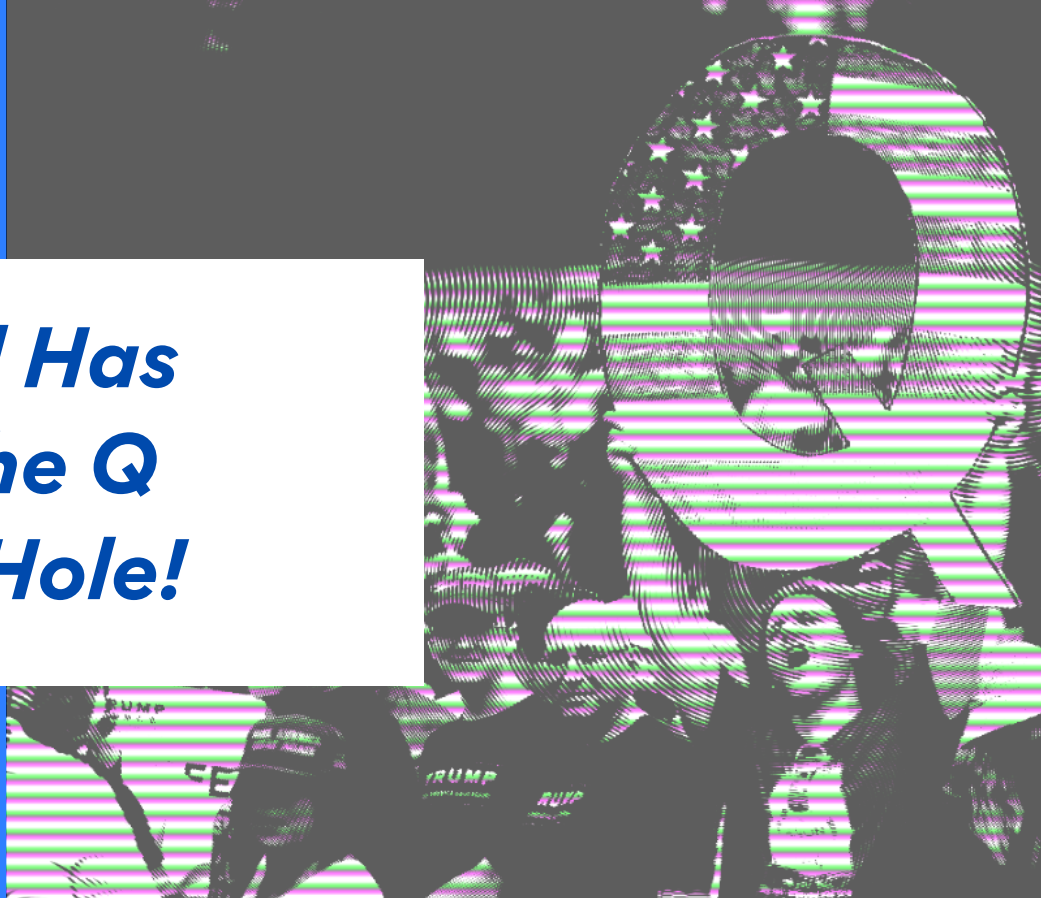


Help! My Dad Has Gone Down the Q Anon Rabbit Hole!

***A Guide to Modern
Day Spiritual
Challenges***



How to talk to those who have been captivated

by Rev. Jennifer Butler

During the Trump Presidency and the pandemic, many of us saw friends, family members, congregants, and colleagues succumbing to conspiracy theories and extremist viewpoints. In doing book talks around the country for *Who Stole My Bible? Reclaiming Scripture as a Handbook for Resisting Tyranny*, I am always asked how to handle those drawn into cult-like conspiracy theories and ideologies.

This resource guide seeks to review briefly what we are up against, then share a method for talking to those captivated by such beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

Political cults and conspiracy theories

Q Anon

QAnon is a political cult that recruits and indoctrinates primarily online. Q Anon teaches that dozens of politicians and A-list celebrities work in tandem with governments around the globe to engage in child sex abuse. A recent poll by Public Religion Research Institute and Interfaith Youth Core found that 15% of Americans (30 million people) say they think that the levers of power are controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, a core belief of QAnon supporters [1]. The same share said it was true that “American patriots may have to resort to violence” to depose the pedophiles and restore the country’s rightful order. That size ranks up there with a major religion. White and Latino evangelicals are the most susceptible as are Republicans and those who watch right-wing news like Fox. Bill Haslam, the Republican Tennessee governor, recently observed in dismay that people in his state “have become convinced that theories [such as QAnon] are reflective of their Christian faith [2].”

Q predicted a storm was coming in which Trump would win the 2020 elections, arrest and hang corrupt elites, and launch a Great Awakening.

Christian nationalism

Christian Nationalism has been with us since the founding of our nation in some respects. It seems odd to list it side-by-side with the newer Q Anon. Since Barack Obama’s historic election this heresy has been weaponized by political operatives. These beliefs prime white Christians for Q Anon and newly formed hate groups.

Christian Nationalism is the belief that America is a Christian nation created by and for Christians with God’s blessing. It seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy [3]. It carries assumptions about nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, authoritarianism, and militarism, at its extreme espousing the erroneous belief that white people, rather than minority groups, are being victimized.

A study by religion scholars Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead identified that 20% of the U.S. population are Ambassadors of Christian Nationalism and 32% are Accommodators-- meaning they are open to or tolerant of Christian Nationalism [4]. As we plan outreach, it is important to take into account this group of Accommodators to head off deeper indoctrination. With so many getting pulled in our resources might be best spent heading this off at the pass.

1 <https://www.ppri.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/>

2 <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/06/bill-haslam-trump-evangelicals/619101/>

Historic and religious roots

Sadly both Christian Nationalism and Q Anon capitalize on Christian belief, symbols, and rituals to sow fear, deceit, and even violence. Q Anon builds on beliefs about the end times from the books of Revelation. These beliefs are rooted in toxic theology and misinterpretation of scripture. The beliefs around sex trafficking and abuse rehash racist tropes targeting religious and racial minorities (from Jews in Middle Age Europe to Catholic immigrants in the early Twentieth Century US, to Blacks in Jim Crow South.



I share this because it is important to know that conspiratorial thinking has deep roots in the history of efforts to establish the superiority of white Europeans using Christianity to justify a social hierarchy. The goal of these theories is to channel resources (including land and cheap labor) to a select few. This outcome harms all of us.

The fact that racist tropes are rooted in the false use of Christian scriptures and symbols is horrifying, yet it makes our work as Christians all the more important. Those of us who practice a liberative Christianity and know God as the one who frees slaves in Egypt have a powerful role to play in dismantling such oppression. By tapping our shared biblical story bank and using a liberation perspective we can help people find their way out of an ungodly and isolating worldview that threatens our community and nation. My book provides examples of ways to do that from the pulpit, in bible studies, or in one on ones.

Our congregations are places where there is deep trust even when we disagree. Yes, this bond is being tested but much remains. Our theology and biblical stories are shared belief systems that can help free hearts and minds and fortify those who are vulnerable. Spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation can help calm those who might fall prey to fear tactics. Our pulpits and classrooms can also be powerful sites to resist misinformation campaigns.

3 <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement>

4 Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Oxford Press. 2020.

What can we do?

Each of us has a sphere of influence regardless of whether we have an official leadership role in the church or community. We all can make a difference through conversations with those in our orbit and help loved ones to find a way home [5].

CLARA is a conversation approach used in a variety of settings including individual and community conflict [6]. It originated as LARA, a communication guideline developed by Bonnie Tinker, a Quaker leader who noticed a need to teach others to engage in difficult and emotional conversations around sexual orientation.

I have elaborated on this method to apply it to our current political context while recognizing that these conversations are among the most challenging one can undertake.

While CLARA is versatile, talking to someone who has been pulled into a political cult or hate group carries unique challenges that cannot be solved in a single conversation. Change begins with introducing a sliver of doubt and keeping an open channel of communication. As you start out, remember these essentials:

C enter
L isten
A ffirm
R espond
A sk Questions

- Your compassion for the person caught up in conspiracy theories and their trust in you is the foundation of everything else.
- Telling a personal story is ideal, particularly sharing your own journey story of forming a new belief about an issue.
- Talk about how your faith informs how you see the situation at hand. Some of us may need more practice at that. We know, but we don't always have the words. My book, *Who Stole My Bible*, can help you articulate why Q Anon and Christian Nationalism are leading Christians down the wrong path. Speak about what you affirmatively believe rather than critique these heresies directly.
- Be compassionate toward yourself because this is not a science. Just do your best to be calm, caring and thoughtful.

5 Adapted from Stanford SPARQ Tools. <https://sparqtools.org/lara/> and Jesse Berg, www.intrinsicchange.com; See https://www.intrinsicchange.com/uploads/4/8/9/8/48980893/clara_2.0_outline.pdf

6 The CLARA 2.0 communication technique is based on the traditional LARA/CLARA (Tinker, 1992)

Center

I found this reminder to center helpful because having conversations of this nature is heartbreaking, frustrating, and scary. Losing someone you care about to a conspiracy theory is a grave loss akin to death. I lost my father to these ideologies which were gaining steam throughout the Obama era as right-wing groups mobilized racial resentment around our first Black president. When he died in 2014 I realized I had actually “lost” him twice.

If we are unaware of and not taking time to process our grief or fear we are apt to respond in fear or anger rather than compassion and calm. So the first step in the CLARA method is to Center.

So first, calm and center your mind. As part of your prayer life, establish a deep breathing and mindfulness practice that allows you to get in touch with your grief and fear. Let yourself move through those feelings rather than avoid them. Once you are aware of your feelings; you can observe them so that they inform rather than control you. Part of centering is to prepare to suspend ego and agenda and set an intention to help the other.

The biggest thing to let go of is the belief that you are entering a debate that you need to win. Let go of the need to control the outcome or what the person believes. Your goal is to show up in compassion to connect and share your truth; not to win. Success is not changing the other person’s mind. Success is connecting and showing respect. Cults seek to isolate believers. Our ability to stay connected is critical.



Listen

Yep, the first step is just to actively listen. How rare that is these days! How opposite from the usual approach we see on Cable TV news and social media threads where the goal is to jump in and get off a zinger!

Your speech in this phase is minimal. Your goal is to be supportive of the person and seek to understand what they are thinking and why.

- Ask questions.
- Repeat back.
- Probe feelings.
- Breathe and keep open body language and eye contact.
- Maintain an attitude of curiosity.

I've known this phase to bear a lot of fruit on its own, especially for those not fully bought into the conspiracy theory. Your listening and mirroring (repeating back, acknowledging their feelings) can help them begin to self-reflect.



Affirm

Affirm Q Anon!? But it's a delusion -- It deserves no respect!

At first glance, the concept of affirming a person wrapped up in a dangerous fiction seems jarring. Remember though, you are not affirming their worldview. You are affirming them as a person of value and establishing agreement on a shared principle, love, or aspiration. When we establish a shared value, we're not only bonding, we're reasoning. That's where reconsidering a mistaken belief starts. Universally shared values are the most solid ground: family, safety, responsibility.

Affirm

Sit with the feelings, name the underlying beliefs about right and wrong, and deepen the connection.

 "I SENSE THAT YOU FEEL..."	 "IT SEEMS LIKE..."	 "WHAT I HEAR YOU SAYING IS..."
Example: "I sense you are feeling misunderstood and frustrated."	Example: "It seems we both care deeply about our children's futures."	Example: "What I hear you saying is you have a deep desire to do what's right."

In conversations, I have found myself able to affirm that I too find it difficult these days to trust politicians and news sources (without throwing my hands up in the air or making false equivalencies). I have found common cause over unjust economic policies and downward mobility many experiences. And I always find I can affirm feelings. Everyone is afraid and hurting, even those with privilege. In this stage, resist the urge to move right away to the "but...." Sit with the feelings, name the underlying beliefs about right and wrong, and deepen the connection.

Respond

Respond to the issues they raise and the underlying needs behind them. You can tell a story about your own journey toward your views on the matter, or facts from a source you both find credible. These approaches can start the person on their own journey of discovery.

A few guidelines:

- Avoid labeling or accusing them. “You are racist; You are paranoid;”
- Use “I statements” to frame your response:
 - I feel I believe, I think, I read, I learned in school,
 - Example: " I once thought Defund Police sounded extreme but then I learned that..."

Consider the good vs. bad responses below:



Note how this approach differs from what we hear pundits, debaters or politicians do. They look to control the conversation, pounce on contradictions and attack straw men to play to their audience. We, on the other hand, should have no audience in mind except our conversation partner, and be completely respectful and intellectually honest.

Ask questions or add more information

In this final stage, you can ask them to react to your response or elaborate on their beliefs to gain a deeper understanding of intention, motivation, and person. Open-ended questions help you gain a better understanding of the other person's perspective. They also demonstrate that you are genuinely interested in an exchange of information, not just working to win your point.



Pointers:

- Just a reminder to listen to the speaker's concerns before you add additional information.
- Use open-ended questions to help you gain a better understanding of the other person's perspective and create openness. How did that make you feel? How did that sound? How did you reach those conclusions?
- Ask "would it be OK if I shared my perspective?"

Continue the process as you're able, but don't force it. Keep practicing. Give yourself grace. Boundary your time spent. Agree to disagree. If you feel triggered, compassionately end the conversation.

Conclude if possible with an appreciation for the conversation.

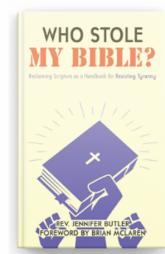
Conclusion

Change takes time, and I have often found out only years later that a conversation led to a change in someone's point of view. In fact, we might never know. It's easy to come away wishing you'd presented a better argument or been better informed. These are moments of learning and growth. It's even ok to say you don't know all the answers, or suggest looking into something together. Shared relationships, compassion, integrity, and values have more of an impact than all the facts in the world.

Most of all, know that these conversations reflect your courage, and they're absolutely worth having. If you are looking to further engage faith history or wanting to embark on a journey to reclaim scripture and your faith, be sure to check out my book, 'Who Stole My Bible: Reclaiming Scripture as a Handbook for Resisting Tyranny.'

"A forceful manifesto of awakening to the claims of biblical faith amid our deep and costly social political crisis."

-Walter Brueggemann
Columba Theological Seminary



Also be sure to visit my website at revjenbutler.com and follow me on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter for similar reflections and updates. Thank you for taking on the challenge of difficult conversations!



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