

## **The Bitter End: Apocalypse and conspiracy in white nationalist responses to the IS Paris Attacks**

### **Abstract**

This paper will examine how apocalyptic thinking converges with the use of conspiracy theory in white nationalist worldviews at a time of crisis. Apocalyptic thinking is, typically, a religious response to secular threats to the faith community prophesising, or attendant on, 'the End'; these millenarian outlooks provide communities in crisis a promise of confirmation of the object of their faith, the vanquishing of enemies, and, crucially, continuity for the community in a better world to come. In the latter half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, apocalypticism and conspiracy theory have tended to coincide. The tendency toward a binary distinction between terms of absolute good and absolute evil and the revelation of secrets relating to human destiny through prophesy or 'truth-seeking' provide a broad transposability between the two interpretative strategies. An increasing amalgamation of political paranoia and eschatology have given rise to what has been termed 'conspirativity'. Much recent white nationalist rhetoric can be understood to be produced from this discursive position and this analysis will demonstrate how one white nationalist we community drew on conspiratorial apocalypticism in its response to the multiple IS attacks in Paris on 13-14<sup>th</sup> November 2015.

**Keywords:** Racism, conspiracy theory, millenarianism, apocalypse, Islamic State, anti-semitism

### **Introduction**

The apocalyptic is a milieu informed and shaped by a teleological understanding of human societies: all things will pass. In rare instances (some deep ecology) the non-human is positioned at the heart of the 'end' but, primarily, the concern expressed is one with the end of human history, or, in certain instances, a section of humanity. What constitutes the end is moot but, with few, again largely ecological, exceptions, the source of events is generally extrinsic and prophesised from within a community of believers. With the exception of secular accounts of environmental or cosmological disaster (global warming, asteroid impact) a small proportion of humanity will typically survive; these are invariably cast as fulfilling the principles, characteristics or zeal of the community from which prophecy emerges. This survival, in most cases, provides the surviving remnant of humanity a new chance of creating a society reflecting the values of the chosen community or, more usually, a prophesised paradise on Earth. This general structure of apocalyptic prophecy is fluid and adaptive, drawn upon primarily, but not exclusively, by religious communities. Importantly, though, it is crucial here to retain the idea that apocalypticism is not the preserve of religious thought, so, for instance,

there is a literature that points to the millenarian structures of Marxist teleology<sup>1</sup> (Hall 2009; Zimdars-Swartz & Zimdars-Swartz 2000; Baumgartner 1999). As this paper will seek to show, the apocalyptic outlook of current white nationalist thinking demonstrates the potential threat implicit in the seriousness with which the extreme far right consider their position. Here, then, the religious and political potential within apocalyptic thinking will be shown to merge and amplify the potency of each position.

The following identifies trends within the messages posted to the white nationalist web forum *Stormfront* in the wake of the Islamic State (IS) attacks on Paris during the night of 13<sup>th</sup> November and early morning of 14<sup>th</sup> November 2015 and frames an analysis of the messages in millenarian terms. The November attacks were the culmination of a wave of IS violence in France during 2015 that began with a fatal attack on the offices of satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January. On the evening of November 13, three groups of terrorists launched a series of attacks on public spaces in Paris including a football match between France and Germany at the Stade de Paris, a music concert at the Bataclan, and streets known for their nightlife. 130 victims were killed and over 350 injured with the majority of deaths coming at an Eagles of Death Metal concert during a siege and mass shooting of the assembled crowd. The IS statement claiming responsibility for the attacks was clear in its framing of the attack as part of an ongoing attack on secular, 'Western values'. It described Paris as the, "capital of prostitution and obscenity," and the French and German football teams as representing, "Crusader," countries.<sup>2</sup> In doing so it revealed a dichotomous staging of religious values and cultural exclusivity that depends upon the same binary logic of identity drawn upon within white nationalism. This reductionist view of identity was evident in the responses to the attack by white nationalists.

*Stormfront* was chosen as it provided an opportunity to observe a community responding to a period of crisis in which culture and race (intrinsically, in racist discourse) are used as the loci through which the community mobilise their shared identification as a defence against a perceived external threat. It is in moments such as these that politically paranoid groups are at the greatest likelihood to perceive the immanence of 'their' apocalypse and so they are most likely to be most rigorous in determining the boundaries of their identity. Given the inchoate nature of an international

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999); John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009); Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz and Paul F. Zimdars-Swartz, "Apocalypticism in Modern Western Europe," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, Volume 3: Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, ed. S.J. Stein (London: Continuum, 2000), 265–92.

<sup>2</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, 'ISIS Claims Responsibility, Calling Paris Attacks 'First of the Storm'', *New York Times*, 14 November, 2015

community of 'nationalists' negotiating a shared understanding of 'whiteness' it is in this perceived time of crisis in which, for them, 'the end' is coming soon that we are most immediately able to map the current dominant forms of belligerent nationalism and the cultural worlds they operate within.

### **Social Context and the End of the World**

It is common to much of the literature on apocalypica that the social context of prophecies of 'the end' is a primary influence on the formation of an apocalyptic outlook. So, for instance, the seminal Norman Cohn, in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970) suggested that the Jewish and Christian apocalypica served a social function, '[A]ll these prophecies were devices by which religious groups, at first, Jewish and then Christian, consoled, fortified and asserted themselves when confronted by the threat or reality of oppression.'<sup>3</sup> He identifies Daniel's dream in the Book of Daniel (c.165 B.C.) as 'the earliest apocalypse,'<sup>4</sup> (*Ibid*, 20). For Cohn, it was composed in response to a time of oppression and strife for the Jews of Palestine following the attempted outlawing of Judaism during the Seleucid takeover of Palestine (175-163BC) and offered the oppressed community a promise of hope in the form of divinely ordained improved circumstances. Nonetheless, Daniel's vision is not straightforwardly of a life paradisiacal but instead only offers paradise following a period of intense and violent strife in which a 'false prince of peace' brings suffering for the powerful and to the faithful whilst revelling in his own pride:

23. And in the latter time of their kingdom, when their transgressors are come to the full, a king of fierce countenance, and understanding dark sentences, shall stand up.

24. And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power: and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper, and practise, and shall destroy the mighty and the holy people.

25. And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify *himself* in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: he shall also stand up against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand.

Daniel 8:23-25 (KJV)

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<sup>3</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 20

Despite allowing his pride to set himself against God, the false Prince's death is preordained; the historical context would suggest, then, that the Jews who kept their faith and resisted the Hellenization of Palestine under Antiochus IV Epiphanes will see their oppressor struck down by the will of their God. And so, in the primary Apocalypse the cast is set: after a time of suffering, the chosen people will be freed from their suffering. Following the book of Daniel, the Tanakh/Old Testament of the Christian Bible incorporates a number of other apocalyptic prophecies. At times of persecution or of worldly challenges to the faith there is, typically, an apocalyptic prophecy promising the return of a vengeful form of God who saves or assures the continuation of the people of the faith. These themes can be found in Isaiah, Ezekiel (in which we find the Gog and Magog of Revelation 38-39) and Zechariah. In *The Method and Message of the Jewish Apocalyptic* (1964), D.S. Russell points to passages in Ezekiel that refer to earlier OT texts and demonstrates, although not in these terms, the intertextual borrowings of the Jewish apocalyptic traditions<sup>5</sup>.

If we are to follow Russell, the apocalyptic, before the time of Christ, was developing into a resource of ideas, motifs and promises that were drawn upon and recontextualised according to the demands of the moment. Russell is clear on this point and argues for a well-established apocalyptic tradition before the time of Christ,

The apocalyptic books constitute a record of [the inter-testamental] years, not in terms of historical event, but in terms of the response of faith which the nation was called to make. They cannot be understood apart from the religious, political, and economic circumstances of the times, nor can the times themselves be understood apart from these books whose hopes and fears echo and re-echo the faith of God's chosen people.<sup>6</sup>

Although certainly the products of an imaginary archive of hope, what is crucial here is the idea of the apocalyptic as a response to worldly conditions; prophets should not be considered as the bearers of a sanctified pathology but as faithful representatives of a community of believers seeking the means to galvanise or renew their communities. The rich symbology of the early Jewish apocalypica did not fade away with the rise of Christianity, far from it.

As will be discussed, the Jewish prophetic canon is still used today as a prophecy resource but was also a key informant of the structure and content of early Christian apocalyptic prophecy. The influence of Jewish apocalypica is evident throughout the Revelation of St. John. Again, from Russell, '[F]amiliar features of Jewish apocalyptic are evident throughout the whole book – fantastic

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, David Syme Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 190–195.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 16

imagery, symbolic language, angelic powers of evil, the resurrection, the judgment, the messianic kingdom, the world to come.<sup>7</sup> Despite the flamboyance of the language and the dramatic imagery the tendency is to interpret it as being primarily of its age and this tendency in academic responses has been in evidence for some time, as this following observation from Martin Kiddle's (1949) *The Revelation of St John* is testament to,

John has baffled his later commentators, it seems, much more than his original readers. Of one thing we may be quite certain; John had not the slightest intention of including in his book curious apocalyptic material with no bearing on the central problem of contemporary affairs. His first and last concern was with the churches; Revelation was a life and death message to the faithful [...] John was writing to those about to die for their faith.<sup>8</sup> (Kiddle 1949, 193)

Since its (disputed) composition by John of Patmos during the mid-90s CE, *Revelation* has been the object of a ceaseless proliferation of interpretations and applications. In almost every instance, the unifying tendency has been to see the unfolding of the prophecy as immanent and real. Similarly, in addition to speaking to a community suffering a crisis during a time of persecution, Baumgartner emphasises the role of John's *Revelation* as an evangelical tool, calling upon the faithful to be steadfast in their faith,

The primary millennial work in Christianity, the Revelation of John of Patmos, also was a product of persecution in the form of exile, to which he refers in his introduction. Far from dampening millennial expectations as Paul sought to do, John was clearly intent on inflaming them.<sup>9</sup>

Eugen Weber describes Christianity's first couple of centuries as being rife with chiliastic movements full of fervour for Christ's return but points to the growing conservatism of the early Church as a foil to this fervour<sup>10</sup>. For Weber, it is Origen's 3<sup>rd</sup> Century intervention that diminishes the importance of *Revelation* in the canon with Origen painting the dangers of taking it literally as evidence of 'Jewish tendencies'. This diminished status has been long lasting but whilst the Church has reduced its apocalyptic tendencies for this – and other ecumenical reasons – *Revelation* has continued to be used by popular movements and a variety of sects and schisms from the violence of John of Leyden's Anabaptists in Münster to the Great Disappointment of the Millerites. More than

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 35

<sup>8</sup> Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940), 193.

<sup>9</sup> Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs throughout the Ages* (London: Hutchinson, 1999).

this, though, it is not just *Revelation* that inspired Christian radicals but also the Jewish books of prophecy. As Wojcik points out many of these prophecies from the Jewish canon are still being cited today as descriptions of current or coming events<sup>11</sup>. For example, he points to ‘prophecy believers [who] searched the bible for possible allusions to nuclear conflagration,’<sup>12</sup> and found evidence in *Zechariah* (14:12), *Malachi* (3:19) as well as New Testament sources. The search for signs of prophecy is not something that belongs to the past and has by no means been usurped by reason. More recently than Wojcik’s examples, Ed Kalnins, pastor of the Wasilla Assembly of God Church, cites conflict in the Middle East, America’s dependence on foreign oil and the depletion of energy reserves as evidence that ‘storm clouds are gathering’. He told *The Times* in 2008, ‘Scripture specifically mentions oil instability as a sign of the Rapture. We’re seeing more and more oil wars. The contractions of the fulfilment of prophecies are getting tighter and tighter.’<sup>13</sup> Kalnin’s significance and a spur to his exposure in *The Times* is that his church congregation once included Sarah Palin, the 2008 vice-presidential candidate of the U.S. Republican party and current pro-Donald Trump political commentator.

### **The Politics of the Right and the Endtimes**

The American political right wing has had a long-standing relationship with conservative Christianity. The indebtedness to the ‘silent majority’ of politically and theologically conservative Protestantism of the New Right project of the 1970s and 1980s is well documented and does not need rehearsing here. Instead, a few salient points regarding the nature of the congregations whose beliefs find representation the outlook of the Republican party should be noted. Kalnin’s reference to ‘the Rapture’ is not figurative but reflects a Rapture readiness amongst US evangelical congregations. The majority of these are dispensational premillennialists – dispensationalism indicating a belief in history being composed of a series of dispensations, or tests, of the chosen people and premillennial referring to a belief in the physical return of Christ in advance of a thousand years of Christian dominion on Earth. Postmillennialism (Christ’s Second Coming occurring following a thousand years of perfected living) had dominated for much of the early history of the US Postmillennialism but from roughly mid-nineteenth century onwards premillennialism has come to dominate U.S. Protestantism. A hermeneutic imperative drives much DP (Dispensationalist Premillennialism) and

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 33

<sup>13</sup> Alexi Mostrous, “Sarah Palin, the Pastor and the Prophecy: Judgment Day Is Not Far Away,” *The Times*, September 10, 2008.

underpins the highly rationalized approach to Bible study undertaken by Dispensationalists. There is a consistently applied interpretation of the world as it unfolds around them guiding the outlook and lives of DPs. As has been stated, DP is based upon a literal reading of the Bible and, more particularly, a reading of *Revelation* which seeks to locate the events which will develop into the Seventh Dispensation in current History. Thus, world events are woven into the fabric of Biblical prophecy and 'signs of the End Times' are frequently perceived in the world around us.

Cohn warns against this commingling of apocalyptic prophecy and politics; indeed, he saw in the model of a society removed of all inner contradictions and 'agents of corruption,' a means by which the Utopian social violence of Lenin and Hitler could be understood<sup>14</sup>. And it is in the impression of an achievable fulfilment of prophecy that the promise of the apocalyptic is at its most potent and dangerous. This danger is evident in Dan Cohn-Sherbok's (2006) *The Politics of Apocalypse: The History and Influence of Christian Zionism*<sup>15</sup>. In this, he demonstrates the complex relationship between dispensational premillennialism and Judaism. For DP readings of prophecy to be fulfilled the Temple on the Mount must be rebuilt in Jerusalem. The site is currently occupied by the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock - both significant sites within Islam. The dispensational eschatological necessity thus has a profound and potentially dangerous political dimension. Cohn-Sherbrook notes the influential and powerful networks in which the Christian Zionist movement circulates,

Christian Zionist organizations and the pro-Israel lobby are among the special interest groups whose concerns have converged since Bush was first elected president. These interest groups include the right wing of the Republican Party; neo-Conservatives; multinational construction firms; the petroleum industry and the arms industry; the pro-Israel lobby and think tanks; and fundamentalist Christian Zionists.<sup>16</sup>

Christian Zionism is not the only tendency within DP believers and it should be noted that not all are as prepared to immanentize the eschaton to the extent that Christian Zionism appears prepared to. Wojcik usefully points out that within dispensational Christianity there are arguments against direct intervention in worldly matters - and thus politics<sup>17</sup>. Part of the rationale is developed from a position of a deep distrust toward politics and statecraft. This distrust is due, in no small part, to Hal Lindsay's 1970 work of populist eschatology, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. In this, Lindsay interprets

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<sup>14</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

<sup>15</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Politics of Apocalypse: The History and Influence of Christian Zionism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 166

<sup>17</sup> Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*.

Biblical texts and draws from them the suggestion that an expanded European Economic Community – the forerunner to the EU – would, as a revived Roman Empire, be the grounds from which the Antichrist of *Revelation* would emerge. Notably, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* was a huge commercial and evangelical success; it was, according to the *New York Times*, the bestselling non-fiction book of the 1970s whilst inspiring a hugely successful industry in populist premillennial speculation<sup>18</sup> (Shuck 2004). Lindsay's powerful rhetoric and willingness to map Biblical prophecy revitalised the US evangelical movement and bred within it an interest in but distrust of political life. So, for instance, Wojcik points to the fatalism that spread within dispensationalism,

[There is a] widespread dispensationalist belief that international peace efforts are the work of satanic forces, with organizations such as the European Community and the United Nations, as well as various governmental and church institutions, considered to be part of a worldwide, evil conspiracy. Human efforts to improve the world are considered not only useless but possibly satanic, and believers are freed from moral obligations to save it from annihilation because the world's problems and ultimate destruction are part of the divine plan.<sup>19</sup>

Here, in raising the spectre of an evil conspiracy guiding world events, it becomes evident that the populist apocalypticism of premillennial dispensationalism lends itself readily to the rhetoric of conspiracy theory. Each relies upon the figure of a vast, hidden network of 'evil': in DP it is the work of the Antichrist, in conspiracy it is invariably a secret cabal working toward (global) domination and the downfall of the community to whom the conspiracy theorists belong. The more typically political outlook of conspiracy might not, on the surface of things, appear to lend itself

Although Lindsey does not advocate political activism there is clearly a political dimension to his analysis, indeed, his support for the Reagan White House would seem to belie his apparent fatalism. Lindsay's influence in the White House during the Reagan presidency was extensive; his consultancy was hired to by the US Congress and the Pentagon whilst Lindsay was invited by Reagan to speak at the Pentagon<sup>20</sup> (New 2002). Whilst impatient believers in the coming apocalypse may have seen their influence wane in US politics, they remain a significant proportion of the US population.

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<sup>18</sup> Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> David S. New, *Holy War: The Rise of Militant Christian, Jewish and Islamic Fundamentalism* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Co., 2002).



## Apocalypse and Conspiracy

Mark Fenster notes the complex and contradictory position that Lindsey and other Christian conservatives take; it is constantly renegotiated as circumstances and fortunes change<sup>21</sup>. Satanic forces are ever ready in the world of DP but the extent to which the faithful engage with the world can change – as can the guise the Antichrist takes. So, after the fall of the Soviet Union, it could no longer take on the role of 'Gog' as it 'traditionally' has within the modern prophetic tradition. The fluidity of prophecy and the dualistic nature of the final reckoning mirrors the simplistic reflexive work done to reconfigure conspiracy theory as events overtake theory. Fenster suggests that Millennialism and conspiracy theory relying on a dualistic division of the world into 'good' and 'evil' establishes the portability of narratives from one milieu to another,

One of the most important aspects of popular eschatology that works within many of the teachings and political views of conservative Christianity is the tendency to view historical and current events in terms of vast conspiracies led by knowing and unwitting agents of Satan. The tendency to divide reality into antitheses of good and evil, and to place such antitheses within a historical narrative that seeks to understand the natural through the supernatural, leads to a specific type of cognitive understanding and mapping that structures the interpretation and understanding of events.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly drawing on Jameson's description of conspiracy theory as, 'the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system,'<sup>23</sup>. In borrowing from Jameson, Fenster is making the case that millennialism draws upon an interpretative strategy which is not uncommon amongst dispossessed and threatened communities. And Jameson's observations on conspiracy theory are worth dwelling on: Here, conspiracy theory is an attempt at representing the 'total logic of late capital,' where no other means are available. This situates conspiracy as a narrative – a representational mode – essentially a story, by means of which the excess of signifiers that proliferate in postmodernity can be tied to a small and manageable number of signifieds. So it is, then, that for Jameson accounts which narrativize and provide coherency to an otherwise incomprehensible situation provide the opportunity for meaning regardless of how limited and apparently irrational that meaning may be. The forces of the Antichrist stirring in a federal Europe

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 175-6

<sup>23</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 356.

are easier to grasp than the intangible, overwhelming and evershifting movement of global capital. In other words, conspiracy forces all complexities and contradictions to resolve themselves within the hermeneutic framework established by the terms of the conspiracists' narratives. In this sense, we can understand the usefulness which Jameson saw in the figure of 'mapping' as the conspiracists draw a map of the conditions of life in postmodernity. These maps may be 'degraded' but despite this and in spite of the total system of alienating domination, Jameson still recognises a utopian impulse in conspiracy. To reiterate, Fenster confirms Jameson's approach and recognises the political structuration of the conspiracy narrative's organisation of a totalised and fully integrated economic, cultural, social, political totality. Because of the importance that conspiracy theorists allot to revealing to the alienated 'sheeple' the conspiracy orchestrating this totality, there is a claim to agency, of the reinsertion of the individual subject into history:

[I]n its attempt to reveal a hidden truth that challenges the alienated social conceptualized within classical liberal thought, the conspiracy represents a utopian desire to reflect upon and confront the contradictions and conflicts of the contemporary democratic state and capitalism.<sup>24</sup>

Conspiracy betokens a lack of understanding and a naïve utopian impulse in Jameson's reading, however, here Fenster extends this to consider conspiracy as an enabler of agency or, at least, as a source of meaning. More than, though, Fenster identifies conspiracy theory as a means by which communities might reassert agency; there is something progressive about the way he describes it as demonstrative of the manner in which, 'religious, racial, ethnic, gender and sexual minorities and dominated groups must continually attempt to articulate their histories and versions of the historical process against the dominant, "consensus" history.'<sup>25</sup> The inclusiveness of the examples here point to a liberating role for conspiracy theory but it should be noted that conspiracy theories, whilst not exclusively stemming from reactionary sources, have tended to reflect conservative values; hence the appeal to the conservative Christianity of dispensational premillennialists. In his early study of conspiracy theory, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', Richard Hofstadter cast conspiracy as a style of political rhetoric characterised by a tendency to an exaggerated suspicion that unseen forces are secretly working against a particular group within society. He was careful to delineate between his use of the term 'paranoid' and its use as a pathology; in the following passage it is also clear that he sought to demonstrate the political paranoid style relied upon a sense of communal threat,

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<sup>24</sup> Fenster, *op cit*, 128

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 179

[T]here is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world as necessarily directed *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture and a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others.<sup>26</sup>

In so doing, Hofstadter had identified a further path to the convergence of apocalyptic thought and conspiracy theory that has also been identified in the work of both Wojcik and Fenster. It is in this that the figure of the conspiracy theorist takes on a heroic cast and, in their position of 'heightened understanding', they position themselves at the heart of a vast historical struggle, 'The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms--he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization.'<sup>27</sup> For Hofstadter, the conspiracist deals only in absolutes (good versus evil, survival versus destruction) so that defeat by the 'forces of evil' is also absolute and would mean the end for the conspiracist and his or her beleaguered 'nation'. Michael Barkun's (2003) more recent survey of conspiracy theory delineates a graduated typology of conspiracy<sup>28</sup>. Although all conspiracies share similar qualities Barkun is keen to make clear the differing forms of conspiracy theory; he identifies these as:

*Event Conspiracies.* These are limited in scope and relate to a single event or a limited series of events with no general implications beyond those caused by the objective of the conspiracy. Barkun cites the Kennedy assassination and the plot to target African-Americans with the AIDS virus

*Systematic conspiracies.* These are widespread conspiracies that have broader objectives than event conspiracies but are mobilised from within a single source: communists, Masons, Jews, the Catholic Church and so forth

*Superconspiracies.* These are 'nested' global conspiracies that feature complex, multi-layered plots with conspiracies within conspiracies but ultimately controlled by a hidden group of evil conspirators.

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 30

<sup>28</sup> Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press, 2003).

This latter type has become increasingly pervasive over the past 30-40 years with an increasing complexity that seeks to contain the otherwise delimited plots of event and systematic conspiracies. The superconspiracy incorporates all other plots and fulfils the totalising resolution of contradictions that Jameson described. Barkun identifies in the fluidity and slippery exegetical elusiveness of superconspiracies a tendency toward *bricolage* that is also shared by what is, for him, an emerging form of millennialism: improvisational millennialism. A developed form of syncretism, improvisational millennialism draws disparate elements together into a contingent but holistic ordering of meaning within an apocalyptic framework. It transcends and incorporates the discrete worlds of religious and secular apocalypses. Barkun suggests that improvisational millennialism has emerged due to the simultaneous coincidence of two factors: (i) a wide range of resources in circulation from which the improvisations can be fashioned and (ii) weakened authoritative accounts of social, theological or scientific reality permitting the ready circulation of alternative explanations. In addition to a proliferation of other media, the internet has, in the absence of gatekeepers, permitted the sharing of extensive variations on what Barkun describes as 'stigmatized knowledge' and thus fulfilling this first criterion whilst no general system of knowledge is untroubled by challenges to its validity or ethics. It is in this space that competing millennialisms compete, each formation attracting, and sometimes sharing, its own audience. As stated, Barkun identifies the internet's ability to amplify the first condition but also, in the ubiquity of 'information' offered through it, to also exacerbate the erosion of dependence of trust in what were previously held to be reliable sources; further, the capacity to disseminate information without prejudice similarly holds an allure for the 'truther' or the would-be prophet, 'one effect of the Internet is to obscure the distinction between mainstream and fringe sources, another is to bind together individuals who hold fringe views. The validation that comes from seeing one's beliefs echoed by others provides a sense of connection for otherwise isolated individuals.'<sup>29</sup> The first point is crucial to attracting new or potential converts and the second is crucial to the negotiation and maintenance of group and individual identities.

### **Apocalypse, Conspiracy and the Far Right**

Barkun's study builds on these themes to explore the presence of anti-Semitism within UFO theory and cosmic apocalypticism. In this, he was delineating the field of conspiracy-informed spiritualities made up, in equal parts, of conspiracy theory, New Age UFOlogy, and improvisational millennialism

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 20

that Charlotte Ward and David Voas would come to term, 'conspirativity'<sup>30</sup>. In the face of these outré bricolage beliefs, the imaginary of white nationalists might seem prosaic and dated. Barkun brackets nationalism in the archaic form of secular millennialism, seeing it as one of the,

[I]slands of secular millennialism [that] appear in the resurgence of ethnic nationalism [...] in the racist and xenophobic movements that are prominent in Western and Central Europe and, to a lesser extent, in North America [...] they emerge in some antiglobalization rhetoric, with its implied nostalgia for a lost golden age of self-sufficient communities.<sup>31</sup>

Certainly, the nationalism of the far right can be considered in these terms and, for instance, Kaplan's consideration of the Christian Identity movement with its 'commingling of text and current events – the Bible and CNN'<sup>32</sup> reflects this but even prior to the widespread adoption of the internet and the conspiracy year zero event of 9/11, Christian Identity was somewhat dated and definitely of the 'old world.' Kaplan sees Christian Identity believers as being strongly reminiscent of earlier millennialists; although they reject the Jewish influence upon Christianity they still, nonetheless, and perhaps naively, embrace its embedded patterns of prophecy and redemption. But even in its archaic millennialism, the Christian Identity had combined secular and religious millennialisms and in so doing had problematized the distinctions. So, whilst it is understandable that Barkun would seek to maintain the integrity of these earlier forms of millennialism by casting racist nationalisms within the secular millennialist tradition to do so would be to overlook the extent to which it is rapidly becoming characterized by the flexibility (within the terms of belligerent racist discourse) associated with improvisational millennialism. The presumed dichotomy that separates religious and secular millennialisms is increasingly undone by the extent to which the divide has been undermined by Barkun's synthesising third term. Much recent white nationalism has been composed of the range of stigmatized knowledge Barkun describes as typifying improvisational millennialism. The hollow Earth, extra-terrestrial spiritual dimension escape route employed by Hitler coupled with yoga cosmic conflict and conspiracy theory that is described in the Nazi millennialism of Miguel Serrano<sup>33</sup> coincides with many of the touchstones mentioned by Barkun. Similarly, the blending of strands of white nationalism with new religions, especially neo-paganisms.<sup>34</sup> The blending of the secular with

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<sup>30</sup> Charlotte Ward and David Voas, "The Emergence of Conspirativity," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 1 (2011): 37–41.

<sup>31</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Duke, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity*; Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism*; Anton Shekhovtsov, "Apoliteic Music: Neo-Folk, Martial

the religious and commingling of faith, nation and conspiracy has yielded a particular iteration of white nationalism that eschews traditional markers of national identity for a wider sense of belonging to, and apocalyptic fears for, an ethnonationalist 'spiritual homeland'. In *Millennium Rage*, Philip Lamy situates this kind of fear of communal disappearance in the context of white supremacist survivalists,

To white supremacist survivalists, the new world order is viewed in terms of multiculturalism, cultural relativism, political correctness, and "polyglot mud people" - immigrants and minorities despised by the Aryan Nations and other white supremacists and viewed as henchmen to the Jews. They point to the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* and to the belief in the mythical Jewish-led conspiracy to take over the world, a truly apocalyptic event.<sup>35</sup> (Lamy 1996, 249)

Stripped of the overt racism, this echoes much of paranoid rhetoric that characterises some threads in the general warp and weft of premillennial dispensationalism whilst also mirroring the content of much recent conspiracy theory. Nonetheless, it was an overtly racist interpretation of Biblical sources by the Christian Identity movement that demarcated them from other Christian millennialists. So, typically, Montana Freeman, a sect within Christian Identity, described by Catherine Wessinger in *How the Millennium Comes Violently* held that their racial separatism was divinely inspired, that Europeans were the true Israelites and that other 'races' were 'the children of Cain'.<sup>36</sup> It is precisely in this admixture of racialism and religion that Barkun's improvisational millennialism is made manifest and, most pertinently here, with the heroic surety of the defenders of (a) civilization, a potentially lethal 'cognitive map' is drawn up by adherents. It is here that the all-or-nothing stakes of paranoid apocalypticism are at their most apparent. The violence of The Order (Brüder Schweigen/Silent Brotherhood), Frazier Glenn Miller, Jr. (Overland Park Jewish Community Center shooting), or Anders Breivik is rooted in the discursive fields that are still tended to by many nationalists and, as will be shown, these distinct manifestations of white nationalist violence and those described above retain a currency among internet active white nationalists.

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Industrial and 'metapolitical Fascism,'" *Patterns of Prejudice* 43, no. 5 (2009): 431–57; Andrew Fergus Wilson, "The Invisible Empire: Political Extremity and Myths of Origin in the Networked Cultic Milieu'," in *Myth, Mysticism, and "Celtic" Nationalism*, ed. Marion Gibson, Garry Tregidga, and Shelley Trower (London: Routledge, 2012), 199–215.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Lamy, *Millennium Rage: Survivalists, White Supremacists, and the Doomsday Prophecy* (New York & London: Plenum Press, 1996), 249.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).

## White Nationalist Response to the Paris Attacks of 2015

*Stormfront* is one of the busiest WN websites and attracts an international audience. In the 90 days between 28<sup>th</sup> August 2015 and 25<sup>th</sup> November 2015, it attracted over two and a quarter million unique visitors and these visitors viewed just under eighteen and a half million pages. The majority of visitors were from the US (78%), the UK (14%), Canada (9%), Australia (5%), the Netherlands (4%), Serbia (3%), Brazil (3%), Spain (3%) with tens of thousands of visitors from a number of other nations including India, Sweden, Croatia, Mexico, South Africa, Argentina, Belgium, Finland, Poland and France<sup>37</sup>. It keeps the majority of the forum open without registration necessary to access it; there are multiple sub-forums covering a variety of topics and sub-fora dedicated to geographically specific nationalist scenes. The disparate locations and varied nationalisms in evidence on *stormfront.org* underline Barkun's observations regarding the echoing back to lonely individuals of their otherwise stigmatised viewpoints. There is a solidarity borne of a mutual awareness of their outsider status. *Stormfront* regulates statements of religious belief within its fora with the subforum dedicated to formal religious discussion accessible only to signed-up members and even then only by application and vetting. Members are restricted to invoking their deities for rhetorical emphasis only. Nonetheless, a palpable sense of apocalyptic longing is in evidence and the curbing of religious expression effectively forces forum members to express these apocalyptic perspectives in secular terms. However, these secular expressions of apocalyptic belief are invariably phrased in terms of superconspiracies that situate the white nationalist community in the heroic role of countering the civilization-threatening plots of the conspirators.

The Paris attacks yielded a dedicated thread, 'BREAKING NEWS: 18 dead in Paris terror attack' in the 'News/Newslinks and Articles' sub-forum; the title was sporadically updated as new information about the attacks became available. Within a week, it had attracted over 100,000 views and more than 1700 separate posts. It was evident that the majority of posters betrayed a conspiracist mindset. By the seventh post on the thread, the figure of a Jewish conspiracy had been invoked by a poster with the forum name, Varietas Caucasia,

*Shooting is said to be continuing.*

*Will whites wake up? If they blew up the stadium, I'd wager....*

*The Ancient Regime were paragons of virtue and beneficence and the tribune of the French compared to the traitors in France today.*

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<sup>37</sup> Website statistics available from <http://www.seethestats.com/site/stormfront.org> [visited 26th November 2015)

*And on the topic of Jews, for guests, remember, just because some Jews died in Charlie Hebdo doesn't mean the Jews don't want this to happen and aren't participating.*

*Information on Jews helping to destroy Europe RIGHT NOW:*

This is followed by a series of links to websites claiming to unmask a Jewish conspiracy to undermine Europe. The idea that Jews manipulated the IS terrorists is popular throughout the thread, post #238 typifying this,

*False flag doesn't mean "holograms and laser beams" Remember that ISIS is Israel, so they could be the masterminds behind this attack, or maybe they gave some mentally unstable muslim a klashnikov and grenades and hoped for the best. And either way we know who is importing all these Muslims so it's still technically a conspiracy whether the Jews and their dumb goyim leaders planned this or not.*

In this post, Barkun's model of the superconspiracy is clearly evident with IS having acquired a managed autonomy within the nested conspiracies of the Jewish superconspiracy. This is a recurring and characteristic motif within responses. Thus, #494

*It's disgusting listening to these leftist British newscasters shunting public understanding away from the true cause:*

*The jewish government's and the jewish EU's opening the gates of Europe (and, in this case, France) to the brown and black and muslim invaders -- and probably arming them as well.*

Again, in the active 'shunting' of the public away from the 'truth' by British news media a perceived organised effort to silence this 'truth' is discerned. Typifying the conspiracy theorist's privileged vantage point, the poster simultaneously expresses their position whilst demarcating himself from the 'sheeple'. White nationalist intertextuality is drawn on at various points throughout the thread with external links incorporated into posts. So, post #549 incorporates an embedded Youtube video entitled, 'Europa Erwache! Europe Awaken! Европа вставай!'<sup>38</sup>. The video incorporates images of central European pastoral scenes, neo-classical and art deco architecture, and brief clips of Nazi propaganda with a soundtrack of martial industrial music featuring 'Europa' by Triarii. The lyrics are pompous and fanciful, painting Europe as, "my kingdom; This is my silver sun; This is my mother; Of ascension and decline." Posted on the day of the Paris attack, the Youtube video description features more anti-Semitic rhetoric,

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9p9QY3ejbBQ> [Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2015]



*This is Europa, this is our ancestral home. Rise up my comrades, the time is NOW. Jews wont stop flooding us with non-Europeans until we are a tiny minority, so they can rule and enslave us without limit, as they do in other countries, like South Africa. We must fight the Jews, not the other non-Europeans, which don't form part of the ruling families. JEWS are the cause, massive immigration is only a symptom. Don't lose your time confronting Blacks, Pakis or Asians, that's what the Jews want (Divide & Conquer). We must flood the streets and point out the JEWS every damn day. Stop White Genocide.*

The final phrase, 'Stop White Genocide', is a constant refrain in white nationalist web presences. In the *Stormfront* Paris thread, there are calls for its use as part of a social media strategy, as is evident in post #113

*Get on Twitter people spread the #WHITEGENOCIDE message to copy paste this #Paris #ParisAttacks #ParisShooting #Whitegenocide*

*Now.*

The apocalyptic terms of the perceived Jewish conspiracy is made starkly here. If the posters are to be taken at face value there is a generalised sense that race war is unfolding and that it is mobilised by Jewish conspirators. In this conspiracy it appears that Jews control Muslims, people of African descent, Western governments, mass media, the 'international banking community', and so on. Teenagers on Twitter expressing concern for refugees are seemingly also under the sway of Jewish media for the poster of #905 who is here responding to an earlier, quoted, post:

*[Quote]Looked on Twitter. These teenage libturds are more sympathetic towards muslims than the actual victims. [/Quote]*

*You are hearing the echo created by the jew voice. The jew voice is present in large numbers across all the internet. They control print and television media. The are working as hard as they can to contain the internet awakening. It is not going to work the dam has burst, and the awakening is pouring out. Their jew voice will be drowned out.*

Like a number of posters, the poster above sees the Paris shooting as a catalyst for change. Borrowing from the terminology of new age improvisational millennialism the poster describes 'an awakening' through which 'the truth' shall be revealed; further confirming Barkun's analysis, the poster clearly believes that the potential for spreading 'stigmatized knowledge' via internet communication lies at the heart of this awakening. Further underscoring the presence of the syncretic tendency of new age religions within the white nationalist imaginary, the following post (#843) combines conspiracy with cosmological struggle, Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic language and imagery, and the self-development motifs of new age personal development,

*Probably the sheeple will never wake up -- and what would they do about things they don't understand even if they did wake up?*

*[Lengthy call to arms and the destruction of Israel]*

*A world endlessly controlled by the satanic jews is best destroyed -- for the sake of the upward evolutionary path of the universe -- no matter the cost to planet earth and its inhabitants.*

Given the epistemological confusion in evidence here, it is tempting to dismiss this kind of muddled mélange out of hand but to do so would be to confirm the persecuted ('stigmatized') status of the knowledge claims being made. Wessinger<sup>39</sup> makes evident the benefits of taking conspiracist apocalypticism seriously in her account of her involvement in the defusing of the stand-off between the FBI and the Christian Identity sect, the Montana Freemen. That is not to say that there is a concrete threat emerging from with white nationalist apocalypticism but there is certainly a widely held belief within the community that they are at a significant and potentially cataclysmic moment:

*#25 Hang the traitorous politicians people who let Muslims into Europe! [angry emoji]*

*#143 Time to deal with Islam once and for all. And at the same opportunity deal with Jews and blacks by deporting them all*

*#172 The plague of Islam has festered yet again! This is what's coming to ALL white nations, and thus why all of us must become able to fight the Mohammedans with any and all means at our disposal.*

*#301 RISE UP, EUROPA! [posted above a map of Europe dominated by a Reichsadler]*

*#362 I have chills running down my spine. You can feel it happening, a great awakening. I think our enemies will regret this day for years to come.*

*#400 I expect to see much more refugee housing centers burned down. Europeans cannot wait to just "vote" out the muslims; THE MUSLIMS HAVE DECLARED WAR. Stop letting the "moderate muslims" be their shield, kick them all out.*

And so it continues. The danger posed here is an active apocalypticism that clearly draws on an adaptive improvisational Nazism (posts asking if Europe 'missed Hitler yet?' abound) and which feels that its 'time has come'. It is instructive here to recall the 'manifesto' of racially-motivated mass murderer, Dylann Roof. In this, he wrote that he felt,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

*I have no choice. I am not in the position to, alone, go into the ghetto and fight. I chose Charleston because it is most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country. We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.*<sup>40</sup>

An *LA Times* article dated June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015 found that passages from the manifesto had earlier been posted by user, 'AryanBlood1488', in comments on news stories posted at *The Daily Stormer*, a racist news website. There are clearly psychological factors to take into account in such cases but the similarity in tenor, content and neo-Nazi symbolism in the chosen forum name provides a sobering comparison with the anger in evidence on *Stormfront*.

## Conclusion

Thankfully, the literature provides multiple instances in which an apocalyptic faithful is let down by fate and the longed-for end and its promise of a better world to come never arrives. Festinger *et al*'s *When Prophecy Fails* is the seminal example.<sup>41</sup> What should be recalled, though, is that Dorothy Martin never abandoned her beliefs nor did many of her followers. The fervour on show amongst the white nationalist community is almost certainly temporary. Differences in value, religious belief and between national cultures ensure that the white nationalist communities remain inchoate; their shared apocalyptic ardour is insufficient to overcome more established differences within the community. However, what also is apparent is the manner in which the event provided an arena for the community to rehearse and determine the boundaries of the belief that incorporate members of the 'white nation'. One lone voice suggested that Jews had nothing to do with the Paris attacks; the community quickly rounded on this poster and ridiculed their suggestion. This is an apocalyptic community that is currently delineating its core beliefs. It is inchoate and lacks a foundational text through which to organise communal values more fully. That these values are retrogressive, irrational and couched in the overwhelmed and anxious fears of apocalyptic conspiracism are no barrier to their longevity. What requires further scrutiny is the ease with which these values and beliefs are capable of extending into the more populist and less marginal aspects of apocalyptic belief. Racist improvisational millennialists with social media strategies and a degraded but partially

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<sup>40</sup> Available from <http://gawker.com/here-is-what-appears-to-be-dylann-roofs-racist-manifest-1712767241> [Accessed 26th November 2015]

<sup>41</sup> Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper-Torchbooks, 1956).

familiar map of the current situation pose a threat to domestic and international order; IS have demonstrated the value of social media to belligerent millennialists and whilst white nationalism does not have the resources of IS it has a shared belief in the absolute rightness of its position.