

Between the COVID-19 Pandemic and Saving the World: Practices and Narratives by the Falun Dafa Community in Bulgaria

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This paper presents a research case study that explores in depth the question of the function of conspiracy theories and their uses among a religious community during a Global Pandemic. Falun Dafa is a new religious movement that emerged in China and was banned by the Chinese Communist Party. Growing into a global community, it has nowadays followers in many countries, including Bulgaria. The movement's complex doctrine includes visions of the impending destruction of humanity. Today, they serve as a well-prepared coping mechanism to deal with the crisis, having set their apocalyptic expectations long before the advent of COVID-19. Based on years of observation of the community in Bulgaria, I explore how the conspiracy narratives, underlying this movement, help to reassure and restore psychological balance among followers and how the conspiratorial attitudes get stabilized in such situation of Global Crisis.

Keywords: Falun Dafa, new religious movements, conspiracy theories, cultivation, apocalypticism, COVID-19

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Introduction

Stop forced organ harvesting in China, a sign I have come across, walking around the center of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, back in 2014. Around the wide banner, visible from afar, there is a group of people wearing yellow T-shirts and a table with various flyers and a petition. Each passerby is invited to affix their signature, after being briefly

informed that there is a group of people in China who have been repressed by the communist regime because of the practice and spread of an ancient system of self-cultivation of body and spirit, that can bring a person to high levels of consciousness and ensure exceptional health. The followers claim that it is because of their exceptional health, gained through the exercise systems, and their defiance of authority, that their organs have become valuable on the black market, at the expense of their lives. The system is called Falun Dafa, and the collection of signatures aims to draw public attention to the situation in China. The group sparked my research interest, related to contemporary alternative spirituality and, more specifically, cultivation practices in the field of New Age spirituality. In 2014, I also defended my Master's thesis, based on ethnographic research in this community, through which I had the opportunity to describe and participate in the life of the community for about a year (Manova, 2014). I remained in contact with some of my respondents over the years and to follow, albeit from a distance, the Falun Dafa community and its development in Bulgaria.

When the pandemic, caused by the COVID-19 virus, swept across the world and people began to seek and form all sorts of explanations for what was happening, I often returned to my memories of my work with Falun Dafa. Being a millennialist movement, there are some particularly vivid lines of apocalyptic ideas in their visions of the future. Along with this, the teaching's kinship with China brings them one idea closer to the current case study: a newly discovered virus first isolated in China. Their particularly strained relationship with the Chinese government forms the basis for further criticism by FD¹ supporters of the Chinese government's actions to contain the pandemic. There is also a very central theory underlying the teachings here, and it states that anyone who chooses to improve themselves according to its principles and its methodology, achieves *exceptional health* (without that being its primary goal). This is because by achieving *high levels of consciousness*, the practice inevitably and mystically cultivates the body as well. Therefore, *a true practitioner* of Falun Dafa's teachings should not suffer from any illnesses, including getting sick from viruses.

A final, and perhaps, most significant, element of the movement, around which I have focused my attention, is a narrative that has been steadily operating in the rhetoric of the community since 2014. It had to do with an expectation of a future catastrophe that would start in China and affect all of humanity. Without specifying what this disaster would be, the reasons for it were explained, and these were linked to *moral degradation* and *the decline of values* in China, but also throughout the modern world. According to the practitioners, their teacher Li Hongzhi, the author of this practice, possesses extraordinary, supernatural powers and has, for years, been carrying out a process called *Fa-rectification*, which aims to change the laws of the dimension in which all humanity finds itself. Only *the rightly practicing* and *righteous*

1 Several abbreviations will be used in this paper to ease repetition: FD – Falun Dafa; CT – Conspiracy Theories; CCP – Chinese Communist Party; and PRC – the People's Republic of China.

people will pass to the next dimension, where they will be saved. Everything else from the old world as we know it, along with morally degraded human beings, will be wiped out or fall into much lower levels of existence (Li, 2013: 177).

In this so colorful philosophy, a complicated scenario is entangled, which is zealously defended by Falun Dafa followers. It involves a) *good forces* (the teacher, the gods, spiritual entities, righteous people) and *evil forces* b) (the Chinese Communist Party, morally degraded people); c) *knowledge that is known to a group of people* trying to enlighten, to the extent possible, the people unenlightened by it (the practice of Falun Dafa); d) a clearly *drawn coordinate system* in which everyone has their place and everything is ordered and connected in a mystical way. These characteristics, while derived from long-standing community narratives, are also strikingly similar to key features of conspiracy theories, and conspiratorial thinking and are associated with the production of conspiracy theories (Knight, 2000; Bratich, 2008; Robertson, 2016; Hofstadter, 1964; Barkun, 2003; Butter, 2014). This doesn't automatically make Falun Dafa just a conspiracy movement, but it highlights that there are structural similarities between a millenarian movement like the FD and conspiracy theories that cause them to reach out in times of crisis. From such a perspective, the Falun Dafa community provides a very good glimpse into a conspiratorial world, to look at and discuss how these elements assemble identities, shape life trajectories, and, most importantly, how they manage to cope with the sense of uncertainty and anxiety, inherent in the postmodern world. Against this backdrop, we have an additional opportunity, and that is to trace how these conspiracy theories serve in a Pandemic situation, where the crisis is not only in the theory of a given community and its visions of the future, but it is real and beyond control.

In a methodological context, one additional consideration is the possibility of a pre-test, insofar as conspiracy theories in this community are a fact prior to the Pandemic (and have been recorded by myself and other researchers on the subject),² rather than being directly generated by it. They seem to be more like a kind of crisis preps, already constructed matrices of explanations that come into use immediately. Therefore, CTs in different contexts and communities can be considered as a rescue plan that has been long and painstakingly prepared to take on various dire scenarios, long before a crisis occurs. All of the above is leading up to the main research question underlying the present study: How is the COVID-19 pandemic reflected in Falun Dafa's worldview, and how does this worldview succeed in coping with feelings of general insecurity and anxiety, reassuring members of Falun Dafa groups? Unfolding this question will provide insight into the function of conspiracy theories in a particular community when they are preset and embedded in the foundation of its teachings. While they can potentially provoke fear in a normal setting, in an emergency this fear is transformed into the peace of mind regarding personal health and safety. Thus, the emergency does not prove to be a problem for Falun Dafa followers, as their theory places them in a continuous emergency to which they are

2 See Palmer, 2007; Farley, 2014b; Ownby, 2008; Chang, 2004.

always exposed. This feature in itself is remarkable and opens up a field for scholarly discussion about the nature of the crisis, its predictability and contingency, and how it evokes responses in different individuals and communities.

This research is part of my long-standing interests in contemporary alternative spirituality, new religious movements, and New Age practices (Manova, 2022). It is based on an anthropological approach that employs a range of ethnographic methods including longitudinal observations with personal participation in community practices, open-ended conversations with interlocutors, semi-structured interviews, and observations of my respondents' lives and daily routines. As specified above, this paper is based on my work in 2014–2015, but only insofar as the community contacts were made, the basic data about its philosophy and practices were collected, and the included observations were made during this period. In 2021, my research interest has renewed towards conspiracy theories during Pandemic with special emphasis on their impact on various religious communities; apocalyptic ideas, and their uses today. Interviews were conducted with new respondents over a six-month period with the aim of updating observations on the narratives already recorded in this group. The focus was on narratives of 'Fa-rectification'; the pandemic setting and Master Li Hongzhi's current prescriptions, and my aim was to reach the deepest layers of the use of FD philosophy and examine how it serves in a time of pandemic, what explanations it engenders and how people in this community experience current events.

Falun Dafa Basic Contexts

Falun Dafa (or Falun Gong), translated³ as *Great Law Wheel Practice* or *Great Law Wheel Way*, is a physical and moral cultivation teaching, established in China in 1992 by Li Hongzhi. Its followers claim that performing the five meditation exercises⁴ creates extraordinary resilience to human health, but the main purpose of practicing Falun Dafa is to achieve *higher levels of consciousness* and *release the cycle of rebirths*. The movement is classified as a qigong system, a part of Chinese folk culture, in the depths of which Buddhist and Taoist philosophy are intertwined. The movement emerged during a period for the country called the *qigong boom* (Ownby, 2008; Palmer, 2007), alongside many similar meditation practices that have similar ideas, goals, and methodologies, distributed across different schools and taught by different teachers, often in competition with each other. Falun Dafa is disseminated for free, without membership fees or donation campaigns. Master Hongzhi propagated his ideas mainly through books, lectures, and conferences, and, in the later development of the movement, some media channels, such as newspapers, television, and radio

3 Translated from standard Mandarin Chinese.

4 I will not dwell on their detailed descriptions because they have been presented by other researchers before me (Burgdoff, 2003; Ownby, 2008; Chang, 2004; Porter, 2003).

broadcasts were also created, covering the ideas, philosophy, and issues surrounding the practice and development of the movement. Falun Dafa is among the most enduring schools of qigong, which influence has grown to become a worldwide movement, and researchers mostly define it as a new religious movement (NRM).

The controversial philosophy, the religious nature of the practice, and its growing popularity are among the likely reasons for the strong discontent among Chinese public figures. A series of protests between 1998–2001 is most often cited as unleashing tensions between the two positions. The Chinese government suppressed them with force and took the opportunity to express its position about Falun Dafa being a dangerous cult (Farley, 2018; Chang, 2004). In 1999, the teachings were officially banned on Chinese territory. Adherents claim that from that point on, repression, persecution, torture, and organ harvesting began (Ownby, 2008; Farley, 2014b; Junker, 2019). The leader of the doctrine found refuge in the United States, where still lives today (Melton, 2001: 542). Li Hongzhi has taken on the dual task of both spreading Falun Dafa's teachings to new followers and *clarifying the facts*, namely, making the general public aware of the situation in China about Falun Dafa practitioners there. Disciples in various countries are undertaking the task of *clarifying the facts* by organizing petitions, performances, marches and protests in front of Chinese embassies in different countries around the world. This is how Falun Dafa is getting out of the local context and is spreading rapidly, entering many Western countries, including Bulgaria.⁵

For the past twenty years, small groups of followers of the movement in the country (each ranging from 10–50 Bulgarians) have been gathering once or twice a week in the larger towns for general gymnastics or group readings. They note that they are sympathetic to the plight of their Chinese brethren and organize petitions against atrocities in China. They also believe that this particular teaching will lead them to higher awareness and improve their health and lives. The Bulgarian case is interesting for the fact that the community is built on the cultural landscape of a post-socialist country. After the political transition in 1989, people began to freely pursue their need for spirituality, expressed in an increasing interest in religious practices and ideas, in sects and denominations of Christianity, or, simply, in the paranormal (Benovska-Sabkova, 1991; 1993). Furthermore, the interest in such movements as Falun Dafa among some Bulgarians (albeit small in number) can also be explained by a kind of fixation on reaction and also revanchism towards the previous regime. Presumably, this is a necessary compensation for a part of the Bulgarian population that carries within itself the impulse to resist and gives expression to this impulse by engaging in a new type of religious practice. The shaken and changing socio-cultural environment of the transition is characterized by a crisis of trust in the new authorities of power, which, in its turn, generates another type of trust – in the charismatic nature of the new religious leaders (see Verdery, 1996). In

5 According to the movement's official website, it has spread to over 70 countries to date. Link: <https://en.falundafa.org/falun-dafa-global-contacts.html>, last visited on 01. 12. 2021.

the Bulgarian scientific community, these issues have been studied in-depth and continue to be the subject of researchers' observation (Baeva, 1998; Georgieva, *Ed.*, 2013; Vukov, 2009; Rot, 1998; Luleva, 2021). The academic community has drawn attention to some significant consequences of the Transition, still perceptible today, such as the rise of religiosity in post-socialist societies, the "disenchantment" and new enchantment of the world after the end of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, post-socialist identities, new social relations and expressions of trust and distrust after 1989, etc. All of these processes undoubtedly leave their imprint on the Falun Dafa movement and played a role in its presence in Bulgaria.

Falun Dafa as a New Religious Movement – Specifics

Falun Dafa is a well-known community in academic circles internationally and has been the subject of numerous academic discussions where its various aspects have been highlighted (Ackerman, 2005; Ownby, 2008; Ching, 2006; Farley, 2014b; Junker, 2019; Melton, 2001). That indicates its significance and recognition among new religious movements. The FD has essentially been defined as a Milleenist movement (Chang, 2004; Ownby, 2008; Palmer, 2002) which, due to its peculiar fate (being banned from practice in its homeland), was brought beyond its local context and well-conventionalized for a Western audience, which soon turned it into a global movement. Its success can be sought in the direction of the physical and mental comfort practices it offers, which are highly valued in the West, given the popularity of New Age culture and its spiritual ideas. Though it attracts an audience more associated with New Age seeking, the researchers of FD identify it as a New Religious Movement (ter Haar, 2006; Adams, 2011; Junker, 2019; Ownby, 2005). This stance is not agreed upon by the followers; the community even distances itself from any hint of religiosity. Nevertheless, some obvious signs of religiosity cannot be avoided, such as the fact that the movement has a clearly defined philosophical doctrine, cosmology, a charismatic leader and well-defined communities which, while claiming a lack of formal hierarchy, do have their informal leaders by region and place. A canonicity based on Li Hongzhi's texts is also observed, in which there are clear guidelines for a pious way of life and a system of cultivation to be followed by anyone who is desirous of being a true disciple. In fact, there is a definite boundary in the verbal representation of Falun Dafa adherents, distinguishing them as *true practitioners*, or *Dafa disciples*,⁶ and the rest of the people, often referred to as *ordinary* or *nonpractitioners*. This demarcation shapes the boundaries of the community and marks its detachment into one particular entity. The movement has also developed active civic initiatives subservient to Li Hongzhi's writings, which also have their names (*clarifying the facts* – this is about publicizing the

6 Their emic label is also the phrase Dafa community; Dafa disciple; Dafa student; Dafa practitioner; Dafa event; Dafa law. In this text, in terms of followers and community, I also adhere to these designations.

conflict between the FD and the CCP) and (*saving sentient beings* – again, this can refer to either the conflict with the Chinese government or merely spreading the FD system among new followers).

Falun Dafa and the Realm of Conspiracy Theories

The religious characteristics of the movement are also intertwined with some deeply conspiratorial attitudes, derived from the writings and statements of Li Hongzhi and embedded in the foundations of this philosophy. I have outlined above some of these that can be unambiguously translated as conspiratorial: the struggle between good and evil, a clear ordering of the known world; and a well-defined path to enlightenment, a knowledge understood by few. It is not a new thesis that the new religious movements display a number of conspiratorial tropes achieving a re-enchantment in a secular world, that has renounced its gods in favor of rationalism (Popper, 2013; Wood, Douglas, 2018). Rationalism and spirituality, however, are intricately intertwined with every theory supported by faith-based evidence (Barkun, 2003: 7; Hofstadter, 1964: 38–39). This very element often causes scholars to view contemporary conspiracy theories in direct relation to religiosity (Dyrendal, Robertson, Aspren, *Eds.*, 2018). According to Geoffrey Cubitt, dualism and occultism are two main characteristics that are part of conspiracy theory-making (Cubitt, 1989: 13). Michael Barkun outlines three key characteristics observed in conspiracy thinking (which are also accounted for in FD): nothing happens by chance; nothing is what it seems; and everything is connected (Barkun, 2003: 7). The figure of evil, for its part, is an essential element helping to shape conspiracy narratives (Uscinski, Parent, 2014: 32). Peter Knight emphasizes that “by discovering a hidden agenda behind the surface chaos of contemporary history, conspiracy theory attempts to provide a compensatory sense of historical disposability” (Knight, 2000: 20).

In effect, the subject of conspiracy theories has been in the academic fields of much of the social sciences long before the Pandemic. To date, the term conspiracy theories is not a complete and settled concept. In different scholarly fields, however, a number of debates are emerging about the limits, functions and uses of the concept (see Butter, Knight, *Eds.*, 2020). In the present case, for the purposes of this article, we are interested in the cognitive functions of conspiracy narratives and theories embedded within the larger field of religious philosophy. Falun Dafa is just such a case. The movement is one more proof of the profound need for spirituality and guidance, inherent in human beings in the postmodern world, as well as the need for the solace of a community of like-minded people in which to realize oneself. However, before suggesting that the function of conspiracy theories is to restore superstitious thinking and more traditional forms of social organization, it is important to mention that such seemingly anti-modern ideas and sentiments are in fact embedded in and motivated by the processes of modernization (Aupers, 2012). CTs express a deep-seated logic of distrust, inherent in the culture of modernity (Aupers, Harambam,

2018). The individuals' attempt to resist social control (institutions) and modern knowledge-producing authorities (science) engender radical doubt (Melley, 2000: 13). This reveals conspiracy theories as a product of modernity itself, and the attempt of people to be reflective and logical, as a response to the complexity and uncertainty in the modern world. Regardless of how we treat the understandings and theories in which classical conspiracy formulas are found, it is important to pay attention to their functions of providing explanations when they are particularly needed.

All of these studies deal with particular aspects of the complex matter of conspiracy theories. The focus that guides the present article is that insofar as they are embedded in the philosophy of religious groups, conspiracy theories stabilize and serve in reinforcing a sense of meaning and purpose. The case of Falun Dafa shows that this stabilization helps when rapid adaptation is needed, for example, in crises caused by social and health circumstances such as the pandemic caused by COVID-19.

What kind of world is Li Hongzhi creating for his disciples?

In order to understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on strategies for constructing explanations and regaining psychological balance within the Falun Dafa community, it is necessary to look at how the lines of conspiracy that I have outlined above, are shaping the worldview of this movement's adherents. What are the specific, predetermined and even originally set explanations? What kind of world Li is building for his adherents and how this world deals with uncertainty and anxiety?

Master Li's charisma. Inclusiveness to the community. Practices

Li Hongzhi's public image has been shaped by his charisma through the complex concepts that the leader produces for himself and that he describes in his books and lectures. These include supernatural abilities such as levitation, the ability to become invisible, and the ability to see through his 'inner eye' (Farley, 2014a). Furthermore, he is able to connect with any of his disciples and be in contact with their thoughts (Li, 2017: 79), and, also, there are invisible entities that are copies of him and can travel anywhere, called *Fa-shens* (Li, 2017: 183). Joining the FD community for anyone new to this path of cultivation is a process marked by mysticism, too. According to followers' accounts and according to Li's writings, anyone who has accepted the principles of "goodness – truthfulness – patience" with their heart, is localized by the Master's fascies, and an invisible organ called *the Falun* (translation: wheel) is installed in that person's lower stomach (Li, 2017: 49; Adams, 2011: 388; Burgdoff, 2003: 334). The function of this organ is to cleanse the newcomer's body of diseases and to redeem some of their karma. Afterwards, the new Dafa disciple continues the work of clearing karma and maintaining the body simply by performing the five exercises that the Master has taught. Through this act, integrated into one's daily routine, the Wheel of Falun continues its rotating course, cultivating

special energy in one's body (*gong*). According to my interlocutors, this energy is from higher levels, and once the cultivation process has begun, the practitioner's body already adopts a different structure. It does not succumb to the diseases that ordinary people's bodies suffer from.

This is, however, only the foundation necessary for practice. *One cannot cultivate with a sick body*, my respondents say, but much of cultivation is more of a moral act. In the group's rhetoric, moral elevation is called *cultivating xinxing* (translation: 'character'). It involves continually eliminating attachments (as the Buddha taught), along with applying the principles of "goodness – truthfulness –patience" to the practitioner's daily life (as Li taught). To understand well what it means to apply these principles *correctly*, the practitioner is busy with the task of studying the *Fa* (translation: 'law'). This is the other practice of the teachings, which involves systematic rereading of the book *Zhuan Falun* (in a group or individually), considered foundational to Falun Dafa and written by Li. According to Li, the systematic reading of this text helps to improve one's understanding of it and reach *a higher level of awareness*. Interpreting it, however, is strictly prohibited. It is the prerogative of the Master alone. Li Hongzhi's insistence on his exclusive interpretive authority raises concerns about the possible uses of his charismatic power (Burgdoff, 2003: 334). FD's cosmology also includes a rich pantheon of gods, different dimensions, and different versions of history and scientific facts, even aliens, that are thought to have long had contact with Earth (Farley, 2014a).

Fa-rectification

The idea of Fa-rectification is widely popular and also fundamental to Falun Dafa's philosophy. It reflects the apocalypticism characteristic of the movement, which is precisely what classifies it as one of the Milleannist movements (Chang, 2004; Palmer, 2007; Burgdoff, 2003, etc.). Fa-rectification directly correlates with Li Hongzhi's superpowers and also explains his activities. According to Li Hongzhi, human civilization has been destroyed 81 times in its history, but the few who escaped have laid the foundations for each subsequent civilization (Li, 2017: 27). Nowadays, due to the moral degradation of people, civilization is again facing total destruction. However, the practice and ancient knowledge that Li Hongzhi disseminates outlines a clear path for people, giving instructions on how to save themselves and rise to high levels. It basically consists of clearing the karma of every spiritually awakened person. This is individual work that everyone does alone and no one can help another human being. Li Hongzhi's task, however, is to influence on a collective level. According to him, the true laws of the universe resonate with the principles of "goodness – truthfulness – patience", which, though, are no longer observed due to the low morality of the people on earth. In Li's theory, the latter means that people must either be quickly informed that they need to repent and begin conscious spiritual work to clear their karma, or they will themselves contribute to the extinction of their species. Exactly how the process of Fa-rectification occurs is not a clear point, and neither is what the destruction of the world would entail. It is a curious fact that disciples hardly show any interest in

these matters, and therefore, they are not a particularly commented topic. The Fa-rectification is most mentioned concerning the CCP's persecution of practitioners. It is said to be the most obvious sign "of the coming of the end of days" (Chang, 2004).

Elimination of attachments and cultivating character

Elimination of is a disciplined spiritual practice that requires practitioners to confront specific challenges in their life experience (Burgdoff, 2003: 336). While Li is preoccupied with his cosmic tasks and maintaining the delicate balance between good and evil, the primary task of his disciples is progress in their cultivation, focusing mainly on themselves, paying no attention to external factors. This means being disciplined about the physical exercises they will use to clear karma, and being consistent in reading and rereading Li Hongzhi's books and lectures (*studying the Fa*). In this way, they train their patience and endurance to remain steadfast in the face of external challenges and to properly understand both the inner and outer worlds. It is also expected that Master will often send (*arrange*) challenges to them in their life path, and it is by how they handle them, whether they remain steadfast, that their progress in cultivation and karma clearing is measured. Overcoming attachments of all kinds is also an essential mark of character resilience. Overcoming one's attachments includes not showing excessive enthusiasm and curiosity toward developing supernormal abilities; toward Master's Fa-rectification work; toward extraterrestrials or other phenomena. Master informs them of these things, but to the extent that they are knowledgeable and aware of the more complex workings and structure of this world. In this way, the possibility of criticism and unnecessary curiosity is cut off. Anyone who exhibits these qualities is deemed to have a poor understanding of the law (Burgdoff, 2003: 333). It is responded to with impartiality and compassion. This may be a person who has recently joined the group or a person with a weaker spirit who has more karma to clear.

Extraordinary health

Dafa students consider themselves to be extraordinary people, not only because of their resilient character but also because of the extraordinary health of their bodies. One of the first things that anyone interested would learn from them alone is that they can't get sick from any kind of illness, and if they had previous complaints, they have disappeared after incorporating the principles of "goodness – truthfulness – patience". In disciples' stories, there is often the line, "I had complaints, I read the Law (*obtained the Fa*), and then I realized many things. I haven't been sick for about (a period), and all the old sicknesses disappeared". Likewise, according to them, the Chinese authorities' kidnappings are aimed at taking away Dafa disciples' organs, as they have realized that they can be extremely valuable. I previously explained where this belief of unusual health comes from: the mystical initiation by the Master, the change of their body structure and the diligent performance of the special exercises.

In fact, this theory of theirs requires a few additional explanations. A frequent criticism of Li Hongzhi is that anyone who wants to cultivate properly according to

his teachings is advised to forget all kinds of medication and medical help (Li, 2017: 267; Burgdoff, 2003: 341; Palmer, 2007: 229; Ownby, 2008: 110). Again, this prohibition stems from the concept of karma purification. Alleged illness presents a unique opportunity to release significant amounts of karma, but only if practitioners recognize this opportunity. Thus, the pain and suffering of illness are understood as a spiritual problem, not a medical one (Burgdoff, 2003: 341). In view of the Pandemic situation, this is a particularly important element of the teachings. And it is also, as will become clear later in the text, an opportunity for a number of arrangements, aimed at overcoming cognitive dissonance. Practitioners should treat probable infestations and illnesses as a good opportunity to clear their karma. This element is of particular concern to outside observers, but it is also among the essential factors in keeping Dafa Practitioners themselves calm during a Pandemic.

The CCP and evil

The community that Li has formed for his followers is like an oasis in a world, where the forces of evil are at work, and their secret plots aim at destruction. This most basic narrative calls attention to the fact that Falun Dafa followers are originally prepared for crises. The movement has emerged and is functioning in an ongoing crisis and tension with the authorities in China. This is among the first things that anyone new to this teaching is introduced to. My account of how I discovered the Plovdiv group of Dafa disciples shows a sort of scene of extraordinariness – collecting signatures to save people who are being kidnapped and brutally murdered for their views. The fact that this crisis is being carried beyond China’s borders and seeded onto foreign contexts perhaps hints at the first lines of conspiracy emanating from the teachings. This does not mean, of course, that the tensions between the FD and the CCP are fictitious. On the contrary, it raises deep concerns among anyone familiar with the case (Burgdoff, 2003: 332; Ownby, 2008: 136). Multiple lines of evidence point to a propaganda war in which both sides race to present a variety of arguments and counterarguments against each other (Farley, 2018). In this complex tide of information, however, any outside observer would be lost. According to the FD, the totalitarian regime in China grossly tramples on human rights and freedoms.⁷ According to official statements from the Chinese government, the FD is an evil cult that aims to destabilize the country and brainwash followers.⁸ This conflict, however, is the key denouement, the lure for the curiosity of anyone unfamiliar to find out what knowledge FD provides that is so dangerous to the general public. In this sense, as Craig Burgdoff notes, any thorough analysis of the case cannot help but recognize that “the PRC is a partner in the ongoing evolution of Falun Gong theology” (Burgdoff, 2003: 334).

7 More information about the official position of Falun Dafa followers can be found here: <https://faluninfo.net/why-is-falun-gong-is-persecuted-in-china/> (accessed 1. 12. 2021).

8 More information on the position of the People’s Republic of China can be found here: http://www.chinaembassy.bg/eng/zgzt/jpflg/LiHongzhiandHisFalunGong/200406/t20040613_2370466.htm (accessed 1. 12. 2021).

Further complicating the picture is the fact that conspiracy theories sometimes come true in their predictions (Aupers, 2012: 24). Eagerly persecuted or deliberately provoking the authorities, Dafa disciples share actual and verifiable cases of abductions or wrongful detentions. One such example is the case in December 2014 when 7 Bulgarian citizens were detained while travelling to Serbia where they were supposed to participate in a peaceful protest in front of the Chinese Embassy during a visit by leaders from China. As a number of irregularities were found in their detention, their release took place through the intervention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria and the European Union and was widely reported in the Bulgarian media.⁹ For the purposes of this analysis, however, I am mainly interested in the symbolic element of this conflict, namely, the CCP as the main antagonistic figure in the Falun Dafa universe.

Alien Theology

Apocalyptic attitudes and persecution by official authorities are accompanied by another potential source of anxiety, and that is aliens. According to Li Hongzhi's accounts, they have long been in contact with Earth and have been trying to interfere in people's lives. In a 1999 interview with the New York Times,¹⁰ Li Hongzhi explained details about the aliens such as their appearance, their ability to use human bodies, their control over people's minds, using modern technology such as computers and mobile devices; abducting people and transporting them to other planets where they keep them as pets. According to Li, aliens are morally undeveloped and their greed and lust have led to intergalactic "star wars" (Farley, 2014a: 414). These claims have been met with harsh criticism from both the media and academic observers. Followers of the movement, however, do not take sides on these issues and are cautious about commenting on them. Instead, the disciples claim to be aware of these undeniable facts, but they themselves have no role in the complicated interplanetary relationships. Therefore, according to them, their focus *should only be* on the things over which they have control: removing attachments, clearing karma, and spreading awareness about the persecution in China. All excess activities are left to Master Li's care. In addition to removing the responsibility and situating the attention primarily on the Self, this act also reduces the possibility of possible criticism from the disciples.

9 The case is explored in the 2019 documentary film "The black listed" by Dejan Markovic. Link: https://tv.faluninfo.net/bg/%d0%b2-%d1%87%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%8f%d1%82-%d1%81%d0%bf%d0%b8%d1%81%d1%8a%d0%ba/?fbclid=IwAR0aD_23AaEJ2gbsokX-UbAHQhbNl6jfe2dIkaRBTjLPzDgb7tCsImIPlsmA (accessed 1. 12. 2021).

10 The interview can be seen here: <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2053761,00.html> (accessed 1. 12. 2021).

Who will be saved? Explanations and recommendations from the Master regarding the Pandemic

It is particularly noteworthy that, given Li Hongzhi's rich philosophy and complex explanations of the structure of this world, he gives only one official statement on the World Pandemic from COVID-19. The text of his official statement was released on 19. 3. 2020 with the title *Stay Rational*.¹¹ It was posted on the international website falundafa.org, and is translated into Bulgarian, which is common practice for the followers of the movement in Bulgaria. In this text, Li urges students to remain calm (and sane) as Pandemics, according to him, are arranged by the gods and are inevitable consequences of people's low morality. In his view, measures to deal with the virus are a misguided move to contain something that has been ordained by the gods to purge the world of human beings' karmic debt. Of course, this does not affect Dafa disciples:

True Dafa disciples have higher energy and can destroy karma and germs; they are emissaries of salvation in these latter days, and bring their wisdom to bear upon saving people as they share truthful information related to our practice.

However, they are strictly warned not to try to help ordinary people in any way other than to make them aware of the moral decay and especially the activities of the PRC:

Also, I should mention that there are practitioners in many regions who are calling upon everyone to send righteous thoughts together to put an end to the Chinese Communist Virus (Wuhan Virus). But that is not the right idea. You are not here to change history, but rather, to save people at this most dangerous time in history, by raising awareness, persuading people to withdraw from China's three major communist organizations, encouraging people to sincerely say the magic words, and so on. All of these are the best medicine possible, the best way to rescue people – when people's morals change, things will change for the better.

An important point of the statement is that a “miracle” is possible if individual countries around the world give up their cooperation with China. It also points to Li's argument that the countries most affected by the virus were those in close cooperation with China. It is also said that *the CCP is in its death throes and trying to harm people by causing pandemonium in the world.*

The next time the topic of the Pandemic enters Li Hongzhi's statement again is on November 18, 2021, entitled: *Wake Up!*¹² This statement begins with Li's important announcement that the Fa conflict is now over:

11 Lecture *Stay Rational* (translate: yellow team): <https://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2020/3/20/183715.html> (accessed 1. 12. 2021).

12 Can be seen here: <https://en.falundafa.org/eng/articles/20211118A.html> (accessed 1. 12. 2021).

The Fa's rectification of the Cosmos has finished, and now a transition to the Fa's rectification of the human world is taking place. Most of our Dafa disciples will join me as the Fa rectifies the human world.

What follows are perhaps the obligatory clarifications. Some of them are that the world is now in transition from the old state to the new one; that lives with enormous karma are being destroyed, Dafa's practitioners are protected, but only those who cultivate properly. It seems that for the rest, Master's support is lacking:

However, during the course of it, numerous lives with enormous karma as well as members of the wicked Communist Party will be weeded out and annihilated. And along with this, there are those among Dafa practitioners who have not made good on the vows they signed with their lives at the time of coming to this world – such as, for example, by not having done well what Dafa disciples are supposed to do or not having worked on saving people – and who as a result have strong human thinking and have long had a negative effect on the environment for spiritual development among practitioners.

In addition to this important news for the community, Li Hongzhi gives a very brief update on one of the most commented topics for 2021 – the vaccination against COVID-19:

Some practitioners have been afraid of getting infected, while others have adamantly refused to get vaccinated. In either case, you should stop and ask yourself whether you are living up to the title of "Dafa Disciple". This of course includes some female practitioners who are pregnant. But it's not that I am telling you whether to get vaccinated nor how the epidemic may impact you. Don't be extreme either way. Doing that stems from human thinking. What I want to tell you is that you are sizing yourself up with human thinking, rather than viewing things from the perspective of someone who is devoted to spiritual practice. And that is because there is a flaw in how you have developed yourself spiritually.

These two documents serve to mobilize the faith of the disciples; they point out the similarities between current events and Li's teaching. They aim to show the veracity of his words regarding topics that have been the subject of discussion for most of the movement's life: the communist regime in China; the proper practice of Falun Dafa; Master's powers. It seems that the Pandemic Crisis is only a backdrop for this evidence, a means of testing the faith of the disciples.. Li decries fear and seems to praise the refusal of vaccination, though he ends by urging his followers not to be extreme. The introduction of the concept of the title "Dafa Disciple" is like a prize being dangled as a lure to mobilize the efforts of disciples. Regarding this title, Li concludes his statement by saying, *Although there are occasionally people who do foolish things, the title 'Dafa disciple' is something that even deities admire and would*

like to possess. The particularly edifying nature of this statement of Li's (and indeed in much of his messages to his students) is particularly striking. It also seems that his favour could easily be lost.

These are the current comments regarding the Pandemic Crisis, demonstrating the part that the new virus plays in Falun Dafa's philosophy. On the borderline of directness and indirectness, the most pressing questions are raised, concerning protection from the virus; concerning Master's favor; saving the world, and the possible partial annihilation of mankind. The latter comments on the question of how humanity is viewed in the worldview of Falun Dafa? This question deserves to be the focus of a separate study as it affects the general conservatism seen in the teachings. It is important to note here only that, while the movement has a distinctly humanistic approach to the protection of human rights, especially, about the right to choose one's faith and freedom of speech, these freedoms are excluded about different sexual orientations, intermarriage, and feminist ideas. According to Li Hongzhi's teachings, the latter belong to the moral decadence of humanity and are part of the causes of human destruction, because they lead to the accumulation of enormous karma. This double standard raises serious criticisms of the Falun Dafa leader.

Religious Beliefs and Conspiracy Theories in Falun Dafa

The listed elements of Falun Dafa's philosophy outline the complicated contexts in which the followers of this movement are immersed. The shaped worldview and internalized values and norms that derive from Li Hongzhi's teachings, while fundamentally resting on terrifying scenarios of the future, are loaded with cognitive functions, shaping a particular identity, purpose, and overall meaningful framework of existence, that is essential to maintaining psychological balance. The philosophy that Falun Dafa develops, extends to many large-scale explanations of the world. Thus, the teachings cover a variation of horrific scenarios that would frighten any person; would shake their peace of mind and sense of safety. This effect helps bring together a community that has answers and "knows" what is coming, and has knowledge beyond this lifetime (impossible knowledge) (Hristov, 2019) involving past lives and other dimensions. The key here is in the vast scales that this teaching sets. No human imagination can fully comprehend such a volume of information. It deals with vast swaths of time (antiquity) and space (planets), and this precludes any verification of these claims. In such a context, conspiratorial thinking is set as if preventively. It is set up to resist a variety of frightening scenarios: abductions by official authorities; UFO invasion; CCP control (worldwide): a paradigm scenario of a clash between the forces of good and evil. The FD has a well-developed mechanism for dealing with crises, precisely because of its constant exposure to the conspiracy theories of leader Li Hongzhi. But let us consider what the functions of this intimidation would be.

Joining the community

One of the most basic functions of the teaching is that it provides safe and sustainable communities for its followers. This most visible role alleviates significantly the deepening processes of alliteration in an increasingly globalized world (Bauman, 2001). However, initial initiation into the Falun Dafa group is associated with a message of high anxiety. Li's philosophical concepts may keep groups of initiates calm in his knowledge, but to an outside observer, these theories would hardly bring reassurance. In support of this assertion, it can be pointed out that followers report their particular ailments early in their joining the FD (melancholy and confusion to headaches, diarrhea, vomiting). The teacher attributes these to the initial physical and mental clearing of karma and the installation of Falun (Li, 2013: 90), but the more likely reason is that newcomers cannot cope with such complex, large-scale, and threatening explanations of the world and its workings, and its destiny of destruction. Thus, after this transition and initial "shock therapy", all responsibility for cultivation falls on the individual, and the things that cannot be controlled are left in the hands of the Master (Fa-rectification; aliens; superpowers). It's a peculiar dynamic between personal self-control and placing responsibility in the hands of a higher authority. Thus, the hope is pinned that through the personal efforts and superpowers of the Master the course of destiny can be changed. Thus, a purpose is formed, that demands dedication, but in return provides meaning, which in turn strengthens the general uncertainty in an anxious and confused world.

Imagined identity

There is a remarkable standardization in Falun Dafa in terms of creating sustainable communities. Although the movement's philosophy is strongly tied to Chinese culture and tradition, which are often difficult to translate for Western audiences, a homogeneous environment has been achieved that offers the sense of a common whole, which is among the main factors in building tranquility. This observation is further reinforced by ethnographic descriptions of communities around the world published by researchers in various countries (Ackerman, 2005; Porter, 2003; Burgdoff, 2003; Ying-Ying, 2011). The dynamics and actions described in these studies attest that the teachings succeed in building quite identical groups in different cultural contexts. Successful standardization can be attributed to several factors, such as free access; easy-to-learn exercises; and the use of modern telecommunication technologies to convey the knowledge that teaching offers. In terms of the Chinese diaspora, the Falun Dafa movement can be associated with nostalgia for the homeland and an act of opposition to authority (Ying-Ying, 2011). However, groups made up of foreigners employ several strategies to get as close as possible to the Chinese context, thus forming an imagined identity to participate in universal brotherhood. One of these strategies, for example, is a narrative registered among Bulgarians that states that every person born into this world spent his or her first incarnation in China, that is, was once Chinese. Along with this, it is claimed that the last reincarnation of every person who has ever existed and will exist on Earth

will again take place precisely in China. This narrative, according to my interlocutors, was shared by Master Li, though I, at least, found no such writing. This may be a real statement or a local narrative framing the claim of oneness with the Chinese people. In either case, this narrative brings two culturally and geographically quite separate peoples together, serving to cohere and achieve a cohesive environment.

In Falun Dafa's language, the idea of community is conveyed through the metaphor of *One body*. Often, followers refer to their groups as a *body*, and they also perform frequent "diagnostics" on this body, testing not only themselves but also their groups through the actions they organize together and their teamwork. A common question is: *Are we forming a unified body together? Are we united enough?* (Manova, 2014). Thus, a common identity is built, which must be constantly reaffirmed through systematic practice and character improvement, because the title of Dafa disciple can easily be lost and one falls out of the bosom of the community. This metaphor undoubtedly demonstrates the particular sadness of the loss of a common telos characteristic of modern man. From this perspective, all the rhetoric in FD related to destruction, decay, enemies, the end of the world can be related rather to a crisis generated by an amorphous, impermanent, risky, and difficult-to-make sense of the world, which, due to the lack of solid structures giving some clear contour to reality, cannot foresee anything but destruction.¹³

The Evil

In addition to the presence of a clearly defined evil in Falun Dafa's visions, its objectification precisely in a country's government outlines a classic image of conspiratorial attitudes. Accusations of behind-the-scenes power to official authorities (church, governments, regimes) is a frequent element of contemporary conspiracy theories (Knight, 2000; Butter, 2014, Aupers, 2012). It can be associated with modern man's cardinal distrust and broken relationship with authority (Aupers, Harambam, 2018: 51). The figure of authority (evil authority) plays an essential role in stabilizing Li's conspiracy theories. The resistance that the movement offers to the regime in China shapes the stability of the paradigmatic plot of a clash between the forces of good and evil. Alongside this, this element of objectifying evil into something livable and visible indicates that Li's conspiracy bears the marks of a "certain paranoia" (Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000). According to Peter Knight's theory, there is a dynamic in conspiratorial attitudes, manifested in a transition from a "secure paranoia" (fixation on a clearly defined enemy: communists; Muslims; Jews) to an "insecure paranoia" (a vague sense of unease caused by the particularities of modern societies: bureaucratic, unstable, lack of authority). Knight emphasizes that after the 1960s "popular conspiracism has mutated from an obsession with a fixed enemy to a generalized suspicion about conspiring forces. It has shifted, in effect, from a paradoxically secure form of paranoia that bolstered one's sense of identity, to a far more insecure version of conspiracy-infused anxiety which plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion" (Knight, 2000: 4). According to

13 In this regard see also the study of T. Hristov's "Impossible Knowledge: Conspiracy Theories, Power, and Truth", which considers CT as a form of social suffering (Hristov, 2019).

another researcher, Stef Aupers, the “secure paranoia” form of paranoia “paradoxically reinforces personal and national identity and provides a form of cultural catharsis” (Aupers, 2012: 24). If the older form of paranoia is associated with the construction of a fear-inducing object, the newer form is amorphous, causing a rather vague and diffuse sense of anxiety. Modern conspiracy theories tend to be explained by “paranoia about man-made institutions and modern society itself” (Aupers, 2012: 32).

However, fear and anxiety are two different problems that have different psychological consequences. Anxiety is an intolerance. It submerges, disorients, and disempowers. On the other hand, fear of a fixed enemy mobilizes, accumulates courage, and builds character (it is no accident that cultivating character is a particular hallmark of Li’s teaching). In this case, this fear is achieved through a specific, clearly delineated group (the CCP). Thus, Li succeeds in actually mastering anxiety by replacing it with fear of a fixed enemy. This fear is further developed by the alien theory, which builds on the fear and takes it to super planetary proportions. The idea of extraterrestrials can be seen as in fact another ‘translation’ of the idea of alienation into modernity (Dean, 1998).

Strategies to overcome cognitive dissonance regarding health

It is becoming clear from my recent interviews with followers of this movement in Bulgaria, that the conviction that they cannot contract viruses, remains persistent in their views. Each time this issue is brought up, however, this belief is surrounded by additional caveats. An example of a strategy developed to address /reduce/ cognitive dissonance during the Pandemic is the answers to questions about whether a Dafa practitioner can become ill with COVID-19. Without exception, interviewees stated that this is not possible *if one is a genuine practitioner*, but there are several contingencies in being a *genuine practitioner*. Not everyone who just does the exercises is a true Dafa disciple. Not everyone who reads the book is a true Dafa disciple. There are members of the group, for example, who have recently discovered this philosophy and are still initiating it. Some have not cleared certain traits of their character; some are going through several trials, and some have much more karmic baggage than others. All of these “exceptions” are not guaranteed to be safe from the virus, as it is a natural *arrangement* for the testing character. In such cases, again, one needs to approach with wisdom and patience. Still, for true practitioners, contracting a virus or other type of disease would be unthinkable, because they have developed gong, which is energy from higher levels, whereas viruses and diseases, according to interviewees, belong to lower levels. These caveats are especially necessary to overcome possible cognitive dissonance, when the reality is beyond control (Festinger, Riecken, Schachter, 2009).

The function of such strategies is also obvious in the following example from my interview. The interlocutor (A.S.¹⁴) told me a story, according to which, a close friend

14 Male, 39. Initials have been changed to preserve the informant’s identity as much as possible. The original interview is classified and can be found in the archives of the National Centre for Scientific Research at IEFEM-BAS under number FnAIF No. 3134.

of his group was tested for coronavirus before a trip abroad. After testing positive, he immediately contacted A.S., sharing his situation. Since the man had been practicing for a long time and my interlocutor judged him *to be a very good practitioner*, who was conscientious with his attachments and consistent in his cultivation, he advised him to repeat the test: *I simply told him that this could not be true and sent him to get another test*. The second test turned out to be negative, which became a confirmation of A.S.'s words. Thus, the practitioner's unshakable faith helps to normalize the situation. The apparent evidence of the absence of the virus is sought in the moral merit of the practitioner, and the test to objectify this reality is repeated until a negative result is achieved.

Disciples should not express fear of contamination, as that would be tantamount to a lack of trust in the qualities of the Master and his system. The fear of contamination is also superseded by the danger of marginalization within the group. In the best case, the fear would be considered an attachment or a sign of poor cultivation. Such a shaking, according to some practitioners, would only contribute to possible contamination.

The question regarding vaccines to prevent COVID-19 remains open to Dafa disciples. Among those I interviewed, there were no individuals who had received the vaccine. However, here too, there are some agreements. It is widely believed that just as the virus cannot harm practitioners' bodies, neither could the vaccine. Therefore, it could be administered when necessary, but it was specified that since it was unnecessary for every Dafa disciple, it would only be administered under extreme circumstances (an order from a boss; for convenience, on a long trip; when requested by relatives). The topic of vaccines is one additional opportunity to reaffirm each Dafa disciple's steadfastness. An important clarification here is that the last interviews I conducted with Dafa disciples were from late October 2021, that is, before Li Hongzhi's statement (from November 2021), where the vaccine issue is addressed. That is to say, these last expressed positions may be subject to revision by Dafa disciples and different attitudes may be observed on the ground. According to Li Hongzhi, the ridding of the virus would come about in a very different way: it would be a renunciation of cooperation with China by all countries of the world.

Conclusion

Falun Dafa is a recognizable and popular movement with an overtly religious character and millenarian features. Persecuted in its own country, it enjoys some degree of sympathy in the West for being a victim of CCP repression and for demonstrating (at least) an ostensible defense of human rights and freedoms through its civic initiatives, for which it is better known. These activist manifestations, however, often silence the debates surrounding its complex doctrinal nature. Although openly critical of China's political regime, the movement's leader also runs his groups in a largely totalitarian manner. His image displays elements often

incomprehensible to an outside observer, such as supernormal abilities; insistence on exclusive interpretive rights over his texts; and particular control over his disciples through constant encouragement and reprimand.

The main thesis around which this paper develops is that this particular community operates narratives that can be defined as conspiratorial and that are embedded in the core of its philosophy. Their function is to engender a sense of anxiety, which then serves to join a group of like-minded people and build basic qualities among practitioners: self-discipline, personal responsibility; compassion for others. The basic narratives handled by the teachings place participants in a continuous state of emergency. The initial anxiety that any newcomer or outsider to the teachings would experience, however, is soon replaced after joining a group by a calm and fearless attitude toward external challenges. Thus, caught up in an actual emergency (brought on by a new kind of virus), followers of the movement have already traveled the path of transforming anxiety into equanimity regarding personal health and safety. Several strategies are working to ensure safety and comfort as only a cohesive community could.

Falun Dafa's case lays bare the fundamental existential questions and provides its unequivocal answers. Providing answers is among the most significant benefits of this teaching for its followers. These answers solidify identities, form a common telos, and provide purpose, and all of this generates deep meaning for the movement's followers. No matter how these much-needed formulas are achieved for modern man, they are valuable tools for adaptation and survival. When the world is attacked by unprecedented danger, these preliminary matrices of explanation constitute a form of rescue plan. The scales that the leader of the movement uses in his explanations of the world do not allow the members of his groups to be swallowed up by even a World Virus Pandemic. Moreover, thanks to his long-arranged scenarios in advance, the leader manages to subdue the independent and uncontrollable circumstances by deftly adapting the actual contexts of the crisis to the context of his teaching, using it as a backdrop to prove his claims and assert his charisma. Although these actions are distinctly dangerous and raise troubling questions about his charismatic authority, socially and psychologically they demonstrate a way to deal with the biological threat through the cures of culture.

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