

Research Article

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From Risk to Terror: Islamist Conspiracies and the Paradoxes of Post-9/11 Government

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Abstract: Discourses of Islamist terrorism deployed as part of the War on Terror have fed into a host of conspiracy theories imagining Islam as a system of total government. But even before 9/11, mainstream political discourses reflected similar suspicions. Beginning in the 1980s, concerns about the political establishment were expressed from within government itself in the idea of a government that governs “too much.” In this article, I suggest that the proliferation of Islamist conspiracies after 9/11 reflects this mode of government. To develop this argument, I begin by linking discourses about terrorism produced as part of the War on Terror to conspiracy theories linking terror and Islam to notions of total power in the state. I then suggest that Islamist conspiracies draw on the epistemologies of uncertainty produced by the state in order to transform what is unknown or “risky” into un/certain objects of knowledge and truth. This transformation takes place through their location in the space of the sacred—in the soul of Islam. I illustrate these parallels through a comparative analysis of official policies and discourses of terrorism and conspiracy culture, with a focus on the Center for Security Policy website and Glenn Beck’s *It Is About Islam: Exposing the Truth About ISIS, Al Qaeda, Iran and the Caliphate*, where discourse about terror is used to signify the (hidden) truth of Islam.

Keywords: government, risk, terror, Islam, conspiracy, Frank Gaffney, Glenn Beck

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.

Secretary of State under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld

Introduction

Discourses about terror appear on the front pages of news articles, in political speeches, in films and television, and they form the central preoccupation of a cultural fringe rapt in conspiracies, hidden powers, lies, and truth. In this article, I argue that this conspiracism reflects contemporary anxieties about meaning and power in the modern state. To develop this argument, I begin by linking discourses about terrorism produced as part of the War on Terror to conspiracy theories linking terror and Islam to notions of total power in the state. I then suggest that Islamist conspiracies draw on the epistemologies of uncertainty produced as part of the War on Terror in order to transform them into un/certain objects of knowledge and truth. This transformation takes place through their location in the space of the sacred—in the soul of Islam. I illustrate the parallels between official discourses about terrorism and fears of Islamist conspiracies through an examination of the Center for Security Policy website and a close reading of Glenn Beck’s *It Is About Islam: Exposing the Truth About ISIS, Al Qaeda, Iran and the Caliphate*, where discourse about terror is used to signify the (hidden) truth of Islam.

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“Terror” before and after 9/11

To begin, I would like to explore the meaning of the word “terror”¹ in its post 9/11 development. Popular usages of “terror” often signify a variety of meanings linked to the experience of horror. George Bataille, writing on the theory of religion, equates horror to the vertiginous experience of the sacred, that which is ecstatic and transcendental but also violent and profoundly frightening. However, common usages of horror in the wake of 9/11 draw primarily on its phenomenal connection to fear. “Terrorism” in this context conjures the images of 9/11 victims fleeing the burning twin towers and signifies a state of panic. This usage draws on the etymology of “terror,” which derives from the Latin “terreo” and “tremo” and denotes the physical act of trembling (Cavarero). Trembling is then connected to flight; the trembler is one who flees in fright. As Cavarero tells it, the two reactions need not be sequential; what is signalled in terror is an “instinctual mobility” set off by a fear that drives the body into motion. The “flight” (or fight) instinct is, of course, linked to the instinct to survive, so that what terrorises falls within the ambit of deadly violence. But “terror” does not only signify an experience. Since 9/11, “terror” also refers to a particular form of violence. It is this element of “terror” that I would like to explore in what follows.

In discourses about terror following 9/11, terrorism (and I will be using “terror” and “terrorism” interchangeably) is a form of violence unassimilable to either crime or war. Rather, public discourses about terror situate its violence between the two so that it is like crime in that it exceeds the law, but it is also like war in that its motives are political.² These points are illustrated in the Department of Homeland Security’s definition of terror by two basic criteria. The first involves observable acts that endanger human life and violate state or federal law. The second focuses exclusively on intent. The two are connected by appearances, what is called “*an appearance of intent*” to do any of the following: “(i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping...” (emphasis added). In this definition, the principle from which action proceeds is the self and the target of action is other selves. In this regard, terror is a unique kind of crime because it seeks to change the thought or behaviour of others—a civilian population and/or its government—through violence or the threat of violence. Importantly, terror proceeds from a notion of subjective inwardness reconstructed through the violent act—“*an appearance of intent to*”—that impinges on the subjectivity of others. In terror as violence, then, we are confronted with a distinction in kinds of violence where difference is situated at the level of the individual and the sort of subject he is thought to be. In practice, this translated into a targeted policy of racial and religious profiling that

subjected 80,000 Arab and Muslim immigrants to fingerprinting and registration, sought out 8,000 Arab and Muslim men for FBI interviews, and imprisoned over 5,000 foreign nationals in anti-terrorism preventative detention initiatives. As part of this program, the government adopted an aggressive strategy of arrest and prosecution, holding people on minor charges...such as immigration violations, credit card fraud, or false statements, or, when it had no charges at all, as “material witnesses.” (Cole qtd. in Esposito 162)

The War on Terror from this point of view takes on an epistemological dimension in its search for the “hidden truth” of what might otherwise appear to be harmless or benign figures—the imam who talks a little bit too much about politics; Muslim civil society groups that lobby a little too forcefully for their constituents; a

¹ As I elaborate in the following sections, “terror” and “terrorism” are not precise synonyms; as Lisa Stampnitzky has observed “Definitional debates are the great Bermuda Triangle of terrorism research” (5). Nevertheless, conventional uses of the terms “terror” and “terrorism” in post 9/11 public discourse have given us relatively stable understanding of the terms—even if we can debate the merits of what often appears to be their selective usage, an issue this article attempts to take up and explain.

² Distinguishing the religious from the political in this context is often challenging, a consequence, in part, of the different conceptions of “religion” and “politics” in secular culture from those found in the Islamic tradition. What we find in public discourses about terror is that the political motives of individuals like Bin Laden are omitted in favour of emphasising religious motives. An interesting distinction is also made in this regard between Al-Qaeda and ISIS—the latter’s explicit apocalyptic bent is emphasised over its political goals—but often gets forgotten because of misinformation in the media about al-Qaeda’s “apocalyptic” goals.

refugee from Iraq or Syria who might also be a terrorist. Like the *hostis humani generis*, or the enemy of mankind, “terror”

describe[s] conflict with a perpetrator whose actions against certain people or groups are thought to betray a fundamental hostility toward humankind and the laws that govern humanity...They are defined as enemies of the rule of law itself—“as if” they personally epitomized anarchic chaos, nightmarish oppression, or any other radical and violent refusal of the law. Because they are constructed as perpetrators of violence, and because their violence is defined as inherently illegitimate, violence against such perpetrators is, in turn, inherently legitimate. (Schillings 4)

A crucial aspect of this activity, of course, is that it is never-ending, since the evil it seeks to uncover and eliminate will always be hidden, will always morph into something unexpected, and will therefore always pose a challenge to knowledge. The search for truth will, therefore, also always produce what is sought, assimilating the unknown to the known and vice versa, since the figuration of truth in terror discourse is itself the unacknowledged fiction produced in the course of the search. What matters in the production of truth in these contexts then is not what is said and done openly, but rather what is hidden (and then revealed by power). This epistemological paradigm has formed the foundation for conspiracist links between terror, Islam, and the state itself.

Islamist Conspiracies: From Fears of Terror to Fears of Total Government

Discourses of Islamist terrorism deployed as part of the War on Terror have fed into an array of conspiracy theories in which Islam is imagined as a demonic force threatening both civilisation and the soul. As Michael Barkun notes, quoting Stephen D. O’Leary’s book on apocalypticism, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, in which conspiracism is often linked to apocalyptic discourse and relies on notions of hidden evil (hence the “apocalyptic tones” of the Bush Presidency), conspiracists view power as being “outside the true community, in some ‘Other, defined as foreign or barbarian, though often... disguised as innocent and upright’” (Introduction). But before 9/11, anxieties about meaning, power, and the state were expressed by various anti-government militias—the Posse Comitatus, the Branch Davidians, the Montana Freeman—whose suspicions centred on the hidden machinations of the state. The Federal Reserve, the IRS, the CIA and the FBI, among other government entities, represented not only the institutional overtaking of individual freedom but also formed part of an emerging “new world order” bent on total power. Hidden behind a facade of legitimate government apparatuses were “real,” often foreign (insert “Jewish,” “Communist,” “Russian”), powers working behind the scenes as part of a strategy of global dominance (see Conroy).

Beginning in the 1980s, we also started to see a shift in mainstream political discourses toward suspicions of power. At this juncture, concerns about the political establishment were expressed from within government itself in the idea of a government that governs “too much.” The election of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK signalled a shift away from the welfare state toward a neoliberal model emphasising “small” government, laissez-faire markets, and private enterprise. Individuals who might have turned to the state for social support were increasingly called on to take care of themselves. These moves were representative of a broader ideological shift in government emphasising a paradoxical mix of calculated risk-taking, personal freedom, deregulation, and, at the same time, a strong military and police function.

In “The Risk Society,” Ulrich Beck sees the institutionalization of risk as consequential to the proliferation of uncertainty or unknowns across new zones of action and thought beginning in roughly this time: “New risks (e.g. climate change) do not respect nation-state or any borders”; “new risks have a long latency period (e.g. nuclear waste) so that their effect over time cannot be reliably determined and limited”; “thanks to the complexity of the problems and the length of chains of effect, assignment of causes and consequences is no longer possible with any degree of reliability (e.g. financial crises)” (334). In a world full of risk—environmental and global financial catastrophe, technological and infrastructural failures, nuclear

meltdown, and the proliferation of new forms of violence and war—risk itself was totalized. The formation of the gated community, the production of the commercialised armoured vehicle, the proliferation of guns, and the formation of “survival” communities, all signalled a cultural response to a society at risk as (inevitable) dangers presented themselves.

The War on Terror produced new zones of “risk calculation” as the threat presented by terror could not be circumscribed to any particular location or object but presented itself from everywhere and nowhere at once. Terror as risk was embodied by “terrorists” whose very unrecognisability as such thus rendered them the most threatening. Following 9/11, the felt risk of terrorist violence proliferated, producing politically intolerable levels of uncertainty and socially destabilising levels of fear in many parts of the world, including the US.³ While the devastation of terrorist attacks goes a long way toward explaining the heightened sense of fear characterising the period after 9/11, objective facts, at least in the West, can only partially account for such fear. When compared to the myriad of acceptable risks that accompany daily life, the risk of suffering a major terrorist attack has been shown to be almost non-existent (Nowrasteh). Rather, the fear of terrorism might be thought to be part of the cultural production of a “risk society” bent on knowing, offsetting, minimising and/or eliminating risk. As Beck illustrates, such efforts are not limited to the nation-state, organisations of expertise (scientists, doctors, engineers, etc.) or actuaries. Rather what Beck refers to as “risks of modernisation” has seen “people themselves become small, private alternative experts” (*Risk Society* 61) who not only consult authorities but also, against the advice of experts, seek out their own knowledge and their own means for protecting themselves. In the US, this impetus to know, manage and minimise risk at the individual level corresponds to the prevailing neoliberal paradigm upon which the (domestic) War on Terror has been harnessed. The FBI advises suspicious citizens who “see something” to “say something.” While what is “seen” is not directly supplied in this proviso, it follows on the general neoliberal mandate to care for oneself. Where “danger” floats in the very air, the only solution adequate to the problem is for everyone to be educated in matters of risk and apply themselves to protecting themselves (and others) from those risks. Popular cultures of conspiracism belong in this respect to the risk society since they are a function of the fundamental premise of risk—the impetus to know, to control, to conquer. Islamist conspiracists, however, take up this modern mandate to carry out what has been in the history of Western-Islamic relations a very old task: discern the truth of the Muslim soul. But where such searches in premodern periods aimed to eradicate the “evil” represented by Islam, today it forms part of a modern technology of government emphasising a strong security state on the one hand and an enterprising, resourceful and responsible individual on the other.

We know that before 9/11, and certainly after, official policies of secrecy also stoked fears of hidden threats. Practices of surveillance intensified at both the state and individual levels as video cameras became increasingly ubiquitous and GPS devices almost universal. In the US, the *Washington Post* reports that

There are more than 1,500 components [of the US Federal Government] that do it [collect surveillance]. There are 17 primary agencies in the intelligence community. But that does not even count the 17,000 state and local police institutions, much less what the commercial sector does in terms of collecting information. (qtd. in Maazoui 8)

In his lecture “Enemies Within,” Robert Goldberg details three ways federal authorities contribute to the public’s suspicions and inadvertently advance conspiratorial thinking: playing the conspiracy card against opponents, engaging in a culture of secrecy denying access and accountability, and betraying political promises to constituents. Goldberg recounts Hillary Clinton’s denunciation of the “vast right wing conspiracy” against President Clinton during the impeachment crisis. Goldberg also documents official policies of secrecy leading up to and following the attacks of 9/11:

³ This was illustrated in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in the targeting of Arabs and Muslims as potential threats and/or “material witnesses” to terrorist investigations. In the years following 9/11, this fear has continued to manifest itself in a number of policy positions and rhetorical points in which Muslims and immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries represent a threat to western culture and security, for example, President Donald Trump’s “Muslim travel ban.”

In 1995, three million federal employees were tasked with classifying as secret as many as 10,000 documents each day. In 2000, it was estimated that the federal government had accumulated ten billion pages with secrecy stamps. These figures denote the stockpile before 9-11 and the Patriot Act. Even under the Obama Administration and an announced “new era of open government,” the Department of Homeland Security has detoured requests for federal records, delayed disclosure, and even probed for information about individuals seeking government materials. Recently, leaks of classified materials about the conflict in Afghanistan have given momentum to those who charge that the federal government has downplayed [sic] casualties totals, covered up Pakistan’s collusion with the Taliban, and misled the American people about the state of war. (7)

In this fashion, “conspiracy theorists, media actors, and government authorities have taught Americans the how, why and who of conspiracism” (7).

However, after 9/11 we find a new element in conspiracist thought. The fears of government power that had been prevalent before 9/11 would be brought together with fears of terror. These fears would congeal into a number of conspiracy theories linking such groups as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), among others, to both terrorists and various government figures and apparatuses. In these narratives, we find a linking of fears of terror with anxieties about the meaning and scope of power, reflecting what Foucault described as the “tactical polyvalence of discourse,” which includes “a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (100). One prominent person to arise in this context is Frank Gaffney. His Center for Security Policy, a right-wing think tank devoted to “identify[ing] challenges and opportunities likely to affect American security, broadly defined, and to act promptly and creatively to ensure that they are the subject of focused national examination and effective action,” was in the business of issuing dire (and false) warnings of hidden plots, e.g., to impose Sharia law on an unwitting American public. In time, prominent contributors to this site—e.g., Sebastian Gorka, and Michael Flynn—would become key players in government under the Donald Trump administration. Building on a general theme of conspiracism, much of the information on the site focuses on the problem of the unknown, the hidden, and the deceptive. Stories with headlines like “The New York Times’ Alternative Facts,” “Are US Intelligence Agencies Withholding Intelligence From President Trump?” feature prominently on the site. Following Trump’s election, the terms “fake news” and “alternative facts” became regular, unironic features of the site’s daily articles and blogs. Rhetorical questions on the site prompt a suspicious imagination while the Centre’s articles and books confirm in the unknown what is already known—reality itself should be questioned.

The Centre’s primary security concern, however, focuses on the threat of Islam. The general suspicion directed at various media outlets and government figures is here intensified by the fear of seemingly “benign” Muslims thought to be engaged in what Gaffney calls “stealthy jihad.” According to Gaffney, this [stealthy jihad] is conducted not through violence, but through the infiltration of the state: “The rise of these Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers in elite American policy circles tells the story of the success of the Brotherhood in its stealth jihad against this country. This stealth jihad proceeds through slow-motion infiltration of social, cultural and political institutions rather than the ramming of planes into skyscrapers, but with the same ultimate objective: destroying American society” (3). Further, the site’s main page provides a series of links to books produced by the sites’ authors warning of the dangers of Sharia law, jihad, refugees, various cult-like movements associated with foreign figures, and organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and CAIR. Gaffney’s *The Muslim Brotherhood in The Obama Administration*, for instance, suggests that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s aide, Huma Abedin, had ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Gaffney claims to have uncovered a secret, eighteen-page document showing not only Abedin’s ties to the organisation but also the organisation’s goal of “making the U.S. friendly to the Brotherhood’s Islamist objectives by ‘presenting Islam as a civilization alternative.’”

Conspiracist suspicions surrounding Muslim organisations began in earnest during the election campaign of Barack Obama in 2008. Mazen Abashi, Obama’s Muslim campaign organiser, resigned after Gaffney characterised the North American Islamic Trust, an organisation Abashi had served as a board member, as a “powerful instrument in the Islamists campaign to dominate and radicalize the Muslim community in America” (qtd. in Esposito 20). After the Obama election, a strategy of innuendo was deployed to suggest an Islamist conspiracy between Obama and Muslim organisations. Writing in the *Washington*

Times, Gaffney also suggested that ISNA “was created by the radical, Saudi-financed Muslim Students Association” and is a “Muslim Brotherhood front organization” (qtd. in Esposito 19).

Hardline Christian Zionists also shaped the discourse on Islam during the 2008 presidential elections. Drawing on the apocalypticism of the 1980s and 1990s advanced by the Reverend Jerry Falwell, along with popular Christian leader and founder of the *700 Club*, Pat Robertson, Rod Parsley, John McCain’s spiritual advisor and leader of a twelve-thousand member megachurch, identified Islam as an “Anti-Christ religion” based in “deception” (qtd. in Esposito 21). Parsley also suggested that Muhammad “received revelations from demons and not from the true God.” In Parsley’s view, “America was founded, in part, with the intention of seeing this false religion destroyed,” and suggested that America “has historically understood herself as a bastion against Islam” (qtd. in Esposito 21). For Parsley, “September 11th was a generational call to arms we can no longer ignore.... We find now we have no choice,” since Islam is a “faith that fully intends to conquer the world” (qtd. in Esposito 21). These statements were anticipated in the framing of the War on Terror as a war on the soul of Islam. “Islam has attacked us,” Franklin Graham asserted after 9/11. “The God of Islam is not the same God....[Islam] is a very evil and wicked religion.” Similarly, Pat Robertson represented the prophet Muhammad as wicked, fanatical, and deceptive, and linked terror to the history of Islam: “This man [Muhammad] was an absolute wild-eyed fanatic...a robber...a brigand...a killer” (qtd. in Esposito 165). The Reverend Jerry Falwell called the prophet Muhammad a “terrorist,” during a *60 Minutes* interview, and Benny Hinn framed the War on Terror as a war “between God and the devil” (qtd. in Esposito 165).

Other prominent figures—Pamela Geller, Richard Spencer, and Alex Jones, to name a few, in what has been called the “alt-right,” also alert us to the dangers posed by the hidden cabal of the Muslim Brotherhood, CAIR, various MSAs, ISNA and ordinary, “moderate” Muslims to American freedom. From the point of view of Gaffney et al., what these groups share is an unquestioning faith in the Shariat mandate to “govern every aspect of our social life—the economic, financial, social, political, and dietary” (Gaffney 5). Professions to the contrary are captured in the narrative of total threat as lies hiding the “real” truth of what Muslims believe. In the world of Gaffney and others, Muslims are in this way most dangerous precisely when they seem not to be.

Finding the Truth in non-Truth: Interrogating the Soul of Islam

Hidden truth forms the central point of analysis in Glenn Beck’s *It IS About Islam: Exposing the Truth About ISIS, Al Qaeda, Iran and the Caliphate (IIAI)*, a 2015 publication in his “Control Series” aimed at uncovering the various “known unknowns” of American social and political reality. However, *IIAI* attempts to go further than other texts in this series by interrogating not only the unknown but also the unknowable—the “true” beliefs of Muslims. Drawing on the Islamic principle of taqiyya and several Qur’anic passages where violence is advocated, Beck suggests that the principles of Islam that might make it compatible with western liberal democracy are in fact lies consciously offered up by “moderate” Muslims and their allies as part of a conspiratorial scheme to deceive the American public. Thus Beck insists that “those who claim Islam is not the problem, or deny that it is incompatible with freedom, are racist, homophobic and sexist. Why? Because the Islam that millions of Muslims *believe* in, practice, and promote envisions a world in which we are required to accept a lower standard of life for women, for homosexuals, for Christians, or anyone else who is different from their standard” (emphasis added 10).

Beck’s construction of Muslim thought relies heavily on the idea of a universal principle of taqiyya among Muslims. According to Beck, taqiyya “is used to conceal, obfuscate, or disguise one’s beliefs to confuse the enemy. It’s a classic technique used by the Muslim Brotherhood when they say one thing to Westerners and the opposite to their followers” (Beck 184). Beck derives this definition from two sources: statements by unnamed Muslim Brotherhood figures and Quran 3:28, which, in translation, says “Let not the believers take the disbelievers as *Auliya* (supporters, helpers, etc.) instead of the believers, and whoever does that will never be helped by Allah in any way, *except if you indeed fear a danger from them*” (qtd. in Beck 184, emphasis in the original). Paradoxically, it is the defensive posture of this verse that Beck emphasises. Instead of remarking on this caveat’s granting of permission to deceive in self-defence, Beck

seems instead to read the caveat as itself a lie, producing an odd configuration of lying that is permitted as a generalised strategy of deceit (without regard for ends or reasons) that is itself licensed by a lie. While such a reading would logically seem to undo itself, it is totally coherent within the conspiratorial worldview Beck draws upon.

Throughout the text, Beck also draws a connection between the state, primarily represented by liberal political figures, and Islamists. Like Gaffney and Gorka, Beck, too, is concerned with the infiltration of Muslims into American government. However, where Gaffney and the contributors to the Center for Security Policy frame their concerns in the language of Sharia and hidden connections between groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and government officials, Beck lodges the threat in the souls of all Muslims. Beck's argument hinges on a selective construction of "Islam" through surface readings of various Quranic passages and hadith, and statements by figures like Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri. Against the lie that "jihad as struggle pertains to the difficulty and complexity of living a good life..." offered by Islamic scholar, John Esposito; or former Deputy NSC Advisor John Brennan's statement that "jihad is a holy struggle...meaning to purify oneself or one's community," Beck "discover[s] the truth [himself] in Islamic primary sources," telling readers that "We can—we must—read what Muslims read about their own religion. When we finally make an effort to look, we find that Islamic law is remarkably clear about jihad" (111). Beck's deploys a paradoxical hermeneutic to produce this idea. While the "Islamic primary sources" he consults are "remarkably clear," this does not detract from the overarching theme of deceit by which Muslims are thought to live by. Citing a passage from a medieval Muslim source referencing hadith on jihad in which it is said:

There is a Hadith related by a group of people which states that the Prophet said after the battle of Tabuk: "We have returned from Jihad Asghar [Lesser Jihad] to Jihad Akbar [Greater Jihad]." This hadith has no source, nobody whomsoever in the field of Islamic knowledge has narrated it. Jihad against the disbelievers is the most noble of actions, and moreover it is the most important action for mankind (111).

Two things are of note in this passage. The first is the content of the reported hadith, which suggests the meaning of jihad is of a (non-violent) spiritual struggle that Beck seeks to dispel. The second and more important element in this passage is in the interpretation. Ibn Taymiyyah, according to Beck, "shattered the idea that jihad is anything but holy war against the infidel" (111). Beck bolsters Taymiyyah's interpretation with another medieval text—*The Reliance of the Traveler: The Classical Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*. He illustrates the relevance of this text to contemporary Muslims by pointing out that it is an "authoritative summation of Islamic law from one of its major schools of jurisprudence called *Shafi'i*," that it is "the single most popular handbook of Islamic law in the United States and a leading authority throughout the world" (112). Beck also points out that its translation has been certified by the "most important seat of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, Cairo's Al-Azhar University," and was endorsed by "the Muslim Brotherhood's think tank in the United States, the International Institute of Islamic thought"—a group Beck otherwise mistrusts to speak the truth (112).

From *Reliance's* section on "Justice," Beck provides the following passage on jihad: "Jihad means war against non-Muslims, and is etymologically derived from the word *mujahada*, signifying warfare to establish the religion. And it is the lesser Jihad." Passing over the final point, Beck cites three short Quranic verses that are themselves cited in *Reliance*, though Beck provides no context. Listing them in numerical order as "three definitive verses from Mohammad in the Quran":

1. "Fighting is prescribed for you." (Quran 2:216)
2. "Slay them wherever you find them." (Quran 4:89)
3. "Fight the idolators utterly." (Quran 9:36) (cited in 113)

Beck couples these passages with hadith cited by Bukhari:

I have been commanded to fight people until they testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and perform the prayer, and pay zakat. If they say it, they have saved their blood and possessions from me, except for the rights of Islam over them. And their final reckoning is with Allah. (qtd. in Beck 113)

This strategy of providing literalist “authoritative” Islamic sources is supplemented by a strategy of reading from the souls of some Muslims into all of them. Drawing on a notion of speech as confession, Beck provides a series of writings and quotes from Islamist figures that underscore the textual passages from *Reliance*. Quoting Hassan Al-Bannah, Beck writes:

Islam is concerned with the question of jihad and the drafting and the mobilization of the entire [global Muslim community] into one body to defend the right cause with all its strength than any other ancient or modern system of living, whether religious or civil. The verses of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Muhammad (PBUH) are overflowing with all these noble ideals and they summon people in general (with the most eloquent expression and the clearest exposition) to jihad, to warfare, to armed forces, and all the means of land and sea fighting. (115)

While glossing over the word defence and the context in which Al-Bannah was writing—Egypt in the 1930s, when the country was a British protectorate—as well as the role of Western imperial powers in the production of Islamist doctrine like Al Bannah's (see Massad 2015), Beck aims to draw a direct connection from the Quran and hadith, to what Al-Bannah “really” believes, to what all Muslims believe. For Beck, there is a one-to-one correspondence between “Islamic” textual sources and Muslim faith in violent jihad.

Beck's fears of Sharia reflect the extent to which his understanding of power is drawn from the state. From this point of view, the norm against which Islam should be judged is Christianity. The distinctions Beck makes between Islam on the one hand and Christianity and Judaism on the other also presuppose a particular conception of religion separated from the domain of politics. “Christ told his disciples,” Beck writes, “‘My kingdom is not of this world’, and that they should ‘[g]ive back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.’” Beck's (anachronistic) reading of secularity in the heart of Christianity is meant to define the proper domain of religion as a wholly private affair set apart from the domain of politics and the state. Using this as a starting point, Beck is able to read a straight line toward modernity and secular government from the heart of the Christian tradition. After glossing the authorial connections between Christianity and the Roman Empire, Beck quickly notes that it was a “millennium later, Christianity underwent a reformation that adopted the modern idea of a permanent separation between the church and state.” By contrast, Beck notes “Islam ... hasn't reformed at all”⁴ (103).

But the problem with “Islam” in this view is not that it has not undergone a “reform” in the way that Christianity has, but that it does not cohere to Beck's conception of religion itself. In Beck's figuration, “Islam” or “Sharia,” is read as a system of submission parallel to that demanded by the state: “The vast majority of Muslims since the time of Muhammad have seen their faith as a holistic, all-encompassing way of life, inseparable from politics and law. All authority in the Islamic faith flows from God. There is no separation of church and state in the Sunni Islamic tradition. The caliph was a religious and political leader in one” (103). The divisions he describes derive from a history of ideas and practices locating the political against that which was outside of it, something that never took hold in Islamic cultures until the imposition of the state form in the late nineteenth century. It is only when examined from the point of view of the contemporary nation-state, where, as Robert Musil observed in his 1943 novel, *A Man Without Qualities*, life has “an out-and-out spectral aspect: one cannot step into the street or drink a glass of water or get into a tram without touching the perfectly balanced levers of a gigantic apparatus of laws and relations,” (as qtd. in Asad, endnote 23), that Sharia takes on the look of total government.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to illustrate the dynamic ways in which the domains of culture and politics, theory and practice, thought, language and, importantly, power, interpenetrate and interact with one another in

⁴ The concerns Beck and others express about the security of religious minorities under Sharia governance have no historical justification since each group—Christians, Jews, etc.—was governed by the rules and norms of its own religion and answerable to its own leaders and court systems. Thus the head of each group was responsible for collecting taxes, reconciling conflicts and enforcing the community's religious laws. In turn, subjects within each group were answerable to their own leaders and not the caliph. “The exchange was autonomy in return for loyalty” (Hamid 154).

productive ways. American conspiracism is not new, as Barkun and Goldberg show, and while the attacks of 9/11 were extraordinary in their violence and spectacularity, neither is terrorism. Both conspiracism and terror belong to the landscape of modern power since neither can be imagined without possibilities for knowledge created by modern conditions. At the same time, Ulrich Beck's analysis of risk shows that this "sword" is double-edged since modernity's broadened epistemological horizons also means that among that which is known is that there will always be a remainder of what isn't and, possibly, cannot ever be. While risk calculations and insurance schemes can account for this remainder in certain ways, the desire for a full accounting, particularly where political power is at stake, remains. This desire is productively engaged by a culture of conspiracy where the unknown, in this case, the threat of "Islamic terrorism," can be explained, the fear associated with terror managed. As Bataille theorised on the example of the notion of the sacred assimilated from the mana/taboo of Polynesia,⁵ Islamist conspiracists locate the truth of terrorism, the why of its inexplicable horror, in the spaces where it cannot be known with any certainty—in the souls of Muslims, the domain of belief, intentions or motives. In doing so, I have suggested, they have taken a cue from the model of government produced by the state's War on Terror suggested in the former Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld epistemology of Iraqi WMD's—the unknown unknown—which theorises a mode of impossible knowledge that is nonetheless productive of a mode of knowledge/power/discourse demonstrative of truth.

In a post-truth economy of "fake news" and de-contextualization of information, the stakes for understanding this nexus of power relations could not be higher. The 2016 presidential election illustrated this dynamic, showing the lively and dynamic interaction between the political "fringe" and the "centre" and their evolving cultural matrices as sources of truth and lies, news and "fake news," reality and fantasy for different audiences. In the news coverage of Donald Trump, for instance, what remained clear throughout was that everything Trump said and did was a not meant to refer to reality—we will and will not build a wall along the Mexican border and Mexico will/not pay for it. We will and will not develop a Muslim registry to monitor for "terrorist" activity. We will and will not force China to capitulate to our trading demands. Rather, marketing himself as an impresario of the deal, Trump's power drew on a quality of improvisation that, while immanently performative, appeared totally uncalculated and yet was understood for what it was—an act. His behaviour throughout the campaign confirmed this sense since it seemed to emanate from the random, unpremeditated movements of idiosyncratic impulse. This became the base of his support; many liked Trump for making outrageous promises they knew he could never keep.

Conversely, the suspicion haunting the Clinton campaign stemmed from the opposite. In spite of being in the public eye for thirty years, many voters felt they never knew who Clinton *really* was. Instead, the "truth" of Clinton corresponded to the hidden, while what was said and done openly was read as lies. She was, therefore, criticized for what was thought to be her inauthenticity, a performance hiding her "real" self. The focus on her debate preparation, scripted appearances, political correctness and even her redundant choice of clothing (the notorious "pantsuits") revealed a preoccupation with appearances that were then read (by a suspicious imagination) as lies. The fixation on Clinton's 30,000 disappeared emails revealed an anxiety with the hidden presupposing a correspondence between what was concealed and the "real" truth. In this regard, Clinton's use of a private email server sparked scandal not because of what was known, which was very little, but precisely the opposite. The scandal was produced by the revelation that something was hidden, which, though never uncovered, nevertheless itself revealed the truth—Clinton was, beneath the mask of appearances, *really* corrupt, *really* calculating and *really* criminal.

Of course, the truth Trump represented was always a lie. Yet his radical campaign promises, contradictory

⁵ For George Bataille, the sacred corresponds to unassimilable elements of social life. The two simplest examples derive from cultural anthropology in the conceptions of mana and taboo. Mana refers to the mysterious and perhaps magical powers of authority—exemplified by the king or the doctor. The taboo, by contrast, demarcates a line between the spaces of daily life and the prohibited. Yet for Bataille, both elements form part of the sacred and are regarded as two sides of the same coin. They both constitute what Bataille calls "heterogeneous values" the reactions to which are analogous in both cases—shock and horror: "These reactions are such that the heterogeneous thing is assumed to be charged with an unknown and dangerous force (recalling the Polynesian mana) and that a certain prohibition of contact (taboo) separates it from the *homogeneous* or ordinary world (which corresponds to the profane world in the strictly religious opposition)" (127).

statements and outright lies were not read as lies—they were, as several pundits repeatedly offered, taken seriously, but not literally—but rather as performative. In this regard, they were read as truth. Similarly, sexist, racist and sometimes violent outbursts directed at everyone from the press to other politicians, to ordinary citizens fostered trust in Trump since the naked disdain for others was read as a sign of sincerity even as it was dismissed as rhetoric. Trump exploded the realities of political discourse by revealing them for what they always were—non-realities corresponding to performances of reality. And he did this by being a performer. Trump: a pseudo-negation of the non-real through a performance that is itself totally contrived. As Guy Debord already observed in 1968: “In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.”⁶ By focusing on discourses about terrorism, this article aimed to illustrate this interaction and to explore some of its practical consequences.

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⁶ Populism as a mode of political speech has its origins in American left movements. Used to target the ‘ordinary folk’—farmers and ranchers in the South and Midwest and industrial workers in the NE urban centres—it was marked by plain-spokenness, religious sermonizing stylistics and themes of insider-outsiderness aiming to situate the speaker in line with the “people.” According to Mark Rolfe in *The Reinvention of Populist Rhetoric in the Digital Age: Insiders & Outsiders in Democratic Politics*, the 2008 election marked the beginning of a new digital age of populism since it was the first major election in which online discourse, social media and political organisation came together to form a new coalition of “the people.”

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