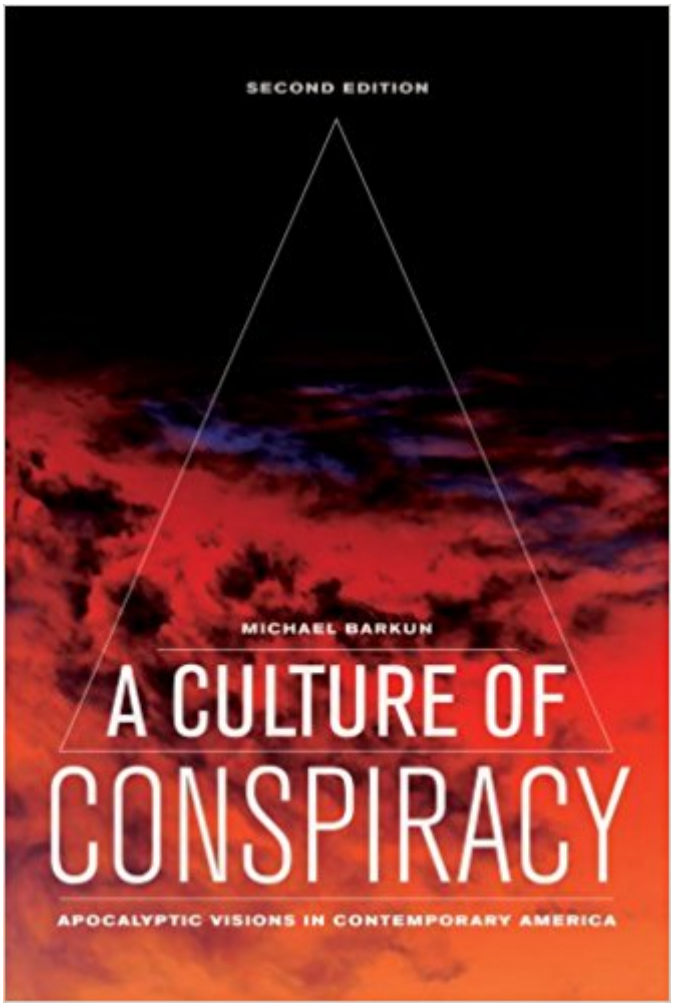
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A Culture Of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions In Contemporary America (Comparative Studies In Religion And Society)



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Synopsis

American society has changed dramatically since A Culture of Conspiracy was first published in 2001. In this revised and expanded edition, Michael Barkun delves deeper into America's conspiracy sub-culture, exploring the rise of 9/11 conspiracy theories, the "birther" controversy surrounding Barack Obama's American citizenship, and how the conspiracy landscape has changed with the rise of the Internet and other new media.What do UFO believers, Christian millennialists, and right-wing conspiracy theorists have in common? According to Michael Barkun in this fascinating yet disturbing book, quite a lot. It is well known that some Americans are obsessed with conspiracies. The Kennedy assassination, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the 2001 terrorist attacks have all generated elaborate stories of hidden plots. What is far less known is the extent to which conspiracist worldviews have recently become linked in strange and unpredictable ways with other "fringe" notions such as a belief in UFOs, Nostradamus, and the Illuminati. Unraveling the extraordinary genealogies and permutations of these increasingly widespread ideas, Barkun shows how this web of urban legends has spread among subcultures on the Internet and through mass media, how a new style of conspiracy thinking has recently arisen, and how this phenomenon relates to larger changes in American culture. This book, written by a leading expert on the subject, is the most comprehensive and authoritative examination of contemporary American conspiracism to date.Barkun discusses a range of material-involving inner-earth caves, government black helicopters, alien abductions, secret New World Order cabals, and much more-that few realize exists in our culture. Looking closely at the manifestations of these ideas in a wide range of literature and source material from religious and political literature, to New Age and UFO publications, to popular culture phenomena such as The X-Files, and to websites, radio programs, and more, Barkun finds that America is in the throes of an unrivaled period of millenarian activity. His book underscores the importance of understanding why this phenomenon is now spreading into more mainstream segments of American culture.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for the First Edition:"Tracing the beliefs in various conspiracies and mega-conspiracies in literature, apocalyptic and political writing, and popular culture, Barkun creates an exceptional and invaluable genealogy of the extraordinary permutations that these ideas have undergone since WWII and, of course, as a result of the Internet. Barkun dives into the religious and political matrix of what some call the "lunatic fringe," forcing us to look at the revival and spread of conspiracist thinking on an even grander scale into broad reaches of American culture. For those who think conspiracy thinking is a fading phenomenon, or a cultural phenomenon of little significance or creativity, think again. Welcome to the third millennium."—Richard Landes, Director, Center for Millennial Studies at Boston University; editor of The Encyclopedia of Millennial Movements and author of Relics, Apocalypse, and the Deceits of History"Millennial dreams, apocalyptic nightmares populated by agents of the Antichrist, space aliens, and acolytes of the New World Order-With a calm approach and scrupulous academic bearings, Barkun navigates through the reefs of conspiracist allegation from the cosmic to the comic, from Biblical prophecy to Internet alerts."—Chip Berlet, co-author of Right-Wing Populism in America"This is a gripping, and at times scary, book. Michael Barkun, one of our most respected political scientists, has produced a meticulously researched and highly perceptive account of those who find credible an incredible assortment of nefarious conspiracies emanating not only from the Jews, Masons, Catholics and politicians in our midst, but also from ' out there.Ã¢â ¬â„¢ This book should be read by everyone who believes that there are some ways of checking the differences between truths and fantasies - and by everyone who doesn' t."—Eileen Barker, Professor of Sociology, the London School of Economics

Michael Barkun,Ã Â Professor Emeritus of Political ScienceÃ Â at the Maxwell School, Syracuse University, is author of Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement

(revised edition 1997) and Disaster and the Millennium (1986), among other books.

A Scholarly yet easily readable work and, definitely called for. It was high time someone simply presented products of the religulous-convoluted mind in a comprehensive form. Although limited to America, it is clearly an international, indeed global phenomenon, and it goes back some 2000 years, to Hellenism and Gnosticism. What prevents me from giving it a full five star rating is that I miss a history-of-ideas element as a backdrop. For instance: Barkun outlines the story in a movie, starring Mel Gibson, who at the end is on the point of meeting a swarm of black helicopters. It wouldn't have hurt to point out that this is an ingenious take on the ancient Greek story of Orestes who, having killed his mother, sees big black birds settling in the garden trees all around him. Others cannot see them but he can, and it chases him around the world. Both Sartre and Hitchcock made use of that; it is fair to say that it belongs to the collective unconscious--close to an archetype. A string of such comments would have expanded the scope of the book in a fascinating way, also putting the contemporary phenomenon in a historical perspective. Maybe, bringing in a co-writer would have been a good idea.

I'm sure that the various conspiracy theorists will all jump on this book and pan it, so let me counter them in advance by posting a good review. I read and loved the first edition. This new edition has various new subjects of conspiracy theorizing, such as President Obama, the alleged Maya prophecies for 2012, and the increasing number of conspiracy theories about 9-11. Suffice it to say that this book is your guide to the idea that giant reptiles under the earth secretly control the world through the Trilateral Commission, the Masons, and the Illuminati. The book is scholarly and well researched, which means it is not as exciting as the literature it analyzes (but, judging from the quotes, Barkun's book is in much better English--conspiracy theorists do not seem very literate).We are living in a surrealistic age when everything is a "matter of opinion." The conspiracy theorists are no more far-out than the postmodernists who held in the 1990s that science was merely a set of white male hegemonic claims. That fad seems to have died, but it produced a widespread discrediting of science, seen e.g. in the truly horrible and terrifying anti-"shots" movement, as well as in denial of global warming, and in resurgent racism. I recently wrote a distinguished academic about some racist claims made by someone under his direction (at the time). The claims were factually wrong, disproved years ago, but the answer I got was that this was a matter of "opinion" and not to be censored. Similarly, in spite of the fact that global warming has been settled science for years, USA TODAY recently "balanced" an article about it with a denialist counter-article. People

seem to have genuinely forgotten that there is a difference between an actual personal judgment and a proven fact.Maybe this anti-fact agenda is yet another sneaky trick of those reptiles from outer space....

I have seen Michael Barkun's A Culture of Conspiracy mentioned in other books about conspiracies, most notably Voodoo Histories. I found the book to be very informative, but also tough to read. I think that Barkun did a fine job of outlining the differences in conspiracy theories, but overall, I think that his use of jargon made the book a little difficult to understand. When he described specific conspiracies, I found myself flying through the pages, but when he dug into the conspiracy theorists, I slowed down. I would recommend this book for the serious researcher on conspiracies, but if you are looking for a fluff piece endorsing some strange theory or exposing some deep-seated corruption, I'd look elsewhere. Barkun thoroughly debunks the entire notion of conspiracies and gives the skeptic some additional ammunition in the process.

Michael Barkun is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Syracuse University who specialises in the social history of fringe belief systems outside the mainstream. His previously published works include `Disaster and the Millennium' (1986) and `Religion and the Racist Right' (1997).This 2013 edition of `A Culture of Conspiracy' updates and expands Barkun's 2003 book of the same title by including new chapters on the fabrication of multiple conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks, the wide range of conspiracy theories about Barack Obama (that he wasn't born in Hawaii, is a Moslem or `The Antichrist' prophesised in Revelations), the propensity for conspiracy theorists linked to armed militias on the extreme right of US politics to engage in violence, and an analysis of the various apocalyptic predictions about 2012.Barkun explores the process whereby `New World Order' ideas originally promoted by a tiny number of right-wing Christian fundamentalist extremists like Pat Robertson in the pre-internet age fused in the 1980s first with the more scientifically respectable study of the UFO phenomenon, and later with other new-agey beliefs usually categorized as `stigmatized knowledge'. This polyglot wove together in the 1990s to meld on the one hand right-wing millennialist NWO beliefs inspired by end-times religious ideologies and multiple conspiracy theories about cabals of Jews, Catholics, freemasons, the Trilateral Commission, the UN & `secret government' scheming to do everyone down with dastardly plots visible only to CT promoters; with on the other hand an accessible bricolage of previously unrelated fringe beliefs: alternative medical cures, junk-science about a hollow Earth populated by shape-shifting reptilian beings, spiritual chanellers, cryptozoology, the UFO subculture and

ideologically motivated propaganda against GM foods. Barkun coins the term `Improvisational Milleniallism' to describe this pick-&-mix societal phenomenon.The author demonstrates how repositioning, mainstreaming and bridging are used by promoters to target their chosen market segment with this bricolage of alternative worldviews in the internet age. As long as `New World Order' ideologies were promoted only by violent anti-government militants, anti-Semites and neo-Nazis, their appeal was limited. Repositioning NWO beliefs within UFO subculture has led to a new cohabitation with Atlantis and `ancient aliens' believers with no overt political identity or agenda:"...Conspiracism has now been placed squarely within the domain of stigmatized knowledge where it shares attention with alternative cancer cures, free energy panaceas and lore about the Great Pyramid" (p228)Barkun considers this new cohabitation is leading to a potentially destabilizing situation where extreme right-wing conspiracy theorists (racist, violent, anti-government, armed) are becoming `culturally sanitized' because of their dilution into the new `cultic milieu'. He cites David Icke as one example of a bridging entrepreneur, targeting both New Age audiences and the racist, anti-government right with a seamlessly integrated and potentially dangerous conspiratorial fusion-ideology. The logical fall-out of such a development is societal polarization where the conspiratorially minded, like hardline Islamic fundamentalists, begin to see themselves as championing a true-believer ideology-of-the-faithful that must utterly obliterate the adversaries it has chosen to demonize.Barkun's book is not a polemic, but an academic study analysing the defining characteristics of a social phenomenon in the modern age. Whilst neither as fluent nor engaging as the free-flowing prose of Peter Knight who writes on the same subjects, Barkun's writing style is nevertheless literate and scholarly without being dry. Readers unfamiliar with the academic style might however find this book hard going. My advice would be to read it slowly and take your time; the book runs to only 239 pages (50 more than the 2003 original) excluding notes, bibliography and index and the effort is well worth it.

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