QAnon as an Online-Facilitated Cult: Integrating Models of Belief, Practice, and Identity

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Abstract: Through the examination of QAnon as a religious apocalyptic "digital cult," this paper integrates individual psychological models regarding the espousal of conspiracy beliefs with sociological and anthropological models of religious cultism, particularly in the context of destructive and violent cults. This integrative model purports to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the extravagant irrationality of the QAnon belief-system with the otherwise normative demographics of its adherents and distinguish—as scholars of religion often do—between the creed, the practice, and the social identity aspects of the movement. Cultic studies (adapted to the digital age) are leveraged to discern the functions that different strata of adherents provide to the movement, and elucidate the mechanisms by which they coexist, collaborate, and avoid splitting along organizational or ideological fault-lines. The model also draws upon studies of apocalyptic cults and violent radicalization to caution against counterproductive over-generalization, over-sensationalizing, and over-pathologizing of QAnon believers.

Keywords: Online Cultism, New Religious Movements, Cognitive Science, Conspiracy Theories, Violent Radicalization, Apocalyptic Cults

Introduction

Even against the backdrop of a longstanding "paranoid style" in U.S. collective psyche (Hofstadter 1966; Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014; van der Linden et al. 2021; Walker 2013) and the perennial partiality of

the American People to religious cultism (Finke and Stark 2005; Jenkins 2000; Morris 2019; Stein 2003), the QAnon conspiracy theory has often been touted as unique in its snowball-like growth and influence, and its ever-expanding scope and explanatory power (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). As with other rapidly expanding, zealous and divisive cultural phenomena in history, it had sparked a debate whether it should be understood as a religion, a New Religious Movement (NRM), a cult (either in the disparaging or the more neutral sense of the term), or as another political manifestation of the "new conspiracism" discourse that took hold in present-day culture (Rosenblum and Muirhead, 2020). This debate is further complicated by the myriad definitions that each of these terms carries, and further obscured by the loose colloquial usage of some of these terms, sometimes to pejorative—rather than productive—ends.

To understand QAnon holistically, this paper turns to existing conceptual frameworks in the social sciences that were developed to understand belief-based cultism. This multi-layered approach starts with the individual appeal of belief as a meaning-making device, as understood through the general Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) framework. However, by highlighting the individual proclivity for meaning-making through belief—rather than through more empirical and falsifiable means—cognitive science had at times failed to capture the phenomenology of belief, which results in over-pathologizing believers as irrational, psychotic or delusional. To both complement and delimit the cognitive-scientific approach, this article turns to sociological-anthropological models of belief, which highlight the communal nature of this phenomenon, as a practical device for social cohesion and identity. The limits on over-pathologizing that the cultural approaches to belief provide are also consistent with forensic clinical developments in the differential diagnosis of psychosis versus ideological radicalization despite the superficial similarity in their presentations (Cunningham 2018; Dudley et al. 2016; Holoyda and Newman 2016; Rahman 2018). Taken together, the proposed integrative framework in this paper conceives of the non-normative nature of QAnoners' beliefs and/or behavior as a potentially reversible outcome of a propaganda campaign that systematically exploited individual mental vulnerabilities for socio-political advantage.

Lastly, the article focusses on cultic studies to understand the organizational structure circumscribing QAnon's communal belief-system and rendering it a viable political movement. In particular, the study of destructive cults has yielded effective frameworks with which to understand the ways in which conspiratorial worldviews translate to mobilization and violence potential. Importantly, the article adapts the "classical," *in situ*, cult coercion and violence to the virtual milieu of the Internet and social media, where echo

chambers and a variety of digital means for social monitoring and control have been coopted for cultic aims.

The powerful combination of motivated perceptions of a treacherous political system, the vague and cryptic (and thus unfalsifiable) "prophecies" by Q, and the decentralized, "something for everybody" digital crowdsourcing of this seemingly novel phenomenon are placed within the larger social-scientific context, in order to guide our understanding of this faith-based apocalyptic movement and its violence potential.

QAnon Ideology as a Religious Belief-System

Formal definitions of religion hinge on specific metaphysical entities and their attributes or manifestations and are notoriously difficult to compare cross-culturally. Many of them are also suspect of Western and/or modern biases difficult to mitigate (Barnhart 2011; de Muckadell 2014). Successful—albeit limited—attempts to define religion in a consistent way across history and regions focus on the phenomenological aspects of the term. The most consistent body of empirical studies in this ilk is generally referred to as "Cognitive Science of Religion" (CSR; Barrett 2007). Despite formidable criticism of this framework from spiritual and post-structural schools of thought, it remains one of the most resilient to cultural biases. Its scientific rigor has also generated an incremental understanding of the motivations, experiences and function underlying belief in general, and endorsement of conspiracy theories in particular.

On the phenomenological level, conspiracy theories share with religion the basic structure of a comprehensive belief system that is accepted as a true and just explanation of reality, and as such can provide a general guide to behavior. The reliance on belief—as opposed to logic or observation—confers a unique cognitive resilience to this structure through the unfalsifiable nature of its tenets (Husserl 1970; Schrijvers 2016; Stackhouse 2007). Whether such resilience to refutation is a virtue (as with devotional integrity) or a liability (as with fanaticism) is a matter of much debate and controversy—a fact that could explain Q's stance, which emphasizes the common denominator between his preaching and other comprehensive belief-systems. For example, Q-drop #885 from March 11, 2018 reads:

"*Everything has meaning.*

This is not a game.

Learn to play the game.

Q" (8Chan, Mar. 8, 2018 7:04:40 PM EST).

Both structurally and phenomenologically, this Q Drop bears striking resemblance to Michael Barkun's (2013) distillation of conspiracist ideation as minimally consisting of the propositions:

1) Nothing Happens by Accident.

2) Nothing is As it Seems; and

3) Everything is Connected (Barkun 2013: 3–4; see also: Groh 1987)

However, consistent with the Enlightenment-bound phenomenological approach, the same propositions simply describe religion. In fact, through this unifying lens, religion constitutes the primordial conspiracy theory, by featuring omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient—albeit unseen—entities who conspire (for good or ill) to affect world events and nature and tilt them in one's favor if they perform the right rituals ("learn to play the game").

It should be noted that Q-drop #885 is not a superficial sentiment, but a staple of Q's worldview. In fact, the phrase "everything has meaning" is repeated seventeen times in Q-drops between October 28, 2017, and December 8, 2020—reiterated at the ending of a post. Further evidence to the centrality of this sentiment as a *bona fide* tenet of the QAnon "creed" and not merely some idiosyncratic shibboleth comes from the fact that although recent computerized stylometric analyses have detected a clear transition between the original Q and another stylistically distinct Q in December 2017 (Orphanalytics 2020), the phrase is distributed evenly across the corpus of Q-drops.

As cognitive science has demonstrated, personal involvement in religious belief systems unconsciously activates a variety of cognitive biases that seek congruence with, and confirmation to, its tenets—even in disparate and/or coincidental bits of information. This unconsciously-motivated "confirmation bias's enhances the cognitive biases that facilitated it, by masquerading as an independently judicious validation of them, reifying, re-affirming and radicalizing them (Correia 2014; Massey 2021; McFarland and Warren 1992; Shermer 2010). Further, these cognitive biases were shown to flare up in times of distress, uncertainty and/or threat, and fuel the intensity of seeking, converting to and radicalizing around a belief system (Franks et al. 2017; Hart and Graether 2018; Jonas et al. 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2017; Kruglanski and Webster 1996). Indeed, both observational and experimental studies have demonstrated the association of these stressors with an increase in religiosity (Gligorić et al. 2021; Granqvist et al. 2010; Pargament 1997; Ullman 1982) and an increase in conspiracist ideation (deHaven-Smith 2013; Flynn et al. 2017; Leibovitz et al. 2021;). High-stakes or existential threats are

potent cues for turning to religion (Greenberg et al. 1997; Morris-Trainor et al. 2019) as to conspiracy theories (van Prooijen 2020).

QAnon approximates the phenomenology and cognitive functionality of religion in its all-encompassing scope and explanatory reach (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021; Brotherton 2015; Wong 2018; LaFrance 2020). In accord with cognitive and evolutionary models of religious beliefs, QAnon—and conspiracy theories in general—provide a seductive explanation to the perennial discrepancy between the known and the unknown, the certain and the uncertain, and between expectations and reality, especially when rational explanations are found wanting. As such, conspiracy theories purportedly restore in their adherents the sense of significance, identity, control, and certainty (Haidt 2012; Hart 2014; Jonas et al. 2014; Kay et al. 2010; Kruglanski et al. 2014; Sternisko et al. 2020; van Prooijen 2018; Wood and Douglas 2019). To its believers, QAnon provided attractive answers to a range of preoccupations, uncertainties, and insecurities. From the reason why Hilary Clinton and other celebrities appear younger than their chronological age (because they ingest youth-restoring compounds harvested from children); To why the price of Wayfair furniture appears exorbitantly marked up compared to their cheap manufacture (because Democrats lock and traffic children inside them); To why—despite seemingly widespread support—Donald Trump lost the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections to Joseph Biden (because democratic conspirators exploited the pandemic-driven changes in mail-in voting procedures); To Why Donald Trump does not explicitly support QAnon, despite sharing the same sentiments and goals, or possibly being Q himself (because he is quietly draining the swamp and cannot risk exposure to the powerful "Deep State"), and so on.

Although a survey of the myriad cognitive mechanisms that give rise to the intuitive appeal of conspiratorial ideation is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that they bear considerable similarities to those associated with religious attitudes, behavior and experience (Atran and Henrich 2010; Boudry and Braeckman 2012; Gligorić et al. 2021; Goreis and Voracek 2019; McCauley and Cohen 2010; Pennycook et al. 2020; Popper 1945; Saroglou 2002). Some of the best-studied cognitive processes undergirding religious and conspiracy beliefs are Hyperactive Agency Detection, Illusory Pattern Perception, Need for Cognitive Closure, and Conjunction Fallacy:

Hyperactive Agency Detection: Refers to the presumption of a powerful-yet-covert mastermind(s), capable of orchestrating large-scale calamities for personal gain. This, for some, is preferable over accepting that most significant events are random, multi-determined, non-intentional or emer-

gent (Petrican and Burris 2012; Scholl and Tremoulet 2000; Valdesolo and Graham 2014; van der Tempel and Alcock 2015; Wagner-Egger et al. 2018).

Illusory Pattern Perception: Refers to the tendency to "connect the dots" prematurely and inflexibly and to underestimate randomness and coincidence in favor of a sense of regularity—however arbitrary, tentative or self-serving (van Prooijen et al. 2018; Walker et al. 2019; Whitson and Galinsky 2008; Zhao et al. 2014).

Need for Cognitive Closure: Refers to an intolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty associated with a need for decisive resolution. Specifically, when the discrepancy between the expectations and reality is too wide for comfort (typically following a disheartening event that challenges our sense of personal significance), our mind experiences an urge to latch onto the most intuitive and effortless explanation that comes to mind ("seizing") and then attempts to confer permanence to this explanation ("freezing") by narrowing the landscape of potentially incongruent information sources (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Gentes and Ruscio 2011; Kruglanski and Webster 1996; Marchlewska et al. 2018; Webber et al. 2018). The Need for Closure is closely related to another phenomenon often implicated with conspiratorial thinking, namely "jumping to conclusions" (Pytlik et al. 2020).

Conjunction Fallacy: Refers to the tendency to estimate a combination of attributes is more likely than one of them. This cognitive process contributes to conspiracist (or any "us-versus-them") belief by skewing the reasoning underlying stereotype and prejudice (Brotherton and French 2014; Dagnall et al. 2017). For example, QAnon rhetoric considers all Democrats as enemies of QAnon, despite the fact that 7 percent of Democrat-voting individuals agree with QAnon beliefs that a Satanist cabal controls the U.S. government, media and finance (PRRI-IFYC, 2021).

The ubiquity and persistence of cognitive biases across all cognitive domains is taken as a testament to their overall utility and evolutionary advantage above and beyond strictly rational utility. *Inter alia*, this holds true for moral ideations and beliefs—be they religious, paranormal, conspiratorial, or otherwise. This "Intuitionist" model of morality surmises that, throughout evolution, cognitive biases have proven more useful than the judicious and impartial evaluation of the data, which is slower because of the higher cognitive costs of effortful counter-intuitive (aka "critical") thinking. The experience of "falling down a rabbit hole" with which converts describe the path between

learning and believing is likely due to the apparent effortlessness associated with belief-bound cognition. The ubiquitous and useful nature of these biases is also what has likely made them normative and sanctioned (Graham et al. 2011; Haidt 2012; Pytlik et al. 2020; van Prooijen et al. 2020). Intuitionist models of morality explain why adherents of socially-sanctioned belief system—be it religion, an NRM, pseudoscientific New Age spiritualism, or a conspiracy theory—privilege information that *feels* intuitively "true" and "natural" and pay scant attention or consideration to its detractors (Aarnio and Lindeman 2005; Barrett 2000; Boudry et al. 2015; Gervais and Norenzayan 2012; Mc-Cauley and Cohen 2010; Washburn and Skitka 2017).

However, these processes may not be as distinct as their names suggest, and research has reported considerable overlap, co-occurrence, and interrelation amongst them (Gligorić et al. 2021; van Prooijen 2019). Further, many of the processes may be subsumed under the generalized cognitive capacity for Analytical Thinking (Aarnio and Lindeman 2005; Epstein 1994; Gligorić et al. 2021; Georgiou et al. 2021; Hart and Graether 2018; Ståhl and van Prooijen 2018; Swami et al. 2014), especially when compounded by Cognitive Rigidity (Bowes et al. 2020; Cohen 2012a, 2017; Cohen et al. 2018; Oliver and Wood 2014; Strozier and Boyd 2010). Another complication to understanding the cognitive foundation of belief is the ever-shifting boundary between normative and "pathological" cognitive biases, manifested as the fuzzy threshold to mental illness, most notably vis-à-vis delusional ideations, and psychotic disorders (Bentall 2018; Dudley 2016; Holoyda and Newman 2016; Kay 2021).

Further, the empirical distinctions between the cognitive biases associated with beliefs—particularly conspiratorial ones—all but disappear when we move from self-reporting questionnaire data to QAnon propaganda. For example, Qanon conspiracists believe that Trump communicates with them in code using multiple means, Hand gestures (either encrypted as a Morse Code as in his Jan. 13, 2021 debriefing, or overtly as his "Ok" gesture on July 23, 2019); Deliberate misspellings (e.g., "*covfefe*" in his May 31, 2017 tweet or "*Barrack Obama*" in his July 11, 2019 tweet); and cryptic expressions (e.g., "*calm before the storm*" on Oct. 5, 2017). This belief is, *prima facie,* an example of Illusory Pattern Perception, operating within the message (e.g., cherry-picking speech where the rhythmicity of Trump's hand movements in his Jan. 13, 2021 debriefing happened to express a word deemed relevant to the ideology), or between the message and (wishful or actual) events (e.g. the misspelling of "*Barrack*" to signal Obama's imminent arrest by the army, predicated on the semantic association of the word "barracks" with military housing).

However, one cannot extricate Illusory Pattern Perceptions from the Need for Closure, considering that in the Jan. 13, 2021 speech where Trump allegedly tapped the letter "Q" in Morse code, he was condemning the violent insurrection on Capitol Hill (for which about fourteen of the 493 arrestees had ties to QAnon sufficient to be included in their indictments as of Oct. 28, 2021; Pulver et al. 2021). In his speech, Trump described the event as a "calamity" and claimed that the rioters were not his "true supporters." Kruglanski's "Significance Quest Theory" may explain why, of the numerous addresses that Trump gave while seated by a desk, it was important to extract a QAnon-consistent message from this particular occasion: The Loss of Significance "supercharged" the search for any pattern that could connote even the most tangential sense for the sake of restoring the sense of significance in the members. The theory explains the curious feat of detecting, four minutes and twenty seconds into the speech, a barely noticeable pattern of "dash-dash-dot-dash" in Trump's hands touching the table, which represents the letter Q in Morse Code. The signal's congruence with the (logically circular and unfalsifiable) ideological tenet that Trump conceals his fight against the "Deep State," using their power to hobble him (including—but not limited to—formal impeachment hearings), is a good example of the reciprocal and complementary relationship of a radical belief-system with its (unconsciously) motivated confirmation bias. This complementarity is not limited to conspiracy theories, but is rather *de rigeur* in most models of ideological radicalization (Cohen 2012b 2019)

Similarly, the cryptic sentence "*calm before the storm*," uttered during the Oct. 5, 2017 press conference after a military briefing in the White House, was initially interpreted as a coded message for an imminent military action to be initiated by Trump. Cognitive Science would suggest that this expectation primed believers to search for any large-scale military action and, once found (for example, using Illusory Pattern Perception), attribute it to Trump (through Hyperactive Agency Detection). This preferential attribution of agency to Donald Trump is not a happenstance but a staple of Qanon beliefs, who regard him with near-messianic reverence (Bond and Neville-Shepard 2021; Dwyer 2019; Smith 2020), and is consistent with the fact that "Trump" (or "POTUS") is the most prominently figure in the entire corpus of Q-drops—with over 900 mentions. However, as neither large military action nor mass arrests ensued, the search for an explanation only *expanded*, as CRS models predict, on pains of cognitive dissonance and crisis of faith. One plausible mechanism underlying this expansion posits that the Hyperactive Agency Detection "re-routed" the attention of the believers to where a large-scale event is most likely to be found, for the sake of maximizing the likelihood of detecting and retrofitting such action to fit the expectations. The collective attention focused on the plans

for the January 6, 2021 rally. CSR can explain the shift from attributing the instigation of "the storm" to Trump to appropriating the term to denote the adherents" own active "storming" of the Capitol. However, considering the urgency associated with failed high-stakes expectations, CSR models cannot rule out the involvement of the "Need for Cognitive Closure," too, in this feat of mental gymnastics. Indication for the consequentiality of this cognitive shift in attribution can be seen in the increasing frequency of the term "Storm the Capitol" on Twitter in the month before the rally, totaling 100,000 mentions (Barry et al. 2021). Cognitive science as well points to the unfortunate self-fulfilling support that mainstream media gave to these cognitive fallacies by adopting the verb "storm" in reporting the event, reifying and magnifying its centrality: The expression "storm/ed/ing the Capitol" reached around 7.5 million Google hits in a little over half a year. Further discussion on the general role of mainstream and social media in amplifying niche messages follows in the next section, concerning the sociology and anthropology of faith-based communities.

Lastly, a word of caution. Whether science, and *inter alia* cognitive science, can conceivably capture the nature of religious beliefs fully and holistically is a matter of perennial debate (Asad 2012; de Muckadell 2014; Holbraad 2012; Latour 2010; Needham 1972). Also debatable is whether science itself is a highly obfuscated form of a self-validating belief in fundamentally unprovable set of axioms circumscribed by the limitations of our cognitive capabilities as a species. This section concerned the observable, quantifiable and testable aspects of belief systems, drawing insights on a seemingly new phenomenon from a large body of existing knowledge. It should be noted that, apart from their ubiquity, belief systems in general, and religions in particular, were the crucible for most pro-social ideologies, practices and institutions—most famously in the fields of education and health. Similarly, conspiracy theories, as a natural byproduct of tried-and-true (at least from the evolutionary perspective) cognitive processes cannot be wholly dismissed as misleading or nefarious (Brotherton 2015; van Prooijen 2019). The fact that some conspiracy theories have been proven correct is a testament to the viability of this form of critical and imaginative style of thinking, and its aptness for healthy resistance (Bamford 2002; Dean 2000; Fassin 2021; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Uscinski 2017; Cassam 2019). This section underscored the darker side of belief-bound cognitive biases regarding QAnon, a rapidly-growing assimilative movement, whose ideology is pernicious due to the circular and self-complementary nature of its mistrustful and Manichean tenets—but one which provides followers little (if any) constructive, positivistic, or pro-social guidance. Still, the reader should bear in mind that QAnon is a relatively new

movement and may evolve like religious apocalyptic movements that eventually renounced violence, such as Aum Shinrikyo in Japan and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In fact, conspiracy and cultism scholars have for some time called for a shift from sensationalizing QAnon ideological indulgences without negating every aspect of its belief system (Barkun 2016; Basu 2020; Franks et al. 2017; Hassan 2020; Perrone 2021). This approach is promising, as it emulates successful deradicalization programs of Jihadi terrorists, which focused on negating the violent aspects of their doctrine without challenging the strict Salafi or Wahabi Islamic tenets they share (Gunaratna and Hussin 2019; Koehler 2017; Rabasa et al. 2010).

QAnon as a Religious Movement

Whereas cognitive and personality psychology proved useful in explaining the innate or initial appeal of (conspiratorial) beliefs, particularly under stress, social dynamics plays a complementary pivotal role in disseminating and cementing these beliefs, packaging them into a social identity, and translating them into coordinated action—whether to pro-social aims (e.g., charity) or anti-social ones, like coercion and violence (Dugas and Kruglanski 2018; Forgas and Baumeister 2019; Greenberg et al. 1997; Jonas et al. 2014; Jones 2008; Xu and McGregor 2018). Similarly, while cognitive science may adequately explain the appeal of conspiracy theories to the unsuspecting, well-meaning individual, the social scientific approach to religion has elucidated the ways in which individual cognitive biases (including conspiracism) are communally organized and magnified for socio-political aims. This line of inquiry was particularly successful in elucidating the organizational structures and group dynamics that yield maximal dissemination of the ideology, maximal adherence by the group members, and maximal gains for the leaders and/or ideologues in the form of publicity, political influence, or material gains (Hegghammer 2009; Juergensmeyer 1998, 2000; Tibi 2018).

Within the social sciences, sociological and anthropological studies of religion and NRMs have developed powerful frameworks with which to understand social identity and the behavior of the faithful, by focusing on their culture and performative praxis—be it seminal to the religion, such as rituals, or collateral to the religion, such as customs. For example, some lines of inquiry point to religion as constituting a *culture of belief*—a conceptual framework that expands the functionality of religions beyond the mere propositional content of their creed and its utilization for theological reasoning and meaning-making. One of the main advantages of this conceptualization is its ability to accommodate the commonly observed gaps between the believers'

knowledge of their religion and their cultural identification with it. Other conceptualizations emphasize religious *praxis*, namely the set of common behaviors that the faithful perform, which may contribute to their sense of social identity more than the abstract theological tenets of their religion. This approach, therefore, views religions and NRMs as *communities of practice* (Mair 2013; Pouillon 1982; Stringer 1996). Together, the sociological and anthropological approaches to religion provide a countermeasure to the cognitive-psychological models, which run the risk of overvaluing the conscious endorsement by the individual of the minutiae concerning the propositional content of their purported ideological affiliation. Additionally, these approaches mitigate some of the biases (attributed to Judeo-Christian traditions that emphasize orthodoxy over orthopraxy, for example Protestant Christianity) that essentialize religions by limiting their definition to the set of explicit propositional content that they profess to (e.g. Geertz 1973)—a relatively recent development in the history of humankind—rather than the totality of their communal experience (however nonverbal), including their practice, community and institutions (Lincoln 2010). Together, these approaches may reconcile the irrationality (or "bounded rationality"—see Kahneman 2011) of faith when formulated as a set of explicit propositional articles and normative or even strategic behavior and presentation of the faithful (Armstrong 2001; Latour 2010; Stern 2003). As such, the sociological-anthropological understanding of religion and NRMs provide some of the strongest buffers against sensationalizing, patronizing, and pathologizing believers. Applying socio-anthropological models to Qanon allows us to study more objectively its *communal* allure, behavioral manifestations (including violence and harassment), and resilience—beyond their CSR treatment as a by-product of its adherents' particular style of faulty cognitive adaptation to socio-economic or existential stressors.

For example, one of QAnon's most remarkable features is its assimilative capacities. QAnon is often referred to as a "Big Tent" conspiracy theory (Roose 2021a; Zuckerman 2019), and was even likened to a "Sticky Ball" (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021), for its ability to organically annex a wide variety of more domain-specific conspiracies under a unifying meta-narrative and meta-praxis. In a relatively short time, QAnon seamlessly assimilated right-wing MAGA supporters along with White Evangelical Christians, White Nationalists, a sizable portion of the *soi disant* left-wing New Age, spiritual, "alternative" crowd, and a substantial number of progressive libertarians. Conspiracy theories have been shown to be agreeable with any one of these segments of the U.S. population across the political spectrum, though with some evidence for a right-leaning bent (Appelrouth 2017; Douglas et al. 2019; van

der Linden et al. 2021; but see Strozier 2020). Sociologists have in particular pointed out the somewhat surprising emergence of "conspirituality" culture, where traditionally left-leaning spiritual sentiments become weaponized by right-leaning conspiracism (Ward and Voas 2011). Even libertarianism in the United States is largely premised on a worldview of pre-emptive hypervigilance against the inevitable proclivities of governments toward tyrannical centralization of power and overreach (Doherty 2009). However, no conspiracy theory in recent memory has managed to unite such traditionally disparate (if not outright adversarial) sub-cultures.

Anthropological studies of belief-systems may attribute this "extension" of the "Big Tent" (or the "adhesiveness" of the "Sticky Ball") to the process of religious syncretism, whereby different sub-cultures of belief co-exist within a vague ideological doctrine flexible enough to accommodate them. This model is a non-exclusive alternative to the functional approach to religion (e.g., Lincoln 2010), which views such diversity as a natural consequence of the multi-faceted function of religions as consisting of belief, identity, and practice. However, models of religious syncretism are uniquely suitable to explain the diversity of sub-cultures and sub-communities of practice within the same religion.

In the case of QAnon, this syncretism can be evidenced in the crowdsourcing of the ideology though a practice of online-facilitated interpretation and targeted proselytizing (Lawrence and Davis 2020; Manjoo 2020). Consistent with anthropological models of religious syncretism (Friedman 1998; Shaw and Stewart 2003; Sperber 1985), this process does not merely enable the accommodation of disparate adherents, but also the accommodation of near-discrepant political ideologies and beliefs. For example, Qanon conspiracists (akin to other populist movements in history) may agree that "elites" secretly control the U.S. government. However, the exact demographics and identity of elites (i.e., whether they comprise of key Democratic Party figures, or all Democrats, and/or financial moguls, and/or entertainment celebrities) and their operational structure is a matter of debate. Some followers presume equal authority and full coordination within the elite, while others differentiate between the general elite (who control public opinion and cultural norms) and the politically entrenched "deep state"; Still others postulate a sharp hierarchical structure, helmed by a particular group (e.g., Illuminati, shape-shifting lizard extraterrestrials, Jews, etc.) or an individual (Hilary Clinton, George Soros, Satan, etc.). Similarly, Qanon conspiracists may believe that their enemies hurt children, but diverge on whether they drink their blood, harvest adrenochrome (or other youth-restoring agents) from it, use their skin as a mask, traffic them to exploit their labor (whether non-sexually as in

advertisements and adrenochrome harvesting, or sexually as sex-workers), or abuse them sexually for their own pleasure. Another ideological fault-line is whether Trump should be reinstated as the forty-seventh or the nineteenth president of the United States (a segment of QAnoners believes that the presidency was nullified with the Organic Act of 1871, when the country allegedly was illegally incorporated), or as its king, befitting his stature as the unifying figurehead in the movement. As a king, however, his role would be chiefly ceremonial, resting on his laurels after the "great awakening," the "storm," and NESARA/GESARA will restore the U.S. political apparatus to its rightful path.

Religious syncretism can also explicate how QAnon's triadic function as belief-system, social identity, and organized practice may accommodate potentially fatal ideological fault lines, by surmising that most Qanon conspiracists may not be fundamentalist believers or engage in a systematic reflection on their "faith." In fact, sociological-anthropological models of religion, when applied to QAnon, point to the general *style*—rather than the propositional *content*—of their belief-system as the most likely determinants of their communal commitment and character (Mair 2013; Sternisko et al. 2020). It also serves to remind us that not all the "tenets" of QAnon's doctrine should be taken literally or countered with the same intensity. QAnon as a movement accommodates beliefs that run of gamut of plausibility and interpretability. These include: The belief that Democrats worship Satan, abuse children, and stole the presidential election; That Trump is the *de facto* president quietly orchestrating mass arrests of politicians and celebrities, while Biden serves as a figurehead; That Trump will be reinstated as the nineteenth President of the U.S. and thus roll back the 1871 illegal incorporation of the country (see above), or that he will be declared king, or "King of Kings" by John F. Kennedy Jr., who will come for this purpose out of hiding.

An example for QAnon's function as belief-system, social identity, and organized practice can be seen in a recent survey of respondents who self-identified as familiar with QAnon and who had a "favorable" opinion of it: Only 38% endorsed the statement "Global network tortures and sexually abuses children in Satanic rituals," with other QAnon beliefs receiving lower rates; Only one in five Qanon conspiracists endorsed the statement "Celebrities harvest adrenochrome from children's bodies" (Schaffner 2020). Conversely, models that differentiate between belief, practice, and identity underscore the danger in "multi-barreled" questions that attempt to gauge QAnon's "creed" by cobbling together elements with differing level of literality and seminality. One example is the sensational item from March 2021 survey of the Public Religion Research Institute (an item that was endorsed by 15 percent of American adults and almost a quarter of Republican respondents and mentioned no less than

1,430 times in five months): "The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation" (PRRI-IFYC 2021).

QAnon as an Online-Facilitated Destructive Cult

The previous sections reviewed sociological and anthropological models that underscore the role that communal practice and culture play in inculcating religious and/or ideological belief-systems to a wide variety of adherents with different capacities for its comprehension, interpretation, and practice. This section incorporates these models to the field of cultic studies, to better explicate the coercive nature of QAnon's group dynamics, which is ostensibly perpetrated in the name of a few (though mostly imaginary) leaders. This section further extends frameworks from Cultic Studies to explicate the role of the Internet and social media in facilitating QAnon's ideological and organizational functions.

One of the most established frameworks for studying the structure and dynamics through which a group inculcates its beliefs to members is found in Cultic Studies. Akin to the way Cognitive Science approaches belief-systems (above), the discipline as a whole gradually strives to transcend the distinction between religious and non-religious, or between new and established belief-systems, by promoting cult typologies devoid of the negative connotations of the word. However, considering QAnon's Manichean, menacing and rigid worldview (Priniski et al. 2021) and its demonstrable violent ramifications (Rubin et al. 2021), this section examines the movement through insights gleaned from the study of coercive (also known as "high-control" or "high-demand"), destructive or violent cults (Hassan 2015; Singer 2003; Lifton 1981; 1999; Ward 2000). As with my treatment of belief and faith, the focus on the negative aspects of cultism in this section—purported to enhance its usefulness and ecological validity vis-à-vis QAnon—should not be overgeneralized to all cults or NRMs.

Over the past two decades, the "Internet Revolution," and the robust penetration of social media, have forced scholars to adapt the definition of "cult" to render it less dependent on circumstances and technical capabilities. In fact, the rise in social media corresponds to a notable decrease in the number of cults during the twenty-first century compared to their popularity from the 1970s till the 1990s (a phenomenon dubbed "the cult deficit." See Douthat 2014; Bacon 2021). Socio-anthropological models responded to this challenge by emphasizing group dynamics and practice ("cultism") within the putative cults (or cult-like groups), rather than basing the definition on the contrast to

hegemonic religious groups or any particular established creed. This approach is compatible with the central premise of evolutionary psychology, that the human brain—and by extension social behavior—is slower to evolve than environmental circumstances, behavioral fads, or technology. The phenomenological emphasis of this approach may explain, for example, the functional similarity between coercive practices that traditionally have required physical proximity and/or confinement and those found in technology-facilitated coercive cultism, which exploits online dynamics such as echo chambers, filter bubbles and social media to achieve social monitoring and control.

Studies of "classic" coercive cults catalogued the structural, psychological, and interpersonal manifestations of coercive cultism (Hassan 2015; Lalich and Langone 2008; Singer 2003). By and large, most scholars consider the core characteristics of a destructive cult to include:

1. A charismatic leader who increasingly becomes an object of worship at the expense of the avowed principles of the group.

2. Totalistic coercive persuasion and/or unethical mind control; and

3. Economic, sexual, and other exploitation of the members' needs (spiritual, psychological and/or physical) by the leader and the ruling coterie (Lifton 1981; 1999).

However, as the Internet and social media globalized real-time communication, virtualized interpersonal relationships, and created an "attention economy" whereby popularity and ratings dictate significance, groups—including cults—could increasingly afford a transition to a leaderless and/or technology-facilitated organizational structure (Berger 2019; Post et al. 2014; Sageman 2008).

The facilitation of religious cultism (or sectarianism) through technological advances is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it could be argued that cultism is often synergistically linked to advances in communication technology—at once a coping mechanism against the social upheaval that often coincide with disruptive new technologies, while being propagated through them. For example, Gutenberg's invention of the printing press is cited as a decisive factor in the propagation of Lutheran Protestantism (which started as a Catholic sect)—but is also linked to the longstanding Catholic resentment to the centralization of religious knowledge and the abuse of power. As such, printing pamphlets that critiqued the church was emblematic of both the *medium* and the *message* of the early Lutheran sect. One example for the synergistic fit between Martin Luther's religious ideology and the communication technology through which it was popularized is the doctrinal tenet of

"sola scriptura," which entrusted the interpretation of the bible to the masses, who could now read it in their vernacular, rather than restricting its access to clergy who read it in the more esoteric Latin, in precious few illuminated manuscripts that were closely guarded for both their monetary value and social significance (Eire 2016).

Similarly, the popularization and penetration of television in the 1960s and 1970s corresponds to a rise in Evangelical Christianity, whereby the exhortation to spread the gospel (Mark 16:15) became a multi-billion-dollar industry, especially in the United States (Bruce 2019). Buoyed by unregulated (or rather deregulated) media laws, this industry became dominated by charismatic and manipulative preachers, whose reach and influence on people's beliefs, behaviors and wallets was larger than any physical church could generate (Buccione and Mello 2020). Indeed, considering its potentially exploitative structure, and the fact that instead of conversion (its purported goal), televangelism mostly exploited individual vulnerabilities for highly centralized gains, it was discussed from its very inception in terms borrowed from the study of cults (Hadden and Swann 1981; Litman and Bain 1989).

The advent of the Internet and social media catapulted the potency of destructive cults to new levels: Not only could ideological material be disseminated instantaneously and globally, but the business model of online platforms facilitated the introduction of, and the demand for, propaganda with ever-increasing efficacy in inducing socio-political polarization and mobilization—especially through the propagation of negative emotion states such as fear, anger and moral indignation (Brady et al. 2017; Crockett 2017; Martens 2018; Munn 2020; Stark 2020). Crucially, the decentralized nature of the virtual "marketplace of ideas" supported a proliferation of niche channels and influencers. These dynamics not only made the spread of cultic ideologies harder to monitor or control (Bainbridge 2017; Tollefson 2021; Urman and Katz 2020), but they also allow influencers to use real-time engagement metrics to tailor their messaging to their growing user base, while maximizing its compatibility and interoperability with the larger digital sphere for opportunities to reach other niche user segments while eluding censorship or cancellation.

This crowdsourced, participatory nature of QAnon is an important linchpin between its function as a discursive belief-system (i.e., a conspiracy theory) and as a community of practice (i.e., an online-facilitated cult), and may arguably fulfil the "institutional" function in the movement—thus cementing its status as a full-fledged religious belief-system (Lincoln 2010).

As with other cults with a functional hierarchy, QAnon exhibits member stratification based on the division of labor, whereby every supporter is "do-

ing their bit" for the cause (Singer 2003; Weber [1922] 1991)—except that in the digital sphere the range of services that can be provided to the movement online and the range of individuals it may reach and recruit in real time are unprecedented in the history of human movements (Hassan 2020).

Further, in online-mediated cultism this mode of work *for* the cause has the recursive function of working *on* the cause, to optimally retrofit propaganda messages in accord with the prevailing sentiments and wishes of the audiences, while interpreting current events through the QAnon lens. Users, far and wide, can engage in a wide variety of digital services for the cause: from merely mass-forwarding propaganda messages, to minimal-effort expressions of support or moral indignation using emoticons ("slacktivism"); To creating visual memes that encapsulate the "correct" emotional stance as dictated by the propaganda using a pithy, recognizable image of an emotionally-equivalent situation (e.g., from a popular movie), which can then serve as an entertaining, highly-disseminable and innocuous-looking tidbit that is optimally poised to "go viral" (Roose 2021b). Additionally, a small army of "digital soldiers" (Flynn 2016; Rondeaux 2021)—including "Cyber Ninjas" from the Pro-Trump eponymous tech company—sleuth away to "uncover" further connections related to the conspiracy and update it to current events, while conspiracy theorists and other influencers with established platforms (e.g., Alex Jones, Mike Cernovich, Jack Posobiec, David Icke, Martin Geddes, Tracy Diaz *aka Tracybeanz*, Coleman Rogers *aka Pamphlet Anon*, to name a few) have contributed to QAnon by aggregating, mashing, rehashing and embellishing belief-compatible "news" items and embedding them within their own signature meta-conspiratorial narrative. The interest of these "conspiracy entrepreneurs" in QAnon also crucially facilitated its popularity *across* platforms and onto mainstream media (Benkler 2020; Wong 2020; Zadrozny and Collins 2018).

For leaderless religious groups throughout history, the apex of the hierarchical structure is inhabited by prophets or priests, whose role is largely symbolic but is nonetheless essential to the social identity of the believers. In the case of QAnon Q has the characteristics and the stature of a prophet (LaFrance 2020; Thomas 2020). In fact, the expression "Q-prophecies" has over 16,000 Google hits as of October 2021. Like biblical prophets, Q claims near-omniscience due to his privileged access to information. In his case: an alleged Q-level U.S. government security clearance that affords him intimate knowledge about the "true" state of affairs. Like the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, Q does not hesitate to critique the highest loci of (earthly) power. Crucially, the belief-enhancing potency of "Q-drops" hinges on their impres-

sive ability to activate the cognitive fallacies associated with (conspiratorial) beliefs, as discussed above.

Similarly to highly effective Biblical prophets (e.g., Jeremiah or Amos), Q's linguistic style is amenable to a range of interpretations (and thus resilient to fact-checking or refutations) through the copious use of rhetorical questions rather than assertions, and language that lends itself to literal and metaphorical readings (Brueggemann 1973; Carlson 2017; Ho 1999). In fact, the proportion of question marks in the corpus of Q-drops (N=1.75K words) is about 40 percent higher than the general online usage, as captured in the iWeb fourteen billion words corpus (as of November 2021). Further, by using rhetorical questions over matters of social and existential import (as Q does), these questions induce fear—further facilitating the activation of belief-enhancing cognitions (For example, through the Need for Closure mechanism). The "Jeremiad" quality of Q's rhetoric is not happenstance. Most indicators for the original Q (Computational Stylometric Analysis showed that there are two distinct individuals who posted as Q; Orphanalytics 2020) point to Paul Furber, a programmer from South Africa known online as BaruchTheScribe (Rothschild 2021). Bible scholars should recognize this handle as a translation of "Baruch HaSofer," the nickname of Baruch Ben Neriah(u), the alleged ghostwriter of the Book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament.

Moreover, the paradox of survival as a religious group that wishes to eschew the perils of authoritarian "hijacking" through leaderless-ness, but cannot survive without an identity and core ideology, was solved—throughout history as with QAnon—through collaborative, consensus-driven exegesis of hallowed texts. To appreciate the robustness of this arrangement, it may be illuminating to examine the successful management of this balancing act in Judaism and Islam, two religions in which orthopraxis, based on religious law (Halakha in Judaism; Shari'a in Islam), required both standardization across disparate regions and regular adaptation to the changing circumstances, technologies, and sensitivities of their respective communities. Both faiths set up sophisticated letter-exchanging networks, whereby religious scholars (Rabbis in Judaism; Muftis or Imams in Islam) could opine on emerging challenges to the practicality of religious laws by interpreting the existing texts in non-binding religious edicts (Responsa or She'elot U-Teshuvot in Judaism; Fatawa in Sunni Islam; or su'al va-gavab in Shi'a Islam). These opinions were then collected, copied, and disseminated across the globe to the faithful (Bacher and Lauterbach 1906; Messick 2017). From a sociological perspective, this practice can be credited with preserving the social identity of the community at least as effectively as its doctrinal purity (Berger 2014; David 2020; Ginsberg 1898; Winer 2019). Similar compilations exist for the "canonized" interpreta-

tions of Q's "prophecies" (1ambecauseweare 2019 (created Nov. 3, 2017 and updated daily until appearing in print); Anonymous 2018; and Davis 2019 (an Amazon bestseller).

In a similar fashion, the practice of adapting QAnon to current events across stakeholder niches has taken the form of a "Digital Responsa": a crowdsourced, cross-platform, distributed network of individuals who work collaboratively to follow "breadcrumbs" in the Q-drops, resembling an Alternate-Reality Game (ARG) of virtual treasure-hunting—while maintaining rudimentary compatibility with the gross contours of the belief-system (Beene and Greer 2021; Bellingcat 2021; Thompson 2020; Smedt and Rupar 2020; Wong 2020). The indispensability of this practice is evident when we consider that Q did not clarify his position on many "hot" political issues around the time of his drops, including: #savethechildren, Wayfair, Bill Gates, 5G, or the widely-shared COVID conspiracy video "Plandemic" (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021; Rothschild, 2021), and did not published a single Q-drop between Dec. 8, 2020 and June 2022—a period characterized paradoxically by a burgeoning interest, membership and virulence of the movement. This practice proved sufficiently robust to sustain "orthodox" QAnon followers, while flexibly adapting to niche communities with a taste for a more "eclectic" doctrine (Argentino 2020; Beene and Greer 2021; Lawrence and Davis 2020; Schaffner 2020). Another factor that facilitated this adaptation, and eschew doctrinal controversies, is QAnon's "new conspiracism" quality as a "conspiracy theory without the theory," namely a set of beliefs concerning primarily the inadequacy, subterfuge and malevolence of hegemonic authorities, knowledge or expertise that is nonetheless devoid of constructive aspirations (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2020)—except for the most generic apocalyptic yearnings for total obliteration of the ancien régime.

Lastly, no discussion of destructive cults would be complete without mentioning the coercion and violence inherent in any Manichean Good-vs-Evil belief system, especially by high-demand groups or cults with apocalyptic worldviews. While the *externalized* threat to the enemies of the cult is apparent, the *internalized* oppression of the cult members is harder to detect, especially when membership appears voluntary and rewarding, and members appear monolithic and resolute in their convictions. However, studies of violent cults—especially apocalyptic cults with nihilistic ideological undertones and fatalistic endgame—have often underscored the interplay between their externalized aggression against the world and the internalized aggression against introspection, doubts and dissent (Antelo 2021; Jones 2008; Hassan 2015; Lalich and Langone 2008; Rousselet et al. 2017; Saldaña et al. 2021). In the case of QAnon, the menacing nature of the movement's messaging and its

violence potential are well documented (Fu 2021; Priniski et al. 2021; Tan et al. 2021; Timberg and Dwoskin 2020; Veale and Veale 2020). However, cultic studies explain how a conspiracy theory that may initially appeal to the cognitive style and emotional struggles of the individual could be weaponized into a "conversion experience" once this individual is welcome with acceptance (sometimes even overwhelmingly so, as in "love bombing"), and a sense of significance, uniqueness, identity, and control (as mentioned above). Conversely, rejection and mockery by the outside world often paradoxically serve to ratify both the conspiratorial mindset on the individual level (Kruglanski et al. 2014; Riek et al. 2006) and the Manichean worldview on the group level (Barkun 2016; Rahmani et al. 2019), and cement its members conviction and commitment. These findings are consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957), whereby in our quest to minimize incongruence between our internal wishes or attitudes and external reality we often unconsciously modify the former to align with the latter. The theory may serve to demystify the steady growth of QAnon's popularity despite the constant refutations of its "prophecies" or untenability of its doctrinal tenets (LaFrance 2020; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021).

Taken together, studies of violent apocalyptic cults point to a common coercive ideology and organizational structure behind conversion epiphanies, cultic mind control and aggression (both inbound and outbound) against cult enemies. As a relatively new phenomenon, this link between externalized and internalized aggression may still be largely obscured in QAnon, although there is already some anecdotal evidence for both online and offline banishment ("canceling"), shaming ("doxing" in the online sphere), and harassment of dissenters (Stanley 2021; Venkataramakrishnan and Murphy 2021). It remains to be seen whether the decentralized and crowdsourced nature of the movement will maintain its largely collaborative and tolerant eclecticism (thus preferentially fostering externalized—though potentially inconsistent—aggression) or whether it will "close ranks" (Gelfand 2019; Krugl Webster 1996) and increase in orthodoxy (thus fostering both externalized and internalized coercion and aggression).

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