

Materialism and the Rise of Conspiracy Theories and Cults

NASIM MANSURI



What are the spiritual roots of new movements based on conspiracy theories, and how we protect ourselves and our loved ones from falling for misinformation?

During the past year, most of us have witnessed ideas with no scientific basis spread across the internet: theories like COVID-19 being transmitted via 5G antennas, anti-mask propaganda, the idea that vaccines will somehow install microchips in people, or that drinking various chemical cocktails can be a miracle cure for COVID-19. As these ideas circulate through social media, group chats, and websites of dubious origin, more and more people adopt them into their worldview and their sense of identity, putting them and their communities at risk.

If you haven't seen ideas like this spread in your social circle, it may seem unthinkable that such extreme points of view can spread so easily. Some experts and cultural critics say we're seeing a new set of "cults" appear. But unlike cults of the past, these new ones are based on materialism, not religious belief. It raises the question: Why do conspiracy theory communities cause harm, and how can we avoid falling for misinformation?

The term "cult" might seem like an odd choice of words about groups dedicated to spreading conspiracy theories. We still tend to associate the word "cult" with the large assortment of religious groups that came with the corruption of spiritual movements of the 1970s in the United

States. Some of these cults ended as quickly as they began, some flourished and are no longer known as a cult, and a small subset brought with them frightening stories of brainwashing, abuse, and death — which largely inform our concept of what a cult is today.

Tina Rodia pointed out in Penn Today that the term “cult” has often been wielded as a way to “other” new ideas — often fueled by prejudice and fear of deviations from the mainstream. She wrote that “cult” is “a term that doesn’t refer to religion at all, but is applied to a social movement.”

Nowadays, the fear towards religious cults that plagued society in the 20th century has diminished or disappeared. But the concept of harmful social movements that prey on people’s beliefs and twist their vision of the world is still very relevant. Because while society isn’t flocking to new religious movements en masse, the numbers of people mobilized — even radicalized — by movements based on misinformation can no longer be ignored.

The cults we are dealing with today are built on material, not spiritual misinformation — but they still have a detrimental effect on our spirit. What are the spiritual roots of this problem, and how we can contribute to protecting ourselves and our loved ones from falling for psychologically manipulative forms of misinformation?

Today’s New Cult Problem

In December 2021, NPR/Ipsos ran a poll. Results showed that 17% of Americans thought it was true that “a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media.” That might not seem like many people, but 37% of Americans responded that they weren’t sure if this was true.

If you have no idea what this alarming, confusing poll question is talking about, it’s a reference to QAnon. QAnon is one of the largest online communities in the United States and is based on anti-science, white supremacist, and anti-establishment ideology. Earlier this year, this potent combination radicalized thousands of its members to lead an insurrection on the United States Capitol.

However, the QAnon community — and movements branching from it — is larger than that. Although not everyone involved has been inspired to participate in domestic terrorism, there is plenty of evidence pointing to how this community has led its members to develop unhealthy habits of thought that are actively detrimental to positive social connections and even physical health.

Let’s take a look at the origins of this phenomenon, and how the Baha’i teachings lay the groundwork to resolve it through independent investigation of reality, **“so that the world of humanity may be saved from the darkness of imitation and attain to the truth.”**

Materialism at the Heart of Misinformation

During this COVID-19-related health and socio-economic crisis, both physical and mental health are at an all-time low. It’s no coincidence that conspiracy theories have thrived during the pandemic — a time when we are all more isolated than ever and even more constricted to our “bubbles.” With limited contact and more and more time spent on the internet, misinformation quickly spreads and latches onto the most vulnerable people.

The Universal House of Justice, the internationally elected administrative body of the Baha'i Faith, wrote in December 2010 that **“it must be realized that the isolation and despair from which so many suffer are products of an environment ruled by an all-pervasive materialism.”**

In a society where power and financial wealth matter more than integrity, compassion, and service to others, the feeling of being adrift and out of control in an unjust, confusing world can become crippling. In a recent interview with National Geographic, Sander van der Linden, a social psychologist at the University of Cambridge, said that conspiracy theories like the 5G conspiracy “help restore a sense of agency and control for many people.” They allow people to believe that there is a quick, material explanation and solution to complicated issues — and reinforce the idea that people can be easily classified as “good” or “bad” based on their material circumstances.

The problem with materialism, Shoghi Effendi wrote, is that it **“lays excessive and ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being.”** When we focus too much on material things, we become **“forgetful of those things of the spirit on which alone a sure and stable foundation can be laid for human society.”**

Our values can become derailed and twisted when we fall into conspiracy rabbit holes. Simon DeDeo, a social scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, said that people who become obsessed with these issues often “have the right values ... These values are virtues mostly, except when the value is overemphasized.”

Materialism, brought on by our fears and anxieties, leads us to define the people around us and our own priorities based on material values rather than spiritual ones. And so, we start to see an excessive focus on creating hierarchies based on money, power, politics, race, and nationality — things that have no real bearing on our spiritual identity. Our world becomes more insular, and we are easily swayed by stories that feed our ego. This drives us to prejudice and fear and can quickly become irrational.

How to Distinguish Between Truth and Misinformation

Although it's easy to laugh off beliefs that seem ridiculous to us, we are all at risk of being seduced by misinformation and the communities that form around it. A sense of community — of shared purpose, shared beliefs, a shared enemy — can be particularly tempting at a time when the state of the world brings new confusion and fears.

But while friends and family can be a good support system and act as a helpful sounding board when considering new ideas, the Baha'i Writings clearly state that an individual **“must not be an imitator or blind follower of any soul. He must not rely implicitly upon the opinion of any man without investigation; nay, each soul must seek intelligently and independently, arriving at a real conclusion and bound only by that reality.”**

We can also follow our heart and our instincts — but along with those innate qualities is our power of reason, which is equally God-given. The Baha'i Writings explain this at length:

God has created in man the power of reason whereby man is enabled to investigate reality. God has not intended man to blindly imitate his fathers and ancestors. He has endowed him with mind or the faculty of reasoning by the exercise of which he is to investigate and discover the truth; and that which he finds real and true, he must accept.

It's important to consider what such an investigation of the truth should entail. We might have to acquire specific skills: the ability to distinguish reliable, peer-reviewed sources, for example. Or we could adopt the habit of cross-checking information across various sources, including scientists and experts of different fields — both those with whom we impulsively agree and those who may introduce new ideas.

We might also allow ourselves a grace period before forming an opinion — enough time to investigate and learn the truth for ourselves. In that way, we can be sure that any words we put out into the world avoid inciting controversy or simplifying complex issues and are instead well-informed and aimed towards productive conversations. This is particularly true on social media, where anything we share easily spreads.

We are all learning how to find truth as we navigate this difficult period full of confusion. But we can take comfort in the knowledge that when developing spiritual qualities is at the center of our lives — particularly selflessness, compassion, and freedom from all prejudice — we are moving closer to discovering the truths that can help us transcend divisions and unify our planet.