

# Religious fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism, and meaning in life

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Two studies examined the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and religious fundamentalism (RF), and tested their unique contributions to meaning in life (MIL).

**Method:** We recruited Amazon Mechanical Turk Participants located in the United States. Studies 1 ( $N = 827$ ) included measures of RWA, RF, and global MIL. Study 2 ( $N = 809$ ) additionally included measures of the facets of global MIL (existential significance, purpose, and coherence), and intrinsic religiosity.

**Results:** In both studies, RWA, RF, and MIL were positively correlated. Partial correlations and structural equation modeling showed that, when modeled together, RF significantly contributes to MIL and RWA facets were either unrelated or negatively related. Study 2 extended these results to show that RF primarily contributed positively to global MIL through existential significance, rather than purpose or coherence. When modeled jointly with intrinsic religiosity, religious fundamentalism no longer contributed to MIL.

**Conclusions:** These studies demonstrate that RF positively contributes to the experience of MIL, and that the link between RWA and MIL arises from their mutual overlap with RF. The link between RF and MIL is about religiosity, rather than fundamentalism. Implications are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

coherence, meaning in life, purpose, religious fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism, significance

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The human needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life...in about the same sense that he needs sunlight, calcium, and love. (Maslow, 1968, p. 206)

Many people find satisfying answers to life's existential questions through religious faith. The link between religiousness and meaning in life is well documented (e.g., Dar & Iqbal, 2020; Park, 2005). However, a number of psychological theories imply that social and political

views (or “philosophies of life”), might serve a similar existential function, contributing to the sense that life is meaningful (e.g., Frankl, 1984; Fromm, 1941; Hogg, 2007; Jost et al., 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2009; Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Van den Bos, 2009). Research inspired by these ideas showed that right-wing authoritarianism positively relates to meaning in life (Womick et al., 2019), a link that obtained even controlling for a number of potential third variables. However, the potential explanatory role of religious fundamentalism, defined by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004) as a religious type of authoritarianism, remains unclear.

Does the link between right-wing authoritarianism and meaning in life arise from their mutual association with religious fundamentalism? Two studies addressed this question in the context of the United States, probing whether factors representing right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism contribute independently to global meaning in life (Study 1) and to the facets of meaning in life (Study 2). Guided by the results of a preliminary study, we expected that, when modeled jointly, only religious fundamentalism would contribute significantly and positively to these. We also tested whether accounting for intrinsic religiosity would explain the association between religious fundamentalism, global meaning in life, and its facets (Study 2).

### 1.1 | Religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism

Religious fundamentalism is an unquestioning belief that fundamental truth is captured by a single set of religious beliefs, that this truth is opposed by evil, and that traditional religious practices must be preserved (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Right-wing authoritarianism reflects preference for a strong leader, submission to authority, strict adherence to cultural traditions, and derogation of individuals perceived as violating such traditions (Altemeyer, 1981, 1996; Feldman, 2003; Mavor et al., 2010). Both religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism involve traditionalism, obedience, and submission, but these impulses are directed toward either religious or political conventions and authorities (Brandt & Reyna, 2014; Hood et al., 2005).

Religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism are strongly positively related (e.g., Hunsberger, 1995), particularly among the highly educated, and those living developed nations (Frederico et al., 2021). They also relate similarly to other variables. For instance, both religious fundamentalism (Hall et al., 2010) and right-wing authoritarianism (Asbrock et al., 2010; Crawford et al., 2015; Laythe, et al., 2001; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008) predict racism. Although multicollinearity renders the separation of their independent contributions to racism challenging (Mavor et al., 2009), a so-called “ideology free” measure of authoritarianism (which taps child rearing values for autonomy vs. obedience) mediated the link between religious fundamentalism and racism (Brandt & Reyna, 2014).

Religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism also relate to personality traits similarly. In U.S., Romanian, and German samples, their associations with the Big Five were nearly identical (Krauss et al., 2006). In addition to their similar associations with racism and

personality traits, both religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism are positively related to meaning in life, as we consider next.

### 1.2 | Meaning in life, religious fundamentalism, and right-wing authoritarianism

Meaning in life is a vital aspect of psychological well-being that predicts numerous indicators of positive functioning (King & Hicks, 2021). Meaning in life is positively related to right-wing authoritarianism (Manzi et al., 2015; Steger et al., 2008), a link that has been demonstrated using a variety of measures of right-wing authoritarianism, including unidimensional and multidimensional attitude measures, and the previously mentioned “ideology free” measure (Womick et al., 2019). Right-wing ideological constructs (including conservatism and right-wing authoritarianism) are positively related to well-being (including self-esteem, life satisfaction, and meaning in life; e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008; Onraet et al., 2013; Schlenker et al., 2012; Womick et al., 2019). These relationships appear most central to meaning in life.<sup>1</sup> For instance, controlling for meaning in life wipes out the relationships of life satisfaction with conservatism (Newman et al., 2019) and right-wing authoritarianism (Womick et al., 2019).

Global meaning in life is comprised of at least three facets--existential significance, purpose, and coherence (Costin & Vignoles, 2019). Existential significance is experienced when a person feels their life and contributions matter to others and society. Purpose is the perception that one's life is characterized by valuable goals that are worth pursuing. Coherence means the person experiences life as comprehensible or as making sense. The relationship of right-wing authoritarianism to global meaning in life is uniquely explained by existential significance, rather than purpose or coherence (Womick et al., 2019). We hypothesized a similar dynamic characterizes the relationship between religious fundamentalism and global meaning in life. Specifically, we expected this link would be primarily explained by the existential significance facet, rather than purpose or coherence.

As noted above, religiosity is positively related to meaning in life (King & Hicks, 2021). As with right-wing ideology, the relationship of religiosity with other aspects of well-being (including life satisfaction, subjective well-being, self-esteem, and optimism) is mediated by meaning in life (e.g., Dar & Iqbal, 2020; You & Lim, 2020). To our knowledge, only one previous study examined the relationship between religious *fundamentalism* and meaning in life. In a South African sample, Neil (2014) showed that religious fundamentalism (using a scale that

excluded reverse-worded items) was positively related to global meaning in life,  $r(420) = .20, p < .01$ . Controlling for meaning in life statistically eliminated the relationship of religious fundamentalism with life satisfaction (Neil, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Although components of right-wing authoritarianism (particularly conventionalism) may be associated with religiousness, right-wing authoritarianism is not a religious construct. Rather, right-wing authoritarianism characterizes a social attitude that is, at least conceptually, distinct from religious beliefs. Similar to fundamentalist religious beliefs, right-wing authoritarianism offers certainty about one's values, a way to deal with life's ambiguities, a clear sense of right and wrong, and provides a place for the individual within the larger social scheme. Thus, one reason these constructs are so strongly linked may be because people who prefer having a single right answer to life's complex problems are able to find them in both authoritarian attitudes and religious fundamentalism. Supporting this possibility, epistemic beliefs that knowledge is certain, simple, and passed down by an omniscient authority partially mediate the association between right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism (Hathcoat & Barnes, 2010).

The psychological functions of right-wing authoritarianism—promoting psychological security, epistemic certainty, social identity, and belongingness—may also be supported by religious fundamentalism. These two constructs may serve interchangeable existential functions, with one being more secular and the other religious. This distinction between these constructs, with one less religious and the other considerably more so, may be important. Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski et al., 2004) suggests that people invest in cultural worldviews to assuage the existential terror fostered by awareness of mortality. Nonreligious worldviews offer *symbolic* immortality. Through investment in culture, secular worldviews allow a person to (figuratively) outlast mortality. Such investments imbue life with a sense of permanence that gives rise to the experience of meaning (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). However, religious worldviews offer something more—*literal* immortality in an afterlife. Recent research considered how endorsement secular and religious constructs serve complementary but distinct terror-management functions. Among the non-religious, mortality salience increases the duration Americans expect U.S. culture to endure after their death (symbolic immortality), an effect that does not occur among the religiously affiliated due to the existential benefits provided by literal immortality (Scott et al., 2021).

Comparing the existential benefits of these two constructs, together, allows for an examination of the

potential distinction between a worldview that provides for many existential concerns (right-wing authoritarianism) and one that provides not merely symbolic but literal immortality (religious fundamentalism). Thus, the existential functions of these two constructs may be similar, but religious fundamentalism may be more effective at serving this function. Because the supernatural elements of religious beliefs (including god belief and the promise of an afterlife) provide something greater than the existential security of right-wing authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism should be uniquely positively associated with meaning in life. We tested this hypothesis in both Studies 1 and 2.

### 1.3 | Intrinsic religiosity

We included a measure of intrinsic religiosity in Study 2 to test whether differences between the relations of right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism to meaning in life could be attributed specifically to the religious (rather than fundamentalist) aspect of religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism and intrinsic religiosity are different orientations to religious belief and practice. Intrinsic religiosity refers to a commitment to integrating religious beliefs into one's life, performing religious activities in pursuit of spiritual development, and experiencing them as ends in themselves (Allport & Ross, 1967; Darvyri et al., 2014; Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). Intrinsic religiosity is more strongly related to meaning in life than extrinsic religiosity, and intrinsic (but not extrinsic) religiosity buffers meaning in life from sources of distress, such as social exclusion (Reynolds et al., 2020).

Religious fundamentalism and intrinsic religiosity are positively correlated with each other (Genia, 1996) and both are positively related to right-wing authoritarianism (Wilkinson, 2004), and prejudice (Whitley, 2009). Yet, these constructs are also distinct in numerous ways. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that intrinsic religiosity is associated with higher extraversion and conscientiousness, while religious fundamentalism is linked with lower neuroticism and openness to experience (both are similarly related to agreeableness) (Saroglou, 2002). Conceptually, both tap god belief, but one concerns devotion to spiritual growth and the other arises from literal interpretations of religious teachings. We expect both constructs serve similar existential functions: Informing one's purpose in life, providing a framework to make sense of experiences, identifying one's place in the social landscape, and connecting a person to something larger than the self. Including measures of both constructs in Study 2 allowed us to test whether the fundamentalist aspect of religious

fundamentalism serves an existential function above and beyond religiosity.

## 1.4 | Overview of present research

Both studies used confirmatory factor analysis to examine the overlap between measures of right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. Study 1 employed structural equation modeling to test the unique contributions of the resulting factors to meaning in life. These analyses allowed us to test whether factors representing right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism independently contribute to meaning in life, or if the association between right-wing authoritarianism and meaning in life is due to their shared relationship with religious fundamentalism. We hypothesized, based on a preliminary study, that when modeled jointly, only religious fundamentalism would contribute significantly and positively to meaning in life.

Study 2 was a confirmatory replication of Study 1. Additionally, we administered a measure of intrinsic religiosity and included it in a structural equation model jointly with right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism to test whether each of these showed independent links to meaning in life. Finally, we tested the hypothesis that the relationships of right-wing authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, and intrinsic religiosity with global meaning in life were more relevant to the existential significance facet of meaning, rather than purpose or coherence, as has been shown for ideological sources of meaning (Womick et al., 2019). Before presenting these studies, we briefly review the results of an exploratory investigation that informed our hypotheses and analytic strategy.

## 2 | PRELIMINARY STUDY

Numerous factors render distinguishing religious fundamentalism from right-wing authoritarianism difficult, including their conceptual overlap, strong empirical association, and similar correlates. A limitation of previous attempts to disentangle these constructs is that assumptions of orthogonality underlying data analytic approaches commonly employed (e.g., factor analysis with varimax rotation) are clearly violated by the strong relationship between them. A previous such analysis indicated the two variables shared complete overlap (with one factor representing all reverse-keyed items for both scales and another representing all non-reversed items; Krauss et al., 2006).

In the present research, we probed the association between these constructs assuming correlated factors and

employing structural equation modeling. We were guided in part by an exploratory analyses of a previously published data ( $N = 941$  Amazon Mechanical Turk workers, Womick et al., 2019, Study 1 subsample). Exploratory factor analysis of a right-wing authoritarianism scale and religious fundamentalism scale suggested a three-factor solution (including authoritarian aggression, authoritarian conventionalism, and religious fundamentalism). Reverse-scored religious fundamentalism items (6 items) had weak primary loadings and strong cross-loadings, highlighting the problematic nature of reverse-keyed items for religious fundamentalism.

Giving a low rating to an item such as, “It is more important to be a good person than to believe in God and the right religion” may not be equivalent to strongly endorsing statements such as “God has given humanity a complete, unflinching guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed.” People endorsing low religious fundamentalism may represent a mix of individuals who are religious, but not in a fundamentalist way, and who are not religious at all, rendering this group more ideologically diverse than those who score high on the construct. In Studies 1 and 2, we present results including these reverse scored items. However, due to their problematic nature in the preliminary study, we also ran analyses without them. Results are consistent with those we present in the text, and can be found in the Supporting Information, (pp. 21–27 for Study 1; pp. 32–39 for Study 2).

Full results for this preliminary study are presented in the Supporting Information (pp. 2–9). These results are well summarized in the most straightforward analyses. The factor score for meaning in life was positively related to both authoritarianism factor scores, and religious fundamentalism,  $r$ 's(762) ranged from .23 to .28, all  $p$ 's < .001. Controlling for the authoritarianism factors, religious fundamentalism remained related to meaning in life, second order partial  $r = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ . In contrast, controlling for religious fundamentalism, neither authoritarianism factor was significantly related to meaning in life,  $p$ 's > .31. These results provide initial support for the idea that right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism are empirically separable, and that religious fundamentalism explains the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and meaning in life.

## 3 | STUDY 1

Study 1 used confirmatory factor analysis to address the overlap between right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism (using a right-wing authoritarianism scale designed to tap three facets of submission, aggression, and conventionalism). We first examined

the associations among religious fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism, and meaning in life with right-wing authoritarianism decomposed into its original three facets and religious fundamentalism items retained in their respective composite variables. Next, we used confirmatory factor analysis to address the overlap between right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. We expected to find the best fit characterized by two authoritarianism factors (aggression and conventionalism, with a mix of submission loading onto each) and one religious fundamentalism factor. Finally, we examined the relationships of these factors with meaning in life using structural equation modeling, expecting to find that religious fundamentalism contributes positively and significantly to meaning in life; and, when accounting for religious fundamentalism, that right-wing authoritarianism does not.

## 4 | METHOD

### 4.1 | Participants

We recruited a sample of 1,097 participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk (May, 2018). Participants were 62.5% female, 71.2% White/European American, 10.5% Black/African American, 9.8% Asian, 5.2% Hispanic/Latino(a), 1.2% Native American, and 2.1% indicated “other.” Age,  $M(SD) = 35.71(12.38)$  ranged from 18 to 76. Median income was \$35,001-\$50,000 USD. Modal education was a Bachelors. Participants were 28.9% Christian (non-Catholic), 13.9% Catholic, 8.5% Protestant, 1.1% Jewish, 1.9% Buddhist, 1.0% Muslim, 14.7% Atheist, 18.8% Agnostic, and 11.2% indicated another affiliation.

We did not include attention checks in the survey. We excluded participants from primary analyses who provided markers of questionable data quality. First, 80 participants did not finish the survey, and were excluded from analyses. Second, we excluded participants ( $n = 83$ ) who took less than 1 *SD* below the average time,  $M(SD) = 7.55(4.22)$ , to complete the study. Finally, we identified 4 conceptually opposite pairs of items. Participants who gave the same responses to any of these opposing pairs were dropped from analyses,  $n = 107$ .<sup>3</sup> Thus, the final sample included 827 participants.

### 4.2 | Measures

All items (shown in Table S3) were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). To measure right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), we administered the 14-item RWA Aggression, Conventionalism, Submission

Scale (Mavor et al., 2010, 2012),  $M(SD) = 3.15(1.20)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ , which contains subscales tapping authoritarian aggression,  $M(SD) = 3.41(1.18)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ , authoritarian conventionalism,  $M(SD) = 2.35(1.18)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.90$ , and authoritarian submission,  $M(SD) = 3.51(1.18)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.83$ . Participants also completed the revised 12-item Religious Fundamentalism scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004)  $M(SD) = 3.22(1.64)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.96$ . Meaning in life was measured with the 5-item Presence of Meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006; sample item: “I understand my life’s meaning”),  $M(SD) = 4.71(1.47)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.92$ . The other 5-item subscale measures the search for meaning in life, for which high scores do not correspond to evaluating one’s life as meaningful and low scores do not necessarily correspond to meaninglessness (search for and presence of meaning in life have been found to be positively and negatively related, see Chu & Fung, 2021). The search subscale was not conceptually relevant to the present research questions. The MLQ is the most widely used measure of meaning in life and has shown strong convergent and discriminant validity (Brandstätter et al., 2012; Steger et al., 2006).

## 5 | RESULTS

### 5.1 | Preliminary analyses

We first analyzed the data using the scales scored as originally designed. Religious fundamentalism was strongly positively associated with right-wing authoritarianism,  $r = .78$ ,  $p < .001$  (corrected for unreliability,  $r = .82$ ). It was less strongly related to authoritarian aggression,  $r = .50$ , than authoritarian conventionalism,  $r = .76$ , or authoritarian submission,  $r = .70$ , both  $z$ 's  $> 6.60$ , all  $p$ 's  $< .001$ . The three subscales of right-wing authoritarianism were positively related to each other,  $r$ 's ranged from .37 to .65, all  $p$ 's  $< .001$ . Meaning in life was positively related to religious fundamentalism,  $r = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ , authoritarian aggression  $r = .09$ ,  $p = .009$ , authoritarian conventionalism,  $r = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ , and authoritarian submission,  $r = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Partial correlations showed that, controlling for religious fundamentalism wiped out the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and meaning in life,  $r = -.02$ ,  $p = .44$ . The same pattern held for each of the facets of right-wing authoritarianism, all  $p$ 's  $> .45$ . In contrast, controlling for right-wing authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism remained significantly and positively linked to meaning in life,  $r = .18$ ,  $p < .001$ . None of the subscales of right-wing authoritarianism, considered individually, wiped out the link between religious fundamentalism and meaning in life, all  $p$ 's  $< .001$ .

## 5.2 | Confirmatory factor analysis

Right-wing authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, and meaning in life items were submitted to a confirmatory factor analysis using maximum likelihood estimation and oblique rotation. We used SRMR, RMSEA, CFI, and  $\chi^2$  to compare 3, 4, and 5-factor models. The 4-factor model was consistent with results of the preliminary study (one factor representing authoritarian aggression, one for authoritarian conventionalism, and one for religious fundamentalism), including an additional factor for meaning in life. The 5-factor model was consistent with the way the scales were designed, allowing a factor for religious fundamentalism, three factors for right-wing authoritarianism (one for conventionalism, aggression, and submission, each), and another factor for meaning in life. The 3-factor model reduced right-wing authoritarianism to a single factor (containing all the aggression, conventionalism, and submission items; for 3-factor models containing only one or the other RWA factor identified in the preliminary, see the Supporting Information Table S10, p. 40). As shown in Table 1, the 4-factor model showed better fit than the 3-factor model and the chi-square for the difference between the models was significant. The 5-factor model showed a significant chi-square difference versus the 4-factor model. However, chi-square change tests are influenced relatively strongly by sample size compared to the other fit indices, which showed negligible change from the 4- to 5-factor models. Given the small magnitude of change in fit statistics, and the results of our exploratory factor analysis in the preliminary study, we retained the more parsimonious 4-factor model. Due to space constraints, item loadings can be found in the Supporting Information (Table S3, pp. 18–20). The first factor represented religious fundamentalism, the second authoritarian conventionalism, the third authoritarian aggression (a mix of authoritarian submission items loaded onto each RWA factor) and the final factor was meaning in life. All loadings within respective factors were greater than .58.

TABLE 1 Confirmatory factor analysis results Study 1

	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	SRMR	RMSEA	CFI	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	<i>p</i> -value
Model 1	4,647.35	431	0.08	0.11	0.82			
Model 2	2,938.72	428	0.08	0.09	0.89			
Model 3	2,428.02	424	0.05	0.08	0.91			
Model 1 versus Model 2						1,709.60	3	.000
Model 2 versus Model 3						510.70	4	.000

Note: *N* = 797. Model description: Model 1 = three factors consisting of religious fundamentalism, right wing authoritarianism, and meaning in life; Model 2 = four factors consisting of religious fundamentalism, two right wing authoritarianism factors (conventionalism & aggression factors), and meaning in life. Model 3 = five factors consisting of religious fundamentalism, three right-wing authoritarianism factors (aggression, conventionalism, and submission), and meaning in life.

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual.

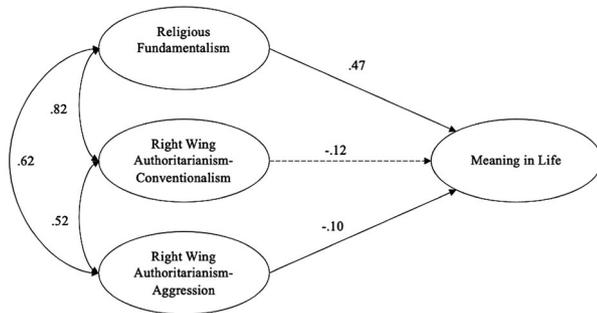
## 5.3 | Structural equation model

We used this model to estimate the joint contributions of religious fundamentalism, authoritarian conventionalism, and authoritarian aggression to meaning in life (computing factors scores using unit weights aggregated within each factor). Note that we used this model not to demonstrate causal links but rather to provide a nuanced depiction of the associations among these variables. Results are shown in Figure 1. Covariances and unstandardized estimates are presented in the Supporting Information, Table S11, p. 41. The three factors were positively related to each other. Only religious fundamentalism positively contributed to meaning in life. The effect of authoritarian conventionalism was not significant, and that for authoritarian aggression was significant and negative, when accounting for religious fundamentalism.

## 5.4 | Brief discussion

Right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism were strongly correlated, and both were positively associated with meaning in life. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that, consistent with the preliminary study, these constructs are empirically separable. Religious fundamentalism was represented by a single factor, and right-wing authoritarianism was represented by two factors: authoritarian aggression and authoritarian conventionalism. The three factors were positively related to each other, and to meaning in life.

With regard to right-wing authoritarianism, the scale we administered used exclusively reverse-worded items to measure conventionalism, and this design flaw may have contributed to the factor structure (although, the structure was conceptually similar in the preliminary study which used a measure including a mix of reverse and non-reverse scored items for conventionalism). Perhaps stronger evidence for a submission factor did not emerge because submission functions as the synergistic component that



**FIGURE 1** Structural equation model, Study 1. Values presented in the figure are standardized estimates. Solid paths are significant, dotted paths are non-significant

drives the covariation of the three facets of right-wing authoritarianism. For instance, the authorities one follows determine both the social conventions one values (corresponding to the authoritarian conventionalism factor), and which groups should be targeted with aggression (corresponding to the authoritarian aggression factor). It is worth noting, however, that improvement to model fit by including a third submission factor was small but significant. We determined to retain the more parsimonious factor structure identified in the Preliminary Study. Due to the subjectivity of these decisions, we urge caution in the interpretation of these factor analytic results for right-wing authoritarianism. For the central purposes of these Studies, results and conclusions do not change, regardless of whether right-wing authoritarianism is represented by two or three factors (see partial correlations reported in main text and additional analyses in the Supporting Information pp. 42–43).

Structural equation modeling showed that accounting for religious fundamentalism, the right-wing authoritarianism factors no longer contributed positively to meaning in life. Authoritarian aggression was, instead, negatively associated with meaning in life. One possible explanation is the apparent suppression effect is multicollinearity. Another possibility is that endorsement of interpersonal or group-based hostility that lacks religious or conventional foundations may disrupt the sense that life is meaningful.

These results suggest that religious fundamentalism explains the association between right-wing authoritarianism and meaning in life. Why might this be so? Both right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism involve rigid submission to authority and valuing of conventions and traditions. However, one of these variables is more secular in nature and the other is religious. Perhaps the addition of religious authority to these values explains their relationship to meaning in life. As noted previously, religion promises not only symbolic but literal immortality and this supernatural element may help to explain the greater relevance of religious fundamentalism

to meaning in life. To probe this possibility directly, we included a measure of intrinsic religiosity in Study 2.

Past research suggests that, of the three facets of meaning in life (significance, purpose, and coherence), existential significance is the key to the link between right-wing authoritarianism and meaning in life (Womick et al., 2019). Study 2 used a facet-level measure of meaning in life to probe whether religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism contribute to global meaning more strongly via existential significance, relative to the other facets of meaning.

## 6 | STUDY 2

Participants completed measures of right-wing authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, intrinsic religiosity, and global meaning in life and its facets. In addition to replicating Study 1, we tested whether, when modeled simultaneously with intrinsic religiosity, religious fundamentalism would retain its significant link to meaning in life. If religious fundamentalism no longer significantly contributes to meaning in life when accounting for intrinsic religiosity, it would suggest that religious component rather than the fundamentalist component of religious fundamentalism is responsible for its positive link to meaning in life.

With regard to the facets of meaning in life, we expected that religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism would be more strongly associated with existential significance than purpose and coherence. We also expected to find the indirect effect of religious fundamentalism and intrinsic religiosity on global meaning in life to be stronger through existential significance versus purpose and coherence.

## 7 | METHOD

### 7.1 | Participants

We recruited 1,067 participants on MTurk (November, 2018) who were 66% women, 73.5% White/European American, 10.2% Black/African American, 6.4% Asian American, 6.7% Latinx, and 3.2% indicated “other.” Age ranged from 18–18,  $M(SD) = 38.23(13.24)$ . Modal education was “some college.” Median income was \$35,001–\$50,000 USD. Participants were 30.2% Christian (non-Catholic), 13.2% Catholic, 10.7% Protestant, 1.6% Jewish, 1.4% Buddhist, 0.7% Muslim, 14.9% Atheist, 17.0% Agnostic, and 10.3% indicated another affiliation.

We conducted the same exclusion procedures described in Study 1 to ensure data quality. We excluded 49 participants for failing to complete the study, 75 additional

participants for finishing the study quicker than 3.79 min (1 *SD* below the average time,  $M(SD) = 9.65(5.86)$  minutes), and 134 participants for giving the same response to any of 7 conceptually opposite pair of items.<sup>4</sup> The resulting final sample,  $N = 809$ .

## 7.2 | Measures

All items (shown in Table S6) were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants completed the same measures of religious fundamentalism,  $M(SD) = 3.31(1.65)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.95$ , and right-wing authoritarianism,  $3.24(1.27)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.92$ , as in Study 1. For RWA facets, aggression,  $M(SD) = 3.33(1.71)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ , conventionalism,  $M(SD) = 2.64(1.60)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ , submission,  $M(SD) = 3.58(1.33)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.86$ . We administered the Tripartite Meaning Scale (Costin & Vignoles, 2019). This scale is composed of 4 subscales measuring global perceptions of meaning in life (e.g., “My life as a whole has meaning”),  $M(SD) = 5.47(1.36)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ; existential significance (e.g., “Even considering how big the universe is, I can say that my life matters”),  $M(SD) = 5.06(1.50)$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ; purpose (e.g., “I have certain life goals that compel me to keep going”),  $M(SD) = 5.14(1.27)$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ; and coherence (e.g., “Looking at my life as a whole, things seem clear to me”),  $M(SD) = 5.04(1.30)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.85$ . Finally, participants completed a 6-item measure of intrinsic religiosity from the Revised Intrinsic/Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; e.g., “My whole approach to life is based on my religion”),  $M(SD) = 3.81(1.74)$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ .

## 8 | RESULTS

### 8.1 | Preliminary analyses

First, we created composites by averaging all items from each respective measure to examine correlations among

variables, shown in Table 2. As can be seen, religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism were strongly correlated (corrected  $r = .84$ ). Global meaning in life was positively related to the facets of meaning in life, and all of these were positively associated with religious fundamentalism. The link between religious fundamentalism and existential significance was stronger than for purpose or coherence,  $z$ 's = 4.99, and 3.96, respectively, both  $p$ 's < .001. Global meaning in life and the facets of meaning were positively related to right-wing authoritarianism. As with religious fundamentalism, existential significance was more strongly related to right-wing authoritarianism than purpose,  $z = 4.20$ , or coherence,  $z = 3.38$ , both  $p$ 's < .001.

Intrinsic religiosity was positively related to all variables, and especially strongly with religious fundamentalism (although confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated these are empirically separable, see the Supporting Information, pp. 50–51). As with religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism, existential significance was more strongly related to intrinsic religiosity than were purpose,  $z = 4.81$ , or coherence,  $z = 4.40$ , both  $p$ 's < .001.

Partial correlations showed that controlling for religious fundamentalism or intrinsic religiosity, overall right-wing authoritarianism, and authoritarian aggression, conventionalism, and submission were no longer significantly related to global meaning in life or the facets, all  $p$ 's > .07. As in Study 1, controlling for RWA, religious fundamentalism remained positively related to global meaning in life and the facets,  $r$ 's ranged from .12 for purpose to .25 for existential significance, all  $p$ 's < .001. However, controlling for intrinsic religiosity, religious fundamentalism no longer significantly related to meaning in life variables, all  $p$ 's > .43 (and in the case of purpose, the relationship flipped to negative,  $r = -.09$ ,  $p = .016$ ). Finally, partialling out RWA or religious fundamentalism, intrinsic religiosity remained significantly related to all meaning in life variables,  $r$ 's ranged from .17 to .35, all  $p$ 's < .001.

TABLE 2 Correlations among measures, Study 2

	Significance	Purpose	Coherence	RF	RWA	IREL
Global meaning in life	.84*	.74*	.78*	.29*	.22*	.36*
Significance		.62*	.66*	.38*	.30*	.45*
Purpose			.76*	.15*	.10	.24*
Coherence				.20*	.14*	.26*
Religious fundamentalism					.79*	.83*
Right-wing authoritarianism						.62*

Note:  $N = 808$ .

Abbreviation: IREL, intrinsic religiosity; RF, religious fundamentalism; RWA, right-wing authoritarianism.

\* $p \leq .001$ .

## 8.2 | Confirmatory factor analysis

Because Study 2 employed a multifaceted measure of meaning in life, we compared models allowing for 4, 5, 6, and 8 factors, using SRMR, RMSEA, CFI, and  $\chi^2$  to evaluate model fit. The 4-factor model was the simplest—with each construct represented by a single factor. The 5-factor model added an additional factor for right-wing authoritarianism (one for conventionalism and one for aggression, consistent with Study 1). The 6-factor allowed meaning in life to be represented by an additional second factor. Finally, the 8-factor model allowed for two right-wing authoritarianism factors, and four meaning in life factors (consistent with the original scale design), and one factor each for religious fundamentalism and intrinsic religiosity.

As can be seen from Table 3, the 8-factor model showed significantly better fit than the other models. This model included a factor for religious fundamentalism, one factor representing authoritarian conventionalism, one representing authoritarian aggression, four factors for meaning in life (global meaning in life, significance, purpose, and coherence), and one representing intrinsic religiosity. All item loadings were above .62, and are shown in the Supporting Information (Table S6, pp. 28–31). The 8-factor model was retained for the structural equation model (with each factor score computed using unit weights).

## 8.3 | Structural equation models

### 8.3.1 | Replicating Study 1

The structural equation model for the contributions of right-wing authoritarianism and religious

fundamentalism to global meaning in life through each of the facets of meaning is shown in Figure 2. Replicating Study 1, when modeled jointly, only religious fundamentalism significantly and positively contributed to meaning in life. Authoritarian aggression was unrelated to the facets of meaning, and authoritarian conventionalism was negatively associated with purpose and existential significance.

Table 4 shows the indirect effects of each factor on global meaning in life through the facets of meaning. As can be seen, indirect effects of religious fundamentalism on global meaning through all facets were statistically significant, but that for the existential significance facet of meaning was significantly stronger than those for coherence, and purpose, demonstrated by their non-overlapping 95% confidence intervals. The indirect contributions of authoritarian conventionalism through purpose and existential significance were significant and negative. No other indirect effects reached statistical significance.

### 8.3.2 | Intrinsic religiosity

Is there something unique about fundamentalism, or does religiosity, itself, explain these results? To address this question, we modeled the contributions of right-wing authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, and intrinsic religiosity to global meaning in life through each of the facets of meaning (shown in Figure 3). *Only* intrinsic religiosity significantly and positively contributed to meaning in life. Paths for religious fundamentalism and authoritarianism were not significant (except the direct path from conventionalism to purpose was significant and negative) when modeled simultaneously with intrinsic religiosity.

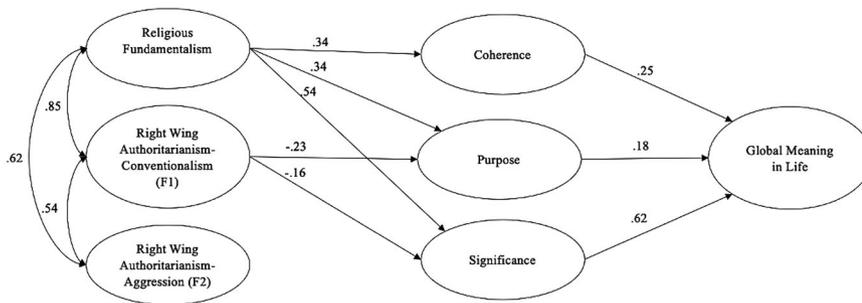
Indirect effects of each factor on global meaning in life through the facets of meaning are shown in Table 5.

TABLE 3 Confirmatory factor analysis results Study 2

	$\chi^2$	df	SRMR	RMSEA	CFI	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	p-value
Model 1	8,176.53	1,074	0.08	0.09	0.80			
Model 2	6,516.33	1,070	0.07	0.08	0.85			
Model 3	5,634.40	1,065	0.07	0.07	0.87			
Model 4	5,092.68	1,052	0.06	0.07	0.89			
Model 2 versus Model 4						1,423.70	18	.000
Model 3 versus Model 4						541.72	13	.000

Note:  $N = 789$  (out of 809 observations). Model description: Model 1 = four factors consisting of religious fundamentalism, right wing authoritarianism, meaning in life, and intrinsic religiosity; Model 2 = five factors consisting of religious fundamentalism, two right wing authoritarianism factors (conventionalism & aggression factors), meaning in life, and intrinsic religiosity; Model 3 = six factors consisting of religious fundamentalism, two right wing authoritarianism factors (conventionalism & aggression factors), two meaning in life factors and intrinsic religiosity; Model 4 = eight factors consisting of religious fundamentalism, two right wing authoritarianism factors (conventionalism & aggression factors), four meaning in life factors (global meaning in life, significance, purpose, and coherence), and intrinsic religiosity.

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual.



**FIGURE 2** Structural equation model, Study 2. Values presented in the figure are standardized estimates. Only significant paths are presented. Non-significant paths can be found in Table 4

As can be seen, indirect effects of intrinsic religiosity on global meaning in life through all facets were statistically significant. The magnitude of indirect effect through the existential significance facet of meaning in life was stronger than those for coherence, and purpose, as the 95% confidence intervals did not overlap. Finally, no indirect effects for religious fundamentalism or right-wing authoritarianism reached statistical significance when modeled jointly with intrinsic religiosity.

#### 8.4 | Post-hoc analyses

Multicollinearity arising from the strong relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and religious variables renders the estimation of their unique contributions to meaning in life challenging. Results of partial correlations and structural equation modeling that included these variables simultaneously were influenced by suppression effects, with positive raw correlations flipping to significantly negative links. We implemented one final approach to testing the possibility that right-wing authoritarianism may serve an existential function in the absence of religious beliefs. In Studies 1 and 2, we included an item tapping god belief (“To what extent do you believe a Supreme Being, God, exists?”). Possible responses included 1 “God certainly does not exist;” 2 “God probably does not exist;” 3 “God might exist (not sure);” 4 “God probably does exist;” and 5 “God certainly does exist;” Study 1  $M(SD) = 3.52(1.39)$ ; Study 2  $M(SD) = 3.61(1.42)$ .

Using these data, we examined whether right-wing authoritarianism was related to meaning in life among those rating this item a 1, that god certainly does not exist. In Study 1, for those who did not believe in god ( $n = 87$ ), right-wing authoritarianism was positively related to global meaning in life,  $r = .21, p = .047$ . In Study 2, among those giving the item a rating of 1 ( $n = 77$ ), right-wing authoritarianism was significantly related to existential significance,  $r = .25, p = .031$ , and was positively but non-significantly related to global meaning,  $r = .17, p = .13$ , purpose,  $r = .15, p = .20$ , and coherence,  $r = .10, p = .38$ . These results suggest that among those who believe in

god, the existential function of right-wing authoritarianism is overlapping with that of religious fundamentalism, and particularly intrinsic religiosity. However, among those who do not believe god exists, right-wing authoritarianism demonstrates some capacity to serve an existential function, and consistent with past research (Womick et al., 2019), it is primarily about promoting existential significance.

#### 8.5 | Brief discussion of Study 2

Study 2 replicated Study 1, showing that religious fundamentalism explains the association between rightwing authoritarianism and meaning in life. However and importantly, the association between religious fundamentalism and meaning in life is, itself, explained by intrinsic religiosity. Thus, it appears there exists no unique existential benefit of fundamentalism above and beyond religiosity.

With regard to the facets of meaning in life, predictions were largely supported. Right-wing authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, and intrinsic religiosity were more strongly related to existential significance than purpose or coherence. In addition, the structural equation model showed that, although the indirect effects of intrinsic religiosity through coherence and purpose were statistically significant, these were significantly weaker than the indirect effect of intrinsic religiosity through existential significance. These data add to mounting evidence showing the existential function of ideological sources of meaning primarily concern existential significance.

### 9 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In two studies, we probed the potentially unique versus overlapping contributions of right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism to meaning in life. We extended on past research, which linked religious constructs to meaning in life (e.g., King & Hicks, 2021), showing that religious fundamentalism is not only

positively related to this experience, but explains the association between right-wing authoritarianism and global meaning in life. The existential function of religious fundamentalism was primarily about the existential significance facet of meaning, rather than purpose or coherence. Thus, one reason people may find fundamentalism psychologically appealing, despite its association with rigidity and hostility, may be because it serves such an existential function. Study 2 additionally showed that intrinsic religiosity was similarly more strongly related to significance than purpose or coherence. Further, religious fundamentalism no longer significantly contributed to meaning in life when accounting for intrinsic religiosity. Thus, the fundamentalist aspect of this construct appears not to serve a unique existential function above and beyond religious belief. A number of implications of these results warrant discussion.

### 9.1 | Religious versus secular sources of meaning in life

In addition to building on one previous study (Neil, 2014) by providing evidence for the positive link between religious fundamentalism and meaning in life the United States, these studies also tested the unique contribution of secular versus religious philosophies of life to meaning in life. Both right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism were positively related to perceptions of life's meaningfulness, consistent with theoretical perspectives (e.g., Fromm, 1941; Hogg, 2007; Jost et al., 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2009) asserting that both secular and religious views may serve an existential function. However, partial correlations and SEM showed that when accounting for religious sources (religious fundamentalism and intrinsic religiosity), secular sources (right-wing authoritarianism) no longer served such a function. This pattern is consistent with the notion that the existential function of religious beliefs may be superior to that of secular beliefs because they offer answers to questions of both one's meaning in life, as well as the larger question of the Meaning of Life. Yet, post-hoc analyses demonstrated that among those who do not believe in god, right-wing authoritarianism continues to promote perceptions of meaning in life, particularly significance. Thus, in the absence of religious belief, right-wing authoritarianism retains the capacity to serve an existential function, perhaps by offering symbolic immortality through investment in cultural values and traditions.

Study 1 left open the issue of whether the religious or fundamentalist aspect of religious fundamentalism was responsible for driving its positive relationship with

meaning in life. Due to its link with anti-social outcomes, like racism (Hall et al., 2010), religious fundamentalism differs from typical sources of meaning in life. However, Study 2 showed that when modeled jointly with intrinsic religiosity, religious fundamentalism no longer significantly contributed to meaning in life. These results suggest that fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible do not uniquely contribute to meaning in life above and beyond intrinsic religiosity. Thus, the positive relationship of religious fundamentalism with meaning in life arises from the religious component of this construct, rather than the more rigid and intolerant fundamentalist component.

When accounting for their mutual association with religious fundamentalism in Study 1, and intrinsic religiosity in Study 2, factors representing authoritarianism had non-significant or weak and negative relationships to meaning in life. What might explain these results? The fact that authoritarianism factors had positive relationships with meaning in life that only flipped to negative signs when considered in tandem other variables suggests the potential role of suppression resulting from multicollinearity. Another possibility is that these negative relationships are conceptually meaningful. Recall that authoritarian aggression was negatively linked with meaning in Study 1, and conventional authoritarian attitudes and preference for societal tradition were negatively linked with meaning in life in Study 2. Perhaps authoritarian aggression in a vacuum, without a religious or conventional basis simply detracts from the experience of meaning in life. Similarly, attitudes reflected by items measuring authoritarian conventionalism (e.g., "There is nothing wrong with premarital sexual intercourse," and "Gays and lesbians are just as healthy and moral as anybody else," both reverse-scored) often co-exist with religiousness in the United States (Frederico et al., 2021). It is unclear what ratings on such items mean for those who are not also religious. Absent from the divine justification provided by religion, these judgmental and homophobic attitudes may stem instead from personality traits reflecting aggression, hostility, and interpersonal callousness, contributing to a lower sense that life is meaningful. Due to the inconsistency in these patterns across studies, we urge caution in their interpretation and suggest these issues as worthy of further empirical attention.

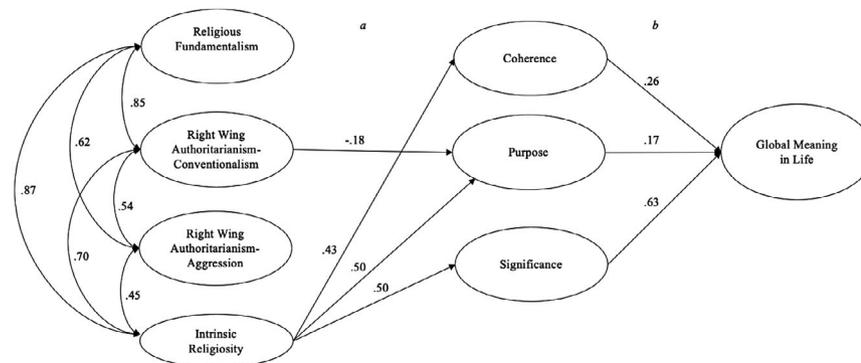
Reconciling the present results with past research, it is possible that the previously observed contribution of right-wing authoritarianism to global meaning in life through existential significance (Womick et al., 2019) was driven by the sense of identification with religious, rather than political groups. Alternatively, it may be that authoritarianism rooted in the spiritual or sacred provides better

**TABLE 4** Indirect & total effects of religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism factors on global meaning in life through significance, purpose, and coherence, Study 2

Path	$\alpha$ path	$b$ path	Effect [90% CI]
Religious fundamentalism			
Indirect path via coherence	0.22 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	0.25 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	0.06 <sup>**</sup> [0.03, 0.10]
Indirect path via purpose	0.24 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	0.16 (0.05) <sup>**</sup>	0.04 <sup>*</sup> [0.01, 0.08]
Indirect path via significance	0.40 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	0.53 (0.04) <sup>***</sup>	0.22 <sup>***</sup> [0.15, 0.28]
Total effect on global meaning	–	–	0.31 <sup>***</sup> [0.21, 0.40]
Authoritarian conventionalism (F1)			
Indirect path via coherence	–0.12 (0.06)	0.25 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	–0.03 [–0.06, 0.01]
Indirect path via purpose	–0.20 (0.07) <sup>**</sup>	0.16 (0.05) <sup>**</sup>	–0.03 <sup>*</sup> [–0.07, –0.01]
Indirect path via significance	–0.14 (0.06) <sup>*</sup>	0.53 (0.04) <sup>***</sup>	–0.07 <sup>*</sup> [–0.14, –0.02]
Total effect on global meaning	–	–	–0.15 <sup>*</sup> [–0.26, –0.04]
Authoritarian aggression (F2)			
Indirect path via coherence	–0.01 (0.04)	0.25 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	–0.01 [–0.03, 0.01]
Indirect path via purpose	0.02 (0.04)	0.16 (0.05) <sup>**</sup>	0.00 [–0.01, 0.02]
Indirect path via significance	0.01 (0.04)	0.53 (0.04) <sup>***</sup>	0.01 [–0.05, 0.04]
Total effect on global meaning	–	–	–0.02 [–0.09, 0.05]

Note:  $N = 789$ . Estimates presented are unstandardized. Standard errors are in parentheses.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ ; <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ ; <sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$ .

**FIGURE 3** Structural equation model including religiosity, Study 2. Values presented in the figure are standardized estimates. Only significant paths are presented. Non-significant paths can be found in Table 5

existential support (e.g., Feldman, 2003), and the possibility of literal, rather than symbolic immortality (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Future research might probe this issue further.

## 9.2 | Measuring religious fundamentalism

These results have implications for the measurement and conceptualization of religious fundamentalism. At the very least, exploratory factor analyses in the preliminary study demonstrated that there are issues regarding reverse-worded items intended to capture religious fundamentalism. Although such items are commonly thought to help avoid yea or nay saying, such items may not truly reflect the opposite of religious

fundamentalism (and scholars have raised similar concerns for reverse-scored items included in numerous other measures, see Ebesutani et al., 2012; Jachimowicz et al., 2019; Spector et al., 1997). It is clear that strongly endorsing items such as “To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to the one, fundamentally true religion,” corresponds to the conceptual definition of high religious fundamentalism. However, it is less clear what exactly is measured by reverse-keyed items like, “Whenever science and sacred scripture conflict, science is probably right,” or “All of the religions in the world have flaws and wrong teachings. There is no perfectly true, right religion.” Strong endorsements of these (corresponding to a low score on religious fundamentalism) might arise from a variety of sources, including open minded thinking, interpersonal and epistemic tolerance, cognitive complexity, the absence

**TABLE 5** Indirect & total effects of religious fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism factors, and intrinsic religiosity on global meaning in life through significance, purpose, and coherence, Study 2

Path	<i>a</i> path	<i>b</i> path	Effect [90% CI]
<b>Religious fundamentalism</b>			
Indirect path via coherence	−0.06 (0.09)	0.25 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	−0.02 [−0.07, 0.03]
Indirect path via purpose	−0.13 (0.10)	0.15 (0.05) <sup>**</sup>	−0.02 [−0.06, 0.01]
Indirect path via significance	0.02 (0.09)	0.54 (0.03) <sup>***</sup>	0.01 [−0.09, 0.11]
Total effect on global meaning	–	–	−0.03 [−0.18, 0.12]
<b>Authoritarian conventionalism (F1)</b>			
Indirect path via coherence	−0.09 (0.07)	0.25 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	−0.02 [−0.06, 0.01]
Indirect path via purpose	−0.16 (0.07) <sup>*</sup>	0.15 (0.05) <sup>**</sup>	−0.02 [−0.12, −0.01]
Indirect path via significance	−0.10 (0.06)	0.54 (0.03) <sup>***</sup>	−0.05 [−0.01, 0.03]
Total effect on global meaning	–	–	−0.12 <sup>*</sup> [−0.23, −0.01]
<b>Authoritarian aggression (F2)</b>			
Indirect path via coherence	0.04 (0.04)	0.25 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	0.01 [−0.01, 0.04]
Indirect path via purpose	0.08 (0.04)	0.15 (0.05) <sup>**</sup>	0.01 [−0.00, 0.04]
Indirect path via significance	0.06 (0.04)	0.54 (0.03) <sup>***</sup>	0.03 [−0.01, 0.08]
Total effect on global meaning	–	–	0.06 [−0.02, 0.13]
<b>Intrinsic religiosity</b>			
Indirect path via coherence	0.31 (0.07) <sup>***</sup>	0.25 (0.06) <sup>***</sup>	0.08 <sup>**</sup> [0.04, 0.14]
Indirect path via purpose	0.42 (0.08) <sup>***</sup>	0.15 (0.05) <sup>**</sup>	0.06 <sup>*</sup> [0.02, 0.12]
Indirect path via significance	0.42 (0.08) <sup>***</sup>	0.54 (0.03) <sup>***</sup>	0.23 <sup>***</sup> [0.14, 0.33]
Total effect on global meaning	–	–	0.37 <sup>***</sup> [0.25, 0.51]

Note:  $N = 785$ . Estimates presented are unstandardized. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

of religious beliefs, or non-fundamentalist religious beliefs. Thus, these reverse-scored items may be more conceptually ambiguous, and this ambiguity may have been reflected by their weak primary loadings and strong cross-loadings.

### 9.3 | Meaning in life

The present results add to the literature suggesting that worldviews contribute to the global sense of meaning in life via the facet of significance. The present studies replicated previous research showing that right-wing ideology and intrinsic religiosity contribute to global meaning via existential significance (Womick et al., 2019), and demonstrated the same pattern for religious fundamentalism.

The link between right-wing authoritarianism and existential significance identified in past research may be counterintuitive. After all, it is puzzling that endorsing an ideology that involves submitting the self to an authority would enhance a sense of personal significance (except perhaps via vicarious processes). The present results help resolve this ambiguity. The link between right-wing authoritarianism and existential significance is explained by

the persons' relationship to a divine authority and a religious group, which offer the existential security of an after-life. Worldviews characterized by rigid dictates and values contribute to meaning through the sense that one matters.

Intrinsic religiosity related to global meaning through existential significance and to a lesser extent purpose and coherence. These results are consistent with Park and Edmondson's (2012) assertion that religious faith provides a kind of all-purpose meaning source that serves the need for meaning in an all-encompassing way. Such breadth may distinguish religiosity from other sources of meaning in important ways. It may be that, unlike secular worldviews, religiosity informs behavior that promotes not only significance but purpose and experiences of coherence. For instance, religiosity might offer valued goals such as attending church and improving one's relationship with one's religious community. Likewise, it might be such routines and rituals that result from regular engagement in these behaviors (e.g., weekly church attendance; prayer before bed) that promote coherence. Thus, it is possible that, through lower-level constructs, religiosity contributes to purpose and coherence with a magnitude similar to that of existential significance. Future research should address these possibilities.

## 9.4 | Limitations

These data are cross-sectional data and were collected from non-representative online samples. A key weakness is the lack of religious diversity. In both studies, the overwhelming majority of participants were Christians. Although people of all religious faiths are similarly susceptible to endorsing fundamentalist and extremist views of religion (Bakali, 2019; Johnson, 2018), whether the present results would generalize to other religious groups is a remaining question for future research. Likewise, participants in all samples were located in the United States, where there may exist an idiosyncratically strong link between Christianity and right-wing ideology (e.g., Frederico et al., 2021; Pew Research Center, 2014). Future research should examine whether, in other cultural contexts where the two are not so closely intertwined, each may have unique contributions, or relate with differing magnitude or direction, to meaning in life.

Additionally, cross-sectional data cannot speak to the temporal order of the associations among these constructs. Consistent with the theory, we conceptualized meaning in life as an outcome of right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. However, it is also possible that meaning in life could be a predictor of these constructs. Low meaning in life may predict subsequent increases in religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism (consistent with Significance Quest Theory, Kruglanski et al., 2009). Additionally, it is possible that these two orders of associations (meaning in life predicting ideology, and meaning in life resulting from ideology) are not mutually exclusive. Likewise, anecdotal evidence suggests religious fundamentalist groups have been instrumental in driving the popularity of authoritarian political movements in the United States, such as the alt-right (Johnson, 2018). The temporal interplay of these religious and secular forms of authoritarianism warrant future scientific attention. For instance, it is possible that religious fundamentalism promotes subsequent political authoritarianism (or vice versa), which in turn contributes to the feeling that life is meaningful. Future research needs to employ longitudinal methodology to address these possibilities.

## 9.5 | Conclusion

Two studies showed that the link between right-wing authoritarianism and meaning in life is explained by their mutual overlap with religious fundamentalism. The contribution of religious fundamentalism to meaning in life arises from religious aspect of this construct, rather than fundamentalism, itself. The unique association of intrinsic religiosity and meaning in life was primarily

about existential significance, providing some support for theories that place social identity and group dynamics at the crux of the existential function of ideology (e.g., Hogg, 2007; Kruglanski et al., 2009; Pyszczynski et al., 2004). By pitting secular and non-secular constructs against each other, we demonstrated that non-religious worldview beliefs, which provide answers to the question of meaning in life, carry less existential potency than religious sources, which are poised to answer questions of both one's meaning *in* life and the grander question of the Meaning *of* Life.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose for this research.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

All Studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the corresponding author's institution, and were conducted in an ethical manner.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

J. Womick and L.A. King developed the study concept and study design. Data collection was performed by J. Womick. All authors contributed to data analyses. J. Womick wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors provided feedback and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These studies were not pre-registered.
- <sup>2</sup> In a U.S. sample, a composite of religious fundamentalism, general religiousness, religious commitment, and intrinsic religiosity was positively related to meaning in life (Davis & Hicks, 2016; though it is unclear whether one component was primarily responsible for the link).
- <sup>3</sup> The first pair was two meaning in life items, "My life has a clear sense of purpose," "My life has no clear purpose," and the other three pairs were religious fundamentalism items, including: Pair two ("God has given humanity a complete, unailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed," "Scriptures may contain general truths, but they should NOT be considered completely, literally true from beginning to end"); pair three ("No single book of religious teachings contains all the intrinsic, fundamental truths about life," "There is a particular set of religious teachings in this world that are so true, you can't go any "deeper" because they are the basic, bedrock message that God has given humanity"); pair 4 ("The basic cause of evil in this world is Satan, who is still constantly and ferociously fighting against God," "'Satan' is just the name people give to their own bad impulses. There really is no such things as diabolical 'Prince of Darkness' who tempts us").

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the three religious fundamentalism pairs from Study 1, we identified 4 opposite pairs of meaning in life items: Pair 1 (“My entire existence is full of meaning” vs. “My existence is empty of meaning.”); pair 2 (“I can make sense of the things that happen in my life” vs. “I can’t make sense of events in my life.”); pair 3 (“I have certain life goals that compel me to keep going.” vs. “I don’t have compelling life goals that keep me going.”); and pair 4 (“Even considering how big the universe is, I can say that my life matters” vs. “Given the vastness of the universe, my life does not matter.”).

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