious traditions, to produce legitimate knowledge. The production of legitimate knowledge is put in the hands of the participant, and when shared with others on the forum, affirmed or criticized by them. In this form, knowledge production becomes a democratic process in the sense that every participant is able to produce knowledge that is, when shared, legitimized or criticized by others. Formal institutions and authoritative spokespersons are no requirement for producing legitimate knowledge. On the contrary, knowledge claims are only legitimate for the participants if they ring true to them. This process of democratization empowers the individual participant to conduct their own research and share his findings with others, because he knows that his knowledge claim can be as legitimate as the ones produced by institutions or spokespersons.

Besides the tenet of “do your own research,” second person narratives also invoke a sense of empowerment because it encourages people to show other participants ways in which they can “wake up.” Giving advice on topics they know about, especially when other participants request additional knowledge about them, fosters the feeling that their knowledge on subjects not accepted by mainstream orthodoxy is relevant for others. Sharing knowledge and giving practical advice invokes a sense of importance for the growth of other participants, as well as responsibility to ensure the accuracy of the information. Besides the empowering factor of “do your own research,” helping others in reaching a similar level of education empowers the participants in the conviction of the correctness of their worldview.

6.2.2 Empowerment through community

Do it yourself research, sharing experiences and aiding each other in gaining similar experiences can create a feeling of empowerment because it shows that their efforts matter. Since the discussion forum provides a medium for sharing the results of their personal investigations and narratives of experience, these sources of information do not fall on deaf ears. Only very few threads on the David Icke forum invoke no replies. In a discussion forum, active participants play the part of spokespersons as well as audience. The fact that other participants almost always reply to a thread shows that it is worth their while to act as spokespersons for conspiratorial knowledge. Especially in cases of stigmatized groups and ideas, amongst which conspiratorial knowledge could be counted, the idea of being with likeminded individuals who are interested in what you

have to say can be empowering for the individual participant (Amichai-Hamburger *et al.* 2008). Beside the fact that a participant can act as a spokesperson of the conspiritual worldview, the idea of sharing a set of norms and values can also empower the individual participant. As Spears *et al.* (2002) have shown, norms and values are of a greater adherence in online environment than in face-to-face interaction. By adhering to these norms and values, the participant can have a sense of belonging to a community (Amichai-Hamburger *et al.* 2008).

While there is a strong emphasis on individual development and inquiry there could still be a sense of community. Jon P. Bloch (1998), for instance, interviewed 22 people who identified as spiritual on their experienced relationship between self-autonomy and the alternative spiritual community. Bloch acknowledges that there exists a tension between the ideology of self-autonomy and community, but found out that this tension is resolved by the interviewees:

Alternative spirituality did not criticize but encouraged qualities that made him feel cut off from mainstream society. At the same time, [the interviewee] stated he found a way toward a “cohesive worldview” for the shared norms, values, and beliefs of alternative spirituality. This process further enabled him to feel a part of the overall “scheme of humanity”. Thus, countercultural spirituality enabled [the interviewee] both to develop his sense of individuality and to feel part of a shared system of meanings – as well as part of humanity at large. (42)

It would not be surprising if participants of the David Icke forum experienced the tension between self-autonomy and community similarly. Perceiving themselves as being awake and aware as a result of their own research and experience, they can relate to each other by this feature. Yet at the same time they ask for information about certain topics and are willing to help others in their quest. Moreover, the process of legitimizing knowledge creates an appreciation for certain values such as rationality, autonomy and freedom. This shared value-system could provide the connecting characteristic of conspirituality culture. As Bloch concludes: “social networks [...] can promote a sense of community and shared values. Moreover, some of the people who participate in these networks state that a viable sense of community is exactly what they did *not* get from a more organized religion” (117). Furthermore, participants on the David Icke forum use the signifier “awakened” to characterize themselves in opposition to the

mainstream orthodoxy of “sleepers.” This signifier, while broad, creates at the very least a notion of “self” and “other” through which group identities can be build (Baumann 2004). As we have seen in Chapter 4, sharing narratives of personal experience greatly helps to establish this dichotomy of “self” and “other,” because only by experiencing the conspiracy through research or personal events can one really “wake up.”

This sense of community can strengthen the individual in his or her conviction of the conspiritual worldview in various ways. First, as Bloch (1998) suggests, individuals in the alternative milieu can feel cut off from mainstream society because of their ideas, but find in the process of connecting with likeminded individuals an affirmation of their worldview and value system. Second, through means of discussing various topics related to conspirituality, the participants can act both as spokespersons and audience of the conspiritual worldview. Being able to share experiences and research findings *and* being heard by likeminded individuals makes the act of contributing to the conspiritual worldview worthwhile (cf. Chandler 2010, 84). Third, sharing experiences and discuss research findings establish a sense of shared norms and values. Because not every knowledge claim is accepted at face value but have to correspond to a set of norms and values, the participants have ways to create boundaries on what can and cannot be accepted as legitimate knowledge. This in turn creates a more or less coherent worldview, including norms and values, to which participants have to submit. Thus, as we have seen in Chapter 4, a participant may claim that he has been visited by extraterrestrial being that provided him with secret knowledge, but as long as additional information on the beings is not provided, the other participants have no frame of reference to check the truthfulness of the account. This, for instance, in opposition to revealed information in dreams, a concept much more widely accepted in the alternative milieu.

6.2.3 Empowerment through dualism

In Chapter 5 I have argued that conspirituality culture creates a thoroughly Manichaeian worldview that perceives historical and contemporary events, groups, and individuals in a dualistic “good” and “evil” that are entwined in an ongoing battle. Because of this worldview, they create an enemy with chimerical assertions, attributing characteristics and powers to it that have never been empirically observed. Everyone who is affiliated with this enemy shares similar assertions. Since the “other” is a representation of the ultimate evil, it follows that the

participants see themselves as part of the “good.” This dualistic worldview can have profound implications on potential outcomes. As we have seen above, attributing chimerical assertions to certain groups can lead to extreme and destructive thoughts, exemplified in the result of anti-Semitic tendencies in the Second World War. In Barkun’s (1994) discussion on the Manichaeic worldview of Christian Identity, that incorporates a mixture of conspiracy theories, white supremacy, anti-Semitism and a fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity, he argues that a universe structured according to dichotomous lines can lead to politics of ultimacy: “The politics of ultimacy rejects conventional political norms of coalition building, compromise, and incrementalism. There can be no coalition building [...], for other groups are almost certainly either willing participants in the conspiracy or its hapless dupes. [...] In like manner, compromise is unacceptable, for that means complicity in the program of Satan” (249-250).

Barkun continues to explain that Christian Identity adopts an attitude of ‘revolutionary millenarianism’, in which Identity see themselves as progenies of God’s battle against Satan and his minions, even if the forces of evil seem invisible. Indeed, “the defeated are God’s martyrs, simultaneously role models and the objects of cultlike devotion” (250). While I want to stress that the participants did not show any affiliation with either anti-Semitic groups or religious fundamentalists (most of them reject any form of strict institutional religion), nor spoke of any form of violent acts from their side, Barkun paints an interesting picture of an extreme form of a Manichaeic worldview, its potential dangers, and its potential to create heroes and martyrs for the good cause.

As James P. Aho (1994) explains, the dialectic of heroism that is, as Barkun (1994) argues, prevalent in the Identity movement comprises three moments: at first, an ideal is imagined, then, the actual world is counterpoised with the ideal: “this is the *Is* in opposition to the *Should Be*” (25). This experience of contradiction issues suffering and compassion for others. Finally, to eradicate his pain and that of others “the hero embarks on the third and decisive moment in his quest: transformative labor, courageous, persistent effort to embody his ideal in the concrete” (Ibid). The quintessential reason for heroic behavior is the conviction that the world can still be saved, and would turn into a dark place if it were not for the hero to do it. Similarly to Christian Identity, this dialectic of heroism empowers the participants of the David Icke forum to continue their struggle. As I have shown in Chapter 5, one of the ways in which

knowledge claims are legitimized is when they are put in a grander perspective of a dualistic worldview. When this is done, it puts the knowledge claim, the participants who tell them and the participants who acknowledge them in this dualistic worldview. This means that the participants that share this knowledge are in the empowering position to claim that they know about the malevolent deeds of the Elite and their peers, that they dared to share this knowledge, and therefore tried to sabotage the malevolent deeds of “evil.” Moreover, while perceiving the world in a radical dualistic way, there is still hope for humanity. As discussions on subforums that have not been part of my data show, some of the participants get together to think about ways to wake up others⁹¹ or think about alternative ways to live with as little involvement of the malevolent Elite.⁹² Instead of talking about violent resistance, the participants on the David Icke forum seem to focus more on alternative ways based on non-compliance and raising awareness.

6.3 Further research

In recent years, more and more scholars have discovered the empowering aspect of online discussion forums, especially for marginalized groups (Rosenmann & Safir 2006, Barak *et al.* 2008, Punie 2011). With this present study, I hope to have contributed to the understanding of conspirituality as a worldview with its own rules of legitimation that have the potential to empower their participants in various ways. While I have tried to re-create the connection between the various legitimizing strategies and empowerment, this study is far from exhaustive. Judging by the fact that there are more than 70,000 registered members on the David Icke forum and over 200,000 individual threads, I cannot claim to have covered all the aspects of the conspirituality worldview. The vastness of the forum and the fact that there are more websites like this shows that conspirituality is a force to be reckoned. Future research should not just focus on the way in which the conspiritual worldview is legitimized by its proponents, but should aim to investigate to what extent this worldview is influencing people’s offline lives.

Furthermore, while my research focused on the content of the discussions, it would be interesting to conduct in depth interviews with some of the participants to see to what extent the empowerment that I have identified is actually experienced, and what the consequences of this

⁹¹ Most notable the subforum ‘The Awakening / What Can We Do?’
<http://www.davidicke.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?s=92c38c5fb5cd547805a485f9037437e4&f=22>.

⁹² ‘Freeman-on-the-land’
<http://www.davidicke.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?s=92c38c5fb5cd547805a485f9037437e4&f=60>.

empowerment is for other online and offline activities. Finally, I would suggest researching the way in which the ideas of conspiritual spokespersons such as David Icke are reflected in the discussions on the David Icke forum. To what extent are the participants familiar with these ideas and how do these ideas matter for the establishment of the conspiritual worldview. Answering these questions would greatly increase the knowledge of a phenomenon that is not yet very well understood. Because of the ever-increasing number of conspiracy websites, this worldview will have an increasing influence on the way people think and act. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the way in which these ideas emerge and move, online as well as offline, is of the utmost importance.

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<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/david-icke-claims-london-2012-1199641> (6 November
2012).

Appendix

Data-Corpus (Total of 39 threads)

Symbolism / Mind Control / Subliminal Programming (9)

Kylie Minogue's Aphrodite

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=173733>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Secret'

No Reptilian Eye

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=182441>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Esoteric', 'Occult'

Schizophrenia, Synchronism, & Movie-Going

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=184306>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Occult'

Collecting: Subliminals

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=88377>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Conspiracy', 'Esoteric', 'Occult'

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=183206>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'TPTB', 'Occult'

The Mind must be destroyed

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=176252>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Esoteric'

One eye symbolism thread!

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=175464>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Esoteric', 'Occult'

Laurel Canyon Celebrities MKUltra

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=171006>

Keywords: 'Ritual', 'Conspiracy', 'TPTB', 'Esoteric'

So who is NOT a butterfly?

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=175493>

Keywords: 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Esoteric'

Illuminati / Secret Societies (8)

August Order of Light

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=88175>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Ritual', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Esoteric'

Azazel Masonic Connection

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=191888>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Ritual', 'Secret', 'Esoteric', Occult'

555?

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=178820>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Secret', 'Esoteric', Occult'

Orange Order/UVF

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=186548>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Ritual', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Esoteric', Occult'

The Bohemian Grove

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=174115>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy'

The Lesser Key of Solomon

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=178579>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Ritual', 'Secret', 'Occult'

Can a mason 'retire' from the craft?

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=175114>

Keywords: 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Esoteric'

Give me REAL Proof

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=176831>

Keywords: 'Ritual', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'TPTB'

Political Manipulation // Cover-Ups / False Flags (4)

Political Manipulation Through Science

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=180916>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret'

Socialism vs Capitalism

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=189580>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret'

Jack the Ripper Murders

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=48101>

Keywords: 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Secret', 'Occult'

11-9-11 and 11-11-11

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=189285>

Keywords: 'Esoteric', 'Occult', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret'

Earth Changes / Global Warming / Chemtrails / Weather Warfare (1)

The Clock runs out sep 25th 2011

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=180076>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'TPTB'

9/11 (4)

Rockefeller reveals 9/11 FRAUD to Aaron Russo

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=177493>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret'

911 First Responders excluded anniversary ceremony

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=181186>

Keywords: 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret'

Saddam Hussein HOAX DEATH ACT

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=172284>

Keywords: 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Occult'

Who did 9/11? The poll

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=187233>

Keywords: 'Ritual', 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Occult'

Satanism / Child abuse / Cults / Esoteric / Astral Entities & Spirit Possession (4)

NYC boy Killed after he asked for help

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=176004>

Keywords: 'Elite', 'Occult', 'Spiritual'

Ordo Templi Orientis London Symposium

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=173036>

Keywords: 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Ritual', 'Occult'

List of Satanic Movies

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=185956>

Keywords: 'Conspiracy', 'Secret', 'Ritual', 'Esoteric'

The Esoteric Agenda MUST SEE documentary

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=57365>

Keywords: 'Secret', 'Ritual', 'Occult', 'Esoteric'

Psychic Ability / Channelling / Remote Viewing / Dreams (1)

CIA remote viewing

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=9984>

Keywords: 'Secret', 'Occult', 'Spiritual'

Meditation / Human Consciousness / Spirituality / Ascension / 2012 Mayan Calendar (5)

Planet Niburu returns and there is hell to pay

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=186752>

Keywords: 'Elite', 'Conspiracy', 'Secret'

Has anyone been in heaven/Nirvana?

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=188612>

Keywords: 'TPTB', 'Secret', 'Spiritual'

The Mayan Calender: Dr. Calleman was right

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=188491>

Keywords: 'Secret', 'Ritual', 'Spiritual'

Subconscious & Conscious

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=181031>

Keywords: 'Secret', 'Occult', 'Spiritual'

2012 Nexus Event

<http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=44268>

Keywords: 'Spiritual', 'TPTB', 'Conspiracy'

Astrology / Mysticism / Tarot / Numerology / The Occult / Alchemy (3)

The number 11

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=174553>

Keywords: 'Conspiracy', 'TPTB', 'Secret', 'Spiritual'

Musings

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=173322>

Keywords: 'Secret', 'Ritual', 'Esoteric'

Elemental Spirits

<http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=190376>

Keywords: 'Secret', 'Ritual', 'Occult', 'Spiritual'