



## THE COMPUTER CALLED THE BEAST: ESCHATOTOLOGY AND CONSPIRACY THEORY IN MODERN RELIGIOUS CULTURES

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**A b s t r a c t:** Conspiracy theory is a powerful explanatory model that influences many cultural forms and social processes throughout the contemporary world. Mutual relations between conspiracy theories and religious imagination require further discussions and investigations by social scientists. However, it seems that certain social phenomena and ideological tendencies that we usually label as ‘religious’ demonstrate, so to speak, the specific ‘valency’ of conspiratorial explanatory models. Christian eschatology gives a lot of obvious examples in this context, especially in relation to present day apocalyptic thinking.

This article deals with a particular group of conspiratorial / eschatological themes of popular imagination that has a certain impact on religious cultures in present day Russia, Ukraine, and some other post-Soviet states, namely the stories about ‘the Beast computer of Brussels’. The legend about this apocalyptic computer emerged among ‘the New Christian Right’ in the USA in the mid 1970s. This paper focuses on its cultural, political and historical contexts as well as its migration from the US to Eastern Europe. The legend appeared to serve as a sort of ‘narrative foundation’, or even a trigger, for the moral panic that influenced theological and ideological discussions in many post-Soviet religious communities. The Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate had to consider the ‘problem’ of individual taxpayer and social security numbers as well as passports with electronic chips at the highest levels of its hierarchy.

The study of this particular legend facilitates the discussion of certain theoretical aspects of present day ‘conspiratorial eschatology’. First, we are dealing with a narrative that does not in fact essentially differ from what is known as contemporary legend. Its international transmission as well as de- or recontextualisation provides one more example of what is known in present day folkloristics and anthropology as ‘memetic’ or ‘viral’ spread of ‘cultural replicators’. Second, the legend seems to be a part of a more broad conspiratorial (meta)narrative that appeared to be equally valid for quite different religious ideologies and cultures. It seems that studies of present day conspiratorial cultures and narratives could take into account the concept of emotional communities formulated recently by the American historian Barbara Rosenwein. This constructionist idea that, in turn, proceeds from the theory of ‘textual communities’ by another American historian, Brian Stock, implies that we should pay more attention to emotions that are ‘expected’ by a particular community and thus are especially valued by its members. I would not argue that the ‘conspiratorial communities’ that we are dealing with in the present day world should be recognised as purely emotional. By and large, conspiracy theories try to make problematic not only socially shared values, but the status of conventional or official knowledge as well. I think, however, that conspiracy theories and practices of ‘conspiratorial hermeneutics’ are inspired by particular combinations of emotional, moral and epistemological expectations. These shared expectations provide ‘conspiratorial communities’ with particular narratives and practices and, on the other hand, they enable combining traditional religious ideas with newly invented conspiratorial ones.

**Key words:** conspiracy theories, present day eschatology, evangelical Christianity, surveillance society, computers, the Beast of Revelation, emotional communities.

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One of the first historical models for explaining conspiracy theory (rather as an epistemological model than as a form of collective imagination) was proposed by Karl Popper in the second volume of his well-known work *The Open Society and its Enemies*. This is what he wrote:

*It [conspiracy theory. — A. P.] is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.*

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*This view of the aims of the social sciences arises, of course, from the mistaken theory that, whatever happens in society — especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike — is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups. This theory is widely held; it is older even than historicism (which, as shown by its primitive theistic form, is a derivative of conspiracy theory). In its modern forms it is, like modern historicism, and a certain modern attitude towards 'natural laws', a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition. The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups — sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from — such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists [Popper 2012: 306].*

It is obvious that the passage just quoted was necessary to the philosopher to bring his own indeterminist understanding of social and historical processes into sharper relief. At the same time the idea of 'the secularization of a religious superstition' and the reference to the gods being abandoned explicitly direct us if not to historical determinism as such, at least to a 'progressive' concept of 'the disenchanting world'. I think that this concept in itself can hardly be the subject of serious discussion nowadays, after so many academic discussions of 'desecularisation' and 'the post-secular world'. This does not, however, obviate the question of the correlation between conspiracy theory and religion, even if both concepts are approached from a position of the most radical constructionism.

It cannot of course be excluded that the theories of secularisation, or at least the anthropology of secularism have certain prospects in this context. It may be proposed, for example, that the conspiracy models peculiar to modern times (if such there be) owe their appearance at least in part to those configurations of private and public, pluralism and monism, faith and knowledge, that are characteristic of a classical secular society, and that in such a way the gods, as they return to our world, have discovered that they will now have to share their space and form an alliance with, or wage war on, mysterious forces and sinister conspirators.

However, the very history of 'desecularised' Europe is evidence against this hypothesis. We are well aware that the narrative models of conspiracy theories that have circulated in the period now known as the 'persecuting society' (see: [Cohn 2005; Frankfurter 2006; Moore 2007]), are in themselves, despite their religious tonality, not much different from the conspiracy theories of secular ages. Moreover, we can trace the history of these models back to more archaic types of agrarian and pastoral societies and speak of the essentially conspiratorial character of ideas connected with witchcraft

in the most diverse cultures. We may recall, for example, how Edward Evans-Pritchard described and interpreted such ideas among the Azande, giving as an example the story of the collapsed barn: the idea of witchcraft provides an explanation of why ‘two chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place’ although there is ‘no mutual dependence’ between them [Evans-Pritchard 1976: 23]. I would further remind the reader of the concept of ‘limited good’ proposed by the American anthropologist George Foster in the 1960s, which assumes that an agrarian culture perceives all goods and values (economic, social or cultural) as a closed system — a sort of limited resource. Therefore any imbalance in the distribution of goods is seen by a peasant society as some people thriving at the expense of others, a situation which requires a redistribution of valuables, and every serious crisis that threatens the life, health and wellbeing of the group is solved by looking for a scapegoat [Foster 1965]. In this way the genesis of conspiracy theories in the modern world may be interpreted in the light of the specifics of the intellectual history of modern times (on which see also: [Wood 1982]), and in a wider context of social explanatory models characteristic of archaic and agrarian societies.

At the same time, these considerations do not give an unambiguous answer, or even a clear answer to the question of the correlation between conspiracy theory and religion (either in a synchronic or diachronic aspect). Searching in this direction will probably lead us to define the problem of the category of evil in various cultures and socio-economic contexts. One way or another it is evident that certain social phenomena and ideological tendencies that we identify as religious are, if one may so express it, specially favourable towards the explanatory models of conspiracy theory. I have in mind particularly Christian eschatology. Quite a lot has been written about this, and also in respect of the present day. Thus in his work on the modern American apocalyptic, symptomatically entitled *A Culture of Conspiracy*, the political scientist Michael Barkun remarks:

*Belief in conspiracies is central to millennialism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. That is scarcely surprising — millennialist worldviews have always predisposed their adherents to conspiracy beliefs. Such worldviews may be characterized as Manichaeic, in the sense that they cast the world in terms of a struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, and hold that this polarization will persist until the end of history, when evil is finally, definitively defeated [Barkun 2003: 1].*

In this perspective I should like to focus on a group of ‘eschatological conspiracy theory’ motifs which play quite a noticeable role in the mass religious culture of contemporary Russia and at the same time have quite a curious history. In this case it is necessary to begin with a short historical commentary.

In the 1970s the mass religious culture of the USA was going through a wave of eschatological terror and expectation, connected for the most part with the ideology of the so-called 'ultraconservatives', or 'New Christian Right'. The latter concept may be used in various ways (sometimes it is only applied to those who take an active part in politics), but on the whole it designates 'New Protestants', that is, Evangelical Christians who are orientated towards a fundamentalist, literalist reading of the Bible and who hold extremely conservative views on politics and society. A large number of Baptist and Pentecostal churches belong to this movement, as do many 'non-denominational' groups. Besides their conservatism and anti-liberal attitudes, most of the New Christian Right is marked by strongly expressed eschatological expectations. Returning to the aforementioned wave of the 1970s I would point out that the apocalyptic fears and expectations of that time were disseminated not only through theological treatises and the texts of sermons. Books by Christian prophets telling of their expectations or visionary experiences connected with the coming end of the world became widely popular, and there appeared a new genre of popular fiction, the 'eschatological novel' set in the 'end times', and cinema films of the same sort [Boyer 1992: 115–290; Shuck 2005].

It should be noted that in the culture of Evangelical Christians the problems of the apocalyptic future are discussed with much greater detail and attention than, say, in Russian Orthodoxy, which pays less attention by comparison to the interpretation of Holy Scripture. Attempts to systematise all the eschatological prophecies to be found in the text of the New Testament have led New Protestants to formulate several doctrines that depict in different ways the history of mankind as it approaches the end of the world and the Last Judgment [Boyer 1992: 80–111; Shuck 2005: 29–52]. Without going into the details of these discussions, I shall note that disagreements concern principally the order of the events connected with the 'thousand-year reign' of the righteous (Rev. xx), the Great Tribulation of which Christ taught his disciples on the Mount of Olives (Mt. xxiv 3–44, Mk. xiii 3–33, Lk. xxi 5–36), and the Rapture of the righteous to heaven (I Thess. iv 14–18). Thus, according to one conception which is quite popular amongst New Protestants, known as *Pre-tribulational (dispensational) Premillennialism*, Christ will first return to earth in order to take the true church up to heaven, after which the 'time of sorrows' will begin, and when it ends the thousand-year reign will begin, to be followed by the Last Judgment. According to another point of view (*Post-tribulational Premillennialism*), the series of eschatological events will begin with the Great Tribulation and only those who preserve true faith and righteousness through those hard times will participate in the thousand-year reign.

However that might be, attempts within the culture of the New Christian Right to discern signs of the approach of all these events in the second half of the twentieth century did not of course ignore current political events. The foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 received particular attention, which is perfectly logical. Details of the role to be played by the Jews in the 'end times' may also be the subject of debate between different branches of Christian fundamentalism, but they all agree that 'Israel shall be gathered for conversion and salvation,' to use the formulation of the Russian 'unregistered Pentecostals'.

As for the Antichrist, his confederates and proclaimers, the circumstances of his appearance and the manner of his actions, the scope for fantasy and interpretation is wide. Again, without dwelling on the innumerable possible variations on this theme, I shall note that one traditional enemy for Protestantism in general (and for American Protestantism in particular) was the Catholic Church. In a certain sense the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65 only revived these ancient fears. Moreover, it often happened that apprehensions connected with European Catholicism were transferred amongst American Evangelicals to Western Europe as a whole, and it is probably in part because of this that the movement towards union that began in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome and ended in 1992 with the creation of the European Union was viewed by many in the same apocalyptic perspective, as a sort of preparation for the coming of the Antichrist. A union of European countries could be seen as a renascent Roman Empire, and even as the beast with ten horns from the thirteenth chapter of the Apocalypse (and also the dream of the prophet Daniel: Dan. vii 23): this was discussed when Greece became the tenth member of the EU in 1979 [Boyer 1992: 277]. However, the eschatological expectations of Christian fundamentalists in America have generally been connected with international political organisations with pretensions to global power: many of them regarded the United Nations and similar organisations with the same apprehensions and hostility. This peculiar antiglobalism became one of the main motifs of American eschatological narratives of that period.

One way or another, American apocalyptics of the 1970s expected no good to come of the European Community and observed the activities of this organisation — at this period still an economic organisation — with great anxiety. Alongside this, a specific technophobia regarding television as a tool in the hands of demonic forces and the chief weapon of Antichrist remained quite popular amongst ultraconservative Christians in those years [Boyer 1992: 106–7, 279–81]. Moreover, worries about television were by that time supplemented by a particular fear of another technological and informational innovation — the computer. A leitmotif of these

phobias was the idea of the total subordination of humanity and its manipulation by concealed, mysterious forces mediated by all-powerful and ubiquitous technical apparatus [Webber, Hutchings 1978]. At the period in question such an image of the ‘surveillance society’, to use the term coined by the Canadian sociologist David Lyon [Lyon 1994] (cf.: [Shuck 2005: 119–28]), corresponded directly with the theme of George Orwell’s anti-utopian novel *1984*. This literary text, absolutely secular in character, was read by many Christian conservatives in the spirit of their own apocalyptic prophecies and taken, if not as a literal description of the near future of humanity, at least as yet another sign of the approach of the ‘end times’ at the beginning of the 1980s. Here, however, it is possible to speak of more general social contexts bringing together literary anti-utopias and specific forms of ‘eschatological conspiracy theory’ in the twentieth century. As Maria Akhmetova has rightly pointed out, the eschatological narratives that spread through Russia in the 1990s and the following decade often depict the coming reign of the Antichrist ‘according to the canons of the anti-utopian novel — a literary genre which was perceived by late Soviet and post-Soviet readers as a description of twentieth-century totalitarianism’ [Akhmetova 2010: 195]. Here, moreover, it is not only a matter of totalitarianism and the Soviet experience, but also of the global processes that accompanied modernisation, urbanisation and the formation of the consumer society: it is these factors, apparently, that encourage the growth of collective fears linked to a loss of identity, to anonymity, and to a loss of control over one’s own body and which are expressed in the motifs and images of the ‘anti-utopian imagination’ (for more detail see: [Panchenko 2014]).

This sort of anxious expectation evidently created the conditions for the appearance of the motif of the ‘computer called the Beast’ which is the subject of this article. I do not at present attempt to determine its origins and early history with total precision, but it is again something that occurred in the mid-1970s in the ultraconservative American Christian milieu of the southern United States.<sup>1</sup> To all appearances, the story of the sinister computer was invented and put about in 1975 by one of the pastors of the Southwest Radio Church, a non-denominational Evangelical radio station founded in 1933 in Oklahoma and still in existence today. The most probable authors of this motif are David Webber (1931–2004) and Noah Hutchings (b. 1922), who wrote several books in the 1970s and 80s about the coming apocalyptic role of computer technology [Webber, Hutchings

<sup>1</sup> I will note that there is also, so to speak, a false trail here — the sceptical narrative about the Christian author Joe Musser, who is supposed to have invented the story about the ‘Beast’ computer for his apocalyptic anti-utopian novel *Behold a Pale Horse* (1970). This version, which has received a wide diffusion on the internet, has been believed by certain researchers (see, for example: [Lewis 2001: 24; Akhmetova 2010: 147]), but I have not been able to find any factual evidence to support it.

1978; 1986]. One way or another, in 1975 the Southwest Radio Church reported that this supercomputer, dubbed 'the Beast', would 'link banks throughout the world and gradually force a socialistic economic leveling and a new money system in the 1980s. In the same year Colin Deal (a prophecy writer especially known for his bestseller *Will Christ Return by 1988? 101 Reasons Why. — A. P.*) informed his readers that Common Market leaders during a crisis meeting in Brussels, Belgium, were introduced to the "Beast", a gigantic computer that occupies three floors of the Administration Building at the Common Market Headquarters. The computer is capable of assigning a number to every person on earth in the form of a laser tattoo. Then, through infrared scanners, this invisible tattoo would appear on a screen' [Fuller 1995: 181].

It was supposed that this computer would be able to assign every person on earth an individual number, which would be etched into his skin with a laser. Tattoos that could be recognised only with an infrared scanner would replace credit cards and would consist of three groups of six numbers. It is obvious that this contains a transparent hint on the one hand at the number of the Beast in Revelation, and on the other at bar codes, which were beginning to be introduced at that time in the United States, and a little later in Europe (the first product with a bar code was a packet of Juicy Fruit chewing gum sold on 26 June 1974 in Ohio). Taken together, this was an unambiguous reference to one of the most popular texts of Christian eschatology, the thirteenth chapter of the Revelation of St John the Divine:

*And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six (Rev. xiii 16–18).*

The second story about a computer called The Beast was widely disseminated without reference to specific Christian authors and, so to speak, in the form of a persistent virus.<sup>1</sup> It soon began to be

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<sup>1</sup> Here is the original English text of one of the most persistent versions: 'Dr Hanrick Eldeman, Chief Analyst of the Common Market Confederacy in Brussels, has revealed that a computerized restoration plan is already under way to straighten out world chaos. A crisis meeting in early 1974 brought together Common Market leaders, advisers and scientists at which time Dr Eldeman unveiled "the Beast". The Beast is a gigantic three story computer located in the administrative building of the headquarters of the Common Market. That monster is a self-programming computer that has more than one hundred sources distributing entries. Experts in programming have perfected a plan that will handle by computer all of the world's trade. This master plan would imply a system of digital enumeration of each human being of the earth. Thus the computer would give each inhabitant of the world a number to be used for each purchase or sale, removing the problem of present credit cards. This number would be invisibly tattooed by laser, either on the forehead or on the back of the hand. This would establish a walking credit card system. And the number could be seen only through infrared scanners, installed in special verification counters or in business places. Dr Eldeman pointed out that by using three

translated into other languages.<sup>1</sup> Mary Relfe's bestseller *When Your Money Fails: The 666 System is Here*, of which more anon, played an important role in popularising this story. First, however, it is necessary to say a few words about the historical context of this popularisation.

Besides the general tendencies in American apocalyptic thought in the 1970s, of which I have written above, the appearance of the narrative about the computer called The Beast and Dr Eldeman was also most probably determined by specific politico-economic circumstances. 'A crisis meeting at the beginning of 1974' does not figure here by chance. In 1973 the world was struck by the first (and so far the worst) global oil crisis. Eleven days after the Yom Kippur War, when Egyptian and Syrian forces attacked Israel on Sinai and the Golan Heights, the OPEC countries announced a cessation or substantial reduction of the supply of oil to the USA and its allies who supported the Jewish state. Before long world oil prices had quadrupled, rising from \$ 3 to \$ 12 a barrel. As a result the EEC foreign ministers, meeting in Brussels on 6 November 1973, signed a document calling upon Israel to implement UN Security Council Resolution 242, that is, to withdraw from the territory of the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. The final result of all this, however, was only a split within NATO and continuing high oil prices, from which the Soviet Union emerged a clear winner — this is how the foundations of the 'Brezhnev period of prosperity' were laid. Moreover, the war of 1973 led to another worsening of relations between the USSR and the USA: once the Israeli troops had begun to gain the upper hand and mounted a counter-offensive in enemy territory, forcing the passage of the Suez Canal, Brezhnev threatened direct involvement in the war, and the USA announced that its nuclear weapons had been put into a stage of advanced readiness.

It must be said that for American Evangelicals the events surrounding the 1973 war corresponded directly to current eschatological prophecies and expectations. According to one of the best-known apocalyptic prophecies, made by the preacher Hal Lindsey (1970), the main enemies of true Christianity in the 'last days' would be 'Russia (equivalent to the Gog peoples of Ezekiel), which is developing a vast army <...> and will march on Israel; the Arabs, who will join with Africans and be led by Egypt in a march on Israel; China and <...> a vast "Oriental horde" of more than 200 million soldiers; and the European Community, which will form a new

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entries of six digits each, every inhabitant of the world would be given a distinct credit card number' <[http://www.theforbiddenknowledge.com/hardtruth/beast\\_666.htm](http://www.theforbiddenknowledge.com/hardtruth/beast_666.htm)>.

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately the text of a work by Erik Metz, 'The Legend of the Computer-Beast', which deals with the diffusion of the main variants of this story in Europe, has been unavailable to me. There is a brief summary of it is: [Kommelina 2010: 3–4].

Roman Empire and dominate the world under its leader, the Antichrist' [Fenster 2008: 2010].

However, Israel conquered again, the oil crisis did not destroy the world economy, the Third World War did not begin, and the story of the Brussels computer took on a life of its own, acquiring new meanings and contexts. In this perspective its career in Russia is indicative.

The story of the computer called The Beast, barcodes and electronic cards made several attempts, so to speak, to reach its Russian audience. As far as I can tell, in every case the immediate source for the translations was *When Your Money Fails: The 666 System is Here*, a book published in 1981 in Alabama by Mary Stewart Relfe (1916–2011), an Evangelical preacher and founder of 'The League of Prayer'. She maintained that the number 666 was penetrating into all aspects of everyday life in America (even managing to find it on the marks of floor tiles and the labels of men's shirts) and paid particular attention to the development of the international payment system and the spread of plastic debit cards, which she thought would be the main instrument for the economic subordination of humanity. The story of the Brussels computer and Dr Eldeman is repeated several times in Relfe's book [Relfe 1981: 37, 42–6], where it also says that the 'Little Beast' in Brussels would soon be replaced by another super-computer to be sited in Luxembourg [Relfe 1981: 46]. Amongst other tokens of the coming reign of the Antichrist, the Alabama preacher pointed to the appearance of various international organisations: the World Bank, the World Health Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, etc. A large part of the book deals with the future eschatological role of the Soviet Union, which as before is associated with Gog and Magog. As a proof that it is Russia that is the army of horsemen in the prophecy of Ezekiel that will 'in the latter years <...> come <...> against the mountains of Israel' (Ezek. xxxviii 8) the book featured the postage stamp (value 14 kopecks) commemorating the tenth anniversary of the First Cavalry Army, issued by the USSR at the beginning of 1930. It shows mounted soldiers with a red banner and a map of the northern Black Sea littoral showing the routes of the military operations of the cavalry army. In Relfe's opinion, this stamp 'prophetically commemorated' the future invasion of Israel by the Russians [Relfe 1981: 182–3].

None of this embarrassed one of the first translators of the story of the computer called The Beast into Russian, Paul Vaulin (1918–2007), Professor of Russian at the University of South Alabama. Vaulin was an émigré from the USSR, having been captured during the Soviet-Finnish War and found his way to Sweden and thence to America, where he had attached himself to the radical religious nationalist wing of the Russian diaspora. The author of a biographical

dictionary of the Russian emigration, describing Vaulin's life in the Russian colony in Richmond, Maine, recounts that 'Here he built a stone house with his own hands, not without a view to a possible nuclear war' [Aleksandrov 2005: 92]. In the same year, 1981, Vaulin translated a few introductory fragments from Relfe's book (including the story of the Brussels computer) and published them under the heading 'The Attack of the Beast' in the Russian-language journal *Niva* which he edited [Vaulin 1981]. Another translation of the same introduction was made independently, as it would appear, by American Old Believers of the Chasovennye denomination, and reached the USSR at the end of the 1980s [Ageeva 1997: 11, 16; Soboleva 1997; Pokrovskiy, Zolnikova 2002].<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the monks of Athos also evidently took part in the dissemination of 'computer eschatology' among the masses of post-Soviet Russia, particularly Païsius Eznepides (1924–1994), who is also known as the Elder Païsius of the Holy Mountain. Mary Relfe's book was translated into Greek by the monks of Athos [Meletiy 2001: 5–9], and evidently enjoyed great popularity there. In 1987 Païsius wrote a brochure entitled 'Signs of the Times, 666', where it says, in particular:

*Behind the worldly spirit of modern 'liberty', the lack of respect for the Church of Christ, for elders, parents and teachers in whom is the fear of God, there lies a spiritual slavery, confusion and anarchy, which brings people to a dead end, to spiritual and bodily disaster. Likewise, behind the perfect system of 'smartcards' and computer security lies world-wide dictatorship and enslavement to the Antichrist. <...> Those who rely 'on their intellect' in interpretation will be deceived — and this, when the signs are so obvious: almost every country has already been swallowed up by the computer 'beast' in Brussels with the number 666. The card, the identity document, the 'introduction of the seal', what do they mean? Unfortunately, the only thing we pay attention to on the radio is the weather forecast. <...> After the card and the identity document, the 'computer dossier', in order cunningly to lead up to the seal, television will constantly be saying how somebody took somebody else's card and took all his money out of the bank. Meanwhile, they will be advertising the 'perfect system': a seal on the hand or the forehead made with a laser beam, externally invisible, with 666, the name of the Antichrist.<sup>2</sup>*

One way or another, we can observe an explosion of Russian texts about Dr Eldeman and the Brussels computer at the beginning of the

<sup>1</sup> L. S. Soboleva is mistaken in her supposition that the Old Believer 'text about the computer Antichrist' has a genetic connection with Vaulin's translation [Soboleva 1997: 123]. Textual analysis makes it possible to state with confidence that the Vaulin and Old Believer variants are independent translations of the same fragments of Relfe's book.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from the electronic publication: <<http://www.vselprav.org/library/znamenija.htm>>.

1990s (see: [Akhmetova 2010: 146–8]). As a result, it is this version, and its later variants, that enter the ‘conspiracy theory canon’ of the radical Orthodox movement against barcodes, tax numbers and electronic cards (see: [Serzhantov 2007; Beglov 2014: 123–6; Russele 2015]). Not only that, it was this text, together with some others, mostly Western in origin, which, as it seems to me, was, if not the ‘trigger’, then at least the narrative foundation of this movement, which has had quite a noticeable effect on the ideological and theological discussions that have taken place within various religious organisations, not least the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has more than once had occasion to discuss the ‘problem’ of tax numbers, national insurance numbers, and passports with electronic chips at the highest level.

What general conclusions may be drawn from this history? It is clear that, in a broad typological perspective, there is nothing particularly new about it. The topic of the account, of the manipulation of people and total control over humanity by sinister and inimical forces before the end of the world has a long history in Christian eschatology. The thirteenth chapter of Revelation is not the least important factor here, and has seriously influenced the image of ‘the seal of Anti-christ’ as a physical mark. While American Evangelicals, followed by modern Orthodox, talk about a laser tattoo imprinted by the Brussels computer, nineteenth-century Russian peasants rejected smallpox inoculations, regarding them as ‘the seal of Antichrist’ [Ivanitskiy 1890: 120].

At the same time, there seem to me to be certain other important aspects of the topic under discussion. First, we must bear in mind that this is an example (by no means the only one, as I think) of the migration of a motif, which is disseminated in the same way as an urban legend. There is not much difference between the story of the computer called The Beast and those forms which we call modern legends, and its de- and re-contextualisation allows it to be examined in the context of ‘meme theory’ and the concept of topics ‘that spread like viruses’ (see: [Oring 2014a; 2014b]). There is another thing that is more important, though: for very different religious groups, inhabiting different parts of the world, this particular text functions as a component of a wider eschatological conspiracy theory meta-narrative, the contours and structure of which are perhaps not so vague as they seem at first sight. In the same ‘package’ as ‘the eschatology of control and manipulation’ we find, for example, religious homophobia, the somewhat unexpected and equally explosive appearance of which in modern Russia should also evidently be explained by American sources.

Without going into detail on this problem, I shall give a single example. This is another American eschatological text, *The Vision* (1973) by the

Pentecostal pastor David Wilkerson (1931–2011), the founder of the Times Square Church in New York.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, this text contains a thoroughly recognisable description of bar-coding, which leads into the story of the Brussels computer:

*I know that a restored Roman Empire will eventually become the power base of a super-world leader, who will appear to restore economic order, and it will doubtless be he who creates the world-wide system of 'living credit cards'. Invisible lasers will be inscribed on the forehead and hand, and will be visible only to photoscopic apparatus. It is possible that these numbers will be arranged in three groups of six figures each; these groups will be one finger's width away from each other. This 'sign' will be placed on everybody, and nobody will be able to buy or sell without this invisible digital tattoo [Wilkerson 1993].*

On the other hand, the coming social and moral degradation of the West (including the United States themselves) is a prominent theme in Wilkerson's eschatology. He pays special attention to the spread of sexual freedom, pornography and homosexuality:

*It says in the Bible, 'As it was in the days of Lot, so shall it be in the days of the Son of Man.'<sup>2</sup> In my vision I have seen things that make me fear for our children's future. I mean wild wandering bands of homosexuals who openly attack innocent people in parks, on the streets and in dark places. The brutality of these bands of Sodomites must inevitably come. And although they might not state it publicly, the law enforcement agencies will know perfectly well what is happening. <...> There are only two things that prevent homosexuals from indulging in their sin openly — these are their rejection by society and their condemnation by the Church, in accordance with its doctrine. When society no longer criticises their sin as unnatural but accepts them completely and imitates them in their perversion, and when the Church no longer denounces homosexuality as a sin, but starts to bless their sexual life, there will no longer be any power to restrain them. The floodgates will be opened, and homosexuals will be encouraged and confirmed in their sin. In my vision I saw that these two barriers have been taken out of their way. If that which restrains is removed, chaos will ensue [Wilkerson 1993].*

We find very similar things in modern Russian eschatology (both Orthodox and Protestant). Here too fear of bar-codes is regularly

<sup>1</sup> On Wilkerson's prophecies and their ideological context see: [Boyer 1992: 236–41].

<sup>2</sup> The full passage: 'Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even so shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed. In that day, he which shall be upon the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away; and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back. Remember Lot's wife' (Lk. xvii 28–32).

combined with moral anxieties and hypertrophied homophobia. But what does form these narratives and the groups which are, so to speak, receptive to them or at which they are aimed?

It seems to me that our research on conspiracy narratives should take account of the concept, rather popular at the moment, of ‘emotional communities’, proposed by the American historian Barbara Rosenwein. This constructionist idea, the point of departure of which is Brian Stock’s theory of ‘textual communities’, supposes that the researcher should bear in mind not the ‘real emotions’ apparently experienced by a group, but the ‘expected emotions’ which have a high social value for that group. ‘Emotional communities,’ writes Rosenwein, ‘are largely the same as social communities <...> But the researcher looking at them seeks above all to uncover systems of feeling, to establish what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them (for it is about such things that people express emotions); the emotions that they value, devalue, or ignore; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore’ [Rosenwein 2010: 11].

I do not assert that the conspiracy theory communities (if such there be) that we are studying may be identified as particularly emotional. In the end, conspiracy theories problematise not only socially shared values, but also the status of conventional knowledge. However, it seems to me that it is a specific combination of emotional, value and gnoseological expectations that engenders conspiracy narratives, and likewise the practices of conspiracy hermeneutics, and that it also brings into existence the groups that own these narratives and practices (or else the reverse: that these narratives and practices take possession of).

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Some modern occult systems use the terminology of science and try to prove that their doctrines are scientific, but their quest for a higher knowledge is fundamentally extra-rational. In addition, most occult doctrines assume rejection of material in favor of spiritual reality. Just as the French Revolution was labelled a masonic conspiracy, the Bolshevik Revolution was attributed to a "Judeo-Masonic conspiracy." The Great Depression and Hitler's coming to power fostered a change in the social mood. Russian Orthodoxy did not discourage personal religious experience; it tolerated gnostic speculations by clerical and lay theologians that would have been condemned as heresy in the Roman Catholic Church. "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. The conspiracy theorist must "engage in a constant process of linkage and correlation in order to map the hidden connections." (pp. 3-4). Most modern eschatology and apocalypticism, both religious and secular, involve the violent disruption or destruction of the world; whereas Christian and Jewish eschatologies view the end times as the consummation or perfection of God's creation of the world,[4] albeit with violent overtures, such as the Great Tribulation.