

Under God’s Consent: An Examination of ‘Religious Tradition’ as a Nodal-Point for Illiberal Alliances in Hungary and the United States

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Abstract: In the following paper I construct an argument for how “illiberal democracy” operates as a *floating signifier* for a more defined ethno-religious political program. While the term is employed by figures on the populist-right, it obscures what is driving the relationship between Hungarian and American conservatives.¹ If illiberal democracy is a *floating signifier* then there must be another ideology that grounds Orbán’s rhetoric with his base. Following the work of András Máté-Tóth, who tied Central European right-wing populism to a “wounded collective identity,” I argue that *religious tradition* binds together this wounded collective identity and operates as a *nodal point* in Orbán’s rhetoric.² Thus, illiberalism or illiberal democracy represents a malleable program for a restorative, ethno-religious nationalism. In short, illiberal democracy is grounded in the politicized language of ‘Judeo-Christian’ values, an Antemurale myth, and the crisis of Christian persecution. Finally, and arguably most interesting, this paper attempts to explain Orbán’s exceptional influence within American conservative politics through a post-structuralist analysis of his CPAC speech. A post-structuralist discourse analysis reveals how *religious tradition* operates as a shared language between Hungarian and American conservatism.

Keywords: Hungary, United States, Orbán, Christian Nationalism, Illiberalism

Introduction

At the most recent CPAC convention the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán spoke to the growing

Christian-nationalist movements in both his nation and the United States. Not one to be shy about his language, Orbán contended that a “trust” in Judeo-Christian

1 The term “floating signifier” is central to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In short, a floating signifier is an empty term that redirects political animosities or attitudes towards another. See: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, 2001).

2 The concept of “Religious Tradition” that I reference is developed in the following two works: Martin Riesebradt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); Geneviève Zubrzycki, “Religion, Religious Tradition, and Nationalism: Jewish Revival in Poland and ‘Religious Heritage’ in Québec,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 3 (2012): 442–55.

teachings would deliver the west victory against adversarial leftists, cultural-Marxists, and liberals.³ This language is not new from the Fidesz leader, and yet on American soil it resonated with a Republican party that has become increasingly entrenched in the vernacular of the ‘culture wars’—Christianity vs. secularism, Americanism vs. liberalism, etc. Orbán’s presence at the American CPAC convention is not only noteworthy, but offers Americanists a rare opportunity to assess the impact of foreign political developments on domestic politics. In particular, the growing influence of Viktor Orbán’s style of ‘illiberal democracy’ among the American right.

What does illiberal democracy mean exactly? It has been over 25 years since Fareed Zakaria defined the term in *Foreign Affairs* as, “a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism,” the latter represented in restrictions on speech and press, the curtailing of liberties, and threats to human rights (Zakaria 1997, 24). In the late 20th century, Zakaria considered nations like Russia (then under Boris Yeltsin), Belarus, and Romania as paradigmatic illiberal democracies.⁴ However, a quarter century later the term has found renewed meaning in what may be surprising locations for commentators in 1997—those nations with movements that have either outwardly embraced illiberal democracy or that have hitched their wagon to its momentum include the Philippines, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States.

Yet it is Hungary, once a beacon of post-soviet democratic ambitions, that has become the bellwether for illiberal politics. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has championed his state’s path towards illiberal democracy by rejecting the authority of supranational institutions (like the EU and UN); defining national belonging in ethnic rather than civic terms; and touting a distrust of domestic political opposition. The weight of Orbán’s political program rests not in his blanket calls to illiberalism, but in what illiberal democracy has come to identify and sanction within his rhetoric. In fact, illiberal democracy lacks weight as a standalone term – it is what some scholars may colloquially call a ‘garbage term’ in political science. Rather, as this paper demonstrates, illiberal democracy draws its power and meaning by triggering a constellation of racial-religious

attitudes. This less visible racial-religious message allows Orbán to successfully tout his vision of illiberal democracy to receptive audiences in the United States. In turn, American conservatives reinterpret Orbán’s political program within their own historical and social context.

Methodological Approach & Case Study

I. Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis

Given Orbán’s recent appearances at the Conservative Political Action Conferences (first in Budapest in May 2022; the second in Dallas in August of the same year), I have chosen to focus the analysis on his address in Dallas. The Dallas speech is chosen for two reasons: (I) it is representative of not only Orbán’s domestic political presence, but also his international presence; and (II) the speech situates Orbán in direct conversation with his American interlocutors. While his Dallas speech forms the basis of the analysis, it is important to recognize that discourse is embedded in historical, social, and political fields (Wodak and De Cilla and Reisigl 1999, 149). Therefore, in acknowledging discursive context, this analysis draws upon other addresses from Viktor Orbán as well as important historical and political events that shape the context of his discourse. In addition to Orbán’s CPAC speeches, a comparative analysis is established through a brief look at the discourse of his American interlocutors—like former President Donald Trump, CPAC chairman Matt Schlapp, and media personalities like Rod Dreher and Tucker Carlson. The two CPAC conferences and the media surrounding them offer an ideal case study for the discursive transfer of conservative and illiberal thought.

As stated earlier, the objective of this study is to further our understanding of the deeper meaning and implications behind the discursive push for illiberal democracy and, the strange marriage between the Hungarian far-right and the American far-right. To achieve this Orbán’s CPAC address is approached through a post-structuralist lens. Rather than focusing on the structural or institutional drivers of illiberalism, this investigation operates on the understanding that ‘illiberal democracy’ is itself a political discourse that

3 Hungarian Government, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas” (Speech, Dallas, August 4, 2022), www.miniszterelnok.hu.

4 It is important to note that Zakaria’s initial definition of “illiberal democracy” is not politically neutral. His article in *Foreign Affairs* makes the positive argument for liberal democracy in the late 20th century; therefore, illiberal democracy was originally offered as a term that could explain the absence of liberal democratic principles in a functioning democracy.

advocates and justifies the short-circuiting of democratic structures and institutions. This study supports the theory that discourse shapes societal problems and the corresponding modes of political organization (Hartz 2019, 3).

To further explore the discursive construction of illiberal democracy, I employ a methodological schema introduced in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, that is further developed in the context of Central European conservatism by Christian Lamour and Ronald Hartz. From the Laclauian perspective, populist discursive output is characterized by a *chain of equivalence*. Lamour defines this as “the association of different demands and identities that can be substituted by one another to construct the demarcation between the in-group and the out-group” (Lamour 2022, 320). For Laclau and Mouffe, the chain of equivalence is the most general condition of existence and hegemonic formation (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 144). This theory holds that difference alone is not sufficient to construct social and hegemonic limits (i.e., who/what is *in*, and who/what is *out*); rather, because the field of difference is a “field of infinitude”—meaning infinite possibilities of difference and boundary formation— there must exist a process by which an ensemble of differences are reduced to a totalizing trait, ideology, or primordial characteristic (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 143).

Simply put, populist discourses must identify a central point (the technical term being *nodal point*) of difference that structures the boundaries of who belongs and who does not. Importantly, this logic of difference is not only a process that introduces negative difference into the social realm (‘us’ v. ‘them’) but also

a process of self-signification, whereby the self is defined in the transformation of one’s limits/boundaries into frontiers.

In summary, the discursive *chain of equivalence* is built upon: (I) the framing of crisis or dislocation; (II) the discursive employment of *empty signifiers* like ‘the people’ or the ‘elite’ that are defined by their conflicting identities and/or antagonistic relationship; (III) *floating signifiers* that ambiguously represent the ideas, place or issues that the political struggle is over (like “immigration” or “freedom”); and (IV) a *nodal point* that partially fixes meaning to the *floating* and *empty* signifiers.⁵ The last component of the discursive chain is critical as the *nodal point* shapes the political imaginary. For example, in left-wing populist movements “revolution” has often been a nodal point, framing claims to action, belonging, and objectives. As Ronald Hartz writes, the nodal point “functions as a hegemonic representative of various demands and constitutes the chain of equivalence” (Hartz 2019, 6).

Any study of right-wing discourse must therefore identify a nodal point or privileged signifier whose meaning is established within the discourse, and which partially fixes the political language that is contested or ambiguous. Applying this Laclauian model, I argue that illiberal democracy operates as a floating signifier built on an antagonistic demarcation against all that is pejoratively associated with liberal democracy. The nodal point in this discourse is not necessarily fixed, and in the case of Viktor Orbán often fluctuates depending on his audience. However, one nodal point that has figured prominently into the discourse of

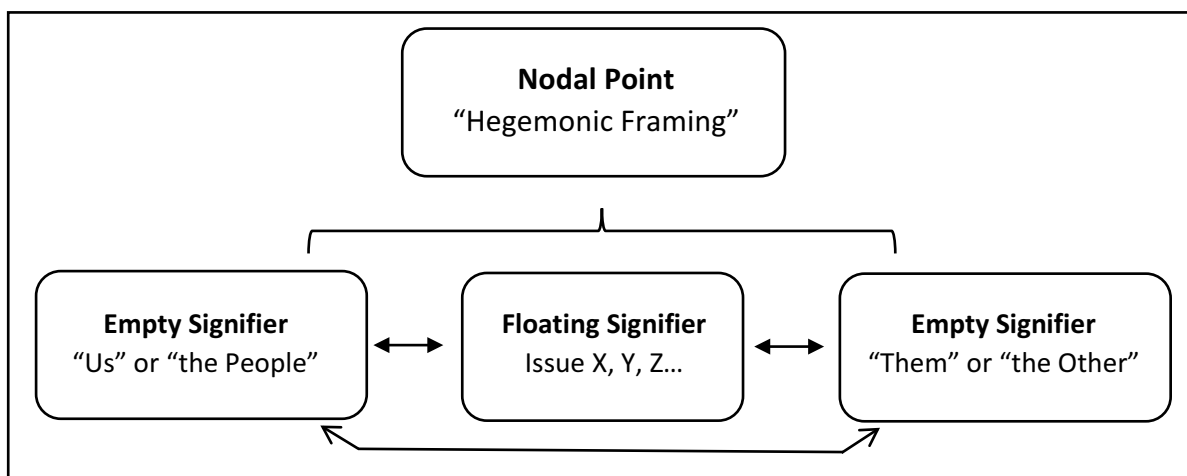


Figure 1. Populist Chain of Equivalence.

5 See Figure 1.

Central European populism—particularly in the case of Hungary and Poland—is *religious tradition*. Calls to respect and/or revive religious tradition have fixed ‘meta-populist’ discourses and alliances across the Atlantic (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 301-319).

II. Religion v. Religious Tradition

In a recent publication, Christian Lamour suggested that ‘Christianity’ operates as the nodal point of Orbán’s populist discourse through: (I) “the density of Christian references used to shape a negative and antagonistic discourse, strategically adjusted to his audience”; (II) “the use of Christianity to ground three ideological pillars of the radical right (populism, nativism, and authoritarianism)”; and (III) “the mobilization of Christianity to organize a hegemonic struggle against the dominant political force that has defined the meaning of this religion in the European public sphere” (Lamour 2020, 317). Lamour directs scholarship in the right direction, and his work recognizes that the antagonistic divisions in Orbán’s rhetoric, especially since the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, are commonly structured around the duality of Christian Magyartdom and the threat of the ethnic or religious other. Indeed, recent scholarship on Hungarian politics has consistently demonstrated that the Orbán regime employs a [quasi-] religious ideological discourse to mobilize a right-wing base (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, 39-53).

Yet, while Orbán liberally uses Christianity as a marker of Hungarian identity, the term ‘Christianity’ is not fixed to any institution or confession of faith.⁶ Instead, like many cases of right-wing populist discourse in Europe, Christianity is invoked in relation to questions over “who we are” or “who is the authentic citizen.”⁷ In this application, national, religious, and sometimes ethnic identity are made inseparable. Thus, Christianity comes to signify exclusionary attitudes and identities, as well as the concentration of meanings secure to cultural and political hegemony. Christianity

is not defined in confessional or theological terms but rather a floating signifier for identity, belonging, and boundaries. Instead, religious tradition better encompasses a nodal point—providing both a definitive meaning connected to a phantasmic past, and moral weight to political claims.

The theoretical distinction between *religion* and *religious tradition* is introduced by Martin Riesebrodt in his 2010 work, *The Promise of Salvation*. Summarizing Riesebrodt’s theory, Genevieve Zubrzycki notes that religion is defined as a “complex of religious practices based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers that offer the promise of salvation” (Zubrzycki 2012, 442). Conversely, religious tradition is more broadly defined by Riesebrodt as the “historical continuity of systems of symbols” (Riesebrodt 2010, xii). This distinction, while not without faults, is an important one. The latter phenomenon best captures the concern of social scientists—that is, the political and cultural dimensions of religious acts, language, and ideals. Zubrzycki writes, “If religion *can* be converted into political capital, religious tradition [or heritage]—as a set of discourses, symbols, practices, and material resources—is already thoroughly political” (Zubrzycki 2012, 443). When religion is invoked as a tradition it contributes to the process of defining “who we are,” “what is the nation,” and most importantly, “who is the other.”

Religious tradition is not merely an articulation of faith, but a means of hegemonic framing. Claims to religious tradition draw their legitimacy less from ecclesiastical texts and institutions, but more from appeals to collective memory, historic events, and the presence of a preternatural threat. Therefore, religious tradition is in part the project of claiming authenticity—for example, in the United States this is visible in the blending of Christian nationalist messaging (e.g., “America is/was a Christian nation”) with restrictive immigration policy. Tradition is key to this blended messaging as it maintains a connection between the

6 The use of Christianity in the public realm is different than the American case, as in the latter religious ascription and political identity are more intertwined. In part, this reflects a different religious culture in Hungary. Hungary can best be described as a state that has Christian pluralism (e.g., a diversity of Christian denominations, with a relatively small proportion of non-Christian groups). Orbán himself identifies as Protestant (his son is a Pentecostal preacher), yet much of the nation is Roman Catholic. The term Christianity is therefore less tied to denominational specificity – unlike some Evangelical conservatives in the United States who narrowly define the term to exclude Catholics, Mormons, etc. – and more so to nativism. For more on the history of Christianity in Hungary and the changing definitions of what it means to be a Hungarian Christian see: Paul Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890–1944* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

7 Many scholars have written on how European populists employ religious identity as a means of signifying racial or national belonging (what is known as the race-religion constellation), a great example is the following work: Anya Topolski, “The Dangerous Discourse of the ‘Judaean-Christian’ Myth: Masking the Race-Religion Constellation in Europe,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 1–2 (March 14, 2020): 71–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1696049>.

present and the past. To quote Georgy Mamedov, “The vector of the reactionary quest for ‘authenticity’—or in other words, ethnic, cultural or religious purity—is always aimed at the past as a source of phantasmic unity and wholeness of an imagined community” (Mamedov 2019, 124).

Given this distinction, I believe religious tradition is more accurately representative of a nodal point in the rhetoric of Viktor Orbán and his American interlocutors. Discourses on ‘Christianity,’ the ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’ and the reclamation of the ‘Christian nation’ represent various political demands, and are conceptually attempts to maintain historical continuity. Religious tradition therefore supplies complex meaning to signifiers like ‘Christianity,’ which are missed if focus is solely given to the confessional dimensions of the term.

Analysis: Orbán’s CPAC Appearance

Before arriving at CPAC, Orbán had touted illiberal democracy as a synonym for “Christian democracy” on numerous occasions. In a 2018 speech he argued that “Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal: it is, if you like, illiberal.”⁸ What makes a Christian democracy an illiberal one, Orbán asserted, is the prioritization of “Christian culture” instead of the liberal democratic favor of multiculturalism. In turn, a Christian democracy is one that is “anti-immigration,” critical of “adaptable family models,” and pursuant of Christian statehood.⁹

Orbán’s discourse is in line with the nativist argumentation coming from fellow European populist leaders like Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen (See Brubaker 2017). The European populist-right has made a strategic modification to Christianity, employing the term to denote a European cultural background or ‘way of life’ rather than a belief system. This discourse is effective because it draws upon a communal or collective understanding of national, religious, and cultural tradition. It is religious tradition, as a political articulation of belonging, that the populist-right registers in their discourse, and which they use to tame/thwart pluralist religious aspirations (e.g., the practice of Islam). Orbán brought this same discourse to the American CPAC, activating fears over secularism,

Islam, and globalism. However, what is fascinating is that his discourse resonated with an American base whose socialization and collective understanding of tradition differs greatly from European civilizationist narratives.

What follows is an undertaking to unpack Orbán’s CPAC speech through the nodal point of religious tradition. This discourse strategically shapes an ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’; legitimates populist and authoritarian political programs; and defines a hegemonic struggle for the soul of western civilizations. In his August 2022 address to CPAC in Dallas, Orbán quickly established that his political ideology is grounded in the Christian religious tradition:

“So, first and foremost: we need to trust our Judeo-Christian teachings. They help us decide what actions are right and what actions are wrong. If you believe in God, you also believe that we humans were created in God’s image. Therefore, we have to be brave enough to address even the most sensitive questions: migration, gender, and the clash of civilizations. Don’t worry: a Christian politician cannot be racist. So, we should never hesitate to heavily challenge our opponents on these issues. Be sure: Christian values protect us from going too far.”¹⁰

His opening remarks recognized a shared identity with the CPAC audience around “Christian values” and a “trust in Judeo-Christian teachings.” This appeal to Christianity as a tradition or cultural system further oriented his populist chain of equivalence. The political climate (or social formation) is framed as a binary opposition between that which is “right”—what he claims are actions and ideals derived from Judeo-Christian teachings—and that which is “wrong”—an empty signifier articulated only in opposition to the “Judeo-Christian teachings.” Here religious tradition provides a fixed definition of the ‘self’ or collective ‘we’ that Orbán speaks to, as well as establishes hegemonic and historical continuity.¹¹

In defining the ‘self’ or ‘we,’ Judeo-Christianity is only a floating term; its true meaning is derived from an appeal to cultural and historical memory (e.g., a connection to the Christian roots of the nation). This

8 Hungarian Government, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp,” www.miniszterelnok.hu.

9 Hungarian Government, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s...”

10 Hungarian Government, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas.”

11 It is somewhat ironic that as Martin Silk (1985) noted, “Judeo-Christianity” first rose to prominence in the early 20th century in the anti-fascist critique of individuals like Father Coughlin. Nevertheless, its use in the latter half of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century has been primarily attributed to far-right and religious nationalist movements.

memory is however a powerful tool for constructing the ‘self.’ As Amanda Klugeveld argued, the ‘Judeo-Christian’ tradition is neither connected to Jewish nor Christian theology, rather, in present-day Europe it is more often a discursive instrument employed in the secular search for identity (Klugeveld 2016, 241-265). In a growingly multicultural Europe, this secular search for identity has found renewed vigor in the right-wing’s pursuit of a sanitized and mythologized past (See Richardson and Wodak 2009).

Orbán’s appeal to religious tradition is similarly a secular project of demarcating identity. Moreover, religious tradition implies an adherence to a rather secular political program, which he calls the proper (or Christian) response to, “migration, gender, and the clash of civilizations.” Judeo-Christianity supplies both the impetus (or bravery) to counter liberal policies on “migration” and “gender” (it legitimates illiberal politics), the political program to remedy such “crises”, and the check or restriction on his groups internal political discourse.

The first two points are obvious, but the latter deserves further attention. Just as Laclau and Mouffe argued that the populist logic of difference is a process of self-signification, Orbán employs the Judeo-Christian tradition to draw the boundaries for group belonging, ideals, and interestingly its defense. This last point is fascinating, and it illustrates how religious tradition supplies the ideological defense of populist discourse and the legitimation of illiberal and proto-authoritarian politics. Illiberalism and right-wing populism are shielded from critiques of “going too far” by their adherence to “Christian values” and the “Judeo-Christian teachings”—evident in Orbán’s quip to the audience, “Don’t worry: a Christian politician cannot be racist.”¹² This supports Michael Toomey’s finding that the manipulation of national history (and tradition!) allows Orbán to build a “shield against criticism from international and domestic actors” (Toomey 2018, 87).

Circling back to the second role of religious

tradition, Orbán’s appeal to Judeo-Christianity carries a historical and, particularly in Europe, civilizational connotation.¹³ The populist and illiberal-right is justified in their political stance because they position themselves as the bulwark of defense of Christendom. This is set up in the closing statements of his Dallas address:

“And my friends, as it happens, today’s progressives try to separate Western Civilization from its Christian roots once again. They are crossing a line that should never be crossed. If you separate Western Civilization from its Judeo-Christian heritage, the worst things in history happen.

Let’s be honest: the most evil things in modern history were carried out by people who hated Christianity. Don’t be afraid to call your enemies by their name. You can play it safe, but they will never show mercy.”¹⁴

These remarks blend cultural memory with a ‘crisis of modernity’ rhetoric common to populist movements. The ‘crisis of modernity’ narrative comes into sharper focus through the break in historical continuity—that is, the natural and historical connection between Western Civilization and its “Christian roots.”

Orbán commonly employs this narrative when speaking to Hungarian audiences. In this context, the language of religious tradition triggers the “wounded collective identity” of the Hungarian people.¹⁵ As András Bozóki suggests, Orbán’s rhetoric is a prime example of this interplay between past and present in Central and Eastern European politics.¹⁶ Speaking to his Hungarian constituency, the “wounded collective identity” unites the language of religious tradition (e.g., “Christian Hungary” or “European Christendom”) with the collective memory (and re-imagination) of historical moments like the 16th c. Ottoman wars. In this frame, religious tradition helps to build historical continuity between two unrelated events—seen in the linkage of the refugee crisis with the battle of Mohács in 1526, both

12 Hungarian Government, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas.”

13 For more on the connection between “Judeo-Christian” roots or tradition and the construction of European civilizational identity see works like Andrea Molle, “Religion and Right-Wing Populism in Italy: Using ‘Judeo-Christian Roots’ to Kill the European Union,” *Religion, State and Society* 47, no. 1 (2018):151-68; and Ayhan Kaya & Ayşe Tecmen, “Europe Versus Islam?: Right-Wing Populist Discourse and the Construction of a Civilizational Identity” in *A Quarter Century of the “Clash of Civilizations,”* ed. Jeffrey Haynes (London: Routledge, 2021), 49-64.

14 Hungarian Government, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas.”

15 András Máté-Tóth’s contends that the political discourse arising out of Central and Eastern European nations (CEE), may be best understood through the hermeneutical power of historical traumas and their presence in multi-generational memory (i.e., “wounded identity”), as opposed to meta-narratives like secularization (Máté-Tóth 2022, 65).

16 András Bozóki, “Occupy the State: The Orbán Regime in Hungary,” *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 19, no. 3 (December 1, 2011): 649–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965156X.2012.703415>.

framed as threats to European Christendom—and national identity, where Orbán consistently claims Hungary is the “defender of Europe.”¹⁷

However, among a largely American audience the “wounded collective identity” is not shared. Rather, in this context religious tradition operates not only as a hegemonic nodal point, but as an interpretive bridge for the two respective groups. While the American interlocutors cannot draw meaning from references to Mohács, let alone locate it on a map, they can identify with the language of securitization. Vibeke Schou Tjalve argued that the ‘Judeo-Christian’ imaginary has become a historical “meeting ground” for conservative radicals on each side of the Atlantic (Tjalve 2021, 332). This discursive meeting ground brings together traditions of American and European conservatism—each carrying different historical legacies and memories, as well as complex interpretations of Judeo-Christianity as a geo-political alternative to liberalism.

The movements between “Orbánland” and the American “Heartland” are joined by their shared imaginary of a sacred, ethno-religious civilization, and by their language of religious securitization (e.g., defending “Christian values” or the “Christian homeland”).¹⁸ While the two movements may dream of different pasts, Orbán has effectively tapped into Christian traditionalism in such a manner that the American right may understand his Hungarian experience and perspective as their own—that is, as a battle with a corrupt liberal elite, a nostalgia for bygone glory, and a critique of threatening progressive politics.

If, for any Americans reading this, the nostalgia of “Orbánland” sounds familiar, that is because it is akin to the “lost cause” myth which has plagued American political thought since the late 19th century. Certainly, Orbán’s rhetoric of defending “Christian values” and making Hungary great again resonates with the recent rearticulations of the lost cause myth in American conservative politics. Originally the lost cause was a

negationist myth defending the heroism of the confederacy, however, today it persists in attacks on LGBTQ rights, the history of American slavery, and religious pluralism. Like Orbán’s political program, some American conservatives couch restorative and nationalist politics in their “defense” against liberal hegemony and un-American pedagogy.¹⁹

The American right has identified Orbán’s illiberal democracy as the answer to threats like empty modernist standardization, secularism, and the project of liberal remembrance. In this context, Hungary and its respective history is presented as a proxy or parallel to the American experience through a shared “illiberal memory” (Rosenfeld 2021). This illiberal memory is a “protectionist reaction against the globalization of liberal remembrance,” or the liberal impulse towards national self-critique and a self-critical memory (Rosenfeld 2021). Orbán’s illiberal remembrance rejects guilt, normalizes the historical shortfalls of the nation, and claims victimhood by the present liberal order. Likewise, American conservatives have fashioned an unapologetic political discourse.²⁰ At the basis of this “illiberal memory” is a restorative Christian nationalism that defiantly justifies illiberal politics as a defense of Christian values and traditions.

Orbán constructs this shared experience at multiple points in his CPAC Texas speech, notably sounding like a weathered and tested crusader addressing a civilization on the brink of their first [culture] war:

“I am here to tell you that we should share our experiences. I am here to tell you that our values: the nation, Christian roots and family can be successful in the political battlefield. Even nowadays, when political life is ruled by liberal hegemony. I am here to tell you how we made these values successful and mainstream in Hungary! Perhaps our story can help you Keep America Great!”²¹

17 “Viktor Orbán, Defender Of Europe’ – Swiss Weekly’s Interview With Hungarian Leader In Full,” *Hungary Today* (blog), November 13, 2015, <https://hungarytoday.hu/viktor-orban-defender-europe-swiss-weeklys-interview-hungarian-leader-full-50008/>.

18 Tjalve (2021) used the terms “Orbánland” and “Heartland” to juxtapose the right-wing populist movements in Hungary and rural America.

19 This is most recently visible in Gov. Ron DeSantis’ attacks on African American studies and LGBTQ history in Florida. For an example see: Andrew Atterbury, “DeSantis Defends Banning African American Studies Course as Black Leaders Call for Action,” *POLITICO*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/23/desantis-banning-african-american-studies-00079027>.

20 See: Mel Leonor, “Trump Proclaims ‘we Are Not Going to Apologize for America,’” *POLITICO*, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/25/trump-no-apologies-america-608713>; Jamiles Lartey, “Tucker Carlson Refuses to Apologize after Sexist Remarks Resurface,” *The Guardian*, March 11, 2019, sec. Media, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/mar/11/tucker-carlson-fox-news-sexist-comments-remarks-no-apology>.

21 “Hungarian Government, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas.

Again, “Christian roots” is the nodal point for shared experience, where both “values” and the “nation” are floated without concrete definition, but are understood through the conceptual “battlefield” between *religious tradition* and “liberal hegemony” that the American and Hungarian right can respectively interpret. Additionally, “our” Hungarian story is presented as the key to keeping “America Great”—this an example of the discursive blending of Orbán’s “wounded collective identity” with American populist discourse. Despite not sharing the ‘wounded past’ and historical traumas, Orbán can effectively speak to the “persecution complex” that has become so prevalent within American conservative evangelical discourse.²² This ‘myth’ of persecution is centered around the perception of an ethno-religious threat and secular decline, driving restorative-nostalgic politics for a bygone era of white Christian cultural dominance.

Hungary’s ‘illiberal democracy’ has become a blueprint for reclaiming cultural dominance and political hegemony, even if the Hungarian context and political situation cannot be so easily transposed onto the American landscape. This is evidenced by recent visits to, and collaborations with, the Orbán regime by American conservative commentators and officials. Prior to Orbán’s CPAC appearance in Dallas, American conservative commentators even wrestled with, and rationalized, his racialized discourse through the prism of the “wounded collective identity” (though by no means in an academic sense) and religious tradition.

Defending a controversial statement made by Orbán in Transylvania, in which he condemned the prospect of a “mixed-race” Central European society, conservative filmmaker Rod Dreher justified Orbán’s reprehensible discourse as a rational response to centuries of “Muslim occupation.”²³ Dreher adopts the language of religious securitization that has become prominent in CEE political discourse to (I) justify Orbán’s fear of Muslim migration and integration, and (II) call upon Christians in the west to heed the threat of religious pluralism. To

the latter point, Dreher laments the American “cultural relativists” who have let the religious tradition (what he calls “cultural hegemony”) of the nation succumb to “woke capitalism” and “US government forces.”²⁴ More importantly, Dreher concludes that Hungary’s illiberal-democratic project has “long-term civilizational consequences” for the whole of the Christian-West, setting the stage for a transatlantic conservative movement.²⁴

This discourse was similarly on-stage at the CPAC convention in Budapest, and the Texas convention that shortly followed. CPAC chairman Matt Schlapp opened the Budapest convention proclaiming that American conservatives were moved to visit Hungary because the nation was a great example of “autonomy” and “freedom” in a globalized world.²⁶ Schlapp extolled a reverence for religious tradition as the critical juncture between American and Hungarian conservatives. Speaking on why American conservatives were choosing to look east towards Hungary for political inspiration, Schlapp proclaimed:

“America is a wonderful country, almost 250 years of leading on this question of freedom. America was founded with the understanding that God had a special plan. Not only for our country, but for each American. And it is true that, that spirit we have created, we have sometimes broken that spirit... And I want you to know that sometimes in America we elect people that are more deserving of this spirit, and sometimes we elect people that are less deserving... It is a strange thing that when we elect people from the right, they think you should do as you wish, and they respect the people of Hungary! When we elect people from the left, they want to tell you what to do. They want to tell you what to think. And I don’t know if they would have liked all those prayers that started off our proceedings today. I can understand now some of the hostility as they embrace secularism. And they try to change our history to not have a history of a people who believe in a creator.”²⁷

22 For more on the role of a persecution complex in American Protestant Christianity, see: Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the ‘War on Christians,’” *Differences* 18, no. 3 (December 1, 2007): 152–80, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2007-014>; Alan Noble, “Why Do Evangelicals Have a Persecution Complex?,” *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/the-evangelical-persecution-complex/375506/>.

23 Rod Dreher, “Orbán & ‘Defending The Indefensible,’” *The American Conservative*, July 30, 2022, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/orban-defending-the-indefensible/>.

24 Dreher, “Orbán & ‘Defending The Indefensible.’”

25 *Ibidem*.

26 Brooke Bezdek, “CPAC Chairman Matt Schlapp’s Opening Remarks from CPAC Hungary;,” CPAC, May 19, 2022, <https://www.conservative.org/2022/05/19/matt-schlapps-opening-remarks-cpac-hungary/>.

27 *Ibidem*.

Like Orbán, Schlapp's address follows a paradigmatic populist chain of equivalence. Empty signifiers that distinguish the 'we' from 'them' are laid out in electoral terms— "the right" and "the left." These signifiers are further engaged (and differentiated) in the battle over a floating signifier: "freedom." However, "freedom" is not the primary message; rather, a closer look at Schlapp's opening remarks reveals a more concrete difference being established between a religious-right and a secular-left. Religious tradition, seen here in statements like "*And they try to change our history to not have a history of a people who believe in a creator,*" reframes a conventionally liberal-democratic 'rights-based' discourse into an illiberal dog-whistle for ethnic and religious nationalism. This reframing of rights-based discourse has long been a tool of American conservative messaging, particularly on issues of abortion and anti-LGBTQ legislation (Lewis 2017). Still, Schlapp critiques the "liberal memory" and frames the 'other' (e.g., the secular left) as a threat to American freedom and democracy precisely because they reject the religious tradition of the nation.

In addition to Schlapp's address, the praise directed towards Orbán by figures on the American-right further demonstrates how the discourse and 'defense' of religious tradition legitimates Hungary's illiberal democracy within American circles. In 2019, then President Donald Trump lauded Orbán's leadership on thwarting immigration into Central Europe, telling him "You [Orbán] have been great with respect to Christian communities," adding, "You have really put a block up, and we appreciate that very much."²⁸ When pointedly asked about democratic "backsliding" in Hungary, Trump reinforced a discourse of religious securitization by calling the Hungarian PM "tough."²⁹

Conclusion: Strange Bedfellows? The Marriage of Central European and American Conservatives

If religious tradition is a nodal point of Orbán's discourse on illiberal democracy, then what are the political implications of his CPAC speech? Orbán regularly draws upon the securitization and protection of Christian values and Christian nationhood to highlight conservative policies on issues like immigration

(lauding his country's success in building a "physical" and "financial" wall protecting Hungarian families), and the rejection of gender inclusivity (proclaiming the Hungarian people said, "no to gender or anything!").³⁰ Floating signifiers like "progressive way of parenting," "Communist trick," and "Gender Ideology" constitute a broader ambiguous threat: 'liberal democracy.'³¹ The remedy to such a threat is the construction and maintenance of an alternative political society, one that is grounded in the rejection of these liberal democratic threats—e.g., illiberal democracy. However, rather than framing this as 'illiberalism' v. 'liberalism,' Orbán justifies the rejection of modern liberal democratic principles through the defense of religious tradition. Often noted simply as 'culture,' religious tradition justifies an incompatibility between Hungary and progressivism, liberalism, and Western hegemony. Additionally, it grounds the empty signifier of 'we'—Christian culture is therefore what protects Hungarians, families (in the heteronormative understanding), and the community.

A similar discourse is prevalent among the American right. Policies limiting LGBTQ rights (like DeSantis' 'Don't say Gay' bill) and curtailing immigration are justified through a defense of Christian America. Like with Orbán, the nodal point is not religion, but instead a hegemonic framing of religious normativity, tradition, and authenticity. While an embrace of illiberalism may have drawn the ire of both sides of the American electorate some 25 years ago, it has made its way into the discourse and politics of the American right-wing through the defense of religious tradition. Orbán's CPAC speech signals that illiberalism is no longer fringe, but now mainstream within American political discourse.

The Hungarian Prime Minister's CPAC address demonstrated that illiberalism is grounded in the securitization of religious tradition, thus justifying repressive social policies, hardline responses to immigration, and the restrictive definition of national belonging in terms of religious identity.³² This plays in his own country through a "wounded collective identity" that operationalizes the politics of fear against the foreign other, supranational institutions (like the EU), and liberal hegemony (which stresses multi-

28 Shane Goldmacher, "Trump Endorses Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Far-Right Prime Minister," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2022, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/03/us/politics/trump-endorses-viktor-orban-hungary.html>.

29 Ibidem.

30 Hungarian Government, "Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas."

31 Hungarian Government, "Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán..."

32 In his CPAC address Orbán lauded his country's ability to rewrite the constitution in such a way that the "Hungarian state institutions are obliged to protect the Christian culture of Hungary."

culturalism over traditionalism). Although America lacks a similar “wounded collective identity,” the appeal to Christian traditionalism is an interpretive bridge between the Hungarian leader and his American

counterparts. Charges against secularism, liberal hegemony, and the threat of the other, resonate with a conservative movement that operationalizes the fear of losing hegemonic control.

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Harm in Yoruba Cosmology - The Ajogun as active forces contributing to cosmic and social order

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Abstract: Human beings continue to question the meaning of and explore ways to overcome death, pain, suffering and the various misfortunes and calamities that beset their lives, at collective and individual levels. Religions may offer an answer to these questions along with the means to restore health and well-being; or they may leave unresolved questions and contradictions, such as the Christian irreconcilability regarding the existence of evil in a world created and ruled by an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God.

Yoruba cosmology provides a complex explanation of harm. Moral, economic, socio-political and natural evils are ascribed to a wide range of causes, mostly related to the broken cosmic or social disequilibrium resulting from human wrongdoing, which needs fixing. Death, illness, conflict, loss, deprivation, tears, imprisonment, drought, infertility, plagues, etc. are spiritual forces known as Ajogun (*lit.* “warriors against humankind”). Although people try to keep these forces away, they accept that they have a role to play in maintaining the equilibrium in the Cosmos and society and in the continuity of life.

In this paper, I explore the ways in which the Ajogun are conceived of and treated in Yoruba cosmology, based on ethnographic research on *Òrìṣà* worship, the Ifá system and Candomblé.

Keywords: harm and religion; evil and religion; Yoruba cosmology; Ajogun; Ifá; Candomblé.

Introduction

Human vulnerability along with pain, suffering and death are vexing questions that philosophies and religions have long tried to answer. In these discussions, unsolved problems, controversies and contradictions emerge, such as the existence of evil in a world created and ruled by an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God and the geographical, temporal, and social disparities in the distribution of pain and suffering. Religions have provided a wide range of answers

explaining the existence of “moral evils” – perpetrated by humans, such as murder, torture, theft, and war – and “natural evils” – such as epidemics, floods, fires, and earthquakes – that harm individuals and collectivities. For example, that evil is a way of preventing greater harm or attaining greater good; the illusion of pain and suffering; the free will of human beings; the necessity of harm for the development of good moral character and for virtuous acts; punishment for human wrongdoing or a broken taboo or contamination; the

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existence of a powerful, malevolent being; the will of divinities, ancestors, or other spiritual beings; the consequence of witchcraft, magic, or sorcery; part of a dynamic (cosmic and/or social) equilibrium and disequilibrium; privation of substance, form, or goodness; an inevitable occurrence in the world; divine punishment, and admitting the incapacity of the human mind to comprehend the reasons for evil.

Comparing the concept of evil in Yoruba² and Igbo³ thought, Babajide Dasaolu and Demilade Oyelakun note that “it is a given that the problem of evil is a substantive philosophical problem only within the Western conception of evil and that such a problem does not hold much weight when situated within the African notion of evil” (Dasaolu & Oyelakun 2015, 23). They agree with Sophie Oluwole (1978) that in the Yoruba worldview evil has a moral rather than a religious connotation, being associated with human wrongdoing and the law of cause and consequence.

In Yoruba cosmology, death and the various harms that devastate human life and cause suffering are also conceived of as spiritual forces known as Ajogun (*lit.* “warriors against humankind”), which have received little attention in the literature⁴.

The concept of Ajogun does not contradict the moral understanding of evil because humans are considered to be responsible for their creation and actions. The Ajogun also play an important role in maintaining the dynamic equilibrium of forces in the Cosmos and the circularity of life, by compelling human beings to consider the consequences of their actions, to monitor and improve their behaviour and character, to work to achieve their goals, to continue worshiping the *òrìṣà*,⁵ and to make forces and materials circulate in the Cosmos. Therefore, God is not considered directly responsible for the existence of evil (Dasaolu & Oyelakun 2015, 24) and the Christian problem of the irreconcilability regarding the existence of evil and the idea of God does not make sense in the Yoruba worldview.

Human beings are thought to be endowed with free will and responsible for their actions, the effects of which may extend more widely. In fact, a disequilibrium caused by a single member may have consequences for the whole family and community (and extend to their descendants⁶, if not solved), who then participate in the healing process or act of reparation. In many myths, natural disasters such as epidemics, floods, fires, and earthquakes are the result of human misbehaviour (Prandi 2001), or a means of restoring a broken cosmic or social order.

In this paper, I explore ways of conceiving and dealing with the Ajogun, relying on ethnographic research conducted at the Candomblé and Ifá Temple *Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Oḍẹ* and the *Òrìṣà* and Ifá Temple *Ijo Adinula Ajé Ifá*. In the *Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Oḍẹ* of Bàbá Marcelo Monteiro Ifamakanjuḷa Alabi Adedosu, located in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), the Candomblé of Ketu *nation* is intertwined with the Ifá system⁷ and Yoruba traditions. In the *Ijo Adinula Ajé Ifá* of Bàbá Ifàlòba Iuoínsànyà Ifálòsèyí Gennaro Timeo and Ìyá Fàwèmímó Òṣúnṣéwà Fániyí Lucia Santoro, based in Bari (Italy) and Salvador (Brazil), traditional Yoruba religion (*esin ibilẹ̀*) from Oyó (Nigeria) and Ifá system are practiced. The research has been ongoing since 2015 at the *Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Oḍẹ* and since 2021 at the *Ijo Adinula Ajé Ifá* (in Italy) and involves participation in rituals, celebrations, daily life, as well as semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with members of the religious communities and participants of the rituals and celebrations.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I present the spiritual forces that are harmful to human life: the Ajogun and Eléninì, along with the ways in which they are prevented from acting and influencing human life. The second section is devoted to analysing death through everyday experiences, rituals, and myths. And the third section explores the function of Ajogun and Eléninì in maintaining balance in the Cosmos and society, and in encouraging human beings to develop

2 Yoruba peoples inhabit parts of Nigeria, Togo, and Benin, which are often collectively referred to as Yorubaland. The Yoruba settled in the Americas after the slavery trade. In Latin America and the Caribbean, they reterritorialized and adapted their religions and traditions. In Brazil, Candomblé is one of the many religions that emerged in this process, whereby the Ketu and Nagô *nations* make direct reference to Yoruba ancestry and traditions.

3 Igbo peoples inhabit parts of Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea.

4 Jagun (2015) provides a more detailed description of the Ajogun.

5 Divinized ancestors (who hold sway over the natural elements and social and cultural domains, such as war, metallurgy, hunting, justice and medicine).

6 On the possibility that a person's behaviour or failure to achieve his or her chosen destiny may affect his or her descendants, see, for instance, Calvo (2019).

7 Ifá denotes the oracle given to humanity by a divinity called Òrúnmilà, as well as a complex system of knowledge encompassing religion, history, medicine, botany, and ethics (Bascom 1969).



◁ Figure 1. Bàbá Ifàlòba performing an oracular consultation (Archive of the Ijo Adinula Ajé Ifá).

△ Figure 2. Bàbá Marcelo making a borí (Archive of the Àṣẹ Idasile Ode).

good character and to act in accordance with ethical values.

Spiritual forces that harm human life: the Ajogun and Elénini

Yoruba cosmology is based around monism: all beings have a common origin that is not separate from the Creator. All beings are formed through successive subdivisions and “molarizations” (Goldman 2005) of the *àṣẹ*, the life-force that flows from the Supreme Being, called *Ọlórún* (Lord of the *òrun*, the spiritual world), or *Olódùmarè* (Lord of creation), which constitutes life in all its prisms and forms, and ensures dynamic existence and the process of happening and becoming (Elbein 2008).

The Cosmos is a system composed of forces, in a persistently unstable equilibrium of discontinuous principles (Bastide 1993, 41), opposed principles in changing states of equilibrium and disequilibrium, as expressed in the “moral mathematics of Afro-Atlantic religions” (Capone 2018, 176), where *Èṣù*⁸ ensures the dynamic equilibrium and sustains transformation and movement. He can be represented by both the

number 3 as well as as the generative operation “+1” (Calvo 2019).

According to Alcides dos Reis (2000), the number 2 and its powers form the basis of Yoruba cosmology because they represent equilibrium, the harmony of opposing forces:

Life is only possible because of the union between pairs, such as man/woman, male/female, day/night, etc., and the most important pair, the universe itself: [four] is a sacred number for the orixás religion because there are four cardinal points (north, south, east and west); four seasons (spring, summer, autumn and winter); four moon phases (crescent, waning, new and full) four elements of nature (water, earth, fire and air) [...]. Finally, the number sixteen, which is the product of four times four, is, in fact, the number four itself in its entirety, so [there are] sixteen *odus*⁹, sixteen orixás, sixteen cowry shells in the oracle and so on (Reis 2000, 41-42).

Anything that may harm human life – such as death; illness; conflict; failure; unhappiness; drought; famine;

8 The *òrìṣà* of communication and movement, which is also the foundational principle of Yoruba cosmology (Sàlàmi & Ribeiro 2015) and ethics (Aguessy 1970).

9 Signs of Ifá, representing the 16 possible configurations of the cowry shells and, through their combinations, the 256 possible configurations in the Ifá divination chain or *ikin* [palm nuts]. They are also divine beings.

soil, animal and female infertility; locust swarms; unsuccessful hunting or fishing attempts; or epidemics – are caused by active spiritual forces, collectively known as Ajogun (*lit.* “warriors against humankind”) or *Igbamọ̀nlẹ̀* (“spirits of the left-hand side”), as opposed to the *Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀* (“spirits of the right-hand side”, including the *òrìṣà* and ancestors, who generally help and protect humans).

The Ajogun obey to the principle of duality, as they represent the counterpart to the *òrìṣà* because the *òrìṣà* protect and favour human beings, whereas Ajogun cause them harm and suffering (Abimbola 1993).

Bàbá Marcelo observed that *Èṣù* and *Ìyámí* (the Ancestral Mothers¹⁰) circulate from one side to another (left and right) and have the power to control the Ajogun and send them to the *aiyé*¹¹.

Bàbá César Ifalola *Ẹbí Offe Orùnmilà* – a *babaláwo*¹² with a religious office in the *Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Ode* – explained that the Ajogun act spiritually, but their prejudice manifests physically, in the *aiyé*.

Bàbá Ifàlòba and *Ìyá Fáwèmímó* told me a myth about the origin of the Ajogun. Humans were living comfortably and there was no suffering or death, so they neglected the agreement to worship and respect the *Ìyámí* and the *òrìṣà*. They behaved irresponsibly, producing chaos in the *aiyé*. To rectify the situation, the *Ìyámí* sought the assistance of *Olódùmarè*, who sent the Ajogun, which had the function of reminding humans of the original deal, getting them to learn from their mistakes, accept the consequences of their actions, improve their behaviour and character, and continue to make offerings to the *Ìyámí* and the *òrìṣà*.

Therefore, human beings are deemed responsible for the emergence of the Ajogun, and their actions, because bad character (that is an Ajogun, according to Bàbá Ifàlòba) and wrongdoing attract the Ajogun into their life. *Èṣù* is in charge of monitoring human behaviour and maintaining moral and social order in the *aiyé*, so he may send the Ajogun to endanger humans’ lives, forcing them to reconsider and correct their behaviour, consult the oracle and carry out reparative actions.

Bàbá Marcelo listed the principal Ajogun: *Ikú* (death), *Àrùn* (disease), *Ègbà* (paralysis), *Èpè* (curses),

Òfò (loss), *Èwọ̀n* (imprisonment), *Ọ̀rà̀n* (trouble) and *Èṣe* (affliction), and observed that the Ajogun have the ability to multiply continuously, in a cosmology that accepts plurality and the continuous possibility of generations and transformations (Olupona 2011). Hence, a new illness, misfortune, or calamity may appear at any moment. *Ìyá Fáwèmímó* added that the Ajogun frequently attract others: “for example, a bad character may cause an upset stomach due to anger, then stress may appear and, in the long run, provoke a disease” (*Ìyá Fáwèmímó*, personal communication).

Elénìni, also known as *Yèyémúwó* (*lit.* “mother of disgrace”), is another “cruel enemy of human beings” (Bàbá Marcelo, personal communication), a spiritual being whose task is to place obstacles and difficulties in the path of human destiny¹³. *Elénìni* is the guardian of the inner chamber of *Olódùmarè*, which is where humans choose their destiny before being born, so she witnesses their life aspirations (Jagun 2015). Before human beings come into the world, they must make an offering to *Elénìni*. Those who do not comply go through great tribulations in life and do not achieve realization and happiness (Jagun 2015).

Humans are considered responsible for *Elénìni*’s actions, as Bàbá Marcelo explained: negative thinking and all actions and behaviours that weaken the *orí*¹⁴ – such as overconsumption of alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, overconfidence, vanity, pride, depression, excessive greed, harmful friendships, being close to those attacked by *Elénìni* – facilitate her influence and her ability to allow the Ajogun to enter into the person’s life. *Elénìni* can appear suddenly, bringing chaos, madness, unexpected attacks of anger, accidents, violence, and murder.

Humans wanting to feel free and safe and attain happiness and realization, will attempt to avoid any Ajogun interference in their lives and seek solutions when they appear. In my fieldwork, I observed the use of the following preventive and corrective measures in relation to the Ajogun: regular consultation of the oracle, or before taking an important decision, and following its advice; avoiding wrongdoing and respecting the principles of ethics and personal and collective rules;

¹⁰ For a description of *Ìyámí* see, for instance, Oyèwùmí (2015).

¹¹ The material world, that has complex relations of correspondences and mutual influences with the *òrun*, the spiritual world.

¹² *Lit.* “father of the secret”, *Ifá* priest.

¹³ Human beings choose their destiny in the *òrun*, the spiritual world, before being born in the *aiyé*, the material world, and are supposed to fulfil it. In any case, human beings are endowed with free will and are responsible for their actions, and can change their destiny and neutralize undesirable events by consulting the oracle, through ritual practices, daily behaviour, and the choices they make (Dias 2013, Calvo 2019).

¹⁴ The head, which is the most important and sacred part of a human being, concentrates his or her force and powers of realization, and forms the basis of destiny.

worshipping the *òrìṣà*, ancestors and other spiritual beings; strengthening one's own *orí* through recourse to the ritual of *borí*¹⁵ and daily prayers; performing healing and cleansing rituals; and balancing relationships with people, spiritual beings and nature.

In fact, health and, in general, human life, have a relational character (Bastide 1993, Calvo 2019), because they depend on the complex mesh of forces and life-lines connecting human beings, the ancestors, *òrìṣà* and other spiritual beings, animals, plants, and the environment. Healing a person also means healing his or her relationships; consequently, the whole family and community are called on to take part in a family member's healing ritual (Calvo 2019).

Síkírù Sàlámì and Ronilda Ribeiro (2015) point out that rituals can correct and adjust the complex dynamics of relationships and forces in the Cosmos and society:

Setting in syntony the different instances of the being, rituals propitiate the inertia break and create a new impulse, a movement of transforming actions, directed by the *ori* and other agents, both inside the person and in his or her environment. (Sàlámì & Ribeiro 2015, 102).

Even if the Ajogun are not worshipped, they are given offerings and prayers intended to feed and appease them. For instance, when Bàbà Marcelo performs a *borí* ritual, an *obí*¹⁶ is chewed and broken down into small pieces that are given to Èṣù to deliver to the Ajogun.

Bàbà Ifàlòba performs a long complex ritual called *ẹbọriru* when the oracle detects the Ajogun's presence in a person's life. The aim is to feed the Ajogun to appease and ward them off. Prayers are addressed to them and various items are offered, including water, gin, *obí*, and cowrie shells. The *ẹbọriru* usually precedes the other rituals and offerings prescribed by the oracle, all of which are aimed at helping the person solve his or her problems, attain his or her objectives, and "align with his or her predestination, chosen before birth because it is necessary to clean the path, removing the Ajogun, for good energies to flow and concentrate in the person" (Bàbà Ifàlòba, personal communication).

However, the Ajogun cannot be completely erased from human existence, as is the case in death, that can only be postponed following Ifá's advice.

Ìkú, death

Death may be considered the greatest consequence of harm in human life since it prevents the achievement of valuable goods and the fulfilment of one's own project of happiness and destiny. Bàbà Marcelo pointed out that in the Ifá system the principal misfortunes afflicting human life are (in order of importance): *Ikú* (death), *Àisàn* (illness), *Ìjà* (struggles, difficulties and conflicts), *Owo* (poverty), and *Ofo* (defeat). They are the counterpart to fortune, which includes long life, richness, family, children, and victory.

In an interview with Yaktin, Olupona states that:

Death as a palpable force looms large in the Yoruba religious and social consciousness. From cosmology to various ritual practices and genres of oral traditions such as proverbs, poetry and short stories are all brought to bear on the reality of death. Not a day goes by that speakers of the Yoruba language do not make mention of death as both a phenomenon and a certainty (Olupona *apud* Yaktin 2021).

Yoruba personal names also reveal the fear of death or try to ward it off through the force of speech, such as through the name *Mákú* (*lit.* "don't die"), which Bàbà Marcelo states is often given to children thought to be at risk of premature death according to the oracle.

Death is considered a passage in human life when it occurs in old age and for natural reasons, once the person has fulfilled his or her destiny and "left the world better than s/he found it" (*Ìyá Fàwèmímó*, personal communication). It is celebrated by the community through long complex rituals, that favour the transition to the ancestral world and return to the *òrun*, from which the spirits of the dead continue to be part of society, influencing the life of their descendants and being worshipped. According to Wande Abimbola, "Death is, however, seen as a means of transformation of human beings, from a level of existence, in the *aiyé*, to another level of existence in the *òrun*" (Abimbola 1983, 75).

When I participated in funeral rituals in Candomblé, called *aṣéṣé*¹⁷, I observed people following rules and taking particular care to prevent the consequences, including death, from seeping into their own lives: staying awake even when the ritual lasts all night, wearing white clothes and covering their head, and not mourning the dead for too long.

¹⁵ *Lit.* an offering to the head, in order to strengthen the person and to balance his or her forces.

¹⁶ Kola nut, one of the principal offerings to spiritual beings.

¹⁷ For a description of the *aṣéṣé* see, for instance, Elbein (2008) and Oliveira (1999).



Figure 3. Offerings to the òriṣà at the Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Ọḍẹ (Archive of the Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Ọḍẹ).

At an *aṣẹṣẹ* performed at the *Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Ọḍẹ*, following the death of a woman of around seventy years old, I asked Bàbá Marcelo what had happened to her. In his explanation he mentioned unhealthy behaviour and relationships with family members and the dead. She was so strict with her granddaughter, who lived with her, that the girl returned to her mother's home. The woman died of cancer after feeling lonely, smoking a lot, and perpetually mourning for her husband, who had died several years earlier. Bàbá Marcelo explained to me that the dead, from the *òrun*, sense the call and want to be close to their loved one suffering in their absence: since they cannot get near, they end up taking the person with them.

When a violent death (such as an accident, murder, or suicide) occurs in infancy, childhood, or young adulthood, or there are mysterious circumstances (such as when different people die at the same time with no apparent connection), it is considered a “bad death” and the causes have to be identified so the equilibrium can be restored, and the recurrence of other family issues can be prevented. Miscarriages and death in infancy or childhood may be related to a particular type of spirit, called *abiku* (lit. “born to die”), which moves rapidly back and forth from the *aiyé* to the *òrun* in a perpetual cycle. The community of “spirit children” in the *òrun* tell one another the date and circumstances of their

death and promise to meet again in the *òrun*. Oracle consultations and the observation of behaviours, particular conditions, or situations (such as severe or chronic diseases, risky behaviours that endanger the person's life, or attempted suicide) can lead to the timely identification of a person's condition as *abiku*. The oracle may then recommend behaviours, identify taboos, and suggest rituals to ensure a long healthy life or prevent the *abiku* spirit from returning to the womb of the mother or the lineage.

Death, *Ìkú*, is the chief of the Ajogun. In the *itàn*, myths, and Yoruba folktales he is described as a young warrior or haggard old man carrying a heavy club used to kill victims simply by touching them. There are also accounts of humans and even divinities running away and hiding from him, or trying to get him to spare them.

There is a myth¹⁸ about the creation of *ẹtù*, the guinea-fowl – the main symbol in initiation rituals that is thought to expel death and promote long life – by means of an attempt to defend against *Ìkú*'s action.

Ìkú settled in a village, causing the deaths of a large number of people of all ages. They asked *Òriṣánlà*¹⁹ for help. He recommended that they made an offering containing a black chicken and *ẹfún*, a white powder. Following his instructions, they painted the tips of the feathers of the black chicken with the *ẹfún* and then released it in the market. When *Ìkú* saw the strange

18 See Prandi (2001, 511-512).

19 “The big òriṣà”, thought to be the eldest òriṣà.



Figure 4. Foods of the *Olugbajẹ* at the *Àṣẹ Idasilẹ Ọḍẹ* (Archive of the *Àṣẹ Idasilẹ Ọḍẹ*).

animal, he got scared, and left immediately, so the people of the village were no longer under threat. That is how the guinea-fowl was created and obtained the power to expel death, far away from people.

The function of *Ajogun*

The *Ajogun* play an important role in testing, strengthening, and correcting human will and behaviours, in making humans responsible for their mistakes and failures, and maintaining the equilibrium and flow of forces in the Cosmos and society.

The ideal of *iwà pèlé*, a good character, that is central to Ifá teaching and Yoruba ethics (Sàlámì & Ribeiro 2015) and expressed by virtues such as patience, humility, honesty, was frequently mentioned in conversations I had with Bàbá César, Bàbá Marcelo, Bàbá Ifàlòba, and Ìyá Fàwèmímó. It is the primary means of removing the *Ajogun* from a person's life and enabling them to live in harmony with other people. Bàbá César once said that *iwà pèlé* has to be cultivated in the private and public spheres and requires determination and effort; that consulting Ifá, making the prescribed offerings and respecting the personal and collective rules can free a person of the *Ajogun*, and allow him or her to lead a long life of health and prosperity, and to be happy in life.

Ìwà brings together character and personality and has a relational aspect, including attitudes, behaviours, ways of proceeding and responding to what happens (Sàlámì & Ribeiro 2015), in daily relationships with the members of the family and community, and with ancestors, animals, plants, and the environment (Thomas 1993).

So, *iwà pèlé* facilitates life in society, since, as emerged in discussions with Bàbá Marcelo and Bàbá César, it has practical importance for being lucky and achieving success in harmony with other people, and avoiding conflicts. Pride and arrogance lead to a tortuous path, since no one acts alone and everyone needs someone's help. Moreover, having conflicts with other people may lead them to curse us or perform acts of witchcraft against us. Even witchcraft is linked to human responsibility, since spiritual forces can be used for different purposes. Witchcraft is not evil, or is not necessarily evil, but may become evil when used to harm someone else, or make them do what the person wants without consent or being aware of it (Oluwolé 1978).

The *Ajogun* may signal a disequilibrium of forces in the Cosmos and in relationships between human beings, ancestors, the *òrìṣà*, or nature, and may therefore be part of the solution, since they encourage humans to determine the causes and make reparation, which may include correcting the wrongdoing and making offerings to ancestors, the *òrìṣà*, the *Ìyàní*, or other spiritual beings, making the *àṣẹ* circulate in the Cosmos and restoring moral and cosmic order.

When offerings and sacrifices are performed, it is common to sing “asking water to cover and kill discords (*bomi pa ejo*), to cover and kill illnesses (*bomi pa àrùn*), to cover and kill curses (*bomi pa epe*) ... to cover and kill the powers of the *Ajogun*” (Bàbá Marcelo, personal communication).

When a harmful thing – such as a drought; famine; infertile soil, animals or women; locust swarms; the failure to hunt or fish; epidemics – threatens the life of the community, the elders consult the oracle to determine the cause and the potential for re-establishing the equilibrium of forces and restoring the continuity of life in the Cosmos, that is “made up of correspondences, analogies and interactions, where the human being and all the other beings constitute a unique network of forces” (Ribeiro 1996, 18).

The myth that gave rise to the *Olugbajẹ*, an annual ritual devoted to Ọbalúaié, the *òrìṣà* of smallpox and epidemics as well as of their cure – in which guests are offered foods of all *òrìṣà* in castor leaves and Ọbalúaié is invited to eat with humans – is an example of a reparative action in a calamity.

According to myth²⁰, Şàngó²¹ was visited by dignitaries from different kingdoms and Ọbalúaié, coming from afar, performed a dance that others did not know and was ridiculed. In revenge he sent epidemics to that region. Şàngó then consulted a *babaláwo*, who revealed the cause and recommended Şàngó invite Ọbalúaié to a rich banquet to appease his rage. For the occasion, each *òrìşà* brought his or her food to offer him, which is the mythical antecedent of the *Olugbaje*.

In this myth, epidemics do not just cause harm, but also repair the disagreement arising out of the misbehaviour, conflict and rage, and lead to reconciliation. In fact, in Yoruba cosmology, nothing is considered to be intrinsically good or evil; often “order arises out of chaos and justice is often conquered through the fight against injustice” (Şalámì & Ribeiro 2015, 139). Every being, force, or event is considered part of an often unknowable divine plan and a network of interconnected forces that makes life continue, and maintains the dynamic balance in the Cosmos and society. This applies to the Ajogun as well, evident in another myth²² about the role of *Ìkú*, death, in forming human beings, with life being the condition of death and death being the condition of life (Oliveira 1999).

Òrìşánlà, commissioned by Olódùmarè to shape human beings, observed that the *amò*, the primordial mud he was using, had run out and people were sad at not being able to have more children, and so he asked Olódùmarè what should be done. He thereby established that, after a period in the *aiyé*, people should return to the *òrun*, so that the matter they return to the earth may be used to make new life surge. *Ìkú* was the only *òrìşà* who accepted the task.

Therefore, as observed by Altair Oliveira:

Ikú, for the traditional Yoruba, is, at once, the primordial supplier and the restorer of the matter withdrawn from [the earth] and supplied by him, therefore the beginning and the end, and the beginning and the end, and the beginning and the end..., so on, in an eternal circle, where there is no beginning nor end, which is always starting again (Oliveira 1999, iii-iv).

The Covid-19 pandemic – a new Ajogun that spread death and suffering around the planet – was similarly interpreted by Candomblé practitioners: the pandemic was caused by the disequilibrium in relations with nature, owing to unruly exploitation, pollution, and destruction. It was also a nature’s response to the disequilibrium, and an attempt at restoring the balance, and forcing human beings to reflect on and change their behaviour towards nature and other people (Calvo 2021).

Final considerations

In Yoruba cosmology, the conception that pain, suffering, and harm are spiritual beings, collectively known as the Ajogun, has no effect on the notion of God and is essentially moral in character.

There is no strict demarcation line between “natural” and “moral” evils as “Religious, social and natural causes of affliction cannot be seen in Africa as entirely separated and unconnected” (Kasomo 2009, 151), and their cause and origin is usually attributed to human misbehaviour. Human wrongdoing led to the creation of the Ajogun and it continues to attract them into their lives.

Moreover, everything in the Cosmos is intertwined and interconnected and follows the duality principle of balancing opposed forces that sustain existence, and there is no strict division between good and evil. Èşù, the *òrìşà* of communication and movement, responsible for monitoring the cosmic and social order, embodies this principle: he is a trickster, who gives wise advice and is a best friend to his devotees, but he also provokes conflict, causes accidents, and sends the Ajogun to the *aiyé*. All his actions are aimed at (re-)establishing order, harmony, discipline, justice, and organization.

Hence the Ajogun are part of the dynamic forces that help maintain order in the Cosmos and society, prompting the circulation of the *àşę* through offerings, respect for an ethic based on responsibility, reciprocity, and solidarity among all more-than-human beings (humans, animals, plants, the environment, the ancestors, the *òrìşà* and the other spiritual beings) (Calvo 2022), as well as the development of *iwà pèlé* (a good character). This also applies to *Ikú*, death, which is the necessary condition for the continuity of the life cycle and allows new beings to be born.

20 There are several versions of this myth and each one attributes a different cause to Ọbalúaié’s rage. The version reported here was told by Bábá Marcelo during my fieldwork.

21 Mythical king of Oyó, *òrìşà* of justice and lightning.

22 See Beniste (2000).

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Healing or hurting? Interpretations of possession as a disease in the second half of the 19th and early 20th century press¹

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Abstract: This study focuses on articles published in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century in which possession was portrayed as a disease, be it mental or physical. At the beginning, we will briefly show how possession cases were interpreted by the medical profession in the 19th century. We will also describe changes in conceptions of possession and exorcism in Christian religion over this period. The core part of our study entails an analysis of articles, focusing on descriptions of the disease and how possession was perceived by those involved. The paper also considers individual cases and the outcomes and potential consequences of the exorcisms performed on the possessed, including court cases or being committed to an asylum for the mentally ill.

Keywords: possession, devil, witch, hysteria, demonopathy, mental disease

Introduction

This study examines the 19th century view of possession as a mental illness. We examine the role of possession in society and the manifestation of Christian beliefs about possession in the post-enlightenment period in cases of possession. Our main aim is to investigate press reports of possession cases and exorcisms in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century in the context of modern medicine. In the 19th century, psychiatry became a new medical discipline and perceptions of mental illness and supernatural beliefs were changing. Public opinion shifted away from supernatural interpretations to the more modern explanation that possession was an illness.

The main sources used in our research are newspapers articles, specifically, articles published in Cisleithania in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century. We identified several discourses in the periodicals published within this timeframe. This

study focuses on the medical discourse. We identified cases in several articles in various periodicals in which possession was portrayed as a disease. As the ideological focus varied from newspaper to newspaper, that is also taken into consideration.

Role of possession

Possession has been variously defined by many researchers. Littlewood, for instance, defines it as “a local belief that an individual has been entered by an alien spirit or other parahuman force, which then controls the person or at least significantly alters their actions and identity to a greater or lesser extent”. (Littlewood 2004, 8). The phenomenon of possession is found in many cultures and societies (Walter and Fridman 2004, 74). Evidence of some form of possession can be found in the majority of the world’s cultures. Examples occur in most religions, but are more common in some societies (Keener 2015, 217).

¹ This publication is the outcome of the SVV project 'Historická antropologie moderních společností', No. 260733.

Anthropologists describe possession as a type of altered consciousness. It may be involuntary or sought; the latter is typically found in Africa, the Caribbean and parts of Brazil (Littlewood 2004, 8). It is usually spontaneous, but can be induced in healing sessions through an altered state of consciousness (Walter and Fridman 2004, 75). Possession is deeply embedded in the cultures of many developing societies. It is usually thought to help people cope with everyday life and its attendant misfortunes. It has a large range of potential functions, such as everyday resistance against socially oppressive conditions and solving personal disagreements (Jadhav 1995, 809).

Possession is a research topic in many scientific disciplines. In anthropology the focus is on a transcultural framework for classifying or interpreting spirit-possession, or on explaining the cultural meaning of possession in society and finding cross-cultural parallels (Keener 2015, 217). Medical research concentrates on the neurophysiological origins of the symptoms and characteristics of the central nervous system. In psychiatry, possession has been investigated as a mental disorder. It has been diagnosed as neurosis, psychosis, epilepsy and personality disorder. But in some cases the possessed individual showed no signs of mental illness (Jilek 1971, 203). Some psychiatric disorders are considered pathological in all cultures, but there is a group of mental illnesses or conditions that are treated as pathological in some cultures (Jilek 1971, 212).

Possession and medicine in 19th century

In the 19th century, physicians started paying more attention to cases of possession. In this era, asylums for the mentally ill were being built; to protect the afflicted rather than separate them from the rest of society (Huguelet 2009, 67; 65-81). By the end of the 19th century, psychiatry was becoming more professionalized and a growing number of patients were admitted to psychiatric hospitals (Thielman 2009, 15; 6-18). Jean-Martin Charcot, a French physician and psychiatrist, researched hysteria and its relationship to the possession state. In his *Les démoniaques dans l'art* from 1887, he stated that hysteria was not the only cause of the disease associated with possession (demonopathy). Other causes included diagnoses of epilepsy or hypochondria (Charcot and Richer 1887, 91). Charcot identified four phases in hysteria attacks. In the third phase, patients exhibited extraordinary flexibility in movement, dexterity and physical strength. He attributed this to the tendency to misdiagnose hysteria as possession. Patients were liable to exercise strength

disproportionate to their age or gender, and men could be very violent. Some patients were able to contort themselves into the most unimaginable positions, arching over with just their head and feet on the bed and their abdomens bulging (Charcot and Richer 1887, 97). Rapid limb or whole body movements were common. Patients would often jerk up in bed as if they were going to sit up, laying their heads on their knees, but would then bend backwards sharply (Charcot and Richer 1887, 100). Charcot called this phase the passionate attitude period – *période des attitudes passionnelles* (Charcot and Richer 1887, 102). According to Charcot, hysteria attacks were an important part of possession cases. Hysteria manifested in diverse ways, such as through seizures, twisting different parts of the body, ecstasy or, conversely, lethargy, catalepsy, somnolence, paralysis, etc. (Charcot and Richer 1887, 106). In the introduction to Charcot's book *La foi qui guérit* (Faith that Heals), Désiré-Magloire Bourneville pointed out that persons accused of witchcraft were suffering from hysterio-demonopathy and required medical and/or scientific attention, rather than secular justice and executioners (Bourneville and Charcot 1897, 1).

Other physicians sought the origin of mental illness in external influences. Andrevetan attributed nervous disorders to preachers frightening people with horrific religious images and stories. According to Andrevetan, many people in hospices thought they were possessed by the devil (Andrevetan 1862, 10). Some 19th century doctors sought the origins of psychosis in physiological changes. Bittner, for example, claimed that mental illness was caused by the blood as it nourished the nerves. Bittner stated that the brain was highly sensitive to changes in the circulatory system, especially changes in the quality and volume of blood. The symptoms of mental illnesses were manifest mainly in sight and hearing, for example visions of monsters. According to Bittner, hallucinations were related to blood pressure and occurred in conjunction with "bloodlessness" caused by injury or fever. The sufferer's hallucinations are a fixed idea that keeps returning – e.g. believing that one is possessed by the devil (Bittner 1876, 185). Kuffner described the feeling of being possessed as a state where the person thinks they have an additional personality besides their own original one, a concept he called *dvojvědomí soudobé* (Kuffner 1897, 29). He attributed the origin of this condition to thoughts running counter to the original personality that Kuffner considered were meaningless, bad and unpleasant. Rude words coming to mind when praying is one such example. The greater the resistance, the more the person was controlled by and subjugated to them. Motoric hallucinations, unconscious movements,

unintentional utterances and so on are manifestations of this. Affected individuals think they are being controlled by an evil spirit: a state referred to as *daemonomania* (Kuffner 1897, 31).

Possession and exorcism in Christianity

In Christianity, possession is a state in which the afflicted individual's physical activities are controlled by an evil spirit (DiNola 1998, 288). It can occur for several reasons. In the Middle Ages, it was seen as punishment for sinning (Ferber 2006b, 922). Possession could be caused by bewitchment or could be spontaneous but with God's permission (Ferber 2006b, 920). Unlike in other cultures, in which possession can be caused by a good deity or spirit, in Christianity possession is always caused by an evil spirit (Walker 1981, 17). The evil spirits, or demons, represent fallen angels (Kelly 2009, 216). The Christian belief in possession is derived mainly from the New Testament. The synoptic Gospels portrayed Christ as a warrior fighting evil spirits and having the ability to command them. Christ is often portrayed as healer casting out disease (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 24). While traditionally only Christ could cast out evil spirits, relying on his own authority, later Christian priests had to resort to exorcisms and invoke saints and God (Ferber 2006a, 338).

In Christianity, exorcism is a ritual designed to cast demons out of the human body, object or place (Ferber 2006a, 338). The word exorcism derives from the Greek word *exorkizo* – to swear, to conjure (DiNola 1998, 295). Originally, exorcize did not mean casting out the demon, but letting it swear (Walker 1981, 5). In the Middle Ages the Latin word *exorcizo* was interchangeable with the terms *adjuuro* and *conjuuro* (Bailey 2003, 46).

Records of possessions and exorcisms can be found in church writing dating back to early Christianity. In that period and in the early Middle Ages, diseases were often associated with possession (Godu 1992, 4). And it could lead to any illness (Godu 1992, 1). For example, in his *First Apology* Justin Martyr (100–165) referred to madmen as possessed. He thought such people were haunted by the spirits of the dead (Justin Martyr 1885a, 443). He further claimed that exorcism performed in the name of Christ could cure possession (Justin Martyr 1885b, 509). Possession is associated with illness in the *First Letter of St. Clement*, an anonymous letter stating that the brothers in Christ should visit those tormented by evil spirits. People with healing powers cast out demons with God's help and perform other healing acts (The First Epistle of the Blessed Clement 1885, 108).

The Byzantine historian Sozomenos described, in his third book, a possessed man running through a market with sword drawn, having been restored to full mental health through exorcism (Sozomenos Scholasticus 1886, 692).

Physical healing played an important role in early Christianity (Ferntgren 1992, 1). The early non-canonical Christian texts from the 1st and 2nd centuries contained no reports of miraculous healing. In the second half of the 2nd century, accounts of the ability to heal began to appear in Apologetic writing. And by the 3rd century, the number of reports about miraculous healing was growing. In contemporary writing, it is often hard to distinguish between healing and exorcism (Ferntgren 1992, 6). From the middle of the 3rd century, exorcism became part of the training for catechumens and the ritual of accepting new converts into the church (Nischan 1992, 162). Devil expulsion served both the purposes of healing and rooting out belief in pagan gods. However, there was no commonly accepted method of exorcism (DiNola 1998, 292). Exorcism was just one of many treatments. Other methods included fasting, prayer and invoking the name of Christ (Ferntgren 1992, 12). In the early centuries of Christianity, any Christian could carry out exorcisms (Bailey 2003, 46). Nor was there verification of proof of possession (Godu 1992, 16).

In the High Middle Ages, demonic possession was often thought to be the cause of mental illness (Forcén and Forcén 2014, 262). Epilepsy, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are examples of such disorders (Forcén – Forcén 2014, 278). An individual was often considered to be possessed when other remedies failed. Yet, if exorcism did not work, possession was ruled out (Godu 1992, 16). The disease indicating possession was called *demonomania* (Vencovský 1996, 101). Exorcisms entailed the invocation of powerful names, initially the name of Christ and later the names of saints. The first attempts at creating the liturgical texts for exorcisms probably emerged in the 10th century. During an exorcism, the demon was commanded to leave the body or body parts thought to be possessed (Forcén and Forcén 2014, 263). In the High Middle Ages, a growing number of women, known as saints, reported to have supernatural visions. At the same time, a growing number were reported to be possessed. The “saints” and the possessed exhibited similar symptoms and it was often hard to distinguish between the two. Their symptoms included falling into a trance, xenoglossia, predicting the future, surviving without eating, and even levitation (Forcén and Forcén 2014, 263). Trances caused by various diseases were often feminized (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 11). However, holiness

was predominantly a male phenomenon, especially among the nobility or clergy. Conversely, possession was associated mainly with women (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 7). In the 13th century, trances and visions were attributed to diseases of the womb or melancholy. The latter was considered the cause by some early modern demonologists, such as Jean Bodin (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 35). According to Bourguignon, it was not only in Christianity that possession predominantly affected women but also in various other religions and cultures. Most exorcists were men (Bourguignon 2004, 557). Alongside exorcisms, some mentally ill people received medical treatment. But only for a very narrow range of diseases (episodes of melancholy and violence, etc.). In the 15th century, the first asylums for the insane were set up in Spain and in Italy. Treatments were based on Arabic medicine (Foucault 1997, 83).

In the early modern period, the Reformation and witch hunts shaped belief in possession (Burns 2003, 239). Early modern demonologists drew a clear distinction between the possessed and witches. Possession was not seen as a voluntary act and so it was not considered as a crime (Levack 1996, 1613). At the end of the 16th century, suicide was frequently attributed to possession (Midelfort 1992, 130). After the Reformation, the Protestant churches abandoned the rituals and ceremonies of exorcism. Protestants generally believed in possession, but considered exorcisms an *adioforon*, a non-obligatory religious act that had no basis in the sacraments. Zwingli, Calvin, and other Reformation leaders thought exorcism a papal relic (Nischan 1992, 163; Kelly 2009, 216).

Typical symptoms of possession in the early modern period included vomiting foreign objects, seizures, great strength, clairvoyance, xenoglossia, and insensitivity to pain (Levack 1996, 1616). Possession and the typical symptoms were derived from several sources, especially Francesco Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608), which contains a description of 50 possible symptoms (Ferber 2006b, 921; 920-924). During this period, a large number of exorcist manuals was published. The most important authors of these manuals are Girolamo Menghi, Valerio Polidoro, and Petrus Thyraeus (Ferber 2006a, 340).

Even in the early modern period, the notion of using exorcism for the ritual expulsion of an evil spirit did not replace the use of exorcism as a healing tool (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 21). In the 16th century, diagnosis was still completely reliant on assessments of the patient's visible symptoms. Natural causes could not be determined just from visible symptoms and exorcism was no longer just a means of treatment but also of

diagnosis. This change elevated the importance of exorcism and led to greater usage (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 20). In 1643, the Roman church issued a decree calling for women's supernatural experiences to be treated with skepticism (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 32).

In the 17th century, possession was increasingly associated with witchcraft, which meant that witches were frequently accused of causing possession (Levack 1996, 1614). By the turn of the 18th century, mental illness institutions could be found in larger cities (Venocovský 1996, 155). Doctors and philosophers began to shift away from religious interpretations of mental health and toward philosophical and scientific perspectives (Thielman 2009, 12). In the 19th century, supernatural causes of disease had completely disappeared from medical publications. But the role of religion in mental illness continued to attract interest (Thielman 2009, 13).

Possession as an illness in 19th and early 20th century press

Morzine

The first case in this study concerns mass possession in the alpine village Morzine. This case started in 1857 and ended in 1868. More than two hundred people were thought to be possessed. In 1857, two young girls who were preparing for their first communion claimed they were possessed and drew public attention to their symptoms (Levack 2013, 228). In September 1857, another 13 girls aged from 10 to 22 exhibited similar symptoms (Devlin 1987, 136). We analyzed 25 articles published in 16 periodicals. Nine of the articles contained medical discourse. In several newspapers, the Morzine case was described as an epidemic (Ost-Deutsche Post 1865; Lumír 1874; Vereinigte Laibacher Zeitung 1864). *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* called for doctors to investigate the "disease" (*Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* 1858). It claimed that there was a predisposition for mental illnesses in Morzine (*Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* 1858). *Ost-Deutsche Post* stated that possession was a special disease called demonomania (*Ost-Deutsche Post* 1858). *Fremden-Blatt* referred to it as an epidemic or disease that affected mostly women "Everyone is familiar with the sad and strange disease that has affected the village of Morzine for years and cannot be identified. Those affected by the disease were labeled as possessed, and many inhabitants believed it was caused by a spell" (*Fremden-Blatt* 1864). This article was also published in *Grazer Zeitung* (*Grazer Zeitung* 1864). *Vereinigte Laibacher Zeitung* noted that the disease resembled St. Vitus' Dance and

mainly affected young girls aged 9 to 16 (Vereinigte Laibacher Zeitung 1864). Several periodicals provided detailed descriptions of the symptoms. The main symptom among patients in Morzine was convulsions, followed by hysterical laughter, a burning sensation in the body, stuttering, and eye rolling. Some newspapers mentioned invulnerability, experienced for example when falling from a great height or during seizures (Wiener Kirchenzeitung für Glauben, Wissen, Freiheit und Gesetz 1858; Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung 1858). Possessed individuals also fell into a deep sleep (Wiener Kirchenzeitung für Glauben, Wissen, Freiheit und Gesetz 1858, 6; Die Presse 1858). To investigate the situation in Morzine, the French government dispatched Adolph Constans, chief supervisor of mental hospitals. The French government's decision indicates it felt the case required a doctor with knowledge of mental disorders.

Ponte a Ema

Another case occurred in Ponte a Ema near Florence in 1893. According to newspaper reports, the daughter of a local farmer was suffering from hysteria. It is worth noting that it was the newspapers that provided the diagnosis. It was said that she screamed all night long. Her father asked several doctors for help, but they could do little to help her. Her seizures worsened and the local priest informed her father that she might be possessed (*Teufelei*). The farmer took his daughter to Florence where a famous witch lived. He told the witch that his daughter had been bewitched (*verhext*). The farmer confidently observed the exorcism, which was performed in a darkened room with light from only two candles. When the incantation (*Beschwörung*) ended, the witch stated it had worked and told them to go home. The first person to visit them would be the source of the girl's illness. She told them to dispose of that person and then the disease would disappear. The peasant obeyed the witch's command. In the morning an old woman, a beggar, asked for a piece of bread. A horrific act then ensued, according to the newspapers.

The farmer grabbed her with both hands and threw her into the hot bread-oven. Two passing milkmen heard her calling for help. They kicked the door down and pulled the old beggar out of the oven. The exact details of what happened next are unknown; we are simply told that the farmer was charged and punished. The article was first published in *Deutsches Volksblatt* (Deutsches Volksblatt 1893) under the heading "Wieder eine Teufelsaustreibung" and subsequently in other newspapers as "Opět vymítání ďábla" (Národní listy 1893a), "Eine Teufelsaustreibung bei Florenz" (Grazer Tagblatt 1893a), "Ueber eine Teufelsaustreibung"

(Arbeiterinnenzeitung 1893), "Eine Teufelaustreibung" (Mährisches Tagblatt 1893a), "Wieder eine Teufelsaustreibung" (Salzburger Volksblatt unabh. Tageszeitung f. Stadt u. Land Salzburg 1893a) and "Eine Teufelsaustreibung" (Troppauer Zeitung 1893).

Gif

In 1893, articles about a young woman from the French village of Gif, near Versailles, appeared in the newspapers. The 19-year old had been suffering from seizures for four years. According to *Národní listy*, she was an ugly laborer who was probably afflicted by a disease (Národní listy 1893b). *Marburger Zeitung* reported that she had fallen ill and had nervous attacks (*erkranktean nervösen Anfälle*) that developed into hysteria (Marburger Zeitung 1893). When struck with a seizure, the girl would roll around the floor making strange noises (Národní listy 1893b). The locals claimed she was able to predict the future. They came to the conclusion that she was possessed. The priest reported the matter to Bishop Goux of Versailles and requested permission to perform an exorcism. The priest and his assistant prayed over the patient for several months (Národní listy 1893b). Amid growing protests against the church, the mayor of Gif asked Dumontpallier, a leading Parisian doctor, to examine the girl. Dumontpallier and his colleague Pikert diagnosed a late stage of hysteria. However, the girl's relatives refused to allow the treatment (Národní listy 1893b; Marburger Zeitung 1893). The priest then performed another exorcism. The newspapers consistently use the term "ill" to describe the girl. One of the exorcists claimed to have heard the devil in her voice. Bishop Goux justified the exorcism by saying that the girl's illness was so unusual and abnormal that the doctors were helpless (Marburger Zeitung 1893). No further details are given, but the girl eventually made a complete recovery (Národní listy 1893b).

Montelepre

On 5 September 1893, reports of a possession case in Montelepre on Sicily were published in *Mährisches Tagblatt* ("Eine barbarische Scene") and *Grazer Tagblatt* ("Stück Aberglauben"). The newspapers identified the cause as persistent belief in witches and the devil among the predominantly rural population of Sicily. They described the inhabitants as being narrow-minded. Most thought the victims were suffering from the effect of an evil spirit on the human body. A 17-year old girl complained of a painful illness. The family asked the local witch (*Dorfhexe*) to help. She stated that August 15th was the ideal date for an exorcism. The exorcism began with a hot bath of nettles, snail shells, crayfish

and mole skins. Incense was burnt around the tub and the girl was covered in a sheet. She lost consciousness and later died. Relatives thought her fight against death was a sign of the healing power (*Heilkraft*) fighting the evil spirit. The witch and the “superstitious” relatives were charged with murder (Mährisches Tagblatt 1893b; Grazer Tagblatt 1893b). Later other newspapers published the same or very similar articles under different titles, e.g. “Ueber einen barbarischen Vorgang” (Feldkircher Zeitung 1893), “Eine barbarische Scene” (Znaimer Wochenblatt 1893), “Aberglaube!” (Salzburger Volksblatt unabh. Tageszeitung f. Stadt u. Land Salzburg 1893b), “Ein Opfer furchtbaren Aberglauben” (Prager Tagblatt 1893). An article “Príšerný čin povery” also appeared in Czech in *Národní listy* (Národní listy 1893c).

The Kabard woman 1902

This last case, discussed in this paper, was a highly critical article published in five newspapers. It concerned a young Kabard (local ethnic group) woman in the Caucasus mountains who was possessed. The case was referred to in the newspapers as a dark superstition (*finstere Aberglaube*). A young woman had fallen ill and as she had convulsions, the villagers thought she was possessed. Her husband asked the local mullah (Islamic religious leader) for help. The mullah advised him to exorcise the woman. The man laid a fire and undressed her. He tied her arms and feet and tried to “heal her” on the fire until she lost consciousness. The ill woman, as she is referred to in the articles, began to scream but witnesses thought the noise was caused by Satan leaving her body. When the authorities investigated, the mullah stated that it was a common “healing procedure” (Pester Lloyd 1902; Ostdeutsche Rundschau 1902; Salzburger Volksblatt. unabh. Tageszeitung f. Stadt u. Land Salzburg 1902; Pilsner Tagblatt 1902; Brünner Morgenpost 1902). A shorter article was published in *Mährisch-Schlesische Presse* (Mährisch-Schlesische Presse 1902).

Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed five cases of possession that were presented as a disease in 19th and early 20th century newspapers and one case of mass possession – the Morzine case. Most of those affected in Morzine were young women and some newspapers describe Morzine as a young woman’s disease (Fremden-Blatt 1864; Vereinigte Laibacher Zeitung 1864). The possessed in the other cases were young women as well. One should not be surprised to find that possession was thought to be a woman’s disease in 19th century medicine. Some diseases were considered to affect women in particular. In the first half of the 19th century, physicians believed

that hysteria was specific to women (Drouin-Péréon-Hautecoeur 2020, 1). Newspaper reports described Morzine as an epidemic of hystero-demonopathy. Monteplepre, Ponte a Ema, and Gif were all depicted in the newspapers as cases of hysteria. But that does not automatically lead us to the conclusion that only women were possessed in the 19th century. During our research, we found possession cases among men as well. But our paper is mainly based on newspaper articles so we only examined cases that were publicized. Consequently, the cases selected represent a small sample of the possession cases documented in the 19th century.

None of the possessions cases that were attributed to disease analyzed in this study ended in a ritual church exorcism, with the exception of Gif. The Morzine case ended with the intervention of the French government and the gendarmes. In Monteplepre and Ponte a Ema, the village witches expelled the devil. The Kabard woman was exorcised by her husband on the advice of the local mullah. In the cases analyzed here, the cases where possession was seen as a disease tended not to end in a ritual church exorcism, but rather in various folk techniques for expelling the evil spirit.

Of the 24 newspapers discussed in this paper, we were able to identify the ideological slant and focus of 21 newspapers. *Lumír* was a literary magazine (Beránková 1981, 130) containing poetry, feuilleton and cultural information (Bednařík, Jirák and Köpplová 2019, 106). Some periodicals had a national German focus – *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (Lang 2003a, 190), *Deutsches Volksblatt* (Melischek and Seethaler 2016, 183), *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (Lang 2003a, 190), *Pilsner Tagblatt*, *Ostdeutsche Rundschau* (Olechowski 2004, 417) and *Ost-Deutsche Post* (Lang 2003b, 173). Others were political party mouthpieces – *Grazer Tagblatt* and Deutsche Volkspartei für die Alpenländer (Lang 2003a, 292). *Arbeiterinnenzeitung* was a social-democratic magazine (Lang 2003a, 109), while *Národní listy* was liberal paper that supported Národní strana svobodomyseľná (Beránková, Křivánková and Ruttkay 1988, 171). Other liberal newspapers were *Die Presse* (Kubiček 2008, 32), *Ost-Deutsche Post* (Lang 2003b, 173), *Feldkircher Zeitung* (Lang 2003a, 250), *Mährisches Tagblatt* (Fasora-Hanuš-Malíř 2007, 345), *Znaimer Wochenblatt* (Fasora-Hanuš-Malíř 2007, 28), *Prager Tagblatt* (Fasor-Kunštátň-Pavlíček 2019, 345) and *Salzburger Volksblatt. unabh. Tageszeitung f. Stadt u. Land Salzburg* (Glaser 1956, 153). Christian and conservative media included *Wiener Kirchenzeitung für Glauben, Wissen, Freiheit und Gesetz* (Lang 2003b, 422). Some of the newspapers were published by the governmental departments – *Grazer Zeitung* (Olechowski 2004, 417) and *Troppauer Zeitung* (Olechowski 2004,

418). *Brünner Morgenpost* were independent (Malíř 2013, 89) and *Pester Lloyd* were political newspapers promoting Hungary (Rózsa 2003, 2). As we can see the idea that possession was a disease was not typical of a particular ideological slant but could be found in various media, as well as in Christian newspapers.

In this paper, we analyzed five 19th century cases of possession. We showed how 19th century medical opinion was linked to newspaper depictions of possession as a disease. We also looked at how the media presented the possession cases, what the outcome of the case was and the means used to expel the devil.

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FRANTIŠEK VÁLEK

Wellbeing, Harm, and Religion – Conference Report

September 9–11, 2021, Brno, Czech Republic

In September 2021, Masaryk University in Brno hosted the fifth international annual doctoral conference in religious studies. The *Department for the Study of Religions* at Masaryk University was not the only organizer. The conference was arranged in cooperation with (mostly doctoral) students from several institutions: the *Center for Religious Studies* at the Central European University, *Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies* at Charles University, and *Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies* at the University of Pardubice.

The papers all centred around the key theme of wellbeing, harm, and religion. Three interesting keynote lectures, one on each day, formed the backbone of the conference. Andrea di Antoni from Kyoto University opened the conference with a lecture on “Spirits in the Material World: An Anthropology of Religious Healing, Affective Affordances, and Affective Technologies”, in which he presented his anthropological research and discussed the methodological implications of healing through spirit possession practices. On the second day, Radek Kundt from Masaryk University presented his paper “Effects of Extreme Ritual on Physiological and Psychological Health”, familiarizing the audience with the cognitive field research of the organizing institution. On Saturday, Michal Pagis from Bar-Ilan University closed the conference with her paper “Re-enchanting Therapy” on integrating Buddhist and Jewish elements in psychological practice.

The two full conference days were structured around presentations by doctoral students from numerous institutions around the globe. Participants came from, or joined in from, Italy, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, Iran, Portugal, India, Brazil, Austria, Germany, and Egypt. The conference theme was explored from various different cultural perspectives – from antiquity to the modern era – and through the prism of different methodological approaches – ranging from textual interpretative approaches to anthropological research to computer modelling. Conference delegates had the opportunity to experience the interdisciplinary nature of religious studies. Moreover, the small size of the conference meant there was plenty of opportunity for fruitful discussion after the papers and when mingling with a good cup of coffee and tasty snack.

Given the ongoing pandemic, the conference was held in hybrid format. Naturally that had its ups and downs. Some participants were able to join us from afar and the conference papers could be heard by a wider audience. But unfortunately, some participants had unreliable internet connections and others even found it impossible to deliver their presentation. Those attending in person were able to enjoy the additional program, consisting of a guided city tour and social events to foster bonding among young scholars.

In addition, the conference in 2021 was a turning point in the sense it broadened collaboration among doctoral students at Central European institutions researching religion. Following the conference, *Central European Symposium on the Academic Study of Religion* (CESAR) was established, serving as a platform to bring together doctoral students in Central Europe. Since, University of Pardubice hosted the sixth year of the conference, themed “Transformations of Religions in Times of Crises: Spiritual Alienation and Rethinking of Ethics” in September 2022. The 2023 conference on “Religion and Identity” will be held at University of Szeged in October. The readers of the current issue are wholeheartedly welcome to participate.

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