

Qanon: Is it a Cult?

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Abstract:

This paper is a comparative analysis between Qanon and past cults in the United States. The purpose is to understand the criteria of past cults in order to explore whether Qanon can be categorized as a cult and examine its propensity for violence. Observing the internal and external factors of how cults form and become violent will then allow for the examination of the origins of Qanon and how this group of people have been led to violence. The criteria used for comparison are charismatic leadership, apocalyptic beliefs, isolating others from society, extreme devotion for the leader, extreme paranoia etc. after exploring Qanon's origins and expansion Qanon can be considered a cult because it fits the criteria. In the first section I define what religion is, in the second section I define what a cult is and researched popular cults that ended in violence. The third section I discuss the reasons why cults become violent, followed by a section that provides information about the formation of Qanon, how they fit into the criteria for a cult, and how they have and continue to have the potential for violence. Aligning Qanon with certain criteria will help answer the question about whether Qanon can be considered a cult that poses a threat to our society.

Introduction

Is Qanon a cult? And is Qanon a cult prone towards violence? My paper examines the often violent rhetoric and actions of Qanon by looking at research on cult related violence. After

studying the research on cult related violence and how they become violent, Qanon fits the criteria for a cult prone to becoming violent.

I was never one to ponder politics. However, when the 2016 presidential election occurred, my interest in politics began to change. I, like so many people, thought that there was no way this man was going to win and forever change our democracy. As a highschool student at the time, I was frightened by the possibility of a Trump presidency. I could only imagine the rise of misogyny, racism, and white-authoritarianism becoming 'mainstream' after hearing Trump talk about immigrants being rapists and his overall treatment women. I felt all of the worst parts of our society were now feeling free to emerge from the shadows and the rise of White supremacist ideology coming back to the forefront of American life. I believed that the Republican party, elected officials and the lay voters, would certainly keep any damage to a minimum and reject any criminality and keep oppressive policies in check.. This was my ignorance in full effect. Surprisingly, the Republican leadership, with Mitch Mcconnell at the helm allowed the lies, obstruction, and hate to go unanswered. Instead of disavowing the actions and words of hate they went along with Trumps trajectory and perpetuated the most ridiculous and dangerous ideas and theories.

Ideas like the notion that Jews and people of color would replace 'white' Americans and other factless conspiracies were once only a part of laughable internet groups. These ideas, which some believed were gone from our society, have been "allowed" back in and create dangerous situations. I am not attempting to explore the possible connections or reasons why these bizarre 'theories' are believed but to present information to allow for the reader to determine for themselves whether or not QAnon is a violent cult or what I had believed early on it to be; a hoax and bad adaptation of the 1988 movie, They Live, something no one in their right

mind would even consider no matter how utterly committed to ignorance they were. I was guilty of this ignorance as well. Even after the Charlottesville, VA ‘unite the right’ rally held on August 11, 2017 (McEldowney, 2018), I still believed that these were just ignorant hateful bigots and represented a very small portion of the American political ‘right’. I refused to tie this to mainstream Republican thought even though I had not agreed with 99% of it. When the President of the United States stated that there were ‘Good people on both sides’, I understood my denial was at an end (Campbell, 2019).

The rise in Qanon conspiracy theories is the greatest internal threat to our democracy in history (Lewis, 2020). Qanon has inspired its adherents to commit violent and treasonous acts due to the influences from creator “Q” (Mohamed & Mohammed).

What Is Religion?

Religion has many different meanings. Religion is a general practice that others perform when they have a certain set of beliefs. These beliefs do not necessarily have to be related to God, what makes a religion, a religion is the actions that people commit within their set of beliefs.

There are many sociologists that have their own interpretation of religion. Max Weber viewed religion as a source of social change and as giving life meaning and purpose. Weber’s definition of religion was composed into 6 components.

“1. A belief in one or several of a wide-ranging variety of supernatural powers, 2. Evidenced in a variety of charismatic manifestations 3. Articulated through symbolic expressions 4. Responded in a variety of forms 5. Under the guidance of various types of leaders, 6. In a variety of patterns of relationships significantly determined by the patterned behavior of the lay people of the community.” (Christiano, 2017).

Sociologist Emile Durkheim saw religion as a way to bring social order to society. Durkheim believed that religion was normal and socially healthy for society and saw religion as performing certain functions for society (Christiano, 2017).

Religion is a complex topic and is not singularly defined. Religion can have different meanings for people, overall religion is the actions people commit based on their beliefs.

“Religion is what the participant says it is.”(Christiano, 2017) Religions provide a group for ideas, values, and lifestyles of society. Religions create ways people think they ought to act.

Individuals join New Religious Movements for many reasons, for some it is to have a sense of belonging or having shared ideas about someone or something.

What is a Cult?

According to Lorne L. Dawson, a cult is a group of individuals sharing similar religious practices and beliefs, idolizing a certain person or figure (Dawson, 2017). What can be qualified as a cult has many characteristics such as the group having a charismatic leader, isolating others from society, extreme devotion for the leader, extreme paranoia etc. (Bohm & Alison, 2001).

An example of a cult would be Jonestown/The Peoples Temple in Guyana. Leader Jim Jones was a powerful and influential figure, in the 1950's Jim Jones was a Christian minister and advocated social and racial equality and this attracted a group of followers, by the 1960's he had left the Church and relocated the Peoples Temple in California with his recruited followers. In the 1970's Jim Jones forced his thousands of followers to move to the Guyanese jungle promising a peaceful utopian society, which turned out to be a lie. After moving himself and his followers, his followers were abused with harsh labor in the jungle along with being subjected to diseases and illnesses. Former members of the People's Temple began to report their experiences and stated that they were threatened with beatings, giving up their belongings and forced to leave their families behind. This negative media attention began to make Jones extremely paranoid and Jones using drugs made the paranoia even worse, Jones was convinced that the government and the media were out to destroy him (History, 2010). November 18, 1978 after being investigated for these abuse claims, Jones declared that his followers injected babies and children with cyanide and to then drink cyanide laced punch, Jones then killed himself due to a self inflicted gunshot wound to the head. After this incident researchers and other officials found over thousands of tape recordings of propaganda and disturbing conversations and pictures of the activities that took place at the People's Temple.

Another example of a violent cult is the Manson Family. Leader Charles Manson was in and out of reformation facilities and was sent to prison at a young age. When he got out of prison in 1967 he started a small following in San Francisco. His followers found him charming, funny and liberating and saw him as a free spirit. Manson would use sex and drugs to dominate his followers and by isolating them in Spahn Ranch (Cusak, 2020). The Manson Family began their violence in July 1969 with their first murders of Bernard Crowe and Gary Hinman, these

murders ignited the fire in the Manson family to continue their violence that led to the eight murders including Sharon Tate and Leno LaBianca (Cusak, 2020).

Lastly, The Order of the Solar Temple. The order of the Solar Temple was founded in 1984 by Luc Jouret and Joseph DiMambro (Melton, 2018). The Order of the Solar Temple stems from the religious order the Knights Templar that came after the french revolution in the 12th century. This religious order was split into many different practices one of them being the Templar Renewed Order, this order preached about the end of the world (Melton, 2018). The Order of the Solar Temple stated that the apocalypse was going to happen in the mid 1990's and would end in great famine (Melton, 2018).

Leaders Jouret and DiMambro would manipulate their followers. Jouret used sex and money in order to give him his spiritual strength and DiMambro was more obsessed with having power. He had such a manipulative hold on his followers that his followers would do and believed anything DiMambro said (Melton, 2018). Before the apocalypse would take place members were told and believed that they needed to enter a spiritual realm (Melton, 2018). In 1994 numerous members of The Solar Temple committed murder/suicide by being in burning buildings (Melton, 2018). More murder-suicides occurred a year later with 16 more members killing themselves in a similar way (Melton, 2018).

These leaders used sex, drugs, money and power to manipulate and control their followers, leading their followers to commit acts of violence.

Violence and Cults

Cults like Jonestown, the Manson Family, the Solar Temple, the Covenant the Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSA) etc. Have many reasons as to why they became violent. Some of these reasons include various internal and external factors.

One of these reasons includes having apocalyptic thinking/beliefs. Having apocalyptic beliefs in a cult appears to have more violent interactions with others that are outside of the group and having a belief system that is centered around the “end of the world” can contribute to acts of violence (Dawson, 2017, Bohm & Alison, 2008). Although apocalyptic thinking creates legitimacy for conducting violence it was not the main cause for cults to commit violence, it was more of a way of providing urgency and motivation for followers to take action. An example of this is the Covenant the Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSA) threatened that if God did not start these “riots” then they would bring down the government themselves (Mayer, 2001). Violent acts will only happen in this case if the cult believes that doing these acts of violence will prevent the apocalypse in some way (Mayer, 2001).

Another reason why cults become violent is that charismatic leadership influences violent acts by testing communities faith and loyalty in traumatizing ways (Dawson, 2017). An example of this would be mind control, mind control is receiving influence that interrupts a person's true identity and replaces it with a new false identity (Hassan & Collins, 2022). New members of the People’s Temple were people who believed in God and wanted to make their community a better place. At the time of joining the People’s Temple they were not aware that they needed to be fully committed to Jim Jones and did not agree to move to Guyana, but as new members spent more time in the People’s Temple they were subjected to more manipulation under Jim Jones. The days leading up to the mass-murder/suicide those who had agreed to drink the cyanide

infused Kool-Aid and kill hundreds of children had been recorded to prove their loyalty and obedience to Jones (Hassan & Collins, 2022).

Charismatic leadership has a huge impact on how followers will act in order to be seen as loyal and to be in their leaders' good graces.

Another reason for resorting to violence in cults is that committing an extreme action allows small groups to receive attention from outsiders (Mayer, 2001). According to Jean-François Mayer, the Solar Temple had wanted to explain their "transit" to another world by leaving behind video-tapes and recordings from 1994, another example is Jim Jones affirmed to his followers that they "... have to go down in history..." (Mayer, 2001). These cults making headlines provided deep satisfaction and recognition, they wanted their cause acknowledged by the world.

Another way cults become violent is when former members speak out from what happened within the cult.

While opposition from the outside can influence violent reactions, having information leaked to the outside world from the inside the cult in many cases seems to have triggered the turn toward violence (Mayer, 2001). Example, The People's Temple committing mass-murder/suicide was an outcome from former members speaking up about their experiences, and why congressman Leo Ryan went to Guyana to investigate these claims (History, 2010). After the investigation, the murder of Ryan and other government officials, Jones then declared to his followers to commit murder and suicide. Another example is the Solar Temple's idea of leaving this world before the apocalypse began. It was first mentioned after several members left the main group in the 1990's, and former members started to share their experiences (Mayer, 2001).

Threats coming from inside the cult are much more dangerous than receiving outside threats. When followers start to doubt their cause the whole structure of everything they were taught gets put into question, and the survival of the cult is threatened and members of the cult will become violent when private information is leaked to outsiders (Mayer, 2001).

These cults overall resorted to violence after being influenced and manipulated by their charismatic leader or the cult was being threatened either internally or externally.

QANON

In the 2016 presidential election, a new online far-right group emerged online called Qanon. Qanon began on websites 4chan and 8chan with the user under the name “Q”. “Q” started a conspiracy that there is a child sex trafficking ring occurring within the Democratic Party and other members in the media. This theory stems from the Pizzagate conspiracy, the Pizzagate started when Hillary Clinton’s former campaign manager John Podesta emails getting hacked and Qanon members believed that his emails had a secret code that indicated children being sexual abused (Rothschild, 2021).

Qanon is a right wing conspiracy group that grew through the internet and has obtained millions of followers in the United States. Qanon members believe that there are government officials and people in Hollywood that are running a satanic pedophile child sex trafficking ring, the individuals that are running this so-called organization are Bill and Hillary Clinton, and many others (Alicipoulios, Papasavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou & Blackburn, 2021). Qanon believes that Donald Trump was elected into office in order to try and stop these people and bring down their organization (Alicipoulios, Papasavva, Ballard, De

Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou & Blackburn, 2021). “Q” would post further messages that Qanon supporters believed that were encoded clues also known as “q” drops that would determine when an event would be taking place. These drops would then be discussed on image boards for easy access for other internet communities (Alicipoulios, Papasavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou & Blackburn, 2021).

Qanon’s core idea is that Donald Trump has been working with a secret political organization of wealthy elites called “The Cabal” (Zuckerman, 2019). This cabal seeks to undermine American Democracy, destroy American rights and freedoms and dominate the nation by pushing their own criminal agenda (Zuckerman, 2019).

In May of 2019 FBI reports that there has been an increasing influence of anti-government and extreme political conspiracies, that includes Qanon motivating criminal or violent activity (Armarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

According to the report Qanon contributed to the radicalization of many people committing violent and criminal acts. With the help of the internet, a ““crowd-sourcing” effect” occurred, meaning that the conspiracies that Qanon have come up with are now being shared on the internet (Armarasingam & Argentino, 2020). Qanon members have been linked to many crimes in the U.S., one of them being the January 6th riot and another attempting to blow up a statue in Illinois to protect children that have been allegedly been kidnapped by pedophiles (Alicipoulios, Papasavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou & Blackburn, 2021).

Qanon behaves the way most conspiracies do, its main purpose is to give this master narrative of explaining disturbing events and assuring their followers that they see the big picture. This narrative gives believers a sense of control over the uncontrollable (Zuckerman, 2019). Qanon is different from other far-right extremist groups, due to its lack of organization. It

does however, represent a public security threat with the potential to become a more impactful domestic terror threat in the future (Armarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

Rastafarianism

For those who say that a cult must have a leader or must have its originator that is the central dominant force and the creator of its dogma and the tenants need only look to Rastafarianism where the belief that a messiah would rise within Africa to lead people of color from the African diaspora who believed that their captivity even though many were free at the time, was a kin to that of the Israelites and they saw their mostly Caribbean homes as being the exile in Babylon where the Israelites were held in captivity.

The Messiah that Rastafarians rallied around was Haile Selassie the second of Ethiopia. Haile Selassie did not claim to be the savior or the Messiah or even claimed any semblance to Jesus or the Hebrew version of the Messiah but Rastafarianism nonetheless grew around the belief that he was the chosen he was the person who would lead the previously enslaved Africans out of Babylon into the holy Land which in this case would be Ethiopia or back to Africa triumphantly. They gave Haile Selassie the title of king of kings Lord of lords the conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah that was prophesied in the Old testament. Even though Selassie being a Christian ruler in Ethiopia and arguably and supposedly a descendant of the tribe of David and the tribe of Judah there had been no previous belief by any other group that he was a leader in any sense of religion though Rastafarianism as a movement and as a religion grew up around a central belief that he would lead them to freedom (Cardillo, 1998).

In many ways Qanon grew out of a belief that one person, in this case being Donald Trump, would lead them to some sort of American rebirth or the expulsion of the “evil” that has led to the destruction of American values (Hanke, 2021). Though Trump himself may have been unaware of this cult belief at one point he diverged from the model of Haile Selassie and rastafarianism by embracing some of the most dangerous and factless conspiracies and beliefs that the Qanon adherence were spewing.

Conversely the cult created by Jim Jones, the people's Temple, was a straightforward cult. Though it grew out of mainstream episcopalianism Jones took the dog buttons and even ritual practices of Episcopalian Christianity and molded them to what was seemingly a progressive inclusive movement (Conroy, 2018). What may have started as something that was human-centered and provided for not only the members but the community at large became his personal religion. His beliefs of Christianity and or a new divergent form of Christianity were the central themes and dictated solely by Jim Jones himself (Conroy, 2018). In this way trumpism spawned or at least propagated by Trump himself is much more like a standard cult movement that it is queuing on. Though the two combined and overlap in many ways, and many of the mainstream Trump cultists latched on to many of the beliefs of Qanon or at the very least allowed them to proliferate and responsible for the propagation of many of the fallacious theories and conspiracies to ingratiate themselves with Trump or to promote themselves and solidify their power within the Trump movement (Blazakis, 2021). So in this way the dictates of Trump which we're not going to get into in this paper in detail or at all are more important to the adherence of the Trump cult for whatever reason whether it be power whether it be to court his core believers or to save their political lives or in many instances to basically just make money or more like the People's Temple or a standard idea of a cult.

The Qanon beliefs, many of which remain in the shadows and in the far reaches of political discourse and mainstream political thought, are often combined with mainstream Republican thinking. And it was not such a far stretch since mainstream Republican politics have, thanks to Trump, moved more towards the outer reaches of acceptable thought and have devolved into whatever Trump says. His truth is their truth. If their truth is different than his truth they are the enemy regardless of whether or not the Republican Democrat or independent (Blazakis, 2021).

Methods

Methods that were conducted for my research was doing content analysis on previous articles about cults and how those cults became violent or what could be potential factors/warning signs for these groups to become violent, and I compared these factors with the Qanon movement to see if they share similar qualities and if those qualities. I also watched interviews from former Qanon members and family members that have been affected by Qanon and their movement as well as reading more articles about how Qanon has isolated these individuals.

Findings & Analysis

After reviewing articles that have demonstrated qualities of a cult, Qanon and previous cults do share similar characteristics.

The cults mentioned previously Jonestown, the Manson Family, the Solar Temple etc. and Qanon both have a form of leadership. “Q” shares their posts on 4chan and 8chan for followers to decode, do their own research and come to their own conclusions with the information from these allegedly secret coded messages, Qanon followers are then taking matters into their own hands (Hodwitz, King, & Thompson, 2022). The only difference is that Qanon developed over the internet and “Q” does not strictly tell his followers what to do with the information that is posted, “Q” simply influences his followers.

Another similarity is that both previous cults and Qanon recruit others and make individuals feel like they have a sense of belonging by isolating them from society. An example, former Qanon member Melissa Rein Lively was browsing the internet looking up yoga and spirituality when she stumbled upon Qanon and their conspiracies (Frew, 2021). Going down the “rabbit-hole” Lively then became obsessed and a true believer in the movement, so much so to call herself as a spokesperson for Qanon (Frew, 2021). Lively decided to get help after being given a choice to choose between Qanon or her family, and even needed to go to a psychiatric facility. Lively stated ““I absolutely call it a cult in every single way... it destroyed me completely...”” (Frew, 2021).

Similarly with Jonestown members were being isolated and being forced to leave their families behind to move to Guyana and Qanon’s manipulation has turned people’s lives upside down.

Another example, CNN interview with Danielle Marshall in February 2021 only a month after the January 6th riot discusses her mother being at the Capitol on that day and also being a Qanon member. Marshall states that she lives very close to the Capitol and saw “people walking down the streets with Trump flags, MAGA hats...” and wondered if her mother was at the Capitol and she was. Danielle also states regarding her mother “not only does she really believe it, it intersects in her mind with her religion” (CNN, 2021). Marshall also states that after that incident she has not spoken to her mother because Marshall’s partner was an officer at the Capitol that day and disregarded her partner's safety for Qanon (CNN, 2021).

Qanon has torn families apart and has made people who are part of the movement change into completely different people.

Another former member, Ashley Vanderbilt got sucked into Qanon through the social media app TikTok. Vanderbilt at first did not realize that the videos in her “for you page” were Qanon related and saw videos that children were being sex trafficked, and her being a mother wanted to protect her children (Rosa, 2021). Vanderbilt recalls being terrified about the 2020 inauguration because she had read on Qanon sites that there was going to be a blackout as Joe Biden was being sworn into office, but there was no blackout (Rosa, 2021). Vanderbilt then feared that her child was going to be taken away. As a close friend of Vanderbilt talked her out of that conclusion, she started to doubt “the plan” and realized that Qanon’s conspiracies were not true and that “life outside of Qanon is not as scary as members are making it sound.” (Rosa, 2021).

Qanon has affected and disrupted the lives of others through the internet and social media. Former members like Lively and Vanderbilt became so consumed with Qanon’s

conspiracies that they were not paying attention to their families or other people close to them until they finally came out of this haze (Rosa, 2021 & Frew, 2021).

Demographic findings I discovered is that Qanon members are mostly an older generation of white men and women. Qanon members identify as a Republican and they all support Trump. Qanon is also very anti- government and displayed that behavior at the January 6th riot.

The Qanon conspiracies have failed to come to light, none of these so-called secret codes or predictions have come true. The F.B.I. again has warned that Qanon members will become even more violent due to “Q”’s and Trump’s going silent on the internet (Benner, 2021). Qanon believers are starting to doubt their “plan” and that increases the chances of Qanon members committing more acts of violence. Qanon’s prophecy of Trump staying in office and arresting his democratic enemies did not happen, thus resulting in future violence (Benner, 2021).

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Conclusion

Overall, my conclusion regarding Qanon and other previous cults is that their leaders are never wrong and any discrepancies in belief can be explained via the ‘believers’ rationalization or the leaders' outright denial or explanation. Even if the ‘cult’ is not originating from its leader or perceived leader it is the adherents who ultimately give the power and can take it away but very often do not. Even non-violent movements such as Rastafarianism, whose ‘leader/savior’ was not a party in its creation rather placed in that role by its adherents based on perception and belief, ultimately take cues from that leader regardless of whether or not the leader is meaning what is interpreted (McAlister, 2022).

In the case of Haile Selassie, he did not use this position granted him as a means of control or to establish some sort of power or dominance over any of his ‘followers’ but wholly, without denigrating their beliefs, distanced himself from the notion that he was somehow their lord and master (McAlister, 2022). This can not be said for Donald Trump who embraced or refused to denounce even the most dangerous and baseless claims and beliefs associated with the QAnon conspiracy. This was likely a symptom of his narcissism and desire to garner and keep the support of those who were/are the adherents solely for personal gain. Conversely, Qanon adherents and adherents of other violent cults will do anything to keep their leaders happy or keep them in their good graces. Qanon gains power from the far reaching internet and social media and it is possible that potential groups similar and possibly more dangerous than Qanon will emerge in the same way and begin disrupting people’s lives unbeknownst to them.

The difference with Qanon from any other cult or movement, rastafarianism, the People's Temple, etc, is that it has an impact on our daily lives.

There are members of our Congress in the United States who now espouse these beliefs and hold these conspiracy theories to be true . Even more “moderate” Republicans or now echoing Trump lies conspiracy theories based both on Trump's beliefs or supposedly and even killing odds bizarre conspiracy theories(Alicipoulios, Papasavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou & Blackburn, 2021). This not only creates an environment for violence based on its adherence belief in chewing on or Trump but also leads to their belief that they're defending what it is to be an American and in essence our very nation. This makes it even more imperative that we recognize the danger and the impact that these beliefs can spawn. It is less important to label Qanon or Trumpism as a cult or as a violent cult than it is to just recognize what makes up a cult and view their tenants and dogma and teachings and beliefs through a lens that makes clear what the impact can and cannot be.

Although Qanon is not the traditional said “cult” or New Religious Movement members still have the power to recruit people through social media, which is much more dangerous and can cause even more havoc to our democracy. Qanon has remained silent since the January 6th riot, but who's to say that the movement won't spark up again in the 2024 presidential election if Trump runs for office for a second time? With all the previous research about cults, new religious movements Qanon can identify as either of them.

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