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Article

Religions and Conspiracy Theories as the Authoritarian "Other" of Democracy?

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Abstract
This article theorises and conceptualises the ambivalent role of religions and conspiracy theories in modern democracies. Based on a concise comparison of both phenomena, it elaborates the similar risks and functions of religions and conspiracy theories for the political community without neglecting the fact that, under secular conditions, the spread of conspiracy narratives might outweigh those of religious messages in the long run. That observation seems particularly relevant for contemporary governance and political science, as a tendency towards social anomie in the sense of Durkheim can be deduced from democratic theory, which significantly increases democracy's need for compensatory moral and cognitive authorities.

Keywords
anomie; authority; belief; conspiracy; democracy; disintegration; emotions; orientation; substitute religions; uncertainty

Issue
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1. Introduction

As Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* presented the first serious theory on conspiracy theories in the social sciences (Popper, 1963/2002, Chapter 14), the core of his argument was that all conspiracy theories underestimate the complexity of modern societies by claiming that social phenomena and events are generally the intended result of mutually coordinated action. According to Popper, only this fundamental misunderstanding can lead to the misperception that a small circle of conspirators control and manipulate millions of people's thoughts and actions and run the state or even the world in secret (cf. Pigden, 1995). This is precisely why the discovery of "real" conspiracies and secret agreements can never confirm the "conspiracy theory of society" as such, simply because real conspiracies are inevitably on a much smaller scale.

In the same context, Popper compared the belief in conspiracy theories with religious superstition insofar as in the secular environment of modern societies, powerful individuals and groups simulate or even replace the traditional omnipotence of gods. Thus, conspiracy theories can be seen both as surrogate religions *and* as antagonism to rather differentiated religious beliefs (Wood & Douglas, 2019). In turn, this ambivalence raises the question of what role both phenomena play in democracy, as religious accommodation here is often appreciated as a factor in providing social capital and public welfare (e.g. Böckenförde, 2013; Greenawalt, 2009; Habermas, 2005; Putnam, 2000; Rosenblum, 2022), while conspiracy theories usually share a pejorative image. Is this perhaps a misperception that ignores the obvious analogies between religious convictions and "belief" in conspiracies (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015, 2019; Dyrendal, 2020)—a phenomenon which has experienced a rapid rise during the Covid-19 crisis (Parmigiani, 2021)?

This article argues that the ambivalence both conspiracy theories and religions imply for democratic societies is due to democracy's own paradoxes that are linked to the significant lack of authority inherent in all democratic decisions and procedures. Proceeding from a theoretical comparison of religions and conspiracy theories (Section 2), the argument recurs on Durkheim's concept of anomie to demonstrate why democracy is always susceptible to being supplemented by external

authorities at best, and thwarted at worst (Section 3). Such "authorities" as, for instance, (secular) religions and conspiracy theories promise atomised individuals not only intellectual orientation and meaning but also a collective identity and a way out of (subjectively perceived) powerlessness. Moreover, religions and conspiracy theories assume almost the same "functions" in the democratic state: as resources for complexity reduction, moral authority, and normative legitimacy, even if—in the case of conspiracy theories—these are mostly carried out in a one-sided manner necessarily undermining any tolerance towards dissenting opinions and thus democratic plurality (Section 4).

2. Religions and Conspiracy Theories: On General Similarities and Dissimilarities

The relation between conspiracy theory and religion can be considered through the lens of three components—conspiracy theory *in*, *about*, and *as* religion (Dyrendal, 2020; Robertson et al., 2019). While the first perspective deals with different types of conspiracy beliefs that apply ideologically to certain religious groups, the second one presents religions as actors, as it happens, for instance, in the antisemitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or the *Trojan Horse Affair*, which alleged there had been an "Islamisation" of secular state schools in Birmingham (Holmwood & O'Toole, 2018). Finally, the focus on conspiracy theory *as* religion examines the philosophical, psychological, cognitive, and emotional underpinnings that characterise both cultural concepts, generally emphasising that belief is the most important dimension of both conspiracy theories and religions (cf. Bronner, 2003, 2011; Goertzel, 1994).

This contribution centres on the third component—conspiracy theory *as* religion—which includes the question of to what extent conspiracy theory can be understood as a continuation of religious modes of thinking and therefore as a (secular) substitute for religion itself. In this respect, the social and political idea of "democracy" (as well as the concept of "science") provides a sort of *tertium comparationis*, being able to identify such aspects in which conspiracy theory and religion definitely coincide. Proceeding from this, it will become possible to analyse similar functions conspiracy theories and religions are taking up in democratic societies.

This approach presupposes a few introductory remarks that contour the fundamental comparability of conspiracy theory and religion in terms of the nature of thought and behaviour under the circumstances created by modern democracies. Thus, the following paragraphs aim to clarify the five most relevant characteristics in this respect.

First, both religion and conspiracy theories are situated *beyond empiricism*, i.e., their effectiveness does not depend on the empirical verifiability of their assumptions. Instead, it is precisely the claim of religions and conspiracy theories to illuminate people and to make statements about a world that eludes sensory perception, supported experience, and intersubjective falsifiability. Another parallel between religions and conspiracy theories is that both usually mix fact and fiction, supernatural things or beings and conventional experience. Some well-developed conspiracy theories, such as those of Alex Jones or David Icke, are not even inferior to religious belief systems in their grasp of complex interrelationships. Hence, they are similar not only in wanting to control the uncertain, the empirically unprovable, to a certain extent (Schließler et al., 2020) but also in that they share an esoteric approach to the world (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2019; Taguieff, 2005), which offers explanatory frameworks scientific explanations cannot address (Keeley, 2019).

Second, both religions and conspiracy theories primarily address *people's feelings and emotional needs* (Douglas et al., 2020). They help them deal with fears and insecurities and provide emotional support, particularly during societal crises (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). In this way, they contribute to terror management (Greenberg et al., 2008), i.e., to the constructive handling of one's own mortality or the imponderable risks of life (Vail et al., 2010). On the other hand, they differ in that religions usually convey a positive message of salvation and redemption, while conspiracy narratives, although generally situated between secular scepticism and spiritual salvation (Aupers & Harambam, 2019), mostly only identify the negative—the conspiracy and its authors—without themselves developing a concrete idea of the optimal, paradisiacal state (Tezcan, 2020). However, they overlap again in that both the followers of religions and conspiracy theories are able to draw comfort and confidence from their beliefs since both "faith systems" claim to be part of a sort of moral crusade to solve the world's ills. Although religions and conspiracy theories often share a rather apocalyptic view of the world (Barkun, 2013), they actually succeed in ensuring that their followers do not remain pessimistic but face the approaching challenges with a particular kind of optimism.

Third, religions as well as conspiracy theories offer *intellectual orientation* by a particular "holistic cognitive style" being focused on big pictures and connections between elements rather than on individual details (Wood & Douglas, 2019). So, both offer a cognitive explanation of how the world and human coexistence can be understood and how one can attain information about it. However, the (minority of) enlightened religions of today can reflect on themselves as forms of belief rather than knowledge (Blume, 2020). They know and accept that they interpret the world and the objects and phenomena that exist in it from a religious-metaphysical point of view and not according to the methodological standards of modern sciences. In contrast, conspiracy theorists are mostly convinced that the results of science, insofar as they contradict their own views, are part of the conspiracy, while the conspiracy theories themselves supposedly reflect the "true" state of (uncorrupted) science.

In this respect, conspiracy theories apparently find it more difficult than modern enlightened religions to separate belief from knowledge, although there are definitely some conspiracy groups that unapologetically accept the lack of reason in their epistemological position. Hence, especially against the background of religions' diversity, it is plausible that a religious perspective finds it easier to tolerate ambiguity than a conspiracy theory. Instead, conspiracy theories tend to immunise against any contradiction since counter-arguments can always be dismissed as part of the conspiracy.

Fourth, from a genuinely political point of view, religions and conspiracy theories are *comparable* because they often correspond with the impression of individual and collective *powerlessness* (cf. Adorno et al., 1950/1967; Blanuŝa & Hristov, 2020, pp. 72–73). While this impression could reduce one's intention to engage in politics (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), it could also encourage believers to do so (Jolley et al., 2020). Just as religions have often been attested to serve as a motivational factor for political and social engagement and personal, altruistic commitment to the community, conspiracy theories can be interpreted as an immediate call to political activity. Hence, in certain contexts, conspiracy theories could also "inspire collective action and social change attempts, especially in reaction to threatening events" (Jolley et al., 2020, p. 232), organising protests (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), among other things. In this concern, the perception of having uncovered a conspiracy is an explicit or at least implicit call to hold those responsible accountable and change the situation in a legitimate manner contrary to the conspirators' plans. Accordingly, the fighters against a conspiracy subjectively find themselves in any case in the camp of the "good guys" who are morally superior (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013) and put a stop to the "evil," which is another parallel to the political effect of religions, which promise the actions of believers a normative standard, a direction of thrust, with which they are in harmony with their beliefs. In this context, it is much more than a coincidence that conspiracy theories often emphasise the alleged power of actually powerless groups, religious or ethnic minorities, etc. (Nera et al., 2021), to ascribe the counter-conspirators a politically powerful role with a chance of success. However, the political impetus of such counter-conspiracism is radical since it is shaped by a deep distrust of democratic institutions (Miller et al., 2016; Moore, 2017, 2018; Renard, 2015). Moreover, it would seem that no arrangement with the conspirators is possible, which is why only a revolutionary tabula rasa promises any political success. Concerning the political power of religions, on the other hand, not only radical but also moderate projects and reforms seem to be conceivable.

Finally, religions and conspiracy theories are proper resources to build *collective identities*. Following the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), this mainly needs a positive distinction of one's own social group identity, i.e., the in-group, from a relevant, negatively connoted out-group. By belonging to a "religion," such a distinction is easy to achieve since the recourse to the religious promises epistemological and ontological certainty as well as a performative differentiation of "believers" and "non-believers" (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). This makes it possible to divide the political space into "us" and "them," friends and enemies, which is why political conflicts are often structured along religious identity markers, without the causes of these conflicts themselves necessarily being religiously based (Hidalgo, 2018, pp. 225–253). As "moral communities," religious communities can unite their members even without "faith" in a theological sense, which predestines them as a resource for identity even in secular or pluralistic environments (Graham & Haidt, 2010). Therefore, conspiracy theories as secular substitutes to religions can also enforce social identity (Dyrendal, Asprem, & Robertson, 2019, p. 43), distinct in-groups and out-groups, friends, and enemies by dividing the evil side of the perpetrators, stooges, followers, and ignoramuses of a conspiracy from the good, which consists of initiated connoisseurs, opponents, and innocents of the same conspiracy (cf. Biddlestone et al., 2020; Van Eck Duymaer van Twist & Newcombe, 2019). Furthermore, conspiracy theories can be seen as appropriate agents to separate a positive in-group from a negative out-group, since individuals are expected to exhibit more pejorative attitudes and behaviours towards social out-groups to the extent that those out-groups are perceived as realistic threats (Stephan et al., 2009). Just like religions, conspiracy theories can also establish an identity apart from group dynamics in the form of interpersonal or self-image processes (Biddlestone et al., 2021). But again, the differences between religions and conspiracy theories may not be underestimated since the latter currently have more problems creating compromises, an overlapping consensus or a modus vivendi between "believers" and "non-believers" and, thus, almost inevitably lead to a friend-enemy dichotomy in the sense of Carl Schmitt. In contrast, for religions, the aforementioned ways of mutual understanding are easier to achieve. Additionally, compared to religions, the ability of conspiracy theories to build communities is rather superficial and provisional, as the need for uniqueness—the claim to know things that others do not—is higher among conspiracy theorists than among religious believers (Lantian et al., 2017).

As a result, we can state that both religions and conspiracy theories work as moral, intellectual, and political authorities within modern societies, at least for the believers of corresponding religious or conspiracy-theoretical messages. In this respect, they each build an entity that normally does not lose its persuasiveness through scientific research, empirical studies, or fact-checking; on the contrary, it is located in a vacuum in which (many) people continue to form their emotional identity and stability. As will be shown in the next section, this potential of religions and conspiracy myths is of immense importance, especially in a democracy, as

the latter cultivates a significant lack of cognitive orientation and security. The vacuum in which religions and conspiracy theories thrive is therefore created by democracy itself.

3. Anomie as the Hidden Tendency of Modern Democracies

It was not only the theory of radical democracy (following, e.g., Claude Lefort, Richard Rorty, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière, or Bonnie Honig) that elevated contingency to the central character of the rule of the people and made it a kind of commonplace of political theory that democratic politics is beyond (metaphysical) claims to truth. What classical authors from Plato to Alexis de Tocqueville, John Dewey, and Hannah Arendt emphasised, namely that (mass) democracy is to a certain extent at war with knowledge and expertise, so that its own epistemic dimension always remains vague, is still one of the least controversial findings of contemporary political science. Therefore, the famous judgement of Hans Kelsen that the results of democratic politics must be evaluated beyond the distinction of "right and wrong" and "good and evil" is still valid. As Kelsen (2006, p. 236) wrote:

> If the question of what is socially right, what is good, what is best, could be answered in an absolute, objectively valid, directly binding…way for all: then democracy would be utterly impossible. For what could be the point of voting and letting the majority decide on a measure whose correctness is beyond all doubt?

Kelsen's understanding of the paradoxical "essence" of democracy leads to the insight that, for democracy, two highly contradictory principles are constitutive: the *quantitative* (i.e., the majority, the power of the large number) and the *qualitative* (i.e., the public good, the rule of law or social justice). Both principles shape democracy but finally remain independent of each other. This makes it conceivable how majority decisions can undermine the rule of law, even though in a democracy, there can be no legitimate law beyond majority rule. This includes that the origin of law, which should qualify and, if necessary, limit people's sovereignty within a constitutional democracy, cannot depend on its justification by the popular will. Consequently, such a "constitutional law" becomes a blind spot in democratic theory, which means what is to be considered as "law" is logically decoupled from those criteria of legitimacy that can be clearly identified as "democratic." Thus, Jacques Derrida speaks about the "mystical foundation of authority" in democracy, a mysterium which is connected with the "autoimmunity" of democracy (Derrida, 1990, 2005), i.e., democracy's particular tendency to self-destruction, whenever an "undemocratic" group of political actors attempt to gain the majority of voters to abolish civil rights and democratic institutions with the help of legally implemented "democratic" procedures. In different words, democracy must end up in an insoluble contradiction with itself if it declares the quantitative principle of universal suffrage/majority decision to be inviolable while at the same time arming against possible (anti-democratic?) aberrations of "people's" voting with the help of qualitative guidelines and constitutional boundaries. From this, Kelsen (2006, p. 227) drew the radical conclusion that democracy needs a clear priority of quantity against quality. Since (secular) democracy is not allowed to refer to any "higher" normative truth, it must rely on the positive cognitive capacity of human beings. This requires that the "coercion" of a legal order has to be legitimised solely "by the consent of at least the majority of those whom the coercive order is intended to help." As an "expression of political relativism," which opposes any authoritarian claim to truth and therefore the logic of "political absolutism," democracy cannot fix a point outside itself, from which it could, if necessary, even be asserted against the principle of majority. Instead, Kelsen (2006, p. 163) stressed that "the quality which appears under the name of the people" is synonymous with a "fiction not being checked any longer" but "set into reality," an expression that anticipated Rancière's (1998) emphasis of "the non-identity of the people."

Under the conditions of the democratic paradox between the principles of quantity and quantity, Kelsen felt compelled to accept even the structural weakness of majority rule (in which liberal thinkers such as Madison, Tocqueville, or Mill had seen the danger of a tyranny of the majority) without any reservation. Nevertheless, in terms of democratic theory, it would, of course, be legitimate to avoid such radical consequences as Kelsen's and to recognise the authority of law without demanding its origin in the majority in a strict sense. Hence, it could be just as "democratic" to argue against Kelsen and in favour of the rule of law as a necessary limit to the majority principle. However, since democracy consists of contradictory principles such as quantity and quality, it hardly provides a clear normative orientation. And although democracy undoubtedly has its own normativity, which is primarily in the effective moderation of political discourses and the equal legitimacy of alternative political positions (Hidalgo, 2014, pp. 511–574), it is precisely this normativity that denies the option to describe certain positions within the aporetic framework of democracy as definitively "right" and the counter-position analogously as definitively "wrong." Therefore, the plurality or even the contradiction of legitimate views becomes nothing but the paradoxical program of democracy, whereby the normative "correctness" of concrete decisions is always guaranteed by the fact that the same decisions could have been different.

Accordingly, democracy always implies the "other" side of how it presents itself at a particular moment. One can say that democracy is not characterised by radical contingency but, as seen by a very presuppositional relationism, which, in many cases, cannot be adequately

depicted by compromises, the middle between two extremes, etc. Consequently, in the numerous situations in which the contradictory norms of democracy coexist largely unmediated, the tolerance of counter-positions becomes the democratic virtue par excellence. Such tolerance, however, is characterised by its own paradox: That it cannot be legally enforced and remains epistemologically and normatively amorphous as a merely subjective relational standard (cf. King, 1976, 51–54).

Thus, democracy, in theory and practice, is always in danger of leaving its supporters normatively in the dark and overtaxing them individually and collectively. At the same time, this shows an overall pathology of popular sovereignty, which can be called the "anomie" of democracy as this pathology expresses precisely the state of weakened or even absent social, political, and cultural norms, rules and parameters of order that Durkheim (1893/1997) or Merton (1949) had in mind as they designed the category of anomie in modern sociology. That democracy tends to an individual and social anomie follows the fact that, in democracy, the validity of law and order and their establishment through appropriate procedures are structurally decoupled. And although democracy has procedural norms that could compensate for the lack of content-based norms to a certain extent, the citizens' trust in such procedural norms is insufficient to avoid epistemological insecurity. Consequently, an intersubjectively comprehensible, universally valid emergence of law or norms justifying coercive power is definitely an impossibility in and for democracy. Against the background of the necessarily incomplete, aporetic "democratic" procedures and the "non-identity" of the people, the normative validity of law implies an evident gap in democratic theory.

As a result, the state of anomie, in which the vulnerable foundation of all legal norms becomes individually and socially transparent, is like a sword of Damocles in democracy, where the justification of all norms of law and conduct must remain vague or even self-contradictory. This is the reason why no rules emerge in democratic practice that are really clear and binding for all. And although all citizens must yet obey the existing rules, in a democracy everyone—the government as well as the opposition—can set out to change them according to their own ideas. This obviously leads to the constant dynamics, temporary nature and continual law changes in democracy, whose opposing principles will always find their respective partisans and political representatives. Moreover, the nevertheless "possible'' declaration of norms in democracy, which always has to restrict itself, balance opposing positions, and renounce claims of absoluteness, can only insufficiently guarantee that the individual and social need for authority and orientation usually are satisfied by the validity of laws that are not contested. So, the existing framework of norms in democracy can always be challenged from two sides: by the *minority* as an expression of persisting inadequacies and injustices caused by the political and social system; and by the *majority* as an available object that can (or must) be reshaped by virtue of its own claim to power. Such mutually legitimate questioning of the existing normative framework in democracy threatens to lead to anomie as soon as the aporias of democracy provoke an individual and social lack of orientation, the subjective feeling of being overwhelmed, and therefore the increasing desire for "simple," clearly deducible rules and authorities.

4. The Ambivalent Role of (Substitute) Religions and Conspiracy Theories as External Authorities in Democracy

The relevance of the idea of anomie as a general conceptualisation of the pathological sides of modern democracies becomes more evident when we return to the context of religions and conspiracy theories. In this respect, it is anything but a coincidence that the term "anomie" originally marked a theological expression for the breaking of religious and ethical laws (Orrú, 1987) before being introduced into sociology by Durkheim as a synonym for "normlessness" (not understood in an anarchic way) and "social alienation." Durkheim gained this view from Guyau's (1887/1897) *L'Irréligion de l'avenir*, which described anomie as "the absence of apodictic, fixed, and universal rules" (cf. Orrú, 1983, p. 505). In his works, Durkheim (1893/1997, 1897/2005) interpreted anomie as the loss of social homogeneity and solidarity, which—in the increasingly individualised, industrialised, and secularised modern society—gave rise to people's unfulfillable desire for socially shared meaning along universally binding rules. For Durkheim, this fundamental loss converged with the erosion of traditional religion and religiosity, the lack of social bonding, and the plurality of values. Proceeding from this assumption, he understood anomie not as a form of individual despair and alienation but rather as a lack of social integration and, thus, a collective disease of modern society.

Durkheim's diagnosis that anomie, social disintegration and destructive competitions of moral perspectives are consequences of the declining (eternal) norms and values of traditional religions led him to a new functional concept of religion to conceive religion as the enduring source of human social identity and collective morality still in secular society (Durkheim, 1912/2001). In this respect, Durkheim suggested that it could become the task of substitute religions to evoke the necessary integrative force of morality and law for the social and political body. Furthermore, the problem of secularisation that Durkheim described as an aftermath of eroded religious norms is almost identical to the social state of epistemological and normative uncertainty provoked by the aporias of modern democracy. This immediately reminds us of the five characteristic analogies between religions and conspiracy theories that can now be interpreted as a plausible compensation for democracy's affinity with the state of anomie. As we have seen in Section 3, democracy

stands precisely for the lack of emotional safety, moral orientation, and intellectual authority that—to some extent—can be expected from religions as well as from conspiracy theories. Therefore, both phenomena should be discussed together as a possible external authority being able to therapy democracy's particular pathology, at least on a subjective level.

About traditional religions, the relevant discussion about their relationship to democracy has already been reconstructed in the way that these authors who are convinced of a positive role of religion in modern democracy definitely have religion in mind as an authoritarian counterweight to the vices of popular sovereignty (Hidalgo, 2021). Apart from Durkheim, similar positions can be found, e.g., in De Tocqueville (1840/2002), Bellah et al. (1985), Casanova (1994, 2009), Putnam (2000), Taylor (1991, 2002), Lübbe (2004), Toft et al. (2011), or Böckenförde (2013, pp. 112–114). Following Rousseau and his idea of a "civilised" form of religion, the aforementioned authors consequently wanted to solve modern democracy's tendency to anomie, atomisation, emotional insecurity, and normative disorientation in the field where the problem once arose, namely in the (missing) lines between religion and modern politics. However, under the current conditions, this undertaking seems to attempt to square the circle. Since pluralisation and individualisation as main catalysts of an anomic, disintegrative society (cf. Merton, 1949) are relativising all cultural identity structures, they have significantly changed the area of (traditional) religions as well, as many sociologists have emphasised (e.g., Beck, 2010; Davie, 1990, 2002; Hervieu-Léger, 2004; Luckmann, 1991; Stark & Finke, 2000). In this respect, the risks of anomie can hardly be contained with the help of religious resources. Instead, the very attempt to use religion to re-establish an anchor for "truth" and "authority" in a democracy that basically contradicts its own logic and characteristics could be counterproductive to the goal of social integration and normative orientation if it seeks a state of socio-religious homogeneity that is irrevocably lost in modern pluralistic and multi-religious societies. Such a cultural backlash which, in Europe, is currently being orchestrated by right-wing populist and anti-Muslim actors (cf. Brubaker, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), would even have to undermine itself performatively since considerable resistance would come from a large number of (alternative) religious groups and minorities, and especially from the continuously growing number of non-religious citizens. Therefore, the compensatory role of substitute religions and conspiracy theories may become even more relevant under the conditions of modern secularisation.

However, the possibility that conspiracy theories might replace religions' function as an authoritarian counterweight to democracy is rather underexposed so far (see, e.g., Butter & Knight, 2020; Dyrendal, Robertson, & Asprem, 2019). Although some authors have already focussed their attention on the cognitive science of religion (e.g., Boyer, 2001; Norenzayan et al., 2006) to suggest that conspiracy theories may have "quasi-religious" functions (cf. Franks et al., 2013) and to compare conspiracy theories and religions along the categories of "superstition, seekership and salvation" (Robertson & Dyrendal, 2018), there is a lack of reflection on the topic in terms of democratic theory. In contrast to the elaborated research on the functions of conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes (e.g. Giry & Gürpınar, 2020) and authoritarian ideologies (e.g. Wood & Gray, 2019) or also for (right-wing) populism and extremism (e.g. Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Bergmann, 2018; Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Lipset & Raab, 1970; Van Prooijen et al., 2015), the focus on the general relationship between democracy and conspiracy is rather one-sided. And instead of (also) analysing the compensatory role of conspiracy myths and narratives for the pathology of democracy, the scholars discuss almost exclusively the vices and pathologies conspiracy theories imply for democracy, e.g., misinformation (Bronner, 2013; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) or political radicalisation (Lee, 2020).

Proceeding from the diagnosis of democracy's own tendency to anomie means, to a certain degree, a changing perspective. At least in theory, and preferably under secular conditions, conspiracy myths and narratives are supposed to provide the "impossible knowledge" (Hristov, 2019) that many democratic citizens desire whenever they are tired of the moral and normative uncertainty the democratic system cultivates. With regard to the aporetic and anomic character of democracy, a specific social-psychological and political function of conspiracy theories could thus be identified that was originally attributed rather to religions, i.e., to avoid social anomie by (a) providing a kind of "knowledge" based upon common comprehensibility and reduced complexity which is nevertheless protected against any scientific or methodological falsifiability, (b) strengthening people's emotional security and (c) intellectual orientation, (d) relieving the "believers" of their subjective and collective feelings of powerlessness, and finally (e) offering atomised individuals an opportunity to build a collective identity and to become part of a normatively legitimised political project.

At least theoretically, the attractiveness of conspiracy theories in democracy—or even better, for democratic citizens—becomes evident since we focus on the concept of anomie as a hidden pathology of democracy that is in urgent need of compensation by moral and cognitive authorities. On the other hand, this perspective must not forget the immense risks and problems conspiracy theories (and religions) usually generate. In this respect, it is important to consider the ambivalent role of conspiracy myths for democracy. To achieve this, we can again refer to the comparison between religion and conspiracy theories, which has already drawn our attention to the relative "shady sides" of conspiracy myths. In this regard, it is important to mention, or repeat, the following:

- Conspiracy theories, as well as religions, are suited to manipulate people with the help of invented information, fake news, and fake facts, and to frighten them with completely exaggerated or irrational threat perceptions.
- Compared to religions, conspiracy theories not only tend to spread purely negative messages without offering consolation and moderation through positive prospects, but due to their pseudo-scientific claim and the resulting ignorance or instrumentalisation of expertise, they also fail to strike a balance between (counterintuitive) valid knowledge and emotional stability.
- As a result of the friend/enemy dichotomy that they almost inevitably provoke, conspiracy theories create extreme social and political polarisations, which necessarily undermine the democratic respect for political opponents and their alternative opinions.
- In sum, the potential for collective political power that goes hand in hand with conspiracy theories is threatened to be used less for participation in policy-making processes and overcoming post-democratic structures than for the formulation of radical political projects and the emergence of fantasies of violence.

Additionally, a positive role of conspiracy theories in democracy is burdened by two aspects. First, trust in conspiracy theories is often accompanied by mistrust of democratic institutions. As long as the followers of conspiracy theories do not immediately fall into political apathy and passivity, what they organise as resistance and protest against the (alleged) conspirators may subjectively speak in favour of saving democracy but is objectively in danger of damaging the idea of democracy as such. Second, and in this respect, conspiracy myths and (traditional) religions are again very similar (cf. Girard, 1989); intergroup conspiracy theories have a scapegoat function whenever accusing certain individuals and minorities of being responsible for crises and anxiety-provoking events (Moscovici, 1987). While this function can indeed strengthen collective identity and homogeneity, it is at the same time a fundamental contradiction to individual rights and democratic pluralism.

Apart from these burdens, the substantive similarities between religions and conspiracy theories suggest that the positive role traditionally accorded to religion as an authoritarian counterweight to democracy could, in theory, also be assumed by conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, the social sciences have paid little attention to this perspective so far, which may have to do with two things in the usual treatment of the topic. On the one hand, the comparatively (too) negative image of conspiracy theories may result from the fact that religion today is considered a priori to be an ultimately state-regulated category that has proven its accommodation accordingly (see Taira, 2022, Chapter 4), while conspiracy theories are almost always ascribed a dangerous and irrational character. On the other hand, the academic reflection of conspiracy theories—including this article—is still dominated by the social-psychological focus on pathologising the subject, rather than taking them seriously as religious phenomena (Robertson, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The increasing belief in conspiracies and conspiracy theories is due to the ontological insecurity generated by the rationalism and scepticism inherent in modern societies, which also delegitimises traditional sources of moral and epistemic authority such as religion (Aupers, 2012). Here, two interwoven developments are very remarkable: that the declining power of organised religion corresponds with the growing mistrust in the social and political order and that the proliferation of conspiracy myths is obviously *not* captured by the Zeitgeist of scepticism—on the contrary, it finds highly favourable conditions (Blanuŝa & Hristov, 2020, p. 78). This intertwinement suggests that the need for religious truths and authorities in a secular environment for many people does not disappear but merely shifts. However, this (authoritarian) need for unambiguity and reliability can neither be satisfied by scientific knowledge (which always remains provisional and incomplete) nor by political processes and negotiations in a modern democracy. As De Tocqueville (2002, Vol. 2, Part 1, Chapter 2) already noted, democracy itself is rather the prototype of doubt and scepticism, or better: It is the social and institutional *expression* of the permanent doubt of its citizens.

The thesis that conspiracy theories today tend to replace traditional religions as the "authoritarian other" of democracy, which at the same time complements and undermines it, obviously requires further empirical research to confirm. In this respect, we must not forget that many contemporary conspiracy theories do not fit the conceptual model of belief as they invite an ironic or non-serious attitude (Knight, 2000). Nevertheless, all current indications suggest that research findings on the ambivalent role of religion in democracy can also be transferred to the field of conspiracy theories, especially if we look at the diffuse quasi-religious spirituality of the New Age movements that are closely associated with conspiracy myths and has already taken over several functions of the organised religions (Dyrendal, 2020). However, because of the additional disadvantages that conspiracy theories have compared to religions, this could be more of a curse than a blessing for democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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