

Disciplined Discernment and Stigmatized Knowledge: A Christian Social Epistemology of Conspiracy Labels, Institutional Trust, and Knowledge Control

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Abstract

Background: In contemporary information environments, labels such as “conspiracy theory,” “misinformation,” and “extremism” increasingly shape whether contested claims receive evidentiary evaluation or are excluded before inquiry begins. Yet Christian responses often oscillate between institutional naivety, which equates authorized narratives with truth, and conspiratorial credulity, which treats suppression as proof. **Aim:** This article develops a Christian social epistemology for evaluating stigmatized, suppressed, and institutionally discredited knowledge claims with courage, restraint, and fidelity to biblical truth. **Method:** Using a secondary-data conceptual design, the study integrates social epistemology, sociology of knowledge, epistemic injustice, conspiracy theory studies, propaganda and misinformation research, critical realism, and biblical theology. It does not adjudicate any specific controversial claim. Instead, it constructs a normative framework for responsible inquiry. **Findings:** The article argues that “conspiracy theory” functions not only as an epistemic category but also as a social and institutional label that can discipline discourse, protect legitimate standards, or prematurely foreclose investigation. It proposes a ten-level layered discernment model moving from empirical observation, epistemic classification, institutional mechanism, historical genealogy, discursive framing, power analysis, rival explanations, and disconfirmation testing to biblical-theological discernment and ethical response. The framework distinguishes verified evidence, documented patterns, plausible inference, contested interpretation, and theological discernment. **Contribution:** The article contributes to theology, social epistemology, and public discourse by offering an academically rigorous and biblically governed alternative to both uncritical institutional trust and reckless suspicion. It contends that Christian scholars, churches, and public intellectuals must test contested claims through evidence, humility, methodological transparency, and moral accountability, refusing both fear-driven speculation and passive conformity to managed narratives.

Keywords: Christian social epistemology; stigmatized knowledge; conspiracy theory; suppressed discourse; epistemic injustice; institutional trust; biblical discernment

Accepted: Apr 27, 2026

Published: Apr 28, 2026

CITATION

Sangwa, S. (2026). *Disciplined Discernment and Stigmatized Knowledge: A Christian Social Epistemology of Conspiracy Labels, Institutional Trust, and Knowledge Control*. Open Journal of Stigmatized Knowledge & Suppressed Discourses, Vol 2(1). Open Christian Press.

DOI:

[10.65655/OpenChristianPress.2026.110](https://doi.org/10.65655/OpenChristianPress.2026.110)

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PUBLISHER INFO

Open Christian Press—the publishing arm of Open Christian University—is produced in partnership with the Center for Faith and Work.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary public life is marked by a troubling relationship between information abundance and epistemic insecurity. Citizens encounter official reports, platform warnings, expert consensus statements, journalistic fact checks, institutional press releases, whistleblower claims, alternative media investigations, leaked documents, and viral allegations within the same communicative environment. The central problem is not merely that there is too much information. It is that the social mechanisms by which claims are classified as credible, fringe, dangerous, misinformed, conspiratorial, or authoritative have themselves become objects of dispute. In such an environment, the words used to classify a claim often shape whether the claim receives a fair hearing at all. This is consistent with scholarship on classification systems, which shows that categories do not merely describe social reality but also organize visibility, authority, and participation within institutional life (Bowker & Star, 1999).

The label "conspiracy theory" occupies a particularly powerful position in this classificatory system. It can name a genuinely irresponsible explanation that attributes events to secret plots without adequate evidence. It can also function rhetorically to move attention away from evidence and toward the supposed irrationality, extremism, or moral defect of the person raising the question. Scholarship on conspiracy culture recognizes both realities. Some conspiracy theories are demonstrably false, harmful, self-sealing, and politically corrosive (Cassam, 2019; Douglas et al., 2019; Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020; Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). Yet the public dismissal of alleged conspiracy can also become a strategy of exclusion, a mechanism for defending institutional legitimacy, or a boundary-policing device that obscures real questions about power, secrecy, corruption, and accountability (Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Husting & Orr, 2007; Keeley, 1999).

The Christian intellectual tradition has resources for addressing this problem, but those resources require disciplined use. Scripture commands believers to test claims rather than believe every spirit, to expose works of darkness without becoming slanderous, to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, and to resist conformity to the patterns of the age. These imperatives do not authorize suspicion as a substitute for evidence. Nor do they authorize passive trust in every official narrative. They call the Christian community to discernment, which is a morally ordered practice of judgment under the authority of God's revelation (Matt. 10:16; Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:11; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

This article therefore develops a Christian social epistemology of suppressed discourses. By social epistemology, the article refers to the study of knowledge as socially mediated through testimony, institutions, media, authority structures, trust relations, and practices of verification (Goldman, 1999; Hardwig, 1991). By Christian, it means that the account is governed finally by Scripture and shaped by theological commitments regarding truth, sin, deception, witness, authority, and spiritual conflict. The article is not written to prove any specific stigmatized claim. Its task is methodological and theological: to ask how such claims should be evaluated without collapsing into either institutional naivety or conspiratorial credulity.

The thesis is that modern institutions sometimes classify claims as misinformation, conspiracy theory, extremism, or fringe before those claims receive fair evidentiary assessment. This concern does not deny the reality of disinformation harms; rather, it aligns with policy literature warning that responses to misinformation must preserve transparency, plurality, accountability, and freedom of expression (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2023; United Nations Special Rapporteur et al., 2017). A biblically faithful epistemology must therefore examine stigmatized knowledge with courage and restraint. It must ask whether a claim is empirically supported, institutionally inconvenient, ideologically

threatening, poorly evidenced, psychologically attractive, socially harmful, or spiritually deceptive. The Christian task is not to believe every suppressed claim, but to test all things, hold fast to what is good, and refuse both naivety and cynicism.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Gap

The problem addressed by this article is the absence of a sufficiently integrated Christian framework for evaluating controversial knowledge claims that are socially stigmatized or institutionally discredited. Existing scholarship provides valuable tools, but it often operates in separate domains. Social epistemology analyzes testimony, expertise, trust, disagreement, and knowledge-producing institutions (Goldman, 1999; Hardwig, 1991; Hawley, 2012). Sociology of knowledge investigates how social worlds shape what is accepted as reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Epistemic injustice identifies how prejudice can distort credibility and interpretive resources (Fricker, 2007). Critical theory and discourse analysis examine the relation between knowledge, institutional power, and social regulation (Foucault, 1980). Propaganda and misinformation studies analyze manipulation, media systems, cognitive vulnerability, and information disorder (Benkler et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Stanley, 2015; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Conspiracy theory studies examine suspicion, political culture, crisis, self-sealing belief systems, and the ambiguous boundary between warranted suspicion and irrational distrust (Barkun, 2013, 2015; Dentith, 2014; Keeley, 1999; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

What remains underdeveloped is a framework that joins these literatures to a biblically faithful account of discernment. Christians regularly confront claims about hidden institutional coordination, propaganda, censorship, technological control, public health governance, financial power, religious deception, ideological capture, and media manipulation. Some claims are reckless and should be rejected. Some are plausible but unproven. Some expose documented misconduct. Some mix evidence with speculation.

Some are partly true but morally dangerous because they cultivate fear, contempt, or false accusation. Without a disciplined epistemic framework, Christian communities are easily pushed into one of two failures: uncritical trust in credentialed systems or uncritical distrust of them.

In social-epistemic terms, both failures can be intensified by echo chambers, epistemic bubbles, and weakened epistemic vigilance, especially when communities are trained either to distrust all outside sources or to accept credentialed claims without examination (Nguyen, 2020; Sperber et al., 2010).

The first failure may be called institutional naivety. It assumes that official narratives are reliable because they are endorsed by governments, corporations, universities, media institutions, or expert bodies. This assumption is historically fragile. Institutions can produce truth, but they can also protect interests, suppress embarrassment, punish dissent, confuse consensus with moral authority, or use technically accurate language to obscure morally significant omissions. A calibrated account of trust must therefore distinguish blind deference from warranted reliance on communities whose claims are produced through transparent, plural, critically responsive, and reproducible practices (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Oreskes, 2019). The second failure may be called conspiratorial credulity. It assumes that the stigmatization of a claim is itself evidence that the claim is true. This assumption is also unstable. Social suppression may occur because a claim is threatening to power, but it may also occur because the claim is false, defamatory, manipulative, or dangerous.

The research gap is therefore both scholarly and ecclesial. Secular scholarship has increasingly sophisticated tools for studying knowledge, authority, stigma, propaganda, and conspiracy belief, yet it often lacks a theological account of deception, sin, witness, and spiritual conflict. Christian discourse often recognizes spiritual deception, yet it sometimes lacks the methodological safeguards needed to distinguish courage from recklessness and

discernment from accusation. The present article addresses this gap by developing a layered Christian social epistemology that can be used to evaluate suppressed discourses with intellectual seriousness and moral restraint.

1.3 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this article is to develop a publishable conceptual framework for evaluating suppressed, stigmatized, controversial, or institutionally discredited knowledge claims from a Christian social epistemological perspective. The framework is designed for scholars, churches, theologians, educators, policy analysts, and Christian public intellectuals who need to study controversial claims responsibly without either surrendering critical judgment to institutional authority or baptizing suspicion as discernment.

The article is guided by five research questions. First, how does the label "conspiracy theory" function as an epistemic, social, and institutional category? Second, under what conditions can stigmatized knowledge be responsibly examined without falling into gullibility or paranoia? Third, how can Christian theology provide a disciplined framework for discerning suppressed discourses? Fourth, what methodological safeguards are necessary when studying controversial claims? Fifth, how can scholars distinguish between

verified evidence, documented patterns, plausible inference, contested interpretation, and theological discernment?

These questions are intentionally methodological rather than case-specific. The article does not ask whether a particular controversial claim is true. Instead, it asks what kind of epistemic posture, conceptual vocabulary, and theological discipline would allow such claims to be evaluated responsibly. This distinction is essential. A framework that begins by proving a preferred contested claim risks becoming advocacy in the weak sense of defending a conclusion already chosen. A framework that begins with evidence, rival explanations, disconfirmation, and theological restraint is more likely to produce disciplined discernment.

1.4. Conceptual Definitions

Conceptual precision is necessary because many debates over suppressed discourse collapse through ambiguity. Conspiracy theory, misinformation, propaganda, discernment, and knowledge control are not neutral words in contemporary discourse. They carry social, institutional, and moral force. Table 1 offers working definitions for this article. The definitions do not settle all debates, but they clarify how the terms are used in the argument.

Table 1. Working conceptual definitions for a Christian social epistemology of suppressed discourses

Concept	Working definition
Stigmatized knowledge	Knowledge claims rejected, marginalized, or treated as illegitimate by dominant institutions or cultural authorities, regardless of whether the rejection is warranted.
Suppressed discourse	A discourse whose circulation, legitimacy, or public intelligibility is constrained by formal censorship, informal sanctions, platform controls, institutional risk, or reputational costs.
Conspiracy theory	An explanation that attributes significant events to secret coordination by powerful agents; it becomes epistemically defective when evidence is weak, inference is disproportionate, and disconfirmation is impossible.
Epistemic gatekeeping	The regulation of what counts as credible knowledge through journals, platforms, curricula, funding, expert bodies, media routines, credentialing systems, and professional norms.
Epistemic injustice	A wrong done to persons in their capacity as knowers, especially when credibility or interpretive resources are unfairly denied.
Institutional trust	Calibrated reliance on institutions based on competence, integrity, transparency, accountability, and demonstrated truthfulness.
Discernment	A Scripture-governed practice of testing claims, spirits, motives, methods, fruits, and institutional patterns in order to distinguish truth from error and obedience from deception.

Concept	Working definition
Deception	The distortion, concealment, or manipulation of truth in ways that misdirect trust, judgment, desire, worship, or obedience.
False witness	The moral violation of misrepresenting persons or realities through lying, exaggeration, reckless accusation, selective evidence, slander, or negligent circulation of untested claims.
Propaganda	Communication that manipulates public reason, often by using morally attractive language to obscure interests, harm, coercion, or domination.
Knowledge control	The shaping of visibility, legitimacy, interpretation, and access to information through institutional, technological, economic, legal, or discursive mechanisms.
Spiritual deception	Deception that turns persons or societies away from God's truth through counterfeit light, idolatrous authority, moral inversion, false doctrine, or false worship.

Note. Author's synthesis from Barkun (2013, 2015), Bowker and Star (1999), Dotson (2011), Fricker (2007), Gillespie (2018), Gorwa et al. (2020), Stanley (2015), Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), and biblical-theological categories of truth, witness, deception, and discernment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social epistemology, testimony, and institutional trust

Social epistemology begins from the recognition that knowing is not merely an isolated mental act. Much of what persons know is received through testimony, educational institutions, media systems, scientific communities, legal procedures, archives, and networks of trust. Goldman (1999) develops a veritistic social epistemology by asking how social practices can be assessed according to their tendency to produce true belief. This is important for controversial claims because the credibility of a claim often depends on the reliability of the institutions and testimonial chains through which it is communicated.

Hardwig (1991) argues that trust is not an optional supplement to knowledge but a condition of knowing in modern expert cultures. Hawley (2012) likewise treats trust as indispensable yet vulnerable to betrayal. These insights matter because rejection of all institutional knowledge is not epistemic courage; it can become isolation. Yet unquestioning acceptance of institutional knowledge is also not wisdom; it can become dependence without accountability. A Christian social epistemology must therefore develop calibrated trust: reliance that remains open to evidence, correction, audit, and moral scrutiny.

Oreskes (2019) is especially helpful here because she defends trust in science not as submission to isolated experts, but as reliance on properly structured communities of inquiry marked by diversity, critical scrutiny, transparency, and responsiveness to evidence.

2.2 Sociology of knowledge, power, and truth validation

The sociology of knowledge adds that public plausibility is socially mediated. Berger and Luckmann (1966) show how social worlds are maintained through institutions, language, habits, roles, and legitimating structures. This does not mean that truth is merely constructed, but it does mean that the social recognition of truth is institutionally mediated. Claims become thinkable or unthinkable within particular symbolic universes. Once a social order defines certain claims as absurd, immoral, dangerous, or irrational, those claims may be excluded before their evidence is examined. Classification studies strengthen this point by showing that categories and standards are embedded in information infrastructures and can shape what becomes visible, actionable, normal, or deviant within institutional systems (Bowker & Star, 1999; Star, 1999).

Foucault's (1980) analysis of power/knowledge is valuable because it directs attention to the ways institutions classify, normalize, discipline, and

authorize discourse. Christian realism cannot reduce truth to power, because truth is grounded finally in God and reality. Yet Christian scholarship can still use discourse analysis to ask how power shapes visibility, searchability, funding, publication, credentialing, and reputational risk. The point is not that power creates truth; it is that power often regulates which claims are allowed to appear credible.

2.3 Epistemic injustice and credibility deficits

Fricker's (2007) account of epistemic injustice is especially important for suppressed discourse. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker receives a credibility deficit because of prejudice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when social groups lack shared interpretive resources for making sense of their experience. Stigmatized knowledge may involve both. Dissident speakers may be treated as irrational before they speak, and some experiences of institutional harm may lack legitimate vocabulary because dominant institutions control public interpretation.

This dynamic also overlaps with epistemic silencing and epistemic oppression, where hearers fail to meet speakers as credible knowers or where dominant social imaginaries prevent resistant knowledge from becoming publicly intelligible (Dotson, 2011; Medina, 2013).

This does not mean every discredited claimant suffers epistemic injustice. The concept should not be used to shield weak claims from scrutiny. Rather, it identifies a genuine risk: institutions and publics can wrongly degrade credibility when a claim threatens accepted frames or powerful interests. Responsible inquiry must therefore ask whether a claimant's credibility has been assessed through evidence or reduced through stigma.

2.4 Conspiracy theory studies: pathology, politics, and warranted suspicion

Conspiracy theory studies provide a contested but indispensable field. Hofstadter's (1964) influential account of the paranoid style emphasized heated exaggeration, apocalyptic imagination, and the perception of history as controlled by malevolent agents. Later research identifies cognitive and social risks associated with conspiracy beliefs, including self-sealing reasoning, distrust of corrective evidence, identity protection, and susceptibility during crisis (Bruder et al., 2013; Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) describe some conspiracy beliefs as products of restricted or distorted informational environments, although their proposed interventions remain controversial because state efforts to manage conspiracy discourse can deepen distrust when perceived as covert manipulation.

Yet scholarship also cautions against turning conspiracy theory into a mere term of abuse. Keeley (1999) argues that not all conspiracy explanations are irrational, since real conspiracies occur and explanations involving hidden coordination are sometimes warranted. Bale (2007) makes the same distinction by warning that scholars should not confuse bogus conspiracism with genuine covert or clandestine political activity, while Coady's edited volume shows that the philosophical debate itself is divided over whether conspiracy theories can be dismissed as a class (Coady, 2006). Pigden (1995) criticizes overbroad dismissals of conspiracy theories by noting that history contains real conspiracies, even if a totalizing conspiracy theory of society is untenable. Dentith (2014) develops this point by distinguishing theories about conspiracies from the pejorative use of conspiracy theory as an epistemic dismissal. Husting and Orr (2007) show how the label can operate as a strategy of exclusion that displaces evidence by attacking the competence of the questioner. Harambam and Aupers (2015) show that conspiracy discourse often contests epistemic

authority and boundary work around science. These analyses do not vindicate irresponsible conspiracy claims. They show that the label itself can perform institutional work.

Barkun's (2015) concept of stigmatized knowledge is central to the present article. Stigmatized knowledge refers to claims that mainstream truth-validation institutions reject. The concept helps separate a claim's social status from its truth value. Some stigmatized claims are false. Some are obsolete. Some are rejected because they lack evidence. Some are rejected because they threaten institutional arrangements. The value of the concept is that it prevents the scholar from assuming that institutional rejection is identical with epistemic defeat.

2.5 Propaganda, misinformation, and information disorder

Propaganda and misinformation studies add another necessary layer. Stanley (2015) argues that propaganda can manipulate public reason by using ideals such as freedom, security, equality, or democracy in ways that undermine those very ideals. Ellul (1965) emphasizes the sociological and technological conditions under which propaganda becomes pervasive. Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, though debated, remains influential for showing how media institutions may filter attention through ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and ideological pressures. Benkler et al. (2018) analyze networked media ecosystems and the ways digital information environments can produce manipulation and radicalization.

Platform-governance research further shows that content moderation is not a peripheral technical function but a central mechanism through which digital platforms shape public discourse, visibility, and harm-management decisions (Gillespie, 2018; Gorwa et al., 2020; Roberts, 2019).

Misinformation research is equally important because not all problematic claims are institutionally suppressed. Many false claims are widely amplified.

Lazer et al. (2018) call for systematic study of fake news and its institutional, technological, and cognitive conditions. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) show that misinformation can continue to influence belief even after correction, while Lewandowsky et al. (2017) locate misinformation within a wider post-truth environment marked by declining trust, polarization, inequality, and fragmented media. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) distinguish misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, which is essential because falsehood, intent, and harm should not be collapsed into one category. This precision is equally necessary for conspiracy labels.

This condition reflects a broader shift in which digital platforms, journalistic fact-checking, and public information-governance systems increasingly mediate what citizens encounter as credible, questionable, or harmful (Gillespie, 2018; Graves, 2016; OECD, 2024).

This need for precision has also been developed in recent Christian legal-theological work on social media governance. Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025c) argue that the language of misinformation may protect public reason when used carefully, but may also become coercive when it restricts truthful dissent, religious conscience, or constitutionally protected expression without transparent criteria. That analysis is relevant here because it shows that the problem is not correction itself, but the institutional authority to classify speech, the procedural safeguards surrounding that classification, and the theological duty to preserve truthful witness without enabling reckless falsehood.

This concern is also consistent with international free-expression guidance, which warns that efforts to counter disinformation should be transparent, proportionate, rights-respecting, and protective of media pluralism rather than reduced to content suppression (UNESCO, 2023; United Nations Special Rapporteur et al., 2017).

2.6 Christian theology, truth, and discernment

Christian theology supplies the normative center. Plantinga (2000) argues that Christian belief can be warranted under conditions of proper cognitive functioning within a design plan aimed at truth. Frame (1987) situates human knowledge under the lordship of God, emphasizing that knowledge is covenantal and ethical rather than autonomous. Bavinck (2003) grounds theological knowledge in divine revelation while engaging the whole field of human knowing. Vanhoozer (1998, 2005) emphasizes the morality of interpretation and doctrine as faithful participation in God's communicative action. Newbigin (1989) insists that Christian truth is public truth, not merely private preference.

These theological resources show that discernment is not merely suspicion. It is truthful judgment before God. Christian discernment must be governed by Scripture, marked by humility, disciplined by evidence, purified by love, and restrained by the command not to bear false witness. It recognizes that deception is real, subtle, institutional, linguistic, religious, and spiritual. It also recognizes that the desire to expose deception can itself become corrupted by pride, fear, factional identity, or the pleasure of accusation.

2.7 Synthesis and gap

The literature therefore presents two unresolved needs. The first is an epistemic need: a framework that permits serious examination of stigmatized knowledge without equating stigma with truth. The second is a theological need: a framework that allows Christian categories of deception, discernment, witness, and spiritual conflict to illuminate public knowledge without becoming a substitute for evidence. This article addresses both needs by proposing a Christian social epistemology of disciplined discernment.

3. Theoretical Framework: A Christian Social Epistemology of Disciplined Discernment

The proposed theoretical framework rests on five claims. First, human knowledge is socially mediated. Second, social mediation is necessary but morally vulnerable. Third, institutional authority is epistemically significant but never infallible. Fourth, Christian discernment must test both official narratives and dissident claims. Fifth, theological interpretation should follow, not replace, empirical and conceptual analysis.

The first claim is that human knowledge is socially mediated. No finite person verifies all claims independently. We rely on testimony, teachers, archives, methods, media, laboratories, courts, publishers, algorithms, and communities of interpretation. This dependence is not a defect; it is part of creaturely finitude. However, the social character of knowledge means that trust becomes a central epistemic question. Because human communication creates both epistemic dependence and exposure to accidental or intentional misinformation, epistemic vigilance becomes a necessary cognitive and social practice rather than a merely skeptical attitude (Sperber et al., 2010).

The second claim is that social mediation is morally vulnerable. Because human beings have fallen, knowledge systems can be distorted by pride, greed, fear, ideology, tribal loyalty, career incentives, market pressures, state interests, and spiritual deception. This does not mean every institution is corrupt or every expert compromised. It means that the Christian doctrine of sin forbids epistemic romanticism. Institutions can serve truth, but they can also conceal wrongdoing, discipline dissent, launder propaganda, or confuse reputational protection with public good.

The third claim is that institutional authority is epistemically significant but never infallible. Expertise matters. Peer review matters. Public health institutions, courts, universities, and archives can

preserve truth. Yet their authority must remain accountable to evidence, transparency, replicability, moral integrity, and public reason. When institutional trust is demanded without accountability, it becomes a substitute for truth rather than a servant of truth. When institutional distrust becomes total, the public loses the very conditions under which complex knowledge can be responsibly assessed.

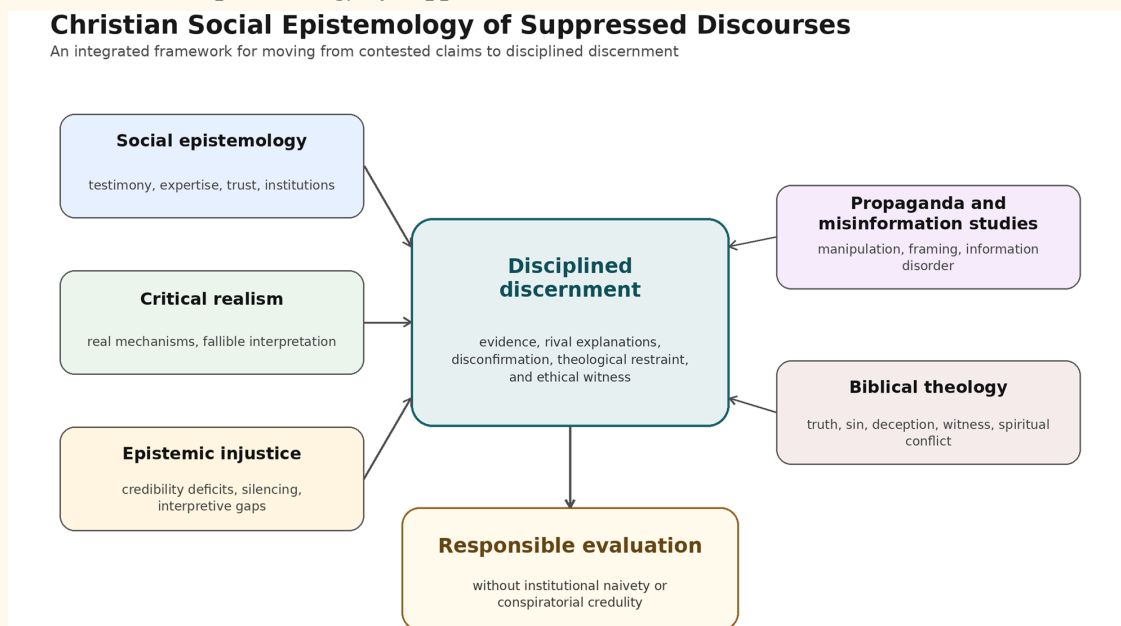
The fourth claim is that Christian discernment must test both official narratives and dissident claims. It is not discernment to accept an official claim simply because it is official. It is also not discernible to accept a suppressed claim simply because it is suppressed. Both errors confuse social location with truth. The Christian alternative is disciplined testing: attending to evidence, motives, mechanisms, rival explanations, and moral consequences.

The fifth claim is that theological interpretation should follow empirical and conceptual analysis. Christians may rightly interpret deception, propaganda, idolatry, moral inversion, and institutional coercion through biblical categories. But theological language must not be used to compensate

for weak evidence. To call something serpentine or spiritually deceptive without first establishing what is happening, how it operates, and why rival explanations are inadequate risks bearing false witness. Theological discernment becomes faithful when it illuminates reality under Scripture, not when it shields speculation from examination.

This article can also be read as a methodological refinement of earlier work on theopolitical discernment. Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025b) proposed that global governance, digital infrastructures, and moral-engineering systems should be examined not only as policy arrangements but also as spiritually significant formations. The present article does not abandon that concern; rather, it disciplines it by insisting that theological interpretation must be preceded by empirical observation, source traceability, rival explanations, proportional inference, and disconfirmation testing. In this sense, Christian social epistemology provides guardrails for theopolitical discernment so that prophetic interpretation does not collapse into speculative accusation.

Figure 1. Christian social epistemology of suppressed discourses



Note. Author's synthesis from Goldman (1999), Fricker (2007), Foucault (1980), Barkun (2015), and the biblical mandate to test all things in 1 Thessalonians 5:21

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This article uses a secondary-data conceptual methodology combining conceptual analysis, selective literature review, critical realist synthesis, and theological interpretation. This design is appropriate because the article does not seek to measure public opinion, test a psychological variable, or adjudicate a specific controversial claim. It seeks to construct and justify a framework for responsible evaluation of contested claims. This aligns with methodological guidance for conceptual articles, which requires explicit justification of the focal phenomenon, theoretical sources, analytical logic, and intended conceptual contribution (Jaakkola, 2020).

The primary materials are published academic works, theological sources, policy-oriented reports, and biblical texts. Where policy documents and institutional reports are used, they are treated as documentary sources whose value lies in their capacity to reveal institutional language, priorities, assumptions, and governance logics (Bowen, 2009).

Conceptual analysis is used to clarify key terms such as stigmatized knowledge, conspiracy theory, epistemic gatekeeping, propaganda, knowledge control, discernment, and false witness. Selective literature review is used to engage major bodies of scholarship relevant to the problem. Critical realist synthesis is used to connect observable discursive practices with possible underlying mechanisms while maintaining fallibilism. Theological interpretation is used to bring biblical categories of truth, deception,

witness, wisdom, and spiritual conflict into constructive relation with the social analysis.

4.2 Literature selection and exclusion criteria

Literature was included when it met at least one of four criteria. First, it offered a recognized theoretical contribution to social epistemology, sociology of knowledge, epistemic injustice, propaganda, misinformation, conspiracy theory studies, critical realism, or Christian theology of truth and discernment. Second, it provided a concept directly relevant to the classification, suppression, or evaluation of controversial claims. Third, it represented a major competing position that a balanced framework must address. Fourth, it provided a credible policy or public communication framework for distinguishing types of information disorder.

Literature was excluded when it was primarily anecdotal, polemical, unverifiable, case-specific without theoretical relevance, or dependent on claims that could not be responsibly assessed within the article's scope. The exclusion of sensational and unverifiable materials is essential because a Christian social epistemology must not reproduce the very epistemic irresponsibility it critiques.

4.3 Analytical procedure and criteria of rigour

The analytical procedure followed four steps: conceptual clarification, interdisciplinary synthesis, theological interpretation, and normative framework construction. Table 2 summarizes the safeguards used to protect the analysis from both institutional naivety and conspiratorial credulity.

Table 2. Methodological safeguards for responsible inquiry into stigmatized knowledge

Safeguard	Purpose	Scholarly requirement
Evidentiary specificity	Prevents vague suspicion from masquerading as analysis.	State the claim in testable form and identify the evidence required.
Source traceability	Prevents dependence on rumor, anonymous assertion, or circular citation.	Use documents, data, credible testimony, legal records, or transparent literature.

Safeguard	Purpose	Scholarly requirement
Proportional inference	Prevents conclusions from outrunning evidence.	Distinguish suspicion, pattern, inference, interpretation, and demonstrated fact.
Rival explanation testing	Prevents confirmation bias and monocausal explanation.	Compare conspiracy, incompetence, market incentives, shared ideology, bureaucratic imitation, and coincidence.
Disconfirmation criterion	Prevents self-sealing claims.	Specify what evidence would weaken, revise, or falsify the claim.
Theological restraint	Prevents spiritualized accusation.	Apply biblical categories after empirical and conceptual analysis, not before.
Moral accountability	Prevents false witness and reckless publication.	Avoid slander, exaggeration, and claims that cannot be responsibly defended.

Note. Author's synthesis from critical realist method, social epistemology, misinformation research, and biblical ethics of truthful witness.

4.4 Delimitations

Several methodological limits must be stated clearly. The article does not attempt to prove or disprove any specific controversial allegation. It does not treat institutional disapproval as evidence of truth. It does not treat dissident status as moral superiority. It does not treat expert consensus as infallible. It does not collapse propaganda, error, secrecy, corruption, and spiritual deception into one category. Its contribution is a framework of evaluation rather than a catalogue of claims. This restraint is not weakness; it is a condition of scholarly credibility and Christian obedience to truthful witness.

5. Analysis and Findings

The analysis yields six findings. First, the label conspiracy theory has multiple functions and must be analyzed rather than merely repeated. Second, stigmatized knowledge becomes responsible inquiry only when it is subjected to evidentiary and moral discipline. Third, institutional trust must be calibrated through accountability rather than demanded as loyalty. Fourth, knowledge control operates through multiple mechanisms that need not all be centralized or conspiratorial. Fifth, Christian discernment requires a layered evaluative model. Sixth, the scholar must distinguish levels of claim status: verified evidence, documented patterns, plausible

inference, contested interpretation, and theological discernment.

5.1 The label conspiracy theory as epistemic, social, and institutional category

As an epistemic category, conspiracy theory can identify a specific type of explanation that attributes significant events to secret coordination among powerful agents. This meaning is not automatically irrational, because conspiracies exist. Political corruption, corporate collusion, intelligence operations, cartel behavior, institutional cover-ups, and criminal coordination are historical realities. For this reason, Bale (2007) argues that careful scholarship must distinguish unfounded conspiracist fantasy from real-world clandestine or covert political activity. The epistemic question is therefore not whether an explanation involves hidden coordination, but whether the proposed coordination is supported by evidence, proportionate inference, plausible mechanism, and openness to disconfirmation (Dentith, 2014; Keeley, 1999).

As a social category, however, conspiracy theory often marks the speaker as outside respectable discourse. The label can imply gullibility, extremism, paranoia, low education, or moral irresponsibility. Husting and Orr (2007) argue that the term can operate as a strategy of exclusion by shifting attention from the content of a claim to the character of the

claimant. This is especially important when the label is applied before evidence is examined. A claim may deserve rejection, but a person should not be discredited merely by classification.

As an institutional category, conspiracy theory can protect boundaries of authorized knowledge. Institutions have legitimate reasons to distinguish evidence-based claims from harmful falsehood. Yet gatekeeping can become self-protective when it defends authority rather than truth. Harambani and Aupers (2015) show that conspiracy discourse often challenges scientific authority itself, which helps explain why institutional responses may become defensive. The danger is circularity: a claim is rejected because it lacks recognized institutional endorsement, while institutional endorsement is unavailable because the claim is already classified as illegitimate.

The implication is not that scholars should rehabilitate every conspiracy theory. Rather, they should examine how the label functions in each case. Is it being used descriptively, analytically, morally, politically, or strategically? Is it identifying a weak evidentiary structure, or is it terminating inquiry? Does it name a genuine epistemic vice, or does it create a credibility deficit? These questions are essential for disciplined discernment.

5.2 Conditions for responsible examination of stigmatized knowledge

Stigmatized knowledge becomes responsibly examinable when five conditions are met. The first is evidentiary specificity. A claim must be stated in a form that can be evaluated. Vague assertions that "they are hiding everything" or "the system is controlled" cannot be meaningfully tested. The second is source traceability. Claims should be linked to documents, data, testimony, material records, or observable patterns rather than anonymous assertion. The third is proportional inference. The conclusion must not outrun the evidence. A pattern may justify suspicion without justifying accusation.

The fourth condition is rival-explanation testing. Responsible inquiry asks whether incompetence, bureaucratic inertia, market incentives, ideological conformity, professional self-interest, emergent coordination, error, or coincidence explains the data better than intentional conspiracy. This is crucial because many institutional harms result from systems rather than secret plots. The fifth condition is disconfirmation. A claim that cannot specify what would count against it has moved from inquiry to ideology. Self-sealing claims are dangerous because every counterevidence becomes proof of suppression (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020; Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

These conditions help distinguish disciplined attention to stigmatized knowledge from conspiratorial credulity. The responsible investigator may examine discredited claims, but does so with evidentiary patience, ethical caution, and willingness to revise. The credulous investigator treats stigma itself as proof and often interprets every objection as confirmation. The Christian scholar must reject such reasoning because love of truth includes willingness to be corrected.

5.3 Institutional trust, credibility, and knowledge control

Institutional trust is indispensable in complex societies. No individual can personally verify medical research, legal archives, intelligence histories, financial systems, or technological infrastructures in their entirety. Yet trust is not submission. Trustworthy institutions must be accountable, transparent, corrigible, and willing to distinguish evidence from reputation management. When institutions demand trust while restricting inquiry, censoring dissent, concealing conflicts of interest, or using stigmatizing labels to discipline questions, they weaken the moral basis of trust.

Knowledge control operates through several mechanisms. It may operate through formal censorship, such as legal restriction or platform

removal. It may operate through informal gatekeeping, such as editorial selection, funding priorities, peer-review norms, professional risk, or reputational sanction. This is particularly evident in AI-mediated communication environments, where algorithmic moderation, recommender systems, generative synthetic media, and automated classification systems can shape what appears credible, visible, dangerous, or unspeakable (Bucher, 2018; Gorwa et al., 2020; Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025a). It may operate through discursive framing, where language makes some questions appear immoral or irrational before they are examined. It may operate through institutional dependency, where journalists, researchers, or public officials depend on powerful sources for access, funding, legitimacy, or career advancement. Such dependency is visible not only in traditional media sourcing and funding structures but also in platform-mediated information systems where news organizations, fact-checkers, and public institutions rely on digital infrastructures for reach and legitimacy (Gillespie, 2018; Graves, 2016; Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Recent Christian policy analysis of the United Nations' digital-governance architecture illustrates why this distinction matters. The author's published analysis argues that the movement from digital cooperation to coordinated governance should be assessed through documentary analysis rather than rhetorical overstatement: official frameworks may understate institutional concentration, while critical commentary may overstate the emergence of centralized world government (Sangwa, 2026a). That balanced formulation strengthens the present article's claim that knowledge control can emerge through coordination, standards, infrastructure, incentives, and discourse without always requiring a single secret command centre.

These mechanisms do not prove that any particular suppressed claim is true. They show that social

conditions of visibility and credibility are not neutral. The Christian social epistemologist therefore asks not only whether a claim is true, but also how the claim became speakable or unspeakable, who has authority to define it, what incentives shape the classification, what evidence is accessible, and what moral risks accompany both acceptance and rejection.

5.4 The ten-level layered discernment model

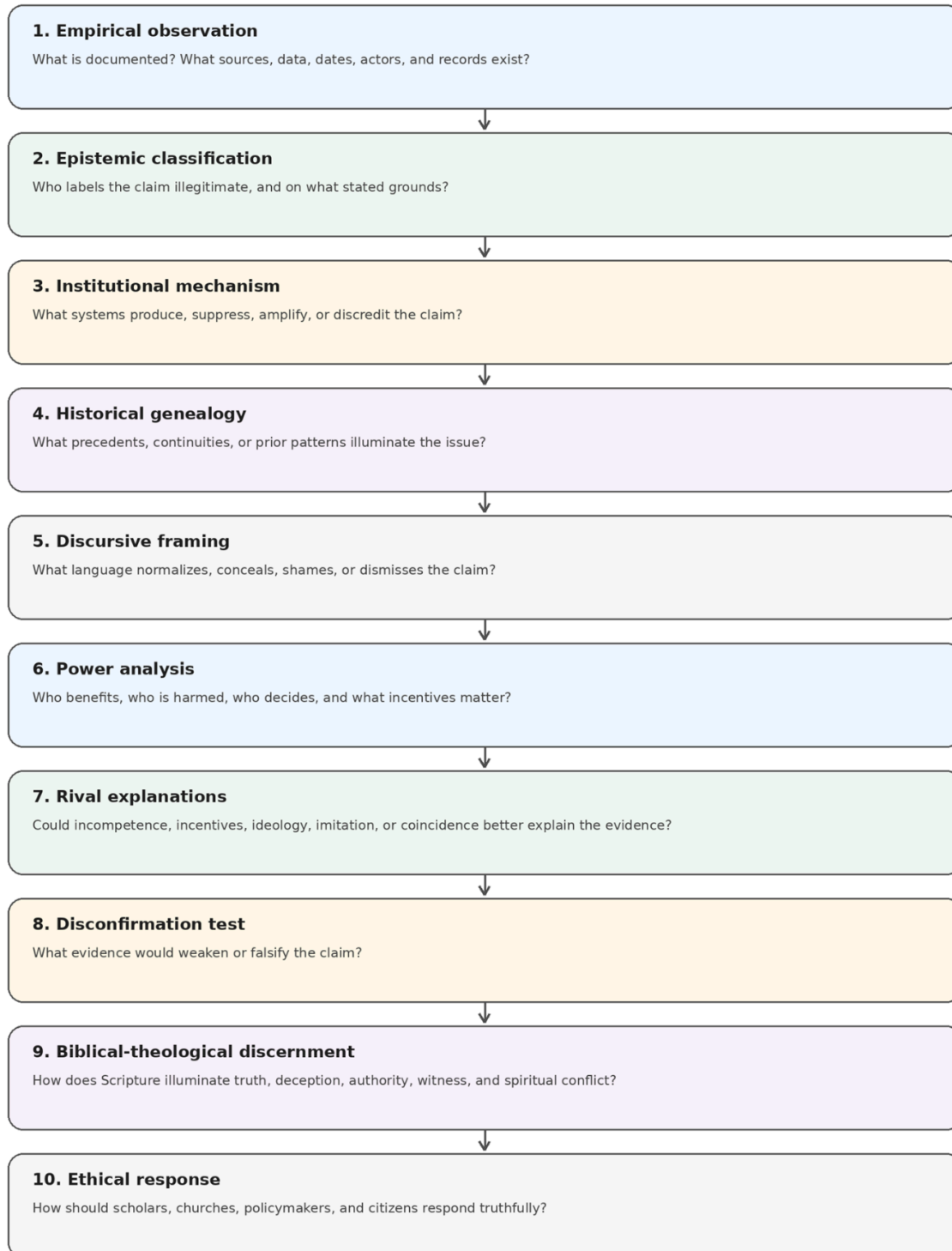
The article proposes the ten-level model shown in Figure 2. The model begins with empirical observation because disciplined inquiry must first ask what is documented. It then asks how the claim is classified and by whom. This prevents premature submission to labels. It examines institutional mechanisms, historical genealogy, and discursive framing so that claims are situated in social context. It asks who benefits, who is harmed, and who decides, because knowledge disputes are often also power disputes. It requires rival explanations and disconfirmation because truth-seeking must resist confirmation bias. Only then does it move to biblical-theological discernment and ethical response.

The order matters. If theological interpretation comes first, the scholar may spiritualize untested suspicion. If institutional classification comes last, the scholar may ignore legitimate expertise. If power analysis comes without disconfirmation, the inquiry may become ideological. If evidence comes without moral reflection, the scholar may treat truth as a technical matter detached from love, justice, and witness. The model is therefore layered to discipline the sequence of judgment. As a conceptual model, its value lies not in empirical validation at this stage but in clarifying the sequence, criteria, and logical relationships needed for future case-based testing (Jaakkola, 2020).

Figure 2. *Ten-level layered discernment model*

Ten-Level Layered Discernment Model

The sequence disciplines inquiry by delaying theological judgment until evidence and alternatives have been examined.



Note. Author's synthesis from critical realist method, social epistemology, and biblical discernment texts including Matthew 10:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, and 1 John 4:1.

5.5 Levels of warrant and responsible scholarly posture

At the heart of the model is a distinction between levels of warrant. This distinction is necessary

because controversial inquiry often fails by treating pattern, inference, interpretation, and proof as if they were the same. Table 3 clarifies the levels of claim status and the posture appropriate to each.

Table 3. Evidence status and responsible scholarly posture

Claim status	Criteria	Responsible posture
Verified evidence	Corroborated documentation, reliable data, direct observation, legal record, credible testimony, or replicable finding.	State with confidence while preserving scope, context, and limits.
Documented pattern	Repeated observable association or institutional behavior without full causal certainty.	Analyze cautiously; avoid assigning motive prematurely.
Plausible inference	Reasoned conclusion that explains available evidence better than rival accounts while remaining provisional.	Present as tentative, disconfirmable, and open to revision.
Contested interpretation	Meaning, cause, implication, or moral significance remains disputed among credible interpreters.	Represent rival accounts fairly and avoid rhetoric of certainty.
Theological discernment	Biblical interpretation of documented realities under categories of truth, deception, witness, authority, idolatry, and spiritual conflict.	Apply Scripture carefully after empirical and conceptual analysis; avoid proof-texting and false witness.

Note. Author's synthesis from Bhaskar (2008), Goldman (1999), Fricker (2007), and the biblical command to test all things.

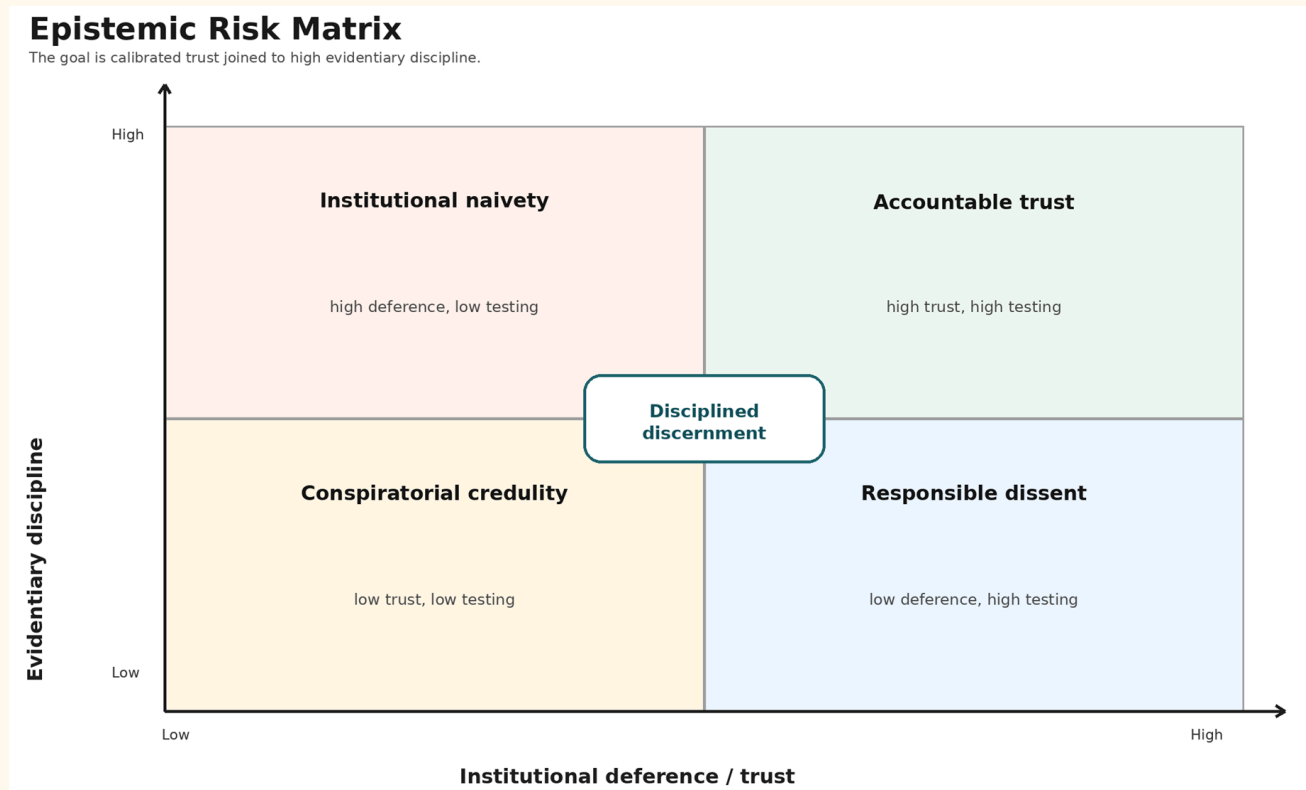
5.6 Avoiding institutional naivety and conspiratorial credulity

The framework intentionally avoids two symmetrical errors. Institutional naivety treats official endorsement as sufficient for truth. It may appeal to expertise, consensus, or institutional reputation without asking about conflicts of interest, incentives, censorship, methodological limits, historical failures, or moral accountability. This posture can appear humble because it defers to authority, but it may become morally irresponsible when authority is treated as a substitute for evidence. This does not undermine the legitimacy of expertise; rather, it follows the view that institutional trust is warranted when communities of inquiry remain transparent, plural, critically responsive, and accountable to evidence (Oreskes, 2019).

Conspiratorial credulity treats institutional rejection as sufficient for truth. It may appeal to suppression, whistleblowers, patterns, anomalies, or distrust without asking whether the claim is proportionate,

falsifiable, or morally responsible. This posture can appear courageous because it challenges power, but it may become morally irresponsible when suspicion is treated as a substitute for evidence. This risk is amplified when communities become echo chambers that actively undermine outside sources or when conspiracy beliefs become resistant to correction by interpreting disconfirmation as further evidence of concealment (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020; Nguyen, 2020; Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

Disciplined discernment refuses both errors. It recognizes that authority can be truthful and corrupt, that dissent can be prophetic and deluded, that institutions can protect public goods and protect themselves, and that stigmatized claims can be neglected truths or destructive falsehoods. Such discernment is slower than outrage and less satisfying than certainty. Yet it is more faithful to the Christian calling to truth.

Figure 3. Epistemic risk matrix

Note. Author's synthesis from Barkun (2015), Dentith (2014), Lewandowsky and Cook (2020), and Wardle and Derakhshan (2017).

6. Biblical-Theological Reflection

Christian discernment must be governed by Scripture rather than by cultural suspicion or institutional approval. The biblical witness presents truth as grounded in the character of God, deception as morally and spiritually serious, and witness as a covenantal obligation. The following texts are treated as theological controls for truth, deception, witness, authority, and spiritual conflict, not as slogans for speculative accusation.

6.1 Truth, creaturely knowledge, and moral accountability

A Christian social epistemology begins with God as the God of truth. Truth is not merely correspondence to facts, although it includes correspondence. Truth is grounded in God's character, speech, covenant faithfulness, and self-revelation. Because God speaks

truly, human beings are morally obligated to receive, interpret, and bear witness truthfully. This theological foundation prevents both relativism and manipulative pragmatism. Biblically, this claim is grounded in the testimony that God does not lie, that Christ is the truth, and that God's word is truth (Num. 23:19; John 14:6; John 17:17; Titus 1:2, CSB).

Creaturely knowledge is finite, socially mediated, and dependent. Human beings require testimony and institutions. Yet the fall means that human knowing is also morally vulnerable. Pride, fear, greed, ambition, desire for control, and social conformity can distort both official institutions and dissident communities. Therefore, Christian discernment must submit every claim to God, including the claims of experts, prophets, platforms, governments, pastors, influencers, and alternative media.

6.2 Genesis 3 and the epistemology of deception

Genesis 3 presents deception not merely as denial of truth but as the manipulation of trust, desire, language, and authority. The serpent does not begin with open rebellion. He reframes God's word, raises suspicion concerning divine intent, and offers a rival path to wisdom. The pattern is epistemic and moral: deception works by destabilizing trust in God while promising autonomy.

For the present article, Genesis 3 cautions against two errors. It warns against believing every seductive counter-narrative, because the serpent himself speaks against authority. It also warns against assuming that all authoritative speech is righteous, because the fall introduces human rebellion into every institution. A Christian social epistemology must therefore ask how language is used to reframe good and evil, how authority is contested or counterfeited, and how desire can distort judgment. The serpent-strategy lens is useful only when disciplined by evidence and Scripture. It should identify patterns of deception after analysis, not replace analysis with accusation.

6.3 Wise innocence and nonconformity

Jesus' instruction to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves in Matthew 10:16 is central for contested knowledge environments. Wisdom without innocence becomes manipulation; innocence without wisdom becomes naivety. Christian inquiry should therefore be alert to deception while refusing deceitful methods.

Paul's command in Romans 12:2 not to be conformed to this age requires transformation of mind, not mere opposition to mainstream culture. The renewed mind tests cultural patterns, including both official narratives and dissident subcultures, under the lordship of Christ. Nonconformity is not contrarianism. It is faithful judgment shaped by worship, Scripture, and obedience.

6.4 Testing spirits, exposing darkness, and rejecting false witness

The New Testament repeatedly calls believers to test rather than passively absorb. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 commands believers to test all things and hold on to what is good. 1 John 4:1 commands believers not to believe every spirit but to test the spirits to see whether they are from God. These commands oppose both gullibility and contempt. They do not permit Christians to accept every claim. They require disciplined examination.

Ephesians 5:11 calls believers to expose the fruitless works of darkness. Exposure, however, is an ethical act. It requires evidence, courage, timing, and accountability. Exposure without evidence becomes slander. Silence before documented evil becomes complicity. False witness is not limited to courtroom perjury. The biblical prohibition includes not only formal legal falsehood but also distorted, malicious, or irresponsible testimony against one's neighbor (Exod. 20:16; Prov. 18:17; Eph. 4:25; Jas. 3:1–12, CSB). It includes reckless accusation, selective quotation, manipulation of evidence, slander, exaggeration, and the circulation of claims one has not responsibly tested. In stigmatized knowledge communities, the temptation is to excuse false witness because the perceived enemy is powerful. Scripture permits no such exemption. Truthful resistance must remain truthful.

6.5 Counterfeit light, spiritual conflict, and institutional power

Paul's warning in 2 Corinthians 11:14 that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light is particularly relevant to modern systems that justify control through morally attractive language. Safety, inclusion, health, security, progress, expertise, and freedom can be genuine goods. They can also be used propagandistically when morally attractive vocabulary conceals coercion, dehumanization, idolatrous claims of salvation, or unjust domination (Ellul, 1965; Stanley, 2015). A Christian social

epistemology must therefore examine moral vocabulary as well as factual claims. The question is not whether an institution uses good words, but whether those words correspond to truthful, just, and accountable action.

This concern is not limited to political or technological institutions. In studies of contemporary spirituality, Sangwa (2025c, 2026b) argues that terms such as “energy,” “alignment,” “awakening,” “Christ-consciousness,” and “spiritual empowerment” may function as morally attractive vocabulary that conceals metaphysical assumptions contrary to biblical revelation. Such analysis is relevant to Christian social epistemology because spiritual deception often operates through semantic familiarity rather than open opposition. The issue is not whether every contemporary wellness practice is intentionally deceptive, but whether its language, anthropology, and soteriology redirect trust away from Christ while appearing therapeutic, inclusive, or enlightened.

Colossians 2:8 warns against captivity through philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition rather than Christ. Ephesians 6:12 locates Christian struggle not finally against flesh and blood but against spiritual powers. This does not remove human responsibility; it deepens it. Christians should not demonize human opponents, nor should they reduce institutional deception to merely human error. Spiritual conflict operates through lies, fear, idolatry, pride, and domination.

Revelation 13 gives a symbolic theological account of beastly power, worship, deception, economic coercion, and conditional participation. This text should not be used carelessly to identify every disliked policy as apocalyptic fulfillment. It should, however, train Christians to recognize that political, economic, technological, and religious power can converge in ways that demand worship-like allegiance. The biblical-theological conclusion is that discernment is neither suspicion nor compliance. It is faithful judgment under God.

7. Discussion

The proposed framework contributes to theology, social epistemology, and public discourse in several ways. First, it reframes stigmatized knowledge as a problem of discernment rather than automatic belief or automatic dismissal. This is important because many contemporary debates are structured by classification before evaluation. Once a claim is labeled misinformation, conspiracy theory, extremist, or fringe, the social cost of examining it can become high. Yet scholarly integrity, democratic accountability, and Christian witness all require that claims be evaluated by evidence, not merely by labels.

Second, the framework provides a way to study knowledge control without becoming conspiratorial. Knowledge control does not always require a secret centralized plot. It may arise through incentives, funding structures, media routines, algorithmic governance, professional norms, state-corporate partnerships, institutional risk management, and ideological conformity. Critical realism is useful here because it allows inquiry into hidden mechanisms without leaping from pattern to accusation. The question is not whether all control is centrally planned. The question is how systems shape what can be known, said, funded, platformed, and believed. Infrastructure studies strengthen this point because standards, classifications, technical architectures, and seemingly mundane governance arrangements often become powerful precisely because they disappear into ordinary institutional operation (Bowker & Star, 1999; Star, 1999).

Third, the framework challenges Christian communities to recover moral seriousness about truth. Some Christian publics have become vulnerable to unverified claims because they rightly distrust dominant institutions but lack disciplined methods. Other Christian publics have become vulnerable to institutional capture because they rightly fear misinformation but lack theological suspicion toward worldly power. Both failures

damage witness. The church cannot expose deception while practicing exaggeration. It cannot resist propaganda while spreading untested stories. It cannot defend truth while outsourcing discernment to either official institutions or alternative media personalities.

Fourth, the framework suggests that conspiracy theory should be treated as an object of analysis rather than as a terminal verdict. Scholars should ask what kind of claim is being made, what evidence supports it, what mechanisms are proposed, what rival explanations exist, what moral effects follow, and how the label itself functions. This approach is more demanding than debunking alone. It is also more demanding than dissent alone. It requires patient scholarship.

Finally, the framework clarifies how theological interpretation can enter controversial inquiry responsibly. Biblical categories such as deception, idolatry, false witness, discernment, and spiritual conflict are not decorative additions to secular analysis. They illuminate dimensions of reality that purely secular frameworks often neglect. Yet they must be applied with care. When used prematurely, they can intensify speculation. When used faithfully, they deepen moral and spiritual understanding of documented realities.

8. Implications for Church, Academy, Policy, and Society

8.1 Implications for the church

For the church, the primary implication is catechetical. Churches need to teach discernment as a disciplined practice, not as a temperament. Believers should be trained to ask what is documented, how evidence is being used, what sources are reliable, what rival explanations exist, and whether a claim can be stated without exaggeration. Churches should also teach the sinfulness of false witness in digital life. Sharing an unverified accusation because it

supports one's worldview is not courage; it is moral negligence.

The pastoral urgency of this formation has been developed in a previous critique of ecclesial silence before the powers of the age (Sangwa, 2025f). That work should not be used here as empirical evidence for institutional capture, but as a pastoral-theological witness to the church's need for courageous, truthful, and disciplined speech. The present article adds the epistemic discipline required for such speech: before churches expose darkness, they must learn to test claims, name evidence, avoid slander, and distinguish faithful warning from reactive accusation.

8.2 Implications for theological education

For theological education, the implication is curricular. Seminaries and Christian universities should integrate biblical theology, media literacy, social epistemology, and public ethics. Students preparing for ministry should learn how propaganda works, how platform incentives shape belief, how institutional trust is formed and lost, and how to shepherd congregations through contested information environments. This recommendation is supported by evidence that digital media literacy interventions can improve users' ability to discern mainstream from false news, while global platform-governance guidance also identifies media and information literacy as central to rights-respecting responses to online harms (Guess et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2023). Apologetics must include not only defense of doctrine but also formation in truthfulness.

8.3 Implications for the academy

For the academy, the implication is methodological openness joined to rigor. Scholars should not permit stigmatizing labels to end inquiry prematurely. Nor should they romanticize marginalized claims. Research on suppressed discourse should include transparent criteria, careful source evaluation, rival explanations, and explicit disconfirmation standards.

Peer review should guard against both ideological gatekeeping and evidentiary laxity.

8.4 Implications for policy

For policy, the implication is that interventions against misinformation must avoid becoming opaque systems of knowledge control. Public communication should distinguish falsehood, uncertainty, contested interpretation, and harmful manipulation. Institutions that correct public error must also disclose conflicts of interest, explain evidence, permit good-faith questioning, and correct their own mistakes publicly. Trust is restored less by demanding obedience than by practicing accountability. This aligns with international guidance that disinformation policy should promote information integrity, transparency, platform accountability, plurality of information sources, and protection of freedom of expression rather than arbitrary or disproportionate suppression (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2023; United Nations Special Rapporteur et al., 2017).

8.5 Implications for society

For society, the implication is civic humility. Citizens should resist both cynical distrust and passive consumption. A healthy public sphere requires institutions that are trustworthy and citizens who are capable of disciplined questioning. The suppression of legitimate questions weakens public trust; the amplification of reckless claims weakens public reason. The common good requires both freedom to inquire and responsibility to tell the truth.

9. Limitations

This article has several limitations. First, it is conceptual rather than empirical. It proposes a framework but does not test the framework through case studies, interviews, discourse analysis, or survey data. Future research should apply the model to specific controversies to assess its explanatory power and practical usefulness.

Second, the article is interdisciplinary and therefore selective. It cannot exhaust the literature on social epistemology, misinformation, conspiracy theory, theology, and critical theory. Third, the biblical-theological reflection is constructive rather than exegetically exhaustive. Each biblical text discussed warrants fuller treatment. Fourth, the article's Christian framing may limit reception in some secular journals, even though the framework engages widely recognized academic literatures. Fifth, the article does not adjudicate which contemporary claims are truly suppressed, false, or plausible. Some readers may desire direct application. The restraint is intentional. A framework should not be confused with a verdict.

10. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should apply the layered discernment model to concrete cases through comparative documentary analysis. Bowen's (2009) account of document analysis is useful here because it treats documents as stable, retrievable, and contextually meaningful sources for qualitative inquiry while also warning that they require careful interpretation and triangulation. Suitable cases might include whistleblower controversies, platform moderation decisions, public health communication disputes, declassified intelligence histories, corporate misconduct disclosures, digital identity systems, financial-governance debates, or religious claims of spiritual deception in technological governance. Each case should distinguish evidence, pattern, inference, interpretation, and theological assessment.

A second research direction is empirical study of how Christian communities evaluate controversial claims. Several existing studies could be revisited as test cases for the layered discernment model. Digital identity systems could be examined through the model's categories of empirical documentation, conditional access, power analysis, and theological discernment (Sangwa, 2025b). Payment

infrastructures could be studied by distinguishing technical standardization, financial gatekeeping, infrastructural power, and eschatological interpretation (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025d). Stigmatized claims about secret and quasi-secret societies could be re-examined by separating historical evidence, network influence, speculative inference, and theological interpretation (Sangwa, 2025d). Such applications would allow the model proposed in this article to be tested, corrected, and refined through concrete cases rather than asserted only at the conceptual level.

Interviews, focus groups, and surveys could examine how pastors, theologians, educators, and lay Christians distinguish discernment from suspicion. A third direction is discourse analysis of the label conspiracy theory in academic, media, governmental, and ecclesial contexts. Such research could identify when the label clarifies and when it functions as exclusion.

A further methodological direction is to convert prophetic, blog-style, or conspiracy-inflected discourse into analyzable corpora rather than treating it only as devotional warning or cultural pathology. Sangwa's (2026c) computational mapping of World War III discourse and biblical prophecy offers one example of how a contested narrative can be studied through narrative policy analysis, securitization theory, and epistemic-injustice concerns. Future work should extend this approach by asking how claims move from blogs and sermons into policy discourse, church interpretation, social media, and institutional classification systems.

A fourth direction is the development of theological media literacy curricula. These curricula should combine biblical teaching on truth and witness with practical tools for source evaluation, fact-checking, argument analysis, and recognition of propaganda. A fifth direction is policy analysis of misinformation governance, especially where state, corporate, academic, and civil society actors cooperate to classify or suppress content. Christian public

theology can contribute by asking how truth, freedom, authority, and conscience should be ordered in such regimes.

11. Conclusion

The contemporary crisis of knowledge is not solved by trusting institutions uncritically or by rejecting them reflexively. Nor is it solved by treating every controversial claim as either brave truth or dangerous delusion. The more faithful path is disciplined discernment. This article has argued that conspiracy theory should not function as an automatic epistemic dismissal, because labels can operate socially and institutionally to prevent fair evaluation. At the same time, stigmatized status does not confer truth. Suppressed claims must be examined with evidence, humility, rival explanations, disconfirmation, and moral seriousness.

A Christian social epistemology brings distinctive resources to this task. It recognizes that truth is grounded in God, that human knowing is finite and socially mediated, that sin distorts institutions and dissident communities alike, that deception often works through language and counterfeit light, and that false witness remains sin even when directed against powerful actors. Scripture calls believers to be wise and innocent, to test all things, to expose darkness, to resist conformity, and to refuse deception.

The proposed layered discernment model offers a way forward. It moves from documentation to classification, mechanism, genealogy, framing, power, rival explanations, disconfirmation, theological discernment, and ethical response. Its purpose is not to make Christians suspicious of everything. Its purpose is to make them faithful seekers and witnesses of truth in a world where both official narratives and alternative claims can deceive. Such discernment is slow, demanding, and morally costly. Yet it is necessary if the church and the academy are to serve truth rather than merely manage belief.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article because no empirical datasets were generated or analyzed. The article is a conceptual and theological study based on published academic literature, policy documents, and biblical texts cited in the reference list.

AI Use Statement: Generative AI was used only for editorial assistance, including language refinement, structural organization, and manuscript-polishing support. The author reviewed, verified, revised, and approved the final manuscript and remains fully responsible for its content, argumentation, citations, and conclusions.

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