

Wilson, Robert Anton

Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007) was an American writer, known for the *Illuminatus!* Trilogy (1975, co-written with Robert Shea) and the autobiographical *Cosmic Trigger* (1977). He had a considerable influence upon the popularisation of "invented" religions, conspiracy theories, and Chaos Magick. Wilson was involved in early Discordianism, a satirical religion invented in 1957 by Greg Hill and Kerry Thornley, two Californian high school friends. It was based upon light-hearted worship of Eris, the Goddess of Chaos, and the philosophical position that all order is illusory, and salvation lies in embracing chaos and silliness. Discordianism developed largely through correspondence with a slowly expanding circle of smart, young, (mostly) white, male atheists, including Wilson. The material developed was compiled by Hill and published as the *Principia Discordia* in 1969. Wilson's contributions included some conspiracist material on the Bavarian Illuminati, references to writers HP Lovecraft and James Joyce, and the "23 Enigma", which states that once you are aware of it, you will start to see the number twenty-three everywhere.

Discordianism provided many of the characters and themes of *Illuminatus!*, which Wilson was writing at the time with Robert Shea. While working as associate editors for Playboy, the two became fascinated by the many letters the magazine received spinning elaborate conspiratorial narratives concerning the Illuminati, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Vatican and the Kennedys. Wilson soon realised that a surprising amount of the claims were based in fact, but that it was difficult to tell which ones, making these narratives a synecdoche of his concerns with information, power, and reality. As such, they mixed well with the similarly ambiguous Discordian stance on reality and truth, and Wilson wove them and the *Principia* together to produce the complex apocalyptic narrative of *Illuminatus!*

Discordianism was also important for *Cosmic Trigger*, published two years later. The book is primarily an account of a period between July 1973 and October 1974 when Wilson experienced what appeared to be communications from the Sirius star-system. He discovered that psychedelic psychologist Timothy Leary and sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick had recently had similar experiences. *Cosmic Trigger* fires off comparisons and explanatory frameworks from conspiracy theories, hallucinogens, Aleister Crowley's magick and evolutionary psychology. Discordianism (here presented without fictional trappings) gives him a framework by which epistemic positions - or "reality tunnels" - are not absolute and necessary, but multiple, mutable, relative and optional, a position Wilson calls "model agnosticism".

The book also elaborates upon the 23 Enigma. In *Cosmic Trigger*, Wilson explains that the point is to demonstrate how our preconceptions affect the "reality" we experience, and how easily this can be "hacked". There is nothing special about the number itself, but if we choose to believe there is, then it seems to behave as though there is. As with his writing on conspiracy theories, however, many would take the 23 Enigma literally, and it would later inspire the 2007 Joel Schumacher thriller, *The Number 23*, starring Jim Carrey.

Through the 1980s and 90s, Wilson produced a string of sequels and spin-offs from *Illuminatus!* and *Cosmic Trigger* with mixed success. *Prometheus Rising* (1983), *Sex, Drugs and Magick* (1989) and *Everything is Under Control* (1998) further develop his ideas on evolutionary psychology, Crowleyan Magick and conspiracy theories respectively. Wilson also had a close association with the Discordian-inspired Church of the Sub-Genius, with some claiming he was the inspiration for the central figure of J. R. "Bob" Dobbs. Wilson suffered from post-Polio Syndrome, and his productivity declined rapidly along with his health in the late 1990s. A social media campaign in 2006 raised enough to cover his healthcare until his death in January, 2007.

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