

(Dis)Belief in QAnon: Competing Hermeneutics in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

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Among many disruptive events in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, the meta-conspiracy theory known as QAnon surged, intertwining politics and (quasi-)religious belief in ways that have yet to be fully understood. This article explores the power of deep memetic frames—namely, how we ideologically see the world and communicate that worldview—as a means used by certain individuals and amplified by politicians, including President Trump, to mobilize the voting public across party lines. It also reveals how representations of QAnon by the mainstream media played into the movement’s success. For QAnon followers, the election became a crossroads moment, a “Great Awakening” whereby one could identify as part of a collective insider movement. Examining the epistemological de/construction of truth in a media context and diverging hermeneutical approaches—faith and suspicion, respectively—the article argues for the importance of religion as a lens to better understand QAnon in a deeply polarized United States.

Introduction

The 2020 U.S. Presidential Election took place during the culmination of a three-year campaign known as QAnon, which was waged by an anonymous person—or, more likely, a set of individuals—posting under the moniker Q. The political significance of QAnon should not be underestimated, both before the election and after, including its potential impact on the

insurrectionism at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. From its inception, QAnon presented President Donald Trump as a protector of the United States against a range of enemies, and its followers were urged to patriotically lend him their support. However, insofar as QAnon used religious language and painted its enemies in a polarized worldview of good versus evil, the movement demands analysis not only as a historical phenomenon leading up to 2020 but also as representative of an enduring set of beliefs that promise to have an impact on future U.S. politics. This article therefore examines the religious dimensions of QAnon alongside the political, understanding them as both entangled and distinct.

First, I present a brief overview of QAnon and the stages of its growth by using a model based on the proselytization and diffusion of a new religious movement (e.g., early Christianity). In QAnon's messaging and framing of the war to be waged, religion was tightly intertwined with political actors and agendas. Wading deeper into the fray, the article joins the existing discussion on conspiracy theories and religion, particularly *conspiracism as religion* (Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem 2019, 4–5), by arguing that belief in QAnon's tenets is akin to religious belief. As Adrienne LaFrance (2020) put it, "To look at QAnon is to see not just a conspiracy theory but the birth of a new religion." And yet, to understand QAnon also requires problematizing the term "conspiracy theory" as a trope used to demonize positions held by a certain individual or group, thus obscuring analysis of their actual beliefs; the same even can be said of religion, often regarded as demanding an adherence to dogma at the expense of intellectual argumentation. Here it is helpful to employ hermeneutics, a methodology that critically engages competing interpretations of texts and what is true; traditionally used in biblical scholarship, it has since been extended to historical and philosophical analysis. This method is all the more relevant in light of QAnon's intertwinings with Christianity, for as much as one might describe the movement as a new religion, it fundamentally depended on the tenets and language of an existing one. Furthermore, I argue that QAnon was complicated by an intertwining of political and religious motivations, reflecting entangled but also differing concerns. On one hand, competing interpretations of truth (versus post-truth) during the Trump presidency were instrumentalized for a political purpose. On the other, they signaled a profound epistemological rupture between those who followed QAnon and those who labeled and critiqued these followers as "disconnected from reality". The article closes by framing this juncture and tension in the language of hermeneutics: in relation to QAnon, one finds in play both a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of faith.

In this article, I use discourse analysis to examine religious elements contained in the primary source published by Q. Practically speaking, this means locating posts purportedly made by Q side by side with biblical citations. Given the size of the QAnon corpus, there are limitations to this approach, and so quantitative content analysis is employed as well (for example, by reviewing how many times certain keywords appear). I also review the rhetoric of secondary sources, including media representations of QAnon, as they have a bearing on the discussion of competing hermeneutics. Furthermore, in an attempt at scholarly objectivity, I do not attempt to assign truth status to either side, especially given the wide range of points which Q made and followers later added; these demand analysis individually and in their own right, something that is far beyond the scope of this article. Nor is the goal to prove that religion was a universal in how people approached QAnon, as certainly it was not a factor for many. The aim here is to demonstrate how religion was employed by QAnon and belief played an important role in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election.

The Growth Arc of QAnon: Canonical Creation and Evangelism

The growth and success of QAnon as a movement can be attributed to a number of different factors: the power of the internet to support community-building and the sharing of political memes (Wong 2020), a process of social contagion through which radical ideologies are spread (Youngblood 2020), a peculiar predisposition toward conspiracy theories in the United States (LaFrance 2020), or the participatory nature of QAnon as a nexus of conspiracy theories that others could engage in and write (Zuckerman 2019). I would argue that another theory can be added to this, namely, that the growth of QAnon can be mapped through a model of canonical creation (i.e., assigning authority to a closed corpus of texts with religious significance) and evangelism dependent on key actors at various stages.

From the first message—or “drop” of data—by the person(s) known as Q on 4chan on October 28, 2017, until the last one on 8kun before the election on November 3, 2020, the QAnon corpus comprises approximately 4,950 different posts, not including “lost” ones that were discovered later, over thirty-eight months (for a stylometric analysis of different writing styles, see Aliapoulous et al. 2021, 6–7; OrphAnalytics 2020). Their content ranged widely, changing in relation to current events and failed prophecies (Tian 2021), being predominantly political in nature but also including religious allusions. Followers seized on new Q-drops like revealed gospel, engaging in exegesis to

decipher the more cryptic posts and creatively building a body of interpretations. To argue for a canonization of QAnon, however, it is necessary to understand the process by which the movement grew, as it did not happen overnight or by accident.

At a White House dinner held with the heads of the U.S. Armed Forces on October 5, 2017, President Trump drew a circular figure in the air and made an odd comment: “Maybe this is the calm before the storm.” When reporters asked him what he meant, he enigmatically replied, “You’ll find out” (Carter 2017). Three weeks later, in the /pol (“politically incorrect”) discussion thread on 4chan, an anonymous online imageboard created in 2003, a pseudonymous user with the name “Q” (based on the Department of Energy’s security clearance granting access to Top Secret Restricted Data) posted twice about “the calm before the storm” (QPosts Online, 11/2/2017). These drops suggested concerns with foreign actors like Russia and China, while other posts purported inside knowledge about the threat to democracy by the “Deep State” (a group of individuals in seats of power or the military, who are believed to be controlling the government) or that Hillary Clinton would soon face extradition for sex trafficking. What the “storm” entailed, and whether it would be foreign or domestic, was not entirely clear. In retrospect, not forgetting Trump’s comment, the storm can be read as QAnon itself.

As we will see, QAnon used strong Christian framing in its messages. By extension, the main actors connected to it were cast in a religious light. In my overview of the movement, therefore, I highlight the range of roles in italics. For example, if Q was a “*postmodern prophet*” of the movement to be, Trump was presented as a *savior*, a “messianic figure” who would bring the storm (Burke 2020) and catalyze “The Great Awakening” (Figure 1).



Figure 1. “The Great Awakening.” Meme posted by Q, 10/21/2020. QPosts Online.

This expression signaled a fusion of political and religious. Followers could interpret awakening on two levels, conspiratorial or soteriological, as waking up to the truth (of the Deep State, for instance) and/or the Truth (of God). It is important to note that for them, these were not mutually exclusive.

Long before it caught President Trump’s interest, however, QAnon had quite a humble beginning. Born of an already existent “anon” genre in online bulletin boards, the first posts by Q followed those of a “high-level analyst and strategist” of FBIAnon, who promised criminal details on the Clinton Foundation, which was under investigation in 2016. Q made similarly mysterious drops on other imageboards, abandoning 4chan (after it was supposedly infiltrated) for the more permissive 8chan board (later rebranded as 8kun), known for its acceptance of discussions favoring white supremacy and neo-Nazism. At this point, QAnon had an audience but not a large one. In fact, it is unlikely that the posts would have gone anywhere without the efforts of what I call *evangelists*, a select group who brought the message to a wider audience. These were a successful YouTuber and a pair of 4chan moderators (Zadrozny and Collins 2018), who shared the Q-drops on Reddit, a popular discussion website with millions of users. Here, a community formed around a sub-reddit called r/CBTS_Stream, named after Trump’s “Call Before the Storm”; it would soon be followed by others, the largest being r/GreatAwakening. Once again, certain individuals played a disproportionately significant role in interpreting Q’s often cryptic posts, driving discussion and evangelizing the message. An analysis of Reddit reveals that “20% of users made

over 90% of the comments on QAnon subreddits, suggesting that a few prominent individuals control the conversation” (Aliapoulios et al. 2021, 11). This phase was absolutely critical in the formation of the *canon* and its dissemination to the broader public.

The next major growth spurt came when posts shared on Reddit began propagating on Twitter, other social media platforms, and aggregation sites. Their viral spread was especially supported by the use of hashtags (e.g., #QAnon, #GreatAwakening), which allowed easy identification and framing (Xu 2020, 1081). By replicating a specific corpus of posts, the aggregation sites also accorded canonical status to the set of drops purported to have been made by Q (Aliapoulios et al. 2021, 6). By the time Reddit shut down QAnon-related threads in September 2018, they had already caught fire across the Internet and as a topic in mainstream media. For instance, just before Reddit’s announcement, the *New York Times Magazine* published a piece, “A Trail of ‘Bread Crumbs,’ Leading Conspiracy Theorists Into the Wilderness” (Schwartz 2018), that effectively left a trail for *the masses* to follow as well. At the same time, one-sided and “snarky” coverage by the media only served to solidify belief among QAnon followers that there was a disinformation campaign and agenda to ignore or invalidate what they perceived as the truth (on the tendency of the media to mock QAnon, see Phillips 2020a).

After gaining a wider audience, Q was able to better mobilize their posts toward influencing votes. It must be noted that the general tone of Q-drops had been political before. For example, key figures like Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain were vilified: Clinton was described as part of a child sex trafficking ring, while Obama and McCain purportedly had secret ties to terrorist groups. At the same time, Trump was built up as a hero who was heroically trying to save the children, or whom, they believed, was targeted by Obama’s wiretapping and “spygate” operation in the 2016 election (Tian 2021). QAnon’s political agenda became especially overt in the midterm elections, when Q used multiple drops to stress a “red October” (code for a GOP landslide in the midterm elections) and then make claims of election fraud. Both of these foreshadowed events that would be seen in the 2020 Presidential Election. As Q began to increasingly play an influencer role and the canon served as a playbook, two more types of evangelists emerged: at the institutional level, there were *patriarchs* within the administration, such as the President and those in his camp, whose retweets and messaging to large audiences on social media bordered on explicit approval of QAnon; at the grassroots level, there were those who acted almost

like *missionaries*, taking the gospel of Q to the streets and political rallies, carrying signs and wearing clothes with provocative slogans.

As noted above, the use of Christian terminology is intended to highlight the roles of the different actors and how the growth of QAnon can be understood as a form of religious proselytism—from revelation to codification to wider dispersion. In a similar way, one can even read the approval of QAnon at the highest levels of government as an important turning point in the movement, akin to the Emperor Constantine’s validation of Christianity in the fourth century, when it was longer considered a marginal cult. Perhaps most significantly, however, the followers of Q understood themselves in terms of this model. As one posted on Telegram, a messaging app that became popular after social media channels like Facebook and Twitter removed the accounts of QAnon evangelists, “If Jesus turned the world upside down with 12 people, imagine what we could do? How many are we now?” (Greenspan 2021).

The Entanglement of Christianity and Politics in QAnon

Christianity formed an important aspect of the content offered by QAnon to its followers. Quantitative cluster analysis shows that a large number of posts use religious and/or spiritual terms, with “heavenly” being one of the ten most important words in the corpus (Aliapoulios et al. 2021, 8). A search for “God” (understood here in the context of Christianity) reveals that it is mentioned no less than 223 times in the Q-drops. Beyond sheer numbers, however, the types of references made to religion are also significant. Q frequently cited passages of Christian scripture calling on God for strength, and such posts leveraged spirituality in various ways. For example, using shared language not only strengthened the canonical nature of Q’s corpus and established common cause with a Christian audience but also bade followers to marry their faith with their belief in the movement, and to actively engage in praxis by praying for the realization of its goals (QPosts 11/1/2017); in this way, QAnon was able to mobilize people beyond the voting booth, leveraging their spiritual investment and ideological worldview for a wider public dissemination of its message. Needless to say, I do not intend to equate QAnon with Christianity here or disparage it—just as the fact that radical forms of many religions exist is not taken as criticism of those religions themselves—but merely point out the power of strategically targeting and attracting people on the basis of their faith.

Furthermore, the scriptural references chosen by Q (QPosts 2/17/2019) reinforced a deeply polarized worldview: “But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from evil” (2 Thessalonians 3:3 Revised Standard Version); “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1); “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13). The “us and them” trope was reiterated and amplified in chat rooms online and in person, in books (e.g., Simon Smith’s *QAnon and 1000 Years of Peace: Destroying the New World Order and Taking the Kingdom of Christ by Force!*), self-made documentaries, and classrooms even (Kafka 2019). As an example, a video made by a QAnon supporter, which had millions of views before being taken down by YouTube, narrated over archived footage of President Trump: “The world is currently experiencing a dramatic covert war of biblical proportions, literally the fight for earth, between the forces of good and evil” (Joe M. 2018). Presentations like this served to deepen in QAnon supporters and groups a strong sense of righteousness—and a need to be on the right side.

The place of politics and specific religions in this battle was not always black and white, however. On one hand, Q called followers to go beyond partisan and faith-based divides: “This is not about religions or party affiliation. EVIL is everywhere. There are no drawn lines. No boundaries. Good vs Evil” (Q, 3/10/2018). Such non-exclusionary rhetoric created an opening for unlikely bedfellows, as those on the left who were anti-establishment or held alternative worldviews came to support QAnon in common cause against child traffickers or globalists. Theories about COVID vaccines matched some of the narratives held by anti-vaxxers; for instance, the viral success of the “Plandemic” video on YouTube was partly due to QAnon networks active on social media (Gallagher 2020). The spiritual language of QAnon also resonated with proponents of New Age faiths (Meltzer 2021), supporting the idea of “conspirituality” introduced by Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) to describe the fusion of negative-focused conspiracy theories and positive-oriented spirituality in a “politico-spiritual philosophy.” Entanglements of belief by individuals on opposite extremes of the ideological spectrum—from the “Pastel QAnon” of Instagram influencers (Argentino 2021) to the “raw QAnon” of 8-chan and the “partisan penumbra” of the far-right (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 148)—allowed the movement to resist reductionist analysis and labels.

Yet, the dogma of QAnon did ultimately have a political orientation. As Rose See (2019, 97) observes, Q vilified resistance to the Trump presidency. In a deeper reading of QAnon discourse in which religious cosmology is intertwined with its political agenda, “good becomes conflated with

conservatism and evil with liberalism, so that speaking about evil actors becomes a de facto way to discuss liberal politics and Democrats in particular. Establishing this conflation serves to delegitimize and demonize competing claims within the US political system” (See 2019, 97). If this had not been the case, it is extremely unlikely that President Trump would have supported QAnon to the extent he did.

As QAnon and its followers grew, Trump stood at the center of the movement—but supposedly unaware of it. This purported ignorance continued even until the final days of the presidential election. For instance, when asked by the NBC News host Savannah Guthrie at a Town Hall in Miami on October 15, 2020 if he would disavow QAnon and “just say it’s crazy and not true”—and if he would dispel the “theory that Democrats have a satanic pedophile ring and you are the savior of that”—the President answered, “I don’t know about QAnon. ... I know nothing about it” (O’Kane 2020). During his presidency, however, Trump used Twitter to amplify accounts promoting QAnon-related conspiracy theories at least 315 times; the same was also done by those close to him, including Rudy Giuliani, Roger Stone, Steve Bannon, Michael Flynn, and campaign staff manager Brad Parscale, not to mention the President’s own family (Kaplan 2019–2021). And they did more than support other accounts—they directly promoted QAnon and leveraged it for political momentum (Figure 2). It could even be entertained that the entire QAnon rollout was a plan engineered by those close to the President, in order to exploit existing ideological divides in the electorate and strengthen his base.



Figure 2. “Who’s ready?” @erictrump, Instagram, June 20, 2020.

Collective identity-building was fundamental to QAnon’s messaging, and it formed the basis of the movement’s main slogan: “Where we go one, we go all” (abbreviated in the tweet above as #WWG1WGA). Membership within this in-group—primarily Trump supporters—was visibly displayed on T-shirts and other gear at rallies and election events, making it increasingly possible for the mainstream media to comment on QAnon as a political phenomenon, which in turn acted as advertising for further growth.

Churches also served as a channel for building the “we go all” QAnon community. Christian conservatives, especially white evangelicals, were already aligned with the apocalyptic messaging. Ed Stetzer, an evangelical pastor and the executive director of the Billy Graham Center of Wheaton

College in Illinois, put it simply: “QAnon is a train that runs on the tracks that religion has already put in place” (Rogers 2021). Compared to religiously unaffiliated individuals, those who belonged to some kind of faith were nearly twice as likely to believe in the tenets of QAnon (PRRI 2021). In some cases, such as the Omega Kingdom Ministry in Indiana, Q-drops and The Great Awakening were preached alongside biblical sources (Argentino 2020a). Due to the groundswell that QAnon enjoyed in both political and spiritual contexts, as well as their intersection, belief in QAnon was no longer fringe. At a certain point, radicalization becomes normalization, and this may especially be the case when different demographics overlap. In a survey by the conservative American Enterprise Institute in January 2021 on the relationship of religion and conspiracy theory (Cox 2021; Jenkins 2021a), more than a quarter (27%) of white evangelicals maintained that the ideas held by QAnon are mostly or completely accurate, and 29% of Republicans believed the same. These results were corroborated a few months later in a poll conducted by PRRI in March 2021: 25% of white evangelical Protestants and 23% of Republican agreed that “government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation”; respectively, 26% and 28% believed that “there is a storm coming that will sweep away the elites in power” (PRRI 2021). This level of conviction in such numbers, underlining the significance of religious aspects of QAnon in the historical context of the election, clearly indicates the correlation between faith and political affiliation.

Interpreting QAnon through the Study of Religion: Competing Hermeneutics

As much as politics and religion were combined in the messaging of Q and the ideologies of those who support it, a better understanding of QAnon may be gained through the lens of the academic discipline known as the study of religion. Politics and religion (in this case Christianity) speak different “languages” and follow different logics. For example, whereas the former is part of the mundane sphere, the latter tends to correspond to a transcendent worldview. These can be located along two axes, horizontal and vertical, of how far out one’s views could be considered. As seen above, Q spoke both languages and raised concerns regarding both domains. Thus, instead of only following the classic model of understanding conspiracy theories as the secular manifestation of a religious impulse (Popper 1945), it is important to also recognize belief in QAnon as religious per se, and sometimes even at a remove from worldly or political concerns.

It may be helpful to provide some examples of how QAnon plays on the two different levels of secular/political and religious. On one hand, the belief that politicians are involved in the sex trafficking of children, for instance, specifically targeted Hillary Clinton along purely partisan lines. On the other, certain versions of this narrative included a larger anti-government or anti-imperial trope with cosmological elements, as found in David Icke's (1999; see also Lewis and Khan 2005) extreme theory that the Bush family or British royals are blood-drinking reptilian aliens. Similarly, the image of child cannibals echoes the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory used by the Protocols of the Elders of Zion about a secret cabal of Jews working toward world domination (Doward 2020). Another example may be found in the concept of The Great Awakening, which can be interpreted in terms of the masses waking up to the fact that they have been enslaved in a nefarious but worldly power structure (engineered by globalists or the Deep State, for instance), or seen as a redemptive moment when a person wakes up to their own spiritual corruption (LaFrance 2020). Worth noting here is that The Great Awakening as a trope has had a similar dual interpretation at different points in U.S. history. Prior to the American Revolution, it reflected both a religious revival movement and the revolutionary spirit: "historians have seen in it nothing less than the first unifying event of the colonial experience, the origins of the American evangelical tradition, and a major source of revolutionary antiauthoritarian and republican rhetoric" (Butler 1990, 164–65). Making frequent references to "patriots" and targeting a Christian audience, QAnon accordingly located itself within a disruptive religiopolitical tradition and created a modern mimesis of it.

The two-axis model also provides a simple means of differentiating between those who followed QAnon. Instead of speaking of an "either/or" of secular and religious, it may be more accurate to consider people's worldviews as operating on a sliding scale. For many Trump supporters who were exposed to QAnon, the political was almost surely more important than any religious aspect. For those whose political and religious ideologies were linked, and for whom Q's messaging may have synced with existing ideals of patriotism and eschatological expectations, it would be harder to separate these or determine which was stronger. And finally, for some true believers, the religious worldview appeared to be predominant.

As a well-publicized example of the latter type, one can point to Jacob Anthony Chansley (aka Angeli or Yellowstone Wolf), who came to be known as the "QAnon shaman." The creator of the Star Seed Academy—the Enlightenment and Ascension Mystery School, he described himself on

Facebook (profile since removed) as “a metaphysical warrior, a compassionate healer and a servant of the Divine Creator God” (Evans 2021). Posing next to a cosplayer of Batman at the Capitol, a superhero dedicated to maintaining justice in the world, Chansley was more of a cosmic player, wearing a costume of his own making and tattoos of Norse religious symbols (e.g., Odin’s Valknut, Thor’s hammer Mjölner) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The two sides of the QAnon shaman’s sign. Photos: TheUnseen011101; @DavidPuente.

As a hero of his own mythology, which included spiritual elements from pop culture (e.g., *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*), Chansley epitomized comparisons made between QAnon and “hyper-real religion” (Argentino 2020b), defined by Adam Possamai (2012, 20) as “a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life.” I would argue that in the case of QAnon, the connection was more than metaphorical. It provided for many of its followers a new type of lived religion, and it certainly pushed conventional understandings of Christianity. In the vertical-axis religious worldview of the QAnon shaman, the rotunda of the Capitol was more than a political place; it was a power spot. “Let’s all say a prayer in this sacred space,” he invited his comrades; first he invoked the “divine, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent creator God,”

and then he thanked the “Heavenly Father” for “filling this chamber with patriots that love you and that love Christ” (Jenkins 2021b). Those gathered around removed their hats, bowed their heads with eyes closed, and silently joined in (The New Yorker 2021).

Despite Jake Chansley’s unusual costume, he was clearly accepted by the QAnon community (or at least until some labeled him an agent of antifa); he was not a loner but embedded in a social network that more or less believed the same—depending on its place on the two axes discussed above—and voted the same. For this reason, when discussing belief in QAnon it is important to pull out from the individual to the larger cultural context, in which alternative worldviews converged and were supported, and then propagated, in an echo chamber of like-minded contacts (Jenkins 2021a). On social media especially, deep memetic frames had a strong impact on perceptions of what was real; due to algorithms prioritizing what friends and what posts one would see, an information bubble was created. This led not only to an increasingly blindered idea of reality but also a sense of things connecting together, forming overwhelming evidence to support one’s own views. Calling this the “media-wraparound effect,” Whitney Phillips (2020a; 2020b) explains: “Once that happens, disbelief in QAnon becomes the irrational thing—because everything they’re seeing (and are inclined to trust) confirms that the theory is legit. Believers think they’ve stumbled upon some vast and hidden truth, and it makes sense that they would. From their perspective, confirmation is everywhere.” At this point, due to conflicting versions of what is real, dialogue can become increasingly difficult. Here, scholarly analysis benefits from the hermeneutical method.

In the study of religion and philosophy, hermeneutics has been used as a theoretical tool to understand how texts should be interpreted and understood, especially in relation to the question of truth. For some, like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1819), this required considering the perspective or agenda of the author; later, the process came to be informed by a need to also reflect on the objectivity of the interpreter, forming an ever-widening hermeneutical circle. As much as one might analyze Q-drops, therefore, the scholar should self-reflexively consider their own sources and biases. In the case of this article, that would mean acknowledging that its sources include mainstream media, and that sometimes the journalists quoted here are critical of what they are writing or admonishing their peers to practice that same view (Thompson 2016; Phillips 2020a; 2020b). Similarly, it means problematizing the use of terminology like “conspiracy theory” even; insofar as this term would likely not be employed by those who hold certain beliefs or are charged

with doing so, it arguably reveals bias. I have chosen to use it for practical reasons, because it is a common rubric that offers a way of contrasting one set of beliefs from another, but once the nature of the contrast is visible, it may be dispensed with.

Paul Ricoeur (1981; see also Josselson 2004) helps us in this regard through his differentiation of a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion: the former amplifies the assumed meaning of a certain text and the latter problematizes it. Traditionally such debates have concerned theology and large ontological questions, but in recent years there has also emerged a more pragmatist approach toward hermeneutics, which reframes the question of truth not in terms of reality but the practical ramifications of interpreting. This departs from a transcendentalist interpretation of religion—or hermeneutics of faith *sui generis*, predicated on an understanding of a prior experience of something called religion—to employ a non-transcendentalist interpretation, which is concerned with causes and conditions (Stausberg 2009, 12). In other words, even within the study of religion, one can see a trend from the vertical to the horizontal axis discussed above. Another way to approach this difference is to consider the two hermeneutical approaches—faith and suspicion—as concerning ultimate truth or relative truth, respectively. Either way, the two conflicting hermeneutical strategies can provide insight into the way QAnon is understood—or not.

From the perspective of the typical academic or journalist, an examination of QAnon tends to begin with hermeneutics of suspicion, including a problematization of the truth status of the content (i.e., Q-drops). When the *Guardian* asked professor of political science Joseph Uscinski why fighting QAnon’s narrative is a “moral imperative,” he answered: “It’s a potentially dangerous belief; it’s very disconnected from reality; I don’t really think we want more people getting into it” (Wong 2020). The media and expert thus invoked a superior rationale and claim to truth, invalidating “belief” and those who would hold it (i.e., a hermeneutics of faith) as “disconnected from reality.” Such critiques of QAnon can even extend to ad hominem charges of mental illness: an NBC article was titled “Why do seemingly sane people believe bizarre conspiracy theories?” (van Prooijen 2018), the *Guardian’s* “Today in Focus” podcast (2020) called QAnon adherents “unhinged,” and a researcher on *The Conversation* discussed the “psychology of conspiracy,” citing what appeared to be an apparently disproportionately large number of mental health problems among QAnon followers arrested after the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021 (Moskalenko 2021). Recently setting a high-profile example, U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth ordered the QAnon

shaman Jake Chansley to be placed in a mental health facility for a psychological examination (Hosenball and Lynch 2021). My point here is not to question the sanity of QAnon followers or lack thereof, but rather to illustrate the nature and extent of suspicion in academic and media discourse.

There are at least two ways in which QAnon followers disputed such argumentation. The first was through their own hermeneutics of suspicion. Since relative truth is relative after all, what is perceived as “real” or “fake” can vary widely, depending on one’s lens and to whom one is listening. Thus, the cause of confusion is not merely individual but due to a greater epistemic error—people misjudge what they believe because they have misjudged their source of information—and the question of who is misjudging is a matter of debate. As Keith Harris (2018, 243) explains, “from the perspective of each agent, it is not immediately clear that the non-conspiracy theorist has more grounds to dismiss conspiracist sources than the conspiracy theorist has to dismiss non-conspiracist sources.” In practice, this entailed an epistemological war, with mainstream media and Trump battling over representations of reality, and the minds of those who (still) subscribe to them. When Trump used the term “fake news,” mentioning it 2,343 times during his presidency (Factba.se), it constituted an epistemic attack; the journalist Jonathan Rauch (2018) complained of this as “emanating from the very highest reaches of power, on our collective ability to distinguish truth from falsehood.” By flipping the idea of truth, Trump revealed how the media itself was vulnerable to a hermeneutics of suspicion. Some precedent for this existed already, of course. As discussed by Mark Thompson (2008, 2016), CEO and President of the New York Times Company, declining trust in the media can be connected to journalists’ attitudes and active distrust of politicians, or of religion. But in this case in particular, use of the hermeneutics of suspicion resulted in fallout on both sides and the status of truth as collateral damage. As each side claimed their own truth to be the actual one, it opened a space for inversions of logic. In the case of QAnon, disbelief in the media led to anything that the media said is not real being taken as real; consequently, critiques of QAnon by the mainstream media likely resulted in some people adhering to it even more.

In the era of “post-truth,” to use the Oxford Dictionaries 2016 Word of the Year defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief,” the nature of discourse has changed. While one can point to a decline in rhetoric (i.e., oratory skill, wit) and increase in demagoguery and ad

hominem claims to truth, the loss of logic mentioned above signals a kind of epistemological morass, where radically different ideas of relative truth demand a move outside of conventional reason or justification. In this regard, QAnon fits with what Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead (2019, 3) identify as a shift from “classic conspiracism,” which provides a narrative and theory for the set of beliefs, to “new conspiracism,” which lacks the burden of proof or theory even. Gaining its power from sheer repetition (retweeting, sharing, etc.) and echo chambers, there is a move from scientific validation to social validation. According to David Brooks (2020), those who rebel against the “epistemic regime” need “stories that will both explain their distrust back to them and also enclose them within a safe community of believers.” When enough people agree about a certain idea, consensus reality itself—the epistemology that everyone shares—is challenged. Thus, as Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019, 9) explain, “The most striking feature of the new conspiracism is ... its assault on reality. The new conspiracism strikes at what we think of as truth and the grounds of truth. It strikes at what it means to know something.” Interestingly, this situation sounds similar to what is commonly described by those who have experienced a spiritual revelation or awakening.

This brings us to the other reason why QAnon supporters might dismiss objections raised by those employing a hermeneutics of suspicion. Simply put, they did not privilege that mode of interpreting what is real, but instead employed a hermeneutics of faith, which allowed them to claim access to an ultimate level of truth. A great deal has been written on this (see Ricoeur 1981) but the point is simple enough: followers of QAnon, like religious adherents around the world and throughout history, justified their position in relation to a higher, divine authority. In this specific context, I would argue that argumentation based on ultimate truth held especially great appeal and power in the epistemological morass resulting from the dislocations of relative truth during Trump’s presidency. In this sense, the hermeneutics of faith served as both the basis and justification for belief in QAnon.

Conclusion

This article has explored the religious aspects of QAnon in an attempt to explain its force in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, charting its rapid growth from a conspiracy theory on a marginal online imageboard to an ideological movement that captured the attention of mainstream media and famous political figures, including the President. While the movement invoked prayer and a

Christian frame to galvanize faith in Donald Trump and create a powerful electoral bloc, this language of faith simultaneously provided a means for followers of QAnon to avoid cognitive dissonance and invert the hermeneutic of suspicion that critiqued them. It also allowed them to inhabit their own modern mythology as agents of real change. In this way, QAnon took the traditional electoral rhetoric of change to another level. Four years before, with the slogan “Make America Great Again,” Trump had fused exceptionalism with a message that the country was in decline (Butters 2017). But after his first term, the swamp was supposed to have been drained—and a new narrative was needed. QAnon provided this in two ways. On one hand, conspiracy theory tropes justified how the United States was *still* in decline. On the other, a rhetoric of what I would call extra-exceptionalism, which resonated with the deep memetic frames of the MAGA worldview, accorded soteriological significance to the presidential election, offering “true patriots” the promise of a better future that not only included the nation but heavenly rewards as well.

Of course, such a future was not to be. After Trump lost the election, posts from Q dropped off sharply. Two days after the insurrection on January 6, 2021, Twitter suspended Trump’s account, severely limiting his ability to directly message his followers. On the very same day, no less than 70,000 other accounts associated with QAnon were purged (Tollefson 2021). At a glance, it might have even appeared that the movement, failing to achieve its objective of Trump’s final victory and being largely deplatformed, was done. And yet this is far from the case. In the leadup to the midterm elections of 2022, the former president is using his Truth Social platform to explicitly promote QAnon more than ever before (Herman 2022), and its famous “The Storm is Coming” motto—which can be taken as either a warning or a promise—prominently appears on the lapel pin he wears. Given the clearly perennial nature of the movement and its potential significance for the future political landscape of the U.S., it goes without saying that further research on QAnon is direly needed. There are many angles from which the subject might be approached, but the conclusion of this article is that the religious dimension cannot be ignored.

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