



Who to Trust?

Christian Belief in Conspiracy Theories



ISBN 9780645067156

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Version 1.0; 19 September 2022.

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ISCAST. "Who to Trust? Christian Belief in Conspiracy Theories." ISCAST Discussion Papers, September 19, 2022. <https://iscast.org/conspiracy>.

There may be updates to this document on our project homepage:

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Foreword

Revd. Dr Chris Mulherin (ISCAST Executive Director)

ISCAST's tagline is **Christianity. Science. In conversation.** We are committed to engaging people in constructive conversation between Christian faith and the sciences. We do that in numerous ways, ranging from speaking to school students through to an academic journal.

However, for a number of years we have talked about the importance of helping Christians and others to think carefully about issues close to ISCAST's heart. In the ISCAST spirit of promoting conversation, our goal is not to tell people what to believe or to lobby for a particular position. Rather, our hope is to produce resources that will allow people to understand the issues. Too often, people find themselves either toeing a party line or entering a discussion without having considered the issues properly or fairly. So, this first "ISCAST Discussion Paper," which focusses on conspiracy theories, aims to help people grapple with an important cultural issue that often occurs at the meeting point of discussions about truth, faith, and science.

For the Christian, pursuing the truth in love—whether in science, in relationships, or supremely in following the one who is the truth—should be central to faithful living. For the Christian, weighing all things and retaining the good is a biblical maxim. Conspiracy theories are not only ubiquitous and often attractive; many are destructive, often leading people to believe falsehoods which destroy relationships and the fabric of civil public discourse. This paper will help Christians navigate the complexities of a world where truth seems to be the result of market manipulation and where fake truth is rife.

This document represents a *tour de force* by a group of volunteers coordinated by Nigel Chapman. On behalf of the staff and Board of ISCAST, I congratulate Nigel and his team of volunteers for an exceptional document. Thank you so much for producing a document that should be read by church leaders and all Christians who ask themselves—in sophisticated or in straightforward ways—*Who to trust?*

Summary

Conspiracy theories are universal. But some political trends have raised their profile in recent years, especially populism and political polarisation. **II: §2–3**

Conspiracies happen, so we can't just dismiss them. But those that have been exposed have not been global conspiracies, but rather crime and corruption. They have been uncovered by mainstream institutions like journalism and the courts, not conspiracy theorists. **I: §3.b**

Conspiracy theories are enormously varied, but frequently share distinctive kinds of reasoning. They prefer fringe sources to 'mainstream' sources; favouring the "speculative, contrarian, esoteric, and amateur" (Cassam). They seek truth, but not in a general way; they are looking specifically for mainstream lies. They seek to confirm a counter-theory, but not always to test or critique it. They propose enemies who are necessarily vague and remote; which excuses poor or incomplete evidence. **I: §1.b**

Many factors predict or motivate belief in conspiracy theories: anxiety, pattern-seeking, marginality, alienation, and believing in other conspiracies. But while trends matter for policy and leadership, they are difficult to apply to individual people or ideas. **I: §3.d**

Conspiracy theories cause problems in relationships and in society:

- Building isolation, paranoia, anxiety, or depression in some individuals. **I: §3.d**
- Splitting friends, families, churches, and communities by advocating for conspiracy theories in disruptive ways. **I: §1, III: §3–4**
- Undermining public institutions through cynicism and mistrust: democracy, scholarship, public health, journalism, the courts. **II: §1**

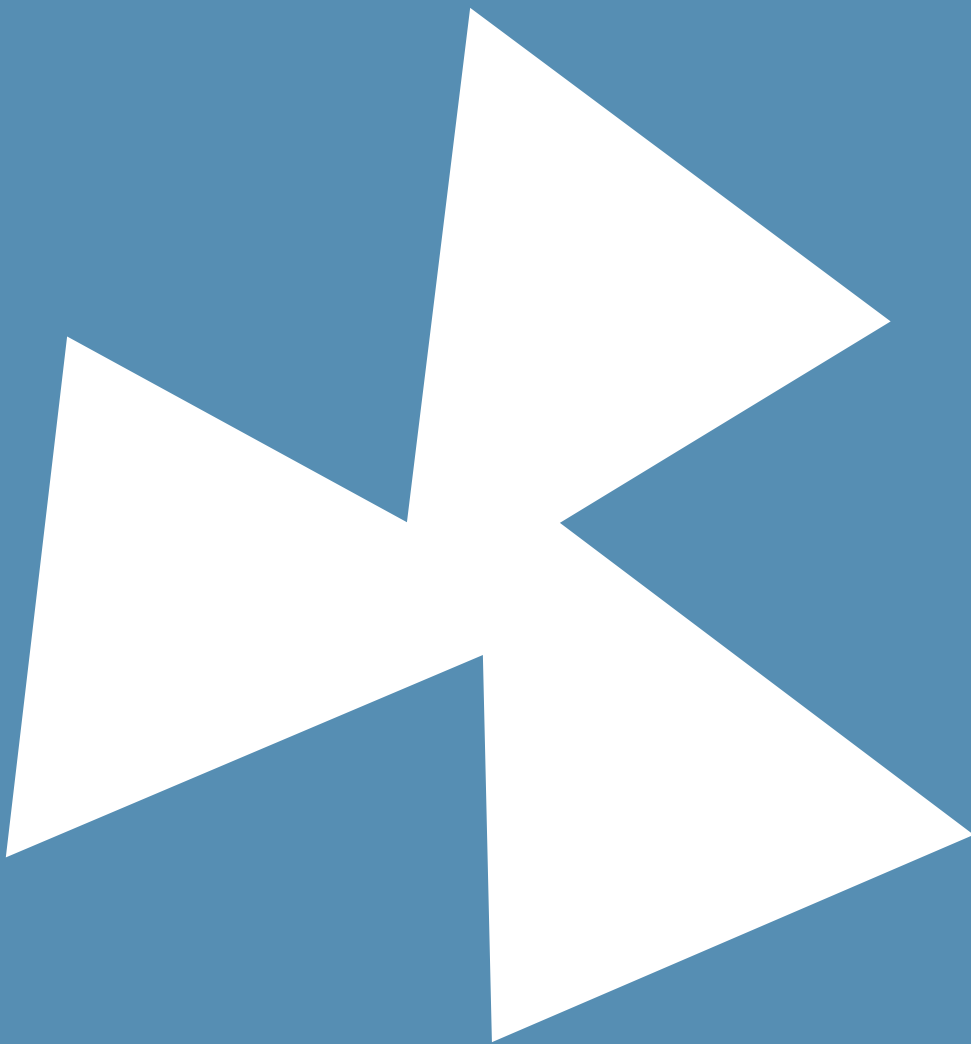
Christians should guard against these disruptive behaviours, especially false or careless accusations (slander), strife and partiality, or angry judgements and insults. Most of these are sins under any normal Christian understanding. We must be reasonable and persuasive, find agreement, and patiently bear with each other in our disagreements. **III: §3–4**

We can take immediate and practical steps to limit the problems that conspiracy theories can cause in churches and communities.

- A Christian conspiracy theorist should understand themselves to be seeking truth and justice; this is common ground to build upon. **III: §1**
- Everyone believes some conspiracy theories and rejects others. We should ask, not assume, what confidence a person gives to different conspiracy ideas. **I: §2.c**
- Christians can be prone to conspiracism through specific biblical ideas, historical suspicions of expertise and authority, and concerns for the loss of social influence or political power. These concerns can be addressed directly. **I: §4, II: §5**
- Inoculation is better than cure. We can guard against both common bad ideas and common bad behaviours. We should understand conspiracism, cognitive biases, and disinformation. We should train Christians to hear diverse views; have good conversations; debate ideas; hear from Christians who work as experts or authorities in public life; demand consistent democratic values in public life; and have the emotional maturity to be generous in spirit toward their opponents. **IV: §2–4**

Intro

A quick orientation



**O God, you have bound us together
in a common life.
Help us, in the midst of our struggles
for justice and truth,
to confront one another without
hatred or bitterness,
and to work together with mutual
forbearance and respect;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

(The Book of Common Prayer, 2007)



We invite critiques or suggestions for future improvements.

1. An ISCAST discussion paper

ISCAST is an Australian network interested in the interface of science, technology, and Christian faith (iscast.org). Members range from students to distinguished academics.

In mid-2021, one of our regular seminars addressed Christian belief in conspiracy theories, especially in light of the COVID19 pandemic. These have caused problems in our professional lives, in our various Christian and church commitments, and among our neighbours, friends, and families. There was sufficient interest in the subject that we formed a working group of about twenty people and spent a few months reading up on the literature. A list of participants may be found in the Credits at the end of the paper.

Interest and publishing on this subject has sharply escalated in the past five years. As a group of spare-time volunteers, we have not aimed to cover every possible topic or every relevant paper, and will certainly not be trying to summarise all of it. Rather, we have asked ourselves what of this material we have found helpful. What do we think would be useful to Christians, Christian leaders, and Christian knowledge professionals? We assume that, like us, they want to understand the phenomenon, and to address the concerns of those involved, the concerns about those involved, and the disruption to relationships and communities that they may see occurring.

We divided ourselves into four groups, each of which examined a particular topic area, although the focus of Group Two took an entirely different form by the project's end. Selected sources will be given at the end of each section for anyone wishing to follow up on details.

- I. **Theory.** How does recent research help us to understand conspiracy theories?
- II. **Politics.** How does recent research on populism and polarisation help us to understand political conspiracy theories?

We'll then use a modern anti-vaccination conspiracy theory as an exercise in applying the ideas from Parts One and Two, before shifting to ethical and practical questions.

- III. **Ethics.** How should Christians behave when discussing conspiracy theories, whether for or against?
- IV. **People.** How should Christians respond to conspiracy theories in our professional and personal relationships?

We'll then boil down what we've learned in Parts Three and Four into a set of conversational ideas: "Where to start and what to ask."

Similar projects to ours have addressed the particular needs of teachers and librarians, though they have been the work of academics and professional organisations rather than volunteers (Beene 2020; Hayward 2021). This and other early reading helped shape the conventions that we thought would suit a project of this kind:

- We'll provide an outline at the start of each section, organised around the questions we think will most concern readers.
- We'll try as much as possible to put our readers in direct contact with what we've found to be the most useful sources. Most sections will consist of outlines, quotations and summaries. As a consequence, each section should largely stand on its own, and you can go straight to the parts that interest you.
- We'll aim for a senior high-school reading level (the final text is under 12 on the Flesch-Kinkaid score), though many quotes will be much higher.
- We'll try to provide some substantial ideas in each topic we address; so there will be a lot of material. The four major quarters of the paper might each best be read in a single sitting.
- We won't be quoting individual academic studies, for the most part, unless they raise especially thought-provoking questions or ideas. We are not specialists in these fields, and won't be able to assess them relative to the whole body of literature in each field. We'll try to rely on the summary work of people who can.
- We'll occasionally offer our opinions or thoughts based on our reading.

2. A quick orientation

It is contested whether conspiracy theories are more common now than they were in the past. They may just be more visible because of the media and the internet. However, they are associated with polarisation and populism, and these trends have recently increased in western countries. Polarisation says that our problems are caused by enemies, and tends to share conspiracy theories about those enemies. This makes it harder to find agreement with people of opposing views, to tolerate them or to work together, and strife or division follows in churches and communities. Populism also says our problems are caused by enemies, but it identifies them as elite groups that are working against ordinary people. This is also fertile ground for conspiracy theories about powerful strangers. In modern populism the elites include authorities and experts, who are seen to have compromised the institutional pillars of our democracies.

We can't say categorically that a conspiracy theory is false just because it is a conspiracy theory, nor that it is automatically wrong to believe in one. Some conspiracy theories are similar to real conspiracies that have been publicly exposed. However, we can say that conspiracy theories have distinctive styles of reasoning that keep them from seeming persuasive to outsiders. If a Christian is to argue a particular theory, and wishes to persuade anyone about it, they must be alert to a range of such problems.

We also can't say categorically that conspiracy theory adherents are bad or stupid. An individual may have real concerns for truth and justice. However, involvement in conspiracy theories produces reliably bad behaviour a certain amount of the time. It is these behaviours, much more than the conspiracy theories themselves, that disrupt churches and

communities. Again, if Christians wish to advocate for conspiratorial beliefs, then they must not fall into these behaviours, which are sins. And neither, of course, should those who disagree with them.

It is important then to ask *how* Christians should pursue conspiracy theories. We must assume that many of us will. But how can we seek truth and justice on the one hand, and avoid the traps and pitfalls on the other? And how can churches maintain faithful community in the face of disagreements about supposed conspiracies?

It is more effective and much easier to inoculate people against conspiracy theories than it is to try and change people's minds about them afterward. We think that in Christian circles this likely applies to the behavioural concerns as well. In churches we ought to emphasise the Christian ethics that oppose these behaviours; it will then be easier to say exactly what the problems are if strife ensues. And we should expect Christians to take responsibility for understanding and communicating with people of different views. What is the business of churches, if not understanding people well enough to talk with them?

Inoculation should especially focus on the polarisation and populism that drive political conspiracy theories. To reduce polarisation in congregations, Christians need to hear from, and get to question, Christians of opposing political or social views. Or better yet, to hear good representatives of opposing views debate relevant issues in front of them, and do so with civility and respect. This puts a human face on people who might otherwise be painted as enemies, and creates the expectation that their views should be understood. To reduce populism in congregations, Christians need to hear from, and get to question, Christians in roles of public authority and expertise. Especially those who work in science, government, policy, journalism, academia, medicine, and related fields. Then these won't be strange or unknown fields about which conspiracy theories can so easily spring up. And when they do, this will mean that people know some Christians with experience of those areas, with whom they might check conspiratorial claims.

Conversations about conspiracy theories are notoriously difficult. We will reduce parts One and Two to a set of analytical questions and apply them to an anti-vaccine conspiracy theory, then reduce Parts Three and Four to a list of questions that we suggest might be useful in conversations.



What is the business of churches, if not understanding people well enough to talk with them?

Notes

Quotations from any sources may have citations removed and paragraphs combined for readability. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

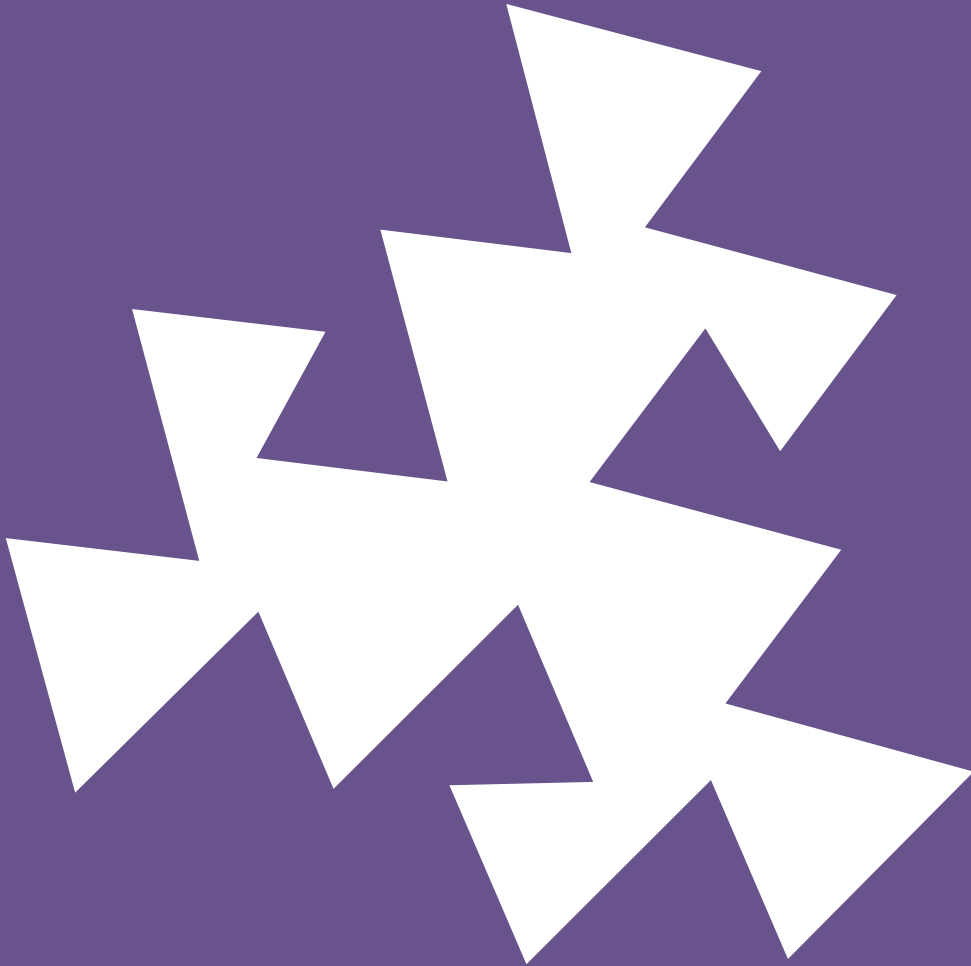
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PART I

Theory

How does current research help us understand conspiracy theories?



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After reading this section you should be able to:

- Describe some problems that conspiracy theories can cause.
- Define conspiracy-related terms and use them in non-prejudicial ways.
- Discuss conspiracism as a social phenomenon.
- Discuss the ways in which Christians can be prone to conspiracism.



We invite critiques or suggestions for future improvements.

I lead a network of 20,000 religious leaders, and what I'm hearing is that everybody is grappling either with how to talk to their congregants about QAnon or to help their congregants talk to friends and family members. A lot of people are very distraught at seeing family members and the country get pulled into this.

**Jennifer Butler, CEO of Faith in Public Life
(Gilbert 2021)**

1. What problems can conspiracy theories cause?

Conspiracies happen, and theories about them cause problems. Not all the time, in either case, but often enough for it to matter. This should be common ground for anyone discussing these issues. People opposing conspiracy theories must remember the first point and be respectful; it means they can't reject conspiracies, or theorists, out of hand. People supporting them must remember the second point; it means they mustn't cause these problems themselves if they wish to persuade others.

We can't blame all conspiracy theories, or theorists, for the problems caused by extreme views. Conspiracism is diverse and disparate, and conspiracy theorists, more than anybody, will tell you that there are plenty of conspiracy theories they reject and with which they resent being associated. When we discuss problems caused by conspiracy theories, we should not assume that they only or purely have negative effects. Positive effects have been argued by academics:

... conspiracy theories may provide a sense of community for people with marginal views. They may also open up opportunities for political debate, increase accountability, encourage greater transparency and inspire people to mobilize toward collective goals with the intention to bring about social change. Some scholars view conspiracy theories as a result of people's attempts to understand social and political reality, and therefore as an important ingredient of democratic discourse. (Douglas 2021, p.1)

For example, Republican conspiracy theorists were more critical than other Republicans of the weapons-of-mass-destruction narrative that justified the invasion of Iraq, and their suspicions were ultimately seen to be justified (ibid).

Conspiracy theories that affect society at large, or public policy, will be considered at the start of Part Two, on political conspiracy theories. In Part One, we will principally consider their effects on individuals and relationships.

Conspiracy theories disrupt relationships

The contributors to this paper have all experienced tensions over conspiracy theories in families, churches, professional networks, or wider groups. The effect on personal relationships is the most deeply felt. As Kasey Edwards wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2020:

It's as if the person I have known and loved all my life has gone, fallen so far down a rabbit hole that there's little hope of ever finding their way out. And the further they fall, the more lonely they become. All relationships are re-assessed on agreeing to a world view, no matter how warped. Family members are given veiled ultimatums to agree or be excommunicated. Friendships, some decades-long, are abandoned when people can't accept "the truth."



It's as if the person I have known and loved all my life has gone, fallen so far down a rabbit hole that there's little hope of ever finding their way out.

The sense of having *lost* friends and relatives to conspiracy theories is common. They are only sometimes presented as ideas on which people might reasonably differ, or which might require diligent persuasion. In 2021 the Washington Post related the story of a mother, Claire, and her two adult daughters, Celina and Laurie (Real 2021). Claire had “cut the cord on the mainstream media” some years before, and begun posting conspiratorial content up to and including to the ‘stolen election’ theories of 2020.

And so on one Saturday in February, Celina meticulously assembled a spreadsheet of every court case filed by former president Trump and his allies to contest the 2020 election. From her home outside Baltimore, she coded by date, state, case number and outcome. She analyzed how many lawsuits had been won, lost or dismissed and on what grounds. She broke down whether the presiding judges had been appointed by Democrats or Republicans.

Celina, 50, was not overly hopeful. She knew that her mom no longer trusted the mainstream media to tell the truth, nor the country’s democratic institutions to adjudicate an election she was certain had been stolen. It was her anti-Trump children, Claire Ryan contended, who were brainwashed.

Nevertheless, Celina gathered her spreadsheet and her notes and emailed them to Claire, 71, who lived in Maine with Celina’s stepfather. She had to know whom her mother trusted more: her own children, or strangers on the Internet.

In reply she received a two hour video of Mike Lindell, CEO of My Pillow, expressing further conspiracy ideas.

... It repackaged claims that had already been disproved by the media and dismissed by the courts, which was spelled out in the exhaustive set of court filings and links Celina had sent her mom.

“Your response was to find some idiot’s video ... and think that somehow that proves your point,” she wrote back. “I gave up my weekend to make sure you had access to see what real evidence and research looks like, and you somehow think a video is ... what? Evidence? Proof?”

What Celina wrote as a closing rebuke: “You used to be smarter than this.”

What Celina had been thinking for months now but could not find a way to say: “I want my mom back. I’m terrified for her.”

Her other daughter, Laurie, a doctor, had had a similar exchange with her about “abortion cells” in vaccines.

... Laurie had lost their argument before it even started. She felt as though the facts did not matter, like her expertise as a physician did not matter. Truth was a process born of trust, and maybe that was what was missing between them now. She had diagnosed the problem. She could not treat it.

Another time, it was a white supremacist leader whose videos Claire was passing on.

Laurie thought about the doting grandmother Claire was, how she would patch jeans and sew masks, how she'd digress from political arguments over text to share pictures of a new haircut. She struggled to reconcile the dichotomy.

And so the discussion continued:

Claire. Do you think you have the right to control my vote and to completely lambast me over it. It is sickening to me. If you want to be an MSM cheerleader not knowing or caring how much they have been [bought] then you go ahead

Laurie. I don't care that you voted trump, I think it's sad that you can't accept he lost. ... I can't say no fraud at all took place, but nowhere near on the scale of hundreds of thousands of votes it would take to overturn it

Claire. Millions, not thousands.

Laurie. Why is this important enough to compromise your relationships with your kids? Why does he mean more to you than us?

In 2020, the BBC quoted the son a prominent British conspiracist:

Sebastian Shemirani got in touch because of his fears about his mother's impact on public health — and their relationship. Sebastian's mum Kate Shemirani has collected tens of thousands of followers with false claims - including denying coronavirus exists, blaming the symptoms of Covid-19 on 5G radio waves and likening the NHS to Nazi Germany. She's spoken to crowds of thousands at protests in London. "This is her five minutes of fame and when this is over, people will forget about it," Sebastian told me. "But you know the disaster that goes on within my family and the relationships that she's losing now – that stuff stays forever." In response to her son's interview at the time, Kate Shemirani told us: "From what I can see it would appear ... a 'conspiracy theorist' is actually now anyone who believes something other than what your controllers want them to believe. I find this deeply disturbing."

A common analogy used in these discussions is the sense that their friend or relative has joined a cult. This appears both in popular language, and in some aspects of the study of conspiracy theories in religion. In *QAnon and On* (2021, ch.6), Van Badham tells a number of Australian QAnon stories with similar themes...

Together again, Meshelle and Dave joined a community yoga class, and it was here she had her second experience with a cult. When the couple who ran the classes split up, the yogi husband was left behind and, during the pandemic, went "full QAnon". Meshelle, Dave and the other students found themselves on the end of an increasing barrage of Facebook posts and other communications

insisting that rejecting the conspiracy theory was rejecting yoga itself. People in the class who knew a little of Meshelle's background came to her for advice. "They couldn't believe somebody that they respected had gone off the planet," she says. "They were really worried, and people were coming to me distraught; he was tearing strips off them." Meshelle stood up to the yogi on Facebook and tried to reach out to him privately. He repeated QAnon stories to her about paedophiles, kids in tunnels under New York City, and how "Hillary Clinton is actually in jail and that's a body double that's walking around". She realised there was no bringing him back when he started on the "f***ing lizard people". (Badham, 2021)

This carries over into church relationships. Lifeway Research surveyed a thousand U.S. Protestant pastors in 2020, of whom, 49% said they "frequently hear members of their congregation repeating conspiracy theories they have heard."



49% of U.S. Protestant pastors said they frequently hear members of their congregation repeating conspiracy theories they have heard."

2. Important terms and concepts

- **Conspiracy.** An agreement to engage in secret illegality or deception. From the Old French *con + spirare*, 'breathing together,' a picture of huddling and whispering. Technically, this might include surprise birthday parties or news reports about Santa Claus, but a *Conspiracy theory* will only be interested in conspiracies that are large and malevolent.

We define the term conspiracy as a secret arrangement between two or more powerful actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights or agreements, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government or other institutions. (Douglas 2019, p.4)

- **Conspiracy spectrum.** A tool for setting conspiracy beliefs on a scale, and ranking them by personal confidence in order to understand what is being claimed and how strongly it is believed.
- **Conspiracy theorist.** Someone who believes in, and may advocate for, one or more *Conspiracy theories*. The term is often used pejoratively or dismissively, as if all conspiratorial beliefs were of equally low plausibility. We will treat it neutrally, using this definition. If holding to *Conspiracism*, then also called a *Conspiracist*.

Conspiracy Theory (CT) endorsers believe in an omnipresent, malevolent, and highly coordinated group that wields secret influence for personal gain, and credit this group with the responsibility for many noteworthy events. (Moulding 2016)

- **Conspiracy theory.** The hypothesis of a generally unrecognised *Conspiracy*. Recognition may be assessed by the public or by those with expertise on relevant subjects, whose assessment may in turn be considered part of the conspiracy. The term may be used

pejoratively or dismissively. We will treat it neutrally according to this definition.

while a conspiracy refers to a true causal chain of actions and events, a conspiracy theory refers to an accusatory perception that may or may not be true. (Douglas 2019, p.5)

On the use of the term 'theory'. In science an hypothesis is an explanation that can be tested, and a theory is an explanation that has passed testing and is considered knowledge. But in wider society 'theory' is used to mean guesswork and speculation ("it's just a theory"). A conspiracy theory is never a scientific theory, since if it were considered knowledge we would just call it a conspiracy. It may sometimes be an hypothesis in the scientific sense – something provable – and will often claim this.

- **Conspiracism.** A general conspiracist mindset or worldview may cause some people to prefer conspiratorial explanations, other things being equal.

Another suggestion made more recently by scholars is that there may be such a thing as a conspiracy mindset. This general idea stems from the most robust finding in the literature to date - that people who already believe in particular conspiracy theories are likely to believe in others. In other words, the most reliable predictor of belief in conspiracy theories is belief in other conspiracy theories. (Douglas 2019, p.6)

- **Errant data.** Conspiracy theories skilfully appeal to missing or contradictory information in official accounts and explanations. Keeley (1999) argues that there will always be such discrepancies because data produced by real humans will contain at least some inconsistencies.
- **Fundamental Attribution Error.** Our minds are more naturally biased toward explanations from human dispositions rather than situational factors. The concept of a malevolent enemy is more appealing than a set of complex social causes, and everyone understands what it might mean to have enemies.

To give up a conspiracy theory in favor of a non-conspiratorial alternative is typically to abandon a dispositional explanation in favor of a situational explanation. But this involves overcoming the fundamental attribution error, which is to go against our cognitive instincts. (Clarke 2002, p.146)

- **Glocalisation.** As the term pertains to this subject, the adaptation of an existing conspiracy theory to a new national environment.

For example, the anti-Masonic and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that developed in Roman Catholic France two hundred years ago have been rebranded by the anti-federal

and anti-globalist “New World Order” theories of American right-wing circles, and have since been imported as far afield as Turkey and Japan, where they find new local uses and adaptations. The Satanism scare, partly a creation of American Evangelicals, developed into a global pandemic that reached South Africa, where it mutated in response to a new environment where racialised social divides created a new spin. (Dyrendal 2018, p.16)

- **Improvisation.** Conspiracy theories are highly adaptable, sometimes forming a ‘bricolage’ into which other similar ideas can be freely integrated or removed.
- **Knowledge vs. Narrative.** There is an academic divide between those who study *Conspiracy theories* as a set of truth claims, and those who study them as stories that themselves have social causes and effects within particular historical and social contexts. (Dyrendal 2018, p.27–35).

2.a. Mainstream and fringe

Karen Sorenson’s book *Fringe Rhetorics: Conspiracy Theories and the Paranormal* (2022) draws a consistently useful distinction between ‘the mainstream’ and ‘the fringe’. The way they interact captures many, though not all, of the important dynamics of Christian conspiracism in modern liberal democracies, and we will use this as a framing concept in this paper. We notice the following ways that the ‘fringe’ and the ‘mainstream’ appear in the material covered by this paper.

Neither the fringe nor the mainstream use these terms for themselves – at least not on the whole. On one side, the fringe defines the mainstream as the status quo or ‘normal’ society. It contains the government, the courts, the universities and public health, the news media (the ‘MSM’), entertainment and technology, business and industry, the institutions that guide public policy, religious and cultural leaders, and so on. It contains the elites who own and run these systems, the professional classes who make it all work, and the general public who live their lives here. The mainstream purports to have a reasonably coherent picture of the world through science, media, and the checks and balances of liberal democracy.

On the other side, it’s the mainstream that defines the fringe: they are the people who question or reject the mainstream. Fringe beliefs are enormously diverse and vary wildly between individuals, but they will band together when they need to fight their common enemies in the mainstream. They exploit the supposed consistency of the mainstream, picking holes in its account of the world, highlighting contradictions, and drawing unflattering conclusions. The fringe are seldom well connected with mainstream experts or authorities, and find it easy to mistrust them. But then neither are most people in the mainstream, and they cannot necessarily answer hard questions either.

The fringe mistrusts the mainstream and does not believe them. The mainstream thinks the fringe are cranks and ignores them unless

they appear to be doing something dangerous. Conspiracy theorists live on the fringe for the most part, along with others who are mildly or strongly rejected by the mainstream, like science deniers or militant nationalists. Even though the rhetoric of conspiracy theories is about open-mindedly following the evidence where it leads, the fringe is not looking for truth in a general or disinterested way. It is looking for the *lies* of the mainstream.

Colin Campbell's work on the 'cultic milieu,' which drew a similar distinction in the early 1970s, is cited repeatedly by authors in the *BRILL Handbook of Conspiracy Theories and Contemporary Religion* (2018).

The cultic milieu can be regarded as the cultural underground of society. Much broader, deeper and historically based than the contemporary movement known as the underground, it includes all deviant belief-systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs. Substantively it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure. This heterogeneous assortment of cultural items can be regarded despite its apparent diversity, as constituting a single entity—the entity of the cultic milieu. ... At the basis of the unifying tendencies is the fact that all these worlds share a common position as heterodox or deviant items in relation to the dominant cultural orthodoxies. This fact gives rise to a common consciousness of deviance and the need to justify their own views in the light of the expressed ridicule or hostility of the larger society. (Campbell 1972, p.122)

The ridicule and hostility are mutual. The mainstream thinks the fringe's ideas are automatically suspect, and the fringe thinks the same about the mainstream's ideas. It's the kooky versus the corrupt. Each side sees the other as ignorant and gullible, certainly deceived, and possibly wilful participants in their own deception. Each side thinks the other's ideas are not just wrong but potentially dangerous. They question whether somebody could hold those ideas honestly, or conscientiously, or responsibly, or in good faith.

This turns to insults: The mainstream sees the fringe as out of touch and in denial; like house cats – to borrow a libertarian insult – dependent upon a system that they neither understand nor appreciate, and others maintain for them. The fringe see the mainstream as sheeplike, unthinking, uncritical followers, “drinking the kool-aid” of a mass delusion, too invested in ‘the system’ and ‘the narrative’ to live with courage or integrity. The fringe makes accusations against the mainstream; and not just the experts and authorities, but the followers too. The mainstream has ‘debunkers’ and others concerned with the dangerous effects of fringe ideas. The fringe interprets attack as confirmation and validation.

Through antagonism and misunderstanding the fringe and the mainstream struggle to talk or relate in constructive ways. This creates



all these worlds share a common position as heterodox or deviant items in relation to the dominant cultural orthodoxies.

issues for Christian churches, who can lean toward the mainstream or the fringe, but must, by their nature, be open to people from either.

2.b. Examples of conspiracy theories

Some historical conspiracy theories are common reference points for the discussion of modern conspiracies.

Ten classics

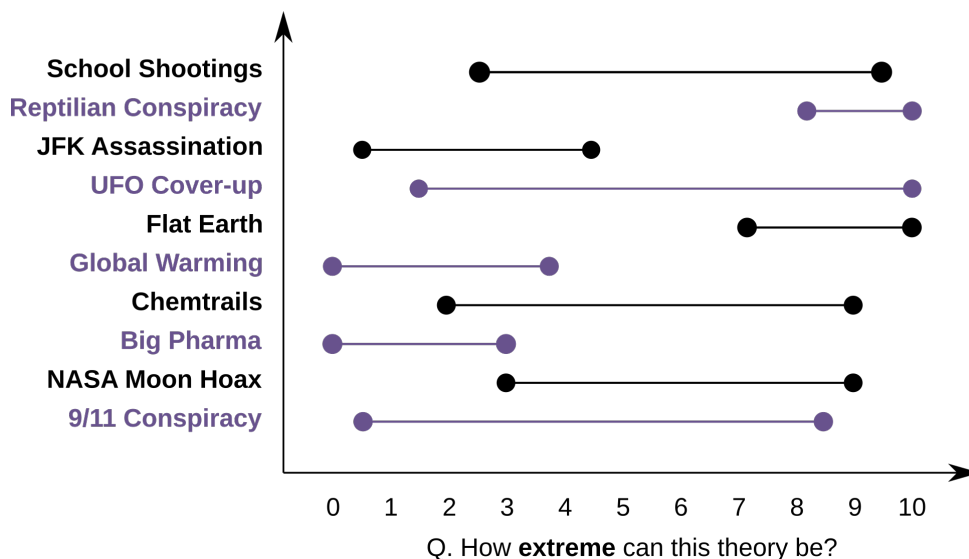
In *Escaping the Rabbit Hole* (2018, ch.2), Mick West provides a list of ten conspiracy theories that have had a significant online presence in the time he has been running conspiracy-debunking websites. We will quote his one-line summaries, but give them the same titles and order as they appear in the diagrams below.

- *School Shootings*. The theory that shootings like Sandy Hook and Las Vegas [or other supposed false-flags] either never happened or were arranged by people in power
- *Reptilian Conspiracy*. The theory that the ruling classes are a race of shape-shifting trans-dimensional reptiles
- *JFK Assassination*. The theory that people in addition to Lee Harvey Oswald were involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy
- *UFO Cover-Up*. The theory that the US government has contact with aliens or crashed alien crafts and is keeping it secret
- *Flat Earth*. The theory that the Earth is flat, but governments, business, and scientists all pretend it is a globe
- *Global Warming (as a hoax)*. The theory that climate change is not caused by man-made carbon emissions, and that there's some other motive for claiming this
- *Chemtrails*. The theory that the trails left behind aircraft are part of a secret spraying program
- *Big Pharma*. The theory that pharmaceutical companies conspire to maximize profit by selling drugs that people do not actually need
- *NASA Moon Hoax*. The theory that the Moon landings were faked in a movie studio
- *9/11 Conspiracy*. The theory that the events of 9/11 were arranged by elements within the US government

A current United States list would include stolen elections, the Deep State, and QAnon, while one for the western world generally would include the COVID19 pandemic. We will discuss 'classic' conspiracy theories in Part One as a precursor to discussing political conspiracy theories in Part Two.

2.c. Conspiracy spectrums

West then presents a conversational tool he calls a Conspiracy Spectrum. Suppose, he says, you were to make a chart that showed how *extreme* different conspiracy theories could be, resulting in a diagram like this:



Obviously, conversations will be more constructive if we know the particular ideas our friends or family are putting forward, and indeed how strongly they believe in each idea.

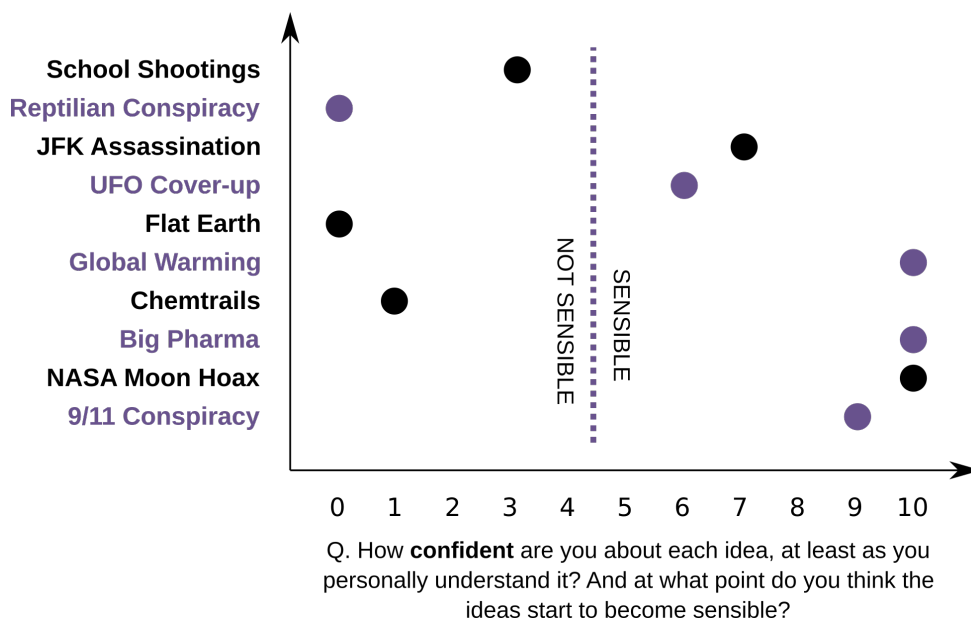
Each conspiracy theory has a range of values on this chart because they each contain a range of possible theories. For example, the 9/11 conspiracy may lead a person to say any of a broad range of ideas:

1. the US government was slack in investigating intelligence about the attacks,
2. it used the attacks as a pretext for the Iraq war,
3. it had intelligence about them but permitted or enabled them to go ahead,
4. it demolished all the buildings itself,
5. whatever else happened, no plane struck the Pentagon – a key point of difference among 9/11 truthers – or even,
6. the attacks never happened at all, but were created with computer graphics, and the towers quietly demolished a week later.

Low-level claims can have little in common with high-level claims even within the same general theory. Obviously, conversations will be more constructive if we know the particular ideas our friends or family are putting forward, and indeed how strongly they believe in each idea. This is where conspiracy spectrums come in.

We can use a similar graph to ask about a person's *confidence* in each idea, as they understand it. For any such set of conspiracy beliefs, including the range of ideas that exist within a single conspiracy theory, an individual can mark their confidence as a value between zero and ten. (West counts from one, but zero seems to us to better indicate complete disbelief.) They can then draw a vertical **demarcation line**, to show at

which point they believe the ideas become plausible or sensible. A conspiratorially minded individual might fill it out like this:



Using a spectrum of this kind offers many benefits for discussion:

- Two people having a conversation can do the same spectrum, add or remove statements depending on their interest, and compare their answers.
- It may become apparent that everyone involved believes at least some conspiracy theories, and doubts others. That creates common ground.
- It will be clear that individuals hold different ideas with surprisingly different degrees of conviction or seriousness. This keeps us from making wrong assumptions about what each other believes.
 - We should not assume someone believes in more or larger conspiracies than they actually do. They may think we're mocking or misrepresenting them, lumping them in with the crazies, or using more extreme ideas to discredit more sensible ones.
 - We should not assume that they believe in fewer or smaller conspiracies than they actually do, since big conspiracies will override small ones. There's no point discussing whether COVID has been merely exploited for commercial gain if a person thinks it was created as a bioweapon.
- Answers in the form of confidence values will tend to raise epistemological questions, that is, questions about how they justify these levels of confidence:
 - Why isn't this a 10 rather than a 9?
 - Why do you think this is more likely than that?
 - Can those both be equally high in confidence? (Don't they contradict each other?)

- What discoveries would make you more confident about this? Or less so?
- You're an 8 on this, but I'm only a 2. How could I get to being an 8?
- In West's experience, people accept most of what lies on the right (the sensible side) of their demarcation line, and not much on the left, so constructive conversations will most likely happen near the line, that is, where confidences and uncertainties are being balanced.

As part of this project we created an online tool for sharing conspiracy spectrums. It may help with determining what conspiratorial convictions your friends and family genuinely care about:

- eukras.github.io

3. Conspiracy theories in current research

The academic study of conspiracy theories has grown substantially in the last decade, and more-so since 2016, when conspiracy theories gained a higher profile in the United States through their use by the Trump campaign and Presidency.

In 2009, I submitted my undergraduate thesis on conspiracy theories in the New Age milieu at the University of Edinburgh. I was then aware of only one other scholar looking at religion and conspiracy theories seriously – Michael Barkun – and he came from political studies rather than a Religious Studies angle. (Robertson 2017)

The best one-stop resource is *Understanding Conspiracy Theories* (Douglas 2019), a condensed overview of research written by leading academics that can readily be found online without requiring journal access. Douglas and some of her co-authors are affiliated with COMPACT, the *Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories In Europe* project, which maintains a large and up-to-date online bibliography of research publications. Scholars involved in COMPACT are featured in the Anthill Podcast series *The Expert Guide to Conspiracy Theories* (Anthill 2020) which provides an accessible introduction to the field in six podcast episodes. We recommend these resources as starting points.

3.a. What kinds of conspiracy theories are there?

- Categorising by interest
- Categorising by scale
- Categorising by topic
- Categorising in relation to modernism

- Categorising by possible risk

Categorising by interest

Hunemann and Vorms (2018) propose a “tentative typology” that highlights the diversity of conspiracy theories:

- *General vs specific*. Some are concerned with the whole world (New World Order), others only with a single event (JFK Assassination).
- *Scientific vs non-scientific*. Some oppose accepted scientific knowledge (“COVID is a hoax”) while others make no scientific judgements. Grimes (2016) gives the examples of the NASA moon landing, climate change, vaccination, and cancer cures as popular conspiracy theories about science. Hunemann and Vorms discuss at what point rational criticism crosses over into undue scepticism, and the extent to which the valid social criticism of science as a fallible human institution undermines its conclusions.
- *Ideological vs neutral*. Some are tied to particular understandings of the political and social world (Eurabia, Deep State, False Flags), while others have no such aspect.
- *Official vs anti-institutional*. Some are used by governments against marginal groups, others are used to oppose governments or public authorities.
- *Alternative explanations vs denials*. Some offer different interpretations of events (9/11 “controlled demolition”), others deny official accounts (“Global warming is a hoax”).

Categorising by scale

Michael Barkun (2003, ch.1) introduced a now widely used three-level schema for the scale and complexity of conspiracy beliefs:

- *Event conspiracy*. “The conspiracy is held to be responsible for a limited, discrete set of events.” Example: Watergate.
- *Systemic conspiracy*. The conspiracy “is believed to have broad goals, usually conceived as securing control over a country, a region, or even the entire world. While the goals are sweeping, the conspiratorial machinery is generally simple: a single, evil organisation implements a plan to infiltrate existing institutions.” Examples: Jews, Freemasons, Catholics, Communists, Illuminati, the Deep State.
- *Superconspiracy*. “Conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically.” Examples: The New World Order; Cultural Marxism (when understood as an international conspiracy).

The larger a purported conspiracy becomes, the more it “implies a universe governed by design rather than randomness” (Barkun 2003) in which:

- *Nothing happens by accident.* The world is coherent.
- *Nothing is as it seems.* The true reality is being hidden or disguised.
- *Everything is connected.* Patterns can be discovered, which will reveal the truth.

Categorising by topic

Robert Brotherton (2013) proposed a now-widely-used instrument for measuring conspiracy belief using the following ‘Big Five’ themes.

- *Government Malfeasance*, in which governments commit secret criminal and terrorist acts against their own citizens; [e.g. QAnon’s cannibalistic-pedophile elites; or governments exploiting COVID for tyranny]
- *Malevolent Global conspiracies*, which depict small global elites controlling important events; [e.g. the New World Order; Reptilians]
- *Personal Wellbeing*, concerned with the spread of diseases, suppressed cures, and tests of experimental technologies on an unaware public; [e.g. Anti-Vaccination conspiracies; Directed Energy Weapons; mind control]
- *Extra-Terrestrial Cover-ups*; [e.g. Area 51, UFOs]
- *Control of Information*, in which organisations (including governments) hide information from the public [e.g. Extraterrestrial cover-ups or suppressed medical cures; this often complements other theories]

Categorising by relation to modernism

In *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture* (2021, ch.3), the Dutch researcher Jaron Harambam summarises studies that categorise conspiracies by their use of **modern** or **postmodern paranoia**. From a Christian ethics perspective, we might add the pre-modern conspiracies that we find in Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and elsewhere (against monarchs), or in Esther (against a minority group).

- *Pre-modern conspiracy.* Secret plots exist, targeting monarchs or minorities.
- *Modern conspiracy.* Secret plots can be investigated and uncovered by members of the public, through evidence and analysis.
- *Post-modern conspiracy.* Large parts of public life are secretly weighted against citizens, so that it is reasonable to suspect that anything ‘mainstream’, ‘expert’, or ‘official’ is part of a deliberate deception.

Modern paranoia carries the message that our society or our government is threatened. The upheavals of the French Revolution were quickly blamed on secret societies such as the Illuminati. The American Declaration of Independence included conspiracy accusations against

King George III of England for plotting “absolute tyranny over these states,” and the expectation that officials will conspire to abuse their power, so that researchers have said “the United States was founded on a conspiracy theory.” As Jews gained legal equality in Europe through the 1800s, accusations developed that they used “their money, knowledge and influence to secretly rule the world.” The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* took this into the western mainstream in the early 1900s, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Arab countries today have imported and transformed the same ideas. The ‘Red Scare’ of the 1950s and 60s saw communists planted at the highest level of the United States government. Harambam called this ‘secure paranoia’, as it aims to draw a nation together against a supposedly foreign threat.

Given these characteristics of secure paranoia, of establishing order and stability in a chaotic world, and considering the underlying epistemology of mechanistic causality, I conceive of such conspiracy theories as utterly modern products. They all imply, after all, a course of history that is manmade, where every effect has an identifiable cause, and every event an intentional agent. In other words, these conspiracy discourses keep it simple and predictable: all that moderns ever wanted. (ch.3)

In contrast, postmodern paranoia expresses, as Peter Knight puts it, “a not entirely unfounded suspicion that the normal order of things itself amounts to a conspiracy”. Nowadays, “Conspiracy has become the default assumption in an age which has learned to distrust everything and everyone.”

[Conspiracy has come to mean] a broad array of social controls [and] rarely signifies a small, secret plot anymore. Instead, it frequently refers to the workings of a large organization, technology or system – a powerful and obscure entity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of the traditional conspiracy. (ibid.)

Where the modern kind of conspiracy theory might have soothed anxiety or built a collective unity by pinning the blame on some outside group, the postmodern trend both justifies and rationalises anxiety. It articulates “a fundamental insecurity about truth and reality” and challenges those in society who are ordinarily trusted to say what is true and real.

Categorising by possible risk

Created by Abbie Richards, a comedian and activist on TikTok, conspiracychart.com offers a grading of contemporary conspiracy theories into five levels of concern. The chart is in many ways debatable, but the categories might be useful for the purpose of discussion.

- Things that actually happened: e.g. “Big Tobacco lied about cancer.”
- Speculative but not implausible: e.g. “Epstein didn’t kill himself.”
- Unequivocally false, but mostly harmless: e.g. “Michael Jackson is still alive.”



[Conspiracy has come to mean] a broad array of social controls [and] rarely signifies a small, secret plot anymore. Instead, it frequently refers to the workings of a large organization, technology or system – a powerful and obscure entity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of the traditional conspiracy.

(Harambam)

- Dangerous to yourself and others: e.g. “COVID-19 is a hoax.”
- Promoting hatred and violence: e.g. “The Holocaust never happened.”

3.b. Can conspiracy theories just be dismissed as nonsense?

In short, no. Many or most conspiracy theories must be false, because they contradict each other on essential questions like “Who secretly controls the government?”, and because, in the nature of the case, they are working with limited information. But even though there is a class of unwarranted conspiracy theories, that doesn’t mean that none are ever warranted. The idea that conspiracy theories can be dismissed *just* for being conspiracy theories is called *generalist*; the idea that they must be individually examined is called *particularist*. The present consensus is **particularist**:

The chief problem is that there is a class of quite warranted conspiracy theories about such events as Watergate, the Iran-Contra Affair, etc., and that there is no principled way of distinguishing, a priori, the two classes from one another. There is no “mark of the incredible,” as it were (as Hume argues there is for reports of miracles). (Keeley 2007)

However, we can use true conspiracies as precedents for considering what is possible; and ask what the special kinds of reasoning found in conspiracies are actually able to prove. These questions may be of special interest to conspiracy theorists who resent being associated with more extreme ideas than their own, as they may help to distinguish their position from those that are less credible.

- Conspiracies do happen
- We *should* be critical of power
- We know how some conspiracies have been exposed
- Conspiracies theories involve special reasoning

Conspiracies do happen

Long lists of real conspiracies are easily compiled:

The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed. People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify



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(Keeley)

the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes. The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits. (West 2018, Introduction)

So what distinguishes a conspiracy *theory* from an actual conspiracy? When we say a conspiracy “really happened”, we typically mean that relevant authorities and experts have confirmed it. Consider the claim, for instance, that a sitting U.S. President had their opposition’s headquarters bugged during an election campaign:

- *Conspiracy theory*. Donald Trump alleged that the Obama government illegally wiretapped Trump Tower in 2016, but he did not go to the courts with any supporting evidence.
- *Conspiracy*. It was determined by the courts in the 1972 Watergate investigation that operatives of Republican President Richard Nixon had tried to bug the headquarters of the Democratic National Convention and he had tried to cover it up. Nixon resigned, and several dozen people went to prison for involvement in the scheme.

There are institutions that exist to say whether criminal conspiracies happen, and they confirmed one of these two claims but not the other. But if we say that a conspiracy is distinguished from a conspiracy theory by being real, and being real means being accepted by the relevant experts or authorities, then we run into the problem that these are *mainstream* institutions – *precisely* what the fringe mistrusts and rejects. Why should someone who mistrusts the mainstream accept their idea of which conspiracies are true? If everything is rigged, won’t the courts be rigged as well? In practice the line between conspiracies and conspiracy theories will vary with the audience that we are talking to.

We should be critical of power

Since conspiracies happen, and banal forms like corruption or misinformation are even relatively common, we should appreciate the sense of justice that lies behind conspiracy theories. As Ellen Cushing, an editor at *The Atlantic*, writes in “I was a Teenage Conspiracy Theorist” –

By the later part of my teens, the Illuminati was a stand-in for something I understood to be true about the distribution of power and wealth in the world. I no longer believed in it literally, but I believed in – still believe in – the metaphor: rich and influential people secretly working together to enact unseen influence over the rest of us. I genuinely regret the moments when I repeated things I knew not to be true, but I don’t regret becoming obsessed with something that unlocked a deeper sort of thinking about systemic inequity. Why would I? I was right! It would be naive to suggest that the power always acts in transparency, generosity, and

good faith. Sometimes, even demonstrably false conspiracy theories contain a little bit of truth. Other times, what seems like an absurd fabrication turns out to be real. (Cushing 2020)

Thinking through conspiracy theories can be a good way of thinking about how powerful people and systems can be held accountable. On the other hand, conspiracy theories can themselves be a way of exercising power and control over the public, and can work against truth and justice if they are pursued without diligence or integrity. Modernist conspiracy theories will advance a mountain of purported evidence and try to persuade authorities and experts. But post-modern conspiracy theories, and conspiracist mindsets, have a prior suspicion of power that precedes and frames any specific evidence.

We know how some conspiracies have been exposed

The fact that conspiracies are sometimes exposed supports the possibility and reasonability of conspiracy theories as a broad category. Conspiracies that are acknowledged by the mainstream in the United States include:

- *Government Malfeasance.* Watergate; Iran Contra; NSA Spying.
- *Personal Well-being.* Project MKULTRA; Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments.
- *Control of Information.* The Tobacco Industry Playbook; Institutional sexual abuse.

However, only some kinds of conspiracies have been exposed and only in certain ways. Those in the list above were exposed through a combination of regular journalism, freedom-of-information requests, whistleblowers or leaks, and government or police investigations. For example, the Watergate conspiracy failed through a combination of simple bungling, leaks from inside sources, and investigations by journalists and police, leading to court convictions. Even an American president who was already willing to engage in illegality could not stop its exposure.

Moreover, the exposed conspiracies were mostly event conspiracies, with a few systemic conspiracies thrown in (NSA spying, Institutional sexual abuse). There were no superconspiracies at all. So known conspiracies only offer limited support for the biggest conspiracy theories. And more importantly, conspiracies that have been exposed were exposed *by mainstream institutions*, rather than by fringe investigators. The tools for exposing them have been transparency and anti-corruption measures: freedom-of-information requests, legal protection for whistleblowers, or having journalists and a legal system that are protected from government or corporate interference.

This historical exposure of conspiracies raises a number of important questions for as-yet unproven conspiracy theories. Among those commonly mentioned:



Modernist conspiracy theories will advance a mountain of purported evidence and try to persuade authorities and experts. But post-modern conspiracy theories, and conspiracist mindsets, have a prior suspicion of power that precedes and frames any specific evidence.

- *Scale.* Does a conspiracy theory become more or less persuasive as the size of the conspiracy increases? Does the alleged conspiracy become so powerful that it can reasonably conceal anything? Or does it rather involve so many people – so many weak links – that exposure by some conscientious or disgruntled individual becomes inevitable?
- *Management.* Could the aims of the conspiracy have been better achieved in some other, more efficient, way? Could chemtrails be more secretly and cheaply added to municipal water supplies, say? Does increasing scale demand a degree of coordination and control that even large corporations and militaries struggle to achieve?

In 2008, [Abby Martin] was a supporter of the 9/11 Truth movement and described the 9/11 attacks as an “inside job” as she participated in a 9/11 Truth march in Santa Monica, California. In 2012 she moved to Washington, DC, to work for RT America. This gave her access to a lot more people in varying positions of power and allowed her to observe “how the government really works.” Her discovery of Washington as a corrupt yet lumbering bureaucracy simply did not fit with the type of super-competent, all-powerful evil entity required to pull off the version of a 9/11 conspiracy theory she previously subscribed to. It seems she emerged slowly, with a gradual realization that her previous belief made no real sense in the context of the world as she now understood it. (West 2018, ch.4)

- *Loyalty.* What motivates people to keep the secret? Large military secrets like the Manhattan Project stayed unknown for several years, but those involved were motivated by being at war, on top of which, leaks could be court-martialed. Even crime families, who kill informants, have informants. Would no-one have a moment of conscience, like Edward Snowden in the NSA spying case? Would there be no-one with a score to settle and nothing to lose? Can a large group be kept in line by fear without that fear itself leaking out or triggering resentment?
- *Competition.* Is the ‘elite’ or ‘establishment’ a single entity, or a number of entities in competition with each other? Are there competitors or enemies that would have been motivated to expose them? (So, if one country or corporation had created COVID19, wouldn’t others have known, and benefitted from exposing this?)

In a 2016 study, David Grimes tried to put some numbers on these kinds of questions. He used a small set of acknowledged conspiracies (NSA PRISM Affair, Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments, an FBI Forensics Scandal) to develop a model of how the number of people who know of a conspiracy affected the odds of exposure over time. Recognising that significant approximations were unavoidable, he allowed quite generous assumptions on the side of the conspiracies. Even so, he projected that more than a thousand conspirators meant virtually certain exposure within a decade.

Since international scientific conspiracies need many more people involved, their likelihood of exposure is correspondingly higher. On this projection the moon landings, climate change hoax, and suppressed cancer cures each have hundreds of thousands of conspirators and only 3–4 years until almost certain exposure. Any such estimation is approximate, but these general principles should be considered by anyone proposing a conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories involve special reasoning

Conspiracy theories have been called “the only theories for which evidence against them is actually construed as evidence in favor of them” (Keeley 1999, p.120). They appear to exploit a number of loopholes in ordinary logic, so it may be asked whether they are systematically irrational (“not even wrong”), riddled with reasoning failures like confirmation bias, or suffer from the limited possibilities of a bad starting position. Quassim Cassam of the University of Warwick has boiled this down to five primary characteristics; Michel Gagné summarises his analysis as follows:

Cassam argues that CTs are “implausible by design” and marked by five recurring and distinctive characteristics: (a) they are speculative, relying on conjecture instead of sound logic; (b) they are contrarian, born to discredit an “official” or dominant viewpoint; (c) they are esoteric, favoring hidden and outlandish causes over simpler and obvious ones; (d) they are amateurish, preferring the crowd-sourced explanations of laypersons, or the musings of sages speaking outside their field of research, to the careful analysis of qualified experts; and (e) they are premodern in the sense that they favor deterministic explanations and hypercompetent beings over the chaotic forces of history and human error that modern scholarship, time after time, has revealed to underlie catastrophic events. (Gagné 2022, ch.1)

Cassam’s use of ‘premodern’ invokes religious parallels that we will consider below. A number of these themes may be worth following up in discussion:

- *Falsifiability*. Because conspiracy theories study agents that they think are actively impeding their investigation, the scientific principle of falsifiability does not discredit or disprove them as it would in the hard sciences, where the subjects of inquiry are inanimate objects. By analogy, a detective who suspected the existence of a crime syndicate would need to allow that they would conceal evidence, provide false alibis, and otherwise misrepresent their activities. Still, our detective has to find evidence against them. They can’t convict anyone in court with just a generalised sense of mistrust. A modernist approach to conspiracy theories would accept this burden of proof, while a postmodernist approach would not.
- *Vagueness*. Conspirators like the Deep State, the ‘mainstream media’, or the military-industrial complex are extremely broad



Conspiracy theories are speculative ... contrarian ... esoteric ... amateur ...

(Cassam)

targets. How does the supposed conspiracy differ from the ordinary course of government, with favours for donors, dark-money think-tanks influencing policy, and a revolving door between political and corporate work? How does it differ, evidentially, from no conspiracy at all?

A major reason for the longevity of JFK conspiracy theories is the nature of their scapegoat. The “military industrial complex” serves as a perfect patsy: tangible enough to be perceived as real, even by skeptics; dangerous enough to be blamed for countless deaths every year; greedy enough to sap public resources from the common weal; large and diffuse enough to be everywhere and nowhere at once; faceless enough to be ageless, deathless, and devoid of a human conscience; and elusive enough never to be brought to justice. ... Because it is so vaguely defined, such an enemy has become, in the words of historian Richard Levy, “infinitely adaptable”. It becomes, in other words, whatever boogeyman the theorist most fears: a war racket, Big Oil, a faceless bureaucracy, a fascist spy network, a criminal confederacy, a doomsday machine, or a coterie of homosexual thrill seekers. (Gagné 2022, ch.18)

- *Grain*. Does a plausible general suspicion translate into a viable real-world scenario? For example, if we accept that “powerful people often get away with things”, is that enough to conclude that cancer cures are being suppressed by pharmacology companies? How many practical problems would arise from the implementation of the conspiracy? As a program manager at Microsoft has remarked:

Conspiracy theorists should be forced to manage a project with lots of people for a short while. That’ll give them a sense of how adorable their claims of efficiency and secrecy are. (Chris Hellmann, twitter.com/codepo8/status/1404041694237036548)

- *Hyper-scepticism*. No-one could apply a conspiratorial degree of scepticism to every area of their life, so why these specific areas? Moreover, even if proof is difficult, is there a point beyond which a conspiracy ought to have been proven if it ever could be?

It is [the] pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability per se, but the increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes. (Keeley 1999, p.123)

- *Proving too much?* Conspiracy theories can easily be made to oppose any other conspiracy theory. For example: Are conspiracy theories themselves used by the elite to make people distrust government institutions, and so undermine the anti-corruption measures those governments place on those elites? If conspiracy theories can prove contradictory ideas equally well, then are either of them really proven?
- *Degenerating research programs.* A conspiracy theory is potentially a research program: it starts with a possibly provable hypothesis. However, the theory typically moves *away* from proving its hypothesis over time: “successful novel predictions and retrodictions are not made. Instead, auxiliary hypotheses and initial conditions are successively modified in light of new evidence, to protect the original theory from apparent disconfirmation” (Clarke 2002, p.136).

Because conspiracy theories use distinctive reasoning styles, they differ in nature from scientific theories or research and cannot be directly compared with them.

3.c. What are the characteristics of conspiracy theories?

Douglas and van Prooijen (2018) identify four “principles of an emerging discipline” for conspiracy studies, using the acronym CUES. Conspiracy theories are consequential, universal, emotional, and social:

Consequential

They affect health, relationships and safety, even when they are highly unlikely to be true. *Examples.* Believing in HIV conspiracies or black genocide conspiracies results in lower usage of contraceptives. Suspicion of vaccines has reintroduced previously eliminated diseases into western societies.

Universal

Conspiracy theories are not restricted to particular times or cultures. In Africa, conspiracy theories about malevolent action by the western world nations are common (e.g. that vaccines cause sterility among Africans generally or Muslims in particular). In China, both Falun Gong and the government spread conspiracy theories about each other. The BRILL *Handbook of Conspiracy Theories and Contemporary Religion* devotes its central chapters to cataloguing examples from many cultures. (Dyrendal 2018).



Are conspiracy theories themselves used by the elite to make people distrust government institutions, and so undermine the anti-corruption measures those governments place on those elites?

Emotional

Conspiracy theories can involve masses of detailed explanation. However, as we have seen, they can produce angry exchanges in relationships and communities. And as we will see (below), they correlate experimentally with intuitive rather than analytical thinking, lower education levels, and situations of social anxiety and uncertainty. Anxiety and uncertainty affect our pattern perception and agency detection. Ronald W. Richardson, in *Polarisation and the Healthy Church* (2012, see Part Four), considers the breakdown of relationships to be an indicator of emotionality:

People in polarised positions often appear to have strongly held, principled positions... However, they reveal their emotionality in their inability to tolerate those on the other side. There is rigidity to their beliefs and they cannot listen to or think along with others. (p.70)

Social

They are forms of intergroup conflict; which presuppose ingroup identity and outgroup threat. Thus they flourish among groups who are involved in conflict already, or who comprise a stigmatised minority.

3.d. What motivates or predicts belief in conspiracy theories?

In *Escaping the Rabbit Hole*, Mick West offers a general caution about theories of conspiracy adherence: they are difficult to apply to individuals. “The degree of correlation is generally small, and they deal with factors that are difficult to gauge in your friend” (ch.4). So he cautions against ‘pigeonholing’ on the basis of general findings, while recognising the benefit of general trends for public health (and we might also say, for church leadership). What follows is a brief selection of themes from a survey of a large body of research (Douglas 2019).

1. Predictors
 - a. Other conspiracy beliefs
 - b. Partisanship / Motivated reasoning
 - c. Political extremes / Simplifying
 - d. Personality disorders
 - e. Social context / Education level
2. Motivators
 - a. Epistemic
 - b. Existential
 - c. Social

Other conspiracy beliefs

As noted already, the strongest predictor of belief in conspiracy theories is whether a person already believes in other conspiracy theories, even completely unrelated ones. This finding lies behind the idea of a conspiracy mindset, ideology, or worldview. “In addition, those who believe in a conspiracy theory often turn to other conspiracy theories to explain why their pet theory has amassed no positive proof or support” (p.7).

Partisanship / Motivated reasoning

Motivated reasoning means setting out to prove or disprove a desired conclusion without making any effort at neutrality or objectivity, such as testing one’s own conclusions, or hearing contrary views. It is largely why “people with different ideologies are likely to interpret the same information differently” (p.12). We generally favour views we already hold, in both conscious and unconscious ways. This is a characteristic of partisanship, which we will consider in Part Two. “Motivated reasoning has frequently been observed with conspiracy theories, particularly with partisanship and political ideology” (p.12) – which includes filtering ideas through our beliefs about conspiracy theories.

Political extremes / Simplifying

The far left and far right of politics are more prone to conspiracism than moderates, and on all sides political opponents are suspected of malevolent behaviour (p.11). Relatedly, while moderates believe answers to political problems are often complex, those on the extremes believe they are relatively simple. Willem van Prooijen summarises his own research projects as follows:

We conducted four studies – one in the United States, and three in the Netherlands – to test the relationship between political extremism and belief in conspiracy theories. ... Results indicated that people on both the extreme-left and extreme-right believe in conspiracy theories more strongly when compared to people in the political centre. Furthermore, we asked to what extent participants believe that societal problems could, in principle, be easily solved. Mirroring the findings on conspiracy beliefs, both extremes believed more strongly in simple political solutions than moderates did. Finally, our statistical analyses revealed that this faith in simple political solutions accounted for the increased belief in conspiracy theories among political extremists. Evidently, political extremism and conspiracy beliefs are rooted in the same rigid style of thinking. (van Prooijen, 2015)

Personality disorders (PDs)

We might suppose that the unusually paranoid are more prone to conspiracism than others, and while conspiracism only directs suspicion toward specific groups rather than everybody, this is borne out in experimental findings. A recent UK study (Furnham and Grover 2021) concluded “The strongest PD correlates were Schizotypal, Paranoid, and Borderline PDs” (p.6), though they were only moderately strong predictors (30-40%). The authors note that this is consistent with the existing (small) body of research on the subject, and quote the DSM-IV short descriptions of these disorders (p.3):

- *Schizotypal*. Odd beliefs or magical thinking; behavior or speech that is odd, eccentric, or peculiar.
- *Paranoid*. Distrustful and suspicious of others; motives are interpreted as malevolent.
- *Borderline*. Inappropriate anger; unstable and intense relationships alternating between idealization and devaluation.

Social context / Education level

Much more study has been applied to social factors that predict conspiracy belief than to personality predictors. Douglas (2019) summarises a representative study:

conspiracy believers were more likely to be male, unmarried, less educated, have lower income, be unemployed, be a member of an ethnic minority group, and have weaker social networks.

The correlation between low education and conspiracy belief has been further examined, though not conclusively, and some explanations like higher news literacy are conjectural.

[The] relationship was explained in part by the tendency for people with lower levels of education to also be more likely to attribute agency and intentionality where it does not, or is unlikely, to exist. Van Prooijen (2017) found support for two additional mediating factors – greater feelings of control and a general doubt that complex problems may have simple solutions. (ibid)

Motivators

In recent research, conspiracy theories answer three primary groups of desires, which may not be consciously perceived (van Prooijen 2018). As with predictors, we should see these only as trends, and not as determinative in any individual case.



conspiracy believers were more likely to be male, unmarried, less educated, have lower income, be unemployed, be a member of an ethnic minority group, and have weaker social networks.

(Douglas)

1. **Epistemic.** The desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty
2. **Existential.** The desire for control and security (vs. anxiety)
3. **Social.** The desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group

It is debated whether conspiracy theories really help with these desires (Douglas 2019, p.10), or actively prevent them from being fulfilled.

Epistemic motivations

Conspiracy theories may aim to make sense of the world. “Conspiracy belief is ... stronger among people who consistently seek patterns and meaning in their environment, such as believers in paranormal and supernatural phenomena” (Douglas 2019, p.7). This may be relevant to Christians depending on the frequency with which we expect God to be continuously pulling strings or granting signs in everyday events. Conspiracy belief is also stronger in people who overestimate their ability to understand complex causal phenomena, overestimate the probability of co-occurring events, overestimate agency and intentionality in events, and display lower levels of analytic thinking.

Overall, there is evidence that conspiracy theories appear to appeal to individuals who seek accuracy and/or meaning, but perhaps lack the cognitive tools or experience problems that prevent them from being able to find accuracy and meaning via other more rational means. (Douglas 2019, p.8)

This recalls Prooijen’s research on political extremes (above), and their preference for simple explanations:

This style of thinking – referred to as ‘belief in simple political solutions’ – feeds into one of the main functions of conspiracy theories: to provide comprehensive explanations for distressing events that are hard to make sense of otherwise. Conspiracy theories enable believers to resolve any ambiguity, and to find answers for any open question, when confronted with distressing events – by assigning blame to a set of powerful actors that they deem to be untrustworthy. Indeed, all conspiracy theories – even those which at first glance appear articulate or well-constructed – essentially depart from [i.e. start with] a simple assumption: that the official explanation must be dishonest. (van Prooijen 2015)

Existential motivations

Conspiracy theories are associated with individual feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, alienation, and anomie. Anomie is the sense that norms and values have disintegrated and that the social and moral world cannot be relied upon, producing a loss of connection or belonging.



Conspiracy theories enable believers to resolve any ambiguity, and to find answers for any open question, when confronted with distressing events – by assigning blame to a set of powerful actors that they deem to be untrustworthy.

(van Prooijen)

... people who lack agency and control may reclaim some sense of control by believing conspiracy theories because they offer the opportunity to reject official narratives and allow people to feel that they possess a better account. (Douglas 2019, p.8)

Social motivations

Conspiracy theories contribute to a sense of individual and group identity. They are linked with narcissism and a need to feel unique in individuals, and with collective narcissism in groups, “a form of ingroup positivity that reflects a belief in the ingroup’s greatness associated with a conviction that others do not acknowledge the ingroup’s worth enough” (p.9). Conspiracy beliefs are more common among members of low-status groups than high-status groups. (Though groups with a history of mistreatment may be more justly suspicious of authority.)

4. How can Christianity support conspiracy theories?

The interplay of religious belief and conspiracy theories has been analysed in three major ways in modern research (Dryendal 2018, pp.3–8).

- Conspiracy theories AS religion
- Conspiracy theories ABOUT religion
- Conspiracy theories IN religion

Conspiracy theories AS religion

Conspiracy theories can seem quasi-religious, and religions can seem conspiratorially minded. Conspiracy concepts are sometimes derived from religious precursors, such as **millennialism** for any expectation of a climactic showdown between good and evil (e.g. QAnon’s ‘The Storm’), or **Manichaeism** for any strongly dualistic view of the world where everyone is wholly on the side of light or darkness. The term ‘religion’ is used pejoratively – including by Christians – to demean and dismiss various ideas, and this is often applied to dismiss conspiracism:

Are conspiracy theories just another religion, full of improvable [unprovable] beliefs, with nothing but faith to sustain them? (cit. Dryendal 2018, p.49)

We find parallels also in some popular Christian language: “I don’t believe in coincidences!” or “God has a plan for your life!” recall Barkun’s description of conspiracism as “a universe governed by design rather than randomness,” where “nothing happens by accident”.

Conspiracy theory in grand mode posits patterns and explains suffering with reference to a hidden, overwhelming power that

suffuses history, leaves traces for believers to find, and drives history towards a goal. Studies may thus draw out analogous features shared by conspiracist and religious narratives, such as promiscuous teleology, providence, soteriology, theodicy, and ‘revelatory’ claims to higher knowledge. (Dryendal 2018, p.4)

Chapter 2 of the BRILL Handbook tries to locate conspiracism in between spirituality and secularity. Three parallels are of special importance:

- Teleology – the ends or purposes of things
- Epistemology – the justification of belief
- Significance and meaning-making

Teleology. The authors, Aupers and Harambam, begin with a brief but influential passage in Karl Popper’s 1945 book *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Best known for his philosophy of science work, he here asked why the liberal and democratic ideals of some ancient Greeks have been opposed through history, and still are in modern times. Popper at one point reflects on the endless intrigues of the Greek gods, as they shape the course of the Trojan War in Homer’s *Iliad*.

The conspiracy theory of society is a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition. The Gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups – sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from. (Popper 2012, ch.14)

Either way, someone is bending history to their will, and bringing it to their desired conclusion. For Popper, teleology is bad sociology. When dealing with complex social phenomena, the habit of first seeking blameable conspirators is “the very opposite of the true aim of the social sciences” (ibid).

Epistemology. Both religion and conspiracy theories “believe in something that transcends empirical observation” (Dryendal 2018, p.49). The agents they study are hidden; their influence invisible. It is common for sceptical questions concerning religion to be reapplied to conspiracy theories:

- David Hume’s arguments against miracles appear repeatedly in the literature, including: Is there a parallel in your experience for these [superconspiracies]? Is there another, more probable, explanation for their supposed effects??
- We are reminded of John Wisdom’s parable of the invisible gardener. How does an undetectable [conspiracy] differ from none at all?

On the other hand, believers in religions and conspiracies may insist that the belief is intuitively obvious or there are clues about the secret plans everywhere. They may insist that the real problem is denial by outsiders, finding belief to be vital and virtuous, and unbelief to be suspicious. We will discuss these kinds of claims below.

Significance and meaning-making. Knowledge of a conspiracy is important knowledge. The larger the conspiracy, the more true this is, the more vital becomes the task of opposing it. Hofstadter wrote in 1964:

The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and deaths of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at the turning point. Like religious millennialists he expresses the anxiety of those who are living through the last days and he is sometimes disposed to set a date for the apocalypse. (Hofstadter, p.82)

Conspiracy theories may also offer a **theodicy** of sorts, blaming hypothetical humans for wide-ranging evils in the world, and letting God off the hook. If Christians think they are losing their place in the world, they may favour conspiratorial explanations of their decline over introspection or self-critique.

Having enemies fills life with clarity, and if enemies can be understood and perhaps overcome, this offers significance too. If we also understand them as God's enemies, then our struggle against them takes on cosmic and eternal significance. In contrast the random and mundane progress of everyday events can seem quite literally senseless and deeply unsatisfying. As Michel Gagné has written about his former belief in JFK assassination theories:

That JFK could be murdered for no greater reason than that a disgruntled young Marxist decided one morning to take his rifle to work and turn himself into someone important simply did not compute. (Gagné 2022, Author's preface)

Conspiracy theories ABOUT religion

The BRILL *Handbook of Conspiracy Theories and Contemporary Religion* (Dyrendal 2018) notes that:

Religious majority groups can draw on conspiratorial elements to demonise schismatic groups, or to target religious minorities; minorities, on their part, may demonise majority institutions as part of a cosmic conspiracy connected to metaphysical evil. (p.7)

It spends the bulk of its chapters describing conspiracy theories in global contexts that are usually at least partly religious: Buddhist majorities targeting Muslim minorities with state power in Sri Lanka and Myanmar (ch.11, 12); anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in the Arab world (ch.13); Greek and Russian orthodoxy (ch.16, 19); the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan (ch.17); Falun Gong and the Chinese government (ch.22). Sometimes this is simply silly or naive, as when recently, in Australia, *Eternity News* found itself debunking the left-wing Twitter claim that the Australian federal Cabinet was packed with Hillsong church members (Sandeman 2021).



That JFK could be murdered for no greater reason than that a disgruntled young Marxist decided one morning to take his rifle to work and turn himself into someone important simply did not compute.

(Gagné)

Conspiracy theories IN religion

The remainder of Part One will address the tendencies toward conspiratorial belief in Christianity, first as they have happened in United States history, and then as they may be biblically supported.

4.a. End-times conspiracies in United States history

Gregory S. Camp's 1997 book *Selling Fear: Conspiracy Theories and End-times Paranoia* is a survey of American Christian conspiracism since the French Revolution, and the range of ideas that have collected around it. The outsized influence of the United States on the global church and on world culture makes patterns and trends in this history important for churches today, even on the other side of the globe. Camp quotes with approval a 1995 George Johnson article about the Oklahoma City Bombings, "The Conspiracy That Never Ends," which offered five rules of thumb about conspiracism in the United States (pp.229–31).

1. The conspirators are internationalists, and so, anti-patriotic.
2. **Nothing is ever discarded.** Rather, the same ideas keep reappearing.
3. Seeming enemies are really secret friends; e.g. communists and international bankers.
4. The takeover by the international godless government will be initiated by the collapse of the economic system.
5. It's all spelled out in the Bible.

It is an overstatement to say that *nothing* is ever discarded in conspiracism, when failed predictions are continually set aside, but as we will see, the major themes of American conspiracism have been uncannily persistent.

Secret societies

Fraternal organisations, including professional guilds, were common in the later middle ages and the early modern period in Europe. The Freemasons held secretive initiations and other rituals, and purported histories traced their origins to Moses, Euclid, Pythagoras, the Culdees and Essenes, the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, and various well-known historical figures. (But more mundanely, they were also clubs for social advancement, whose members gave each other discounts in their businesses.) They began to be organised under Grand Lodges in the early 1700s, first in England, then in Europe and America, and had many influential members. Suspicions concerning them waxed and waned over time, such as when an anti-Mason party contested the 1828 United States election.

The Illuminati

In France in 1785 a Jesuit-trained professor of Canon Law named Adam Weishaupt began a highly secretive society called The Illuminati. It blended Freemasonry with Enlightenment rationalism, ancient Egyptian mysticism, and the same opposition to church and monarchy that would produce the French Revolution in 1789. Beginning as a secret society within freemasonry, they claimed to be the real and original Freemasons, saying the others were secretly controlled by the Jesuits. The Illuminati disappeared from history not long after the Revolution, but in France, Britain, and America, several authors subsequently blamed them for it and claimed their influence was ongoing. In 1798 an English professor of natural philosophy named John Robison published a book claiming that the Illuminati were working through European freemasonry to overthrow governments, religion, and society. This quickly crossed to America, where a prominent Boston minister and the president of Yale College each publicly accused Thomas Jefferson and his party of being the dupes or accomplices of the Illuminati.

Corporate and monetary conspiracies

The U.S. War of 1812 created broad financial uncertainty, which was addressed by creating a central bank in 1816, on a twenty-year charter. It was a private institution suspected of being controlled by European banking interests. When President Andrew Jackson refused to renew its charter in 1837, an economic collapse and depression lasted until 1845, requiring substantial overseas borrowing from Europe. Later, when the economic and industrial boom of the post-Civil War years created enormous wealth it also produced a high degree of corruption, monopoly, and protectionism. Labour unions formed to try and protect workers from exploitation, and farmers facing enormous economic problems in the 1890s turned to a populist People's Party in which prominent leaders including Ignatius Donnelly blamed their problems on an international banking conspiracy mostly organised by Jews. William Harvey popularised the view that only gold and more-so silver were real currency and paper money was an unstable counterfeit that enabled mass-market manipulation by malicious actors. A second privately-owned central bank (actually a group of banks) called the Federal Reserve System was created in 1913, after a financial panic in 1907. Shareholders included major international interests (Rothschilds, Lehman Brothers, Goldman Sachs, Rockefellers). In 1921 the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) was formed, sponsored by many of these same interests, pursuing peace, furthering the interests of the English-speaking world, and generally pursuing global solutions to large-scale problems. Some of its members had been sponsors of the revolutionary movement behind the Russian Revolution (1917). When President Roosevelt's "New Deal" reshaped the economy after the Great Depression, and America took a larger role in international affairs, the CFR's views and interests became influential, and were considered by some conservatives to be a harbinger of a one world government. In 1973

it formed a branch called the Trilateral Commission to promote trade. President Carter had been a member, and many of its members served in the Reagan administration (and Reagan himself had been a Freemason). Since the 1950s the meetings of the Bilderberg Group – global business interests – have also attracted conspiracy theories. In the 1980s Larry Burkett and other writers argued that the United States foreign debt would shortly lead to its financial collapse and takeover. Pat Robertson's 1992 book *The New World Order* maintained that this was being orchestrated by the Illuminati, the CFR, and the Trilateralists.

Biblical prophecy

William Miller gained many tens of thousands of followers by predicting the return of Christ on particular dates in 1843 and 1844, based on the seventy weeks prophecy in the Book of Daniel (ch.9). Samuel Baldwin in 1854 published a correction to Miller that equated the United States with Israel as it appeared in prophecy, expecting it to be invaded, and equated Gog and Magog (Ezek 38–39) with Russia. John N. Darby (d.1882) theorised that God dealt with humanity in different historical 'dispensations', and that the Church Age – a proposed intermission in Daniel's timeline – would end shortly with the removal of Christians from the earth and the Great Tribulation (Matt 24:21, 29; Rev 7:14); his ideas were later widely popularised by the Scofield Reference Bible (1909). In the 1930s a Baptist evangelist from Kansas, Gerald Winrod, combined anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories, and prophecy teaching in a powerful new blend, expecting a Jewish antichrist. (In other contemporary movements, Hitler and Mussolini were considered more likely candidates.)

Communism

Also in the 1930s, a Catholic priest from Wisconsin named Father Charles Coughlin broadcast a popular weekly radio program heard by an estimated thirty million listeners. He taught that America was heading toward socialism and political ruin, as international bankers, Jews, and communists conspired against it. After World War Two and the Soviet Union's takeover of Eastern Europe, the United States adopted a global policy of 'containment' of communism. It largely sponsored the formation of the United Nations (1945), the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and Japan (1948), and, with western allies, founded the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation as a military defence pact (NATO, 1949). In the early 1950s Senator Joseph McCarthy accused hundreds of State Department officials of being communists or sympathisers, a concern taken up by others including the John Birch Society. The United States and Russia had both developed nuclear weapons by 1950, which quickly became vastly more powerful, threatening the world with unprecedented destruction. (For some end-times writers, nuclear weapons were envisaged in 2 Pet 3:17.) China turned communist ('kings of the east', Rev 16:12), and the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War kept communist

expansion in the public mind. But when, in 1989, the Soviet Union and its iron-like grip over the Eastern European states simply fell apart, marking the end of the Cold War, anti-communist organisations declined with it.

The Middle East

The British government had noted its support for a Jewish state in Palestine in the Balfour Declaration (1917), and this became a reality in 1948 after World War Two and the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust. End-times writers have understood this as the end of the ‘times of the gentiles’ (Dan 8:13; Matt 21:24; Rev 11:2), and taught that there would be at most a generation (Matt 24:34) until Christ’s return; this was sometimes taken as forty years, though that view became less popular after 1988; others counted from Israel recapturing the Temple Mount in the Six-Day War in 1967; and others awaited a Third Temple to be built. Out of these conflicts, Israel emerged with a strong alliance with the United States. This is interpreted by some conspiracists as evidence of Zionist control of US foreign policy, but by end-time conspiracists as God setting up an apocalyptic battle at Armageddon (Mount Megiddo in Israel; Rev 16:6).

Social Changes

Within the United States, the pace of social change began to advance in the 1960s. Racial desegregation and the civil rights movement advanced racial equality, while ‘sex, drugs and rock and roll’ disturbed popular culture. John Stormer’s 1964 book *None Dare Call it Treason* typified American conspiracism of the period, seeing intentional planning behind the failure to stop communism, and claiming the educational and mass media sectors were brainwashing the nation into accepting new understandings of the nation, the family, and the individual. The rise of computer technology was seen by some writers to offer the social, economical, and political control of a coming antichrist system.

Religion

In the 1970s and 80s Christian conspiracy theories prominently featured New Age religion and satanic ritual abuse. Its crossover with conspiracism is best illustrated by Jack Chick’s comic tracts, which weaved together many of the above themes, but understood the Roman Catholic Church to be behind it all.

4.b. A biblical basis for Christian conspiracism?

As will be clear from this outline, Christians of the last two centuries have appealed to scripture in support of conspiracist beliefs. We will conclude Part One of this paper with an overview of four major supports they have found there.

1. Biblical interpretation
 - a. The Powers
 - b. Millennialism
2. Christ against culture
 - a. Spiritual knowledge
 - b. Persecution

Biblical interpretation

We think it is reasonable to say that most Christians are suspicious of people claiming too much knowledge about demons or the future. There is material about each subject in Christian scripture, but they are still largely mysterious and unknown. Still, Christians who are willing to speculate can readily envision evil powers behind any conspiracy, link the aims of that conspiracy with their own apocalyptic image of the future, and often support them with suggestive proof-texts or traditions of interpretation. Conspiracism can be built on different theological foundations, however. The classic NWO conspiracy has been premillennial, expecting the world to get worse until Christ returns, whereas Dominionist postmillennialists think that Christians must build Christ's kingdom by taking over the world's institutions and improving them (see Part Two for more on this).

The Powers. Christianity comes with varying degrees of dualism, which emphasises unseen spiritual powers. On the 8th April 2020, for example, "Q", the supposedly high-placed government source behind the QAnon conspiracy, tweeted:

What is the primary benefit to keep public in mass-hysteria re: COVID-19? Think voting. Are you awake yet?

To this tweet was attached a photo of Eph 6:10-11 in the NASB translation. The passage, with a little extra context, reads:

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.

¹¹Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:10-12 NASB)

Christians typically think about demons as entities who tempt or delude, possess or afflict *individuals*. The idea of 'rulers' and 'powers' in scripture (most notably Col 2:15) is much bigger than this, however, suggesting figures who control the earth to varying degrees, and then building on

this imagery by treating impersonal entities like death or law as similarly subjugating forces. If 1 Cor 2:8 is understood in this way, such ‘rulers’ are seen working through Jewish and Roman authorities in Jesus’ crucifixion.

Millennialism. The New Testament was written against a background of apocalyptic Judaism and embraced apocalyptic imagery in many places, especially in the one apocalypse in the New Testament, the book of Revelation. In apocalypses (literally ‘revelations’ or ‘disclosures’) hidden realities are revealed through prophets or angels and a war between Good and Evil lies behind the daily struggles faced by Christians.

There are a range of views about how to interpret biblical prophecy. In the schema popularised by J. N. Darby and Scofield Reference Bible, the return of Christ will trigger the rise of the Antichrist, with a Tribulation and Millennium to follow (Ezek 38; Daniel 9:20-26; Mark 13/ Matt 24; 2 Thess 2; Revelation, esp. ch.12–13, 16–17).

The idea that an Antichrist is lurking in wait to take over the world, but that we can identify this figure and his arrival by deciphering signs, leads directly to a conspiracist mindset. One current example is the *Rapture Ready Index* which assigns 45 different indicators a rating between 1 and 5 for a total score out of 225. As of 18 April 2022, it showed 188 (the all-time high is 189). Satanism and earthquakes are down (“lack of activity”), but plagues are up (“The coronavirus pandemic has maxed out this category”), as is Gog (Russia) due to its war in Ukraine. The Mark of the Beast is at 5 (“Several big tech companies are working on tracking software”), but the Beast Government indicator is only at 4 (“The government movement is having trouble with world unity”). Some categories can be directly mapped to biblical references, but others, like economic indicators, require an understanding of prophecy literature over the past century (see above).

Millennial conspiracism is very widely distributed, especially through American TV evangelism, and highly consequential. As of November 2021 the population of Papua New Guinea (pop. 9M) was only 1.7% vaccinated against COVID19. One correspondent wrote:

Years ago, some Papua New Guinean friends declared barcodes were the mark. More recently, they insisted it was the government’s national ID card initiative. Now, in a completely different order of magnitude and intensity, it is the COVID vaccine. As one group protesting a vaccine drive recently chanted, “Karim 666 chip goh!”, or “Get out of here with Satan’s microchip”. (MacDonald 2021)

There is nothing to prevent Christians from arguing for any particular view of scripture or theology that persuades them. However, when there have been many confidently false claims about Christ’s return in the past, it would be helpful to carefully explain how their present views have learned from those mistakes, and how it offers better reasons for confidence than they did.

Christ against culture

If we understand Christianity and wider culture to be at war, or view ourselves as the persecuted remnant of God's faithful people, then we're in the fight-or-flight, military-or-monastery framework that Richard H. Neibuhr called 'Christ Against Culture' (*Christ and Culture*, 1951). Like modern conspiracy theories, the early Christian gospel was "stigmatised knowledge" rejected by the "epistemic authorities" in the temple, synagogue, and courts.

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants..." (Matt 11:25; Luke 10:21)

Worldly and spiritual knowledge. Conspiracy theories contain elements of secret knowledge, in which the conspiracy theorists claim to know the truth which is hidden from ordinary people by the mass media and governments.

This can easily be justified by appeal to apocalyptic literature and the concept of special revelation in the Bible, especially in the book of Revelation (e.g. Rev 1:1–3). The gospel itself is not understood or embraced by most people which seems to fulfil Paul's warning that "the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). This is legitimate conspiracy language that can then be applied to other actions one finds threatening: "We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). In millennialism, a 'great delusion' is anticipated in the end-time (2 Thess 2:11–12). This makes for an easy sectarian dismissal of opposing views, and even a rejection of the biblical expectation that Christians should try to persuade others (see Part Three).

If the world at large is out to get us, then of course there are going to be conspiracies. When Christian movements feel threatened by claims of new knowledge or discoveries, framing this as a conspiracy turns it into a situation of opposition rather than disagreement, making it easier for non-specialists to understand. For example, if young-earth creationism understands scientists to be actively suppressing or maliciously misrepresenting natural history, then scientists will be understood as conspirators. (We will consider Christian opposition to expertise in Part Two.)

However, if an elevated sense of spiritual enlightenment is leading a person to cause strife in their church—as some conspiracism does—that is something that the New Testament writers consider immature, worldly, and unspiritual. (We discuss this in Part Three.)

Persecution. Jesus told his first followers to expect persecution, deliberately linking this to Jewish martyr traditions (e.g. Matt 5:11–12). This continues into the early church of Acts (e.g. 7:52), and it was frequently observed in churches in the Roman Empire (e.g. Gal 5:12; 2 Tim 3:12). For both Jesus and Paul the right response was to persevere, bless not curse,



If an elevated sense of spiritual enlightenment is leading a person to cause strife in their church—as some conspiracism does—that is something that the New Testament writers consider immature, worldly, and unspiritual.

do good, and not provoke opposition by doing evil or causing avoidable offence (Matt 5:44; Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Pet 4:19).

In a liberal democracy, persecution would have to be somewhat indirect, so expectations of persecution blend together with expectations of conspiracies. Discussing the Victorian government's LGBTIQ+ Strategy for 2022–2032, the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) writes:

... we will see more legal protections and LGBT-friendly communities mushrooming in Victoria. Those who do not bow down to their agendas will find themselves being censored or marginalised, if not prosecuted, especially when the Change or Suppression (Conversion) Prohibition Act 2021 takes effect on 17 February 2022. It's not hard to imagine, very soon, Christians in Victoria will be living like Christians in the early centuries and be rejected by their neighbors. Children attending Victorian schools will find themselves at odds with their Christian parents' values, and some could even do their parents in for "discrimination." The Andrews government's 10-year plan goes beyond 10 years. This plan is to bring long-term cultural change. Its aim is to destroy conservative and Christian values, and substitute them with LGBT ideology. (Yuen 2022)

Note the language of persecution in the passage: 'bow down', 'censored or marginalised, if not prosecuted', 'living like Christians in the early centuries'. Writing in *Eternity* in 2019, Mark Stephens suggests a few important checks on the Christian use of persecution language. To summarise:

- There are kinds and degrees of opposition that Christians may face; we shouldn't call them all 'persecution'.
- Using the term 'persecution' loosely can obscure valid reasons for opposition, which we need to understand and respond to.

... the New Testament concedes that Christians can suffer for bad reasons, not just for good (1 Peter 2:20; 3:17). If Christians suffer because they are "obnoxious for Jesus", then they cannot claim to be fools for Christ [1 Cor 4:10] – they are just fools.

- Using the term 'persecution' loosely can obscure or trivialise real persecution.
- There is a right way to respond to persecution.

The book of 1 Peter is written to believers who are experiencing all kinds of trials (1:6), who keenly feel their strangeness in the surrounding culture. Yet Peter tells them to avoid all forms of retaliation, to humbly examine their own behaviour, to set apart Christ as Lord, and to commit to speaking with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 2:23; 3:14-16). Peter urges the believers to "commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Peter 4:19)

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PART II

Politics

How does current research on polarisation and populism help us to understand political conspiracy theories?



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After reading this section you should be able to:

- Describe some problems that can be caused by political conspiracy theories.
- Explain polarisation and populism, and judge when popular conspiracy theories express these ideas.
- Consider the effect of social media on conspiracism in the past ten years.
- Consider public affairs from a liberal democratic and liberal scientific perspective, and relate this to some Christian and conspiratorial views of expertise and authority.
- Discuss Christian arguments against expertise and authority that appear in conspiratorial contexts.
- Discuss how Christians should participate in democratic societies.



We invite critiques or suggestions for future improvements.

Heard a joke. Two Christians are driving to a Trump rally when they are caught in a terrible car accident. They're suddenly standing before some enormous shining gates, and Jesus is looking at them expectantly. He says, "Well done, my good and faithful servants, enter into your rest!" They are stunned and overwhelmed, and wander in, mouths agape. But they come back just a few minutes later with sheepish looks, and say "Hey, could we just ask this one question that's been bugging us? How on earth did Joe Biden manage to steal that election? We can't figure out how he did it." Jesus shakes his head and says, "It wasn't stolen. He got more votes than the other guy." At this, there's an awkward pause for just a moment, until one looks at the other and says: "Well *this* goes higher than we thought."

1. What problems can political conspiracy theories cause?

We begin here with the same cautions with which we began Part One. Conspiracies happen, and theories about them cause problems. Not all the time, in either case, but often enough for it to matter. Christians who oppose conspiracy theories should remember the first point; Christians who advocate for them should remember the second, and be sure that they are not a part of any such problems. With this again in mind, we will now consider some of the social problems caused by political conspiracy theories.

- Prejudice and extremism
- Undermining democratic institutions and authorities
- Undermining social trust
- Undermining public health

Prejudice and extremism

To begin with the worst of it, a certain amount of conspiracism is racist (Great Replacement, Eurabia, Anti-semitism, Holocaust denial). These forms of conspiracism have caused the greatest public concern, and their rejection should be common ground for Christians of every kind.

In recent years, conspiracy theories have been tied to extremism, radical politics, and terrorism ... Conspiracy theories have also been closely linked to prejudice and racial violence. Historically and across the globe, conspiracy theories have played prominent roles in witch-hunts, revolutions, and genocide. (Douglas 2019, p.28)

While conspiracism correlates with prejudice, this correlation does not only come from already prejudiced or extremist groups resorting to conspiracy theories (though they do). Rather, exposure to a single racial conspiracy theory is sufficient to raise prejudice against multiple racial groups. Douglas (2021) summarises:

Belief in anti-Jewish conspiracy theories was associated with anti-Israeli attitudes but also racism towards Chinese people. In experimental studies, Jolley et al. (2020) found that exposure to anti-Jewish conspiracy theories predicted prejudice and discrimination toward Jews, but also prejudice toward groups who were not part of the alleged conspiracy, such as Americans, Asians, and Arabs. Overall, this research suggests that conspiracy theories may have damaging and broad implications for intergroup relations. (p.3)

Additionally, conspiracism correlates with violence. Those who are more inclined toward conspiracy theories are more likely to agree that “violence is sometimes an acceptable way to express disagreement with the government” than those less inclined (ibid., p.33). Some people have cited conspiratorial reasons for murdering friends or family members (e.g. Edwards 2021), though these actions are typically also blamed on mental

illness. Mass-killers, who seem concerned that people might miss the conspiratorial aspect of their work, take pains to spell it out in manifestoes. The Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 were described by the Australian killer as a reponse to ‘The Great Replacement’ and ‘white genocide’. In Norway in 2011 a mass-killer styled himself as a Christian knight fighting the Eurabia and Cultural Marxism conspiracies. The Oklahoma City Bombings in 1995 were decribed by the killer as a response to government tyranny being introduced through gun control. Other conspiracy theories have justified mob-killings, such as Jewish ‘blood libels’ in medieval Europe, which alleged that Christian children were being murdered by Jews and led to pogroms.

Some conspiracy theories have contributed to genocides. Hitler’s *Dolchstoß* (‘dagger-thrust’) explanation for Germany’s defeat in WW1 said that Germany had been betrayed from within by Jews, communists, their own government, and other alleged traitors. This played into racial and ethnic prejudices, linked up with other anti-Semitic conspiracy theories both new and old, and contributed to the Holocaust.

Undermining democratic institutions and authorities

In experimental studies conspiracy belief correlates with a lower intention to vote, and with mistrust of government. “It was found that exposure to the conspiracy theories negatively affected trust in government and institutions, even when the institutions were not connected to the allegations” (Douglas 2019, p.32).

“They often told me very similar stories,” View says, recounting his interviews with QAnon members at the January 2020 Red Pill Roadshow in Tampa, Florida. All my life I’ve known something is off — that the global narrative is an illusion and there’s something beneath the surface, they would tell him. “A lot of QAnon people were conspiratorial before it came around, but this gave them a framework,” says View. “If you believe anything off the beaten path then you’re welcome to the family.” (Grable 2020)

Conspiracy theories can aid the questioning of “dominance hierarchies and... the actions of powerful groups” (Douglas, p.34). But democracy, the rule of law, education, the institutions of knowledge, and journalism can all be undermined by cynicism and public mistrust. There is a consequent danger that Christian conspiracy theorists, though hoping to have “brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52), could ironically aid the powerful and the corrupt by weakening the only institutions that can hold them accountable.

Undermining social trust

Willem van Prooijen (2018) summarises numerous studies which suggest that undermining social institutions also undermines many of our social relationships.



All my life I’ve known something is off — that the global narrative is an illusion and there’s something beneath the surface...

Institutional distrust strips away a basic sense that one is protected from exploitation, thus reducing trust between strangers, which is at the core of functioning societies.

At the low end of the scale this creates a general social mistrust, reduced commitment and cooperation, and reduced prosociality, meaning less of the kinds of behaviour that are intended to help others. If social distrust escalates then we see prejudice, affective polarisation, intergroup conflict, and extremism. If you thought your fellow citizens were trying to deceive and harm you, why wouldn't you take some kind of defensive action?

Some of these effects are unpredictable and chaotic. A *Christianity Today* article reports that fully “29 percent of Republicans and 27 percent of white evangelicals—the most of any religious group—believe the widely debunked QAnon conspiracy theory is completely or mostly accurate” (Jenkins 2021). A later article relates how activists against sex-trafficking, including former victims, sometimes struggle to communicate the real facts about the problem when sections of the audience reject what doesn't line up with the conspiracy theory.

What myth-believing Christians don't want to hear is Dewees's experience as a trafficking survivor. When her experiences don't match what they've read on the internet, some trust the internet rather than the survivor in front of them. (Fowler 2022)

Undermining public health

Coordinated national and international responses to science have struggled with the weight of disinformation shared in recent years. Douglas (2021) summarises recent studies showing, among other things:

- Theories about climate change conspiracies by scientists are politically effective. “Specifically, people who read about climate change conspiracy theories felt powerless, uncertain, and disillusioned, and were in turn less inclined to take climate action.” (p.4)
- Climate change conspiracies correlate with other forms of science denial. (p.4)
- Conspiracy theory believers “were less likely to trust medical professionals and were more likely to look elsewhere (e.g., alternative medicines) for treatment”. In a 2020 study, “belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories in the U.S. was associated with lower perceived threat of the pandemic, less likelihood of taking preventive action (e.g., wearing a mask), and refusal of a vaccine if one became available.” Curiously, “‘hoax’ conspiracy theories in particular predicted refusal of preventive behaviors, but conspiracy beliefs that the virus is a bioweapon were associated with more self-centered prepping behavior.” (p.4)



Institutional distrust strips away a basic sense that one is protected from exploitation, thus reducing trust between strangers, which is at the core of functioning societies.

(van Prooijen)

2. Important terms and concepts

- **Agonism.** A political theory that accepts a place for conflict and struggle but tries to channel it constructively toward good outcomes. Democracy, for example, is a system of political competition that allows regime change without violence.
- **Collective narcissism.** Groups which believe that they deserve special recognition, or resent not receiving it, are more likely to believe in conspiracies against them.
- **Confirmation bias.** The human tendency to consciously and unconsciously favour information we already believe. We seek information we agree with, we interpret it in ways that suit our existing views, and we better remember things that we agreed with. High intelligence does **not** protect us against confirmation bias; rather, it helps us find better reasons for what we already think, including the belief that bias is something that happens to other people. Countering confirmation bias is a skill and a discipline, not a function of intelligence.
- **‘Conspiracy theories are for losers.’** Joseph Uscinski has argued that conspiracy theories have historically appeared as groups lost social prestige, power, or preeminence.
- **Conspirituality.** The convergence of conspiracy theories and wellness or spirituality movements.
- **Dot connectors.** Conspiracy theory influencers must undermine *Epistemic authorities* while establishing themselves as sources of *Counterknowledge*, or as a counter-elite, without triggering the backlash against elites that they are otherwise encouraging. They do so by presenting themselves as ‘dot connectors’ for independent thinkers; people with the broadest range of sources and materials, who allow you to “do your own research”. Examples: Alex Jones, David Icke. (Robertson 2018)
- **Echo chamber.** A news or social media environment in which we only hear the ideas we already hold reflected back to us. Rush Limbaugh pitting conservative talkback radio against ‘mainstream’ media in the 1990s created a news echo chamber in this sense in the United States. (Compare *Filter bubble*.)
- **Elite.** The small number of people who have a disproportionately large influence over government, business, technology, and media; from C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite* (1958). When *Populist* movements become anti-intellectual, the elite is seen to include experts as well as authorities.
- **Epistemic sorting.** The process of organising ourselves into groups that mostly agree with each other. (See *Echo chamber*, *Filter bubble*)
- **Filter bubble.** The combination of self-selection and algorithmic selection that shows each of us a highly personalised internet, which in turn affects our perception of the world. Online *Echo chambers* can be understood as the social phenomenon of similar, overlapping filter-bubbles.



High intelligence does *not* protect us against confirmation bias; rather, it helps us find better reasons for what we already think, including the belief that bias is something that happens to other people. Countering confirmation bias is a skill and a discipline, not a function of intelligence.

- **Infodemic.** By analogy to the COVID pandemic, the parallel public health danger arising from the spread of medical misinformation.
- **Mediatisation.** Conspiracy theories seem unusually prevalent at the present time. But it is also argued – including by analogy with how religion has gained a higher media profile as it has numerically declined – that conspiracy theories may only be more ‘mediatised’ through internet and media coverage. This is unresolved (Dryendal 2018, p.529). We will suppose that, while human predispositions may be constant, trends like **Polarisation** and **Populism** are pushing conspiratorial thinking into public life.
- **Partisanship.** Prejudice in favour of a particular cause.
- **Populism.** The claim to represent the virtuous ordinary people in a political and economic conflict with a corrupt *Elite*. Conspiracy theories correlate with populism. There can be left and right wing populisms, though they differ in some ways:

attitudes of supporters of one of the Democratic candidates, Bernie Sanders, were very strong in anti-elite sentiment – more so than supporters of the Republican candidate, Trump. Trump supporters, on the other hand, exhibited a stronger distrust of experts compared to Sanders supporters. (Stecula and Pickup 2016, p.4)

- **Producerism.** A right-wing variation of *Populism* that sets the economically productive middle class against those above *and* below it, seen as not producing anything.
- **Pseudolaw.** By analogy to pseudoscience, a set of legal-sounding statements that are not legally correct. Examples: 1) the United States’ Sovereign Citizen movement’s argument that individuals are not bound by laws they disagree with; 2) some anti-vaccination group’s claims that masks or lockdowns are ‘unconstitutional’.
- **Sectarianism.** A group’s distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism, whether considered against society or against other groups.
- **‘Spiral of Silence.’** The theory of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann that, because people fear isolation, those who believe their position is in the minority will say less, while those who believe their position is the majority will say more. Those saying more seem more dominant, and those saying less will seem less so, creating a spiral.
- **Truthiness (Social Media).** When we encounter new information we want to know: Is it compatible with other things I know? Is it internally consistent? Does it come from a credible source? Do other people believe it? Is there supporting evidence? We process information intuitively at the first pass, and only analytically if we think we need to do more mental work on our first impression. But intuitive thinking takes shortcuts. Information will feel intuitively true if it flows smoothly, feels familiar (especially if we have heard it repeatedly), if there is a photograph attached (Greifeneder 2021, ch.5–6), and if some supporting evidence comes to mind without having to be actively sought.

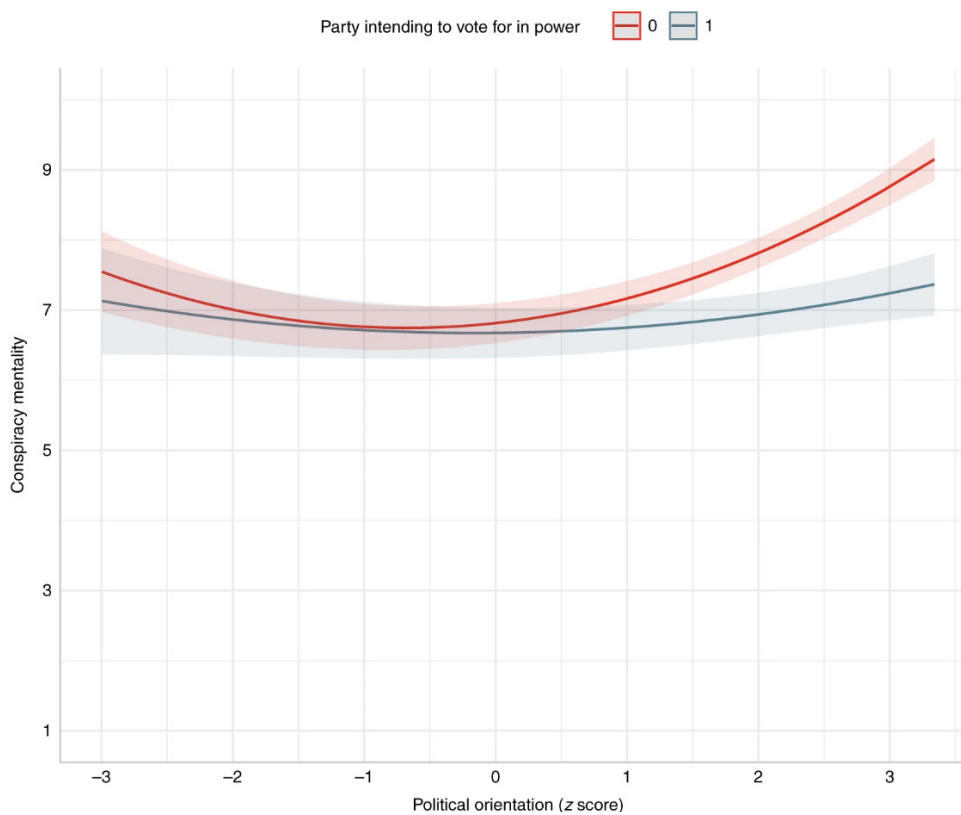
2.a. The decade in conspiracy theories

In Part One we listed ten ‘classic’ conspiracy theories from a 2018 book, things like Chemtrails and the JFK assassination. The list feels comparatively quaint only four years later. Few people’s families, friendships, or churches are being disrupted by moon landing deniers or flat earthers, nor have ideas like these threatened aspects of public life in major democracies. Concerns about ‘Big Pharma’ have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, but only because of a larger trend: that conspiracism has become political, and politics, conspiratorial.

- Right wing or left wing?
- Social media since 2009

Right wing or left wing?

Conspiracism is strongest on the political extremes, is more common when out of political power, and has a moderately stronger association with the extreme right than the extreme left. A recent study of 100,000 total respondents across 26 countries captures these three relationships in a single graph:



Conspiracy mentality as a function of linear and quadratic political orientation, inclusion of party intending to vote for in government (0=no, 1=yes) and their interaction in study 1 (N=25,910) with predicted 95% confidence interval. (Imhoff et al 2022)



Conspiracism is strongest on the political extremes, is more common when out of political power, and has a moderately stronger association with the extreme right than the extreme left.

The United States far right before Trump was already highly conspiracist. A *Salon* article by Mark Potok and Don Terry in 2015 listed 10 influential right-wing conspiracy theories at that time, each with quotes from right-wing media figures or GOP officials. Note that these are primarily political conspiracy theories.

1. the Common Core State Standards in education are political indoctrination
2. the Jade Helm 15 military exercises were a prelude to invoking martial law
3. the United Nations' Agenda 21 program was "a comprehensive plan of utopian environmentalism, social engineering, and global political control"
4. the North American Union will merge Canada, the United States, and Mexico into a single nation
5. Sharia law (i.e. Islamic religious law) is being implemented in American court-rooms
6. the government is planning to seize privately owned firearms
7. the Federal Emergency Management Agency has built hundreds of concentration camps across the United States
8. international Jewish bankers are manipulating economic events in the United States
9. there are Muslim terrorist training camps scattered across the United States
10. campaigns for LGBT rights are a campaign to control and marginalise Christians.

However, with the Trump Presidency, we saw a "mainstreaming of the fringe", as conspiracy theories were employed on an ongoing basis by a successful candidate. The Wikipedia page 'List of conspiracy theories promoted by Donald Trump' includes:

1. Barack Obama was born overseas and so is disqualified from office (and similarly, Kamala Harris)
2. Trump opponents Bill and Hillary Clinton have had various political associates murdered; and Trump critic Joe Scarborough murdered an intern
3. the Obama administration spied on the Trump campaign, including by wiretapping Trump Tower
4. the 2016 Ohio Caucus, which Trump lost to Ted Cruz, was rigged against him; he won the popular vote in 2016; the 2020 election was stolen from him through several kinds of elaborate fraud ('Italygate'; voter suppression; vote-switching)
5. a 'Deep State' is opposing him from within the government
6. Ukraine (not Russia, as intelligence agencies were saying) had interfered in the 2016 US election
7. Death tolls from COVID-19 and Hurricane Maria were overcounted to make him look bad

8. Vaccines cause autism; wind turbines cause cancer; Global warming is a hoax
9. Syrian refugees are terrorists; the Mexican government sends criminals to the United States as migrants.
10. Trump has also tweeted support for QAnon and public conspiracists such as Alex Jones, best known now for his claims that school shootings were ‘false flag’ operations meant to increase support for gun control.

The political left tend toward well-being and anti-corporate themes in conspiracy theories, and by having more minority support, inherit more of their suspicion of government. They believe things that reflect badly on the right (e.g. The Steele Dossier, now largely discredited), although that occurs in both directions. When the South Australian Liberal senator Alex Antic wrote ‘The left are the real conspiracy theorists’ (*The Spectator*, August 2020), he offered anti-Zionism (including anti-Semitism in the UK Labour party), anti-vaccination, and anti-GMO movements as examples. Michel Gagné, in his 2022 book on the JFK assassination, considers it a left-leaning theory: that the military-industrial complex killed a socially reforming president (Gagné 2022, Author’s preface).

Social media since 2009

In parallel with the politicisation of conspiracy theories, changes in the nature of the internet have boosted their popularity. In an April 2022 article in *The Atlantic*, Jonathan Haidt wrote about the heady early promise of the open and egalitarian internet, compared it unfavourably with the present state of political polarisation, and asked “What happened?” He holds that “there is a direction to history and it is toward cooperation at larger scales,” but for the internet, he considers 2011 was its high point, when Google Translate and the Arab Spring appeared.

Social scientists have identified at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories. Social media has weakened all three. To see how, we must understand how social media changed over time—and especially in the several years following 2009.

He uses the analogy of the Tower of Babel, to describe a people whose language has been confused so that they can no longer communicate. Haidt dates our tower’s fall to between 2011 and 2015, ending with the “great awakening” and cancel culture on the left and the ascendancy of Donald Trump and conspiracy theories on the right. We will follow just the conspiracy thread here. Haidt writes:

Trump did not destroy the tower; he merely exploited its fall. He was the first politician to master the new dynamics of the post-Babel era, in which outrage is the key to virality, stage performance crushes competence, Twitter can overpower all the newspapers in



Social scientists have identified at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories. Social media has weakened all three.

(Haidt)

the country, and stories cannot be shared (or at least trusted) across more than a few adjacent fragments [of society] – so truth cannot achieve widespread adherence.

Haidt contends that the critical shift in the Internet occurred between 2009 and 2012, when Like and Share/Retweet buttons were added to Facebook and Twitter, and then used to filter busy newsfeeds by predicting what users would like to see, or at least would react to, and so, what would drive engagement with their platforms. Among the points relevant to our topic:

1. “Later research showed that posts that trigger emotions – especially anger at out-groups – are the most likely to be shared.” What was good for engagement was immediate, unconsidered responses; what the founding father James Madison called “the turbulence and weakness of unruly passions.” Haidt cites Madison’s reflections on how to protect against factional discord in the early Union of the United States (The Federalist Papers No.10, 1787):

A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.

Haidt writes: “The tech companies that enhanced virality from 2009 to 2012 brought us deep into Madison’s nightmare.”

2. Martin Gurri, a former CIA analyst, suggested in 2014 that the single gigantic mirror that the mass media had once held up to the public had been shattered into millions of tiny shards:

So the public isn’t one thing; it’s highly fragmented, and it’s basically mutually hostile. It’s mostly people yelling at each other and living in bubbles of one sort or another.

3. This raised the profile of trolls...

Across eight studies, Bor and Petersen found that being online did not make most people more aggressive or hostile; rather, it allowed a small number of aggressive people to attack a much larger set of victims. Even a small number of jerks were able to dominate discussion forums, Bor and



So strong is this propensity of man-kind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.

(Madison)

Petersen found, because nonjerks are easily turned off from online discussions of politics.

4. ...as well as raising the profile of political extremes. Haidt quotes the *Hidden Tribes* study (2018), which categorised 6% of the United States as 'devoted conservatives', and 8% as 'progressive activists'. They are the whitest and richest of internet users, they share the most political content, and they attack their own groups, enforcing a homogeneity of opinion.

The "Hidden Tribes" study tells us that the "devoted conservatives" score highest on beliefs related to authoritarianism. They share a narrative in which America is eternally under threat from enemies outside and subversives within; they see life as a battle between patriots and traitors. According to the political scientist Karen Stenner, whose work the "Hidden Tribes" study drew upon, they are psychologically different from the larger group of "traditional conservatives" (19 percent of the population), who emphasize order, decorum, and slow rather than radical change.

Only within the 'devoted conservatives' narratives do Donald Trump's speeches make sense, from his campaign's ominous opening diatribe about Mexican "rapists" to his warning on January 6, 2021: "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

5. Filter bubbles supercharged confirmation bias to an unprecedented degree, so that people increasingly lived in disconnected news universes, which crowded out other perspectives.
6. Highly believable disinformation drove much of the polarisation that followed. But where old-style disinformation tried to present a coherent narrative favourable to its sponsors, the new style viewed media itself as the enemy and aimed to "flood the zone with sh**", in Breitbart founder Steven Bannon's crudely programmatic phrase. The tactic of simply exhausting the finite attention of the public under a "firehose of falsehood", and disillusioning them with even the possibility of truth is a Russian propaganda practice going back to the 1980s. This erodes trust in democracy.

It's not just the waste of time and scarce attention that matters; it's the continual chipping-away of trust. An autocracy can deploy propaganda or use fear to motivate the behaviors it desires, but a democracy depends on widely internalized acceptance of the legitimacy of rules, norms, and institutions. Blind and irrevocable trust in any particular individual or organization is never warranted. But when citizens lose trust in elected leaders, health authorities, the courts, the police, universities, and the integrity of elections, then every decision becomes contested; every election becomes a life-and-death struggle to save the country from the other side.

7. Because highly believable disinformation can now be computer-generated, and since this capacity will increase over time, it will soon be possible to deploy false information on a functionally infinite scale. This will lead to Web 3.0, which will need to find disincentives for running accounts that seem to be human but are not.

2.b. Mainstream knowledge

To understand the implications of conspiracy theories' rejection of western society's institutions of public knowledge, we should quickly ask: What exactly is being rejected or defended when 'mainstream knowledge' is discussed?

In *The Constitution of Knowledge* (2021), Jonathan Rauch draws a long analogy between the Constitution of the United States and the practices and institutions that reliably create public knowledge in modern western societies. These include scholarship (including science and research), journalism, government, and the judiciary – what he terms the 'reality-based community' that forms the pillars of liberal democracies. We will quote from Rauch at considerable length in order to set up a comparison with Christian conspiratorial thought.

Rauch begins by outlining many of the well-known problems with human rationality – cognitive biases, motivated reasoning, and group identity – especially as recent study has brought them into sharper focus (see Part Four). These lead him to his starting question:

Given humans' innate tribal wiring; given our natural facility for hypocrisy and self-serving belief; given our many cognitive biases and our need to conform: how, then, could we possibly have created the advanced and generally peaceful world we occupy? How is it that the reality-based community not only exists but has gone from triumph to triumph? If anything is striking about the modern age in advanced democracies, it is how rare creed wars are, not how common. (ch.2)

By 'creed wars' he mainly means the devastating post-Reformation wars in Europe (mainly 1522–1648 CE), out of which economic, political, and epistemological liberalism were born. A set of thinkers proposed that humanity's competitive and often destructive traits could be **guided by rules** that made them serve cooperative purposes. He begins with Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), seemingly because the application of the idea to economics is easiest to grasp:

True, humans are also greedy and ambitious; yet – here is Smith's most famous insight – a well-structured social order can harness those very traits to promote activity which benefits ourselves by benefiting others. If we get the rules right, millions of people of every imaginable skill and temperament and nationality can cooperate to build a fantastically complex device like a Prius or iPhone, all without the oversight or instruction of any central planner. If we get the rules right.

By ‘getting the rules right’ Rauch means the broad outlines of economic liberalism. He is alert to its many criticisms, but emphasises its big-picture gains:

.... Although Smith did not invent markets, he notated the code which enabled a tribal primate, wired for personal relationships in small, usually related groups, to cooperate impersonally across unbounded networks of strangers, and to do so without any central authority organizing markets and issuing commands. Economic liberalism – market cooperation – is a species-transforming piece of social software, one which enables humans to function far above our designed capacity. (ch.2)

Rauch then draws parallels with political and epistemological liberalism using John Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) and *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), from about a century earlier. Locke was the first to bring together the following ideas:

- *Natural rights*. Especially regarding life, liberty, property: “rules which all other persons and also sovereigns and governments are bound to accept”
- *Rule by consent*. “Governments are not instituted by a divine right to rule the people, they are instituted by the people to enforce natural rights”
- *Toleration*. “Force cannot save souls because it cannot change hearts, and even if it could, force cannot be relied upon to discern religious truths”

Choosing the right rules had compounding advantages for political liberalism:

Natural rights, popular sovereignty, and toleration together make up something larger than the sum of the parts. Impersonal rules, neutrally applied; limited government, accountable to the people; pluralism of belief, and government which protects rather than persecutes dissent: the elements of modern liberalism are all there, although elaborating and applying them would be the work of centuries.

Locke then applied these ideas to epistemology as well: the justification of beliefs. Certain problems recur in human understanding: “All men are liable to error, and most men are in many points, by passion or interest, under temptation to it,” he wrote. “Good men are men still liable to mistakes and are sometimes warmly engaged in errors, which they take for divine truths, shining in their minds with the clearest light.” Rauch sees two primary rules in epistemological liberalism that counter these problems:

1. *The fallibilist rule* – “No one gets the final say. You may claim that a statement is established as knowledge only if it can be debunked, in principle, and only insofar as it withstands attempts to debunk



Good men are men still liable to mistakes and are sometimes warmly engaged in errors, which they take for divine truths, shining in their minds with the clearest light.

(Locke)

it.” In other words, all knowledge is provisional, and “being open to all criticism requires humility and forbearance and toleration.”

2. *The empirical rule* – “No one has personal authority. You may claim that a statement has been established as knowledge only insofar as the method used to check it gives the same result regardless of the identity of the checker, and regardless of the source of the statement.” (ch.3)

This protects individual freedoms, but also imposes individual obligations:

By protecting criticism and dethroning authority, both rules protect freedom of expression. But both also impose stringent obligations on anyone who purports to advance knowledge. You have to check your own claims and subject them to contestation from others; you have to tolerate the competing claims of others; you have to accept that your own certainty counts for nothing; you have to forswear claiming that your god, your experience, your intuition, or your group is epistemically privileged; you have to defend the exclusive legitimacy of liberal science even (in fact, especially) when you think it is wrong or unfair.

A range of values orbit around these, the most important saying that progress is made by communities and institutions, and human knowledge resides in such communities rather than in individuals. Rauch quotes Michael Polanyi to say:

Scientific opinion is an opinion not held by any single human mind, but one which, split into thousands of fragments, is held by a multitude of individuals, each of whom endorses the others’ opinion at second hand, by relying on the consensual chains which link him to all the others through a sequence of overlapping neighborhoods.

This all means that claims to knowledge must **persuade**, and human knowledge is the set of claims that have done so. Academic journals are where such persuasion is attempted, and their total number is a measure of the rate at which knowledge is advancing. By 2010, that number was 24,000.

Rauch’s primary claim is that liberalism – setting these kinds of ‘rules’ to channel human freedom in productive directions – has been enormously successful, whether in our economics, politics, or epistemology. He quotes Lee MacIntyre’s *The Scientific Attitude* on the changes that occurred when this was first applied to medicine in the late 1800s and early 1900s:

“For all its progress, medicine was not yet a science,” writes MacIntyre. All kinds of cranks claimed to be doctors; practices and training were haphazard and unscientific; practitioners based their work on hunches and anecdotes; folk medicine and lay healing were standard treatments; the number of drugs which actually worked could be counted on the fingers of two hands. Yet a few decades into the twentieth century, medicine was recognizably a science and breakthroughs came at a dizzying pace: penicillin and cortisone in the 1940s; streptomycin, open-heart surgery, and

polio vaccine in the 1950s; kidney transplantation in the 1960s; chemotherapy, in vitro fertilization, and angioplasty in the 1970s; and much more. When a frightening new disease appeared in the early 1980s, identifying the human immunodeficiency virus took less than two years, and developing a life-saving treatment took less than two decades—a mobilization of intellectual resources whose scale and efficacy would beggar the imaginations of all earlier generations of humans.

What caused this transformation? For McIntyre, it was that professional societies provided standards and accountability for practice:

The Federation of State Medical Boards and the American Medical Association set practice guidelines which acquired something akin to the force of law; medical schools instituted rigorous scientific curricula; professional journals and networks culled and disseminated the latest research; professional associations held doctors accountable for using up-to-date research. “Once physicians started to think of themselves as a profession rather than a band of individual practitioners, things began to happen,” writes McIntyre. “They read one another’s work. They scrutinized one another’s practices.... As a growing majority of practitioners embraced the scientific attitude, the scrutiny of individual ideas became more common ... and scientific medicine was born.” Instead of relying on hunch and anecdote, researchers could scrutinize treatments, discard the ineffective ones, and develop the promising ones.

Such ideas extended beyond science and medicine into journalism, government, and the judiciary, as they adopted rules about fallibility and empiricism:

The American Society of Newspaper Editors was founded in 1922, and its first order of business was to promulgate an ethics code. “By every consideration of good faith a newspaper is constrained to be truthful,” the code said. “It is not to be excused for lack of thoroughness or accuracy within its control.” The code called for distinguishing between news and opinion, and for soliciting a response from anyone whose “reputation or moral character” might be impugned in print. ... And – here a formulation which would make Locke, Peirce, and Popper smile – “it is the privilege, as it is the duty, of a newspaper to make prompt and complete correction of its own serious mistakes of fact or opinion, whatever their origin.” Those two words, “the privilege,” speak volumes; to news professionals, correcting errors should be a point of pride, a distinguishing and defining feature of the culture.

Rauch quotes Benkler, Faris and Roberts’s *Network Propaganda* (2018), in which they studied two stories about United States politicians. In one Donald Trump was accused of raping a thirteen-year old girl; in the other, Bill and Hillary Clinton were accused of involvement in a paedophile ring.

When observing right-wing conspiracy theories, we saw positive feedback loops between the core of that network – composed of

Fox News, leading Republican pundits, and Breitbart – and the remainder of the online right-wing network. In those cases we saw repetition, amplification, and circling of the wagons to criticize other media outlets when these exposed the errors and failures of the story. By contrast, the mainstream media ecosystem exhibited intensive competition to hold each other to high journalistic standards, and a repeated pattern of rapid removal of content, correction, and in several cases disciplining of the reporters involved. Moreover, in none of these cases did we find more than a smattering of repetition and amplification of the claims once retracted.

One of these news networks had a ‘positive epistemic valence’, so that it tended to winnow out falsehoods, while the other had a negative epistemic valence, and tended to retain and even amplify them. These examples of epistemic liberalism illustrate not only how we have come to have the public knowledge that we do, but how we *should* do so. Rauch depicts these ‘reality-based networks’ as funnels, which accept many candidates for knowledge at the wide end – he connects this to the need for free speech – but then filters them through disproof or, more commonly, through neglect, should they simply fail to persuade the network as a whole. This brings us to his key statement:

If we care about knowledge, freedom, and peace, then we need to stake a strong claim: anyone can believe anything, but liberal science – **open-ended, depersonalized checking by an error-seeking social network** – is the only legitimate validator of knowledge, at least in the reality-based community. Other communities, of course, can do all kinds of other things. But they cannot make social decisions about objective reality.

That is a very bold, very broad, very tough claim, and it goes down very badly with lots of people and communities who feel ignored or oppressed by the Constitution of Knowledge: creationists, Christian Scientists [i.e. members of The First Church of Christ, Scientist], homeopaths, astrologists, flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers, birthers, 9/11 truthers, postmodern professors, political partisans, QAnon followers, and adherents of any number of other belief systems and religions. It also sits uncomfortably with the populist and dogmatic tempers of our time.

We think Rauch offers a fair if brief representation of how the institutions of public knowledge function in western societies, and the ideals they purport to follow. The question for Christians, conspiracists, populists (more on them shortly), and especially people who combine all these identities, is whether we should agree that this is the right way to produce the kind of information on which public decisions depend.

Conspiracists may object that the notion of an ‘error-correcting network’ is naive and does not take account of corporate influence, political corruption, or self-interest. However these systems, and their values, and their checks and balances, were built precisely in response to scandals and failings in all those areas. So to reject the ‘mainstream’ institutions of knowledge, it must be argued 1) that their inbuilt checks

“

If we care about knowledge, freedom, and peace, then we need to stake a strong claim: anyone can believe anything, but liberal science – open-ended, depersonalized checking by an error-seeking social network – is the only legitimate validator of knowledge...

and balances are failing and that 2) conspiracism is a better path to knowledge than simply strengthening their independence, accountability, and transparency.

Christians may object that some of Rauch's terms and concepts sound anti-Christian. Rauch is a secularised Jew and self-described atheist who, among other convictions, considers Hume's argument against belief in miracles to be conclusive. He uses the term 'reality-based community' for those working in the kind of "open-ended, depersonalised, error-checking network" that characterises good science or journalism. However, he also rejects scientism, noting that most scientists are some kind of believer, and that an exemplary scientist like Francis Collins appears in no way handicapped by being a Christian. He appears to limit his procedure to finding common public facts about the world as a basis for agreed collective action.

This appears broadly compatible with the idea that God created a perfectly lawful and consistent world, equally accessible to everyone, which is good and exists for humanity's benefit. It resembles **soft secularity**, the ideal of a neutral public square in which no set of beliefs is privileged over another. This is more-or-less the system of toleration that Locke built on originally Christian foundations as a response to political-religious conflict. The alternatives to such a system are that non-religious people will have authority over religious people (hard secularity), or vice-versa (some kind of theocracy). If we believe in soft secularity, then can any factual decision in public life depend on something other than publicly available information, or be decided by any process other than open, factual persuasion?

3. Polarisation: Conspiracies by enemies

We have already described the effects of the past decade and of the internet on the rise of conspiracy theories. We will now describe two political trends in more detail – polarisation and populism – and see how they contribute to conspiracism in society.

Polarisation is the process of becoming ever more sharply divided. Social or economic polarisation happens when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Political polarisation happens when political processes are jammed by an inability to cooperate. This has two aspects:

1. *Ideological polarisation*. A shrinking 'common good' shared between political platforms; and a decreasing number of moderates and bridge-builders in the major parties
2. *Affective polarisation*. An increasing mistrust and dislike between politically affiliated people

Polarisation is unusually high in the United States for reasons not shared by other nations.

[A] distinctive and perhaps even unique feature of U.S. polarization is the powerful alignment of ethnicity, ideology, and religion on

each side of the divide – what we call the “iron triangle” of U.S. polarization. In most other countries, just one or two of those three identity divisions is at the root of polarization; in the United States, all three are. As a result, America’s polarization is unusually encompassing and sharp. (O’Donahue 2020)

This has increased in the past few years, for partly demographic reasons:

Polarization is a 30 year cultural trend, according to sociologists and political scientists. When Bill Clinton beat George H. W. Bush in the 1992 presidential election, a little more than a third of Americans lived in “landslide counties,” where one of the two candidates won more than 70 percent of the vote. In 2016, when Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton, more than 6 out of 10 Americans lived in landslide counties. Most people lived surrounded by people who thought just like they did, “clustering,” as sociologist Bill Bishop wrote in *The Big Sort*, “in communities of like-mindedness.” (ibid.)

Two important dimensions of this polarisation are:

- Filter bubbles and echo chambers
- Misinformation and disinformation

Filter bubbles and echo chambers

Eli Pariser coined the term *filter bubble* in 2011 for the form of online echo chambers in which everyone receives an individualised world of information. It is an example of an epistemic bubble, in which knowledge is mutually shared and reinforced. A more recent study considers echo chambers to be a product of multiple overlapping filter bubbles.

Filter bubbles are defined here as an individual outcome of different processes of information search, perception, selection, and remembering, the sum of which causes individual users to receive from the universe of available information only a tailored selection that fits their pre-existing attitudes. On the societal level, individuals tend to share a common social media bubble with like-minded friends; over time, such communities in which Internet content that confirms certain ideologies is echoed from all sides are particularly prone to processes of group radicalization and polarization; this phenomenon has come to be known as the echo chamber effect. Thus, echo chambers are a social phenomenon where the filter bubbles of interacting individuals strongly overlap. The dangers of a society falling apart into distinct echo chambers can be described as a lack of society-wide consensus and a lack of at least some shared beliefs among otherwise disagreeing people that are needed for processes of democratic decision-making. (Geschke 2019)

The Royal Society, with Oxford University and the Reuters Institute, published a 2022 paper on the Online Information Environment as it affects

science communication. Similarly to Pariser, they define echo chambers as having two primary qualities:

[Echo chambers are] what Jamieson and Capella in their influential book *Echo Chamber* defined as “a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both **magnify** the messages delivered within it and **insulate** them from rebuttal” (2008, p.76). The magnification part is typically taken to be a preponderance of attitude-consistent information (e.g., people on the left seeking out information that reinforces their pre-existing views) and the insulation part about the absence of cross-cutting exposure (e.g., people on the right not coming across centrist or leftwing perspectives that challenge their pre-existing views). (RS 2022)

The internet, as noted by Haidt (above), greatly accelerated the process of epistemic sorting whereby we organise ourselves into groups with similar beliefs.

Misinformation and disinformation

A video that circulated in Canada in the early days of the pandemic showed a crisply-attired and professional-looking man sitting in his lounge room, commenting on the pandemic. Against the trend of minimisation, he overstated its danger by claiming that repeat infections were always fatal. It turned out that he had no medical qualifications, but the video was viewed two million times in only a few days. A journalist for the *Montreal Gazette* commented on the disproportionate effort of making disinformation compared to verifying it:

He makes all kinds of different claims. I had to check every single one of them. I had to call relevant experts and talk to them. I had to transcribe those interviews. I had to write a text that is legible and interesting to read. It's madness. **It took this guy 15 minutes to make his video and it took me three days to fact-check.** (Feith 2022)

Like rumours, and the forest on fire in James 3, misinformation spreads faster and wider than corrections. In the paper mentioned above, the Royal Society identified four kinds of misinformation actors:

1. *Good Samaritans* – who think it's real information and are trying to help
2. *Profiteers* – who gain some personal advantage by producing information that they either know to be false or at least are not concerned to verify
3. *Coordinated influence operators* – who are working to sway public opinion for the benefit of their organisation, industry, or government
4. *Attention hackers* (trolls) – who enjoy sharing outlandish or divisive content.

The Good Samaritans are presumably those we will most likely encounter in churches. Good Samaritans should not, however, be assessed purely as consumers of misinformation:

By heightening political polarization, attacking established institutions, and fueling social mistrust, propagandists can make a portion of the public not only receptive to disinformation but eager to pitch in and help manufacture it. “A great deal if not all the time,” writes the psychologist and law professor Dan Kahan, “misinformation is not something that happens to the mass public but rather something that its members are complicit in producing.” Far from blindly following what they are told, believers are convinced they are conducting their own rigorous investigations, that they will be the last to be fooled. Conspiracy theories like the ones about the 2020 election and the COVID-19 pandemic “are profoundly participatory disinformation campaigns,” as the University of Washington’s Kate Starbird told a Lawfare interviewer. “It is both top-down and bottom-up. At times elites and political operatives set the agenda, but the online crowd or the audiences help generate the narratives and piece together the evidence. So it’s this two-way relationship.” (Rauch 2021, p.183)

Profiteers have included the burgeoning fake-news businesses in Veles in Macedonia (Hughes 2021) that targeted US audiences. Coordinated influence operators include the Internet Research Agency in St Petersburg (Ball 2019). Christians are specifically targeted by each kind of campaign. Facebook documents leaked in 2021 showed that 19 out of 20 of the top US Christian pages on Facebook in 2019 were run from Eastern European countries. Jeff Allen, a former senior-level data scientist at Facebook, wrote in an internal report:

[Facebook] has given the largest voice in the Christian American community to a handful of bad actors, who, based on their media production practices, have never been to church... (Hao 2021)

‘Attention hackers’ (trolls) will also be found in Christian social media channels. Their behaviour is usually unambiguously anti-Christian, and this should be pointed out. (The relevant Christian ethics will be discussed in Part Three; and we suggest referring them to that document.)

4. Populism: Conspiracies by elites

Polarisation is only one aspect of modern conspiratorial politics. Another that carries at least as much weight is populism, which, almost by definition, believes in a conspiracy against ordinary people by a class of ‘elites’. Most parts of the world have some kind of populism, and it is not limited to the political left or right. Right-wing nationalist populism predominates in Europe, but left-wing socialist populism predominates in Latin and Central America. The Democrat Bernie Sanders and the Republican Donald Trump were both populists in the 2016 United States Presidential



Far from blindly following what they are told, believers are convinced they are conducting their own rigorous investigations, that they will be the last to be fooled.

Election cycle, though Trump's movement displayed a wider range of characteristically populist qualities.

Exploiting a large “representation gap,” Donald Trump has enjoyed a ripe opportunity to make a strong populist claim to the presidency. Trump capitalized on this by employing a rhetoric that is distinctive in its simplicity, anti-elitism, and high degree of collectivist language. Trump's supporters echo these sentiments, exhibiting a unique combination of anti-expertise, anti-elitism, and pronationalism. Unlike supporters of the other “populist,” Bernie Sanders, Trump's supporters are also distinctive in their high levels of conspiratorial thinking, nativism, and economic insecurity. (Oliver and Rahn 2016, p.2)

So to understand conspiracy theories in western society, we need to understand populism. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017) offers three partly-competing understandings of the term: as an ideology (Cas Mudde, ch.2), as a political strategy (Kurt Weyland, ch.3), and as a social and cultural expression of ‘low’ society (Pierre Ostiguy, ch.4).

Pure Ideology

The ideological approach to populism is the most common, possibly because of its definitional clarity. It understands public life as a contest between “the people” and “the elites”. The idea of a social elite is not unique to populism, but it understands the elite in a distinctive way. In saying that the people are virtuous or authentic, while the elite are corrupt, it draws a *moral* distinction between them. The elite would be pure and authentic if they carried out “the will of the people”, as supposedly expressed through populist leaders. But populists say they do not.

In populism, “the people” are a single, homogeneous group. They are a “heartland,” an “idealised conception of the community” (think of “real Americans” or “quiet Australians”). This must reflect a popular national self-image if it is to appeal to voters, but the image can be largely symbolic or idealised. Most importantly, the idea of a homogeneous people leads to the idea that they have a homogeneous will. The voice of the people will be “common sense”, and anyone who opposes it will be seen as devious. Common-sense will be seen as “non-political”, or only reluctantly so. In contrast, the voice of the elite will be the “special interests” of a “political class”. If the people are homogeneous, then special interest groups are artificial or irrelevant to their interests. Populism's opposites, then, are not just elitism, but also pluralism. On both counts it is opposed to the norms of western liberal democracies: although it is strongly participatory, it doesn't respect rules, division of powers, or the autonomy of state bodies. They all obstruct the sovereign will of the people, as represented by their leader. If it gains power, populism may pursue a *majoritarianism* that rules primarily for its followers – the authentic people – and not for all of society (e.g. the BJP in India).

Political Strategy

Because “populist movements are notorious for not espousing a clear, systematic, well-defined ideology” (Weyland, ch.3) they are also analysed as a style of speaking, and a “top-down political strategy rather than a bottom-up mass movement.” The leader demonstrates popular support through rallies and polls, and pursues a “constant mobilisation” of their followers toward a “heroic mission such as refounding the country or combatting dangerous enemies.” Thus populism is a performative kind of “opportunistic personalism,” by which the leader directly appeals to the masses. This typically involves grand and sweeping announcements, many of which will remain unrealised.

Low Society

A socio-cultural approach to populism (Ostiguy, ch.4) identifies ‘high’ and ‘low’ elements in society and culture. The ‘high’ are polished, rational, and cosmopolitan. The ‘low’ are raw, coarse, and very much “from here.” The high want the formalities that go with the rule of law; the low want direct action, not more bureaucrats. The high are procedural in the pursuit of fairness; the low value personality and immediacy. The ‘low’ is an “unspeakable other” that “provokes shame or embarrassment for ‘decent’, ‘politically correct’, ‘proper’ or ‘well-educated’ people” (think of Hillary Clinton’s ‘deplorable’ remark). Populism is “**the flaunting of the low.**” It is performative and transgressive because it delights in offending the ‘high’ and mighty. The low are “a silent majority”, a “repressed truth,” or “previously excluded social sectors”. Populism is a loud, proud, recognition of identity – “an antagonistic appropriation of an ‘unspeakable other’ who opposes a ‘proper’ civilizational project”. For Ostiguy, defining ‘the people’ as virtuous is more relevant to western populism than other kinds. In South America, some populists count criminal elements as followers. So he prefers to say ‘authentic’.

There is a majority of people (individuals) of “the people” (the pueblo), the most “typically from here,” whose authentic voice is not heard, and whose true interests are not safeguarded. They face a three-way coalition, comprised of [1] a nefarious, resented minority (the object of greatest hatred and not necessarily the elite) at odds with “the people”; [2] hostile (and very powerful) global/international forces; and [3] a government in line with the resented minority. This situation is a source of moral indignation. These highly generic categories are filled in the most diverse ways. That nefarious minority can be the oligarchy, the Jews, a socially dominant ethnic minority, the financial sector, immigrants, the liberal elite, white colonizers, or black minorities, depending on the casting of the social antagonist. The empirical set of powerful, allied global/international forces is more limited, but nonetheless diverse: American imperialism, an international Jewish conspiracy, global capitalism, global finance, Soviet infiltration, global migration, European colonialism, and now perhaps even “Europe”

(or its “Eurocrats”). The “problem” is that the government, instead of “responding to the ‘true’ people,” has been captured by those nefarious forces. (ch.4)

Populism in Australia and New Zealand

Benjamin Moffitt (ch.6) finds populism in Australia and New Zealand to sit between that of Europe and the United States, and to be better understood as Ostiguy’s ‘flaunting of the low’ than through Mudde’s ideological structure. In Australia, Queensland has supplied the most notable populist politicians (Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Bob Katter, Pauline Hanson, Clive Palmer). This concentration is explained through a larger agricultural and rural sector with a more dispersed population, provincialism and its consequent suspicion of southern states, lower education, higher media monopoly, lower cultural diversity, and cultural and religious conservatism. Palmer’s populism is distinguished by being anti-major-party rather than anti-immigrant like Hanson or pro-rural like Katter. Populists in Australia have had less sustained success than in Europe, which Moffitt attributes to a “mainstreaming” of populism. He cites the example of Prime Minister John Howard outflanking Hanson by adopting her stances against “‘noisy’ privileged minorities” and “refugee ‘queue jumpers’”, after which it became harder for populists, including Hanson, to distinguish themselves. Thus figures such as Cory Bernardi, George Christensen, and Craig Kelly were all initially elected as Liberal or National Party candidates. In New Zealand, in contrast, there has been one major figure and one major party since 1993: Winston Peters of NZ First. Like One Nation in Australia, he has attacked Asian immigration, special treatment for indigenous peoples, various elites, and (later) Muslim immigration and ‘Cultural Marxism’. But NZ First differs from Australian populism in several ways: their policies place them closer to centre on the left-right axis; Peters himself is a long-time political figure who lacks “outsider” credentials; and the party has had a lasting stability that populist parties in Australia have lacked. For Moffitt, antipodean populism is economically protectionist, appeals to producerism (the concern that upper and lower classes are taking wealth created by the hard-working middle class, and contributing nothing back) and is targeted at three main groups of enemies: the ‘elite’, the immigrant ‘other’, and indigenous peoples receiving ‘special treatment’.

Populism and scapegoating

Populism is fertile soil for conspiracism, since the ‘elites’ are clearly up to *something*. In populism, an attack on the leader is presented and construed as an attack on ‘the people’, and vice versa. So reflexively blaming every setback on enemies, traitors, and conspirators – even or especially within one’s own party – becomes effective political messaging.



For Moffitt, anti-podean populism is economically protectionist, appeals to producerism, and is targeted at three main groups of enemies: the ‘elite’, the immigrant ‘other’, and indigenous peoples receiving ‘special treatment’.

However imperfect Trump is, the reason for the intensity of the attacks we've seen against him ... is that he's now standing in the way of the globalist, New Age, and Marxist revolution (McGuire and Andersen 2018, *Trumpocalypse*, pp.152–153).

Populism and fascism differ in their commitment to an ideology. A Hitler or a Mussolini would never have sacrificed core beliefs to gain power; whereas for populists a lack of power is the central, fundamental problem, and ideology is negotiable. However, commonalities can quickly appear between the two, especially when conspiracies inflame them. Michel Gagné applies Rene Girard's work on scapegoating to this problem:

According to Girard, scapegoating is a typical human reaction, the psychological by-product of unresolved feelings of anger and helplessness. Rather than face the humbling possibility that such feelings are caused by our failures, or that we need to change our beliefs, take responsibility for our predicament, make amends for past wrongs, or forgive our abusers, such feelings get purged through the easier path of blaming others ...

His provocative conclusion reads:

Girard's argument invites us to view conspiracism as a contemporary manifestation of mob violence akin to ancient public stonings, medieval witch hunts, and racist lynchings. In such cases, the principal aim of the crowd is to satisfy its collective outrage, not enforce justice dispassionately. A genuine exercise in truth-telling would require them to stop, bring their emotions under control, and carefully weigh the accusations heaped on the scapegoat against any proofs of its innocence. A genuine exercise in truth-seeking would also require them to coolly consider their own biases, unjustified fears, bloodthirst, greed, intellectual laziness, xenophobia, jealousies, self-righteousness, or exaggerated sense of victimhood. But lynch mobs don't function this way. Neither do conspiracist movements. (Gagné 2022, ch.18)



A genuine exercise in truth-telling would require them to stop, bring their emotions under control, and carefully weigh the accusations heaped on the scapegoat against any proofs of its innocence.

(Gagné)

5. How can Christianity support political conspiracy theories?

The path from mainstream to fringe beliefs in Christianity – especially as they cause problems in wider society – is often analysed into sectarian, fundamentalist, and extremist categories. Joseph O. Baker in the *Routledge Handbook of Deviance* (ch.18) offers the examples of snake-handling churches (sectarianism), Westboro Baptist Church (fundamentalism), and Christian identity militias (extremism). However, in modern research, fundamentalism includes sectarianism and has now largely replaced it as a topic of research, and extremism is generally understood as a higher degree of fundamentalism. So, while all three terms remain useful, fundamentalism is the primary academic category for assessing a religious

group's distinctiveness, separation from, and antagonism toward, its surrounding society.

“Fundamentalism,” in this usage, refers to a discernable pattern of religious militance by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors. ... [C]onsistent with the origins of the term in American Protestant traditions in the 1910s, fundamentalism is viewed as characteristically rejecting of the “modernity” of the era in which it exists, and an effort to reassert a definitive and pure version of a religion which is not subject to the secularizing effects of pluralism, multi-culturalism, or globalism. ... [N]otably fundamentalist groups often deny interpretation at all (e.g., textual literalism) in an effort to restrict the (perceived) Truth from alternative interpretations. Ideas or arguments that do not operate within a group’s authoritative rendering of sacred texts are ignored or openly combatted. (Baker 2018, ch.18)

In each case there is a rejection of the ‘outside world’ that corresponds to conspiracism’s ‘mainstream’ and rejects both expertise and authority. We will look at Christian support for political conspiracy theories through these themes:

- Christians against losing influence?
- Christians against expertise?
- Christians against authority?

5.a. Christians against losing influence?

Joseph Uscinski argues that conspiracy theories have historically accompanied the loss of social power or preeminence:

At bottom, conspiracy theories are a form of threat perception, and fears are fundamentally driven by shifts in relative power. Because defeat and exclusion are their biggest inducements, **conspiracy theories are for losers** (speaking descriptively, not pejoratively). (Uscinski and Parent 2014, p. 131)

This theme appears repeatedly in populist movements, as an example or two will demonstrate. Douglas Hofstadter wrote in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964):

... the modern right wing, as Daniel Bell has put it, feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialistic and communistic schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by

treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners as of old but major statesmen who are at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors had discovered conspiracies; the modern radical right finds conspiracy to be betrayal from on high.

The sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild offered a similar analysis in 2016. Between the height of the Tea Party in 2011 and the election of President Trump, she visited Gulf Coast Louisiana, made a range of friends, and tried to understand the concerns of Republican-voting, FOX-watching conservatives. The resulting book was called *Strangers in their Own Land*. She found she could roll up the concerns expressed in her interviews into a ‘deep story’ (ch.9), which could be abbreviated as follows: Hard working conservatives have been patiently standing in line, waiting for their share of the American Dream, but it still seems off over the hill somewhere. It may actually be receding as their wages and living conditions go backward. Meanwhile, they see people cutting in up ahead, people who aren’t as hard working, who get things handed to them on a plate by the government. And all this time conservatives are being dismissed and derided as racists, homophobes, and ignorant rednecks by a national media that doesn’t even know them. They believe in the America of the flag and the constitution, but real Americans like them are strangers now in a land they no longer recognise as their own. This story resonates with Hochschild’s interviewees, though some also want to extend it:

“That’s it, but the American Dream is more than having money. It’s feeling proud to be an American, and to say ‘under God’ when you salute the flag, and feel good about that. And it’s about living in a society that believes in clean, normal family life. But if you add that, then yes, this’s my story.” (ch.9)

If Uscinski is correct that conspiracism follows the loss of social power or prestige, then that presents a pertinent challenge to Christians who are losing numbers, influence, and respect. When we experience decline or marginality, do we resort to blaming enemies or elites without first asking ourselves why we are failing to impress or persuade in public life?

5.b. Christians against expertise?

Conspiracism regularly needs to dismiss the views of apparently well-credentialed experts. In *Redeeming Expertise* (2021), Josh A. Reeves summarises three theories about why people-in-general mistrust expertise: 1) their misleading cognitive biases make it hard to understand scientific theories; 2) they are concerned for group identity over truth; or 3) they want truth but are limited in time and energy and take misleading shortcuts. In the case of Christians, he argues for the third explanation:

... the problem of rejecting scientific conclusions about the world is often not a result of irrationality – Christians are using the same reasoning strategies as non-Christians – but is instead a



When we experience decline or marginality, do we resort to blaming enemies or elites without first asking ourselves why we are failing to impress or persuade in public life?

consequence of poor information resulting from a low view of the major purveyors of scientific information in modern societies: government, academia, and journalism. (p.14)

The third option does not preclude the first two, since mistrust can be reinforced by confirmation bias and by partisanship. But he argues the third issue is foundational. Most Christians can't verify science themselves and when they take shortcuts these are sabotaged by their mistrust of experts and the presence of other voices who frame their contrary opinions as authentically Christian. Reeves sees this resulting from three major lines of thought:

1. *Intellectual Individualism*. We expect to be able to think about both science and scripture as individuals, that is to "think for ourselves," using natural common sense.
2. *Spiritual and Intuitive Knowledge*. We expect God's spirit to supply knowledge, but may also expect our intuitive understanding of issues (understanding not based on any conscious reasoning) to be knowledge of that kind.
3. *Spiritual Warfare*. We may understand ourselves to be in a spiritual war involving experts and authorities. This conviction may be grounded in present and historical opposition, and sometimes also in presuppositional or worldview-based apologetics.

Intellectual individualism

Intellectual individualism, as Reeves calls it, has featured prominently in both science and Protestant theology. As they grew up together in the Early Modern period, each movement consciously taught the rejection of traditional authorities and promoted the ability of the individual to discover the truth for themselves, whether in the book of Scripture or the book of Nature. The motto of the Royal Society (1660), is *nullius in verba*, "taking no-one's word for it." Science and scripture have both been historically framed as democratically accessible; and expressly *not* the province of special authorities.

Whenever a scientist makes a claim about the world that does not match one's experience, followers of Bacon say it is far better to trust one's own senses than defer to the misguided reasoning of the so-called authorities. The public accessibility of science was especially emphasized in Scottish common-sense realism, which asserted that each Christian had a duty to access certain truths of God through common sense. (Reeves 2021, p.27)

However, by the mid-1800s the study of both science and scripture had become increasingly specialised and professionalised. Amateur practitioners of science disappeared, and gaps developed between popular and professional understanding. By the 1950s government research funding in the United States exceeded a billion dollars a year, and the production



Intellectual individualism has featured prominently in both science and Protestant theology ... each movement consciously taught the rejection of traditional authorities and promoted the ability of the individual to discover the truth for themselves...

of PhDs and academic journals was sharply accelerating. Big Science had arrived, far outstripping any individual's ability to understand more than a fraction of it. The self-reliance of earlier times was gone and would not return; modern knowledge is held in community, as we have already considered (see above). By the 1970s, in parallel with these other developments, popular voices had begun to question certain consequences of scientific progress. Reeves notes environmentalism and anti-militarism on the left, and anti-regulation and young-earth creationism on the right. And from the 1990s onward the internet and social media gave a global platform to non-scientist critics of scientific knowledge, and, later, conspiracist critics. "Do," they insisted, "your own research."

Spiritual and intuitive knowledge

Reeves briefly canvasses the expectation that God's spirit gives understanding (e.g. Col 1:9), and notes how God's wisdom in changing the world through Christ's humility and death – and our imitation of him – may seem like the greatest foolishness to those acquainted with the normal operation of our social and political worlds (e.g. 1 Cor 1:18, 25). Paul's own cultural knowledge and capable rhetoric show he did not reject *all* 'words of human wisdom', however, and the cases for and against the Christian life of the mind have proceeded back and forth through history. Thomas Aquinas and the High Mediaeval church formed a comprehensive theological synthesis with Aristotelian philosophy. But Reeves quotes Zwingli and Luther to show that the Protestant Reformation maintained their rejection of the Catholic system and hierarchy, in part, by emphasising the spiritual illumination of every Christian – and specifically the conferral of *certainty*.

Several intellectual consequences result from this shift in understanding concerning the Holy Spirit. One is that since intellectual certainty comes from God, then doubt is something to be resisted as an attack from the devil. It is better for the believer to not put him or herself in positions where critical doubts might arise. Another consequence is that any knowledge that conflicts with one's personal understanding of Scripture is suspect, and easily identified with the "worldly wisdom" described by the apostle Paul. As the historian Susan Schreiner summarizes: "The Spirit, working directly and immediately within the soul, compels one to speak God's word. . . . The Spirit alone grants truth and certainty, while human knowledge is likely to be false and deceptive." Since the Holy Spirit restores the ability to perceive truth through a new "frame of mind," why rely upon the secondhand testimonies of others? This view is exemplified in the words of twentieth-century theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer, who argued: "The very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind and to be concerned only with what the Bible actually teaches." To admit the role of others in the Christian faith is to say that the Bible is in some way unclear, making the mistaken assumption that the

biblical message needs to be restated and clarified so that others can grasp it. (pp.73–74)

But in Protestantism, it was notoriously difficult to settle on the ‘plain sense’ of God’s word. Disagreement and splintering were a constant feature of the movement. Attention to real communities, Reeves writes, should disprove any supposition “that all members of the community are logically competent and that there are no significant limits on each person’s ability to investigate questions.” Moreover, a little attention to either the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament (see Part Three), or the emphasis on discipleship in the New Testament, should assure us that growth in character and understanding usually requires diligent work, and this expectation sits alongside any expectation that God will work through us.

Spiritual warfare

Reeves also argues that, since the 1870s, the Christians who rejected scientific consensus views didn’t understand themselves to be rejecting science or knowledge *per se*. Rather, they opposed what they characterised as distorting biases, and generally only in a small set of areas (evolution, materialist views of the human being, or biblical criticism). In important cases these distorting biases were understood as the blinding presuppositions of a materialist worldview, or as ingrained antipathy to God and religion, conceived either as the noetic (mental) effects of original sin or as wilful rebellion against God, and so, often, as a kind of spiritual warfare.

Portraying science as a place of spiritual warfare changes how Christians disagree with scientific theories. If scientists create false theories because of mistaken assumptions, then reasoned debate is the correct strategy. But if the problem is spiritual in nature – if secular scientists have aligned themselves with the dark and fallen powers of the world – then philosophical debate will be little match for supernatural forces spreading untruth. A “spiritual warfare” perspective teaches Christians to take a hyper-skeptical view of scientific conclusions, since evil spiritual powers are more than capable of coordinating widespread deception. The way to resist this spiritual attack is to trust fully in the word of God, regardless of what secular intellectual authorities say. Christians have a special relationship with the Holy Spirit that gives them access to knowledge of the world that sinful reason alone cannot acquire. In order to humble human pride and display God’s power, the Holy Spirit will often empower those with little education to reveal the foolishness of worldly learning. For this reason, this perspective is much more popular among lay Christians than those who work in academic institutions. (p.67–68)

5.c. Christians against authority?

In conspiracism, fundamentalism, and populism, the rejection of established expertise sits alongside the rejection of established authority. A recent study of the conspiracy beliefs of around 500 Australians, one half religious and the other half non-religious, suggests an intriguing relationship between these two trends.

To begin with, our results showed that, on average, both believers and non-believers adhered to the same extent to conspiracy theories. This finding is important for two reasons. First, it suggests that we need to be careful when attributing belief in conspiracy theories to religious segments of society only... (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Jetten 2019, p.949)

Rather than being differently *weighted*, the study found that religious and non-religious conspiracy beliefs were differently *motivated*.

Even though, in comparison with non-religious worldview, religious worldviews predispose people to higher anti-intellectualism, it is also associated with more political trust, inhibiting the negative effects of anti-intellectualism. The opposite is true for [the] non-religious worldview: even though, in comparison with [the] religious worldview, it predisposes people to lower anti-intellectualism, it is also associated with less political trust, counter balancing the positive effects of low anti-intellectualism. (p.950)

This raises the worrying possibility that an upsurge in Christian anti-authority sentiment may no longer cancel out our collective anti-expert sentiment, and leave us more vulnerable to conspiracist ways of thinking. We should ask, then, how conspiracism may reinforce Christian anti-authority sentiment, and what Christians convictions might support participation in democracy.

- Christians against ‘tyranny and statism’
- Christians for liberal democracy?

Christians against ‘tyranny and statism’

Some moderately influential Christian movements originating in the United States believe that western liberal democracy is completely incompatible with Christianity. A wider circle believes that governments are veering toward ‘tyranny’ and ‘statism’ generally, and a wider circle again believes this about their handling of the COVID19 pandemic, or other specific events from time to time. Movements which say Christians must serve God by taking political power over others are called Dominionist. Paul C. McGlasson’s *No! A Theological Response to Christian Reconstructionism* (2012) provides an outline and a theological critique of the most influential threads in this movement (though see Selbrede 2012 for a reconstructionist critique of McGlasson). He identifies Cornelius Van



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Til, Rousas J. Rushdoony, Francis Schaeffer, and Gary North as key figures. They were all Presbyterians, though some left the denomination.

Cornelius Van Til, the father of ‘presuppositional apologetics’, maintained that scripture “is self-asserting in such a way that only those who already presuppose its truth can understand it”. This means Christian and non-Christian worldviews are not merely in disagreement, but have no overlap. Every idea has either God or humanity as its final point of reference, and there is no possible common ground or meeting point for discussion. *Rousas J. Rushdoony* applied this to society at large, adding the idea that the Old Testament Law is ‘case law’ that is binding on all people, including its death penalties, and called Christian groups that did not agree ‘antinomians’. Law finds its ultimate grounding in God or in human thought, and civil or human law is (variously) idolatry, heresy and blasphemy. The task of dominion that God gave to Adam is fulfilled by the law of Moses; only this law provides freedom, whereas human law devolves into **tyranny** through **statism**. He taught ‘sphere sovereignty’, in which God has instituted the family, church, and state as governing authorities, assigning only a very limited role for the state. He was a postmillennialist, believing that Christians had to take political power over the world in order to build God’s kingdom ahead of Christ’s return. He was also one of the most influential figures in the modern homeschooling movement, following from his categorical rejection of any government role in education. *Francis Schaeffer* wrote *A Christian Manifesto*, evoking the Communist and Humanist manifestos. Christianity implies a culture, and its culture should operate in every sector of society. He believes that this happened in the early United States, but that now Christianity and Secular Humanism are in deadly competition: one must win and the other must lose. Christians must ensure the complete victory of the Christian worldview in the totality of society. Finally, *Gary North*, combining all these convictions, taught that Christians should be engaged in ‘comprehensive evangelism’, meaning the “socio-political domination of the world” by Christians. This means establishing a Christian civilisation by confrontation, not by consensus.

Some of these ideas may be present without the whole system (*Soft Reconstructionism*), and so, may not intend to oppose democracy. Some Christians drawn to oppose ‘tyranny’ might see it as the opposite of democracy rather than, as in Reconstructionism, the opposite of theocracy. Some Christians drawn to oppose ‘statism’ might see it as a government overreach on certain issues, rather than, as in Reconstructionism, the fundamental nature of all human government. And some Christians drawn to defend ‘religious freedom’ might see it as something to be established for everyone, rather than, as in North’s view, something used to gain power and then be eliminated once we have the power to do so.

McGlasson’s critique of these ideas taps into historical and biblical theology in ways not quickly summarised, but some accessible entry points include the ideas that: 1) the gospel of Christ is a message for the entire world, as they are, implying real communication across worldviews; 2) the gospel is expressly not law in the New Testament, and the law of Moses is expressly not binding for gentiles in the New Testament; 3) the

Christian gospel does not serve personal, cultural, or national agendas; and 4) Christ's example is to love and serve, not to dominate. And in any case, with an eye to history, wouldn't trying to enforce a system of biblical law take us straight back to sixteenth-century 'creed wars' over which one? How would Rushdoony's idiosyncratic interpretation of biblical 'case law' prevail against, say, Catholic integralists who want the government to recognise a Thomistic view of natural law and the authority of the Vatican?

Christians for liberal democracy?

Should Christians support western liberal democracies? In *The Good of Politics*, James W. Skillen sets out to defend Christian political involvement in democracy (or any government, more broadly) from several common suspicions. He notes, of course, that our situation differs from that of Christians and Jews in the Bible:

In the course of history, from the time of God's covenant with Israel at Sinai until today, many things have changed, for better and for worse: the responsibilities of governing officials, the structure of states, the patterns of economic life, the obligations of family members, and most other conditions and institutions of human society. Nevertheless, the normative precepts of God still stand: love your neighbor, do justice, be merciful, be good stewards, walk humbly with God. The questions for us today are essentially the same as those of ancient times, but we must try to answer them in circumstances of greater societal differentiation, a shrinking globe, and a rapidly expanding world population. (Ch.3)

The need for government is substantially justified by the need for justice in society. Skillen cites Isa 1:15-17 and Jer 22:16-17 as prominent examples of this requirement; but his most striking reference is Job, protesting to God about his blamelessness, declaring the good that he had done as an elder at the city gate:

I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
my justice was like a robe and a turban.
I was eyes to the blind,
and feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy,
and I championed the cause of the stranger.
I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,
and made them drop their prey from their teeth. (Job 29:14-17)

For Skillen reading early Genesis, the command for "the man" to steward and control the earth could never have been fulfilled by just a few people, but envisaged an earth that was well and truly populated. Which is to say, culture and agriculture, the building of cities and nations, and all that goes with them, which is depicted in the chapters that follow. This opposes the idea that government only exists to restrain human sinfulness. As we move into the New Testament, human rule provides the concepts for God's coming kingdom:

The question for Christians is this: How should we engage politically, guided by the vision of Christ's kingdom that has not yet been revealed in its fullness? The obvious starting point should be to heed the teaching and example of Jesus whom we confess to be the Christ. We should do what he taught his followers to do: serve your neighbors in love, do justice, seek to live at peace with everyone, do not lord it over others but act as servants (Luke 9:23–27, 46–48; 22:24–32). In the political arena, therefore, we should work for the kind of political communities in which those who fill offices of government act as public servants to uphold public justice for the common good, willingly accepting their equality with all citizens under the law. (Ch.8)

Skillen suggests this leads to a vision of 'Christian secularisation' in which there is no mediating church authority between God and human beings, rather we serve God in every aspect of life, including our maintenance of our common good.

Christians should not try to use government to give themselves an advantage over non-Christians (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43), nor should they presume that Christ's governing authority on earth is mediated through them or through the church. Rather, they should work to support constitutional patterns of government that assure equal treatment of all citizens, including equal protection of the rights of every person without regard to their faith. Christians should operate with the conviction that final judgment is in the hands of God and that as long as the enthroned Christ is ruling by mercy, patience, and long-suffering, we, too, should exercise our citizenship in keeping with that merciful patience extended to all humankind, including sinners like us. God sends rain and sunshine on the just and unjust alike (Matt. 5:45). (Ch.8)

You'll be able to pick out many biblical influences here – Jeremiah's message to the exiles; Jesus' parables of the kingdom; Christian citizenship in heaven; the weeds and the wheat growing together 'til harvest. This may recall aspects of Rauch's discussion of political liberalism in the tradition of John Locke, who argued biblically for toleration of dissenting views. But the most interesting reference may not jump out at first glance – the ideal Israelite king (Deut 17:14–20), chosen from among you, not seeking wealth, subject to the same laws as others, not considering himself better than them. It's an oddly powerful picture of government as a way for Christians to serve their neighbours and the common good. When we find Christians urging anti-authoritarian views for ostensibly biblical but also conspiracy-minded reasons, we should be able to contrast this with a Christian case for serving God and neighbour through liberal democracy.

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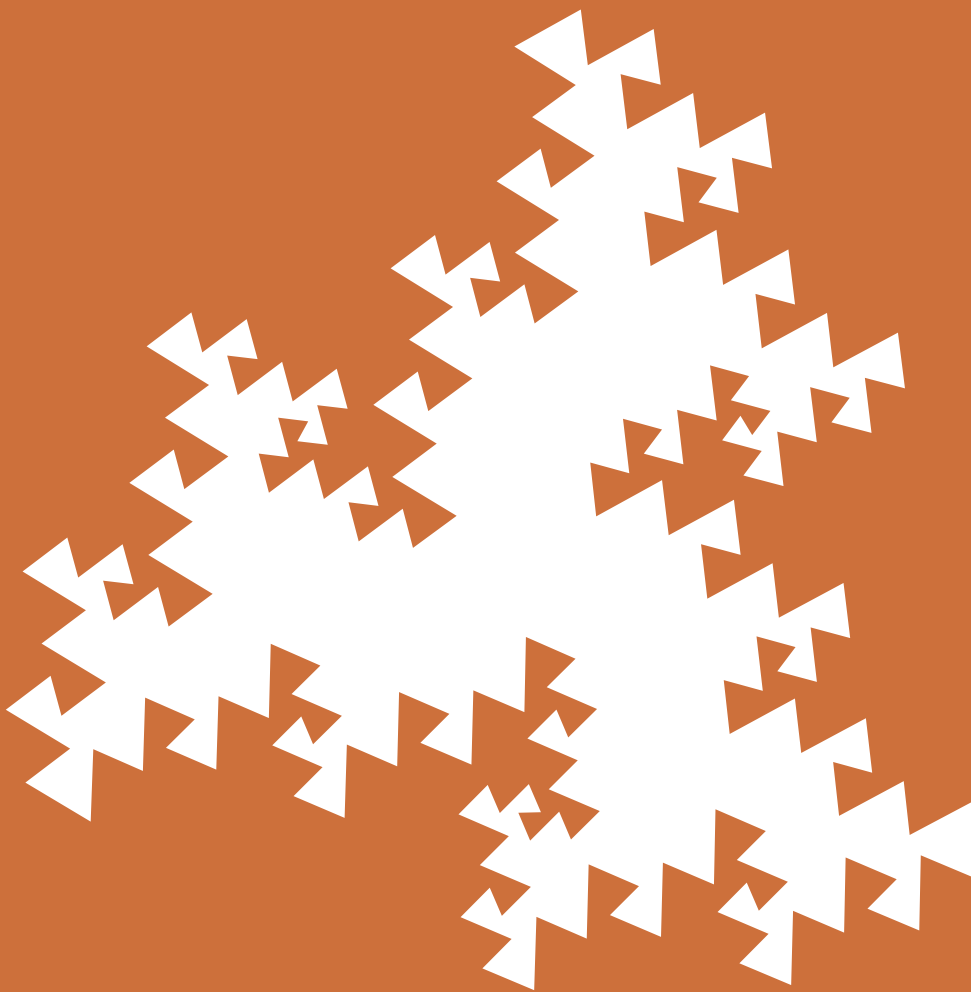
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EXERCISE

Vaccines

Applying Parts One and Two
to contemporary conspiracy
theories about vaccination



1. Anti-vaccination in 19th Century England	93
2. Criticism of the COVID-19 pandemic response	94
3. Anti-vaccination in 21st Century Australia	95
4. Questions from Parts One and Two	100

After reading this section you should be able to:

- Describe some anti-vaccination arguments from history and others that appear in some Christian circles in Australia today
- List questions you could ask about them based on some current research into conspiracy theories, and some current political trends including polarisation and populism.



We invite critiques or suggestions for future improvements.

Anti-vaccination in 19th Century England

Anti-vaccination movements are nearly as old as vaccines, which allows a little historical perspective. In the 1700s, smallpox was an endemic disease that was contagious, severely disfiguring, had a 35% mortality rate, and killed about 400,000 people every year in Europe (Porter and Porter 1988). A British doctor, Edward Jenner, showed in 1796 that exposure to the much safer cowpox virus conferred immunity to smallpox. This gave us the words vaccine and vaccination from the Latin *vacca* for 'cow'. In the 1800s public vaccination campaigns began to be carried out in European countries using lymph fluid from calves, a procedure whose literal 'beastliness' was parodied by cartoonists and attacked in tracts. One W. Halkett wrote in *Compulsory Vaccination!! A Crime Against Nature!!* (1870), "The Creator stamped on man the divine image, but Jenner placed on him the mark of the beast."

These concerns coalesced into political movements, the largest appearing after 1867 when the government mandated vaccination for all children under fourteen. A thirty-year boom in anti-vaccine publishing then followed. There were religious arguments from providence, such as that smallpox served a purpose in the world and that people would otherwise just die of other causes and so keep the death rate about the same. There were political arguments from civil liberty, individual responsibility, and what we might now call parent's rights. But a range of purportedly medical objections provided the foundation for the other complaints. It was argued:

- that the sickness was not caused by a contagion at all, but by poor sanitation and drainage (p.236), being a "filth disease" (ibid, p.250)
- that vaccination was "a foul poisoning of the blood with contaminated material," (p.237); that the vaccine itself caused diseases, including smallpox and syphilis (p.242; these diseases had in some cases been transferred by reusing needles); and that a single vaccination failed to provide life-long protection (p.242, which was true)
- that some eminent doctors agreed with some of these criticisms (which was true)
- that Jenner had been "little better than a criminal and money-grabber who had duped Parliament and the scientific and medical worlds into believing in his mythical method." (p.242); that doctors acquiesced to vaccination out of professional loyalty to whatever was "established and lucrative" (p.243); and that medical professionals were falsifying statistics by registering vaccinated patients who died of smallpox as unvaccinated (p.243)

Today, a dozen major diseases have been controlled through vaccination, and one – smallpox itself – has been fully eradicated. But in the late 1800s scientists did not understand the mechanism by which vaccination worked, and even the general idea that germs cause disease only overtook the ancient idea of miasma (foul air) in the public consciousness in the 1890s. The anti-vaccination movement of the time achieved a

conscientious exemption clause in the revised Vaccination Act in 1897, but by that time had lost the medical and public debate over vaccination itself.

Criticism of the COVID-19 pandemic response

Fast-forward to the present COVID-19 pandemic, which has so far killed a million people in the United States and many more globally. In a lengthy Guardian article in Feb 2022, the Columbia University sociologist Musa al-Gharbi argued that, in the public mind, some vaccine scepticism has been warranted by the response of experts and authorities to the pandemic. Among his major points, he lists:

- The “record speed” of vaccine development, using an mRNA technology that employed “artificial proteins never seen in the natural world.”
- In the United States, politicking within and between the Trump and Biden administrations undermined public confidence.
- Public health announcements and advice changed in confusing ways, and sometimes suggested the use of “noble lies”, intended to calm the public or prevent a run on equipment needed for medical staff (cf. Powell and Prasad 2021).
- There was a sharp drop in vaccine efficacy after the omicron variant emerged, leading to a program of booster shots, with, he wrote, “no clear end in sight”.
- Public health advice shifted after the omicron variant, from saying that vaccines protect against infection to saying they protected against hospitalisation or death.
- Even vaccinated and boosted people sometimes experience “break-through infections”.
- There is a financial motive to have more rounds of vaccination. Each additional round of boosters generates billions of dollars in revenue for pharmaceutical companies. Moreover, the CDC is not fully transparent about its donors, and United States politicians (legally) hold shares in pharmaceutical companies, and receive donations from them.
- The Johnson & Johnson vaccine was FDA-approved as safe and effective, but later advised against, due to “rare but occasionally fatal side effects.”
- As of mid-Feb 2022, the public VAERS database of possible vaccine reactions shows “nearly 12,000 Americans have died shortly after receiving Covid vaccines.”
- There is no legal recourse or financial recompense for negative vaccine effects.
- Expert modelling and predictions have often proved inaccurate, often in the direction of overestimating infections and deaths.
- People at times employed double standards between the acceptability of gatherings they did and did not approve of.

- Many “scholars, bureaucrats and pundits” have a vested interest in an ongoing crisis. “As the political scientist Oren Cass put it, many have been granted more money, prestige and institutional power than they have ever had in the wake of the pandemic.”

As al-Gharbi notes:

With respect to all of these matters – possible adverse side effects, the origins of the virus, pandemic modeling, the efficacy of vaccines, masking, lockdowns, travel restrictions – experts and policymakers have been relying on data that was extremely provisional. They were regularly forced to improvise on the basis of their best judgments and theories. Robust efficacy for many recommended interventions and policies had not been empirically established. And, frankly, they got a lot wrong. This is not unusual – it is how science works.

We may allow that al-Gharbi means that scientists relied on “extremely provisional” data *at specific crucial times*, and not at all times over the course of the pandemic, at least not for all the issues listed. Still, errant data is the special expertise of the conspiracy theorist, and all this provided an abundance of fuel for concerns among both conspiracists and the general public:

In a world where the experts are regularly wrong but continue to project high levels of confidence even as they change their minds and update their policies, where elite narratives about the crisis often seem to be inappropriately colored by political and financial considerations, where those who share one’s own background, values and interests do not seem to have a seat at the table in making the rules – and especially among populations that have a long history of neglect and mistreatment by the elite class (leading to high levels of pre-existing and well-founded mistrust even before the pandemic) – it would actually be bizarre to unquestioningly believe and unwaveringly conform to elite guidance. ... Put another way, there is no need to appeal to Tucker Carlson, Joe Rogan, Donald Trump or internet “fake news” to explain why so many have been skeptical of, or resistant to, recommendation by state officials, experts, journalists, et al.

Anti-vaccination in 21st Century Australia

Anti-vaccination messages were widely shared during the COVID19 pandemic. In November 2021 the *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted an intensive care specialist on the practical problems caused in his unit (Cunningham 2021).

The level of verbal assault our clinical staff have been exposed to in the last six to eight weeks is something I have never, ever experienced in my career, ... The misinformation, the belief this isn’t real, the absolute distress they are experiencing when their relatives are

critically unwell makes it very, very difficult to have a conversation with them about how we can help them because what they're requesting is often not consistent with the medical advice.

It will be best to consider a relatively detailed example of what this specialist is calling misinformation. Such material is often circulated in videos, or through private messaging applications, and finding and transcribing a representative selection would require more time and resources than a project of this kind can offer. The Australian *Ezekiel Declaration* on vaccine mandates and a similarly influential conservative rejection of it would make a sensible starting point for discussion (Grant et al 2021 vs. Campbell and Ould 2021), but only covers a fraction of the ideas in circulation. We will use a more detailed example that has drawn together a wide cross-section of conspiratorial concerns.

Pastor Bob Cotton OAM is the minister of a small regional church in the Hunter Valley, near Newcastle. He received the Order of Australia in 2021 for his work with and for survivors of church sexual abuse. With his wife Angie he has publicly advocated against vaccine mandates on his church's Facebook page, where a video shows him addressing a 'Freedom Rally' in Sydney in 2022. We will quote from their Facebook post to the Maitland Christian Church page, "MIDWEEK MESSAGE: GOD SPARE OUR CHILDREN" from 15 Dec 2021, with some supplementary material from other posts.

Dear Christian friends,

Australia is about to embark on what could potentially be the greatest medical disaster in our history. Further to that, it is an injustice against the innocent on an unprecedented scale. If we choose to do nothing, not only do we deserve what is coming but we deserve the judgement of God as well.

Their concerns are that the NSW Government Minister for Health wanted to see "as many children as possible" in the 5–11 year age range receive the COVID-19 vaccine, and that 'our so called "Christian" Prime Minister' had begun a campaign to support this.

If our PM was truly Christian, he would care more about what Jesus thinks than what his buddies the G7 and Pfizer do. He would also be less inclined to blatantly lie and deceive relative to whether vaccinations are "compulsory" or not (Rev 21:8). Nor would he sit idly by, looking the other way, while constitutional rights are ignored and SOG [Special Operations Group] police violate human rights. ... Most of all, most of all and (let me say it again) most of all – if Scott Morrison truly is a real Christian, he would understand his God mandated responsibility to protect our children and not offer them up to the false god of vaccination like Molech of old. (Lev 18:21; 20:1-5)

Then Prime Minister Scott Morrison, they maintain, knew the risks.

It is impossible for Morrison not to be aware of the many serious vaccination reactions that are indeed the real plague. Ever since

the vaccination fiasco began we have heard of blood clots, strokes, blindness, guillain-barre syndrome, bell's palsy, myocarditis, pericarditis, still births and of course death but our PM seems to think this is fine and our kids need to be jabbed up. ... This is no longer a case of irresponsibility, it is a case of evil and our PM appears to have chosen the wrong side and if that is so, God Almighty will judge him for it. (Matt 18:6)

Why then are church leaders not challenging the Prime minister on this?

As I have said before, the top tier of church hierarchy run charities that receive hundreds of millions of dollars in government funding every year and their love of this money has turned them into nothing but the harlots of those who fund them. ... These corrupt pretenders are reminiscent of the Harlot of Revelation (Rev 17) and may well face a similar fate if they do not turn from their wicked ways (Matt 6:24). People need to clearly understand that our senior clergy have betrayed us and the vast majority of average rank and file pastors / priests / ministers are either too cowardly or too sycophantically devoted to their hierarchy to address the wicked elephant in the room. All clergy need to be reminded that they too will face the judgement of God for their complicity in these betrayals and injustices. (Jas 3:1)

The Cottons argue that this is a simple matter of biblical justice:

The word of God makes it very clear that we should speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves and ensure justice for those who are perishing (Ps 31:8), this is a very clear picture of our children at this point in time. Jesus also warned that if anyone harmed a child, it would be better for them to be fitted up with a millstone and drowned in the sea. (Luke 17:1-2) That is His "child protection policy" plain and simple, there can be no mistaking His stance. We should be of the same mind.

The right course for Christians is, then:

Until your minister stops endorsing state policy which violates God given rights you should stop attending their meetings. If they are leading you in prayers that "thank God" for the vax, or if their policy turns away the unvaccinated from attending services, you need to be out of there. If they segregate or push the vax – come out from amongst them. Hold them to account with your attendance and finance, it's about the only language they understand. ...

Refuse to comply. Do not, under any circumstances, allow your child to receive the experimental jab. If that means they can't go to school, then homeschool them. If enough parents keep their kids away, the whole thing falls over. ... Find like-minded people, start forming groups, support one another. God knows that there are enough unemployed teachers that can help homeschool. Make good decisions and stick to them. Form communities that build strength and unity while you protect your kids. Find yourself a decent church, if there isn't one, then start a home group. ... Keep speaking

up, pray [that] God gives you courage to keep doing so. Expose the fruitless deeds of darkness just as the bible calls you to (Eph 5:1).

Point at and identify the wicked social engineering that is right in front of everyone's eyes and pray that God delivers them from the deception. Remember there is a federal election coming, this is our democratic moment to hold these grubs to account. Lend as much support as you can to the "Freedom Parties" in your electorate and vote with a vengeance. It's time to get political. Attend rallies, swell their numbers, never give up and fight for your kids. You get one shot at this, let's make it a good one. Finally, in the words of Augustine of Hippo "Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you".

Grace & peace to you,

Bob & Angie

Other posts help clarify some of the ideas here. The state of New South Wales required vaccinations for work in several fields including education, aged care, healthcare, and airport and quarantine operations. The Cottons explain why they see the vaccine as in fact compulsory in a post from 9 October 2021:

... if someone cannot retain their job, can't provide for their family or pay their mortgage without being vaccinated then I would suggest that they are being forced into it. Their choice has been removed. ... It appears that in many cases, there has not been "valid consent" because of undue pressure, coercion, manipulation and withholding of risks. This is wicked and shameful, particularly considering that we are supposed to be a democratic and free society.

A post from 10 March 2022 connects the virus response with the World Economic Forum (Chief Executive Klaus Schwab), a New World Order conspiracy theory, and encroaching tyranny.

Greetings church and friends,

Many believers have had to ask themselves whether Prime Minister Scott Morrison is truly a Christian or whether he is simply a hypocritical "stage player" and a puppet for globalists like Klaus Schwab who would like to see everyone implanted with a microchip by 2026. Every Christian should be aware of the potential that exists for the corruption of our government officials by global entities whose end game is to create a "mark of the beast" style new world order.

The following video is only 13 minutes long and connects many well [known] Australian federal and state politicians and public servants with powerful corporations and organisations that have antichrist motives. Please take the time to watch it in its entirety.

The Federal Election will soon be upon us and we need to be very careful how we vote. The major parties have shown that their loyalties do not lie with [the] best interests of the Australian people therefore a vote for either is to vote for further betrayal and

tyranny. Please watch the following, do your research and make up your own minds.

As always, our faith, hope and trust ought be in Jesus Christ and His promises alone! Grace and peace to you all,

Bob & Angie

A post from 19 April 2020 commends the New Zealand end-times preacher and conspiracy theorist Barry Smith (d. 2002), who was similarly concerned with New World Order themes, equated the Mark of the Beast with RFID microchips, and used a form of English-language gematria to find the number 666 in words like ‘computer’ and ‘vaccination’.

A post from 4 November 2021 gives their understanding of Romans 13 and government authority. (We will consider this passage in Part Three.)

Before I get started I would like to deal with a common misunderstanding of scripture, in particular, Romans Chapter 13. On the basis of this portion of scripture, many Christians believe that we must obey the government no matter what because they are instituted by God. The reality, however, is that the government is meant to uphold that which is righteous and good in the eyes of God, to reward those who do good and punish that which is evil. When that is out of order, there is no longer any obligation to comply. Throughout scripture there are many examples of righteous men and women who defied decrees by the governments of their day. (Dan 3, 6:10 Acts 4:18, Heb 11:31).

After referencing the use of embryonic cell lines in the development of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, they then add their understanding of Romans 14 and Christian conscience:

This is an incredibly important facet of the Christian faith referred to as the “liberty of the conscience”. It is so important that God inspired the Apostle Paul to write clearly about it in the 14th chapter of the epistle to the Romans. The [Bible] clearly tells us that if our conscience prohibits us from doing something, then to us that is a sin. Further, we are taught that we have no right to judge another’s conscience or force someone to violate theirs. This is where we get the concept of “conscientious objection”.

A post from 27 March 2022 contains a video showing Ps. Cotton addressing demonstrators at a Freedom Rally outside NSW Parliament house on 22 March 2022. The text reads:

It is definitely time to turn your back on the institutional church who have become nothing more than the puppet of the government and its new world order agendas. The institutional religious leaders have abandoned you by not standing up against the government who has denied your God given right of conscientious objection (Romans 14). It is time for you to abandon them and their corrupt organisations.



It is definitely time to turn your back on the institutional church who have become nothing more than the puppet of the government and its new world order agendas.

(Cotton)

Questions from Parts One and Two

We can use the first half of this discussion paper to assess the elements of this anti-vaccination advocacy that involve conspiracy theories:

1. Which aspects of Bob and Angie Cotton's advocacy against vaccination could reasonably be considered a conspiracy theory?

(We will call these "this conspiracy theory" in the questions that follow.)

2. Could you construct a Conspiracy Spectrum for this topic? (i.e. what confidence level do you give to each of the conspiratorial claims represented here? – See Part One)
3. Does this conspiracy theory identify itself as fringe, or define itself in opposition to 'the mainstream'?
4. How would you categorise this conspiracy theory by scale (Barkun), topic area (Brotherton), by whether it takes a modern or postmodern stance toward evidence (Harambam), or by the level of risk it poses (Richards)?
5. Does this conspiracy theory have persuasive elements?
 - a. Does it build on legitimate criticisms?
 - b. Does it understand and fairly represent the views it is critiquing?
 - c. Does it resemble conspiracies that have been previously exposed?
 - d. Does it explain how the conspiracy is managed and kept secret?
6. How would you characterise this conspiracy theory using the CUES acronym: What are its consequences for adherents and society? Which of its ideas seem universal? What are its emotional and social effects?
7. Do common predictors of conspiracy theories tell you anything useful about this particular conspiracy theory? Does it build on other conspiracy theories, appeal to political extremes, personality disorders, or social and educational disadvantage?
8. Do common epistemic, existential, and social motivations tell you anything useful about this conspiracy? Does it provide a way of understanding complex or chaotic issues? Does it provide a sense of agency and control in great uncertainty or anxiety? Does it provide a sense of group identity?
9. Are your answers to the last two questions on predictors and motivations useful in talking to individuals?
10. Does this conspiracy theory reflect or illustrate the shift toward political conspiracy theories observed over the past 15 years?
11. How does this conspiracy theory think about institutions of public knowledge: scholarship, journalism, democratic government, and the judiciary?
12. Does this conspiracy theory rely on polarisation, whether social or political, and whether ideological or affective?

13. Does this conspiracy theory ever appeal to mis- or dis-information?
14. Does this conspiracy theory depend upon filter bubbles or echo chambers?
15. Does this conspiracy theory take a populist stance against 'elites' on behalf of the virtuous 'ordinary people'?
16. Does this conspiracy theory understand itself as Christian? What specifically Christian ideas does it appeal to? (From any Christian movements.)
17. Does this conspiracy theory show any concern with Christians losing influence?
18. Does this conspiracy theory make supposedly Christian arguments against the role and value of expertise in public life? Does it claim its own set of experts?
19. Does this conspiracy theory make supposedly Christian arguments against the role of public authorities? Does it support democratic government?

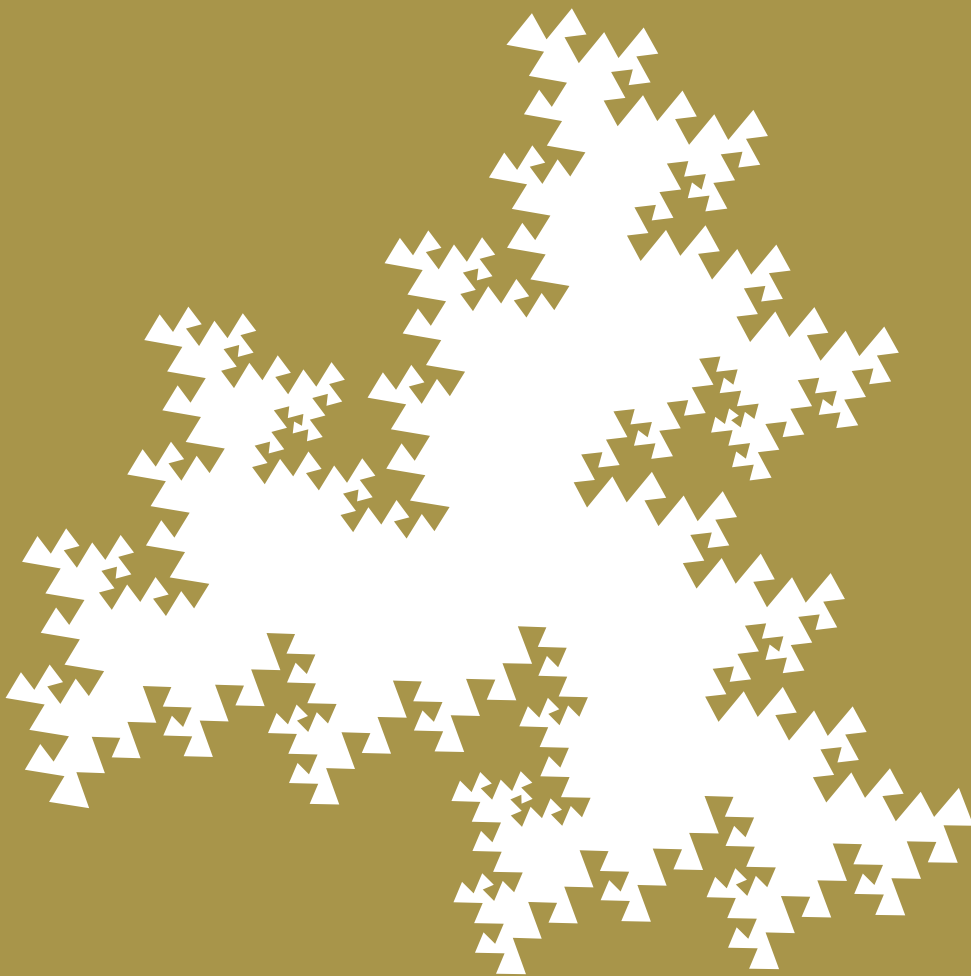
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PART III

Ethics

**How should Christians behave
when discussing conspiracy
theories, whether for or against?**



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After reading this section you should be able to:

- Describe aspects of Christian ethics that apply to arguing for and against conspiracy theories.
- Advocate for these ethics in Christian communities, including online Christian communities.



We invite critiques or suggestions for future improvements.

As we pursue truth and seek justice together, habits of forbearance train us to see theological and moral differences not as impediments to faithfulness but as opportunities to develop Christian character in our relationships with each other. The practice of forbearance relies on the cultivation of familiar virtues in the tradition – humility, patience, wisdom, faithfulness, and love – and is built on fundamental Christian confessions, like the trustworthiness of God and the complicated limitations of human finitude.

James Calvin Davis (*Forbearance*, 2017, Preface)

1. Christians for truth and justice?

Parts One and Two have given us a picture of how conspiracy theories operate in society and among Christians, how they contribute to a mindset of conspiracism, how this serves polarisation and populism in contemporary politics, and how this can affect individuals, churches, and communities. It cannot be assumed that this discredits every conspiracy theory or every person who believes them. However, it should mean that Christians who are attracted to conspiracy theories – as well as others who oppose such ideas – will understand the pitfalls that await them in discussions on these subjects, and will endeavour to avoid them.

In what follows we treat the Bible as **ethically normative** for Christians. In saying this, we recognise that “much of what we call the Bible—the Old and New Testaments—is not a rule book; it is narrative” (Wright 2016). If we say or imply that “the Bible expects” some specific behaviour, that is a shorthand way of saying that Christian scripture shows God interacting with people through history, revealing God’s own purposes, truth, and character, and doing so in human circumstances that are comparable to our own. There is a common horizon in our experience of God and the world that makes the resulting text ethically understandable, applicable, and authoritative. All of us should be able to adapt a biblical reference list of this kind to the biblical narrative that we see ourselves continuing. We’ll link the Bible references in this section for easy checking.

Any conspiracy theory says that powerful people have been working together to keep a big secret, something explosive. It usually says that ordinary people have been asking questions and figuring out what really happened – and that the findings are shocking. We may agree that if a story like this is true, that’s important to know. It means that powerful people are abusing their power, harming or deceiving others, and escaping accountability. If so, we should be angry at the evil and the cover-up; we should expose the guilty, and seek justice for the victims. Christians *especially* should do this:

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy. ([Prov 31:8–9](#))

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead
expose them. ([Eph 5:11](#))

The many passages in scripture that support advocacy and justice will apply to the exposure of cover-ups. It is suggestive that, under Old Testament law, refusing to bear witness to a crime was also a crime:

When any of you sin in that you have heard a public adjuration to testify and – though able to testify as one who has seen or learned of the matter – does not speak up, you are subject to punishment. ([Lev 5:1](#))

Conspiracy theories, then, can be understood as quests for truth and justice. As discussed in Part One, they can't be automatically dismissed just for being conspiracy theories. Conspiracies really have happened, and, while there are better precedents for some kinds than others, there is no absolute principle that separates conspiracies that have really happened from others that have proven false.

This must be balanced, however, by acknowledging the problems that are sometimes caused by conspiracy theories, or by those advocating for them. As discussed in Parts One and Two, conspiracy theories are not generally successful at persuading others, and can be disruptive to relationships and communities. We most easily notice this in the theories we don't agree with, and it perhaps reminds us of scripture's concern for false rumours:

A perverse person spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends. (Prov 16:28)

With conspiracy theories, Christians must value the good that is intended, but also prevent the evils that sometimes follow. There are several ways that good intentions can go wrong. If we make *false* accusations then we will be working against truth and justice. If we don't carefully check what we're saying, or promptly correct any errors, then we will be speaking insincerely. If we are drawn into angry insults, quarrelling, or contempt, our concerns will have started to undermine our faith. And all this is equally true for any Christian arguing *against* conspiracy theories.

In what follows, our main questions will be: When can conspiracy theories be foolish? When do the necessary accusations become slander? When do they show partiality or bias? When are they being argued without sincerity? When do the necessary judgements, and the anger and insults that follow, turn to evil? How do we maintain a reasonable and gentle manner in these discussions? How do we live with sharp differences? And how should we be relating to our wider societies?

2. Important terms and concepts

- **Agreement.** The state of having worked out our differences.
- **Conscience.** Our inward conviction of right and wrong.
- **Exile.** Being forced to live away from our own home and country.
- **Forbearance.** Patient self-control and tolerance in difficult circumstances.
- **Persuasion.** Changing another's convictions or intentions, whether through argument or by appeal to morals or emotions.
- **Slander.** The sin of making false and damaging statements about another person.



When can conspiracy theories be foolish? When do the necessary accusations become slander? ... When do the necessary judgements, and the anger and insults that follow, turn to evil?

3. "Who is wise and understanding among you?"

We derive Christian ways of thinking and speaking from the Bible's wisdom literature. The parts that say the most about wise and foolish speech are the Book of Proverbs and its analogues in the New Testament: the Sermon on the Mount, the homily of James, and the parallel middle sections of Ephesians and Colossians (Holloway 2000, Dittman 2018). Proverbs is by no means a systematic document. However, we can outline what it says about foolishness through the four main terms that it uses for fools. They overlap considerably in meaning, but each can be used with distinctive connotations. Fools are:

- The simpleminded, naive, and immature, who **believe anything**. Wisdom calls out to them. (*pethîy*. Prov 1:4; 1:22; 1:32; 7:7; 8:5; 9:4, 6, 16; **14:15**; 14:18; 19:25; 21:11; 22:3; 27:12)
- The **quarrelsome**, who freely express rage, and suffer avoidable harm. (*'evîl*. Prov 1:7; 7:22; 10:8,10,14,21; 11:29; **12:15-16**; 14:3,9; 15:5; 16:22; 17:28; **20:3**; 24:7; 27:3,22; 29:9)
- The **wise in their own eyes** who, unlike the truly wise, resist changing. (*kecîl*. This is the most general term; Prov 1:22,32; 3:35; 8:5; 10:1,18,23; 12:23; 13:16,19-20; 14:7-8,16,24,33; 15:2,7,14,20; 17:10,12,16,21,24-25; 18:2,6,7; 19:1,10,13,29; 21:20; 23:9; **26:1-12**; 28:26; 29:11,20)
- The arrogant **mockers**, who reject correction. (*lêš* or *lîš*. Prov 1:22; 3:34; **9:7-8,12**; **13:1**; 14:6,9; **15:12**; 19:25,28-29; 20:1; 21:11,24; **22:10**; 24:9)

Mockers reliably identify themselves on social media by using the laugh emoji in circumstances of disagreement. 😏

These four terms should recall some of the problems we have seen in families and churches in Parts One and Two. If we just believe anything, then we fall into falsehood and slander. If we are quarrelsome, then we fall into partiality and create strife. If we are wise in our own eyes, then we fall into pride, or we cannot acknowledge our faults and become insincere. If we are mockers, then we fall into patterns of judgement, anger, and insults that don't respect the dangers of these kinds of thought and speech. We will use this outline below.

- Accusations and slander
- Strife and partiality
- Insincerity and pride
- Judgement, rage, and insults

All four of these concerns appear in the New Testament, and each offers a simple check on whether involvement in conspiracism is affecting our faith. Or, by the same token, whether responding to conspiracism *badly* is affecting our faith.

Aside. A fifth word for fool, *nābāl*, may be familiar to English-language readers from the story of Abigail in 1 Samuel 25 (see v.25). This

term is rarer; it means a stupidly wicked and vile person. This is the term used in Psalms for those who say in their heart “there is no God” (Ps 14:1/53:1; cf. Isa 32:5). However, we can’t say that merely believing in God makes us wise – not when Jews and Christians are the recipients of all of the biblical exhortations to gain wisdom. And however often foolish people might dismiss God for bad reasons, it doesn’t follow that every non-Christian or non-theist is foolish. Especially on the behavioural issues that we will consider here, people of all faiths or none can be more thoughtful and morally reflective than many Christians. They may have had better role models; and may have put more time and effort into thinking ethically about these issues – and the Christians may not.

3.a. Accusations and slander

The Australian philosopher Patrick Stokes has observed that moral objections to conspiracy theories have generally said they lead to bad outcomes. They “promote alienation from political society” and burden their believers with “imaginary ills on top of their real ones” (Stokes 2018, p.189). But, he argues, a more directly ethical objection can be made:

engaging in conspiracy theorising involves a willingness to entertain and multiply accusations (p.190)

While accusations can be necessary, conspiracy theories “tend to generate what I’ll call auxiliary accusations: a class of accusation of malfeasance made purely to defend a theory from countervailing evidence” (ibid).

Consider someone who believes in a simple *event conspiracy*, like an assassination or a major medical fraud. They have trouble getting attention for their claims, don’t see their ideas in the newspapers, and begin to wonder if the ‘mainstream media’ are a part of the conspiracy. Or they find their claims being dismissed by academics and public authorities, and wonder if there are conspirators within the universities and the government. Before long they have, in Barkun’s terms (see Part One), a *systematic* conspiracy, or even a *superconspiracy*. It may seem that increasing the number of conspirators better explains opposition to the conspiracy theory, but this comes with a moral cost:

The conspiracy theorist takes on more and more **evidentiary debt**, so to speak, as she enunciates more and more accusations that will at some point need to be “paid for” with evidence. But just as adding auxiliary accusations is more epistemically expensive, so too it is, so to speak, more morally expensive. When the OPV-HIV [virus] hypothesis “went conspiratorial,” it took on board a new and explanatorily inert auxiliary hypothesis (namely, that there was a cover-up within the medical fraternity) with no real evidence in its favor. But it also took on board the moral liability of leveling an accusation. Even if the parties are not specified, a class of persons are nonetheless impugned. (p.198)



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(Stokes)

This should sound familiar to Christians. If we make false accusations we become slanderers. If we are fast and loose with accusations then we *might* become slanderers, but we don't know or don't care if we do. Which is arguably worse. Even if we make a true accusation, we must be prepared to substantiate it. So a Christian who is persuaded that they should advocate for a conspiracy theory *must* take care with the accusations it involves.

You *shall not* spread a false report. You *shall not* join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness ([Ex 23:1](#), emphasis added).

The simple believe everything, but the prudent give thought to their steps. ([Prov 14:15](#))

There's quite a lot about slander in the New Testament. For Jesus, outward regulations don't "defile a person," since only what comes from within a person has moral significance, and slander is one of those things ([Matt 15:18-20](#), cf. [Mark 7:21-23](#)). This appears in numerous New Testament vice lists ([Rom 1:30](#); [2 Cor 12:20](#); [1 Tim 6:4](#); [1 Tim 3:11](#); [2 Tim 3:3](#); [Tit 2:3](#)). A similar term, 'reviler,' appears twice in 1 Corinthians, where Paul says that a Christian should not even eat with a fellow Christian who acts in this way, and that such a person will not inherit God's kingdom ([1 Cor 5:11](#); [6:10](#)).

rid yourself of all... slander. ([Eph 4:31](#); [Col 3:8](#); [1 Pet 2:1](#))

whoever utters slander is a fool. ([Prov 10:18](#))

The same concerns appear in the Old Testament, though largely in Israel's legal code. We normally think of the Ninth Commandment, "Do not bear false witness" ([Ex 20:16](#); [Deut 5:20](#)), as a command not to lie to one another. But its focus in the law is on public accusations in matters of justice, and so is closer to the kind of accusations entailed by conspiracy theories. The penalties outlined in [Deut 19:15-21](#) required that a false accuser was to receive *the same penalty* they had sought for the accused. For a false accusation of a capital crime they would be put to death ("show no pity: life for life..." v.21). This offers us, at very least, a useful mental exercise. Posting on social media addresses a potentially public audience, and may call for, or imply, action against alleged conspirators. Are we taking enough care with what we say that we would gladly receive the same punishment if we could not prove what we were saying to a court's satisfaction? Notice the standards of proof in that passage in Deuteronomy: claims required multiple witnesses, and were publicly judged by agreed authorities. The New Testament employs similar norms at a community level ([1 Tim 5:19-20](#); [Matt 18:16](#)).

Of course, Christians who advocate for conspiracy theories seldom feel like slanderers even when making unproven public accusations. This is most likely because, when we do, we are not consciously or deliberately lying. We might rather be saying:

1. **"We're just asking questions."** – If we are really just "raising awareness", or calling for suspicions to be investigated, then that is not slander. But if so, our claims will be cautious and tentative, and we will distinguish what we think can so far be publicly proven and

- what cannot. When accusations of conspiracies show no such care or diligence, then they cannot claim to be “just asking questions”.
2. **“We believe it’s true.”** – If an accusation is true, then it is not slander. But an accusation can be diligently believed and still be false, or at least impossible to prove, so the private belief of a crime is not a solid basis for a public accusation. Accusations can themselves be gross injustices if they are made without diligence or evidence.
 3. **“We’re not accusing individuals.”** – The accusations that comprise a conspiracy theory may not feel like slander if they are directed at a distant, shadowy ‘elite’, faceless bureaucrats, or a class of political enemies. Not “real people”. However every human being *is* a real person, known and loved by God, and God will judge slander against them. Sins are no less sins for targeting strangers.

There is no necessary moral contradiction in a Christian investigating or advocating for a conspiracy theory. But if we have a conspiracist mindset (see Part One), so that conspiracies are our *preferred* or *reflexive* explanations for public events, then we will find ourselves making a lot of accusations. If we make these accusations but we are not careful or concerned to avoid falsehood or slander, this creates a deep moral contradiction with our faith. As a check, we should be asking:

- Is it possible that the accusations being made could be supported by conclusive evidence? And are we making a good-faith effort to do so? If we accused a public figure of specific crimes on social media, and were sued, could we defend our statements?
- Should any conspiracy movement crowd-fund legal actions, research projects, or investigations that would settle their questions decisively one way or the other? Are there social institutions we would trust to judge this evidence, like the courts, journalism, experts, public authorities? Or do we have a prior distrust of all such institutions?

An especially dubious class of accusations are based on **‘mind reading.’** This is when we allow ourselves to define what others are *really* thinking, or what their *real* motivations are:

- They are afraid of the truth, and can’t face it.
- They are irrational, emotional, and losing control.
- They do what they do out of envy/fear/self-interest.
- They know, deep down, that they are wrong, but they are in denial.
- It’s all about power/money/fame for them.
- They just want to destroy everything that’s good.

It’s difficult to say these things with confidence about people we know personally, let alone about large groups of strangers. We should show everyone the courtesy that we ourselves would like to receive, and so, only be judged by what we actually say and do.

The test of slander is the most important moral check that a Christian conspiracist should apply to themselves or their online communities, because it is a moral evil that unambiguously contradicts their Christian faith.

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbours... ([Psalm 15:1-5](#))



The test of slander is the most important moral check that a Christian conspiracist should apply to themselves or their online communities.

3.b. Strife and partiality

In Parts One and Two we canvassed some of the effects of conspiracy belief in society and church. Strife was a recurring theme: families “torn apart”; ministers and members leaving churches; online defriending; insults and abuse. If it weren’t for strife – the social disruption, the fractured relationships, the quarrelling, the anger and insults – we’d hear a lot less concern about conspiracy theories than we do, and they themselves would have less prejudice to overcome. When Christians discuss conspiracy theories we should find common ground by rejecting such behaviour.

Conspiracy theories can *always* be advanced in a civil and reasonable manner. The way that many engineers expressed their concerns about the mechanics of the Twin Towers collapse is a good example of this. Gentleness, reasonableness, humility, and patience are always possible.

It’s easy to find condemnations of strife in the New Testament ([Rom 1:29-31](#); [1 Cor 5:8](#), [Eph 4:31](#); [Col 3:8](#); [Tit 3:3](#); [1 Pet 2:2](#)). We might benefit from recovering some of its vocabulary for our personal conflicts in modern life:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: ... **enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions**, ... and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ([Gal 5:19-21](#))

It is honourable to refrain from strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel. ([Prov 20:3](#))

James in particular says much about how Christians should speak. If someone thinks they are religious – meaning in this case Christian – but does not control their tongue, their Christianity is worthless ([James 1:26](#)). Don’t let many presume to be teachers, who will be judged more strictly ([3:1-4](#)). The tongue is a fire that can burn down a forest; no-one can control it ([3:5-8](#)). Fresh and bitter water cannot flow from the same spring; and we should not both bless God and curse our brothers and sisters, who are made in God’s likeness ([3:9-12](#)).

Instead the New Testament expects gentleness and patience from us ([Gal 5:22–23](#); [1 Tim 6:11](#); [2 Cor 6:6](#)). This can't be dismissed as politically-correct tone-policing (on the Christian right), or a failure to rage at injustices (on the Christian left), since it is grounded in God's character:

... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. ... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ([Gal 5:22–23,25](#))

Two causes of strife are mentioned prominently in Christian scripture. Some strife is caused by **quarrelsome people**. The Pastoral Letters are especially concerned about those who have a “morbid craving for controversy” that leads to “envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling” ([1 Tim 6:3–5](#)). “Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels” ([2 Tim 2:22–23](#)).

avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. ([Titus 3:9](#))

Conspiracy theories – especially in politics – have much of this reputation today. This does not mean they are false. But it does mean that those advancing them should work hard to show they are not “senseless and stupid” – they should try and do the *work* of persuading others, be open to reasonable critique, and not be quarrelsome. And others should reciprocate this goodwill. When we have disagreements, we must have them in this manner.

Other strife is caused by **partiality**, meaning favouritism or unfair bias toward a particular side or position: In [James 2](#) and [1 Cor 11:17–34](#) the writers address favouritism to the wealthy over the poor. This is rejected, following the law and prophets ([Ex 23:1–8](#); [Lev 19:15](#); [Deut 24:14–15](#); [Amos 4:1–5](#); [5:10–13](#); [8:4–6](#)). In [1 Cor 1:10–17](#) and [3:1–23](#), when party spirit blows up between the followers of Paul, Peter and Apollos, it is similarly rejected. Having partiality in the church is in every case condemned, for “There is no partiality with God.” ([Deut 10:17](#); [2 Chr 19:7](#); [Acts 10:34](#); [Rom 2:11](#); [10:12](#); [Gal 2:6](#); [Col 3:25](#); [Eph 6:9](#)). The God's-eye view is perfectly loving, perfectly just, and perfectly even-handed.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ... You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ([James 2:1,8–9](#); cf. [1 Pet 1:17](#))

In Part Two we explained polarisation as the process of forming antipathy toward enemies, whether social or political, and populism as the process of identifying social elites as the enemies of ordinary people. Each tendency can grow by spreading quarrels and partiality in church and

society, and, through conspiracism, teaching one's hearers that enemies are acting secretly against them from positions of power.

There are many examples in scripture of people facing up to partiality. The religious and wealthy in Israel were condemned by Amos for mistreating their workers and the poor, and told to fear judgement for it ([Amos 4–5](#)); Israelites in exile realised that foreigners and eunuchs could become faithful Jews ([Isa 56:3–8](#)); the Parable of the Good Samaritan reframed the “who is my neighbour?” question to specially include people you don’t like ([Luke 10:25–37](#)); Paul converted from a kind of violent zealotry (e.g. [Gal 1:13](#)); he told Christians with conscientious differences over food and worship to accept each other, even on issues he himself argues strongly about elsewhere ([Rom 14 vs. Gal 2:11–14](#)); Peter declared “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” ([Acts 10:34–35](#)). It’s not unusual to have partiality and to think that it’s good, and to think that you’re fighting for what’s right.

Do not, for the sake of ____, destroy the work of God. ([Rom 14:20](#))

We should therefore apply special care to conspiracy theories that support polarisation or populism, especially when they are deployed freely, as a reflex, or as a first resort. More so if they set out to inflame divisions. And most of all if they deliberately escalate strife by taunting or mocking their enemies.

Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us.. ([Titus 2:7–8](#); cf. [2 Cor 6:3](#))

Conspiracy theories may be true or false. But if we want to avoid spreading untruths, injustices, and strife, then we must cultivate a reasonable and peaceable impartiality in the way that we assess or discuss them.

3.c. Insincerity and pride

One of the most interesting and disruptive findings in conspiracy theory research is that people will to some degree accept contradictions in **auxiliary conspiracy theories** (Wood 2012). In experimental studies, research subjects who approved of comments that Princess Diana faked her own death *also* approved of comments that she was murdered.

What is happening here? People know, of course, that contradictory statements cannot both be true, and people who accuse others of lying to them are especially attuned to this. We think what’s happening is this: two contradictory ideas may each also contradict a third idea, and if it seems important to oppose that third idea, they may both seem comparatively plausible and significant. So if a person believes that official narratives are generally suspect, then many fringe ideas may seem more likely to be the real explanation – even those that individually contradict each other.

Wood's findings changed the discipline of conspiracy studies (Douglas et al 2019, p.7). They questioned the 1990s view that conspiracy theories were **monological belief systems** – ways of keeping everything consistent in your own mind – and moved researchers toward the present consensus that they have a much wider range of psychological causes and effects (see the **CUES** acronym in Part One).

Insincerity

The obvious warning here for Christians is that conspiracy theories may tempt us to make inconsistent or merely utilitarian claims. That is, they can tempt us toward insincerity, when sincerity is foundational to good character. In biblical Greek, it is *anupokrites*, the opposite of hypocrisy, and the absence of play-acting. Christians must “speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.” (2 Cor 2:17; cf. James 3:17). We must let our Yes be Yes and our No be No (Matt 5:37; James 5:12), and not try to artificially inflate our credibility with anything cheaper than lifelong sincerity. “Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pet 4:11). Sincerity means that when we claim to be seeking truth and justice, we really must be doing so, in our minds. We have to stand behind what we say, which means:

- genuinely caring and actually checking that what we say is true; we can't just automatically repeat what 'our people' are saying.
- making apologies, corrections, and even reparations if something we have said was false. It means repenting and changing.
- not ducking accountability for what we've said (Prov 26:19). So no “just joking” or “just asking questions” if we've actually made some perfectly clear allegations.

This should all sound quite straightforward but many factors can undermine our sincerity. Anyone who's ever led Bible studies will have noticed that some Christians feel a deep need to be the person who gives *The Right Answer*, and are visibly shamed or slighted if anyone present is genuinely better informed. For partisans, disagreement feels like an attack or betrayal, and acknowledging mistakes feels like losing ground in a war. We just may not want to admit we are wrong, or that our side could be wrong. Partiality can be supported by pride, and pride by overconfidence. Both pride and overconfidence are worth examining more closely here.

Pride

Many studies have connected conspiracy belief with qualities about which a person may be intellectually self-conscious, such as lower education and income (Douglas 2019, p.14). These are only trends; we stress that they do not define or determine any individual case. But Christians who are involved in conspiracy theories may wish to ask themselves if they are deriving self-esteem from their involvement in the conspiracy. And if they

are not accorded this esteem elsewhere in their life, then does that play a role in their involvement?

... do not claim to be wiser than you are. ([Rom 12:16](#))

This is a delicate issue, because great stigma and shame are attached in our society with having low intelligence or reasoning ability; and this happens as much in church as anywhere else. Few people reading this will have ever seen a Christian stand up in church and talk about the temptations of foolishness and simplemindedness, and how they are working to overcome them. It is one of life's ironies that the wise are usually humbler than the foolish. Yet if these problems are as common as their profile in the Old and New Testaments suggest, we should expect to have such struggles in our churches, and in ourselves, and we should be humble and watchful about this.

Do you see a person wise in their own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for them. ([Prov 26:12](#))

We saw in Part Two that echo chambers and filter bubbles tend to reinforce views like our own and to exclude any critical reflection about those ideas, or face-to-face discussion with opponents. This may lead a person to believe their group's ideas are beyond question, regardless of what their merits really are. This is the ignorance, triumphalism, and pride of being "wise in our own eyes" – which is to say: often in error, but never in doubt. The wisdom that comes with humility helps to prevent overconfidence, as does hearing contrary views.

The one who first states a case seems right,
until the other comes and cross-examines. ([Prov 18:17](#))

3.d. Judgements, anger, and insults

When we make accusations against supposed conspirators, then judgement, anger, and insults will often follow. They are seen as bad people, doing bad things – people who *deserve* our condemnation, rage, and mockery. We would hope that most Christians are able to disagree without ridicule and contempt. For some though, it is a reflex, and discussions of conspiracy theories in particular will quickly take this turn.

Drive out a scoffer, and strife goes out; quarrelling and abuse will cease. ([Prov 22:10](#))

It can be difficult to talk about combative behaviours with highly partisan Christians. One reason is that they can appeal to seeming loopholes in the Old and New Testaments to defend such behaviour. For, while there are biblical warnings against judgement, anger, and insults, they are sometimes justified, and we see important people acting in these ways. So criticising one person for angry insults may elicit the response that Jesus



The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines.

(Prov 18:17)

and Paul used them, and thus: “So can we, you *moron!*” For another, the same criticism might lead to the response: “Didn’t Jesus say not to judge?” It’s worth getting these issues straight in our minds before we have these conversations.

Judgements

The New Testament expects Christians to make good moral judgements ([John 7:24](#); [1 Cor 5:12–13](#); [1 Cor 6:1–5](#)). However, it also says “do not judge” on several occasions ([Matt 7:1](#); [Luke 6:37](#); [Rom 14:4](#); [James 4:12](#)). These two sets of passages can be played off against each other. We should note, however, that particular wrong *kinds* of judging are in view in the second group of passages:

- moral hypocrisy ([Matt 7:1–5](#))
- harsh or unforgiving condemnations ([Luke 6:35–38](#))
- needless quarrels ([Rom 14:1–4](#))
- wrong or malicious judgements, and “speaking evil” of each other ([James 2:4](#); [4:11–12](#))

So if we want to say someone is making wrong judgments, or making them in a wrong way, we should confirm whether they are making a good moral judgement, in good faith, in a good spirit, and with the hope of reconciliation.

Anger

In a similar way the New Testament contains both prohibitions of anger and high-profile examples of it. At one point Jesus physically expels from the Jerusalem Temple certain traders who were extorting foreign pilgrims and converts, all with the seeming approval of the priestly families. (Follow his references to [Isa 56:6–8](#) and [Jer 7:11](#) to make these connections.)

... Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’;
but you are making it a den of robbers.” ([Matt 21:12–13](#))

Of course, anger can be right or wrong: there’s a difference between a reasoned moral judgement and the experience of rage, where we lose control; or wrath, where we lash out in payback. That’s why anger “lodges in the hearts of fools” ([Eccl 7:9](#)), and Paul writes “be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” ([Eph 4:26](#)). The problems arise when anger is unwarranted, reflexive, habitual, or otherwise uncontrolled. It is a constant theme of scripture that God is *slow* to anger ([Ps](#)

86:15, cf. Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2), and James expects the same of us.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be **quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger**; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. (James 1:19–20; cf. Prov 14:29)

Except for this quote from James 1, listening is not mentioned as a virtue in Christian Scripture. However, a moment's thought shows that it is required by many or most of the Bible's interpersonal ethics. Loving, understanding, persuading, reconciling, bearing one another's burdens, mourning and laughing together, and making peace all require listening – and all help resist anger.

Insults

Finally, insults also show this same balance between biblical warnings and biblical role models. Jesus, Paul, and the prophets all speak sharply to different people at different times: “You blind fools! ... You snakes, you brood of vipers!” (Matt 23:17, 33; cf. 23:27; Acts 13:9–10; Amos 4:1; Ezek 13:4). Elijah mocks Baal at some length to the faces of his prophets (1 Kings 18:25–27), Proverbs satirises sluggards and drunkards (Prov 23:34–35; 26:13), and Isaiah similarly sends up idol-makers (Isa 44:9–20). At the same time, Jesus, Paul, and James stress that we repay cursing with blessing:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ... Live in harmony with one another. ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:14–21; cf. Luke 6:28; 1 Cor 4:12–13; 1 Thess 5:15; 1 Pet 2:20–23; 3:9)

It seems then that scripture endorses some rebukes of foolishness and hypocrisy, while still prohibiting the kinds of verbal retaliation that leads to discord. This parallels the passages on anger, so Christians should take special care if insults flow from anger or lead to strife. We *can* be justified in judging, growing angry, and speaking insults. But it is important to get them right, and there are many ways to get them wrong. We should be cautious, careful, and deliberately “slow” in any of these activities, without ‘quick’ temper or ‘hot’ anger. The burning forest in James 3 is a warning that these traits can be destructive. It is tempting to respond to angry insults in the same vein; but that must be countered with intentional gentleness.

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted (Gal 6:1)

4. “Gentleness born of wisdom”

If faith, wisdom, and character all require that we avoid certain habits of mind, are there others habits that we should actively pursue – habits that should help us to discuss conspiracy theories constructively? Reasonableness and persuasion may not seem to many to be biblical values, but they do appear as consistent expectations in Christian scripture. To this we can add the need to respect conscientious differences, as well as to show active forbearance toward those with whom we disagree. These expectations must be mutual between Christians in the mainstream and the fringe. Finally, we can suggest that the political framework of the New Testament is quite minimalistic: it says to pursue holiness, on the one hand, and peace with everyone on the other hand. Even in modern democracies, with conspiratorial suspicions, this can still be our baseline.

4.a. Persuasion and agreement

A very specific character is associated with wisdom in Christian scripture. In James especially, godly wisdom is gentle, peaceable, reasonable, and impartial. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” ([James 3:13](#)). If you want to be wise, as a Christian, this is how you do it.

... the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle (*epieikēs*), willing to yield (*eupeithēs*), full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. ([James 3:17–18](#))

The two Greek words that are highlighted here, *epieikēs* and *eupeithēs*, can mean simple gentleness, but also openness to reason and a willingness to be persuaded. David Starling writes for *The Gospel Coalition* (2021) that while *epieikēs* can simply mean a gentle demeanour, and is usually translated as such,

its commonest use – within and beyond the New Testament – relates to politics, judgement and conflict resolution. ... This is the kind of cool-headed, fair-minded approach to debate and decision-making that comes from God.

That’s why Paul writes: “Let your *epieikeia* be known to all” ([Phil 4:5](#)). It makes a lot more sense for him to be concerned about a church’s reputation for reasonableness than for gentleness. This reasonableness should especially characterise Christian leaders ([1 Tim 3:3](#); [Tit 3:2](#)). ‘Soft virtues’ like gentleness and reasonableness do not eliminate the need for exhortation, reproof, and correction in Christian community ([Lev 19:17–18](#); [Prov 10:10](#); [Heb 3:12–13](#); [2 Tim 4:2](#)); but they absolutely do mean that we must invite such correction for ourselves ([1 Thess 5:12](#)) and receive it gently and reasonably. This can be tested both by advocacy for and advocacy against conspiracy theories.

The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness to their lips. (Prov 16:23)

When Paul counsels people in his churches to “agree with one another” or “be of the same mind” (1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 2:2; 4:2), he surely doesn’t mean that ideas are justified by being popular or that social conformity is anything to strive for. He is saying to *do the work of finding agreement* with each other. To work out our differences. Valuing our churches and communities should mean that we prioritise the work of finding agreement. When Jesus gives guidelines for settling disputes in community (Matt 18:15–17), he stresses speaking face-to-face with opponents individually and in small groups. Paul suggests something like mediation for the church in Corinth: “Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?” (1 Cor 6:5). There is perhaps no sharper test of whether a person’s commitment to a certain conspiracy theory has begun to interfere with their Christian faith than whether they would accept arbitration in the case of disputes or divisions arising from it.

Paul may be a more relatable model of persuasion than Jesus, since we may not feel we can emulate Jesus’ degree of insight into his questioners. We find Paul not just busily persuading people of no Christian commitments (Acts 17:4; 18:4; 26:28; 28:23; cf. 2 Cor 5:11), but doing the same in his interactions with fellow Christians through his letters. James W. Thompson sums this up in *Apostle of Persuasion* (2020):

Despite Paul’s frequent claims that he does not, like the rhetoricians, persuade others (cf. 1 Cor. 2:4; Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4), all of his letters are exercises in persuasion. Although he employs some of the conventions of letter writing, he “destroys arguments” (2 Cor. 10:4 AT) in a way that was unparalleled in both Jewish and Greco-Roman letters. ... While one may analyze both Paul’s theology and his rhetoric, both must be seen within Paul’s larger aim. As his letters consistently indicate, his primary aim is to present a transformed people to Christ at the end, and he writes letters to ensure that his work is not in vain (cf. 2 Cor. 6:2; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 2:1, 4, 3:5). Theology and persuasion are the means toward that goal, for the ultimate outcome of the churches remains in doubt in the midst of both internal and external challenges.
(Conclusion)

The idea that Christianity involves persuasion should be quite informative for life in modern society, where human knowledge is advanced by persuading professional communities, and democratic government proceeds by persuading the general public, and even political opponents (see Part Two). This may, however, challenge our natural tendency to think of persuasion in purely individualistic terms. In his 2002 article ‘Publics and Counterpublics’, Michael Warner suggests that ‘circulation’ is a better metaphor for our public ‘conversations’ about ideas. We’re not talking to one person over a coffee; we’re swimming with multitudes in a broad and ever-changing stream of ideas. This should prompt Christians to accept



There is perhaps no sharper test of whether a person’s commitment to a certain conspiracy theory has begun to interfere with their Christian faith than whether they would accept arbitration in the case of disputes or divisions arising from it.

the responsibility of persuasion in private and public life, but especially in our discussions of conspiracy theories.

4.b. Conscience and forbearance

Both conscience and forbearance should help us to maintain community in spite of differences, and they are just as much the responsibility of those advancing conspiracy theories as those opposing them.

Conscience

The understanding of conscience that appears in the New Testament can help us defuse sincerely held differences of opinion among Christians. On the one hand we ought to respect our sincere differences. God honours a person living by their conscience ([Rom 2:15](#)), it is perilous to ignore it ([1 Tim 1:19](#)), and a person may defend themselves by declaring that they have done right by it ([Acts 23:1, 24:16; 2 Cor 1:12](#)).

But on the other hand conscience is quite fallible. Conscience may be sharpened by God or by moral development ('perfect', 'purified,' [Heb 9:9,14](#)). Or it may be numbed like scar tissue by dishonesty ("seared with a hot iron," [1 Tim 4:2](#)). A conscience may be just plain wrong ('defiled' [Tit 1:15](#), 'evil conscience' [Heb 10:22](#)).

So if conscience is not some kind of inspiration or divine conviction, what is it? It's just a person's genuine internal understanding of right and wrong – a 'witness' ([Rom 2:15; 9:1](#)) – which gives us moral comfort when we keep to it, or discomfort when we do not. It's precisely because conscience is not absolute that it helps us with conscientious differences. In [Romans 14](#), gentile Christians believed they could eat anything and not observe special calendars, while Jewish Christians wanted to honour their law and culture. Paul had strong opinions on these issues; but he had stronger opinions about living together in peace.

We honour conscience, then, because God honours it, because we respect people doing the best they know how, and because it helps us live together in peace. We can show patience and forbearance by allowing that people who differ from us may be acting in goodwill. This brings us back to understanding each other, finding agreement, and making peace. Respect for conscience should help us to *avoid* community disruptions. It should give no one a licence to amplify disagreements by demanding their conscience be respected, but offering no such consideration to others.

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ([1 Tim 1:5](#))

Writing in *Themelios*, with an eye on United States politics in the age of Trump, Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli suggest a distinction between 'straight-line' and 'jagged-line' issues in Christian politics (2020). Straight-line issues have a direct connection between a biblical or a theological

principle and a political position; jagged line issues involve a “multi-step process” of reasoning (p.20).

Fellow church members should agree on straight-line political issues, and they should recognize Christian freedom on jagged-line political issues. ... Most political issues are not straight-line issues. Most are jagged-line issues. Think of everything from trade policy to healthcare reform to monetary policy to carbon dioxide emission caps. (p.21)

This is not a magic bullet, because many disputes between Christians reduce to disagreements over which issues are (in this language) straight or jagged in the first place. However, the idea does seem useful for conspiracy disputes. They are never issues on which there is a one-step biblical argument. Rather they have many sources; they take time to weigh and argue; and, manifestly, people of goodwill do disagree about them. They are jagged line issues, and while we all may wish to persuade others on these topics, they cannot in themselves be issues over which to disrupt Christian fellowship.

Forbearance

When we have important differences, one expectation found in Paul's letters is that we will 'bear with one another.'

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace... (Eph 4:1-3)

In a 2017 book on the subject, James Calvin Davis notes that forbearing means withholding a judgement, but also “suggests not just voluntary restraint but actively carrying something or someone for a time” (ch. 1). This eloquently captures Paul's emphasis on God's prior forbearance as the model for our own (Rom 2:4; 3:25; cf. Col 3:13 on forgiveness).

Forbearance is more than a *modus vivendi*, an ideological ceasefire. It is instead a positive commitment to living with the productive discomfort of difference as a reflection of the grace of God ... As Paul reminded the Romans, God responds to our own alienation with patient grace, without trivializing our sin, and so we bear with others in grace without artificially ignoring the differences between us. In following God's lead, our own forbearance “pays forward” God's forbearance of us. (ibid)

4.c. Submission and exile

A range of Christian conspiracy views involve opposition to their government, sometimes invoking the tradition of civil disobedience. In Part Two we quoted a NSW rural church that said “the government is meant to uphold that which is righteous and good in the eyes of God, to reward those who do good and punish that which is evil. When that is out of order, there is no longer any obligation to comply.” The authors were alluding to [Romans 13:1–7](#) and possibly the parallel passage in [1 Peter 2:13–17](#).

- Romans 13:1–7
- Citizens or exiles?

Romans 13:1–7

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul wrote: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities” (v.1) and “it is necessary to submit to the authorities” (v.5). He justifies this statement in two ways, by principle and by pragmatic considerations. He appeals to principle when he writes, “The authorities that exist have been established by God” (v.1), and rebelling against them will bring judgement (v.2). This seems to mean God’s judgement, not just Roman judgement, since Paul writes that Christians should submit “not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience” (v.5).

Second, he appeals to practicality: We may suppose that some in the church at Rome were afraid of their government, since Paul asks them: “Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority?” (v.3). It’s a mixed church with Jewish and gentile factions; some of the Jewish Christians may have been exiled from Rome by Claudius in 48 CE and only recently returned. It would not be much more than a decade before Jews in Israel would start three military rebellions against Rome in the space of seventy years, with catastrophic consequences. Paul emphasises paying taxes (vv. 6–7), which may remind us how a question about Roman taxes was used to try and trap Jesus in [Luke 20:20–26](#), leading to his dictum: “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” Some kind of tension with the Roman government would explain why this subject is raised in the first place. Paul’s response is “do what is right” (v.3), which he says will be recognised by the government. In this way, Romans 13 continues the behavioural advice from the end of Romans 12:

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. ... 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ... 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ... 16 Live in harmony with one another. ... 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge... 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. ([Rom 12:9–21](#))

Romans 13:1–7 would then seem to say to the church in Rome: Don't do anything stupid – and attract real punishment – just because you're afraid of your government. Read it through:

3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. 4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ([Rom 13:3–4](#))

This brings us to two common arguments against Christian submission to government. The first appeals to higher loyalty; it says “We must obey God rather than human beings!” ([Acts 5:29](#)) – at least when we perceive a conflict. We may dismiss out of hand the idea that Paul was teaching unconditional obedience or absolute subordination. He isn't going to worship the emperor, or stop speaking about Christ. But on the other hand he thoroughly opposes an attitude of insubordination. He doesn't say the government is illegitimate or suggest that Christians refuse to pay taxes. Quite the opposite, in both cases. He believes that being faithful Christians ought to look a lot like being good citizens and subjects, and that this is the safest and most fruitful way to live. This resembles the Old Testament advice to Jews living in foreign exile (see below), and is likely influenced by it.

The second argument looks at the concept of legitimate authority that Paul is using in Romans 13, and which is echoed in 1 Pet 2. It says that if the government is not really being “God's servant” to us – doing good, and restraining evil, as we understand that it should – then it is not a legitimate government of the kind that Romans 13:4 expects. The problem with all such arguments, at least insofar as they are argued from these passages, is that no modern democratic government fares worse than the Roman Empire of the first century on such comparisons. Yet Paul expected general Christian submission to the rulers of *that* Empire. It's hard to escape the conclusion that if Rome was ‘legitimate’ enough for Paul, then so are western governments today.

Citizens or exiles?

When Christians say that a government is not legitimate in this way, they are necessarily measuring it against an idea of what a government *ought* to be like. This raises the question of whether any such ideas exist in Christian scripture.

There are only two political contexts in the Bible, at least where governments are in the picture at all. We either find Jews living under the Jewish law in an ancient Jewish nation, or we find Jews or Christians living under foreign empires like Egypt, Babylon, or Rome, perhaps with some concessions but without independence. Christians in modern liberal democracies live somewhere in between these two positions: we

have the democratic freedom to participate in law making, and persuade others of whatever political action we consider appropriate; but if we fail to persuade others then we must live under collective decisions with which we do not agree. In either case, as Christians, our situation is like that of exiles, because we fundamentally belong elsewhere.

The Jewish exile in Babylon is used as an image of Christian life under the Roman Empire in the New Testament. Notice how 1 Peter makes almost the same exhortation as Romans 13:1–7, but addresses mixed congregations of Jews and gentiles in a Roman province in what is now northern Turkey:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and **exiles** to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution.... (1 Pet 2:11–18)

An attitude of exile in public life finds a middle path between either conforming to society or becoming combative towards it. It does not require social or political power, and is unsurprised by opposition from the powers that do exist. Yet it can serve the common good, and seek justice for others in public life. It pursues both “peace with everyone” and also “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” (Heb 12:14, cf. 1 Thess 4:11).

This is not to oppose larger systems of Christian political thought. But whatever political principles a Christian may otherwise choose to follow, they must be consistent with these ideals of living in exile – the clearest political theology in the New Testament.

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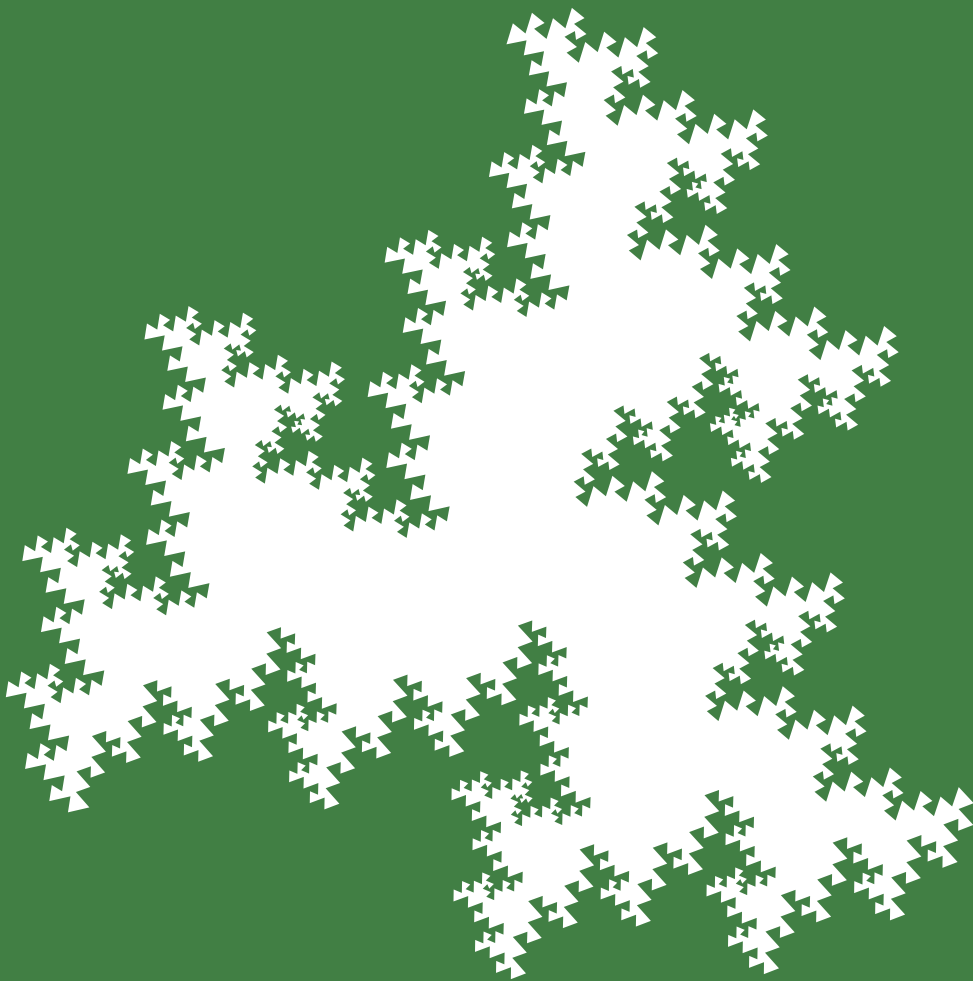
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PART IV

People

How should Christians respond to the negative effects of conspiracy theories on relationships and churches?



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After reading this part you should be able to:

- Distinguish when conspiracy theories cause problems and when they do not.
- Describe ways to inoculate your church or family against the potentially negative effects of conspiracy theories.
- Describe ways to counter the potentially negative effects of conspiracy theories in relationships and churches.



We invite critiques or suggestions for future improvements.

What I came away with after hearing the recordings was a sense of overwhelming helplessness and even fear. If the conspiracy was as Myron Fagan described, it was immensely powerful and capable of superhuman political, economic and military feats. Despite its physical, tangible attributes, the struggle was presented as ultimately a spiritual contest. The spiritual forces involved, Fagan claimed, were of the darkest evil and with the most malevolent intentions – whether its human agents were aware of it or not. It was a story of great sweep and interest, but was it true? At that time I was frankly unable to decipher it all and make any sense of it.

The historian Gregory S. Camp describes his first teenage encounter with a conspiracy theory (*Selling Fear*, 1997, p.16)

1. When do Christian conspiracy theories become a problem?

Conspiracy theories, even when they are completely false, can still be quite harmless beyond a certain loss of time and respect, and the danger of becoming more susceptible to others that aren't so harmless. Most belief in conspiracy theories causes no particular problems for Christian churches and leaders, Christian knowledge professionals, or society at large. But already in this paper we have seen that some result in:

1. *Immoral behaviour.* For some, including some Christians, conspiracism leads to false accusations, strife and partiality, insincerity and pride, or uncontrolled judgements, rage and insults. (See Part Three)
2. *Damage to individuals.* Conspiracy theories can have serious effects on individuals, regardless of whether they are true or false.
 - a. social isolation may increase.
 - b. anxiety, depression, anomia, paranoia, and other mental states that correlate with conspiracism may escalate.
 - c. theories involving medicine, pharmacology, and vaccination can sicken or kill, as well as undermining public health for others.
 - d. theories demanding resistance against supposedly evil governments can lead to criminal sanctions.
3. *Disruption to relationships.* When someone's life is greatly changed by conspiracy theory belief, their relationships with friends, family, and acquaintances may be damaged to the point of breakdown.
4. *Disruption to communities.* Damage to relationships may extend to schools, community groups, and churches, inflaming strife and corroding trust.
5. *Damage to society and democracy.* Undermining trust in democratic institutions can leave citizens feeling less served and protected by them, and less likely to rely on them or support them. Christians and Christian organisations must not undermine the common good for the sake of partisan advantage, especially in those cases where conspiracism drives extremism.

We will consider damage to relationships and communities in this section. This will presuppose the case argued in Part Three, that Christians who believe in conspiracy theories, or advocate for them, must understand and guard against some of their common dangers. Even radical ideas should not result in antagonistic behaviour.



Even radical ideas should not result in antagonistic behaviour.

2. Inoculation is better than cure

One of the most settled findings in the study of conspiracy theories is that (to use a suitably viral analogy) inoculation is easier and more effective than cure. Trying to correct disinformation after the event is prone to the **backfire effect**: it can actually galvanise resistance to good information.

Vaccines are weakened versions of pathogens (e.g. a virus) that, upon introduction to the body, trigger the production of antibodies. These antibodies become active once the real version of the pathogen enters the body thus conferring protection (immunity) against future infection. Inoculation theory postulates that the same can occur with information: by preemptively presenting someone with a weakened version of a misleading piece of information, a thought process is triggered that is analogous to the cultivation of “mental antibodies”, rendering the person immune to (undesirable) persuasion attempts. Over the years, a large body of evidence has been amassed showing that public attitudes can be inoculated across domains, including health and politics. Meta-analyses also confirm that inoculation messages are effective at conferring resistance to persuasion. (van der Linden and Roozenbeek 2020, p.152)

Douglas (2021) summarises:

Jolley and Douglas (2017) showed that for anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, pro-vaccine counterarguments were effective in improving intentions to vaccinate if presented prior to the conspiracy theories. However, once the conspiracy theories had already been presented, they were difficult to counter with provaccine arguments.

The tactic of getting-in-first is a way of taking power over others and so, when we are using inoculation, we should always do so responsibly and transparently. We should tell people what we are doing, and help them learn to recognise it when it happens. They should end up with more options rather than fewer, as would be the case with propaganda.

Effective inoculation against disinformation has two parts.

- a warning about disinformation which helps a person be alert to the problem.
- a prior refutation of some of the wrong information.

What forms of conspiracy theory inoculation make sense for churches and similar local communities? Primarily, we can help Christians to:

- Understand conspiracy theories
- Understand cognitive distortions
- Understand disinformation strategies
- Understand conspiracy rhetoric

Understand conspiracy theories

Parts One and Two, and our exercise on vaccines, have supplied information and resources for understanding conspiracy theories. In our conversations we should bear in mind:

- Conspiracy theories are very common.
- Conspiracy theories are not automatically wrong, and conspiracies do occur.
- Conspiracy theories, even if wrong, usually contain at least a seed of truth.
- Everybody does (and should) believe in at least some conspiracies.

Understand cognitive distortions

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy proposes that a range of exaggerated or irrational thought patterns contribute to depression, anxiety, and other conditions. Some examples may be relevant to conspiracy theories, both because of their close connection with anxiety and because these are generally recognisable phenomena.

- *All-or-nothing*. There is no middle ground between two alternatives. “You’re with us or you’re against us.”
- *Catastrophizing*. Assuming the worst about events; and blowing them out of proportion.
- *Emotional reasoning*. Drawing conclusions in response to your emotions (pride, embarrassment, shame, anxiety).
- *Fortune-telling*. Reasoning from assumptions about what will happen in future.
- *Labelling*. Saying “they ARE” rather than “they DID”. They are idiots and liars rather than (say) people who made mistakes or hold differing views.
- *Mental filtering*. Only seeking or paying attention to certain kinds of evidence.
- *Mind-reading*. Reasoning from assumptions about what others inwardly think, feel, or intend.
- *Overgeneralizing*. “Nothing happens by accident.” “Everything is connected.”
- *Personalisation*. Looking for individuals to blame for events.

Having words for these kinds of problems and tendencies gives us handles on these experiences, and so, more understanding and control of them.

Understand disinformation strategies

The list of disinformation tactics in NATO’s 2018 *Digital Hydra* defence study included impersonation (of people, institutions, news sources), emotional content, polarisation, conspiracy, discrediting opponents, and

trolling (van der Linden and Roozenbeek 2020, pp.156–61). Any standard first-year-of-university guide to writing, like Anthony Weston's *A Rulebook for Arguments* (2008, 4th. ed.) will be a good inoculation against messaging that relies on popular forms of bad reasoning.

- **getbadnews.com** is an online game that was created to test inoculation against common disinformation tactics (van der Linden 2020; it's fun).

Understand conspiracy rhetoric

In *Fringe Rhetorics: Conspiracy Theories and the Paranormal* (2022, ch.2), Karen Schroeder Sorenson uses critical discourse theory to ask, irrespective of whether any such beliefs are true, whether the advocates of conspiratorial or paranormal ideas employ distinctive rhetorical strategies.

- *Skeptical framing*. A story of how they came to be convinced about this belief by rational means, having formerly thought otherwise. This anticipates and deflects a perception of non-rationality. They are “investigators and researchers” concerned with truth. But they are not, for some reason, doing so in the journals, conferences, or professional societies where investigation and research are usually reported and assessed.

Although fringe rhetorics tend to distrust official sources and rely heavily on evidence that originates outside of what is usually considered “expertise,” this image fulfills the vital purpose of getting people to listen with some measure of objectivity.

- *A dichotomous relationship with science*. Conspiracy theorists align themselves with the culture, language, and processes of science, while rejecting the conclusions of most actual scientists, who are framed as the scientific ‘orthodoxy’ or ‘establishment’.

While traditional science itself may not be considered credible because of its supposed connection to deceptive or manipulative structures, science used by non-scientists provides both credibility and evidence. Identifying with the fringes actually makes a speaker more reliable and the evidence more believable. ... People who are “anti-establishment” may be given more credibility because the certified expert has likely (in the group's philosophy) been indoctrinated to the prevailing falsehood. In fact, sometimes simply stating that an explanation has been declared “official” means that it must be a lie.

- *Use of rhetorical fallacies*. Conspiracism often relies on a range of rhetorical tactics for strengthening their position or weakening that of opponents. Citing experts from irrelevant fields can impress

amateurs. Interruptions, red herrings, ad hominem attacks, which all help to distract and slow the opponent, can impress partisans or those without an understanding of argument or debate. Running multiple arguments at once and jumping between them means that the arguments will come to sound familiar, and some points may stick, even if nothing is ever soundly established. An incongruity or missing data of virtually any kind can be presented as if vitally significant. Tactically, this controls the discussion, diverts when in trouble, confuses opponents, and crowds out other views.

conspiracists take the offensive position in order to avoid questions about their own theories. ... This move relieves fringe arguments from the same types of scrutiny being applied to the opponent's account.



conspiracists take the offensive position in order to avoid questions about their own theories.

(Sorenson)

3. When conspiracy theories disrupt relationships

While inoculation is the best medicine, it is not always possible. We may only notice a conspiracy theory when it leads to serious public accusations, when someone blows up their relationships with friends or family, or when it reveals some pattern of thinking, like prejudice, delusion, or strife, that we had hoped was absent from our own social circles. A study written for Norwegian teachers describes the shock or paralysis that may follow:

When conspiracy theories came up in the classroom, it was almost always because a student spontaneously uttered support or fascination for one of them. Although experiences varied broadly, these “**panic moments**”, as one group of teachers called them, could be difficult to handle. This was especially the case when students who brought up these issues were among the more socially isolated and had taken on an explicit outsider role. These “outsiders” made themselves difficult to reach, the dynamic in the classroom became difficult, and teachers often felt they lacked constructive, didactic tools to deal with the situation as a possible situation for learning. One stated that she, therefore, tried to smooth over and otherwise ignore the topic; others went into open dialogue letting the class explore with whatever tools they felt they had (that were usually statements of opinion). This was especially difficult when students were pushing conspiracy beliefs denigrating fellow students—typically antisemitic and/or Islamophobic versions, but also gender-related ones. This made the universal demand for treating viewpoints and students with respect difficult; furthermore, it was sometimes seen as possibly tied to radicalization into extremist attitudes. (Dyrendal 2020, p.4–5)

Numerous fears surround the possibility of responding badly to conspiracy theories: How serious is the person? How shocking is the idea? Do we know enough of both the theory and the person to say something genuinely useful? Is saying nothing already a bad response? Will saying nothing seem like agreement, to them or others? Can a discussion be kept

from antagonism or deepening the alienation? Will the **backfire effect** mean they dig in their heels and become more determined? How far down the rabbit hole will any conversation need to go? But in many cases, we have to find a way to speak. How can we do so?

- Can we speak?
- How to start a conversation
- How should we speak?
- What do they actually believe?
- Has it affected their behaviour and relationships?

Can we speak?

There are many reasons why a conversation may not be helpful, or even possible, at least not at the present time. Some people simply do not want to talk; their interests are fulfilled by broadcasting their views on social media or sending you Youtube videos. (And people opposing conspiracy theories may behave just as dismissively.) It may be necessary to acknowledge:

- “I don’t believe you’re interested in my thoughts or my questions about what you’re saying. I’d be interested in discussing this, but I don’t see any possibility of that at present.”

If a conspiracy advocate is antagonistic in close relationships, it can feel as if they have strapped a bomb to their social and personal connections, and their willingness to blow up these relationships gives them power over those who want to preserve them. In conspiracism losing these relationships may be seen as a badge of honour for taking a principled and important stand.

In a 2020 series on conspiracy belief in *Psychology Today*, Joe Pierre discusses the transtheoretical or ‘stages of change’ model of behaviour change. The key point Pierre makes is that people who are deeply involved in a conspiracy theory **don’t want to be saved**. They are the ones helping others, or at least trying to. If the conspiracy theory is causing them problems, they are in a precontemplative stage of thinking about them.

- *Precontemplation*. The person is not aware of any change being required, or actively denies any problem exists.
- *Contemplation*. The person is aware of problems arising from their behaviour. They are ambivalent about change, weighing up the pros and cons. They are open to receiving information and reflecting on the situation.
- *Preparation*. They recognise that something needs to be done, but have not yet decided what it is.
- From there the stages progress to *Action*, *Maintenance*, and possibly *Relapse*, which then cycles back to Contemplation.



Some people simply do not want to talk; their interests are fulfilled by broadcasting their views on social media or sending you Youtube videos.

Conspiracism may act like an addiction, or like joining a cult, for some people, yet for others it will be held at a distance as entertainment or trolling. But if it causes problems for them, or for others, then some kind of realisation of those problems will be necessary.

... QAnon is part conspiracy theory, part religious cult, and part alternate reality role-playing game. Thinking about QAnon based on these different facets helps to understand why followers don't want to escape – doing so might mean giving up a form of recreation, a sense of belonging, or even a new identity and mission in life. But these facets also suggest possible interventions. (Pierre 2020)

So what can be done at each stage? In precontemplation, the primary need is to realise there is a problem. We can suggest:

- *Support*. “We’ll be there for you, even if no-one else will.”
- *Recognise problems*. It is probably not controversial to say that *some* forms of conspiracism have bad effects, including bad effects on Christian life and community. The question then is whether our own conspiracy theory involvement does the same. This can be acknowledged as a fact without expressing a judgement.

In a type of psychotherapy called “motivational interviewing” (MI), therapists are taught to be on the lookout for any statements that might suggest that a compulsive behavior is causing problems in someone’s life and to use that to encourage change without arguing about it. So, if someone were to say, “I’m getting in trouble at work for spending so much time online, but no one understands that QAnon is more important than anything else,” an MI therapist might reply with a reflective comment like, “other people don’t appreciate how important QAnon is to you and that’s starting to negatively affect your life.” This is a non-confrontational way of echoing distress caused by QAnon that can hopefully nudge someone closer to the “contemplation” stage of thinking about whether it might be worth trying to “unplug.” (Pierre 2020)

In the contemplation stage, openness to information is the key.

- *Unplugging*. Conspiracy theories are very largely an online phenomenon. Taking time off from the internet for a month or two may be a good way to “check if we’re really in control of this” or to step back and get some perspective and calm.
- *Reading contrary views*. Learning about conspiracies and their general effects, or deliberately seeking out people who believed and then rejected their ideas, may be a good way to assess whether involvement really needs to cause the problems they are seeing. In recalling his involvement in the JFK conspiracy theories, Michel Gagné recalls how important it was for him to simply read the *Warren Report* into the assassination (1964), which summarised the events

and testimony from the day. But he also recalled that he had been involved for 20 years before doing so (Gagné 2022, Author's preface).

How should we speak?

In Part Three we considered a number of ethical concerns for Christian speech: being gentle, humble, kind and patient; working to find agreement; using our intellectual gifts to serve others, and more. These principles are echoed, and greatly expanded upon, by a wide range of modern writers when they take up the topic of difficult conversations, and especially conversations about conspiracies. We will draw on four examples of this literature.

- ChangeMyView
- Steve Hassan
- Mick West
- Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay

ChangeMyView

The MIT Technology Forum (2020) interviewed the moderators of the ChangeMyView forum of the Reddit discussion website, as well as some conspiracy researchers, and asked them about the best way to talk. Some of their recommendations could be mapped directly onto biblical expectations:

- Always be respectful
- Speak privately where possible; i.e. “take it offline”. Especially on social media, this prevents anyone losing face or performing for an audience
- Find points of agreement and common ground

However, they were very hesitant to recommend their methods for engaging with friends or relatives. These might then be understood as principles for online discussion.

Steve Hassan

Steve Hassan was a member of the Unification Church in the 1970s, and since then has served as an expert on cults and deprogramming from cults. Asked about talking to QAnon adherents in a Slate interview, he replied:

Say something such as, “Look, you’re an intelligent, educated person. I respect you very much. It’s clear that you believe sincerely that QAnon is real. I would like to think that I am an intelligent, educated person too. If what you are following with QAnon is real, and I’m not understanding it, then I need to know what you know. Let’s agree to pursue truth together. If it is legitimate, it will stand



Speak privately where possible; i.e. “take it offline.” Especially on social media, this prevents anyone losing face or performing for an audience.

up to scrutiny. And if it's not, why would either of us want to spend time believing and acting on things that aren't real?"

Then typically the Q person will send you 60 links and they'll say, "Do the research I did." Which is code and loaded language for, "I got indoctrinated. You get indoctrinated." And you should say, "You know what? I'm interested in pursuing this based on my faith and my relationship with you. So what I'd like to propose is you pick one thing that was very influential and important to you. Let's watch it together and agree to discuss it. After we do that, I get my turn and I will present something. We'll watch it together and we'll discuss it. And we'll take turns back and forth. Are you game?" If done properly, with love and respect — and the frame isn't, "I'm right, you're wrong. I'm smart, you're stupid for believing" but instead, "Let's find out together what's really true" — this can be the most effective approach that family members and friends can take to helping someone in QAnon. (DeVega 2021)

Mick West

Mick West is a retired software developer. He has twenty or so years experience 'debunking' (his preferred term) conspiracy claims online, and runs the *Metabunk* website. We used his Conspiracy Spectrums tool in Part One. In *Escaping the Rabbit Hole* (2018, ch.5) he organises his core techniques into three key points: maintaining an effective dialogue, supplying useful information, and giving it time. For West maintaining effective dialogue means:

- Understand what they are thinking and why (see **Conspiracy Spectrums**, Part One)
- Be respectful, honest, open, and polite
- Find common ground
- Validate their genuine concerns
- Avoid the **backfire effect** (the tendency for people to double-down on ideas when challenged, so that they reinforce their commitment to the ideas by defending them)

Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay

Peter Boghossian is a philosophy professor and writer of *A Manual for Creating Atheists*. James Lindsay is a mathematician and polemicist against what he calls 'critical social justice', or 'woke' tendencies. In their book *How to Have Impossible Conversations* (2019), the two work through six levels of discussion techniques that begin with fundamental courtesies and end with hostage negotiation skills. Boghossian, in the opening pages, confesses to having sometimes been the jerk who just wanted to win the argument and show up his opponents. This itself illustrates a few of the book's principles, such as building rapport, modelling the behaviour you want to see in others, and changing your mind.

It is a complex and multifaceted book with 36 major sections that build advanced skills on the backs of more basic ones, and connect them to recent research on communication. The authors emphasise a process of listening, understanding, and then instilling doubt. Whether “instilling doubt” is seen as virtuous by some Christians will depend on whether they see doubt as something that only attacks Christian faith, or as something that tests, refines, and strengthens it by weeding out unworthy ideas. But even those who consider it suspect when applied to faith may well feel its application to conspiracy theories is reasonable, given that such theories are themselves busy instilling doubt in public figures and institutions. In this book constructive doubt is foundational to Boghossian and Lindsay’s core work of **moral epistemology**, or seeking out the justification of moral beliefs.

Many of the book’s ideas are immediately usable. We may distinguish obvious and basic points from those that are more complex and sometimes counter-intuitive. The basic ideas include:

- *Let friends be wrong.* You should have good friends with whom you have important disagreements. Boghossian, for example, is a good friend of Phil Vischer, creator of the Christian children’s show *Veggie Tales*.
- *Have goals for your conversations.* Know why you are having conversations and what you hope to achieve by them. To understand people? To help them? To expose them? To keep the peace?
- *Build rapport.* Be genuinely friendly, asking curious and sincere questions. “How do you spend your free time? What got you interested in that? Where did you learn about that?” Have things you’re ready to talk about. Say when you don’t understand. Listen and echo feelings: “I hear that. I understand your frustration.” Score easy points by acknowledging that there are extremists on your own side.
- *Model the behaviour you want to see.* If you want to see kindness, curiosity, self-critical thought, giving direct answers, and so on – then show it.
- *Avoid anger.* A mass of recent research should make anyone hesitant to have important conversations while angry or experiencing similarly strong emotions.

You’ve heard of “blind rage,” but even modest anger makes you the victim of your own nervous system. Emotions, especially anger, limit what knowledge, beliefs, and information you can access and process. ... All emotions, including anger, carry with them what is known as a refractory period. During a refractory period, your nervous system and temporary emotional biases severely impact your information processing. There’s nothing you can do except wait it out. (ch.4)

- *Adopt a learning posture.* Whatever happens in a hard conversation, you can *always* switch your goal to understanding, first of what

they think, then why, then how they understand themselves to be a good person in doing so.

- *People have better intentions than you think.* Setting aside internet trolls and psychopaths, most people understand themselves to be doing and seeking good. If you find yourself assuming bad intentions, switch to a frame of curiosity and learning – “help me understand...” – or simply ask what they hope for from the conversation.

When you encounter a person with radically different beliefs, you might think they’re ignorant, crazy, or malicious. Resist this inclination and instead consider that they view issues from a different perspective or that they’re acting upon what they think is the best available information. Chances are far better that they mean to help but aren’t great at communicating than that they’re actually ignorant, crazy, or malicious. (ch.4)

Make your goal of collaboration and understanding explicit. Say “I really want to understand what led you to those conclusions. I hope we can figure this out together.” ... Ask yourself, *not your partner*, “How could someone believe that?” and ask it in earnest, with curiosity instead of incredulity. (ch.2)

- *Know how to walk away.* This skill allows you to step out of a conversation that becomes heated, derailed, or unproductive. It allows you to give a person time to reflect if they have uncovered something they need to think about – or if you do. This can be as simple as saying “I think I need to take a break and come back to this later.” “Thanks for chatting with me!” “Let’s do this some more.”

People need time to wrestle with doubt, incorporate new information, mull over challenges and different perspectives, and rethink their positions. And so do you. Changing one’s mind happens slowly and in a way that suits one’s individual psychology and habits. (ch.4)

A further range of claims are counterintuitive or require some practice and repertoire if we want to apply them successfully.

- *Shoot your own messenger.* The authors accept the principle that “delivering messages” does not work. One-way messaging is not authentic conversation, so, while facts are important, a message needs an invitation. Offer your beliefs, data, facts, etc, *only* upon your partner’s explicit request.
- *Build golden bridges.* Make it possible for your friends to change their mind without losing face or feeling shame.
 - “We all want the best for ourselves and each other and are doing what we can with what we think is true.”
 - “Expertise is the result of having made many mistakes and changed one’s mind accordingly.”



Ask yourself, *not your partner*, ‘How could someone believe that?’ and ask it in earnest, with curiosity instead of incredulity.

(Boghossian and Lindsay)

- “This is an extremely complicated issue and there’s just so much confusion surrounding it.”
- *Altercast*. Create a hypothetical role for your conversation partner that involves the virtues of good conversation; e.g. “You seem to me to be civil, fair and open-minded. Suppose the government chooses you to solve this whole problem by mediation...”
- *Use scales*. It is frequently illuminating to ask people to rate their confidence on a scale of one to ten. (See *Conspiracy Spectrums* in Part One.)
 - “So on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that x is true?” “8.” “Out of interest, why didn’t you say 9?”
 - “I’d say I’m only a 3 about that issue. You’re an 8. I’m curious to know how I might get to be an 8?”
 - “You’re saying the country is racist, and I’m saying it’s not. If you had to put now and the 1950s and the 1850s on a scale from 1 to 10 for racism, then what would those numbers be?”

4. When conspiracy theories disrupt churches and communities

In an article discussing the spread of conspiracy theories in a UK mental hospital, a helpful distinction is drawn between three levels of prevention (Panchal and Jack, 2020):

1. *Primary prevention*. Preventing conspiracy theories from taking hold.
2. *Secondary prevention*. Responding to conspiracy theories that have taken hold.
3. *Tertiary prevention*. Managing the ongoing presence of conspiracy theories.

This may be a helpful way of framing our ongoing concerns. Tertiary prevention is not much discussed in the literature of conspiracy theories, which mostly focuses on analysis, prevention, or hopes of cure. Higher levels of conspiracism may be “the new normal,” at least for some time. Conspiracism may become, in viral terms, endemic, and have to be lived with. If so, what can we do? We suggest the following eleven approaches.

- Maintain diversity
- Teach our values
- Gamify our values
- Teach perspective-taking
- Commit to disagreeing well
- Demand values and standards in public life
- Use narratives and testimonies
- Get to know experts and authorities, especially Christians
- Find answers within existing civil systems
- Build the emotional maturity to handle anxiety and differences

Maintain diversity

The trend in United States churches is toward homogeneity; churches tend to be ‘red’ or ‘blue’ (conservative or liberal), like their communities. A 2020 *Christianity Today* article (Silliman 2020) quoted Chris Rea, an Indiana pastor, who said: “I think a church ought to be solidly purple,... Our identity should be in Jesus, not in anything else, ... Our political persuasion should not be our primary identity.” Silliman commented:

The problem is not that people in the church disagree about who to vote for. The problem is not that people get angry, shoot fiery emails to the pastor, and get into bruising fights with other church members on Facebook. (Though that does happen.) And really, the problem is not even that some things are suddenly intensely political, though they weren’t before – trusting health experts, saying everyone is created in the image of God, or preaching on a passage of Scripture that mentions the poor. The problem of polarization, according to the pastors of purple churches struggling to minister to red Republicans and blue Democrats during another divisive election, is that people stop fighting. They part ways. And they sort themselves by political preference.

We’re not that socially polarised in Australia, but we can inoculate against this by hearing from people who are not represented in our own churches and communities.

Teach our values

In *Part Three* we considered some biblical ethics relevant to conspiracy theories. Obviously, teaching these values will provide both inoculation and resistance to the kinds of behaviour that can make conspiracy theories disruptive.

- *Truth and justice.* Pursuing truth and justice are Christian obligations; insofar as they do these things, conspiracy theories are commendable. (And when they don't, or when they do them badly they are not.)
- *Social responsibility.* We must take care not to undermine the institutions that serve truth and justice in society, but rather to protect and strengthen them.
- *Wisdom, not foolishness.* Conspiracy theories can be pursued in foolish ways and Christians must ensure they do not do so. In Proverbs, foolish people believe anything, are wise in their own eyes, are prone to quarrels, and are characterised as mockers and scoffers.
- *False accusations.* Conspiracy theories make accusations against others. Christians must take care to never make false accusations, or to spread falsehoods and slander. Accusations made in public must be proveable.



The problem of polarization, according to the pastors of purple churches struggling to minister to red Republicans and blue Democrats during another divisive election, is that people stop fighting. They part ways. And they sort themselves by political preference.

(Silliman)

- *Pride and insincerity.* We must have the sincerity to stand behind what we say and correct any errors we make, while never claiming to be wiser than we are or to know more than we do.
- *Partiality and strife.* Christians who advocate for conspiracy theories must never bring partiality or strife into their families, friendships, churches, or communities. We *must* be gentle, kind, and patient if we seek to be Christlike.
- *Judgement, anger and insults.* Judgement, anger, and insults are not always wrong – they can be necessary and right – but they come with a high risk of strife and discord. These behaviours are common enough in conspiracy-oriented groups, especially online, that Christians must take extra care to be distinctively Christlike in their conspiracy adherence.
- *Reasonableness and persuasion.* We should maintain a gentle and reasonable demeanour and do the work of finding agreement with, and persuading, others.
- *Conscience and forbearance.* We should not just demand that people respect our conscientious beliefs and choices, but test them, and actively respect those of others too, as a way of maintaining community in spite of differences.
- *Submission and exile.* We should seek the peace and well-being of our societies, using our freedoms to serve and persuade rather than take power over others, recognising that we are citizens of a different, perfect, and future kingdom.

These principles can be taught both to inoculate against behaviours that disrupt communities, and also to de-escalate them when they occur. If a person insists that they are a faithful Christian, but is not concerned to behave in these ways, there is a contradiction.

Gamify our values

It might (we suggest) be possible to gamify some of our collective values, since churches are open to learning through group exercises and activities. Note this has to be done with agreement and consent in every case, should always be lighthearted in tone, and should only be applied to unambiguous problems rather than simple disagreements. Most of all, it should start with leaders. However, the more people who do this, the more normal it will become.

- *Putting away falsehood.* If someone shares a story on social media without checking it, and is wrong in a clear and obvious way, they may be nominated (and may accept the honour) to wear a conspicuous hat or tiara at church that week.
- *Respecting understanding.* Run a game show at church in which teams compete to guess what is true about some highly specialised professional, academic, or government field, with an actual expert in that field judging their answers.

- *Slow anger.* Have a month where, each week, people are invited to confess having ‘blown it’ on social media, or in real life, based on the standards they agree to uphold (e.g. Part Three). With prizes for the best descriptions of what happened.
- *Inviting correction.* Have a month where everyone is invited to invite corrections or criticism from people who know them well, and to share the best correction they have received. With prizes for the best answers. This adds the conviction that “we are self-critical” to the church’s self-identity.
- *Conciliation.* Have a month where people take up the challenge of talking constructively with the most difficult person they know, applying different persuasion strategies (from this document?), and sharing their experiences. With prizes for the best answers.
- *Impartiality.* Run debates on important social issues in your church. Either have participants argue against their own position, or prepare both sides, and have the side they will argue be chosen by a coin toss on the day. Require them to summarise the previous speaker, to that person’s satisfaction, before presenting their own case. If they are presenting a view that exists in your community but which is not well-represented in your church, invite a community member to judge and comment on whether they have been represented fairly.
- *Guard your thoughts.* Schizophrenia research has noted that “patients with paranoid schizophrenia jump to conclusions, show attributional biases, share a bias against disconfirmatory evidence, are overconfident in errors, and display problems with theory of mind” (Moritz and Woodward, 2007). These researchers used games to test and improve **metacognition**, the conscious awareness of how we are thinking, and our consequent ability to intervene in our own thinking. Absolutely everyone has cognitive biases, largely because our minds try to provide instant responses to anything that feels vaguely like danger, and don’t activate our critical-thinking functions unless they sense an incongruity (see *Cognitive biases*, above). Those who avoid cognitive errors simply have the habit of pausing to ‘switch on’ their critical thinking about their intuitive responses (“quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger”). Metacognitive strategies include:
 - Describe a mistake you made and ask “Where did I go wrong?”
 - Talk through your thought process when answering questions or solving previously unseen problems, or have people with relevant qualifications do so.



Perspective-taking helps to understand opposing views, develop listening, appreciate complexity, and understand differences, as well as reducing stereotyping.

Teach perspective-taking

Debating can teach perspective-taking, that is, the thought-based dimension of empathy. In *Teaching Debate in the Classroom* (Davis et al, 2016, ch.9), M. Leslie Wade Zorwick notes that perspective-taking helps to understand opposing views, develop listening, appreciate complexity, and

understand differences, as well as reducing stereotyping. In particular, she notes the positive and compounding effects of seeing others take the time to understand our own perspective.

Aside: To debate or not to debate? Having mentioned debating, we should add that scientists and debunkers mostly see little benefit in debating vaccine or climate deniers, and their concerns likely translate to conspiracism. In a discussion on his *Science-Based Medicine* blog, David Gorski (2010) quotes Brian Dunning's Skeptoid podcast approvingly:

It has been argued that scientists have a huge advantage in debates because we have the facts on our side. Well, so we do, but that's not an advantage at all. Rather, it's a limitation. The audience members who are not scientists can rarely discriminate between facts and pseudofacts. The pseudoscientist has an unlimited supply of sources and claims and validations. He can say whatever he wants. If compelling rhetoric would benefit from any given argument, he can always make that argument. Pseudosciences have typically been designed around compelling rhetorical arguments. The facts of science, on the other hand, rarely happen to coincide with the best possible logic argument.

Assessing unfamiliar claims takes time if you are at all conscientious; a debate is poorly suited to fact-checking obscure claims in real time; and there can be a bottomless well of these for most fringe ideas. If an opponent is unwilling or unable to debate reasonably, there is little benefit to be had:

If the wise go to law with fools, there is ranting and ridicule without relief. (Prov 29:9)

If two sides wish to debate, though, there are some debating conventions that could help counter those problems. We could require that:

- The claims of each side must be given in writing a fortnight ahead of time so that opposing sides, and the audience, can be properly prepared. If they will not do so, do not proceed.
- Participants must have read an introductory book on good argumentation, or have participated in school or university debating competitions. If they will not agree to abide by normal debating standards, do not proceed.
- The debate will use adjudicators and commentators agreeable to both sides. Adjudicators will highlight for the audience if a person misrepresents an argument, fails to respond to an argument, introduces arguments other than those they listed ahead of time, employs a fallacy or a cognitive distortion, or fails to maintain civility and respect. Commentators will highlight for the audience any extra context or background they think would help with understanding. If no available adjudicators or commentators are agreeable to both sides, then simply do not proceed.

Commit to disagreeing well

Our values should affect the way we disagree. In John Calvin Davis's book *Forbearance* (2017; quoted in Part Three) he offers an example of two students in a course he taught, who clashed about foundational moral issues, but managed to respectfully come to terms with what each other were saying:

Anna was raised by progressive Christian ministers and considers herself a liberal feminist Protestant. Andy was raised in a traditional Roman Catholic family. Andy and Anna are both Christians, but there the similarities end, for they saw eye to eye on very few issues. While they shared my class, the issue that taxed them most was abortion. As a traditional Catholic, Andy believed that a fetus is a person with moral value akin to yours and mine, and that therefore abortion is the unjustified killing of an innocent person. Anna believed that a fetus has moral value but is not a person in the same way infants, children, and adults are, so that the value of a fetus is more easily outweighed by the medical, mental, or emotional needs of the woman carrying it. For Anna, the central moral issue in abortion is almost always a question of justice — a woman's right to control decision-making over her body, and her right to access health care resources to do so. For Andy, the abortion debate is fundamentally about the inviolability of innocent life.

Andy and Anna were at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum when it came to abortion, and the semester could have dissolved into a weekly shouting match between the two. But partly because of the rules I set for my classroom, and partly because of the virtuous disposition of my two students, that did not happen. Instead of seeing class as a contest to win, Anna and Andy approached it as an opportunity to understand a position within their own faith tradition that heretofore had perplexed them. So they listened, they prodded each other, and they carefully considered what the other had to say. As a result, they left the semester with what they were seeking. They did not change their respective minds on the morality of abortion, but they understood better how someone could come to such a remarkably different conclusion than theirs, from within the same general set of Christian convictions. They also developed profound respect for each other, as moral thinkers and persons of deep faith. (Davis 2017, ch.3)

Forbearance can be the last thing anyone wants to hear about during a conflict. Davis is a liberal Protestant from a conservative Protestant background. He recalls an occasion where his seminary released a call for forbearance during the discussion of gender and sexuality questions.

Predictably, the seminary statements were pummeled in the denominational press, from both sides. Conservatives read the statements as a call to abdicate our responsibility to preserve what they perceive to be biblical teachings on sexuality. Liberals chastised the faculties for abandoning their responsibility to give voice to justice for LGBTQ Presbyterians. For both sides of the debate,

the call for forbearance sounded like an appeal to abandon truth and justice in the name of passive nicety or a gradualist pursuit of consensus. (ch.1)

However, he argues that forbearance, apart from being God's own character and thus non-negotiable for Christians, has the practical virtue that it helps us disagree well, without corrupting our character through the process of conflict.

To the contrary, forbearance invites us to believe, to defend our convictions, and to pursue what we think is right and true in God's eyes. But it invites us to do all of that good work with a certain character and attitude, so that our pursuit of justice and truth itself is reshaped by the practice of forbearance. (Preface)

He begins his book with this very question:

What happens when we approach theological disagreement not as a problem to solve or a crisis to endure, but as an opportunity to practice Christian virtue?



What happens when we approach theological disagreement not as a problem to solve or a crisis to endure, but as an opportunity to practice Christian virtue?

(Davis)

Demand values and standards in public life

Suppose a Christian is told that 'the mainstream media' are lying to them and they should trust fringe sources instead. How do they fairly adjudicate between the two? One obvious approach is to ask which sources genuinely practise journalism. The Society of Professional Journalists is one of many organisations that publish a *Code of Ethics*. It roughly follows the common V.I.A. acronym of verification, independence, and accountability, but adds a section on consequences in the middle. Purported news sources can be measured against these standards. Journalism should:

1. **Seek truth and report it.** Identify sources (or if they are anonymous, explain why). Provide context. Fairly represent views which they find repugnant. Clearly label any advocacy or commentary.

Diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing. (SPC Code of Ethics)

2. **Minimise harm.** Weigh privacy, especially of non-public figures, and the right to a fair trial, against the public's right to know. Don't pander to "lurid curiosity".
3. **Act independently.** Avoid conflicts of interest; disclose those that are unavoidable. Never blur the line between reporting and advertising. Deny favoured treatment to advertisers or donors.
4. **Be transparent and accountable.** (We'll just quote this entire section.)

Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences.
Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.

Respond quickly to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness.

Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.

Expose unethical conduct in journalism, including within their organizations.

If a news source is not adhering to journalistic standards then they are not doing journalism, so they are not providing the public with the quality of news that the public has a right to expect from a service which presents itself as news. They should at very least be supplemented with real journalism, which should be financially supported. A similar process can be applied to other public institutions, such as political parties or public officials. Standards of this kind ought to be common ground in public life, however polarised different sides become.

Use narratives and testimonies

Scientists understand that “the plural of anecdote is not data” and eschew personal or individual stories in their work (Dahlstrom 2014). However, research into communication suggests that telling stories is a vastly better way to explain, communicate, or persuade.

Logical-scientific communication aims to provide abstract truths that remain valid across a specified range of situations. An individual may then use these abstract truths to generalize down to a specific case and ideally provide some level of predictive power regarding that specific [case]. **Narrative communication** instead provides a specific case from which an individual can generalize up to infer what the general truths must be to permit such a specific [case] to occur. In essence, the utilization of logical-scientific information follows deductive reasoning, whereas the utilization of narrative information follows inductive reasoning. (p.13614)

Popular science authors seem to grasp this.

Empirical studies support ... a categorical difference between paradigmatic and narrative processing, and suggest that narrative processing is generally more efficient. Narratives are often associated with increased recall, ease of comprehension, and shorter reading times. In a direct comparison with expository text, narrative text was read twice as fast and recalled twice as well, regardless of topic familiarity or interest in the content itself. Graesser and Ottati describe these and similar results as suggesting that narratives have a “privileged status” in human cognition. These benefits should not be assumed to come from simplicity, as coherent narratives demand

a high level of complexity in both internal complexity and alignment to cultural and social expectancies. Instead, narratives seem to offer intrinsic benefits in each of the four main steps of processing information: motivation and interest, allocating cognitive resources, elaboration, and transfer into long-term memory (p.13615).

Christians should have a special affinity for narratives, as they form the largest part of the Old and New Testaments, were Jesus' preferred mode of teaching, and are common preaching devices. But what is the right way to use them?

- For factual communication, we would seem to need stories that suggest correct generalisations, that is, which are genuinely indicative of reality. And all the better if they illustrate good ways of thinking about the issues.
- Stories, especially contradictory stories, can be used to raise questions. An anti-vaccination message will tell the stories of bad reactions to vaccines. A pro-vaccination message will tell the stories of nurses who could not save patients because they rejected vaccination and now it's too late. Which stories are true? Which stories are wise to heed?
- An especially effective form of narrative is the story of a person who changed their mind on the subject at hand.
- Having people talk about their experience of polarisation, partisanship, or conspiracy theories may help to normalise these issues as conversation topics.

Get to know experts and authorities, especially Christians

Church networks are often very broad, so there are likely to be a range of Christians in your wider circle who serve as experts or authorities in society: in universities, industries, government, the courts, and in media and journalism. Having guests talk about their work in these fields – and answer questions – could help give your church an understanding of how those fields really work, how outsiders misunderstand them, what the real problems are, how good and bad decisions happen, and so on. And also what Christians in those fields really spend their time thinking about. Then, when conspiracy theories come up, members will have a better sense of what's plausible, and will know that there are people they can ask about contentious claims.

Find answers within existing civil systems

Polarisation can lead to extremism. Moddaghan's 'Staircase of Terrorism' (van Stekelenburg 2014) offers a useful way of picturing the key choices that lead to more extreme positions. Imagine a stepped pyramid with a central staircase and six floors:

0. *Apolitical*. On the ground floor are the general public, who are not politically involved. But if they feel the need or desire for political involvement, say, by perceiving injustice, they will go up the stairs.
1. *Politicised*. People on the first floor are politically aware and involved. But if they cannot satisfactorily address their concerns within existing political systems, they will go up the stairs.
2. *Polarised/Partisan*. People on the second floor are persuaded that their problems are caused by enemies, and are involved in a social and political conflict with these enemies. If they come to believe that extreme measures such as violence are needed, they will go up the stairs.
3. *Extremist/Radicalised*. People on the third floor have developed beliefs, feelings, and behaviours that support violence in the service of partisanship. Moral support for violence alienates them from society. Increasingly, anyone not with them is against them, and any and all attacks on those people are legitimate. If they decide to participate, they will go up the stairs.
4. *Terrorist*. From here to the top of the pyramid are increasing degrees of involvement in terrorism. Their circles and options decrease until they are willing to kill themselves and members of the general public.

If the vital question that leads to polarisation (the step from Level 1 to Level 2) is whether problems can be solved by normal democratic processes, then a fundamental question for churches is whether our members know how to do this? Do they know how many of our democratic systems exist to provide checks and balances on power – to serve truth and justice – and do they know how to support and strengthen them? Do they know why elections, courts, and the news media work as they do, or what standards they claim to adhere to? Do they see the public life of society as something in which they could participate? Do they see common ground between Christians and other groups? Do they believe in persuasion and discussion? An obvious danger is that sectarian Christians could jump straight from being apolitical to being polarised (from flight to fight), without ever understanding or appreciating the possibilities a democratic society affords them, or how this might integrate with their faith.

Build the emotional maturity to handle anxiety and differences

In *Polarisation and the Healthier Church* (2012) Ronald W. Richardson applies Murray Bowen's *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (1978) to the problem of polarisation in churches. The theory centres on 'differentiation of self' and the management of anxiety in social systems. Richardson asserts that "Well-differentiated people are not going to be polarisers" (p.77) whereas "Polarising leaders will pander to the anxiety within people and use it to promote their own agendas" (p.76).

Differentiation of self is a psychological and counselling construct rather than a theological or biblical construct, although there is a broad literature discussing its application to spiritual formation. It seems to



The lower the level of differentiation, the more likely the family, when stressed, will regress to selfish, aggressive, and avoidance behaviours; cohesiveness, altruism, and cooperativeness will break down.

(Kerr)

provide a useful way to think about how emotional maturity (subjecting your feelings to your thoughts) and spiritual integrity (not simply going along with others) can offer individuals and churches some resilience against the emotional and behavioural aspects of polarisation, populism, and conspiracism.

Differentiation of self has inward and outward dimensions. Inwardly, it refers to a person's ability to distinguish their feeling process from their thinking process. People who can do this will be freer to fully experience their emotional existence, knowing they can always switch to logical reasoning as the need arises. Those who cannot may be highly intelligent but "are more easily flooded by their own emotionality and that of others" (p.69). Outwardly, differentiation of self refers to the ability to embrace difference from others and not require sameness as a condition of closeness. This is reminiscent of Henri Nouwen's concept of hospitality in *Reaching Out* (1975): making space within ourselves for other people to be themselves.

Among the well-differentiated people in your congregation are those who can best relate to a broad range of people in your church. They are not cliquish or elitist. (p.71) ... The more we believe that we all have to think, feel and act the same, the more difficulties there are in our relationships. (Richardson again, p.72)

Strong differentiation of self allows people to act on their considered principles and goals in emotionally volatile situations, rather than responding to anxiety. People with this quality will be better able to be objective and seek out the bigger picture. Richardson twice quotes a statement by the therapist Michael Kerr, to say that:

The higher the level of differentiation of people in a family or social group, the more they can cooperate, look out for each other's welfare, and stay in adequate contact during stressful as well as calm periods. ... The lower the level of differentiation, the more likely the family [or social group like the church], when stressed, will regress to selfish, aggressive, and avoidance behaviours; cohesiveness, altruism, and cooperativeness will break down. (pp. 80, 153)

5. Will our problems get better with time?

As this paper goes to publication in mid-2022, we seem to be in a conspiracy lull after several busy years. Populist leaders have lost some influence in Australia and the United States, and public health mandates are now less intrusive, triggering less opposition. Still, these trends could turn around again, or we could encounter new stresses in public life. The major concerns of this paper – conspiracism, polarisation, populism, and disinformation – still generate powerful currents in western democracies.

In a 2020 article in *Christianity Today*, Daniel Silliman pondered the likelihood of churches overcoming polarisation:

It can be hard to tell if the proclamation of a God and gospel bigger than partisanship is enough to counter the forces of polarization. In the middle of the coronavirus, a national discussion about racism, and a presidential election, it's easy to feel like it's not. Every pastor who is trying to minister to a congregation that spans the political divide has a story about a family that left, a fight that blew up, or a feeling of futility that was overwhelming.

An informal Pew survey of about a thousand experts found them split exactly down the middle over whether online misinformation will get better or worse (Anderson and Rainie 2017). Their answers may generalise to conspiracism.

Those who said things would get worse thought that human nature was the real problem: “Humans are by nature selfish, tribal, gullible convenience seekers who put the most trust in that which seems familiar.” Too many powerful people can profit from social turmoil and from undermining the common good. Technology will advance so rapidly that problems will compound faster than they can be addressed. Misinformation may be too seductive, and only counterable with authority, and fear of authority will be used to protect misinformation as free speech.

Those saying things would improve thought that technology would create solutions, or that human beings would adapt. People would adopt technological tools to apply crowdsourced “trust ratings” to information. Regulation might take on botnet operators and fake accounts. People might pick up better critical skills, and insist upon better ethics in public or digital life. Information and media literacy might be integrated into education, strengthening journalism and democracy.

Christian leaders and Christian knowledge professionals cannot directly change the major structures of the world or the progress of technology. But, we suggest, Christians can take substantial control of the challenges of conspiracism as it affects our own communities:

- We can keep our churches aware of the problems that can be caused by conspiracy theories and related phenomena (see Parts One and Two).
- We can think biblically about their ethical implications, both as beliefs and as sometimes-related behaviours (see Part Three).
- We can inoculate against disruptive behaviours and can maintain standards that mitigate their worst effects in our own communities (see Part Four). We can also insist upon similar standards in those spheres that we influence, and require them from people who claim to represent us in public life.

We suggest these as ways forward.

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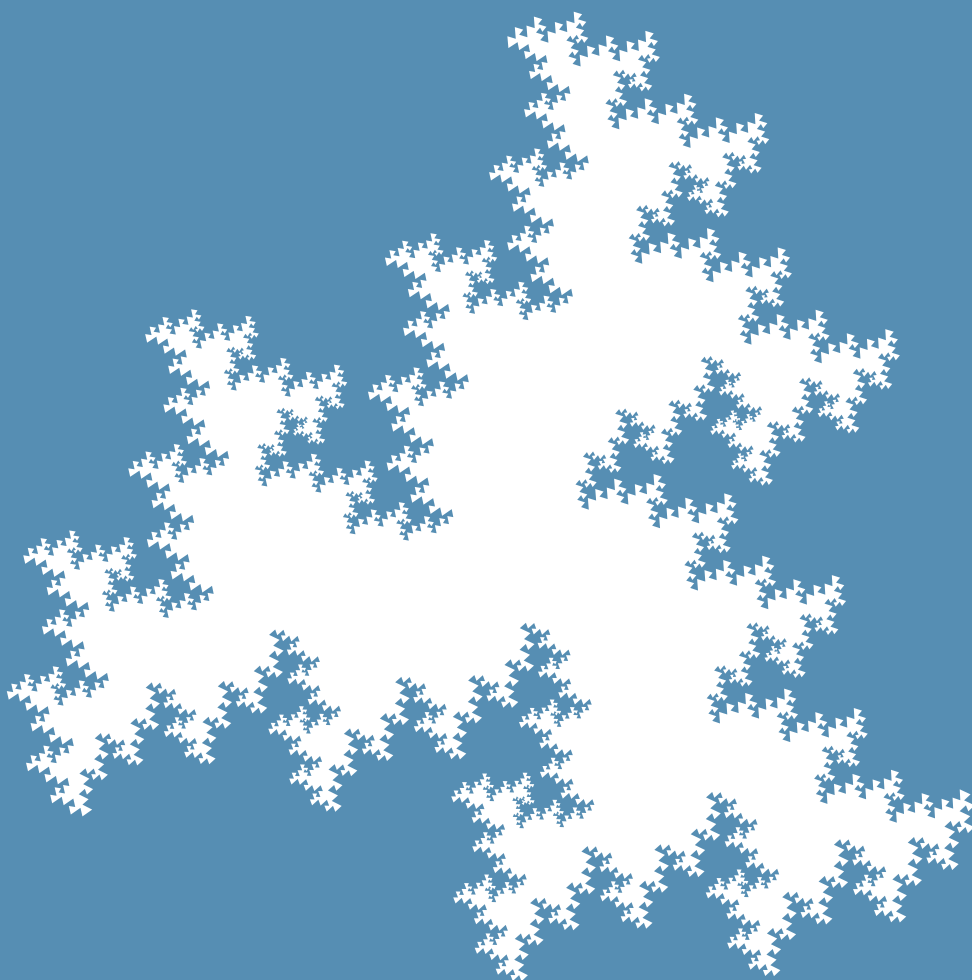
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Questions

**Ideas for better
conversations**



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We invite critiques or suggestions for future improvements.

1. Starting points

Using this discussion paper

- Can I copy/print/modify this paper? – Yes. That’s what a CC-BY-SA licence allows. See the copyright page at the start.

Before we start –

- Do you mind the term ‘conspiracy theory’? When I use the term I just mean that you think there’s a conspiracy going on that most people don’t recognise. Is that what you’re saying?
- What would you like to gain from talking about this? And I?
- If you want to stop at any point to think about anything, just say “Let’s come back to this in a little while.”

Can we agree that –

- Lots of conspiracy theories are pretty far out (flat earth; lizard people); but then some conspiracies do really happen (Watergate; NSA Spying); so they’re not automatically crazy.
- Some conspiracy theories – or at least the ways that people talk about them – are quite disruptive to friendships, families, and even whole communities. We should be able to do better.
- Whether I agree with you about this or not, I want you to know that I support and accept you, and will always be free to talk about things, even if you get rejection from others because of this.
- Can we agree that, most likely, we both have good intentions here, and we’re both trying to help?

Things that concern me

(Write out your own list for this part...)

- I see conspiracy theorists making a lot of loose accusations that much of the time have to be slander. Much of it is just based on sheer guesswork about what others are ‘really’ thinking.
- I see conspiracy theories causing strife in friendships and families, as well as churches and communities. I think that it should be possible for Christians to argue for or against conspiracy theories without these bad effects.

2. Shall we talk? – And how?

Is a conversation possible?

1. Do you want to talk?
2. What is your interest in talking about these ideas? I'd like to hear in your own words what this means to you.
3. Do you feel we know and respect each other well enough to genuinely discuss this? Or does that usually not happen?
4. Do you find you can generally relate well to people with whom you disagree?
5. Do you respect that I can be sceptical about what you're saying but still interested in understanding it, and understanding why you believe in it?
6. Do you understand why people might be sceptical of conspiracy theories as a general category of opinion, even if some are true? Were you ever of that view?

What do you find makes for a good conversation?

1. What do you dislike about the ways that people try and talk to you about this?
2. Do you feel it's possible for people who disagree about this to persuade each other?
3. Why do you think some people are difficult to persuade? (And does that apply to me?)
4. If someone had concerns about these ideas, or thought that they were affecting you in a bad way, how would you like them to raise that with you?

What does it mean to you?

1. How does it make you feel to be involved in the conspiracy theory? Angry? Hopeful? More or less anxious? Do you feel closer to people?
2. How did you get involved in this issue, or become persuaded about it?
3. What would it mean for you to discover it was all completely true? Or completely false? How would you most likely find out, either way?
4. Would you say you are seeking truth and justice? And if so do you connect these objectives with your Christian faith? How would you explain the connection?
5. Is there something about this that's really urgent right now? What creates the urgency? Does the reason for the urgency stay the same over time, or does it change?
6. Do you think some conspiracy theories can be dangerous if they are wrong?
7. Do you feel that people respect your ideas?

Christian ethics

1. Do you have a diversity of people and opinions in your Christian circles?
2. Do you often relate your belief in the conspiracy theory to Christian values like truth and justice? (or Christian faithfulness?)
3. Do you think that some belief in conspiracy theories results in bad behaviour from some Christians?
4. Is it possible to believe in a conspiracy theory, but have humility about the claims that are being made?
5. Does the conspiracy theory involve serious criminal or moral accusations? What precautions do you take to avoid the sin of slander?
6. If you make conspiracy claims publicly, and they turn out to have been wrong, what do you do? What would you expect your news or information sources to do?
7. Do you think a Christian could disagree with the conspiracy theory, and do so in good conscience, so that you would have to respect their difference of opinion? What would it look like to 'work out your differences' with them?
8. Does your involvement in the conspiracy theory lead you to become angry, make harsh judgements, or use insults? How do you distinguish when these are justified or if you've just lost control?
9. If you had a disagreement about conspiracy theories in your church, and it was affecting your ability to tolerate each other, is there someone impartial you would trust to arbitrate the dispute?

3. How has it been going?

1. Does discussing this conspiracy theory make things difficult with people you know?
2. Can a conspiracy theory (believing or rejecting one) ever be a reason to break community with other Christians?
3. Do you feel you should be able to have civil and reasonable discussions about these ideas? What do you think interferes with communication?
4. Would you say you understand the views of the people you tend to get into arguments with? Do they understand yours?
5. Do you feel you could take your opponents' sides in an argument about these topics, and have them feel that you represented them fairly?
6. Do you find you get really angry about this? Or that other people get really angry at you? Angry enough to lose control or compose? To your mind, what causes that?

4. What are we each saying? – And not saying?

Are we both clear about what you're saying (and not saying)

1. What's your 'elevator pitch', i.e. how would you describe what you think is happening in just thirty seconds?
2. Do you think your position is obvious to anyone who is willing to look at it fairly?
3. Do you see yourself as "just asking questions", or having a definite idea of exactly what's happening?
4. What's the name that you use for your position, or for the people who hold these ideas?
5. Are there people or views that you want to emphasise that you *don't* agree with? People who might have extreme or crazy views of the same topic?
6. Would you mind if I asked you about your level of confidence on the different ideas that seem to exist in this area? (And you can ask me the same.)
7. Do you think this conspiracy theory is like some conspiracies that have been exposed in history?
8. Have you ever read the other side – the books or reports or authors that the conspiracy theory is saying are wrong?

What's your big-picture view of conspiracies and society?

1. Does some form of conspiracy seem likely to you just because of the way the world is, regardless of whether it could be proven? Or would you only support a conspiracy theory that you felt could meet that a particular standard of evidence?
2. Are you trying to explain everything in a comprehensive way, or just say there are inconsistencies in official explanations?
3. Do you think there are most likely simple solutions to social or political problems?
4. Do you feel you can contribute to investigating and exposing the conspiracy?
5. Do you see yourself as fighting for a group of people? Are they in some way being persecuted?
6. Do you define your position in opposition to 'the mainstream'? What is it? Is it like being in the Matrix?
7. What do you think about 'classic' conspiracies like UFOs, chemtrails, and the moon landing?
8. Have your concerns been important throughout history, or are they new concerns that have only just now become important?
9. Would you say that you believe in superconspiracies (see I: 3.a) – the big international ones that are secretly pulling *all* the strings?

What are your sources for the different ideas?

1. Do you see a wide range of news and information, or mainly just follow a narrow set of important issues?
2. Is there a community that you're part of, where this is discussed, and what is it like?
3. Where are your sources for news and issues? Do they seem to have journalistic standards?
4. Do you know of an article or video where experts who disagree talk face-to-face about these ideas? Could you ask around and see?
5. What are your own ideas about it? Do you have your own special twist on it?
6. Can you say by what steps a person could get to your view?

What's your level of confidence in the different ideas?

1. What are the conspiracy ideas that people assume you believe but you don't actually believe?
2. What do other people say about these ideas that you disagree with? Do you believe you are misrepresented?
3. What are your top three questions or concerns about these ideas? If they were answered, would that settle the issue in your mind, or would there be other issues beyond these?
4. What things do you think are definitely true, and what things are probable or possible, and what things don't you care about one way or the other even if others do?
5. What do you think prevents this conspiracy from being properly exposed? Do you think a larger conspiracy is more or less likely to stay a secret? Why do people go along with it?
6. Can we say how the proposed conspiracy differs, in terms of evidence, from...
 - a. No conspiracy at all?
 - b. Cultural or social change?
 - c. Ordinary crime, corruption, or political influence-peddling?
7. Do you think conspiracy theories could themselves be a way that elites control the public?

Experts and authorities

1. Is there a field in which you have some kind of expertise? Do outsiders generally get it right when they talk about it?
2. Do you use the term "mainstream media" (MSM)? How do you distinguish good journalism from bad?
3. If you take a stance of suspicion towards experts and authorities, do you feel anger or impatience with people who don't share it?
4. Do you think that both science and scripture are accessible to amateurs? What role does expert opinion play in understanding them?
5. Do you think of 'elites' as the source of most of what's wrong with the world? Who are they?

6. Do you trust people like doctors, government officials, university researchers, or journalists?
7. Do you know many Christians who work in science, health, the media, or whichever areas you think the conspiracies may be occurring?
8. Do you think that the normal checks and balances in democratic societies are able to expose wrongdoing or corruption? Or perhaps that it can be done but it's just very difficult?
9. Could your movement crowd-fund legal actions, research projects, or investigations that would settle their questions decisively one way or the other?

Credits

Special thanks

- Our several anonymous contributors.
- Rev. Dr **Chris Mulherin**, ISCAST Executive Director.
- **Jackie Liu**, ISCAST Digital Communications Specialist.
- Some sources of helpful advice:
 - Rev Dr **Andrew Sloane** of Morling College.
 - Dr **Enqi Weng** of Deakin University.
- A number of Australian ministers who replied to a general letter about their experience with conspiracy theories in Australian churches and denominations.

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