

# **On the Trail of the Illuminati:**

## **A Journalist's Search for the “Conspiracy That Rules the World”**

by George Johnson

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*Many readers encounter the history and mythology of the Illuminati for the first time in the course of reading Angels & Demons. They typically wonder if the Illuminati is a real organization in history and, if so, how much of Dan Brown's description is accurate. To help answer that question, we turned to George Johnson, the well-known New York Times science writer. Johnson shares several interests with Dan Brown and fans of Angels & Demons: He has written extensively about the conflicts and confluences of science and religion (including contributing an essay on that topic elsewhere in this volume). He has written about quantum physics and antimatter. And, as it turns out, he has written a book that deals extensively with the Order of Illuminati, its history, and the uses of myths and legends about the strange organization by (mostly right-wing) modern conspiracy theorists. That book, Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics, was published in 1983 and remains a veritable gold mine of hard fact and analysis about the real history of the Illuminati. Even more important than the factual history presented by Johnson is his description of the vast web of myth that has grown*

*up around the Illuminati and similar organizations of the past and present and the negative political uses to which the myth is sometimes put.*

*For Secrets of Angels & Demons, Johnson wrote a mini-memoir of the experiences more than two decades ago which that drew him into the Illuminati, conspiracy theories, and political paranoia and its impact on American politics.*

Twenty years later, the boxes are still stacked in my shed, stuffed with pamphlets, newspapers, books, magazines, cassette tapes, even a few educational comic books, all describing in numbing detail the connections of a conspiracy as invisible and dense as the wiring on a computer chip. The writers of these tracts include anti-Communists, anti-Semites, anti-Catholics, anti-Protestants, anti-secular-humanists—so many things to be against! There are Christian fundamentalists who believe they, not the Jews, are God's chosen people, that America, not Palestine, is the promised land; there are British Israelites who insist that the people of England are the lost tribe of Israel; there are right-wing Catholics intent on overturning the Vatican II reforms; there is an Orthodox rabbi condemning Reform Judaism as the source of all modern evil.

What all these tracts have in common is the belief that the world is in such a mess because of a conspiracy. Never mind what you are told by the press. The events we see unfolding on the television news shows and across the pages of newspapers and magazines are stage-managed distractions, a shadow play for children, diversions to hide from us the true driving force of history: a centuries-old struggle for world control by a secret society called the Illuminati.

Egyptian sun worshipers and ancient Greek mystery cults; Gnostics, Cathars, Knights Templar, and other medieval heretics; mystical societies like the Spanish Alumbrados (the "enlightened

ones") and the German Rosicrucians; European Freemasons, the Communist party, the Federal Reserve, the World Bank, the Council on Foreign Relations, and, of course, the Trilateral Commission, a kind of Rotary Club of the extremely rich and powerful—all have served as "Illuminati fronts" in somebody's conspiracy theory. A picture is worth a thousand words and the symbol of this group—an eye hovering above a pyramid—says it all: a small elite of enlightened beings sits at the top of the heap, controlling all that happens below. They also control the money supply, hence the appearance of their emblem on the back of the one-dollar bill along with the Illuminati motto: *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. For that is the ultimate aim of the conspiracy: a new secular order.

I stumbled across the legend, recycled yet again in novelist Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons* (bits and pieces also appear in *The Da Vinci Code*), back in the early 1980s when I was working as a newspaper reporter in Minneapolis. A reader named Frank had been struck (for all the wrong reasons) by an article I had written, something about politics. He called and promised me the biggest scoop of my life.

So on a very slow day (anything to get out of the office), I drove to the western suburb where Frank lived by himself amid the acres of asphalt and shag carpeting that had replaced the cornfields. He invited me into his modestly furnished living room, offered me coffee, and then launched into an increasingly angry disquisition on the horrors of modern life: wars, famines, the rise of totalitarianism, drugs, crime, venereal disease, the gyrations of the stock market, inflation, interest rates, atheism—all were soaring beyond control. Then he posed his question:

*"Do you think all of this could be happening accidentally?"*

The answer was in the hard glare of his eyes. Impossible. There had to be a master plan. Someone was benefiting—the people at the top of the pyramid. The Illuminati. He asked me to pull a dollar

bill from my wallet and look at the back. Maybe he had a point. What was that weird shining eyeball doing there?

Frank turned out to be right in an unexpected way: this was the scoop of a lifetime. The story was not that everything was controlled by something called the Illuminati, but that, all over the world, people like Frank fervently believed that it was. Where did this strange story come from and why had I not heard it before?

I quit my job, moved into the library, and started my search.

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They probably didn't mention this in your high school history class, not (I'm pretty sure) because of a nefarious cover-up but because of the relative obscurity of the event: on the ninth of May in 1798, a prominent leader of New England's powerful Congregationalists, the Reverend Jedidiah Morse (father to Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph) stood at the pulpit of the New North Church in Boston and warned of a secret plot to destroy Christianity and overthrow the newly formed government of the United States. Religion would be replaced with atheism, faith in God with faith in human reason. The name of this seditious force, he declared, was the Order of the Illuminati. Hiding inside Masonic lodges—a secret society coiled inside a secret society—the conspirators were waiting for the perfect time to strike.

The reverend's suspicions had become aroused by a book that had just been published and was, in its day, as popular as a Dan Brown thriller is today. It was called, in the unwieldy manner of the time, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Freemasons, Illuminati and Reading Societies*, by John Robison, a

mathematician and professor of natural philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. As was clear from the title, he intended the book not as fiction but as an exposé. More accustomed to writing about scientific subjects (telescopes, magnetism) for publications like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the professor had recently been shaken to hear that a secret society called the Bavarian Illuminati had infiltrated the Masonic lodges in France and was responsible for fomenting the bloody French Revolution. Far from a popular uprising of oppressed countrymen, Robison had concluded, the revolution had been stage-managed by this group of puppeteers, conspirators bent on overthrowing the French monarchy and its ally, the Catholic Church. Having toppled this holy alliance, the ancien régime, the Illuminati were spreading across Europe and possibly beyond. Their ultimate aim was world domination.

Reverend Morse had picked up his copy of *Proofs of a Conspiracy* in a Philadelphia bookshop. Intently turning the pages, he read how the plot had been hatched some two decades earlier in Bavaria, a principality in southeastern Germany, by an atheistic young professor named Adam Weishaupt. Hyped up on the ideas of Enlightenment philosophy—the superiority of reason over religion; the equality of all men—his Order of the Illuminati tried to overthrow the Bavarian government. The revolution failed and the group was disbanded, or so the authorities believed. In fact it had survived underground, spreading like the flu through the Masonic lodges of Europe. That was the story, anyway. Robison was a Freemason himself—he considered it a harmless diversion, a social organization aimed at instilling the virtues of brotherhood and charity. He was shocked to read what had been happening on the Continent. Recently, he warned, the tentacles of the Illuminati had reached into lodges in England, Scotland, and even the United States.

That was enough for Reverend Morse, who immediately took to the pulpit to warn of "dark conspiracies of the Illuminati against civil government and Christianity" emanating from an "illuminated mother club in France." Everyone, he said, must read Robison. "We have reason to

tremble for the safety of our political, as well as our religious ark."

Late-eighteenth-century New England was a land ripe for paranoia. Since the fall of the Bastille in 1789, Americans had watched in wonder and then horror as the French Revolution, with its call for a "reign of reason"—fraternity, liberty, and equality—had given way to the Reign of Terror. In the churches, statues of the saints were toppled, replaced with depictions of atheist philosophers like Voltaire. Priests, noblemen, and other dissenters were dispatched to the guillotine.

Morse was terrified that the same sort of thing was about to happen in America. New England in those days had its own, milder form of church-state establishment: the Standing Order, consisting of Morse's Congregationalists, the upper-crust descendants of the Pilgrims, and their political allies, the Federalists. With Napoleon's armies now marching across Europe, President Adams, the leader of the Federalists, feared that the United States would soon be the target of a French-controlled insurrection, an attack from within. Rallying to the threat, Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, reining in civil rights. Jefferson's Democrats were eyed suspiciously as French sympathizers. Who knew? Maybe the Illuminati were behind the plan.

Even the wildest tales become easier to believe when they hit you from two different directions. Around the time Robison's book appeared, some local newspapers began excerpting the recently translated writings ("the ravings of a Bedlamite," Thomas Jefferson called them) of a French Jesuit, Abbé Barruel, who traced the Illuminati plot back to the medieval Cathars and Templars. Before long his four-volume book on the Illuminati conspiracy was translated into English. (President Adams's wife, Abigail, considered the work must reading, recommending it to friends.)

Actually, it turns out, Robison and Barruel were cribbing from the same sources, a mass of

pamphlets and articles that had been circulating in Germany and France, portraying the eighteenth century's various upheavals—political and ideological—as secret plots by a society of "illuminated" men. Whether this inner light was sparked by impious philosophy or, as some of the tracts argued, occult mystical powers, seemed unimportant. Either way it was a black light of pure evil.

It wasn't just the wackos who believed these things. In the midst of the hysteria, the president of Yale University, Timothy Dwight, warned the people of New Haven about the threat: Shall we, my brethren, become partakers of these sins? Shall we introduce them into our government, our schools, our families? Shall our sons become the disciples of Voltaire, and the dragoons of Marat; or our daughters the concubines of the Illuminati?" His brother, Theodore Dwight, suggested in a public speech that Jefferson himself might be an Illuminatus. Reverend Morse listed Thomas Paine as a coconspirator.

When he took to the pulpit the following year, he was ready to name names: "I have now in my possession complete and indubitable proof . . . an official, authenticated list of the names, ages, places of nativity, possessions, of the officers and members of a Society of *Illuminati* . . ."

It is impossible now to read these words without thinking of a later demagogue, the Red-baiting Senator Joe McCarthy, as he spoke in 1950 of another nefarious plot: "I have here in my hand a list of 205 members of the Communist party . . ."

Morse's evidence was as flimsy as McCarthy's: the names of some one hundred Virginians—mostly French immigrants—who belonged to a Masonic lodge with ties to one in France. Who knew what kind of radical ideas might be fermenting inside those walls? To Morse and other leaders of the Standing Order, the secular ideals of Enlightenment philosophy seemed as

threatening as Communism would 150 years later. And France, in the grip of an ideology, its armies marching across Europe, had all the makings of an evil empire.

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The human race has blundered on as long as it has because our brains have evolved into precision instruments for seeing order in the world, even when it isn't there. As I read about the New England Illuminati scare—the primary source is Vernon Stauffer's 1918 history, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati*—and about the confusing role of Freemasonry in the French Revolution, I felt the neuronal hum of ideas clicking together to form a structure. It's a seductive feeling—that everything is connected, that this mad, mad world can be embraced by a single theory of everything, a tight network of cause and effect with a prime mover in control . . . that there is a secret history in which everything you know turns out to be wrong.

Individually the facts check out. There was indeed a struggle in the eighteenth century between the Catholic Church and Freemasonry, whose secretive lodges served in those days as safe houses for gentlemen interested in new ideas—science, philosophy, politics, a cosmopolitan government, a secular society, a brotherhood of man extending across the boundaries of nations. Amid the claptrap of secret rituals and ceremonies, dangerous ideas were being entertained.

Some of these "free thinkers," as they were called, naturally became involved in the French Revolution. A few pursued more dubious interests: spiritualism, mesmerism, the cabala, alchemy. There was a thin line then between hardcore science and what we now dismiss as the occult. If all that seems hard to reconcile with Masonry today—conservative middle-aged businessmen raising money for charity and marching in patriotic parades—then remember: these were tumultuous times. The world was in upheaval, everything was up for grabs.



Whether or not, as legend has it, this unlikely consortium descended from traveling guilds of ancient stonecutters is a mystery. In any case *operative* masonry—the real kind, involving hammers and chisels and flying chips of rock—provided the inspiration for *speculative* Masonry: just as a rock can be shaped to fit sturdily within a wall so can a man be shaped into a better citizen, not just of the country but of the world.

Those who felt threatened by the phenomenon had no tools for understanding it, except as a conspiracy. Add in the spurious myths that Masons had concocted about themselves—that they inherited their traditions from the builders of the pyramids and biblical stonecutters, that their rituals have been protected for centuries by secret societies (this is where the Cathars, Templars, Rosicrucians, and so forth come in), and it all makes for a tantalizing tale. Each of these groups had, at one time or another, been branded by the church as heretics, dabblers in the occult; some had been dragged before the Inquisition. Spice up the tale with some of the Vatican propaganda that had been floating around for centuries and you had yourself a conspiracy theory: the history of the European Enlightenment stripped of its subtleties and contradictions, milled and hammered into rectilinear form.

Swept along by the intellectual free-for-all, an idealistic (and somewhat megalomaniacal) professor—the real Adam Weishaupt—started his Order of the Illuminati on May 1, 1776. (Conspiracy theorists just love this date: May Day, when the Communist Internationale is celebrated, grafted onto the birth year of the U.S.A.) Weishaupt wasn't the first to use the Illuminati name. Long before, a mystical society called the Alumbrados, (Spanish for "Illuminati") had been targets of the Inquisition. There is no evidence that the Bavarian order shared anything with the Spanish Alumbrados except the name. But to the paranoiacs, there had to be a connection.

Viewed from the twenty-first century, Weishaupt's aims sound noble enough: to smuggle philosophy books—Voltaire, Diderot, D'Alembert, Montesquieu—past the Jesuits who ran the Bavarian school system and to arm a generation of scholars intellectually against the repressiveness of a country paralyzed by dogma.

Weishaupt, however, was not the man for the job. It is human nature, perhaps, for one to take on the worst qualities of his enemies. The Jesuits, the soldiers of the Vatican, were known (partly through their actions and partly through Protestant propaganda) for their wiliness, as the pope's CIA. So ingrained is this image that the second definition of *jesuit* in *Merriam-Webster* is "one given to intrigue or equivocation." Maybe Weishaupt felt that he was up against so formidable an opponent that he had to fight it on its own terms. In any case, his first order of business was to invent an array of secret rituals and codes that gave his new Illuminati the appearance of a cult of reason. Members in the lowest ranks were not allowed to know even the identities of their fellow initiates, much less that of their highest superiors. They were required to spy on each other and write intelligence reports. (Sometimes Weishaupt comes off as an eighteenth-century Bavarian version of Lyndon LaRouche.)

This weird combination of scholarship and skullduggery apparently had an appeal. The more illustrious members included Goethe, the German poet and natural philosopher, and the author of *Faust*. The movement spread throughout universities and Masonic lodges in Germany and Austria, becoming influential enough to engender a high degree of paranoia among keepers of the status quo. It was not a violent revolution Weishaupt and his acolytes were hoping to foment, but an intellectual one. Thomas Jefferson probably had it right when he later wrote:

"As Weishaupt lived under the tyranny of a despot and priests, he knew that caution was

necessary even in spreading information, and the principles of pure morality . . . This has given an air of mystery to his views . . . and is the color for the ravings against him of Robison, Barruel, and Morse."

In the end, the church and the royalty easily triumphed. Responding to all kinds of fantastic accusations, the government quashed Weishaupt's order less than a decade after it was founded. The Illuminati conspiracy, such as it was, ended. And the Illuminati conspiracy theory had begun.

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I still remember the evening in 1982 when I drove my rental car to the Los Angeles suburb of Van Nuys to hear a talk called "Adam Weishaupt, a Human Devil." I'd finished the library research for my book and was now on a fact-finding mission in the land of paranoia, southern California. Outside the meeting room, people sat at card tables selling tracts about the great conspiracy: *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*, published in 1924; *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*, a classic of right-wing paranoia from the 1960s; a booklet called "The Cult of the All-Seeing Eye." There was even an edition for sale of Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, reprinted by the John Birch Society with a new introduction pointing out the parallels between the Illuminati and the Communist party.

For the next hour, the speaker, an electronics engineer for an aerospace company, laid out the twentieth-century version of the Illuminati legend. By now the tale had taken on a fundamentalist Christian flavor. The original Illuminatus was Lucifer himself—of course! the angel of light—and the mischief began in the Garden of Eden when Eve was tempted by the serpent and mankind fell from grace. From there the satanic plot was carried forth by the usual chain of cults, secret societies, and European philosophers, culminating in the Bavarian Illuminati staring at us

insolently from the back of our own dollar bills. Light, Lucifer, Enlightenment, Illuminati— the words rang with a sonorous resonance. Maybe the deepest of mysteries is how ideas and images, these *memes*, as some scientists now call them, take on a life of their own. We are just the vectors, disposable receptacles, brains equipped with arms and legs for spreading the infection around.

From Van Nuys I drove to Rancho Cucamonga—what a perfect name for this town!—where I met Alberto Rivera, a disturbed little man who claimed to be a former Jesuit priest. He had left the church in horror when he learned that it was actually controlled by the Illuminati. Now here was a curious twist: a legend started by paranoid priests had mutated into anti-Catholic propaganda. The conspiracy theory had come full circle. The details were all there in a lurid Christian comic book, *Alberto*, part of a series in which the Catholic Church, invented by Lucifer and descended from pagan worship, uses occult powers to secretly control the world. The Vatican had fomented the Bolshevik Revolution, it had recruited Hitler to exterminate the Jews.

This was all becoming drearily familiar by now, as was the version of the tale in which the Jews are the Illuminati, with the plan for world domination laid out in *The Protocols of the Meetings of the Elders of Zion*. Was the Christian ecumenical movement a Catholic-Illuminati plot to subsume Protestantism (Alberto Rivera again) or a Protestant-Illuminati plot to undermine Catholicism (as in *Conspiracy Against God and Man* by Father Clarence Kelly)? Take your pick. I'd read in *The Occult and the Third Reich*, by the pseudonymous Jean-Michel Angebert, how the Nazis were an Illuminati front and, in *To Eliminate the Opiate* by Rabbi Marvin S. Antelman, how the Illuminati were Reform Jews.

Everyone was part of the conspiracy.

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It turns out that there is a perfectly innocuous reason for the staring pyramid on the dollar bill. The very same symbol appears on the back of the Great Seal of the United States, as adopted by the Continental Congress in 1782. (On the front is the familiar eagle with *E Pluribus Unum* dangling from its beak.) Egyptology was all the rage back then—a pyramid already appeared on the Continental fifty-dollar bill. When he designed the Great Seal, Charles Thomson adopted a similar image to signify strength and duration. The eye, he explained, was that of Providence, looking benevolently over the new nation. *Novus ordo seclorum* is Latin for "a new order of the ages," referring, Thomson said, to "the new American era."

A century and a half later, Henry Wallace, a member of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's cabinet, suggested (with a bit of a stretch) that the motto could also be taken to mean "the New Deal." Roosevelt liked the idea and had the whole seal, front and back, emblazoned on the dollar.

As it happens, Masons do count both FDR and Wallace among their illustrious past members, along with George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Monroe, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, Warren G. Harding, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford—and for that matter Davy Crockett, Buffalo Bill, Douglas Fairbanks, and John Wayne.

Such are the coincidences that serve as the glue for conspiracy theories—and for Dan Brown thrillers. Other novelists have also cashed in on the myth: Robert Anton Wilson in his whimsical *Illuminatus!* trilogy and Umberto Eco in his intellectual bestseller *Foucault's Pendulum*. Both works were written tongue in cheek, with a high sense of irony. With his more low-brow approach, Brown has brought the Illuminati thoroughly into the mainstream. Like the good Reverend Morse, we live in paranoid times.

In concocting his version, Brown takes even greater leaps than John Robison and Abbé Barruel. The most illustrious Illuminatus in *Angels & Demons*, Galileo, had, in fact, been dead for 134 years when the Bavarian order began. There are other possible connections. During Galileo's lifetime, Alumbrados were skulking around. Like the fictional Illuminati in the novel, they were indeed enemies of the Vatican. But their brand of mystical illumination would hardly have appealed to a scientist.

If I wanted to weave Galileo into a conspiracy theory, I think I would make him a Rosicrucian. In *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, the Renaissance scholar Frances Yates speculated that this secret society, similar to the Masons in its grab bag of beliefs, was a precursor to the Royal Society, which was to emerge as the most prestigious scientific organization in the world.

Then I'd connect the Rosicrucians to the Alumbrados and the Alumbrados to the Illuminati. The whole structure is lying there waiting to be twisted like a pretzel into all kinds of fantastic shapes.

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When my book, *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics*, was published in 1984 it made barely a ripple in the infosphere, selling some three thousand copies before disappearing from the face of the earth. During a call-in radio show in Los Angeles, a member of the John Birch Society (Gary Allen, the guy who wrote *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*) told me I was a purveyor of "accident theory"—the naive belief that sometimes things just happen, that there is a fair amount of randomness in life. After winning a minor literary award, I'd pretty much forgotten about the book until a few years later when it was

translated into Japanese.

I suspected something was wrong the moment I saw the cover: The legendary eye in the pyramid looking sternly, ominously, not at all providentially, out over the skyline of Wall Street, with a flurry of American dollars spreading everywhere. On the back was a photograph of a very nerdy Japanese man wearing a beret and large-framed glasses. Who was this person and what had he done to my book?

By then I was living in New York and working for the *New York Times*. Drawing on a colleague's advice, I hired a Japanese music student at Juilliard to translate the translation. The title was now *The World of Illuminati That Exceeds That of the Jews*. The subtitle: *The Power Organization That Rules the World*. On the bottom of the cover were the words "The Top Conspiracy Organization Revealed for the First Time. What Is the Illuminati!? And What About Japan?"

In a new forward, the man in the beret had put forth his own conspiracy theory, a complex tale in which the Illuminati plotted World War II as part of a plan to subvert his country's economy. "In spite of the author's zealous protests," he wrote, "I am inclined to believe that Illuminati have the power to control the Western society as one great intellectual, economic, and political power." A translator's afterward suggests that my book may actually be Illuminati disinformation—part of a conspiracy to deny the conspiracy.

With some legal help, I was eventually able to get the book removed from the marketplace. I learned that this transmogrified version had sold far more copies than the original American edition. Promoting conspiracy theories turns out to be much more profitable than debunking them, another reason this mania will never go away.

