Conservatives and the Constitution incorporates a wide range of topics into the originalist narrative. Kersch has clearly mastered the relevant literature and brings in a great deal of original research. If there is one flaw in the book, however, it is that the plot tends to get lost in the minutiae of details at times. For instance, he spends 14 pages summarizing two documentary films produced by evangelical minister Francis Schaeffer. While there is no doubt that Schaeffer was important for politicizing the abortion issue and uniting Roman Catholics and evangelicals in the pro-life movement, these films could have been dispatched in a much more efficient fashion.

This minor point should not detract from the importance of Conservatives and the Constitution. As the first in a proposed three-volume project, it restricts its focus to ideas and beliefs. Subsequent works will look at originalism in practice in legal and political institutions.

Contemporary conservatism is built on a worldview that casts liberals, Democrats, and all other political opponents as betrayers of the nation’s constitutional principles. Kersch painstakingly and persuasively demonstrates how this worldview came to be.

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How did it come to this? Time was when the lunatic fringe was on the fringe. Politicians, scientists, and network anchors told us things, and we believed them. Democracy usually worked as advertised. Now, the lunacies are running the asylum, possibly into the ground. Conspiracy theories are breeding and seething like a zombie apocalypse, scaling the battlements of civilization with their countless corpses and bottomless hunger for brains. “Conspiracism has reached such a point of prominence today that we must ask whether it is about to destroy democracy and civil society,” (p. 12) warns Thomas Konda.

Konda’s central question is this: “Americans see hoaxes and plots everywhere... why?” (p. 1). Yet the book is really about “how” questions. The focus of the work is “conspiracism—a mental framework, a belief system, a worldview that leads people to look for conspiracies, to anticipate them, to link them into a grander overarching conspiracy” (p. 2). Konda’s explanation is that modern conspiracism dates back to the French Revolution; it developed in fits and starts during the nineteenth century, mostly in the United States, “gained a
permanent foothold in the public consciousness first as an anti-Semitic conspiracy, then as a global-Communist-new world order conspiracy" (p. 12), and went mainstream following the election of Barack Obama, especially after the 2016 presidential election. That is how it came to this.

Before returning to the “why,” we should talk about the “whether”: whether or not the “how” is true. Konda may be right, but, like the conspiracy theories he studies, it is often hard to tell. To be fair, the work is not a conspiracy theory; it is a just-so story. Konda draws on psychology, history, and conspiracist writings, but logics and counterlogics are not laid out or empirically assessed. One event jumps to another, culminating in the present. Religion, growth rates, social change, trust, technology, politics, immigration, and theoretical improvisation, all appear as stepping stones that cluster fortuitously in the river of time. But there is no clear measure of conspiracism, or any of the foregoing factors, to determine what is causing what. Polling data, official statistics, content analysis, television ratings, internet traffic, even Google Ngrams are astonishingly absent. If we cannot agree on the whether, the why will have to wait.

Yet the book succeeds anyway. True, it does not show that conspiracism is overrunning America, or why it waxes and wanes, or even that Americans are more prone to it, or that it is a major cause of democratic downfall. Yes, many concepts are ill defined and poorly tracked across time and space. Indeed, not all the facts are straight—for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt did not reject the Morgenthau Plan to deindustrialize Germany (p. 131), and the mid-1970s were not “the beginning of intellectual white supremacism” (p. 138). Nonetheless, in spite of all the biases and blind spots endemic to human creation, Konda’s panoramic book overflows with the weird and wondrous worlds of conspiracy theories and the people that love them.

If Konda’s claims are wrong, they are wrong for the right reasons. They curate a compelling set of factors and facts in ways that encourage young minds to take an interest and do a better job taming a tough topic. Who knows, they may even help stave off the apocalypse.

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God against the Revolution: The Loyalist Clergy’s Case against the American Revolution by Gregg L. Frazer. Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2018. 320 pp. $36.95.

Throughout the American Revolution, Loyalists prayed that God would save the King and bring an impious rebellion to an end. In this well-researched