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International Master
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**Erasmus
Mundus**

‘Stand against the wiles of the devil.’

**Interpreting QAnon as a Christian extremist
movement**

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Abstract

QAnon has become a prominent domestic security threat in recent years due to the involvement of its supporters in violent terrorist and criminal acts. Numerous QAnon supporters participated in the 2021 U.S. Capitol Storming and the 2022 Freedom Convoys in Canada, committing criminal violent and non-violent acts. When analysing these events, researchers have observed that numerous QAnon supporters have been influenced by religious and spiritual beliefs, emphasising the importance of QAnon's religious dimensions and their impact on individuals' radicalisation. However, academics have not explored such religious dimensions by drawing upon the body of literature from the field of religious studies, thus overlooking core facets of QAnon's religious dimensions. By conducting an empirically driven research based on the collection and analysis of QAnon religious imagery downloaded from QAnon-related Telegram channels, this dissertation aims to analyse QAnon's religious dimensions and hypothesise about the potential impact of religious extremism on its affiliates' propensity to violence. The visual analysis conducted by applying both semiotics and hermeneutics to QAnon religious imagery shows that QAnon can be labelled as a Christian extremist movement that shares commonalities with the religious phenomena of Christian Identity and Liberation Theology. Extremist Christian theology can enhance radicalisation of QAnon supporters by legitimising and justifying the use of violence to achieve religious and socio-political objectives.

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

LARP – live action role-playing

MAGA – Make America Great Again

NRM – new religious movement

OKM – Omega Kingdom Ministry

U.S. – United States of America

WWG1WGA – when we go one we go all

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Introduction

QAnon emerged as an online conspiracy theory in 2017, and rapidly developed into a widespread online and offline network fulfilling different social, political, and psychological purposes (Fitzgerald, 2022). Violent extremism was one small but prominent aspect of QAnon's evolution; its affiliates committed criminal acts including murders and violent protests, being charged of terrorist acts (Amarasingam and Argentino, 2020). Members of the movement have committed crimes in numerous countries such as the United States of America (U.S.), Australia, the Netherlands, and Germany, thus testifying to the international dimension of QAnon (The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), n.d.).

As a result of QAnon's engagement with violence in the U.S., the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has warned against the security threat the movement poses to domestic institutions (Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 2019). Especially, governmental bodies have been concerned by QAnon supporters' participation in violent rallies and protests against governments, lockdown measures and vaccination mandates (Suber and Ware, 2021). QAnon affiliates' participation in the 2021 United States Capitol Attack exposed the violent potential of the movement (Farivar, 2021) which, despite declining, still 'continues to pose a national security threat in the U.S. and abroad, remaining a threat to democratic processes and a threat to public health.' (Argentino and Aniano, 2022)

Indeed, the movement has recently gained publicity due to its links to the spread of disinformation on Covid-19, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests and violent actions. In March 2021, two Italian citizens who were exposed to QAnon-related propaganda attacked a vaccination hub in Brescia by throwing a Molotov cocktail against it (Open, 2021). In 2021 and 2022, numerous QAnon supporters and influential personalities have been condemned

for encouraging acts of violence against health workers and sending death threats to politicians in multiple countries (The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), n.d.). Lastly, in early 2022, QAnon adherents have participated in the so-called Freedom Convoy, a series of trucker protests against Covid-19 vaccine mandates that broke out in Canada and later inspired similar events in France and Australia (Butler, 2022; Ling, 2022; Xu and Kent, 2022).

QAnon's involvement in violent acts has attracted the interest of academics in the field of terrorism and extremism studies who have explored the movement's features and the factors behind its members' radicalisation. Although QAnon is an amorphous phenomenon constantly changing that can be studied from diverse perspectives, researchers have increasingly emphasised that its religious dimensions are playing a crucial role in radicalising individuals online (LaFrance, 2020; Stanton, 2020; Argentino, 2020a; Argentino, 2020b; Badham, 2021; Balzakis, 2021). Particularly, radicalised QAnon supporters who participated in both the 6th of January storming of the Capitol in the U.S. and the Canadian Freedom Convoy have been shown to be strongly influenced by QAnon's religious dimensions, especially those associated with Christianity (Boorstein, 2021; Lecaque, 2022a).

This dissertation aims to contribute to the study of QAnon's religious dimensions and their potential connection to violence by providing evidence-based research supported by theoretical concepts from the field of religious studies. It argues that QAnon's religious dimensions are deeply rooted in Christianity, can be conceptualised as Christian extremism and can pose a threat to security on this basis. The empirical evidence shows that QAnon and its affiliates emphasise the importance of Jesus as a saviour and protector against the Evil, spread Anti-Semitic content, reinterpret the sacred scriptures in the light of current events and vice versa, and encourage supporters to prepare for

an ultimate battle for freedom from oppression, thus radicalising individuals and likely increasing their propensity to violence.

The research will argue that QAnon Christian extremism presents an intrinsically violent socio-political character that draws upon fervent nationalism, religious-political support for the former U.S. President Donald Trump, who is viewed as a sort of messiah and religious liberator, and anti-vax stands legitimised and justified on the basis of religious interpretation of the Covid-19 pandemic. The violent nature of QAnon Christian extremism shares commonalities with the religious phenomena of Christian Identity and Liberation Theology that have engaged in acts of religious violence. In particular, like Christian Identity movements in the U.S., QAnon Christian extremism conveys Anti-Semitic beliefs and the idea of spiritual warfare to encourage violent actions against the deep state. Similarly, like Liberation Theology movements, QAnon Christian extremism portrays a religious battle of the oppressed against the oppressors, viewing in Jesus and political leaders a source of liberation from the Evil. Although Christian Identity and Liberation Theology are characterised by some specificities QAnon does not share, looking at the similarities between these religious phenomena and the conspiracy theory can help to better understand QAnon Christian extremism.

This study addresses three main objectives. Firstly, the research aims to fill the literature gap by providing a well-informed theoretical analysis of QAnon's religious dimensions. Secondly, the study will increase the knowledge about QAnon by providing an in-depth understanding of the movement's religious dimensions. Finally, the analysis aims to contribute to the field of terrorism and extremism studies by developing cutting-edge evidence-based research concerning the online activity of QAnon. This dissertation will first illustrate the methodology employed and the limitations of the study, dedicating in-depth attention to the ethical concerns originating from the research design and to the measures adopted to mitigate them. It will then conduct a

comprehensive literature review to situate the study and highlight the gap in the research on QAnon's religious dimensions. Subsequently, it will analyse and discuss the evidence collected developing a comprehensive theoretical and empirical study of QAnon's religious dimensions. Particular attention will be dedicated to engaging with the literature on QAnon's religious dimensions, challenging some core observations of researchers and increasing the knowledge about the movement. In the conclusions, the research will address the core findings of this study and discuss potential implications for future research. The study is guided by the following research questions: *(1) what are the features of QAnon's religious dimensions? (2) how can QAnon's religious dimensions be conceptualised? (3) what can be hypothetically inferred about the nexus between QAnon's religious dimensions and its affiliates' propensity to violence?*

Methodology

The research's methodology is qualitative and evidence-based, focusing on the collection and analysis of images spread via QAnon-affiliated Telegram groups. The analysis of visuals is based on a two-folded approach. Firstly, the content has been analysed by using semiotic analysis. Secondly, the images have been interpreted by using hermeneutics. Both semiotics and hermeneutics require a deep and careful understanding of the context the images originate from. Hence, the critical analysis of the literature, especially religious studies on Gnosticism, esoterism, cults, and Christian extremism, has been providing the theoretical concepts for deepening the data analysis and comprehensively answer the research questions.

Several pivotal works from the field of terrorism and extremism studies have emphasised the importance of visual analysis as a methodology to explore violent extremist propaganda. Visual analysis has been employed as a methodology to analyse images and visual content of terrorist actors such as Hamas and the Islamic State to unveil peculiar ideological and organisational features of jihadi organisations (Seo, 2014; Venkatesh et al., 2018; Baele, Boyd and Coan, 2019; Abdelrahim, 2019; Ayad, 2021). Similarly, studies focusing on far-right extremism have applied visual analysis to the dissemination of extremist images online. In particular, cutting-edge research has applied image analysis to the study of far-right memes and emphasised the importance of such a methodology to analyse far-right visual propaganda and explore the diverse ideological and sub-cultural influences over the production of far-right content (Miller-Idriss, 2019; Crawford, Keen and de-Tangil, 2020; Kingdon, 2021; McSwiney et al., 2021; Ayad, 2021). This dissertation's research design takes inspiration from these works, acknowledging the importance of visual analysis to understand extremist visual propaganda and aligning with Conway's (2019) call for a 'visual turn' in violent online extremism research.

Because social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have recently taken down QAnon accounts and banned QAnon-related content (Zadrozny and Collins, 2020; Bond, 2021), the research opted for focusing on Telegram channels in order to analyse QAnon online activity from a different and under-explored angle. Regarding this, recent research has shown that QAnon is becoming strongly active on Telegram, especially due to the migration from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Wildon and Argentino, 2021). Telegram channels have been searched by inserting keywords such as “QAnon,” “Great Awakening,” and “WWG1WGA” into the Telegram search engine. The importance of these keywords has been shown by empirical research analysing QAnon online activity accounts and posts on diverse social media such as Facebook and Twitter (O’Connor et al., 2020; Garry et al., 2021; Priniski, McClay and Holyoak, 2021; Papasavva et al., 2022). The groups’ selection has been informed also by the literature review; scholars have indicated the existence of prominent QAnon groups and high-profile influencers on Telegram such as Praying Medic and Ghost Ezra. For example, Argentino and Aniano (2022) and Fitzgerald (2022) have mentioned Ghost Ezra as a prominent QAnon-related Telegram account. Data have been collected also from these channels.¹ However, attention has been focused on exploring evidence not only from religiously inspired channels. This mitigated potential selection biases and helped to evaluate whether the religious dimensions are transversal to the movement or rather characterising specific sub-groups.

The images’ selection has been informed by three criteria: 1) similarity; 2) theme; and 3) language. Therefore, the content analysed are 1) images which 2) make religious references and 3) use the English language for potential texts

¹ Due to ethical considerations, this dissertation will not provide the names of the Telegram channels analysed which are not publicly mentioned by the literature on QAnon. The researcher, however, retains a list of the Telegram groups which was made available to the dissertation’ supervisor and mentors at Macquarie University.

reported in the content.² The literature review played a pivotal role in selecting visuals relevant to the analysis. Academics have provided a conceptual apparatus to understand the religious dimensions of QAnon and, thus, approach the images and explore their significance. For instance, as the literature has emphasised the connection between Christianity and QAnon, visuals with Christian symbols (e.g., Jesus, crucifix, and God) were collected. Moreover, before downloading or screenshotting an image reporting, for example, the words “God” or “Satan,” it has been evaluated whether these were merely metaphorical references or were indeed linked to a religious identification of the Good and the Evil. Such an evaluation resulted intuitive for images clearly conveying religious views through the representation of Jesus Christ or the quotes from the sacred scriptures, while it required, once more, the support of the literature on religious symbolism in cases of uncertainty. For instance, the support of existing works on QAnon was fundamental in understanding that New Age spirituality-based images and pop culture symbolism were relevant to the analysis.

Subsequently, the images collected have been analysed by using semiotics. This technique involves the study of meanings and symbols in order to fully understand the message(s) conveyed (Yelle, 2021). This approach was used to explore the symbolism characterising the images and generate key observations about the meaning(s) conveyed. Consequently, the sources have been interpreted by employing hermeneutics. This method shares commonalities with semiotics as it is centred on the interpretation of meanings and symbols (Ibid.). It requires the analyst to continuously interpret a source, dedicating special attention to social and cultural factors which can inform it (Gilhus, 2021). Hermeneutics has allowed for a multi-layered analysis of the

² Similar criteria have been adopted by other researchers. For example, McSwiney et al. (2021) have clustered the images selected by topic, genre (e.g., meme, photograph, and post) and country/language.

sources by relating them to the context in which they were created (Ibid.). Therefore, drawing upon the existing literature on Gnosticism, religious movements, cults, QAnon's thinking, and the U.S. social, cultural and religious environment, the study has been critically interpreting the images and their symbolism to understand whether QAnon's religious dimensions can be categorised as a cult, a sect or rather a religious movement.

As a result of the two-folded methodological approach, QAnon's religious dimensions have been interpreted as Christian extremism and analysed by comparing them to the concepts of Liberation Theology and Christian Identity. Particular attention has been dedicated to the socio-political nature of QAnon's religious dimensions as it can shed a light on the potential nexus between Christian extremism and QAnon affiliates' propensity to violence. The concepts of Christian extremism, Liberation Theology and Christian Identity, as well as other concepts, have been interpreted multiple times by reading the literature and criticising the author's initial observations. Indeed, attention has been dedicated to assessing whether these concepts can effectively apply to QAnon given its features, the characteristics of its religious dimensions and the context the movement originates from. This approach also supported the critical analysis of the potential connection between QAnon, Christianity and affiliates' propensity to violence, ensuring a meaningful contribution to the literature.

Limitations and ethics

It is important to note that both semiotics and hermeneutics are methods adopted in the field of religious studies and can be seen as overlapping as they both focus on interpretation (Engler and Stausberg, 2022). Most importantly, these two methods become crucial when analysing potential texts, but are not limited to linguistics as they indeed can be applied to a great variety of sources, including visuals. Despite these pivotal advantages, both methodologies present limitations which should not be overlooked and need to be mitigated. Moreover, the empirical nature of the research brings about ethical concerns that must be taken into account and addressed.

Interpretation – which is at the core of both semiotics and hermeneutics – needs to be constrained, so as not to be far-fetched. As of this, the philosopher Umberto Eco (1994) offers a clear perspective on some core methodological implications in his book “The Limits of Interpretation.” He has emphasised that although there can be multiple interpretations of sources, interpretation cannot be arbitrary and is limited by specific factors. The literal sense of a source needs to be acknowledged and interpretation of one part of the source needs to be compared with interpretations of other parts (Ibid.). Hence, the interpretative conjectures need to be preceded by the literal reading and then verified by addressing the source as a whole.

In addition, as Roland Bleiker (2014; 2015) has observed in his pivotal works on visual analysis, the context is a crucial variable to consider when interpreting sources. He has highlighted the importance of acknowledging images’ multiple possible meanings, emphasising their relation to the socio-political dynamics behind their production and dissemination (Ibid.). The context is of extreme importance as the analysis of sources’ meanings needs the acknowledgment of the intent(s) and aim(s) behind their production (Bleiker, 2001). Because ‘any form of representation is inevitably a process of

interpretation and abstraction' (Ibid.: 532), the source needs to be explored also from the perspective of who creates it.

This research adopts Eco's views on interpretation and Bleiker's observations on visual analysis, thus limiting the set of potential interpretations in the light of the data and literature collected and analysed. Moreover, the images have been compared between them in order to find commonalities and differences and better support the interpretation of data. In line with Bleiker's conclusions, visual analysis has been developed by dedicating attention to the potential different meanings of the images. Regarding this, the dissertation has analysed certain images in more than one chapter to testify to the approach adopted and better explore the different meanings potentially conveyed by a single visual. By drawing on the relevant literature on QAnon, the researcher dedicated particular attention to exploring QAnon affiliates' thinking and adopting QAnon lenses to hypothesise what potential meanings the movement's supporters aim to convey through the images. However, it needs to be noted that these observations are only hypothetical in nature as the research design of this dissertation does not allow for producing definitive observations about content creators' (QAnon affiliates') aims.

A further limitation originates from the data selected and the focus of the analysis. This study addresses only the content QAnon spreads via Telegram groups, thus excluding other social media channels from the analysis. Hence, future studies need to evaluate the online content disseminated on other social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Gab). In addition, as semiotic analysis has a 'case-centric approach,' (Curtis and Curtis, 2011: 245) this research is a qualitative study of a sample of visual content diffused within the QAnon cosmos. Therefore, generalisations are cautious and need to be tested in further research which focuses on other types of content such as videos, texts, and audios. In particular, the observations about the potential violent character of QAnon's religious dimensions should be seen as hypotheses that need further

testing and empirical evidence. Indeed, the research design, centred on the analysis and interpretation of visuals, does not allow for thoroughly exploring the impact of QAnon religious imagery on violent radicalisation. This would likely require interviewing former QAnon affiliates who committed acts of religious violence.

Finally, the author has been paying particular attention to ethical concerns. As the empirical evidence is collected on QAnon's Telegram channels, measures to ensure the researcher's personal safety as well as the rights of social media users have been developed. The content collected was deprived from any element which could reveal the social media users' identity. When screenshotting visuals, the images were edited to remove users' names, nicknames, and comments. Similarly, some images reporting nicknames and hashtags potentially revealing identities were edited accordingly by the researcher to ensure the privacy of social media users. In addition, information has been secured into an online folder accessible only by authorised users, namely the dissertation's supervisor and the mentors for the collaborative dissertation placement at Macquarie University, Sydney. The online folder has been rendered available for limited time and deleted after submitting the dissertation.

Moreover, in order to comprehensively protect the author and ensure ethical standards, the researcher applied for and received the approval for the research from the University of Glasgow's College Research Ethics Committee (see file uploaded alongside the dissertation). As of this, due to the direct exposure to sensitive extremist content, the researcher has been supported by his supervisor and offered potential psychological help should issues arise. Particular attention has been dedicated to avoiding unnecessary exposure to risks originating from conducting online research. For instance, because the Telegram channels analysed are publicly accessible and do not require joining the groups, the researcher has avoided any form of online interaction with

QAnon supporters. This allowed for guaranteeing the researcher's identity protection and safety and for mitigating the exposure to online extremist content, namely potential verbal threats. These measures ensure safe research which respects ethical standards and aligns with recent practice in the study of extremism and associated content (Conway, 2021).

Literature review

Academic interest in QAnon is recent and has surged particularly after the 2021 U.S. Capitol attack. Despite its recency, the body of literature on QAnon is rich and constantly expanding. Academics have conducted quantitative research on online communities as well as qualitative analyses of QAnon-related issues. The academic knowledge on QAnon can be clustered in three main areas of analysis: 1) QAnon's online and offline activity; 2) its gender dimension; and 3) its religious dimensions. However, this literature review and the following section will show that the academic knowledge on QAnon's religious dimensions still lacks a well-informed theoretical analysis based on key concepts of religious studies. Especially, academic work has not provided an evidence-based analysis informed by theoretical observations from the field of religious studies of QAnon's religious dimensions.

The online and offline activity of QAnon has been explored in both quantitative and qualitative studies. Pivotal empirically driven studies have shown that the conspiracy theory has attracted numerous users on multiple social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram by spreading content that relates to diverse QAnon-related narratives (e.g., red pilling, Covid-19, and the Save the Children campaign) (Gallagher, Davey and Hart, 2020: 12-16; O'Connor et al., 2020: 18-24). Although the U.S. was found to be the largest QAnon-content producing country (Gallagher, Davey and Hart, 2020: 9), thus testifying to the importance of the contextual nature of QAnon-related online narratives, research has shown that the conspiracy theory has assumed an international dimension by affecting online audiences in countries like Russia, Germany, and Italy (O'Connor et al., 2020: 46-53). In addition, these studies have emphasised the significant increase in the spread of QAnon-related content in 2020 due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ibid.; Ibid.), highlighting the diffusion of anti-vax rhetoric and conspiracy accounts of the health crisis.

Further studies have deepened the knowledge about the conspiracy by looking at the impact of QAnon narratives on online radicalisation. QAnon-related narratives have been argued to cause radicalising effects similar to the ones produced by the radicalisation strategies of jihadi groups (The Soufan Center, 2021b). By spreading disinformation on Covid-19 and polarising narratives about the 2021 U.S. Capitol attack, QAnon adherents have been spreading anti-governmental sentiments, encouraging violent actions against governmental bodies (Ibid.). In addition, researchers have found in QAnon's Anti-Semitic discourse a potential bridge between the conspiracy and online white suprematism in the U.S. (Ibid.). Bleakley (2021) has also found a connection between QAnon narratives and the far-right as the conspiracies (e.g., the Pizzagate, and the Jeffrey Epstein conspiracies) incorporated in QAnon spread anti-government sentiments, appealing to far-right movements. Such conclusions are shared by Conner and MacMurray (2021) who have emphasised that QAnon-related content diffuse distrust in government and public institutions, attracting far-right Internet users.

Moreover, scholars have shown that QAnon content can cause radicalisation through the echo chambers resulting from social media's algorithms and QAnon supporters' online activity (Priniski, McClay and Holyoak, 2021). The radicalising effects of echo chambers on QAnon affiliates and online social media users have been further highlighted by Garry et al. (2021) who have discussed the challenges QAnon online activity poses to preventing and countering violent extremism online by exploring the diverse disinformation sources weaponised by QAnon adherents. Furthermore, the manipulation of information and sources has been found to constitute a core radicalisation strategy employed by QAnon supporters to generate conspiracy thinking in other social media users (Hannah, 2021). Such a manipulation is often facilitated by the online environment as QAnon exploits social media recommendation algorithms, using strategies such as topical hashtags and group

suggestions to effectively spread their narratives among Internet users (Forberg, 2021).

Further studies have linked QAnon's online radicalisation strategies to adherents' engagement in violent acts. Amarasingam and Argentino (2020) have explored the link between the QAnon conspiracy theory and five prominent violent crime cases, emphasising that vulnerable individuals are highly exposed to QAnon online narratives. Their study has highlighted that the conspiracy theory can deeply impact ideologically motivated violent extremism by constructing narratives that legitimise and justify violence (Ibid.). While these concerns are shared by other academics, scholarship has also shown that QAnon-related violence should be seen from a broader perspective, including criminal cases of kidnapping, interpersonal violence, and homicide (Jensen and Kane, 2021). These findings emphasise that the conspiracy theory has a broader social impact on individuals (Ibid.), thus encouraging to study QAnon from diverse perspectives and pay attention to the multifaceted security threat the conspiracy poses.

More recently, researchers have been focusing on the gender dimension of QAnon, showing how gender has become a powerful radicalisation tool. Bloom and Moskalenko (2021) have published a pivotal contribution by analysing QAnon's conspiracy theories and exploring the active role women play in the movement's online radicalisation strategies. Motherhood has been found to constitute a core rhetorical and radicalisation strategy employed by QAnon and its female affiliates (Ibid.). Similarly, Bracewell (2021) has emphasised how feminine identities are weaponised by QAnon to engage women in populist politics, encouraging them to take action to support and spread the conspiracy theory in the mainstream political sphere. Researchers have further emphasised QAnon female supporters' activism by analysing the so-called phenomenon of 'Pastel QAnon,' the community of female influencers affiliated with the movement who are spreading its narratives via diverse social

media (Argentino, 2021). QAnon female members' engagement in socio-political activities has reached a new stage as they are running as candidates for the U.S. Congress and holding power positions in society, thus spreading QAnon beliefs in the mainstream socio-political sphere (Crawford and Argentino, 2021a, b).

Furthermore, fundamental studies have addressed the religious factors shaping QAnon's narratives and thinking, focusing on the impact of Christianity on QAnon and the extremist nature of QAnon's religious dimensions. Particularly, researchers have emphasised the apocalyptic thinking characterising QAnon and its supporters' references to the Christian sacred scriptures in online posts, arguing that QAnon's theology results from the merging of Christianity with cultic beliefs and has a deep radicalising impact on individuals as it religiously legitimises and justifies violence (LaFrance, 2020; Hardy, 2021; Kline, 2021; MacMillen and Rush, 2021). Moreover, QAnon's core narrative of the Satanic Cabal has been connected to Christian demonologies and the Satanic panic – a moral panic about the existence of Satanist organisations abusing children which emerged in the U.S. in the 1980s (Vrzal, 2020; Kaplan, 2021). The portrayal of the deep state as a Satanic entity provides QAnon extremism with religious legitimisation and justification (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, scholars have argued that Christian beliefs are not the sole factors influencing QAnon's theological views. Especially, Meltzer (2021) has explored the impact of New Age spirituality on QAnon's supporters by focusing on the case of Jake Angeli, the so-called QAnon Shaman, who participated in the 6th of January storming of the U.S. Capitol. Moreover, researchers have dedicated attention to the potential influence of gaming on the theological narratives of QAnon. QAnon's mythmaking has been argued to originate from an intrinsic connection between live action role-playing (LARP) games and cults (Goldenberg et al., 2020: 12-14). Similarly, Argentino (2020a) has

suggested analysing QAnon as a hyper-real religion which blends mythos with pop culture such as the movies *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Matrix* to convey QAnon narratives and radicalise individuals.

Although research addresses numerous aspects of QAnon both as an online network and an offline phenomenon, the studies focusing on QAnon's religious dimensions lack a well-designed theoretical analysis which draws upon religious studies. Researchers have been concentrating on numerous factors influencing QAnon such as Christianity, New Age spirituality and pop culture, but the literature lacks an empirically oriented analysis of these elements and has not critically addressed QAnon's religious dimensions through the conceptual apparatus of religious studies. To have a better understanding of the literature gap, it is necessary to provide an in-depth analysis of the key concepts and arguments expressed by researchers. This will show how this study can contribute to this area of research by providing a theoretical and evidence-based analysis which explores QAnon's religious dimensions by drawing upon religious studies.

Key insights from the literature on QAnon's religious dimensions

The QAnon research community has explored and conceptualised the core aspects and factors underlying QAnon's religious dimensions. Particularly, researchers have argued that QAnon presents pivotal religious features such as Good-Evil dualism, apocalypticism/millennarism and prophetism/messianism. Although these archetypes can be found in diverse religions and philosophies, academics have suggested a deep connection to Christian-Evangelicalism and the U.S. socio-political environment. Furthermore, they have highlighted that QAnon's Christian-based religious dimensions have merged with beliefs and ideas originating from sub-cultures like New Age spirituality and pop culture. By building upon these observations, both academics and the media have differently defined QAnon by using concepts such as "cult", "religion", "new religious movement" and "sect."

The literature offers fundamental reflection upon the dualistic and messianic vision of QAnon. The conspiracy theory is argued to build upon 'Christian dualism,' portraying a battle between the forces of the Evil guided by Satan and the forces of the Good supported by God (Vrzal, 2020: 46). QAnon's conceptualisation of the Evil – represented by the global Satanic cabal drinking the blood of children – is rooted in the so-called Satanic panic that spread in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s (Ibid.; Argentino, 2020a; Thomas, 2020). Allegedly, in that period of time secret Satanic organisations and individuals had been kidnapping and murdering children. These alleged cases attracted the interest of U.S. Protestant groups which interpreted them according to traditional Christian dualism (Vrzal, 2020). QAnon finds the Good and God in its adherents and, especially, in Donald Trump who 'is believed to have the agency to triumph over the Satanic arch enemy.' (Ivi.: 58)

Moreover, LaFrance (2020) has emphasised key religious aspects characterising QAnon. The movement has been adopting an apocalyptic rhetoric

– through the idea of The Storm –, conceptualising a fight between the Good and the Evil and portraying both Q and Donald Trump as religious figures. Similar observations are shared by Argentino (2020a) and Hardy (2021) who have emphasised QAnon’s Good-Evil dualism, its millenarism and its portrayal of Q and Trump as prophets-messiahs. In addition, as Kline (2021) has noted, QAnon’s dualism and apocalypticism assume further relevance through the concept of The Great Awakening,³ a time representing a righteous U.S. freed of demoniac forces which should follow The Storm.

Vrzal’s (2020) observations on the connection between Christianity in the U.S. and QAnon’s dualism results of particular interest if read in the light of the literature on the conspiracy theory. Indeed, numerous researchers and observers have emphasised such a connection. It is argued that ‘the language of evangelical Christianity has come to define the Q movement.’ (LaFrance, 2020) Argentino (2020a) followed this argument, stating that

The QAnon theology (conceptions of the sacred, gods, spirits, demons, the ancestors, culture heroes and/or other superhuman agents) is rooted in American evangelicalism and neo-charismatic movements developed in the 1970s and 1980s.

This analysis is widely shared among academics, for example by Bruke (2020), Kline (2021), Pettipiece (2021), and Hardy (2021) who has argued that ‘Q is able to relate to a wide range of devout Christians by connecting Q drops directly to the bible.’ With concern to the Evangelical influence on QAnon, researchers agree on considering the Omega Kingdom Ministry (OKM) – an online environment where QAnon supporters interpret passages of the Bible through the lenses of the conspiracy theory – the most prominent example of the connection between QAnon’s religious dimensions and Evangelicalism

³ The Great Awakening also represents a process preceding the Storm; QAnon adherents slowly wake up to reality.

(Argentino 2020a, Hardy, 2021). Particularly, ‘QAnon is built into their [OKM] evangelical Christian rituals.’ (Argentino, 2020a) In addition, the influence of Christianity on QAnon has been found in the movement’s use of Christian sacred scriptures. As of this, Argentino (2020a) has claimed that ‘Ephesians 6:11-18 is the most shared verse among QAnon adherents.’

However, the Christian religious archetypes are not the sole elements shaping QAnon’s religious dimensions. Indeed, analysts have explored the convergence of Christian beliefs with three main sub-cultures: 1) New Age Spirituality; 2) pop culture (e.g., novels, and movies); and 3) gaming. As of this, Meltzer (2021) has thoroughly analysed the case of Jake Angeli, the so-called QAnon Shaman, who became an iconic figure of the 6th of January storming of the Capitol. Not only was Angeli wearing symbols of pagan spirituality (e.g., Nordic tattoos, and Indigenous clothing) during the storming, but he has also been involved in New Age-oriented organisations and has been publishing posts praising non-Western spiritual and religious concepts originating from Buddhism and Hinduism (Ibid.). According to Meltzer (Ibid.), Angeli’s system of beliefs also reflects a certain idea of New Age masculinity which is argued to share commonalities with U.S. Evangelical ideas on masculinity. Particularly, by drawing upon research from the fields of religious studies and psychology, Meltzer (Ibid.) has argued that New Age masculinity parallels Evangelical conceptions of the role of men in society. Men are seen by both religious phenomena as protectors of the community. This bridged Angeli’s belief of system and the QAnon conspiracy as it conceptualises the idea of a community that needs protection from a Satanic cabal and deep state.⁴

⁴ These observations are reflected in Jake Angeli’s public pronouncements. During an interview, Angeli declared: ‘[...] in order to beat this evil occultic force you need a light occultic force that is of the side of God, of love... almost like on the side of the angels, okay, as opposed to the demons, all right... and so as a shaman I am like a multi-dimensional and hyper-dimensional being, okay... I am able to perceive multiple different frequencies of light beyond my five

In addition, Argentino (2020a) has argued that QAnon's religious dimensions are strongly connected to pop culture that offers metaphorical interpretations of everyday life. An example can be found in QAnon's references to the metaphor of the blue pill/red pill which originates from the Matrix movies and symbolises the will to discern between the world of lies and the world of truth (Ibid.). Similarly, the idea of adrenochrome – the chemical compound allegedly produced from children's blood – originates from the 1971 novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson and is conceptually rooted in the so-called blood-libel conspiracy spread in the Middle Ages by the Catholic Church, that accused the Jews of harvesting Christian blood to bake unleavened bread (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021).

Finally, gaming culture is claimed to play a role in shaping QAnon's religious dimensions. Goldenberg et al. (2020) have argued that QAnon shares similarities (e.g., Good-Evil dualism, and group participation) with augmented reality games and that these common features resemble the mythmaking of cults and religious movements like Aum Shinrikyo. Most importantly, this argument has been endorsed not only by researchers but also by alleged or self-proclaimed inventors of Q and its conspiracy like Manny Chavez, who has claimed that QAnon was created as a LARP game from the online puzzle Cicada 3301 (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021). This is not a minor observation as the cyber-puzzle Cicada 3301 was characterised also by occultist, esoteric and religious symbology (Ibid.; Andjelkovic, 2021). Therefore, the gaming culture itself presents a set of characteristics which can accommodate and merge with traditional religious discourses.

senses and it allows me to see into these other higher dimensions that these entities, these paedophiles, these rapists, these murders, these really high up people, that they almost hide in the shadows... nobody can see that because the third eye ain't open [...].’ (QAnon Shaman - Jake Angeli - Interview - ORF, 2021)

In the light of these observations, researchers have conceptualised QAnon's religious dimensions differently. When addressing QAnon, observers have labelled the movement as a "cult." The term has been widely applied to the conspiracy theory by both scholars and the media. Among academics, Stanton (2020) has argued that QAnon is a 'Nazi cult' as the blood-drinking cabal conspiracy is deeply rooted in the Anti-Semitic narratives spread by Nazi propaganda. Balzakis (2021) has advocated that the references to spirituality, the use of religious imagery and the leadership of Q and Trump make QAnon a cult comparable to the Heaven's Gate religious movement and the Rajneesh Movement, thus representing a threat to security due to the history of violence of the mentioned cults. This typification of QAnon has been further adopted by journalists who have published interviews with former members of cults, suggesting a comparison between QAnon's psychological effects on individuals and the brainwashing suffered by the interviewed (Badham, 2021; Hassan, 2021).

Nonetheless, the term "cult" is not the sole categorisation developed. Indeed, QAnon has been defined also as a "religion", a "new religious movement" and a "sect." LaFrance (2020) first referred to QAnon's emergence as the 'birth of a new religion,' mentioning a potential comparison with the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints and emphasising the faith supporters have in Q and its drops as well as the existence of 'worshipping groups.' Furthermore, Argentino (2020a) has defined QAnon an 'hyper-real religion' which distorts reality through the lenses of pop culture and shares similarities with phenomena such as the Heaven's Gate, the Church of All Worlds, and Jediism. In addition, Argentino and Amarasingam (2021: 20) have stated that 'QAnon has evolved into a religio-political ideology,' highlighting its Good-Evil dualistic rhetoric and the religious-like faith adherents have in Trump and Q.

Finally, Argentino (2020b) and Pettipiece (2021) have defined it a ‘new religious movement,’ arguing that Christian fundamentalism deeply influences QAnon’s religious dimensions and focusing on the OKM which offers a more formalised religious space for QAnon’s adherents. Differently, Kaplan (2021: 919) has argued that ‘QAnon thus emerges as a self-proclaimed prophet whose audience follows his or her every word with religious zeal,’ labelling the movement as a ‘sect.’

Although the observations made by researchers are precious and pivotal contributions to the study of QAnon’s religious dimensions, this dissertation will argue that the terminology adopted to define the movement’s religious dimensions is misleading and challenged by both the literature from the field of religious studies and the empirical evidence collected. While the concepts of “cult” and “sect” have been applied without referring to their definitional features and are potentially subject to strong biases, the terms “religion” and “new religious movement” are extremely general and need further analysis. In addition, research has not provided sound arguments exploring the potential connection between QAnon’s religious dimensions and affiliates’ radicalisation and propensity to violence, suggesting instead debatable comparisons between QAnon and unconventional religious phenomena that engaged with acts of violence. As of this, this study aims to hypothesise that QAnon affiliates’ propensity to violence stems from Christian extremism and can be better explored by looking at the concepts of Liberation Theology and Christian Identity.

Key findings generated from semiotics and hermeneutics

The visual content collected was transversal to the Telegram groups, being diffused primarily via religious-inspired channels but impacting also non-religious-focused chats. Some images were recurrent and spread multiple times in different days, while others were shared fewer times but still via all the main Telegram groups analysed. The semiotic analysis of the images highlights the presence of four main types of symbolism: 1) religious symbolism; 2) QAnon symbolism; 3) political symbolism; and 4) pop culture symbolism. Nonetheless, these different symbols are often co-present and interrelated. Because the author collected a total amount of 117 images that cannot be all analysed in this section and the following chapters, this section will use few images as examples to provide the main findings that have informed the broader analysis of QAnon's religious dimensions. All the visuals collected can be found in the Annexes (A, B, C, and D) appended to this dissertation.

Religious symbolism is mainly shaped by Christian themes and references. Its analysis provides three main findings. Firstly, as Figure 1 shows, great emphasis is dedicated to the figure of Jesus Christ who metaphorically represents Q/QAnon and its divine power to save the believers. An attentive analysis of the image unveils fundamental Christian references that relate to the concepts of faith and salvation. Indeed, the image is an explicit reference to Jesus walking on water,⁵ one of the miracles of Jesus recounted in the New Testament. The miracle is described in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and John and follows another miracle of Jesus, named "The feeding of the five thousand." However, the image makes a specific reference to the Gospel of Matthew. The visual portrays Jesus walking on water and offering his hand to a subject

⁵ It is almost certain the image is a reference to Jesus walking on water as the visual is an edited version of the work "Christ Walking on the Water" by Robert T. Barrett. See: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/image/jesus-walking-on-water-7beb022?lang=eng>.

depicted as Pepe the Frog. The sea is stormy, and, in the background, there is a boat with people on it. The image resembles core lines of Matthew's account of the miracle which are as follows:

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:29-31)

It is important to emphasise that Peter attempted to walk on water because called by Jesus as Matthew (14:27-29) writes. The people on the boat in the background are the other disciples. Indeed, as the Gospel of Matthew (14:22) tells, after "The feeding of the five thousand miracle," 'Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee].'

As of the image (Figure 1) spread by QAnon, Pepe the Frog potentially represents a QAnon affiliate who, like Peter, is called by Jesus Christ, who, arguably, metaphorically represents either Q or the QAnon conspiracy, to walk on water. Walking on water – a call to have faith – can hypothetically imply exploring the QAnon conspiracy theory. The exegesis of the Gospel argues that Jesus' miracle and act of walking on water shows the power of Christ to rescue and save the ones who have faith (Derrett, 1981). Jesus' act assumes further significance as salvation reaches a further stage; as Jesus helps Peter and takes him to the boat, the wind ceases and the sea becomes calm (Matthew 14:32). Subsequently, 'those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, Truly you are the Son of God.' (Ivi. 14:33) Therefore, the image likely conveys the idea that Q/QAnon has the power to save believers in troubled times – potentially represented as the stormy sea. As a result, other individuals – the disciples on the boat – witness the miracle and recognise Q/QAnon' superior and divine nature, thus developing faith in it.



Figure 1. *Jesus walking on water and giving his hand to Pepe the Frog*

Secondly, the religious symbolism is embedded in the Christian dichotomic view of the Good and the Evil that conveys the idea of an ultimate battle between God and the devil through apocalypticism and millennialism. Most interestingly, these stands are conveyed mainly through the images that either explicitly or implicitly refer to passages from the sacred scriptures. For instance, Figure 2 makes reference to Ephesians 6:11, a key text that relates to the theological concept of ‘spiritual warfare.’ (Yates, 1977: 520) According to this concept, believers are called to engage in a spiritual battle against the Evil by using the Christian virtues of truth, righteousness, the Gospel, faith, salvation, and spirit as weapons (Ibid.). These weapons represent the extension of the influence of Jesus, after his death, and are available to those who retain Jesus as the Lord (Ibid.). Hypothetically, the image calls upon QAnon’s followers to continue hold on QAnon beliefs in their personal daily lives, engaging in a spiritual battle against the forces of the Evil. Individuals can win

the battle because they are provided with QAnon's principles and are protected by the conspiracy and its community. Although the meaning is metaphorical in nature, the discourse is highly weaponised as it adopts the language of warfare.



Figure 2. Image quoting *Ephesians 6:11*

This apocalyptic view can be found also in the images referring to the idea of the Anti-Christ. The Anti-Christ is considered not merely a human opponent in Christian theology but is rather a powerful entity associated with Satan that brings chaos and leads people astray (Collins, 1999). As Figure 3 shows, passages addressing the Anti-Christ are shared among QAnon affiliates. Particularly, the visual reports a passage from the First Epistle of John 2:22 (Figure 3). The choice to quote this sacred source is meaningful. Indeed, the First Epistle of John is stated to present an apocalyptic worldview within a broader eschatological scenario which focuses, among other themes, on the battle between Christ and the Anti-Christ and the victory of the faithful community (Schmid, 2004). In John's letter, victory 'is not only promised, it is also proclaimed,' (Ibid.: 34-35) thus further enhancing the idea of a blessed undefeatable religious community destined to winning over the Evil. Hence, the visual seems to suggest that QAnon affiliates are the faithful community

engaging in the battle against the Anti-Christ, the ultimate Evil. In addition, the enemy is the Anti-Christ because it has not acknowledged the divine nature of Christ. Out of metaphor, the image likely suggests that who does not hold the QAnon conspiracy theory as truth is a ‘liar’ (Figure 3) and, therefore, a Satanic enemy to fight; a Satanic enemy the QAnon community will eventually win upon.

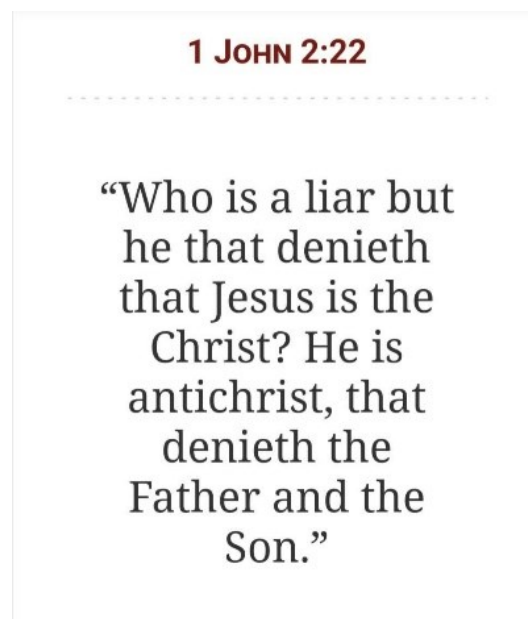


Figure 3. *Visual citing the First Epistle of John 2:22*

Thirdly, the religious symbolism, particularly the portrayal of Satan and the devil, is characterised by an often implicit but anciently rooted Anti-Semitic discourse. A subtle Anti-Semitic rhetoric can be detected in the image portraying Baphomet (Figure 4) as it was drawn by Eliphas Lévi (Strube, 2016). Although Lévi’s conceptualisation of Baphomet is far from being connected to Satanism and Anti-Christian values, since the 19th century Baphomet has been interpreted as a representation of the Evil (Ibid.). A closer look at the image’s symbolism unveils the Anti-Semitic character of QAnon’s interpretation of Baphomet. The words ‘Solve’ and ‘Coagula’ written on the figure’s arms

(Figure 4) were purposely highlighted in red. Despite meaning ‘dissolve’ and ‘coagulate’ and being associated with alchemic processes (Huckvale, 2011: 35), they are interpreted differently by QAnon. Specifically, they are seen as a testimony of the fact that the Evil – represented by Baphomet – drinks blood. The association between blood-drinking and the Evil dates to an Anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that first originated in Norwich, England, where a monk, Thomas of Monmouth, accused local Jews of torturing and murdering a young boy (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), n.d.). The conspiracy takes the name of blood-libel and was spread by Christian communities in Europe and overseas (Ibid.). Jews were accused of conducting ritual murders of children – a trending topic in QAnon rhetoric – to extract their blood and bake bread for Passover (Johnson, 2012). This conspiracy has endured over the centuries under different forms within countries such as Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Russia, and the U.S. (Kotlerman, 2012; Bemporad, 2012; Benbassat, 2017) and, hypothetically, found new fertile ground in QAnon. Indeed, it is not surprising that Baphomet has been openly associated with George Soros by QAnon’s affiliates (Figure 5).



Figure 4. *Baphomet as drawn by Eliphas Lévi with the words "Solve" and "Coagula" highlighted in red by QAnon affiliates*



Figure 5. *Statue of Baphomet associated by QAnon affiliates with George Soros*

Besides religious symbolism, the images convey QAnon symbolism. The visuals often adopt an explicit QAnon symbology by using sentences, letters, and acronyms such as ‘WWGIWGA’ (Figure 6). Nonetheless, other images convey a less explicit symbolism which, however, can be traced back to QAnon narratives. For instance, concepts such as the ‘White Rabbit’ (Figure 7) and the portrayal of children (Figure 6) relate to QAnon thinking. Indeed, the white rabbit represents a metaphor – taken from Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland” – that has been widely used by QAnon (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021). Moreover, the term has been incorporated into names and titles of QAnon social media groups and users. For instance, one of the largest QAnon-related Facebook groups was named ‘QAnon follow the White Rabbit.’ (Wong, 2020a) Similarly, the emphasis on children clearly relate to QAnon narratives. Since the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theory, the protection of children – from an alleged Satanic paedophile ring – is at the core of the conspiracy theory

(Donegan, 2020; North, 2020). Evidence of this symbolism can be also found in the previous images portraying Baphomet (Figure 5). Although the statue (Figure 5) is an existing bronze monument unveiled in Detroit in 2015 by the Satanic Temple (Jenkins, 2015), it is highly likely QAnon sees in it a proof of the connection between the Evil – Baphomet – and the ritual murdering of children.



Figure 6. Visual depicting Jesus Christ among children and Pepe the Frog and reporting the acronym WWG1WGA



Figure 7. Image using the metaphor of the White Rabbit

Moreover, the images are associated with political symbolism. Particularly, the images mainly refer to the former U.S. President Donald Trump by representing him and his political symbols such as the MAGA (Make America Great Again) hat (Figures 8, and 9). The political meanings conveyed through such a symbolism are multiple. However, the merge of Trumpism, nationalism and Christianity is the most prominent facet of these images. The term Trumpism refers to the broader political attitude and ideology of the former U.S. President D. J. Trump. Although his ideology has been widely defined as populist and includes numerous factors, ranging from anti-establishment sentiments to anti-immigration views (Lowndes, 2018; Savage, 2018),

Trumpism has also had a strong nationalist character (Giroux, 2017; Restad, 2020) that can be detected in the visuals.



Figure 8. *The image portrays Jesus Christ touching Donald Trump's shoulders and a U.S. flag in the background*

Figure 9. *Image depicting Jesus with the MAGA hat*

The MAGA hat (Figure 9) represents one of most well-known symbols associated with Trumpism and has been found to be strongly connected to U.S. nationalist identity (Graham et al., 2021). Such a symbol assumes further relevance in the image (Figure 9) as it is worn by Jesus Christ. This is not a minor aspect as Trump's discourse has often used and politicised Christian terminologies and references to draw support from religious groups in the U.S. (Hughes, 2020). As of this, empirical studies have shown that Trump was viewed by numerous U.S. Christian nationalist citizens as a protector of what

they believe to be the Christian identity and heritage of the country (Whitehead, Perry and Baker, 2018). Plausibly, the visual connects Trumpism to Christian nationalism and so does the other image (Figure 8) that portrays Jesus Christ touching the shoulders of the former president and the U.S. flag in the background. Hence, the images likely aim to spread Trumpism, praise the former president and his ideology and encourage QAnon affiliates to either vote for him in the future or take further actions to support him. The socio-political dimension of these images will be further discussed in the next sections of the research, dedicating particular attention to the other political meanings conveyed and the potential nexus between QAnon's religious dimensions and violence.

Finally, the visuals employ pop culture symbolism. The use of Pepe the Frog is frequent (Figures 1, 6, and 11) but the meme is not the sole pop culture symbol used. Indeed, the white rabbit metaphor is often used in the images (Figures 7, and 10); the concept derives not only from the Alice in Wonderland novel, but also from the first Matrix movies (Shenk, 2006). Similarly, despite being a main symbol of the QAnon conspiracy, the acronym-hashtag 'WWG1WGA' (Where we go one, we go all) (Figure 6) is argued to originate from the movie White Squall (1996) by Ridley Scott (Chabria, 2021). Internet memes are products that target specific sub-cultures and audiences and allow their consumers to understand the message conveyed in an innovative, digitalised and more direct manner (Niebuurt, 2021). Likely, the references to

movies and books in the images serve a similar function, spreading a message that targets a specific audience through an alternative mean of communication.

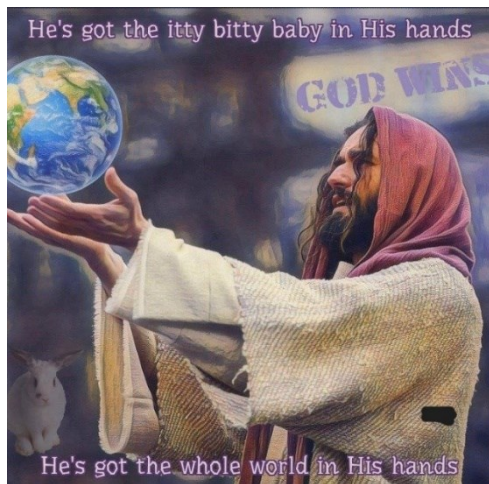


Figure 10. Visual depicting Jesus and the White Rabbit and reporting lyrics from the song “He's got the whole world in his hands”



Figure 11. Image depicting Pepe the Frog and the U.S. Capitol in the background and associating it to Babylon

It needs to be highlighted that these four types of symbolism are often either co-present or inter-connected and, in some cases, overlap. For example, the Pepe the Frog meme is not only a pop culture symbol but can also convey political significance. Indeed, the meme has been appropriated by the far-right from a non-far-right context to spread extremist messages (Miller-Idriss, 2019; Greene, 2019). The meme is represented in the images portraying Trump (Annex D), probably because the former U.S. President has been politically characterising the meme by tweeting it since 2016 (Cohen, 2020). Similarly, QAnon symbolism often overlaps with religious symbolism and pop culture symbolism. As previously stated, the Anti-Semitic references to the blood-libel are of religious inspiration but, at the same time, represents the core rhetoric of the QAnon conspiracy theory. Indeed, QAnon claims that a paedophile ring traffics in children and harvests their blood (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021).

Speculatively, pop culture symbolism can also convey religious meanings. Indeed, the Matrix movies are argued to draw upon Gnostic Christianity which presents the idea of salvation through knowledge and enlightenment offered by Jesus Christ (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, 2001). The religious significance of pop culture symbolism is more evident in the image reporting some lyrics from the song “He's got the whole world in his hands” (Figure 10). Indeed, the song is both a religious hymn written in 1927 by Edward Boatner (Jones, 2003) and a pop music hit sang by numerous artists such as Mahalia Jackson and Marian Anderson.

It is important to summarise the specificities of the religious symbolism as QAnon's religious dimensions are the primary phenomenon under analysis in this research. The religious images adopt dichotomous views by portraying a world where the forces of the Evil are at fight with the Good. The Good who fights against the Evil is protected and blessed by God and Jesus Christ who promise salvation to the oppressed. The Evil is incarnated by numerous figures, ranging from Satan to U.S. Democratic Party's politicians (Annex C). Likewise, the Good is associated with diverse religious and non-religious real and imaginary figures such as angels, Jesus, the former U.S. president Trump, and Pepe the Frog (Annex C, and D). The visuals employ an apocalyptic rhetoric, and their representation of the devil is influenced by ancient Anti-Semitic narratives. In addition, these religious views relate to the U.S. political landscape, making explicit references to nationalistic themes and praising the former U.S. President D. J. Trump.

These findings encourage an attentive critique of the literature on QAnon's religious dimensions, moving towards a clearer categorisation of QAnon as a religious phenomenon. Particularly, by further applying hermeneutics to the analysis of the images collected, a critique of the terminology applied to QAnon (e.g., cult, sect, and new religious movement) can be made to identify a more comprehensive categorisation based on both

theoretical concepts from the field of religious studies and the empirical evidence analysed. The symbolism conveyed in the images and the literature from the field of religious studies suggest QAnon is neither a cult nor a sect but is instead a Christian extremist movement which shares commonalities with the phenomena of Liberation Theology and Christian Identity.

Developing a clearer categorisation of QAnon religious dimensions is of pivotal importance as it can help to shed a light on the potential connection between religious extremism and violence. Indeed, if QAnon was to be defined as a cult, the analysis concerning the potential religiously inspired violent character of the movement should be centred on analysing cultic movements and their propensity to violence. By comparing QAnon to past and existing violent cultic movements, it would be possible to reach a deeper understanding of QAnon's religious dimensions and their potential impact on violent radicalisation. However, as the next sections will argue, QAnon is neither a cult nor a sect but rather a Christian extremist movement. This leads the analysis towards hypothesising about the violent nature of QAnon religious dimensions by looking at examples of extremist Christian movements such as Christian Identity and Liberation Theology.

Is QAnon a cult? A critique of the cult-label

As previously stated, both academics and journalists have defined QAnon as a cult. However, not only does this terminology result misleading due to the specific connotations of the term “cult” – which QAnon does not present –, but it is also contested by academics from the religious studies field as it bears an intrinsic negative characterisation potentially detrimental to the analysis of religious phenomena. Challenging the cult-label is of fundamental importance as it allows for understanding QAnon’s religious dimensions and their potentially violent character by comparing the movement to more similar religious phenomena, namely Christian Identity and Liberation Theology.

Although there is not a commonly shared definition of cult and the concept is highly contested (Zablocki and Robbins, 2001), scholars have defined some core characteristics of cultic phenomena. Cults have been conceptualised as religious movements that distance themselves from the dominant religious traditions, emphasise mystical experiences and are mainly concerned with the problems of the individual (Nelson, 1969). The mystical dimension of cults is of utmost importance; Campbell (1977: 383) has argued that ‘the mystic collectivity’ – intended as the people who share certain beliefs and a sense of collective solidarity and obligation – is the core aspect of cults. Most importantly, he has emphasised that

this form of religion, with its stress upon first-hand experience, is hostile to dogma and the historical dimension of Christianity, thus eliminating the centre around which a religious organisation can form (Ivi.: 384).

Hostility to dominant religious traditions, subjectivism and mysticism have been characterising numerous cults since the ancient times. For instance, in ancient Greece the mystery-cult of Dionysos was widely based on mystical and ritual practices centred on initiating individuals and making them transit from the unknown to revelation (Seaford, 2007). Although the religious figure

of Dionysos shared similarities with the one of Jesus Christ, the mystery-cult was considered a threat to Christianity as it represented an alternative to the new religion officially adopted by the Roman Empire (Ibid.); it underwent severe criticism and backlash from politicians, intellectuals and religious institutions and was met with great hostility from Christian communities (Ibid.). A more recent case of cultic phenomenon is the Church of Scientology, whose early beginnings have been described as a cult by Wallis (1975). Until the 1960s/70s, Scientology was widely considered a cult by both the media and public opinion due to the contrast between its beliefs and practices and dominant social and religious norms (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, the previously mentioned factors are not the sole features that cults can present. Richardson (1993) has suggested the adoption of Ellwood's (1986) definition. According to Ellwood (1986), cults are groups that

1. position themselves as an alternative to dominant patterns within society;
2. present an authoritarian and charismatic leadership;
3. privilege subjective experiences;
4. emphasise the differentiation between the cult cosmos and the outsiders;
5. draw their legitimisation upon a long tradition of practice.

Some of these observations are in line with Nelson's (1969) and Campbell's (1977) work. Especially, the researchers agree on the contrast between cultic beliefs and dominant religions and cultures and the importance of mystic first-hand experiences. Ellwood (1986) has narrowed the definition by adding core variables that refer to organisational aspects (i.e., the authoritarian and charismatic leadership).

Ellwood's (1986) definition, the literature on QAnon and the empirical evidence analysed suggest that labelling QAnon's religious dimensions as a cult results misleading. Indeed, the movement's religious dimensions draw upon Christianity, thus being embedded in a dominant religious theology and culture.

New Age spirituality can constitute an alternative. However, the literature highlights that New Age beliefs are transversal to other phenomena, thus not constituting a unique feature of QAnon. For instance, New Age spirituality has been shaping the broader political spectrum, from the right-wing⁶ to the left-wing (Wiseman, 2021; Häberlen, 2021). In addition, New Age beliefs are extensively shared also among Christians in the U.S. (Gecewicz, 2018). Therefore, New Age spirituality does not exclude the hold of Christian beliefs by individuals (Jennings, 2021), thus being incorporated in a dominant culture.

Furthermore, from a structural perspective, QAnon is not characterised by an authoritarian leadership. The movement is an amorphous phenomenon which has a well-developed and interconnected, but decentralised, digital presence (Hanley, Kumar and Durumeric, 2022). There are neither authoritarian leadership nor centralised organisation and neither Q, the anonymous user behind the Q drops, nor Trump impose moral obligation upon individuals. Neither are they authoritarian personalities deciding on the personal lifestyle of affiliates and supporters. They are rather seen as inspirational leaders and semi-prophetical figures. In addition, OKM is a mainly digital space gathering online individuals with Christian-Evangelical background who read Christian sacred scriptures and QAnon's texts (Argentino, 2020b), thus reconnecting the movement to a dominant religion and culture.

Despite this, it can be argued that QAnon emphasises subjective experiences as it encourages Internet users to look for the drops and find connections autonomously (O'Connor et al., 2020: 6; Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021). However, researchers do not agree on the nature of these subjective experiences.

⁶ In addition, the far-right has historically been drawing upon New Age spirituality and non-Western philosophies and spiritual beliefs. Most prominently, Fascism and new extreme right movements have been influenced by thinkers like Julius Evola and Alain de Benoist who developed transversal philosophies based also on spiritual beliefs. (Sheehan, 1981; Deam Tobin, 2021) This results of interest as QAnon is often labelled as a far-right conspiracy theory.

For instance, Hughey (2021) argues that QAnon affiliates do not engage in first-hand experience; they are rather involved in a secondary process made of second-hand discussions through the Q drops and other QAnon-related content (Ibid.). Therefore, the concept of subjective experience can undergo fervent debate as individuals are somehow directed towards secondary sources – the ones established by Q and its most prominent supporters. Similarly, QAnon’s rhetoric centred on othering and building boundaries between the in-group and the out-group is a feature that does not characterise solely cults. Indeed, it is a rhetorical and discursive strategy adopted by a wide spectrum of actors, including political parties, social movements and terrorist and extremist organisations (Çelik, Bilali and Iqbal, 2016; Loadenthal, 2019).

Finally, QAnon does not draw its legitimisation upon a long tradition of practice; QAnon is a new, mainly digital, phenomenon that, despite having precedents like FBIAnon, HLIAnon and CIAAnon⁷ (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018), does not present coded practices that can be stated to form a sort of tradition. To qualify as a cult, QAnon and its affiliates should follow long-established coded rituals. OKM presents this feature under the form of weakly Sunday morning public services. QAnon affiliates gather online via Zoom to attend public services held by prominent and experienced supporters who celebrate the public service (Argentino, 2020b). However, there is not much new about these public services. As argued by Argentino (Ibid.), who attended these online public services, they are embedded in an ‘an existing model of neo-charismatic home churches.’ Indeed, the public service is mainly centred on the interpretation of events through the Bible and QAnon narratives (Ibid.). Hence, if considering the OKM’s coded practices, the link between QAnon and

⁷ These were accounts of 4chan posters who claimed to be high-level ranking officials of U.S. public institutions (e.g., FBI, and CIA) disclosing classified documents and information (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018).

Christianity – a dominant religion – is once more evident, thus challenging the cult-libel.

Besides the literature, the empirical evidence collected point to similar conclusions. It is clear from the images that Christianity plays a crucial role in shaping QAnon's religious dimensions. Throughout the collection stage, the author has found some images arguably related to beliefs linked to New Age spirituality (Figure 12) and Freemasonry⁸ (Figure 13). However, these visuals were rare (Annex B) and spread only among a few of the Telegram channels. Therefore, QAnon's religious dimensions are likely mainly connected to Christianity, a predominant religious and cultural background in the U.S. In addition, it can be speculated that although Trump is the charismatic protagonist of numerous images (Annexes A and D), the visuals often associate him with either God or Jesus Christ, thus arguably conveying the idea that the former president is blessed by the Lord but is not above him. Such a reflection can also apply to Q/QAnon. The conspiracy presents a prophetic character but is not above God. As of this, the images (Figures 7, and 10) using the White Rabbit metaphor are exemplary. The White Rabbit, the discovery of the truth –

⁸ However, it needs to be noted that Freemasonry draws upon a great variety of symbols and cultural influences that relate to numerous religions such as Judaism and Christianity. Hence, Freemasonry beliefs are not necessarily in contrast with traditional religious beliefs. For example, the Eye of Providence – which represents the eye of God – is a symbol used in Christianity that can be found in many churches and religious paintings. The Eye of Providence is also depicted in Figure 13 as it has been widely used by freemasons. Similarly, the concept expressed in the sentence 'From Light to Darkness' (Figure 13) can be found in Christian sacred scriptures (Annex A).

represented by Q/QAnon – leads the individuals to Jesus Christ and not vice versa.

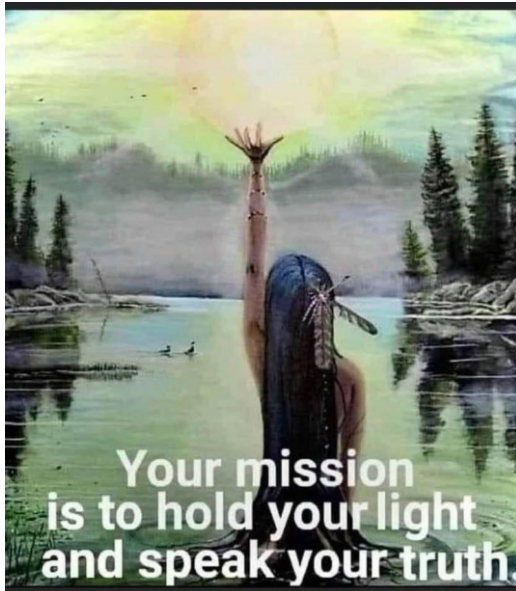


Figure 12. *Visual likely related to New Age spirituality*

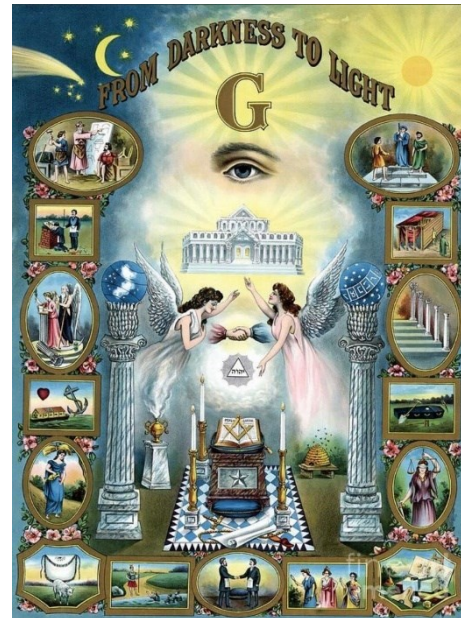


Figure 13. *Visual using Freemasonry' symbolism*

Although the concept's definition suggests the inaccuracy of the cult-label, this is not the sole reason to avoid it. Indeed, the term's rejection stems from a deeper reflection about the concept. Researchers have argued that the cult-label can imply an othering power discourse, thus necessitating either a more attentive and limited use or its disuse (Richardson, 1993). In the collective imaginary the term "cult" has often been associated with groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo that were involved in violent acts like the 1993 Waco siege and the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin attack (Olson, 1999), thus bearing an intrinsic negative connotation. Particularly, the media has been considered highly responsible for spreading a sort of moral panic by labelling unconventional religious movements as cults and igniting fears and tensions between these organisations and the public (Wright, 1997; Wessinger, 2018). Prominent

scholars from the field of religious studies share these concerns and have stated that “cult” is an inaccurate and even dangerous label to apply to QAnon (Wessinger, 2021; Lecaque, 2022b). Such a label can indeed be used to build a collective imaginary of fear and suspicion about QAnon, transforming its supporters into brainwashed individuals ready to commit any sort of atrocity and violent act against the community (Ibid.). This approach, however, fails to comprehensively investigate and analyse QAnon’s religious dimensions while developing a securitising approach that can be detrimental (Ibid.).

As a matter of fact, the cult-label can lead to a potentially detrimental power discourse, causing further conflict within society. In recent years, the fears generated by unconventional religious phenomena in both public opinion and governmental authorities have brought about the misuse of the term “cult,” leading even to the justification of violent acts against cults by extremist anti-cult movements (Introvigne, 2000). The term has become so controversial – due to its intrinsic negative connotation – that Richardson (1993: 35), among the most prominent researchers in the field of religious studies, has stated: ‘I would take the regrettable position that the term should be abandoned by scholars as currently being misleading and not very useful.’ Consequently, experts have suggested the use of other terms such as “religion,” “sect,” and “new religious movement” which, indeed, have been applied to QAnon by other researchers.

QAnon as a religion, a sect, or a new religious movement (NRM)?

As the cult-label was severely criticised by scholars, researchers have developed other categorisations to classify QAnon's religious dimensions. Particularly, scholars and journalists have used the terms "religion", "sect" and "new religious movement." In order to better inform the debate on QAnon's religious dimensions, it is necessary to critically reflect upon these concepts and assess to what extent they can apply to QAnon. While the term "sect" will be shown to be a misleading label to apply to QAnon, the concepts of religion and new religious movement (NRM) can be employed to define QAnon's religious dimensions. Nonetheless, these terms are general and need to be narrowed down, developing more precise categorisations of QAnon's religious dimensions. As of this, the concept of Christian extremism can better exemplify QAnon religious dimensions, highlighting the influence of Christianity on the movement and its potential radicalising effects.

The concept of religion is highly contested and numerous definitions have been developed (Comstock, 1984). However, scholars have identified some core characteristics. Southwold (1978: 370-371) has argued that what qualifies as religion possesses at least some of the following twelve characteristics:

1. the conceptualisation of godlike beings;
2. the dichotomy sacred/profane;
3. the idea of salvation from the material existence;
4. ritual practices;
5. beliefs which are not empirically demonstratable, but supported by faith;
6. ethical code(s);
7. supernatural sanctions for breaking the code(s);
8. a mythology;
9. scriptures or oral traditions;

10. a priesthood/religious elite;
11. a connection with a moral community/church;
12. an association with an ethnic/similar group.

Although this research cannot comprehensively assess each of these twelve characteristics, it is clear from the literature on QAnon and the data analysis that if QAnon were to be labelled as a religion, it would be appropriate to connect it to Christianity. Indeed, as explained in the above sections, scholars and empirical evidence show that QAnon's religious dimensions are strongly linked to Christian beliefs. They are based on a dualist conceptualisation of the Good and the Evil representing God, Jesus Christ, and Satan, spread the idea of Christian salvation, refer to the Christian sacred scriptures, are connected to the Christian moral community and adopt Christian ritual practices.

However, this research will avoid this label for two main reasons. Firstly, because the term is broad and adopting this label would bring a little contribution to the research on QAnon's religious dimensions; the aim of this study is to reach an in-depth understanding of the type of religious phenomenon QAnon is. Secondly, because, similarly to the term "cult," the concept of "religion" can imply a power discourse. Indeed, phenomena which became suspicious in the eyes of the public due to their unconventional features such as the Church of Scientology and the Temple of Satan have often encountered opposition to their recognition as religions because such a status would guarantee also specific legal and economic benefits other subjects may do not want to provide them with (Laycock, 2020). The case of the Church of Scientology is emblematic as the organisation engaged in a long legal and public media struggle for recognition as a religion and for tax-exemption in the U.S. (Halupka, 2014; Westbrook, 2018). Hence, the term "religion" has often been used or misused for purposes other than the academic interest to define the boundaries of a phenomenon.

If the term religion can result appropriate, so cannot be stated regarding the application of the term “sect” to QAnon. Max Weber first developed a conceptualisation of the term through his church-sect typology (Bromley, 2016). The sociologist categorised the sect as an exclusive religious group centred on individual spirituality and commitment to defined doctrines and worships (Ibid.). Subsequently, the historian Troeltsch built upon the work of Weber, further characterising the sect as a religious behaviour which is either hostile or indifferent to the established social order and that attract low-status individuals (Ibid.). Followed-up studies on religion, especially on sects, have highlighted a crucial trait which distinguishes the sect from other religious phenomena: its schismatic nature. Indeed,

sects have a prior tie with another religious organisation. To be a sect a religious movement must have been founded by persons who left another religious body for the purpose of founding the sect. The term sect, therefore, applies only to schismatic movement (Stark, Bainbridge and Doyle, 1979: 125).

Sects tend to claim a return to the origins of the faith as professed by the religious organisations they are distancing themselves from (Ibid.). Moreover, they present centralised and hierarchical structures guided by a strong, potentially authoritarian, leadership (Hill, 1971). Furthermore, sects present an elitist dimension considering themselves as the only bearers of truth which can be rendered available only to trustworthy and carefully selected individuals (Wallis, 1975).

QAnon’s religious dimensions seem not to fall within such a categorisation. Indeed, QAnon cannot be defined as a schismatic movement as it likely does not have ties to a prior religious organisation. Moreover, its alleged founders do not seem to be individuals who left a religious organisation. As of this, researchers have hypothesised that QAnon originated from a previous enigmatic Internet puzzle, called Cicada 3301, as alleged QAnon’s founders and

promoters such as the media producer Lisa Clapier encouraged the individuals trying to solve the puzzle to ‘follow the white rabbit,’ and read Q drops (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021: 8). However, these are speculations that need further evidence. Furthermore, although Cicada 3301 was influenced by spiritual and religious themes (Andjelkovic, 2021), defining the puzzle as a religion or a religious institution is far-fetched. On top of this, QAnon is not an elitist movement; the Q drops, and QAnon-related websites, blogs and social media pages are publicly accessible and often created and developed by QAnon affiliates themselves (Papasavva et al., 2022). QAnon content is accessible and not restricted to a few individuals. The absence of an authoritarian leadership in QAnon has already been discussed above, in relation to the cult-label.

Scholarship has also labelled QAnon’s religious dimension as a NRM (Argentino, 2020b; Pettipiece, 2021). However, the term “NRM” has been used in a vague manner without defining its features. As of this, Wallis (2017) has offered a clear typology of NRMs, categorising three different types of NRMs according to their attitude towards society and other factors (e.g., religious doctrine, structure, and member’s lifestyle). The world-rejecting new religious movement firmly condemns society as corrupted and decadent and despises the materialistic values that prevail as they depart from God. It can originate from diverse religious traditions but conceptualises the existence of a God distinct from man. Most importantly, the world-rejecting NRM presents a centralised authoritarian structure which imposes a specific lifestyle upon its adherents and requires them to renounce their personal identity in favour of a collective one.

Differently, the world-affirming NRM views both the existing social order and the individuals as positive entities (Ibid.). This type of NRM often lacks a well-defined theology or religious doctrine and tends to be more inclusive and less authoritarian than the world-rejecting NRM. The world-affirming NRM aims to boost the individual’s access to spirituality and his/her fulfilment of society’s positive values. Finally, Wallis (Ibid.) conceptualises the

existence of a third category of NRM: the world-accommodating NRM. This mainly focuses on protesting against the existing religious institutions and often originates from traditional churches and religious associations. Furthermore, the world-accommodating NRM does not dictate what lifestyle the individual should pursue, thus presenting a less centralised and more inclusive structure if compared to the world-rejecting NRM.

Although none of these categories can fully apply to QAnon, QAnon's religious dimensions likely resemble a world-rejecting NRM. Indeed, researchers have emphasised that 'QAnon is driven by grievance and anger at the world's injustices,' (MacMillen and Rush, 2021: 4) thus condemning society and its decadency. In addition, both the literature and the empirical evidence show that QAnon's religious dimensions are rooted in Christianity, thus conceptualising the existence of a God distinct from man as do world-rejecting NRMs according to Wallis' (2017) definition. However, as explained in the above sections, QAnon does not present an authoritarian leadership and affiliates are not obliged or morally bound to specific practices, rituals, or lifestyle. Hence, defining QAnon's religious dimensions as a world-rejecting NRM needs a more cautious analysis.

Although the term "NRM" seems to be the most appropriate label, this study aims to take a further step to develop a constructive debate around QAnon's religious dimensions. By further applying hermeneutics to the analysis of the images collected, the next sections will argue that there is not much new about QAnon's religious dimensions, and that the movement can be labelled as a Christian extremist movement that shares commonalities with the phenomena of Christian Identity and Liberation Theology. By developing a deeper understanding of QAnon's religious dimensions it is possible to hypothesise how Christianity can play a role in increasing QAnon affiliates' propensity to violence. To reach such an understanding, it is necessary to look at the context QAnon originates from and explore the form of Christian extremism QAnon

incarnates. Hence, it is pivotal to inform the analysis by drawing upon the literature analysing Christian extremism in the U.S. as QAnon has been shown to be strongly connected to the U.S. religious, social and political environment.

QAnon as a Christian extremist movement

It is necessary to qualify QAnon's Christian extremism in order to justify such a label and better understand its potentially violent character. The visuals analysed suggest that QAnon's religious dimensions are extreme from a theological, ideological and, potentially, behavioural perspective (violent extremism). The theological aspect will be only briefly addressed as the focus of the dissertation is placed upon the ideological and behavioural features. Nonetheless, the next chapters will thoroughly analyse the potential connection between extremist theology, extremist ideology, and violent extremism. While the behavioural aspect will be explored in the next chapters, it is fundamental to understand both the theological and ideological dimensions of QAnon's Christian extremism. This implies considering the U.S. religious and socio-political landscape and exploring how it shapes the theology and ideology underlying QAnon's Christian extremism. These features will be analysed by focusing on U.S. Evangelicalism. In this section, extremism is intended as 'the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.' (Berger, 2018: 44)

Concentrating on Evangelicalism is justified by the fact that, as showed throughout the literature review and the previous sections, research on QAnon's religious dimensions points to a deep influence of Evangelicalism on the movement (Argentino, 2020a; Vrzal, 2020; Hardy, 2021). In addition, scholarship has argued that Evangelicalism in the U.S. is strongly connected to republicanism and conservatism and the spread of conspiracies (Barkun, 2013; Sturm and Albrecht, 2020; O'Donnell, 2020a; O'Donnell, 2020b; DW Documentary, 2022). As of the connection between Evangelicalism and conspiracy theories, a further justification for the adoption of such an approach results from empirical data concerning the QAnon conspiracy theory and its impact on religious faiths in the U.S. Empirical studies have shown that in the U.S. 'white evangelical Protestants are most likely to be QAnon believers,'

(Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), 2021a: 37) with about one in five QAnon believers who identify as white evangelical protestants (20%) (Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), 2022: 4).

Although this dissertation cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of Evangelical theology and its connection to QAnon, a few pivotal aspects must be outlined as they are relevant to the visual analysis. Bebbington (1989: 2-17) has identified biblicism/biblical literalism, conversionism, crucicentrism and activism as the four core characteristics of Evangelicalism. These principles respectively relate to the Evangelical focus on the Bible as a source of utmost importance, the belief that individuals need to be converted, the atoning work of Christ on the cross, and the need to act in society according to the faith (Ibid.). Because of its emphasis on these doctrinal principles and its historical hostility to liberal theology and modernism, Evangelical theology has often been labelled as fundamentalist (Marsden, 1977; Maltby, 2013). Although not all Evangelicals are fundamentalist (Maltby, 2013), Evangelical biblicism, the focus on apocalypticism and millennialism and Christian conservatism are fundamentalist aspects characterising numerous evangelicals (Ibid.). Such a theological fundamentalism underlies numerous images collected and has a deep impact on the ideological dimension, especially on Christian nationalism.

The visuals suggest QAnon’s religious fundamentalism places particular importance on biblical literalism. For instance, Figure 15 cites core lines from the Book of Revelation, conveying the idea of salvation, provided by God to the believers, and of a coming golden age. The Book of Revelation is intrinsically connected to both apocalypticism and millennialism that, respectively, focus on the catastrophic global judgment of the world and the expectation of a future golden age (Sweetnam, 2018: 179). Although these two concepts contrast each other, they are not mutually exclusive (Ibid.). In the images collected (Annexes A, and C), apocalypticism refers mainly to the fate of the out-group – QAnon’s enemies – while millennialism characterises the in-group – Q, QAnon, Trump and its affiliates. For example, Figure 14 uses the episode of the Tower of Babel, narrated in Genesis 11:1-9, to criticise the out-group and prophesying its ‘downfall’ (Figure 14). In particular, the image refers to the company Amazon, assuming an anti-capitalist narrative that likely relates to the economic grievances driving the QAnon conspiracy (Kamola, 2021).



Figure 14. *Image paralleling the creation of the new Amazon headquarters and the Tower of Babel*

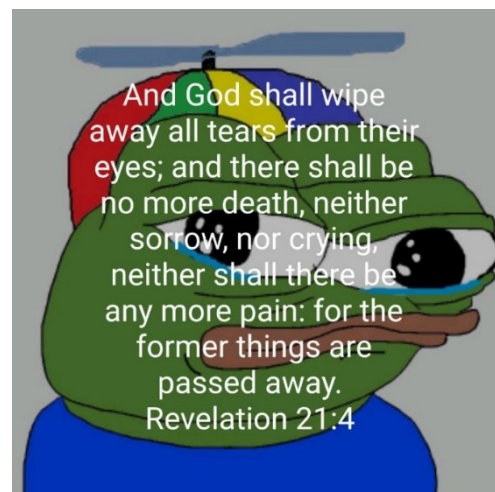


Figure 15. *Visual reporting core lines from the Book of Revelation*

Further images spreading apocalyptic and millennialist ideas merge with political narratives, shedding a light on the ideological extremism of QAnon's Christian fundamentalism. Figure 16 can be defined as extremist from the ideological perspective. Indeed, the in-group's success – reflected in the potential coming of the golden age – is threatened by the Satanists, represented by the U.S. Democratic Party's leadership. The active role of demonic forces in the guise of deep state political leadership against God's plan is a crucial theological-political narrative among the Evangelical community in the U.S. (O'Donnell, 2020a). The power of this image lies in the representation of Satan. While the concept of the Evil can be understood as symbolic and metaphorical by some individuals, Satan assumes a metaphysical dimension for QAnon religious adherents who believe in the actual Satanic nature of the deep state (Young and Boucher, 2022).



Figure 16. *Visual contrasting the coming of a golden age with the horrific reality of political leaders conducting ritual murders of children*

The belief in the Satanic nature of the deep state can be better analysed by understanding QAnon's Christian extremism from a U.S. perspective. The spread of Anti-Satanism in the U.S. was strongly connected to the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the 1970s-1980s (Richardson, Best and Bromley, 1991). For Christian fundamentalists, the sacred scriptures, which are interpreted through the lenses of biblical literalism, clearly predict the spread of Satanism and the increase in Satan's power (Ibid.). Therefore, it is not surprising that the visuals collected fervently refer to Satan as an immanent threatening presence in the world (Figure 17). Moreover, QAnon's narratives on the Satanists murdering children and harvesting their blood (Figure 16) resemble the Satanic Panic rumours that spread especially in the U.S. in the 1980s-1990s. At that time, Satanic Panic strongly affected Evangelical communities in the U.S., being spread especially by media affiliated with Evangelical groups (Soto-Vásquez and Sánchez-Santos, 2022: 3).

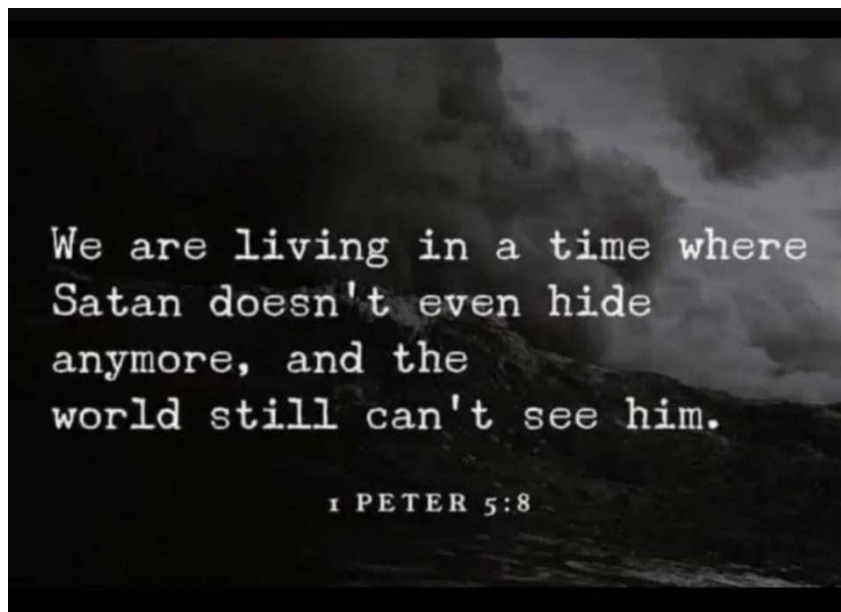


Figure 17. *Visual reporting a passage from the First Epistle of Peter*

Although the religiously inspired othering political narrative is a key feature of QAnon's Christian extremism, the ideological dimension of QAnon's Christian extremism mainly lies in its fervent nationalism. As per the political symbolism analysed in the previous sections, it is clear that QAnon's religious dimensions connect to Trumpism and Christian nationalism. From an ideological perspective, nationalism can be viewed as a sub-set of extremism (Berger, 2018: 34-36). The images vary in degree of Trumpism and nationalism assuming both mild and more fervent nationalist connotations. However, the sense of national identity remains strong and is associated with explicit symbolism. For example, the U.S. flag is often used as a symbol to convey national identity (Figures 18, and 19). Empirical research has shown that the U.S. flag is a pivotal symbol of both patriotic and nationalist identity in the country (Kimmelmeier and Winter, 2008). Most importantly, the nationalist identity conveyed through the flag is associated with Christian symbolism, thus assuming a religious character. Both Jesus Christ and God (Figures 18, and 19) are either depicted or quoted in the images.



Figure 18. *Image representing an angel, the U.S. flag, and enemy soldiers about to attack*



Figure 19. *Visual portraying Jesus Christ touching the shoulders of the former U.S. President Donald Trump*

It is important to note that Christian nationalism is strongly connected to Trumpism (Figure 19). The connection between Christian nationalism and Trumpism has been comprehensively analysed by researchers. Scholarship has shown that the former U.S. president has often rhetorically weaponised Christianity during his 2016 election campaign and his presidency to obtain support among Christian groups (Whitehead, Perry and Baker, 2018). In addition, research has revealed that Christian nationalists were fervent supporters of Trump and his political agenda, especially regarding the protection of Christian values and the Christian identity of the U.S. and the fight against the alleged corrupted Satanic deep state (O'Donnell, 2020a; O'Donnell, 2020b). Such a connection characterises the images collected and further links Christian nationalism and Trumpism to QAnon.

In the visuals, Christian nationalist rhetoric, Trumpism and QAnon narratives have merged and shape a peculiar form of Christian extremism that mixes Christian theology, U.S. political narratives, and conspiracy theories. This is evident in Figure 20 where religious, political and QAnon symbols are co-present and convey theological and ideological meanings, connecting Christian extremism, Trumpism and QAnon. While both the Christian and political symbols are evident, QAnon symbolism is less explicit but can be detected in the use of the words in the image. For instance, the words ‘THE PLAN’ (Figure 20) likely refer to the sentence ‘Trust the Plan,’ one of QAnon’s most infamous phrases (LaFrance, 2020). In the image, the concept of the plan conveys a multi-layered meaning that connects Christian nationalism, Trumpism and QAnon. Indeed, the plan is QAnon’s plan, ‘God’s plan’ (Figure 20) and, likely, Trump’s plan which is his political agenda. This aligns with research on QAnon showing that Trump is seen by QAnon affiliates, especially

by the ones with a religious background, as a sort of messiah coming to free the oppressed from the Satanic cabal (LaFrance, 2020; Vrzal, 2020).

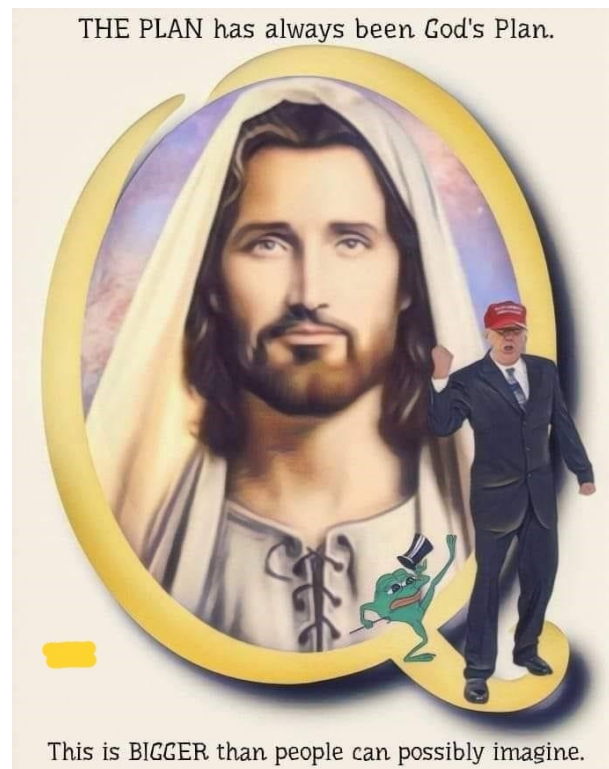


Figure 20. *Visual employing religious, QAnon, political and pop culture symbolism*

Although Christian nationalism is a prominent facet of QAnon's Christian extremism, it is not the sole extremist ideological factor. Indeed, QAnon's Christian extremism seems to be responsive to the socio-political environment it is immersed in and, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, has assumed an anti-vax character.⁹ Indeed, research has shown that QAnon affiliates have

⁹ Empirically driven research has shown that there has been a significant uptick in the spread of QAnon content due to the conspiracy's capitalisation on the pandemic and related disinformation (Gallagher, Davey and Hart, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2020). Likely, QAnon

developed apocalyptic religious interpretations of the Covid-19 pandemic (Crossley, 2021). In particular, OKM and its leadership have been using the Bible to interpret the pandemic in light of QAnon conspiracy narratives (Ibid.). Such a peculiar feature of QAnon's Christian extremism can be explained by looking at both theological and ideological factors. From a theological perspective, Evangelical communities tend to present religious accounts of empirically explainable events, being particularly hostile to scientific knowledge (DW Documentary, 2022). For instance, many Evangelicals believe in creationism as opposed to the Big Bang theory (Ibid.). As of the Covid-19 pandemic, Evangelical fundamentalists have interpreted the health crisis as God's message and believe that getting vaccinated or wearing masks is like going against the Lord's will (Barlow, 2021). Regarding this, empirical studies have shown that the highest vaccine refusal rate in the U.S. characterises white evangelical communities (Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), 2021b).

This theologically inspired hostility to scientific knowledge is conveyed in the images referring to the pandemic and merges, to different degrees, with ideological stands and QAnon beliefs. Particularly, anti-vax stands are prominent features of the visuals collected. Figure 21 is an exemplary case of QAnon's religiously driven anti-vax stands. The image adopts a religious narrative centred on the Biblical episode of the Temptation of Christ. In particular, the visual is likely a reference to Matthew 4:8-10 that narrates how the devil took Jesus to a high mountain and offered him command over 'all the kingdoms of the world' if Christ worshipped him.¹⁰ Jesus stood the devil's temptation and refused. The devil's sentence 'All the desires of this world, I'll give them to you. Just get the vaxseen' in the image (Figure 21) likely

Christian extremism was deeply impacted by the pandemic, thus generating online content related to it.

¹⁰ As per previous images analysed, the visual (Figure 21) is an edited version of an illustration by the French artist Gustave Doré. See: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/gustave-dore/the-temptation-of-jesus>.

resembles Matthew 4:9: “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”” Hence, Jesus’ religious refusal assumes a socio-political character being connected to the vaccines’ refusal. Refusing the vaccine becomes a religious duty and a sign of resistance against the devil. It is worth noticing that once more the narrative is characterised by pop culture symbolism as it is evident in the reference to the ‘Super Bowl tickets’ (Figure 21). This further shows the strong connection to the U.S. social environment.

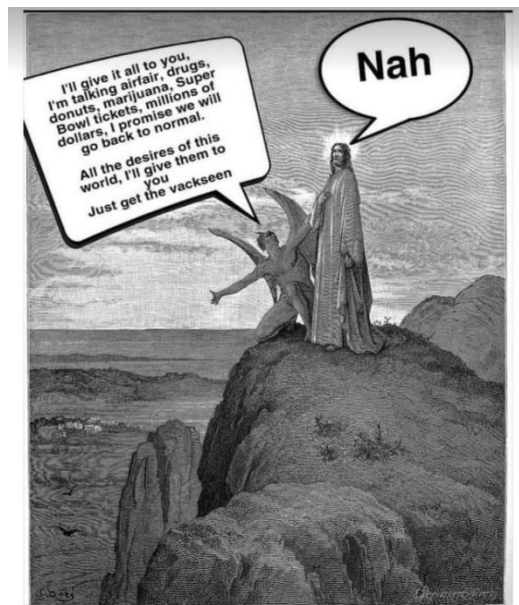


Figure 21. *Visual likely referring to the episode of the Temptation of Christ*

Although the image is of powerful nature, other visuals spreading anti-vax stands can further testify to the influence of Christian religious narratives on QAnon affiliates. Figure 22 conveys both meanings linked to the QAnon conspiracy theory and Christian theology. The image is centred on a mother protecting her child from the Evil willing to vaccinate it. The mother’s act assumes religious significance by connecting it to the words ‘Stand firm’ reported in the image (Figure 22). Likely, the words are a reference to Ephesians

6:11, which, as showed previously, is a key Biblical passage shared among QAnon affiliates. This aspect is of extreme importance as it conveys both religious and QAnon symbolism. Not only have child abuse and ritual murders been at the centre of the Satanism scare (Richardson, Best and Bromley, 1991), but they also connect to the core narrative underlying the conspiracy theory. Likely, the protection of children reconnects to one of the most infamous QAnon’s narratives and rhetorical strategies. In the past years, QAnon affiliates highjacked the slogan “Save the Children” from the well-known NGO and weaponised it as a hashtag in social media posts to spread the conspiracy of the Satanic cabal trafficking in children (Buntain et al., 2022).



Figure 22. *Image representing a mother protecting her child from the devil that wants to vaccinate him*

The protection of children links to the weaponization of gender, a core strategy used by QAnon and analysed by researchers (Bracewell, 2021; Argentino, 2021). The image (Figure 22) emphasises the role of women as mothers. Such a strategy aims at perpetuating stereotyped gender roles and portray both women and children as threatened subjects who need protection (Benton and Peterka-Benton, 2021). The use of this discursive strategy in a religious-inspired image might not be accidental. Indeed, numerous Evangelicals believe that specific gender roles were assigned by God and that women cover primarily the role of mothers (Gallagher and Smith, 1999; Shaw, 2021). Hence, potentially, this image highlights a further aspect of QAnon's Christian extremist ideology: its highly conservative and anti-feminist gender views. To convey such a gender discourse, the image adopts religious symbolism and further exacerbates group dynamics by portraying the out-group as an imponent and threatening demon attacking a heroic mother that, despite all, is willing to protect her child at any cost, guided by God and her faith.

This analysis suggests that QAnon's Christian extremism is multifaceted and characterised by both theological and ideological features, including the recently surged anti-Covid-19 vax stands. Especially, Evangelical fundamentalism, Christian nationalism, Trumpism and anti-vaccine stands are core extremist narratives conveyed by the images. These extremist facets strongly characterise QAnon's Christian extremism and are conveyed in the visuals through the four types of symbols analysed in the previous chapters of this dissertation. Although these elements suffice to qualify QAnon's Christian extremism, a further analytical step can be taken. Indeed, it is fundamental to evaluate whether QAnon's Christian extremism can assume a violent dimension and pose a threat to security. This implies hypothesising about the potential extremist behavioural aspect of QAnon's Christian extremism. The following section will explore the potential extremist behavioural dimension of QAnon's Christian extremism by referring to the phenomena of Liberation Theology and Christian identity.

QAnon's theological-political Christian extremism and its propensity to violence

Scholars analysing QAnon's religious dimensions have often emphasised the likely increase in its affiliates' propensity to violence due to the influence of religious extremism. Argentino (2020a) has argued that understanding QAnon from a religious perspective 'provides a pathway to protecting our societies and institutions from the public health, democratic, and national security threat that QAnon potentially poses.' Similarly, Hardy (2021) has stated that

As long as this new religious movement [QAnon] is legitimised by co-opting aspects of Christianity, and vice versa, more violence with increasing religious undertones may be heralded by QAnon.

Other researchers have come to similar conclusions by drawing upon the concepts of cult and new religious movements, warning against the potential threat religiously inspired QAnon affiliates can pose to society (Stanton, 2020; Balzakis, 2021). Academics have often suggested parallels between QAnon's religious dimensions and other extremist and violent religious movements such as Aum Shinrikyo, the Heaven's Gate, and the Rajneesh Movement to understand the potential violence QAnon religious affiliates can engage in (Argentino, 2020a; Goldenberg et al., 2020; LaFrance, 2020; Balzakis, 2021).

However, because the previous chapters have shown that the concepts of cult and sect are not appropriate labels and that Christian extremism is a crucial dimension of QAnon's religious dimension, this dissertation argues that comparing QAnon's religious dimensions to other examples, especially Christian extremist movements, can better shed a light on the potential propensity to violence of QAnon religious affiliates. Regarding this, looking at the concepts of Christian Identity and Liberation Theology can help to explore the potential extremist behavioural facets of QAnon Christian extremism. Nonetheless, it is fundamental to note that these phenomena are diverse and

differ from QAnon from historical, theological, political, and social perspectives and should not be seen as phenomena directly connected and correlated to QAnon. However, they can serve as sources of reflection as they share core commonalities with QAnon Christian extremism.

As the visual analysis has shown, QAnon Christian extremism is multifaceted. Among numerous factors underlying its religious extremism, biblical literalism, apocalypticism/millennialism, anti-Semitism, and nationalism are core characteristic of QAnon Christian extremism. Christian Identity movements share these aspects. In particular, Christian Identity movements' ideology is based on a strong Anti-Semitic character, and on nationalism and patriotism, infused with strong anti-government sentiments (Sharpe, 2000).¹¹ Christian Identity movements present conspiracy accounts of politics, believing in the existence of deep state evil forces that act against white Christians to erase their religious and ethnic identity (Ibid.). The battle between the Good and the Evil is depicted by Christian Identity movements as a racial holy war to be fought and won under the guidance of God (Ibid.). Although explicit discourses on race and ethnicity have not been found to be at the centre of QAnon images, the visuals collected heavily depict the forces of the Evil as acting against God and Christ and engaging in a fight against the Good.

The visuals overtly adopt the language of warfare and employ religious symbolism to portray the holy war being fought by QAnon religious affiliates. The spiritual warfare analysed in the previous chapters and narrated in the visuals drawing upon the sacred scriptures assumes an active socio-political

¹¹ Interestingly, Christian Identity shares a further commonality with QAnon Christian extremism. QAnon gender discourse, infused with the stereotypical portrayal of the woman-mother/wife in need of protection, is common to Christian Identity movements that conceptualise white women as vulnerable subjects that white males must protect (Sharpe, 2000).

dimension. As shown in Figures 24 and 25,¹² QAnon affiliates are holy warriors, blessed and supported by God and Jesus in their fight against the devil. Figure 24 is particularly interesting as it merges extremist theology and pop culture, thus emphasising once more the connection between religious extremism and social dynamics. Likely the image is a reference to the Chronicles of Narnia,¹³ a series of fantasy novels by C.S. Lewis that inspired the Chronicles of Narnia film series, as it depicts the lion Aslan and the character of Susan Pevensie (the archer standing by the lion) (Figure 24). Nonetheless, pop culture is openly merged with theology. The image refers to ‘Jesus’ (Figure 24) who is represented as the lion Aslan, thus making an implicit reference to the Book of Revelation that titles Jesus as the Lion of Judah (McDonald, 1996; Skaggs and Doyle, 2009: 366-367).¹⁴ The symbolic representation of Jesus as a lion characterises also other QAnon visuals (Annexes A, C, and D).

In the previous chapters, the Book of Revelation has been shown to constitute a central element informing the apocalyptic/millennialist thinking of QAnon. Figure 24 serves similar objectives by rendering the war fought by the characters of the Narnia Chronicles an immanent holy war fought by Jesus/Aslan and QAnon supporters/Susan Pevensie. The war is both spiritual as it relates to theological stands and conspiracy beliefs and practical as it merges

¹² Although it is not the main focus of this dissertation, it is worth noting that the warriors depicted in the images also convey a gender discourse. In these images, the female warriors are depicted as protectors and fighting for the community. This likely connects to the core QAnon narrative of the murdered children and further relates to the stereotyped gender roles the conspiracy theory perpetuates.

¹³ As per previous images, the visual is an edited version of an image circulating on the web and associated with the coming of the Chronicles of Narnia on Netflix. See for example: <https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/news/the-chronicles-of-narnia-on-netflix-what-we-know-so-far-2022/>.

¹⁴ Revelation 5.5 reads: *Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”* (Bible Gateway, n.d.)

socio-political stands and narratives. The Great Awakening¹⁵ (Figure 25) becomes much more than mere spiritual awareness and the discovery of the QAnon conspiracy; it is a time of fight and the ultimate struggle between the Good and the Evil. In this struggle, the former U.S. President becomes ‘ONE OF GOD’S FINEST WARRIORS’ (Figure 23), thus incarnating a socio-political fight based on a theology of holy war.



Figure 23. Image claiming Trump to be 'one of God's finest warriors'



Figure 24. Image depicting an archer supported by Jesus in her fight

¹⁵ The Great Awakening is a religious concept. Indeed, throughout history the term has been applied to identify those periods of religious revival in U.S. Christian history. However, these religious revivals have often resulted in socio-political outcomes. For instance, researchers have argued that the Great Awakening has been deeply impacted by the development of liberal and democratic values resulting from the French and U.S. revolutions of the 18th century (Mathews, 1969; Conforti, 1991).

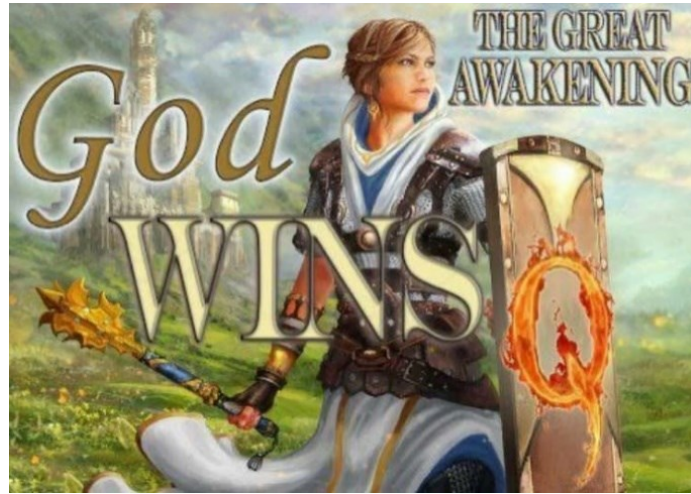


Figure 25. *Visual representing a holy warrior armed and equipped to fight under the guidance of God*

The theological legitimisation and justification of warfare and violence can be further understood by looking at the intrinsic Anti-Semitic character of QAnon's Christian extremist narratives from the perspective of Christian Identity. Anti-Semitism in Christian Identity is multifaceted and relates to the belief that a deep state of Satanic nature infiltrated by Jews, who, according to Christian Identity's theological Christian fundamentalism are considered the ultimate and most prominent manifestation of the Evil on earth, is acting against white Christians (Bochicchio, 2021). Christian Identity movements believe that such a deep state must be engaged in physical battles and fights through 'sacred extermination' and 'direct armed warfare.' (Ibid.: 44) It is a religious duty to fight the Jewish devil that, according to Christian Identity movements, manifests in different forms and infiltrate different sectors (e.g., government, media, and financial institutions) of society. Although QAnon religious narratives are less explicit than Christian Identity's ideology in their Anti-Semitic character, QAnon Christian extremism repeatedly uses symbolism and concepts that present an underlying Anti-Semitic dimension. As shown in the previous chapters, the portrayal of children, ritual murders, and the blood libel are argued

to be prominent examples of the Anti-Semitic character of QAnon Christian extremism (Thomas, 2020; Vrzal, 2020; Wong, 2020; Young and Boucher, 2022). In addition, the references to George Soros (Figure 5) further shows QAnon supporters' belief in the existence in a Jewish deep state engaging in evil practices.

Figure 26 further testifies to the Anti-Semitic character of QAnon. By referring to the 'Synagogue of Stan' (Figure 26), a quote from Revelation 2:9 widely used by Christian Identity movements (Barkun, 1997b),¹⁶ the visual conveys the idea of Jews as an evil entity incarnated by the State of Isarel, established in 1948.¹⁷ The image also conveys anti-freemasonry stands by depicting one of Freemasonry's most known symbol: the square and compasses (Figure 26). Such an association between Freemasonry and Jews likely originates from the infamous Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory that theorises an alleged alliance between Jews and Freemasons (von Bieberstein, 1977). The Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory has been weaponised throughout history by far-right governments and groups, including, for example, the Francoist and the Nazi regimes in Spain and Germany (von Bieberstein, 1977; Ruiz, 2011).

¹⁶ As shown previously, numerous images cite passages from the Book of Revelation. Hence, mentioning the synagogue of Satan connects to the other visuals analysed.

¹⁷ The reference to the State of Israel is not a detail of minor importance. Indeed, Christian Identity movements believe that Jews are false Israelites (as also mentioned in Figure 25), thus usurping the Holy Land, while white Europeans are the true Israelites (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2017).

Hence, the image likely conveys political extremism as these conspiracies are widespread among far-right groups.¹⁸

Synagogue of Satan

False Israelites

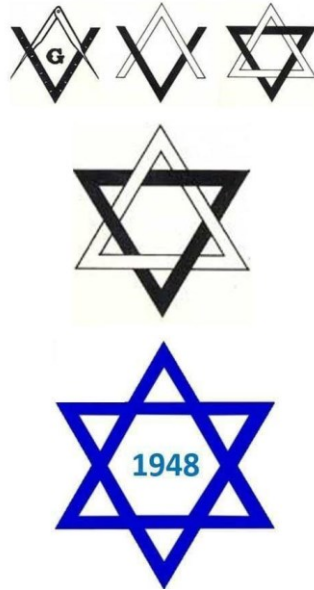


Figure 26. *Visual conveying the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory and spreading Anti-Semitic sentiments*

¹⁸ However, labelling QAnon as a far-right movement might be misleading. Indeed, empirical research has shown that the conspiracy has been supported by individuals with diverse political background, including left-wing (Enders et al., 2021).

Violence against the out-group – the (Jewish) Satanic blood-drinking deep-state Cabal – is theologically legitimised and justified because of its holy and divine nature. Christian Identity movements are strongly characterised by apocalyptic/millennialist thinking and believe that society is about to be devastated by a cosmic battle between the Good and the Evil – the battle of Armageddon – that will result in the second coming of Jesus (Middlebury Institute of International Studies, 2021). Such a battle needs to be triggered and fought by believers because Jesus has prophesied the end of times and the coming of the golden age after the Great Tribulation – a period of sufferance, chaos, and violence (Barkun, 1997a; Ibid.). QAnon Christian extremism adopts similar tones. By referring to salient episodes narrated in the Bible, QAnon imagery spreads the idea of the imminent apocalypse and the end of times. Figure 27 is extremely relevant as it emphasises, through a metaphor, the role QAnon religious affiliates cover in the apocalyptic battle. The image reports a passage from Psalm 78:45 and depicts one of the Plagues of Egypt. In the image, QAnon affiliates are likely represented by the Pepe the Frog meme. They are both the frogs sent by God as one of the Plagues of Egypt and Pepe the frog(s) to destroy modern societies. It is God/Q/QAnon who has sent them to accomplish a religious duty by fighting against the Evil.

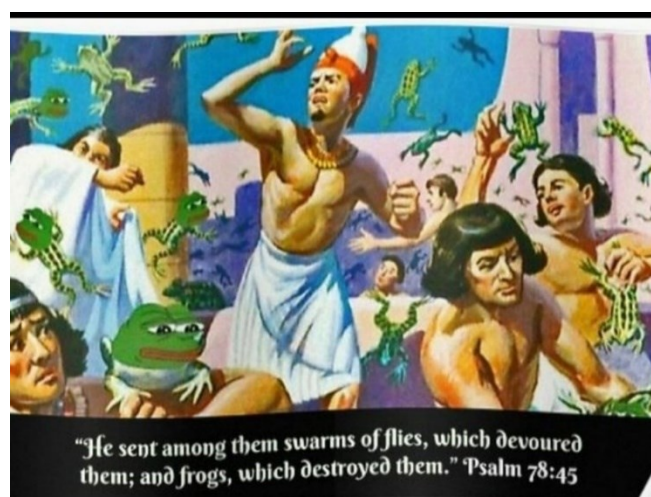


Figure 27. *Image reporting Psalm 78:45 and referring to one of the Plagues of Egypt*

Although looking at QAnon Christian extremism by considering Christian Identity can help to understand the potential link between extremist Christian theology and violence, it is necessary to take a further step and address the potential connection between QAnon theological fundamentalism, the movement's political extremism and violence. The concept of Liberation Theology can serve as an example. However, it needs to be mentioned that the concept is used only for explanatory purposes to better emphasise the strong political character of QAnon Christian extremism. This caveat is necessary because QAnon Christian extremism, as shown previously, is strongly associated with far-right stands, while Liberation Theologies have historically been influenced by the far-left, especially Marxist views.¹⁹

The term Liberation Theology encompasses several social movements²⁰ that have developed within the Christian church since the 1960s and that place particular emphasis on the Gospel, the figure of Jesus and the need to act in society by siding with the oppressed to fight political and economic injustice and achieve freedom (Leathers, 1984: 1160-1162; Kim, 2018: 3-4). Liberation Theology places great emphasis on the concepts of liberation and salvation and interprets the sacred scriptures according to current events and vice versa (Goizueta, 2015). Salvation is granted to the oppressed by Jesus who guides them in the spiritual fight for remission from sins and the socio-political fight for social justice and equality (Ibid.).

QAnon Christian extremism shares some commonalities with Liberation Theology. Especially, QAnon Christian extremism emphasises the love of Jesus

¹⁹ Moreover, Liberation Theology does not present an Anti-Semitic and racist character, while Christian Identity is strongly influenced by Anti-Semitism and looks at race from a theological perspective.

²⁰ From Latin America (Foroohar, 1986) to the U.S. (Cone, 2000), from Palestine (Patierno, 2015) to South Korea (Kim, 2018), Liberation Theology movements have spread worldwide in different times.

for the oppressed, prophesises salvation and liberation and encourages affiliates to take socio-political actions. As the visuals have shown, Christ is a central figure in the QAnon religious discourse and is seen as the protector of the oppressed against the oppressors (Figures 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 19, 20, and 21). The oppressors are identified by the Stanic Cabal and represented by several figures, ranging from the U.S. Democratic Pary leadership (Figure 16) to pop singers (Figure 28). The oppressed are QAnon believers and affiliates, who can be deceived by the devil. As Figure 28 shows, the devil can take different forms to ‘highjack those in a vulnerable state.’ Hence, oppression is multifaceted and does not relate simply to political dynamics. It is rather an intrinsic characteristic of society.

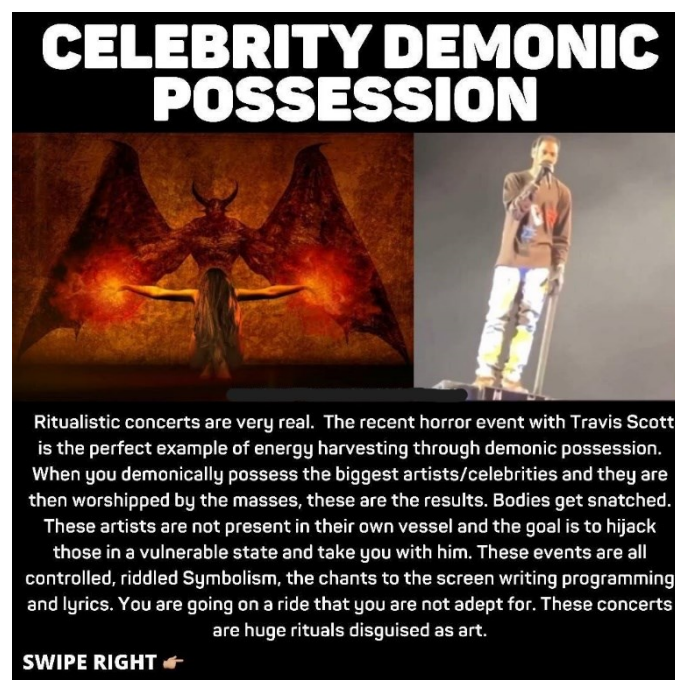


Figure 28. *Image drawing a parallel between Travis Scott's concert and demonic possession*

Currently, the most prominent example of the perceived oppression is represented by the governmental measures taken to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. The visuals collected clearly evidence that QAnon followers view in

lockdown and vaccination mandate oppressive measures of the devil. As Figure 29 shows, the public authorities dealing with the pandemic at the highest level – the World Health Organisation – are associated with the devil, incarnated by Baphomet. Their work is the work of the Evil who, once again, threatens children (Figure 29). The reference to the children is not accidental; it conveys the core narrative of the conspiracy theory and weaponizes it by linking it to Covid-19. During the pandemic, children’s vaccination against Covid-19 has been one of the most debated and controversial issues causing vaccine refusal in numerous parents (Suran, 2021). By leveraging this aspect and addressing it through religious lenses, QAnon Christian extremism assumes a socio-political character boosting anti-vax stands in its affiliates.



Figure 29. *Visual associating the World Health Organisation with Baphomet*

This dynamic is further enhanced in Figure 30. Although the religious reference is extremely complex,²¹ the socio-political message is clear; mainstream U.S. media are supporting the Federal Drug Administration in their diabolic intent to vaccinate children with the Pfizer vaccine (Figure 30). Therefore, vaccination refusal assumes a further socio-political dimension as it does not simply relate to anti-vax stands but it conveys an anti-establishment rhetoric against the media and governmental bodies. The Satanic elites – the media and the government – are accused of using the pandemic and vaccination to harm children. As Morelock and Narita (2022: 13) have noted in their work analysing conspiracy theories, QAnon and the pandemic,

It is not only that allegedly these ‘elites’ have secret diabolical agendas and engage in unsavoury or evil practices, it is also that allegedly these elites are involved in the cover-up, providing misinformation disguised as expertise.

²¹ The image likely represents an offering to Molech. Molech is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament and is understood by scholars as both a deity and a type of sacrifice, often including child sacrifice (Smelik, 1995; Stavrakopoulou, 2012). As a deity, Medieval sources have often portrayed Molech as bull-headed figure with its arms outstretched over fire (Rundin, 2004). Figure 30 is an edited version of an original illustration referring to Molech that can be found in the book “Bible Pictures and What They Teach Us” by Charles Foster (1897).

Hence, the mediatic and governmental elites represented in the image (Figure 30) are not only to blame for pursuing evil intents but also for covering them up by spreading disinformation.

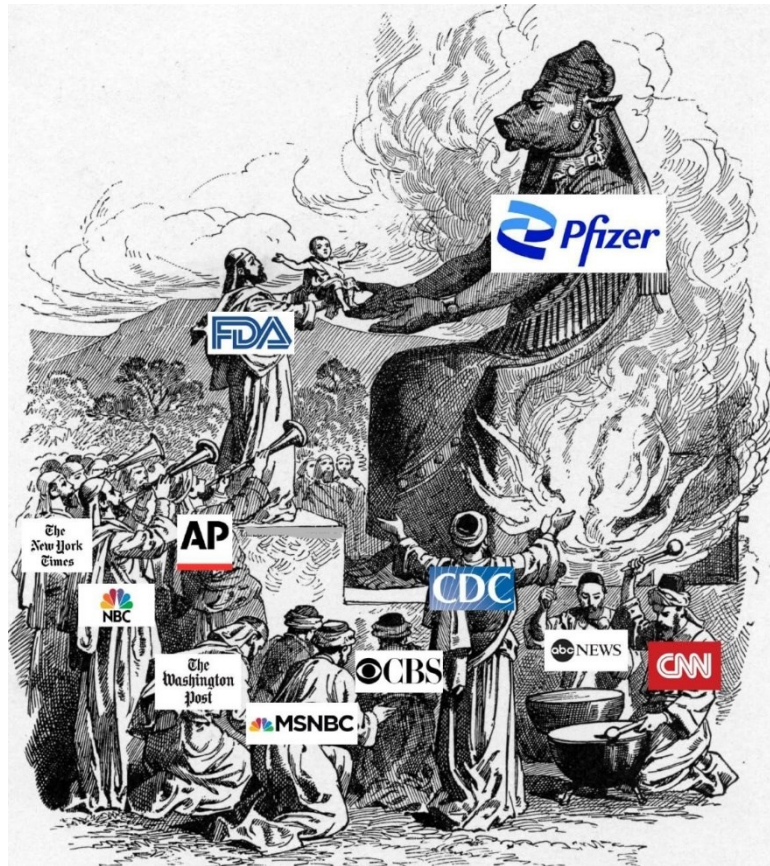


Figure 30. Image likely portraying Molech and drawing a parallel between child sacrifice and vaccination

The reading of oppression through religious lenses encourages affiliates to take actions, because the ultimate goal is to fight the oppressors and achieve salvation and freedom. QAnon Christian extremism is deeply connected to socio-political activism in the guise of nationalism and, especially, Trumpism. As previously analysed, Trump is a central figure in QAnon religious imagery (Figures 8, 9, 19, 20, and 25). He is not just a political figure, but a sort of

messiah who came to save the nation and liberate it from the forces of Evil (Vrzal, 2020: 54). As Vrzal (Ibid.: 58) has noted,

Like Jesus Christ, Donald Trump is believed to have the agency to triumph over the Satanic arch enemy in a specific event (i.e. “The Storm”) (Ibid.: 58).

Trump and his political agenda represent the promise of salvation and are God’s plan. This thinking pervades QAnon religious visuals as shown by Figure 31. The arrival of Trump – the political messiah – is ordained by God and his political ascension cannot be stopped by the forces of the Evil (Figure 31). This eschatological perspective was adopted by Trump himself in his speeches, especially in the moments preceding the 6th of January insurrection (Bond and Neville-Shepard, 2021). The evil forces were to be fought because Trumpism promised salvation to the nation and its patriots.²² Trump, through his speeches, assumed the role of a political messiah, encouraging followers to fight against the Evil to stop the alleged electoral steal and pave the way for his second

²² Trump’s 6th of January speech often makes references to the concept of salvation: ‘We’re gathered together in the heart of our nation’s capital for one very, very basic and simple reason: To save our democracy.’ (Associated Press, 2021)

mandate (Ibid.). The socio-political fight is not just a decision to be made but a politico-religious commitment.



Figure 31. *Visual reporting Isaiah 14: 27 and making explicit reference to the former U.S. President Donald J. Trump*

On the 6th of January 2021 the fight concretised in the Capitol Storming. As Figure 32 shows, the Capitol storming is viewed through religious lenses by QAnon affiliates. The Capitol is Babylon that was conquered in the 6th century BCE by the Persian King Cyrus who was chosen by God to allow Jews in exile to return home.²³ Although Trump is not explicitly represented in the image, the Fall of Babylon might implicitly convey a reference to the former U.S. President. Indeed, religious groups supportive of Trumpism have often drew a parallel between Cyrus and Trump, seeing the former U.S. president as a modern-day liberator guided by God (Burton, 2018; Duff, 2021). The apocalyptic nature of the fall of Babylon and the Capitol storming is further

²³ The Fall of Babylon is narrated in the Book of Isaiah, in the Old Testament. This further connects to Figure 29 that cites Isaiah 14: 27.

enhanced by the image of the nuclear strike reflected in the glasses of Pepe the Frog (Figure 32). The fall of Babylon/Capitol Storming is the ultimate symbol of socio-political change, infused with religious significance, that can result in salvation and freedom. During the Storming, numerous individuals affiliated with Christian organisations and movements displayed Christian symbols, sang Christian songs, and recited passages from the Bible, referring to Trump and the Storming as a religious event connected to the concept of salvation (Rowley, 2021).



Figure 32. *Image drawing a parallel between the U.S. Capitol and Babylon*

Liberation Theology sees in the political establishment the systemic dominion and discrimination against the oppressed (Goizueta, 2015). Acting violently against the oppressive political establishment becomes a socio-political duty infused with theological legitimacy. Liberation Theologies have been supportive of fat-left inspired violence in Latin America, especially in countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador where theologians have supported

and even joined Marxist guerrillas (Sigmund, 1991).²⁴ In a similar vein, despite the clear and evident theological and political differences between QAnon Christian extremism and Liberation Theologies in Latin America, the movement sees in the establishment an oppressive agent that needs to be fought. According to QAnon narratives, Donald Trump represents the socio-political opportunity to defeat the Satanic establishment and accomplish the religious mission assigned by Jesus. The Capitol Storming and the violent acts committed on the 6th of January are part of the process of salvation and liberation from the Evil.

To summarise, QAnon Christian extremism and its propensity to violence can be measured in terms of theological and political legitimisation and justification of violent acts. Not only is violence contemplated from a theological perspective as it relates to the ultimate battle between the Good and the Evil, but it is also politically legitimised, infused with Christian nationalism and Trumpism. Like Christian Identity movements, QAnon Christian extremism defines the need to act violently in society as a religious duty by portraying the battle against the forces of the Evil as a theological necessity. The fight against the Jewish Satan Cabal governing the world is a biblical battle ordained by God. Such a battle is to be fought also from a socio-political perspective. Like Liberation Theology movements, QAnon Christian extremism connects its theological stands to socio-political activism. Such activism can be seen in the anti-vax stands spread by the images as well as in the mythization of the former U.S. President Donald Trump as a religious-political messiah. The oppression exercised by the Evil is to be fought by QAnon adherents. Trumpism offers QAnon affiliates the chance to transform theology into politics, defeat the oppressors and obtain salvation and liberation. The Capitol Storming has represented a prominent example of political extremism merged with

²⁴ The participation of liberation theologians in extremist and violent movements has been severely criticised by the Catholic Church (Sigmund, 1991).

theological extremism. As did Babylon fall, so did the Capitol (Figure 32) under the violent acts of QAnon supporters, guided by God, Jesus, Trump and Q.

Conclusions

Research focusing on QAnon's religious dimensions has developed pivotal studies to understand and conceptualise the influence of religion and spirituality over the conspiracy theory. However, academics have not drawn upon the body of literature from the field of religious studies, thus overlooking pivotal aspects shaping QAnon's religious dimensions. In particular, the lack of a well-informed theoretical framework and its application to the study of empirical evidence has led to mislabelling QAnon's religious dimensions. While numerous studies have argued that QAnon is either a cult or a sect that resembles other extremist and unconventional religious movements, this dissertation has shown that QAnon's religious dimensions are deeply impacted by Christianity, thus challenging the cult-label and other potentially misleading categorisations of QAnon's religious dimensions.

QAnon's religious dimensions are multifaceted and infused with diverse symbolism and cultural references. Christian symbolism plays a crucial role in shaping QAnon's religious dimensions and is connected to other cultural and sub-cultural references. Especially, QAnon narratives and symbols are strongly conveyed in the religious imagery spread by QAnon affiliates online. Furthermore, U.S. nationalism and Trumpism are core narratives shaping the religious discourse of QAnon. Finally, pop culture such as memes, movies and songs is employed in the imagery to diffuse religious and sub-cultural references. These different types of symbolism are interconnected and often co-present in the religious visuals. Nonetheless, religious symbolism remains the primary and most prominent narrative QAnon images aim to convey.

Due to the prominent role of Christianity and Christian symbols in QAnon religious imagery, labelling QAnon religious dimensions as either a cult or a sect would be misleading. Indeed, QAnon religious dimensions can be better understood as an example of Christian extremism that heavily weaponizes

Christianity to convey extremist religious, social, and political beliefs. Strongly connected to Evangelical fundamentalist theology and the U.S. socio-political landscape, QAnon Christian extremism conceptualises the world in apocalyptic/millennialist terms by portraying an ultimate battle between the forces of the Good and the Evil. Such a worldview is reflected in the extremist socio-political views conveyed in the religious visuals. Indeed, overt and extreme nationalism is conveyed through religious references – a core characteristic of Christian nationalism in the U.S. – and anti-vax stands are legitimised and justified as opposition to the devil. Similarly, Trumpism and the support for the former U.S. President Donald Trump do not result from mere political stands but rather from an extremist theological interpretation of reality that sees in Trump a liberator and fighter siding with the Good against the Evil.

By comparing QAnon Christian extremism to other Christian extremist movements, it is possible to hypothesise about QAnon Christian extremism's potential violent character. In particular, the concepts of Christian Identity and Liberation Theology can serve as examples. Like Christian Identity movements, QAnon spreads Anti-Semitic beliefs, theorising a spiritual and physical battle between the alleged Jewish Satanic deep state aiming to destroy righteous Christians and God's devotees. Such a battle is to be fought because the Bible prophesises it. Hence, engaging in violence against the deep state is a legitimate and justifiable religious duty. Similar to Liberation Theologies, QAnon also conceptualises a world where the oppressed are promised salvation by God and Jesus. Salvation comes in the form of a religious socio-political struggle to defeat the oppressors and achieve freedom. The former U.S. President Donald Trump is the ultimate representation of such a struggle that can be carried out by engaging in violent acts such as the 2021 U.S. Capitol Storming. By using the concept of Liberation Theology, it is possible to see the connection between theological stands and socio-political views, shedding a light on the potential political violence QAnon affiliates can engage in.

However, these concepts need to be used carefully. For instance, the concept of Liberation Theology does not fully apply to QAnon as Liberation Theologies have not been characterised by Anti-Semitic and racial beliefs. In addition, Liberation Theologies have been mainly influenced by far-left ideologies like Marxism, while QAnon can be linked mainly to far-right ideologies. These limitations are fundamental methodological caveats that stem from the concept of interpretation and the research design of this dissertation which does not argue that QAnon is either a Christian Identity movement or a Liberation Theology, while it aims to show that QAnon Christian extremism shares similarities with these religious phenomena.

This dissertation's conclusions should not be viewed as comprehensive theoretical generalisations about QAnon religious dimensions. The nature of the research design, centred on the concept of interpretation, allows for making different complementary conclusions. QAnon is an online and offline phenomenon constantly evolving and changing. Hence, further research is needed to analyse QAnon's religious dimensions and their impact on its affiliates' propensity to violence. In particular, it is necessary to conduct empirically driven research that addresses diverse content (e.g., audio, video, and text) on multiple platforms, comparing and evaluating the different religious influences shaping QAnon. Because QAnon affiliates are increasingly participating in politics by running as candidates at the 2022 U.S. Congress elections (Zitser and Ankel, 2021), future studies should pay in-depth attention to the socio-political dimension of QAnon and assess whether religiosity/spirituality is playing a role in encouraging QAnon supporters to engage in mainstream politics.

Moreover, it is important to analyse QAnon religious dimensions from a more international perspective. As the movement has assumed a transnational character and is present in numerous Western and non-Western countries (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021: 157), future research should address QAnon

religious dimensions by looking at content production in different cultural and linguistic online spaces. While this dissertation's analysis is centred on the U.S. religious, social and political environment, future studies should also look at different environments, especially non-Western countries where QAnon is diffused. This can allow for comparing QAnon's religious dimensions and better explore the influence of religion(s) and spiritual beliefs over the conspiracy theory. Likely, where Christianity is not the most diffused religion among the population, non-Christian religious and spiritual beliefs are shaping QAnon religious dimensions.

Hence, although this dissertation has shown that Christian extremism is a prominent facet of QAnon religious dimensions, other religious and spiritual influences should not be overlooked. Especially, the impact of New Age spirituality and other non-Christian beliefs on QAnon thinking should be carefully analysed as the literature on QAnon has shown their importance. Future research should also focus on the potential interplay between these alternative beliefs and Christianity to analyse how the conspiracy theory can appeal to audiences with diverse background. QAnon can be explored from diverse perspectives and still needs to be comprehensively understood in all its facets and characteristics.

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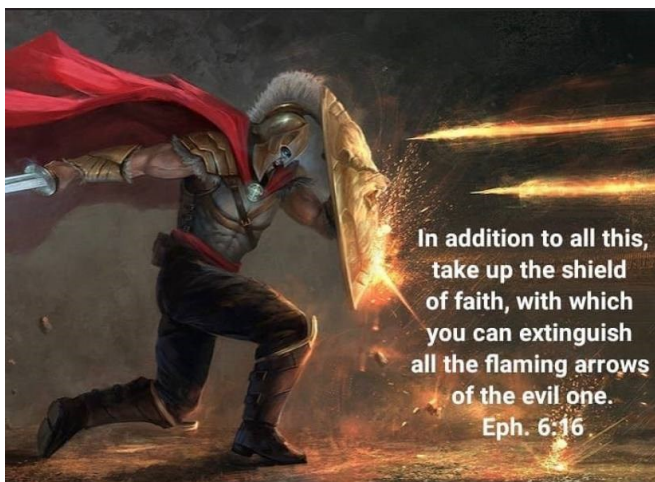
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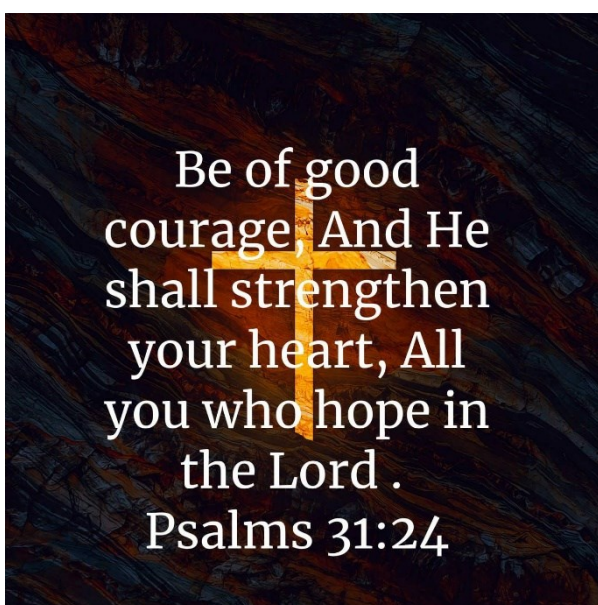
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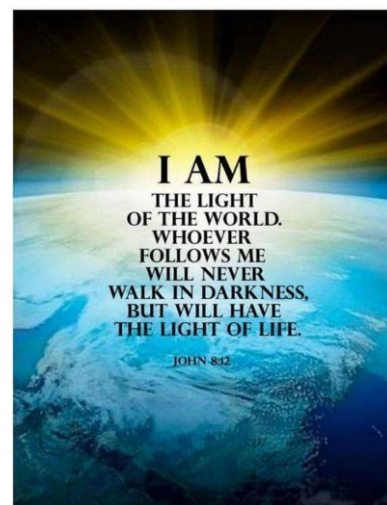
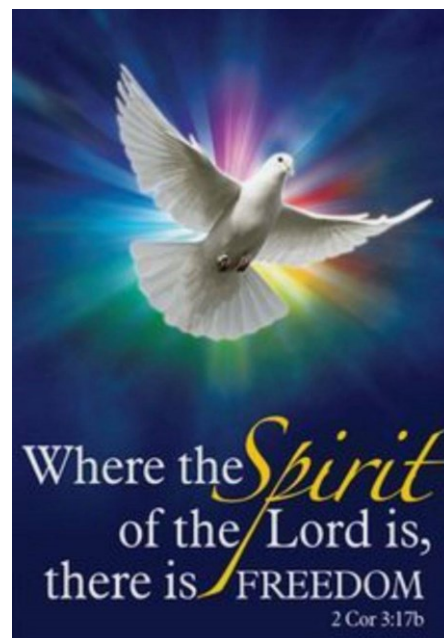
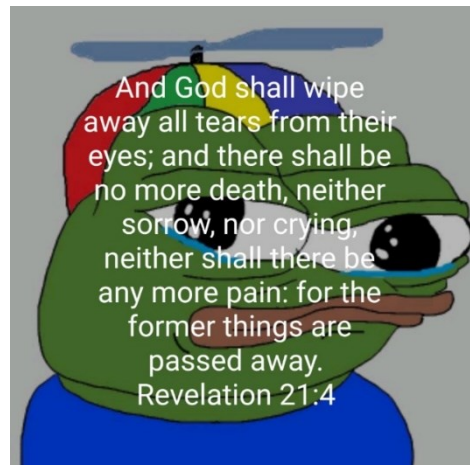
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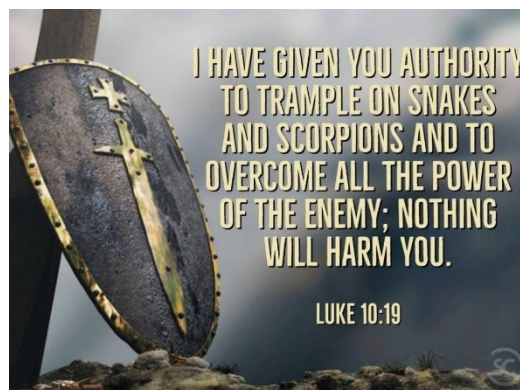
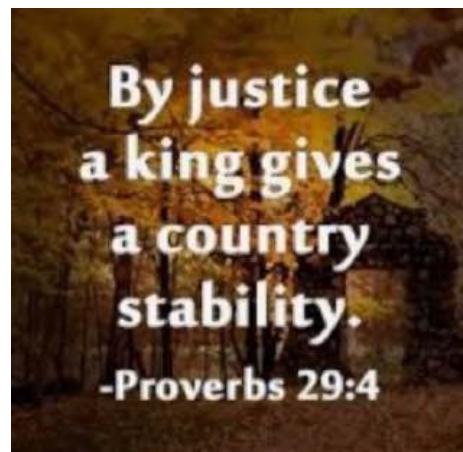
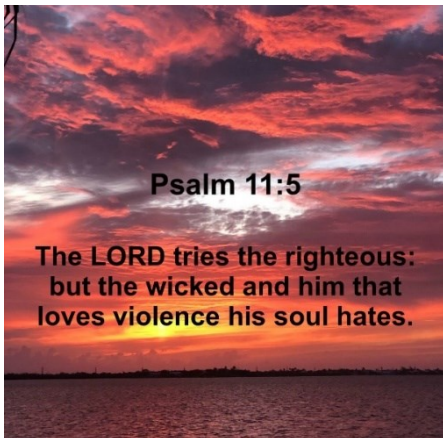
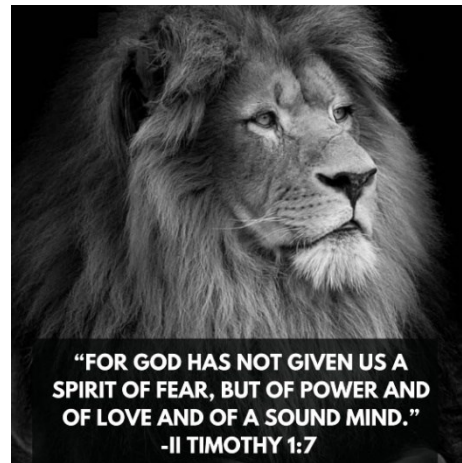
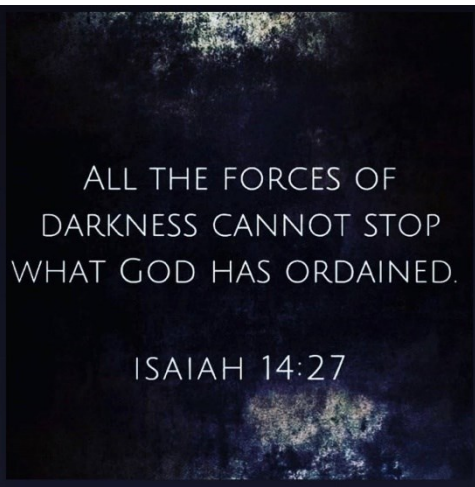
Zuckerman, E. (2019). QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal. *Journal of Design and Science*, [online] 6(6). doi:10.21428/7808da6b.6b8a82b9.

Annex A. Images referring to the sacred scriptures



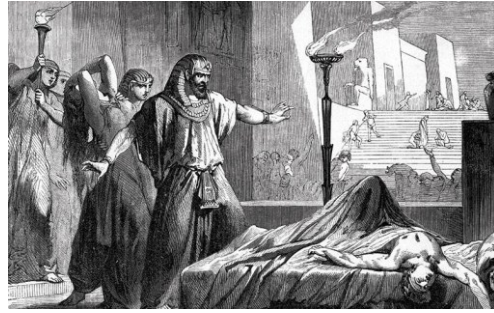






We are living in a time where
Satan doesn't even hide
anymore, and the
world still can't see him.

1 PETER 5:8



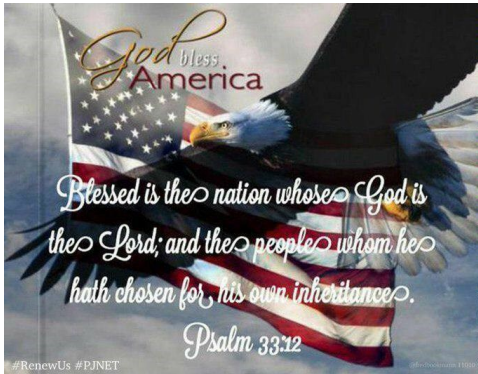
You therefore
must endure
hardship as a
good soldier of
Jesus Christ.
II Timothy 2:3



But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.

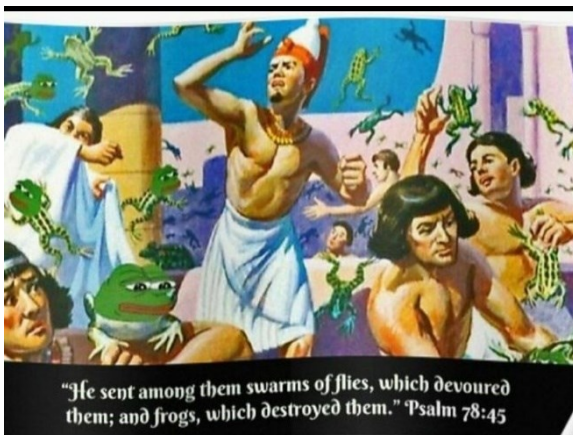
Isaiah 40:31

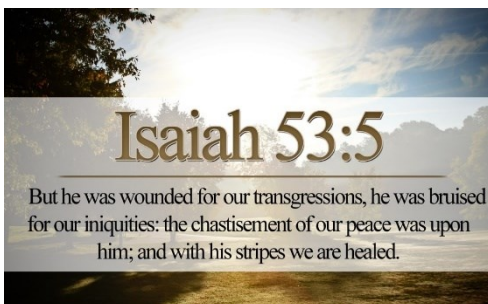
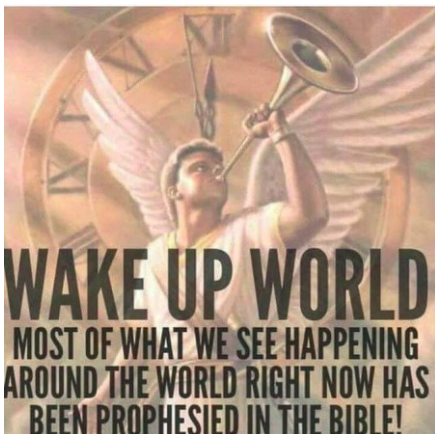
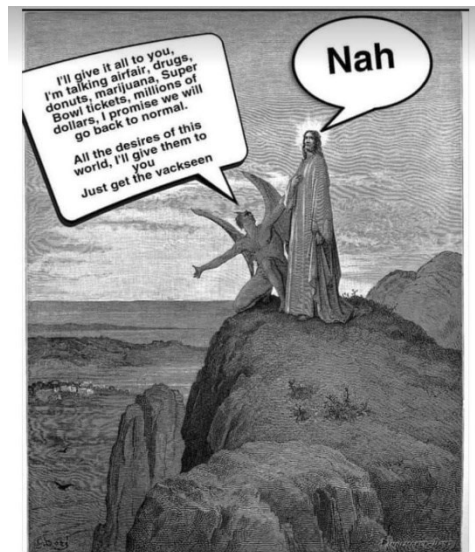
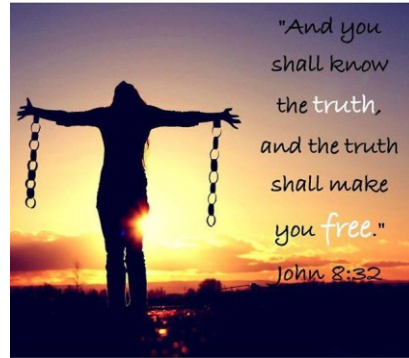


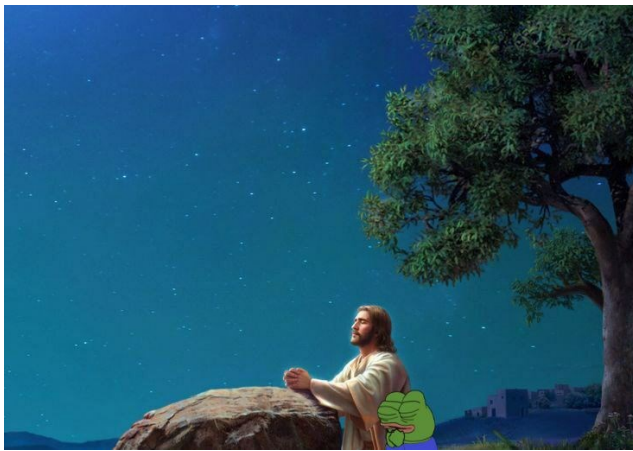


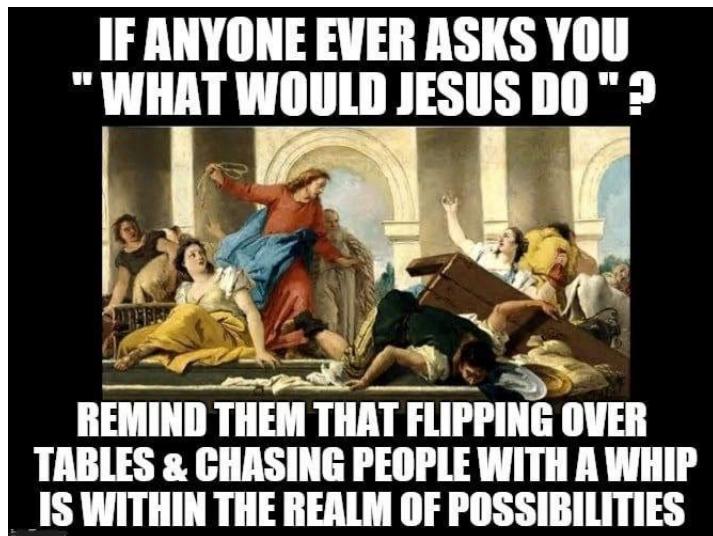
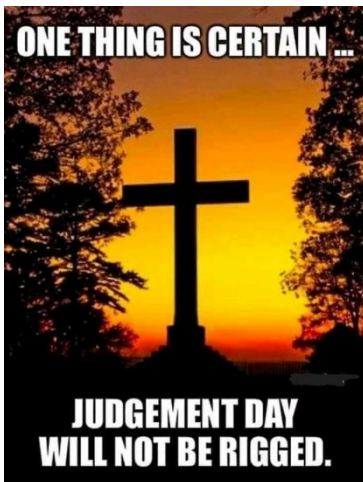
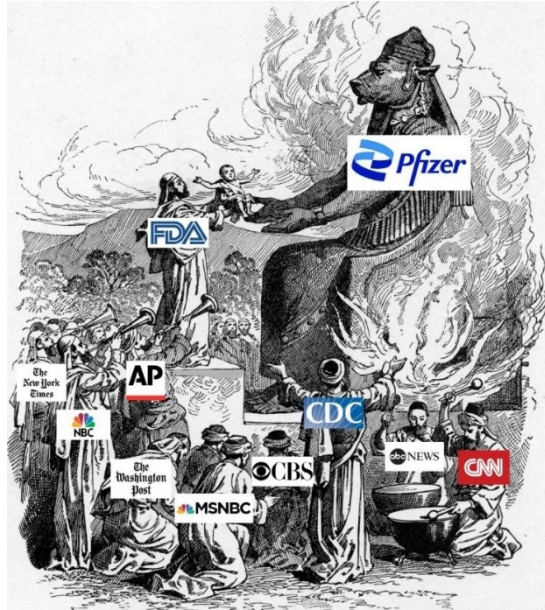
1 JOHN 2:22

“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.”

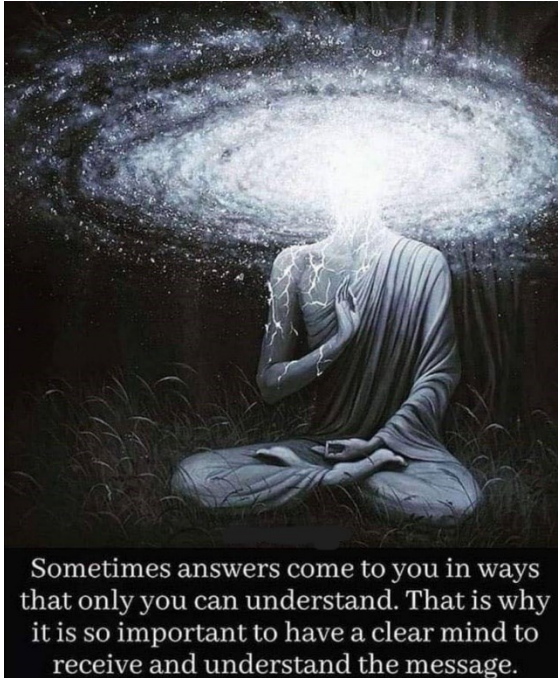








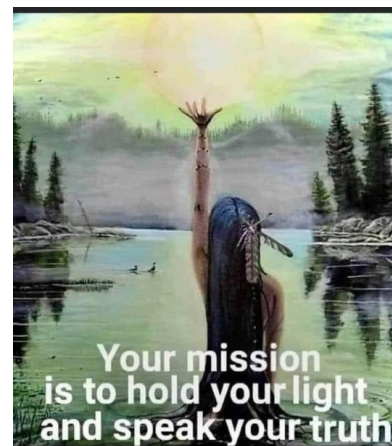
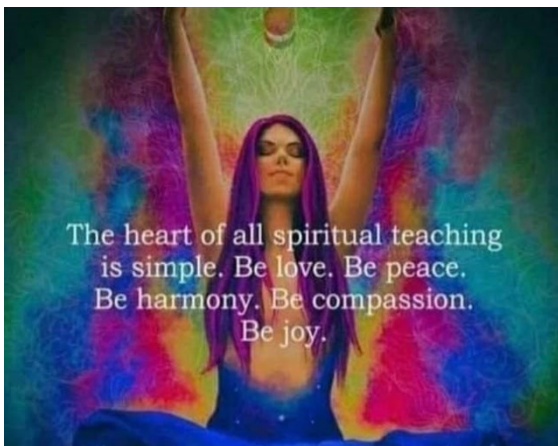
Annex B. Images conveying New Age spirituality and non-Christian beliefs

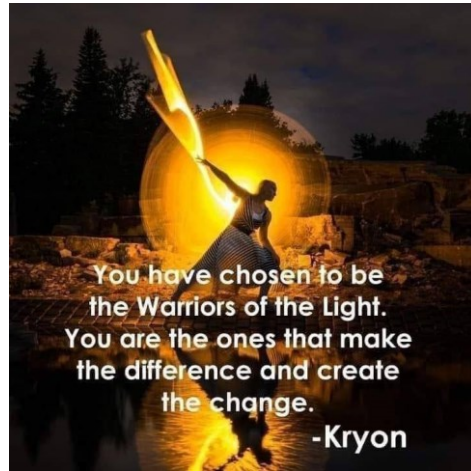
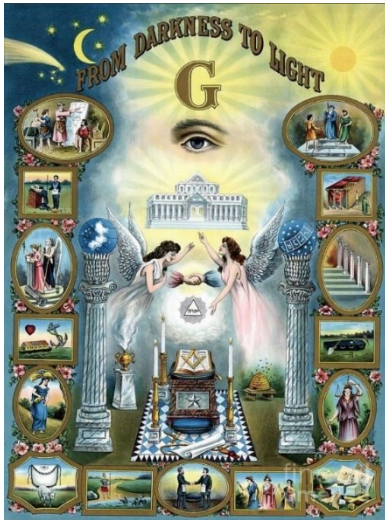


Old soul

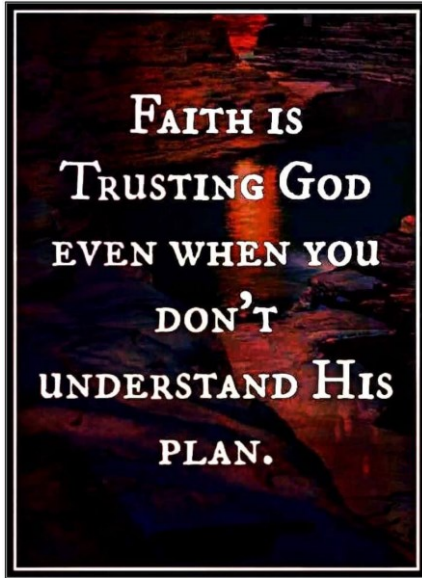
Signs your soul has Reincarnated many times:

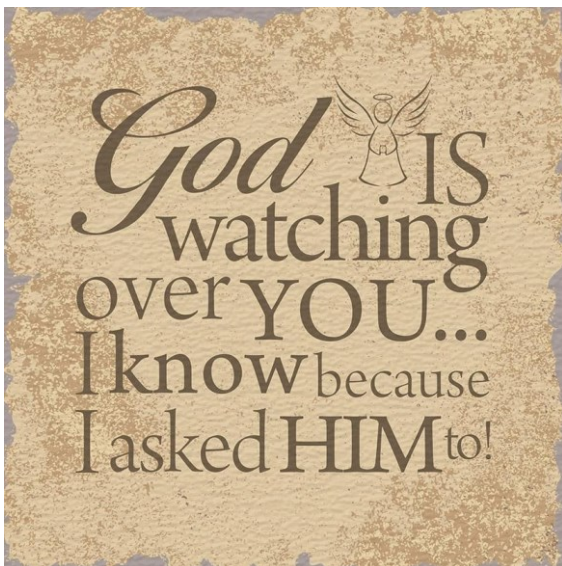
- You have strong intuition.
- Out-of-place memories.
- You feel older than your age reflects.
- Unexplainable fears or phobias.
- You have a great affinity for certain cultures/ time periods/envirnonments.
- You're an Empath.
- You feel as though this Earth is not your home.





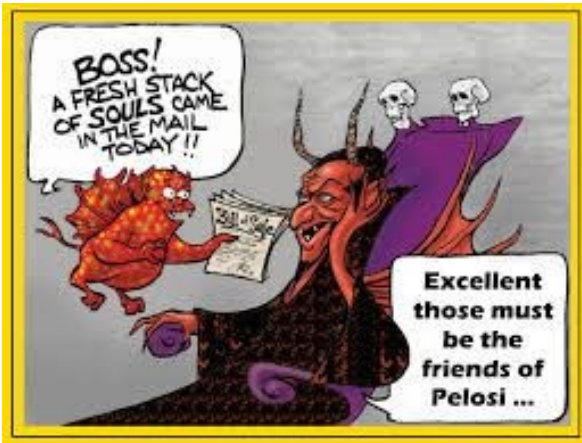
Annex C. Images conveying Christian Good-Evil dualism







**Covid backwards is
Divoc, the Hebrew
meaning of Divoc is,
POSSESSION BY AN
EVIL SPIRIT**



6 ft apart, wearing masks...
 Does this sound familiar?
 You are taking part in a luciferian ritual. Willingly.



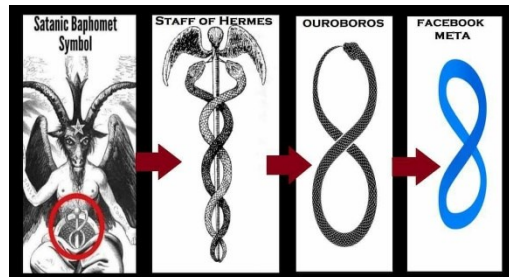
Synagogue of Satan

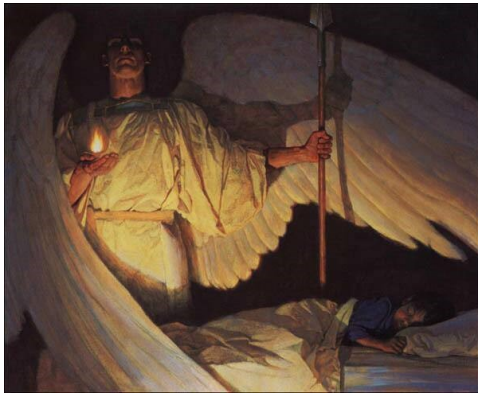
False Israelites



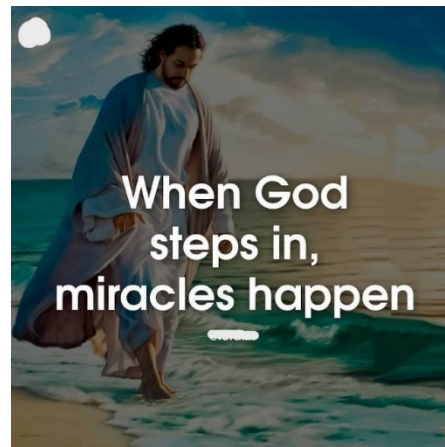


Once you understand that their "god" is transgender, you start to understand why they are indoctrinating your children





The
Delta
and
Omicron
are no match
for the
Alpha
and
Omega



Blood, bleeding

It refers to blood sacrifices, and also to human sacrifices, where the blood of the victim, charged with adrenaline, is consumed. It is better known as adrenochrome, and it is the most powerful drug known.

+ The upside down cross

The cross is turned upside down in order to mock and dishonor Christ and his death, while it is an honoring of the opposing force which is in rebellion to God. This symbol represents a rejection of God's will.

Dragon symbol of the Cosmos

In original Jewish texts, Satan would hold up this hand sign to summon demons and direct them to possess a tribe. Today it is used to cast curses on people who are watching the performer.

Skull & Bones 322 Osiris Risen aka The X Sign

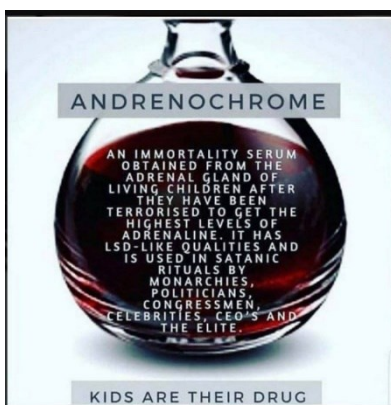
Nimrod stands unequal for his symbolism of Satanic practices. The legendary symbol for Nimrod is "X." The use of this symbol always denotes witchcraft. Therefore, the "X" in modern Freemasonry represents Antichrist.

The Devil' Horns

AKA: Sign of Satan the horned god, Sign of the horns, the goat horns, evil fingers, Diabolicus, the horns, devil sign.

666 Triple 6

This sign is the hand gesture to represent 666, the Number of the Beast. It is used to indicate to whom they owe obedience.



EVIL
IS AT
THE GATE.
IT'S TIME TO
PRAY

NASA

ALEISTER CROWLEY

Werner Magnus Maximilian Freiherr von Braun

John Whiteside "Jack" Parsons

Lafayette Ronald Hubbard

Sir Arthur Charles Clarke

Walter Elias "Walt" Disney

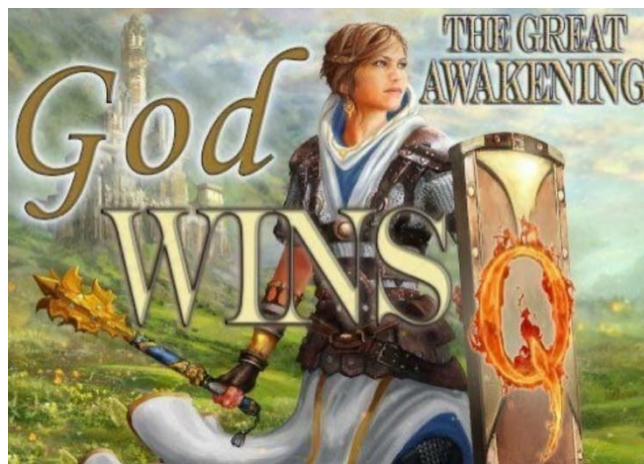
You don't have to be a rocket scientist. Just connect the satanic dorks(dots). Check out how this Rat Pack played a roll in influencing the public and creating the LIE called **NASA**

CELEBRITY DEMONIC POSSESSION

Ritualistic concerts are very real. The recent horror event with Travis Scott is the perfect example of energy harvesting through demonic possession. When you demonically possess the biggest artists/celebrities and they are then worshipped by the masses, these are the results. Bodies get snatched. These artists are not present in their own vessel and the goal is to hijack those in a vulnerable state and take you with him. These events are all controlled, riddled Symbolism, the chants to the screen writing programming and lyrics. You are going on a ride that you are not adept for. These concerts are huge rituals disguised as art.

SWIPE RIGHT ➡

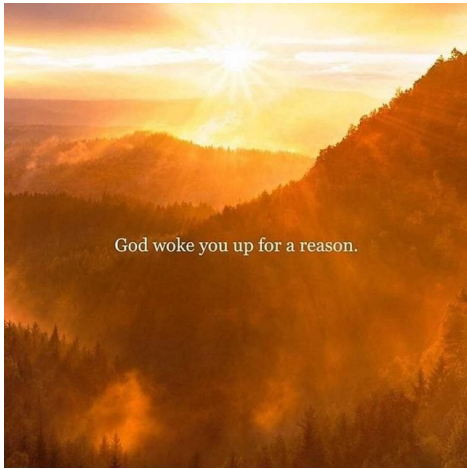
They say the ✂ will do it's job in 2 years...

$$\begin{array}{r}
 2021 \\
 2022 \\
 + 2023 \\
 \hline
 666
 \end{array}$$


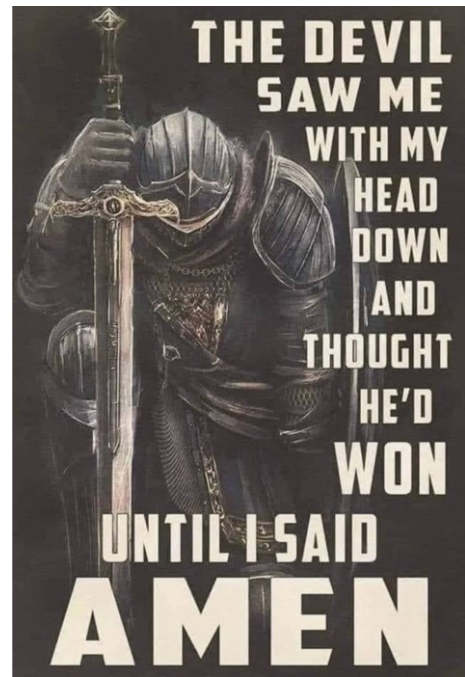
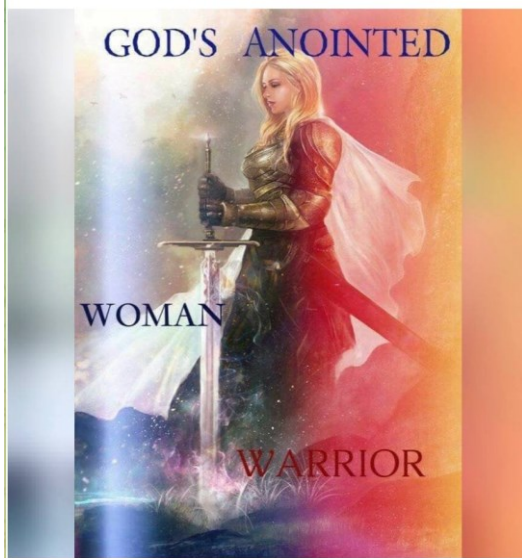


How I feel knowing Jesus is with me
when I face battles





WHEN'S GOD'S WARRIORS GO DOWN ON THEIR KNEES, THE BATTLE IS NOT OVER.
IT HAS JUST BEGUN.



Annex D. Images conveying U.S. Christian nationalism and Trumpism

