

# QAnon as Gnosis: A Voegelinian Explanation and Solution

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the QAnon phenomenon through political philosopher Eric Voegelin's concept of Gnosticism. Gnosticism, says Voegelin, arises from a hostility to the existing world and a desire to reconstruct reality according to the Gnostic believer's preferences, leading to doomed attempts to create a pseudo-reality. This promised transformation is to be brought about by "Gnosis"—secret knowledge offering adherents liberation from a corrupt reality and a key to understanding the direction and meaning of history. Viewing QAnon as a form of "Gnosis" allows for an exploration of the psychological appeal of QAnon, a better understanding of the relationship of QAnon to Christianity and other non-Gnostic experiences of transcendent reality, an explanation of QAnon's resilience in the face of failed predictions, and lastly, a program for addressing the underlying causes of the pneumopathology—the disease of the soul—that gives rise to QAnon and other forms of Gnosticism.

## Introduction

Since the anonymous poster "Q" appeared on a message board in October 2017, claiming to speak as a high-ranking official with access to classified information (Martineau 2017), the QAnon belief system has spread rapidly online despite several highly public failed predictions of future events. Given its virtual base and decentralized nature, exact figures on the number of adherents to QAnon are impossible. Still, based on the number of members of now-defunct Facebook groups devoted to expounding the theory, estimates can be in the millions (Roose 2021). Although there is a fair amount of divergence of views among various wings of the movement, the core beliefs of QAnon are relatively easy to identify (Roose 2021). The theory is premised around the central idea that a cabal of Satan-worshipping, pedophilic elites run a child-trafficking ring and exert strong control over American politics and media. Against this cabal, the theory also posits that former president Donald Trump is engaged in a long-running battle to expose this group and bring them to justice. This struggle between Trump and the corrupt elites is expected by QAnon adherents to soon culminate in a climactic revelation—an event referred to by them as "The Storm" or sometimes as the "Great Awakening" (LaFrance 2020)—that will finally pull the cover from this cabal and punish them for their offenses (Roose, 2021).

Through these anonymous posts, Q has focused on predicting future events. In one posting—or "Q drop" within the parlance of the movement (Rothschild 2021)—on August 19, 2018, he predicted the imminent arrest of Hillary Clinton and ensuing riots. Q has focused on predicting the coming revelation that would follow imminent arrests of leading members of this cabal, such as a series of predictions that John Podesta, chairman of Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign, would be indicted on November 3, 2018 (Rothschild 2021). Over time, as these and subsequent explicit predictions failed to come to pass, Q's predictions have tended to become more general (Rothschild 2021)—with open-ended injunctions like "Just wait until next week" or "trust the plan"—while still predicting a climactic moment at some yet-to-be-determined time in the future when the truth will be revealed and corrupt elites within the cabal punished.

Yet, despite these failed predictions of future events, belief in the QAnon theory continued to grow to the point that it has periodically inserted itself in American—and occasionally global—politics. At least two Republican members of Congress—Lauren Boebert of Colorado and Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia—have had to distance themselves from previous statements expressing at least tentative interest in the theory (Mathias, 2023). Trump himself was asked about the theory at multiple points during his reelection campaign in 2020 and responded, first by denying familiarity with the theory while acknowledging and expressing appreciation for their support for him (Coaston 2020), and later, when an interviewer asked whether he believed such a "Satanic pedophile cult" actually existed, responding that neither he nor she could know for certain (Rev 2020). After the election, some of the participants of the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, were also QAnon supporters, including Jacob Chansley—the so-called "QAnon Shaman" known in large part for his outlandish costume during the incident (Feuer 2021)—and Ashli Babbitt—the woman shot by Capitol police officers trying to break through a barricaded door—who appears to have been a follower of the movement and wrote on Twitter the day before the attack that "the storm is here and it is descending upon D.C. in less than 24 hours" (Eustachewich 2021). Many QAnon adherents continued to

believe that Trump would retain the presidency until Biden's inauguration, an event that caused considerable upheaval in the QAnon online community (Brewster 2021). In 2022, 25 members of a far-right group in Germany based in part on QAnon beliefs were arrested for conspiring to orchestrate a coup of the German government (Bennhold and Solomon, 2022). Overall, then, QAnon has proved to be a belief system with both a wide appeal and an apparent durability even despite failed predictions of future events; moreover, at least some adherents of the system are deeply committed enough to it to engage in illegal or revolutionary activity to bring its promised "storm" to fruition.

## Misinformation and "Fake News"; the Broader Context for QAnon

Belief in QAnon would seem to be related to a much larger political and social phenomenon. Viewed in the context of contemporary concerns over a perceived increase in "fake news" and the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories, QAnon could be seen as simply a particularly stark example of a broader phenomenon. The broader issue of misinformation—and the question of what, if anything, can be done to counter it—has attracted a relatively high degree of political science research, shining light on some aspects of the phenomenon; for instance, it has been argued that belief in conspiracy theories is particularly tied to losing political campaigns (Uscinski and Parent 2014) and research in political psychology has pointed to "a range of psychological, political, and social factors" that contribute to belief in conspiracy theories (Douglas, Uscinski, Sutton, Cichocka, Nefes, Ang, and Deravi 2019, 3). Yet, there seems to be little agreement on how to counter such misinformation, with one source, for instance, noting that simply presenting misinformation consumers with more accurate information shows very little promise of overcoming belief in wrong information (Nyhan 2020, 231), and that warning viewers of the prevalence of "fake news" appears to increase a general skepticism toward truth claims in general, rather than misinformation in particular (233). In other words, combating the problem of misinformation appears to be more complicated than merely presenting potential consumers of misinformation with "the facts."

Moreover, little attention has been paid to conspiracy theories and misinformation from a political theory perspective—that is to say, little attention has been paid to how such theories operate ideologically and philosophically. There have been studies, going back at least to Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Hofstadter 1965), suggesting links between conspiratorial thinking and other comparatively mainstream ideologies—conservatism, in Hofstadter's instance. Contemporary scholarship is split on whether belief in conspiracy theories is more prevalent on the right than the left or if it attracts people on both extreme ends of the ideological spectrum (Douglas, Uscinski, Sutton, Cichocka, Nefes, Ang, and Deravi 2019, 11-12). However, the treatment of misinformation or conspiracy theories as ideological phenomena deserving of philosophical treatment in its own right has been lacking. This paper will attempt to rectify this by examining belief in QAnon as a philosophical phenomenon, and this philosophical analysis may indeed apply to many aspects of the broader phenomenon of misinformation and "fake news."

## Explanations of the QAnon Phenomenon

In addition to scholarly treatment of the broader issue of misinformation and belief in conspiracy theories, the striking features of the QAnon theory—its surprisingly broad appeal and apparent durability in the face of failed predictions—have prompted a wide range of proposed explanations by media commentators attempting to understand its appeal to adherents. Among the various answers offered to explain the theory, some in the media have likened it to a video game (Daley 2020) or an offline alternate reality game (Warzel 2020) due to its addictiveness and level of immersive engagement, allowing adherents to become part of the unfolding mystery it presents. Another line of commentators explain the phenomenon through a more religious lens, picking up on the explicit religious overtones of the theory, its apparent draw to evangelical Christians, and the religious fervor it inspires among adherents to label it either "a new religious movement" (LaFrance 2020), a cult (Hassan 2021), or a form of Christian syncretism, blending elements of Christianity with other belief systems (Beaty 2020).

The last of these authors, Katelyn Beaty, writing for Religion News Service, concludes her article by briefly linking QAnon to an ancient heretical offshoot of Christianity, Gnosticism: a blend of Christianity with Greek philosophy and Zoroastrianism which emphasized a sharp opposition between the physical world and the spiritual world, the spirit and the flesh. Gnosticism was essentially dualistic, emphasizing the conflict between a good deity—who had created spiritual reality—and an evil one—who had created the physical world that believers found to be oppressive and constraining. To escape the confines of this physical world, viewed by Gnostics as evil, Gnosticism held out the prospect of liberation from this world by possessing secret divine knowledge, or *gnosis*. Beaty hinted that The QAnon belief system operated in the same way as a *gnosis*: a secret knowledge available to the select few who possessed it, allowing them to overcome the oppressiveness and corruption of the world and society around them.

A surprising number of other voices have also linked QAnon to Gnosticism. Seminary professor and blogger R. Scott Clark pointed to the enduring influence of Gnosticism and Manichaeism in exploring the appeal of conspiracy theories such as QAnon to Evangelical Christians (Clark 2020). Similarly, religion professor Timothy Pettipiece asserted the same thing in a piece for

The Conversation website (Pettipiece 2021). Academic and journalist Jeff Sharlet also proposed the connection in an essay for *Vanity Fair* (Sharlet 2020a) and a subsequent radio interview (Sharlet 2020b). The latter drew a response from a doctoral candidate asserting that QAnon and other conspiracy theories were much more closely related to Evangelical Protestantism than Gnosticism (Grieve-Carlson 2020). A report by the Public Religion Research Institute also described QAnon as containing “echoes of older movements within Christianity, such as Gnosticism” (“Understanding QAnon’s Connection,” 2021).

This idea of Gnosticism animating mass movements in the modern world may strike many readers as odd. Still, such was the analysis offered by 20<sup>th</sup> Century German-American political theorist Eric Voegelin. Like many thinkers who fled Nazi Germany, Voegelin’s overarching philosophical project throughout his career was responding to what he saw as the crisis of modern Western society. For Voegelin, 20<sup>th</sup>-century totalitarian mass movements like communism and fascism were radical extensions of a deeper philosophical crisis that underlay Western society (Federici 2002, 13). Voegelin identified that crisis as essentially a spiritual crisis: the result of a long philosophical process that had cut off Western society from any conception of a transcendent reality beyond this physical world (xxvi), resulting in a loss of consciousness of transcendent reality (17). Voegelin described this loss of consciousness as a “spiritual disease” (17) or *pneumopathology*—a disease of the soul (Voegelin [1968] 1997, 7)—and identified it as the same spiritual disease that gave rise to ancient Gnostic sects declaring the “essence of modernity” to be “the growth of Gnosticism” (Voegelin [1952] 1987, 126).

This paper will analyze the QAnon phenomenon through Voegelin’s description of Gnosticism. It will be argued that the QAnon theory operates as a form of *gnosis*, promising adherents liberation from a corrupted reality through the promise of secret knowledge held by the select few. Viewing QAnon through this lens allows for an exploration of the psychological appeal the QAnon theory offers to its adherents, a better analysis of the relationship of QAnon to Christianity and other non-Gnostic experiences of transcendent reality, an answer as to why belief in QAnon can prove resilient in the face of many failed predictions of future events, and lastly, a program for addressing the underlying causes of the *pneumopathology*—the disease of the soul—that gives rise to QAnon and other forms of Gnosticism. This last consideration is significant because, as Voegelin was careful to point out, although Gnosticism is built around an attempt to reconstruct reality to fit the Gnostic adherent’s wishes, this attempt does not succeed in changing the underlying, objective reality of the world around them ([1968] 1997, 73) but allows merely for the creation of a “fantasy” pseudo-reality that cuts off the Gnostic from the truth of being.

## Gnosticism: Ancient and Modern

As has been said, Voegelin saw key elements of modernity as philosophically and spiritually connected to ancient Gnostic religious sects. In particular, Voegelin saw both ideological mass movements—for instance, fascism and communism—and dominant intellectual schools—positivism, scientism, rationalism, Freudianism, existentialism, etc.—as experientially related to Gnosticism (Sandoz 1997, xi). That is to say, adherents to such “isms”—as Voegelin liked to refer to them (Federici 2002, xxx)—share related experiences with ancient forms of Gnosticism; they experienced the world around them in similar ways.

Voegelin emphasized the distinction between two components of reality: that part of reality that exists beyond this physical world and history (the transcendent) and that part of reality that exists within the physical world and history (the immanent). Voegelin saw both as part of the truth of the structure of existence and saw genuine philosophy as marked by an openness to transcendent truth (Voegelin 1953). Conversely, Gnosticism resists transcendent reality (Voegelin [1968] 1997, 20).

Voegelin discusses the Gnostic hostility to the truth about existence—the “order of being” in his terminology—in his brief book *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, translated into English in 1968. There, Voegelin laid out a series of six defining characteristics of the Gnostic attitude:

1. Dissatisfaction with the surrounding world (which, Voegelin notes, is not surprising—we all have some reason not to be completely satisfied).
2. “The belief that the drawbacks of the situation can be attributed to the fact that the world is intrinsically poorly organized.” (In other words, a belief that this dissatisfaction with the world is due to a deficiency in the world and not an inadequacy or fault on the Gnostic believer’s part; the problem is that the world does not conform to our standards, not that we need to attune ourselves to some external truth).
3. The belief that salvation from the “evil of the world” is possible.
4. Following this, the belief that this salvation from the defects of the surrounding world means that “the order of being will have to be changed”—that is, the reality of existence will have to be transformed—through a “historical process.” This is to say that the transformation that must occur will occur in, rather than beyond, world history. (This last point makes the Gnostic attempt at salvation distinct from the Christian view that, in Voegelin’s words, “history will remain as it is” while redemption from the world occurs only in the transcendent, in the life to come).

5. This leads to what Voegelin calls “the gnostic trait in the narrower sense”—the distinctive feature of Gnosticism, ancient and modern: “the belief that change in the order of being lies in the realm of human action, that this salvational act is possible through man’s own effort.” (Again, the point of emphasis here is that this is not a task that is beyond human undertaking. Reality, in other words, is not a fixed standard for humans to accommodate themselves to or learn to work within. Rather, it is incumbent upon humans to fix the defects of reality themselves through direct action).
6. Lastly, if this salvational work is possible, the task of the Gnostic is thus to find the prescription for how to effect this transformation. “Knowledge—gnosis—of the method of altering being is the central concern of the Gnostic.” What is required, therefore, in order for the defects of the order of being to be remedied, for salvation from the evils of this world to take place, is “the construction of a formula for self and world salvation” and the propagator of a Gnostic system thus presents themselves to the world “as a prophet who will proclaim his knowledge about the salvation of mankind” (Voegelin [1968] 1997, 59-60).

This review of the central features of Gnosticism—including a focus on the world’s defects as it is and the need for redemption or salvation from the world’s evils—immediately suggests a parallel with Christianity.

Such a parallel is not coincidental, as Gnosticism emerged as a reaction to Christianity (Voegelin [1968] 1997, 74-75). Voegelin’s views on Christianity are complicated, particularly in light of his opposition to the Gnosticism that Christianity gives rise to. On the one hand, Voegelin viewed the Christian view of the transcendent God as an example of a healthy openness to transcendent reality; on the other hand, the experience of the transcendent that Christianity held forth to its believers is described by Voegelin as a difficult, if not impossible, one to maintain. Christianity offered a transcendent fulfillment for its believers. Still, this fulfillment could only be grasped through faith, and Voegelin notes that this “thread of faith, on which hangs all certainty regarding divine transcendent being, is indeed very thin” (74). Promising a transcendent reality and salvation from the evils of this world and then giving believers nothing more tangible within the physical world to grasp onto requires a heroic spiritual strength, and Voegelin subtly notes that “not all men are capable of such spiritual stamina” (74-75). Gnosticism, by contrast, presents a very appealing alternative, as it offers the believer a firmer grip on the transcendent than Christianity allows for (Voegelin [1952] 1987, 123-124). Whereas in Christianity, the believer’s spiritual energy went to “the sanctification of life,” Gnosticism allowed it instead to be “diverted into the more appealing, more tangible, and, above all, so much easier creation of the terrestrial paradise” (129). Voegelin thus suggests that the pull toward Gnostic constructs will likely always be strongly felt in Christian civilizations ([1968] 1997, 75).

The difference between Christianity and the manifestations of Gnosticism lies in the relationship of this world to the transcendent—to that higher reality beyond this world, beyond human action, and outside of human history. While Christianity looks to an ideal of eventual human perfection, of an experience of fulfillment and redemption in the *transcendent*—beyond this world and the reach of human action—, Gnosticism takes the Christian expectations of perfection and fulfillment and places them within the *immanent*—that is, it expects to achieve them in the here-and-now, within human history. In denying the distinct reality of a transcendent realm beyond the immanent, Voegelin argues, Gnostics reject the truth of existence. “All Gnostic movements,” writes Voegelin, “are involved in the project of abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action” ([1968] 1997, 68). Gnosticism thus manifests itself as an impatience with the imperfections of existence and a belief that a transformation of existence—of the “order of being,” in Voegelin’s terms—to alleviate these imperfections lies within the grasp of human action. What that transformation looks like will vary considerably between various forms of Gnosticism.

Voegelin noted that various forms of Gnosticism differed on the direction of this deliverance—on whether they offered the Gnostic believer a way *out from* the world and into the transcendent or a way of bringing the transcendent down into this world. Herein lies a major contrast between ancient and modern manifestations of the Gnostic impulse. Voegelin notes that in ancient Gnosticism, the deliverance from this evil world is done “through faith in the ‘alien,’ the ‘hidden’ God who comes to man’s aid, sends him his messengers and shows him the way out of the prison of the evil God of this world” ([1968] 1997, 8). In other words, deliverance in ancient Gnosticism still required the help of a transcendent God who would help the Gnostic believer escape from the physical world and into a higher realm of existence. In modern Gnostic movements, however, there is no such transcendence out of this world; rather, the transformation and deliverance offered to man must take place within history on this plane of reality. As one Voegelin scholar put the shift: “Modern Gnosticism is especially distinguished from ancient Gnosticism by its renunciation of ‘vertical’ or other-worldly transcendence and its proclamation of a ‘horizontal’ transcendence or futuristic [perfection]—that is, intramundane or worldly salvific doctrines—as ultimate truth” (Sandoz 1997, xi-xii). In other words, whereas ancient Gnosticism attempted to overcome the evil of the immanent, physical world by escaping from it, modern Gnosticism attempted to overcome the evil of the world by transforming it and bringing about a perfection within immanent history itself. Modern Gnosticism thus takes the Christian image of a reality perfected and places it squarely within human history. In Voegelin’s terminology, the transcendent is then *immanentized* or made immanent.



Two radical implications of the modern Gnostic attempt to remake the world according to a transcendent model of perfection may here be brought out. First, this transformation of the world within history endows the unfolding of the historical process itself with new significance. History can now be seen as having a meaning and a direction (Voegelin [1952] 1987, 119), as the darkness and oppressiveness of this world are removed through the workings of the historical process. Voegelin saw examples of this Gnostic faith in history at work in Enlightenment and early modern conceptions of the historical process, marking the growth of progress through history toward a future perfection (119). More radical expressions of the same idea can also easily be seen in the role that the unfolding historical process plays for Hegel or Marx in their respective transformations of reality. Thus, under Gnosticism, history can be read as having a discernible meaning—at least, to those who possess the *gnosis* or knowledge to understand its meaning. Voegelin insisted that such speculation on the meaning of history, however, was “a theoretical fallacy,” noting that history can have no such observable meaning “because the course of history extends into the unknown future. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion” (120). In other words, despite the Gnostic attempts to speculate about the direction of history and thus predict its final meaning as if they were looking already at its end, Voegelin held that such attempts were doomed to fail as the Gnostic speculators, themselves within history, had no sufficient vantage point to view or perceive history’s direction or meaning. The question of why the Gnostic believer will nevertheless attempt to speculate about the meaning of history anyway will be addressed in a later section.

The second and even more radical implication is that this immanentization process—taking the transcendent aims of perfection and deliverance and transposing them into things that can be achieved in this world, the immanent—can easily produce revolutionary, even totalitarian, political movements. Modern Gnosticism attempts to bring about an earthly transcendence of sorts by taking the Christian hope of a transcendent reality—including hope in an *eschaton*, the final, culminating transformation and perfection of the world at the end of history with Christ’s second coming—and bringing about the same transformation within history. The difference, again, between such Gnostic attempts and Christianity is that the Gnostic is not content to wait for a transcendent God to bring about this transformation but desires rather to bring it about on the Gnostic’s terms and on the Gnostic’s timeframe. It is in this sense that Voegelin describes modern Gnostic movements in one work as “the immanentization of the Christian idea of perfection” ([1968] 1997, 68). and in another as the “immanentization of the eschaton” ([1952] 1987, 188). Among the many manifestations of this particular impulse within Gnosticism are various millenarian religious movements and utopian totalitarian systems such as Marxism and National Socialism, all of which promise the reconfiguration of human nature and the radical transformation of society. Such radical attempts at immanentization can naturally manifest as revolutionary movements, as Gnostic adherents believe their dreams of a world transformed to be waiting just on the other side of a change in political regimes. Voegelin describes the revolutionary fervor of 17<sup>th</sup> Century English Puritans in this light:

The Gnostic revolutionary. . . interprets the coming of the realm [i.e., the eschaton] as an event that requires his military co-operation. In chapter 20 of Revelation, an angel comes down from heaven and throws Satan into the bottomless pit for a thousand years; in the Puritan Revolution, the Gnostics arrogate this angelic function to themselves (145).

Like with attempts to discern the movement or the meaning of history, however, Voegelin holds that such attempts at establishing a kingdom of God on earth will not succeed. The overarching aim of these revolutionary Gnostic movements—“a change in the nature of man and the establishment of a transfigured society”—is impossible to realize (152). Their visions of a world remade may be mere “fantasy” (Voegelin [1968] 1997, 73), and the theoretical systems they construct a “dream-world” (Sandoz, xii), but the Gnostic dreamers’ real-world impact is attested to by the human destruction left in their wake.

With these radical implications of modern Gnosticism being realized, we may return to discussing the common tendencies of Gnostic movements. Between ancient and modern Gnosticism, and even between various forms of Gnosticism within the modern world, Voegelin recognized that there would exist considerable differences in how the Gnostic tendency presents itself; it need not always take the form of revolutionary utopianism, although Voegelin saw such radical expressions as the most revealing of Gnosticism’s true nature (Voegelin [1952] 1987, 152). To summarize the preceding section, three features common to all forms of Gnosticism may be noted here. First, Voegelin notes that in both ancient and modern Gnosticism, “Gnostic man must carry on the work of salvation himself” ([1968] 1997, 8), noting that this “labor of salvation” can take any number of forms. All of these forms, though, involve the individual freeing themselves from the constraints of the evil world and reconstituting themselves as required for their coming salvation—whether that transformation takes place within the soul of the individual Gnostic (8) in ancient Gnosticism or within the unfolding historical process, in modern. Secondly, all Gnostics find themselves hostile to the existing order of being, and the aim of all Gnostic movements is “the destruction of the old world and passage to the next” (8). Lastly, in ancient and modern Gnosticism, the “instrument of salvation” is the same: *gnosis* or knowledge (9). Voegelin notes that since, for Gnosticism, it is *agnoia*—ignorance—that “entangles” the individual within the corrupted world, it is through *gnosis* that the soul has the opportunity to “disentangle itself through knowledge of its true life and its condition of alienness in this world” (9). Thus, for Voegelin, the possession of *gnosis* or hidden knowledge offers its adherents not just knowledge in general, but knowledge of the following: the true nature of who the believer is, the true nature

of the corrupted order of the current world and its hostility to them, and the means of deliverance from their current oppression (7-8).

We might also add that, in modern Gnosticism, *gnosis* also provides both the means of transforming the current world and also the framework for discerning the true meaning and direction of historical events. We may further point out that this process of historical speculation must necessarily involve the prediction of future events; such predictions may of course be of varying degrees of specificity, but any speculation that fails to predict where history is going cannot in any meaningful sense be said to speak of its direction. Moreover, modern Gnostics do not see themselves as passive observers in history either, but the Gnostic desire to actively reshape reality leads to a view of history as “a closed process manipulated by the revolutionary elite—the few who understand the path, process, and goal of history as it moves from stage to stage toward some sort of final perfect realm (Hegel, Marx, Comte, National Socialism)” (Sandoz 1997, xii). This understanding of history by the revolutionary elite is *gnosis*. All of these functions, this paper argues, the QAnon conspiracy theory promises to provide to its adherents. Having already provided a brief summary of that theory, its history and its central tenets, in the introduction to this paper, a few brief additional points on the QAnon phenomenon bear mentioning; we may then proceed to an extended application of Voegelin’s theory to explain an otherwise-puzzling phenomenon.

## QAnon and Gnosis

One feature of QAnon that may contribute to its appeal is the flexibility of the system. Beyond the core set of QAnon beliefs already discussed, there is a surprisingly wide array of views held by QAnon adherents. Part of this is surely due to the often-cryptic nature of Q’s postings, leading believers to draw their own inferences, as well as rely on the interpretations of influential secondary commentators who share their own interpretations of Q’s messages with their online followers (LaFrance 2020). While the vision of a coming Great Awakening may unite them, QAnon adherents diverge on their focus, as well as their interpretation of various events; there exists, for instance, a variety of viewpoints on the identity of Q (LaFrance 2020). QAnon tends also to incorporate elements of other conspiracy theories, leading a podcast dedicated to the phenomenon to label it a “big tent conspiracy theory” (QAnon Anonymous 2018). This wide divergence among QAnon followers may contribute to the resilience of the theory: if an adherent is aware of the various interpretative factions within the movement, a disproving of any particular interpretation or prediction may lead the adherent to simply choose another faction, rather than quitting belief in QAnon altogether.

One other notable feature of the QAnon theory, likely relevant to a study of its appeal and spiritual nature, is its participatory quality. Adherents are exhorted by Q to study and apply his predictions themselves—“do your own research” (LaFrance 2020). They are also instructed not only to ignore traditional mainstream media sources, but to act as their replacement—“You are the news now” (LaFrance 2020). Put differently, QAnon demands of its adherents not passive obedience, but active participation. “QAnon is deeply participatory, in a way that few other popular conspiracy theories have been,” writes Kevin Roose for *The New York Times*. “Followers congregate online to decode the latest Q posts, discuss their theories about the news of the day, and bond with their fellow believers” (Roose 2021). Such collaboration is not surprising, for many reasons: one can easily imagine that a sense of solidarity revolving around shared belief and shared purpose would fill an emotional need among adherents, particularly during the loneliness and isolation of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns when the movement rapidly expanded (Roose 2021).

But such solidary incentives for belief in QAnon are insufficient to answer a deeper question: what purpose does such a participatory element serve within QAnon? From the sceptic’s point of view, one may see this requirement of active participation as either a fortuitous accident or a shrewd psychological ploy to encourage deeper engagement and belief. But from the believer’s point of view, what purpose does participation by QAnon followers serve in the system of thought itself? The fact that Q is sharing these insights at all would suggest that he sees belief and participation with the system as a necessary component for its success, but exactly what it is that Q expects believers to contribute to the project is highly ambiguous. Adrienne LaFrance, in a long essay on the phenomenon for *The Atlantic*, summarized this paradoxical aspect of QAnon: “The eventual destruction of the global cabal is imminent, Q prophesies, but can be accomplished only with the support of patriots who search for meaning in Q’s clues” (LaFrance 2020). LaFrance doesn’t bring out the obvious question, but it is not at all clear what purpose Q’s followers and interpreters have if the coming Great Awakening is already set to occur and—at least to some followers—is divinely preordained.

It is here that Voegelin’s account of Gnosticism begins to help shape our understanding of the movement. For there is nothing internal to the QAnon theory that would, on its face, require active participation in the movement—Trump could just as easily expose the members of the cabal with or without their prior understanding of what he was doing. The possibility thus presents itself that Q is inviting his adherents into the same creative activity he is engaged in. They are not passive recipients or observers of the system he is creating; they are co-creators with him. When Q encourages his listeners to “do [their] own research,” he is inviting them into participation in the same speculative activity that he is engaging in: participation in the act of studying history as it unfolds to understand its true nature, participation in the act of reconstructing the narrative of events to fit

their own understanding of their deeper significance. When he tells his listeners “you are the news now,” he is not asking them so much to announce an external reality they have discovered, so much as to participate in the shaping of a new construction of reality as they would prefer it to be—the way his followers believe the mainstream media shapes and contorts reality to suit its own purposes. Q is inviting his listeners into participation in the reconstruction of reality. This will, of necessity, involve the destruction of the old reality, a reality seen by QAnon believers as corrupt and vile. QAnon appeals to these alienated souls who feel that the world and their country is not as it should be, and tells them that by possessing the right knowledge, they can make it whatever they want it to be.

It may be worth pausing here to dwell on the revolutionary nature and appeal of QAnon, for the claim in this paper that it offers its adherents the ability to participate in the reshaping of reality is not one that may be immediately apparent to the casual observer. It is true that the QAnon belief system, as developed in Q’s postings, is far from a systematic account of history—on the level of Hegel or Marx, for instance—or an explicit and fully-worked-out conception of how belief in QAnon can lead to its followers’ personal or collective redemption—on the level of other forms of ancient or modern Gnosticism. It is worth noting that some prominent secondary interpreters of Q may indeed have more fleshed-out systems of thought, particularly when, as has been emphasized, QAnon tends to adopt and incorporate elements of preexisting theories, including those adopting and borrowing from overtly religious systems of thought; for instance, Mark Taylor is a prominent QAnon theorist and self-described “prophet” who blends interpretations of QAnon with interpretations of Biblical end-times prophecies (Crossley 2021, 97). Many Christian adherents to QAnon appear also to have had a preexisting tendency, common in certain Evangelical circles, to draw links between Biblical end-times prophecies—in the Book of Revelation, for instance—and contemporary world events (LaFrance 2020). In other words, many participants in the QAnon phenomenon may indeed come to QAnon already having in place a much more fleshed-out system of belief that they incorporate Q’s posts into.

Moreover, it is hard to overstate the radical nature of QAnon. For its adherents, it promises to open up to them the prospect of an alternative reality far from the one reported on in the mainstream news: a reality of clear delineations between good and evil, and one where history is moving toward a definitive goal, knowable to them but not to nonbelievers. The promise of the coming “storm” necessarily requires a speculation about the direction of history, and adherents are explicitly encouraged to engage with Q in that process of speculation by “doing their own research.” The fact that this speculation is then carried out chiefly by secondary commentators—or their individual viewers—does not diminish the Gnostic nature of the reconstruction of reality being engaged in, even if each individual believer’s speculation may not rise to the same level as a Hegel or a Marx.

This decentralized nature of the QAnon phenomenon—with individual believers being encouraged to fill in the considerable gaps through their own “research”—also gives an insight into a related question revolving around the asserted link between Gnosticism and QAnon: if modern Gnosticism calls for actively remaking the current evil world to make it align with the Gnostic theorizer’s proposed vision, why are more QAnon believers not attempting to transform the physical world around them to enact this vision? This question is partially answered by noting that Q does call adherents to the theory to engage in some actions—e.g. “do your own research,” “trust the plan,” pray, etc.—,albeit not overtly political or revolutionary ones. Much of the Gnostic activity that QAnon followers are called to is on the level of theorizing alternative meanings of events as they occur, not on trying to change the material world. In fact, one can interpret Q’s statements as communicating to believers that the work is being done for them by Trump and others, and they need only “enjoy the show”—a favorite rallying cry of Q’s (LaFrance 2020); the call to research and critical inquiry is designed to liberate followers in their own minds—to lift their consciousness to see what Q is doing, not to change outward political structures. In other words, QAnon may offer its adherents something in between the promises of ancient and modern Gnosticisms: on one hand, an individualized and internalized deliverance from a false conception of reality, and on the other hand a transformed social and political environment rid of pernicious evil influences.

At the same time, it is hardly surprising that some QAnon adherents should choose to engage in such revolutionary action if they feel that existing political figures are unable, or unwilling, to bring about the “storm” without their prompting or their insistence—and thus we do see QAnon devotees occasionally attempting to take matters in their own hands, as on the January 6 attack on the Capitol and the 2022 attempted German coup, as discussed earlier. Finally, we may note again that Voegelin held that Gnosticism need not always manifest itself as a revolutionary movement, although he did see such manifestations when they did occur as particularly instructive as to the true nature of Gnosticism (Voegelin [1952] 1987, 152). In trying to understand the spiritual nature—in Voegelin’s sense of the term—of QAnon, the willingness of its adherents to engage in violence to bring about their ends may be less important than other features: a sense of alienation from the world around them, a belief that relief from this alienation is possible through the possession of secret knowledge, and a hope for a remade world on the other side of a climactic struggle within history. These latter features QAnon certainly displays.

## **The Psychological Appeal of QAnon**

This sense of hostility toward reality and a desire to remake it according to our own wishes is of course a key aspect of Voegelin’s account of Gnosticism. Voegelin wrote that, among the various Gnostic experiences and symbols, the defining

feature was a feeling of alienation, a sense of not belonging in the world as it was experienced, and a desire to find a way back to another world to which we belong:

The world is no longer the well-ordered, the cosmos, in which Hellenic man felt at home; nor is it the Judaeo-Christian world that God created and found good. Gnostic man no longer wishes to perceive in admiration the intrinsic order of the cosmos. For him the world has become a prison from which he wants to escape ([1968] 1997, 7).

Voegelin notes that for both pre-Christian Greek philosophy and in the Judeo-Christian conception of God, our experience of reality is a given: an external reality that is not under our control (35). The goal of Gnosticism, on the other hand, is to destroy what it perceives as a bad world and to replace it with a better one of its own creation (35). This requires, of course, that the structure of reality is not a given, but rather something that is within the power of humans to shape for themselves (35). But one may wonder why people would believe that the structure of reality is under their control, when their daily experiences with reality would suggest that the world is not under their control, that they are not able to make of it what they will. Where then does this desire to remake the world come from, when the desire itself is easily seen not to fit with reality?

One may ask a similar question about the QAnon believer: why would they be eager to participate in the reconstruction of reality or in speculation on the meaning of history when common experience tell them such reconstruction and such speculation are pointless? The simplest answer is to say that the attraction to this project is because they *desire* it to be true. In her essay for *The Atlantic*, LaFrance quotes a QAnon believer, Shelly, that she interviewed describing the appeal for her as soon as she first encountered the theory online: “For me, it was revealing some things that maybe I was hoping would come to pass” (LaFrance 2020). One may naturally ask why anyone would hope that the world is run by a secretive evil cabal. Shelly, according to LaFrance, is frustrated at the world as it is: schools, banks, the media, “even our churches are out of whack.” To the alienated soul opposed to the reality around them, there is a *desire*, a hope, to remake the world. What then is the nature of this desire?

Voegelin finds the answer to this question by turning to the creator of another Gnostic system, Friedrich Nietzsche. In Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power, the *libido dominandi*. Voegelin finds the key to the desire to overcome and remake the structure of reality as it currently exists. This will to power is tied to the Gnostic’s desire to destroy what it sees as a corrupted reality and to create its own instead. To submit in humility to the structure of reality as it is—to acknowledge the natural limits on man and society as outside of their control—would require them to lay aside their visions of a transformed humanity, society, and politics (Federici 2002, 73). The will to power, then, triumphs over humility in the Gnostic defiance against the order of being; but, as Voegelin notes, the will to power has not actually triumphed—it gains no real power over the structure of reality, despite its rebellion against it:

[T]he constitution of being remains what it is—beyond the reach of the [Gnostic] thinker’s lust for power. It is not changed by the fact that a thinker drafts a program to change it and fancies that he can implement that program. The result, therefore, is not dominion over being, but a fantasy satisfaction ([1968] 1997, 73).

In other words, the will to power drives the Gnostic to rebellion against the order of being; the will to power “strikes against the wall of being, which has become a prison,” (20) and in the process, the will to power is turned into “the will to intellectual deception” (19). When considering the spiritual hopes that believers have put into this dream-world Gnostic fantasy—a coming, climactic victory of good over evil, of a society and a world renewed, and of vindication for themselves and their fellow Gnostics against those who have doubted them—giving up this fantasy and submitting to the givenness of a reality that they find oppressive and corrupt is too much to do. Much more palatable is to allow themselves to be deceived, but deceived into believing something that, like Shelly, they were “hoping to come to pass.”

The QAnon adherent, then, has been deceived. And deceived at multiple levels: at one level they have deceived themselves, at another level they have been deceived by the professional social media influencers who have introduced them to this theory, and ultimately by the original creator of this system, by Q. While allowing that Gnostic believers often are engaged in self-deception, Voegelin does not absolve the creators of Gnostic systems of moral responsibility, calling Marx an “intellectual swindler,” who spread a view of reality he knew to be false, as evidenced by the fact he barred philosophical examination of his system ([1968] 1997, 19). Deeper than the self-deception of the Gnostic follower is the awareness, at least in the first propagator of the system, that the system is false; Q is not self-deceived, whoever it is knows that these predictions are not true and that he has no such inside knowledge of immanent arrests and secret cabals. Voegelin hypothesizes that at its core, as the Gnostic creator persists in his deception in full knowledge of its falsity, the *libido dominandi*, the will to power, carries the deception further down in rebellion against the idea of a transcendent reality beyond our control (22-23).

In addition to the will to power, another potential explanation as to the psychological appeal of QAnon lies in the degree of certainty it affords its adherents. Voegelin notes that the Gnostic constructs will constantly be colliding against the constraints of the constitution of being, which has not actually changed, despite Gnosticism’s rebellion against it. Voegelin suggests that



the Gnostic believers are blinded to the problems with their systems through a desire to achieve “a certainty about the meaning of history and about their own place in it,” which outside of the Gnostic construct is not possible ([1952] 1987, 122). The appeal of such certainty to QAnon believers is understandable: witnessing disorienting global events and distrustful of various institutions that in previous generations might be trusted to help make sense of the world, QAnon believers are hungry for a theory that clearly explains world events and offers a degree of certainty in an uncertain world. Beaty quotes one pastor who attributes the appeal of QAnon within his church to broader societal trends: the “death of expertise” and a sense that “nothing feels authoritative right now” and they will have to “find [their] own truth” (Beaty 2020). This degree of certainty is only offered within Gnosticism. As has been said, standing within the stream of history, we have no vantage point to ascertain the meaning or direction of history; Gnosticism offers its adherents the assurance of how history will play out in the end, and a confidence about what role they play in what would otherwise be an unfolding mystery. Philosophy too fails to deliver the certainty that Gnostic believers crave, as philosophy springs from a desire to perceive and orient oneself toward a transcendent truth that the philosopher realizes is outside of his control; the Gnostic, by contrast, seeks to dominate and seize control over the order of being (Voegelin [1968] 1997, 30).

Interestingly, this desire for certainty is echoed by a contemporary philosopher of Voegelin’s, Hannah Arendt who, like Voegelin, was also a refugee from the Nazi regime. In her essay “Truth and Politics” in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt reflected on what was unique about the lies told by the Nazi regime. Such falsehoods, Arendt argued, went beyond “the traditional political lie” to something much larger: an attempt to reconstruct reality (Arendt 1968, 252). The goal of such lies was “not to flatter reality” as in traditional falsehoods, “but to offer a full-fledged substitute for it” (252). Traditional lies, smaller and more specific to particular facts, are eventually revealed by their incongruence with the larger “fabric of factuality,” while Arendt noted that “big lies” amounting to the total reconstruction of reality by totalitarian regimes could be immune to such incongruencies:

[I]f the modern political lies are so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture—the making of another reality, as it were, into which they will fit without seam, crack, or fissure, exactly as the facts fitted into their own original context—what prevents these new stories, images, and non-facts from becoming an adequate substitute for reality and factuality (253-254)?

This internal consistency is indeed key to the appeal of the new reality; as one scholar commenting on Arendt’s theory explained the connection, “masses crave consistency in reality as a reassurance in the face of their loss of self-control and self-determination. Here ideologies fit the bill perfectly. . . .Consistency is what the masses want; thence, as Arendt saw it, ideology is what they get” (Nelson 1978, 274). Thus, in calling QAnon believers to “do their own research,” Q is inviting them into a construction of a reality that will—at least to adherents—certainly appear to be more consistent, predictable, and historically certain than the relative inconsistency and unpredictability of reality as it is perceived outside of the QAnon belief system.

This artificial, manufactured level of internal consistency and predictability—so much greater in a constructed ideology than in the comparatively inconsistent and unpredictable real world—thus draws believers in by seeming to be more rational and more plausible than actual reality. Arendt notes this paradoxical phenomenon in her essay “Lying in Politics” in *Crises of the Republic*:

[L]ies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared (Arendt 1972, 6-7).

Thus, for Arendt as for Voegelin, ideological systems promise their adherents new realities that seem, to their adherents, to be more plausible and more rational than reality as it is understood outside of the belief system. Gnostic systems can indeed be constructed to fit exactly what seems most plausible to the adherents, and this artificial level of internal consistency fits with the certainty the Gnostic system provides its believers on the ultimate meaning of history, as it provides meaning to otherwise-disconnected events that can all be seen by adherents as pointing toward an established historical end point. Such certainty and such consistency are not available outside of the Gnostic system.

## **QAnon: Ersatz Religion**

Voegelin argued that Christianity does not offer believers the same degree of certainty as Gnostic systems did. “Uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity,” writes Voegelin ([1952] 1987, 122). Compared to the pre-Christian pagan “world full of gods,” the world within Christian is “de-divinized,” and the transcendent God of Christianity is much less tangible, accessible to the believer only through “the tenuous bond of faith, in the sense of Heb. 11:1, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of

things unseen” (122). Against this faith in a transcendent God, as has been argued in a previous section, Gnosticism promises the establishment of a terrestrial paradise through “immanentizing the eschaton.” The world is even further “de-divinized” by the Enlightenment and the advance of Gnostic doctrines such as positivism and rationalism that further separate modern people from divine reality; the spiritual void in their wake is filled by the “pseudo-religions” of modern ideological movements (Federici 2002, 55). It is thus that the modern world sees the rise of “immanentizing political religions” (55) that may have some superficial similarities to Christianity or other genuine experiences of the transcendent, but upon inspection the deliverance they offer is a purely intramundane one—one that takes place solely within this world, and one that it is within the possibility of humanity to bring about on its own.

Thus, despite the Christian symbolism on the surface of QAnon—Q will quote Christian scripture and instruct his followers to pray (LaFrance 2020)—, it is not difficult to see that the deliverance it offers is purely immanentized: the spiritual battle between the forces of light and darkness is synonymous with the conflict between Trump and the corrupt elites, the establishment of Christ’s kingdom on earth is initiated by sentencing corrupt elites through military tribunals. Even Q’s references to scripture tend to impart an intramundane (i.e. within this world) reading to scriptures, as they seamlessly toggle between the Christian’s spiritual struggle against sin with a supposed earthly struggle between Trump and Democrats. One example of this comes on April 8, 2020, a post by Q suggested that Democrats were deliberately promoting “mass hysteria” over Covid-19 for political gain: “What is the primary benefit to keep public in mass-hysteria re: COVID-19. Think voting. Are you awake yet? Q.” The post then concluded with the Apostle Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesians: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (LaFrance 2020). In QAnon, in other words, scriptural commands are recast to fit the demands of an earthly political movement. It is possible too that some Evangelicals came to QAnon already prepared for such an immanentized reading of scripture through a previous practice of attempting to connect Biblical end-times prophecies in the Book of Revelation to contemporary political and economic events. Some QAnon believers, it seems, are eager to link the foretold “Storm” with Biblical end-times prophecies (LaFrance 2020). It should be remembered that Voegelin saw Gnosticism as permeating much of modern society; the fact that many Christians would have an easy time believing that human action could play some role in either accomplishing or hastening the eschaton is consistent with Voegelin’s analysis.

## The Resiliency of QAnon

In addition to the emotional investment Gnostic believers put into the movements and the degree of certainty that the Gnostic believer is offered, Voegelin describes other mechanisms that Gnostic systems will use to inoculate their followers against disbelief in the system when the Gnostic construct’s “disregard for the structure of reality” ([1952] 1987, 173) leads to its falsehood becoming apparent (Federici 2002, 71). One such “technical device” offered by Gnosticism is what Voegelin labels, perhaps confusingly for some readers, a Gnostic *koran*—a “systematic formulation of the new doctrine” which keeps each adherent from adhering to their own interpretations and reorients them to a comprehensive “formulation of truth that would make recourse to earlier literature unnecessary” ([1952] 1987, 139). In a certain sense, “Q drops” do not seem to fit this standard, as they are not systematic or comprehensive, allowing considerable room for various interpretations of their meaning; a key part of the movement is, as we have seen, that Q invites believers into participation with him in the creation of his new body of knowledge. Moreover, it is not technically true that Q cuts off his followers from all preexisting belief, as QAnon tends to incorporate and borrow elements from various preexisting conspiracy theories. At the same time, Voegelin notes that this “codification of truth” serves as “the spiritual and intellectual nourishment of the faithful” (140) which does fit some descriptions of the QAnon treatment of Q’s postings. It is perhaps questionable whether such a comprehensive, ready-made explanation of all events would be as appealing to these followers who are skeptical and distrustful of traditional authorities and whose preference for trusting “their own research” was presumably a prerequisite for the movement’s appeal. On the other hand, it is possible that the uncertainty this distrust generates would leave some followers even more open to the certainty and psychological security that comes with having their “research” done for them.

A second way that Gnostic systems inoculate their believers against counter-argument from outside the system is through what Voegelin labels the “prohibition of questioning” ([1968] 1997, 15). In other words, the creator of a Gnostic system precludes adherents from asking certain questions that do not first buy into the basic presuppositions of the Gnostic construction, and thus problematic aspects of reality are dispensed with without argument. For instance, the positivist will not entertain questions about moral values. Voegelin gives the example of Marx, who dismisses problematic questions by declaring that “socialist man”—that is, the man who buys into Marx’s presuppositions—does not ask himself such questions (17). Similarly, the QAnon believer is not likely to accept challenges to the system based on reporting by mainstream media sources, which they believe to be corrupt and, in at least some cases, part of the evil cabal of elites. Only by accepting certain premises first, in other words, is the Gnostic believer willing to entertain objections to their system. Put differently, one must buy into the Gnostic construct in order to criticize it. The result, according to Voegelin, is that the Gnostic construct proves itself to be remarkably unshakable: “the attitude is psychologically iron-clad and beyond shaking by argument” ([1952] 1987, 137). This

appearance of invincibility surely contributes to the sense of certainty that Gnostic adherents have in their system. But this degree of certainty is, of course, deceptive. The grasp on transcendent reality may appear firmer when it has been immanentized by the Gnostic system, but this is only because the transcendent reality itself has been lost.

## The Recovery of Truth

Herein lies the difference between philosophy and Gnosticism, to Voegelin: philosophy does not pretend to possess knowledge itself, but only the love of knowledge (*philo-sophos*), whereas Gnosticism desires to possess, to control “actual knowledge,” to use Hegel’s term (Voegelin [1968] 1997, 29). Maintaining such a grasp of the transcendent is impossible: “the leap over the bounds of the finite into the perfection of actual knowledge is impossible. If a thinker attempts it, he is not advancing philosophy, but abandoning it to become a Gnostic” (29). It was the recovery of this love of knowledge, this openness to the existence of a transcendent reality that lies beyond our control that Voegelin saw as the only source for recovery in the modern world. This recovery of genuine philosophy, of a sense of the transcendent, is a tall order, but Voegelin saw it as the only solution to curing the “spiritual disease” at the heart of modern Gnosticism.

The solutions modern society itself offers up to cure the ills of such deformations of reality are not at all helpful, according to Voegelin. Voegelin pushed back, for instance, on the solutions offered by modern critics of Nazism. He argued, for instance, that offering up “ethical counter-propaganda” was not an adequate response to Nazism; Voegelin, of course, agreed that the Nazis had committed immoral acts and he disapproved of these acts, but argued that merely responding on the level of moral condemnation failed to address the deeper spiritual disease that gave birth to such actions (Federici 2002, 5-6). Similarly, Voegelin also argued against certain representations of Nazism as a return to the “Dark Ages” or a rejection of Enlightenment values (6)—an argument that is strikingly similar to LaFrance’s description of QAnon as “a movement united in mass rejection of reason, objectivity, and other Enlightenment values” (LaFrance 2020). Voegelin, of course, saw such positivistic reliance on “facts” as but a different manifestation of Gnosticism—“the struggle against the consequences of Gnosticism is being conducted in the very language of Gnosticism,” as genuine philosophical knowledge had been destroyed ([1968] 1997, xx)—and argued that it would have no hope of curing the hostility in the modern world toward the true nature of reality. Voegelin saw Nazism as the direct outgrowth of modernity, not a turning away from it.

For Voegelin, the only alternative was to present a genuinely true vision of reality, including transcendent reality, and for people in the modern world to orient their hearts to it. Perhaps the most discomfiting part of Voegelin’s analysis to the modern reader is his suggestion that the spiritual disease that manifests itself in murderous totalitarian regimes and transparently-false conspiracy theories is one that infects a large portion of modern Western society (Federici 2002, 10). In the Nazi lectures, delivered from Berlin in 1964, Voegelin suggested that the same spiritual conditions that had given birth to Nazism were still prevalent in German society 20 years later and had not been addressed; the reaction was so fierce that it prompted him to leave Germany a second time and return to the United States (9-10).

Voegelin’s solution—that the crisis giving birth to QAnon and other Gnostic manifestations can not be addressed, except through a new acceptance of “the truth of man’s spiritual existence” (17)—is no doubt a difficult solution to sell to modern people. The point, though, is not to return to Christianity or some other historical insight into transcendent reality, some past formulation of the truth of existence; rather, as Michael Federici puts it in his introduction to Voegelin’s thought, “the true, the good, and the beautiful must be rediscovered and reconstituted in each historical age” (Federici 2002, 27). Nevertheless, past discoveries of truth—such as ancient Greek philosophy or Christianity—“can illuminate the present search for order” by helping to orient the philosopher toward transcendent truth (27-28). No doubt this recovery of order will not be an easy project. As has been said, the Gnostic attitude has considerable appeal when compared to the comparatively hard work of philosophical and spiritual attunement to divine reality (68). Voegelin notes, moreover, that in a culture that has already been spiritually depleted, resistance against the Gnostic temptation is even harder (69). As Federici describes the dilemma, “the impatience and idealism of the modern personality” make the prospect of Gnostic revolution through mass political action or through ideological conformity more appealing than the hard work of attaining virtue (69-70). Gnosticism’s temptation of easy fixes, however, runs both ways: just as removing the evil and corruption from society is assuredly a harder task than simply storming the Capitol on January 6, 2021, so too recovering a healthy sense of the whole of reality and restoring a humility toward the constitution of being is a harder project than confronting QAnon believers with “the facts.”

Nevertheless, Voegelin was optimistic about the opportunity for the recovery of truth. Gnosticism’s “disregard for the structure of reality” makes it ultimately self-defeating in the long run (Voegelin [1952] 1987, 173). Despite the prevalence of Gnosticism throughout Western society, contemporary society contained healthy elements as well (176). Gnosticism, wrote Voegelin, “in spite of its noisy ascendancy, does not by far have the field for itself... the building-up of spiritual and intellectual resistance against Gnosticism in all its variants is a notable factor in our society” and may prove to be a decisive turning-point toward resolving the Western crisis (165). Through philosophy, the soul can turn in openness toward the truth of existence and so can again.

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