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**Faith Down the Rabbit Hole:**

**A Critical Rhetorical Interrogation of Q-Anon and Parasitic Christianity**

Nate Carlson

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Communication Studies

Eastern Illinois University

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### **Abstract**

Over the course of the last six years, the conspiracy theory community known as Q-Anon has risen to prominence across the internet, coming to encapsulate a significant portion of the United States' conservative and protestant populations. This study applies the act of Critical Rhetoric as proposed by McKerrow (1989) to the Q-Anon "drops"; message board posts wherein Q, the enigmatic leader of Q-Anon, preached conspiratorial ideology and misinformation to his followers. A pattern of Christian theology being usurped and retooled by Q as a method of faith-based political radicalization emerged throughout the texts, and this phenomenon was named "Parasitic Christianity." Using this concept of Parasitic Christianity as a guiding framework for analysis, this study explores the four main thematic areas of theology which are present overtly and latently in the texts. In building the scholarly community's understanding of Q-Anon as both conspiracy theory and theology, I aim to assist in working towards processes of deradicalization for conspiracy movement members.

*Keywords:* Q-Anon, Conspiracy Theories, Critical Rhetoric, Theology, Radicalization

**Dedication**

For Basil, who cannot read this because he is a cat.

For Natalie, who has heard and read it all before, but will read it again anyway.

For Cameron, who will read a few pages and get bored.

For my parents, who may or may not bite their tongues.

And for the lost and lonely souls who inspired this work; may you find peace.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

Forward: Two Afternoons in Central Illinois

In July of 2020, my partner and I drove through the rolling hills of Shelbyville, IL on our way home from a visit to her parents. As we rolled down the town's main drag, we were surrounded by the sights of rural Americana. We neared a stoplight, and as traffic condensed around us, we realized we had been caught up in a parade of some sort. All around us were pick-up trucks adorned with enormous American and MAGA flags, the streets lined with supporters of all ages who were cheering and holding posters. I assumed at first that this was an impromptu Trump rally, and I was eager to proceed with an eye roll and a funny story to tell, until several of the handheld signs caught my eye: "*Save the Children!*" "*STOP PEDOPHILES!*" "*WWGIWGA [(Where We Go One, We Go All)] Q.*" I felt my stomach lurch as grim realization dawned on me—this was no ordinary Trump rally, but a Q-Anon protest; a real-life manifestation of rage and militant faith spurred on in part by the darkest depths of mediated paranoia and conspiracy theorizing. Amidst our innocuous trip across central Illinois, we had inadvertently driven into the eye of the storm. In the smiles and apparent camaraderie of the Q supporters that lined my peripheral vision, I was struck by a sickening sense of familiarity.

Six months later, I lay catatonic in bed, the grey glow of an overcast afternoon dotting the wall through the blinds as I reluctantly refreshed my Twitter feed. On my dimly lit screen, I scrolled through a seemingly endless array of videos and images rolling in from the Jan. 6 Capitol Riots. In the eyes of each marauding protestor, I saw a simmering, all-consuming self-righteousness that I knew all too well. It was the same feeling I had seen in the eyes of the protestors in Shelbyville. I saw anger beyond political grievance, fealty beyond demagogue's grasp, desperation beyond earthly struggles, and certainty beyond reason: I saw faith. I saw the same burning, passionate faith I had grown up with in my far-right, evangelical household. I saw

living rooms where portraits of Jesus Christ and George W. Bush hung parallel to one another on the wall. I saw my grandparents clasping hands with my mother and I, praying with tears in their eyes the night that the Affordable Care Act was passed. I saw faith so powerful and absolute it could alienate family members and consume a person's every waking moment. I knew at this moment that the paltry efforts of deplatforming and censorship that Facebook and Google were using to try and undercut Q-Anon would never succeed. I knew that for many of these believers, there would be no way back from the cliff of radicalization. What I did not know, and could not have known then, was how this had happened; how faith and politics and conspiracy theory had become so tightly enmeshed as to become inseparable; how this enigmatic, hateful icon of Q could have become so central to politics, identity, and faith; how people so ostensibly dedicated to truth and light could have become so totally subsumed by this kind of darkness.

What follows is an exploration of the relationship between Q-Anon and American Evangelical Christianity conducted through the lens of critical rhetoric: an exploration of how this specific iteration of digital faith was constructed, reified, and propagated through the Q-Anon texts. Because of my own lived experience with faith and religion, it is an exploration that endeavors to never lose empathy for those who have fallen down the rabbit hole. It is an exploration that seeks to emphasize the tragedy of a faith exploited and twisted for the most hateful of causes. Most of all, it is an exploration that seeks to increase our understanding of digital radicalization; how we might recognize and fight it, and the myriad ways in which we have failed to understand it.

### **What is Q-Anon?**

The central conceit of the Q-Anon conspiracy theory (or rather, of the web of contradictory but coexisting theories that fall under the umbrella of Q-Anon) is belief in the

existence of a Satanic, pedophilic cabal which secretly controls all the world's major governments as well as the mass media. According to Q-Anon, the Democratic Party of the United States, along with the majority of famous Hollywood actors and popular musicians, are manipulated by or are active members of this cabal which was born out of wealthy banking families such as the Rothschilds. The cabal is the greatest evil force in history, tied to pedophilic kidnappings and satanic sex rituals across continents, all for the glory of Satan. Every act of modern historical cruelty is assigned to the cabal, and every political action which disservices individual freedoms is but another carefully calculated act of evil in the cabal's plan for total world domination. Those who belong to the cabal are completely consumed by evil, irretrievably wicked and innately capable of the foulest trickery. They have hidden secret messages within films and television, using subliminal messaging and masterful propaganda to brainwash the masses into unquestioning obedience. They are everywhere and nowhere, and they are more powerful than can be imagined—but not so powerful as to be completely invulnerable to the bravery of those patriots who are willing to stand against them.

Within the narrative of Q-Anon, "Q" himself claims to be a deep state intelligence operative who has the highest level of government security clearance, also known as "Q-clearance." Q works at the behest of President Donald J. Trump, who although a wealthy elite himself, is believed to be working to expose their evils and rose to the presidency out of moral necessity. There have been various theories both within and outside of the Q-Anon conspiracy group as to the identity of Q, with popular explanations within the community ranging from him being a pseudonym for Donald Trump as well as being John F. Kennedy Jr., who died in 1999. It is most widely believed at the time of this writing that the true identity of Q is Ron Watkins, owner of the 8chan message board and 2022 primary candidate in Arizona's first congressional

district (Stieb, 2021). Regardless of Q's true identity, who he is believed to be within the Q community is much more significant in gauging his cultural influence and impact. Q functions as both a prophet and a whistleblower in the Q-Anon movement, warning of events to come while offering a lens through which followers interpret current and historical events. It is believed by the group that Q speaks through anonymous posts on the 4chan and 8chan message boards (known as "Q-Drops") due to their reputation among the alt-right as being "the last bastions of free speech on the internet." The anonymous author of "Q-Anon: The Storm" speaks to this, claiming, "Mainstream media is hopelessly compromised...The chans are where it's at: pure uncensored raw discussion, analysis and detective work" (p. 18).

Another narrative component central to Q-Anon is belief in an impending, Rapture-like event known as "the storm," wherein Trump and Q will expose the deep-state/cabal to the world. Some followers have speculated that the storm will culminate in the mass/public execution of Democratic politicians, and the Q drops support this belief. The "storm" is the apotheosis of Q theology, lending the conspiracy theory a macabre yet deterministic outlook like that of Evangelical Christianity; so long as followers trust in Q, they are promised that they will be vindicated and rewarded with the punishment of their sworn political enemies. Q has repeatedly failed to deliver on predictions and promises of the storm, and as a result, many bizarre Q-Anon beliefs have originated not from the Q-Drops themselves, but from influential followers' explanations of these failures, which go to far-fetched extremes in order to maintain faith in Q. These include the belief that much of the government has been summarily executed and replaced by Trump-loyal clones, as well as the belief that the Biden Presidency has been controlled by Trump himself, who some believe is still in power.

While many have prematurely celebrated the death of Q-Anon conspiracy belief in the wake of the 2020 Presidential election, the January 6th Capitol Riots and election of Q-Anon believers to state and federal office make it clear that the prominence of Q-Anon and its rhetoric within the American political sphere is far from vanquished. Furthermore, the ability of Q-Anon supporters to conceal its ideology within adjacent reactionary political movements such as the viral social media campaign #SaveTheChildren indicates the need for a study of the conspiracy's rhetoric and ties to American Evangelicalism.

### **Origins of Conspiracy Belief**

Uscinski & Parent (2014) use a mixed methodology of content analyses and survey data collection within the field of political science to develop a general theory of American conspiracy thought and its origins in *American Conspiracy Theories*. The authors are political scientists operating from a positivistic framework, so their analysis eschews cultural analysis in favor of electoral statistics in determining the impetus for conspiracy thought amongst Americans. Although the present study differs significantly in its approach to epistemology and disciplinary focus, it is worth noting the departures between my analysis and their theoretical framework.

The authors argue that conspiracy theorizing is a bipartisan activity and not a recent phenomenon, but one that has prospered throughout American history, amplified by the increased promulgation of mass media in the twentieth century. This perspective fails to take into consideration the extent to which the severity and legitimacy of conspiratorial beliefs have evolved over time however; a contemporary Republican who thinks that government officials are reptiles who must be exterminated is not categorically equivalent to a 1980s Democrat who

believes in the Iran-Contra scandal. Similarly, it can hardly be argued that 9/11 trutherism has had as significant of a cultural or political impact as Q-Anon, though they both would technically fall under the same umbrella of “conspiracy theory.” By attempting to establish conspiracy theories as a structural and bipartisan political phenomenon, Uscinski and Parent fail to anticipate the notion of the hyper-partisan conspiracy community that Q-Anon embodies.

The authors attempt to disavow traditional demographic stereotypes of who conspiracy theorists are. Using their data to develop a trait signifying a predisposition to conspiracy ideas called “the conspiracy dimension,” Uscinski and Parent describe the demographics of conspiracy theorists: “On average, they tend to be as likely to be men as women and Republican as Democrats, poor in terms of education and money, less likely to participate politically...On the whole, they appear to deserve their reputation as outsiders” (p. 103). While the idea of conspiracy theorists as political outsiders is a comforting one, it falls flat in the face of the reality of Q-Anon; a 2021 study by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 14% of Americans fit under the category of “Q-Anon Believers,” and that number increases to 23%, or nearly a quarter when looking at Republican voters. Additionally, 22% of white evangelical protestants, 21% of Hispanic protestants, 21% of Mormons, and 17% of Hispanic Catholics were found to be Q-Anon believers. Q-Anon followers are not outsiders as Uscinski and Parent would suggest them to be, but make up a sizable portion of the broader American population and a significant portion of the American protestant population.

There is nothing to suggest that the existence of Q-Anon as a mainstream belief system negates the notion of conspiracy believers as outsiders; it is entirely possible that the Q-Anon conspiracy movement is a relative outlier which defies the typical traits used to classify conspiracy theories. This is in part because the movement represents a fundamentally new kind

of conspiracy theory in which the practices and structural elements of Christian theology are contorted and repurposed to foster loyalty towards an overtly political cause, as I will further establish below.

A key component of the authors' conclusions is the notion that conspiracy theory thought is spurred on in America by cyclical shifts in power between its two major political parties. The authors argue "Conspiracy theories are essentially alarm systems and coping mechanisms to deal with threats...they tend to resonate when groups are suffering from loss, weakness, or disunity." (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 131).

The notion that conspiracy theories are for political and cultural losers seems acceptable at face value, and notable recent conspiracies such as 9/11 Truthism and the Obama Birtherism movement originated in opposite political parties when their opponents rose to power. This conception of conspiracy movements is comforting and optimistic in that it offers a built-in self-destruct mechanism for any concerning or prominent movements; "Nothing fails like success, and ascending groups trigger dynamics that check and eventually reverse the advance of conspiracy theories" (p. 131). Again, we see a departure here when analyzing the emergence of Q-Anon in America's political ecosystem. Rather than arising out of electoral defeat, Q-Anon rose to prominence at a moment when American Conservatism seemed to be amidst a generational triumph, controlling both houses of Congress as well as the presidency. Under Uscinski and Parent's framework, the rise of Q-Anon as a popular conspiracy phenomenon necessitates that a significant loss of power was felt within the GOP's political base despite Donald Trump's 2016 electoral victory. While it could be argued that there was a loss felt by conservatives due to a sense of negatively shifting ground in the culture war or as the result of

Trump's 2016 popular vote defeat, this is another instance in which Q-Anon differentiates itself from typical conspiracy movements.

Barkun (2014) offers a differing conception of conspiracy thought origins. Unlike Uscinski and Parent, he argues that conspiracy theorizing in America has steadily increased since the latter half of the twentieth century due to subcultural belief in millenarianism/end-of-days theologies. He theorizes that conspiracy thought emerges not because of sociopolitical tension, but out of a cultural desire to make sense of the perceived evil in the world:

The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil. At their broadest, conspiracy theories 'view history as controlled by massive, demonic, forces.'...The result is a worldview characterized by a sharp division between the realms of good and evil. (p. 3)

The hyper-partisan binary through which Q constructs the world for his followers certainly seems to fit this conception, with demonic pedophiles on one side and brave patriots on the other. Similarly, a central tenet of Q-Anon is that history has been significantly determined by the whims and political fancies of the demonic cabal. In participating in Q-Anon, Q's followers attempt to delineate the evil they observe in American politics and culture, and the drops provide impetus and emphasis for their devoted theorizing.

### **Commonalities and Falsifiability in Conspiracy Beliefs**

Barkun goes on to outline three qualifying principles found in all conspiracy beliefs: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected (p. 3-4). These principles immediately call to mind Q's frequent refrain of the rhetorical question "Do you believe in coincidences?" Barkun offers further differentiation and classification between the

levels of scope that a conspiracy attempts to address. Conspiracy thought may be limited to theorizing about a specific event, they may attempt to explain a systemic evil, or most broadly, might be “superconspiracies,” which contain systemic theorizing that is synthesized with micro-level theorizing about the causes and effects of specific events (p. 6). Q-Anon fits nicely into the category of the superconspiracy in terms of its scope, having provided a thorough delineation of day-to-day events during the Trump presidency as well as a macro-level narrative about the hidden, demonic machinations of American culture and government. Having noted that surface-level categorization however, it is worth noting that Q-Anon ultimately supersedes categorization based on scope as encompass a new and dangerous kind of conspiracy movement that contains the broadness of a superconspiracy and the commanding faith of a fundamentalist ekklesia.

Barkun’s theory of falsifiability in conspiracy thought differs significantly from Uscinski and Parent in that he believes conspiracy theories to be necessarily unfalsifiable; “No matter how much evidence their adherents accumulate, belief in a conspiracy ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof” (p. 7). Whereas Barkun believes conspiracy theories to be naturally synonymous with a theological lack of falsifiability, Uscinski and Parent argue that the ability of conspiracy theories to be falsified is the only thing that separates them from being theologies. This conflict of opinion between contemporary scholars strikes at the heart at the dichotomy between faith and conspiracy, exposing the need to examine the precise nature of the relationship between the two. In this instance, I extend Barkun’s argument to make the claim that Q-Anon lacks falsifiability not because of its epistemological commitments as a conspiracy theory, but because it represents a new theology-driven superconspiracy that draws primarily from Millenarian Christianity in forming its worldview.

### **Millenarianism and Suppressed Knowledge**

Barkun explores various branches of millenarian thought, noting the differences between its religious and secular permutations; End-of-days evangelicalism is categorized as the former, with Marxist conceptions of impending class warfare fitting in with the latter. He also offers a third category of “improvisational millennialism,” which is free of ideological boundaries and freely borrows from multiple traditions of thought; “An improvisational millenarian belief system might therefore draw simultaneously on Eastern and Western religions, New Age ideas and esotericism, and radical politics, without any sense that the resulting *mélange* contains incompatible elements” (p. 10-11). Q-Anon seems to fall into this tertiary category of millenarian thought, borrowing thematic elements from secular theories such as the reptilian conspiracy theory, which posits that world governments are controlled by a race of reptilian monsters masquerading as human, as well as from evangelical millennialism.

Narrowing in on the intersection of American evangelicalism and improvisational millenarianism, Barkun describes how the proliferation of Christian millennialist media such as the *Left Behind* series and the internet’s profound obfuscation of fact and fiction has coincided with the rise of belief in what he calls “stigmatized” knowledge claims (p. 22-27). He lists multiple categories of stigmatized knowledge, which share the common trait of being marginalized by the academic community due to lack of verifiability. Among these categories, the most applicable to the Q-Anon conspiracy is that of “suppressed knowledge.” Per Barkun, “[Suppressed knowledge includes] claims that are allegedly known to be valid by authoritative institutions but are suppressed because the institutions fear the consequences of public knowledge or have some evil or selfish motive for hiding the truth” (p. 27).

Barkun points out that suppressed knowledge claims have been lionized in media such as *The X Files*, making them a tangible part of our cultural vocabulary, acknowledged at the level of mainstream thought (p. 33). It is evident that suppressed knowledge claims are central to the Q-Anon conspiracy theory and to the Q-Drop texts in particular; many of the Q-Drops are structured around a list of provocative questions such as “Why is...relevant, and What is the significance of...?” These lines of questioning imply a vast degree of suppressed knowledge to be obtained from participating in Q-Anon and engaging with its texts, and are seen as evidence in and of themselves. Ultimately, followers of Q-Anon are tasked to decipher the suppressed knowledge Q shares with them and share it with the world; a task of endless analysis and propagation.

### **The Rhetorical Functions of Evidence**

Rice (2020) writes extensively about the rhetorical functions of evidence within conspiracy theories in *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence*. Drawing upon a mixed methodology of interviews, case studies, and rhetorical criticism related to contemporary and 20th-century conspiracy thought, Rice posits that to combat and understand conspiracy theories, scholars must re-conceptualize evidence as a series of rhetorical and epistemological processes which support an ideology/worldview, rather than as a set of “things” that are in support of an argument.

Of those processes, the act of archiving is discussed in detail as the prominent act of evidence within conspiracy theorizing; Rice points out “Archives are always performative. Even something so mundane as record-keeping is a form of rhetorical work, generating meaning beyond the content of those records” (p. 35). She notes that this is partly because the process of accumulation shares an implicit tie to coherence through etymology, which results in the former

constructing the latter: “Coherence is a feeling. It is an experience that you’ve taken in something in a satisfactory way...Adding up is the ongoing accumulation from which new orientations emerge among certain bodies” (p. 40). These new orientations, produced by the activity of archiving, include conspiracy theories as a matter of epistemological convenience because the more evidence that appears to be collected in support of a claim-- the more that the process of archiving has been engaged in-- the more legitimized a claim seems to be.

This desire to accumulate a massive archive of evidence is precisely the reason why the justifications for conspiracy theory beliefs often feel overwhelmingly eclectic and disorganized; they are so by design. Rice points out, “There is no end to the accumulated links. Just as rabbit holing [sic] or endless web surfing have no set goals to bring them to a conclusion, the aim of conspiracy linking and accumulating is precisely those actions. Accumulation is the point” (p. 48). Accumulation enables, among other things, the coexistence of mutually exclusive beliefs within a conspiracy ideology; Rice notes that “conspiracy theorists often possess contradictory beliefs about a single conspiracy...contradictory beliefs do not indicate a troubled dissonance, but rather that competing viewpoints are united in support of a ‘conspiracist worldview’” (p. 56).

The phenomenon of contradictory beliefs within the same conspiracy ideology is common within the Q-Anon community, particularly as its focal points have shifted away from the Q-Drops themselves and towards broader speculation about the 2020 election and Biden presidency. Certainly, the Q-Drops themselves are rife with contradictions, failed predictions, and a constantly shifting sense of who and what the present dangers are; these are overlooked however, because for every instance of incongruity, followers can point to the amassed archive of “successful” predictions and commentaries that Q has made. In understanding evidence as a ritual act, we can understand how conspiracy theory intervention fails when it attempts to

address the logical inconsistencies that are present in a conspiracy belief. This understanding is further heightened in the context of Q-Anon by understanding the movement's position as the newest iteration of existing millennialist faith movements online.

### **Vernacular Religion, Ekklesia, and Ritual Deliberation**

If contemporary scholarship on conspiracy theories and their rhetoric explains the gratifications and epistemological processes which enabled Q-Anon's success in garnering followers, they fail to address how American evangelical Christianity was so amenable to those processes. Howard (2011) describes the four core beliefs which make up the vernacular forms of Christianity found in faith-based online communities since the 1990s: "belief in biblical literalism, a belief in the experience of spiritual rebirth, a belief in the need to evangelize, and a belief in the End Times interpretation of biblical prophecy" (p. 8). These four beliefs enable a kind of community called a "virtual ekklesia" according to Howard, who believes these digital faith movements resemble and contain the theological fluidity of the early Christian church. Howard (2011) argues:

In vernacular Christian fundamentalism, individuals generate powerful social control without any institutions, leadership, or even a shared geographic location. By performing ritual deliberation about the End Times, they choose to follow this specific ideology. In that choosing, they generate the vernacular authority that enforces a self-sealing system of belief that alienates them from the mainstream society in which they live. (p. 14)

This notion of a community experiencing profound alienation from society due to active participation in online discussions about the End Times seems to predict the phenomenon of Q-Anon nearly a decade before its inception. Even Howard's conception of how the followers of

vernacular Christianity await the apocalypse speaks to Q-Anon followers' enthusiastic anticipation of the storm's violence; "the ekklesia is based on a shared hope that, despite the violence that will accompany it, Christ will return soon" (p. 45).

Similarly, while the figureheads of Q and Trump loom large over the mythology and faith practices of the Q-Anon movement, the actual devotees themselves lack formal structure or organization. Much like any other community or faith online, certain members have risen to the top of the pack through skillful content creation and algorithmic luck, but even those "famous" within the movement have no actual authority. Without formal leadership, the followers of Q-Anon are free to express whatever ideas about the movement that they choose; so long as they add to the discussion, their ramblings are treated as valid. Only recognition by Q himself serves as a legitimating factor, but even that legitimation can be overridden or marginalized through group members' polysemic interpretations of anything and everything that is posted.

The endless analysis and debate undergone by Q followers in the construction of their ekklesia is identifiable in Howard's conception of "ritual deliberation." Whereas Howard uses ritual deliberation to describe the aimless, hopeful discussions wherein members of a vernacular religion connect every day events to the apocalyptic prophecies they find in the book of Revelation, Q-Anon followers instead rely on the sacred text of the Q drops to conduct their analysis of real-time events. Key to "ritual deliberation" is its utter aimlessness; there is no end to the deliberation, as every day and news story offers up a new lens through which believers' millenarian hopes can be realized. The Q drops facilitate a similar kind of deliberation, relying on secret codes and decipherable biblical references to enable on-going and unceasing analysis of news events, tweets, and world history. Howard notes the capacity for millenarian Christians to experience immense spiritual gratification through ritual deliberation;

There were infinite possible facts to be located and discussed...the End was near, but had not come; only God knew the hour of its coming. This certain unknowability of God's divine plan is also rooted in a literal understanding of biblical texts...This attitude keeps the end of times near, but never too near. As a result of this belief system, the community seems able to deliberate about End Times ceaselessly. (p. 60)

In Howard's conception of the virtual ekklesia, we find the final puzzle piece to understanding the enigmatic allure of Q-Anon; combining pre-existing elements of digital millennialist faith within the structure of a superconspiracy, Q-Anon effectively supersedes believers' faith practices to become their dominant ideological lens of cultural experience. How this process occurs is what I attempt to unravel in the following chapters.

### **Critical Orientation**

This study follows in the tradition of critical rhetoric as first proposed by Raymie McKerrow in 1989, which situates critique as an overtly political act of performance. To that end, the goal of this study is not only to shed light on the inherent falsities present in the conspiracy beliefs put forth by the Q-Drop texts, but to expose and analyze the extent to which the dominant ideology of American Evangelicalism is reproduced both overtly and latently within the texts, and in doing so, attempt to shift public opinion on the relationship between the church and belief in Q-Anon.

Critical Rhetoric is structured around the combined critiques of domination and freedom; whereas the critique of domination is enacted by revealing the way that forms of power are reified and opposed through rhetoric, the critique of freedom attempts to show where the underlying ideologies of a text constrain and determine what assumptions are "taken for

granted.” Combined, the critiques of domination and freedom allow for the development of what McKerrow calls “doxastic knowledge”: the understanding of what a text is doing rather than what a text is.

McKerrow argues that the absence of rhetoric is just as significant as the presence of rhetoric; what is not said is just as indicative of a text’s constructed ideology as that which is said. Such an understanding becomes crucial in a study of texts as alienating and purposefully enigmatic as the Q-Drops, as in practice, much of what is considered central to its ideologies is implied rather than explicitly stated. The practice of polysemic interpretation proves especially effective in this study, as the Q-Drops are rife with purposeful ambiguity as to their intended context.

For example, one Q-Drop contains the phrase “The US Military is the savior of mankind.” This can be interpreted metaphorically, as in “The US Military is largely solely responsible for protecting the world from evil and tyranny,” or literally, as in “The US Military has or is going to save humanity from its imminent destruction,” or theologically, as in “The US Military acts as the will of Jesus Christ, its actions ordained by God to save humanity from its sins.” All these interpretations offer separate but equally important understandings of the construction of Q-Anon’s ideology, and the critical rhetorical approach allows that each is studied as valid.

Also key to McKerrow’s theory for the practice of Critical Rhetoric is its function as an orientation rather than as a rigidly defined methodology; scholars of critical rhetoric are free to draw upon whatever theories prove useful as the texts reveal themselves through the participatory act of analysis, and in this way the content of each study dictates its form rather than the other way around. McKerrow’s emphasis on embedding oneself in the text in order to

reveal its polysemic interpretations and applicability to theory allowed me the flexibility to draw upon multiple disciplinary traditions, enriching the quality of my scholarship and my analysis.

### **Down the Rabbit Hole: Parasitic Christianity and Chapter Outlines**

In the ekklesia of Q-Anon, believers found a messiah for the sins of the virtual world. Q-Anon followers logged in each day to a virtual “church,” surrounded by fellow believers equally eager to receive, decipher, and propagate Q’s sacred texts in real-time, awaiting the rapturous justice of the storm. The parallels between Q-Anon theology and American evangelicalism do not end on the level of broad metaphors, however; God and elements of Christian theology and scripture feature prominently within the drops.

Building upon interdisciplinary studies about the relationship between conspiracy theories and American evangelicalism, this study uses the act of critical rhetoric as the means of uncovering and analyzing the overt and latent references to Christianity within the Q-Anon texts. The goal is not to make judgments of truth or falsity regarding the texts, as much of their falsity is evident enough without the use of critical analysis. Rather, this study aims to observe and critique the ways in which these texts have been constructed to preserve hegemonic/oppressive forces within their selected audience, as well as parsing out the polysemic nature of the texts in such a way that they can be understood within a fuller context. In conducting this analysis, I posit “Parasitic Christianity” as a new conception of vernacular religion in which digital acts of faith and theology are manipulated and repurposed by cynical actors for overtly secular and political means, often without the believers’ knowledge or consent.

Parasitic Christianity shares traits with vernacular faith and improvisational millenarian conspiracy beliefs, but differs in that the relationship between theology and conspiracy is a

fundamentally cynical one; the conspiracy recreates the structures of Christianity in a way that seems natural and cohesive, consistently reaffirming the appropriateness of its usurpation until the believer no longer can distinguish between their faith and their conspiracy belief. Like a tapeworm that goes unnoticed, parasitic Christianity presents itself as living in symbiosis with mainstream Christianity while actively detracting from it and alienating believers from their own faith and loved ones, all in the name of a dedicated political cause. In the case of Q-Anon, this cause is the political fortunes of Donald Trump as well as the call for increased opposition to the Democratic Party and the broader liberal culture.

In the following chapters, I explore the phenomenon of Q-Anon's parasitic Christianity through a critical rhetorical interrogation of the Q-drop texts, which were accessed via an online archive. Over the course of several months, all 4,953 drops were read and analyzed for overt or latent religiosity, allowing for the formulation of four distinct categories which each represent a specific component of Christian theology repurposed by Q-Anon. Because of the polysemic nature of both the texts and my analysis, some drops or their excerpts may appear across multiple chapters, understood within different contexts.

In limiting my analysis to constructions of Parasitic Christianity within the Q drops, my research eschewed thematic elements and motifs which were irrelevant to constructions of faith or theological concepts within the movement. These include Q's frequent allusions to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as the myriad lists of acronyms, initials, and code phrases which comprise so many of the drops. I also excluded from my analysis the hundreds of memes and linked YouTube videos which were featured in the drops, as those media were extracted from third party sources by Q and were therefore not technically canonical, though they often

functioned as concentrated distillations of Q-adjacent ideology. Also excluded were the thousands of comments made on the 4chan and 8chan message boards in reply to the Q drops analyzed here, though they comprise the lifeblood of the movement I have strived to outline in these chapters. While this excluded content is just as rife with polysemy and ideological implications as what was analyzed here, the scope and focus of this project required difficult decisions as to which content to include. In any event, the exclusion of the aforementioned content represents a tremendous opportunity for future study and contextualization.

In analyzing the drops themselves rather than their accompanying message board paratexts or any of the myriad Q-adjacent YouTube videos, I aim to identify a baseline of theological elements which future studies may use as a point of departure. Because Q-Anon has continued to evolve and fracture into additional sub-conspiracy groups in the absence of new Q drops, it remains to be seen whether or not the elements of parasitic Christianity outlined here have been affirmed or negated by the movement's newer iterations. Regardless, I argue that Q's continued cultural and political prominence is testament to the texts' manipulative usurpation of Christian faith that I outline in the chapters below.

In Chapter One, I argue for the existence of a new religiopolitical trinity of godlike figures in the drops that closely and purposefully mirrors the biblical trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Most crucial to this analysis is the revelation of the messianic narrative that Q creates for Donald Trump, who is directly compared to the figure of Jesus Christ. Similarly, I note that the omniscience, omnipotence, and enigmatic nature attributed to the Q persona in the texts establish him to be a spiritual vessel for Trump's earthly will in a role not dissimilar to that of the Holy Ghost in the Christian trinity. Lastly, I argue that the

Abrahamic God is reduced to an empty signifier in the Q-Anon drops, his functions replaced by Trump and Q, though his presence remains as the means of masquerading the parasitic relationship between the two belief systems. In noting the construction of this new trinity, I lay the groundwork for a full understanding of how Q-Anon uses believers' political dedication to Donald Trump to steal from and build upon the pre-existing structures of the Christian faith.

In Chapter Two, I explore how faith itself is constructed in the drops, beginning with an acknowledgment of Q's "great commission" for his followers and the need he creates for his followers and their loved ones to experience a spiritual conversion. Recognizing this permutation of Christian theology, I further demonstrate how the sacred rituals of prayer and proselytization are subsumed by Q-Anon, as well as the ways in which followers are manipulated to maintain and actively increase their levels of emotional and spiritual investment in the movement. These digital acts of faith are the primary means of radicalization and retention within the Q faith, allowing for the dehumanization of political enemies and the millenarian anticipation of righteous violence that is seen elsewhere in the texts.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the ways in which Q presents celebrities and members of the Democratic Party as the literal disciples of Satan, addressing the ways in which strategic ambiguity and a purposeful conflation of political and religious evil are used to construct a worldview in which demonic corruption is everywhere and can only be defeated through violence and further investment in one's faith. Drawing upon Hofstadter's theory of the paranoid style and Eco's tenets of fascism, I articulate the means by which Q dehumanizes his followers' political adversaries and readies them for the real-world violence of a holy war against the demonic Democrats he constructs for them.

Lastly, in Chapter Four, I describe the various permutations of the rapture-like “storm” that is prophesied throughout the texts, including in my analysis an exploration of the white supremacist undertones which denote “the great awakening” as well as the notion of violence as entertainment that is implied by phrases such as “boom week” and “popcorn day.” In assessing these constructions of elusive rapturous vindication, I illustrate how Q’s repeated failures to materialize the storm has created an endless cycle of disappointment and deeper radicalization for his followers which becomes all-consuming, potentially leading to complete alienation from both their former faith and the outside world. In analyzing this bait-and-switch, I aim to expose the inherent cruelty of parasitic Christianity as enacted by Q-Anon and the Q drops.

In proposing Parasitic Christianity as a new concept for understanding Q-Anon’s usurpation of Christian theology, I aim to explicate the ways in which Q-Anon differs from our traditional and contemporary understandings of conspiracy movements. In understanding Q-Anon belief as a twisted manifestation of Christian faith, we understand the need for intervention from within the church and faith-based communities; scholarly intervention is best directed towards progressive, faith-based communities, as well as any influential faith leaders willing to stand up to the conspiracy belief that is ravaging their faith and repurposing their theology. While this study does not immediately address that need for direct intervention, it will hopefully serve as a springboard for the difficult but important dialogue that will be necessary to smother the still-raging inferno of Q-Anon belief.

## I. Saviors

The absence of Donald Trump in the Q-Anon drops is baffling at first glance. Though the drops refer to him abstractly as “your president” and “POTUS,” the name “Donald Trump” is missing from the drops outside of a single appearance in a copy and pasted quotation. It was supposedly at the behest of Donald Trump that a raging swarm of Q followers and self-described “deplorables” attempted to storm the United States Capitol Building on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, and it was on Trump’s behalf that Q-Anon followers took up arms to “stop the steal” of the 2020 election. It is clear that Trump looms large over Q-Anon, and that without his presidency the movement would not have existed, so how could he not appear in the movement’s sacred texts that birthed hundreds of conspiracy theories and lauded him as mankind’s sole chance of defeating the global satanic cabal?

The actual human Donald Trump is neither Q-Anon's central figure, nor its sole savior, and the reality of his life and actions are entirely inconsequential to his status as a figure of worship. Instead, the Q drops construct Trump as a messiah figure whose life narrative and actions mirror that of Jesus Christ. Not wishing to blaspheme the Christian God overtly however, the drops masquerade this cynical manipulation of the sacrosanct by centering the Trump-as-Christ theme within a pre-existing structure of Christian faith: the trinity. This chapter uses the Trinity as the thematic lens through which to view one key aspect of Q-Anon’s Parasitic Christianity; in deconstructing the ways in which the movement presents its figureheads as deities worthy of zealous worship, we move towards a fuller understanding of how it usurps its followers’ faith and commands unquestioning loyalty.

## The Triumvirate Q

In many iterations of the Christian faith, God is not characterized as a singular entity but as an amorphous trinity composed of three separate entities: the father (creator), the son (savior), and the holy spirit (a guiding force). A similar trinity exists within the theology of Q-Anon, allowing for the religious practices of its followers to be enmeshed with, co-opted by, and ultimately usurped by political ideology. Rather than overtly trying to convert its followers from Evangelical Christianity to Q-ism, the rhetoric of the Q-drops functions to convince them that the two are one and the same. I refer to this phenomenon by use of the phrase “Parasitic Christianity,” as while fundamentalism and right-wing politics in America have shared a symbiotic bond for much of the country’s political history, never has a political ideology so completely subsumed and reshaped that fundamentalism to its own ends. The ability of Q-Anon to directly channel the spiritual devotion of its followers through Parasitic Christianity is directly tied to Trump, who is constituted not merely as an avatar or vehicle for God’s will within the theology of Q-Anon, but as a sort of God himself.

Trump is not conceptualized as being alone in his place as God, as saying as much would likely be considered blasphemous and alienating to the faithful that Q is trying to convert. Instead, the rhetoric of the Q drops conceives Trump as part of a new trinity central to the Q religion. The Christian God still exists within this mythology as God the creator, but his importance is significantly reduced and he is usurped by Trump as the Messiah figure, and the enigmatic Q as the guiding holy spirit.

This shared partnership between God, Trump, and Q is most often enacted in the Q texts through use of an omniscient, omnipotent “we” pronoun. In an early Q-drop, Q writes “Dear Patriot. We hear you. We hear all Americans such as yourself.” (p. 39). In a manner not

dissimilar from that of the Christian God, Q characterizes himself not just as a mouthpiece for political espionage, but as a compassionate confidante and friend. Elsewhere, he shifts to a mode of commanding strength: “Should the lights go out, know we are in control” (p. 42). In proclaiming the existence of near and present danger (the lights may go out) while simultaneously orienting himself as the master of that danger (we are in control of the lights), Q establishes a state of permanent rapture under his command; his followers have nothing to fear, but his enemies do. This oscillation between guiding compassion and brute aggression is seen throughout the Q texts, as if the rage of the Old Testament God and the love of the New Testament savior are at odds with one another within the Q trinity.

In an early drop which addresses “the enemy” rather than his followers, Q writes “WE SEE YOU! WE HEAR YOU! YOU EVIL SICK BASTARDS ARE STUPID!!!” (p. 174). This drop serves two functions: it is a direct threat to Q’s enemies that references the literal power of the American intelligence agencies he is claimed to represent; on a spiritual level, it proclaims the Q Trinity’s omniscience. This same sentiment is expressed more drastically later: “THERE IS NO ESCAPE. THERE ARE NO DEALS...WE SEE ALL. WE HEAR ALL. THE HUNT CONTINUES. PRISON. DEATH” (p. 218). Here Q and Trump are not only omniscient, but omnipotent as well, capable of delivering extrajudicial justice to evil. The use of all-caps typeface and aggressive punctuation is meant to intimidate not just the hypothetical enemies of Q, but the Anons themselves who are taught to fear the awesome power of their virtual deity. While these early uses of the trinity “we” are somewhat grounded in material reality, this façade quickly fades away; direct and purposeful obfuscations of the spiritual and political realms occur as the texts continue.

One use of the trinity “we” tells followers, “We are working to END. EVIL.” (p. 417). Rather than saying that Q and Trump are working to end the supposed evils of the Democratic Party or of the global pedophilic cabal they claim to oppose, this drop denotes Q and Trump’s purpose as extinguishing the spiritual existence of evil itself- something only accomplishable in Christianity by God at the time of apocalypse. In claiming “evil” to be an end-able, materially existing phenomenon, Q conflates the spiritual and the political to his advantage. Even the extraneous use of punctuation after the verb “END” speaks to a finality represented by Q’s earthly mission that is reminiscent of the millenarian beliefs that Q-Anon is usurping. This drop showcases the virulent polysemy observable within the Q-Anon texts: for the uninitiated, there is a plausible deniability as to whether or not Q is being hyperbolic, whereas for Q’s followers, there is a certainty in the spiritual warfare being promised.

Drop #2450 gloriously proclaims, “We are going to show you a new world. Those who are blind will soon see the light. A beautiful new world lies ahead. We take this journey together.” These uses of “we” serve separate but equally essential functions; the Q-Trinity is both the harbinger of the new world and a fellow journeyer into it. Like the messianic figure of Jesus walking among men, the Q trinity resides in both the physical realm and the spiritual one. The millenarian promise of rapture and heavenly paradise on earth are subsumed here, replaced by the promise of a new world fostered by the equal, if not greater power of the religiopolitical trinity at the center of Q-Anon.

Through use of the trinity “we,” the lines between the biblical God, Q, and Trump are deliberately blurred until the distinctions between these figures, their actions, and their very existences are irrelevant: Q is Trump, and Q is God; ergo, Trump is God. As Q says in a drop from 2017, “This is not about religions or party affiliation. EVIL is everywhere. There are no

drawn lines. No boundaries. Good vs Evil.” (p. 420). There is both truth and falsity in this statement; Q is not about religions or party affiliation—it is about both. It is a conflation of religious morality and political resentment that relies upon there being “no drawn lines” so that the two can become one through the all-consuming ensnarement of Parasitic Christianity. In Drop 3683, Q responds to an anon who says, “God bless you POTUS and Q! You saved our nation and our children’s future” by saying “We are all equal in this fight. No one person is above another.” In this instance, Q is taking the opportunity to establish a lack of hierarchy between himself, Trump, and the biblical God. In the battle against evil, the three are equal partners—a trinity.

Drop 1052 hauntingly forgoes the use of “we” entirely, stating, “Your trust & faith in us is enough...Enjoy the show. BIRTH of a NEW NATION. NEW WORLD.” The reader’s trust is attributed to the purposefully ambiguous “us,” which signifies both Q and his anti-deep state intelligence allies, as well as Trump and the biblical God as being the worthy recipients of faith. Additionally, this proclamation signifies that for Q-ism, political victory in the United States alone is insufficient as an end goal; the spiritual domination must be worldwide. This is reminiscent of the oft-referenced biblical passage Philippians 2:10, which prophecies that “every knee shall bow” to Jesus. While a later chapter will more deeply examine the idea of salvation presented in the Q-Anon theology, discussion of the “we” trinity feels incomplete without inclusion of the following drop: “We will never lose again when this is finished.” (p. 205). Again, the victory is presented as an expression of the permanent attainment of lasting, spiritual power on the part of the Q-trinity.

The domination here is evident; robbed of their theological salvation by faith in Parasitic Christianity, Q followers are coerced to trade a literal paradise for a decidedly vindictive and

political one in which satisfaction is only drawn from the destruction of their enemies. Through faith in Q, the optimistic hopes of their millenarian faith are transplanted into the cynical realm of the political, which promises all of the former's vengeance and self-righteousness with none of the latter's alleviation from worldly suffering.

Once we have uncovered God/Q/Trump as a new religiopolitical trinity at the heart of Q-Anon, it is enlightening to re-read references to God in the Q-drops, replacing the word "God" with "Trump" or "Q." The frequent repetition of "FOR GOD, HUMANITY, & COUNTRY" is not just a patriotic rallying cry, but a call to holy war against those who would oppose Trump. When drop #3707 comforts the Anons by saying "God is on our side," it is tantamount to saying "Trump is on our side"; they are synonymous within the church of Q. The frequent posting of the biblical passage Ephesians 6:10-18 ("Put on the full armor of God") is no longer about readying oneself for spiritual conflict on behalf of God, but instead a command to prepare for political warfare on behalf of Donald Trump; the two are one and the same. By using biblical texts as coded commands with political implications, Q rewrites the theology of Christianity in his and Donald Trump's image; the armor of God is God's no longer.

### **Trump as Messiah**

The rhetorical construction of Trump as a messianic figure within the Q texts is assisted by use of biblical passages. The first verse to appear in the Q drops is not a prophecy of apocalypse nor a condemnation of liberal sins, but the oft-referenced "John 3:16"; "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Beyond being one of the most culturally recognizable symbols of Christian proselytizing, this passage offers a condensed version of the new testament's messianic narrative: There is a savior sent from heaven who can save you, but only if you believe. It is no

coincidence that the first biblical allusion in the Q canon is to a messianic one; the narrative constructed throughout the Q drops closely resembles the New Testament gospels of Jesus Christ.

The ascension of Donald Trump is presented by Q in all its bizarre curiosity within the drops, but the text suggests a spiritual impetus for Trump's decision to enter politics so late in life. Q asks the reader, "[W]hy would a billionaire who has it all...want to endanger himself and his family by becoming POTUS...What does he get out of this?" (p. 81). Just as Jesus Christ's earthly life is portrayed as the humble sacrifice of an all-powerful savior, Donald Trump's entrance into the American political sphere becomes the martyr-like duty of a man who "has it all." Many across the political spectrum wondered what could have stirred Trump, a then-nearly 70-year old reality TV star, to enter the running for the United States presidency; widely-held among his opponents and detractors was the notion that his doing so was an act of unbridled narcissism and wealth-fueled resentment. Not only is Q's explanation less cynical, it fulfills the other half of Trump's messianic narrative: "Perhaps he could not stomach the thought of mass murders occurring to satisfy Moloch...Perhaps he could not in good conscious see the world burn" (p. 82).

Just as Christ came to earth to save humanity from its deserved and fiery suffering in Hell, so Trump is conceived as having sought out the presidency as a means to prevent the world from burning. This passage is also notable in that it contains the only direct mention of Moloch in the Q drops, which speaks to its importance as a reflection of Q-Anon's core theology; Moloch, often spelled "Molech" was an ancient Assyrian God who has become synonymous with cultic ritual sacrifice and false Gods in popular culture (Margaritoff, 2021) That this specific allusion to Q's metaphysical enemy takes place in the same drop as the most blatant

Trump-as-savior narrative is no coincidence, but a purposeful tying of one to the other that reflects the pre-existing structure of the Christian gospel narrative: there can be no Savior without a villainous, demonic opponent. Also, of interest here is the idea that Trump pursued power due to his own innate goodness and unwillingness to “stomach” the evils of the world.

Throughout the New Testament gospels, Christ is said to have performed a series of wondrous miracles that inspired his disciples, converted even the most cynical of his non-believers, and helped those in need. While Trump accomplishes none of those feats as Q-Anon’s messiah figure, he does provide his followers with a variety of “miraculous” occurrences in which he seems to validate the truth of Q-ism through supposedly coded gestures or the likely inadvertent reposting of Q-adjacent social media texts. In one such miracle, Trump uttered the infamous phrase “the calm before the storm” at a press conference with various high-ranking military staff, inspiring years of speculation and excitement among Q-followers, as “The Storm” became one of many names for the rapture-like apocalypse they hoped his presidency would deliver. Other “miracles” were even less concrete. At one point, Q makes the unsubstantiated claim that he and his intelligence operatives were given “go orders” for a secret military operation at the same time that a Trump tweet was posted, asking his followers “Coincidence?” (p.58).

One of the more overt comparisons between Donald Trump and Jesus Christ in the Q canon comes from an interaction between Q and an anon responding to a drop in which Q critiques the board for insufficiently decoding his messages. The anon writes:

Dear Q: Jesus Christ was fucking pissed at his apostles most of the time because they were stupid fucks (at the time) that couldn’t even piece together the most basic of clues.

We are no different and are even more clueless. We are trying, but you really do have to spell it out for us. Sorry. We believe you are speaking the truth. (p. 94)

Interestingly enough, Q neither scolds the anon for the apparent blasphemy of his comparison nor attempts to discredit his self-flagellation in his response, merely commenting, “Sniffer progs would kill the site [if things were spelled out]. Everything has to be carefully crafted and tooled prior to release. Godspeed, patriot.” (p. 94). By tacitly approving of both the Anon's Christ comparison and the notion of Q's followers being “stupid fucks”, Q further solidifies both the construction of Trump as a publicly misunderstood Messiah and his followers as being inadequate fools in need of a savior's grace.

In another parallel to the gospels, great emphasis is placed on Trump suffering on behalf of his faithful. Though Trump has (as of this writing) been neither flogged in the streets nor crucified by the liberal deep state, the trolling that the then-president received on Twitter in response to his frequently outlandish posts seems tantamount to such punishment in the mind of Q. An early drop commands the anon followers to defend Trump on Twitter and elsewhere, saying “OPEN THEIR EYES. DON'T LET POTUS SUFFER FROM THE SOROS/LOSER BOTS THAT CONTINUALLY FLOOD” (p. 223). The idea that Trump would be caused any sort of pain or inconvenience that would qualify as “suffering” due to the mean tweets of “Soros/loser bots” is humorously ironic given his own infamy in regards to social media cruelty, but that phrasing is also indicative of how online politics and spiritual warfare are conflated within the Q-Anon faith. For followers who have pledged religious devotion to Trump through the virtual lens of Q-Anon, it is perhaps not so far-fetched for them to conceive of online slights as being a legitimate cause for righteous fury.

Also, of note here is the invocation of George Soros, the financier and frequent Democratic Party donor who is often caricatured as a puppeteering boogeyman in right-wing media and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (Cohen, 2020). By positioning Soros here as one of the chief instigators of the messianic Trump's persecution and earthly suffering, the drops follow a long line of antisemitic millenarian superconspiracies and vernacular religious movements. Barkun (2014) notes how the expansive nature of superconspiracies makes them particularly vulnerable to both advertently and inadvertently coming to contain antisemitic ideas and tropes: "[The] villains who populate conspiracy theories tend to multiply rapidly. Conspiracists find it difficult to keep out new evildoers" (p. 37).

Trump being the victim of an ongoing virtual crucifixion is affirmed again elsewhere in the texts, as Drop #2816 pointedly asks the Anons, "Do you understand and fully appreciate what POTUS endures each and every single day? He loves this country. He loves you." The implications of this particular text are twofold, as followers are reminded of the president's continued martyrdom on their behalf while simultaneously being manipulated via affirmation of the mediated, parasocial love of their savior. Though Trump's electoral defeat was regularly denied by Q-Anon followers post-2020, even Q's response to the victory of Joe Biden is in line with this depiction of Trump as the messianic, sacrificial lamb. In Drop #4951, the final text-based drop (the few posts after this point merely repost a meme or YouTube video), Q leaves his followers with the following note: "It had to be this way. Sometimes you must walk through the darkness before you see the light." Indeed, the Q-Anon faithful were left in darkness following the apparent defeat of their political and religious deity; how easy it would be, however, to imagine that the savior Trump was in fact not vanquished, but merely waiting for the stone of his own tomb to be rolled away, salvation awaiting within.

As a result of Donald Trump's construction as a Messianic figure within the theology of Q-Anon, the lived realities of his presidency and personhood fade away. Like the childhood and early adulthood of Jesus of Nazareth, the first 75 years of Trump's life become non-canonical and irrelevant, confined to the realm of "fake news." Every tweet, executive order, and media snafu are understood not for what they are, but as coded, polysemic pieces of a broader mission taking place behind the scenes, just out of view. Any perceived missteps or errors in judgment on Trump's part become indicators of one's own lack of vision and need for spiritual guidance. He is the object of praise and a cause for rejoicing, his detractors conceived as blasphemous fools in league with the devil. As the political and spiritual realms converge in the ciphers and antagonisms of virtual space, material reality itself begins to slip from one's fingers, leaving them estranged from those who have failed to acknowledge and accept the salvation they have found. But surely such a process is not resultant from one man's tweets alone—even if that man is believed to be the savior of humanity. There is need for an emissary and a prophet to bridge these disparate worlds and illuminate the connections between them.

### **Q as the Holy Spirit**

Though he is mostly confined to the realm of the trinity, the character of Q himself manages to retain some individuality within the texts, part-Jason Bourne, part-Orwellian Big Brother. Though it is never made explicitly clear which intelligence agency Q and his compatriots work for, it is implied that they operate beyond the scope and awareness of the media and federal government, acting as the aforementioned bridge between the spiritual digital realm and the political physical realm. Although the use of "We" by Q is used to symbolize the overarching power and omniscience of the God/Q/Trump trinity, it is also used to emphasize the physical threat of violence that Q is supposedly able to impart as the invisible manifestation of

the Trinity. Just as the Holy Spirit is believed to be the avatar for God's will on Earth in the absence of Christ's physical presence, so Q is able to wage Trump/God's war against the deep state in both the shadows of diplomacy in the real world as well as in the ciphers of cyberspace.

Q's earthly work is rhetorically constructed as to seem violent and frightening to those not in the know; one drop proudly boasts that "We are crushing these sick people" (p. 162). Another of the drops proclaims, "We are FIGHTING for LIFE. We are FIGHTING for GOOD. WE are at WAR...NOT EVERYTHING WILL BE CLEAN." The ominousness of these texts seems oddly intended to frighten the Anons themselves, as if they should consider themselves lucky to be unaware of just how much blood is being spilled behind the scenes. In an early post thanking 4chan board administrators and moderators for their efforts in providing him a platform, Q says, "There will be a day (within the next few months) that a scary but safe personalized message finds its way to you on multiple platforms recognizing your contributions" (p. 156). The idea of a "scary but safe" message from beyond immediately calls to mind the biblical appearances of angels, who are at once both mesmerizing and terrifying to those who encounter them. It seems that not unlike these terrifying angels of the lord, the figure of Q is to be both feared and adored.

In spite of this threatening façade, there is another, equally sinister side to the Q persona constructed throughout the Q texts; that of a caring, compassionate counselor. To the many Anons who became estranged from their families, ostracized in their workplaces and communities, or pinned all their hopes on the coming of the "storm", Q shows a great deal of manipulative parasocial kindness. In one drop, Q responds to a suicidal anon, saying "Patriot, your country needs you. You are not alone. God is LOVE. 2018 will be GLORIOUS!" (p. 168). Rather than suggesting that this anon seek professional counseling or treatment, Q encourages

him to push deeper into his faith, giving him hope through the ever-ethereal promise of the glorious oncoming storm. One can only wonder what became of this anon when, rather than being glorious for Q-Anon, 2018 culminated in a crushing midterm defeat for Republicans, with no storm in sight.

In the lead-up to yet another “storm” fake out, Q told followers “We’re closer than you think. Try to get some sleep, it must be difficult.” That so many vulnerable individuals dedicated years of their lives to faith in Q is decidedly tragic in and of itself; that many remained ensnared at the cost of their own mental health and familial/social relationships due to the parasocial influence of Q is infuriating. The voice of Q, previously a commanding and violent enigma, is rendered here as a soothing, patronizing patriarch. There is a cruelty to this constant bait and switch by Q; he lauds his followers for their patriotism and loyalty, all the while condescending to them for failing to live up to his goals of nationwide ideological dominance and exposure. This occasional kindness does not negate Q’s general cruelty and aloofness, and it only seems to emerge in the texts when Q has pushed his followers to their breaking point.

### **God the Creator, God the Empty Signifier**

Having explored the constructions of the messianic Trump and omniscient holy spirit Q narratives within the Q texts, one might start to wonder just what room remains within their theology for the Abrahamic deity both of those individuals are claimed to be working on behalf of; as it turns out, very little. This is not to say that the word “God” is absent from the Q drops—much the opposite in fact. But God serves little purpose here besides that of an empty signifier whose power and authority are coopted by the other members of his trinity.

It is in the Q texts' treatment of God and the Bible that the faith's departure from fundamentalism and evolution into Parasitic Christianity are most evident. Biblical paratexts such as the Lord's Prayer are posted multiple times but meant to be read as coded messages rather than taken at face value as legitimate calls to prayer. Q asks his followers "Why was the Lord's prayer posted? Which version? ... Do you believe in coincidences?" (p. 128). While the Lord's Prayer is a sacred ritual within Evangelical theology, here it is just another clue for Q's followers to pick apart and analyze; its spiritual significance is stripped away in favor of a political interpretation. The verse Jeremiah 29:11 states, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (p. 350). As originally intended, this verse soothes Christians' anxieties and troubles by assuring them that no matter what happens, God has a plan for them. Not so is this verse within the theology of Q-Anon: instead, what was written as a pacifying refrain becomes a rallying call to arms for the Anons. The "plan" shifts from being a cosmically pre-ordained destiny that they cannot control to a dynamic political power struggle in which they themselves hold responsibility and agency for what becomes of their nation. All that is political is sacred, and all that is sacred becomes little more than an additional layer of politics.

In one of the more lore-heavy drops, Q describes a prayer supposedly said daily by President Trump in the Oval Office during his tenure:

Rest in peace Mr. President (JFK), through your wisdom and strength, since your tragic death, Patriots have planned, installed, and by the grace of God, activated, the beam of LIGHT. We will forever remember your sacrifice. May you look down and continue to guide us as we ring the bell of FREEDOM and destroy those who wish to sacrifice our children, our way of life, and our world. We, the PEOPLE. (p. 314)

This “prayer” is a literal example of God’s spiritual existence being shoved aside; he is referenced in an aphorism-- “by the grace of God”, but he himself is not the recipient of prayer— instead, that honor is given to JFK, who begins to fulfill a “John the Baptist” type-role as a martyr who paved the way for the true savior, Trump himself. This Post-God political theology is present in an early Q drop which plainly states, “US Military = Savior of mankind.” (p. 60). In the framework of Parasitic Christianity, where past political leaders become the worthy recipients of praise, and current military and paramilitary operatives are presented as powerful angels among us, there is little glory left for God the Creator to obtain.

While God receives plenty of namedropping throughout the Q texts, it becomes clear that his presence is little more than an alibi; a masquerade which serves to hide the fact that those who have pledged their faith to Trump and Q have forgone their faith entirely in favor of a new, twisted religion fueled by political animosity and the conspiratorial mindset that their millenarian faith has spent years preparing them for. The verses which describe God’s compassion serve as a vessel for Trump’s savior narrative, and those which describe his wrath become symbolic of Q’s worldly omnipotence as the Holy Spirit. The Biblical God now withered away within the Q theology, the only function of “God” becomes the fulfillment of an empty signifier for whomever reads it. “God Bless” is repeated ad nauseum, but the phrase becomes meaningless. In cannibalizing the theological functions of God for overtly political purposes, Q lays the groundwork for an audience of followers who treat his word as literal gospel.

## II. Saints

In the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 28, verses 18-20, Jesus appears to his followers post-resurrection and gives them the great commission, the sacred bedrock of religious duty upon which the Christian church is believed to have been founded and spread throughout the world:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, the son, and of the holy ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

The central theme of the great commission is that Christ has provided his followers with an abundance of knowledge and sacred truths and that it is their duty to spread that knowledge and truth throughout the world. The same refrain echoes throughout the Q drops, but rather than joyously spreading the promise of eternal life on behalf of a benevolent savior, the disciples of Q and Donald Trump are endowed with a more cynical duty. In this chapter, I deconstruct what faith in Q-Anon's Parasitic Christianity looks like: how its followers come to acquire it, what it looks like to enact it, and the ways in which they are compelled to share it.

In performing the act of critical rhetoric to discern these facets of Q-Anon faith, I draw upon Burke's (1970) landmark essay analyzing the rhetoric of the book of Genesis as well as Howard's (2011) ethnographies of vernacular religious movements, noting the revealing similarities between previously analyzed religious rhetoric and the Q texts. Also of use here is political scientist Richard Hofstadter's (1967) theory of the paranoid style in American politics, which helps to contextualize the theology of Q-Anon within the broader history of reactionary movements in the United States.

**Awakening: Conversion to Q-Anon**

Before one can become an evangelist on behalf of Q, they must be converted; a process which requires the believer to entirely forego their view of reality in favor of Q's. An enraged Q asks in drop #1269, "Are you a SHEEP? ARE YOU AWAKE? DO YOU THINK FOR YOURSELF? LEARN THE TRUTH." The implied notion is that truth is whatever Q says it is; that to be awake is to be fully invested in the theology and faith practices of Q-Anon, and that to do or believe otherwise is to be a sheep. This metaphor of non-believers as sheep is somewhat contradictory with how sheep are presented in the Bible; Psalm 23 famously opens with the phrase "The Lord is my shepherd," and Ezekiel 34:31 tells Christians that "You are my flock, the sheep of my pasture. You are my people and I am your God." Whereas the humility and obedient passivity of sheep makes them a desirable model of faith for mainstream Christians, the rugged individualism of American conservatism requires that believers in Q-Anon maintain an obstinance that is utterly un-sheep-like. This reflects that while Q-Anon represents a new iteration of faith as a form of Parasitic Christianity, it maintains elements of secular millenarianism, drawing upon multiple ideologies which at times seem incongruous with one another. In the case of Q's sheep metaphor, it is clear that the choice presented to followers is a false dilemma; either you are a patriot and awake, or a sheep and asleep.

The notion of faith in Q as an existential, all-consuming choice is reiterated throughout the drops, including #3038: "When you are awake, you are able to clearly see. The choice is yours and yours alone." This binary choice between damnation and liberation is akin to the Christian concept of salvation: the gift of eternal life is free to all, but it is the responsibility of the individual to accept Christ and receive that gift, lest they be condemned to Hell. Beyond that, this drop makes it clear that if you cannot yet clearly see, it is because you aren't fully awake yet,

and need to more actively pursue the choice of truth that Q is offering. There are no gradations of faith allowed under this framework; you are either a believer, or you aren't. Howard (2011) describe the power of similar conversion experiences in his analysis of vernacular religious communities: "The revelatory experience seems to be a unilateral transfer of knowledge from a divine source. It is known to be true because it is felt directly" (p. 36).

If one chooses to embrace the salvation of Q, their path forward is clear: first, disavow and reject the truths of the outside world. An early drop states that "Reality is labeled as conspiracy. You are made to feel crazy. You are told to obey...REMEMBER, WE ARE WINNING, DO NOT TRUST WHAT YOU READ. MIND WARFARE. UP IS DOWN." (p. 380). As if the commandment to "not trust what you read" were not on the nose enough, Q ends this drop by saying "up is down." This is a departure from traditional conservative critiques of liberal media hegemony; it is not the objectivity of "the establishment" that is questioned, but the establishment's objective reality itself.

To embrace Q-ism is to completely reject the world outside oneself and adopt a subjective perspective on what constitutes truth in our society; as Q also notes in drop #3038: "Free thought' is a philosophical viewpoint which holds that positions regarding truth should be formed on the basis of logic, reason, and empiricism, rather than authority, tradition, or dogma." The idea that Q followers' "free thoughts" are based on logic and empiricism rather than dogma is laughable but reflects the need of the Q faithful to see themselves as not just morally superior to the rest of the world, but intellectually superior as well. The necessary turn away from the world and towards Q is best encapsulated by the following impassioned drop: "WHO CAN YOU TRUST? THE WORLD IS NOT HOW YOU VIEW IT" (p. 341). You can trust Q, this text implies, and he will show you a new, true way to view the world. This is confirmed in drop

#4550, which optimistically tells followers, “You are being presented with the gift of vision. Ability to see [clearly] what they’ve hid from you for so long.”

In creating such a drastic dichotomy between the truth and goodness of his followers and the evil of non-believers, Q draws upon Manichean thought that has long-since been noted as a fundamental component of religious rhetoric. Burke (1970) discusses how the Book of Genesis offers a similar dichotomy: “The choice thus becomes not just a difference between seeking the light and not seeking the light, but rather the difference between eagerly seeking the light and just as eagerly seeking darkness” (p. 199). By proclaiming the need for a second conversion, the texts recreate this Manichean structure within the Parasitic Christian theology of Q-Anon.

By conflating unquestioning faith with objectivity, Q enables his “patriots” to reject and condescend anyone who dare oppose or criticize the logical flaws of their beliefs; how exactly the conspiracy-laden Q texts constitute an objective lens through which to observe reality is never verbalized, but a clear pattern of degrading non-believers as gullible sheep emerges throughout the texts. Q commands his faithful to “SHOW THE WORLD the TRUTH. OPEN THEIR EYES.” (p. 223). Like Christ in the gospel of Matthew, Q gives his followers a great commission of their own, and an early drop commends a disciple for putting a few of the conspiratorial pieces together:

Amazing how things make sense once you are asked a question. That’s the entire point of this operation. It’s up to you to collect, archive (safely), and distribute in a graphic that is in order with the crumb dumps. It will all make sense. Once it does, we look to you to spread and get the word out...Your president needs your help...Everything stated is for a reason. (p. 53)

In this commission we see multiple elements that define what it means to be a faithful follower of Q-Anon: (a) the call to action: followers are called to not just interpret Q's word, but also to proselytize it through the creation of memes; (b) belief in the dire necessity of this action: Q-Anon is not just a game, but a righteous crusade that must be undertaken by patriots if the country and world are to be saved; (c) the notion that Q's followers are a 'chosen people' of sorts; and (d) the theological determinism that everything is happening for a reason and is building towards a rapturous climax.

In Q's great commission, we see another instance wherein the line between conspiracy theorizing and faith is blurred within Q-Anon; just as Rice (2020) theorizes evidence as an act of collecting "things" within a conspiracy movement, so Q directly commands his followers to engage in an endless amassing and redistribution of memes and videos as the means of spreading his truth. As such, it can be noted that this act of collection serves a double purpose in Q-Anon, acting as a legitimating series of proofs for followers' beliefs while also fulfilling their faithful duties.

### **Calls to Action**

The call to action is a frequent motif throughout the Q drops, as well as an area of faith where Q often finds his followers lacking. Shortly after posting his commission, Q scolds his followers: "Learn to read the map. We may have overestimated your ability" (p. 92). Here, the call to action is not characterized as an exciting opportunity, but as a manipulative guilt trip—you have a moral duty, and your savior has found you to be lacking in your capacity to serve him. The verb "learn" implies that service to Q is not something inherent to being ideologically aligned with him, but a skill that must be practiced and honed over time. This creates a natural hierarchy within the movement as there will be those who more quickly excel at deciphering the

drops: those people will be of more use to the faith, in both the decoding process and the act of delivering Q's message to the public. It is no coincidence that a priesthood of Q-Anon bloggers, YouTubers, and social media personalities emerged from the Q movement and have continued to thrive long after his passing. Just as Christianity outlived Christ, Q's construction of an active and hierarchical sect is designed to ensure that his beliefs continue to evolve and spread through paratexts long after the last Q drop is scrubbed from the face of the internet.

Particular emphasis is placed on the need for the creation of memes, and Q justifies this as a matter of practicality: "Graphic form for each correlation a MUST. This will be the AUTH tool you use when all of this becomes public to provide to friends, family, others" (p. 212). "Graphic form," being used as a euphemism in place of the more common "meme" underscores the notion that the memes Q followers create are an extension of himself; the word "form" implies that rather than being new messages, they are the new medium through which Q is speaking, amplified by the labor of his followers. The commanding tone of the capitalized "MUST" leaves no room for hesitancy, and the future tense of the phrase "tool you use" implies work to be done even after the rapturous glory of the great awakening. For the faithful Q supporter, there is always work to be done on his behalf. And just as memes function as the medium through which the gospel of Q-Anon is spread throughout the broader internet, so they also reinforce the theology of Q-ism among its own followers. As Q reminds his flock in Drop #2390, "There is TRUTH in MEMES. TRUTH that DESTROYS the FAKE NEWS narrative." Once again, the implied commandment is the rejection of the exterior world, along with any and all "fake news" which attempt to disprove the meme-based truths of Q-Anon. While the call to proselytize through memes forces Q supporters to engage outwardly, it is accompanied by a recommitment to delving further inward in search of "truth."

Drop #4461 further stresses the urgency of sharing Q-Anon with one's friends and family members: "YOU MUST SHOW THEM. ONLY THEN WILL PEOPLE FIND THE WILL TO CHANGE." No matter how strong Donald Trump, Q, and their allies are argued to be, and no matter how inevitable their victory is claimed to be, the drops forbid any sense of complacency among the faithful, ensuring an endless cycle of obsession and evangelizing. A somber drop from 2018 reflects this sentiment: "...Message is all that matters. THE GREAT AWAKENING. Time is severely limited" (p. 196). Here, urgency is pushed to its limits in multiple respects; not only is the decoding and spreading of Q's message "all that matters," but the act of doing so is also constructed as a time-sensitive act. Under such restraints, frantic paranoia becomes the default mindset of a Q-Anon supporter operating according to the standards laid out by Q himself. As such, it is no surprise that Q-Anon became an all-consuming belief system for many of its followers. This franticness calls to mind Hofstadter's (1967) theory of the paranoid style: "He [the paranoid] constantly lives at a turning point: it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy. Time is forever running out" (p. 30). Certainly, time seems to be forever running out for Q's followers' duty to spread his message.

Q uses guilt and manipulation throughout the drops as an incentive for his followers to contribute more to his cause; "Those [good] who know cannot sleep. Those [good] who know cannot find peace. Those [good] who know will not rest until those responsible are held accountable" (p. 249). Here, the believer's sense of morality becomes directly attributed to their willingness to labor on behalf of Q. The drop seems intended to inspire self-reflection, with the implied question of ones' goodness being tied to their unwillingness to rest. This kind of emotional manipulation to adhere to the faith is often indirect, and is sometimes framed as being empowering rather than commanding and restrictive. Q scolds his followers, saying, "You, THE

PEOPLE, need to remember how TO PLAY. You, THE PEOPLE, have the POWER.” (p. 290).

The first sentence here serves a punitive purpose, with Q making his audience and condescending tone clear as he admonishes his deficient pupils. The second sentence, seeking to soothe the sting of the former, reminds his followers of the importance of their role. Even as Q almost mockingly reduces his army of allegiant followers to “THE PEOPLE,” he does so while attempting to swell them with pride. This drop is particularly malicious in its attempt to inspire a greater commitment to Q-Anon, as the people “need to remember” by engaging more consistently and aggressively with the message boards and drops.

Another rendition of this manipulation occurs when Q offers a definition for the word patriot: “a person who loves, supports, and defends his or her country and its interests with devotion” (p. 356). Much like the description of “good” people, this conception of patriotism is presented in order to stir feelings of inadequacy among Q followers; desperate to be worthy of the “patriot” moniker to which they aspire, they are reaffirmed in their devotion to engaging in Q-Anon “research.” Q reinforces this desire to be seen as a patriot by speaking highly of those who meet his call, as well as offering them solidarity; In drop #1964, he offers a simplistic mantra: “Patriots protect patriots.” Here, there is an implicit threat in the style of the old gangster movie mafia boss: if you want to be protected and accepted by your fellow patriots, you need to act like one. In addition to inspiring more impassioned servitude, Q’s definition of “patriot” also creates an ideological flexibility for the movement whereby whatever is perceived by the reader to be in the country’s “interests” can be enthusiastically supported; no doubt, a partial inspiration for the “patriotism” displayed by many Q followers on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. These frequent calls to action, combined with repeated emphasis placed on the importance of the Q movement, serve as a powerful impetus for believers’ unblinking commitment to Q-Anon.

Through Q-Anon's enmeshing of millenarian conspiracism and vernacular religion, the message boards come to feel like a virtual church or community of impassioned believers, albeit an often-times rowdy and crass one given the generally antisocial nature of the chans. Howard (2011) notes the ability of participatory media to generate this sense of faith-based community:

For the individuals enacting the virtual ekklesia of vernacular Christian fundamentalism, participatory media help to resolve the tension between authority and deliberation by enabling them to collect, link, and repost content they gather from divergent and even hostile sources while at the same time excluding any communication that does not support their shared ideology. (p. 113)

### **A Chosen People**

While faith in Q is enforced overtly through constructions of moral obligation and direct calls to action, it is also encouraged through the sense of importance that Q imparts to his followers. Like the twelve wandering tribes of Israel before them, the disciples of Q-Anon become a kind of chosen people, posting and meme-ing their way towards the promised land. Q exults the Anons in an early drop, telling them:

HAVE FAITH. YOU WERE CHOSEN FOR A REASON. YOU ARE BEING PROVIDED THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF INTEL TO EVER BE DROPPED PUBLICLY IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD. USE IT – PROTECT AND COMFORT THOSE AROUND YOU. (p. 219)

A far cry from the belittling tone Q uses later on in his drops, this passage clearly intends to ensnare the devotion of the board members through an appeal to their own sense of pride and self-importance. Released from the shackles of their worldly selves, Q transforms the members

of his audience into the privileged and heroic harbingers of truth and salvation. No matter how often they have been rejected and scorned in the real world, here they are not just accepted but have been chosen by a literal higher power. Even the message board itself is changed from the digital equivalent of a dive bar into a sanctum of enlightenment, sacred ritual, and praise—not altogether dissimilar to a church: “We chose this BOARD for a very specific reason. We believe in you” (p. 212). Even if your family, friends, and employers have forsaken you; Q and Donald Trump still love you and believe in you, this text seems to say. You still have a purpose and a reason for being: your purpose is to post, and your reason is Q.

These wholesome affirmations feel out of place among the Q drops, crudely nested in between calls for martial law and memes of Pepe the Frog. A certain nefariousness seems to arise from their kindness, as if these brief glimpses of warmth exist to distract the faithful from their estrangement from reality, as well as the alienation from families and loved ones that many have experienced. Amidst this façade of kindness is the element of faith which ties theology and conspiracy in the most cynical of secular critiques of both; that if things don’t make sense or add up, you’ve just got to believe harder, because there is a plan at work that is far bigger than you.

### **Trust the Plan**

Early drops comfort the frightened Anons, telling them, “Rest assured POTUS is backed by the absolute finest people alive who are all dedicated to the eradication of evil and corruption from the US/World” (p. 39). Rather than prophesizing about the great awakening, these texts seek to secure Q’s disciples in their faith, reducing any gnawing uncertainty that they may be investing in a ludicrous conspiracy. Another drop acknowledges the mental leap of faith required to believe that Q’s cryptic posts are anything more than cluttered nonsense: “Have faith. These, the crumbs, in time will equate to the biggest drops ever disclosed in our history. (p. 45). There’s

a sense of magnitude and importance in these statements, which notably contain an overt call to place faith in Q and his movement. Even if things aren't quite adding up, you need only reaffirm your commitment to Q and double-down on spreading his message in order to more quickly bring about the triumphant ending you desire.

As one might expect, explanations are provided as to why Donald Trump, Q, and their allies cannot simply publicly move against their enemies. Q addresses skeptics within the movement itself with drops such as the following:

TRUST THE PLAN. WE ARE WINNING. ARRESTS WILL COME. LOGIC SHOULD ANSWER WHY IT MUST FOLLOW OTHER UNFOLDING EVENTS...DIRECT CONFIRMATION WILL COME. IT CANNOT COME NOW. IT WILL BE LOST. THE MESSAGE IS NOT READY. YOU ARE A PART OF THE ARMY. WE ARE DEPENDING ON YOU. (p. 341)

Again, the explanation provided for Q's secrecy is his believers' deficiency in spreading his truth to the world. If you really want the arrests and the vindication of your dedication, the message needs to be ready. Even if Q wanted to tell the world the truth, the message would be "lost" because you haven't worked hard enough to refine it into memes. To even question Q's plan is to be illogical; you must repress your doubts through use of his logic, which is learned and reified into the psyche through the repeated consumption of his messages. There is a cruelty to these backhanded reassurances, as no matter how much one commits to their faith in Q-Anon, it is never enough. Each time they assured that victory will come if they only would just believe harder and post more, they are only pulled deeper and deeper into the depths of their conspiratorial madness, with no payoff in sight.

Even when Q's followers aren't the recipients of blame for the movement's failure to materialize political successes more significantly in real life, they are shamed for ever doubting that "the plan" is in action. Not unlike Jesus Christ's finger-wagging of the doubting disciple Thomas who demands to see Christ resurrected with his own eyes, Q scolds his followers: "Just because you can't see doesn't mean it's not ongoing. Trust the plan" (p. 306). Again, the failure is not Q's, but his followers for being insufficiently able to "see" the machination of his plan. Recall Q's final text-based message to his followers in Drop #4951: "It had to be this way." Even at the end, Q assures his followers that their faith has not been misplaced, and that everything is going to according to plan.

### **"Prayer" and Digital Acts of Faith**

While the Q-Anon texts often convey elements of faith and religion overtly, they also engage in the simultaneous and subtle process of subverting and usurping existing theological concepts and practices from Evangelical Christianity. Prayer is an intriguing concept to explore in the drops, as it represents one of the more direct cannibalizations of Christian thought in the Q canon. As mentioned in Chapter I, part of the Q mythology is the notion that President Trump and his closest allies offer a daily prayer to the late President Kennedy in the Oval Office. This overtly political and secular conception of prayer is crucial, as it can inform analysis of the ways in which prayer is referenced elsewhere in the Q drops. Prayer being offered to a human figure, albeit a dead one, would seem to be blasphemous, as prayer is conceived in Christianity as mankind's primary, if not sole way of communicating with God; both a privilege and a duty. Both worship and requests for divine intervention are conveyed through the spiritual medium of prayer, and for many believers, it is a sacred ritual that represents the most direct connection to their chosen deity.

At first glance, Q's conception of prayer seems similar to that of the Christian faith. The first mentions of prayer in the texts signify it as a behavioral response to the unseen battles and trials of Q's deep state intelligence allies: Drop #36 asks followers to "Please be safe and pray for those in harms [sic] way as they continually protect and serve our great country." Even here, prayer is not explicitly coded as being Christian, though it does seem to be earnestly directed towards a higher power. Shortly thereafter, prayer continues to be a response, but the context of its mention informs us of a crucial shift. Drop #104 solemnly reports: "Now is the time to pray. We are operational.", followed shortly thereafter by Drop #105, published just five minutes later, which says "Please pray. Operators are in harms way...Please pause and give thanks to those who would die to save our republic." Suddenly, both the object and venue for praise are called into question; prayers are being offered to Q's compatriots alongside God, and the text seems to be asking for a response that is not indirect and spiritual, but rather a direct response on the message board itself. Here, the act of posting becomes synonymous with prayer; it is a virtual act of faith which signifies spiritual and political solidarity with the Q movement. The posting of memes and conspiratorial musings is transformed from a political act to a religious ritual, with participants likely unaware of this significant and costly shift.

The construction of posting as prayer is the ultimate desecration of faith in the Q-Anon texts, as well as the most elusive. Just as Trump is transformed into the Messiah, and the Q message boards become a sacred place of worship, so the act of prayer is subsumed and reshaped through Q. At one point, a drop instructs followers that if they are religious, they should pray. This seemingly acknowledges that Q's normative use of "pray" as an instruction to his followers is not a call to spiritual action, but a command to engage in fervent posting on the message boards, hence the exception in that specific case (p. 249). Whereas Q takes a negative and

scrutinizing tone when addressing the Anons' failures to interpret and spread his intel, the flip-side of that coin can be observed in his more positive "prayer" rhetoric. He tells them, "We appreciate your prayers. We really do. Thank You" (p. 419). Another post (#1029) tells followers. "Thank you for your prayers" shortly before launching into a list of intricate and enigmatic clues. In both cases, prayer becomes a tangible, observable response that can be positively reinforced and repeated. In the days following the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential election, Q comforts his followers in Drop #4648, telling them, "Find peace [solace] through prayer...Nothing can stop what is coming. Nothing." The learned response to uncertainty in both Q-ism and Christianity is prayer, but what "prayer" means is twisted to become a call for further engagement in digital faith.

With the construction of posting as prayer, two distinct acts of digital faith can be noted as being required of the Q-Anon disciples: the first being the act of interpreting and spreading Q's gospel, and the second being the act of "prayer" that shows internal solidarity and believer-status within the broader movement. These two acts of faith, reinforced both positively and negatively through the Q drops, are prompted as the dire and necessary duties of any and all patriots. Within the comforting echo chamber of the Q message boards, these acts of faith bring about a real sense of community, as if the followers are bound not just by devotion to their parasocial saviors, but to each other as well. The frequent repetition of "WWG1WGA," or "Where we go one, we go all," becomes a heartfelt reminder of this feeling of community, regardless of how alienating it may be to the outside world. In this constant cycle of consuming and regurgitating the same motifs and memes, these acts of faith come to resemble the recitation of hymns and scripture, both comforting and indoctrinating followers further with each repetition.

The construction of faith that Q bestows to his followers through the Q drops is one of utter domination of both their online and offline lives. Through competing narratives of shame and resilience, he entices his followers to provide him and the other members of the Q trinity with the utmost devotion, regardless of the consequences they may face for doing so. By demanding followers undergo a spiritual conversion, admonishing them into zealously spreading its message, and reducing sacred rituals to digital political pastimes, Q-Anon cruelly enacts Parasitic Christianity through its notions of faith. No doubt, Q is able to command such faithfulness due to fear and loathing of the demonic entities he presents as the enemy for his chosen people.

## III – Satan

The two-horned, vibrantly red, pitchfork-wielding devil is a constant fixture of human storytelling in cultures influenced by the Abrahamic religions. Whether perched on the shoulder of a cartoon character, reframed as a tragic hero, or slinking in the shadows of a supernatural horror film, this manifestation of ultimate evil is a ubiquitous and compelling presence in our mythology. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that the theology of Q-Anon preaches of a world where the devil is everywhere. In this chapter, I examine how Q rhetorically transforms Donald Trump's political adversaries into the literal servants of the Devil, dehumanizing them and preparing his followers for holy war on his behalf. In this shift from political to spiritual opposition, we see how Parasitic Christianity uses fear and hatred as the means of political manipulation.

Borrowing again from Burke (1990), I draw comparisons with his rhetorical criticism of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, noting the ways in which he characterizes the overt religiosity of Hitler's fascist writings. This critique of religious and fascist rhetoric in turn inspires allusion to philosopher Umberto Eco's (1995) tenets of fascism, and I note the similarities between the Q-Anon texts' construction of the enemy and Eco's own conception of how fascism portrays its opponents. The frenetic terror of the texts again calls to mind Hofstadter's paranoid style (1967), and all of these elements' cohesion with one another within the conspiratorial theology of Q-Anon reflects Barkun's notion of improvisational millenarianism as being comprised of disparate but uniformly functioning parts.

### **The Inescapable Enemy**

From early on in the drops, Q paints a haunting picture of a media environment and government full of Satan-worshipping monsters who clandestinely commit unspeakable acts against women and children. Drop #3 is the first to make this spiritual connection: “Many in our govt worship Satan. Not about Republican v Democrats at this stage.” It is worth noting that this early drop provides no evidence for the claim of “many” practicing satanic cultists in the American government, though it does set up a crucial and revealing contradiction: Q makes the claim here that the conflict his believers are involving themselves in through their acts of virtual faith is not a political conflict. Instead, the conflict between Q/Trump and his political opponents is characterized in purely moral terms of good versus evil. Of course, that distinction becomes meaningless upon closer inspection of who Q describes as good and evil; quickly, the illusion of Q-ism as an apolitical, morality-based movement falls apart.

Soon after his initial proclamation of all-encompassing satanic evil, Q remarks that the evil he and Donald Trump are fighting is a global phenomenon, raising the stakes of the spiritual conflict he describes by broadening its geographical horizons (p. 24). The gigantic scope of this conflict, which is almost entirely invisible to Q’s followers in a manner not dissimilar to that of the spiritual warfare between angels and demons described in the bible, is reiterated constantly: “CORRUPTION and EVIL DEEP WITHIN. EVERYWHERE...TREASON AT HIGHEST LEVELS. FOREIGN AGENTS WITHIN OUR GOV’T. HIGHEST LEVELS” (p. 218). Here, Q pays homage to the time-honored American tradition of xenophobic suspicion by painting the ubiquitous evil he describes as a “foreign” threat in addition to a spiritual one. Establishing evil and corruption as existing at the highest levels of government preys upon American conservatives’ distrust of federal institutions, using pre-existing biases to legitimize the

believers' sense of a real, tangible threat to their values. The repetition of "highest levels" also serves as a wink and a nod to longstanding conspiracy beliefs regarding the Clinton and Obama families, allowing Q-Anon to neatly coalesce followers with varying conspiracy belief backgrounds; whether you believe Hillary Clinton is a lizard person or that Barack Obama is from Kenya, there is room for you in the Q family. Additionally, the syntactical pairing of "corruption" and "evil" signifies a conscious choice to connect political and metaphysical conflicts; corruption in government is spiritually evil, and spiritual evil is the root cause of corruption in government.

A later drop reiterates the ubiquity of evil threat: "This not about religions or party affiliation. EVIL is everywhere" (p. 420). What that evil entails exactly is left purposely vague.

### **Evil Unspoken**

An interesting element of Q-Anon's constructions of evil is the extent to which Q allows for his followers to use their own imaginations in conceptualizing the threat that they face. Whereas so many of the Q drops are predicated on the need to unravel and disseminate Q's cryptic and secret codes for the benefit of the public good, the drops describing evil attempt to do the opposite by hinting at a darkness so unspeakable that even the Anons themselves are unprepared for it. The few direct mentions Q does make of his movement's opposition and their crimes are just enough to satiate his base and spur them to action, without going into so much detail as to inadvertently prove himself fraudulent through their sheer incredibility.

Because his and Trump's political enemies are already despised by his followers, Q does not need to provide any sort of concrete evidence to prove that they are engaging in acts of unspeakable evil; by their very nature as his opponents, they are already assumed to be doing so.

This speaks to Kenneth Burke's (1990) notion in "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle" that once an enemy or scapegoat has been essentialized in the minds of their detractors, "all proof henceforth is automatic." (p. 194). By merely suggesting that evildoing is underway, Q solidifies for his followers the idea that Trump's Democratic rivals are enabling demonic monstrosities.

An early drop states "The child abductions for satanic rituals (ie Haiti and other 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries) are paused (not terminated until players in custody)" (p. 32). The idea of satanic rituals involving child mutilation/sacrifice taking place in Haiti creates a geographical boundary between Q's followers and their supposed enemies, while also relying upon racist stereotypes regarding people of color and the practice of voodoo/satanic magic. Tracing evil rituals to Haiti also shows how Q improves upon the falsifiability of previous reactionary conspiracy movements, as a major downfall of the Pizzagate conspiracy was the ease with which it was disproved, albeit tragically, due to Comet Pizza's proximity to Americans who believed in the conspiracy. Ritual evil existing in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries also speaks to nativism, as if the holy land of America is not to be desecrated with such acts, though its wealthiest inhabitants may travel elsewhere to partake in such monstrosities. This conception of evil speaks to Hofstadter's (1967) famous theory of the "paranoid style" in American political culture, and Hofstadter describes the paranoid leader's opponent in similar terms: "he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving...he is a free, active, demonic agent" (p. 31-32). Certainly, the idea of jet-setting elites who fly off to third world nations in pursuit of sadistic pleasure fulfills this conception.

Drop #153, which most clearly lays out the Trump-as-Messiah narrative, also provides one of the more intricate descriptions of satanic evil:

Perhaps he [Trump] could not stomach the thought of mass murders occurring to satisfy Moloch? Perhaps he could not stomach the thought of children being kidnapped, drugged, and raped while leaders/law enforcement turn a blind eye. Perhaps he was tired of seeing how certain races/countries were constantly being abused and kept in need/poor/and suffering all for a specific purpose. Perhaps he could not in good conscious see the world burn. (p. 82)

In this text, we see multiple aspects of the Q theology surrounding evil: (a) Humans in positions of power commit heinous acts against children on behalf of a dark spiritual belief system; (b) The blame for the economic suffering of domestic and foreign peoples ultimately resides in the spiritual realm rather than in the greed or apathy of human decision making; (c) the full extent of the enemy's evil is unspeakable if not unknowable; and (d) without the intervention of a messiah, the world will fall to darkness. Notably, Q does not offer specific occurrences or contexts for the evils he describes here; he allows his followers to perceive of invisible, unspeakable evil around every corner.

These four aspects can be traced to several other passages that tantalizingly address the knowledge Q claims is just around the corner: "We still haven't started the drops re: human trafficking / sacrifices (yet)(worst)...Nobody can possibly imagine the pure evil and corruption out there" (p. 249). And yet, in hinting at this unimaginable evil, Q invites and demands his followers to obsessively imagine and attempt to parse out the corruption he so vaguely describes. Just as Q's followers perceive their digital behaviors as acts of righteous faith, so they are implicitly called to begin a pattern of news media consumption that will allow them to trace the hidden connections and signs of criminality he assures them are there.

As seen elsewhere, Q skillfully uses the imagery and themes of Christianity to his advantage; asking his followers, “Does Satan exist? Does the “thought” of Satan exist?” (p. 69). The latter question serves to make the former irrelevant; even if you do not believe in Satan or the spiritual evil he represents within the theology of Christianity, you cannot disprove that he has servants on earth who claim to do his bidding. In this framework, the earthly worship of Satan becomes scarier than the metaphysical existence of an actual devil, as his followers represent a direct, material threat rather than a spiritual one. Focus is purposefully shifted away from spiritual evil and towards the political adversaries whom Q claim represents an existential threat. All the while, Q continues to claim that the Anons are not engaged in a religious or political movement; Drop #4545 does so most powerfully, stating:

This is not about politics. This is about preserving our way of life and protecting the generations that follow. We are living in Biblical times. Children of light vs children of darkness. United against the Invisible Enemy of all humanity.

In addition to making yet another allusion to Satan, this drop seems to contradict itself by setting up a dichotomy between the “children of light” and “children of darkness” that likely refers to America’s major political parties. In aligning Trump and the GOP with “children of light” and the Democratic Party with Satan himself, Q leaves no room for nuance or middle-ground; you are either with him, or against him. In this way, the theology of Q-Anon once again embodies the paranoid style; in his description of reactionary paranoia, Hofstadter notes:

Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Nothing but complete victory will do. (p. 31)

In amplifying this paranoid binary of good and evil through the lens of his followers' own faith practices, Q is the ultimate fulfillment of Hofstadter's theory, conceptualizing his movement's victory as metaphysical as well as political. Describing left-leaning voters and politicians as "children of darkness" serves a dehumanizing function that is noticeably different from more traditional viewpoints espoused by reactionary leaders; liberals are not just misguided bleeding hearts, but are the knowing servants of dark forces beyond comprehension.

It is worth noting that Q himself never uses the word "cabal," though it appears quite often in the Q memes, paratexts, and message board threads as the operative word for the shadowy organization the movement is postured to oppose. The presence of belief in the cabal is not absent from the drops however, it is merely rephrased in attacks on "the media" and the "New World Order." This ambiguity is useful in that it provides followers the ability to form their own conceptualization of just who comprises the enemy; anti-Semites, nationalists, hardline republicans, and radical evangelicals are all free to define the enemy for themselves, so long as their definition includes Democrats.

### **Hell on Earth**

Q ceases to shy away from melding his spiritual and political conceptions of evil into a singular entity as the drops continue. An early drop joyously celebrates Trump's presidency, saying, "SATAN has left WH" (p. 153). The obvious implication of this is that Barack Obama is being signified as either Satan himself, or a dark harbinger of Satan's will on Earth, not dissimilar to the role played by the Antichrist in the Book of Revelation. It would be easy to chalk this statement up to simple hyperbole and reduce its significance in doing so, but in consideration of the Messianic Trump that is constructed throughout the drops, that would be an error. In the Obama/Democrats as literal agents of Satan narrative, we see the natural conclusion

to the Trump as Savior narrative: just as Jesus Christ is believed to have been born to save the world from its satanically-induced sin and desperation, so Trump is believed to have reclaimed the sacred ground of the White House from a literal agent of the devil, if not the devil himself.

This conception of Barack Obama as a satanic menace is confirmed in another early drop: “The wizards and warlocks (inside term) will not allow another Satanic Evil POS [to] control our country” (p. 29). It is worth noting that while the “wizards and warlocks” term is understood to be a nonsensical metaphor within the drop, the description of Obama as a “Satanic Evil” is given no such clarification, expressly understood as being taken literally. There is no implication that any of this is exaggeration, rather, it is taken deadly seriously in order to inspire the purest feelings of righteous rage and fear. As another drop clarifies, “We are truly up against pure evil” (p. 32).

In presenting the Democratic Party and its leadership as literal demons working on behalf of Satan, the theology of Q-Anon once again rears its ugly head and uses existing components of the Christian faith to its own explicitly political ends through the enactment of Parasitic Christianity. Differences in foreign and economic policy are no longer ideological disagreements, but existential and moral conflicts between “patriots” and disciples of Satan. Like the biblical story of the fallen angel Lucifer who was led astray by his own arrogance and pride, America is conceived in Drop #2436 as the former land of the free, tricked down the wrong path by the corrupting darkness of the left:

We became divided. We became weak. We elected TRAITORS to govern us. We allowed EVIL to prey on us. Those who claimed to represent us gave us false hope, made false promises. The evil and corruption only grew... WE MUST RISE AGAIN. WE MUST UNITE AGAIN. WE MUST FIGHT AGAIN.

This notion of the Democrats being demonic tricksters feels reminiscent of Satan himself tempting Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden; just as the first humans were tempted and corrupted by the promise of Godlike power and knowledge, so the Democrats exerted political power through the false promise of social and economic equity, so Q seems to claim. Also similar to Christian theology is the idea that the Q followers themselves have been complicit in accepting the Democrats' deception and traitorous corruption, providing them with another reason to wage spiritual warfare on his behalf that they might purge themselves of the weakness that allowed their country to be led astray.

This deception, perpetrated against the world through mass media on behalf of Satan and the Democrats, is the reason according to Q that it is so difficult for the general population to accept the truths of his movement, hence the need for his followers to evangelize on his behalf. In response to the temporary closing of churches due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Q tells his followers in Drop #4550, "Their deception [dark actions] on full display. People are waking up in mass. People are no longer blind. Do you think it's a coincidence they banned you and prevent you attending Church\_house of worship? Anti-American. Anti-God." It matters little here that churches were far from the only mass gatherings that were affected by the quarantine measures taken in 2020; there are no coincidences in the gospel of Q, only the evil deception of Satan's dark followers. The idea presented here of mass deception perpetrated against the masses by puppet masters at the heart of a corrupt institution speaks to Barkun's (2014) concept of suppressed knowledge claims within conspiracy movements, and it is worth acknowledging that while Q-Anon ultimately takes the form of Parasitic Christianity, it still routinely engages in acts of overt conspiracism.

Although Q's movement is generally optimistic in anticipation of the storm, the texts are quick to remind believers that America is never more than a single presidential election away from falling to the tyranny of the Satanic left. In a particularly telling drop, Q ruefully tells his followers, "AMERICA has been sold to the highest bidder...The depths of their TREASON is unimaginable. Pure EVIL. HELL on earth – HRC victory" (p. 390). The auction rhetoric here is no doubt intended to call to mind the human trafficking Q claims is part of his enemies' crimes against the people, while also decrying the ills of liberal globalization. Simultaneously, the reminder of the once-possible Hillary Clinton presidency invokes strong feelings of fear and relief about just how close the country came to being engulfed in a political and spiritual hell. This feeling of America itself always teetering on the brink due to the dark forces that would seek to subvert it once more reflects Hofstadter's (1967) paranoid style:

The modern right wing...feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try and repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. (p. 23)

In the theology of Q-Anon, the aversion of a victorious Clinton presidency is the glorious act of preservation upon which the savior narrative of Donald Trump stands. Ironically however, this is used as a fear appeal rather than a celebratory rallying cry, as if it should frighten every believer to imagine the darkness their country would have been plunged into were it not for Trump. To use Hofstadter's language, it would seem that the final destructive act of subversion is realized in every opportunity for a Democratic president, with Clinton's 2016 campaign in particular signifying the ultimate boogeyman. Drop #4545 illustrates this fear in greater detail, lamenting:

Democracy was almost lost forever. Think HRC install...2+ Supreme Court Justices,  
200+ Judges, rogue elements expanded inside DOJ, FBI, CIA, NSA, WH,

STATE...removal 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment, border, etc...change voter rules and regulations allow illegals+ballot harvesting w/ SC backed liberal-social opinion...

While this description likely bears little resemblance to what the realities of a Clinton presidency would have entailed, it is worth noting here that the format and structure of this presentation of evil are quite different from those Q initially describes. Gone are the threats of demonic sacrifice and trafficking, replaced with a strawman of liberalism no different from those found in milquetoast conservative media outlets. Like the classic example of the spoonful of sugar helping medicine go down, the spiritual paranoia of Q's believers only serves to ensnare them more deeply in their political loyalties to Trump and Q himself; their faith reduced to an irrelevant trove of cultural signifiers through the emergence of Parasitic Christianity.

This is not to say that Q abandons spiritual conceptions of evil entirely; this would be impossible, as fear of evil serves as a major impetus for the digital acts of faith he demands of his followers. Instead, it is the consequences of spiritual evil that are transformed over time from horrific and unspeakable acts to generic attacks on tradition and conservative values. In drop # 4627, preceding the 2020 presidential election, Q stresses the spiritual differentiation between America's political parties: "One party discusses God. One party discusses Darkness. One party promotes God. One party eliminates God. Symbolism will be their downfall. The Great Deceiver(s)." While the Democrats' alignment with demonic forces is still alluded to here, the severity of their transgressions seems significantly reduced, perhaps to refocus attention away from spiritual warfare and towards the election, which is conceptualized as a spiritual battle in and of itself. Unable to provide concrete evidence for his claims, Q once again points to "symbolism," encouraging his followers yet again to invest further time in attempting to delineate such symbols.

This conception of Democrats as scheming deceivers working on behalf of the devil is borne out in the frequent posting of the “Armor of God” passage of scripture; just as Christians are called to “resist the Devil’s schemes,” so Q’s followers are instructed to see through the lies of the Democratic party; the two are one and the same, as the Devil’s schemes are realized here in the political maneuvers of the liberal elite. This further clarifies the use of this passage as a call for the study and evangelization of the Q faith; followers’ friends and family members are not merely sheep, but have inadvertently aligned themselves with the devil and are in dire need of salvation from his trickery. Just as Christians are called to save their loved ones from an eternity of suffering, so Q fosters a desperation within his followers to spread the good news of the political salvation he and Donald Trump offer.

Of course, electoral defeat is not sufficient punishment for the crimes Q assigns to the Democratic Party and its satanic allegiant; just as Christians wait for the righteous vindication of Lucifer’s destruction in the lake of fire, so Q-Anon preaches of the violence that is to befall those it has portrayed as deceivers and monsters. Drop #1574 speaks to this desire for extrajudicial vengeance: “They cheat. They steal. They harm. They are sick. They are evil. At some point the streets (for them) will not be safe.” The image of politicians and media personalities shot dead in the street is invoked here, along with the dehumanizing use of the “they” pronoun that serves to further remind Q’s followers that “they” are not one of us.

### **Weak and Strong**

While the Devil is characterized in many ways in the Christian Bible, he is seldom presented as weak. Much the opposite; the first book of Peter describes him as a roaring lion on the prowl, 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians as a cunning serpent, and the Book of John names him the “Father of Lies” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, 1 Peter 5:8-9, 2 Corinthians 11:3, John 8:44). Not

so is Q's Devil, who is characterized not only by his strength and cultural dominance, but simultaneously by the near hilarity of his weakness in comparison to Q and Trump's righteous power. Additionally, despite the ingenious scheming that has allowed them to ostensibly control much of the media and government, Q repeatedly defines his enemies as being unintelligent: "These people are stupid. You are safe," "YOU EVIL SICK BASTARDS ARE STUPID!!" (p. 138, 174). This contradictory construction of an enemy who is both all-powerful and incredibly weak calls to mind Umberto Eco's (1995) tenets of fascism, and in particular, his description of how fascists portray their opponents within their rhetoric:

The followers must feel humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies...However, the followers must be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak.

In utilizing fascist rhetorical techniques in the construction of his theology, Q improves upon Christianity's Satan by more explicitly embracing the need of his followers to believe that they as individuals are stronger than the imagined threat they face. At the same time, he forces them into unquestioning submission by depicting an evil so vast and powerful that only the savior he offers them stands a chance at defeating it. While this work is not situated to specifically address the connections between Q-Anon and fascist ideology, it is worth recalling Kenneth Burke's (1990) now startlingly prescient warning of how religious rhetoric can be utilized for fascistic purposes: "I believe we must make it apparent that Hitler appeals by relying upon a bastardization of fundamentally religious thought...There is nothing in religion proper that requires a fascist state. There is much in religion, when misused, that does lead to a fascist state" (p. 219).

The end result of these on-going processes of rhetorical dehumanization is a bloodlust that Q's followers long to embody on his behalf, and work to bring about through their digital acts of faith. In his most blunt call for violence, Q tells followers: "These people should be hanging" (p. 249).

### **The Wrath of God**

Violent imagery is plentiful throughout the drops in reference to the fate that awaits the monsters of the cabal, as well as in reference to the on-going secret warfare being conducted by Q and his allies in U.S intelligence. A vengeful Q tells followers, "PATIENCE. THERE IS NO ESCAPE. THERE ARE NO DEALS...THE HUNT CONTINUES. PRISON. DEATH" (p. 218). This commandment to be patient is in some ways infantilizing, but also depicts the most righteous Q followers as being insatiably eager for the violence to come, which in turn reinforces that eagerness among his less radical believers. Characterizing Q's crusade as a "hunt" serves to further dehumanize the enemy as a rabid animal in need of being put down, while also endowing the movement with a sort of finality; sooner or later, the hunter will catch his prey. The idea of "no deals" being offered to Q's enemies serves a variety of purposes in that it reiterates the righteous wrath of Q while simultaneously serving as an antithesis to the corruption Q claims to be rampant in American democracy. Due process, it would seem, is not conducive to the idea of justice that Q and his comrades have in store; the concise brutality of "PRISON" and "DEATH" calls to mind the military tribunals that so many followers speculated were underway throughout the weaning months of the Trump presidency.

This desire for violence is not expressed as the emotional whims of political ideologues, but as the necessary holy war that Q's followers must engage in as part of their faith. In

responding to a hostile Anon who claims to be a member of the cabal, Q cites scripture in Drop #1712, saying:

Put to death therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immortality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. -Colossians 3:5 Your evil has no place in this world.

It is doubtful to begin with that the Anon whom Q responds to here is a member of the cabal; more likely, it is a “sock puppet” account created and posted from by Q himself to inspire greater paranoia among his followers. Bearing that in mind, the way that this passage of scripture is utilized in this response speaks again to the utter usurpation of the Christian faith by the Q theology. In its original context, this verse is a warning to believers to purify themselves of sin, lest Christ’s salvation be withheld from them, and their souls forced to bear the wrath of God. While this original message is still a threat, its intentions are prescriptive rather than vindictive; most notably, “putting to death” is taken as a metaphor for internal spiritual growth rather than as a literal call to violence. Here, the verse is reframed and recontextualized as a condemnation and threat of violence against the sexual predators whom Q claims have infested the American government on Satan’s behalf. The wrath of God is no longer the looming threat of Christ’s judgment, but a promise of military/state-sanctioned violence against the enemies of Q and Donald Trump.

In constructing Satan as the spiritual underbelly of the Democratic party and media establishment in his twisted formation of Parasitic Christianity, Q calls his followers to engage in a digital holy war, all the while alienating them even further from both political and religious reality. With the promise earthly violence against their political enemies serving as the only salve

for the horrors they've imagined, the Anons pray fervently for the rapture they are certain is to come.

## Chapter IV – Salvation

Many iterations of the millenarian Christian faith promise the emergence of an eventual paradise on Earth; that at the end of apocalyptic crises, the 1,000-year reign of Christ will come to soothe the suffering of the weary faithful and smite the wicked. Beyond the vindictiveness of this prophecy, there is a hopefulness that speaks to the downtrodden masses of humanity, which the continued prominence of the Christian faith no doubt serves as testament to. And just as millenarianism offers this hopefulness, so the theology of Q-Anon makes a guarantee of justice and vindication to those who pledge allegiance to it. Woven throughout its sacred texts, the eternally impending salvation of the storm promises nothing less than spiritual and political rapture.

### **The Great Awakening**

Salvation is imminent for the Q faithful, but it is not without its trials and tribulations. Although there remains the promise of an instantaneous, rapture-like reckoning called “The Storm,” the texts indicate that the country and world must be made ready by Q’s followers before that rapture can be realized. The end-goal of these preparations, including the incessant meme-ing and digital prayer which characterize Q-Anon as a movement, is The Great Awakening. Even the name itself speaks to a grand and dramatic sense of historical importance, as if the fate of the country hinges solely upon the ability of Q’s followers to awaken their “sleeping” country to the horrors of the cabal.

Historically speaking, “The Great Awakening” refers to multiple instances of major theological revolutions amongst American protestants. In each of its iterations, the great awakening has represented large-scale changes to the church’s understandings of what salvation

and sin are, how eternal life can be obtained, and what the role of the church should be (Fogel, 2000). As with all elements of Q-Anon's Parasitic Christianity, the great awakening comes to take on a much more political and controversial meaning in light of its new context.

The first use of the phrase "The Great Awakening" comes in drop #9, where it is used to describe a process by which America's black population will become aware of the evils committed against them by the Democratic party, forever turning the country's political tide. This original context is steeped in racial animus, implying that America's black population needs "awakening" due to having been systematically led astray by the Democrats. Black people are endowed with this "original sin" of ignorance within this racist narrative, only capable of obtaining salvation through acceptance of Q's benevolent knowledge. This racism and the phrase "the great awakening" itself call to mind the white nationalist theory of "the great replacement" wherein people of color, the followers of Islam, and the global elite are believed to be conspiring to eradicate the influence and existence of European/White cultures. The great replacement found its origins in Nazi ideology, but has become a mainstream conspiracy theory in recent years among alt-right activists and white supremacists, even going so far as receiving on-air mentions from Laura Ingraham and Tucker Carlson of Fox News (Obaidi et al, 2021). In this new, theology-infused take on the great replacement, people of color are still considered complicit in the fall of western civilization through their electoral folly, but can be redeemed through the power of white conservative wisdom.

Nostalgia for a more openly white supremacist culture is reflected in Q's calls to action; he tells followers, "The time has come to take back our great land" (p. 39). The unstated question: take it back from whom? While the answer is most easily constituted as "The Democrats", "The Media", or even "The Satanic Cabal", Q's understanding of the American

political climate as being chiefly enabled by a brainwashed black population belies a grim vision of what political revolution would entail.

The great awakening quickly comes to represent the necessary conversion of all Americans rather than just Black Democrats, but this strain of white nationalist thought adds another layer of dire urgency to Q followers' pursuit of the awakening and the subsequent storm; they are presented with only two options: eradication, or domination by any means necessary. These white supremacist undertones see themselves fully realized in drop #4076: "This is about regaining POWER. Self-preservation...Win by any means necessary. WIN OR DIE." Just as Evangelical Christianity views the secular world as a source of all-consuming darkness and persecution that must be cleansed through the return of Christ, so Q-ism weaponizes bigotry to present a world without total white dominance as one of spiritual darkness in need of its Trumpian savior. The threat presented by a world without Q's salvation is not just one of post-racial liberalization, but that of death itself, and the binary constructed by this commandment to "WIN OR DIE" implicates followers in a struggle that is not just concerned with the spiritual and political realms, but the physical realm as well. Thus, the task of achieving the great awakening is poised to become the central goal of Q believers in both their digital behaviors and interpersonal relations.

Although this primarily functions to push followers yet further into their dedication to Q, it creates a more active role for them compared to the passivity associated with rapture in the Christian faith. Whereas Christians have a religious duty to spread the gospel ahead of Christ's return, their doing so has no leverage over when the day of rapture arrives. Their witnessing primarily functions to save others from condemnation rather than to sooner alleviate their own suffering; there is no expectation that if Christ amasses enough earthly followers, the rapture and

defeat of evil will necessarily follow. Christian theology dictates that the rapture and believers' subsequent salvation from sin and earthly suffering will occur regardless of what Christians do or do not do; those already "saved" feel joy rather than frantic paranoia in spreading their faith, fully confident that Christ has already carried the burden of ensuring their salvation. This does not indicate that Christian proselytizing cannot succumb to paranoid impulses, merely that such impulses likely originate within specific sects of that faith, rather than in the holy texts themselves; in Q-Anon, the drops overtly construct a sense of neurotic urgency by universally declaring salvation as fragile and conditional.

Recall from Chapter II the instances in which Q scolds his followers for failing to sufficiently interpret his messages: "We may have overestimated your ability" (p. 92); "It's up to you to collect, archive (safely), and distribute" (p. 53). Q seems to imply here that there is a real danger of the storm never being realized due to his followers' inability to bring about the great awakening. This develops a theological duality of confident millenarianism and fatalistic political desperation; the storm is so close, yet so far. A vindictively angry drop commands followers: "WE must work TOGETHER. WE are only as strong as your VOICE. YOU must organize and BE HEARD" (p. 389). These two uses of "must" as a modal verb represent this duality; there is the "must" which describes the followers' actions as pre-ordained and fated, and the "must" which describes their actions as a conditional requirement of salvation. Even Drop #492's prophetic statement "We will never lose again when this is finished" comes with a qualifier; "when this is finished." Q's frequent sign-off, "Godspeed," is a command to spread his word more hurriedly in service of the great awakening, combining his own millenarian movement with the theological signifier of "God."

Salvation itself, conceived in the form of the Great Awakening and the Storm, comes to represent just another layer of obsession and alienation for the followers of the Q faith, their message spread not as an outwardly focused act of benevolence, but as a means of realizing their own vindication and vengeance. The crushing responsibility of bringing about the great awakening is characterized as an all-consuming one: “THEY divide. WE Conquer...Message is all that matters. THE GREAT AWAKENING. Time is severely limited” (p. 196). Here, the promise of rapture is placed between a call for all-consuming faith and a reminder of severe paranoia. There is a purposeful vagueness to just how “severely limited” the movement’s time is; time is always limited;<sup>5</sup> therefore, you must always act as though the promise of the storm could slip through your fingers at any moment if you do not remain dedicated and steadfast in your faith. While the theology of Christianity allows for believers to move beyond the moment of salvation into a greater sense of one’s self-actualization within the faith, there is no such relief for the disciples of Q, who must always torturedly remain on the cusp of salvation.

This notion of salvation as fragile and indeterminant speaks to the ability of Q-Anon’s followers to excuse its repeated failings in bringing about “the storm.” Under this framework, the deficiency is perceived to be on the part of the believers rather than on the part of Q; it is not that Q’s prophecies have failed, but that they have been failed by those whose responsibility it was to ensure their success. As Q himself tells the frustrated Anons in Drop #3724: “It [the great awakening] must be done right...There can be no mistakes.” It would seem therefore that a great many mistakes have been made.

### **Rapture upon Rapture**

One of the more tragically compelling elements of Q-Anon as a religious movement is in this pattern of repeated failures and the ways in which Q addresses or does not address the

myriad of supposed “storms” that he foretells in the texts. The first of these instances comes as early as Drop #64, which ominously states:

Fellow patriots, I'm being advised actions have created accelerated counter-actions. We have not yet ascertained the scope of the attack. Watch the news outlets...Should the lights go out, please know we are in control. Do not panic. We are prepared and assets are in place. God bless – I must go for good at this point.

There is a comical amount of vagueness here, with talk of “actions” and “counteractions” clearly intended to invoke the intrigue and secretive power of the Q trinity. Additionally, Q's declaration that he must “go for good” here is unique throughout the drops; at no other time, even in the wake of the 2020 Presidential election, does he ever again tell followers that the movement is ending, or that the time of the storm is imminent. Humorously enough, this melodramatic sign-off was almost immediately followed by multiple additional drops on the same evening, with no significant pause in posting in the following days. Even at Q's most bombastically prophetic, there is no gratification for his followers—no storm or awakening to speak of. This kind of “close-call,” while no doubt disappointing, fits well within the narrative of the great awakening serving as a prerequisite to the storm. No reasoning is given for why Q had to “go for good,” nor is any explanation given for why the lights may “go out”, merely a continuation of questions without answers which beget deeper paranoia and faith.

In one of the more embarrassing lead-ups to a non-existent storm, Q rallies his followers around the idea that the storm will commence with President Trump's first annual “Fake News Awards,” a PR stunt which doubled as an attack on media outlets that were critical of Trump or were infamous in GOP circles for covering the multiple congressional investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 election (Kirby and Nelson, 2018). In the lead-up to Trump's

faux award ceremony, Q asked his followers, “Are you prepared? MEMES/POSTS Organized and coordinated? ... READY FOR LAUNCH? SHOW the WORLD. SHOW the WORLD the TRUTH. OPEN THEIR EYES.” Here, the great awakening seems to be reaching its victorious climax; the call to “launch” feels indicative of a soon-to-be-realized mass movement predicated on the truths of Q and his followers. To the mass of followers who frantically assembled their memes and eagerly awaited their long sought-after vindication in response to this drop, it must have been bewildering and disenchanting to emerge yet again empty-handed. Q’s response to such disappointment is as nefarious as it is condescendingly patriarchal; “We’re closer than you think. Try to get some sleep, it must be difficult” (p. 225). Of course, this pretense of empathy is merely another act of emotional manipulation; the expression of solidarity is accompanied by the false promise of the storm as being close at hand. With each failure to materialize the victory they seek in the form of the Great Awakening; the Q followers are further radicalized in their commitment to see the prophecies of the storm fulfilled.

The texts themselves seem to revel in this cycle of disappointment and deeper investment, as if knowingly fueling the oscillation between urgent paranoia and crushing defeat. Apart from Q’s exceedingly rare displays of empathy for his struggling believers, the drops never let up, constantly sounding the drum beat and the call to spread the good word of the oncoming storm: “Fight, Fight, Fight. DEMAND public disclosure. BE LOUD, BE HEARD. This is just the beginning. 2018 will be GLORIOUS!” (p. 232). Again, the fate of the storm relies upon the ability of Q-Anon to draw additional attention to itself, with the promise of glory positioned just out of reach. The call to “be heard” is insidious in its implications when considered in conjunction with Q’s commandment to “win or die”; the underlying notion being that followers must do whatever it takes to ensure visibility and victory.

## **Fear the Storm**

Although it seems destined to lie forever on the horizon, Q spends much time in the texts describing the glory that awaits his followers when the storm does come. The three themes which most consistently arise in Q's descriptions of the storm are that of comprehensive understanding, large-scale political violence, and spiritual transformation. These themes reflect a more traditional millenarian conception of the rapture, and Q's uses of biblical texts help to clarify the linkage between the two.

For a movement so thoroughly defined by the dissemination and interpretation of coded sacred texts, it is no wonder that the idea of comprehensive understanding is so central to Q-Anon's conception of rapture; just as Q's followers will use the great awakening to reveal the partial truth to the American public, so Q will bestow upon them the glory of complete understanding at the time of the storm. Drop #1866 references Corinthians 13:4, stating "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." The idea of "fully knowing" is a great comfort in Christianity, as an understanding of God's vast plan for the universe would no doubt help to soothe and clarify the struggles that define human history. In Q, "full knowledge" becomes something so horrendous that it must be kept secret until the time is right; "Nobody can possibly imagine the pure evil and corruption out there" (p. 249). But just as a line of cars slows down to gawk at a collision, so Q's followers seem to salivate at the idea of unearthing this suppressed knowledge once and for all, regardless of how horrible it might be. With spiritual and political evil combined to form the movement's satanic menace, political victory becomes a spiritual victory as well, with any information that could wound the Democrats' electoral chances representing a form of rapture in and of itself. Thus, followers are incentivized to

celebrate the imagined crimes of the cabal, as each immoral act merely becomes the promise of a larger electoral victory for Trump and Q; “The depths of their TREASON is unimaginable. Pure EVIL” (p. 390). The use of the word “unimaginable” seems akin to reverse psychology, as the drops’ responses are full of feverishly paranoid followers who do their best to guess at what kind of horrors the Clintons and Rothschilds are responsible for. The unimaginable described here is in fact quite imaginable, as it exists purely in the imagination, with no basis in reality. Still, Q warns his followers that they themselves may be unable to fathom or process the darkness he claims he will reveal: “This is only the beginning. Be careful what you wish for” (p. 249). This is reminiscent of the horrors described in the book of Revelation, and just as the Bible warns of great crisis ahead of Christ’s eternal victory, so Q describes the storm as a cataclysm of biblical proportions; Drop #3624 states this plainly, saying “It’s going to be BIBLICAL!”

While revealing suppressed knowledge to further electoral success is one component of Q’s rapturous storm, however, it is only one small fragment of the salvation he offers. Far more tantalizingly, he also promises extrajudicial violence against Trump’s enemies. Q’s caps-locked rage proclaims to his followers: “THERE IS NO ESCAPE. THERE ARE NO DEALS...THE HUNT CONTINUES. PRISON. DEATH” (p. 218). Here we see the promise of holy violence against those who would oppose Trump and his movement, as well as the assurance that in fact, that violence is already on-going through the present-tense use of “continues.” Just as Christians believe that all will face Christ on judgment day, so Q promises that there will be no deals or solace for his enemies when the storm comes, only the punishment of imprisonment and death. While the Q faithful are generally constructed as being insulated from the deep state actions he claims are constantly underway, the storm changes all that. Drop #3724 tells followers, “Attempts to slow/block the inevitable justice will fail...These people are sick. We are the cure.”

Here, justice is realized in the violent actions of the Anons themselves, given the liberty to finally lash out against the deep state with all their imagined strength and vitriol. When the storm comes, Q seems to imply that righteous mob justice will prevail: recall his promise in Drop #1574 that “at some point the streets for them will not be safe.” A noteworthy contradiction emerges here: the salvation of the storm is ethereal but is rooted in the violence attributed to the faithful themselves. Trust is therefore not just placed in Q and Trump, but in the Anons’ own willingness to believe in their capacity for violence against their enemies. The storm is not merely a gift from the heavens, but a call to spiritual and physical war against the media and Democrats.

The murder of Q’s enemies is the ultimate fulfillment of his movement, viewed as a catalyst for revolutionary change as well as a vicious source of entertainment for those who pledge themselves to him. When an Anon thanks Q for his proclamation that “2018 will be glorious” saying that “It already IS glorious,” Q responds to him in Drop #1966: “In our opinion, until those responsible are dead and/or suffering, it shall remain ‘will be.’” The inclusion of “suffering” here denotes that Q and his followers do not just wish for his enemies’ death as a means of public safety, but out of a sadistic desire to inflict or observe pain in others. This conflation of murder with entertainment is observable in the names and metaphors that Q uses to describe the storm’s violence, including “Boom week,” “popcorn day,” and “the movie trilogy.”

“Boom” as onomatopoeia serves to describe the hail of gunfire and executions that are believed to be imminent, with Q telling his followers on multiple occasions in Drops #3332 and #4072: “BOOM WEEK AHEAD. Treason doesn’t pay well in the end.” The visceral sensory experience of hearing a gunshot is not invoked lightly, but as a marker of divine justice not dissimilar to the seven trumpets which sound to signal the start of apocalypse in the book of

Revelation. Q's use of "BOOM" as an indicator for behind-the-scenes violence against predators and deep state enemies is one point of origination for the popular sub-conspiracy that Joe Biden and many other democrats are actually clones or imposters, having been secretly executed by Trump and Q during the waning months of the Trump administration. The sentence "Treason doesn't pay well in the end" invokes a sort of narrative omniscience on the part of Q that recalls his position as the "Holy Spirit" of the Q trinity; it is preordained by the knower of all things that violence shall be doled out against the wicked.

As graphic and visceral as this violence may be as the imaginary undercurrent of deep state activity, it is most often presented as an entertainment event that followers should (and do) look forward to. That the violence of the storm is righteously justified seems less important than the fact that it will be personally gratifying to those who eagerly await it, hence the "popcorn" and "movie" imagery. In drop #16, Q tells followers, "Get the popcorn. Friday & Saturday will deliver on the MAGA promise. POTUS knows he must clean house (gov't) in order to 'free up' and demonstrate who has authority." While this is yet another instance of the failure of Q's raptures to materialize, it also directly ties the notion of rapture to Trump in his messiah role, going as far as to invoke the "MAGA" slogan.

This construction of Q's mission as an entertainment event traces back to the earliest drops, with Drop #4 telling followers, "Patriots are in control. Sit back and enjoy the show." This provides a useful baseline for noting the shift from political machinations to calls for spiritual violence across the chronology of the drops: by the time Drop #3651 rolls around, Q tells followers, "People actually believe those responsible for the attempted coup attempt of a sitting president will go unpunished...Escape unscathed? Enjoy the show!" No longer is "the show" merely a political victory for the MAGA movement, but an act of violent "punishment" against

the spiritual enemies of the president, all for the enjoyment and vindication of his loyal followers. In a movement that demands constant attention, analysis, and prayer, the notion of being able to relax and “enjoy” the rapturous storm represents a form of psychological relief that is never realized; followers are punished for passivity even as they are called to be passive.

While the storm promises a wave of revelatory knowledge and spiritually justified violence, those elements of Q’s prophecy serve as the necessary catalysts for its final iteration of salvation: a complete spiritual and political transformation of the country and world. Just as many millenarian protestants believe that Christ will one day rule a perfected Earth from his throne in New Jerusalem, so Q promises followers that through the necessary chaos of the great awakening and the storm, the United States will be reborn as a utopia no longer burdened by the nefarious deceptions of the media and Democratic party. Drop #1052 tells followers, “Your trust & faith in us is enough. You elected us to do the heavy lifting. Enjoy the show. BIRTH of a NEW NATION. NEW WORLD.” Similarly to his descriptions (or lack thereof) of the evils he and his followers face, Q leaves a great deal of ambiguity as to what his new world will entail. Drop #2450 repeats a similar line, offering no additional details: “We are going to show you a new world. Those who are blind will soon see the light. A beautiful brave new world lies ahead. We take this journey together. One step at a time.” In spite of the social and political isolation that Q immerses his followers in, this promise of redemption and rebirth serves as a binding promise of hope and solidarity. The oft-repeated acronym “WWG1WGA (Where we go one we go all)” becomes not just a rallying cry for the political rage of Q’s followers, but is transformed into a sacred reminder of the salvation they truly believe is coming; a desperate prayer to Trump and heaven. Q’s promise that “those who are blind will soon see the light” is a cruel beacon of hope to those believers who have found themselves ostracized from their earthly communities

and families; they are made certain that one day soon, their faith will be rewarded and their relationships with loved ones restored.

Conditional as it may appear at times within the texts, salvation is guaranteed as an inevitability by Q. Drop #2218 promises “In the end, all will be right,” and Drop #4950 assures followers that “Nothing can stop what is coming. Nothing!” In spite of this simplistic optimism, there is a dreariness imparted by Q when writing about the future, as if he is passively admitting that things are not going to proceed as the Anons expect them to. He tells followers in drop #4461, “It had to be this way. This is not another 4-year election,” echoing a similar line from Drop #2816 which states “There is simply no other way.” His most manipulative and devastating prophecy comes from Drop #4951, the final lengthy text-based Q drop, posted on Nov. 12, 2020, five days after the 2020 presidential election had been called in Joe Biden’s favor, and 55 days before a mass of Trump supporters (including many Q faithful) would storm the halls of Congress in the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack: “It had to be this way. Sometimes you must walk through the darkness before you see the light.” For the thousands of believers who fell prey to the spiritual allure of Q-Anon, one can only wonder and hope whether or not they will ever truly see the light.

The cruelty of Q-Anon’s Parasitic Christianity is evident in this bait and switch; having had their conception of salvation rendered a grim political massacre, followers are forced to endlessly subject themselves to further alienation and isolation in pursuit of that unattainable end to their raging obsession. It seems unsurprising that Q-Anon has continued to expand in the absence of the Q drops; its own notions of faith and salvation are predicated on doubling down in spite of failure.

## Conclusion

### Summary of Findings

In this study, I applied the act of critical rhetoric to the Q-Anon drops in order to reveal the various facets of Parasitic Christianity at work within them. In grounding my analysis within existing theories surrounding conspiracy theories and digital millennialism, I establish Q-Anon as representing a new kind of mediated religiopolitical superconspiracy called Parasitic Christianity. This formulation describes a movement where believers in millennial Christianity or other End of Days religions are compelled to follow an overtly political conspiracy worldview through participation in acts of digital faith.

Parasitic Christianity represents a new form of ideological domination in that it necessitates alienation from the outside world and an overt usurpation of believers' faith. In acknowledging this movement's manipulative distortion of existing belief systems, we can reconceptualize what intervention should look like for individuals who have fallen prey to Q-Anon and future iterations of this superconspiracy. The Q drops facilitate Parasitic Christianity through purposeful conflation of political and spiritual ideology, and this analysis sought to clarify the areas of Christian theology in which that conflation is most evident.

The Q-Anon texts construct a "new trinity" comprising Donald Trump, Q, and the Creator God. Within this construction, we see how biblical and political narratives are combined to present Donald Trump as a messiah figure who like Jesus Christ, is persecuted by his demonic enemies in the media. By articulating Trump and Q as saviors with capabilities of divine justice in both the political and spiritual realms, Q-Anon usurps the Christian God and reduces his status to that of a mere cultural signifier. With Trump and Q conceptualized as the spiritual arbiters of

prophecy and revelation, followers are compelled by devotion and obedience to further embed themselves within the virtual ekklesia of Q.

There are notable parallels between Jesus Christ's great commission and Q's calls for his followers' propagation of his messages within the Q drops, and followers are called to undergo a spiritual conversion or awakening as part of their entry to the world of Q-Anon. Once converted, Q uses theological rhetoric and passages of scripture to compel believers to commit digital acts of faith on his behalf. Most significantly, "prayer" is constructed to become synonymous with the act of posting memes and commentary on Q-Anon message boards, creating a ritualized pattern of behavior that is both spiritual and political. Safely secured within their Q-Anon echo chambers through their daily acts of prayer, followers are routinely shamed and made to feel incompetent for their inability to successfully spread Q's truth; this constant reminder of their inadequacy forces them further into radicalization and demands that their attempts to spread Q's gospel become all-consuming.

The Q drops warn followers of a Satanic menace lurking around every corner of American culture and politics; an evil so inescapable and powerful that it can only be defeated through faith in Trump and Q. Combining strategic ambiguity with Christian theology, Q allows for his disciples to work themselves into frightened paranoia by theorizing about the unseen and unspoken horrors that they are working to end. Q perpetuates the myth of this amorphous cabal through the drops in a way which calls to mind Eco's (1995) tenets of fascist ideology; they are simultaneously conceived to be frighteningly powerful and laughably weak. Presenting the Cabal as both a spiritual and earthly threat, Q readies his followers to commit violence as part of the holy war that they believe will be waged on their behalf at the time of the storm.

The idea of the storm as Q-Anon's political rapture is borne out of the overtly white supremacist narrative of the great replacement, but also comes to synthesize with the deterministic outlook of millenarian Christianity. In establishing the Great Awakening as a prerequisite for the storm, followers are led into a continuous cycle of disappointment and reaffirmed commitment to Q. All the while, the drops foster a never-ending sense of impending rapture and the need for violent intervention as the means of realizing the storm's revolutionary potential. Increasingly radicalized against any external criticism, the disciples of Q-Anon are isolated by their desperation to experience the spiritual and political validation of the storm.

### **Implications for Theory**

This work bridges an existing gap in scholarship on conspiracy theories and mediated faith movements by exploring the ways in which Q-Anon has reified itself as hybridization of millenarian superconspiracy and vernacular religion. In establishing Q-Anon as the first iteration of a new phenomenon called Parasitic Christianity, this work exposes the ideological domination that followers of Q-Anon are subjected to through consumption of the Q-Anon drops. Parasitic Christianity will be a useful conception for future studies of American political discourse, as the country's continuously increasing political polarization will likely spawn further movements which blur the line between faith and conspiratorial fanaticism. Additionally, as Q-Anon continues to evolve and splinter in the wake of Trump's 2020 electoral defeat, having the nomenclature to accurately describe the movement's categorization and relationship to the Christian faith will be of use to scholars, journalists, and concerned community members alike. This study is also one of the first to do an in-depth textual analysis of the Q-Anon drops, providing valuable insights into a group that has been most-often been studied from the outside-in and as a freak show anomaly rather than as an important religiopolitical movement. While the

relevance of the drops' theology to contemporary iterations of the Q-Anon movement remains to be seen, having established this theological baseline for the movement's initial following will prove useful as a point of comparison for future studies. In understanding Q-Anon as a theology with overtly political implications rather than as a political ideology with religious signifiers, scholars will be able to contextualize its significance as a form of religious radicalization and address it as such in making suggestions for intervention and deradicalization.

### **Implications for Scholarly Intervention**

There are two major implications for scholarly intervention which result from understanding Q-Anon through the lens of Parasitic Christianity as outlined in this study. Firstly, the followers of Q-Anon should be regarded as victims of a dominant ideology rather than as hateful icons of disinformation. I say this not to defend Q-Anon members' morality, but as a reminder that behind each trolling meme and unhinged Facebook rant are real human beings, many of whom have been completely alienated from their friends and loved ones on account of a movement that they earnestly believe to be the last best hope for humanity. Regardless of one's feelings or critiques about Christianity itself as a religious movement, there is no denying that the fear and paranoia which characterize Q-Anon are a far cry from the forgiveness and acceptance that Christianity aim to impart in its theology.

By acknowledging Q-Anon as an overtly cynical bastardization of Christian theology, we are enabled to view its followers not as raging sycophants, but as vulnerable media consumers who have been misled and are in need of community outreach. I believe it is incumbent upon scholars who are privileged to safely traverse radicalized communities to work to establish dialogues which can lead to deradicalization. In a similar vein, categorizing Q-Anon as a faith-based movement rather than as a purely political or conspiracy theory-driven movement has

implications for what community intervention should look like. Whereas debunking conspiracy theories often takes the form of painstakingly rational arguments which attempt to nullify as many of a theory's components as possible, there is no proven methodology for debunking a faith-based movement; theology and faith are beyond the realm of rational argumentation by their very nature. I argue that faith-based communities are best-positioned to enable deradicalization for Q-Anon members, as those same communities are the ones which now find their theology under attack by the cynical machinations of political actors. I am hopeful that this study and others will empower communities to recognize the existential threat to faith and politics that Q-Anon represents.

### **Limitations**

While the four categories of theological texts outlined in the preceding chapters are the most significant patterns of thought that display Q-Anon's Parasitic Christianity, they are by no means all-encompassing, nor are they the only narrative threads that I pulled on in conducting my analysis. Certainly, smaller and less distinct overlaps between the texts and Christian theology exist that would only add to a greater understanding of the relationship between superconspiracy and vernacular religion. While I am regretful that these thematic "scraps" did not find a home in my final published study, all were useful to me in developing my theoretical framework.

Additionally, this study's focus on the Q drops, which were authored and posted between October 28th, 2017 and December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, fails to encompass the breadth and enormity of the movement that Q-Anon has become in the wake of its eponymous leader's disappearance from the internet. As the movement has grown beyond the initial ekklesia offered by the chan message boards and spread its signifiers and memes to the farthest corners of the internet, so new

iterations of Q-Anon have flourished, each with their own codes and interpretations. While much of the mainstream discourse surrounding Q-Anon has been digitally displaced by the wave of deplatforming which followed the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol Riots, these communities have found new homes and remain an influential and impactful force in American politics that are rife for analysis. I am hopeful that this study will remain useful and relevant as likeminded rhetoricians and media scholars continue to unpack and unravel these new iterations of Q-Anon, and I am hopeful that the analysis undergone here will help to shed light on the directions that those new iterations have traveled in furthering the dominant force of Q-Anon's Parasitic Christianity.

### **Directions for Future Study**

While this study has attempted to delineate the parasitic relationship between Q-Anon and Millenarian Christianity, it is clear that it just barely scratches the surface in terms of understanding the immensely consequential phenomenon within American political culture that Q-Anon represents. Future studies which seek to understand Q-Anon through the lens of Parasitic Christianity might choose to focus on interrogating just one of its narrative patterns within a specific paratext, such as examining the messianic Trump theme in a popular influencer's video essay or series of Tweets. Beyond the field of critical rhetoric, ethnographic study of current Q-Anon communities could help form a more comprehensive understanding of whether or not the thematic strands of Parasitic Christianity outlined here continue to be prominent within newer iterations of the movement. Interviews with ex-Q-Anon followers could also be revelatory in this regard, and there is no shortage of ways to analyze the ways in which Q-Anon continues to contort itself and its devotees to fit the currently prevailing conservative political narratives. Critical scholars of communication and media would be foolish to

underestimate this now near-mainstream movement, which threatens to destabilize communities with its insidious conceptions of “truth.”

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