



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Conspiracy Theories Are an Integral Part of Western Culture

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The coronavirus pandemic has sparked widespread conspiracy theories. Such theories are an integral part of contemporary Western culture, even in places that are purportedly enlightened. The irrational elements in Western society are very significant, and it will take serious study to begin to understand the many ways in which this irrationality affects Western attitudes.

The public's reactions to the coronavirus pandemic illustrate that conspiracy theories continue to be an integral part of contemporary Western culture. One might have thought the Enlightenment had dealt a devastating blow to the power of conspiracy theories to capture the minds of Westerners. It had, after all, promised a future in which people base their judgment on rational thought, not prejudice and stereotype as taught by religions (monotheistic and non).

When Christianity became the dominant religion of the West, it spread antisemitic stereotypes about Jews through the use of conspiracy theories. For centuries, Catholicism in particular falsely and criminally held that all Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. Even worse, unborn Jews of later generations would all be guilty of the same past crime. One might call this the mega-conspiracy theory of Christianity. This hatred established the infrastructure for ethnic and national antisemitism. Nazism and its genocidal Holocaust developed from these roots.

Over the centuries, Christians developed more conspiracy theories about Jews. They were falsely held responsible by many gentiles for the outbreak of the Black Plague in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, for instance—a slander that led to acts of murder.

The blood libel, which claimed that Jews required the blood of Christians for ritual purposes such as the making of unleavened bread for Passover, was yet another centuries-old Christian conspiracy theory. In the nineteenth century, Christians started to introduce the blood libel to the Islamic world. Well before that time, Islam had its own antisemitic conspiracy theories. The Qur'an stereotyped Jews as apes and pigs.

New conspiracy theories can be widely found among Muslims today. For example, the 9/11 terror attacks in the US, which were carried out by Arabs, led to massive conspiracy theories among Muslims in many countries. The Pew Global Attitudes Project of 2006 found that majorities in several relatively Western-oriented Muslim states did not believe Arabs had carried out the attacks. The survey concluded that 65% of those polled in Indonesia and 59% in both Turkey and Egypt did not believe that Arabs carried out the attacks; in Jordan that figure was 53% and in Pakistan 41%. In the last of these, only 15% believed Muslims had been responsible.

Fifty-six percent of British Muslims surveyed did not believe the truth about 9/11 either. Only 17% thought Arabs had carried out the attacks. According to another survey conducted by Policy Exchange, a non-profit education think tank, only 4% of British Muslims could correctly identify who was responsible for the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center.

In several other Western countries, substantial minorities among Muslims held the belief that Arabs were not responsible for the mass murders. In France, the figure was 46%; in Germany 44%; and in Spain 35%.

The coronavirus pandemic caused a huge uptick in conspiracy theories in the Western world and elsewhere. Initially, many of them focused on Jews and Israel. These were mainly mutations of historical strains of antisemitic concepts, including the "poisoning of gentiles" motif and the accusation that "Jews want to control the world." The ADL cited a claim by white supremacists that Jews created the virus in order to increase their control over a decimated population and profit financially. This message was spread on social media. Some conspiracy theories suggested that the virus had been manufactured by the US and Israel to target political rivals like China and Iran.

In the months that followed, the flood of conspiracy theories about the origins and various aspects of the pandemic moved in other directions—yet another reminder that Jews are often the first target, but not the last. These conspiracy theories included assertions that "the COVID-19 virus does not exist," "COVID-19 is just like the flu or the common cold," "masks don't work to prevent the spread of COVID-19," "the vaccine contains a microchip," "the

vaccine will alter your DNA,” “secret powers control the world,” and “the virus is a cover for child sex trafficking.”

One group that plays an important role in the dissemination of conspiracy theories about the pandemic is QAnon. The *Atlantic* called this group a “new American religion.” It wrote, “Among the people of QAnon, faith remains absolute. True believers describe a feeling of rebirth, an irreversible arousal to existential knowledge. They are certain that a Great Awakening is coming. They’ll wait as long as they must for deliverance.”

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) published a report in June 2020 that showed that membership in QAnon groups on Facebook increased by 120% in March, with engagement rates increasing by 91%. From October 27, 2017 to June 17, 2020, the ISD recorded 69,475,451 million tweets, 487,310 Facebook posts, and 281,554 Instagram posts mentioning QAnon-related hashtags and phrases. A major new study has found a pattern of deep distrust of authority that has become widespread across Europe and the US.

Statistics have been available for years about the percentage of people who are religious and those who are secular in Western countries. Recently, data became available on the percentage of Westerners in some countries who believe in conspiracy theories regarding the pandemic.

In 2015, well before the onset of the coronavirus, the *Washington Post* reported that 50% of Americans believed at least one conspiracy theory. The *Guardian* reported that 60% of British people believe at least one conspiracy theory about how the country is run or the veracity of information they have been given.

According to the 2012 WIN-Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism, 66-69% of British citizens are not religious. Combining the figures, one must conclude that many secular people believe in conspiracy theories. In view of the high percentages concerned, one can also conclude that irrationality is an integral part of society. The West is thus far away from the aims of the Enlightenment.

The German figure for people believing in conspiracy theories is lower than those for the UK and the US, but it is still substantial. The German press agency *DW* suggested that one-third of the population believe in conspiracy theories in a country where the absence of religiosity is 69-70%. An even higher percentage of believers in conspiracy theories is found in France. As many as 76% of French citizens believe in conspiracy theories. This is in a country where half the population is irreligious.

In several countries where the Enlightenment was supposed to have penetrated greatly, there is a widespread—often a majority—belief in conspiracy theories. The combined statistics indicate that this thinking has permeated their secular populations in a major way.

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