

2021

The End of the World According to Q

Francisco G. Mendoza III
University of North Florida, n01334406@unf.edu

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Julie Ingersoll, Professor
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
2020-2021 Neil Gray Paper Prize

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/pandion_unf



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [New Religious Movements Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#),
and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mendoza, Francisco G. III (2021) "The End of the World According to Q," *PANDION: The Osprey Journal of Research and Ideas*: Vol. 2: No. 1, Article 12.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/pandion_unf/vol2/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at UNF Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in PANDION: The Osprey Journal of Research & Ideas by an authorized administrator of UNF Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Digital Projects](#).

© 2021 All Rights Reserved

The End of the World According to Q

Francisco Mendoza

Faculty Mentor: Julie Ingersoll, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
University of North Florida

*This paper won the 2020-2021 Neil Gray Paper Prize
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies*

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must happen soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.”¹

Introduction

The political landscape of the United States in 2021 is characterized by trends including tribalism, stagnation, the rebuking of political norms, and distrust in politicians, scientists, and other experts and their narratives. Collectively, and in circular fashion, these trends have created and contributed to an increasingly conspiratorial and paranoid society. Navigating such a sociopolitical environment – what many colloquially have called the “post-truth era” – has proven difficult for many enterprises which project themselves as truth based (mainline churches, traditional broadcasting and publishing outlets, healthcare organizations, government agencies, etc.). Certain other groups, however, have thrived in the murkiness of our massively connected but informationally decentralized world.

1 Revelation 1:1-3. *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/revelation/1>.

One of the most prominent of these groups in the contemporary moment is QAnon.² QAnon's followers are overwhelmingly devout supporters of former President Donald J. Trump. The crux of their worldview revolves around the results of the 2016 election and its implications, although the tenets that define and make up the movement have bubbled under the surface of American politics for decades and rely on dynamics which have furthered conspiratorial thinking for centuries. The QAnon movement is uniquely modern when compared to some of its predecessors, however, and it has a political consciousness tied to material action unparalleled by the often belief-oriented evangelism of other comparable conspiratorially minded movements in America. The thrust behind the QAnon community is deeply religious, and the demographic makeup of the community reflects that, leaning heavily on support from white Evangelicals to bolster its numbers and volume, although QAnon is often more diverse than popular commentary portrays it.

This paper will focus on two main tenets of QAnon belief, and what those beliefs reveal about the shifting nature of American society since 2000. The two tenets are, first, belief in "the Storm," a quasi-apocalyptic final undertaking to clear the evils of American society; and, second, "trust in the plan," one of the main thrusts of the movement's adaptiveness and what truly defines QAnon as a movement in the so-called post-truth era. I will analyze how QAnon followers consume information in relation to "trusting the plan" and consider the process of reality-building and interpretation that they call "baking." I will explore how QAnon's decentralized nature allows for its unique adaptivity in the face of what others may see as failed predictions, and how both "the Storm" and the "trust in the plan" reflect the religious, specifically Evangelical, nature of the QAnon worldview. Thus, this paper will examine ways in which the QAnon community functions as not only a political movement, but also as a religious one. I will show how theoretical tools for understanding religion can fruitfully be used to understand the nature of QAnon as a cultural movement.

2 Kevin Roose, "What Is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?", *The New York Times*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>; Mike Wendling, "QAnon: What is it and where did it come from?", *BBC News*, 6 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434>; Brett Forrest, "What Is QAnon? What We Know About the Conspiracy Theory Group," *The Wall Street Journal*, updated February 4, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-is-qanon-what-we-know-about-the-conspiracy-theory-11597694801>.

Sources and terminology

Locating primary sources for a contemporary, volatile, immediately adaptive movement is difficult; therefore, to navigate this challenge I will focus on the “information dumps” allegedly posted on the imageboard website 8kun (previously onto 4chan) by the QAnon leader known as “Q.” Q’s information dumps, also called “drops,” are interpreted and echoed back into the QAnon online community by other adherents, gathering a volume of “followers” at such speed as to seemingly confer interpretive legitimacy. In addition to the “legitimate” interpretation of Q’s drops, this paper will at times consider the interpretations of more grassroots followers, to show how various meanings and applications of the core tenets of QAnon can become personalized.

Little scholarly work has been done to date on the QAnon community, although some investigative reporting on the QAnon community has been published by journalists from *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Magazine*, *Wired*, etc. Conspiracy theory researcher Travis View has written articles and created a podcast around the existence and various adaptations of QAnon as the movement navigates our shared political realities.³ The theoretical underpinnings of this paper rely upon Peter Berger’s concepts of externalization and internalization, Emile Durkheim’s liminality, and Marxian class analysis, as well as a framework to understand the building of reality which Mark Fisher presented in his 2009 publication, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*⁴

Understanding QAnon

QAnon is a massively decentralized network of anonymous followers of the online message boards 4chan and 8kun (previously called 8chan) which feature “provocative content from users around the world, often without charging any fees.”⁵ The “Q” in QAnon, like the moniker assigned to the movement’s anonymous leader, symbolizes

3 “About Travis View,” *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/travis-view/> (last viewed 18 May 2021).

4 See, for example, Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1991); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, tr. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995); Leszek Kozakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995); Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

5 Sam Machkovech, “Imageboard sites 4chan, 8chan announcement new ownership arrangements,” 9/21/2015, <https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2015/09/imageboard-sites-4chan-8chan-announce-new-ownership-arrangements/>.

a level of government security within the Department of Energy, thought by QAnon adherents to be the highest possible clearance one can hold. The base of followers initially existed mainly in the online spheres of influence of websites like 8kun but has spread in recent years onto larger social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, YouTube and, very successfully, on FaceBook. The movement has also morphed into branch media websites such as Parler or Gab, created as a result of the alleged censoring of speech that the larger platforms have levied on QAnon's followers. Although the main drivers of its spread have been online communities, QAnon is not without representation in the offline world.

The QAnon community has held protests across the United States in growing numbers, mostly revolving around child sex trafficking, and these protests have even spread into America's western counterparts like the United Kingdom and Germany.⁶ In the words of *Washington Post* writer and QAnon Anonymous host Travis View, QAnon is centrally defined by the belief that, "there is a worldwide cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who rule the world... They control politicians, and they control the media... And they would have continued ruling the world, were it not for the election of President Donald Trump."⁷ Although the central belief revolves around the election of Trump as a sign of a Genesis flood-style Rapture against the "Deep State," the QAnon community is neither monolithic in belief nor in demographics. QAnon exists now in older generations' FaceBook groups or email inboxes just as much as it has existed in the radicalized younger right-wing spaces of 4chan and Reddit. Contrary to popular belief about QAnon's followers, as many as twenty-eight percent of those polled said they had planned to vote for Joe Biden in the 2020 election.⁸ Although QAnon's supporters overwhelmingly lean white and Evangelical, there is also representation in the Black community and within deeply conservative and religious Latino communities, such as among Cubans in South Florida.⁹

6 Marianna Spring and Mike Wendling, "How Covid-19 Myths Are Merging with the QAnon Conspiracy Theory," *BBC News*, BBC, 2 Sept. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53997203.

7 Matthew Rozsa, "QAnon Is the Conspiracy Theory That Won't Die," *Salon*, Salon.com, 17 Aug. 2020, www.salon.com/2019/08/18/qanon-is-the-conspiracy-theory-that-wont-die-heres-what-they-believe-and-why-theyre-wrong/.

8 Gilad Edelman, "QAnon Supporters Aren't Quite Who You Think They Are," *Wired*, Conde Nast, October 6, 2020, www.wired.com/story/qanon-supporters-arent-quite-who-you-think-they-are/.

9 Sabrina Rodriguez and Marc Caputo, "'This is f---ing crazy': Florida Latinos swamped by wild conspiracy theories," *Politico*, Capitol News Company, LLC, September 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/florida-latinos-disinformation-413923>.

Donald Trump's election was a uniformly pivotal moment in its canon for all Q followers, in spite of the various rifts in beliefs or demographics previously mentioned. The community which would become the base of QAnon came out of various semi-parallel movements, some of which have existed under the surface of American politics for decades, but the most relevant, and recent, movement was PizzaGate. PizzaGate asserted that the basement of a pizzeria named Comet Pizza was home to a Satanic pedophile ring headed by Hillary Clinton and other mostly-but-not-exclusively-Democratic political operatives.¹⁰ This online belief infamously turned to real political action when a lone gunman came to the storefront armed and shot into the pizzeria. Other than the obviously ensuing panic, the shooting ultimately led to no injuries.

The influence that PizzaGate has on the very moralized political framework in which QAnon operates is obvious, and it can be traced with specificity. Many of the allegations of child sex trafficking and Satanism as they exist in the QAnon movement, and even of the specific actors, particularly Hillary Clinton, who hold key roles in these stories, are built directly on the foundations laid during the rise of PizzaGate. These stories are also a sign that the Q movement is more than just a belief system. The movement's beliefs can, and do, function as an impetus just as PizzaGate did for that lone gunman: a moral cause upon which to act. Sometimes such action is expressed in the political sphere, most notably as in the case of QAnon presence at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, but it is not exclusively political. The action-oriented character of the Q movement is sometimes culturally-focused, as, for example, is the online trend "#savethechildren," which propagates child trafficking allegations of people holding the Q worldview.¹¹ Multiple allegations exist suggesting that some parents who hold QAnon beliefs have even kidnapped their own children purportedly because they fear child trafficking. *Insider* reports on one such case of a mother in Utah, noting that, "Over the last several years, numerous QAnon believers have allegedly kidnapped their own children following the false belief that Child Protective Services is involved in a child-trafficking cabal."¹²

10 Gregor Aisch, et al. "Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories," *The New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2016, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/10/business/media/pizzagate.html.

11 EJ Dickson, "What Is #SaveTheChildren and Why Did Facebook Block It?," *Rolling Stone*, Penske Media Corporation, August 12, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/savethechildren-qanon-pizzagate-facebook-block-hashtag-1041812/>.

12 Rachel E. Greenspan, "Utah police say a woman associated with QAnon kidnapped her own son with the help of a friend," *Insider*, Insider Inc., October 2, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/qanon-kidnap-utah-police-boy-linked-mom-friend-2020-10>.

QAnon was also birthed from the cultural aftermath of GamerGate, another online phenomena which painted itself as a vanguard movement against a growing social liberalism intruding into traditionally white male gaming and online spaces. GamerGate existed as a less explicitly political and more culturally targeted movement, though the political undertones were certainly notable, and its self-consciousness as a political movement grew over time. In the aftermath of GamerGate, one of the most important threads tying it to QAnon is the story of Steve Bannon, a political operative known for his work with the right-wing journal, *Breitbart*.

Based upon a personal “revelation” that certain social fringe groups, like the World of Warcraft guilds, were the perfect breeding ground for disillusioned young white men, Bannon moved to organize and politically radicalize men in the online and gaming worlds. He urged them toward the right and toward the politics of white male aggrievement, which came to undergird the QAnon movement during GamerGate.¹³ His efforts seamlessly conjoined with the traditionally right-wing humor and cultural politics of websites such as 4chan. Such fringe groups were QAnon’s first base of support. Core tenets of QAnon belief developed within the shared common spaces of these marginalized groups, including that of the seemingly-Biblical Rapture event understood as “the Storm,” as well as who would become targets of the Storm which would be spearheaded by a Q team and, specifically, Donald J. Trump.

Collectively, followers of Q are known for holding the view of a world in rapid and extreme decline – one in which trust in politics and the media is approaching zero, and the stakes are essentially the destruction of civilization as they know it. “The Storm” broadly refers to a belief in the mass arrest, or mass execution, of the aforementioned Satanic cabal, as well as various people perceived to be part of a political and cultural “Swamp.” The expression “the Swamp” in these contexts refers generally to the entrenched bureaucracy of American politics in so-called “alphabet agencies” such as the FBI or NSA, sometimes also called the “Deep State,” as well as the cultural and political establishment beyond a select few, who are mostly pro-Trump. Often, but not always, this understanding of the organs of power behind society include either subtle or overt anti-Semitism. The demonization of figures

13 Mike Snider, “Steve Bannon Learned to Harness Troll Army from ‘World of Warcraft,’” *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 18 July 2017, www.usatoday.com/story/tech/talkingtech/2017/07/18/steve-bannon-learned-harness-troll-army-world-warcraft/489713001/.

such as George Soros, for example, builds upon the long history of conspiracy and its relationship to the belief that a small Jewish minority is behind the Deep State facade, holding real and almost omnipotent power.

Some followers of Q, called Anons, and the bakers among the Anons, perceive the existence of faceless organs of power, including the military-industrial complex, which continues wars across multiple oppositional partisan presidencies, or the continual stagnation of wages across presidential administrations, which they attribute to this “Swamp.” The systems of power that are internalized as having wreaked havoc in their lives, or movements which seek to redistribute already gotten gains among the upper class, are all externalized into individualized and tactile enemies which QAnon believes need to be taken down. Not only are systems of power externalized into these figures, but the battle over politics is then reframed into a battle of morals, parallel to a common Evangelical understanding of the Rapture, which includes the battle over all existence found within the Book of Revelations, or sometimes as an echo to the flood story found in the Book of Genesis; that is, an ultimatum between absolute Good and absolute Evil.

Understanding “the Storm”

Many QAnon adherents believe that through the organs of government, the armies of God (sometimes united in QAnon canon under the banner of a pseudo-resurrected John F. Kennedy, Jr.), will bring down the political swamp that has caused the moral degradation of America over the past several decades in the ultimate battle: the Storm.¹⁴ The Storm itself is understood by its proponents as a quasi-apocalyptic event, both in its language and its content, wherein mass arrests or executions will take place, usually starting with, or most notably involving, Hillary Clinton herself and anyone in her political orbit. In these prediction stories of the Storm, it is often asserted that planned protests and riots will take to the streets and martial law will be declared. The good, faithful, and just populations of America will then experience a Great Awakening, in which those who have previously been “asleep” to the inner workings of the Deep State will realize the unreality in which they live, akin to the taking of the red pill in the film, *The Matrix*. In a sense, then, people will become

14 Avi Selk, “JFK Jr. didn’t die! He runs QAnon! And he’s No. 1 Trump fan, omg!!!,” *The Washington Post*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/08/05/jfk-jr-didnt-die-he-runs-qanon-and-hes-no-1-trump-fan-omg/>.

saved through that Awakening. It is precisely through this breakthrough event, QAnon adherents believe, that the liminality of these ungrounded Americans can be ended, that meaning can be found through the Great Awakening, and the new America can be established.¹⁵ It is also no coincidence that the Great Awakening takes its namesake from the eighteenth century movement against secular rationalism, which promoted moralizing sermons, salvation through faith and evangelism, and religious dedication.

Proponents often broaden the scope of the Storm to include people who express liberal ideas or those who are perceived as anti-Trump cultural figures, even if they are only slightly or circumstantially so. Among these are often cultural figures in Hollywood or other spheres of American cultural life, such as Jim Carrey.¹⁶ Here, GamerGate's specific influence is felt, even as the mechanics of the Storm harken back to eschatology and centuries old scapegoating tactics. As their paths align with the much more online-based radicalization project of young white males, even older white Evangelicals have adopted the terms used to label enemies and potential members of the Swamp or supporters of the cabal. Some congregants of churches have moved away from more liberally minded pastors because they fear the pastors are becoming "social justice warriors," a term popularized during the GamerGate movement.¹⁷ Alongside this tendency, several Q posts describe dozens of arrests and hundreds of indictments of specifically named political operatives, both Democratic and Republican, for sexual crimes, most often regarding child trafficking or child pornography.¹⁸ In the view of Q and its followers, the Storm is necessary for the Great Awakening to follow, and that retributive justice must be doled out, much like a Genesis flood, in order to rid the world of its evils and build anew. It is precisely

15 Q posts numbers 4429, 3906 <https://qalerts.app/?n=4429>, <https://qalerts.app/?n=3906>.

16 David Marsters, "I'm really sad to say this Jim Carrey but welcome to the storm you're now at Target enjoy the time you have because we are coming for you #gameover" Twitter, March 21 2020 10:59 PM <https://twitter.com/Davidmarsters5/status/1241560032535359488>, Bruno Bornay, "You used to be an actor at pedowood , but it is the end ! I prefer Ricky Gervais , I know that you know ! Good luck Tic toc tic tocWe are awake all over the World ! The Storm is upon US !" Twitter, October 5 2020 3:57 PM, <https://twitter.com/BBornay/status/1313206624253816833>, God Wins, "Are you enjoying the storm? @JimCarrey" Twitter, March 23 2020 7:48 PM https://twitter.com/TrustThePlan_/status/1242055712395669504.

17 Abby Ohlheiser, "Evangelicals Are Looking for Answers Online. They're Finding QAnon Instead," MIT Technology Review, *MIT Technology Review*, 13 Nov. 2020, www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/26/1007611/how-qanon-is-targeting-evangelicals/.

18 Q posts numbers 4633, 4632, 4631 <https://qalerts.app/?n=4633>, <https://qalerts.app/?n=4632>, <https://qalerts.app/?n=4631>.

this Storm that adherents believe will ultimately end today's liminal period of American social and political life.

The Storm is thus understood in several ways. First, it exists as an externalization of an internalized desire for a shifting of the status quo. The parts of American political life that are perceived as stagnant, even described as being swamp-like, are most often the targets of the Storm which would be eradicated. The Clinton dynasty, for example, is not just disdained by the right wing. In 2016, even many on the left levied criticisms of Hillary Clinton's nomination as a sign of stagnant politics based on dynastic loyalties and seniority rather than as a representation of what they allege would be common economic and political interests. Clinton's nomination was also often tied to the military-industrial complex and a stagnant economic regime of neoliberalism, and as a continuation of policies such as the aforementioned endless wars and trade policies which are often criticized as having harmed the manufacturing industries of America.

The Storm also targets a Washington, D.C. and Hollywood elite which adherents suspect entrenches itself in politics, not only for its own alleged financially corrupt purposes, but also for morally corrupt purposes. Adherents, for example, have accused actors, directors, and others in those spheres of participating in global child sex trafficking plot. I believe this is because the followers of Q, and the bakers among them, often perceive a faceless, nameless and formless, seemingly meaningless bureaucratic stagnation and declination of American politics and economy, and attribute to it a moral evilness that gives it reason and purpose to exist.

The way in which the Storm connects the network of these targets – through Hillary Clinton and through other figures like Anthony Weiner, and even into the cultural sphere through people like Harvey Weinstein or Kevin Spacey – is also an externalization of a perceived internal incestuousness of the political and cultural establishment into which they themselves cannot break. This is another point where QAnon's perception is not entirely false and produces a feedback loop which intensifies itself as the Anons set their sights on a new actor or politician. Connections to morally corrupt actors or politicians are easily observable, and without many degrees of separation, because of how absolutely entrenched the politics and culture which Q opposes at its core seems actually to be. It also acts as the externalization of a desire to stop the shifting of the status quo in some areas, with some QAnon believers also adhering to a theory of "White Genocide."

White Genocide theories allege that the changing demographic trends that seem to indicate a decrease in white ethnic representation in proportion to non-whites is intentional, and represents an intention to end white Western civilization at the hands of a Satanic cabal, or Bill Gates, or George Soros, etc., and thus end the racial hierarchy that affords them some feeling of superiority over a perceived true underclass. This theory is not exclusive to QAnon, nor is it accepted by all or the majority of its adherents, but it is a sign of the movement's ability to act as an umbrella organization for those who feel they exist within liminal spaces, whether economic, political, socio-cultural, or racial. Ultimately, and most applicably, the Storm is a way in which an uncomfortable existence within liminal spaces and times meets its final and ultimate end, rather than a slow, uneasy existence continuing on seemingly forever.¹⁹

QAnon through a Marxist Lens

A Marxist analysis of the QAnon phenomenon reveals that a working class, unable to come to grips with the enormity of the structures of power and the profit-seeking, emotionless, and amoral functions of those structures, becomes somewhat pacified by an attribution of individualized moral reason to them, even if that moral reason is one of an absolute and ultimate evil.

Analyzing the Storm through a Marxist lens reveals it as a pacification of anxieties about economic displacement, about the loosening ideological grip of capital over workers, and not only for workers, but for an overclass as well. It functions as a sort of last breath of both a privileged underclass to deny their economic realities by attributing their weakening paycheck to a Soros-funded, or Satanic, plan to destroy Western civilization, and of a privileged overclass to deny the economic reality and untenability of the inequality upon which their wealth is built. Both of these dynamics are remedied through the Storm. For the overclass, the growing civil unrest is perceived not as anguished despair at material conditions, but rather as manufactured and filled with paid actors, employed by the exact same Swamp that would be flooded out in the Storm. For the underclass, the political elite which

19 See also: Adrienne LaFrance, "The Prophecies of Q." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 24 Sept. 2020, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/; and David Neiwert, "Conspiracy Meta-Theory 'The Storm' Pushes the 'Alternative' Envelope Yet Again." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 17 Jan. 2018, www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/01/17/conspiracy-meta-theory-storm-pushes-alternative-envelope-yet-again.

denies them economic freedom, the cultural elite which seeks to tell them that they are worse off than they perceive themselves to be all while being the most morally corrupt group of pedophilic Satanists and traitors – they are among the same swamp creatures which the Storm would flood out.

Understanding the meaning of “Trust the Plan”

The very first recognized Q drop, posted on October 28, 2017, set the tone for the predictive nature of posts surrounding the Storm. It asserted: “Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning on Oct 30, 2017... HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am.”²⁰ Considering that Clinton is not currently in jail, and was not publicly arrested on that date, Q then responded to possible doubts in a follow up, much more cryptic, post, again setting the tone for the nature of QAnon to come, stating: “Mockingbird. HRC detained, not arrested (yet). Where is Huma? Follow Huma.”²¹

This development in the Storm is essential to understanding it as both an idealized final judgement day, in which hundreds, possibly thousands, of arrests are made and even, in some interpreters’ views, executions for treason are doled out, as well as a slow, secret, and steady drip of subpoenas, detainments, and loosely related arrests over time. The essence of the Storm as realized in this seemingly contradictory nature lays bare another essential aspect of QAnon as a movement and a community: “trusting the plan.”

For QAnon’s followers, information is presented in cryptically worded posts that necessitate interpretation and are often filled with questions that allow for many answers, with connections built through word association. These bits and pieces are called “breadcrumbs.” Interpreters of Q, and of reality through the lens of Q, are called “bakers,” and it is they who collect the breadcrumbs and assemble a coherent view of reality molded by the information provided. As Brian Friedberg, a senior Harvard research who studies QAnon, explains, “The kind of literacy that’s implied here—close reading and discussion of texts that are accepted as authoritative—has quite a bit in common with how evangelicals learn to read and interpret the Bible.”²²

20 Q, post number 1 <https://qalerts.app/?n=1>.

21 Q, post number 2 <https://qalerts.app/?n=2>.

22 Ohlheiser, “Evangelicals are looking for answers online,” <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/26/1007611/how-qanon-is-targeting-evangelicals/>.

This type of reading, one meant to dissuade doubts, involves reading the texts loosely, figuratively, or literally, depending on the context in which it is applied. Not only is it comparable to Evangelical readings of scriptural text in terms of framework, but also mechanically as a deeply participatory endeavor, which some have also compared to the way in which Augmented Reality Games (ARGs) function.²³ Much like players in a game, or those reading Biblical scriptures to glean a divine insight into the problems of their lives, Q's drops function as a compass which can be used to help navigate the reader through the confusing political realities which they face.

The parallel also exists in the role Anons view themselves as having, and in what Q has told the Anons their role is, which is to "trust the plan" and "to post," or to evangelize. Some have taken this role to its logical conclusion, organizing a formal QAnon congregation in the style of neo-charismatic home churches over Zoom during the Coronavirus pandemic.²⁴ If a "bake," i.e., a conception of reality, is proven wrong through shared reality, adherents might believe it is the fault of a false prophet, or even the fault of the baker for being unworthy to truly peek behind the veil. Or perhaps it is that the breadcrumbs were indeed correct, but the bakers did not hold all the necessary information because the time in which those pieces fit correctly has not come to pass. Again, this is similar to the ways scripture is often read by Evangelicals, especially prophetic texts such as the Book of Revelation, where the pieces are there to be put together but it is only when the event has come to pass that it can be truly considered a complete mosaic. Attempted application of these prophetic texts to contemporary events can be considered right, or wrong, by different followers depending upon their own individualized interpretations. However, if the interpretation is ultimately too discordant with shared reality, the final weight of blame is placed on the bakers, not on the true prophet or on the Divine who shares His vision.

Not all QAnon followers listen to the same bakers, and not all QAnon followers listen to bakers broadly. Others are not invested enough in QAnon to follow the breadcrumbs and so take a looser approach to the application of presented

23 Clive Thompson, "QAnon Is Like a Game-a Most Dangerous Game," *Wired*, Conde Nast, www.wired.com/story/qanon-most-dangerous-multiplatform-game/.

24 Marc-André Argentino, PhD candidate Individualized Program, "The Church of QAnon: Will Conspiracy Theories Form the Basis of a New Religious Movement?" *The Conversation*, 14 Jan. 2021, theconversation.com/the-church-of-qanon-will-conspiracy-theories-form-the-basis-of-a-new-religious-movement-137859.

information to perceived reality. In all of these scenarios, though, a reckoning with reality and the Real is constantly being created and recreated. The Q account often presents this information in what are called “leaks,” as opposed to floods, because an account of the “complete picture would put 99% of Americans (the World) in a hospital.”²⁵ The movement is highly adaptable to shifts in “shared politics” because of this belief – shared politics meaning conceptions of political reality built through interactions in the political and public space such as the non-arrest of Hillary Clinton over the past four years. I call this shared politics because Q itself must mold its canon around that shared experience, even if that comes in the form of denial by saying that the Clinton we know is a clone, or that the indictments are sealed, among other adaptations. Within the Q framework, their view of real politics is happening, but not for all to see.

As Mark Fisher has written, paraphrasing French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, “The Real is what any reality must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void... glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality.”²⁶ It is then for Q to bring the true essence of the Real to the Anons, to be interpreted and decoded by bakers and by lay followers, in the face of the suppression of that Real hidden behind the media and political establishment’s reality. In the words of Q, “Expand your thinking. Planned [3]. Moves and countermoves. Strategy warfare... Just because you can’t see it, doesn’t mean BIG things aren’t happening.”²⁷

The function of this is then twofold. It asserts to the QAnon community that there is a veil of reality, and that the Real is indeed a traumatic void, but for Anons, through Q, that void is represented by the moralized personification of the otherwise nameless, faceless functions of structures. It is only through the authority of Q that the Real can be glimpsed, and it then becomes a way in which to navigate otherwise schizophrenic and seemingly irrational systems.²⁸ It also functions, in the Marxian sense, to establish its own reality (that is, an obfuscation of the Real) onto the

25 Q post number 111 <https://qalerts.app/?n=111>.

26 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books: Winchester, 2009), 18.

27 Q post number 577 <https://qalerts.app/?n=577>.

28 Schizophrenic here used in the Laing sense, as a delusional break caused by projections upon projections, introjections of those projections and on, as the myth of the unity of shared social realities breaks down. For more context on this use of the term, see R.D. Laing’s *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2018) and *Self and Others* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

community of QAnon and presents a vision of the Real which can be ultimately understood, even if it is hated, because despite it being morally corrupt, it still functions on some sense of individualized rationality. It is in this way that the battle over the Real can become a heavily religious battle of a moral Divine Good and an absolute Satanic Evil.

The trust in the plan functions very similarly to the commonly held Evangelical doctrine of trusting in the final plan of God to carry a person or persons through dark times – the belief that all things ultimately have meaning even if there is a disagreement in a perceived purpose in that immediate moment. By trusting the plan, the followers of Q are able to navigate liminal spaces until the Storm comes, the Great Awakening happens, and Good finally wins over Evil. Friedberg notes that, “QAnon community construction, from the start, has emphasized a traditionalist American morality that is closely aligned with popular Christianity... Q himself posts in a style that both invokes evangelical talking points and encourages deep scriptural research.”²⁹

How does this explain, though, why the QAnon community is able to adapt despite some notable unrealized predictions? I posit, in the tradition of Mark Fisher, that there is an awareness of hyperreality among Anons: that these things we call reality are, like reality television or political opinion polls, scripted, or affected by the observation of them. Not as in being determined, but as a recognition of spectacle, that actors like Q or like Hillary Clinton, or the media writ large, are aware of what implications the Real has, and therefore change their behavior accordingly.

Mark Fisher writes, “Did the presence of the cameras affect the behavior of those being filmed? ... Such questions were undecidable, and therefore ‘reality’ would always be elusive; at the very moment where it seemed that it was being grasped in the raw, reality transformed into... ‘hyperreality’.”³⁰ Fisher notes that a popular phrase from the television show *Big Brother* describes this change in the mode of control over narratives of reality: “You Decide.” It is here, in the personalization of reality, the consumption of the spectacle according to feeling and the elusiveness of any Real, that the world of QAnon is much more tactile, not one of complete fiction, but a narrative of the world much like any other. The recurring planned arrest

29 Ohlheiser, “Evangelicals are looking for answers online,” <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/26/1007611/how-qanon-is-targeting-evangelicals/>.

30 Fisher, 48.

and execution of Hillary Clinton can then be summarized, as written by Fisher, as “‘reality’ ... akin to the multiplicity of options available on a digital document, where no decision is final, revisions are always possible, and any previous moment can be recalled at any time.”³¹ If Mark Fisher’s question in *Capitalist Realism* is if there is truly no alternative, then Anons have answered it: the Storm is the alternative, and if the Storm is inevitable much like the Last Judgement, so then the mosaic of reality must be made to fit in spite of any cognitive dissonance.

Afterword

QAnon is like many of us: incessantly attempting to make sense of a world which seems to make less and less sense. A serious analysis of what helps QAnon function as a popular movement reveals that Enlightenment values such as truth, reality, facts, and rationality have all degraded in the past century, and not just for Anons. QAnon’s alliance with Evangelicals here makes sense, for it provides a way in which to explain the vast complicated networks of power and influence which make this system of global capitalism tick without looking directly at the Sun. It provides for the Anons a narrative of the world, Good versus Evil, acting as a compass and a guide to navigating this system. In this view of the world, one without any tangible alternative, the destruction of the shared reality through the Storm then becomes alluring, just as those oppressed Christian nations in the medieval era viewed John of Patmos’ prophetic texts as liberatory. For QAnon believers, it is only through destruction, through the Storm, through the Last Judgement, that there can be a Great Awakening. In the interim, they believe, Q has proffered them a Great Commission,³² and all one needs to do to be saved is to follow the plan, and evangelize faithfully online through bakes, posts, and memes.

31 Fisher, 54. Fisher’s comments on memory disorder and dreamwork under late capitalism are incredibly prescient as to the seemingly ‘irrational’ nature of QAnon and the trust in the plan, and illuminating to the role of forgetting as an adaptive tool, and as a creation of multiple interpassing and sometimes contradictory ‘realities’ which support life under a system like this.

32 “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’” Matthew 28:16-20, New International Version. Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2028%3A16-20&version=NIV>.