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Article

Religion, Conspiracy Thinking, and the Rejection of Democracy: Evidence From the UK

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Abstract
While some research addresses the relationship between religiosity and political attitudes, little is known about the relationship between religion, conspiracy beliefs, and political culture. Using the concept of authoritarianism, we hypothesise that a conspiracy mentality is likely to be associated with ethnocentric and anti-democratic attitudes, just as some types of religion—e.g., religious fundamentalism—have a close affinity to authoritarian attitudes. Using data from an online UK survey (N = 1093; quota sample, representative of education, gender, age, and region), we enquire to what extent belief in conspiracy theories is associated with xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes, which aspects of religiosity in combination with other factors play a role in conspiracy beliefs, and which communicative and interpretative practices are associated with belief in conspiracy ideologies. Our analysis reveals that both belief in classical conspiracy theories and belief in Covid-19 conspiracy theories are significantly related to anti-Muslim sentiments, anti-Black racism, and right-wing extremism. Moreover, a regression analysis shows that an initially discovered relationship between the strength of religiosity and conspiracy mentality disappears once religious fundamentalism is included in the model. The effect of religious fundamentalism is moderated by narcissism and the style of social media use—namely, trusting posts made by one's friends more than the opinions of experts.

Keywords
authoritarianism; conspiracies; democracy; United Kingdom; religion; social media

Issue
This article is part of the issue "The Role of Religions and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes" edited by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Münster) and Alexander Yendell (Leipzig University).

1. Introduction

Conspiracy beliefs are no longer marginal phenomena but rather associated with significant public threats and harms, including "health risks, negative attitudes and prejudices towards groups in society, political radicalization, political violence, political disengagement and diminishing support for public policies" (Walter & Drochon, 2022, p. 483). In the political sphere, with the rise of right-wing populism, events such as the so-called refugee crisis and, most recently, the Corona pandemic, conspiracy ideologies have become a focus of public and academic concern linked with threats to democracy and the sustaining of autocratic systems (Hogg, 2021). It is therefore critical to understand how and under what conditions conspiracy theories spread, who supports them and why. Using data from an online UK survey on right-wing extremism and racisms (ReRa UK 2021; quota sample, representative by education, gender, age, and region) we ask to what extent belief in conspiracy theories is associated with xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes, what aspects of religiosity in combination with other factors play a role in conspiracy beliefs, and through what communicative and

interpretative practices belief in conspiracy ideologies are spread and intensified—or, conversely, limited in their impact. While the UK is (at the time of writing) only one country, we observe that a recent international comparative (US-European) study found "surprisingly that only 2% of the variance lies at the country level, which tells us that to explain generic conspiracy thinking we must look at people's characteristics more than the characteristics of the country in which they reside" (Walter & Drochon, 2022, p. 497), and that insights into individual-level factors such as personality variables, religiosity, and social media use in one country are likely to have relevance elsewhere.

1.1. Conspiracy Beliefs: Definitions, Functions, and Political Orientation

It is important to define what we mean by conspiracy theories because "by signalling irrationality—these terms can neutralize valid concerns and delegitimize people" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 5). Following the most comprehensive review to date (Douglas et al., 2019), we define conspiracy theories as "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors" and a conspiracy belief as "belief in a specific conspiracy theory or set of conspiracy theories" (Douglas et al., 2019, pp. 4–5). We use the term "conspiracy mentality" broadly to refer to the idea of "a stable predisposition that drives individuals to see events as the product of a conspiracy" (Walter & Drochon, 2022, p. 484), with a more specific use introduced in Section 2. People seem to be attracted to conspiracy theories when they meet psychological needs more effectively than alternative explanations, including "*epistemic* (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty), *existential* (e.g., the desire for control and security), and *social* (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group)" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7; see also Hogg, 2021). The belief that others are conspiring against one's group is more likely to develop when the group is (or members perceive themselves to be) stigmatized, disadvantaged, or threatened (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Lower educational qualifications are linked with conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2016), while news media literacy has been found to decrease conspiracy theory endorsement (Craft et al., 2017). On the political spectrum, both US and European evidence suggests that conspiracy theorising is found mostly at the extremes of the far-left and far-right but is stronger on the right (van Prooijen et al., 2015), possibly because the same personality traits (such as a strong need to manage uncertainty) are associated with both phenomena (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 11). Given these tendencies, it makes sense to examine more closely the association of conspiracy beliefs with other characteristics of the far-right, such as xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes. Hence, we ask:

RQ1: To what extent is belief in conspiracy theories associated with xenophobic, racist, and anti-democratic attitudes?

1.2. Religion and Conspiracy Beliefs: Towards a Differentiated View

Religion relates to conspiracy thinking in several ways. First religion, and Christianity in particular, is used by right-wing populist and extremist parties and movements as an important marker for their identity politics (Hidalgo et al., 2019). Second, other religious communities take on an important scapegoating function, for example, right-wing populist and extremist discourses using conspiracy narratives to discredit Muslims and Jews, and to justify violence against them (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 2022; Hidalgo et al., 2019; Yendell, 2021). Third, traditions within religions share structural similarities with conspiracy theories, for example, apocalyptic traditions within many religions articulate belief in hidden forces shaping world history (Barkun, 2013), while some conspiracy narratives have quasi-religious elements, including QAnon, whose supporters not only believe in the quasi-satanic machinations of an almost anti-Christian elite but also identify a saviour figure (Yendell et al., in press). These similarities raise the question, as posed by Robertson et al. (2018, p. 2): "Do 'religious' and 'conspiratorial' inferences about hidden agents and powers draw on shared cognitive resources, heuristics, or biases?"

Some studies suggest that religious individuals are more likely than non-religious to believe in conspiracy theories (Lahrach & Furnham, 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014). However, Yendell et al. (2021) found that strong religious belief and frequency of prayer are negatively related to conspiracy beliefs and that conspiracy belief is unrelated to religiosity in general, but only to dogmatic religious belief when religious explanations are considered more relevant than scientific ones, suggesting that care is needed to identify which aspects of religiosity relate to conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, a differentiated consideration of religion seems to be important not only for the analysis of conspiracy mentality. The connection between religiosity and political attitudes, especially to democracy and tolerance of minorities, also yields very different results depending on the dimension of religiosity considered. When studies include multiple indicators of religiosity participation and practice (e.g., attendance at church services, frequency of prayer, etc.) and the centrality of religiosity, these are more likely to be related to pro-democratic values than indicators of identification and membership (Doebler, 2014; Huber & Yendell, 2019; Pollack et al., 2014; Yendell & Huber, 2020), which tend to produce contrary results (Decker et al., 2012, 2016; Decker et al., 2010; Küpper & Zick, 2006, 2010; Pickel & Yendell, 2022).

In summary, there are some indications that active religious participation is unrelated—or negatively

related—to conspiracy beliefs, in contrast to less active participation and more dogmatic belief. Of course, it is very likely that these relationships depend on the denominations and traditions under investigation, and on the teaching and beliefs circulating at the local level, beyond the granularity that can be captured through a survey. Nonetheless, one explanation for the connection between nominal belief and conspiracy thinking could be a lack of exposure to religious teaching, which includes counter-narratives with universalist orientations. Conversely, universalist elements are less emphasised by more dogmatic approaches, which rather resonate with conspiracy thinking. Without the balancing universalist elements, religion can be thus used to provide resources that authors of conspiracy narratives take up and reinterpret to lend a spiritual authority to their worldview and to legitimise notions of superiority and justification for domination, especially in relation to other religious communities. At any rate, the different levels of support for democracy associated with different indicators of religiosity suggests the need for a careful analysis of the role of different types and aspects of religion in relation to conspiracy beliefs. The evidence reviewed so far thus suggests that religion plays a complex role both in relation to conspiracy beliefs and in support of right-wing populism and extremism (linked to conspiracy beliefs, for example, where religious minorities are scapegoated in conspiracy narratives), sometimes feeding and circulating such beliefs, but also sometimes challenging them. We seek to clarify some of this complexity by asking:

> RQ2: What types (and indicators) of religion are most associated with conspiracy beliefs?

1.3. Social Media Use and Conspiracy Beliefs

On the issue of circulation, we also seek to clarify the role of social media in relation to the spread of conspiracy beliefs. In response to concerns about the polarising consequences of "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011), a substantial body of research has developed demonstrating an association between social media use and conspiracy beliefs (Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020). However, the mechanisms involved, and the direction of influence are not clear. As Enders et al. (2021, p. 1) argue, the association is "often interpreted as evidence that social media causally promote conspiracy beliefs," but it may be that social media simply provide a convenient way to share for those already predisposed. Reviewing evidence on the role of the internet in general in relation to conspiracy beliefs, Uscinski et al. (2018) contend that the internet may not have increased support for conspiracy beliefs as much as is widely believed, arguing (a) that conspiracy sites receive comparatively limited traffic in Western countries compared to major media outlets, (b) that most commentary on such sites is negative, (c) that there is no evidence that people are more prone to conspiracy thinking since the advent of the internet, and (d) that conspiracy theories tend to "stay concentrated within the communities who already agree with them" (Douglas et al., 2019 p. 15).

However, recent evidence suggests wide diffusion of conspiracy beliefs about Covid-19 in the UK: More than a quarter of a representative sample in September–October 2020 agreed that "the spread of the virus [was] a deliberate attempt by a group of powerful people to make money" and that "the virus [was] a deliberate attempt by governments to gain political control"; the sample also included disturbing levels of antisemitism, with 13.9% agreeing that "Jews have created the virus to collapse the economy for financial gain," and a further 8.9% unsure (Freeman et al., 2020, p. 9). It may be that the conditions of the pandemic have in some way boosted the credibility and amplified the impact of conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, the arguments made by Uscinski and colleagues concerning specialist websites and blogs devoted to conspiracy theories are not adequate to capture the dynamics of social media, where narratives can spread rapidly as part of everyday peer-to-peer communication, and do not require visits to specialist sites. The circulation of conspiracy beliefs via social media may thus form part of an everyday culture in which such beliefs are normalised and so function as a site for the production of a culture of fascism (Griffin, 2016), testimony to the adaptability of fascism to changing conditions (Griffin, 2019). The dynamics of circulation, reception, and belief in conspiracy narratives on social media are complex, but we seek to shed light on just one, often neglected, aspect—the credibility attached to different sources of information, for example, the views of friends compared to the opinions of experts. We suggest that this, rather than reliance on social media as a source of news, is likely to be associated with conspiracy beliefs. Hence, we ask:

> RQ3: Under what conditions is the use of social media associated with conspiracy belief?

2. Theories of Individual Attraction to Conspiracy Beliefs: Psychodynamic Theories and their Development

The concept of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950; Horkheimer, 1936; Reich, 1933), which follows on from Freud's (1930) psychoanalysis and his concept of the narcissism of small differences, has proven productive in explaining conspiracy thinking (Dyrendal et al., 2021). However, it not only argues for an association between authoritarianism, anti-democratic attitudes, prejudices, and discrimination but also discusses religion and religiosity as supporting as well as immunizing factors regarding fascist, ethnocentric, and antisemitic attitudes. Against the background of Freudian psychoanalysis, its founders argued that unconscious conflicts that have their origin in childhood trigger not

just mental discomfort and illness, as Freud assumed, but also relate to ethnocentric, antisemitic, and fascist attitudes. People who show affinities with a fascist ideology had developed feelings of hatred towards authorities in their childhood, especially their own parents, which they could not express or live out under any circumstances. This pent-up hatred is transferred to others, i.e., marginalized people perceived as weaker and strangers. The authoritarian personality is characterized by power orientation, destructiveness, cynicism, sadomasochism, aggression against those who are weaker, desire for punishment, intellectual hostility, and the division of the world into good and bad. Adorno described the authoritarian personality as "ego-weak." It has a fragile sense of self-worth, and scapegoating, also known as projection, is a very common and immature mechanism to stabilise self-esteem.

Authoritarianism researchers argued that there is a strong connection between authoritarian character structure and fascist ideology. They saw roots in the educational ideal of the Weimar period, which was characterized by strict punishment, including physical, and an emotionally distant dominating father figure. So, the individual does not rebel against their parents because that was impossible, but against others, strangers and those who are considered weak. At the same time, the authoritarian personality tends to identify with a dictator and submit, to be able to share in his strength. And while educational and child-rearing practices have changed substantially since the 1930s, relational bonding and emotional formation processes can still be disrupted, with similar results for individuals' personalities.

In the prominent and often-used f-scale, Adorno includes a subscale that he called "superstition and stereotypy" (Adorno, 1999, pp. 55–56. The content of the five indicators of this subscale deals with astrology, fortune-telling, the scientifically inexplicable, a catastrophic end of the world, and a supernatural power. It is noteworthy that these indicators do not contain any specific Christian terminology. They even partly contradict Christian doctrine. For Adorno, superstition contains a tendency to shift responsibility from the individual to external powers beyond his or her control. Superstition is an indication that the "ego" has already given up because it can no longer determine its own fate. In his discussion of religious concepts that occur in the qualitative interviews of the authoritarianism study, he highlights both the immunizing and problematic functions of Christianity. On one hand, it can function as an immunizing factor, as the Christian doctrine of universal love and the idea of "Christian Humanitas" grants minorities the same rights as majorities (Adorno, 1999, p. 281). In addition, the emphasis on "spirit" tends to inhibit emphasis on physical characteristics such as "racial traits," which have the function of denigrating others based on their descent. But when people only attend church to conform socially (Adorno, 1999, p. 285) this extrinsic religion becomes problematic because it may be used to distinguish between those who belong and conform and those who do not and hence become part of authoritarian conformity. Conversely, Adorno contends that when people take religion seriously in an internalized way this is a sign of psychological independence. This form of intrinsic religiosity, which underlines the content rather than the distinction between those who belong to a and those who do not, focuses on a universal ethic of love and compassion.

Summarising Adorno's thoughts on the connection between authoritarianism, religiosity, ethnocentrism, and prejudice, there are three salient types of religiosity: (a) Christians who identify with a religious community because it gives them social status and personal security but who lack engagement with the content of religion (especially universalistic ethics) and who tend towards ethnocentrism and fascism (extrinsic religiosity); (b) intrinsically religious Christians who think about their religion and who have no ethnocentric and fascist views; and (c) people who believe in superstition, which usually goes along with ethnocentrism and fascism.

The first two types fit the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity made by Allport and Ross (1967). A more recent concept, developed by Decker et al. (2020), also fits the authoritarian dynamic and addresses conspiracy thinking directly (see also Imhoff & Decker, 2013). The "conspiracy mentality" believes that political decisions are made by rationally calculating groups or individuals in secret and with mostly malicious intent. These groups or individuals control society down to the smallest detail. According to Decker and colleagues, this protects those involved from dealing with the complexity of societal problems and allows authoritarian aggression to be directed at certain groups and individuals because they are easy to track down and target (Decker et al., 2018, pp. 122–23). What is different about the conspiracy mentality and the aspect of projection within the concept of authoritarianism, is that the conspiracy myth is no longer about strengthening the weakened ego, but about reshaping the world: In the world of conspiracy ideologists, the reality principle no longer applies. The world is supposed to adapt to one's own wishes and needs. Such an outlook is potentially more disruptive to democracy than the classic authoritarian personality, which emphasises rule boundedness and the need to respect the authorities—rather, with the link to reality principle broken, the message is to storm the Capitol rather than respect the electoral authorities.

Another concept associated with conspiracy theories is that of social dominance orientation (SDO), which is a measure of the individual level of acceptance of group-based hierarchies and the corresponding inequalities (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, p. 61; see also Pratto et al., 1994):

> SDO is defined as a very general individual differences orientation expressing the value that people place on nonegalitarian and hierarchically structured

> relationships among social groups. It expresses general support for the domination of certain socially constructed groups over other socially constructed groups, regardless of the manner in which these groups are defined.…Individuals differ in the degree to which they desire group-based inequality and dominance for any number of reasons.

SDO has been shown to have a high level of explanatory power for different kinds of prejudices or political attitudes (e.g., Cohrs & Asbrock, 2009; Dru, 2007; Newman et al., 2014; on Islamophobia see Uenal, 2016). SDO emerged from social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which is a multilevel theory that focuses on the retention and stability of group-based social hierarchies. These hierarchies bestow privileges on dominant groups and are present in nearly all stable societies. According to Sidanius and Pratto (1999), hierarchies consist of three systems:

- Age (adults are more privileged than children);
- Gender (men usually have more power than women);
- An arbitrary system (culturally defined group-based hierarchies).

The link between SDO and conspiracy mentality is scientifically well-established, and the theory offers high explanatory potential (Dyrendal et al., 2021; Hartman et al., 2021; Swami, 2012; Tonković et al., 2021).

Other concepts focus more on the personality structure of conspiracy believers and partly pathologize belief in conspiracies. Körner (2020) distinguishes between two poles of the conspiracy mentality: People who passively accept their fate and describe what they have experienced as coincidence or bad luck and who do not tend to conspiracy theories form the first pole. On the opposite pole are people who are willing to act, who often proactively search for the causes of events for inner psychological reasons and often against the background of a mental illness in order to be outraged about them and possibly even to counteract them aggressively. According to Körner (2020), most people are between these poles and are not prone to conspiracy theories. However, in the case of terrible events that are difficult to explain, such as the assassination attempt on John F. Kennedy, the attack on the World Trade Centre, and most recently the corona pandemic, even people who are between the poles can be attracted to conspiracy theories.

As an inner psychopathological disposition, narcissistic personality structures are widely discussed, and some studies show a connection between narcissism and the belief in conspiracy ideologies. Kay (2021) concludes that individuals with pronounced narcissism can be divided into two groups. People who are high in grandiose narcissism are more likely to believe in conspiracies due to heightened paranoia. Other studies also show the correlation between narcissism and the belief in conspiracies (Cichocka et al., 2016; Hughes & Machan, 2021; Kay, 2021; Sternisko et al., 2021). Hence, our fourth research question:

> RQ4: To what extent are authoritarian personality, social dominance and narcissism associated with conspiracy beliefs?

Belief in conspiracy theories, the concept of the authoritarian personality, SDO, and narcissism share structural parallels in that they are associated with notions of social hierarchy which are also relevant to anti-democratic and ethnocentric attitudes and prejudices. According to Adorno et al. (1950), in this context, religiosity has both a promoting effect and a weakening one. Religiosity is likely particularly problematic when it has structural parallels to authoritarianism, as is the case with religious fundamentalism (Strube, 2021). Conversely, other—broadly intrinsic—forms of religiosity appear to be less or negatively linked to authoritarianism or conspiracy beliefs; many strands of religious teaching promote questioning of rigid hierarchies and binary distinctions and advocate universal compassion and solidarity. Indeed, some research has found that whereas fundamentalism is positively related to prejudice, questing religion is negatively so (Hunsberger, 1995). Likewise, fundamentalism and spirituality differ in their relationship to environmental attitudes (Preston & Shin, 2022).

Such evidence suggests the need for differentiated measures of religion, especially of a fundamentalist orientation when it comes to assessing the relationship between religion and conspiracy beliefs. Research in the Polish context has found that "religious fundamentalism, unlike centrality of religiosity, is positively related to coronavirus conspiracy beliefs" (Łowicki et al., 2022, p. 1), and the UK provides an interesting context to examine these relationships further. First, as argued above, evidence suggests conspiracy beliefs are widespread, with more than a quarter supporting some conspiracy beliefs and almost 15% supporting antisemitic conspiracy theories (Freeman et al., 2020). Second, high religious diversity, including the presence of a diversity of forms of fundamentalism, enables the assessment of the relationship between conspiracy theories and a wide variety of forms of religion. Case evidence shows some of these forms have been linked to the spread of conspiracy beliefs in the context of Covid-19 (Sweney, 2021), and strong connections have been found between ethnicity and vaccine hesitancy (Freeman et al., 2020, p. 7; Razai et al., 2021, p. 1), for which religiously transmitted conspiracy theories present a plausible pathway of influence.

3. Methods and Measures

We answer our research questions using data from an online survey on right-wing extremism and racism in

the UK conducted in August 2021, based on Respondi's Access Panel and sample-controlled by age, gender, education level, and region, based on official statistics. A total of 1093 people between the ages of 17 and 74 took part in the survey (age m = 44.29; SD = 15.9; female 50,3%; male 49,7%; people with a university degree 29,1%). Of these, 114 people professed their faith in the Catholic Church, 241 in the Church of England, Scotland, Ireland, or Wales, 48 in other Christian churches, 48 in Islam, and 46 in other religions. 483 participants were non-religious. We used measures from the classic conspiracy mentality scale and concerning contemporary corona conspiracy theories. Respondents were also asked about democracy in principle and in practice, disenchantment with politics, and extreme right-wing, anti-Muslim, and anti-Black racist attitudes. In addition to religious affiliation, respondents were asked about the importance of religion in their lives, religious fundamentalist attitudes, their use of social media, and their discussion of issues with people from different backgrounds to their own. The exact wording of the statements is listed in the Supplementary File.

In the first part of the statistical analysis, we discuss respondents' attitudes towards democracy, inclination towards conspiracy ideologies also in relation to the corona pandemic, anti-Muslim, racist, and far-right attitudes, and correlations between conspiracy mentality and these attitudes. In addition, we analyse the association between religious indicators such as the importance of religion and religious fundamentalism and attitudes, and between religion-related indicators and conspiracy mentality. In the second part of the analysis, we perform a stepwise regression to find out which indicators are related to conspiracy mentality in a multivariate model. The models include socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, education, religion-related variables such as religious affiliation, importance of religion in one's life, religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, SDO, narcissism, sadism, lack of trust, the importance of social media, and communication with people whose opinion is different from one's own. The individual variables with the exact wording are listed in the Supplementary File.

4. Conspiracy Belief, Religiosity, and Anti-Democratic World Views: Descriptive Results

4.1. Attitudes to Democracy

The overview of frequencies shows that with an amount of 87% a large majority of respondents in the UK support democracy as an idea (see Figure 1). But only just under 50% are satisfied with its functioning, 84% feel they have no control over the actions of government, and more than 50% say there is no point in getting involved in politics. Both "dissatisfaction with democracy" and "political disempowerment" are therefore strong.

What about conspiracy beliefs? A distinction is made between classic conspiracy mentality items (three statements in total) and Covid-19 conspiracy theories (also three statements in total). Figure 3 shows that the belief in conspiracies is strong. One-third of respondents believe that lives are determined by conspiracies hatched in secret. Half of the respondents believe that secret organisations have a strong influence on politics and slightly less than half believe that politicians are puppets controlled by powers behind them. Agreement with Corona conspiracy myths is lower but still high. Just over a quarter of respondents believe that secret, hidden powers are behind the pandemic. About 20% believe that the Corona crisis was exaggerated to benefit a few. Eleven percent of respondents even believe that Bill Gates is behind the pandemic.

Alongside support for democracy, tolerance of diversity is an important imperative in plural societies like

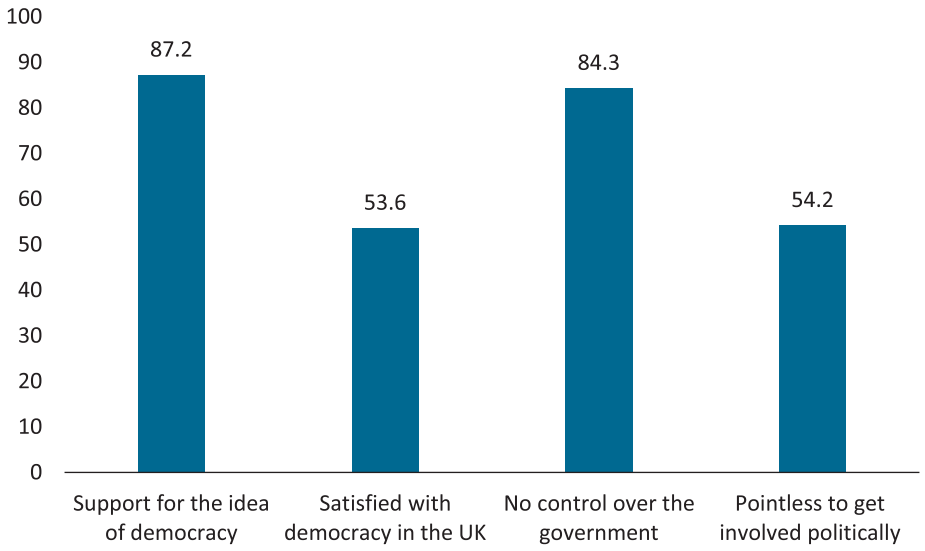

Figure 1. Support of democracy and political apathy. Note: See items 1–4 in the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

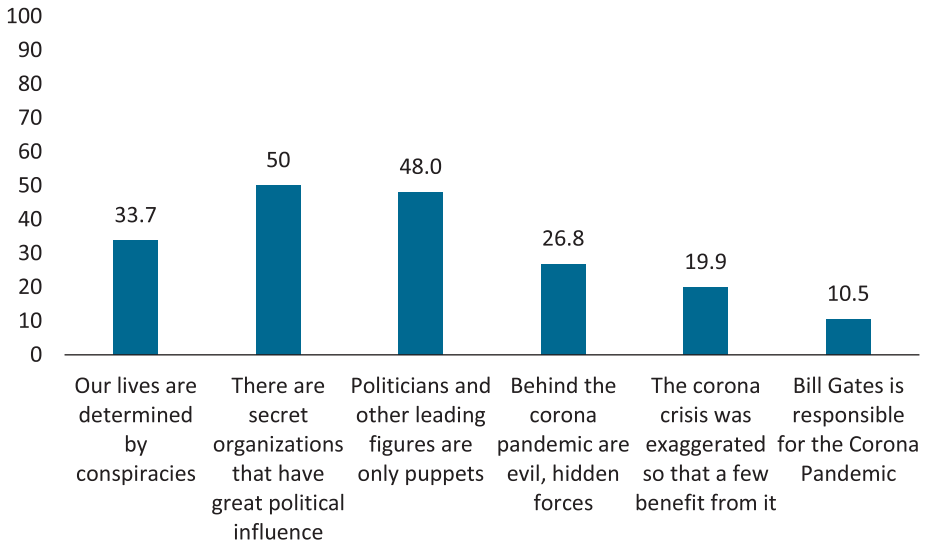

Figure 2. Belief in conspiracies (classic and corona related). Note: See items 5–10 in the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

the UK. Figure 3 shows the distribution of far-right, anti-Muslim, and anti-Black racist attitudes. In each case, this is the proportion of those who agreed with twelve far-right, two anti-Muslim, and two anti-Black racist comments. Thus, for the most part, agreement with individual statements is even higher among the population. The diagram thus shows the proportion of those who have a manifest right-wing extremist worldview and are strongly anti-Muslim and anti-Black. The right-wing extremism scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .89, the Muslim hostility scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .81, and the anti-Black scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .74, which is a high to acceptable reliability. Slightly less than a quarter of the population has strong resentment towards Muslims, 5% of the population has strong anti-Black racist attitudes, and about 4% of the population has a manifest-right extremist worldview, i.e., agree with all twelve statements on right-wing extremism.

What about correlations between belief in conspiracy myths and the attitudes surveyed, and the religiosity indicators? Both the classical conspiracy mentality and belief in corona conspiracy ideologies are negatively correlated with satisfaction with democracy, positively correlated with political apathy, and positively correlated with anti-Muslim sentiment, anti-Black racism, and right-wing extremism (see Table 1). Religious fundamentalism and the importance of religion are weakly positively correlated with democracy satisfaction (except for the importance of religion and support for democracy, which is not significant). Political apathy shows only weak correlations, if any, with the religiosity indicators, which are not significant. What is striking, however, is

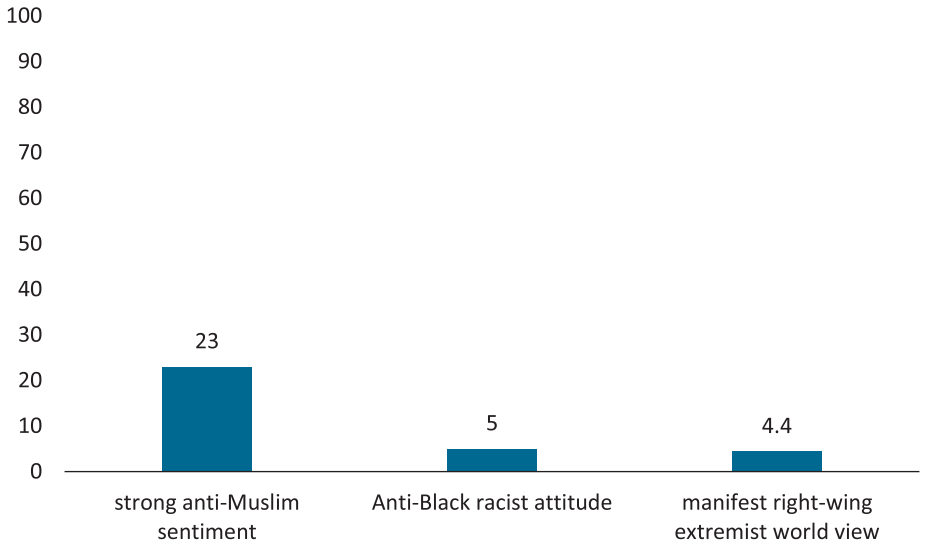

Figure 3. Anti-Muslim sentiment, anti-Black-racism, and manifest right-wing extremist views. Note: See items 11–13 in the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

Table 1. Conspiracy mentality, religiosity, and rejection of democratic principles (correlations).

	Conspiracy mentality	Belief in Covid-19 conspiracies	Religious fundamentalism	Importance of religion in one's life
Support of the idea of democracy	−.082***	−.185***	.072*	n.s.
Satisfaction with democracy and how it works in the UK	−.158***	−.070*	.120***	.133***
No point in getting politically involved	.217***	.244***	.096*	n.s.
No control over what government does	.178***	.119***	n.s.	−.063*
Anti-Muslim sentiment	.169***	.214***	.113***	n.s.
Anti-Black racism	.172***	.291***	.326***	.192***
Manifest-right-wing-extremist worldview	.200***	.281***	.297***	.118***
Conspiracy mentality	1	.450***	.158***	.156***
Belief in Covid-19-conspiracies	.450***	1	.267***	.195***
Religious fundamentalism	.158***	.267***	1	.519***
Importance of religion in one's life	.152***	.190***	.519***	1

Notes: Kendall Tau-c, p = *** < .001; p = ** < .01; p = * < .05; n.s. = not significant; for details of the scales and items see Figures 1–3 and the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

the finding that both religious fundamentalism and the importance of religion correlate with both racism and right-wing extremism. About anti-Muslim sentiment, religious fundamentalism, conspiracy mentality, and belief in Covid-19 conspiracies are significantly positively correlated with conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, both religious fundamentalism and the importance of religion correlate with both classical conspiracy mentality and belief in Covid-19 conspiracy myths.

Both conspiracy mentality and the belief in corona conspiracies are thus demonstrably related to attitudes which are problematic for democracy. This is expressed above all in comparatively strong correlations with dissatisfaction with democracy, racist, and anti-Muslim attitudes, as well as extreme right-wing attitudes. The results confirm the findings of other studies that show an influence of belief in conspiracy theories on attitudes toward democracy and right-wing extremism (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2022; Krouwel et al., 2017; Pickel & Yendell, 2020). Also of concern in this context are religiously fundamentalist attitudes and the importance of religion in life.

5. What Influences Belief in Conspiracies? Results of the Multivariate Analysis

Since conspiracy mentality is an important indicator and can help explain political attitudes, it is worth analysing different influencing factors in a complex hypothesis model. We decided on a backward stepwise regression because we particularly want to assess whether the influence of religious indicators not only correlates significantly with conspiracy mentality but also reduces when other indicators are added, especially indicators derived from psychodynamic theories. A total of five models are available, as shown in Table 2.

5.1. Variables

In the following, we describe the variables in the statistical analysis against the background of theoretical considerations. The exact wording is given in the Supplementary File.

The dependent variable is *conspiracy mentality* and a scale from 1 to 4 was drawn of all three statements on belief in conspiracies, i.e., the sum score of (a) "most people do not realize how far our lives are determined by conspiracies that are concocted in secret," (b) "there are secret organizations that have a great influence on political decisions," and (c) "politicians and other leading figures are only puppets of the powers behind" (Cronbach's alpha = .853).

Independent variables are:

- Gender: Man (0)/Woman (1);
- Age;
- Education: nine levels (low to high);
- Religious affiliation: Christian, Muslim, other (reference category: no affiliation);
- Importance of religiosity: A scale from 1 to 5 was drawn.
- Religious fundamentalism (scale by Pollack et al., 2022): A scale from 1 to 4 was drawn of four statements that measure fundamentalist religious views (sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .896).
- Authoritarianism: A scale from 1 to 5 was drawn that measures authoritarian aggression,

Table 2. Factors which influence belief in conspiracies: Backward stepwise regression (standardized regression coefficients).

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Age	.071*	.080*	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Gender	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Low education level	.107***	.124***	n.s.	n.s.	.097*
Christian		.148***	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Muslim		.145***	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Other		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Importance of religiosity			n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Religious fundamentalism			.221***	.156***	.142***
Authoritarianism				n.s.	n.s.
SDO				.108***	.107*
Narcissism				.267***	.190***
Sadism				n.s.	n.s.
Low Interpersonal trust				.109*	.146***
Take most news from social media					n.s.
Trust more in posts of friends than of experts					.199***
Talk with people who disagree with own views					.125**
N	995	995	505	505	505
Corrected R^2	.010	.044	.047	.108	.156
Change in R^2		.034	.003	.061	.048

Notes: Standardizes regression coefficients, p = *** < .001; p = ** < .01; p = * < .05; n.s. = not significant; for details of the scales and items see Figures 1–3 and the Supplementary File. Source: Own calculations based on the survey.

authoritarian submission, and authoritarian conventionalism (sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .617).
- SDO: A scale from 1 to 7 was drawn of four items on social dominant orientation (sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .775).
- Narcissism: The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire short scale (NARQ-S) was used (Leckelt et al., 2018 sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .821).
- Sadism: A scale from 1 to 4 was drawn of four items on sadistic attitudes (sum score, Cronbach's alpha = .871).
- Low interpersonal trust: A scale from 1 to 4 was drawn on general interpersonal trust.
- Statement: Most news taken from social media (scale 1 to 4);
- Statement: More trust in posts of friends than of experts (scale 1 to 4);
- Question on how often one talks with people who disagree with own views (scale 1 to 4).

In the first model, only the socio-demographic variables age, gender, and education are included in the calculation. While gender does not play a role, age (beta = .071***) and low education (beta = .107***) are weakly correlated with conspiracy mentality. The explained variance is very low with R^2 = .010.

In the second model, religious affiliation is taken into account. In addition to age (beta = .080*) and low education (beta = .124***), affiliation with Christianity (beta = .148***) and Islam (beta = .145***) is also correlated with conspiracy mentality. That is, compared with the reference category "no religious affiliation," these two affiliations are associated with the conspiracy mentality. Other religious affiliations do not play a role. The explained variance is slightly increased with R^2 = .044, but still very low.

The third model is interesting because, with the inclusion of both the importance of religion and religious fundamentalism in the model, only religious fundamentalism remains a relevant factor (beta = .221**). This means that religious affiliation alone is not a relevant explanatory factor. Rather, only a religiously fundamentalist attitude is related to a conspiracy mentality. However, the R^2 of .047 has become only slightly higher compared to the second model.

This changes in the fourth model, which has an R^2 of .108. Here, the social psychological indicators such as authoritarianism, SDO, narcissism, sadism and interpersonal trust were considered. While authoritarianism and sadism are not significant, SDO (beta = .108***), narcissism (beta = .267***), and interpersonal trust (beta = .109*) are relevant influencing variables. Simultaneously, the effect of religious

fundamentalism diminishes but remains significant (beta = .156***).

In the fifth and final model, indicators were added to test for a relationship between social media use and conspiracy mentality, and between communication with people of differing views and conspiracy mentality. While reliance on social media as a source of news has no influence, the attitude of trusting the posts of friends more than the opinions of experts correlates positively with the belief in conspiracies (beta = .199***). We hypothesized that conversations with people from different backgrounds would be negatively correlated with belief in conspiracies because such conversations could be an important corrective. However, the indicator is in fact correlated in the other direction (beta = .125**). It may be that conversations with people who have different views are not used by people with strong conspiracy beliefs for exchange, but rather to reinforce their preconceptions, and reinforce a sense of collective identity. This interpretation fits with Sunstein and Vermeule's (2009) idea of a "self-sealing" hermeneutic, in which any new information that contradicts a conspiracy theory is used to confirm the conspiracy belief, as the messenger of the new information is seen as part of the plot in the view of the person who believes the conspiracy myth. This fits well with the result that narcissism is also relevant in the last model, although it has become weaker than in the previous model (beta = 190***). Besides narcissism, low interpersonal trust is also significant and even somewhat stronger than in the previous model (beta = .146***). The education factor also proves to be significant in the last model but is weak (.142***). The last model shows an even higher R^2 (.156***). Religious fundamentalism remains significant and with beta = .142*** only slightly weaker than in the fourth model. With an increase of R^2 = 0.48, it shows that information processing—specifically the credibility assigned to personal and expert sources—is an important factor in explaining the conspiracy mentality.

6. Conclusion

Returning to our research questions, first we find that both classic conspiracy mentality and belief in corona conspiracies go hand in hand with a lack of support for democracy, a lack of a sense of political agency, and with racist, anti-Muslim, and right-wing extremist attitudes. Second, we find that fundamentalist religious beliefs—but not other religious indicators once fundamentalism is considered separately—are associated with a tendency towards conspiracy beliefs. Third, we find that style of social media consumption—trusting the posts of friends over the opinions of experts—is linked to conspiracy beliefs, but that reliance on social media as a source of news is not. Fourth, building on socio-psychological research associated with the theory of the authoritarian personality, we have found that authoritarianism, SDO, and narcissism are strongly associated with conspiracy beliefs. The high rates of conspiracy thinking warn of the dangers of conspiracy thinking for democracy, given the strong associations between conspiracy thinking and scepticism and opposition towards democracy.

The study has some limitations: The chosen authoritarianism short scale was unsatisfactory and therefore in future studies a more differentiated scale should be used. Also, the study had only a limited number of religiosity items: While religious fundamentalism was well covered, other indicators are needed that provide more information about other forms of religiosity. Furthermore, while we accounted for almost 50% of variance in conspiracy beliefs, this leaves more than 50% unexplained, so further theories should be considered to explain conspiracy mentality. In addition, the causal direction is not always clear: It may be that the conspiracy mentality itself has an influence on media behaviour, for example. Nevertheless, the results of the analysis provide important information on the connections between conspiracy mentality, religiosity and political or anti-democratic attitudes in the context of what Decker et al. (2020) call the "authoritarian syndrome."

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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