recommendations on these subjects. They also humanize the text.

Kao's description of ethical surrogacy is detailed and reinforced by numerous studies and resources. Even so, there remain some ethical concerns she might speak to more thoroughly. Many pertain to the presumptions on which her argument rests. She views the following as morally permissible: (a) conception that is not the result of sexual intercourse; (b) IVF, including the discarding of unused embryos (Kao relies on her denomination's stance rather than offering her own sustained ethical defense; see pp. 93–94); (c) risks associated with IVF pregnancy, including preterm birth, placenta previa, and others; (d) embryonic risks associated with preimplantation and prenatal genetic testing; (e) abortion when it is "in [the pregnant person's] or their fetus's best interests" (p. 75); and (f) the conception and parenting of children by same-sex couples. As these matters polarize the church, it would be helpful to have more fulsome explanations of Kao's foundational beliefs and rationale for calling them morally permissible.

Kao acknowledges the concern about the dynamic between environmental sustainability and the human population. Unfortunately, she discusses only the narrow view of antinatalism, claiming that no one should be forced to have fewer or no children (pp. 88–89). More could be said about how a growing population can maintain sustainable lifestyles.

Kao's argument for reproductive justice would be strengthened if greater attention were paid to broader social and economic injustices. Is surrogacy a responsible use of money in a world with parentless children? Kao defends the financial burdens and emotional toll of surrogacy as being on par with those of adoption (p. 80). Insisting that infertile people are not morally obligated to adopt, she maintains that surrogacy serves the public good by fulfilling the human vocation and right to have children (p. 149). This is tenable. However, reproductive justice, as Kao describes it, offers no alternative for parentless children. The named right of adults to have children competes with the unnamed right of children to have parents—a competition that ended unhappily for Sarai, Abram, Hagar, and Ishmael (Genesis 16, 17, and 21).

I continue to wonder about Kao's attention to the rights of adults when I read the title, *My Body, Their Baby*. Does the comma mark a clear separation of the surrogate and the baby? Kao supports this interpretation by reminding the reader that some pregnant women do not experience a maternal bond. And even when a bond exists, the fetus receives no genetic material from the surrogate, making them two separate entities (pp. 63–64). However, Kao fails to cite available research on DNA exchange or epigenetic effects—research that blurs where "my body" ends and "their baby" begins.[2]

The title also fails to show the tension in the book between Kao's feminist approach that stresses personal agency ("trust women") and the social support she needed to live out her decision to be a surrogate. Strong relationships with the IPs and the child were necessary. Her household had to adapt, as well. Kao's spouse underwent medical and psychological testing, along with mandated periods of sexual abstinence. He took on additional household and parenting responsibilities, and regularly administered Kao's estrogen injections because of her fear of needles. Kao's children, too, were told about what their mother was undergoing. They were able to accommodate her need for ample rest while knowing they were not going to have another sibling. As the book ended, Kao and her family regularly visited with the parents and child—a "cousin" to her children. Kao's body was essential for surrogacy, but surrogacy was a shared experience.

As a Christian ethicist and mother of two, I found Kao's work compelling. Scripture does not provide clear moral instruction on the complex matter of surrogacy. It does witness to the importance of community as a place of nourishment and care. Kao admits so herself: "Surrogacy can serve as a metaphor for a deep truth of our Christian tradition—the caring and rearing of children was always intended to be a communal affair, not simply the task of the parents alone" (p. 100). This is a theological and ethical idea worth pondering.

Notes

[1]For example, Mario Valerio Tartagni and Alessandra Graziottin, "The Love-Shaper: Role of the Foetus in Modulating Mother-Child Attachment through Stem Cell Migration to the Maternal Brain," *European Journal of Contraception & Reproductive Health Care* 28, no. 4 (2023): 216–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/13625187.2023.2216326.

[2]See Samira Negahdari, Maede Nilechi, Mehdi Forouzesh et al., "Evaluation of Epigenetic Factors in Surrogacy: A Mini-Review," *Journal of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Cancer Research* 8, no. 2 (2023): 95–104, https://doi.org/10.30699/jogcr.8.2.95.

*Reviewed by Aimee Patterson, PhD, The Salvation Army Ethics Centre, Winnipeg, MB R3B 2N8.*

## Christian Culture

DOI: https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF3-25Austin

**QANON, CHAOS, AND THE CROSS: Christianity and Conspiracy Theories** by Michael W. Austin and Gregory L. Bock, eds. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023. 286 pages. Paperback; $24.99. ISBN: 9780802882653.

This book is a collection of twenty-four short essays written mostly by Christian academics with a background in philosophy and/or theology. It examines the

relationship between Christian believers—principally white American evangelicals—and conspiracy theories, particularly Covid-19 mandates, the QAnon movement, and the 2020 presidential election. Its stated goals are to shed light on the reasons why Christians get seduced by divisive conspiracy claims and to challenge followers of Jesus to think and communicate according to biblical teachings and the example of Christ.

In their introduction, the editors warn fellow believers that while conspiracy claims sometimes turn out to be true, a majority of them turn out to be false, unlikely, or unjustified. Belief in conspiracy claims is therefore problematic in a community that purports to be lovers of truth. Secondly, conspiracy beliefs often foster tribalistic attitudes and divisive exchanges, hindering the Christian's ability to properly love their neighbor and respect civil authorities, including those whom they suspect of conspiring against them. Thirdly, conspiracy thinking undermines the virtues of hope, forbearance, trust, and gratitude that Christians ought to reflect, provoking them to react impulsively out of fear and anger. American evangelicals are very politically active but also susceptible to having an "us versus them" mentality. Guarding hearts and minds against unproven conspiracy claims is urgent in this age of hyperpolarization (pp. ix–xi). The bulk of the essays in this book therefore promote the moral qualities that followers of Christ should manifest as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God.

Unfortunately, the essays in this book are presented in no particular order; this makes it hard for the reader to gain an overarching perspective. Nevertheless, the essays can be divided into three broad categories: (1) essays that discuss what conspiracy beliefs are and why some are particularly attractive to Christians; (2) essays that critique the evangelical proclivity to confuse civil religion with biblical doctrine, thereby blending their political convictions with their spiritual calling; and (3) essays that exhort Christians to adopt a Christ-like attitude when engaging in polarizing conspiracy talk. The distribution of essays among these categories is uneven. The third category is particularly overrepresented, and this leads to frequent repetition.

Furthermore, insufficient attention is given to unpacking the origins and contents of the conspiracy theories this book addresses. This makes it hard for uninformed readers to grasp the social and epistemic roots of evangelical conspiracism, such as the reasons evangelicals are, in general, more suspicious than the wider populace of public education, academic science, and government-funded social programs. The book also lacks historical, political, and sociological depth. Most of this book's contributing authors, who are almost exclusively drawn from philosophical and theological faculties, show little familiarity with the leading social science research, namely the works of Barkun,[1] Uscinski and Parent,[2] Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem,[3] Douglas et al.,[4] and Knight and Butter.[5]

A few essays stand out as superior. Those by Scott Culpepper ("The Cost of Debunking Conspiracy Theories") and Chase Andre ("The Religious Rhetoric of QAnon") are the only contributions that adequately unpack a specific conspiracy theory—the 1980s Satanic Panic and QAnon, respectively. In each case, they demonstrate how Christians embraced attractive falsehoods that bolstered their moral outrage and sense of victimhood, carelessly empowered charlatans by failing to vet extravagant claims, and shut down thoughtful dissent. Essays by Rick Langer ("Testing Teachings and Torching Teachers") and Tim Muehlhoff ("Word Spoken at the Proper Time") rightly encourage Christians to be empathic and humble communicators, fair-minded toward ideological opponents, and aware of their own biases.

Several essays are of questionable merit and pertinence. The essays by Chad Bogosian ("Is It Always Wrong to Believe in A Conspiracy Theory?") and Christian B. Miller ("All Christians Are Conspiracy Theorists") fail to distinguish proven conspiracies (which tend to be simple criminal acts) from speculative conspiracy theories (which frequently resemble far-fetched movie scripts). They recycle the disputable argument of Charles Pigden (among others) that conspiracy theorizing is a legitimate and healthy form of public discourse, while ignoring a wealth of historical and sociological evidence to the contrary.[6] Similarly, Bogosian and Miller work from vague and self-serving definitions of conspiracy, reducing the concept to "actions or plans undertaken by a small group […] to achieve shared goals" (p. 14), and "a small group of people acting in secret" (p. 99)—and not, as is widely understood, a secret plot whose goal is to deceive, manipulate, or harm others illegally and/or maliciously. Bogosian's and Miller's overly broad characterization of conspiracies could risibly include any number of legal, benevolent, and innocuous acts, such as confidentiality agreements, security clearances, surprise birthday parties, and the inscrutable will of a triune God—the latter used by Miller to argue that conspiracism is not in itself problematic since it is practiced daily by all believing Christians. But this is obviously not the sort of "conspiracy" that leads prominent Christian leaders to proffer angry and unfounded accusations in the public square.

Even more problematic are essays by Shawn and Marlena Graves ("Conspiracy Theories and Meaning in Life") and Susan Peppers-Bates ("The Greatest Conspiracy Ever"), which are mired in (left-leaning) political rhetoric, non-sequiturs, and a shallow understanding of the history of conspiracy thinking. Graves and Graves, for instance, attribute the popularity of conspiracy theories

in America—including the recent QAnon panic—to the industrial revolution of the 19th- and 20th-century globalization of markets, both of which, they argue, caused dislocation of communities, "ubiquitous isolation and alienation," and an enduring crisis of meaninglessness (pp. 44–45).

> In the grand context of an industrialized and predatory neoliberal society where communities are fractured and kinship ties are nearly non-existent … where people feel invisible and unmoored, grand conspiracies can function as the gateway to satisfying the drive to find meaning. (p. 45)

Such conclusions smack of circular reasoning, in that any objective historian of conspiracism could easily summon many examples of conspiracy claims, witch hunts, and moral panics that long preceded industrialization and "predatory neoliberalism." The essay then roams off into a discussion on meaningful existence using Klansmen and Nazis as counterexamples, leaving the reader to wonder what any of this has to do with biblical doctrine or the political fears of American evangelicals.

Peppers-Bates's essay is the nadir of this collection. In her words,

> the seemingly peculiar phenomenon of U.S. evangelical Christians accepting baseless conspiracy theories is grounded in a prior, deeper tendency of Judeo-Christianity in general to reduce God to a white male idol, and in particular to silence or ignore the voices of women, people of color, LGBTQI, and other marginalized groups. […] Once a group is demeaned, it becomes much easier to believe that they engage in paedophilia, drink blood, cause COVID, or any number of wild claims. (p. 145)

The logical and factual problems with this essay are legion. Not only is its accusatory tone and excessive use of Foucauldian jargon likely to make the book's target audience stop reading it altogether, it is filled with many misunderstandings of evangelical teachings and culture, often confusing them with those of mainstream Protestants, Catholics, and even white nationalists. It suffocates its reader in a word salad of cryptic terms like "othering," "patriarchization," "white-washing," "white supremacy," and "religious meaning-making." It ends with a misreading of the Parable of the Good Samaritan—the only scriptural reference offered in this essay and one she surprisingly argues is rarely taught in evangelical churches.[7] Poorly researched and argued, it comes across as more paranoid than the conspiracy theories Peppers-Bates set out to debunk, undermining many of the thoughtful reflections offered elsewhere in this book.

While *QAnon, Chaos, and the Cross* contains some excellent and thought-provoking contributions, it falls short of serving a general church-going audience due to its lack of organization, insufficient reliance on the leading academic research, and the incongruity in quality and usefulness of its component parts.

### Notes

[1]Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America,* 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2013).

[2]Joseph E. Uscinski, ed., *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (Oxford University Press, 2019); and Jospeh E. Uscinski and Joseph Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[3]Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, eds., *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (Brill, 2018).

[4]Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Advances in Political Psychology* 40, Sup. 1 (2019): 3–35; https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568.

[5]Peter Knight and Michael Butter, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Routledge, 2020).

[6]See Peter Knight and Michael Butter, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research," in *Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski, 33–46, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0002.

[7]For example, the wounded Jew in the parable—a victim of a violent robbery—is falsely described as a "leprous Samaritan" to turn the parable into a lesson about racist hatred instead of religious legalism.

*Reviewed by Michel Jacques Gagné, historian and the author of* Thinking Critically About the Kennedy Assassination: Debunking the Myths and Conspiracy Theories *(Routledge, 2022). He teaches courses in critical thinking, political philosophy, and ethics at Champlain College, St. Lambert, QC.*

DOI: https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF3-25Alexander

**COMING TO FAITH THROUGH DAWKINS: 12 Essays on the Pathway from New Atheism to Christianity** by Denis Alexander and Alister McGrath, eds. Kregel Publications, 2023. 294 pages. Paperback; $21.99. ISBN: 9780825448225.

The Four Horsemen of the New Atheists—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett—have faded from the cultural spotlight they once attracted. Their books were not only best sellers but their take-no-prisoner approach toward religion in general, and Christianity in particular, dominated conversations and apologetic efforts in the West for the last two decades. However, times have changed.

The New Atheists are now the Old Atheists. The questions once raised still linger faintly, but cultural conversations have shifted dramatically. Instead of asking, "Does God exist?," there is now an array of books and personalities asking and answering questions of sex, gender, and race, to name but a few. We have new questions and new influencers that now dominate the conversation in academy and household. That being the case, one cannot help but ask: Why write another book about Dawkins? Yet, as it turns out, the Old Atheists are not as irrelevant as one might think. In fact, much of this current cultural moment is a product of their making, one we would be wise to learn from and understand.