
A NEW FACE OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Q-FUNDAMENTALISM

Katarzyna Czornik* and Monika Szynol

The University of Silesia in Katowice, Faculty of Social Science, Bankowa 11, Katowice, 40-007, Poland

(Received 31 January 2023, revised 28 February 2023)

Abstract

We consider QAnon to be a kind of modern and expansive Q-fundamentalism. It has easily overcome the barrier of the virtual world, and - driven by the dissatisfaction with the results of the U.S. presidential election in 2020 - managed to storm the Capitol on 6 January 2021. The multi-threaded QAnon narrative, containing religious, social and political demands, has been fuelled by the covid-19 pandemic crisis and disseminated mainly via social media. QAnon's potential to be a fundamentalist group stems in particular from its radicalistic postulates, growing popularity, the internationalisation of its postulates and the rapid pace of radicalisation of its supporters. QAnon is a group whose objective consists in a broadly understood transformation of religious and political factors, ideologisation, energisation, as well as addition of conspiracy to its character. The version of fundamentalism presented by QAnon displays the traits of anti-Enlightenment, anti-liberalism, moral rigourism, rejection of modernity in favour of tradition. Its characteristics also include militarism, praise of war, fascination with the warrior ethos and building an empire, but in accordance with the rules of ethics and tradition in the hierarchical society. QAnon's recruits or precursors of a new model of Q-fundamentalists are the warriors of QAnon, who has a huge number of followers all over the world.

Keywords: QAnon, religious, fundamentalism, fringe, conspiracy theories

1. Introduction

In the first decades of the 21st century the notion of fundamentalism was perceived and understood in a rather narrow sense. Due to terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon of 11 September 2001 carried out by Al-Qaeda, an Islamic terrorist group, and the subsequent war on terrorism proclaimed by president George W. Bush and waged by American administrations, the notion of fundamentalism was placed within a narrow framework which is determined by Islam and terrorism [1]. Such approach, however, is not appropriate, as while limiting the notion of fundamentalism to religious motivation, one stops discerning threats associated with other

* E-mail: katarzyna.czornik@us.edu.pl, tel.: +48608462692

dimensions of fundamentalism, which are not lacking on the threshold of the third decade of the 21st century. One of such threats is the most recognisable and at the same time the most dangerous, informal group QAnon originating from the United States, which also has its parallels in other countries, such as Great Britain or Japan (JAnon).

We assume in our study that QAnon constitutes a new dimension of expansive, modern fundamentalism. It is a group whose objective consists in a broadly understood transformation of religious and political factors, ideologisation, energisation, as well as addition of conspiracy to its character. The version of fundamentalism presented by QAnon displays the traits of anti-Enlightenment, anti-liberalism, moral rigourism, rejection of modernity in favour of tradition. Importantly, however, its characteristics include also militarism, praise of war, fascination with the warrior ethos and building an empire, but in accordance with the rules of ethics and tradition in the hierarchical society. It is possible to discern a certain return to romantic thinking, but in a modified postmodern form, which calls for searching the Revealed truth (post-truth, Energy), which is the path to new, better times. Fighting secret conspiracies, supported by the created ideology and driven by a new force, will thus become a new kind of religion (New Religious Movements - NRMs).

We claim that radicalisation of Q-believers, similarly to the radicalisation of jihadists, has become an element linking the fundamentalist group members. Mediality, a huge role of the Internet, a unique role of social media and ease of communication, which provide Q-fundamentalists with a link to the outside world, the increasing xenophobia, racism and islamophobia, perceiving reality in hostile and negative terms, the duality in the perception of the world divided into 'ours' and 'theirs' with the progressing alienation of the authorities, as well as the search for the Absolute (the omnipotent power, replacing the religious factor in the life of an individual) and dogmatic faith as infinite energy, but also a difficult moment in history - the unexpected coronavirus pandemic - undoubtedly are all factors contributing to strengthening and expansion of QAnon and Q-fundamentalists. The deep social stress caused by covid-19 and its broadly understood consequences being felt both in the economic and social but also political sphere, lead to the strengthening of the phenomenon of dystopia, which also enhances the functioning of QAnon. It is dystopia - understood as the internally consistent black vision of the future resulting from the critical observation of reality - that makes people start to look for something more: new energy and authority. In the pandemic and post-pandemic reality, dystopia - which is embedded in human thought, reflects pessimism and is a hyperbole of the negative evaluation of current situation - becomes dangerous.

We believe that this vision of reality may attract those who are searching, those who have experienced social alienation or poverty as a result of the pandemic, as well as those who do not approve of the currently propagated values, especially when they are promoted by the authorities. QAnon's recruits or rather precursors of a new model of Q-terrorist or Q-fundamentalist are the

warriors of QAnon, who has a huge number of followers all over the world. It will not be possible to assign Q-fundamentalists or Q-terrorists to one specific social stratum or identify them with a particular socio-political doctrine (one specific ideology). That will be the main difficulty as concerns their identification. They will be characterised by all-encompassing diversity and multifacetedness, including a variety of social classes, strata and groups, opinions varying from far-right and history revisionists to new religious movements, sects, and even anti-vaccine theories, while the element linking Q-fundamentalists will be their belief in conspiracy.

The research methods applied in this study include mainly the comparative method, factor analysis, systemic analysis and content analysis. The article has been structured as follows: in the first section, referring to the definition of fundamentalism, we demonstrate the determining factors, characteristics and elements which constitute this phenomenon and its various dimensions (types). In the subsequent sections we seek answers to the following questions: What is the nature of the QAnon phenomenon? What are the causes of popularity and potential expansion of Q-fundamentalists? Does the QAnon movement have the potential to stimulate a new wave of terrorism? Does the QAnon movement have the potential to stimulate a New Religious Movement? In the conclusion we identify the signals which generate the need for further research on the shape of Q-fundamentalism which is stimulated by conspiracy narratives - the increasing popularity of the QAnon movement, internationalisation of its postulates and the rapid pace of radicalisation of its followers.

2. Various faces of fundamentalism - the specificities of theoretical approach

Religious fundamentalism, based on strict conformity to the rules and norms established by a particular religion, is unquestionably the most common dimension of fundamentalism at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century [2]. However, other dimensions that are still present and even growing stronger, should not be overlooked. These dimensions consist in rigorous compliance with orders and prohibitions established by a specific political doctrine (political fundamentalism), ideology (ideological fundamentalism), as well as culture (cultural fundamentalism).

Therefore, analysing the notion of fundamentalism through the prism of the latest threats, one should refer to its multidimensional and multifaceted nature. Fundamentalism may be defined as a movement of principled and fanatical significance and engagement. Following Bassam Tibi's reasoning, it should be stated that fundamentalism is a religious and political ideology which sees an enemy in modernisation, modernity, Western values and globalisation identified with Americanisation of the world. Fundamentalist ideology is associated with a strictly orthodox view of pillars of faith and advocates the primacy of the religious element over the secular element [3]. Fundamentalism

is a set of evaluative beliefs which create a structure that is resistant to critical reasoning. Fundamentalism creates a world which finds the ultimate grounding in itself, where Truth perceived as the heritage of the past constitutes the point of reference [4]. Fundamentalism was firmly rooted in North America and fundamentalism's centre of gravity, unquestionably, rested in the United States [5].

The rise of fundamentalism is above all attributed to the rapidly progressing secularisation, crisis of spirituality and changes in the social structure in particular states, including the rapidly growing wealth of small elites and the impoverishment of an enormous part of the society, but also to colonisation of the so-called Third World countries by Western powers and their subsequent decolonisation. Other significant causes of fundamentalism include the influence of Western European states and the USA, which has been increasing since the turn of the 20th century, especially in the Middle East [6], their military presence and economic domination and attempts at forced transformation of this region, its modernisation, imposing Western value system as the only right one, or promoting democracy by way of a pro-democracy revolution carried out from above. Fundamentalism has been strengthening its impact by depreciating the messianic illusion of the US pro-democratic military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq [7].

The characteristic features of fundamentalism in terms of professing a particular doctrine include: 1) Manichaeism - perceiving the world in terms of the unceasing struggle between good and evil; 2) rejection of the division into public and private spheres - every action has a political dimension, there is no room for the neutral sphere; 3) militarisation of language - speaking about continuous struggle, attacks by evil or the need for constant protection; 4) rejection of any criticism - treating the adopted beliefs as unquestionable, incontestable and beyond criticism. The characteristics identifying the fundamentalist attitude towards the contemporary world may be summarised as follows: 1) selection of specific values followed by an individual or a group (religious, political, national values); 2) the selected values are absolute and indisputable and are not subject to modification; 3) societies are divided in a dichotomous manner into the good ('us') versus the evil ('them'); 4) the initiators of fundamentalist actions at first operate within a civil society, but they gain broader support over time; 5) the initiators create the identity of the group members; 6) the initiators reduce the identity crisis of the joining individuals with the values they promote; 7) fundamentalist movements do not unite or compromise, such acts being considered as betrayal of the adopted values; 8) fundamentalist movements remain anti-democratic and anti-pluralist [8]. Joel Carpenter enlightens a distinguishing mark of fundamentalism: "Militancy was the mark of fundamentalism, and ideological militancy especially. Fundamentalists were, in other words, a contentious lot, and they held up confrontation as one of their principal duties" [9].

Thus, the general features which constitute modern fundamentalists may be defined as follows: 1) opposition to secularised legislation; 2) exaggerated, even demonic attitude towards opponents, who are mythologised and demonised; 3) engagement in the fight against any entities that do not share their beliefs and views, and even leading a crusade to make the world a better place; 4) conviction that they have got the authority to preach the Truth (revealed or absolute); 5) treating members of their own group as the chosen ones (elite); 6) subordination to a strong, charismatic leader, who makes use of the fanatics' devotion; 7) strict conformity to a rigorous code; 8) creating socio-cultural barriers; 9) dichotomous thinking (us versus them; the good versus the evil); 10) selection of those norms, rules and traditions which strictly conform to the adopted ideology; 11) establishing paramilitary formations which assist in achieving their goals. The arising fundamentalist movements thus constitute a response to the deepening deprivation and the broadly understood crises perceived by them as a threat to their identity [10]. Fundamentalists first strive to exist in the conditions of a crisis, and subsequently to affect mass awareness in accordance with the adopted objectives under the banner of defence of their values for the purpose of dominance and expansion [11].

In a narrower approach, where religious fundamentalism is taken into account, its constituent features are as follows: 1) critical attitude towards the rulers, caused by their departure from religious morality and religious law; 2) idealisation of traditional religiousness and its revival as a means in the struggle against evil; 3) axiological absolutism resulting in imposing the movement's own interpretation and vision of social order; 4) hostility towards those who do not accept the adopted values; 5) tendency to extend the religious order to all spheres of social life; 6) undertaking political activity by means of which the promoted vision of the world is implemented. It is also worth mentioning that the most widespread religious fundamentalism in the second half of the 20th century and in the 21st century (Islamic fundamentalism) creates the rules of law and state based on the Quran, the holy book of Islam, thus striving to politicise religion. Focusing on the criticism of modernity and proclaiming the principles of neotraditionalism, it does not yet reject the technological revolution of the West on the assumption that its inventions can be effectively used to totally eliminate Western influence from the Islamic world. It is important to note that fundamentalists strive to eliminate any attempts to modernise religion, promoting the revival of religion in its original form, propagating 'jihad by sword' and strongly opposing globalisation, consumerism, modernisation and McDonaldisation of the Muslim world [12].

As follows from the above, fundamentalism is a kind of social activity which does not necessarily result in the establishment of a social or political movement. Albert Pawłowski, who defines fundamentalism as a set of political ideas constituting universal systems of values, presents five phases of the development of fundamentalism, emphasising that each phase is characteristic of a new type of fundamentalism. As he points out, the phases occur in the following order: 1) phase of fundamentalist thought; 2) phase of fundamentalist

ideology; 3) phase of fundamentalist doctrine; 4) phase of fundamentalist movement; 5) phase of fundamentalist totalism, when it becomes mass awareness [13]. Douglas Pratt, again, identifies three phases of religious fundamentalism [14]. The first phase is termed passive fundamentalism. The features that occur at this stage are characteristic of all fundamentalist groups, as passive fundamentalism is devoid of social or political character. It is solely a religious phenomenon opposing the use of violence. It concentrates in the enclaves, where time is devoted to defining theological principles and religious practice. There is a conviction of the infallibility of sacred texts and the need to interpret them literally. The second phase is referred to as assertive (hard-line) fundamentalism. At this stage the newly formed doctrine strengthens, takes on a socio-political character and opens up to the outside world. A fundamentalist group identity is created, which constitutes the common good and requires total commitment, regardless of the costs. Individuals and groups with other views are condemned and contact with people from outside the community (even with family members) is forbidden. The third phase is termed impositional. This stage is of radical nature, it resorts to violent behaviours and actions, as well as discriminatory values. It is based on the model of God's authority and sanctions the use of violence.

Having analysed the issues related to various dimensions of fundamentalism, it is also worth referring to several attempts at its systematisation, since this phenomenon has been classified in different ways. Steve Bruce distinguishes between two types of fundamentalism: pre-modern and modern [15]. As far as its scope is concerned, fundamentalism can be classified as intra-systemic fundamentalism - limited exclusively to religious matters, and expansive fundamentalism - permeating all spheres of life. Religious fundamentalism can be divided into Islamic, Christian, Hindu or Buddhist fundamentalism. There is also secular (and thus pseudo-religious) fundamentalism, which can be exemplified by Zionism. Scientific sources also distinguish between critical fundamentalism directed towards transcendental philosophy and understood as a science of methods and principles of philosophical practice, and epistemic fundamentalism (the so-called foundationalism), which is a set of selected norms which are always recognised as true and constitute the foundations of knowledge and are universal in the fields of history, culture and geography.

3. The QAnon phenomenon - from virtuality to reality - the case study

The QAnon phenomenon started relatively innocently: from messages posted at the end of 2017 by a mysterious 'Q' on the 4chan Internet platform. The dynamically increasing interest in the posts made by this user, who claimed to have access to American state secrets, was the reason why 'Time' magazine listed him in 2018 among the most influential people on the Internet, as thousands of people started to believe him, or at least to acknowledge his musings might be credible and probable, thus laying the "foundation of a wide-

ranging conspiracy theory” [*The 25 Most Influential People on the Internet*, Time, 28 June 2018, <https://time.com/5324130/most-influential-internet/>]. QAnon reached its peak of popularity on 6 January 2021, during the attack at the United States Capitol, which happened as a consequence of a protest against results of the presidential election held in November 2020. Not only did a considerable number of protesters use the emblems, slogans or symbols of Q at that time, but an even larger number of Internauts all over the world tried to find the answer to the question: what is QAnon? An analysis of Google Trends shows that the term ‘QAnon’ was most frequently searched in the period from 3 to 9 January 2021, and this value constitutes the reference point for the whole measurement algorithm. The term was searched twice less frequently in the period from 29 July to 4 August 2018, when Q followers appeared for the first time at President D. Trump’s rally in Tampa [*Qanon*, Google Trends, https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2017-10-27%202021-05-14&q=%2Fg%2F1hc_gvb_r].

The first post by Q (the so-called Qdrop or drop) appeared on 28 October 2017 and referred to Hillary Clinton’s extradition in case of her alleged intentions to escape across the border during intentionally started riots in the biggest cities of the United States [16]. It was supposedly the aftermath of the controversy revealed in 2015, related to the use of unsecured private email servers for official communications by H. Clinton (then the Secretary of State in Barack Obama’s administration) and her co-workers and the possibility of disclosing classified information and state secrets in this way. In the course of the respective FBI investigation, it was found that some standards had been violated as a result of carelessness, however, the law had not been broken, which the Bureau announced in July 2016 [*Statement by FBI Director James B. Comey on the Investigation of Secretary Hillary Clinton’s Use of a Personal E-Mail System*, FBI National Press Office, (202) 324-3691, Washington, 5 July 2016, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/statement-by-fbi-director-james-b-comey-on-the-investigation-of-secretary-hillary-clinton2019s-use-of-a-personal-e-mail-system>]. Nevertheless, the investigation was resumed in October 2016, in the final stage of the presidential campaign, which could have had an impact on the results of the presidential election in November, which H. Clinton - the Democratic Party’s nominee for president - eventually lost to the Republican candidate, Donald Trump [17, 18]. Around that time WikiLeaks website started to publish some of the messages hacked from the account of John Podesta, the then chairman of the Democratic presidential nominee’s campaign [*The Podesta Emails*, WikiLeaks, <https://wikileaks.org/podesta-emails/>]. Shortly after that the far-right and conservative media (including fake news websites) and social media informed that the emails contained coded messages proving involvement of several high-ranking Democratic Party officials (including the Clintons) and some businesspeople (especially restaurant owners) in the process of child sexual abuse and human trafficking [19]. This is how a conspiracy theory known as ‘Pizzagate’ originated, which in December 2016 led to a shooting in a pizzeria in Washington carried out by a man from

Salisbury in his twenties, intending to rescue children that were allegedly kept in the basement of the restaurant [C. Kang and A. Goldman, *In Washington Pizzeria Attack, Fake News Brought Real Guns*, The New York Times, 5 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/business/media/comet-ping-pong-pizza-shooting-fake-news-consequences.html>; S.S. Hsu, *Comet Pizza gunman pleads guilty to federal and local charges*, Washington Post, 24 March 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/comet-pizza-gunman-to-appear-at-plea-deal-hearing-friday-morning/2017/03/23/e12c91ba-0986-11e7-b77c-0047d15a24e0_story.html]. Despite the fact that the theory was soon debunked [A. Drobnic Holan, *2016 Lie of the Year: Fake news*, PolitiFact, 13 December 2016, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2016/dec/13/2016-lie-year-fake-news/>], some Americans found it real, credible or likely. According to a survey conducted by the Public Policy Polling following the attack in Washington, the belief in H. Clinton's connection to the child sex ring was expressed by 9% of the respondents (mainly D. Trump voters), 72% believed the opposite, while nearly one out of five respondents admitted they were not sure [*Trump Remains Unpopular. Voters Prefer Obama on SCOTUS Pick*, Public Policy Polling, 9 December 2016, https://www.publicpolicypolling.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PPP_Release_National_120916.pdf]. According to the data collected by The Economist/YouGov Poll, 17% of Clinton voters and as many as 46% of Trump voters admitted that the leaked emails talked about paedophilia and human trafficking (while 82% of Democratic voters and 53% of Republican voters were of the opposite opinion) [K. Frankovic, *Belief in conspiracies largely depends on political identity*, YouGovAmerica, 27 December 2016, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/12/27/belief-conspiracies-largely-depends-political-iden>]. The foundations for the activity of QAnon had been laid.

Originally, it was the fight against the satanic, cannibalistic paedophile ring, composed of depraved and corrupted American political (especially Democrats), business and Hollywood elites ('the Cabal') controlling mainstream media, that constituted a pillar of fight initiated by Q [20]. Over time, the discourse, which was carried out by means of drops (posted on the 8chan/8kun website and shared mainly through social media and 'independent' websites) [21] has extended its range and included such issues as: the battle against global elites constituting the so-called deep state and made up of Jews, Freemasons, Illuminati or reptilians striving to establish their own New World Order, the threats of the 5G technology or the global conspiracy, which purportedly - according to QAnon adherents - is the coronavirus pandemic [22]. Aggregating still new threads of conspiracy narratives by QAnon and evolving towards the superconspiracy theory [23] should come as no surprise for at least two reasons. Firstly, the belief in one conspiracy theory is likely to entail the belief in others [24, 25]. Secondly, the modus operandi is here of key importance. It is described as baking: Q drops Crumbs which in the hands of the followers of the theory (Bakers) become Bread [A. Marwick and W.C. Partin, *The Construction of Alternative Facts: 'Qanon' Researchers as Scientific*

Selves, Paper presented at AoIR 2020: The 21st Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. <http://spir.aoir.org>. Actually, Q leaves only a trail of encoded clues which the active believers must follow in order to reach the ‘truth’ and interpret them to produce the proofs themselves. This specific call to action challenges the ‘researchers’ and ‘investigators’ (calling themselves ‘true patriots’) to personal sacrifice and stronger commitment. Reed Berkowitz compared this mode of operating to a LARP (Live-Action Role-Playing Game) or ARG (Alternate Reality Game), where the participants, guided by apophenia, are led by the hints provided by Q, the game runner (‘puppet master’), but not in order to create their own world that best serves them, but to develop reality that best serves Q [R. Berkowitz, *A Game Designer’s Analysis Of QAnon*, Medium, 30 September 2020, <https://medium.com/curiouserinstitution/a-game-designers-analysis-of-qanon-580972548be5>]. Q creates a peculiar escape room: the participants of the game solve puzzles which allow them to find a key to open the door to a better world which is cleansed of evil. The problem is that behind one open door there is another, closed one.

4. QAnon - New Religious Movements - Q-fundamentalism - discussion and results

The QAnon phenomenon fully corresponds with the fundamentalist narrative. This fundamentalism is modern, expansive and based on religious fundamentalism - predominantly Christian, since QAnon presents some of the characteristics of New Religious Movements [26]. Firstly, it is based on dichotomy. According to the believers, the world is divided into good people, whom they represent, as a matter of fact (also those not yet ‘enlightened’), and evil people, identified as depraved elites which should be eliminated. This approach also makes QAnon similar to satanic conspiracy theories and the Satanic panic of 1980s and 1990s [27]. Since their vision is alternative to the existing *status quo*, they are treated by the society with a certain suspicion. This is why the task to ‘convert’ (‘awaken’) the unawakened - the task they fulfil through a variety of virtual communication channels - is of great significance. Importantly, the leader of the movement (Q) has charisma, is not constrained by any rules and is not accountable to anyone, and his prophecies are accepted indiscriminately - even when they do not come true. Evolution of the content exchanged between the movement followers also indicates that the movement itself may be undergoing rapid changes, adapting to the new circumstances. The key narratives in QAnon are millennialism [28] and apocalypticism [29]. The energy driving the group is the belief that riddance of evil and redemption is forthcoming, which will be brought about by Donald Trump, who has been elevated to the status of a god by the supporters of the theory (he also called himself ‘the chosen one’). Interestingly, according to the results of a survey carried out by Pew Research Center in 2020, 5% of American respondents said D. Trump was chosen by God himself to become president, while 27% of the

respondents admitted that Trump's election was part of God's overall plan [30]. It is of key importance to carry out the clandestine operation allegedly conducted by the administration of the 45th president of the United States - 'The Storm', which is possible due to 'The Great Awakening'. The <https://greatawakeningreport.com/> website helps to monitor the 'progress' in the 'awakening'. The authors say about themselves: "We are a community of cultural creatives and like-minded people seeking truth, awakening, and disclosure." [The Great Awakening Report, *Who Are We*, <https://greatawakeningreport.com/welcome-to-the-great-awakening-report/>] Obviously, access to the full contents requires payment of a fee. Interestingly, biblical motives, attracting also a part of Christians to QAnon, and at the same time explaining the anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic threads disseminated in the drops, are developed under the umbrella of the Omega Kingdom Ministry (OKM), which is a formalised tool for religious indoctrination [G.A. Smith, *About a third in U.S. see God's hand in presidential elections, but fewer say God picks winners based on policies*, Pew Research Center, 12 March 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/12/about-a-third-in-u-s-see-gods-hand-in-presidential-elections-but-fewer-say-god-picks-winners-based-on-policies/>].

Due to such factors as the formation of an informal, noninstitutionalised community driven by the dissatisfaction with the existing world order, refusal to accept the subjectively identified despicable practices and by hopes of building a better world, as well as engagement in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents, building a collective identity, solidarity and a shared system of beliefs, QAnon can be considered as a social movement [M.A. Argentino, *The Church of QAnon: Will conspiracy theories form the basis of a new religious movement?*, *The Conversation*, 18 May 2020, <https://theconversation.com/the-church-of-qanon-will-conspiracy-theories-form-the-basis-of-a-new-religious-movement-137859>]. According to the Radicalisation Awareness Network, the fundamental objective of the movement is to defeat evil and build a world without this evil. QAnon provides simple explanations of the complex world (even more so in the pandemic period) and consequently - also the psychological wellbeing - in particular to the far-right and patriot groups and ordinary people ('everyman'), e.g. to the marginalised parents who are seeking sense and justice [31-33]. Two key factors should be noted: emotions and messianism of the followers, expressed through the necessity to free the children from the harm caused to them by the elites, and making this mission communal (In accordance with the 'motto' of QAnon followers: 'Where We Go One, We Go All' - WWG1WGA), particularly when social ties (with family, friends, co-workers) fall apart as a consequence of individuals' involvement in its pursuit [Radicalisation Awareness Network, *The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives*, Conclusion Paper, RAN C&N event - 24 and 25 Nov. 2020, Digital Meeting, 25 Feb. 2021, 4]. The lack of understanding which occurs here is mutual: relatives and friends of Anon followers do not understand the world of fantasy and myths into which they are plunged, and the followers do not understand their lack of support for their task.

After all, the radical social change they are striving to achieve, is expected to create order which will not only be good and moral but also free, just, equal and prosperous. One of the threads included in the QAnon mythology is the cult of NESARA/GESARA (National/Global Economic Security and Recovery Act), popularised at the beginning of the 21st century, according to which a new economic order should be established that would cancel all debts and guarantee good basic income and prosperity to all citizens [34]. Note that this order was to be allegedly established in September 2001. However, these plans were blocked by the orchestrated terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. That was, anyway, the position of the main propagator of this theory, Shaini Goodwin [S. Goodwin, *[dovefo] NESARA's Announcement Brings Truth about 9-11 Attacks*, 11 September 2006, [https://web.archive.org/web/20090703101000, http://www.nesara.us/doverpts06/September_11_2006.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20090703101000/http://www.nesara.us/doverpts06/September_11_2006.htm)].

QAnon may also be understood as an exaggerated reflection of the political conflict in the social structure, particularly evident in terms of the American two-party system. The political context of Q activities, the unequivocal support for one of the parties and involvement in political rivalry, the unconditional support for one of its sides and the uncompromising stance against the opponents, demonstrate that this phenomenon may be considered as a political movement [35]. It was particularly evident during the 2020 presidential campaign, when QAnon followers supported Donald Trump. Since 2018 numerous QAnon adherents attended campaign rallies [*Conspiracy theory group appears at Trump rally*, CNN, 1 August 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/bvideos/politics/2018/08/01/qanon-trump-rally-foreman-lead-pkg-vpx.cnn>; Y. Dzhanova, *QAnon supporters are expected to headline multiple campaign rallies for President Trump this weekend*, Business Insider, 29 August 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/qanon-supporters-will-rally-for-president-donald-trump-this-weekend-2020-8?IR=T>], they also called for voting for 'their' candidate in their posts [T. De Smedt and V. Rupar, *The QAnon superconspiracy. Analysis of tweets during the 2020 US presidential election*, Textgain, 7, 2020]. The aim of the movement was certainly to maintain the leadership of the then president, which was also in the interest of the Republican establishment. During his struggle for re-election, D. Trump willingly took advantage of such engagement within the framework of expanding standard political practices related to persuasion and electoral mobilisation. Not only did he post content produced by QAnon on his social media accounts [36], but he also indirectly expressed his support for the 'postulates' of the movement, admitting that he did not know much about the it, but 'these are people that love our country', and when asked about his attitude to the theory that he is saving the world from satanic cult of paedophiles and cannibals, he started his answer with a question: "Is that supposed to be a bad thing or a good thing?" [*QAnon: Trump lauds bizarre conspiracy theory*, BBC, 20 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-53844108>]. A symbolic (and dangerous) confirmation of the political orientation of QAnon was the riot of 6 January 2021, which took place when Congress met to affirm the results of the election

lost by Trump to Joe Biden. Supporters of the Republican candidate, some of whom were using Q symbols [D. Barry, M. McIntire and M. Rosenberg, *Our President Wants Us Here: The Mob That Stormed the Capitol*, The New York Times, 9 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/capitol-rioters.html>; *FBI chief says five QAnon conspiracy advocates arrested for Jan 6 U.S. Capitol attack*, Reuters, 14 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/fbi-chief-says-five-qanon-conspiracy-advocates-arrested-jan-6-us-capitol-attack-2021-04-14/>], stormed the Capitol. Five people died as a result of the riot [K. Evelyn, *Capitol attack: the five people who died*, The Guardian, 8 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/08/capitol-attack-police-officer-five-deaths>].

However, it was not the only act of violence with QAnon in the background. The radicalisation level of some QAnon followers has been manifested on numerous occasions - according to National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), as of February 2021, 56 followers of the movement have committed ideologically-motivated crimes (most of them - 44 - were men) [National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *QAnon Offenders in the United States. START Research Brief*, February 2021, https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_QAnon_Feb2021.pdf], therefore we suggest that this movement should also be considered as an informal terrorist group. As early as in May 2019 the local FBI bureau in Phoenix warned against the risk of generating domestic terrorism by Q-movement. FBI admitted that fringe political conspiracy theories “very likely motivate some domestic extremists, wholly or in part, to engage in criminal or violent activity” [FBI Phoenix Field Office, ‘BI Intelligence Bulletin, (U/LES) Anti-government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity, Phoenix, 30 May 2019, <https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/420379775-fbi-conspiracy-theories-domestic-extremism.pdf>]. In April 2021, FBI director Christopher Wray stated that “We’re not investigating the theory in its own right” [Z. Cohen, *FBI director says bureau is not investigating QAnon conspiracy in its own right*, CNN, 15 April 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/15/politics/fbi-director-wray-qanon-threat/index.html>], however, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said: “Domestic violent extremism poses the most lethal, persistent terrorism-related threat to the homeland today. In collaboration with our partners across every level of government and in the private sector, DHS is working to combat the spread of conspiracy theories and other false narratives on social media and other online platforms that can radicalize people to violence and fuel domestic violent extremism” [<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/15/politics/fbi-director-wray-qanon-threat/index.html>].

5. Conclusions - brace yourself, the QAnon fundamentalists are coming

The main aim of this article was to demonstrate the direction in which the QAnon movement, perceived as a modern, expansive fundamentalist group having the characteristics of a terrorist organisation as well as specific features of a New Religious Movement, will evolve in the coming years. We believe QAnon has the potential to fit into a wave of neo-right-wing terrorism, which, among others, will be driven by fringe conspiracy theories: radical narratives based on the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent ends, which generates the belief that nothing happens by accident, nothing is what it seems and everything is connected [37].

The multi-threaded narrative of QAnon, comprising religious (cleanse the world following 'The Great Awakening' and carry out the 'The Storm' operation), social (create a world which will be moral and full of prosperity) and political (maintain and restore the leadership of Donald Trump) postulates, is particularly dangerous for three main reasons: its popularity, its internationalisation and the pace of radicalisation of its followers.

According to Pew Research Center, Americans' knowledge of QAnon increased dramatically in 2020: at the beginning of the year 23% adults said that they had heard or read about the movement (a lot or a little), while in September the number amounted to 47% of the respondents. The majority of these people (74%) found QAnon a very bad or somewhat bad thing for the country, while one-fifth of them said that the movement was good for the country (somewhat good - 16%, very good - 4%) [*5 facts about the QAnon conspiracy theories*, Pew Research Center, 16 November 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/16/5-facts-about-the-qanon-conspiracy-theories/>]. In the poll conducted in February 2021 by the Economist/YouGov, 71% of the respondents admitted they had heard about QAnon (28% - a lot, 43% - a little). However, only 13% of them had a favourable opinion of the movement, yet 23% said they personally knew someone who supported Q (23%) [*February 6-9, 2021 - 1500 U.S. Adult Citizens*, The Economist/YouGov Poll, <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/rqxd02ujy/econTabReport.pdf>, 64-69]. Taking the representativeness of the survey into account, the minority supporting QAnon means millions of Americans.

What is more, the Internet causes that conspiracy theories - which have long been present in the public discourse - have become increasingly visible and popular irrespective of state borders [38]. The same happened in the case of QAnon postulates, which have been adapted by, inter alia, far-right and populist movements all over the world. In Europe (predominantly in Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom) it has manifested itself in at least several ways: through the online pro-Trump political campaigning in 2020; through the adapting of the narratives to the local circumstances as well as identification and discreditation of national and local elites allegedly involved in various contemptible practices; through the appropriation of the name of an

international non-governmental organisation Save the Children and promotion of the original message conveyed by QAnon, related to fighting the satanic and cannibalistic paedophile ring; or through the attendance and active participation of Q followers in mass demonstrations organised by opponents of pandemic lockdowns and restrictions, as well as through strengthening the anti-vaccine propaganda [C. Labbe, V. Padovese, M. Richter and A.S. Harling, *Special Report: QAnon in Europe. QAnon's Deep State conspiracies spread to Europe*, News Guard, 2020, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-report-qanon/>; M. Scott, *QAnon goes European*, Politico, 23 October 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/qanon-europe-coronavirus-protests/>; 22, p. 32-37]. Similar activity of QAnon adherents can be found in, inter alia, Japan, Canada or South Africa [M. Zimmerman, *QAnon's Rise in Japan Shows Conspiracy Theory's Global Spread*, Bloomberg, 29 November 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-29/qanon-s-rise-in-japan-shows-conspiracy-theory-s-global-spread>; B. Owen, *Canada not immune to QAnon as pandemic fuels conspiracy theories, experts say*, CTV News, 11 December 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/sci-tech/canada-not-immune-to-qanon-as-pandemic-fuels-conspiracy-theories-experts-say-1.5226762>; H. McEwen, *Global white supremacy cult: How the South African radical Right bolsters US extremism*, Open Democracy, 11 February 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/global-cult-white-supremacy-how-south-african-radical-right-bolstering-us-extremism/>].

The third warning signal is the available data concerning the pace of radicalisation of QAnon followers. According to START, out of the 56 people who committed crimes in the United States inspired by this narrative, as many as two thirds had been influenced by Q for less than a year, and in some cases they radicalised in mere few weeks. The methods of radicalisation used by QAnon are confusingly similar to the methods used by extremist religious terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda or Islamic State [39]: the process starts with recruitment of followers in their own circle (e.g. among the recipients of the content in social media), at the next stage relations are built between a supporter and the candidates and belief in the prophesies of Q is aroused, then personal commitment and fight are promoted. It must be assumed that radicalisation will increase due the subjectively perceived lack of political representation of a part of the society, increasing political alienation, uncertainty resulting from the pandemic crisis and the ease of dissemination of misleading content, fake news and conspiracy narratives via social media or alternative 'news' portals. In consequence - the number of Q-fundamentalists will grow bigger and bigger.

Last but not least - current (crisis) political, economic and social situation caused by the covid-19 pandemic is conducive to radicalisation not only of QAnon followers and representatives of other extreme right movements; extremism occurs also in the left wing [40]. The events inspired by Q only illustrate how huge the potential for radicalisation of the believers in fringe conspiracy theories can be. Therefore, further research on the *modus operandi*

of expansive activities of the QAnon fundamentalist movement driven by conspiracy narratives, right-wing ideology and religious factors (Christian fundamentalism), seems indispensable.

References

- [1] C. de Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment. The modern struggle between faith and reason*, Bodley Head, London, 2017, XXIII-XXIV.
- [2] Y.M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1990, 53-68.
- [3] B. Tibi, *Islamism and Islam*, Westchester Group Book, New Haven, 2012, 31-33.
- [4] B. Tibi, *The challenge of fundamentalism: political Islam and the new world disorder*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, 20-24.
- [5] M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925*, 2nd edn., Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, 179-180.
- [6] T. Osman, *Islamism. A History of Political Islam from the Fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Rise of ISIS*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2017, 217-241.
- [7] B. Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Fundamentalism since 1945*, Routledge, London, 2005, 94-114.
- [8] B. Misztal and A. Shupe, *Makins Sense of the Global Rival of Fundamentalism*, in *Religion and politics in comparative perspective: revival of religious fundamentalism in East and West*, B. Misztal & A. Shupe (eds.), Praeger, London, 1992, 3-9.
- [9] J.A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, 64.
- [10] N.J. Brown and A. Hamzawy, *Between religion and politics*, Twayne Publishers, Wahsington D.C., 2010, 1-7.
- [11] A.B. van Fossen, *Radical Religious Movements: A Global Perspective*, in *Religion and politics in comparative perspective: revival of religious fundamentalism in East and West*, B. Misztal & A. Shupe (eds.), Praeger, London, 1992, 151-163.
- [12] M. Marczevska-Rytko, *Polish Political Science*, **36** (2007) 215-221.
- [13] A. Pawłowski, *Fundamentalizm współczesny: praca zbiorowa*, Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna im. Tadeusza Kotarbińskiego, Zielona Góra, 1994, 8.
- [14] D. Pratt, *J. Relig.*, **11(1)** (2006) 438-456.
- [15] S. Bruce, *Fundamentalism*, 2nd edn., Key Concepts, Polity, Cambridge, 2008, 17-24.
- [16] T.R. Tangherlini, V. Roychowdhury and P.M. Broadwell, *Bridges, Sex Slaves, Tweets, and Guns. A Multi-Domain Model of Conspiracy Theory*, in *Folklore and Social Media*, A. Peck & T.J. Blank (eds.), University Press of Colorado, Louisville, 2020, 55.
- [17] W.L. Bennett, *Democracy Trumped*, in *US Election Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign. Early reflections from leading academics*, D. Lilleker, D. Jackson, E. Thorsen & A. Veneti (eds), The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, Poole, 2016, 98.
- [18] D. Halcoussis, A.D. Lowenberg and G.M. Phillips, *Soc. Sci. Quart.*, **101(1)** (2020) 161-171.
- [19] A. Marwick and R. Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online. Report*, Data & Society Research Institute, New York, 2017, 55-56.

- [20] A. Garry, S. Walther, R. Mohamed and A. Mohamen, *Journal for Deradicalization*, **26(March)** (2021) 156.
- [21] A. Gallagher, J. Davey and M. Hart, *The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory. Key trends in QAnon activity since 2017. Report*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2020, 5-8.
- [22] T. De Smeth and V. Rupar, *QAnon 2. Spreading Conspiracy Theories on Twitter. Report*, Media Diversity Institute, Brussels, 2020, 17-19.
- [23] M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2003, 6.
- [24] T. Goertzel, *Polit. Psychol.*, **15(4)** (1994) 731-742.
- [25] R.M. Sutton and K.M. Douglas, *Examining the monological nature of conspiracy theories*, in *Power, politics, and paranoia: Why people are suspicious of their leaders*, J.W. van Prooijen & P.A. Lange (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, 254-272.
- [26] E. Barker, *New Religious Movements*, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, N.J. Smelser & P.B. Baltes (eds.), Vol. 16, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2001, 10631-10634.
- [27] M. Vrzal, *Theory and Practice in English Studies*, **9(1-2)** (2020) 54-59.
- [28] B.R. Wilson, *Millennialism*, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, N.J. Smelser & P.B. Baltes (eds.), Vol. 14, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2001, 9881-9885.
- [29] P. Boyer, *The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalyptic in the United States*, in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 3: *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, S.J. Stein (ed.), Continuum, New York, 1998, 164-176.
- [30] P. McLaren and P. Jandrić, *Postdigital Science and Education*, **2** (2020) 303.
- [31] H. Blumer, *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1969, 99.
- [32] N. Crossley, *Making sense of social movements*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2002, 3-7.
- [33] D. Della Porta and M. Diani, *Social Movements. An Introduction, second edition*, Blackwell Publishing, Madlen, 2006, 21.
- [34] Network Contagion Research Institute, *The QAnon Conspiracy: Destroying Families, Dividing Communities, Undermining Democracy*, Rutgers - Miller Center for Community Protection and Resilience, New Brunswick, 2020, 10.
- [35] T.R. Rochon, *World Polit.*, **42(2)** 1990 299-313.
- [36] J. Tollefson, *Nature*, **590** (2021) 192-193, online at <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00257-y>.
- [37] M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2003, 3-4.
- [38] M.J. Wood and K.M. Douglas, *Front. Psychol.*, **4** (2013) 1-9.
- [39] A. Warius and B. Fishman, *CTC Sentinel*, **2(2)** (2009) 1-3.
- [40] J. Guhl and L. Gerster, *German-Language Digital Extremism in the Context of the COVID-10 Pandemic. Report*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2020, 25-30.