

CONSPIRACY THEORIES, GNOSTICISM, AND THE CRITICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

An Interview with David G. Robertson



WRSP: Your PhD thesis, and then your first book—*UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (Bloomsbury, 2016)—dealt with the place of conspiracy theories and UFOs in the New Age milieu of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Many readers may not understand why UFOs and conspiracy theories are being studied by a scholar of religion; how would you explain this project to them?

Dr Robertson: The fact that it's not *obviously* religion is part of the point. Religion is a hugely contested category, and the more you look into it, the less clear it becomes. It is in things that are on the edges of the category where the processes by which the category is maintained become most clear. And the point is not for me to ask is this religion or not, but to think about why others classify certain things as "religion" and not other things? Is religion "belief in supernatural agencies"? Is it a community who hold a similar worldview? Is it a set of ideas about transcendence? Each of those applies to UFOs and conspiracy theories as well as to things we usually identify as religions. These questions—and the processes of the politics of knowledge they reveal—are what makes this project interesting from a scholarly perspective.

But funnily enough, it showed me that the approach of Religious Studies—which uses ideas and methods from history, sociology and anthropology—is applicable more widely than simply those groups we can usually classify as "World Religions." It allows you to bridge sociological models and individual beliefs and practices in ways which are vital to understanding contemporary worldviews—including religions, but also conspiracies, ideologies, and any other case where identities, belief and social structures interact.

WRSP: You talk a little bit about your background in the prologue to your monograph, where you describe yourself as "a lifelong atheist," but I'd be interested to learn more about what got you

interested in religion, ufology, and conspiracism to start with? What led you to decide that this was the PhD topic you wanted to pursue?

Dr Robertson: I always found interesting ideas interesting, even if I never really had any kind of religion or ideology of my own. It's really that simple. As I approached thirty, I realised that maybe I should be working with ideas, and decided to go to university to train my ability to think. I initially considered philosophy, but I eventually took Religious Studies, focusing on the New Testament and Koine Greek. I loved the historical investigation, but it felt like everything had already been done, and I didn't fancy spending my career butting heads with the more religiously motivated scholars. I was getting more and more interested in New Religions anyway.

The specific topic came to me when I came across a reference to David Icke in a book on the history of the New Age movement. Now, being a decade older than most of the other students, I remembered his famous interview on the Wogan show, and I was also aware of his later conspiratorial material too. So I started to wonder how he'd gone from one to the other. I was never primarily interested in UFOs though—they're the McGuffin of the story. They were a way to focus the huge amount of material into a coherent narrative, and to develop the argument of shared discursive objects (like UFOs) facilitating a transfer of ideas across different areas of the cultic milieu.

WRSP: Your research topic was, I think it's fair to say, somewhat unusual. How did people receive it? Particularly, I'm wondering how it was received both by your fellow scholars of religion and also by those who espouse the sort of UFO-based and conspiracist beliefs that you were examining?

Dr Robertson: Some examiners and reviewers have certainly been dismissive, even indignant, especially early in my career. Most of the scholars I met were intrigued, however, including some quite conservative people. Religious Studies scholars love novel areas of research. Nobody else was really looking at religion and conspiracy (or not that I knew of at that time, at least), so there weren't special conferences or journals or anything. I had to work in mainstream venues, so I put a lot of effort into the theoretical issues, and how to justify my work within Religious Studies. And of course, I wasn't getting opportunities to teach on conspiracy theories, it was all Religion 101, so that tightened up my broader knowledge of the discipline, as did starting the Religious Studies Project.

I've had largely positive responses from the groups I've written about. They thought I treated them fairly and reported things accurately, even if they didn't always agree with all my conclusions. I put it down to just common decency. I didn't patronise them, and I made it clear that I wasn't out to write a hatchet piece. In fact, I stayed in touch with some of them for a while, they were mostly pretty sweet and interesting people. I remember someone saying in a review that I'd misrepresented Whitley Strieber in an encyclopedia entry, and being able to respond, "Well, Whitley said I'd done a better job of describing his career in 1,500 words than he could!"

WRSP: Since the publication of your monograph, you've also brought out the *Handbook of Conspiracy Theories and Contemporary Religion* (Brill, 2018), co-edited with Asbjørn Dyrendal and Egil Asprem, in which you bring together contributions from a broad range of academics. Where do you think the scholarly study of conspiracy theories is at the moment and where would you like to see it headed?

Dr Robertson: Over the last ten years or so, there's been a move to seeing conspiracy theories as a global phenomenon, and much more focus on the cultural significance. Much of the work prior to this was more concerned with exposing "wrong thinking." Clearly, the broader cultural relevance is easier to see in the last five or ten years, and there are many more research projects being funded today than previously, although I do have concerns with the normative character of some of these. Conspiracy theories inherently challenge power—governments as well as academia—and scholarship that legitimises the control of free speech and free enquiry in the name of controlling conspiracy theories is more likely to get funding than that which addresses the systemic reasons that people are less inclined to trust authorities, or the state's own use of narratives of a conspiratorial Other, for example.

The next step is to begin to conceptualise conspiracy theories as an intrinsic part of the episteme of the Post-Truth world. Do they, as Bruno Latour, Steve Fuller and Erica Lagalisse have suggested, represent a popularised version of critique, and so a "levelling up" sophistication in popular discourse? Perhaps this democratisation of the means of knowledge production is precisely why conspiracy theories threaten the traditional institutions of political and epistemic power, and those who benefit from their hegemony. Why are some irrational beliefs challenged in the public sphere, and others defended?

WRSP: The existence of conspiracy theories has really been brought to mainstream attention since your monograph appeared, especially through the emergence of QAnon, discourses about "fake news," and conspiracist ideas pertaining to Covid-19. Do you think that there has been a genuine change in either the content or popularity of conspiracy theories in Western countries in the past five years, or is the growing visibility primarily a result of increased media attention?

Dr Robertson: It's partly a result of media attention, and partly the increasingly polarised relationship between "official" and unofficial knowledge. With the benefit of hindsight, it's hard to see how the current QAnon stuff is so substantively different from McCarthyism, or the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 1990s, or beliefs about Jews in the early twentieth century. When I was growing up, members of the IRA—a religious, political and nationalist movement—were regularly bombing sites in the United Kingdom because they thought there was a Royalist Protestant plot against them. Large numbers of people will believe quite extreme things about other groups of people with alarming ease. Religious ideas and supernatural beliefs are held by the majority of people, and they are no more "rational" than conspiracy beliefs, and they can lead to violence too. But the category "conspiracy theory" is relatively recent, not being really in mainstream use until the 1990s. The distrust of institutions has increased steadily since then—as has the gap between rich and poor—and with it the perceived need to protect the institutions they challenge against the barbarians at the gate.

WRSP: You've moved your research focus away from conspiracy theories and are now working on a critical history of Gnosticism in the so-called "History of Religions" paradigm, on the subject of which you have a forthcoming book. Could you tell us about this project and what it reveals? Do you feel that "Gnosticism" is a term that scholars should be using, or would we be better off abandoning it?

Dr Robertson: The book is a history of how scholars (and others) took a term for heresy in the second century AD, transformed it into a religion in the nineteenth century and then again into an ahistorical religious essence in the twentieth. It's a really interesting case study in this sort of reification because almost everything we think we know about Gnosticism was already in place before we discovered the Nag Hammadi texts, and even though they challenged what had been hypothesised from the accounts of Church Fathers, those ideas stubbornly persist in Religious Studies (though not in Biblical Studies). The historical narrative should make it clear that if you choose to use the term, you're not referring to any historical reality, but rather to a narrative about some kind of pure, elite religious knowledge straight out of the Erasmian meetings and the phenomenological History of Religions.

WRSP: With Christopher Cotter, you co-edited the volume on *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, published by Routledge in 2016. Could you tell my readers a little bit more about the concept of "world religions" and why you have joined other scholars in critiquing its utility? If we shift-attention from teaching about the so-called "world religions," how do you think we can best teach about religion, whether in schools or universities?

Dr Robertson: There are really a lot of problems with thinking about religions through the World Religions paradigm. First, why is it always the same five traditions? If it's numbers, then why is Judaism there, and not, say, African or Greek traditions? If it's importance, well, how do we ascertain that? The answer is that the World Religions paradigm presupposes a Protestant Christian model of religion, so religions are ranked on historical proximity to Christianity (so, Judaism) and on similarity—whether or not they have scriptures and priests, or offer a message of salvation, and so on. It also hugely misrepresents the religious lives of adherents—we "know" that Buddhists are pacifists, Catholics believe in transubstantiation and the Vedas are the sacred texts of Hinduism, yet none of these things are true of the majority of adherents of those religions. It oversimplifies the historical and vernacular diversity of traditions to create these monolithic entities, which usually marginalises non-elite voices like women and the poor. And it ignores that people don't necessarily belong to a single religion in the way we tend to in the West.

The important thing to remember is that the concept of "world religions"—and indeed, "religion"—comes from a particular historical context: colonialism. It's the equivalent of the Tree of Life with humans as the pinnacle of evolution, except here it's Christianity as the paragon of religions. The religions of people that the Victorians weren't interested in ruling or trading with were simply ignored. It's high time that the way we teach about religion moves past "descriptions of the strange beliefs of foreigners."

The book is focused on teaching, so there are lots of suggestions in it for how to teach after world religions. My approach is to say to the students, "I'm not going to tell you what religion is—I'm going to help you to see all the different ways that people understand it, and for you to get better at seeing which one is at play at any given circumstance." Then we can take some examples chosen to show when these different models come into dispute—like yoga being banned in schools in Alabama, or whether racist nationalist Christians are "really" Christians, or whatever. This gives them a really useful toolkit for thinking about people, worldviews and societies, not just a set of inaccurate "facts" about some religions.

WRSP: With Carmen Becker you co-edit the peer-reviewed journal *Implicit Religion* (<https://journals.equinoxpub.com/IR>) This isn't a term that will be widely understood outside certain academic circles, so can you explain what you mean by the term "implicit religion" and what you see as the journal's aims?

Dr Robertson: *Implicit Religion* is the name of the journal, and no more. We inherited it when we inherited the journal from Edward Bailey. Implicit Religion was his thing, the idea that anything that people found profoundly meaningful was essentially religious, whether they thought so or not. It has some fans, but was never widely used in Religious Studies, and I certainly had no interest in it. When he died, Equinox wanted to reinvent the journal as a critical religion journal, and approached me because of my work with the Religious Studies Project. We recently added the subtitle, *Journal for the Critical Study of Religion*, to make it clearer that it's really a different journal.

Carmen and I want to focus on cases on the borders of the category, where the ideas of what religion is—implicit or explicit—come into play. So we've had issues on how religion is conceptualised in the law, in nationalism, in Alcoholics Anonymous, features on how scholars study non-religion and Scientology, and a retrospective on Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. We've built an incredible editorial board which brings together the best critical scholars from Europe and North America. I'd urge anyone who'd be interested in contributing to get in touch with me.

WRSP: You are also a co-founder of the Religious Studies Project, which is a really excellent website on which you feature recorded interviews with scholars working on the study of religion. What led you to establish this site, how did it get off the ground, and what do you see its role within the field?

Dr Robertson: Christopher R. Cotter and I were graduate students together at the University of Edinburgh. We'd been hanging out, and one night I suggested we could record a few seminars and put them out as a podcast. The idea developed, and we recorded our first interviews at the British Association for the Study of Religions conference in 2011. That was ten years and about four hundred episodes ago. Now it's a whole international team, we're a registered charity and we're expecting to hit a million downloads this autumn.

The aim was to demystify Religious Studies a bit, presenting ideas in an accessible way and in a natural, conversational style. But we also wanted to embed the whole think in the critical paradigm, always bringing it back to broader theoretical issues about the category "religion." It's funny to think of a whole generation of scholars coming up having listened to the Religious Studies Project, but if it means that they have internalised some of the critical approach, it will have been worth it.

WRSP: We are seeing a decline in the popularity of most humanities subjects at the undergraduate level, at least in Britain, and that probably doesn't bode well for the study of religion as an academic field. How is the field faring, and what do you think are its prospects for the future? Do you think its future health will necessitate greater reliance on independent scholars and on academics working in other (arguably more institutionally stronger) disciplines like history and anthropology?

Dr Robertson: The humanities have been hit hard in the United Kingdom through the neoliberalisation of higher education (the introduction of student fees) and the financial crash of 2008, which led to research funding cuts. Religious Studies was always a small subject, but it isn't faring too badly, in fact—though this isn't too clear from the way the figures are counted.

(Philosophy, Religion and Ethics courses, for example, are actually growing, but aren't counted part of Theology and Religious Studies by the Universities and Colleges Admission Service). Moreover, the World Religions paradigm has meant that departments have been increasingly staffed by area specialists, further weakening the disciplinary identity. So we are still vulnerable.

Religious Studies has two major issues to overcome, however, if it is to thrive as an academic subject. We lack institutional power, because almost every Religious Studies department is controlled by religiously motivated scholars, as are all the bodies who make decisions at policy level or funding research. For such people, Religious Studies is at best "the other religions," or at worst an atheist upstart out to undermine them. This brings me to the second point: we have failed to make the case publicly or institutionally for the unique contribution and value of the social-scientific non-confessional study of religion. If we cannot do so, then we cannot hope to move the public discourse on religion forward. I personally think that the two are related—we cannot hope to make the case so long as we are shackled to those in whose interest it is that we don't. Either Religious Studies has to start cutting ties and work to establish itself among the social sciences, or we should move into sociology and anthropology departments and stop shoring up theology departments with the student numbers and interdisciplinary potential we bring.

WRSP: Are there any other projects of yours that we should be keeping an eye out for?

Dr Robertson: If you like melodic prog rock, you might like to check out my new album at <https://zenarchy.bandcamp.com/releases>.

Dr. Robertson, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,

Dr Ethan Doyle White Blog
(<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)

David Robertson Interview
(<https://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/2021/03/an-interview-with-dr-david-grobertson.html>)

Dr David G. Robertson is a Lecturer in Religious Studies at the Open University. He is the author of *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (Bloomsbury, 2016) and *Gnosticism and the History of Religions* (Bloomsbury, 2021), as well as being the co-editor of *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies* (Routledge, 2016) and *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (Brill, 2018). He co-edits *Implicit Religion: Journal for the Critical Study of Religion* and co-created the Religious Studies Project podcast.

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