

Special Issue Reprint

The Sociological Study of Religion

Edited by
Juan María Sánchez-Prieto and Josetxo Beriain

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Guest Editors

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Jose txo Beriain



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About the Editors

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Juan Maria Sánchez-Prieto (Madrid, 1958) is a former fellow of the French Government; he holds a PhD in History and is Full Professor of Sociology at the Public University of Navarre. He has taught and carried out research stays at the Universities of Navarre, Paul Valéry University of Montpellier, Paris-Sorbonne, and Montesquieu University of Bordeaux. His work focuses on political cultures, collective representations, and social performativity from a transdisciplinary perspective. He is the author of *El imaginario vasco* (1993), *La España plural* (1999), *Navarra: memoria, política e identidad* (2004), and *Ensayos de transciencia social* (2026). He has also produced significant critical studies on the events of 1968 and on renowned intellectuals such as Juan Donoso Cortés (2003), Antonio Alcalá Galiano (2008), and Reinhart Koselleck (2009), as well as numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals and chapters in edited volumes. He has served as principal investigator in competitive research projects and knowledge-transfer contracts, and has been awarded five research productivity periods (sexenios) by the National Commission for the Evaluation of Research Activity (CNEAI). He has coordinated landmark special issues in international journals such as *Anthropos*, *Arbor* and *Religions*. He currently directs the Aprender-Ikasi Chair and the Institute for Advanced Social Research I-COMMUNITAS (UPNA). He is a member of the unit “Technologies, Politics and Sustainable Societies,” an R&D&I Associated Unit of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC).

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Metamorphosis of the Sacred: Power, Identity, and New Ontologies in Late Modernity

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1. The Post-Secular Horizon and the Reinvention of the Sociology of Religion

The sociology of religion, as a discipline, has traveled a long path since the predictions of the founding fathers of sociology to the complex reality of the 21st century. For much of modern history, the discipline was dominated by a “grand narrative” or *grand récit* of secularization. This narrative, whose intellectual origins trace back to Saint-Simon, Comte, and Spencer, possessed an undeniably teleological stamp: it was believed that the more modern a society became, the more secular and less religious it would be. Under this paradigm, it was assumed that the advancement of scientific rationality, the functional differentiation of social spheres, and technical progress would inevitably lead to the “disenchantment of the world” and the confinement of the religious to the private sphere, if not its total disappearance.

However, contemporary empirical evidence and recent theoretical debates have fractured this consensus. As Aguiluz-Ibargüen and Beriain point out in this volume, that “sociological conjecture” which automatically associated modernization with religious decline has proven to be empirically false on a global level. Europe, far from being the universal norm prefiguring humanity’s future, is revealed today as an “islet of secular exceptionality” in an ocean of religious persistence. The classical theory failed in attempting to apply itself as a global rule, ignoring, for instance, the religious vitality of the United States—a country both modern and deeply religious—or the dynamics of intramundane religions like Confucianism or Taoism, which never fit the Western tension between “this world” and “the other world”.

In this context, current sociology has moved toward a paradigm of “multiple modernities” and a “post-secular” understanding of reality. We no longer live in a world where the distinction between transcendence and immanence can be wiped clean. Rather, we find ourselves in what Charles Taylor has termed a “secular age,” defined not by the absence of God, but by a shift in the conditions of belief: faith is no longer axiomatic; it is one option among others. In this immanent frame, where we operate *etsi Deus non daretur* (“as if God did not exist”), the religious does not disappear but transforms and relocates.

In contrast to the teleology implicit in European secularism, which postulates a final conversion of the religious “they” into a post-religious “we,” these two circles do not function as irreconcilably opposed or disjointed elements. Rather, they operate as two circles of sociality that must be carefully understood as possibilities that enter into relation, tension, and mutual interpenetration within each society. Although the general theory of secularization that emerged in Europe prematurely postulated the advent of a post-dualist world, anchored exclusively in the flourishing of the secular immanent world, it is necessary to recognize that the immanent framework itself generates new experiences of

transcendence, in opposition to the secularist ideology—whether active or passive—of the state. Transcendence thus remains possible within a context of functional differentiation of social spheres, in which the religious phenomenon persists in plural forms.

The contemporary “postsecular” world is not characterized by the disappearance of “the religious,” despite the fact that in some societies, such as those of Europe, religious beliefs and practices have declined markedly. Rather, it is characterized by a continuous expansion of new religious, spiritual, and anti-religious options. This is because, when it comes to religion, there is no single global and uniform rule. If we assume the centrality of the religious phenomenon within a context of multiple differentiations, plural secularizations, multiple modernities, and, of course, transnational religions, this world can no longer be described as secular, but rather as “postsecular.” Recognizing this fact consequently undermines the secularist confidence in the imminent disappearance of the religious phenomenon.

Current debates, which this Special Issue collects and amplifies, suggest that the category of “the religious” is itself a construction of Western secular modernity. By questioning the linear narrative of secularization, the need arises to analyze how the sacred metamorphoses. Durkheim already warned that society possesses an incessant capacity to create sacred things out of the profane, sacralizing the nation, liberty, or reason. Thus, contemporary sociological research must attend not only to the decline of traditional ecclesial institutions but also to the “sacralization of the secular,” the proliferation of non-affiliated spiritualities, and the instrumentalization of religious identity in mass politics.

Furthermore, the Simmelian distinction between “religiosity” (as a vital quality) and “religion” (as an institutionalized form) gains new relevance. Traditional statistics, obsessed with church attendance or dogmatic affiliation, often fail to capture “secular religiosity” or the forms of diffuse belief that characterize advanced societies. This volume addresses these tensions, exploring how religion today is not just a matter of personal faith, but a question of cultural belonging, a tool of imperial governance, an ontological refuge in the face of scientific uncertainty, and a battlefield for the definition of human rights and dignity.

As Guest Editors of this Special Issue of the journal *Religions*, titled “The Sociological Study of Religion,” we present a collection of eleven articles that, far from taking the death of God or the triumph of secularism for granted, demonstrate the vitality, ambiguity, and political potency of the sacred in the contemporary and historical world. Through case studies ranging from Imperial Japan to democratic Spain, passing through communist China and the United States of the Black Panthers, this volume proposes that the study of religion is, today more than ever, the study of the fundamental tensions of modernity.

2. The Sacralization of the Secular and the Limits of Secularization

The first axis of the monograph challenges the unidirectionality of secularization and explores the new ontologies of the sacred.

Maya Aguiluz-Ibargüen and Josetxo Beriain, in their article “Sacralization of Secular Spheres in Modernity,” establish the fundamental theoretical framework. They argue that modernity is not merely a process of emptying the sacred, but a machine for the production of new sacralities. They analyze phenomena such as the French Revolution, where the Fatherland and Reason were objects of direct worship, and American “civil religion,” which sacralizes the nation and its institutions without adhering to a specific confession. The authors highlight how modernity has sacralized immanent spheres such as the “human person,” converting human rights into a new faith where the individual is, simultaneously, the believer and the God. This sacralization extends even to the figure of the child, whose accidental death in the 20th century transformed from a misfortune into an “intolerable

sacrilege.” Their work forces us to rethink secularization not as the end of the religious, but as the migration of the sacred toward secular objects.

This theoretical framework is empirically grounded in the work of Javier Gil-Gimeno and Gorka Urrutia Asua, “The Structure of Beliefs and Religious Practices in Spain: A Three-Part Society?”. Analyzing the Spanish case, the authors describe the transition from a religiously monolithic society to a tripartite structure: a declining Catholic majority, a growing group of religious minorities, and a booming sector of “nones” (atheists, agnostics, indifferent). However, their most critical contribution lies in questioning current statistical tools. They argue that by identifying religiosity exclusively with “historical religions,” surveys underestimate the impact of secular religiosities and blindly reinforce the narrative of secularization. They warn that categories such as “atheist” or “indifferent” may hide dynamics of secular sacralization (such as nationalism or the cult of the individual) that standard metrics ignore.

At a level of ontological and symbolic analysis, Jacinto Choza explores “The Feminine Sacred: An Ontosociology of Woman as a Symbol.” Choza traces representations of the feminine divinity from the Neolithic Great Mother to the Virgin Mary, arguing that woman symbolizes indeterminate matter and primordial energy. His analysis connects ancient cosmology with modern physics, suggesting that “mother matter” or the quantum vacuum represent the feminine sacred as origin and return (*regressus ad uterum*). This text is crucial because it shows how religious symbolic structures persist and underlie sociological and political configurations, even in contemporary debates on feminism, where the tension between equality and difference has deep theological roots.

Finally, Todd Madigan, in “Perfect Fools: Sanctity, Madness, and the Theory of Ambiguous Performance,” offers an innovative perspective from cultural pragmatics. Analyzing the historical figure of the “holy fools”—individuals who, like St. Symeon of Emesa, acted obscenely or irrationally—Madigan challenges the idea that the meaning of a social performance depends on the actor’s intention. He proposes the theory of “ambiguous performance,” where incompatible roles (saint and madman) are presented simultaneously. The sociological importance lies in the fact that it is the audience, not the actor, who constructs meaning based on their own interpretive identity. This has profound implications for understanding how modern societies label the sacred and the profane, madness and sanctity, in an environment of interpretive uncertainty.

3. Religion, Politics, and the Struggle for Identity

The second thematic block addresses the instrumentalization of religion in the political arena, both as a tool of domination and resistance.

Carmen Innerarity and Antonello Canzano present a comparative analysis of the radical populist right in “National Populism and Religion: The Case of Fratelli d’Italia and Vox.” The authors demonstrate that these parties do not seek a revival of theological faith but use Christianity as a cultural identity to define the native “people” against the “Other,” represented primarily by Islam. This political use of religion is paradoxically combined with a defense of secularism (a “Christian secularism”) when it serves to exclude Muslim symbols from the public space. Christianity thus becomes a “culturalized religion,” a heritage without a creed that legitimizes nativist policies under the guise of defending Western civilization.

At the other end of the political and temporal spectrum, Sergio García-Magariño and Aaron Yates examine the Black Panther Party (BPP) in “Violence, Politics and Religion: A Case Study of the Black Panther Party.” Although the BPP was a secular organization in a Black movement largely comprising religious groups (led by figures like Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X), the authors show how its ideology of self-defense interacted with the

religious imaginary of its environment. The study reveals that the violent “radicalization” of the BPP was not inherent but a relational response to brutal state repression (COINTELPRO). This article challenges the simple dichotomy between the religious and the secular in social movements, showing how a secular organization can adopt and adapt repertoires of action in an ecosystem saturated with religiosity.

Religion also appears as an imperial battlefield. Yiwei Xiao and Yuanlin Wang, in “The Separation of Church and State as an Imperial Project in the Philippines during the Early American Colonial Period,” demystify liberal secularism. They argue that the imposition of church-state separation by the U.S. in the Philippines was not merely an administrative measure but a project of cultural hegemony. Colonial administrators used the narrative of “religious freedom” to contrast American democratic “civilization” with the “corrupt” and “barbaric” theocracy of the Spanish friars. Thus, secularism reveals itself as an imperial tool to legitimize colonial rule, constructing an unbridgeable difference between the new “enlightened” regime and the old Catholic regime.

Against the co-optation of religion by power, Eun-Young Park and Do-Hyung Kim recover a prophetic voice in “Is Religion Personal or Social?—Reading Yanaihara Tadao’s ‘The Ideal of the State’”. They analyze the figure of Yanaihara Tadao, a Christian and academic in Imperial Japan who used his faith to resist state nationalism. Yanaihara rejected the “subordinate peace” that demanded blind obedience to the Emperor, arguing that religion has a social responsibility of criticism based on divine justice. His concept of the “Ideal of the State” as justice, and not as power, shows how religion can serve to relativize absolute political authority and defend human dignity, acting as an ethical counter-power in times of crisis.

4. Alternative Epistemologies and Social Order

The third axis of the volume explores how religious traditions offer systems of knowledge and cohesion that compete with or complement modern Western rationality.

Chao Jia and Jingting Zhang offer a fascinating re-reading of rituals in “Affective Governance Through Ritual Praxis: A Comparative Study of Confucian Sacrificial Systems and Western Social Cohesion Theories.” Challenging Western functionalist interpretations (such as those of Durkheim), the authors argue that the Confucian sacrificial system is based not on fear or mere social cohesion, but on “affective governance.” The ethical transformation during the Zhou dynasty internalized ritual as an expression of intrinsically moral human nature (benevolence and reverence). This model proposes a social order based on vertical integration (ancestors-descendants) and the management of emotions, offering a humanistic alternative to Western legalistic rationality.

In the realm of science and faith, Yingxu Liu and Saiping An investigate conversion narratives in contemporary China in “The Tension Between Buddhism and Science Within Contemporary Chinese Buddhists.” Through interviews with monastics at the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy, they discover a surprising phenomenon: many monks, educated in secular scientism, converted to Buddhism not out of superstition, but because they perceived Buddhism as a “super-science”. For these practitioners, Buddhism offers epistemological and methodological answers superior to those of materialist science (for example, in the explanation of consciousness or high-dimensional physics). This study challenges the thesis that scientific modernization inevitably leads to secularization, showing how science can, paradoxically, act as a catalyst for religious conversion.

Finally, José Andrés-Gallego excavates the cultural archeology of the West in “Roots of 20th-Century Western Counterculture: From Guillem Rovirosa’s Catalonia to Its Antipode.” Using the microhistory of Guillem Rovirosa and his circle, the author traces how, before the explosion of 1968, there already existed a countercultural “melting pot” mixing Esperanto,

naturism, spiritualism, and theosophy. This eclectic itinerary was not an anecdote but a symptom of a broader spiritual search attempting to escape both materialism and rigid institutional Christianity. Andrés-Gallego demonstrates that the search for “new certainties” and the blending of the political (anarchism) with the spiritual (theosophy) have deep roots that prefigure the diffuse spirituality of today.

5. Conclusions

This Special Issue of *Religions* invites the reader to a profound reconsideration of the boundaries of the sociology of religion. The articles gathered here demonstrate that religion in late modernity cannot be understood simply as a residual variable destined to disappear. On the contrary, the sacred demonstrates extraordinary plasticity: it migrates from altars to parliaments, disguises itself as cultural heritage to exclude the different, becomes a tool of resistance against empires, merges with quantum physics to explain reality, and structures our most intimate emotions.

The transversal thesis emerging from this volume is that secularization is not the end of religion, but its metamorphosis. We live in an era where the “sacralization of the person” coexists with “religious nationalism,” scientific pursuit with Buddhist mysticism, and militant secularism with new forms of spirituality. Studying religion today necessarily implies studying how human beings—whether in populist Europe, post-Maoist China, or colonial Philippines—construct meaning, legitimize power, and manage transcendence in an immanent world.

“The Sociological Study of Religion,” is a compendium that not only observes religious fact but interrogates the very nature of our modernity.

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Article

Sacralization of Secular Spheres in Modernity

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Abstract: Our proposal is aimed at analyzing a series of sacred forms that question that initial hallmark of the general theory of secularization which, based on a teleological conception, postulated a movement from the sacred to the profane, from the religious to the secular. These new sacred forms describe a different pattern that goes from the secular to the religious, as new forms of sacralization. In this sense, we analyze, first, the historical emergence of the grand narrative of secularization in Europe, which describes a unidirectional process from the religious to the secular. Second, we carry out a genealogical critique of the narrative of secularization. Third, we analyze the other direction in that dynamic tension that goes from the secular to the religious. Fourthly, we analyze new forms of sacralization that emerged in the French Revolution, in American “civil religion”, in post-war Europe, in the commemorations of Memorial Day or Veteran’s Day, in the Coronation Ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II, in the proto-event of 11 September 2001, in the sacralization of the person and in the sacralization of the child. “See to it that no one enslaves you through the vain fallacy of a philosophy, founded on human traditions, according to the elements of the world and not according to Christ.” (Saint Paul, Epistle to the Colossians 2: 8); “In the imagination of the simple patriot, the nation is not a society but *the Society*. Although its values are relative, they appear, from his naive perspective, as absolute. The nation is always endowed with an aura of sacredness, which is the reason why religions, which claim universality, are so easily captured and domesticated by national sentiment, religion and patriotism converging in such a process.” (Reinhold Niebuhr); “Everyone can only choose for himself who for him is God and who is the devil because with respect to values, in fact, it is always and everywhere not only a matter of alternatives, but of an irreconcilable fight to the death, between ‘god’ and the ‘devil’.” (Max Weber).

Keywords: sacralization; the secular; religious; secularization; disenchantment of the world

1. Introduction

It has been thought of as a historical process leading from the sacred to the secular. Well visible is the teleological stamp of this belief, whose trail leads back to the first wave of enlightened modernizing sociologists (Saint Simon, Comte, Spencer, Condorcet); it was believed that the more modern a society is, the more secular and less religious it would be. What reality seems to exhibit, however, is rather a process that can be said to be advancing *between* the sacred and the secular, as long as these are seen as two guiding distinctions, of permanent value and in constant dynamic tension in the real world. The theory of secularization was also thought of as a universal general theory (Berger 1967), when, in reality, what we discover is the coexistence of diverse secularizations, de-secularizations

and modern sacralizations (and we must stress the need to emphasize this plural). Our response to these lines of interpretation is that we do not live in a post-dualistic world where the old transcendence/immanence distinction can be made *a clean slate*, as naively thought by that first wave of secularizing conviction, which considered modern society to be embedded, with all its trappings, in immanent finitude. Fifty years later, Berger himself redefines his approach, stating that there currently exists “on the one hand, a coexistence between different religions and, on the other hand, a coexistence between religious discourses and secular discourses” (Berger 2014, p. 9). Social reality persistently warns us of the presence of new religious realities that fill with self-transcendent stretches the very immanence of that cosmos that was postulated purely and exclusively as an immanent realm, but understood in a narrow sense, urgently in need of a reinterpretation of the kind we propose here.

2. Results

2.1. *The Unfolding of the Grand Récit of a General Theory of Secularization*

The self-awareness of living in a secular age can only emerge from the empirical evidence that “belief in God is no longer axiomatic, (that) there are alternatives” (Taylor 2007, p. 3). We have moved from a society where it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, or at least not to have the axiom of belief in God as the cardinal axis of common sense (because it was socially prescribed to believe and proscribed not to believe, in a massively believing context), to one where faith, even for the most radical of believers, is a human possibility (Taylor 2007, p. 3) among others. Charles Taylor, taking up Hugo Grotius’s formula, asserts that this crucial sociological fact will produce a new pattern of meaning according to which we act within an “immanent secular framework” under the premise: *etsi Deus non daretur* (Taylor 1998, pp. 34 and 36) (“as if God did not exist”), and even if God did not exist, the principles that emanate from such a “secular immanent world” are binding. It could be said that within the *saeculum* a new guiding distinction emerges, that which differentiates between an “us” (post-religious subjects who are governed by rational claims of validity) and a “them” (religious believers guided by their faith).

This irrefutable sociological fact will produce a great narrative of secularization that begins with the “modernizing” proto-sociologists—Saint Simon, Comte and Spencer—who champion the *grand récit* (in Lyotard’s terms) that constitutes modern societies, relying on a narrative of progress (Koselleck 1975, pp. 350–423) that constitutes and continues civilization until reaching the “positive” stage where the “secular immanent framework” will have an unavoidable importance. Although Taylor challenges the secularist and denialist prejudices that tend to understand the secular as merely the space that remains when the supramundane reality is emptied of religious content or to see religious indifference as simply the result of scientific-technical progress, nevertheless, he does not shy away from the teleological character of that “evolutionary consciousness of stages”, since according to him, the plausibility of this “secular immanent framework” is based on a process of historical maturation sustained by the argument that “the superiority of our gaze over previous forms of understanding is part of what defines the advance of the current stage over all previous stages” (Taylor 2007, p. 289); modern religious indifference is not the absence of belief but a historical condition that requires the imperfect past tense, “a condition of *having overcome* the irrationality of belief” (Taylor 2007, p. 269).

2.2. *Critical Genealogy of the Grand Récit of Secularization*

Based on this sociological fact from a specific historical context, that of the dynamics of transformation of Western European Christianity from the Middle Ages to the present day, a general theory of secularization has been constructed based on a “sociological conjecture”

that serves as a “regime of knowledge” with not only descriptive but also prescriptive connotations and which we could formulate, in the terms of José Casanova, as follows: “the more modern, the more secular a society is, and the more secular, the less religious” (Casanova 2006b, p. 17). This conjecture has ultimately been proven false in empirical terms. This general theory of secularization in Europe has functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Casanova 2002, p. 24) insofar as a majority of the population in Europe has come to accept the premises of this theory as a normal fact (when, in reality, Europe is an islet of secularist exceptionality in the face of the usual ocean of persistence of the religious fact in the rest of the world) and has projected them as an original from which to make *worldwide* copies, making it clear that modernization and secularization, empirically speaking, are not two synonymous terms. When we refer to religion, we should not forget that “*there is no global rule*” (Casanova 2006a, vol. 8, Nos. 1 and 2, p. 17).

A refutation of this “conjecture” that automatically associates *modernization and secularization* (Joas 2012, pp. 23–43) as the progressive disappearance of religion can be found, for example, in the United States, where, according to de Tocqueville (1990, p. 309), the advance of rationalism (that is, education and scientific knowledge) and the value of individualism (i.e., liberal democracy and individual freedoms) do not necessarily lead to a decline in religion. In other words, the United States is both a secular and a religious country at the same time. The First Amendment to the Constitution does not prohibit the thirteen original states from practicing *their own established religions*. What Congress vetoed was the establishment of an official political religion in the United States. In colonial America there was no feudalism or a national church spread throughout the thirteen original colonies, from which the new federal state needed to separate. Therefore, the separation between church and state was amicable, not only because there was no hostile separation in relation to a pre-existing established church, but also because the separation was constituted to *protect the free exercise of religion*, that is, to construct the conditions for the possibility of religious pluralism (denominationalism), where the assumption is that religious diversity is a “good” for society or the nation.

The Western European pattern of tensions and conflicts between the “secular” and the “religious” cannot be mechanically applied to other parts of the world as if it were the rule to follow, the original from which copies are made, when it is rather the exception (Davie 1999, pp. 65–83) to the rule; in fact, a large part of non-Western postcolonial societies have not followed the Western-European pattern. Nor can it be applied to Confucianism or Taoism, insofar as they are not characterized by a tension between “this world” and “the other world” or by an ecclesiastical organization of mediation. These religions have always been “intramundane” and “secular”, and for this reason there has been no generalized process of secularization in Western terms.

2.3. The Other Hidden Direction of the Pairing: From the Secular to the Religious

The grand problem of the general theory of secularization was to have entrusted its plausibility to an evolutionary conception of teleological character, according to which there is something like a universal law of evolution (sic Herbert Spencer) that leads from the religious to the secular with an unequivocal finalistic orientation, when in fact we must keep in mind that the secular “should not be thought of as the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of “religion” and thus replaces it” (Asad 2003, p. 191). In the historical processes of secularization, an interesting ideological inversion takes place. Initially, “the secular” was part of the theological discourse (*saeculum*), and, later on, the very category of “the religious” was born from the political-secular and scientific-secular discourses. Therefore, “religion” itself emerges, as a historical category and as a universal globalized concept, as a result of a construction of Western secular

modernity (Asad [1993] 1994; 2003, p. 192). Let us see this through a modern example, that of nationalism emerging throughout the nineteenth century. This is a “secular” product, since it is designed to develop within processes of secularization and modernization. Emile Durkheim was the first sociologist to show how nationalism became a source of production of sacredness (Santiago 2010, pp. 349–67), which according to him replaced that previously produced by historical religions. The new cult of the nation thus guaranteed the social bond at a time when the old gods were aging or dying, and others had not yet been born to replace them (Durkheim 1982, p. 398)¹. During the Revolution of 1789, French nationalism worshipped society, without any mediation, without projecting itself into something that symbolized it, in contrast to what had happened previously with totemic and theistic religions. At that time “purely secular things were transformed (...) into sacred things: thus the Fatherland, Liberty and Reason (...) In a given case it has been seen that society and its ideas became directly, and without transfiguration of any kind, the object of a true cult” (Durkheim, opus cit, p. 201). Recently, studies have emerged showing how the notion of “God’s choice”, which was first experienced by the Israelites and formulated in the Old Testament texts, has been adopted by the modern nationalist movement (Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999, p. 6). A proportion of these studies examine the ways in which the idea of choice served to justify the aims and actions of an imperialist policy, while another group of the studies try to explain suffering by providing a stimulus to political emancipation and national liberation. Both forms of choice can be conflated with ideas of racial purity and uniqueness: the men who believed they were bearers of a special mission in British colonial affairs in the 19th century were very consciously Christian and white, as were their counterparts in the Netherlands, in Germany or in the United States. In the substratum of the actions of these men, three concepts are discovered (Van der Veer 2001, p. 30): religious elements, secular nationalism and the notion of race or racial characteristics. First, there is the idea of *choice of a certain people*, which incorporates political and social as well as religious ingredients. Second, there is the theme of *revival or rebirth of the entire nation*. Pietists and Methodists introduced the metaphor of “*Awakening*”—a kind of collective regeneration—in 18th century Protestantism, and 19th century nationalists used the notion of *revival* to explain and advance the idea of a Christian nation, “*a nation under God*” (Gorski 2020) as it was called in the United States. The third idea is the *belief in a new Messiah* who serves as a spiritual (Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, etc.) and/or political leader. In 1914, even those who received a secular education were socialized with biblical stories that pictured their respective political leadership in biblical terms and with spiritual qualifications spelled out in the Old and New Testaments². The religiously united secular national community would recreate itself by creating commemorations of the nation’s violent past (“*sacrificial Birth and Rebirth*”). As we see, in all these examples, “the secular” and “the religious” lend each other concepts, figures and meanings that highlight the ideological inversions that are established between them, even within a predominantly secular world.

But, as opposed to the teleology implicit in European trends of secularization, which postulates a final conversion of the religious “them” into the post-religious “us”, both circles do not function as irreconcilably opposed or disjointed elements, but as two sides of the same coin, two circles of sociality, which must be carefully understood as possibilities that enter into relationship and tension, and interpenetrate within each society, giving rise to different constellations. The religious and the secular continue their struggle within today’s public culture, where a set of complex classificatory systems of symbols and meanings compete to constitute a semantic *field in permanent dynamic tension* in which national life and national identity are implicated. Let us begin by clearing up three common confusions that we should avoid.

Everybody worships. Worship has not receded in a supposedly “secular” world, but has rather migrated from the explicit worship of God to the implicit worship of things of human creation (Cavanaugh 2024). The ubiquity of worship indicates a deep longing in the human heart for the transformation of our lives. What characterizes the modern West is not disenchantment as a unique trend but rather the condition of having learned to describe ourselves as disenchanted and enchanted. What has diminished in the West is explicit worship of the Jewish and Christian God; what has not diminished is worship. People kill for all sorts of things: gods, flags, freedom, ethnicity, oil, nations, the workers’ revolution, the free market, and many other ideologies and practices that people treat as ultimate (Weber 1946, p. 149). Worship is not confined to gods but applies to all sorts of realities commonly labeled “political” or “economic.” We all believe in something; we are spontaneously worshipping creatures whose devotion alights on all sorts of things.

2.4. Modern Sacralizations

In the writings of Emile Durkheim we also find a series of fragments that support the thesis of the presence of modern resacralizations of spheres that are in principle secular, such as the nation and the human person. Durkheim never spoke of modern polytheism like Weber, but he did point to the idea that the processes of “indetermination of collective consciousness” would generate processes of individualization and a strong differentiation of collective representations in the plural. According to Durkheim, the *collective effervescence* (Durkheim 1982, p. 205) that originates the transcendence of the ordinary world and creates an extra-ordinary *plus* and the subsequent *emblematisme* that he observes in the first human societies can also be observed in the symbolism of national realities at the end of the XVIII and throughout the XIX century, in the midst of the intensification of social life created by the French Revolution, in the origin of the nation as the proto-modern expression of collective identity. In Durkheim’s view, there would be no substantial difference in ritual form between the gathering of Christians celebrating the major milestones in the life of Christ, Jews recalling the Exodus from Egypt, or a gathering of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new morality or a new legal system or a significant event in national life. We have to remember that what makes the religious fact recognizable as such is not its content but its form. The contents of the sacred can change over time; i.e., they could be established and they could also lose their aura of sacredness. *Each society creates its own sacred contents*. What was sacred in the past could be less sacred today and could even be totally desacralized in the future. We have to remember that the religious fact is nothing mysterious or supernatural; it is present in all civilizations and in all ages. First we began by sacralizing *nature itself* in the pre-axial religions; then we sacralized the *gods* of the sky in the axial religions, but then in the modern post-axial era we have sacralized the *nation*, the *individual*, the *child*. It is not born of individual feelings, but of states of the collective soul, *and can acquire as many forms as the collectivity that engenders it, and its nature can only be determined through two indicators: practices and beliefs*. “In short, it is the unity and diversity of social life that determines, at the same time, the unity and diversity of sacred beings and things” (Durkheim 1982, p. 385). We should not forget that the sacred in modern societies is not a uniform constellation of symbols and rituals that produces a unanimous consensus among all citizens. Modern societies, in Durkheimian terms, have a *plural collective consciousness with multiple sacred forms that are sometimes in opposition to each other* (Lynch 2012, p. 135). To speak of the sacred in modern societies means to look at contingent historical situations (Tweed 2006, pp. 54–79) that create specific forms of transcendence—the constitutive element of production of sacredness—some of these being still axial and manifesting in the mapping of universal religions, but other forms emerging with different post-axial

characteristics, such as the *sacralization of the nation* and more recently the *sacralization of the person and more specifically of the child*, as we shall see.

The historical selection of the different cases that we study below is based on history and on the set of operative social forces that act within these two poles, religious and secular, configuring a semantic field in permanent dynamic tension that gives rise to specific sacralization constellations within different societies where secularization and sacralization are two processes inherent to social evolution. The processes of secularization and sacralization coexist within societies. There is no single direction that leads from the religious to the secular, as a first version of the secularization that emerged in Europe thought, but rather society sacralizes, creates new sacred forms from secular spheres.

(A) The French Revolution

Beginning with our analysis of expressions of modern resacralizations affecting the nation, let us look at the case of the French Revolution (Hunt 1988, pp. 25–44; Edward 1988, pp. 44–66). Abbé Sieyès, in his celebrated *Qu’ès ce que le Tiers Etat*, published in 1789, stated that the French nation was “a body of associates living under common laws and represented by the same legislative assembly. . . It was something anterior, pre-existent to all social phenomena and institutions. . . The image of the *Patrie* is the only one to worship” (Sieyes [1789] 1970, pp. 10–11). According to this fragment we can observe how the community of salvation is transformed into a community of worship, of practices, into an imagined national community, in Benedikt Anderson’s terms, in which the new object of worship is the nation (Santiago 2015, p. 37), or rather, “the people of the nation”. The historical event does not represent a transfer of sacredness, as Llobera (1994, p. 187) notes, moving from the sacred to the profane, as was usually postulated by the European metanarrative of secularization, but the *sacralization of a secular domain* made possible by the performative revolutionary acts of 1789 and the years that followed the revolution, thus creating a new post-tax religious constellation. From the French Revolution emerged a constituent will represented in a new faith whose principles are contained in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (Mathiez [1904] 2012)³. The royal-regal becomes the national. This sacralization transforms a secular reality such as the nation. We have already seen how originally “the secular” was part of a theological discourse (*saeculum*), where secular forms become independent progressively from religious tutelage, but, later, as a consequence of the secularization process, the category of “the religious” will emerge from political-secular discourses and scientific-secular discourses, something that is evident in these new modern post-taxial sacralizations (Asad 2003, p. 192). This new metamorphosis of “the religious” situates religion as a historical category and as a globalized universal concept within the cultural and political programs of Western secular modernity. The Durkheimian reference is revealing in this regard: “This capacity of society to set itself up as a god or to create gods was at no time more perceptible than during the first years of the French Revolution. At that time, indeed, under the influence of the general enthusiasm, purely secular things were transformed by public opinion into sacred things, thus the Fatherland, Liberty, Reason. There was a tendency to erect for itself a religion with its dogmas, its symbols, its altars and its festivities. . . There remains the fact that in a given case, it was seen that society and its ideas became directly, and without transfiguration of any kind, the object of a true cult” (Durkheim 1982, p. 201).

(B) American “civil religion”

The concept of American “civil religion” coined by Bellah and Tipton (2006, pp. 225–45) offers a genuinely modern example of resacralization of the secular reality of the nation. If Durkheim has offered us the juicy example of the French Revolution, Bellah will draw a series of important conclusions from “a collection of beliefs, symbols and rituals

in relation to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity (the American republic)" (Bellah and Tipton 2006, p. 233). This religious variety is a community of worship, of practices, not so much a community of beliefs, since people hold diverse beliefs. This variety is not oriented to the salvation of the soul of the believer but to the welfare of the citizen, as Robertson-Smith and Durkheim had already warned. The milestones of emergence of "civil religion" occur in the midst of periods of socio-political explosion, of crises that test the social creativity of a collective (Gorski 2017). The first of these periods is represented by the revolutionary war of independence against England, where George Washington emerges as the Moses who leads his people by breaking the chains of tyranny. The second period is forged around the Civil War, the "center of American history," a moment that captures the tragic intensity of a fratricidal struggle in one of the bloodiest wars of the 19th century. While the first period focused on the question of Independence, on whether the emerging country should or could govern itself, the second period concentrated on the idea of slavery, which would eventually represent the most far-reaching problem for the complete institutionalization of democracy within the country. The Civil War brought with it the deeper questions of national meaning, and Abraham Lincoln, "our martyred president" (Bellah and Tipton 2006, p. 236), would appear as the new Jesus picking up the baton from Washington with new challenges to respond to. As the third period of challenge, Bellah places it in the midst of the crisis over the public-sphere consequences of the Vietnam War and the collective effervescence generated by the civil rights movement with Martin Luther King as the symbolic catalyst.

Civil religion is a national community of worship but not a community of salvation; "it is something genuinely American and new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and its own sacred places, its own solemn rituals and its own symbols" (ibid., p. 245); "the God of the civil religion is not a "unitarian" God, ... (but) is more related to order, law, freedom and justice than to salvation and love" (p. 232); in fact, J. F. Kennedy, in his inaugural address, places as enemies, not other men, but tyranny, poverty, disease and war.

In this sense, civil religion is a post-tax religion, reordering the presence of Hebraic and other Christian traits in a new context. Bellah takes up the example of Tocqueville, from whom he draws inspiration when he states that American civil religion is a "*democratic and republican religion*" (Bellah and Tipton 2006, p. 239)⁴. According to de Tocqueville (1990, p. 309), the advance of rationalism (i.e., education and scientific knowledge) and the value of individualism (i.e., liberal democracy and individual liberties) do not necessarily lead to a decline of religion. That is, the United States is both a secular and religious country; the First Amendment to the Constitution does not prohibit the thirteen original states from practicing "their own established religions" in them. What Congress vetoes is the establishment of an official political religion in the United States. In colonial America there was neither feudalism nor a national church spread throughout the thirteen original colonies from which the new federal state needed to separate. Therefore, the separation between the state and the church was friendly, not only because there was no hostile separation in relation to a pre-existing established church, but also because the separation was constituted to "protect the free exercise of religion"—that is, to build the conditions for the possibility of religious pluralism (denominationalism) (Niebuhr [1929] 1957, pp. 3–6, 17–21, 25; Casanova 2012) where it is assumed that religious diversity is a "good" for society or the nation.

(C) Post-war Europe

As examples of modern resacralization, in the wake of Durkheim, we can cite other equally interesting cases. Let us consider the example of post-war Europe. If anything is Europe, it is a *symbol*, a *totem*, but, for Durkheim, the totem is not only a symbol of something that is sacred to the believer but is a constituent part of the sacred as such.

This occurred in Europe in the space of time immediately following World War II and the dreadful Shoah (Schwedberg 1994, pp. 378–87). These are events of collective shock, of crisis, of tragedy (let us recall, in this sense, the energetic pronouncements, perhaps forgotten today, of Winston Churchill in defense of a United Europe in 1946, as well as the founding of the Council of Europe in 1949), episodes that galvanized the pro-European movement) that elucidate *a sort of new post-tax and post-national piacular rite and prelude a new political ideal, that of a United Europe, born in opposition to the perverse Nazi glorification of the national state*, aspects that will crystallize in the Congress of the Hague in May 1948. The *new modern European self-representation* would therefore be the *result of a negative identity*, based on events of the recent past. Jeffrey C. Alexander has situated the Holocaust as the meta-event and the dominant collective representation (Alexander 2004, pp. 196–264) that symbolizes such a negative collective identity (evil) in the second half of the twentieth century. This meta-event is comparable to the meta-event represented by the Sermon on the Mount, if we attend to its implications and repercussions. Without this set of events of reappropriation of the past in the present, Auschwitz would not have gone beyond the stage of a war crime to become a *universal cultural trauma*. Alexander gives voice to the “experience of a universal trauma” (Alexander 2013) that can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful harm inflicted on the collective, establishing the victims, assigning responsibility and distributing the ideal and material consequences as a way of restoring the well-being of the community.

(D) Memorial Day

For Warner (1959, 1962), “Memorial Day and similar ceremonies in the United States are one of the several forms of collective representations which Durkheim so brilliantly defined and interpreted in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*” (Warner 1962, p. 30). The “Memorial Day rites of Yankee City and hundreds of other American towns . . . are a modern cult of the dead and conform to Durkheim’s definition of sacred collective representations”. They “consist of a system of sacred beliefs and dramatic rituals held by a group of people, who when they congregate, represent the whole community” and they are “sacred because they ritually relate the living to sacred things” (Warner 1959, p. 278). Warner analyses “the unifying and integrative character of the Memorial Day ceremony—the increasing convergence of the multiple and diverse events through various stages into a single unit in which the many become the one and all the living participants unite in the one community of the dead” (Warner 1962, p. 16). The ceremony consists in “the progressive integration and symbolic unification of the group” (Warner 1962, p. 18). Warner summarizes his own thesis as follows: “Memorial Day ceremonies and subsidiary rites (such as those of Armistice or Veterans’ Day) . . . are rituals of a sacred symbol system which functions periodically to unify the whole community, with its conflicting symbols and its opposing, autonomous churches and associations . . . in the Memorial Day ceremonies the anxieties which man has about death are confronted with a system of sacred beliefs about death which gives the individuals involved and the collectivity of individuals a feeling of well-being. Further the feeling of triumph over death by collective action in the Memorial Day parade is made possible by recreating the feeling of well-being and the sense of group strength and individual strength in the group power, which is felt so intensely during the wars . . . when the feeling so necessary for the Memorial Day’s symbol system is originally experienced” (Warner 1962, p. 8)⁵.

(E) Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Ceremony in 1953

Edward Shils and Michael Young see their interpretation of the meaning of the British Coronation (Shils and Young 1953, pp. 63–82) as “merely restating the interpretation, in a particular context of [Durkheim’s] more general view” (p. 67). The Coronation was,

they claim, exactly the kind of ceremonial of which Durkheim wrote, “in which society reaffirms the moral values which constitute it as a society and renews its devotion to those values by an act of communion” (p. 67). The Coronation Service itself was “a series of ritual affirmations of the moral values necessary to a well-governed and good society” (p. 67). The service and the procession which followed it were “shared and celebrated by nearly all the people of Britain”; “in these events of 2nd June the Queen and her people were, through radio, television and press and in festivities throughout the land, brought into a great nation-wide communion” (pp. 70–71). This popular participation throughout the country “had many of the properties of the enactment of a religious ritual” (p. 72). There was “the common sentiment of the sacredness of communal life and institutions . . . people became more aware of their dependence on each other, and they sensed some connection between this and their relationship to the Queen. Thereby they became more sensitive to the values which bound them all together” (p. 74). On sacred occasions—of which the Coronation is only one extremely “august form”—the whole of society is felt to be one large family, and even the nations of the Commonwealth, represented at the Coronation by their prime ministers, queens and ambassadors, are conceived of as a “family of nations” (pp. 78–79). Shils and Young sum up their analysis of the Coronation’s meaning as follows: “A society is held together by its internal agreement about the sacredness of certain fundamental moral standards. In an inchoate, dimly perceived and seldom explicit manner, the central authority of an orderly society, whether it be secular or ecclesiastical, is acknowledged to be the avenue of communication with the realm of the sacred values. Within its society, popular constitutional monarchy enjoys almost universal recognition in this capacity, and it is therefore enabled to heighten the moral and civic sensibility of the society and to permeate it with symbols of those values to which the sensitivity responds. Intermittent rituals bring the society or varying sectors of it repeatedly into contact with this vessel of the sacred values. The Coronation provided at one time and for practically the entire society such an intensive contact with the sacred that we believe we are justified in interpreting it . . . as a great act of national communion” (p. 80). The coronation ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II in the British monarchy in 1953 offers, in the view of Shils and Young (1953, pp. 63–82), an excellent opportunity to see how in particular social contexts and at specific historical moments, a specific figure or institution can come to represent the “sacred center”⁶ of society.

(F) The proto-event of 11 September 2001 in New York City

The proto-event of 11 September 2001, in New York, the destruction of the WTC that resulted in the death of 2998 people and 6291 injured, also has important repercussions on the rituals that create and recreate the nation. Although, initially, the terrorist act, *ritually*, meant a heinous shedding of blood—both literally and metaphorically—making use of the vital fluids of the victims to cast a belligerent and horrific painting on the canvas of social life (Alexander 2006, pp. 91–115), in a second phase, the destruction of the WTC, *counter-performatively*, brought people together in a *cross-cultural, cross-racial and cross-class ritual act* in which everybody shouted, *in the midst of a great piacular rite*, as a sign of mourning, “We all are Americans”. The new social space (Ground Zero) and the new time (911) create the conditions of possibility for the communion of consciences in an act of social fusion successfully carried out to constitute itself in the *center* of the social, in the manner of a “total social fact”, in Marcel Mauss’ terms. The social reaction to the attack represents an appropriating event immune to social differentiation in which a cultural trauma has *resacralized* certain discourses in the public sphere. Public grief and remembrance of the events of 9/11 become the *ritual counter-model* of a sacred drama that evokes national and international adhesions with the victims of the assault as sacred symbols of freedom and democracy. What is interesting to underline is that what has created a kind of moral

communion, even in a functionally differentiated society, is not the sharing of the same beliefs, since the United States is a pluralistic and culturally differentiated society, but the sharing of the same practices within the public sphere in which an emerging social creativity re-enchanted and morally re-armed society. However, as Gordon Lynch aptly notes, “The events of 9/11 not only demonstrate how, in pluralistic societies, sacred rituals not only elicit the intended response from their respective audiences but also show how ritual activities and ritual counter-activities related to the sacred can be implicated in entrenched patterns of violent conflict” (Lynch 2012, p. 45).

Terrorism is not only a form of political action but also a form of “symbolic” action. In Austin’s terms we can say that terrorism is an illocutionary force that aims at a perlocutionary effect. It is not “culture” as such that creates the scripts for action, but pragmatic efforts to protect particular cultural meanings in pursuit of practical objectives. Throughout historical time, and with sometimes tragic and terrifying consequences, a pronounced tendency has gradually emerged among Judeo-Christian and Islamic civilizations to project evil onto the other, as something exogenous to one’s own, thus creating a guiding distinction that divides between one’s own “sacred/friend” and the “profane/enemy” of the other, within a cultural logic of exacerbated polarization. In this plot, Bin Laden struck the first blow in a charismatic and “creative” way, since he initially controlled the deployment of the means of symbolic production. The actor/terrorist/martyr/suicide martyrs succeeded in destroying the tainted icons of modern American capitalism, the Twin Towers, which evocatively symbolized the atheistic Western enemy. But, nevertheless, from that apocalyptic and Dantesque painting, typical of Brueghel the Elder, emerges a moral communion, “a cross-cultural, interracial and interclass ritual counter-act”—bringing together the firemen, the brokers, the policemen, and coextensively the whole American and world society behind—in which everybody shouted, in the middle of a great expiatory rite as a sign of mourning, “*We are all Americans now*”, extending both national and international solidarity. *Ground Zero* and *911* serve as the iconic spatio-temporal context; that is, the act of destruction of the towers and the holocaust of the innocents makes them “turn from something profane into something sacred”; the ashes of the towers and the immolated represent the “new symbol of the nation’s fusion”. This commemorative ritual revives the high points of emotional intensity; the participants feel involved in that ritual center of attention (Collins 2004, pp. 53–87), symbolized in the monuments created for this purpose in southern Manhattan. What is interesting to underline, from a sociological point of view, is that what has created a kind of moral communion, even in a functionally differentiated society, is not the fact of sharing the same beliefs, since United States is a pluralistic and culturally differentiated society, but the fact of “sharing the same practices” within the public sphere in which an emerging social creativity re-enchanted and morally re-armed society.

(G) The sacralization of the human person

The nation is not the only modern secular sphere that has become sacralized; dignity and respect for the human person have also become part of the sacred core of modern society. Let us analyze the legal, sociological and theological factors involved in this process.

We can initially interpret the belief in human rights and universal human dignity as the result of a specific process of sacralization in which every human being has been made sacred, being institutionalized in “law,” and generating increasing and widespread motivational and sensitizing effects within modern society. If we presuppose this, then it seems reasonable to understand changes in the penal system from changes in the understanding of the sacred. From this perspective, the reforms of criminal law and penal practice, as well as the creation of human rights at the end of the 18th century, are an expression of a profound cultural change through which “the human person becomes a

sacred object.” A new meaning has been ascribed to sacredness. The history of human rights can be interpreted as a history of sacralization (of the human person).

Although within the universal religions—Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity and Islam—there is already the germ of the sacredness of human life, in the form of an *ethos* of love and universal respect for the (neighboring) other, the process of germination of such a seed take place within the American Revolution and immediately afterwards in the French Revolution. Although the dominant position has considered that human rights have their origin in an approach coming from the Enlightenment, according to which the “charisma of reason” (Weber 1978, p. 937) is the last historical form of charisma coming from the original phases of the French Revolution, individual freedom is the result that represents the best of all worlds; however, in the opinion of Joas (2011, chap. 1) it was Jellinek ([1895] 1979) in his work entitled *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen: A Contribution to Modern Constitutional History*, originally published in 1895, who placed the Christian roots in the Declaration of Human Rights and not so much in the French Enlightenment, which was skeptical, if not hostile, towards religion. Therefore, in this perspective, rather than a sacralization or charismatization of reason, we would be witnessing a “sacralization or charismatization of the human person”.

The intellectual roots of human rights in Renaissance humanism, in the Reformation or in Spanish Scholasticism are generally of less help in understanding the phenomenon we are analyzing than the dynamics of its sudden institutionalization. It is here that Jellinek observed the decisive importance that religious freedom has had for American Protestants, especially for Calvinist-inspired congregations, to which Troeltsch (1931, p. 673) adds Baptist, Quaker and certain forms of free spirituality. Thus, Jellinek places the hero of his story as the Puritan pastor Roger Williams, who leaves Massachusetts in 1632 to settle in Rhode Island, where he guarantees religious freedom not only to Christians of any denomination but also to Jews, pagans and Turks. Jellinek’s central thesis is that “the idea of inalienable, legally established, sacred and inherent rights of the individual does not have a political origin but religious. What has been held up as a work of the French Revolution was in reality a fruit of the Reformation and its struggles. Its first apostle was not (General) Lafayette but Roger Williams, who, driven by a deep and powerful religious enthusiasm, went into the wilderness in order to find a *government of religious liberty* and his name is proclaimed by Americans with the greatest respect” (Jellinek [1895] 1979, p. 77. Emphasis ours). The idea that individuals not only have rights within a state, but also rights against the state, and that these rights are not conferred by the state, points to a religious origin of these rights. This appears clearly in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, where State and religion are clearly differentiated, but where the free exercise of all religious belief is protected and encouraged.

A work by Émile Durkheim from 1898, brought up by Joas (2011, chap. 2), sheds much light on the phenomenon we are analyzing. During the turmoil produced by the Dreyfus scandal in 1898, he wrote: “This human person (*personne humaine*), whose definition is like the touchstone that distinguishes good from evil, is considered sacred in the ritual sense of the world. He partakes of the transcendent majesty which the churches of all times have attributed to their gods; he is conceived as a being invested with such a mysterious property that he creates a vacuum around sacred things, removing them from vulgar contact and withdrawing them from habitual circulation. The respect given to it comes precisely from this source. *Anyone who offends against human life, against human freedom, against human honor, inspires in us a feeling of horror analogous to that experienced by the believer when he observes that his idol has been profaned.* Such morality is not simply a hygienic discipline or a good economy of existence, it is a religion where man is both faithful and God” (Emphasis ours) (Durkheim 1973, p. 46). Durkheim elaborated a theory of social change and its operative

forces but he did not elaborate a theory of the “process” of sacralization of the human person. He links the particularities of modern society to a growing energy that comes from the fact that “the feelings that have man as their object, have become very strong [...] The group [...] is only the means to realize and develop human nature [...] The quality of man, [...], has naturally become the object par excellence of the collective sensibility” (Joas 2007, p. 133). In another passage Durkheim states: “There is nothing that man cannot love and adore in common but himself. This is how he has become a God to himself and can no longer create other gods without lying to himself. And insofar as each of us embodies something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine and is shaped by a sacred and inviolable character before others” (Durkheim 1973, p. 52). For Durkheim, “this *religion of humanity* has all it needs to speak to the believer in a tone no less imperative than that used by the religion it replaces [...] In reality (the believer) receives his dignity from a higher source, one he shares with all other human persons. If he has a right to religious respect, he has it because he shares it with humanity” (Emphasis ours) (ibid., p. 48). The creation of human rights is but part of this process of inclusion and sacralization of the human person and of the coextensive sacralization of humanity. This concept of sacralization of the person has nothing to do with the egocentric individualistic liberal (and utilitarian) glorification of the self but with human personality (Durkheim 1973, p. 45; Joas 2007, pp. 151–68). For Durkheim the “sacredness of the person” is not “a” belief system that contributes to social integration but the “only” belief system that can ensure the moral unity of a country.

The driving idea of this new faith in the person is not selfishness but sympathy for all that man represents, a great suffering for all the pains that afflict man, for human tragedies, a commitment to fight against them. The history of human violence and degradation in 1776 in the American War of Independence, in 1789 in the French Revolution and in Europe in 1948, after the dreadful Shoah, have led to a clear awareness that the dignity of the person is something sacred and inviolable. But suffering, by itself, does not give rise to new values such as the sacralization of the human person. It is necessary to create a “narrative” (Joas 2011, chap. 3) that makes it possible to overcome a horrific event, connecting it with the creation of new values and meanings that are incorporated into the social, religious and political context. In this way, a violent and traumatic event becomes a “cultural trauma” (Alexander 2013, pp. 6–31) that receives its empirical basis from the experience of the members of a collectivity who feel that their existence has been threatened in a horrendous event that leaves indelible traces in their group consciousness and marks their collective memory forever, changing their future identity irrevocably. The various human rights narratives undoubtedly play this role.

This idea is not foreign to Christianity itself. Durkheim himself makes it clear in his 1898 work: “Christianity expresses in an inner faith, in the personal conviction of the individual, the essential condition of divinity. . . The center of moral life has thus been transferred from outside to inside *and the individual has been placed as the sovereign judge of his own conduct not needing to resort to other criteria than himself and his God*” (Emphasis ours) (Durkheim 1973, p. 52). It is a mistake to present this sacralization of the human person and its corresponding moral anchoring as antagonistic to Christian morality. On the contrary, the former derives from the latter. By assuming the former, we do not deny our past, but rather we continue it. Durkheim was following, with nuances, a line of argumentation that had already been initiated by prophets of the Enlightenment such as Saint Simon and Comte when they postulated that sooner or later a new religion of humanity (Durkheim 1973, p. 48) would replace the theocentric religions.

We can exemplify this idea in the recent developments experienced by the Catholic Church itself since the Second Vatican Council (Casanova 2011). The process of transforma-

tion of Catholicism throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the process of its internal democratization, which has come to be called *aggiornamento*, confirms Durkheim's vision of the sacralization of the person operated in advanced modernity, but what none of these prophets and founding fathers of positivist sociology could have anticipated is that, paradoxically, the old gods and old religions, whose death Durkheim announced⁷, have gained new life by becoming bearers of the process of sacralization of humanity, as in the case of the Catholic Church.

While previous encyclicals were addressed for the most part to the Catholic believer, beginning with *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, popes have tended to address their pronouncements to the whole world and to all people. From a theological point of view, "this entails the transfer of the principle of *libertas ecclesiae* (which has served him to use his ad hoc influence in conflicts between nation states, sometimes assuming their perspectives and in other cases coming into open conflict with them), which the church has so scrupulously guarded over time, to the individual human person, to *libertas personae*" (Casanova 1997, p. 212 ff.). In this process, the pope could undergo a curious transformation from being the holy father of all Catholics to become the common father of all God's children and the self-proclaimed spokesman for humanity, *defensor hominis*. The Papacy has been attempting to recreate the universalist system of medieval Christianity, but now on a global scale. Perhaps the fundamental difference is that the sword of spiritual power can no longer seek the protection of the sword of temporal power in order to exercise its authority against competing religious regimes in order to obtain a monopoly of the means of salvation (which would render the Catholic dogma of *extra ecclesia nulla salus* worthless). What sense does it make to speak of the church today as One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman? The recognition of the principle of religious freedom means that the church has agreed to compete in a relatively open global system of religious regimes. In this process of globalization, the Roman Catholic Church has ceased to be a predominantly Roman and European institution; i.e., it has become de-Europeanized. There has been a noticeable shift of the Catholic population from the Old World to the New World and from the North to the South. In recent papal and episcopal pronouncements, especially those on matters of public morality, the fundamental change is that they are not addressed to Catholics as faithful members of the Catholic church, bound to follow the specific norms of Catholic morality, "but rather to all individuals as members of humanity, bound to follow universal human norms, which derive from the universal human values of life and liberty" (Casanova 1997, p. 220).

Undoubtedly, the set of arguments analyzed—legal, sociological and theological—provide empirical support to the argument launched by Talcott Parsons half a century ago around the idea of a "generalization of values" (Parsons 1964, vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 339–57), and more specifically to the generalization of the sacred value of the human person.

(H) The sacralization of the child's life

What is more sacred than the life of a child?

Felix Adler 1908

Jack and Jill climbed the hill
to bring milk to his mother,
with good advice for each of them
that they will take good care of each other
"Let's run to the other side of the street," shouted Juan.
"Honk, honk," the bus replied.
Too late they heeded his warning signal

Jack lies in the roadway.

Safety Education: A Book of Plans for the Elementary School, 1923.

Viviana A. Zelizer, in an excellent 1985 paper collected in a compilation by Jeffrey Alexander (Zelizer 2001, pp. 302–28), relates that on 22 July 1903, five-year-old Mary Miner was playing with friends in front of her father’s restaurant on New York’s Bowery when she was hit by a Third Avenue streetcar and killed. The driver narrowly escaped violence at the hands of a *mob* that, according to police estimates, numbered 3000 people. Press reports describe the girl’s father as so frantic with grief that he had to be forced to desist from a desperate attempt on the driver’s life. Twenty years later, on May Day 1926, declared nationally as “Accident-Free Day” for children, *memorial services* were held at the unveiling of two monuments in New York City. The crowd solemnly honored the memory of the 7000 children killed in traffic accidents during the previous year.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the accidental death of children run over by cars and trucks became a new and alarming social problem. Public response to child victims was more intense and organized than to similar deaths of adults. At first, crowds of neighbors spontaneously demonstrated their solidarity with the grief of bereaved parents, but this was formalized in official acts of public mourning. A national security campaign to protect children’s lives took shape.

Zelizer develops the idea that the magnification of child mourning in the twentieth century is a measure of the transformation in the cultural meaning of childhood, specifically, the *new exaltation of the sentimental value of children*. If child life becomes sacred, then child death becomes an intolerable sacrilege, provoking not only parental grief but also social mourning. The response to accidental death was only one manifestation of a broader rise in public concern for child life that began in the late nineteenth century.

Therefore, reducing infant and child mortality rates quickly emerged as a national priority.

Analysis of the response to the accidental death of children serves as a measure of the “sacralization” of child life. The individualistic and psychological approaches focusing respectively on “rational investment” and “better love” are misguided. The 19th-century revolution in child bereavement and the 20th-century campaign for child life are less significant as measures of changes in private sentiment, i.e., an improvement in maternal love, than as dramatic indicators of *a broader cultural transformation in the value of children*. Because children, regardless of social class, were defined as emotionally priceless assets, their death became not only a painful domestic misfortune, but a sign of collective failure. Individual and group responses, therefore, were shaped by a cultural context that held *child life uniquely sacred and child death uniquely tragic*.

The need to create a separate “sacred” space was linked to the new value of child life and the growing moral offense of “killing” children. Although children’s memorials had a utilitarian purpose (so that the tragedies of reckless driving could be dramatized and motorists “brought home”), their essential function was to *symbolize collective sentiment*. In a study of war memorials, Barber (1972, p. 328) has shown how the spatial location of the memorial symbol is necessary to *express “those attitudes and values of a community toward those persons.”* In the case of children killed in traffic accidents, private mourning and parental grief alone were insufficient. *Collective mourning at the site of the children’s memorials served to express collective grief*.

Ariés (1962, p. 329) recalls that in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist, which does not mean that childhood had no cultural significance in pre-modern society nor that children did not receive love and devotion in medieval families, but that this “short childhood” of the medieval period, in which the main transition was between a phase in which a dependent infant entered the social world of adults, has been gradually displaced

by a “long childhood”. It is through this notion that *childcare begins to acquire the status of an autonomous sacred form*. In medieval society, the child who died “too early” was probably buried in the backyard like a dog or a cat today. For Ariés in the nineteenth century there is a “*revolution in feeling*” (Ariés 1974, p. 68) by which the “death of the other”, particularly the death of a close family member, was defined as an overwhelming tragedy. The death of a young child represents the worst loss imaginable.

The “sacralization” of children (Zelizer 2001, p. 323) in the twentieth century led to a greater intolerance of child death, whether by disease or accident, and a great concern for protecting children’s lives. Children of all social classes were not only vaccinated against disease and better fed, but their lives were increasingly supervised and tamed. Since the 1930s there has been a *significant evolution from the demographic–economic notion of the “useful child” to the economically “worthless” but emotionally “priceless” child*.

3. Conclusions

In the scrutiny of new sacred forms that we have consigned, the unidirectional and teleological evolutionary movement—from the sacred to the profane—that comes from the general theory of secularization and that has been projected as a regime of knowledge and philosophy of history is refuted, and we have seen that, *between* the sacred and the profane, there is a dynamic tension, and in certain contexts it can be secular domains such as the nation, the human person, the child, etc., that are sacralized because each society produces at each moment its own sacred forms. The religious and the secular should not be understood as the origin and end of a process that begins in Europe and spreads worldwide, but rather as two constellations of meaning, between which there is a dynamic tension at all times, giving rise to waves of secularization and waves of sacralization, both in the plural. We must move away from any historicism that considers societies to evolve from the religious to the secular and begin to consider the tension between processes of secularization and sacralization according to a variable geometry in which multiple modernities appear, defining different paths of social evolution.

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Notes

¹ For further information on these issues, see (Prades 1998).

² O’Brien (1994) analyzes William Butler Yeats’ most nationalistic poem, *Cathleen ni Hoolihan*, written in 1902 and serving as a seed for the Irish Rising of 1916.

³ Albert Mathiez, in *The Origins of Revolutionary Cults* (1789–1792), in a work cited by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms...* offers an interesting description of the new cult, its places and its most relevant tempos.

⁴ The phrase is taken from de Tocqueville (1990, p. 310).

- ⁵ The guideline had already been set by Robertson-Smith when he stated that “religion does not exist for the salvation of souls but for the *preservation and welfare* of society” (Smith 1889, p. 30).
- ⁶ According to Shils (1975, p. 125), continuing the Durkheimian tradition, people need some sacred order at the center of their lives in order to drive the basic human need to be integrated into something that transcends and transfigures their concrete individual existence.
- ⁷ See Durkheim (1982, p. 398), *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: “The old gods grow old or die, and others have not yet been born (to replace them)”.

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Article

The Structure of Beliefs and Religious Practices in Spain: A Three-Part Society?

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the structure of religious beliefs and practices in Spain today. In order to approach this task, we have developed a research design that revolves around two analytical cores. The first is of a more descriptive–argumentative nature, where we present the Spanish religious reality by studying available data from relevant statistical sources, specifically, the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* and the *Observatorio del Pluralismo Religioso*. The second is of a more critical–reflexive nature, where we establish whether the available data offer an effectively exhaustive view of the Spanish religious reality in a post-secular context—that is, whether it reflects the existing scenario of religious pluralism, diversity and heterogeneity or whether, on the contrary, it merely reinforces dynamics linked to the General Theory of Secularization, emphasizing narratives that focus on the crisis of the religious and on the incompatibility between the religious and the secular.

Keywords: secular; religious; post-secular; three-part society; Spain

1. Introduction

In recent decades, we have witnessed a transformation in the Spanish religious structure. This observation has already been studied by other specialists, such as Alfonso Pérez-Agote (2012) and, more recently, Rafael Ruiz Andrés (2022). Our concept offers a complementary approach in this introduction¹. Spain has moved from a religious scenario with a high degree of homogeneity and fundamentally ascribed to Catholicism to one in which two other courses of action have unfolded: the first, of a marked and manifestly religious nature, oriented towards a greater heterogeneity or diversity in terms of ways of being religious; the second, a course of action linked to the rise in the category of ‘non-religion’ (Ruiz Andrés 2024) or of ‘the nones’ (Burge 2021). Thus, in the case of Catholic ascription, the presence of religious minorities stems from migratory flows experienced in recent decades and the rise in ‘the nones’, resulting in the current triple religious reality (or parts) of Spain².

Before advancing further in our argument, and in order to understand how the transition from a religiously homogeneous society to another one that revolves around the three parts mentioned above took place, we must go back a few decades and situate ourselves in a political–religious scenario in which the Catholic Church acted as a ‘family’ of the ‘regime’—that is, as a core or as one of the main actors around which revolved what in historiography is known as Franco’s regime, a dictatorship that was totalitarian and autarchic in nature (at least until the 1960s), and which had developed in Spain by the end of the Civil War (1936–1939) until Franco’s death (1975). This political context

allowed Catholicism, at least formally, to continue to implement a sort of moral hegemony over Spanish society, managing to slow down and/or formally disguise the secularization process which had begun previously and continued during Franco's regime. This concept was defended by authors such as Rafael Ruiz Andrés (2022). Additionally, other European societies at that time, for example, the French or British, were in more advanced stages.

From our point of view, the end of Franco's regime serves as a milestone in the transition (religious, not political) we are referring to in a dual sense: on the one hand, as the starting point of the manifest and effective emancipation process of the civil sphere of activity with respect to the ecclesiastical institution, once the latter had ceased to be an element of control and social pressure from its position of the 'family of the regime', meaning it formally lost its hegemonic-moral status over society; on the other, we understand that the existing link between the Catholic Church and Franco's regime acted as an accelerator, favouring this change—among other things, as a consequence of identifying the retrograde and undesirable nature of Franco's regime and Catholicism and the modern and desirable with democracy and the decline of religious belief and practice. Therefore, the Spanish socio-political context at the end of Franco's regime and the beginning of the Transition favoured the development of narratives that reinforced the theories defended by the General Theory of Secularization.

The comments in the previous paragraphs reveal our first significant argument: much of the rapid and profound transformation experienced by Spanish society in the last fifty years related to religious matters can be explained as a reaction to the hegemonic nature Catholicism had held since at least the end of the Middle Ages. However, we must emphasize at this point the existence of a specific socio-political scenario in which an authoritarian regime (Franco's regime) acquired much of its legitimacy from establishing alliances with the Spanish Church.

Thus, the end of Franco's regime and the beginning of the Transition to democracy (1975–1982) had a dual effect: a gradual social disaffection with respect to Catholicism and a corresponding rise in 'the nones'. This second category, made up of groups such as atheists, agnostics and/or those who identify themselves as non-believers, indifferent or nothing in particular when asked about their religious affiliation has grown in recent decades, offering an accurate measure of the process of disengagement from Catholicism that Spanish society has experienced since the 1980s. It is important to emphasize that, according to data, one of the features that define the Spanish cultural secularization programme (Gil-Gimeno 2017) is the development of a differentiation dynamic with respect to Catholicism formulated in the form of adscription to 'the nones'.

Beyond the fact that the existence of this category is in itself relevant in acquiring a real awareness of the disaffection process experienced with respect to Catholicism in Spain, we also understand that it is essential to pay attention to the heterogeneity of the groups that comprise it. For example, as undertaken in other contexts such as the United States (Burge 2021; Pew Research Center 2024) or Britain (Woodhead 2016), the degree of activism or proactivity against traditional church religion (in the case of Spain, Catholicism) shown by atheists is greater than that of agnostics, which may also be greater than that of indifferent people. In this sense, reported studies have indicated that those in Britain and the United States opting for 'nothing in particular' or 'indifferent' could be deemed the least militant with regard to this issue, followed by agnostics and atheists—the latter being the most militant. Further research by Burge (2021, p. 114) and Campbell et al. (2020) argues that a direct distinction can be established within those who opt for 'the none' between those who identify themselves as 'non-religious' (indifferent and nothing in particular) and those who can be termed 'secular' (atheists and agnostics): "Secular individuals have left behind a religious worldview and now utilize a paradigm that is based on logic and science to

guide them through life (...) a non-religious person is defined by what they are not. They don't go to church, they don't pray, they don't believe that religion is important in their life, but they don't adopt a secular outlook on life either" (Burge 2021, p. 114). Thus, in terms of proactivity vis-à-vis historical religious categories (Bellah 1969), we find nuances among the different collectives that make up 'the nones'.

Similarly, it would be interesting to analyse whether, indeed, 'the nones' are proactive or indifferent toward any form of religiosity or whether they are so in the face of those of a historical (Bellah 1969) or universal (Weber 1983) nature. What the data measure, and therefore what they tell us, is linked to these religious forms. Now, can we state categorically that atheists, agnostics or indifferent people do not develop sacralization dynamics? How would they then position themselves in the face of secular sacralization processes such as those experienced by the nation or the individual—to mention some of the most significant ones—in today's societies?

What has been described in the previous paragraphs makes us aware that in order to continue delving deeper into the religious reality of 'the nones' in Spain, it is necessary to focus on establishing this dual logic in terms of approach: on the one hand, joint or centred on the homogeneity that this category treasures and, on the other, differentiated or centred on the heterogeneity of the groups that comprise it. In this way, we will be able to approach the religious group that is growing most at the present time with firmer guarantees.

The second feature of the current Spanish religious situation is the increase in religious pluralism (Berger 2014). Evidently, the rupture of the moral hegemony enjoyed by the Catholic Church over society as a whole implies a process of openness to diversity that manifests itself in a dual sense: in terms of the rise of 'the nones' and in terms of the presence and development of a series of historical religious forms (Bellah 1969), albeit not Catholics. With regard to the latter, the immigration dynamics experienced by Spanish society since the end of the 1990s have necessarily contributed to this. These migratory processes have introduced a series of religious practices and beliefs that do not cease growing, albeit moderately, as we will observe in the following section. This vitality and relative strength of historical (Bellah 1969) or universal (Weber 1983) religious forms such as Islam, Orthodox Christianity or Evangelicalism, among others, call into question the theory that secularization necessarily implies a decline in the belief and practice of these types of religions. At the same time, it reinforces the theory defended above, in which we pointed out that the Spanish cultural secularization programme can be better explained if it is understood as a reaction toward, firstly, the cultural and religious hegemony historically enjoyed by Catholicism, and secondly, the alliance established between Church and State during Franco's regime.

Based on the above, the objective set out by this paper is twofold: on the one hand, to analyse in what terms the transformation of the Spanish religious scenario has taken place on the basis of the data provided by solid statistical sources such as the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) and the Observatorio del Pluralismo Religioso (data based on some studies undertaken by the CIS); on the other, and once the previous objective has been fulfilled, to question whether in a context of religious pluralism and intramundane action orientation and its meaning—of secular age in Charles Taylor's (2007) terms—it is appropriate to approach the religious phenomenon exclusively from the standpoint of its identification with historical religion (Bellah 1969). In other words, we want to critically analyse whether the statistics on religiosity that we have at our disposal allow us to approach the phenomenon in all its complexity and heterogeneity—that is, whether they take into consideration the multiple forms that religion can acquire today, including the historical (Bellah 1969) and secular (Aron 1944). In the particular case of Spain, changes have even occurred during recent decades in terms of who is understood to be a

believer or a religious person, especially in the case of identifying as a Catholic (or how this religious affiliation is felt and/or practised). Some of these issues are addressed in the following pages.

2. Religious Reality in Spain Through Statistical Sources

The religious reality in Spain has attracted the attention of many academics, especially with the restoration of democracy in 1978 and incorporation of the recognition of religious freedom into the regulatory framework. One of the focuses of interest in the study of religion in Spanish society has been that of sociological change, which has been very significant in terms of the transformations that have taken place since the end of the 1970s, as we pointed out in the introduction. Enormous academic output is based on these areas of interest, which revolves around various focuses or themes, such as religion and society (Díaz-Salazar and Giner 1993; Pérez-Vilariño 2003); the decline of religiosity (Comas 2004; Pérez-Agote 2005; Urrutia León 2010); the role of religion in public life (Díaz-Salazar 2007, 2008; Pérez-Agote and Santiago 2008); other forms of religion and replacement of religion (Sáez de la Fuente Aldama 2002); the future of religion (Pérez-Vilariño 1995; Tornos and Aparicio 1995; Mardones 2003); and everything related to the new religious plurality (Pérez-Agote 2005)³. The following provides data illustrating some of these changes, evolutions and possible future trends.

The first question to be considered is the evolution of the socio-religious self-identification of the Spanish population. The data clearly show the transformation in the religious structure to which we referred at the beginning of this paper. As we can see in Table 1, the data provided from 1965 to the present show a clear trend in three directions: firstly, a clear decrease in the percentage of the population that identifies itself as Catholic, which is an indicator of the decline of traditional and hegemonic Catholic religiosity in the country; secondly, and in parallel with this decline, it can be observed how the presence of people linked to other religious traditions has increased over these decades, especially those of the 21st century, with a percentage being consolidated that, although small, is significant and moderately growing; lastly, the third direction we highlight is that of the group that does not identify with any traditional religious tradition, is indifferent to them or considers themselves to represent agnostic and/or atheist people. This is the segment of the population that has grown the most in recent decades, approaching percentages that are increasingly similar to those of the majority (Catholics). With regard to this group ('the nones') and with the data disaggregated by age group, it is a varied group, as we have already pointed out, albeit—and this is what we consider important to stress at this point in the discussion—with a significant and growing presence.

Table 1. Socio-religious self-identification of the Spanish population (1965–2024). Percentages are shown horizontally.

Year	Catholics	Other Religions	Non-Believers, Indifferent (and Atheists)	DK/NA
1965	98	0.0	2.0	0.0
1975	88	0.2	2.0	4.0
1985	87	1.0	11.0	2.0
1988	81	1.0	13.0	5.0
2002	80	1.5	11.5	7.0
2005	79	2.0	17.0	2.0
2009	76	2.0	20.0	2.0

Table 1. *Cont.*

Year	Catholics	Other Religions	Non-Believers, Indifferent (and Atheists)	DK/NA
2015	69.6	2.7	25.9	1.8
2019	68.7	2.4	26.5	2.4
2021	60.1	2.5	36.4	1.1
2024	59.1	5.8	40.4	1.9

Sources: Díaz-Salazar and Giner (1993, p. 133); Pérez-Agote and Santiago (2008, p. 179); CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018, 2024).

In Table 2, the breakdown of the population that identifies with some religious tradition (Catholic or one of the minority denominations) is expanded so that the evolution over the last few decades in each of these population segments can be observed. In addition to what has already been observed in the previous table (decline in the Catholic segment and increase in that of other religions), it can be seen how the Catholic population is the most numerous within the various religious traditions established on Spanish territory. Following this group, albeit with a good number of percentage points' difference, it can be observed how the Protestant, Muslim and Orthodox traditions are the most numerous among the minority confessions (accounting for slightly more than one percent), while the rest barely reach 0.5% each (of the total population).

Table 2. Evolution of socio-religious breakdown.

Confessionality	1998	2008	2018
Catholic	83.7	73.8	64.8
Muslim	0.2	1.3	1.5
Buddhist	0	0.1	0.3
Protestant	0.2	0.7	1.1
Jehovah's Witness	0.2	-	0.3
Christian	-	0.1	0.3
Orthodox	-	0.7	1.1
Other	0.1	-	0.1
None	13.8	21.1	28.6
NA	1.8	2.2	0.9
Total	100	100	99.9

Source: CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018).

Delving a little deeper into religious practice and the degree of religiosity of the Spanish population, in this case, with information from all the segments of the population shown in the previous tables, the data collected in Tables 3–5 provides information about the evolution of the degree of religiosity, attendance at weekly services and the practice of prayer. All of these are key factors⁴ in measuring the degree of belief and practice linked to the profession of faith in contexts of historical religiosity (Bellah 1969), and they help us to scrutinize this reality with greater guarantees. We would like to emphasize at this point that the data collected in these tables refer to the group of people who have shown themselves to be believers in some of the religions established in the country. It should be noted that the Catholic group, being the majority, may be over-represented. In any case, these are data on developments of interest to the study at hand.

Table 3. Evolution of degree of religiosity.

Degree of Religiosity	1998	2008	2018
Religious (extremely/somewhat religious)	56.3	43.8	35.4
Neither religious nor non-religious	12.2	24.3	22.4
Non-religious (extremely/somewhat non-religious)	30.7	31.9	41
NA	0.3	0.8	1.1
Total	100	100	99.9

Source: CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018).

Table 4. Evolution of religious practice (attendance at religious offices).

Attendance at Religious Offices	1998	2008	2018
Never	19.5	38.8	49.7
Several times per year	37.3	17.9	26.5
Several times per month	15.8	15.2	8.3
Several times per week	26.6	19.7	14.7
NA	0.7	2.9	0.8
Total	99.9	100	100

Source: CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018).

Table 5. Evolution of religious practices (prayer).

Prayer	1998	2008	2018
Never	28.2	35.1	42.5
Several times per year	19.9	17.7	16.9
Several times per month	8.5	8.8	6.1
Several times per week	14.3	15.9	19
One or more times per day	22.2	21.3	18.7
NA	1.3	1.3	1.8
Total	100	100.1	100

Source: CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018).

Table 3 shows how there is a decrease in the general degree of religiosity while the increase in the non-religious sector occurs in practically the same numbers as that decrease, which in principle seems to indicate a clear transfer from one category to the other. At the same time, the percentage of the population that falls between the two represents almost a quarter of the population (22.4% in 2018), remaining stable between 2008 and 2018, after having experienced a clear boom in the previous decade (1998 to 2008), in the course of which the group represented by this category doubled.

If we look at the level of religious practice, we *do* observe a considerable decrease, fundamentally in terms of attendance at religious services (beyond celebrations linked to rites of passage or more social rites, such as baptism and marriage or funerals). The percentage of people who practise on a weekly or monthly basis barely accounts for a quarter of the population (both categories added together represent 23% of the sample), as can be seen in Table 4. The similarity between the data referring to attendance at religious offices and frequency of prayer could lead us to understand that the privatization theory—the second sub-theory of the General Theory of Secularization according to José Casanova (Casanova 2012a)—is not a dominant trend in the Spanish secularizing cultural

programme. Against this argument, we would like to provide two nuances: firstly, that prayer can perfectly well take place in a congregational context or religious office—that is, it does not have to be a reliable indicator of privatization of religion (Luckmann 1973; Beck 2009; Warner 2005); secondly, that the statistics consulted do not differentiate between the frequency of prayer in a privatized context and in a congregational one, and so we cannot use this indicator as a reliable measure of the degree of privatization of religion.

If we compare the percentages referring to belief in terms of those who undertake religious practice—measured using these two indicators (prayer and attendance at services)—we can affirm that the Spanish evolutionary trend points directly to the phenomenon that Grace Davie defined as *believing without belonging* (Davie 1994) in the British case. What we have just commented does not imply the existence of two opposing trends between belief and practice, but rather indicates that the ‘decline’ that both are experiencing is more pronounced in practice, and within practice in the communitarian–ecclesiastical sphere of activity. At this point, it is important to remember the general distribution of data about religiosity, since the hegemony that Catholicism continues to enjoy over the other religions present in Spain—in a minority situation—means that the orientation of their responses is over-represented in the sample. Therefore, we must point out that the dynamic of *believing without belonging* is experienced above all by Catholicism.

Up to this point, we have been able to observe the socio-religious evolution of the Spanish population to date. In order to try to decipher or point out what direction it may take in the near future, it is interesting to analyse data about religiosity according to age segments. In Table 6, we gather the most current data about religiosity by age groups, grouping together the three trends which, in some way, reflect the structure of beliefs in Spanish society (Catholics, people who do not belong to any denomination and those identified with minority religions). If the breakdown logic observed in these tables is maintained over the coming years, the group expected to grow the most as the years go by is that of ‘the nones’.

Table 6. Religiosity by age (distribution by age group).

Years (Age)	Catholics	Believers of Other Religions	Non-Believers, Agnostic, Indifferent (and Atheists)	DK/NA	Total
From 18 to 24 years old	31.6	14	54.0	0.4	100
From 25 to 34 years old	34.5	10.5	54	1	100
From 35 to 44 years old	43.9	5.5	48.6	2	100
From 45 to 54 years old	50.8	5.5	42.2	1.5	100
From 55 to 64 years old	60.7	3.4	33.5	2.4	100
From 65 to 74 years old	63.7	3.6	30.1	2.6	100
75 and over	76.5	1.4	19.5	2.6	100

Source: CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 2024).

Table 6 offers us several cases of interesting data. In the first place, Catholicism experiences a clear increase in ascription as age increases (an impact that increases from 31.6% among young people between 18 and 24 years of age to 76.5% among those over 75 years of age). This scenario seems to show—without ever losing sight of the fact that social reality cannot escape contingency dynamics that could reverse, qualify or emphasize this type of trend—that Catholicism will continue to lose weight in Spanish society in the coming decades. The situation regarding religious minorities points to a different scenario: their greatest impact is to be found in the age cohorts to which the youngest people belong (14% among those aged 18 to 24 and 1.4% among those aged 75 and over). Although

less than 1/6 of young people belonging to these religious groups identify themselves as such, the fact is that growth by age group is gradual, which points to a trend towards a greater presence of this type of religiosity in the future scenario in Spain; thirdly, we are approaching the situation in which ‘the nones’ find themselves: their logic is similar to that of religious minorities, but their impact on the social group is greater. In numerical terms, the results range from 54% among people aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 to 19.5% of those over 75. This points to a clear trend towards growth in this group in the future, again provided that the factors and the trend remain stable.

In short, three trends that have been consolidated over the last few decades can be highlighted from the data in the tables above. In the first place, there has been a boom in the ‘the nones’ group. Parallel to the increase in this segment, and in the opposite direction, there has been a decline in the belief and practice of Catholicism in terms of believing without belonging. Lastly, there has been an increase in belief in other confessions, although the volume of the population found in this category is at a considerable distance from the two majority groups. However, analysis of the data distribution by age reveals that the impact of these religious minorities is greater among the younger age cohorts, which points to a growth in this group in the medium term.

3. Analysis of Certain *pars pro toto* Dynamics in Statistical Approaches to the Reality of the Religious Phenomena

This paper has so far focused on analysing the current religious situation in Spain based on the data offered by the different statistical institutions consulted (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas and Observatorio del Pluralismo Religioso), but in this section, we would like to dwell briefly on an important issue which, from our point of view, clearly conditions the approach to the religious phenomenon in all its breadth and complexity. This therefore gives rise to difficulties in assessing the impact of religion on current societies—and specifically on the religious phenomenon in Spain—with the precision required, since the data collected do not take into account part of what Robert N. Bellah, in his “Religious Evolution” (Bellah 1969), defines as the ‘modern phase’. This is characterised by two elements: on the one hand, “the fundamental symbolization of modern man and his situation is that of a dynamic multidimensional who is self-capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation and capable, again within limits, of remaking the world including the very symbolic forms with which he deals with it—even those forms that state the unalterable conditions of his own existence” (Bellah 1969, p. 81); on the other, “religious action in the world becomes more demanding than ever. The search for suitable standards of action, which is at the same time a search for personal maturity and social relevance, is in itself the heart of the modern quest of salvation” (Bellah 1969, p. 81). From this point of view, statistics that approach the religious phenomenon are establishing an identification between religiosity and religion (Simmel 2012)—specifically, between religiosity and historical religions (Bellah 1969) or universal religions (Weber 1983).

In doing so, and in the same way, the data we have at our disposal at both national and European levels do not show the plurality (Berger 2014) of ways of being religious that develop in the secular era (Taylor 2007)—that is, we understand that they do not offer an accurate measure of the effective impact of the religious in a context dominated by what Charles Taylor defines as the immanent frame (Taylor 2007). Nor do they therefore do so in terms of the diverse formulas of secular religiosity (Aron 1944) that prominent authors such as Thomas Luckmann (Luckmann 1973), José Casanova (Casanova 1994) and Hans Joas (Joas 2014, 2021)—to mention just some of the most prominent references—have identified and analysed over the last fifty years⁵.

This dual observation obliges us to dwell briefly on some of the main consequences of this ‘narrow’ or not very exhaustive way of approaching and interpreting the religious phenomenon. As a starting point, it seems appropriate to turn to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, a work in which Émile Durkheim provides an approach to the reality of the ‘sacred’, an element on which both religiosity and religion are pivoted and formulated: “But sacred things should not be understood as simply those personal beings called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred (. . .) It is not possible to determine once and for all the circle of sacred” (Durkheim 1982, p. 33). From the above words, it is clear that if we identify the religious with some of its hegemonic (theistic) or more systematized forms (religion), we generate dynamics of the *pars pro toto* type that can cause validity problems when considering the phenomenon of religion and evaluating its impact, especially in a scenario of post-secularity (Habermas 2008, 2010), characterised not so much by an absence of religious experience, but by its great diversity and pluralism. Perhaps here we find the basis for the error, which is twofold: on the one hand, to consider that we live in a context of absence of religious experience; on the other, to consider that religious experience is either linked to historical religions (Bellah 1969) or universal religions (Weber 1983)—in the Spanish case, to Catholicism—or it is not a religious experience.

Based on what we have just commented, we understand that there are three main consequences of this ‘narrow’ approach to religious reality when it comes to generating solid knowledge about this phenomenon, and we will devote this brief reflection to them:

1. Underestimation of the impact of other religious phenomena or secular religiosities. This, perhaps, is the most evident consequence of the analysis we are carrying out. If data collection focuses on analysing aspects of religiosity specific to historical religions (Bellah 1969), there is a large part of the current religious experience that is left out of the equation. Although we could dwell on other dynamics of a more spiritual nature, here, by way of example, we study how this way of approaching the phenomenon underestimates—and even hides—religious experiences of a clearly secular origin and type. Among them are those derived from the sacralization of the person (Durkheim 1973; Joas 2014), the sacralization of the civil (Bellah 2007), the nation (Beriaín 2016) and revolutionary cults (Mathiez 2012). Here, we point out some of the phenomena of secular religiosity that have been more exhaustively analysed from the field of sociology of religion and cultural sociology. In the case of Spain, we can highlight the phenomenon of Basque nationalism as a substitute religion, as analysed by Izaskun Sáez de la Fuente Aldama (2002). Some of these religious experiences have led to religions—as may be the case with what has come to be known as American civil religion⁶—undergoing a process of systematization of “a set of beliefs and practices related to the sacred” (Durkheim 1982, p. 33). However, that the fact that most of these experiences are not of a systematized or institutionalized nature does not mean that, for that reason, they cease to be experiences that can be called religious. As Durkheim rightly points out when referring to the national spirit, “What essential difference is there between a gathering of Christians celebrating the principal ephemeris of the life of Christ, or of Jews celebrating the flight from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a gathering of citizens commemorating the establishment of a new moral constitution or some great event of national life?” (Durkheim 1982, p. 397). As we have previously pointed out, broadening the spectrum of the religious to this type of secular experience could call into question the anti-religious nature of a collective, such as that of atheists, as proactive in the face of the historical religion.

We understand that to ignore the religious nature of the experiences involved in transcendent ‘overcoming’ (Simmel 2000)—linked, for example, to the protection of children’s rights, to the inviolability of the human subject or to the sacred nature of the cultural

community, whether understood as the core from which the rights of citizenship are formulated, as a bastion from which the nation emerges or from which a totemic religion is formulated in the way analysed by Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle (Marvin and Ingle 2008)—entails not noticing the real impact that the religious has on current societies and the diversity and plurality (Berger 2014) of the ways in which it manifests itself. It entails, therefore, not noticing that religious experience has more to do with what is sacralized and/or what generates social and individual dynamics involving transcendence and sacralization than with the forms of sacralization or generation of transcendence linked to specific, systematized and, above all, hegemonic ways of pursuing such processes of sacralization or generation of transcendence.

2. Reinforcement of the identification between religion and religiosity. What was mentioned in the previous paragraph leads us to a second dynamic in which there is a logic in terms of *pars pro toto* analysis. From the way in which statistics on religiosity are gathered, it might seem that only actions developed in contexts of religion (let us recall the institutionalization of a set of beliefs and practices related to the sacred from Durkheim's perspective) can be catalogued as religious experiences. Against this logic in terms of action and information gathering, it would be interesting to re-read Simmel (2012), specifically the differentiation he establishes between religiosity and religion. For the German sociologist, religiosity refers to 'substance' of the human while religion is one of the 'forms' that the former can acquire. In fact, he points out that "religiosity is already secretly presupposed in all the alleged derivations of it. It is therefore better if from the outset it is recognized as a primary, non-derivable quality" (Simmel 2012, p. 107). From Simmel's words, as was already the case with those of Durkheim (1982), it follows that, indeed, we could perfectly well find ourselves in a scenario involving an absence of religion or crisis of religion—something that has been clearly detected with regard to Christianity in most European societies in which it was the majority faith, and, specifically, in Spain with respect to Catholicism—but not due to an absence of religiosity. In this sense, it is interesting to consider phenomena such as unaffiliated spirituality, which arises in contexts such as Spain, and which has recently been studied by Cornejo Valle et al. (2024). While we understand nuances can be formulated with respect to the Simmelian argument of religiosity, which can be deemed to be a substance of the human, especially with respect to the permanence of any social fact *ad futurum*, his argument is supported both by socio-historical analysis and also by—as we saw in the previous paragraph—of secular and current forms of religiosity in a post-secular scenario.

3. Overestimation of the decline of the religious in secular societies. Finally, the way in which statistics on religiosity are collected reinforces a narrative—that of the General Theory of Secularization (Acquaviva 1961; Wilson 2016)—which, as defended by prominent authors such as Casanova (2012a), Joas (2021) and Berger (2014), has proven incapable of explaining the current religious reality in all its complexity, and which is based on three sub-theses: 1. That of the general decline in religious belief and practice, 2. That of the privatization of religious experience and 3. That of the differentiation between secular and religious spheres. Although we cannot deny that there are dynamics in this sense (especially with regard to Christianity in Europe and Catholicism in Spain, as we have previously pointed out), it is also true to say that, at the same time, a religious vitality can be perceived in the terms analysed in the previous paragraphs. This leads us to affirm that the current phase of social life is not one that is definitively situated with its 'back to God', to paraphrase Max Weber (2004), but one in which the religious continues to manifest itself (not exclusively in divine form) in a plural manner (Berger 2014).

In this sense, we understand that the post-secular approach to religious reality adapts more suitably to reality as it is the one currently being put forward. From its assumptions,

what we have witnessed in recent decades is a transformation of the religious, towards a ‘metamorphosis’ (Lenoir 2005) of the sacred and of what is sacralized, rather than towards a general disappearance of or decline in sacralization dynamics. From this perspective, the reality of post-secular societies will shatter the ‘mantra’ that is repeated time and time again by the General Theory of Secularization, which reads as follows: ‘the more modern a society is, the more secular, and the more secular, the less religious’ (Casanova 2012b). This is because, as Gordon Lynch (2012) points out, we live in secular societies, but not for that reason non-religious ones. In the case we are analysing, the statistics—as they are gathered—reinforce the sub-theory of the general decline in belief and religious practice of historical religions (Bellah 1969), in the specific Spanish case of Catholicism, reproducing the narrative of the General Theory of Secularization and overestimating the impact that historical religions have on the post-secular religious reality as a whole. But not only that, since, as we have seen in the previous section, historical religions are not only experiencing a decline, but there are also historical forms such as Islam or Evangelicalism that are growing moderately in this country. In the case of Spain, we can see how the decline of Catholicism is linked to a dual factor: historical religion and the hegemonic religious position.

But the question does not end here, since the statistics also highlight difficulties in approaching the diversity of formulas of religious identity that have proliferated within the historical religions. In the Spanish context, can we call a person a Catholic who defines their ascription by the logic of believing without belonging (Davie 1994)? Would the dimension of belief—together with the individualization of practice (Luckmann 1973; Beck 2009)—be enough to qualify a person as a Catholic? Or is an active community practice required to effectively define a person as Catholic? If so, then could the dynamics of patrimonial belonging referred to by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2002, 2005) serve as a basis for defining a person’s Catholic religious affiliation? And how do we assess supermarket religiosity (Hervieu-Léger and Champion 1986), in which each person shapes their religious identity as they please, selecting elements from each of the religious formulas (whether historical or secular) at their disposal? After all, the metamorphosis towards diversity and plurality of ways of being religious has not only affected secular religious experiences but also traditional faiths.

Undoubtedly, these and other questions are challenges to which both statistics and, above all, analysts in the field of the sociology of religion must respond. To this end, a dual effort must be made: conceptual, on the one hand, trying to banish the blind spots (Gil-Gimeno 2020b) linked to the General Theory of Secularization, concentrating on conceptual proposals that address the diversity and pluralism of sacralization options; on the other, linked to the development of a series of analytical categories from which religious experience, whether historical and/or secular, can be gathered.

4. Conclusions

Our aim at the beginning of this paper was twofold: on the one hand, to establish the Spanish religious reality through the data gathered and, on the other, to undertake a critical exercise on the capacity of the statistical data as they are collected with a view to approaching the religious phenomenon in all its complexity.

With regard to the first question, the analysis shows a religious reality that is based on a structure of beliefs revolving around three parts, as stated in this paper: (i) firstly, that of those individuals and groups who continue to identify with the Catholic tradition (almost 60%), and although they continue to represent the majority group, are experiencing a steady decline, especially in terms of practice; (ii) secondly, those individuals and groups who identify with other religious traditions (around 6% of the population), which have experienced a gradual, albeit moderate, growth in recent decades and which have a greater

impact on the younger generations of believers in this type of religiosity; (iii) lastly, those individuals and groups who are organised around the category of ‘the nones’, which brings together atheists, agnostics and indifferent people or those who self-identify as nothing in particular. This is the fastest-growing religious category in our country (currently representing 40%).

The above data could be interpreted under the umbrella of the General Theory of Secularization as a demonstration of the steady decline of religious belief and practice in today’s societies. And although in the Spanish case, it is clear that the impact of Catholic belief and practice has witnessed a notable decline in recent decades, if we approach the religious phenomenon from the post-secular or pluralist paradigm, this general decline in religious belief and practice is applicable to a specific religious identity—the Catholic—and not to other historical religions that have proliferated in recent decades. Not only do those fail to lose followers, but, in fact, they actually gain them. In the same way, the statistics—making some of the assumptions of the General Theory of Secularization—ignore another outstanding phenomenon, namely, the proliferation of secular religious forms. In this sense, a person who self-identifies as an atheist will automatically acquire the religious category of ‘non-religious’. Now, could such a person who rejects the existence of a God develop secular sacralization dynamics, and do our statistical approaches consider this possibility? And most importantly, how does this fact affect our understanding of the religious phenomenon?

From the point of view of the critical perspective we have put forward in the second epigraph, it is necessary to approach religious reality—both conceptually and methodologically—by abandoning the ‘narrow’ view that associates the religious experience with historical forms of religion, and that concentrates on the nuclear element around which this social phenomenon revolves: sacralization dynamics.

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Notes

- ¹ For further information on these issues, see Itçaina (2019).
- ² Despite the fact that we study Spanish religious reality from the perspective of homogeneity, we feel it is important to point out that the focus could also be placed on the diversity linked to the different socio-cultural and socio-demographic realities that coexist in this country.
- ³ The series of publications edited by the Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation since 2007 on minority religions in the different Autonomous Communities has led to a significant qualitative leap in the study of this socio-religious reality with the publication of 15 volumes on each of the Autonomous Communities. The Observatory of Religious Pluralism (which is part of the Foundation) has also developed an instrument with data on places of worship in Spain, which helps to illustrate religious pluralism in the country and its evolution (<https://www.observatorioreligion.es/> accessed on 12 November 2024). The publications referred to can be found on the Foundation's website: <https://www.pluralismoyconvivencia.es/publicaciones/coleccion/coleccion-pluralismo-y-convivencia/> (accessed on 12 November 2024).
- ⁴ However, it should be asked whether these items alone are capable of evaluating religious behaviour in general or whether they are only suitable for historical religiosities.
- ⁵ Some current publications that delve into the plural and also secular nature of religious manifestations are (Bellah et al. 2024; Dreher 2024; Taylor 2024; Joas 2020; Gorski et al. 2012).
- ⁶ With the intention of being thorough and exhaustive, it should be noted that social debate has been generated around whether the sacralization of the civil American has crystallized into religion. Even Bellah (1992) himself was a participant in this debate, questioning the assertions that he himself had previously developed. However, regardless of whether or not it has crystallized into a systematized corpus of beliefs and practices related to the sacred—for more information, see Gil-Gimeno (2020a)—we can confirm the existence of sacralization dynamics around the American civic identity (for example, and without wishing to be exhaustive, see Marvin and Ingle (2008)).

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Article

The Feminine Sacred: An Ontosociology of Woman as a Symbol

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Abstract: In contemporary development, feminism is divided into two major trends, that of difference and that of equality. The former tends to rely more on ontology and religious symbolism, and the latter on sociology and political praxis. This paper aims to show that this antagonism has as its background the complementarity and unity between both approaches, which are based on religious symbolism. Religious symbolism has both an ontological value and a sociological value, which give both internal consistency and external form to society.

Keywords: matter; mother; energy; Pythagoreanism; feminism of difference; quantum world

1. The Primordial Mother in Mythology, Sociology, Philosophy, and Theology

From the historical and chronological point of view, the first figures that *Homo sapiens* venerated as creative divinities were the Great Mother Goddess or Mother Earth, who, in the late Neolithic period, adopted the forms of Gaia, Nut, Hecate, Pachamana, and who had other names according to the times and cultures. From the mathematical and philosophical iconographic point of view, they have also been represented in numerous figures and denominations. At this moment, it is not possible to differentiate between an ontological symbol and a sociological political symbol because the symbol has made all these meanings indiscernible.

The first representations of the Mother Goddess are those of the female genitals as stylized geometric figures, i.e., the triangle, circle, oval, and rhombus, among others (see Figure 1), while the most classic, the shape of the fish bladder (*vesica piscis*), is later and permanently used by the Pythagoreans and the first Christians and is better known as the mandorla and pantocrator.

From the Middle Ages onwards, a slight differentiation between the religious and sociological and political meaning of the symbol can already be perceived, depending on whether it is found in the apses of churches or on war banners.

The process of generation and development of the cosmos from primordial matter is staged according to the modality of rituals, that is, from the point of view of body language and iconography, and it is described from the point of view of liturgical hymns and stories, and from the point of view of ordinary language.

This equivalence is clearer in some representations than in others. For example, the equivalence between the Egyptian goddess Nut, the celestial vault, and her brother Geb, the earth's soil, is very clear (see Figure 2)¹.

When abstract philosophical thought began at the beginning of the historical and urban era, the creation of the universe was described sociologically from rites of demarcation of

a territory (for example, those described by Livy in *Ad urbe condita*), and philosophically from a mysterious, infinite, and ineffable First Principle, i.e., the One.

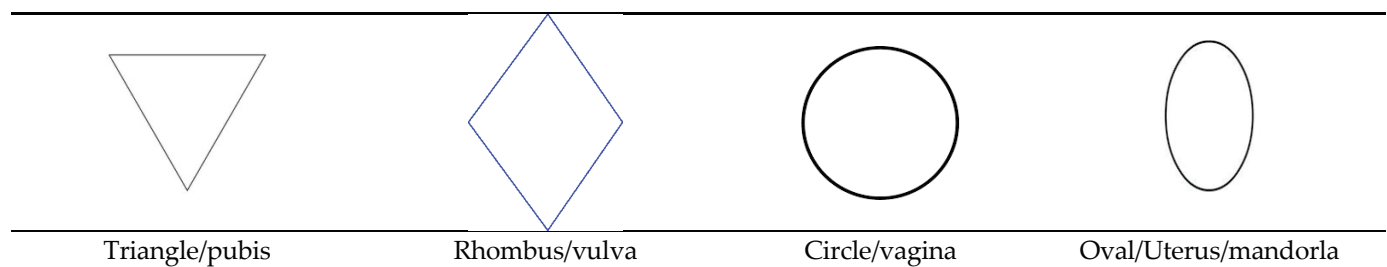
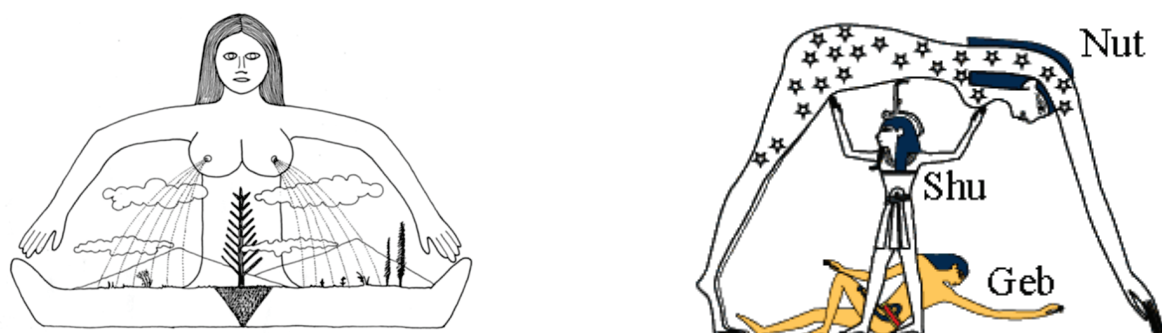


Figure 1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regular_polygon, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollonius_of_Perga#Conics (accessed on 8 January 2025).



Mythical representations of “Mother Earth” in pictorial media. After N. Chausidis, cit.

The goddess Nut, the sky, joins her brother Geb, the earth. Mythical representation of “Mother Earth”...cit.

Figure 2. Representations of “Mother Earth” in pictorial media. After N. Chausidis, cit.

The ancient, historical–sociological and philosophical religious stories call this First Principle by different names from different perspectives, such as raw material, the soul of the world, number, demiurge, etc., and contemporary science does the same, calling it a quantum vacuum, Higgs field, or dark matter, although scientists assign them the same or very similar properties².

The first philosopher to analyze and describe this process of the history of the universe, although based on Plato and Aristotle, in a complete and systematic way, as an exit (*proodos, exitus*) of this indeterminate matter from the First Principle, i.e., as its unfolding for the constitution of the universe and as the return of everything to it (*epistrophé, reditus*), was Plotinus.

He calls the initial indeterminate matter infinite potency and interprets it as matter and as “mother”, i.e., as a philosophical version of the “mother goddess” of the rituals and mythologies of previous times³. From the point of view of sociology and politics, his mother appears in iconography not only as a throne of wisdom, but also as a throne of omnipotence, as a city center, and as a home focus, and her geometrical schemes provide the keys to the iconography of the feminine divinity (see Figure 3).

Since the twentieth century, with the appearance and development of quantum physics and existential phenomenology, it has become possible and inevitable to develop a cosmology from the point of view of matter, indeterminacy, proteic energy, or mother mass, that is, from the feminine point of view. However, at that time, the sociological feminine and the religious were already distanced and confronted. The feminine has begun to revalue itself and access political power as a sociological group and labor force, while it is devalued in

the ontological and religious orders and begins to weaken as a group that sociologically realizes the values of pity and mercy.



Santa maria de Tahull



Pantocràtor de Taüll, Sant Climent de Taüll

Figure 3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Pantocrator (accessed on 5 February 2025).

The principle of indeterminacy begins to be accepted as constitutive of all reality, and conceptual tools are available to operate with the infinite and manage it, in philosophy, mathematics, and linguistics⁴, and that is why philosophy, mathematics and linguistics have demonstrated, in modern times, from the Renaissance to the 20th century, a certain gender bias, as various authors have pointed out⁵, in accordance with historical political and sociocultural configurations.

In ontological and religious perspectives, the universe arises from a duality or a triad. The duality is the Unlimited and the Limited, and the triad is the Unity of the Unlimited and the Limited. In the philosophical perspective, the unlimited is understood as matter and the limited as form; in the iconographic and mathematical perspectives, the unlimited is understood as a pair that is not closed on itself, open and indefinitely determinable, and the limited as a complete essence that is definitively determined.

In the sociological and political perspective, society also arises from duality: the master and the slave, the one and the many, and the powerful and the dispossessed, and the feminine belongs to the second sphere of these binomials. The terms used in iconography, mathematics, and philosophy to designate this duality are continuous/discrete and infinite/finite, and have a long historical development in the theory of perspective and geometric figures, number theory, and hylomorphic ontology.

The continuous and the indeterminate, such as the space–time field, or earth, water, air and fire, are understood as feminine because they produce or generate infinitely through division, i.e., they are infinitely divisible, with an inexhaustible fertility. The same happens in the societies described by Adam Smith and Keynes with wealth, and especially with money, the privileged icon of raw materials.

On the other hand, they are limitable in many ways, because they do not have limits or contours of their own, and, furthermore, once determined according to a specific form and limits, they can repeat that form indefinitely in an inexhaustible production, and also in very different productions. This is especially true for money, which Aristotle calls “artificial

wealth” or chrematistics, because it can grow *indefinitely*, without ever reaching its fullness (*Politics Book VII*, 1323a.25–30).

The third form of the representation of divinity is the objective one, which results from a reflective monologue on it and its manifestations: science, philosophy, and, especially, theology.

The theological point of view has, in turn, three levels: the liturgical one, which belongs to body language; the narrative, which belongs to ordinary language; and the theological interpretation, which belongs to the objectifying reflective monologue. The unity of the three is what gives greater consistency to knowledge and communication with the divine.

The objective theological point of view formally appears when the stories about the origin of a people and their own culture, contained in the epic memory of the first social groups, are considered and taught as communicated by God to men; that is, it is consolidated when the figure of the transmitter formally also becomes an interpreter, i.e., a prophet and priest, and the story is taken as a revelation.

This occurs in all peoples and all cultures during the periods in which ordinary language is formed (beginning of the Chalcolithic, around 5000 BC), and is often also considered revealed, i.e., taught by divinity, because it this is as beneficial for survival as hunting and reproduction.

It is at this point that the epic stories are consolidated, where the social group becomes aware of its own history and its progenitors, 108 when the ontological and theological reflection on the figures of the mother goddess and the First Principle begins, and they begin 109 to be configured conceptually, differentiating themselves from the imaginative epic story.

2. Innocence, Freedom and Evil

The Judeo-Christian Bible begins the account of creation with the following description of a state of original innocence and the irruption of evil:

“And they were both naked, Adam and his wife, and they were not ashamed”
(Gen 2.25)

[...].

10 “I heard your steps in the garden”, he replied, “and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself”.-

11 He said to her, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I told you not to eat?”

12 The man replied, “The woman you put at my side gave me some fruit, and I ate it”.

13 The Lord God said to the woman, “How could you do such a thing?” The woman replied, “The serpent seduced me, and I ate it”. (Gen 3. 10–13)

The first stage of world history is the position of matter outside the One and women as the center of the social order. That which is placed outside is wisdom (*Sophia*, *Hochma*), what Proclus calls *the maternal*, which is infinite power and also infinite nourishment, i.e., energy, which takes on many modalities.

This intellectual version of history has another imaginative prehistoric version, with four types of divinities, namely, cosmomorphic divinities, such as stars, phytomorphic divinities, such as plants, zoomorphic divinities, such as animals, and anthropomorphic divinities, such as human beings.

These four types of divinities are usually divided into two classes, male and female, but these two classes are unified into one, which operates as a kind of bridge between the imaginative plural divinities and the divinity conceived intellectually as a unit, which is the figure of the androgyne.

In the cited text of Genesis, initially the human being was not a separate duality, but a single human being or a dual unity, who did not feel ashamed of his nakedness, because one does not feel shame when one is alone or one is one, i.e., with a spouse. However, when the unity is broken, the duality appears, and with it the estrangement that makes shame possible.

“I was afraid because I was naked. That is why I hid myself.

—He replied: And who told you that you were naked?” (Gen 3, 10)

It is Mephistopheles who breaks the innocence and unity of the androgyne who is naked and shows that he is not one but two; as such, the serpent, the most cunning of animals, who, moreover, is in some way a collaborator of God in the task of creating the universe. The names of Mephistopheles and androgyne do not appear in *Genesis* but were the symbols of the appearance of evil in the cosmos and in society before the differentiation between the ontological and the sociological order.

According to Eliade, Mephistopheles is not the enemy of God, but of life, of stillness, and of starvation. He is the enemy of women (“I will put enmity between you and woman, between your *offspring* and hers”. Gen. 3. 15)⁶.

In the folklore of popular religion, God and Mephistopheles even have a certain sympathy for each other, as also occurs in the Book of Job, and a good reason for this is that God (*Indra*) and the Dragon (*Vrtra*) are brothers: the father of both is *Tvastr*⁷.

The second moment of cosmologies is usually the breaking of peace and original innocence, i.e., the unleashing of a struggle between darkness and light, between good and evil, between provocation and choice, in what the Greeks call the Titanomachy, or the war between the gods of the first generation (the Titans) and those of the second.

In Hindu cosmogony, the universe also unfolds from a primordial rupture as described by the Greek poets, but this time recorded in the corresponding sacred books by Hindu theologians⁸.

The figures of Mephistopheles and the androgyne are the staging of the appearance of evil and freedom in the visible sociological order, which is transposed to the invisible theological order.

They mark the beginning of the differentiation between the mythological imagination and the philosophical theological conceptual intellect, because they can unify at one point the *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites) on the logical and ontological level, the inorganic and organic level, the pre-social and social level, the pre-political and political level, and the premoral and the moral and immoral level. On many others levels, it is linked to the unfolding of the social, philosophical, and religious history of the West.

When Plato recounts the myth of the androgyne at the banquet, he describes the development of Western history as a problem and conflict between the one and the multiple. In the ontological order, this viewpoint is expounded in the *Parmenides*, in the cosmological order, it is expounded in the *Timaeus*, in the psychological order, it is expounded in the *Phaedo*, in the ethical order, it is expounded in the *Phaedrus*, in the political order, it is expounded in *The Republic*, and in the sociological order, it is expounded in *The Laws*. This viewpoint always comes from a primordial matter and soul of the world, which can unfold and collect all the manifold about itself in a unity.

If we take into account that since Anaxagoras and Pythagoras, a good part of Pythagoreanism and Neoplatonism explain the cosmos and society starting from an origi-

nal matter, or a primordial mother, we can see in this myth the argument of the history of the cosmos and society, i.e., of the *exitus reditus* systematized by Plotinus.

In the beginning is the mother, who is a dual unity, like the hermaphrodite Innana and many other male and female divinities, who, as Eliade points out, constitute an original unity and generate by parthenogenesis. Due to an initial shock, the dual unity is divided, and the children are torn from the mother's body.

There is no account of the reason for the externalization of the indeterminate as a unit outside the One in all accounts of the split, i.e., of why it is first the unlimited and then the limited, of why each one wanders around lost, desperately searching until death for the other half of themselves, guided by the madness of desire (*eros*), of why the struggle for unity between the two sides continues, or of why duality continues from the beginning of prehistory to the present, up to the formulation of the principle of complementarity by Bohr at the beginning of quantum physics.

But he does realize why, in a large majority of the stories, the origin of discord and of great divisions and wars is women, or the beauty of women

Throughout prehistory and history, and from the development of modern and contemporary science, there has been a certainty that woman, i.e., the woman's body, is energy. However, she realizes why, in a large majority of the stories, the origin of discord, great divisions, and wars is women. Likewise, it remains a constant that all the elements of the body, after death, return to dust, to become food and energy again, and the key role of women in the funeral rites of the accompaniment of the deceased to the afterlife remains constant. It is also a constant that all the elements of the body, after death, return to dust, to become food and energy again.

This circularity, which is often called *regressus ad uterum*, and which is one of the versions through which the redemption of the human species is described, appears in various interpretations of cultures, various schools of psychoanalysis, and various mythologies, and is one of the ways in which the symbol and human consciousness are used as a hinge between the visible sociological world and the invisible religious world.

This articulation between the sociological–cosmological and the ontological–religious extends to a large number of cosmic elements, especially food.

In addition to the food proper to the gods, i.e., nectar and ambrosia, the immortals give other salvific foods to mortals, and often even convert themselves into foods with specific healing and salvific qualities, offering them forever as gifts to men, and, thus, leading them to fulfill the desires of their love; namely, to be food for loved ones, men, children, etc.

Thus, Persephone transforms the mortal Menta into the mint plant; from the blood of Crocus, saffron is born; there is also the almond tree of Agditis, the pomegranate tree of Dionysus, the apple tree of Melos, and so on with many others. In prehistory, they do so in reality, and in history in ritual. The Hellenistic imagination draws in splendid figures what the Greek intellect later embodies in solid concepts, and later Christianity also expresses the same gift on both levels simultaneously with radiant metaphors.

The symbol is the piece that articulates the religious sociological world with the ontological cosmological world, the human with the divine, and the key to this articulation is, in turn, the woman.

3. The First Creature, Self-Consciousness of Nothingness, and Wisdom

The exit from the maternal womb is a tearing apart of unity and a fall into corruption because life is movement, time, separation, and corruption, but it is also purification, and that life, already purified, is a return to the maternal womb, to the intermediate world, according to the different schools and rituals of the mysteries, not without complicity between God and Mephistopheles.

This circuit of exit and return is expressed sociologically at the different levels of being (physical, biological, psychological, existential, religious, ontological, and theological) and they have their own realization and description in each one of them. In some versions of Neoplatonism and Christianity, it is said that they are sensible signs that cause what they mean, that is, sacraments, and that they are the taxa of the social and legal order, i.e., the factors that determine social identity, whether one is a man or a woman, a child or an adult, single or married, innocent or guilty, etc.

This is recorded *at a first preconscious biophysical level* as a set of hormonal secretions and reflexes which carry their own ritos⁹. It is also experienced *at a second psychological and existential religious level* in maternal intimacy as a feeling of being in oneself for the other, as a primordial form of being for oneself as a unity of two, as a dual being, and also with their corresponding rites¹⁰, and it is manifested *at a third ontological intellectual level* by becoming transparent for oneself as a dual unity in relation to God.

The first two moments begin with a type of maternal–corporal knowledge that is at the same time action and that spontaneously produces gestures and movements of veneration on the part of the mother, such as the kiss, the caress, breastfeeding, the overflow of joy and tenderness in trembling and discomfort, and, finally, everything that can be and is the beginning of the rites that constitute the liturgy of welcoming the new being into existence, the first of all the rites of passage¹¹.

Rites of passage are the taxa of sociological and legal identity, which in some extreme forms of equality feminism are considered words lacking real content (nominalism), while in the feminism of difference they are taken as the real ontological content of rites, that is, of the social structure and the legal order.

From the moment of departure, man begins the fall in its various forms, and always has rites and sacraments of one kind or another, whether they are the Orphic, Dionysian, Eleusinian, Hermetic mysteries, etc.¹²

From the moment of his departure, man begins his fall in its various forms, and he always has resources of one kind or another, whether they are the Orphic, Dionysian, Eleusinian, Hermetic mysteries, etc.

Fallen man knows that he can always turn to woman and especially to his mother, because she is always there, no matter how low man has fallen and how deep hell is. This is so because the relationship of the primordial Mother and Universal Mother (MU, as Ibn Gabirol calls her) with the One is one of continuity¹³, and that of the primordial mother with men as well¹⁴. The Word is always in the beginning, that is to say in matter-wisdom, and the existence of all creatures is in those maternal entrails¹⁵, which are also their beginning.

That is why, from a sociological point of view, certain purification rites are performed by women, such as the priestesses of Asclepius, the Eumenides, the Vestals, and others.

That is why man can go down to hell, and return from there.

That is why man cannot stop going down to hell, nor stop returning from there: Gilgamesh, Ulysses, Christ, Aeneas, Dante, Don Juan, Milton, Faust, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and some others go down and return. Purification is a battle between man and the Archangel Michael, aided by the woman, Anticlea, Beatrice, Agnes, Margaret, and Sonia, who are Ariadne's thread, the umbilical cord with which, through them, he remains connected to the heart of the One.

That is precisely the answer to Nicodemus' question about salvation: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb and be born again?" (John 3:4–6). In fact, he returns to the dust, to the earth, to the bosom of Mother Nature, to the intermediate world, to the stage where "women received their dead by resurrection" (Hebrews 11:35). The womb of the cosmos is the maternal womb, to which the living return when they die to be born again.

Return means returning to the starting point, and, therefore, implies innocence and purification, i.e., becoming like children. It implies returning to the beginning of creation, which here is called beginning, and which involves passing through the various sufferings of life, through the various forms of destruction and of nonexistence.

There are numerous conceptions of *exitus reditus*, and it is common to distinguish between two large classes. In the first class, *exitus* is conceived by all religions in general as the beginning of the cosmos and of man, and *reditus* is conceived as a return to that same paradisiacal cosmos where animals and men live in happy harmony for all eternity.

This *reditus* has its sociological expression in the funerary rites of purification, which vary widely from one religion to another.

In the second class, *exitus* is a transitory stage of the cosmos and not a permanent state of it, and *reditus* is also a transitory stage, a provisional return that culminates in a second and definitive *reditus*, in which the cosmos and humanity are integrated into the intimate relationship of the One and its hypostases. This culmination of the *reditus* consists of the eschatological mystical union with the One and also comprises various rites and sociological phenomena in the various religions.

This second class of *reditus* is systematized by Plotinus and is conceived not only as a return to the innocence of paradise, or to the constitution of “a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away (Rev. 21.1)”, as expressed in Christian terminology, but also as participation in the bosom of the three hypostases of the One.

Christianity inserts between the first and second return the “elevation to the supernatural order” that generates a dense theological complexity¹⁶. In fact, this second return, which consists of the participation of the human person in the intimate life of the One, or, in Christian terms, in the dynamics of the Trinitarian processions, is subsequently elaborated by all of philosophy and historical theology, Christian, Islamic, Hebrew, Buddhist, etc., generating treatises of a motley complexity. Consequently, it generates treatises of a variegated complexity in the ontological order¹⁷, and, on the other hand, creates a whole panoply of rites that constitute in the sociological order half of the ceremonies that make up the “liturgical year” in the various confessions.

This second return, of which there are numerous versions, usually implies and integrates the first, i.e., the recovery of the paradisiacal original innocence, to then reach, also through the woman, the transformation that allows one to pass from this first return to the second, of a higher order, which here is characterized as participation in the intimate life of the One, and is called the Beginning.

The sociological correlate of these two theological moments is, in the first place, the unification of all men in the Roman Empire and in the Church, which is due to the unification of humanity in the empire of Alexander, to the granting of Roman citizenship to all the inhabitants of the empire by Caracalla in 212, and to the declaration of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire by Theodosius in the year 380.

Secondly, the sociological correlate of the second return is the glorification carried out by the church of the heroes and protagonists of salvation. In a certain way, there is a correspondence between the centrality that Plotinus and Dionysius give to the One in the ontological order, and the centrality that Theodosius grants to the Church in the sociological order.

46 Mary then said: “My soul sings the greatness of the Lord,

47 and my spirit trembles with joy in God, my savior,

48 because he looked kindly on the smallness of your servant.

48. ὅτι ἐπέβλεψεν ἐπὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν τῆς δούλης αὐτοῦ.

48 quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae From now on all generations will call me happy, 49 because the Almighty has done great things for me: his Name is holy! (Luc. 1.)

“Because he looked with kindness on the humility of his slave”, because he noticed the surrender of his creature¹⁸. What was the smallness or humility of the servant, the slave? And what was it to look at her with kindness or to pay attention to her?

The first ontological answer to these two questions is probably, as has been said, that of Plotinus. The smallness or humility of the servant consists of her being nothing, not in her not existing from the empirical point of view, but in her being nothing from the ontological point of view, that is, she is not in herself. She is not in her ontological self prior to creation or in her empirical self at the moment of the Annunciation.

In her ontological self prior to creation and then at the very moment of creation, she is *apeyrodýnamon*, or she is *proté apeiria*. For this very reason, “the Almighty has done great things in me” (ὅτι ἐποίησέν μοι μεγάλα ὁ δυνατός, *quia fecit mihi magna, qui potens est*).

What great things can the Almighty (ὁ δυνατός, *qui potens est*) do in this creature who is nothing and wholly at his disposal? And what consciousness can it have of itself and of great things? The consciousness it can have of itself, if it is a true self-consciousness, is that in itself it is nothing, since it is not in itself, or since its subsistence is borrowed and contingent¹⁹. In that case, the self-consciousness of the primordial creature is the self-consciousness of nothingness.

And what are the great things that the Almighty makes out of nothing? Well, the whole creation, the universe, humanity, i.e., what is recounted in the first verses of Genesis, which she probably knew.

In the sociological order, the great things accomplished by the Almighty are, for the Jews, the building of the kingdom of David; for the Romans, they are the building of the empire; and for the Christians, they are the building of Christianity. Christianity, on the other hand, is the symbol that links the first principle, God or the One, with human society, articulated according to the various forms of recognition of this link

The Pythagorean school of Plato and Plotinus said that the first thing that the One puts outside of itself is the Indeterminate, the infinite power, and that it puts it outside of itself because it has had it in itself before, from the beginning. What it puts outside of itself in the second place is the Determined, the number, the Logos, as we have also seen. In the One, one can differentiate the Unlimited from the Limited, and what the One puts outside of itself is another one made up of both things, beginning with the Indeterminate.

The Indeterminate of the One puts itself outside in a *generation of mediate continuity*, like an *eros* of infinite power, like the feminine or the maternal, that is, like the mother, who from the religious theological point of view is *Wisdom*. The Determining, “which was in her from the beginning” (Io. I, 2) is put out in the second place, in a *generation of immediate discontinuity* as the only masculine determinant, which from the philosophical and theological point of view is the *Logos*.

That is to say, nothingness is the beginning from which emerges, on the one hand, the universe, from which, and through Mary, God becomes man, and on the other hand the same universe from which, and through Eve, Abraham and the Abrahamite confessions historically emerge, which exercise their prominence in the development of Western culture.

All these perspectives are unified in some ontological–existential analyses of the personal self and of God.

As Nishida points out, God cannot contain nothingness and evil as something opposed to him, distinct from him and threatening. He must have it integrated into himself in order to be the One, the Almighty God.

“The absolute God must include absolute negation within himself and must be the God who descends to the very depths of evil [. . .]”

God is the absolute precisely in the structure of a dynamic equilibrium of “is” and “is not”. And the human self, the image of God himself, is similarly a contradictory identity of good and evil. Thus, Dimitri Karamazov discusses the beautiful lies hidden within Sodom and that the beautiful is both terrible and mystical. There is a war between God and Satan and the battlefield is the human heart.

Our hearts are essentially that battlefield between God and Satan. Yet the reality of the self as a volitional person lies there. The self is always rational as a self-determining predicate. At the same time, it exists as an objective reality that negates the predicate. Thus, it has its existence in the midst of radical evil, in radical contradiction with itself. From the moral point of view, Kant refers to this as the innate propensity to evil. In my essay “Life”, I used the word “disposition” in the same sense. We have this disposition towards evil as a result of the unfathomable contradiction of our existence”²⁰.

The self-consciousness of nothingness cannot in any case be conscious of having hindered God’s creative action, that is, it cannot be conscious of impurity, of sin, or of destructive action. It can only, as a creature, be conscious of the possibility of affirming itself while affirming God (worship) or without him (sin), that is, conscious of the possibility of evil, conscious of freedom, of one’s own freedom and that of spiritual creatures, and conscious of that battlefield which is familiar to Socrates, to Dostoevsky, and to all men and all women²¹.

On the other hand, it could also have some kind of consciousness of the hostility towards it of the forces of sin, some kind of consciousness of the announcement: “I will put enmity between you and the Woman, between her offspring and yours. She will tread on your head, and you will strike at her heel” (*Genesis* 3:15). And she could be aware of this because she knows not only from the point of view of the material and efficient cause, but also from the point of view of the formal cause and the final cause.

It is in this scenario of intimate self-awareness where the self-awareness of nothingness, Mary, is found by Socrates, Dostoyevsky, and all the women of human history, although in these cases there is self-awareness of impurity, sin, and destruction, and also true self-awareness. The self-awareness of one’s own nothingness in any creature is an encounter with wisdom, i.e., an encounter with Mary. It occurs when men become socially, legally, and politically aware of their dignity and play a leading role in it, and women of theirs, and prepare for their own protagonism, reformulating the relationship between the sexes.

When centuries after the empirical appearance of Mary, human society becomes aware of the closeness of opposites, of the divine ontological One and the empirical individual of human society, and of the similarity between the divine One and the human individual. It is then perceived that the hierarchical principle of the organization “God, country, king” can be replaced by the principle of “liberty, equality, fraternity”. At this point the emergence of feminism takes place, and with it the emergence of self-awareness of the dignity of women in the cosmos and in history.

4. The Intermediate World and the Impurity of Women

In the case of the Greek religion, as well as in the Hebrew and Christian religions, the fall has as its antecedent an episode of struggle between the gods, which explains in some way why evil appears in the human world. It appears because it has previously appeared in the intermediate world.

This intermediate world is external to the divine intimacy and prior to the constitution of the existing universe. That is why it is intermediate. It is intermediate between the beginning of the cosmos and of the living as the stage of the demiurge and the soul of the

world, and their effective appearance in the formed cosmos and the offspring born by the females. It is intermediate between the death of humans and the universe, on the one hand, and the parousia or access of men and the cosmos to divine intimacy on the other.

Since the remote Paleolithic, *Homo sapiens* has had the custom of considering women impure after the menstrual flow, with consequent purification ceremonies.

Bloodshed, whether accidental or deliberate, is always an extraordinary event, one that provokes alarm or awe-filled anguish and fearful respect. Blood, and especially the shedding of blood, is something tremendous and fascinating because it has something of a sacred mystery²². This occurs both in the most distant prehistory and in the most urbanized cultures of the 21st century, even though the phenomenon is contextualized by sirens from ambulances, police, and firemen, by traffic jams, and by images on various types of screens and messages from various types of microphones.

In ancient times, there were two types of bloodshed: that voluntarily provoked in hunting and initiation rites, in transfusions, oaths and pacts of various kinds, which are usually public and with the participation of several people, and that unprovoked or fortuitous, either due to knowable causes, for example, the attack of a wild beast or a fall from a cliff, or due to unknown causes. The latter are usually private and without the intervention of third parties. Among them is the menstrual flow of the woman, an event that she experiences alone, with fear and trembling, and which generally leads to a certain type of exclusion from the community for some time.

There are at least two classic studies on the impurity and purification of women from menstrual flow. One is Sir James Frazer's work, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, first edition 1890, with a second edition in twelve volumes 1907–1915²³, and another is Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's research, *Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive*, from 1931²⁴.

Impurity is contagious and dangerous and can cause various kinds of evils to the people, things, places, and times that are contaminated by the impure woman. For this reason, she has to be isolated from the community and taken to a special hut, built in a remote place. She cannot touch the ground of the village with her feet, nor look at the sky; she cannot touch relatives, animals, plants, or tools of work, war, or domestic use, because it would make them impure, sick, useless, or even cause death. This action and effect of weakening, deforming, or annihilating is called "witchcraft" or "sorcery", and it is produced by the impure woman independently of her intention and will²⁵.

"Can we try to go further, and investigate why catamenial blood constitutes such an "impurity", such a "poison", for the woman herself and for those around her, capable of stopping the growth of plants, of causing illness and death, etc., in short acting as a real spell?"²⁶

"So what makes this blood so dangerous? [...] comparing beliefs and practices related to catamenial blood with those related to other blood losses in women will help us understand its origin"²⁷.

"Mr. Elsdon Best finally gives us the key to this enigma. "Catamenial blood is a kind of human embryo, an immature or undeveloped human being: hence the *tapu*. "The *paheka* (catamenial blood) of a woman is a kind of human being, it is a person in an embryonic state". Another of my informants, an old man, told me: "This blood is a kind of human being, because if the menstruation stops, then it becomes a person; that is, when the catamenial blood ceases to flow, it assumes human form and develops into a man". Mr. Elsdon Best adds: "There are several instances in native legends of menstrual blood turning into a human being. . . or sometimes into an evil spirit""²⁸.

This text is decisive. It throws a vivid light on the fear which the periodic indisposition of women caused the ancient Maoris. What so frightened them was not only the loss of blood itself, but the appearance of an embryo which did not reach maturity, and which was, therefore, a “spirit”, that is, a particularly frightful death. For menstrual blood, while it is the red liquid which we perceive, also has a *wairua* (cf. *Primitive Soul*, chap. IV, p. 176) which can do much harm.

In other words, menstrual blood, before it leaves the woman’s body, is an embryo of a human being, living, and which, if it were not expelled, would take human form. Once it leaves the body, this possibility is destroyed. What terrifies the Maori is that it continues to live, but in the manner of the dead, that is, in the state of a spirit. These spirits are particularly evil and feared, as are those of fetuses expelled in abortions and miscarriages, and those of children who are stillborn or die at an early age.

Elsdon Best puts it in the following words: “A fetus expelled prematurely is always a danger to society, because its *wairua* may become an *atua kahu* (*kahu* means the enveloping membrane), a *cadodem*, an evil demon, who delights in tormenting men. . . . Such a spirit may take up residence in an animal (dog, lizard, or bird) and cause incalculable harm”²⁸.

Menstrual blood is the sacred creative power, which has been hindered in its path towards the formation of a normal living being, an opposition to the creator, which occurred in that mediation between the creator and the creature that is the female, the woman, the mother. Menstrual blood is one of the greatest possible sins.

Woman is the intermediate world, the mediator where indeterminate matter, the processes of embryological development, is a mediator, because it is in her that indeterminate matter, the processes of embryological development, becomes matter determined by quantity, that is, nature or essence. In her resides the power, whether or not it is consciously controlled, to generate a normal child or a monster, and this power over nature is called witchcraft, sorcery, or magic²⁹.

In the Jewish culture of the first century, there is memory of these and other rites, whether their own or those of other foreign peoples, and worship is no longer lived only in the first three senses of prayer that Origen points out, i.e., as action, as obedience to the law, and as a proclamation or declaration of faith in what has been promised, but also in the fourth sense, i.e., as repentance, heartache, and mercy.

The New Testament declares, “Go therefore and learn what this means: I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (*Matthew* 9:13), and he does not declare it as a novelty, but as an update of an already ancient tradition, collected in various places in Scripture, such as *Psalms* 51.

When it is said that “Meanwhile Mary kept these things and pondered them in her heart” (*Luke* 2:19), she welcomed into herself the impurities and purifications of the women who had preceded her and those who would come after her, and the rite of purification was being lived with ecclesial solidarity, and with a contrite heart.

In Greek cosmogony, *the intermediate world* is the time and place of the activity of the demiurge and the soul of the world, which generate order, and, at the same time, it is the time and place of the struggle between the first pair of gods, Uranus and Gaia, and the second and their generation, Cronus and Rhea with their brothers, the Titans. This combat is called *Titanomachy*, and from it comes the set of Olympic gods governed by the authority of Zeus, father of gods and men³⁰.

The Titans kill Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, dismember him and devour him. As punishment, Zeus strikes them down with his lightning bolt and from the ashes human beings are born, who already carry within themselves an original evil, a primordial sin, that of the Titans, from which they must purify themselves throughout their lives in order to return to the immortals.

In the Hebrew tradition, evil comes from Satan, the enemy of God, who fights against him and seeks to make his children abandon him and rebel against him, as is shown above all in the *Book of Job*³¹.

In Christianity, Satan, the enemy of God, is also the one who causes the fall of Eve and Adam, transformed into a serpent (*Genesis*, 3, 1–13).

In the Greek, Hebrew, and Christian worldviews, evil does not originate in the human world or the historical world, but in the intermediate world, and it does indeed arise in a Titanomachy, where evil results from the action of demons.

Titanomachy is well documented in Greek mythology and the Hebrew scriptures. It is also recorded in the Christian Old Testament, and in the New Testament, especially in the Apocalypse and the letters of Paul, although it is only mentioned in the Synoptics: “And he said to them: I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy” (Luke 10:18–20).

The Titanomachy does not frustrate the project of creation; on the contrary, it opens the project of salvation, that is, it opens the plan of the incarnation of the Word and the integration of all creation in the intimacy of the Trinity, for which reason the sin of the Titanomachy and that of men receives the name of *Felix culpa*. In the proclamation of the Mass of the Easter Vigil the following is proclaimed: *O felix culpa quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem*, “O happy fault that won for us so great and so glorious a Redeemer” (Matthew 11:18)³².

From the sociological historical point of view, Titanomachy is the symbolic projection, in the religious ontological order, of the conflicts that occurred during the process of neolithization between the various tribes, ethnicities, and nations, and those which were already advanced in the Chalcolithic gave rise to the fully urban society, that is, to an organic society in the Durkheimian sense.

Sociologists, historians, anthropologists, and specialists in the sciences of religions are the ones who have most closely pointed out the correlation and even the shared identity between historical episodes and characters and ontological–religious configurations and characters, as is evident in the struggle between the old and the new gods³³.

The physiology of women is the union of the ontological moment of the process of the generation of life and the empirical moment of the birth of individuals, and the moment in which the Titanomachy and the formation of society, as a single process, is described in two different ways, i.e., a symbolic religious and empirical war.

The woman is the one who captures this double moment of pain and suffering, on the one hand, and of joy and triumph on the other. Creation, the beginning of being and life, encompasses this double moment of pain and suffering, on the one hand, and joy and triumph on the other. This is the meaning given in Christianity to sin, death, and the pains of childbirth, and also to the birth of life, natural or supernatural, and to resurrection.

This is the way Friedrich Nietzsche understands the figure of Dionysus.

“For it is only in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian state, that the fundamental fact of the Hellenistic instinct is expressed: its “will to life”. What did the Hellenes guarantee themselves with these mysteries? Eternal life, the eternal return to life; the future promised and consecrated in the past; the triumphant yes to life beyond death and mutation; true life as total survival, through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality. Hence for the Greeks the sexual symbol was the venerable symbol in itself, the very depth in all ancient piety. Every detail relating to the act of procreation, pregnancy and childbirth aroused the highest and most solemn feelings. In the doctrine of the mysteries pain is sanctified: the “pains of the woman in labor” sanctify pain in itself; All birth and growth, all that guarantees the future, determines pain. . . In order for there to be eternal enjoyment of creation, for the will to life to affirm itself eternally, there must also necessarily

be eternally the “agony of the woman in childbirth. . .” All this contains the meaning of the word “Dionysus”; I know of no higher symbolism than this Greek symbolism, that of the Dionysus. In it, the deepest instinct for life, the instinct for the future of life, the eternity of life, is religiously felt, and the path to life itself, procreation, is the holy path.

[. . .] Saying yes to life, even in its strangest and most painful problems, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility in the sacrifice of its highest types: this is what I have called Dionysian, what I have guessed as the key to the psychology of the tragic poet³⁴.

The intermediate world is described by science as a moment of eternal return in various ways³⁵, and there are also various ways in which philosophy and theology, sociology, and history describe it in workshop terms.

As far as science is concerned, eternal return is the temporal process that describes a physical system, from the initial moment of maximum potential energy to the moment of zero potential energy, when the same process or a similar one begins again. According to the laws of thermodynamics, this is the case of the universe, if it is a closed system, and it begins again and again depending on external energy factors.

Eternal return is the loop that physical systems describe when they are observed from the point of view of energy, i.e., of an initial energy, followed by its wear and tear and replacement. It is found at all levels of the physical universe, from elementary particles to neurons, from inorganic entities and through successive ascending loops, to biological and intellectual life.

In the formation of particles and atoms, there is an accumulation of elements in certain spaces (phase spaces) up to a certain degree, and then the space loses its energy and then recharges itself, according to a process described in the so-called Poincaré³⁶ recurrence theorem, which Tipler explains clearly because he believes that the Omega Point, the end of the world and the resurrection, occur according to this formal scheme.

The loop or recurrence can be generalized, and it can also be examined in various metabolic processes of cells (for example in mitochondria, in the alternation of high ATP energy and low ADP energy)³⁷, or in the homeostasis of living organisms³⁸.

Chaos, indeterminate matter, or the quantum vacuum are, ultimately, the starting and ending point of the various loops that comprise determinate matter (periodic table), organic matter (chemistry of life) and “psychic matter” both electrical, affective, and mental (human beings). This chaos and this initial emptiness is the maternal womb of nature to which all the creatures of the universe return, because they come from it.

“Remember, man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return” (*Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*, Genesis 3, 19) is said in the Christian Lenten liturgy, in the celebration of Ash Wednesday³⁹.

As regards philosophy, there are many interpretations of Christianity that take these theses, with which Nietzsche proclaims his atheism and discredits Christianity, as the true content and the authentic sense of the Christian doctrine on death and resurrection, starting with Max Scheler, probably the most illustrious of his supporters⁴⁰.

Among the most recent interpretations of Nietzsche in this sense, it is worth highlighting that of Javier Hernández-Pacheco, *Friedrich Nietzsche: study on life and transcendence*, where, with a broad knowledge of Nietzsche’s work and Western metaphysics, it is shown that the most probable referent of Nietzsche’s thesis on Dionysus, and perhaps the only possible one, is Jesus Christ, the Christian doctrine of resurrection⁴¹.

This “Christian Nietzschean” point of view also emerges in some approaches of difference feminism, especially those of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Maria José Binetti, Anne Baring, and Jules Cashford, who articulate the empirical meaning of childbirth and its transcendental meaning, both from a philosophical perspective and from a Jungian psychological perspective⁴².

Woman lives in the intermediate world between the creator and the creatures, and is the guardian and guide of that world, as repeated in all mythologies and recounted in popular rural cultures.

5. Formal Outline of Soteriology: Family Relations and Ritual Incest

From a sociological, legal, philosophical and theological point of view, the expression “behold, I am the handmaid, let it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38) means “yes, I do”; it means granting consent which makes firm the marital bond that gives rise to family and society. It means my soul and my heart can embrace your omnipotence, all your power fits in my bosom, and all that I am and can be I give to you to generate infinitely.

Wisdom is first nothing; then, it is a matter subject to number and measure, and, therefore, it is life and being. Wisdom presides over the unfolding of life from the beginning, and, at the same time as it expands, it experiences the pain of a tearing apart.

Later and at the same time as tearing apart, life is multiplication, knowledge of good and evil, and struggle between the two, and alternation between joy and pain. Life, woman, is what mediates. The middle life between divinity and human beings is the feminine moment of creation and, for this reason, it is ontologically prior to the logos and has a certain autonomy with respect to form. For this reason, it can be chaotic, dangerous, and fearful. It can also have as an accomplice the tearing of form, which threatens it.

From the sociological historical point of view, it can be stated by saying that human history began with matriarchy in the Paleolithic period, as indicated by Banhoeffer, which continued in the process of neolithization, when the rise and domination of patriarchal society took place, reaching, for the moment, equality in terms of human rights.

Finally, wisdom is an ascending movement, the *reditus* or *epistrophe*, contrary to the second law of thermodynamics, and triumph over it, that is, over death. The living return to primordial matter, i.e., a return to the beginning of the cosmos, and withdraw again into nothingness, only to re-emerge later in a new life beyond being and nothingness, next to the One. From the sociological point of view, this already belongs to the empirical existences of present and future individuals.

The maternal beginning is wisdom that generates with the help of the logos. “In Sanskrit, mother is called *matr* and designates both the one who generates life and the one who measures and knows what is generated. From there comes *matra*: womb and measure; *matih*: measure and exact knowledge; *mimati*: to measure. *Mathematics* means, by derivation, the knowledge or wisdom of the mother”⁴³.

In Proto-Indo-European languages, mother is written as **méh₂tēr* (cf. Irish *máthair*, Tocharian A *mācar*, B *mācer*, Lithuanian *mótė*). Other linked languages include Latin *māter*, Greek *μήτηρ*, Common Slavic **mati* (hence, Russian *мать* (*mat'*)), Persian *مادر* (*madar*), and Sanskrit *मातृ* (*mātr*)⁴⁴.

The first two versions of this process are ritual and mythological, as has been said, while the third is philosophical and theological and the fourth mystical. In the ritual and mythological versions, expansion and multiplication is an exit and also a painful tearing, as if fertility carried with it the impurity of the woman. Incest also has this double valence—either it is the maximum imitation of divinity or it is the most abominable of sins.

This is the key to the connection of woman with evil, the ambivalence of the chaos in which matter and she consist, and which can give rise to an infinity of splendid forms or to a certain amount of deformed, untraceable, and sterile entities, doomed to extinction or death, whether thermal death, biological death, or spiritual death.

The infinite power, the *prote apeiría* of Plotinus and Proclus, the first substance and the Eve of Ibn Gabirol, the Great Mother, which the Phoenicians designate with the name of Astarte or Inanna, the Akkadians, Assyrians, and Babylonians with that of Ishtar, and

the Hindus as Pavarti (Maya), is, on the one hand, life and fertility, and, on the other, perversion, but not as two different divinities, but as one with the same name, like Astarte, or the same person with the same name or two different names, like Parvati: *Durga*, which expresses maternal love and *Kali*, which expresses wickedness⁴⁵.

The Greek Athena has this intermediate character between good and evil, because she is the goddess of care and the art of healing (*Hygieia*), but also of just war, prudence, and cunning. On the other hand, Eve, the first Jewish and Christian mother, differentiated from the previous ones because she is not a divine being but a human creature, also has this intermediate character, because she is the origin of evil, and, at the same time, the mother of all living beings.

In all cases, the entire universe, matter and life, which arise from the beginning as chaos in what Plotinus calls *proodos*, returns again to chaos in death, to return from there again to the beginning beyond chaos, in what Plotinus calls *epistrophé*.

From the biopsychological point of view, the process can be understood in the same way. The scheme of the Great Mother, in her fecundity and tearing, is repeated in all the beings from which the others originate, in the atoms and molecules, in the first plant life, in the first animals, and in the first psychic processes of the formation of the unconscious and of consciousness.

"The subjective unconscious understands the maternal archetype as an origin torn apart by its loss and restored by the continuous actuality of existence. In both its cultural and subjective dimensions, reproduction, birth, the division of the maternal womb suppose a difference that, without abandoning the immanence of the origin, generates its constant reaffirmation: that circle in which the ex and the ad utero are reciprocally reversed"⁴⁶. Parto means, at the same time, division, creation, and fall.

This circular scheme of the biopsychological process seems to operate also in the historical order, every time a cultural crisis occurs and every time it is overcome, in what Vico calls the "*corsi e ricorsi*" of the development of humanity.

The crisis of modernity seems to be an exhaustion of the scheme of historical linear time and progress, of what Derrida designates as the phallogocentric scheme, and a return to the beginning of thinking, i.e., to the origin, as is evident in the thought of Husserl, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein.

"This origin is the reproduction of the maternal womb, its creative unfolding, the birth of its unity, not the two of an extrinsic linearity, but the three of its repetition. Such is the medium, the mediation of an existence that flows back to its own being. Because we live, move and have our being in the womb of the mother, reality justifies itself in the eternal return of a newborn origin. The time of the mother is the time of birth that occurred in the instant of that essential memory, towards which contemporary thought seems to be returning"⁴⁷.

These characteristics of wisdom and the maternal womb, which appear in cosmological, biopsychological, and historical analyses, also appear in the perspective of Chalcolithic mythology, in that of mystical Pythagoreanism, and in that of the Kabbalah, where the feminine and evil are associated.

The association of the feminine with good and evil occurs in various ways. In Anaximander's approach, indeterminacy is the infinite as a universal good, and in Pythagorean approaches the Dyad is the first attack on unity, the original sin, which engenders otherness, an ontological audacity (*tolma*), which occurs in each emanation.

This Pythagorean thesis is taken up by Plotinus, for whom matter, the feminine, is the possibility of the illusion of an existence separated from the One (appearance, the goddess *Pavarti* or Hindu *Maya*), and is the root of all forgetfulness and evil (1 *Enneads* V, 1, 10). The Dyad, multiplicity, is both fecundity and a tear, *hybris*.

Proclus insists that Maya, appearance, is the cause of souls forgetting their father, God, and ignoring themselves, but matter does not imply evil in itself, so much as infinite indeterminacy. Only when it enters the order of determination, of the knowledge of the illusory as knowledge of good and evil, does “audacity (*tolma*)” occur, i.e., the birth of the first otherness and the desire to belong to oneself (*On the Existence of Evil*, 12, 10–15)⁴⁸.

This Neoplatonic Pythagorean mystical approach continues in Kabbalah. The first noetic sefira, Hokhma/Wisdom, is the undifferentiated, unifying nature of prime matter and contains no evil. Opposite it arises the Dyad as Binah, as “Intellection” or “Dissociating Intelligence”. This is why the heavenly Mother of duality/plurality is sometimes seen as the source of metaphysical evil, not directly, but, similarly to Proclus’ dyad, “as a by-product, through her participation in the psyche and thus through her role in nourishing the illusion of autonomous existence”⁴⁹.

For Anaximander, Proclus, and Kabbalah, matter, the infinite/indefinite, positively connotes original perfection, so that infinite power is feminine. For Pythagoras, on the other hand, the Unlimited, the apeiron, is, as in Aristotle, the Dyad that rebels against the One (Proclus, *Teologia platonica*. vol. I, book IV, chap. 10).

The Pythagorean tradition, which identifies chaotic and indefinite matter with the indefinite Platonic dyad and the primordial material substance, is reinforced by Orphic cosmology. In all these philosophical and mythological traditions, the primordial feminine principle is infinite in a negative sense: that is, it is infinitely or indefinitely divisible and, therefore, weak, compared to the modern positive infinite, which is usually synonymous with power.

The unifying, individualizing, and, therefore, “powerful” element, that is, the form, “has come to all things from the Monad and the Limit, [while] the endless aspect of the procession has come from the generative Dyad. (Proclus, *On Plato’s Cratylus*, in 385E4–386D7). This Plotinian Pythagorean scheme is transposed into the discrete ontology of Aristotelianism, where, once again, perfection is not the original infinity of possibilities, but the limitation”⁵⁰.

“The metaphysical notion of power becomes, with Aristotle, univocally masculine and exterior, while the ideas of flow, germination and organic growth, which are no longer applicable to the first principles, are relegated to the lower manifestations of the psyche (animals, the vegetative). The feminine is thus reduced to the passive and weak (inferior) aspects on the one hand, and to the chaotic, and therefore equally “weak”, forces of the apeiron on the other”⁵¹.

In *continuous ontologies*, where the original infinity is equated with the indeterminacy of the One, the Dyad became synonymous with limitation, plurality, and manifestation.

In more *discrete ontologies*, on the other hand, indefiniteness, negatively connoted, tends to be identified with the feminine principle, while the limit is seen (as in the Pythagorean categorial scheme) as a masculine aspect. The Kabbalistic tradition is obviously closer to the *continuous ontology* of Anaximander and Proclus than to the *discrete ontology* of Pythagoras and Aristotle.

“Stripped of its numerous feminine connotations, the Dyad is equally associated with Christ, in the flow from the Monad to the Triad, as the manifest aspect of the Unknowable Father, with “orthodox” Greek theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and later Gregory Palamas.

The first determinate and gendered emanation, the “left” sefirot Bina/Intellection, is thus defined as Door, Receptacle and Form, while its “right” correspondent, *Hokhma/Wisdom*, is an amorphous, indeterminate golem”⁵².

This is how fertility and destruction, the unfolding of life, of good and evil, are expressed in the ritual, mythological, ontological, and theological order. In turn, according to this diversity of perspectives, the rituals and doctrines on the role of Eve and Mary, and of the rest of the female figures in the salvation and redemption of society and of human individuals, are then diversified.

The history of feminist movements, although more than two centuries old, is less complex, but almost everything that has been said about feminist movements comes from work done mostly by women in the last two centuries.

6. Resurrection and Salvation: *Regressus ad Uterum*

Sacred marriage, or hierogamy, is found in almost all religions, and constitutes the formal scheme of soteriology: The human being acquires divine nature and life when the divinity acquires human nature and life, which happens in the offspring of the sacred union.

In Christianity, soteriology is expressed in a very technical formula elaborated at the Council of Nicaea: In Christ there is one divine person, and two natures, one divine and one human.

The birth from a virgin woman and from a human mother is also the case for Theseus, Aeneas, Genghis Khan, and other founders of peoples. The parallel texts of other religions on hierogamy and the virgin birth of the founder are equally numerous⁵³.

By analyzing the characteristics of female impurity, its scope in personal and social life, and its universality in prehistory and history, the precocity with which sapiens discovered the mediating role that women play between the supreme creative power, divinity, and the individuals of the human species, and perhaps between the females of living species and the individuals of them, is revealed⁵⁴.

When, at the dawn of the historical epoch, the creation of the universe began to be referred to from the point of view of the intellect and not of the imagination, women ceased to be represented with anthropomorphic images and began to be represented by abstract concepts, such as matter, infinite power, apeiron, proteusia, and others.

Initially, in pre-Socratic and Platonic reflection, these notions were designated as divinities, with different names and functions, such as Demiurge, the soul of the world, divine ideas, genders of being, the unlimited, space, and other names. Later, especially from Aristotle onwards, they were systematized by distributing their functions into four types of causes, namely material and formal, efficient, and final.

The physical and metaphysical description of the functions and activities of women corresponds to the liturgical ritual and the theological elaboration, which has as its setting the same intermediate world, where the final judgment takes place, and where Nicodemus' question about salvation is answered: "Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again'. How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb and be born again?" (John 3:3–6).

When a man dies and returns to the dust, to the earth, to the bosom of Mother Nature, he returns to the intermediate world, to the place where "women received their dead by resurrection" (Hebrews 11:35). That is why it can be thought that the womb of the cosmos, of the primordial mother, of the Immaculate Conception, is symbolized by the maternal womb, to which the living return when they die, identified with the maternal womb from which they arise.

The *regressus ad uterum* is not only a psychological and symbolic event, as described by Ferenczi, Freud, or Jung. It is also the physical event described by Tipler and quantum physics, and the moment of religious events described as transmigration, purgatory, or purification in general, as described in the different creeds and confessions.

Modern science does not have the resources to describe the events of the intermediate world, but the mathematics and physics of the 20th and 21st centuries do. Furthermore, it can describe them in a less polyvalent and more univocal way than psychology, and, on the other hand, as more referable to empirical, debatable, and falsifiable verifications, as is the case with Tipler's proposal.

On the other hand, where the events of the intermediate world appear most clearly is in the sociological perspective. These events are maintained in folklore, myths, and popular culture, they belong to common experience, and they are carried out by entities that, although they may belong to everyday life in some times and cultures, cannot be legally questioned because they do not have an official identity in the public interpretation of reality.

They are the souls in torment, the ghosts, the souls in purgatory, etc., who can interact privately with the living, or publicly at parties where this communication "officially" takes place, such as those of the Anthesteria in ancient Greece⁵⁵, those of Hamsain and Halloween in the ancient Celtic world and in the contemporary Anglo-Saxon world⁵⁶, the festivals of All Saints' Day in Christianity⁵⁷, the Day of the Dead in some Latin American countries, and other similar ones in different cultures.

In the historical period and with the development of cities, the festivals become more differentiated, and with Christianity new factors of diversification appear.

In the 9th century, the date of 1 November was set among the Franks, and in the 11th century, the 2 November was set as All Souls' Day in the Carolingian Empire. This is how the celebration of the three festive days began, with the first being Allhallowtide, the Eve of All Saints (31 October), the second being All Saints' Day (1 November), and the third being All Souls' Day (2 November, as included in the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican (Episcopal) liturgical calendars.

In the 16th century, Catholic rites for the dead were established in Latin America⁵⁸, where they are celebrated as a happy day with elaborate and joyous festivities unique to each region⁵⁹. In 2008, UNESCO declared the festival an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in Mexico.

Ghosts, souls in torment, and souls in purgatory are the most prominent actors in these moments, together with impure spirits (demons) and various kinds of women, including witches, sorceresses, magicians, fairies, and others. These are the most familiar inhabitants of the intermediate world, and there is no lack of historical, sociological, and anthropological documentation.

In the oldest celebrations, from the 6th century BC and earlier, all the actors participate in the same event, namely, the death, dismemberment, and ingestion of the divinity, the purification of the souls of mortals, drunkenness, and the resurrection of the god. These events take place on the same stage and women are the special protagonists.

The first testimony and the first description of a ghost, which remains as a specific icon to this day, is due to Pliny the Younger, and later references refer to that model⁶⁰.

When Tertullian and Plutarch describe the Anthesteria festivals⁶¹, describe the souls in torment and ghosts, the soul (*psyche*) of the deceased to which the spirit (*pneuma* and *nous*) may remain attached, without its body (*soma* or *sarx*). These souls relate to the living according to well-established protocols, but also with complete naturalness and freedom.

The soul in torment is designated by Plutarch, sometimes with the term *psyche*, i.e., without more, and at other times with the term *eidolon*, which is translated as "ghost", and other times with the term *phásmati*, which is translated as "spectre"⁶². Along with the "soul", there often appears the "daimon" (genius in the Roman world), which is always a spiritual double of the deceased, different but associated with him, his personality, and his destiny.

Plutarch's daimon is the daimon that appears in the Socratic dialogues. It corresponds to the personal divinity inseparably associated with each human being, each living being, or each real entity, not only in the Sumerian and Babylonian religions, but also in Hinduism and Japanese Shinto, and even among the Mapuches, and has its equivalent in the guardian angel of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In other works by Plutarch and by Tertullian, these three terms are not synonymous. Sometimes ghosts or specters are not souls of dead people but are satanic or completely fictitious beings.

The souls of the deceased who are in pain, and who return again and again to dialogue with the living, are incomplete souls because their lives ended abruptly.

In chapter LVI of *De Anima*, Tertullian systematizes the ghosts or souls in pain, which are frequently found in Greek and Roman feasts of the dead, into five large categories: (1) first of all, the souls of those who die in childhood, children; (2) those of women who die in bloom; (3) those of soldiers who die in battle; (4) those of people who die a violent death, among whom are military personnel, soldiers, combatants, criminals, etc.; and (5) those of people who die without burial and are left without the help of their loved ones⁶³.

When Tertullian describes the most assiduous and persistent figures of the Anthesteria, he speaks of people whose life was somehow cut short from a biological and social point of view rather than cut short from a moral or religious point of view. Perhaps that is why he conceives the soul (psyche) as the beginning and form of materials that have not finished organizing themselves due to a lack of time.

Souls in torment seek help to reach a certain biological and social completion, for the lack of which they suffer a suffering different from the suffering of those who are morally reprobate. This is why their place is the intermediate world rather than in the world of the damned or the blessed.

In Greek and Roman culture, these are the souls in torment who need help, and in earlier periods this help was provided by the psychopomp. From the Chalcolithic onwards, when religions became urbanized and institutionalized, help was provided by institutionalized religions in public ceremonies, but private practice did not disappear.

This practice continues to exist privately, but it is also universally included in a type of children's game, which remains practically unchanged to this day, and which receives various names depending on the country and language.

In the English-speaking world, it is called Hopscotch (Scottish jump), in Italy it is called "Il Gioco del Mondo", and in Spain it is called "la rayuela" (see Figure 4). It is mainly practiced by girls and consists of carrying a small stone, which symbolizes the soul of the deceased, from the beginning of the route to its final square, which is usually called the "sky"⁶⁴.

It seems that all over the world, girls before the age of reason play at being mothers and bringing men from the intermediate world into the empirical world, and, from the age of reason to adolescence, they play at bringing the souls of the deceased to their proper place in the intermediate world, until they reach their final destination.

The sacredness of the feminine consists of its position and its intermediate activity between the creative and saving action of man on the part of divine action, and the existential journey of human beings from birth to death, and from the moment of their death to the parousia, i.e., to the final judgment and eternal life.

When the feminist movement was born, it came into being as a feminism of equality and confronted the ontological theses on which the privileges of the Ancien Régime were based. Freedom, equality, and dignity are proclaimed in juridical terms in the sociological and political order, and sometimes disregarding their ontological dimension, which is linked to the religious values that are the stronghold of the Ancien Régime.

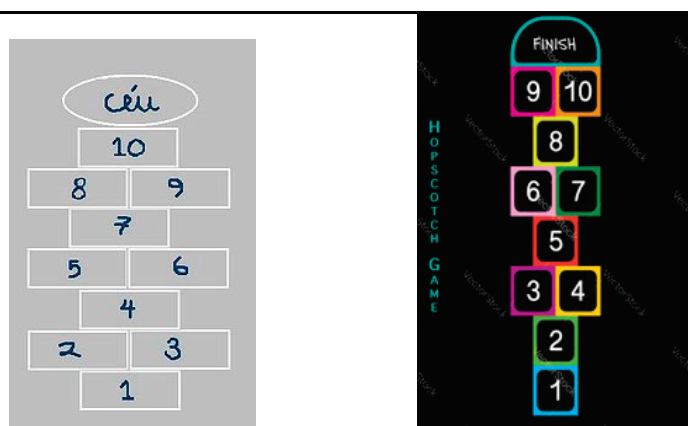


Figure 4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hopscotch> (accessed on 10 February 2025).

As feminist thought becomes broader and more reflective, both sociologically and ontologically, and when equality is sufficiently achieved in the formal order, ontological differences begin to become visible, both in the sociological order of rites, religion, and folklore, and in the ontological order of theoretical reflection.

So, what does the difference or confrontation consist of? To say that one is a man or a woman because one is born from a zygote developed in a uterus may seem very different from affirming that one is a man or a woman because that is how it is recorded in a civil registry.

But law flees from ambiguity as much as any other art or science, and seeks a sufficiently perceptible foundation for its definitions to be enforceable against third parties. The law determines the position and identity of each individual in the social and legal sphere.

When looking for this foundation, one always arrives at the zygote and the uterus, even if they were obtained synthetically, and there is the justification for registration in the civil registry, i.e., their position, according to their identity.

One could analytically go through the set of all the processes ranging from LUCA (*last universal common ancestor*, an acronym in English that refers to the last universal common ancestor), to the embryo, and the human individual in question. Or it would even be possible, in the opposite direction, to go back to the quantum vacuum before the Big Bang, from which LUCA would emerge.

Since the set of these processes is not known, it is not possible to deploy them analytically in fact, but it is possible in theory, because a sufficient number of maximum and minimum forces, of stages, of groups, of sets of units, of superpositions, and of hierarchies, are known, so that it is difficult not to assign them substantial ontological values, both causal and accidental.

That is to say, it is difficult not to assign unity, identity, efficiency in itself, and a result (purpose) to the atom, to the molecules, to various organic formations, to the chromosomes, to the zygote, to the pregnant entity, and to the gestated individual.

These units with ontological value have been called, since ancient times, celestial spheres, infinite matter, the soul of the world, individual substance, self-consciousness, etc., and in the mathematics and physics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries they are described with terms, such as attractors, automorphic functions, self-catalysis, nucleic acids, genome, ontogenetic unit, and phylogenetic effect. If both systems of denominations are unified, theses appear in which the feminism of difference and that of equality are indiscernible.

If the unification of the two systems of categories is avoided and they are used only with those of an empirical type with a sociological and political approach, they result in theses quite similar to those of equality feminism.

The feminine sacrum is included in both approaches and designated with a word that in neither case loses its sacred character, namely, the word “mother”.

The word “mother” has been defined since time immemorial as “the one who gives birth”, that is, the protagonist of a natural process. As a result of sociotechnological innovations, Western legal systems are now faced with the task of formulating a new legal definition: “mother is the one who has the will to beget”, that is, the protagonist of a personal, voluntary, and free process⁶⁵.

Does the word “mother” lose its deep and sacred meaning when it leaves the juridical definition of “she who gives birth” and takes up that of “she who has the will to beget”? The ontology of the feminine seems to remain the same through sociotechnological changes, and it seems that the ancient Roman principle of “mater certa est” is still valid.

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Notes

¹ (Chausidis 2012; Čausidis 2020, pp. 61–62).

² (Heisenberg 1959).

³ *Potencia infinita* (ἄπειρος δύναμις, *ápeiros dýnamis*; (Plotino [1982] 1985)).

⁴ (Zellini 1980).

⁵ The gender bias, masculine in arithmetic and algebra, and feminine in geometry, has been pointed out by Simone Weil and Edith Stein, and the masculine bias in philosophy has been pointed out by Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, among others.

⁶ (Eliade 1984).

⁷ Cfr., (Hirsch et al. n.d.).

⁸ (Eliade 1984). The history and figure of Mephistopheles is almost incomprehensible, as is that of the androgyne as well. Eliade gives a sketch of both in the second part of this essay, pp. 98–158. (Vyasa 2023).

⁹ The transition from mechanical to chemical energy, from the inert to the living, takes place through the appearance of mitochondria, which are transmitted through the maternal line and convert physical energy into psychic energy, or else convert mechanical energy into information. (Rolston 2009).

¹⁰ The transition from chemical to neuronal energy, from the living to the sensitive sensory, takes place through the appearance of the neuron, which converts psychic energy into intellectual energy, or, converts information into ideas and concepts. (Rolston 2009). (Binetti 2015a).

¹² (da Paz and Cornelli 2022; Bernabé 2011; Burkart 2018). Hay también una amplia bibliografía psicoanalítica sobre el desarrollo de la psique intrauterina, en relación con las mitologías y culturas ancestrales.

¹³ (Choza 2023, PF § 2.6.—“Principio y comienzo. Formas de lo femenino continuo y lo masculino discontinuo”).

¹⁴ (Choza 2023, § 2.7.—“Doble modalidad de la materia y de su continuidad. Versión femenina de la creación y el mal como posible”).

¹⁵ The Word is always in the beginning, that is, in wisdom (Philo, Origen), and the existence of all creatures is in those maternal entrails (Ibn-Gabirol, The Kabbalah), Cfr., (Ciner 2010).

¹⁶ Cfr. (Zamora and José 2018; García Vieyra 1980).

¹⁷ Cf., (Ratzinger 1980, pp. 217–20). Although in non-Christian religions the trinity of persons in the One is not clearly defined, in some theological formulations it is different, and in some accounts of mystical experiences, as well. Cf., (Panikkar 1999), (Juan Pablo II 1982), (Sèmassa Hinvò 2021).

¹⁸ “In the general framework of Greek literature, the main meaning of the active verb is to submit, while in the middle voice it means to submit or obey, either out of fear or good spirits, and is linked to contexts in which it expresses submission in the

political or military sphere". (Cervantes Gabarrón 2005). "The beginning of the Magnificat is The intentional parallel to the beginning of Hannah's song after the birth of her son in 1 Samuel 2:1–2 is the parallel to Hannah that continues throughout the Magnificat; for example, Luke 1:48: "For he has looked upon the lowliness of his handmaid", recalls the prayer in 1 Samuel 1:11: "Lord of hosts, if you would consider the lowliness of your handmaid". The handmaid motif was anticipated by Luke in 1:38, where the phrase "Here is the handmaid of the Lord" is part of Mary's final response to Gabriel. The term used is literally "handmaid"; and in addition to the religious context of the Lord's servants (see Acts 2:18), it may reflect the sociological situation of many early Christians". (Olmos 2023).

Also from a sociological and legal point of view, being a slave in the 1st century BC of the Roman Empire is not being in itself. Cfr., (Marín 1993).

(Kitaro 2006, pp. 56–57).

It is also possible to think that Mary is not aware of her impurity because it is possible to think that, in the empirical order, she has not had menstrual flow either. If the annunciation coincides with the first ovulation at the age of twelve, and the virgin birth recorded in tradition means that there is no shedding of blood either during or after childbirth, then in Mary there is no impurity of the woman of which we have spoken, and with self-awareness of that grace.

The adjectives tremendous and fascinating are taken from (R. Otto 1996).

(Frazer 1922). The rites of purification of the menstrual flow are set forth in Chapter 20, Section 3.

(Lévy-Bruhl 2002). Original French edition. On the rites of purification of the menstrual flow, cf. Chapters 8 to 12, cfr. <https://bibliotheque.uqac.ca/accueil> (accessed on 5 October 2024).

"The words "pure, impure, contaminated" have several meanings for the primitive mentality: [...]. The original meaning, according to the above, would be: "exposed to a bad influence, under the influence of misfortune". "Purified" means "put out of reach of such influence, safe from such threat". As an immediate consequence, "impure and contaminated" also mean "that whose proximity or contact is dangerous". (Lévy-Bruhl 2002, p. 175).

(Lévy-Bruhl 2002, p. 230).

(Lévy-Bruhl 2002, p. 231).

(Lévy-Bruhl 2002, pp. 231–32).

This power is also knowledge, i.e., wisdom. "In Sanskrit, mother is called matar and designates both the one who generates life and the one who measures and knows what is generated. From there comes matra: womb and measure; matih: measure and exact knowledge; mimati: to measure. Mathematics means, by derivation, the knowledge or wisdom of the mother". (Binetti 2015a, pp. 331–46).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Radcliffe Edmonds and some other authors suggested the thesis that the myths of the Titans and Orphism are a creation of modern scholars influenced by Hölderlin and Nietzsche, cf., (Edmonds 1999). In contrast, other scholars have rehabilitated the legitimacy of the myths and the references to the Titanomachy and Orphism as a religious movement prior to the 6th century BC. Cf., (Bernabé 2008).

<https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13219-satan> (accessed on 5 October 2024).

The expression comes from the text, "As for men, although they are born of a vitiated and condemned stock, he does not cease to create the germs, to animate and order their members, to give vigor to the senses through various times and places and to provide them with suitable nourishment. For he judged it more expedient to draw good from evil than to prevent all evils", Augustine, Manual of Faith, Hope and Charity (*Equiridon*) VIII, 27. The text is taken from the edition of the *Complete Works of Saint Augustine* at <https://www.augustinus.it/spagnolo/enchiridion/index2.htm> (accessed on 5 October 2024). This doctrine is collected by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*, III, 1, 3, ad 3, "But nothing prevents human nature from being produced for something greater after sin, for God allows evil to happen in order to obtain something better from it. From which it is said Rom. 5. *Where iniquity abounded, grace also abounded*. That is why also in the blessing of the Easter candle it is said: *Oh happy sin, which deserved to have such and such a redeemer!* (Nihil autem prohibet ad aliquid maius humanom naturam productam esse post peccatum, Deus enim permittit mala fieri ut inde aliquid melius eliciat. Unde dicitur Rom. o felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem)".

(W. F. Otto 2012).

(Nietzsche 2013, pp. 142–43).

Cfr., (Tipler 2005), "El progreso enfrentado al eterno retorno y a la muerte térmica", capítulo 3.

Poincaré's recurrence theorem is collected and explained by (Tipler 2005, pp. 136–39).

Cfr., <https://cienciaybiologia.com/que-es-el-atp> (accessed on 5 October 2024).

<https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeostasis> (accessed on 5 October 2024).

The liturgical season of Lent in the Catholic Church begins with the celebration of Ash Wednesday, when ashes are placed on the faithful with the words *Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*, "Remember, O man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return", *Ceremonial of the Bishops*, no. 257, p. 80, (Liturgiapapal 2017).

Scheler's coincidence with Nietzsche and the corrections he imposes on him can be seen in some of his key works, such as (Scheler 1927, 2005).

(Hernández-Pacheco 1990). In reality, this is also the thesis of Hölderlin, of Novalis, and perhaps, in one way or another, of a good part of German Romanticism.

(Binetti 2015a, 2015b); Cfr., también, (Neuman 1955; Baring and Cashford 2014).

(Binetti 2015a, pp. 331–46).

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother> (accessed on 5 October 2024).

Like the goddess Durga, Parvati is the personification of māyā (the illusion of reality), seen as the illusory material energy (Shakti), which causes souls to live within the apparent universe, far from the supreme deity. She is also the substance of which the universe is made, i.e., universo (*Prakriti*). (Klostermaier 2023).

(Binetti 2015a, p. 341).

(Binetti 2015a, p. 345).

(Ciucu 2021, p. 32).

(Ciucu 2021, p. 33).

(Ciucu 2021, p. 35).

(Ciucu 2021, ibidem).

(Ciucu 2021, p. 36). Aunque no aborda el tema concreto estudiado en este trabajo, es básico para él el estudio de (Heidegger 2024).

Parallel texts from other religions at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miraculous_births (accessed on 5 October 2024).

The choice of males or females for animal sacrifices and of males or females for human sacrifices is found in the Inca, Mayan, and Aztec cultures. Generally, the most sublime sacrifice required a male sacrificer, while the sacrifice of a female victim has the meaning of a vicarious victim. Cfr., (Corzo Sánchez 1989; Moscati 1987, p. 3).

The *Anthesteria* is one of the Dionysian festivals, related to others of the same family, cf. (Castillo Pérez 2020).

Cfr., (Frazer 1981, pp. 684–27).

Cfr., (Campa Carmona 2004).

(Vega Deloya 2016).

(Dickins de Girón 2025).

(Quevedo 2014).

I now continue what was stated in (Choza 2018), §32.1.—*Almas, fantasmas y dáimones en los relatos. Plutarco y Tertuliano*.

(Plutarco 2009). Tra. de Dámaris Romero González, Seminario en la Facultad de Filosofía de Sevilla, el jueves 7 de mayo de 2017. I am grateful to Dámaris for his clarifications on Plutarch's terminology and on its presence in the work of Tertullian and in that of Carl Gustav Jung. On the presence of these and other authors in Jung's work, cf., (Del Moral 2017).

(Tertuliano 2014), Cfr., capítulos 55–58.

(Ragazzi 2010). This entry from the English Wikipedia is the one that best shows the universality and antiquity of the game, after the works of Gaudenzio Ragazzi. I am grateful to Gaudenzio for the information he has personally transmitted to me about his works.

(Arechederra 2022, p. 252). Roncesvalles Barber Cárcamo.

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Article

Perfect Fools: Sanctity, Madness, and the Theory of Ambiguous Performance

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Abstract: The theory of cultural pragmatics describes the process through which social actors guide their symbolic performances. However, this theory has not paid sufficient attention to the audience's role in constructing the meaning of these performances. Instead of positing that the intended meanings performed by actors are internal states to be either correctly or incorrectly perceived by an audience, my contention is that the purported intentions of actors are in fact audience constructions that are ascribed to actors. I support this claim through the development of what I call *ambiguous performances*. These are performances that combine elements of incompatible social roles. This combination creates a multistable performance, one that allows for one of several mutually exclusive interpretations. Because of this, ambiguous performances compel each audience member to choose between multiple conflicting interpretations, and in order to choose an interpretation, audience members must look beyond the performance to aspects of their own identity. I illustrate this process through an analysis of holy fools, historical figures who have appeared periodically throughout Christendom over the course of many centuries. These individuals were sometimes canonized as saints, but more often simply considered insane, an interpretive dichotomy that reveals the ambiguous nature of their performances.

Keywords: ambiguous performance; social performance; cultural pragmatics; audience interpretation; holy fools; construction of meaning

1. Introduction

He spent day and night in the streets naked, shunning neither heat nor cold, made game of by the children, and the lads who were idling about. (Philo Judaeus of Alexandria cited in Rosen 1969, p. 89) (first century CE)

Often, indeed, when his belly sought to do its private function, immediately, and without blushing, he squatted in the market place, wherever he found himself, in front of everyone. (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 153) (sixth century CE)

Of this kind there are not many, because it is a very harde and colde profession to goe naked in Russia, especially in Winter. Among others at this time they have one at Moscov that walketh naked about the streetes. (Giles Fletcher [1591] 1966, p. 90) (1591 CE)

Two of the three individuals described above are canonized saints, while one is considered simply to have been mad. But given their similarly aberrant behavior, how does one determine which is which? How does one decide what meaning to ascribe to each of these performances? In the case of the two who were eventually canonized, their social identities were hotly contested in their lifetimes, and identifying them as holy men was neither obvious nor without detractors. One particularly productive way to understand

how questions like those raised here are answered is to call on the conceptual paradigm based on what has been called the “Ur-metaphor for life”: *the theater* (Wilshire 1982, p. 242).

The notion of viewing real-world social interaction through a theatrical prism has had many manifestations since the middle of the twentieth century, including Linton’s role theory, Burke’s dramatism, Goffman’s symbolic interactionism, Geertz’s symbolic action, Butler’s performativity, and the performance studies of Schechner and Turner. More recently, Jeffrey Alexander has developed cultural pragmatics, a conceptual model building on these theories of social performance and explicating the process by which actors draw on cultural meaning structures to guide their behavior. However, while cultural pragmatics provides a compelling conceptual framework that is both dynamic and meaning-centered, it would benefit from a more expansive conceptualization of the audience’s role in meaning-making, a contribution the present paper seeks to offer.

Dramaturgical theories of social performance assert that our social identity is simply “the stylized repetition of acts through time” (Butler 1988, p. 520), and that our “every action is a performance” (Schechner 2006, p. 38). And just as in theatrical performances, such social performances can be said to succeed or fail in varying degrees. From the perspective of cultural pragmatics, performative success has two principal requirements. The first is that the performer’s intended meaning should be correctly apprehended by the audience: “For an action to be successful, an individual or collective actor must be able to communicate the meaning of their actions that they consciously or unconsciously want others to believe” (Alexander 2011a, p. 83; 2006, p. 29; Alexander and Mast 2011, p. 28). The second is that the audience deems the performer authentic in their performance: a successful performance “means that you, as an actor, seem authentic to your audience” (Alexander 2011a, p. 83).

In the case of the second requirement for performative success, cultural pragmatics is consistently committed to a constructivist position in which a performer’s sincerity or authenticity is not an objective, internal state, but rather the way the actor “appears” (Smith 2005, p. 48) to an audience. What is more, this authenticity is always considered an interpretive construction of the audience: “For cultural pragmatics, authenticity is an interpretive category rather than an ontological state. The status of authenticity is arrived at, is contingent, and results from the process of social construction” (Alexander and Mast 2011, p. 13; cf. Mast 2013, p. 11). However, with regard to the other requirement for performative success—that performers “project their meanings effectively” (Alexander 2006, p. 34; 2011a, p. 30)—theorists of cultural pragmatics seem to lose their nerve, wavering between constructivist and essentialist positions. That is, they frequently seem to posit a performer’s intended meaning as an ontological reality that audiences either perceive or fail to perceive. For example, Mast argues that when engaged in social performances, “[actors] communicate their messages” (Mast 2013, p. 10), and similarly, Alexander claims that “Cultural texts are performed *so that meanings can be displayed to others*” (Alexander 2006, p. 34, italics added). In his reflections on the “performative revolution” in Egypt, Alexander writes the following:

It is consciousness—internal, subjective, and collective—that makes revolutionary movements move. To understand the making of a revolution we must look at it from within, from the inside. What did it mean to those who participated in it, and how did they project these internal meanings to the outside? (Alexander 2011b, p. x)

My contention is that this focus on “internal meanings” is a mistake, for regardless of whether we consider an actor’s intended meanings ontological states, they are just as epistemologically inaccessible to an audience as the actor’s sense of their own authenticity. Talk of how we can “gain access” to “how social actors feel and think” (Alexander 2011b,

p. x) is just as misplaced as talk about how we can gain access to actors' sincerity or authenticity. We do not have access to any purported interior state of a performer: neither their authenticity nor their intended meanings are available to others. Both are in fact the interpretive constructions of their audience. Blum and McHugh make this point when they argue that "Motive is not something that an actor has—it is not a property of an actor" (Blum and McHugh 1971, p. 103); instead, they insist that "to give a motive is not to locate a cause of the action, but is for some observer to assert how a behavior is socially intelligible by ascribing a socially available actor's orientation" (Blum and McHugh 1971, p. 100). Alessandro Pizzorno makes a similar point when he argues that the key to an audience's understanding of social action is its "reception, as opposed to [the] intention" of the actor; the "audience (or public) therefore becomes central" to the meaning-making process (Pizzorno 2008, p. 172).

Among those working within the theory of cultural pragmatics, this tendency toward an essentialist view of performers' intended meanings has led to an overestimation of the actor's role in social performances and a disproportionate emphasis on sussing out the actor's performative strategies (e.g., examining how "Individuals try to shape the prevailing set of meanings through cultural performances" (Smith and Howe 2015, p. 9), "looking at how [social actors] symbolically represent their social experience" (Alexander 2011b, p. x), or determining "the meaning that they, as social actors . . . wish to have others believe" (Alexander 2006, p. 32). My claim is that this attention should instead be directed toward understanding the audience's role in social performance, for in the end, it is the audience, not the actor, that will determine the salient meaning of a performance based on *their* (i.e., the audience's) system of cultural symbols and *their* interpretive decisions.

While theories of social performance are in the best analytical position to do so, they are—as currently articulated—unable to explain why behavior such as that described in this paper's epigraphs gives rise to such divergent interpretations. As I will demonstrate below, it is not an actor's perceived authenticity (or lack thereof) that constitutes the principal fault line separating their audiences into two opposing camps. Yet until now, actor authenticity has been almost the only hill that social performances have been said to live or die on. One of the confounding factors of this theoretical incapacity has been cultural sociologists' focus on univocal performances, performances that, given a shared culture, admit of only one reasonable interpretation. This limitation on performance types obscures the fact that it is the audience and not the actor that plays the decisive role in interpreting not only the authenticity of the performer but also the meaning of what is being performed. However, when we expand performance types such that they range along a spectrum from those that are *obvious* at one pole to those that are *indeterminate* at the other, we can see that there is a point in between where we can posit *ambiguous* performances. In viewing social performances as arrayed along a spectrum in this way, the constructed nature of the audience's interpretation becomes apparent and decisive.

In what follows, I will turn to the performances of so-called "holy fools", those individuals who have cropped up throughout the historical record to be hailed variously as saints or lunatics. What makes this empirical example such a revealing case is that if one attempts to analyze the performative goals, motivations, or intentions of holy fools (what I am claiming is an errant application of cultural pragmatics), then one has ipso facto prejudiced one's findings. If a scholar's theoretical assumption is that actors strategize how they will communicate intended meanings through their performances, then irrational behavior—madness—is not a credible interpretation. Indeed, from the perspective of cultural pragmatics, madness sits in a theoretical blind spot. The fact that holy fools were often interpreted as mad underscores my broader contention that we should center

our analyses of performances not on actors' intended meanings, but on their audience's construction of meaning.¹

2. Ambiguous Performance

The literature on social performance has focused on analyzing an actor's communication of a single, unified meaning to their audience. The meaning might be complex and consist of multiple elements, but these elements are assumed to be so entwined as to be univocal; they present a single, specific performance whose interpretation is generally obvious to those who share the same culture (e.g., Louis XIV's performance as the king of France or Einstein's as a physicist). Cultural pragmatics assumes performances are univocal and explores the means by which they are construed by an audience as either authentic or inauthentic. However, univocal performances cannot alone account for all the social performances we actually encounter. In light of this theoretical incompleteness, I would like to suggest another sort of performance, one that—rather than conveying an obvious, univocal meaning—projects one that is equivocal: an *ambiguous performance*.

An ambiguous performance projects a single role to its audience, but it is a role that is multistable. Such a performance comprises essential elements of incompatible roles but so unifies them over time as to form a single persona. When faced with such a performance, the audience must choose how to interpret it, favoring one incompatible meaning or the other. To help elucidate one of the key mechanisms underlying ambiguous performances—*multistability*—an illustration will help.

The ambiguous image of the duck–rabbit (Figure 1) has been employed for decades by psychologists to illustrate the gestalt shift. Through this image, perceptual multistability is obtained because the image leads to an “alternation between two mutually exclusive perceptual states” (Eagleman 2001). And just as the duck–rabbit image is a single representation that admits of only one of two mutually incompatible perceptions at a time, so, too, does an ambiguous performance project a single role that admits of only one of two incompatible interpretations at a time.² That said, while these roles are incompatible, it would be inaccurate to consider them mere negations of one another (e.g., Ahab could not simultaneously be both captain and first mate of the *Pequod*, although *first mate* is not the negation of *captain*). Interpreting the meaning of a performance in this sense differs from pronouncing a moral or aesthetic evaluation of the performance. It is instead the act of categorizing the type of social identity being performed, not a judgment of that identity.

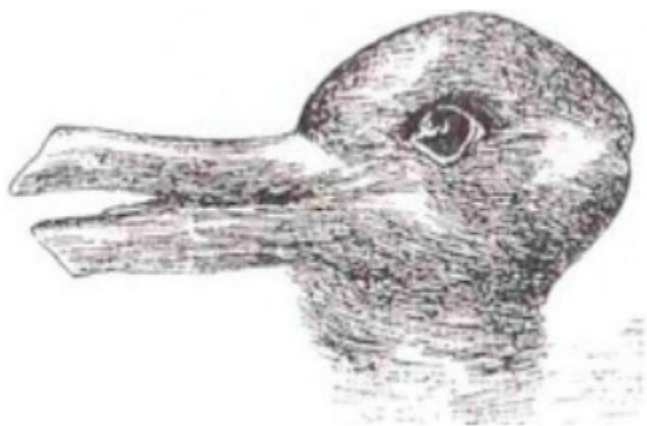


Figure 1. Duck–rabbit image.

This is not to suggest that the interpretation of the duck–rabbit image is so relativistic that “anything goes”; so long as the viewers share the same culture, they will not interpret the duck–rabbit image as an ambulance or a sandwich. In the same way, interpretations

of ambiguous performances are limited by the shared cultural categories with which an audience makes sense of the world. For this reason, ambiguous performances differ from the sort of ambiguity theorized by Victor Turner.

Turner's work in developing Arnold van Gennep's concept of *liminality* (Turner [1969] 2009, p. 94) has played an important role in discussions of social ambiguity since the 1960s, and indeed, it is an important antecedent to cultural pragmatics more generally. His principal claim in this regard is that liminal states are "indeterminate" (Turner [1969] 2009, p. 95):

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (Turner [1969] 2009, p. 95)

However, the phenomenon of ambiguous performance *is* determinate. Observers of the duck–rabbit image easily recognize it as *either* a duck *or* a rabbit; the image perceived is not "betwixt and between". It is quite the opposite: to twist Turner's expression to accurately reflect the character of an ambiguous performance, we would say that the multistable image is "*either* here *or* there"; it is interpreted as *either* a duck *or* a rabbit, not some indeterminate entity.

In a vein similar to that of Turner, Bernhard Giesen also develops the notion of indeterminate categories when he theorizes the interstitial conceptual space that exists between our stable cultural categories, a space of "undecidedness", "ambivalence", and "ambiguity" (Giesen 2012); but this interstitial conceptual space is more nearly the opposite of what I am setting forth. Rather than emerging from the space between social roles, ambiguous performances arise when well-known roles are made to overlap. In Giesen's investigation, the phenomena under scrutiny are those for which there exist no established roles or categories. Therefore, Giesen's phenomena are indeterminate on an individual level; each observer must struggle with how to interpret them. However, when it comes to ambiguous performances, salient collective representations *do* exist, and most audience members will not—as individuals—struggle to identify the meaning of the performance. Instead, the performances are ambiguous at the level of the collectivity. That is to say, while the meaning of an ambiguous performance will appear obvious to most observers, it will carry one "obvious" meaning to some and a different "obvious" meaning to others—just as in the example of the duck–rabbit image.³ In order to demonstrate this in the grit and gristle of social intercourse, I will now turn to an analysis of a social role characterized by ambiguous performance: that of the holy fool.

3. Holy Fools

Holy fools, like martyrs, prophets, apostles, confessors, and ascetics, constitute a unique hagiographic category within the Christian tradition. Although their sanctity is generally recognized in some fashion by most Christian denominations, they are especially revered in the Orthodox Church, where many are canonized and celebrated annually on their saint's day through the chanting of the saint's *troparion* (a short hymn) during the liturgy and veneration through prayers and the kissing of their icon. However, this approbation notwithstanding, holy fools are to most observers some of the most bizarre characters to have walked the stage of history. Observers have consistently considered them repulsive, repellent, repugnant, and worse. And as I will argue below, this interpretive tension is a direct result of the holy fools' ambiguous performances.

The most conspicuous quality of holy fools is their foolishness. In this, we can include inappropriate social interactions, indecency, pranks, mockery, childishness, imbecility, babbling, fits of violence, and the symptoms of various mental disorders. An early instance of such impropriety on the part of a holy fool can be read in the sixth-century hagiography of St. Symeon of Emesa: “sometimes he pretended to have a limp, sometimes he jumped around, sometimes he dragged himself along on his buttocks, sometimes he stuck out his foot for someone running and tripped him” (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 159). This is not what most would consider the sanctified behavior befitting one of the Church’s holy saints. Indeed, this same saint

often skipped and danced, holding hands with one dancing girl on this side and another on that, and he associated with them and played with them in the middle of the whole circus, so that the disreputable women threw their hands into his lap, fondled him, poked him, and pinched him. (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 159)

On another occasion, St. Symeon

found a dead dog on a dunghill outside the city, he loosened the rope belt he was wearing, and tied it to the dog’s foot. He dragged the dog as he ran and entered the gate, where there was a children’s school nearby. When the children saw him, they began to cry, “Hey, a crazy abba [i.e., monk]!” And they set about to run after him and box him on the ears. (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 151)

And then there was Basilakios, a holy fool in 12th-century Byzantium:

When women came to him, he groped their breasts and stared at their legs, muttering nonsense the while and blurting out meaningless words. . . he ran this way and that, leaping about like a foal and making mad movements with his body. Furthermore, he would swear at those around him. (Choniates cited in Ivanov 2008, pp. 217–18)

Similarly strange, we read that at the fearful entrance of Ivan the Terrible into the city of Pskov in 1570, St. Nikola Salos galloped on a child’s hobby horse through the cowering crowds (Ivanov 2008, p. 298). In the early twentieth century, the following was reported of the holy fool, Mariia Shudskaia:

Some people she’d hit, others she’d scold, and she’d smash other people’s windows. Sometimes she’d do what would inevitably get her beaten. She could climb into somebody’s stove and pour the broth from the pots. The plainness with which she accused people got her arrested. (Ivanov 2008, p. 355)

And upon Shudskaia’s institutionalization, within the cell where she was confined, she would scribble across the walls with her fingers dipped in her own feces (Ivanov 2008, p. 355). St. Terence was also repeatedly confined in asylums for his apparent insanity (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 60). Indeed, the concept of insanity, along with confining those who were deemed insane, stretches back to the classical world. However, it was usually the case that those considered mad, but not especially dangerous, simply wandered about, destitute. True to the cultural role of insanity, the holy fool is invariably indigent; he is frequently homeless, habitually hungry, and often nearly or completely naked in public, regardless of the weather. Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware draws a parallel between the holy fool’s lack of material possessions and his lack of sanity: “Clothed in rags even in the winter cold . . . he renounces not only material possessions, but also what others regard as his sanity and mental balance” (Ware 2001, p. 99). In the fourteenth century, Blessed Nikolai Kochanov (“The Cabbage”) walked the streets

barefooted and clothed only in old rags. He possessed nothing of his own but lived on what was given to him by pious people. The saint dressed no differently

in winter, but endured the most extreme cold wearing only his rags. . . . He presented himself as a ridiculous simpleton. (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 19)

Holy fools are sometimes nuns, monks, deacons, or priests, and though they occasionally reside in monastic communities or haunt the lonely regions of the wilderness, more often than not, they spend their days in the midst of great urban centers. While this choice of urban habitation is unusual for those who have dedicated themselves to pursuing the highest degree of Christian sanctity, what makes holy fools so anomalous in the company of other saints is their frequently profane, routinely criminal, often indecent, and occasionally blasphemous behavior. Given this outrageous manner of living, the questions one might reasonably ask of holy fools are “Where is their holiness? How is it that some come to be interpreted as saints?” And this questioning takes us back to the cultural-pragmatic description of how meaning is made.⁴

4. Scripts and Background Narratives

St. Isidora of fourth-century Egypt is frequently cited as among the earliest holy fools. From that point forward, holy fools appear periodically throughout the historical and hagiographic record. Cultural pragmatics agrees with Geertz’s claim that “most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined” (Geertz 1973, p. 9). Given this key to understanding how the meaning of a performance is constructed, an inquiry into the background representations—the myths, narratives, history, and culture—shared by the audiences of holy fools is critical to seeing the behavior of holy fools as constituting ambiguous performances.

In their interpretation of holy fools’ performances, audiences make use of a variety of cultural categories, categories that delimit what is “receivable in their culture” (Pizzorno 2008, p. 172). They construct and attribute social identity by dialing up shared notions of what it is to be a Christian saint, but they also draw on codes of madness, immorality, and demonic possession. It is the synthesis of elements from these sets of incompatible roles that renders these performances ambiguous. On this issue, Lisa McCormick suggests that an actor’s script might proceed from the performer’s audience: “Every social performance involves a script—premeditated, improvised, *or attributed*—that draws on shared background symbols and meanings in order to be both intelligible and meaningful in the manner intended by the author” (McCormick 2006, p. 122, italics added). The first part of this statement highlights the fact that a performer’s intention need not determine the meaning understood by their audience. In fact, I am arguing that since an audience *never* has direct access to a performer’s intentions, the social meaning of an actor’s performance is *always* attributed. This attribution might, of course, align with the inscrutable intention of the performer, but it need not. However, the last part of the McCormick passage shows how difficult this idea is to maintain when equipped with only the univocal concept of performance. McCormick backpedals and, with the words “meaningful in the manner *intended by the author*”, brings the actor’s intention back to a determinative role vis-à-vis the audience’s interpretation of their performance.

Although saintliness takes on a variety of guises in the Christian tradition, there are certain features that have remained central throughout the centuries, and holy fools both follow and flout these characteristics to the confusion and consternation of their spectators. A helpful text in unearthing the particular codes obtained from the time of the earliest holy fools is the sixth-century *Words of the Elders*. This miscellany of the lives and teachings of early Christian holy men and women has been “massively influential, being quoted again and again in sermons and treatises” (Ward 2003, p. xxxi). Another pivotal work is *The Life of Saint Antony*, written by St. Athanasius in the fourth century. The

Life is generally considered the first Christian hagiography, and as such has been widely circulated, contemplated, and emulated from its first appearance right up to the present.

Among the qualities most regularly associated with Christian saintliness from the fourth century onward are fervent prayer, lack of possessions, charity, humility, fortitude, and, naturally, a Christocentric worldview (Ward 2003). We have already noted several examples of the poverty and fortitude of the holy fools. Along with their incarnation of these virtues, these fools are also models of prayer and humility. “St. Andrew spent his nights in vigil, praying for himself, for the whole world, and especially for those who had offended and injured him” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 4). In the eleventh century, St. Isaaky the Recluse “locked himself in a small cave . . . [and] prayed to God with tears” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 14). In fourteenth-century Novgorod, St. Nicholas Kochanov “was frequently beaten, abused and spat upon. Not only did he endure this patiently, but he covered his offenders with love and secretly prayed for those who offended him” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 19). Concerning St. Vissarion, living in fifth-century Egypt, we read that

So enrapt was he with prayers to the Savior that he could not bear to lose even a moment of prayer to sleep. When weakness of the body did force him to rest, he refused to lie down, but took a brief nap standing up, leaning against something, or else sitting upright. (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 9)

Beyond the gift of prayer, and in spite of their destitution, holy fools also manage to give material charity. We read of the fourteenth-century St. Theodore of Novgorod that

he had no permanent dwelling. He walked barefoot and half-naked even in the most cruel frosts. If some pious person gave him something, he would immediately give it away to the poor. (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 23)

In fifth-century Egypt, we read of St. Serapion that on one occasion he “saw a debtor being dragged past him to prison. He had nothing to give the poor man, so the saint sold his Gospel and paid the man’s debt” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 6). In early nineteenth-century St. Petersburg, people “thought this strangely dressed, scarcely shod woman [i.e., St. Xenia] was merely a simple-minded beggar” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 55). When offered pennies as alms, she would accept them, only to turn and immediately “distribute these copper pennies to the poor” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 55). In the seventeenth century, Blessed Prokopy of Vyatka performed an act so shocking that it seems to test the bounds of charity, if not sanity:

The elder Fr. John’s wife suffered terribly from a tooth pain; the priest met the Saint in the Forerunner Church and said, “Servant of God, pray to the Lord that He will grant healing to my wife who is suffering from tooth illness.” At this, Prokopy tore out one of his own teeth and gave it to the priest saying quietly, “Take it”. (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 49)

Holy fools perform these qualities of Christian sanctity—extraordinary feats of prayer, poverty, humility, charity, and abandonment to God—exquisitely. However, other essential characteristics of saintliness are not merely eschewed but positively trampled. The cultural code that defines saintliness in Christendom also includes such qualities as quiet, solitude, flight from the city, self-control, discretion, peace-making, segregation from the opposite sex and those considered sinners, modesty with regard to one’s body, wisdom, obedience, and veneration for the Church, its liturgy, its clergy, and its sacraments (Ward 2003).

What is more, beyond merely defying these saintly codes, holy fools zealously assume the characteristics indicative of madness, violence, immorality, and most puzzling of all, demonic possession. For example, when taunted by children, “Blessed Xenia flew at them, waving her cane in the air. The residents of the Storona were so startled at seeing the blessed one in such anger that they took immediate steps to prevent any further offenses

toward her” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 55). Such outbursts and threats of violence are not uncommon in the lives of holy fools. After dinner at the home of a priest, “blessed Prokoppi took a knife and began to brandish it, and he held the knife to [the priest’s] head and to his chest, and everyone was horrified and though he would stab the priest” (Ivanov 2008, p. 325). Such transgressive behavior is the norm for holy fools. An incident from the sixth century reveals multiple egregious violations of the saintly code. There was a village chief who, aware of St. Symeon’s reputation, was dubious as to the authenticity of his dementia. Traveling to Emesa, he

found Symeon by chance while one prostitute was carrying him and another was whipping him. Immediately the village headman was scandalized, and he reasoned with himself and said in Syriac, “Does Satan himself not believe this false abba is fornicating with them?” At once, the fool left the women and came toward the village headman, who was about a stone’s throw away from him, and hit him. And stripping off his tunic, he danced naked and whistled. (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 160)

In addition to the holy fool’s lunacy and immorality, he also employs the representations of sacrilege, which is perhaps the behavior most antithetical to the code of sanctity. In mockery of the holy order of monasticism, we read that “Whenever any children came to the cave, the fool [St. Prokopy of Ustiug] dressed them as monks. For this, the parents often abused or struck him” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 16). In another act of desecration, St. Prokopy of Vyatka seized a “young man by the arm, dragged him into the *amvon* [the raised platform in the middle of a church’s nave] and shoved him through the royal gates into the sanctuary [a sanctified space strictly forbidden to anyone not appropriately ordained]” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 50). In violation of the most holy, mournful period of the liturgical calendar—a time during which a strict fast is to be observed in remembrance of Christ’s crucifixion—we read of St. Symeon that “From early on the morning of Holy Thursday he sat in the cake shop and gorged himself, so that those who saw him were scandalized” (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 160). And in a crowning act of blasphemy, we read of the same holy fool that

sometimes when Sunday came, he took a string of sausages and wore them as a [deacon’s] stole. In his left hand he held a pot of mustard, and he dipped [the sausages in the mustard] and ate them from morning on. And he smeared mustard on the mouths of those who came to joke with him. (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 164)

St. Isidora behaved as one who was demonically possessed:

in a convent at Tabennisi in Egypt there was a nun who pretended to be possessed by a demon and to be a fool. . . . The other nuns called her a *sale*, for this was the word, Palladios says, which they used for women who were afflicted by demons (*paschousai*). And since she was supposed to be a *sale* they beat her and humiliated her. (Ryden 2001, p. 106)

And Blessed Prokoppi committed murder:

Early one morning the blessed Prokopii [of Viatka] came to the house of the burgher Danil Kalsin . . . and he lay down on the stove. Danil and his children were then at matins, but his youngest was still asleep, as is proper for infants. Prokopii picked up the child and hurled it down from the stove onto the floor, and it died instantly. (Ivanov 2008, p. 402)

With such profusion of unholy attributes—even when coupled with a smattering of saintly virtues—it might be difficult to understand how it would occur to anyone that holy fools are anything other than lunatics or demoniacs. Indeed, in his *Insanity and*

Sanctity in Byzantium, Youval Rotman describes how “Byzantine readers encountering the holy fool as a hagiographic figure would be incapable of discerning the ‘holy’ from the ‘demonized’” (Rotman 2016, p. 59). But there is another body of background symbols essential to the scripts of holy foolishness: those related to Christian scripture. The shared narratives ensconced in the Old and New Testaments form another significant tributary to the background representations drawn on by holy fools and their audiences. And as we will see, these biblical narratives occupy a nebulous area between the other elements of saintliness and madness as they were lived out in late antiquity and on through the Middle Ages, narratives that, while not constituting holy foolishness themselves, certainly might suggest this sort of performance to some of their readers.

Several of the Hebrew prophets participate in symbolic performances that were considered as bizarre 3000 years ago as they would be today. However, these outlandish prophetic acts had specific symbolic importance. They were understood to be object lessons that symbolized coming events or the spiritual state of God’s people. In fact, madness more commonly figures as a form of punishment in early religious myths and heroic fables: Deuteronomy 6:5 explicitly states that “The Lord will smite thee with madness”. Throughout the Old Testament, we read of many possessed by devils and how the Lord punished Nebuchadnezzar by reducing him to bestial madness. In stark contrast to holy fools, far from embracing the arduous mantle of foolishness, the Hebrew prophet Hosea bitterly complained that “the prophet is considered a fool, the inspired man a maniac” (Hosea 9:7), and Jeremiah denounced the wickedness of Shemaiah when the latter wrote to the priest Zephaniah, insisting that he “should put any madman who acts like a prophet into the stocks and neck irons” (Jeremiah 29:26). In fact, Jeremiah goes so far as to accuse the Lord of leading him to enact his particular prophetic performance. Feeling duped by God, he laments, “I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me” (Jeremiah 20:7). Given this self-consciousness, Rosen concludes that “No one can show that the Israelite prophets were mentally ill in the sense of suffering from psychosis” (Rosen 1969, p. 61). The same cannot be said of holy fools.

In the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth was sometimes seen as a lunatic and possessed by the devil. His family said of him, “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:21), and the teachers of the law insisted, “He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons” (Mark 3:22). While Jesus performed unconventionally as he cast moneychangers out of the Temple with impassioned indignation, commingled with prostitutes and tax collectors, challenged religious authorities, and flouted purity and dietary regulations, he seems a far cry from the holy fools. He is never imbecilic, deranged, or immodest. On the contrary, he is generally depicted as grave, engages in rational argumentation with some of the most learned men of ancient Palestine, and when accused of being a demoniac, vehemently denies the charge (Mark 3:23–29).

Although Jesus was accused in ways similar to the holy fools, it is the apostle Paul’s exhortation that “If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ that he may become wise” (I Cor. 3:18), coupled with his claim that he and the other apostles are “fools for Christ” (I Cor. 4:10), that makes the most explicit contribution to holy foolishness as a social type. Here, we have what *prima facie* appears to be a script for holy foolishness emanating from the heart of the New Testament. The difficulty with this reading—in terms of interpreting it as a license for the type of folly we have seen on the part of the holy fools—is that St. Paul evinces no behavior other than that of a sober, wise, pious, and eminently sane individual. And the express purpose of his admonition comes immediately after the verses cited above when he writes, “Therefore I urge you to imitate me” (I Cor. 4:16). Theologian Lennart Ryden explains that what St. Paul “had in mind was in essence that the Christian message is a matter of belief, not of

reason and speculation. This was also how the Fathers understood the text of the Bible” (Ryden 2001, pp. 106–7).

5. Interpreting Ambiguous Performances

Having reviewed the performance of numerous holy fools in the context of their relevant background representations, we can now turn toward their interpretation: how their audiences construe the *meaning* of this foolery. Alexander observes that “even the best acting . . . cannot ensure that the audience gets it right” (Alexander 2011a, p. 74). But in the case of a holy fool’s performance, what could “getting it right” possibly mean? Until now, theories of social performances have had only the univocal concept of performance with which to work, reducing nearly all questions of interpretation to matters of actor authenticity. Accordingly, a performance is successful to the degree the audience deems it “natural” and “unfeigned”. However, if this was all there was to decoding such performances, how would someone who felt that the holy fool was authentic interpret their behavior? Are they an authentic saint or an authentic lunatic? The following two historical events, which are separated by nearly a millennium, illustrate this quandary. In the first,

A lunatic who often disturbed religious services, especially at the elevation of the Host by lifting the skirts of praying women, was seized at More’s order and flogged until the lesson “was beaten home.” (More cited in Rosen 1969, pp. 140–41)

In the second, an individual

took nuts, and entering the church at the beginning of the liturgy, he threw the nuts and put out the candles. When they hurried to run after him, he went up to the pulpit, and from there he pelted the women with nuts. With great trouble, they chased after him, and while he was going out, he overturned the table of the pastry chefs, who (nearly) beat him to death. (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 151)

While sainthood was granted to one, insanity was ascribed to the other. But on what basis? As I have already noted, actors’ intentions are not directly accessible to an audience, so some other factor must influence an observer’s decision to *attribute* a particular motive. Of course, in all symbolic action, the audience brings a certain amount of bias to the task, a bias that colors their interpretations of any given performance. Alexander takes pains to show that the increase in audience heterogeneity is what makes authentic, univocal performances so difficult to achieve in our complex, modern society (Alexander 2006; 2011a). However, in the case of an ambiguous performance, its interpretation runs up against a different conundrum; there simply is no way to determine what role is being performed based on the performance itself, because the performance is not univocal. The meaning of the performance must be *chosen*—consciously or otherwise—by the audience, for each audience member is obliged to look beyond the performance itself and rely on their own interpretive inclination. And literary theorist Norman Holland points to where that interpretive inclination is located, claiming that we can explain “differences in interpretation by examining differences in the personalities of the interpreters” (Holland 1980, p. 123). Putting it succinctly, he adds, “*interpretation is a function of identity*” (Holland 1980, p. 123, italics in original). I would merely add that while one’s identity is involved in any act of interpretation, when witnessing a univocal performance, this fact is occluded by the interpretive agreement with all other audience members vis-à-vis the actor’s social role.

But things are different in the face of an ambiguous performance. In the presence of these performances—performances in which interpretations diverge across the social group—it is some aspect of an audience member’s identity that is exposed. Specifically, what is revealed through an audience member’s interpretation of an ambiguous per-

formance is their membership in what literary theorist Stanley Fish calls an *interpretive community*. “Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies,” strategies that constitute approaches to constructing interpretations and “*assigning their intentions*” (Fish 2004, p. 219, italics added). This last bit is important, because as we have seen, cultural pragmatics has long assumed that performers’ intentions are internal states to be correctly or incorrectly guessed at by an audience. In contrast, I—along with Fish—maintain that performers’ intentions are constructed through the act of audience interpretation in the same way that performers’ authenticity is constructed. What is more, “these [interpretive] strategies exist prior” to the act of reading a text (Fish 2004, p. 219), or, in the present case, prior to observing a performance. In other words, one’s interpretive strategies are part of one’s identity that is brought to bear on one’s interpretations. And the more diverse the interpretive communities within a social group, the more heterogeneous the interpretations of ambiguous performances will be.

The expected interpretive heterogeneity of holy fools’ performances can be readily seen in the historical record. To most observers, St. Symeon seemed “altogether deprived of his senses and mad”, yet there were some who “expressed their respect to him by a bow” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 10). St. Xenia’s family asserted that she had “taken complete leave of her senses” and was “mentally unbalanced”, whereas a certain Anatova knew “Xenia to be truly saintly” (Novakshonoff 1997, pp. 54, 56). In the case of St. Isidora, while her fellow nuns considered her “a mad woman,” St. Pitirim, when introduced to her, “fell at her feet and said, ‘Bless me, Amma [Mother]’” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 2). In fact, the interpretation of holy foolishness has been so controversial that the Orthodox Church has actively worked to suppress such performances. In 692, the Council of Trullo censured those “who pretend to be possessed by demons, and in their depraved behavior copy such persons with feigned mimicry” (Ware 1984, p. 179), and in the eleventh century, Nikon of the Black Mountain asserted that “The divine laws condemn those who practice folly after the manner of the great Symeon and of Andrew, and today such things are altogether forbidden” (Ware 1984, p. 180). And these prohibitions continue to the present day (Ware 1984, p. 179).

6. The Parabolic Nature of Ambiguous Performance

One final point should be made about the unique nature of interpreting ambiguous performances.

There is a striking parallel between the performances of holy fools and the pedagogy of Jesus of Nazareth. It is well known that Jesus taught in parables, those pithy stories that—if one could interpret them correctly—carried with them profound truths about the kingdom of heaven. When his disciples desired to know why Jesus did not teach simply and directly, they went to him and asked, “‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied, ‘Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them’” (Matthew 13:10–11). In this pivotal passage, Jesus is revealing to the disciples that he speaks ambiguously so that only those whom God has chosen will be able to understand his message. Similarly, when Jesus asked his disciples, referring to himself,

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets”. “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven”. (Matthew 16, pp. 13–17)

In both these instances, Jesus is reflecting on his own ambiguous performance. Based on the available system of cultural symbols, multiple meanings of his parables and his identity are available to his audience members, and the interpretation each audience member chooses is allegedly dictated by the activity—or inactivity—of God in that person’s heart. This gesture toward the audience is the interpretive key to decoding the ambiguous performance of holy foolishness as well. McCormick hints at this when she states that, “Because they are differently positioned, differently equipped, and differently invested in the . . . performance, segments of the audience draw on different background symbols for their interpretation” (McCormick 2006, pp. 126–27). Similarly, in the case of holy fools, it is differentiation within the audience that is identified as the decisive factor in their interpretations. To wit, in the case of St. Terence, “Many people understood and profited greatly from his spiritual lessons. Others hated him for his foolish ways” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 60). Similarly, St. Vissarion “taught everyone in the manner of a fool, with actions and words that were comprehensible only to those for whom they were intended” (Novakshonoff 1997, p. 10). The multistability of an ambiguous performance can even be experienced differently by a single individual over time. After having been saved from poisoning by St. Symeon, a tavern keeper “was edified and considered Symeon to be holy.” However, immediately afterward, following a bizarre encounter in the tavern keeper’s home, he changes his mind, avowing that the saint “is completely possessed. I know, and no one can persuade me otherwise. He tried to rape my wife. And he eats meat as if he’s godless” (Leontius of Neapolis 1996, p. 153).

In the end, we see that ambiguous performances are *parabolic* (i.e., akin to a parable), requiring their audiences to interpret them based on some aspect of the audience members’ own identity. This is the opposite of the cultural pragmatic conceptualization of performances, where actors perform in an effort to “display for others the meaning of *their* social situation” (Alexander 2011a, p. 28, italics added). Ware sums up this parabolic characteristic of the holy fool’s performance by remarking that the holy fool “is a living parable” (Ware 1984, p. 179).

7. Conclusions

As currently practiced, cultural pragmatics has its thumb on the scale of actors’ communicative autonomy. But the resulting imbalance robs the audience of its *interpretive autonomy*. Marcel Proust wrote that “each reader is, when he reads, *the reader of his own self*” (Proust 2003, p. 322, italics added), and the theory of social performance I put forward here is an attempt to reorient cultural pragmatics in light of Proust’s insight. Instead of seeing social performances as merely communicating (or failing to communicate) the *performer’s* identity, these performances can now also be seen to communicate something about the *audience’s* identity; indeed, this suggests that performances—to a certain extent—*interpret their audiences*. In the case of a univocal performance, we simply learn that its audience members share the same general set of background codes; those who share the same cultural meanings will tend to interpret the meaning of the performance similarly. And ambiguous performances, *as social performances*, are no different. However, ambiguous performances additionally compel their audiences to reveal something else about themselves by forcing them to choose—consciously or not—between a performance’s incompatible interpretations, relying on their own interpretive positions to make their choices. In this way, ambiguous performances fulfill the same function as parables. That is, ambiguous performances are a finer blade, a more subtle analytical tool in that they can distinguish interpretive differences within a social group in a way unavailable to the blunter instrument of unitary performances.

One example of how this reoriented conception of cultural pragmatics is illuminating is in regard to the advent of Artificial Intelligence (or, more to the point—since this term is already in wide usage for behavior that few people actually regard as philosophically interesting—we might substitute the expression *synthetic consciousness*). In cultural pragmatics as currently practiced, what would “getting it right” mean in terms of an audience’s interpretation of a machine as conscious? Trying to divine a machine’s intended meanings is just as much a fool’s errand as the same attempt made on human actors. Thus, the purported conscious behavior of machines will be an interpretive construction of their audiences in the same way that all social performances are thus constructed. Interestingly, this insight was rejected in the conceptualization of what we know today as the Turing Test.⁵ Before laying out his test for the presence of machine intelligence, Turing raises the idea of putting such a question to the interpretive community itself through “a statistical survey such as a Gallup poll” (Turing 1950, p. 433). But he immediately rejoins that “this is absurd” (Turing 1950, p. 433). And of course, simply surveying the members of a social group *would* be methodologically absurd if one were attempting to determine the presence of some sort of ontologically “real” state of consciousness.⁶ But cultural pragmatics—properly oriented—is not in the business of identifying such phenomena. Instead, what a statistical survey *could* reveal are the contours and compositions of differing interpretive communities within society, including the particular cultural meanings held by the members of each of those communities. Thus, we can assert that in the event that machines perform ambiguously vis-à-vis their purported consciousness, their performance will (among other things) serve to interpret their audiences, revealing their membership in particular interpretive communities with all that that entails about their social identities.

A less speculative and more mundane example of being confronted by an ambiguous performance is that of political commentator Bret Stephens’s reaction to American President Donald Trump. In a *New York Times* op-ed piece (3/28/2019), Stephens (2019) asks, “Is Trump Keyser Söze—Or Inspector Clouseau?” That is, is the president a calculating political genius who merely plays at being imbecilic, or is he a bumbling idiot who luckily succeeds in spite of his ineptitude? Stephens describes his own experience of performative multistability when trying to make sense of Trump’s ambiguous performance: “For years I’ve bounced between these two interpretations of the president—at times astonished by his incompetence; at other times amazed by his cunning” (NYT 3/28/2019). Furthermore, Stephens hints at what I am calling the parabolic nature of ambiguous performances (the fact that interpretation is guided by an audience’s own identity rather than the identity of the performer): “The difference between suspicious and shambolic behavior often depends on who is doing the watching. Where some see chaos, others detect patterns. From a certain distance, they can be hard to tell apart” (NYT 3/28/2019). In other words, *how* one interprets a performance depends on *who* is doing the interpreting. The closer a performance is to the univocal end of the continuum, the more the interpretation of that performance’s meaning will simply reflect its unitary cultural script, leading to (near) unanimity in interpretation for audiences who share a culture. Contrariwise, the closer a performance is to the ambiguous end of the continuum, the more the audience interpretations will cluster around the society’s disparate interpretive communities.

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Notes

- ¹ Roberta Sassatelli makes a similar point in her gloss of Pizzorno: “it is the foundations of cultural reception and not the intentions of the individual that determine the meaning of social action” (Sassatelli 2019, p. 41).
- ² Of course, there might be more than two incompatible roles compressed in an ambiguous performance, and these would follow the same principles of audience interpretation elucidated in this paper.
- ³ For some individual audience members, the meaning of an ambiguous performance will alternate between these “obvious” interpretations.
- ⁴ Ann Taves, in her *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Taves 2011), develops a theory regarding how religious phenomena come to be ascribed as such. However, as her work focuses on the “non conscious mental processing” (Taves 2011, p. 11) involved in interpretation, its focus is beyond the scope of this article, which aims to develop a theory of culturally constructed ambiguous social roles.
- ⁵ Turing himself called this the “imitation game” (Turing 1950, p. 433).
- ⁶ This is not to suggest that this was Turing’s aim.

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Article

National Populism and Religion: The Case of Fratelli d'Italia and Vox

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Abstract: Religion has become increasingly important in the discourse and ideology of the 'fourth wave' of the populist radical right which began in 2000 in Europe. To achieve its normalization in the political contest, these formations have shifted from openly racist positions to other arguments that, like religion, can be used to present their proposals in terms that are, at least apparently, democratic. This paper analyzes how Fratelli d'Italia and Vox appeal to religion in their efforts to construct national identity and differentiate from the "Other". To develop our research, we have carried out a qualitative analysis of the programs, founding documents, speeches, parliamentary interventions, interviews, and key messages of the leaders of both parties from their foundation until the European elections of June 2024. Despite the differences, the emergence of religion in a broad sense, as a form of a sacralization of politics, can be observed in both parties. In both cases, there is also a "politicization" of religion, which emerges as a secularized Christianity. Both parties appeal to a "Christian secularity", which, in their opinion, must be defended against Islam.

Keywords: radical right; religion; Vox; Fratelli d'Italia

1. Introduction

Religion has become increasingly relevant in the discourse and ideology of the "fourth wave" (von Beyme 1988; Mudde 2007) of the populist radical right, which emerged in Europe in 2000. In their effort to achieve "normalization" and to be perceived as legitimate parties in the political contest, these formations have abandoned openly racist positions, adopting instead arguments centered on issues such as religion, secularism, or gender equality. These strategies seek to present their migration proposals as democratic and acceptable. Is it here where religion appears both in the broadest sense as a sacralization of politics, but above all as a politicization of religion, a feature of identity that must be defended, along with secularism, against Islam. However, this process has not been attended to until recent times. The work of Marzouki et al. (2016) stands as a key reference to understand how populists "hijack" religion for the benefit of their ideological interests. According to this perspective, religion is instrumentalized; that is, it is used as a resource outside its original ideological core to support nativist and populist agendas (Marzouki et al. 2016; Wodak 2015)¹.

Studies on this subject show how the question of religion in these parties responds—without being a part of it—to what constitutes their ideological core according to Mudde's (2007) definition: authoritarianism and, above all, populism and nativism (Betz 2003; Zúquete 2017; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Yilmaz and Morieson 2021; Peker 2022; Beuter et al. 2023). The work of Brubaker (2017a) is particularly relevant in explaining how religion

emerges in the context of its confrontation with Islam in a civilizational framework that is defined by identitarian Christianity, liberalism, and secularism. More recently, an interest has emerged in analyzing the compatibility between this apparent religious resurgence and the secularized European context (Morieson 2021; Peker 2021; Innerarity 2023; Cremer 2023). These analyzes coincide in pointing to a “growing standardization” (Marzouki et al. 2016) of the populist radical right’s discourse in relation to religion, especially in Western European countries, despite the differences between the various national contexts². Such standardization derives, fundamentally, from two nuclear elements of its ideology, populism and nativism, as is described below.

1.1. Religion and the Ideological Core of the Populist Radical Right: The Sacralization of Politics and the Politicization of (Secularized) Religion

In the discourse and ideology of the populist radical right, religion appears in the two ways pointed out by Linz (2006), as a religious use of politics and as a political use of religion. On the one hand, the religious use of politics arises from the populist character of these formations (Zúquete 2017; Brubaker 2017b; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Yilmaz and Morieson 2021; Pérez-Agote and Aleman 2023). According to Mudde, populism is “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, p. 543). From this binary, Manichean and simplistic division of society, between a homogeneous “good” and a homogeneous “evil” (Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2017, p. 7; Zúquete 2017, p. 9; Brubaker 2017a), a “national populism” (Taguieff 1995, pp. 32–35) unfolds in which religion emerges as a sacralization of the people and of politics.

The sacralization of the people associated with populism refers to the process by which populist leaders grant a kind of ‘sacredness’ or ‘inviolability’ to the people, often understood as a homogenous and pure unity that is above political, social, and economic divisions. This idea is used strategically to mobilize and unite people around a collective sense of identity and legitimacy. This process of sacralization has several aspects (Zúquete 2017; Yilmaz and Morieson 2021). Firstly, the portrayal of the people as a pure entity, “a moral community that sees itself with the collective mission of fighting conspiratorial enemies, redeeming the nation from its alleged crisis” (Zúquete 2017, p. 453). A second aspect of this sacralization is the consideration of the people as an indivisible whole, a monolithic unity, in which differences are minimized or ignored for the sake of a collective identity. Populism tends to present an ‘us versus them’ vision, simplifying social complexity into a struggle between the people and the elites, who are accused of corrupting or betraying them. In the case of the populist radical right, this binary relationship between the people and the elites is complemented by a third element derived from its nativism, the external ‘Other’, represented in cultural–religious terms: Islam. Thirdly, the leader is often presented as the ‘legitimate representative’ of the people, someone who does not belong to the elites or established interests. This leader takes on the task of defending and representing the interests of the people, and his discourse is based on the idea that he is in direct contact with the ‘real’ needs and desires of the population. Schmitt’s theory of political representation echoes here (Schmitt 1922). According to Carl Schmitt, political representation is the ability to make political unity visible. The leader is not just an individual endowed with power, but rather an embodiment of the collective identity of the political community; therefore, the leader’s presence and actions become a symbol that represents political unity and creates a bond between himself and the people. The leader represents the state and the people, symbolizing the indivisibility of the political community, and fostering a bond that transcends mere legal or institutional frameworks. Closely linked to the role of the leader, the sacralization of the people also translates into a symbolic construction of the

community. Through constant rhetoric and symbolism such as speeches, images, and public performances, populist leaders reinforce the idea that the people are a special entity that deserves to be defended at all costs (Pérez-Agote and Aleman 2023). This helps to create a strong sense of belonging and solidarity among supporters, while at the same time fostering a sense of exclusion of those who are not part of the people. In short, the sacralization of the people in populism is not just a matter of rhetoric, but a strategy for uniting society around a simplified and polarized idea of ‘us’ (the people) versus ‘them’ (the elites, Islam). Populism thus “promises a believing community ‘salvation’ if they follow a particular leader” (Yilmaz and Morieson 2021). This has the potential to result in a strengthening of the figure of the leader, who is seen—or who presents himself—as the sole individual capable of interpreting and defending the will of this sacred people.

In this context, politics acquires a salvific character, with its own myths, rites, and symbols, that becomes a “surrogate of religion” (Linz 2006). The populist leader assumes the role of savior, confronting conspiratorial enemies who embody evil (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, p. 179). A good example of such populist political messianism is Marine Le Pen’s video for the 2017 presidential election. In this video, the leader presents herself, not only as just another one of the people—woman, mother, lawyer—but, above all, as she herself emphasizes, French: the leader embodies the people and the attacks on France are attacks on her person. Something similar occurs when the attacks on the Church and its representants are perceived as attacks on God. “It is a matter”, she asserts, “of choosing a model of civilization” that she, the savior, will lead from the Presidency against the enemies of France “in the name of the people” (Le Pen 2017). All this is framed in grandiose landscapes, some of them located in Normandy, evoking, thus, a sense of patriotism linked to the national heritage.

Along with this sacralization of politics and in clear relation to the opposition between the people and their enemies, the politicization of religion in a strict sense, the political use of religion, is closely linked to another of the nuclear ideological elements of these parties: nativism. This is defined as “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde 2007, p. 19). In this framework, religion is used to construct the identity of the people in homogeneous terms, marking a distinction between the good ‘us’ and the bad ‘them’ (Roy 2016, p. 186). Thus, parties appeal to the ‘Christian Identity of Europe’ (Marzouki et al. 2016; Zúquete 2017; Giorgi 2022) to emphasize cultural and civilizational differences with outside groups, particularly Islam. ‘We’ (i.e., the Occident or Christian Europe) must defend ‘Ourselves’ against ‘Them’ (i.e., the ‘Orient’: Rome, Jews, Muslims) (Wodak 2015, p. 20).

1.2. Religion and Secularity: Secularized Christianity and Christian Secularism

The return of religion in the contemporary political discourse of the populist radical right seems paradoxical in a largely secularized European context. This is particularly salient when these formations not only deploy their action in a liberal environment, but precisely consider that liberal values, including the differentiation between politics and religion, that is, secularization, are aspects of our identity that distinguish us from Islam. Marine Le Pen refers to this combination of Christianity and secularity as a feature of national identity in the context of the 2012 presidential elections: “France is France. It has Christian roots, that is, this is what makes its identity. It is secular (*laïque*); we hold on to this identity and we will not allow it to be changed” (Le Parisien 2011)³. Furthermore, both arguments must be compatible, otherwise we could not explain the growing electoral success of these formations, given the decline in religious belief and practice in Europe⁴.

There are several arguments that allow us to understand this apparent paradox. We explain them below.

In the first place, the compatibility between the defense of religion and secularity is explained by the fact that references to religion do not seem to contain a transcendent meaning, a call to faith or observance, but religion is understood in a merely cultural sense. Europe is a Christian continent because the people who inhabit it is Christian. But it is what some authors call a “culturalized religion” (Astor and Mayrl 2020), “religion as heritage, not religion as belief” (Joppke 2018); “religion recast as culture and as vital to the heritage of some countries” (Beaman 2020). Religion here becomes an identity marker of the European “leading culture” (Roy 2019), rather than a defense of Christianity as a creed or as a religious practice. That is why they do not speak of faith, but always of Christian “identity”, of Christian “values”, “traditions”, of the “Christian roots of Europe” (Eatwell and Goodwin 2019, p. 173). It is a question of belonging, not of believing (Roy 2016), but a question of belonging to a people, not to an institution. For this reason, these parties refer to *Christendom*—the set of countries with a Christian tradition—rather than to Christianity—the Christian religion itself, with its doctrines and practices. It is an awareness of our own identity that is activated in the face of the growing visibility of Islam. Populist radical right parties “have emphasized Christianity as a cultural and civilization identity” only in response to the perceived “civilizational threat from Islam” (Brubaker 2017a). We define the immigrant by (Muslim) religion and ourselves by an “identitarian Christianity” (ibid.), but that does not mean that we are religious. It is only a set of traditions, symbols, and values, not beliefs and precepts.

This reference to a “secular Christianity” (Joppke 2013) and its symbols converted into culture, is what allows its deployment in secularized societies. In this sense, Roy argues that “even if the identity of Europe is Christian, it is no longer a religious identity because the faith has left” (Roy 2013, p. 11). Therefore, “staunch secularists can now defend a Christian identity” (Roy 2013, p. 11) in a “Godless crusade” (Cremer 2023). Indeed, the more secularized Europe becomes, the more easily it can integrate religious tradition into the definition of its identity (Brubaker 2017a, p. 9). The fact is that these parties are not, properly speaking, religious parties, but religion obeys the purpose of defining a civilizational identity (Brubaker 2017a) and excluding Islam as alien to Europe. However, while they underline that liberal values are at the core of European civilization, in opposition to cultures perceived as “retrograde” such as Islam, these parties tend to maintain, at the same time, clearly conservative views, for example, regarding gender issues.

The cultural use of religion allows these formations to avoid certain contradictions in their discourse. Firstly, since it is not a cult, these parties can demand privileges for Christian traditions, such as the celebration of Easter, without challenging state neutrality and secularity proper to the West. Moreover, it allows restricting Muslim religious practices without contradicting the liberal commitment to religious freedom (Joppke 2013, p. 606; Brubaker 2017a, p. 10). Thus, for example, Marine Le Pen can propose to ban Muslim prayer in the streets—compared to the Nazi occupation—while admitting, at the same time, religious manifestations “having a traditional character, deeply rooted in the local or national culture” (Rassemblement National 2021), in a clear allusion to Christian traditions.

On the other hand, although references to Christianity in the speeches of these parties always allude to values, it is not a general commitment to Christian moral precepts, but rather a reference to “our traditions and customs”. This allows for a selective use of arguments, leaving aside those Christian values that may contravene their proposals on issues such as immigration or social justice. This selectivity explains the frequent confrontations with the Catholic Church and the questioning of the authority of its hierarchy, without conflicting with the party’s discourse on this topic. This “dissent” is due to

the fact that the party does not aim to defend the Church as an institution, but instead promotes an individualized, non-institutional form of Christianity, a “believing without belonging” approach (Davie 1990). This phenomenon is coherent with the process of de-institutionalization and disintermediation that religions have undergone in contemporary societies (Casanova 2000).

The fact that Christianity, in their discourse, is neither a creed, nor a cult, nor a system of moral precepts, nor an institution, is what allows them to defend the Judeo-Christian identity and, at the same time, secularity as an achievement of European civilization. Together with this culturalized Christianity, secularity is another key identity marker in their strategy of differentiation from Islam. In the perspective of right-wing populist parties, Islam is a religion alien to the West, not only because of the ‘strangeness’ of its practices, but above all because it has not experienced—nor can it experience—the process of secularization that defines the West. Moreover, the concern of these parties about Islam is not so much about Muslim religious practices *per se*, rather it is chiefly focused on the visibility of Islam in the public space. The mere presence of Islam in Europe and, particularly, its increasing visibility (for example, by the use of the veil or the construction of mosques), not only blurs the panorama of our cities, but also, fundamentally, threatens the secularity that defines us. In this way, a “sacralization of secularism” is produced, as an absolute value to be defended against the threat of Islam. However, this is a “Christian secularism” (Brubaker 2017a), what Joppke has described as “moderate secularism” (Joppke 2015), which exclude Islam allowing at the same time the vindication of a Christian identity without sacrificing the commitment to secularism.

Together with the allusions to Muslim religious practices in the public space, Islam often appears not as a religious creed, but as a political ideology that aims to conquer Europe. This ambivalence when referring to Islam makes it possible to overcome another possible contradiction: defending the religious freedom of the native population while questioning or restricting that of those who practice Islam. This is one more rhetorical strategy with which to circumvent its discursive contradictions (Wodak 2015).

In short, Christianity in the discourse and ideology of the populist radical right is not a faith, nor a religious practice, nor a cult, nor an institution—that is why it is compatible with secularization. Nor is it a moral system—that is why it is compatible with other aspects of its discourse. It is a matter of culture, used to define the identity of the people—of the nation—and to legitimize the exclusion of Islam. Precisely for this reason it is possible to appeal to (secularized) Christianity and at the same time defend (Christian) secularism as something that defines us, Europeans, in the face of Islam.

If Christianity has undergone a fundamental transformation that has allowed it to become a culture, secularism has also experienced substantial changes in the domain of political competition. If, traditionally, it had been an issue proper to the left in the face of the power of the Church in different areas of social life, now it is the right of the political spectrum that has made this issue its own in its combat against Islam (Brubaker 2017a; Innerarity 2023). This is yet another example of the instrumentalization of issues by the populist radical right, like the use of the argument of defending gender equality against Islam (Innerarity et al. 2024), which reveals a profoundly illiberal liberalism.

1.3. *Vox and Fratelli d'Italia*

Vox in Spain and Fratelli d'Italia in Italy represent paradigmatic cases of young parties that have managed to consolidate themselves in the space of the radical right in Europe (Rama et al. 2021; Jaráiz et al. 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020). Although they emerge in different national and political contexts, they share ideological and strategic connections, especially in the use of Christianity as a central element of their identity narratives.

Vox was born in 2013 as a split from the Partido Popular, presenting itself as an ultra-conservative and nationalist response to the decline of traditional values in Spain and the alleged dismemberment of national unity because of the separatist process in Catalonia (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). Fratelli d'Italia emerged in 2012 from the reorganization of the Italian right after the collapse of Alleanza Nazionale and the leadership crisis in the center-right (Vassallo and Vignati 2023; Canzano Giansante 2023). Although both share an emphasis on nationalism and the defense of Christian values, the differences in their trajectories reflect the different degrees of secularization in their national contexts.

At the institutional level, both countries declare the non-denominational nature of the state in their constitutions. At the same time, they have concordats with the Catholic Church that protect certain privileges and its influence in cultural matters. In short, they are non-confessional states, but Catholicism continues to have a symbolic weight in both countries, in line with what has been called “moderate secularism” (Joppke 2015).

In Spain, secularization has advanced significantly, leaving Catholicism with less institutional influence, but retaining a symbolic weight in cultural identity (Ruiz Andrés 2022; Díaz de Rada and Gil-Gimeno 2023). In Italy, although there has also been a process of secularization, the Catholic Church maintains a more visible presence in the public and political sphere. These differences condition how Vox and Fratelli d'Italia position their religious discourses in relation to their electorates.

2. Methodology

To develop our research, we have carried out a qualitative analysis of the programs, speeches, official documents, parliamentary interventions, interviews, and key messages of the leaders of both parties from their foundation until the European elections of June 2024.

The main source of analysis has been the founding documents of both parties, as well as the programs drawn up for the general and European elections held since their formation until the present day. We chose the programs as the basic material, as they are the most visible face of the party at a given moment in time in ideological terms (Mudde 2007; Rooduijn 2013). In them, we looked for all references to religion, Christianity, Catholicism, the Catholic Church, Islam, and secularity to see, through discursive analysis, how they reflected the main discursive topics identified by the academic literature on this issue. To illustrate and complement the programs in a more dynamic way, particularly significant speeches by Santiago Abascal (Vox) and Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia) have also been selected, such as those at the opening of the campaign in the case of Vox or at the closing of the Fratelli d'Italia meeting in Trieste in 2017. Without carrying out exhaustive research, we also draw on parliamentary interventions at the national level and in the European Parliament, especially in debates on immigration, education, and family issues, which confirm our findings. In the case of Italy, we have conducted interviews with party leaders. This approach allows us to identify how Vox and Fratelli d'Italia integrate religion into their political proposals and how they articulate their narrative around issues of identity, culture, and values, aligning themselves with the radical right-wing formations in their immediate surroundings.

3. Results

3.1. Vox

3.1.1. Populism: Salvific Politics

The sacralization of politics linked to populism in the sense we have pointed out above is particularly evident in some of the videos prepared by Vox in the context of electoral campaigns. Symbols, music, images, and landscapes serve to evoke the image of the people as a ‘pure’ unit and the leader as their savior. Already in the video set up for the 2016

general elections (Vox 2016), images of Santiago Abascal climbing a steep mountain, facing the storm, are shown. These images, accompanied by epic music and a speech loaded with terms such as “courage” and “honor” project a heroic vision of politics. A politics of a distinctly moral and Manichean character, as reflected in the recurrent contraposition between concepts such as courage/fear, virtue/vice, and honor/cowardice. “If you choose beauty, goodness and truth”, Abascal affirms, “you will be making Spain great again”, an expression that recalls Trump’s motto “Make America great again”. The leader is invested here with an epic character, presenting himself as the defender of the people and their cultural integrity.

A similar representation of politics appears in the video produced a few months before the 2018 Andalusian elections (Vox 2018a). In this video, with scenes that evoke the film *The Lord of the Rings* and its soundtrack, reference is made to the “Reconquest of Spain”⁵, a recurring topic in Vox, which is posited as a process that must begin in Andalusia. In fact, it is common for Abascal to start the electoral campaign in Covadonga, a place in the north of Spain mythologized as the cradle of the Reconquest against the Muslims and, therefore, the origin of the Spanish nation⁶. This reference to the Reconquest, to the *#espíritudeCovadonga*, includes a clear exaltation of history and of the nation, which owes its origins to the confrontation with Islam. In addition to populism’s epic vision of politics, the allusion to the Reconquista also reflects the politicization of religion derived from its nativism, as we will explain below.

3.1.2. Nativism: The Politicization of Religion

The mythification of the Reconquista establishes a discursive framework in which religion appears linked to the identity and nativist discourse of Vox. “Here it all began”, Abascal recently declared in Asturias (Vox 2024a), “here began the reconquest against the enemies of the cross”, he pointed out, alluding at the same time to the “Islamist migratory invasion that we are suffering”. The roots of Spain—and of Europe, in general—are eminently Christian, and that is why it is necessary to defend Christianity inside and outside our borders. This perspective is reflected in different initiatives, such as the request for diplomatic actions to protect Christians in the world or the proposal to officially support the initiative of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland to establish an “International Day for Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief”. In addition, Vox promotes the establishment in Spain of a “Day of Solidarity with Persecuted Christians” (Vox 2022). The justification for these actions lies in the fact that “Spain is a country of Christian culture and, consequently, its basic legal institutions are inspired by the Christian tradition, as are those of the West as a whole” (Vox 2023).

This identity based on Christian traditions is presented in a monolithic way, without admitting any division within it. Pluralism, then, becomes the first enemy to fight. That is why Vox urges the Government to suppress the *Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia*⁷, arguing that it facilitates “other religious confessions to acquire a greater influence in our society, perpetrating the call effect of illegal immigration and boosting the so-called multiculturalism” (Vox 2023), one of the “globalist dogmas” that, according to the party, threaten Spanish identity. Christianity is used, therefore, to justify its rejection of immigration. Moreover, as it is usual in this type of formations, trying to avoid been accused of racism, its discourse is “dressed up” with apparently democratic arguments, such as the statement that the Foundation “has limited itself to disseminating and promoting confessions that are, in some cases, hostile to democracy and that attack the dignity of women” (Vox 2023). The rejection of Islam appears frequently in a civilizational frame. In this respect, Vox argues that “Western civilization cannot be understood without the three pillars on which it was built: Christian tradition, Greek philosophy and Roman law. Christianity is an essential

part of the Spanish historical identity” (Vox 2023). Therefore, “Islam should not be taught in schools because it is incompatible with our democracy” (Vox 2021b). It is a religion that teaches inequality between men and women or condemns homosexuality. With this same approach, Vox proposes “to reject any attempt to integrate into the Union those States that do not accept the above principles and values and particularly those States that directly or indirectly assume the political postulates of Islam and the imposition of religious ways of life on European citizens” (Vox 2024b). Islam is an adversary that demands a robust defense, particularly considering its repudiation of liberal values, most notably the denial of religious freedom and secularity.

It is an Islam, on the other hand, that is associated in its discourse with Islamic fundamentalism (Vox 2015). Hence the reiteration of the proposal for the “closure of fundamentalist mosques and prohibition of their financing by States or foreign organizations” (Vox 2021c). “Zero tolerance with all forms of Islamic fundamentalism. We will close mosques or centers of worship that propagate ideas that are contrary to our culture and identity such as Islamic radicalism, jihad or contempt for women and our customs” (Vox 2023).

The Christian identity of Europe is thus perceived to be under threat by the process of ‘Islamization’, which is seen as a growing challenge. The elites are the main culprits of this process, they point out, within their populist discourse. “Endophobia as hatred and contempt for one’s own culture has been a constant of the left in this country and continues to be so in our democracy. It is that rejection of the identity and inherent characteristics of the social group that they even dare to mock. It is an attack on the roots and traditions of the people whom they confuse by inoculating their ideological hatred” (Vox 2021a).

In this context, the reproduction of one’s own culture and the rejection of mixing should be an objective of the state. “Many of the secular symbols... come from religious traditions and customs... They are part of our identity and culture and as such must be protected by the public authorities, both nationally and internationally” (Vox 2022). That is why the party proposes, right from its first founding documents: “Quotas of origin will be established, privileging nationalities that share language and important ties of friendship and culture with Spain” (Vox 2018b). Christianity is one of them. For this very reason, the State must assume the commitment to promote its presence in the public space. This is the purpose behind the proposal to declare Easter Week in Madrid as an event of regional tourist interest, “a preliminary step towards its declaration as an ‘event of national tourist interest’” (Vox 2024c), or the defense of the teaching of the Catholic religion in schools, a subject that should receive the same treatment as any other in the educational curriculum (Vox 2020).

Linked to this identitarian conception of Christianity, secularism is also a key characteristic of Western societies according to Vox. However, the party defends a particular version of secularism. It is not the ‘aggressive secularism’ that the party attributes to elites, claiming that this is a strategy designed to eliminate the presence of Catholicism from the public sphere. “That left that makes absolute contempt for Christianity and advocates the imposition of a false secularism; and that, in our culture, Catholic by definition because it is universal, defends Islamism that treats women as an inferior being or condemns homosexuality, contradictions that ride frequently and brazenly. It is the left that aims at cultural and thought hegemony” (Vox 2021a)⁸. Against this ‘aggressive secularism’, hostile to religion, which the Government intends to impose, neutrality and the principle of positive secularism prevail in the Spanish State, as they point out in the argumentation against the Organic Law of Education of 2020 (Vox 2020), whereas at the same time, Vox rejects any form of accommodation for Islam in public spaces.

This positive secularism implies guaranteeing religious freedom and respect for all confessions, ensuring that none is discriminated against. “End the censorship and per-

secution of freedom of thought, conscience and religion imposed by the von der Leyen government (...), we will defend religious freedom" (Vox 2024b). Protection of religious freedom also outside our borders is implied. "Promote all necessary actions in the EU, following the Hungarian model, for the defense of religious freedom and persecuted Christians" (Vox 2024b).

This freedom has a special application in the field of education, as reflected, for example, in their criticism of the reform of the Organic Law of Education of 2020 mentioned above. This is a law that, they point out, "strips the subject of Religion of all academic value and does not even program an alternative subject, violating the Concordat⁹ with the Holy See that provides that the Catholic religion be taught in conditions comparable to the other fundamental disciplines" (Vox 2020). For this reason, they urge the government to guarantee the right of parents to ensure that their children receive a religious and moral education that is in accordance with their own convictions. However, this right only corresponds, it seems, to those who want to educate their children in the Catholic religion, not Islam, whose teaching the party intends to exclude from schools. Regarding Islam, "the Spanish State has no other duty than to guarantee the freedom of religion and worship of its faithful with no other limitation, in its manifestations, than that necessary for the maintenance of public order protected by law. It has no obligation to incorporate its teachings into the school curriculum" (Vox 2021b). The argument is based on religious freedom and the right of parents to choose their children's education. However, as a consequence of the nativist character of this formation, this liberal argument does not apply to individuals who adhere to other religions or identify with different cultures. The protection of Catholicism and rejection of Islam is in clear contradiction with the commitment of the party to a positive secularism that respects all religions and ensures that none is discriminated against.

In any case, the defense of Christianity does not preclude Vox's confrontation with the ecclesiastical institution. The first confrontation derives from the fact that, as we have pointed out, populists do not refer to Christianity as a system of beliefs, values, and practices, but only as an identity. For this reason, while the party considers the involvement of the State in its reproduction to be essential, they select only those values that are most in line with their ideology; everything that has to do with charity or hospitality clashes head-on with their creed. This has caused numerous disagreements with Pope Francis, whom Santiago Abascal refers to as "citizen Bergoglio", to delegitimize his authority. The fundamental clash derives from the Pope's statements in favor of the opening of Europe's borders and his "excessive hospitality" towards immigration. Thus, for example, Ivan Espinosa (former general secretary of Vox) notes, ironically, that he respects that the Pope wants to welcome in the Vatican as many migrants as he wishes but urges him to respect the sovereignty of each country to manage its borders as it sees fit.

In short, the Catholic religion appears in the context of their nativist discourse as an argument to build Spanish/European identity and mark the difference with Islam. It is an argument that allows the party to justify its proposals in matters of migration, thereby circumventing potential allegations of racism.

3.2. *Fratelli d'Italia: A Philosophy of Identity*

In the discourse of Fratelli d'Italia, religion appears in an identity key, linked to its conservatism and as a way of dealing with the crisis of values and identity affecting Europe, and particularly, Italy. In the document drafted during the party's second national congress in 2017, held in Trieste—a city rich in patriotic symbolism¹⁰—it is explicitly stated that this crisis is largely attributed to attacks stemming from "the same ideological scheme inaugurated by the Enlightenment in its crusade in the name of reason against the authority

of tradition” (Fratelli d’Italia 2017). The text denounces that the “mystification” of the Enlightenment led to the “delegitimization of authority”, especially religious authority. Therefore, the defense and, at the same time, the political vindication of the recovery of tradition, must be regarded as nothing other than the reaffirmation of a religious tradition, given that this has historically prevailed in Italy in the absence of a civil tradition of national scope.

Religion not only gives content to identity, but also, and not least, contributes to the unity and sanctification of the people (Urbinati 2014). Thus, in this discursive construction of a collective political identity, the party stresses the centrality of “Christian roots” to restore community ties in a context of disintegration and cultural weakness (Fratelli d’Italia 2017). This position is reaffirmed in the program for the 2024 European elections:

“Fratelli d’Italia wants to defend the identity of European peoples and nations. For us, Europe represents the foundational core of the West, the space where, throughout history, the values and principles on which our civilization is based have been forged: freedom, equality, democracy, law, and the encounter between faith and reason embodied in our classical and Judeo-Christian roots”. (Fratelli d’Italia 2024)

In a largely secularized and desacralized context, religion manifests itself mainly in its symbolic dimension. In Italy, a political discourse incorporating religious elements is particularly effective, since, despite the predominant secularization, most of the population identifies itself as Catholic, even if it does not actively practice religion. This discrepancy between affiliation and practice is evidence that symbolic identification prevails over faith as a personal choice.

In support of the reduction of religion to a cultural component and, therefore, to a sort of religious substitute, Giorgia Meloni affirmed in the interview she gave us in 2022: “Politics for me is a form of civil religion”, understanding by civil religion, Meloni continues, “that culture capable of defending the pillars of identity” (Meloni personal interview 21 May 2022), of which religion is an element of support. In the same vein, Giovan Battista Fazzolari, program director and chief ideologist of the party, pointed out in the interview we conducted in 2022: “civil religion expresses for us a conservative identity that is also a religious identity” (Fazzolari personal interview 21 May 2022). Giovanni Donzelli, the party’s organizational director, further emphasized the following: “Our conservatism is a political culture of identity in defense of Christian roots and an anthropocentric vision of man” (Donzelli personal interview 21 May 2022).

Meloni reinforces in her autobiography this secularized view of religion on which she intends to rebuild the social bond by stating that her struggles against “progressivism” do not derive, despite being a believer, from a confessional approach to politics. Rather, she asserts that her motivations are rooted in the need to save society from those who undermine the foundations of an orderly and “healthy” coexistence through regulations such as euthanasia, surrogate motherhood, free abortion, or gender self-determination (Meloni 2021a, p. 33). According to her perspective, such regulations break community ties based on Christian values. Politics thus acquires a salvific character, centered on the defense of the traditional family, seen as a religious bond and symbol of the social bond *par excellence*, indispensable for the political and identity narrative of the party. Fazzolari reinforces this idea in the same interview: “The feature that best defines the party ideologically is, without a doubt, identity. The great conflict of values is around identity: conservatives value preserving that of the individual, the family, the national context, civilization and religion. This contrasts with those who believe that all these identities must be overcome” (Fazzolari personal interview 21 May 2022).

The political use of religion in the identity narrative of Fratelli d'Italia is characterized, as might be expected, by the identification of enemies that threaten both traditional religion and collective identity, weakening community ties. The most prominent of these enemies is immigration, especially illegal immigration, and the Islamization of Italian society, which is considered its direct consequence. In this context, the defense of Christian roots is seen as a matter of survival, particularly in the face of the cultural weakness of European nations, which exposes them to the aggression of anti-identity forces such as radical Islam.

The defense of Christian identity therefore helps to justify the rejection of immigration, without being accused of racism. In their view, immigration cannot be considered a right, but rather a concession based on the needs of the State. According to Fratelli d'Italia, protecting the homeland implies, above all, defending its borders, especially against illegal immigration and immigration associated with cultures and beliefs considered difficult to integrate into Europe. The document of the Trieste conference points this out along these lines:

Regulating immigration through flow control means favoring the entry of those who come from nationalities that have been able to integrate easily without creating security problems, and blocking, instead, immigration from those nationalities that have shown themselves less willing to accept our laws and our culture, as is the case of Islamic immigration. (Fratelli d'Italia 2017)

In line with this view, Giorgia Meloni stated in our 2022 interview, developing an anti-elitism and nativist discourse to identify her political target: "Europe is currently an instrument of technocratic overreach, and it is no coincidence that it makes decisions, such as those related to immigration, without considering the identity of the peoples" (Meloni personal interview 21 May 2022). From this quote, immigration is not a problem in itself, considering also that millions of Italians have historically emigrated abroad, but is a problem insofar as it represents a real or supposed threat to the national culture, defined mainly by its Christian roots. In our 2022 interview, Giorgia Meloni argued the following:

Globalist homogenization is clearly a tool in the hands of great economic concentration and financial speculation. That is to say those who use themes and arguments that, although they seem understandable and attractive, actually seek something quite different. An example is the issue of mass immigration. These are mechanisms that, in our opinion, are used to dismantle the pillars of identity. The family is attacked but also gender identity and religion. Everything that defines people at their core and their roots is under constant threat. Their goal is a world *à la* John Lennon of the song 'Imagine', which for me was a nightmare. (Meloni 2022)

The religious element thus acquires a central role in the public discourse of Fratelli d'Italia, where the enemy is, above all, who threatens the common faith and, by extension, the sacred unity of the people. This was expressed by Giorgia Meloni in a Facebook post during the 2018 general election campaign:

No to the Islamization of Italy. Defense of our identity against the process of Islamization of Italy and Europe. A battle of Fratelli d'Italia. On March 4 choose which side to be on. #VoteGiorgiaMeloni. (23 February 2018)

More elaborately, the Trieste Theses argue the following:

A Europe that, by denying its Judeo-Christian and classical roots, subordinates the needs of identity and autonomy of peoples to a radical universalism in harmony with an abstract multiculturalism, gives rise to the indiscriminate access of people from other continents in a number that prefigures a real ethnic replacement. (Fratelli d'Italia 2017)

According to Fratelli d'Italia, a kind of "soft invasion" would be taking place, facilitated by the financial support for Islamic institutions and organizations in Europe, leading "to the strengthening of Islamic influence in the West" (Fratelli d'Italia 2017). This phenomenon, the document warns, "not only endangers the Greco-Roman and Christian identity of Europe, but also calls into question the principles of equality, freedom, democracy, and secularity of the State on which Western culture is based" (Fratelli d'Italia 2017).

From this perspective, Fratelli d'Italia unfolds a holistic vision of society or, rather, "of the community that is the repository of positive values forged along historical traditions." According to Colaïanni (2019), this community generates strong bonds and a shared sense of identity and belonging, integrating differences "in a natural and prodigious way into an organic whole"¹¹.

To reinforce its stance against the Muslim religion, Fratelli d'Italia's discourse does not distinguish between moderate Islam, integrated into Western societies, and radical and fundamentalist Islam. This is clearly reflected in the Trieste document:

We are not even afraid to say that the fundamentalist Salafist theories openly spread in our country by fundamentalist Islamic states are the humus in which the terrorism that bloodies our cities is born and grows. This is why we want to prevent fundamentalist propaganda in Italy, limit Islamic immigration to Europe, and reiterate that those who want to live in Italy must accept our culture and identity. (Fratelli d'Italia 2017)

This positioning translates into specific measures included in the 2018 election program, such as the following:

Prohibition of the financing of places of worship by fundamentalist states. Fight against fundamentalist proselytism that fuels terrorism and the introduction of the crime of Islamic fundamentalism. Registration of imams and obligation of sermons in Italian. (Fratelli d'Italia 2018)

The rejection of Islam is combined, as usual in these parties, with the defense of Christian symbols against the "aggressive" and "distorted" secularism that, according to Fratelli d'Italia, predominates in Europe (Fratelli d'Italia 2017). Along these lines, the party proposes "not to give in to those who want to eliminate the symbols of our Christian tradition, ban the nativity scene or remove crucifixes from public places" (Fratelli d'Italia 2018).

Thus, religious identity, specifically Christian identity, redefined as culture, is presented as the fundamental pillar of national and Western civilization. This enables the clear delineation of a dividing line between 'us' and 'others' and the establishment of a cultural hierarchy (Colaïanni 2019, p. 15). However, the party's religious narrative conflicts with the Magisterium and social doctrine of the Catholic Church, which not only avoids imposing barriers between different cultures and religions but explicitly promotes the principle of universal fraternity. More specifically, the Church advocates interreligious dialogue, particularly with Islam, without instigating a "war of civilizations." Similarly, on key issues such as immigration, welcoming, and social solidarity, which are essential to the Church, the Church aligns itself more with the left than with the party's positions.

The relationship of the party with the official religion is, therefore, complex, considering that the Church does not recognize Catholic parties, as happened with the Christian Democrats¹² in the second half of the twentieth century, nor does it grant patents of religious fidelity to any political party. In other words, the ecclesiastical hierarchy does not establish exclusive alliances with the parties¹³. Instead, the parties tend to express a cultural rather than a confessional Catholicism, which does not require an authentic profession of faith (Guolo 2011). In this approach, the figure of Christ is relegated to the background or even disappears, while elements of his doctrine are incorporated and identity symbols are

prioritized, such as crucifixes, nativity scenes, and religious celebrations in public spaces. The Catholic Church is rather involved in the promotion of values that generate both support and opposition. This is evident in its instance on bioethical issues, the defense of life, and the opposition to gender theories. These positions are adopted by conservative parties, with Fratelli d'Italia being a notable example. This party has also distinguished itself by aligning itself with the Church in its defense of the teaching of religion in schools, turning this issue into yet another factor of symbolic identity. This is evidenced by the statement of Deputy Bucalo, published on the party's website:

Lay parliamentarians from different parties to the rescue, together, united as rarely happens in politics, for the abolition of religious teaching in Italian schools have presented a motion for the revision of the State-Church concordat. Among the four points listed in the motion I will dwell on what I consider fundamental for the maintenance of the identity of our nation: the teaching of religion to pupils, to students; education in the values of Catholicism..... This is a motion that must not pass. (Fratelli d'Italia 2021)

Similarly, we see the party positioning itself in favor of the defense of persecuted Christian minorities around the world, in the name of religious freedom. This is expressed in the 2018 general election program, which includes "attention and support for discriminated and persecuted Christian communities around the world" (Fratelli d'Italia 2018) or in the following statement on the party's website:

A great victory for Fratelli d'Italia: the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies has approved the resolution presented by our group leader, Delmas-tro, which commits the Government to include respect for religious freedom and Christian minorities among the criteria to be taken into account by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when providing aid and funds for international cooperation. The persecution of Christians is the greatest ongoing genocide in the world, there are millions of believers who risk their lives every day for their faith, and in some States, it is a real emergency. Thanks to Fratelli d'Italia, our nation can be at the forefront in Europe in the defense of religious freedom. An achievement of which we are proud. (Meloni 2021b)

We may conclude by saying that, in the case of Fratelli d'Italia, religious homogeneity is intertwined with the demand for political unity, which inevitably passes through the political use of religious symbols. The party's objective is to rebuild Italian identity, as articulated in the program devised for the 2013 general elections, "so that Italy may be the land of those who love it, know it and respect its Constitution and its cultural and religious traditions" (Fratelli d'Italia 2013). Precisely so ended one of the most important public speeches of Giorgia Meloni, on October 19, 2019, in Rome, declaring that "we will defend God, the homeland and the family, so assume it".

4. Conclusions

Despite the disparities between them, religion remains a salient issue for both parties. In both cases, religion manifests in the two senses to which we referred at the beginning of this study, as the sacralization of politics and as the politicization of religion. While religion is not an integral component of the defining features of this family of parties, it does manifest in these two senses as a consequence of the ideological core established by Mudde, particularly populism and nativism.

Firstly, the populist character of these movements is reflected in the sacralization of the people, considered the depositary of the values that the populist leader is called upon

to protect. Politics is redefined as a salvific endeavor, framed in a binary struggle between good and evil, pure and corrupt, traditions and progressivism.

The two formations also coincide, according with their nativism, in emphasizing the Christian roots of Europe, specifically of Italy and Spain. This commitment manifests in concrete political proposals, such as the defense of religious festivities or symbols, including processions. It is a defense of Christianity mostly in cultural terms. However, in the case of Fratelli d'Italia, the reference to Christianity is occasionally made, in contrast to Vox, in properly “religious” terms, as exemplified by Melloni’s self-identification as a Christian believer and her commitment to defend God. The explicit reference to a Christian faith or to God in Italy corresponds with the lower level of secularization in this country previously mentioned. However, in both parties, this appeal to religious tradition is intertwined with an explicit rejection of immigration, particularly from countries with a Muslim tradition. The use of issues such as religion, secularism, and gender equality serves to construct a discourse that positions their stance on Islam within the ambit of ‘democratic’ arguments, thereby circumventing the potential accusation of racism. This discursive strategy mirrors those employed by analogous parties in our closest European environment, such as Rassemblement National (RN) in France or Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), thereby serving to reinforce a shared narrative among the European populist radical right.

Along with Christianity, the protection of secularity is also a prominent issue in the discourse of both parties, although it is more pronounced in the case of Vox, again, according with the level of secularization in Spain compared with Italy. Their understanding of the neutrality of the State diverges from the position adopted by the French Rassemblement National (RN), which defends a more republican and strict vision of secularism (*laïcité*). On the contrary, it approaches a “moderate secularism” along the lines described by Joppke, similar to the position espoused by Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The discourse on secularism exhibited by the parties analyzed here seems to fluctuate between non-confessionalism and positive secularism. A fundamental tenet of positive secularism is the protection of religious freedom, a principle that does not prevent the presence or even the protection of symbols in public spaces. However, this positive secularism shows a clear bias as its application is restricted exclusively to Christianity, which is regarded as an integral component of the majority culture. Conversely, when it comes to Islam, the secularism adopted assumes a more stringent and exclusionary character, recalling the most radical version of French *laïcité*. This discursive duality enables these parties to justify a state neutrality that privileges the cultural reproduction of majority traditions, while at the same time adopting a restrictive stance towards the religious manifestations of minorities, most notably Muslims. In sum, the secularism promoted by these formations combines the advocacy of neutrality and religious freedom with a clearly nativist approach, congruent with their objective of safeguarding the cultural and civilizational identity of the majority, wherein Christianity assumes a pivotal role. Consequently, the confluence of national populism and religion—encompassing both secularized Christianity and Christian secularism—emerges as discursive frameworks within their ideological confrontation with Islam.

In any case, as the then editor of *La civiltà cattolica*, the Jesuit magazine and one of the most authoritative voices in the Catholic field, wrote, the crucifix “is used as a sign with political value, but in an inverted way compared to the past: if before what would have been good to keep in the hands of Caesar was given to God, now it is Caesar who holds and brandishes what is God’s, sometimes even with the complicity of the clerics” (Spadaro 2019, p. 41). It clearly consists of an attempt at “cultural appropriation of religious doctrines and symbols that usually resolves in an expropriation of the authentic meaning given to them by religious organizations to the extent that ‘what is God’s’ is ideologized. Thus,

populism adopts the appearance of a new secular faith, but structured like religions: an infallible leadership, which holds the monopoly of the correct political line and, therefore, is endowed with an exclusive disciplinary power to the point of ‘excommunicating’ the dissident. A religious vision, equally secularized, is, after all, that of a unitary people, not traversed by divisions, with individuals in direct, and submissive, relationship with the sovereign or leadership without the intermediation of a plurality of social formations” (Colaïanni 2019, p. 15).

Religion thus seems to be clearly linked to national populism in the two parties analyzed here, similar to what is happening in other European parties of the same family. We have analyzed here two parties that occupy the space of the radical right in two countries that, despite the differences we have pointed out, share similar contexts in terms of secularization. To follow up this research, it would be interesting to develop a comparison with other central and northern European countries with higher levels of secularization or with parties of Eastern Europe where politics and religion are not so clearly differentiated as they are in Western Europe. The study of the ideological evolution of both parties, which could not be done here given the youth of the two cases analyzed, could also contribute to our better understanding of the relationship between national populism and religion in the ideology and discourse of the radical right.

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Notes

- ¹ We do not look into the assessment of the instrumentalization paradigm. A critical analysis of its validity can be found in (Forlenza 2018) and (Giorgi 2022).
- ² Basically, between the United States and Europe and, within Europe, between East and West. In the populist radical right parties of Eastern Europe, the distinction between politics and religion is not as strong as in Western Europe, as they call for a certain return of religion to the public sphere (Morieson 2021, p. 10).
- ³ “La France est la France. Elle a des racines chrétiennes, c’est ainsi, c’est ce qui fait aussi son identité. Elle est laïque, et nous tenons à cette identité et nous ne permettrons pas que cette identité soit modifiée”. Marine Le Pen doesn’t use the term “secular/secularism” but the French “*laïque/laïcité*”, which is considered a specific French model of relationship between politics and religion. In France there is a long discussion on the meaning of this concept (Baubérot 2015). For Marine Le Pen’s use of this concept in the specific French case, see (Innerarity 2023).
- ⁴ The European Social Survey confirms the decreasing trend in the percentage of people in Europe who consider themselves practicing Catholics (European Values Study. 2022. Join EVS/WVS 2017–2022. Available online: <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/survey-2017/joint-evs-wvs/>, accessed on 15 November 2024). Trend also confirmed by the Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>, accessed on 15 November 2024). See on this topic (Díaz de Rada and Gil-Gimeno 2023).
- ⁵ The name chosen by Zemmour for his party resonates here: “*Reconquête*”.
- ⁶ The Reconquest of Spain was a historical process which took place from 718 to 1492. During this period, the Christian kingdoms of the north of the Iberian Peninsula fought to recover the territories that had been established under Muslim control following

the Islamic conquest of 711. This process had important political, religious, social and cultural dimensions, and profoundly marked the history of Spain.

A Foundation attached to the Ministry of the Presidency, Justice and Relations with the Courts. Its mission is to promote the recognition and accommodation of religious diversity as fundamental elements for guaranteeing the effective exercise of religious freedom and the establishment of an appropriate framework for coexistence in Spain.

Note the inconsistency of the argumentation that rejects Islam due to its opposition to homosexuality.

The Concordat signed in 1979 between Spain and the Holy See is an agreement that regulates relations between the State and the Catholic Church.

For decades, the Italian irredentist movement considered Trieste a fundamental target in its struggle for Italian national unity. This sentiment intensified especially towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when the city still belonged to the Austrians. After the victory of the Allied forces, Italy finally gained control of Trieste in 1918, after the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This was a symbolic triumph for Italy, as the city was incorporated into its territory, fulfilling the aspiration of the Italian irredentists.

Organicism in this sense is a form of collectivism of fascist descent, aimed at denying fractures and divisions in the national community.

Italian political Catholicism has its own peculiar history that led it after the Second World War to seek the political unity of Catholics in a single party, namely the Christian Democrats, with the approval of the church hierarchies. With the dissolution of this party in the mid-1990s, its heirs tried to follow in its footsteps, such as the Partito Popolare Italiano, but without success, and the same ecclesiastical hierarchies were no longer willing to grant the license of ‘party of Italian Catholics’ to any other formation. Berlusconi has frequently sought to champion the interests of Catholics in politics, but he has never secured the Church’s official recognition.

What is meant is that the Church does not align itself with the positions of this or that side. It is the left or the right that, depending on convenience, i.e., the assonance of the issues, side or not with the Church. In the case of the left, the Church is now a point of reference on issues of solidarity related to immigration.

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Article

Violence, Politics and Religion: A Case Study of the Black Panther Party

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Abstract: The majority of US Black social movement organizations during the second half of the twentieth century had explicit ties to either Christian or Islamic religious institutions. The Black Panther Party (BPP) was a notable outlier in its secularism. Through the lens of radicalization, this paper examines the place of violence in the Party's ideological platform and political practice relative to the Party's secularism and experience of state repression. Drawing on newly available archival materials, we examine how Party members conceptualized their own programs, made sense of, and responded to the repressive intervention of state actors and institutions in their attempts to create social change.

Keywords: (ir)religion; radicalization; social movement organizations; state-led anti-Black violence

1. Introduction

Violent radicalization studies examine both individual and organizational bidirectional transitions from moderate to violent behavior inspired by political motives. This perspective assumes that any individual or organization, in the face of certain complex social, political, ecological and economic contexts, could end up radicalizing or, conversely, deradicalizing. Authors such as Eitan Alimi (Alimi et al. 2015), Sidney Tarrow (2022), Donathella Della Porta (Della Porta and Diani 1999) or Charles Tilly (Tilly and Wood 2015) tried to explain the dynamics of organizational radicalization, whereas others, such as Horgan (2005), García-Magariño (2022), McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), Hafez and Mullins (2015) or Van Den Bos (2018), focus on the individual trajectory.

Within the previous context, this paper adopts the first perspective, which approaches the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) as an organization that, faced by certain social conditions and factors, resorted, in certain instances, to violence and followed different forms of mobilization and action. Thus, the paper attempts to attain various goals: first, to test the theoretical explanations of organizational radicalization against an empirical case, the BPP; second, to examine the ideological similarities and dissimilarities of the BPP with other Black movements, especially in its religious–secular dimension; and, finally, to produce a characterization of BPP evolution in terms of ideology, repertoire of actions and strategies, all under the light of changing social conditions, popular support and the behavior of the state and other organizations.

In order to achieve those aims, this paper is divided into four sections. Section 1 condenses some theoretical reflections on how organizations radicalize. The second one takes up the case of the BPP to both illustrate the theoretical pattern proposed in Section 2 and to enrich the theory of organizational radicalization. Section 3 compares the ideology of

BBP with other Black movements, particularly the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the Nation of Islam (NOI), by paying special attention to the secular–religious dynamics. Finally, Section 4 tries to characterize the BBP considering its ideology, *modus operandi*, militancy and popular support, repertoire of actions and its pattern of evolution over time.

2. How Organizations Radicalize

Radicalization is a concept used in political science and violence studies that refers to a complex phenomenon linked to the progressive adoption of violent ideas and behavior in order to attain political aims (García-Magariño 2024; García-Calvo and Reinares 2013; Alimi et al. 2015; Horgan 2005). As it was mentioned above, violent radicalization notion might be applied to explaining both the individual and organizational dynamics that end up in the justification and use of violence for political motives. There is consensus around the idea that individual and organizations are not violent *per se* and that social, economic and political contexts impulse or prevent the adoption of a violent framework for political action (Khalil et al. 2022).

In the context of organizational radicalization, scholars of social movements have developed middle range theories to explain the dynamics of radicalization. Aitan Alimi's work, in particular, is especially relevant to trace the BBP's evolution and trajectory. He used some cases to develop a general theory on how movements and organizations radicalize and deradicalize. His framework will be briefly presented here in order to apply it later to the case examined in this paper.

The first feature is that organizations and movements radicalize or deradicalize as a result of relational dynamics. The second feature is that the relational dynamics occur in different contexts and involve very different actors, including the organization in question, likeminded organizations, the state, state supporting organizations, international actors or foreign states and organizations. Third, political violence is considered a “cut-point among other forms of contention” (Alimi et al. 2015, p. 12). In this respect, the vocabulary of social movement scholars is telling, as they coined the notion of “repertoires” to describe the range of tactics that social movements use to attain political aims and that include both legal or legitimate tactics, such as demonstrations, lobbying, vigils or petitions, and illegal or illegitimate practices, such as barricades, strikes, traffic blocking, tax revolts or political violence against the state, properties or other actors. From this perspective, political violence would be a form of contention, along with other forms of violence.

Before addressing the last feature that will be exposed here, it is necessary to underline the fact that Alimi's theory is much richer and more sophisticated than what is shown here. For instance, it distinguishes between (a) cognitive, (b) environmental and (c) relational mechanisms (Alimi et al. 2015, p. 29). However, the fourth feature that will be posed next does not deepen into those distinctions as that will be too much for our assessment of the BBP's evolution in terms of strategy and ideology.

The fourth feature has to do with the adoption of a “process tracing” approach to explain radicalization. Process tracing, as a general methodological proposal, uses the notion of mechanisms to explain complex phenomena. Through the lens of these mechanisms, cases are explored that, on the one hand, illustrate the emerging explanatory theory and, and on the other, feed that same theory (Bennett and Checkel 2014). Along such lines, Alimi proposed that the adoption of violent tactics is either propelled or restrained through the interactions between five relational mechanisms (Alimi et al. 2015, p. 41): (i) spirals of political opportunities in the sphere or the relation between the organization or movement and the political environment; (ii) competition for power between the organization and other likeminded groups; (iii) actions and reactions between security forces and the organization

or movement; (iv) dissociation from the general public or society; and (v) tensions with other countermovement. These five mechanisms might also be seen as five different arenas for interactions between different sort of actors.

3. The Case of the Black Panther Party

When considered in relation to the mechanisms outlined by Alimi (Alimi et al. 2015), the brief and eventful rise and decline of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense¹ (BPP) provides an illuminating empirical case in several respects. First, because the BPP was the target of systematic repression under the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO), there is a large volume of documentation of surveillance, sabotage, manipulation, and state repression that is publicly available due to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)². Second, the non-religious character of the Party offers a counterpoint to other contemporary prominent Black organizations that were strongly associated with the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) or the Nation of Islam (NOI). Given the characteristics, as well as the abundance of secondary literature, regarding Black social movement organizations during the 1960s, the historical trajectory of the BPP is well suited for analysis with respect to the mechanisms identified by Alimi's framework.

In the United States, the popular imaginary around the Black Panther Party has long regarded the organization as the epitome, and most militant expression, of violent Black nationalism. The promotion of this image was no accident. It was part of the FBI's program to discredit, disrupt and, otherwise, stop the Party's activity. Therefore, any fair analysis of the place of violence in the evolution of the BPP's ideology, rhetoric and repertoire, must necessarily attend to the broader historical and political context in which the Party emerged.

3.1. Sociopolitical Context

The BPP was founded in October 1966, in the midst of one of the most dynamic periods of protest in recent history. Not only were there multiple concurrent movements in the United States—including the Civil Rights Movement, the American Indian Movement, and the anti-war movement (against the war in Vietnam), among others—it was also a period of revolutionary conflict around the world (García-Magariño 2023). In Africa and Latin America, there were numerous anticolonial struggles and movements for national independence, along with the destabilizing interventions of powerful states vying for resources and influence in the Cold War era. It was a period marked by violence between and within states. While there may not have always been open war between the US and the Soviet Union, there were countless proxy wars erupting around the world in which their militaries and intelligence operatives played key roles in terms of providing combat training, funding, weaponry and arms, and more. Political dissenters or those protest movements deemed radical or in ideological opposition to the prevailing state ideologies, became the targets of systematic (and violent) state repression. Thus, organizations like the Black Panther Party were born in an era of widespread and flagrant violent state intervention in the lives of individuals, communities and nations.

In that era, Black-led movements in the United States were most popularly associated with the non-violent approach of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK), and the coalition of Christian-based organizations with whom he collaborated (Robinson 2013). After Martin Luther King, though smaller in number and more or less concentrated in northern cities, the Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad, was the most widely known, with Malcolm X (or El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) as its most famous spokesperson until the time of his assassination in 1965. If MLK's nonviolent integrationist legacy is (for better or worse) most commonly thought to be embodied by the sentiments expressed in his "I have

a dream” speech, Malcolm’s non-pacifist ideology is most famously associated with his advocacy for the pursuit of Black freedom “by any means necessary”.

In the years before he was assassinated, Malcom X left the Nation of Islam and took a decisive turn towards embracing a more nonviolent coalition-building approach, but that period is mostly overlooked by popular accounts of his position³. As far as popular imagination was concerned, MLK’s nonviolence and X’s “by any means necessary” represented opposite poles regarding the place of violence among Black political action in the United States during that era. The relative militancy of smaller organizations would most often be considered in reference to either end of the spectrum encompassed by the apparently opposite positions represented by MLK and Malcolm X.

For all intents and purposes, the most prominent organizations associated with civil rights and racial uplift for people of African descent in the United States were deeply tied to religious organizations (Clayton 2018). Taking a decidedly non-religious approach, the Panthers were open about the ways their own ideology and the source of their political will was inspired by elements of both the Christian- and Muslim-based movements. We will return to this point in the following chapter as part of the comparative analysis of the BPP and other Black organizations. We only raise it here for its general relevance to understanding the social and political context within which the Black Panther Party emerged as an actor.

3.2. Ideology

At the time of its founding in October 1966, the basic ideology of the BPP is well summarized in the Party’s ten-point program that is presented here:

[1] We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community.

We believe that Black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.

[2] We want full employment for our people.

We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the White American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

[3] We want an end to the robbery by the Capitalists of our Black community.

We believe that this racist government has robbed us, and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules were promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people. We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over fifty million Black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.

[4] We want decent housing fit for the shelter of human beings.

We believe that if the White landlords will not give decent housing to our Black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.

[5] We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society.

We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

[6] We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.

We believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like Black people, are being victimized by the White racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military by whatever means necessary.

[7] We want an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of Black people.

We believe we can end police brutality in our Black community by organizing Black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our Black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all Black people should arm themselves for self-defense.

[8] We want freedom for all Black men held in Federal, State, County and City prisons and jails.

We believe that all Black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.

[9] We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in a court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.

We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that Black people will receive fair trials. The Fourteenth Amendment of the U. S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical, and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the Black community from which the Black defendant came. We have been, and we are being, tried by all-White juries that have no understanding of the “average reasoning man” of the Black community.

[10] We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect of the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new

government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.⁴

Even the most cursory consideration of this platform reveals how immediately the Party's agenda responds to the specific experiences and conditions faced by people of African descent in the United States. In fact, almost every demand presented in the platform is fully consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted unanimously by the member states—including the United States—of the United Nations in 1948.

Violence is addressed within the platform in two respects. One is the Party's naming of the violence, discrimination, and brutality inflicted on the Black community at the hands of the police, the lack of protection from the government, and the legacy of the slavery and murder of Black people throughout the country's history. The other way that violence enters the platform is in points six, seven, and ten. In point six, the Panthers call for Black people to be exempt from the military draft, in protest of the prospect of being forced to fight and kill for a government that participates in the systematic oppression of Black people. Point six calls for Black people to be prepared to protect themselves and their communities from state and police violence "by whatever means necessary".

Violence appears in point seven first in reference to the police brutality targeting Black communities. In response to this violence, and to the lack of protection from the state, point seven calls for Black people to exercise their second amendment rights and legally arm themselves for self-defense. Finally, in point ten, the issue of violence is invoked only in implicit form. In an act of defiant irony, the final point of the Party's platform quotes nearly *verbatim* from the opening paragraphs of the United States' Declaration of Independence. By doing so, the Party founders drew attention to the parallels between their perception of the injustices suffered by Black Americans at the hand of the government, and the severity of the perceived grievances of the US founding fathers, which ultimately justified their War of Independence from England.

From another perspective, their invocation of the Declaration of Independence also links the Panthers as an organization to the tradition of Black activists going back to the nineteenth century (Foreman 2009), who repeatedly pointed to the disjuncture between the language of universal equality in America's founding ideology and the ongoing enslavement and subjugation of people of African descent—not to mention the displacement and genocide of the Indigenous peoples and nations that preceded the colonization and establishment of the United States.

Another aspect of their ideology that goes beyond the BPP notion of self-defense is the inspiration received from Marxism. Bobby Seale and Huey Newton are considered the founders of the BPP and Newton especially was very much influenced by Marxist–Leninist ideology (Hilliard 2008b). However, despite the common association of the BPP in popular discourse and mainstream analysis, in the archives of the University of Massachusetts about the BPP (one of the biggest in the world) examined for this paper, there is no explicit reference to this in their public communications and internal documents and leaflets.⁵ On the contrary, the connection between Bobby Seale and the Nation of Islam through the

admiration he had for Malcom X is clear (Varda and Hahner 2020). This connection is underpinned by two facts: the figure of Malcom X and the solidarity with Black people. Ideologically, though, both Seale and Newton were clearly not sympathetic to religion, nor to its organizational dimension that could potentially enable collective action.

Why, then, is the BPP linked to Marxism? There are likely four main reasons: the references to violence, the commitment to community social service, the implication of one of the founders (Newton) in other countries with revolutionary movements and the revolutionary imagining that informed the movement.

First, the issue of violence has been explored above, but it is worth underlining that it had to be circumscribed to self-defense. Many documents we analyzed from the archives of Massachusetts showed how to create homemade weapons. Others provided explanations for appropriate gun care and cleaning. Figure 1 appeared in a small pamphlet titled “On Organizing Urban Guerilla Units”, and gives instructions for how to build a simple bomb with a timer.

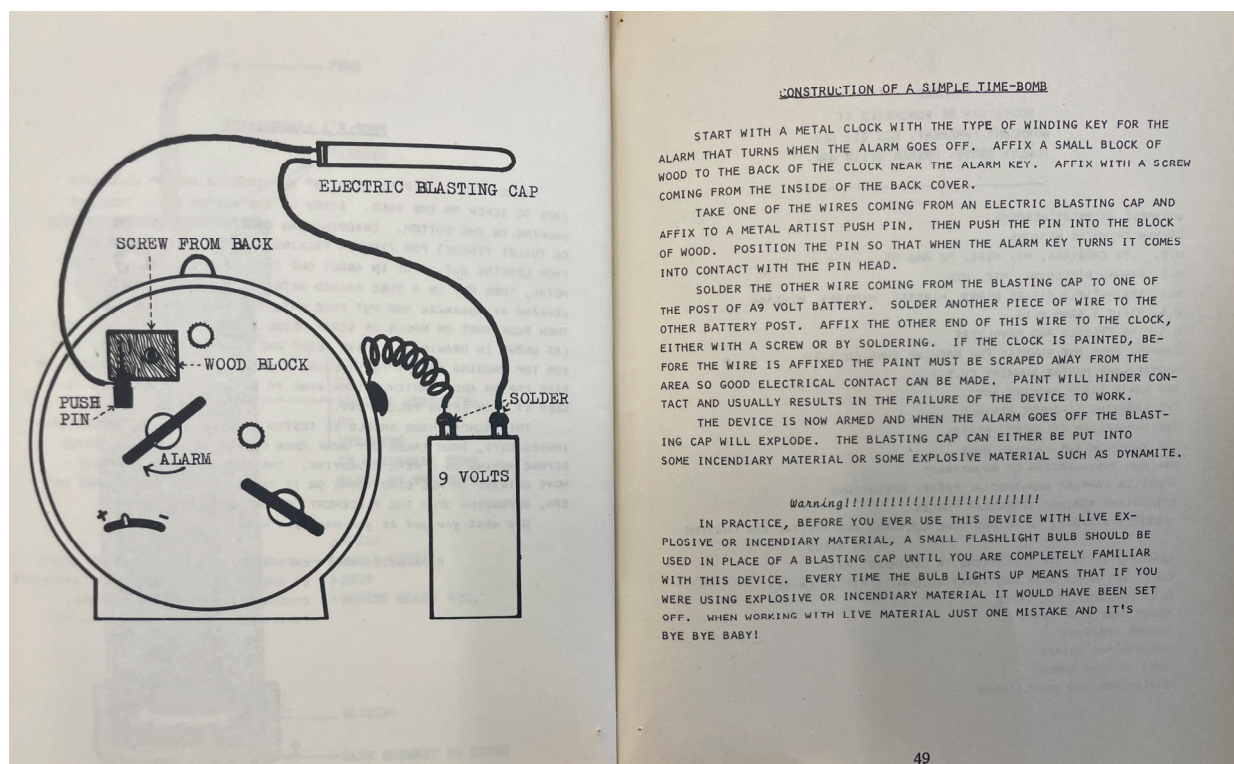


Figure 1. Construction of a simple time bomb.

Second, the BPP created a sort of network of social services to take care of Black communities that were not receiving state support (Hilliard 2008a). Prominent amongst these initiatives was food distribution, which was one of what they considered “survival programs”. They also introduced legal service offices, supported schools for Black kids and provided people with clothes, to name but a few. These endeavors led some to view the BPP as Marxists, owing to their initiative designed to empower the Black proletariat against the state and the capitalist class.

Third, Huey Newton, one of the two founders of the BPP, has commonly been characterized as Marxist, and so too the movement he sought to influence. For instance, the *Routledge Handbook of Marxism and Postmarxism* (Callinicos et al. 2022, pp. 451–59) includes a chapter on him. However, other authors, such as the sociologist and specialist in African American studies, Matthew Hughey (2005), view Huey Newton’s proposal as a radical democratic utopia. In any case, while his Marxist–Maoist inspiration is undeniable, the

characterization of the BPP as a communist movement seems to be a reach. As it will be discussed later, its clear public association with communism could have been a strategy of the state to discredit the movement, within an American context of persecution and public rejection of communism. The archival material approached for this paper included original interviews with Newton in some of the BPP pamphlets and magazines. In those documents, he never described the BPP as a communist or Marxist movement. Figure 2 shows a fragment of one of those interviews.



Figure 2. An interview with Huey Newton. Newton emphasizes the BPP's community programs and the reasons the party moved away from the violent and revolutionary rhetoric that was more prominent in its early days.

The fourth reason why the BPP is usually considered as a Marxist movement is linked to its language. The narrative of the BPP, objectivized through the writing content of its pamphlets and magazines, resembles Marxist language. For instance, the title of some of those leaflets and posters used for mass distribution are "Black liberation army", "On organizing urban gorilla units", "Workers of the world, unite", "Support the Black

rebellion”, “The struggle continues”. However, those same materials also take Malcom X and Nation of Islam as a pattern to follow and address the importance of Black liberation from slavery, either in the United States or Africa.

In brief, despite the fact that the ideology of the BPP seems to be a mixture between anticolonial/antiracial and Marxist discourse, at its deepest level, it could also simply be interpreted as a communitarian self-defense strategy developed by Black Americans that drew insights from other movements’ repertoire of actions.

3.3. *Actions and Reactions Between Security Forces and the Movement*

Building on Alimi’s proposal about how organizations radicalize, the relation between the BPP and state forces requires special attention. This attention must be particularly cautious, as this paper poses the hypothesis that the BPP’s connection to violence was exaggerated by the state in order to legitimize higher levels of repression against their militancy.

This dialogue between state repression and the emergence of violence as a strategy for self-defense is tied to the origins of the BPP in 1966. As part of the non-violent American Black Power Movement of the 1960s, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, who met at Merritt College of Oakland (California, USA), considered that police brutality and state repression against Black communities required shifting gears from mainstream movements and justified the resort to violence as a means to protect Black communities (Van Deburg 1992). Despite the fact that Martin Luther King and Malcom X, who proposed non-violence for Black empowerment, were part of Seale’s and Newton’s inspiration, so too was Robert Williams, who introduced self-defense against organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan in his work *Negroes with guns* (Williams [1962] 1998). This last influence was decisive in its articulation of an organization grounded by the notion of violence in the form of self-defense. In other words, Alimi’s proposal that one of the social factors that contribute to organizational radicalization is state repression seems to have operated in the case of the Black Power Movement. Despite being pacifist in its inception, because of police brutality and other cases of objective and perceived Black repression, an important faction emerged that considered resorting to violence as legitimate for extreme defensive purposes.

Another dimension of the dialogue between repression and the justification of violence is associated with the consolidated fact that the US Federal Government, led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), targeted the Black Power Movement, but more particularly the BPP, for its counterintelligence program that was active from 1956 to 1971. In the case of the Black movements, the program’s aim, as it appears in a FBI memo, was to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” (Churchill and Wall 2002; Gabler 2022; Churchill 2014). The program’s aim was to destabilize organizations and movements—such as the Communist Party, Socialist Worker Party, Ku Klux Klan, American Indian Movement and the BPP—that were interpreted as threats to the status quo. The means and tactics to achieve that goal included extra-legal measures: violence, infiltration, extreme surveillance, police repression, incitement to chaos inside the groups, disinformation about the organizations to denigrate them before the wider public, etc.

During that period, the cases in which members of the BPP were involved in violence grew. The year 1969 was especially intense. However, it is difficult to distinguish if those cases involving the BPP or its members in acts considered violent or criminal were real or manufactured by the counterintelligence program described above. In any case, as the state program gained intensity, so did the BPP’s link with violent acts. This fact appears to again confirm the dialogical tension posed by Alimi between organizational radicalization and state repression.

3.4. Likeminded and Opposing Movements and Connection with the General Public

According to *Dynamics or radicalization: a relational and comparative perspective*, another layer that affects organizations' spiral towards more or less violence—radicalization or deradicalization—connects to three factors: organizations' relations with likeminded groups, with opposing groups and with the general public. We will try to examine those connections in the following paragraphs.

Concerning the connections with likeminded groups, organizations tend to become more radical when other groups, with similar aims and ideology, compete to patronize a movement (Della Porta 2018) or to obtain resources within the context of scarcity. This phenomenon was clearly visible in the Colombian context, as FARC and ELN were pushing each other towards higher levels of violence and public attention (García-Magariño et al. 2022); in the competition between Al-Qaeda and Daesh; and the radicalization of Hamas, as a result of the growth of Palestine Islamic Jihad, to name a few.

In our case, the BPP was close to other groups of the Black Power Movement and most of them were pacifist. However, there are three other groups that advocated violence with which members of the BPP were related, namely Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Weather Underground Organization, and the Youth International Party, also known as the Yippies. These organizations were not Black organizations per se. However, the BPP interacted with them in different ways (Smith 2021). For instance, Bobby Seale became a member of the Yippies, and the BPP co-organized protests with Students for a Democratic Society in various cities. In any case, the nature of the relations amongst these groups seems to be better categorized as collaborative (Abraham 2018). For precisely that reason, they exchanged repertoires for collective action, including protest and the generation of a strong sense of struggle against the state (Leighton 2019). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that, although the relation with likeminded groups was mainly collaborative, that connection strengthened their determination to keep up the intensity of the struggle.

With regard to relations with opposing civil groups, it does not seem to have been the cause of further radicalization or de-radicalization. The reason for this conclusion is that the main opposing group and target of the BPP was the state. However, the previous context of racial slavery and violence against Black communities exercised by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan had fueled the rise of the BPP (Allen-Bell 2015). This antagonist group, the Ku Klux Klan, is sometimes presented as the antithesis of the BPP. However, as shown in the comparative analysis of Prof. Allen Bell, the localities where they worked, their goals and strategies were different, and they never engaged in a direct conflict. Despite this general trend, it must be said that the emergence in 1989 and, especially, the radicalization of the New Black Panther Party, under the leadership of Khalil Abdul Muhammad after 1998, was a direct reaction to the murder of the James Byrd Jr., an African American, in Texas by three Klan members (Musgrove 2019). The Southern Poverty Law Center, a well-known and well-resourced project that monitors groups associated with hate and violence in the States, affirms that the New Black Panther Party, in comparison with the BPP, is much more radical. The New Panther organization falls into what are considered hate groups, and its ideology can be described as racist and anti-Semitic (SPLC 2024c). In brief, notwithstanding the fact that during the 1960s and 1970s there was no direct opposition between the BPP and other groups, in the 1990s, the behavior of an opposing group contributed to the radicalization of another organization that had taken inspiration from the BPP.

Finally, the relations of the BPP with the wider public, particularly its loss of popularity, was one of the reasons why the BPP ceased its activities in the 1970s. As mentioned above, the BPP was founded in Oakland, California. However, in two years, as a result of the public media coverage and spectacular actions they undertook, the group became very popular

in the States and internationally. In fact, as Garret Duncan mentions in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Duncan 2024):

The Black Panther Party grew from an Oakland-based organization into an international one with chapters in 48 states in North America and support groups in Japan, China, France, England, Germany, Sweden, Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uruguay, and elsewhere.

If the number of militants is taken as an indicator of the group's public support, the references range from two to five thousand. As there are no official lists, it is not easy to determine the exact number. Public image, however, worsened soon after the initial appeal (Street 2024). The counterintelligence program probably played a major role, especially those tactics whose aim was to incite violence amongst the leaders and basis of the BPP, to divide the organization into factions and to denigrate the public image in the media, presenting the BPP as violent, prone to criminality, extreme communist, cruel and anti-American. However, the recourse of the BPP to more or less violence does not seem linked to the changing popular support. The BPP broke up from within too, perhaps naturally as a result of centralization and authoritarianism, or maybe as a consequence of the FBI program. Whatever the reason, distinguished members of the BPP progressively left the organization, the National Chapters were closed and Newton apparently came to decisions that disconnected the organization from its community base (Bloom and Martin 2016). In summary, public support for the organization was important, but it did not determine whether the BPP moved toward more or less use of violence in its strategies.

4. Characterization, Similarities and Differences with Other Black Movements

As outlined above, the BPP can be considered a part of the Black Power Movement. However, movements are neither monolithic entities nor centralized organizations. Scholars such as Sidney Tarrow (2022), Tilly (Tilly and Wood 2015), Donatella Della Porta (Della Porta and Diani 1999), Castells (1983) and Giddens (1987) offered definitions of social movements, highlighting nuances. What all definitions have in common is that social movements are wide networks of people, without central leadership, that share a strong and loose common purpose linked to a social problem they feel is unbearable. In our case, the problem was the oppression of Black communities in the United States of America.

In spite of the diversity of organizations within the movement, with regard to the religious–secular perspective, three patterns stand out: Christian-based organizations, Muslim organizations, and, to a lesser degree, secular Marxist-inspired organizations. These three types of organizations are epitomized by three entities, the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), linked to Martin Luther King Jr, the Nation of Islam (NOI), associated with Malcom X, and the BPP. Below, we examine some of their similarities and differences in terms of ideology, repertory of actions, geographic spread and militancy profile.

4.1. Worldviews and Ideology

The BPP ideology is described above from the perspective of two layers: a superficial layer, which represents a mixture between anticolonial/antiracial and Marxist discourse; and a deeper layer where the BPP ideology can be interpreted as a communitarian self-defense strategy created by Black Americans drawing insights from other movements' repertory of actions. With respect to the religious–secular dimension, the BPP was mainly a secular organization. As it will become clear, this represents an anomaly within the context of Black movements in the US, as most Black movements and organizations had a religious background and inspiration (Pimblott 2017; McDaniel et al. 2018; Fichter 1965).

On the contrary, the SCLC was a religious organization that combined a commitment to advance civil rights, especially for Black people; the doctrine of non-violence as the main strategy for social change, inspired in Gandhi; and a Christian Evangelical cosmology (Garrow 2015). In addition to these three core features, there are two other traits that shape the ideological perspective of the group and its aims: denouncing racial segregation and trying to replace the laws that legitimize the segregationist order; and empowering Black individuals to exercise political leadership (Fairclough 2001).

Finally, the NOI was also a religious organization, inspired by Islam. However, most analysts agree that the book that gave consistency to the organization, *The Holy Book of Coran*, bears little resemblance to the Quran that guides the worldwide Muslim community (Melton 2024). That is why, despite the fact that Islam is somehow linked to the NOI ideology, and that mosques have been their seat, the organization cannot be properly characterized according to common categories used to describe other prominent Islamic trends: Sunni, Shia, Sufi, Salafist, political Islamists, and so on. In addition, charismatic former leaders of the NOI, such as Malcom X, who revitalized the organization for a while, abandoned the organization (Lee 1996). To further emphasize its differences with Islam, we will present two additional elements of the NOI's collective imaginary, as promoted by two of the organization's first leaders. The first is that the founder of the NOI, Wallace Fard Muhammad, proclaimed himself to be God and that his mission, and the mission of the NOI that he founded in 1930 in Detroit, was to restore Black people to their original faith. The second is that the successor of Wallace Fard Muhammad (after his mysterious disappearance in 1934), Elijah Muhammed, proclaimed that about six thousand years ago, the Black race lived in a paradise on earth that was destroyed by the evil wizard Yacub, who created the white devil (Gardell 1996).

Aside from its connection with Islam and with the goal to uplift the Black community, the organization has always been regarded as a Black Nationalist group. Indeed, they are considered by Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC 2024b) "a Black supremacist, Black nationalist, anti-Semite, and anti-LGBTBI community organization". In fact, the SPLC keeps the NOI in its registry of hate groups based in the United States. Although the NOI has not explicitly proposed violence as a means to achieve religious or political goals, it does accept violence for self-defense purposes. Finally, members of the NOI have been involved in violent activities over time and the incendiary discourses of some of the NOI leaders have been characterized as incitement to hatred and violence against certain groups, such as Jews and those who identify as LGBTBI (Lewis 2011, pp. 295–305).

4.2. Repertory of Actions

The literature on social movements emphasizes the innovative nature of the repertory of actions used by different groups advocating social change. The case of the BPP is particularly noteworthy, probably because of the Marxian influence, as they regarded the liberation of Black communities as having a strong material dimension. That conviction, together with three others that will be discussed next, shaped their tactics: the liberation of Black American communities could not dissociate with Black liberation in other continents, such as Africa; all white people were not oppressors, but only white and Black capitalists; and self-defense was essential to protect the community.

Each conviction inspired different types of action. For instance, the need for self-defense drove the BPP to prepare leaflets and simple didactic materials to teach members how to create homemade weapons. In addition, patrols in uniform—which made them quite notorious after the first patrol in California—represent an attempt to challenge police brutality (Austin 2008). Acts of defensive violence before the police are in the same line. On another note, their conviction that not all white people were oppressors and that

emancipation should be international, led the BPP to establish collaborative initiatives with other organizations in the US and abroad. Finally, their emphasis on the material dimension of oppression stimulated the creation of many social assistance programs—some of which were mentioned above—in the fields of food distribution, school support, medical assistance, law advice, clothing, transport and ambulance services, to name a few. Their impressive repertoire of complex initiatives is an indicator of their organizational capability, on the one hand, and on the relevance given to knowledge and science on the other (Alkebulan 2007).

The repertoire of the SCLC was a bit different, as they paid more importance to the symbolic struggle and were committed to non-violent civil disobedience as their primary strategy. Though they believed that ideas could change social reality, they did not limit their focus only to the symbolic. During their early years, they focused on organizing protests and demonstrations, including conferences, against discriminatory laws, on empowering Black people to register to vote, on lobbying to improve legislation and on supporting Black candidates that might win elections (Theoharis and Woodard 2005). However, around 1962, they started to include a social and economic dimension to their endeavors, in recognition of the material dimension of oppression. Thus, in the years following 1962, they tried to spread a program for the creation of job opportunities in the Black community. Atlanta and Chicago were the two cities where the program most flourished (Joseph 2006).

In the case of the NOI, its main repertoire of actions is informed by the initial goal of the salvation of Black people through education and the knowledge of God and themselves. This goal shaped their strategy of raising mosques to serve Black communities throughout the United States, and in concerted efforts to win recruits through conversion, including those among the Black prison population (Sahib 1995). Despite the fact that this evangelist strategy was at the heart of their activities, three other factors widen the repertoire of the NOI. The first factor is that some of the NOI leaders, such as Malcom X, were skilled at public activism, so they also organized protests, demonstrations and public conferences to contribute to improve American laws that affected Black communities. A second factor was that the NOI accepts and promoted African Americans self-defense, even if by violent means. Third, and less importantly, some members of the NOI had been involved in different forms of violence and had also incited hatred (Lee 1996). This kind of violent non-self-defense action was not simply the result of overzealous individual actions undertaken by believers that did not fully adhere to the “teachings” of the NOI. Given that the ideology of the NOI is a Black nationalist supremacist one that entails prejudice against white people, Jews and the LGTBI community, those apparently autonomous and spontaneous actions can be considered a logical byproduct of the NOI ideology.

4.3. Geographic Spread and Membership Profile

The BPP started in Oakland, California, in 1966, but soon expanded into more than 20 of the United States’ biggest cities, as well as into United Kingdom and Algeria, where the BPP established chapters. This growth was quite impressive, taking into account that the BPP’s activities lasted only until 1982. As indicated above, the number of BPP members seemed to have reached 5000 people, but the number of readers of the BPP newspaper was about 250,000 (Asante and Mazama 2005, pp. 135–37).

As there are no official lists, it is not easy to describe with precision the sociodemographics of the organization’s membership, but a few facts could be useful to sketch a profile. Firstly, women played a very important role. Half of the members were women, and various women led the chapters that emerged in different cities. They also managed most of social assistance programs. This strong female presence probably contributed to the coining of the notion of *womanist*, as a feature of their ideology. For the BPP, women were

equal in dignity to men, but, in contrast with feminists, the BPP proposed that men and women should have different distinctive roles (Meghelli 2009). Secondly, the BPP attracted many urban Black youths. They are displayed in many pictures and photos wearing Black leather jackets and Black berets; often openly displaying weapons. Thirdly, the group included Afro-American intellectuals and educated youths who were responsible for the BPP's sophisticated organizational capacity in the US and beyond (Williams 2013).

By contrast, the SCLC was created in Atlanta in 1957 to coordinate local protest action throughout the Southern United States. This work involved Black churches and, particularly, Black ministers who had the ability and influence to mobilize their congregation (Kennedy 1989). Although women were involved from the beginning, men have dominated the movement up to today. Indeed, no woman has presided over the SCLC. This is not surprising, as evangelical ministers have traditionally been men. Concerning the ministers who were involved in the SCLC during the first decade of its existence, they did not represent the classical educated elite of ministers and teachers, as they were not willing to organize protests, boycotts or political campaigns for Black candidates. They considered the courts a better place to submit their requests (Fairclough 1986). Furthermore, the SCLC included hundreds of thousands of people, and was able to connect with the youth. In fact, the SCLC closely collaborated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). However, this collaboration progressively declined because, whereas the SCLC was organizing its work through ministers, the SNCC wanted to empower local communities led by the poor (Brown-Nagin 2006).

Concerning the NOI, it has been around longer than both the BPP and the SCLC: from 1930 up to the present. Their membership is estimated to be around 50,000 people, but in some periods, it may have reached as high as 100,000 (Melton 2024). Although the NOI started in Detroit, it spread across the United States and abroad, in some African countries where leaders expressed sympathy towards the NOI. Currently, the Southern Poverty Law Center identifies important bases for the NOI in Chicago, California, Texas, Florida, Georgia, New York and New Jersey (SPLC 2024a).

Concerning the gender dimension, the organization can be characterized as patriarchal. Even though about half of the NOI's members are women, only in very exceptional cases will they have leadership roles. In addition, the general demographics of the organization have changed over time, but there are two prominent member profiles. First, the organization, in its initial stages, focused on the poor, marginalized, criminals, drug abusers and imprisoned Black people. Many individuals coming from these backgrounds converted and joined the NOI. However, over time, and given the success of the economic, agricultural, educational and business activities of the organization, together with the ethics of discipline, self-sacrifice and hard work that it promoted in the believers, the new Black middle class also gradually joined the NOI (Gibson and Berg 2019). There is still an effort to teach prisoners, and to reach, in Marxist terms, the *lumpenproletariat*. Whether a result of the social mobility of former members or of the effectiveness of teaching new target groups, the Black middle class comprises most of its base. No doubt a conscious marketing strategy, the NOI's website prominent features famous Black athletes who were (or are) associated with the organization, such as Muhammad Ali (noi.org 2024). An interesting development is that, in recent years, a number of Latin and Indigenous Americans have also joined the NOI.

5. Conclusions

After (a) exploring the theoretical framework of Aitan Alimi, in connection with other scholars of radicalization and social movements; (b) applying it to the case of the BPP; and

(c) comparing the BPP with two other Black movements, represented by the SCLC and the NOI, we reached the following conclusions.

First, Alimi's theory underlines five relational social factors that drive organizations towards higher or lower levels of radicalization: contextual opportunities, state repression, relations with like-minded organizations and opposing movements, and public support. Under this lens, the BPP can be considered a sub-movement that emerged from pacifist Black movements around the notion of legitimate self-defense. This movement towards a higher level of radicalization, if absolute pacifism is taken as a standard, seems to have been the result of police brutality and repression against the Black community and members of the pacifist and non-violent Black movements. The FBI's counterintelligence program against the BPP consolidated the conviction that violent self-defense was necessary and legitimate. However, the violent, cruel and criminal imagery that emerged around the BPP should not be accepted as a neutral description of the BPP's work, but as a construct manufactured by the FBI to discredit the movement. The other factors posed by Alimi, such as the connection with like-minded organizations, opposing movements and public support did not appear to have played such a crucial role in the organization's evolution.

Second, the BPP, the SCLC and the NOI were compared by examining three parameters: ideology, repertory of actions, geographic spread and membership profile. Concerning ideology, the BPP was the only secular organization, but it had things in common with the other two religious groups. For instance, the notion of self-defense was shared by the BPP and the NOI. Empowering Black communities without prejudice against white people was shared by the BPP and the SCLC. In relation to repertoire, from the beginning the BPP paid more attention to the material dimension of oppression than the other two groups. This fact is symbolized by the community survival programs, which included health care, schooling, clothing and nurturing, to name a few. With respect to demographics and geographic spread, the SCLC was the widest-ranging movement, but the BPP established ample collaborations with other organizations in the US and abroad. In addition, the membership of the BPP and the SCLC differed slightly, but not as much as the difference with the NOI membership. This last organization concentrated on the poor, marginalized, criminals and drug abusers in the Black community, although in recent years, this has expanded to include other Black populations. The BPP, on the contrary, included very capable individuals and youth with high organizational capability.

In conclusion, the BPP is a unique Black organization in the USA, whose ideology combined anti-colonial, Marxist and anti-racial features, held together by the conviction that Black communities should be economically organized to survive and defend against the police and the state, by using weapons legally if necessary. However, the BPP's inception and development must be placed in dialogue with the police brutality and the efforts of the FBI to dismantle and discredit the organization, even by using illegal and covert means.

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Notes

- ¹ At its founding the name of the Black Panthers included “for Self-Defense”, but according to Party co-founder and chairman Bobby Seale, this latter phrase was dropped early on to make the Party less easy for the federal government and media to depict as a paramilitary or guerrilla organization.
- ² On “The Vault” (<https://vault.fbi.gov>), there are thousands of pages of de-classified (though at times quite redacted) FBI memos and reports between various field offices and the director. Prominent Black Panther leaders Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver have more than a thousand pages of individual surveillance and targeting, and the BPP as an organization repeatedly shows up as a target in COINTELPRO memos.
- ³ Similar to the Black Panther Party later, there was a gap between the narratives created and circulated by white media and state organizations about the supposed militancy of the Nation of Islam. Contrary to the aggressive image attributed to them, the Nation of Islam allowed for the notion of self-defense but was opposed to any offensive action that employed violence.
- ⁴ This version of the ten-point program is as it appeared in Huey P. Newton’s doctoral dissertation at University of California Santa Cruz, filed in 1980.
- ⁵ The Frankie Ziths collection at University of Massachusetts Amherst Special Collections and University Archives is a recent acquisition, and as such, is not fully processed. Therefore, materials referenced from the collection are described in the text but are not accompanied by a standard citation.

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Article

The Separation of Church and State as an Imperial Project in the Philippines during the Early American Colonial Period

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Abstract: This paper examines the separation of church and state in the Philippines during the early American colonial period, contextualizing it within the process of American overseas expansion and considering it as one of the projects of imperial hegemony construction. After the Spanish–American War, the United States substituted Spain as the new colonial ruler of the Philippines, legitimizing its regime as the spread of ‘civilization’ to the Filipinos. On this basis, the Americans enacted laws guaranteeing religious freedom and introduced an American-style institution dealing with church–state relations. Beyond the legal and administrative initiatives, the new regime also constructed an official narrative of the transformation of political–religious relations in the Philippine that emphasized the absolute ‘difference’ between the American human rights principle, which guaranteed freedom of worship, and the Spanish theocracy, which was dedicated to the consolidation of privileges. By legislating the separation of church and state, buying up church properties, recognizing the equality of denominations, and constructing the official imperial narrative of church–state relations, the Americans hoped to ‘teach’ Filipinos that the ‘true’ belief was rooted in the inner convictions of individual Christians, not in the authority and coercion of the hierarchical church. By disciplining the construction of ‘difference’ under tutelary colonialism, the separation of church and state movement initiated by the American colonial government in the Philippines became an important source of imperial self-endowed legitimacy.

Keywords: the separation of church and state; the Philippines; American colonial regime; politics of ‘difference’; imperial narrative

1. Introduction

Christian culture has been present in the Philippines for more than four centuries since Magellan’s fleet first introduced the Christian faith there. During the Spanish colonial period, Roman Catholicism became the official and dominant faith among Filipinos, with four major religious orders (Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscans and Recollectos), driven by the Catholic Reformation movement, sending a great number of friars to the Philippines to spread the Gospel faith. For various reasons, these orders insisted on their special rights in missionary matters. However, this caused resentment among the indigenous Filipino clergy and led to the birth of an anti-friar nationalist movement in the late 19th century. After a series of religious and political disputes, the official status of the Roman Catholic Church was revoked and Christian denominations were granted the right to legitimate missions. Since then, the number of Christian denominations in the Philippines has grown rapidly, and the Christian gospel has increasingly spread to high mountains and other remote areas. As Bishop Stephen Neill said, “no country in the world offers better possibilities for research into missionary history than the Philippines.” (Neill 1969, p. vii).

In the Philippines, the separation of church and state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the pivotal event in its Christian history. For a long time, Roman Catholicism, with the support of the Spanish colonial regime, was the only recognized

religion in the Philippines. The friars from the Peninsula insisted on the special status of the religious orders in spiritual matters and claimed to be consulted on political matters. However, with the establishment of the separation of church and state, the legitimate religious status of indigenous Christian denominations in the Philippines was recognized, and Protestant denominations from North America were also allowed to preach in the country.

To tell the story of the separation of church and state in the Philippines, most scholars use the European model of church–state relations to contextualize it in the process of state-building and politico-religious modernization, recounting how Filipinos, with the help of the American regime, gained the right to freedom of worship and ‘liberated’ themselves from the corrupt theocracy established by the Spanish friars who monopolized the priesthood. According to Peter Stanley, “the most fundamental reforms carried out by the Americans were the secularization of the government”, “with the blessing of liberal American Catholics, the near identity of church and state was ended” (Stanley 1974, p. 82). Peter Gowing adopted a narrative pattern which is similar to that of Peter Stanley in his monographic study on the separation movement in the Philippines during the early American colonial period. According to him, secularism in the Philippines arose out of Filipinos’ dissatisfaction with the Spanish friars and various other demands. It ended when Filipino sects learned to coexist peacefully under the American regime, completing the modernization of church–state relations (Gowing 1969)¹.

In fact, most research has mainly adopted the narrative model of the secularization in Europe or the United States, thus weakening the context of colonial rule that was prominent in Philippine political and religious processes, underestimating the extent of the influence of imperial cultural power. In view of this, this paper attempts to contextualize the separation of church and state in the Philippines in the process of American imperial construction and discusses how the colonial officials’ cultural hegemony shaped Philippine church–state relations in accordance with American political and religious schemas. In essence, the separation of church and state in the Philippines led by the American colonial government was seen as a part of the mission of ‘civilization’ of the American empire. Colonial officials, mainly from the American legal and political communities, believed that the legitimacy of American rule in the Philippines lay in the spread of American ‘civilization’ and the construction of a new Filipino state modeled on the United States. In terms of church–state relations, the new regime believed that its goal was to destroy the Spanish-style hierarchical church and state in order to ‘protect’ Filipinos’ religious liberty. In the context of the imperial expansion of the United States in the early twentieth century, the separation of church and state in the Philippines was not simply the result of the autonomous development of nation-building but also the product of the cultural hegemony imposed by U.S. colonial officials.

2. The American Colonial Officials’ Idea of the Separation of Church and State

When the conflict between Filipino and American forces erupted in Manila in 1899, the President of the United States appointed Jacob Schurman to head a five-man commission to investigate the situation in the Philippines. The Commission soon learned that one of the root causes of the political turmoil there was the widespread resentment among the Filipino people against the class of so-called ‘friars’. At the time of the Commission’s arrival, General Otis, the head of the U.S. Army, was discussing the release of the Spanish friars from Filipino captivity by General Aguinaldo, the President of the Philippine Republic. The Commission also noted that “for the first time in the history of the islands several priests in different parts of Luzon were murdered by the populace; many of them were arrested and held as prisoners by the Filipinos” (Report of the (First) Philippine Commission vol. 1, 1900, pp. 130–31). As the investigation progressed, the Commission learned that hostility towards the Spanish friars had erupted throughout the Philippines. When the Commission asked a local Negros elite about the attitude of the people there towards the friars, the latter replied that “it is completely hostile” and “they are enemies of the friars, and do not wish to see a friar there” (Report of the (First) Philippine Commission vol. 2, 1900, p. 419)².

In describing the conflict between the Filipinos and the Spanish friars, the Commission did not fail to emphasize the American idea of the separation of church and state and religious freedom. The Commission wrote,

under our system of government the state would confine itself to securing religious liberty, and would by no means make any distinction between religious sects. All sects would be treated alike and no special privileges would be granted to any (Report of the (First) Philippine Commission vol. 1, 1900, p. 130).

According to the Commission, the root cause of the conflict between Filipinos and religious orders was precisely the close relationship that exists between the Church or religious order and the State. At the end of their report, the Commission provided their policy recommendations on the need to bring the well-established American institution of the separation of church and state to the Philippines in order to end church–state disputes there and to popularize modern religious concepts of freedom of worship among Filipinos (Report of the (First) Philippine Commission vol. 1, 1900, p. 136). The following year, when the Taft Commission succeeded the Schurman Commission in establishing a civil government, it again stressed the need to adopt the modern political principles advocated by the United States, including the separation of church and state. The Taft Commission wrote,

Ordinarily, the Government of the United States and its servants have little or no concern with religious societies or corporations and their members. With us the Church is so completely separated from the State that it is difficult to imagine cases in which the policy of a church in the selection of its ministers and the assignment of them to duty can be regarded as of political moment, or as a proper subject of comment in the report of a public officer (Reports of the Taft Philippine Commission 1901, p. 23).

What American colonial officials were expressing was their own standard view of the relationship between church and state, with the government primarily managing public affairs and guaranteeing the legal rights of citizens. In light of this view, religion, as it is rooted in the inner beliefs of individual citizens, does not belong in the realm of public affairs. Since this principle was written into the U.S. Constitution, Americans have always followed it strictly. According to this, government and public officials usually have little or no interest in religious organizations, and similarly, the selection of ministers and the allocation of priesthoods are entirely internal matters of the religious society and have nothing to do with the government. It was seen by American colonial officials as a self-evident, modern and civilized political principle that required no further explanation. As long as it was upheld by the government, it would prevent many unnecessary conflicts between the church and state or between different sects. The Americans also believed that it was possible to implement this principle directly in the colonial Philippines and that it would quickly resolve the endless disputes between the Filipinos and the Spanish friars.

By emphasizing the political superiority of the American idea of the separation of church and state, the colonial government affirmed the importance of spreading “civilization” to the Filipinos. Before the legal status of the Philippines had been fully determined, President McKinley issued the “benevolent assimilation” proclamation and announced that it was “the earnest wish and paramount aim of the military administration to win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines by assuring them in every possible way that full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of free peoples, and by proving to them that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation, substituting the mild sway of justice and right for arbitrary rule” (Go 2008, p. 46). According to this, the popularization of the concept of human rights, freedom of worship and religious liberty among Filipinos was a source of legitimacy for the new regime, and the establishment of a basic institution of secularism to protect the right of Filipinos to worship would therefore be a priority of governance.

In fact, the American idea of the separation of church and state stems from the historical experience of the Christian Atlantic world. In the midst of the Reformation Movement

and denominational conflicts, Martin Luther articulated the idea of “two kingdoms”: God created two kingdoms, the church as the kingdom of believers and the government as the secular kingdom, with the secular government ruling by the law and the kingdom of believers ruling by the gospel; thus, the church has no secular power. After the British Civil War, John Locke, a naturalistic theist, set out to convince his countrymen that sectarian conflict over minor doctrinal disputes was unnecessary. In his *Treatise on Religious Toleration*, Locke systematically articulated the idea that political governance should be isolated from religious sects. According to him, sectarian divisions are nothing but divisions in the Church, caused by some unnecessary questions belonging to worship or canon law, and therefore, certain Christian sects ought to be tolerated, so long as they do not attempt to establish undue privileges over other sects (González 2010).

The founders of the United States, influenced by Locke, generally accepted the concept of ‘religious toleration’, which regarded the right of citizens to follow their inner convictions to believe in one God, without external coercion, to be born with nature. In 1786, the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson, systematically articulated the principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Jefferson regarded this act as one of his three greatest achievements, and he wrote that “the natural rights of the citizen are not dependent upon his religious opinions” and that “any provision, therefore, that a citizen shall not be allowed to hold public office without professing or renouncing this or that religious opinion, is, in effect, a derogation from the natural rights which he enjoys in common with other citizens” (Jefferson 1786). In a reply to a Jewish newspaper editor, Mordecai M. Noah, Jefferson explained why religious toleration was so important, because “the universal spirit of religious intolerance, inherent in every sect, disclaimed by all while feeble, and practiced by all when in power”, and the only antidote to this universal religious intolerance was “our laws, protecting our religious, as they do our civil rights by putting all on an equal footing” (Jefferson 1818).

In the 1791 Amendment to the United States Constitution, it was expressed as “the Congress of the United States shall make no law respecting an establishment of a religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. It contained two main points: (1) the government does not support any particular sect, i.e., the government’s authority is limited to public affairs, and religious concepts and the rituals associated with them are the outward manifestation of an individual’s inner convictions, which do not belong in the realm of public affairs; and (2) the government, guided by the principles of natural law, should protect the individual citizen’s right to freedom of belief and worship, and that is one of the sources of the legitimacy of democratic government.

The American idea of the separation of church and state, born out of intense sectarian conflicts in the North Atlantic, was based on a particular individualist conception which tended to divide the various dimensions of human experience into a series of dichotomous categories, such as the individual and public, state and society, sacred and secular, rational and irrational, etc. Thinking about political modernity, it means to apply these dichotomous categories to political experiences. As Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote in *Provincializing Europe*, “to think of ‘political modernity’ anywhere in the world”, it would invoke certain categories and concepts, such as “citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on”, which comes from “the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe” (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 4).

This particular individualist scheme of political modernity, combined with the empire’s self-endowed mission of ‘civilization’, became a universal value system for dealing with church–state relations during the expansion of imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The principle of protecting citizens’ religious freedom and the institutional separation of church and state were seen as both the core institution in the United States and the universal principle of political modernity. With the expansion of

American imperialism, it also became an important source of legitimacy for the United States to establish its rule in the ‘uncivilized’ tropical areas.

3. The Perception of American Colonial Officials Regarding the Church–State Relation in the Philippines

American colonial officials already had a clear set of schemes regarding the church–state relation before arriving in Manila. When they wanted to shape a new regime in the Philippines, they necessarily applied their own conceptual scheme of secularism to understand the religious and political affairs there. They studied in detail the extent and scale of the conflict between Filipinos and Spanish friars in different parts of the country. They consulted Filipino ‘ilustrado’ (enlightened) and religious leaders about Filipino perceptions of the friars, the extent of church property, the role of the clergy in politics and governance, the validity of Filipino accusations against the friars, and the possibility of returning the Spanish friars to their dioceses. From these consultations, they concluded that the Spanish had established a hierarchical theocracy both in central Manila and in the local provinces. The friars monopolized the priesthood, while the government relied on them to suppress Filipinos’ liberty. They were spiritual leaders to Filipino people, owned large tracts of the best farmland and controlled a large dependent labor force on the haciendas. They were not only prominent figures in local power but also controlled local culture and education and even the life and death of local residents.

The first fact noted by the Americans is that in the Philippines, most parish positions are held by friars rather than secular clergymen, and the religious orders controlled by Spanish friars normally refused to enroll native Filipino priest. There are 746 regular parishes, 105 mission parishes and 116 missions in the Archipelago. Of the regular parishes, all but 150 were administered by Spanish priests of the Dominican, Augustinian or Franciscan orders. And native Filipinos were not admitted to these orders (Reports of the Taft Philippine Commission 1901, p. 23).

The second fact noted by the Americans was that the Spanish friars not only controlled most priesthood, thus possessing the divine authority, but also exercised extensive political influence on local and national political matters. The Schurman Commission listed fourteen powers that the friars actually exercised in local government, which made them “reverend parochial priest[s]”. The Commission wrote, “the reverend parochial priest” in each parish, “assists in all the meetings of the municipal tribunal”, “has the right to intervene in all business conducted by the tribunal”, and “gives his opinion in regard to the approval of bills presented by the captain and advises the town officials” (Report of the (First) Philippine Commission 1900 vol. 1, pp. 57–58).

American officials knew that it would be very strange to the American readers to comprehend the fact that the friars had so much political power. They explained that although the friars were nominally limited to provide advice and oversight, and not decision-making, there were special circumstances in the Philippines that gave the friars actual political influence. First, the friars had amassed a large amount of real estate, the most important economic resource in the predominantly agrarian Philippines, and mastery of the land means direct control of the survival resources for most Filipinos. Second, unlike civil servants, whose tenure was limited, the friar’s tenure in the parish was virtually unlimited. Finally, as parish priests, the friars were usually the only educated and literate people in the parish who understood both the local dialect and Spanish. They would not only act as the spiritual leaders of the locals but also as mediators between local people and Spanish officials in secular matters (Reports of the Taft Philippine Commission 1901, pp. 24–27).

The third fact noted by the Americans was that the friars not only controlled most priesthood and wielded considerable political influence but also controlled much of the best agricultural land, establishing numerous haciendas and forcing many Filipinos to become their tenants. According to government statistics, the Roman Catholic Church held a total of about 160,000 hectares (406,370 acres) of land in the Archipelago, of which

the Dominicans held about 65,000 hectares (161,593 acres) and the Augustinians held 60,000 hectares (151,742 acres), most of it in the vicinity of Manila, which had the most fertile farmland in the Philippine Islands (Willis 1905, pp. 192–93). As soon as they landed in Manila, the Americans learned that there were numerous land disputes between the Filipinos and the Spanish friars. The Filipinos hated the friars for plundering their land, and this was the direct cause of their arrest of the friars and their revolt against Spanish rule. In 1898, the U.S. general, General Otis, acting under presidential orders and the provisions of the U.S.–Spanish Peace Treaty, took the responsibility to protect the security and property of Spanish friars. To this end, he opened negotiations with General Aguinaldo for the release of a number of Spanish friars arrested by the Philippine army. Aguinaldo, however, refused to release these Spanish priests and noted various reasons for his conduct. He charged that the religious orders had acquired large agricultural colonies by means of fraud and stated that “the products of these lands [...] were first granted”, but in the course of time, the “possession was taken” with the support of Spanish authorities, and ever since, these lands were held by the religious orders (Report of the (First) Philippine Commission 1900 vol. 1, pp. 130–31).

The fourth fact observed by the Americans was that friars enjoyed broad immunity from civil jurisdiction, which was considered as the most critical factor in making them a privileged group. The American officials had consulted a Negros municipal official, Luzuriaga: “Does the friar exercise this influence over the people by virtue of his office? Does he have any position *ex officio*?” Luzuriaga gave a positive response and said, “no complaint could be made against a priest”, even if “he took a man’s wife away from him, or made him pay an exorbitant burial or marriage fee, or induced some dying person to leave him a legacy”, because the friars were “not subject to prosecution in ordinary courts, but in the ecclesiastical court”, and it was obvious that “a native could never win his suit” as “all the judges were friars” (Report of the (First) Philippine Commission 1900 vol. 2, p. 420). For U.S. officials accustomed to the idea that all citizens should be subject to common law, the actual immunity from jurisdiction made friars the largest privileged group in the Philippines.

The fifth fact noted by the American officials was that there were many allegations about the immorality among the friars. The Americans wrote that some of the friars came from the peasant class of Andalusia, did not receive qualified theological training or education and were sent to remote areas, usually at a very young age, to preside over mission sites. As the only white man in the area, “he suddenly sees the women half clothed”, “his eyes were opened”, and if “he is not strong he will fall”. The immorality of the Spanish friar may have shocked educated Americans, but in the Philippines, where “the living together of a man and woman without the marriage ceremony is not infrequent and is not condemned”, the Spanish friar’s affair with the Filipina was not enough to cause outrage (Reports of the Taft Philippine Commission 1901, pp. 28–30). The widespread allegations of the immorality of the Spanish friars were largely the result of Filipino resentment of the extensive privileges enjoyed by the friars, and the key issue was still the lack of an institutional design for the separation of church and state similar to that in the United States.

In contrast with the separation of church and state in the U.S., colonial officials attributed all aspects of the Filipino secular conflict to the same root cause, namely, the theocracy established by the Spanish in the Philippines and the Spanish government’s heavy reliance on the orders and the friars. They summed up Philippine church–state relations as follows: in the Philippines, “the friars were not only spiritual leaders, but were actually the rulers of the local government”, and if the basic principle of American politics was the protection of the natural rights of the citizenry, Spain based its entire rule on the preservation of a hierarchical theocracy, as the friars were “the pedestal or foundation of the sovereignty of Spain.” If removed, “the whole structure would topple over.” In short, the Americans’ investigations convinced them that the relationship between the church and the state in the Philippines under Spanish rule was in every way the opposite of the

rational American system of the separation of church and state, and such an arrangement was not so much for the purpose of evangelization but for the deliberate maintenance of Filipino ignorance and the consolidation of privileges of the religious orders (Le Roy 1907, p. 127).

4. The Implementation of the Policy of the Separation of Church and State in the Early American Colonial Period

Against the American scheme of the separation of church and state, the colonial government was convinced that they were confronted not only with widespread Filipino hostility to the Spanish friars but also with an entire Spanish-style ‘theocratic’ power structure. They had to settle the specific disputes of the secular conflict on the one hand and to introduce the American institution of the separation of church and state on the other. This included the law-making of a “freedom of worship” clause similar to that in the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution, the gradual abolition of the privileges of religious orders, a proper response to the conflict between the Philippine Independent Church and Roman Catholic Church and the subjection of all denominations to the common law in order to establish the supremacy of civil government.

4.1. The Making of the Law of Separation of Church and State

In order to establish political order as soon as possible, American officials agreed that the principle of the separation of church and state should be proclaimed without delay. In early 1900, President McKinley wrote in a letter of instructions to the Taft Commission indicating that, in order to end the war, the Commission should respect the customs and habits of the natives, while at the same time, it should take care to introduce “certain great principles of government” which “we deem essential to the rule of law and the maintenance of individual freedom”. And these included the protection of private property and “the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship” (Instructions of the President to the Philippine Commission 1900, pp. 8–9).

In 1902, the United States Congress passed the Philippine Organic Act, which laid down the basic principles of the organization of the Philippine government. Section 5 was the “religious freedom” Clause. It reads as follows: “That no law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, and that the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever be allowed” (Philippine Organic Act 1902). This bill was in fact an extension of the corresponding clause in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. The First Amendment reads as follows: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. Both expressed the same two points: first, that the legislature shall not legislate in favor of or against any particular religious denomination and shall strictly observe the principle of neutrality regarding sectarian conflicts; second, that the legitimate government shall protect the freedom of belief of its citizens.

Interestingly, the formulation in the Organic Act of 1902 was very different from the separation of church and state clause written by the leaders of the Philippine Revolution in the Malolos Constitution of 1898. The Malolos Constitution reads as follows: “The State recognises the freedom and equality of all religions and the separation of Church and State (*El Estado reconoce la libertad e igualdad de todos los cultos así como la separación de la Iglesia y del Estado*).” This statute, drafted by Tomás G. del Rosario, then a member of the Philippine Revolutionary Assembly, was later submitted to the Assembly for discussion and narrowly defeated a proposal by Felipe Calderón to retain Catholicism as the national religion of the Philippines. In drafting the constitution, the delegates looked primarily at the written constitutions of France, Belgium, Mexico, Brazil, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Guatemala, believing that “the Philippines is very similar to these countries”. In fact, the delegates to the Philippine Revolutionary Assembly never considered borrowing from the United

States Constitution, as they would not consider that the Philippines was in any way similar to the United States (Malcolm 1921, pp. 94–95)³.

The difference in formulation incorporated different meanings. While the American officials considered the principle of “separation of church and state”, with its guarantee of freedom of worship, to be the source of legitimacy for the colonial government, Filipino revolutionary leaders envisioned that an independent Filipino state would rely on this principle to be free from the encroachment of foreign friars on the sovereignty of the state. This difference in perspective is succinctly captured by the political historians Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, as they point out that while “nineteenth-century Spanish officials and *ilustrados* who thought about the problems of the Philippines thought about the state”, “the new twentieth-century governors, set on proving the superiority of American rule, thought about democracy” (Abinales and Amoroso 2017, p. 134).

4.2. U.S. Sent Taft as an Unofficial Envoy to the Vatican

Despite the U.S. colonial government’s initial determination to introduce the modern political institution of the separation of church and state in the Philippines, it was not easy for U.S. officials to take into account the views of different interest groups when implementing this policy. In the Philippines, the government was obliged to address Filipino grievances as expeditiously as possible. The investigations conducted by the Shurman and Taft Commissions, in addition to the military government led by Generals Otis and MacArthur, concluded that the primary source of ongoing unrest among the Filipino population was the widespread discontent against the Spanish friars. The capacity to forestall the return of the Spanish friars to their original parishes became a pivotal concern, one that tested the credibility of the American colonial government. Concurrently, the government was obliged to take into account the criticisms directed at it by Catholics in the United States. Following the commencement of hostilities in the Spanish–American War, members of the Catholic community in the United States expressed concern that the actions of the U.S. military against Spain would result in widespread animosity towards Catholics. Imposing a decree in the Philippines to expel the Spanish friars at this juncture was likely to exacerbate the concerns of Catholics in the United States, leading them to perceive that the United States was not merely acting to defeat Spain but also intended to suppress the Roman Catholic Church (Reuter 1982, pp. 105–10).

The above dilemma required the first Philippine governor-general, William Howard Taft, to be flexible enough to calm Filipino discontent while at the same time assuaging the concerns of Catholics both domestically and internationally. Upon his arrival in Manila, Taft initiated negotiations with Archbishop Chappell of New Orleans, who had been dispatched by the Holy See. The objective was to reach an agreement that would result in the voluntary departure of the Spanish friars from the Philippines in a manner that would be as decent as possible and would also encompass the sale of the friars’ land holdings. However, Bishop Chappell, who had arrived in Manila prior to Taft, developed a profound sense of empathy for the plight of the friars in the Philippines upon learning about the specific circumstances of the Catholic Church in the Philippines. In his view, the accusation in the press that the religious orders had appropriated vast tracts of land was unsubstantiated. He learned that the religious orders lacked alternative sources of income, given the extensive charitable work they conducted in the Philippines. Moreover, the land they possessed was the sole source of revenue that enabled them to sustain this charitable work. Chappell posited that the ongoing conflict had precipitated a dearth of religious services in the Philippines. He contended that the continued deportation of Spanish friars by the U.S. government would likely result in the complete dissolution of the religious service in the Philippines (Reuter 1982, pp. 111–12).

It would appear that Taft and Chappell would not reach any agreement on the Philippine church problem, as they almost held the opposing views on the situation of the friars and religious orders. In light of these circumstances, Theodore Roosevelt, who assumed the presidency of the United States in 1902, along with the Secretary of War, Elihu Root,

facilitated an unofficial visit by Taft to the Vatican, with the objective of reaching a direct settlement of the Philippine church problem with the Vatican. Due to the unofficial nature of the trip, President Roosevelt did not provide Taft with any official diplomatic documentation. Instead, he furnished Taft a letter of instruction from Elihu Root, which read as follows:

The President wishes you to take the subject up tentatively with the ecclesiastical superiors who must ultimately determine the friars' course of conduct, and endeavor to reach at least a basis of negotiation along lines which will be satisfactory to them and to the Philippine Government, accompanied by a full understanding on both sides of the facts and of the views and purposes of the parties to the negotiation; so that, when Congress shall have acted, the business may proceed to a conclusion without delay. You are accordingly authorized, in the course of your return journey to Manila, to visit Rome, and there ascertain what church authorities have the power to negotiate for and determine upon a sale of the lands of the religious orders in the Philippine Islands, and if you find, as we are informed, that the officers of the church at Rome have such power and authority you will endeavor to attain the results above indicated (Baldwin 1902, p. 3).

The United States sought to establish a direct agreement with the Vatican, thereby circumventing the ecclesiastical representatives in Manila. It was anticipated that the ecclesiastical superiors in the Vatican would comprehend the American officials' concern and assist the U.S. government in facilitating the decent withdrawal of the Spanish friars from the Philippines. However, the United States was unable to make its request to the Vatican through the established diplomatic channels and was compelled to engage in informal consultative negotiations between Taft and the ecclesiastical superiors (Alvarez 1992, pp. 361–62). As the instruction letter prepared by Root said, it “will not be in any sense or degree diplomatic in its nature, but will be purely a business matter of negotiation by you as Governor of the Philippines” (Baldwin 1902, p. 3).

4.3. *Vatican's Response to Taft's Proposal and Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical*

Taft anticipated an early and satisfactory agreement with the Holy See. However, the Vatican's initial response just made Taft feel “not unsatisfactory”. The Vatican accepted in principle the offer to purchase the friars' estates while requesting that the details of the purchase plan be left to the apostolic delegate in Manila. This was precisely what Taft had sought to avoid. Additionally, the Vatican proposed that the Spanish friars should be permitted to remain in their parishes, as they believed that the popular antipathy toward orders and friars could be solved by exhorting the orders to return to a proper spiritual life and avoid participation in civil affairs. In this regard, the Vatican refused to recall the Spanish friars from the Philippine Islands as a means of addressing the ‘friar problem’ there (Alvarez 1992, p. 365).

Why did the Vatican not immediately agree to Taft's proposal? David Alvarez points out that “the vague wording of the American proposal had obscured Washington's main goal (the expulsion of the friars) and confused the papal negotiators.” The Americans' actual intention was that, subsequent to the United States' purchase of the orders' property at a “full and fair” price, the orders would utilize the proceeds of the sale to facilitate the withdrawal of Spanish friars from the Philippines. However, the instruction letter lacked clarity regarding the subsequent disposition of the friars and emphasized that the negotiations to secure such agreement would be “purely a business matter” without any diplomatic overtones (Alvarez 1992, pp. 364–66).

In fact, the Vatican proposed an alternative plan for the reform of the Church in the Philippines beyond the confines of the “purely business matter” framework established by the United States. In December 1902, Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical letter, recommending “a plan of action and of organization to be sought promptly and with great care [...] to provide against the relaxation of ecclesiastical discipline” in the Philippine Islands. In the introductory section of the encyclical, Pope Leo XIII acknowledged the

significant contributions of the Spanish government and friars to the advancement of the mission and civilization in the Philippines, while he also noted that “the change which the fortunes of war have wrought in civil matters has also affected religion there”. The remainder of the encyclical sets out 12 measures proposed by the Vatican for reforming the Church in the Philippines, including an increase in the number of bishoprics, improved training for Filipino priests and a larger role for them in Church affairs, in the enforcement of ecclesiastical discipline and reforms and so on. Among the significant aspects pertaining to the friars in the Philippines are the following:

First, the training of native Filipino clergy should be expedited; however, it is imperative that they be formally ordained to the priesthood only after they have undergone rigorous training in virtue and learning. As the Pope said,

Since it is proved by experience that a native clergy is most useful everywhere, the bishops must make it their care to increase the number of native priests, in such a manner, however, as to form them thoroughly in piety and character, and to make sure that they are worthy to be entrusted with ecclesiastical charges.

Second, the clergyman should prioritize evangelization and religious service and refrain from involvement in secular political disputes. This matter was particularly important in the Philippines at that time. As the encyclical wrote,

Above all things the clergy should hold to the rule that they are not to allow themselves to be mixed up in party strife. Although it is a maxim of common law that he who fights for God should not be involved in worldly pursuits, we deem it necessary that men in holy orders in the present condition of affairs in the Philippine Islands should avoid this in a special manner.

Similar, to the members of the Religious Orders, Leo XIII “recommend earnestly to discharge holily the duties which they have assumed when pronouncing their vows, ‘giving no offense to any man.’”

Finally, the clergyman should reverence the authority of the civil government, as St. Paul elucidated in his teachings, “for all power is from God”. And the church, as the “brotherhood in Christ is unanimity in heart and in soul”, should “address themselves with paternal charity to all the inhabitants of the Philippine Islands, and to exhort them with all the persuasion to maintain union in the bonds of peace” (Pope Leo XIII 1903, pp. 372–79).

In essence, the majority of the Pope’s proposed plan of ecclesiastical reform is not in contradiction with the principle of the separation of church and state as proposed by the United States. The encyclical exhorts the clergy to prioritize religious endeavors, adhere to doctrinal and ecclesiastical tenets, refrain from engagement in secular controversies, and acknowledge the newly constituted secular authority of the United States. This created an environment conducive to the implementation of the U.S. policy of the separation of church and state within the Philippines and alleviated concerns among Catholics in the U.S. that the government might be pursuing an anti-Catholic agenda.

The primary point of contention between the Vatican and the United States pertained to the disposition of the Spanish friars in the Philippines. The United States requested that the Vatican arrange the Spanish friars to withdraw from the Philippines on a voluntary basis. The Vatican, however, maintained that the disputes between the friars and the people could be resolved by enhancing theological training, reaffirming church discipline and prioritizing religious services. Moreover, the Vatican emphasized the necessity of secularizing the diocese, advocated for the expeditious formation of local Filipino clergy and pledged to assist the Philippines in establishing additional seminaries and providing financial assistance to local clergy for further training in Rome. In short, the Vatican acknowledged the necessity for ecclesiastical reform in the Philippines to respond to the growing unrest among the Filipinos against the Spanish friars.

4.4. The Removal of the Privileges of the Friars and the Religious Orders

It was the view of United States officials that the popular discontent with the Spanish friars and the rise of the movement of the Philippine Independent Church were both rooted in the privileged position of the Spanish friars and the Catholic religious orders within the Philippines. Consequently, the initial measure taken to implement the policy of the separation of church and state there was to dismantle their privileges. This perspective was aligned with the progressivist reform paradigm that was prevalent in the United States at the time. This paradigm posited that the removal of privilege and corruption was a necessary precursor to moral upliftment and civilizational progress. In official documentation, the United States government made it clear that their opposition was not to Catholicism itself but rather to any privileges that were incompatible with democratic political principles. They held the view that the Filipino public's resentment of the Spanish friars was based on similar grounds. As the Schurman Commission reported,

The Filipinos do not antagonize the church itself; they are faithful and loyal to it; their hostility is aimed at the religious orders; they demand that the parishes should be filled by priests who are not friars; they claim that this is a law of the church and should be the practice in the Philippines (*Report of the (First) Philippine Commission vol. 1, 1900, p. 131*).

In order to remove the privileges of the friars and religious orders, the U.S. colonial government identified two key policies: first, to reduce the economic power of the religious orders, especially by finding ways to address the problem of the religious orders' ownership of large amounts of hacienda land; and second, to replace the Spanish friars with American liberal Catholics without disrupting the basic organization of the Roman Catholic Church (Willis 1905, p. 192).

The first key policy was to dismantle the friars' economic power and repossess the vast amount of land held by the orders. According to the second paragraph of Article VIII of the treaty of peace, negotiated at Paris, the new regime should protect "the property which by law belong to the peaceful possession of property of all kinds, public or private establishments, ecclesiastical or civic bodies, or any other associations" (*Report of the (First) Philippine Commission vol. 1, 1900, p. 131*). In effect, the Americans, without fully understanding the true state of affairs in the Philippines, were tied up by a sweeping guarantee of the personal and property rights of the very men who had done the most to drive the Filipinos to insurrection (Gowing 1969, p. 207). Restricted by the stipulations of the peace treaty, the United States had to try to appease Filipino discontent while protecting the religious orders' property. The colonial government eventually offered a compromise whereby the government would issue bonds to raise funds to redeem the orders' estates and sell the properties at auction to the Filipino people. In 1902, the Philippine Commission drew up a detailed program of redemption, the main elements of which were the (1) authority to acquire and hold real estate by the exercise of the right of eminent domain; (2) permission to use such authority in acquiring the friar lands; (3) power to issue 4.5% five-thirty bonds for the purchase of the lands; and (4) authority to treat the acquired lands as a part of the public domain and to sell, convey or lease them (Willis 1905, p. 196). By the end of 1903, Taft had reached an agreement with representatives of the Vatican according to which the colonial government would contribute USD 7.4 million towards the redemption of the vast majority of the properties held by the churches in the Philippines. In 1904, the Commission passed Act 1120, which placed all lands acquired from the orders under the administration of the Bureau of Public Lands and directed that they be subdivided and sold as soon as possible (Golay 1997, p. 92).

The second key policy in the removal of the friars' privileges was the government's encouragement of sending American liberal Catholics to the Philippines to replace the Spanish friars. Given the widespread hostility to the friars in the Philippines, the colonial government did not dare to hastily agree to allow them to return to their original parishes at the end of the war. At the same time, however, the government had to comply with the provision in the U.S.–Spanish peace treaty that required the United States to protect the

personal security of the Spanish friars. As in the case of the friars' lands, the United States again offered a project of compromise. On his travel to Rome, Taft proposed to the Pope that American Catholic priests be appointed to archbishop and other senior priesthood positions in the Philippines. The Americans believed that American priests would be willing to cooperate with the U.S. government, just as the Spanish friars were loyal to Spain. What to do with the Spanish friars was nominally left to the Vatican (Willis 1905, p. 203).

How to make the Spanish friars withdraw from the Philippines in a 'decent' way had preoccupied Taft for several years. Nevertheless, it proceeded in a surprisingly expeditious manner. As mentioned above, following Taft's diplomatic mission to the Vatican, the Pope declined the American proposal to withdraw the Spanish friars from the Philippines with immediate effect. Furthermore, he was reluctant to issue a public bill urging them to do so. However, in light of the Vatican's subsequent actions, it appears that no further steps were taken to restore the power and status of the Spanish friars in the Philippines. This may suggest that the Vatican took into account the actual situation in the Philippines and respected the demands of the U.S. government. This tacit arrangement greatly facilitated the process of replacing the Spanish friars with Catholic priests from the United States or other countries. In fact, the problem of the Spanish friars just disappeared after several years. Some Spanish friars were killed during the war, and others fled to Manila after the Spanish defeat to seek repatriation. By the end of 1898, there were still 1013 friars in the Philippines. By December 1902, however, there were only 380 friars left, and a year later, there were only 246. Many of the remaining friars were very old and wanted to live out their lives in the place where they had given so many years of their lives. The Vatican did nothing to stop the decline in the number of Spanish friars, and in 1903, all Spanish friars who had been bishop in the Philippines 'resigned' and were replaced by American Catholic priests. Meanwhile, the cultivation and promotion of native Filipino clergy proceeded apace in response to the Vatican's call, which resulted in the appointment of the inaugural Filipino bishop in 1905 (Golay 1997, p. 93). The problem of the withdrawal of the Spanish friars was thus settled.

4.5. To Submit the Disputes between Roman Catholics and the Philippine Independent Church to Judicial Decision

In addition to purchasing the Hacienda land held by orders and arranging the departure of Spanish friars from the Philippines, the colonial government also had to determine how to deal with the sectarian division that arose in the Philippines during this period. When the Americans arrived, the Catholic Church in the Philippines was undergoing a schismatic movement, with local priest Gregorio Aglipay leading Filipino believers out of the Roman Catholic Church to form the *Iglesias Filipina Independiente* (Philippine Independent Church) or Aglipayan Church.

Rumor has it that when the Americans were about to occupy Manila, Archbishop Nozaleda, fearing that the Church would lose all its property, secretly ordained Gregorio Aglipay as Archbishop of the Philippines and asked him to take charge of the Church's property. After the war, however, Nozaleda decided that he no longer needed Aglipay's help and refused to recognize any 'deal' with Aglipay or his episcopal status. Aglipay, on the other hand, declared that he would lead three million Filipino believers to break away from the Roman Catholic Church and organize their own independent church, and in October 1902, Aglipay was inaugurated as "obispo maximo (supreme bishop)" of the new church. The Aglipayan set out their doctrinal differences from the Roman Catholics; they said,

Its doctrines are rationalistic, conforming rigorously to the results of modern science. It accepts Darwinism, harmonizing it with Biblical doctrine. It denies the trinity of the persons of the Divinity, but believes in a trinity of attributes and names. The explanation of this idea accepted by the church is entirely new and peculiar to itself, founded upon reasoning based on scriptural text and upon rationalist writings. It denies original sin, as well as the view that the

consequences of such sin were expiated through Jesus Christ, but it maintains that Christ's sacrifice has redeemed us from our own errors, weaknesses, and passions by means of his divine attributes and inimitable example, but not through an actual material sacrifice. It aims in its constitution and roles to re-establish a more pure democracy and the common holding of wealth which Jesus preached and the apostles practiced. The explanation afforded by its catechism of the creation of the world follows recent geological discoveries (Willis 1905, p. 209)⁴.

In addition to highlighting the rational and scientific tenets of their teachings, the Aglipayans also underscored their nationalist identity, asserting that they had supplanted the Roman Catholics as the "Philippine Catholics". They claimed,

The Roman Church has suffered greatly from desertion and defection because the Pope undertakes to maintain in the parishes friars who are most odious to the country, owing to the great evils they have caused it. The American bishops likewise have proved themselves very distasteful to the people because of their efforts to sustain the friars. For that reason, of the 6,000,000 or 7,000,000 Filipino Catholics formerly counted by it, it would be difficult to find 1,000,000 now remaining. The former members have chiefly passed over to the Iglesia Filipina, which is the representative of the wishes of Philippine Catholics (Willis 1905, p. 210).

In general, we could say that while the American colonial government was trying to pacificate the religious and political disputes through the establishment of the institution of the separation of church and state, and the Vatican or the Roman Catholic Church was trying to assuage the Filipinos' discontent through ecclesiastical reform, the Aglipayans intended to satisfy the nationalistic appeal of the Filipinos through sectarian independence and rational purification of the doctrines. In fact, the Aglipayans, as well as the Roman Catholics, recognized the secular authority of the American civil government. They even sought the help of the government to have them recognized as a legitimate heir to Roman Catholics in the Philippines.

The conflicts between the Philippine Independent Church and Roman Catholic Church lasted for several years. As the 1904 Government Report stated, "We regret to say that there still continues to be much controversy and ill feeling between the Independent Filipino Church and the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church in regard to the ownership of churches, convents, and cemeteries in many localities" (The Annual Report of the Philippine Commission 1904, p. 19).

The colonial government, committed to the separation of church and state, had to decide whether or not to recognize the Aglipayan Church as a legitimate Christian denomination. When the Aglipayans declared that their main aim was "to re-establish evangelical truth, disfigured as it has been by the Romanists, and to restore the pre-eminence of the Philippine clergy, which has been usurped by the friars" (Willis 1905, p. 215), some American officials felt that this made them look more like political radicals than a peaceful Christian denomination. Nevertheless, in order to appease the Filipinos as quickly as possible, the colonial government decided to recognize the legal status of the Aglipayans. As the Americans observed, most ordinary Filipinos were unaware of the dispute between the Aglipayans and the Roman Catholics; all they knew was that the two could offer similar religious services, celebrate the same holidays, impose the same religious duties and follow the same principles of conduct. For the government to recognize the legitimacy of one while outlawing the other would appear to be a breach of its commitment to treat all faiths equally.

The colonial government also had to settle property disputes between the Aglipayans and the Roman Catholics. Gregorio Aglipay himself had a good relationship with Taft, and when Taft made harsh accusations against the friars and suggested that they be stripped of their agricultural property, it gave the Aglipayans hope that the United States would support their claims to church property. The Aglipayans suggested that the huge stone churches that stood in the Philippine Islands had been built on the exploitation of the

poor Filipino people, as the Roman Church had forced the Filipino people to provide free labor, pay tithes and induce common people to give money and inheritance to the Church on their deathbeds. The church property was really the blood and sweat of the Filipinos, extracted by the friars through the most brutal oppression and the most calculating appeals to superstitious fear. On this basis, the Aglipayans proposed that the church property should be returned to the Filipinos, who would then decide to whom it should be entrusted for safekeeping.

While the government acknowledged the validity of the Aglipayans' complaint, it also argued that property disputes between sects are civil disputes that should be decided by the courts and that the government should not overstep its authority in favor of one sect or the other. In this regard, the government insisted that these property disputes be adjudicated by the Philippine Supreme Court. Governor Taft issued an executive order stating that in every case the church should remain in the hands of the present beneficial owner first, and if the other sect contested it, he should prepare the evidence, submit it to the court and await the court's decision. As a result, in most cases, the current priest of the church was treated as the beneficial owner of the church, and the support of the priest and congregation was an important consideration in the ownership of church property. In January, 1905, the Secretary of War approved a proposed Act of the Insular Government conferring authority upon the Supreme Court of these Islands to hear cases relating to Church property claims and pronounce a final decision thereon (Foreman 1906, p. 606). The outcome was a six-to-one decision by the Supreme Court in 1906 favoring the Roman Church, as a majority of the court were Catholics (Golay 1997, p. 93). The Roman Catholics, by their recourse to the courts, received back most of their churches (Robertson 1918, p. 342). There had also been cases where the vesting of church property had not ended up following legal judgements. In La Paz, a suburb of Iloilo, all the natives received an Aglipayan priest to have the right to use the parish church for worship. The Spanish Catholic acting bishop brought a suit to regain possession of the property, but the case was dismissed by the American judge before whom it came up, on the ground that no evidence of titles of ownership or possession had been presented by the Catholic party to him. Yet, a few months later, a Catholic bishop with a crowd of armed retainers took possession of the church. Strangely, the government did not help the Aglipayans to regain possession of the church after the Catholic priests had illegally seized it (Willis 1905, p. 217).

The judicial resolution of sectarian disputes was part of the colonial government's policy of the separation of church and state. The Americans believed that all people were equal before the law, that the judicial process did not take into account the political aspirations of denominations or have anything to do with doctrinal controversies and that the judiciary followed the same fair and approved procedures and treated all denominations equally. This was, in effect, a colonial application of the idea of 'legal reformism' within the United States.

While these disputes between the Roman Catholics and the Aglipayans were no longer regarded by the colonial government and Filipinos as significant political and religious conflicts, they resulted in a gradual diminution of the influence of the movement of the Philippine Independent Church, as the claims put forward by the Aglipayans were no longer perceived as matters of religious or political consequence; instead, they were only regarded as civil cases pertaining to the property rights of churches. As James Robertson described, "the schism diminished greatly" as a result of "the necessity of appeal to the courts", and with the lapse of time, "the fundamental reasons that lay at the bottom of the schismatic church became weakened, the institution [...] continued to diminish in numbers and importance, and [it became] an incident" (Robertson 1918, p. 342).

Moreover, the waning influence of the Aglipayans in religious affairs could be attributed to a number of factors. Primarily, the majority of the Filipino populace was unaware of the schism between the Aglipayans and the Roman Catholics. Instead, they perceived the two as offering comparable religious services, celebrating analogous holidays, imposing analogous religious duties and adhering to analogous principles of behavior

(Willis 1905, p. 210). In other words, there was no compelling reason for the general public to abandon the religious services provided by Roman Catholic priests in favor of the teachings of Aglipayan priests. Second, despite the emphasis placed on the purification of the Roman Catholic Church by the Aglipayans, the majority of religious critics at the time did not perceive their teachings as a catalyst for the renewal of the religious or spiritual cause (Stuntz 1904)⁵. Third, the Aglipayans may have lacked the key resources needed to train indigenous clergies to spread their new doctrines (Robertson 1918, p. 335).

The Protestant churches, which were legally allowed to preach in the Philippines after the passage of the religious freedom clause, faced a dilemma similar to that of the Aglipayans. They were also unable to provide more religious services to the general public, who were not too concerned with doctrinal differences. In addition, most Protestant priests were from the United States and spoke English, a language still unfamiliar to the Filipino people at the time, which meant that their religious work would be mainly confined to the American community in the Philippines. As Henry Parker Willis, an American banker and observer interested in Philippine problems, wrote in 1905, “thus far, the actual hold gained by the Protestant churches has been small” (Willis 1905, p. 221).

In a sense, the American colonial government’s policy of the separation of church and state inadvertently helped the Roman Catholic Church consolidate its position as the most influential religious sect in the Philippines. The depoliticization of religious disputes brought about by the separation of church and state led to the gradual loss of political momentum for the movement of the Philippine Independent Church, which had grown out of the nationalist atmosphere. It also relieved the Catholic Church in the Philippines of too many civil duties, which had been the main cause of discontent among Filipinos towards the Spanish friars. Moreover, the religious disputes and sectarian schism in the Philippines drew the Vatican’s attention to the serious crisis facing the Roman Catholic Church there and prompted the Vatican to propose a detailed plan of ecclesiastical reform. The Philippine Independent Church, which had the potential to become the Roman Catholic Church’s main rival, had been unable to sustain the denomination’s rapid growth due to a lack of clergy and financial resources. According to the 1918 census, Roman Catholicism remained the number one faith among Filipinos, while the Aglipayans only gained some influence in provinces like Iloco Norte (Census of the Philippine Islands vol. II, 1918, pp. 49–52).

5. The Separation of Church and State in the Philippines and the ‘Civilization’ Logic of the American Empire

Since the issuance of President McKinley’s ‘benevolent assimilation’ proclamation, to spread ‘civilization’ has become the source of legitimacy for U.S. rule in the Philippines. In essence, the separation of church and state led by the colonial government was an example of the imperial logic of ‘civilization’. The government’s legislation on religious freedom was modeled on the U.S. Bill of Rights, the acquisition of religious property balanced the principle of protecting private property with the homesteader–citizen ideal of the Homestead Act, the regulation of sectarian disputes followed the spirit of Thomas Jefferson’s ‘religious toleration’ and, most importantly, the dismantling of the privileges of the Spanish monastic orders followed the reform pattern during the progressive movement to reduce privilege and corruption in order to promote true democracy. These actions were all in correspondence with the imperial project of ‘civilization’, which means introducing “certain great principles which we [Americans] deem essential to the rule of law and maintenance of individual freedom” (Instructions of the President to the Philippine Commission 1900, p. 8).

Indeed, as Julian Go puts it, in analyzing the politics of meaning in tutelary colonialism, this ‘civilization’, consistent with the internal cultural beliefs or value systems of American colonial officials, required, for its actual operation in the colonies, a set of external symbolic practices (Go 2008, p. 16). It required repeated references by high-ranking colonial officials in government documents to demonstrate the legitimacy of the concept, as well as repeated proclamations on important occasions involving the practice of rule to emphasize its

universality. It also required the construction of a richly detailed official narrative with impeccable logic, in which the colonial officials who carried out the mission of ‘civilization’ are portrayed as the protagonists of the story and in which their administrative and judicial orders were interwoven with that civilized process.

Following the imperial logic of “civilization”, the first action of U.S. officials was to keep preaching to the Filipinos that the legitimate government has the power to enforce the separation of church and state and the duty to protect freedom of worship and that this is the only way to deal with the church–state relations recognized by civilized modern governments.

In 1900, President McKinley’s Letter of Instruction to the Taft Commission suggested that the future Philippine government would have to balance two principles of governance: to respect the habits and customs of the Filipinos on the one hand and to introduce certain great principles of civilized government on the other. These civilized principles include that “no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law” and “no law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, and that the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship without discrimination or preference shall forever be allowed” (Instructions of the President to the Philippine Commission 1900, pp. 8–9). According to this, a civilized government should take responsibility for protecting the religious freedom of individual citizens while not supporting any particular denomination.

Apart from repeated references in government documents, the American version of protecting religious freedom was also repeatedly preached in public by American colonial officials. General Arthur MacArthur, the governor of military administration, issued a pledge to the Filipino people on 6 July 1900 which, among other things, popularized the American concept of the separation of church and state among the Filipinos:

As under the Constitution of the United States complete freedom is guaranteed, and no minister of religion can be interfered with or molested in following his calling in a peaceful and lawful manner, and there must be a complete separation of Church and State, so here the civil government of these Islands hereafter to be established will give the same security to the citizens thereof, and guarantee that no form of religion shall be forced by the government upon any community or upon any citizen of the Islands; that no minister of religion in following his calling in a peaceful and lawful manner shall be interfered with or molested by the government or any person; that no public funds shall be used for the support of religious organizations or any member thereof; that no official process shall be used to collect contributions from the people for the support of any church, priest or religious order; that no minister of religion, by virtue of his being a minister, shall exercise any public or governmental office or authority and that the separation of Church and State must be complete and entire (Gowing 1969, pp. 209–10).

Since then, America’s idea of the separation of church and state has continued to appear in various government documents and accounts by American scholars. As mentioned above, when the Schurman and Taft commission reported the ‘friar question’ in the Philippines, they would refer to the American concept of the separation of church and state. Through repeated references and proclamations in a series of government documents, the U.S. version of the separation of church and state was molded into a self-evidently civilized political norm.

Beyond government documents and public pronouncements, a series of detailed official narratives were also constructed to explain the legitimacy of government behaviors to ordinary Filipinos. While the colonial government implemented secular measures in the executive and judicial spheres, the official narrative was responsible for explaining the significance of these actions in the historical process of ‘civilization’ and documenting how the United States had liberated the Filipinos from Spanish theocracy.

For instance, when the American historian David Barrows was commissioned by the government to write a brief history of the Philippines for the four-volume Census in 1903, one of his focuses was the transformation of the church–state relationship. According to his narrative, the oppressive Spanish regime was the historical root cause of all of the friars’ problems; it was “history that made the friars responsible for the errors committed by the Spanish government” in the Philippines; the arrival of the Americans meant the end of the theocracy and that “the power of the monastic orders has been completely destroyed” after “having lost support of the government” (Barrows 1905, pp. 340–46).

Similarly, John Foreman, another famous writer who had provided advice for the American colonial government, described the change the Americans brought to Philippine church–state relations as follows: at the outset, “the common people were quite unable to comprehend that under American law a friar could be in their midst without a shred of civil power or jurisdiction”, and it was “with the American domination that came free cult”, and “no public money is disbursed for the support of any religious creed; no restraint is placed upon the practice of any religion exercised with due regard to morality.” (Foreman 1906, p. 594). Similar historical narratives almost always began with the theocracy under Spain and, after a series of struggles between the Filipinos and the Spanish friars, heralded the end of the church–state disputes under the United States, where the Filipinos were granted permanent religious freedom.

A series of differences permeate the official narratives, which were deliberately constructed by U.S. officials and scholars to underline the absolute distinctions between U.S.- and Spanish-styled church–state relations. The first is the difference in regime legitimacy between the American way of government and church governance based on ‘democracy’, ‘consent’ and “rule of law” and the Spanish way of government and church governance based on ‘privilege’, ‘monopoly’ and ‘suppression’.

For example, in his account of the conflict between the church and state in the late Spanish colonial period, David Barrows noted that successive Philippine revolts were related to the Spanish friars’ desire to continue to monopolize the priesthood. Barrows’ *History of the Philippines* was widely used as a Philippine history textbook in public schools during the American colonial period. In the section of the book dealing with the history of the late Spanish colonial period, he focuses on the Apolinario de la Cruz Rebellion of 1841. He suggests that the rebellion arose from the Spanish clergy’s unwillingness to recognize the spontaneous religious fervor of the Filipinos, their refusal to acknowledge their autonomous understanding of their faith and preventing Filipinos from holding any position of priesthood. He wrote, “Apolinario de la Cruz, a young Filipino, came up to Manila filled with the ambition to lead a monastic life, and engaged in theological studies”; through “his attendance upon lectures and sermons and by imitation of the friar preachers of Manila”, he became an orator and was able to “arouse great numbers of his own people by his appeals.” However, in order to monopolize the priestly power of spiritual services, the Spanish friars refused to recognize Apolinario’s religious zeal. Instead of “sympathizing with these [Filipinos] religious aspirations”, the Spanish friars “viewed the rise of a Filipino religious leader with alarm”, as “their policy never permitted to the Filipino any position that was not wholly subordinate”, and “they believed that the permanence of Spanish power in these islands lay in suppressing any latent ability for leadership in the Filipino himself”. To maintain the privilege of spiritual services, the Spanish friars suppressed the legitimate religious rights of Filipinos to the priesthood while relying on an alliance with secular power. The Spanish friar, “who in nearly every pueblo was the parish curate, continued to be the paternal guardian and administrator of the pueblo”. He could decide everything; “neither gobernadorcillo nor councillors dared act in opposition to his wishes”. He was also “the local inspector of public instruction and ever vigilant to detect and destroy radical ideas”. Indeed, “to the humble Filipino”, “the friar was the visible and only representative of Spanish authority” (Barrows 1925, pp. 237–39).

The difference in regime legitimacy brought about a second important difference, namely, the “difference” in missionary purpose. Under the American institution of the

separation of church and state, priests and clergies were preoccupied with their missionary, concentrating on the spread of the evangelical faith, with the aim of building up the character and ethical values of the Filipino people in order to lay the foundations of a civilized society. Under Spanish rule, on the other hand, the main purpose of missionary work was to consolidate the privileges of the friars and the oppressive power of the government. Thus, the “cross” of the Spanish friars was merely an extension of the power of the “sword”, designed to force the Filipinos into submission through physical and spiritual violence. John Foreman adopts this typical imagery of the juxtaposition of the “sword and cross”. He wrote that the “extension of dominion seized” the Spaniards “like a mania”; they “elected to follow the principles of that religious age” and were prepared to “pass the breach opened for him by the sword” and “concluded the conquest by the persuasive influence of the Holy Cross”. After the conquest, the cross replaced the sword as the main instrument used to force the Filipinos into subjugation. He wrote as follows:

History attests that at least during the first two centuries of Spanish rule, the subjugation of the natives and their acquiescence in the new order of things were obtained more by the subtle influence of the missionaries than by the sword. As the soldiers of Castile carried war into the interior and forced its inhabitants to recognize their King, so the friars were drafted off from the mother country to mitigate the memory of bloodshed and to mold Spain’s new subjects to social equanimity (Foreman 1906, pp. 1–3).

James Le Roy, a famous specialist and government consultant on Philippine problems, who had served as secretary of the Taft Commission, further described how the friars relied on the Christian faith to enslave the ordinary Filipino spirit. One of the most important means was the promotion and exploitation of the natives’ “superstitions, witchcraft and fears”. He wrote that, “in the good old days when the Filipinos were represented as being docile and plastic as clay”, the friars did not teach Filipinos “real religion” and did “not make of them models of Christian virtues and morals in all respects”. This has left the Filipinos with little knowledge of real religion to this day, and while “their practices in worship may have changed and they were given a more stately ceremonial”. He noted that “their already existing superstitions were not only not uprooted by the friar’s teachings; they were even, in some ways, utilized as a means of holding them to the new practices”. In fact, “the Filipinos only put on a veneer of Christ”, without grasping any truth of Christianity. Le Roy further stressed that this was the fundamental political problem in the Philippines, namely, that after some 300 years of Spanish rule, the Filipinos had still not been positively influenced for the better by the West, and that their very low level of ‘civilization’ had left them “practically the same Malays as they were in the sixteenth century” (Le Roy 1907, pp. 126–27).

Why were Spanish friars so keen to enslave the Filipinos spiritually? David Barrows explains the matter from the historical perspective in which he specializes. He suggests that it was due to a critical shift in the missionary purpose of the religious orders, following the decline in faith and moral fervor of the Spanish friars: “the work of the friars had been of very great value,” he wrote, but soon “men as well as institutions may lose their usefulness”, and “the autocratic and paternal régime of the friars no longer satisfied the Filipinos”. The friars’ “zeal no longer disinterested, and their work had become materialized by the possession of the vast estates upon which their spiritual charges lived and labored as tenants or dependents.” The decline in faith was accompanied by an increase in the desire for power, and “the policy of the friars became more and more repressive”. As “the aspirations of the Filipinos increased”, the friars, “filled with doubt and fear”, instead of sympathizing with the religious aspirations of the ordinary people, “tried to draw still tighter the bonds of their own authority, and viewed with growing distrust the rising ambition of the people” (Barrows 1925, p. 237).

Barrows’ historical narrative was widely cited as the standard account of the evolution of church–state relations in the Philippines, with the central episode being the decline in missionary zeal and faith among the Spanish friars. The colonial government’s superin-

tendent of education, Fred Atkinson, virtually repeated that kind of narrative in his own observation on the Philippines' history. He wrote that the root cause of the conflict between the church and state in late colonial Spain was the changing nature of the Church in the Philippines. With the friars' "possession of rich estates" and "the great political power which followed almost inevitably", "their character changed", and "they became something more than mere ministers of the gospel". The extension of their power beyond the religious sphere, "in a way that proved injudicious", "laid the foundation for serious antagonism that began to make itself felt on the part of the populace". And that became known to U.S. officials as the "friar question". It was not until the arrival of the Americans that the Filipino secular conflict, or "friar question", reached its standard end, when "our government has effected a satisfactory arrangement" to purchase the arable property belonging to the religious orders and separate the church and state. Finally, with the assistance of the Roman Catholic Church, "an archbishop and three bishops have arrived from the United States and are zealously striving to upbuild the religious institutions that were injured or destroyed by neglect or war" (Atkinson 1905, pp. 320–21).

By constructing 'oppositions' and 'differences', U.S. officials and scholars constructed a standard history of the transformation of church–state relations in the Philippines under U.S. rule. The Spanish friars turned from the evangelization to the consolidation of rule through privilege, becoming 'corrupt' and 'despotic'. The Americans, with their spirit of religious tolerance and reconciliation, revived a benign political order and Christian spirituality. In the realm of secular politics, Taft advocated for the judicial adjudication of disputes between Roman Catholics and Aglipayans to establish the supremacy of civil government while avoiding the impression of government support for any particular sect. In the area of religion and belief, liberal American Catholics took over from the Spanish clergies and resumed the Church's role in spreading the Gospel. In this way, the Philippine separation of church and state led by the colonial government formed part of the imperial mission of 'civilization' and was an important part of the defense of 'good governance' and the establishment of a 'civilized' order in the U.S. overseas territories.

6. Conclusions

By enforcing the separation of the church and state, American colonial officials believed they were leading the Filipinos away from the decadent theocracy imposed by the Spanish. In a sense, however, American and Spanish imperial constructions followed a similar logic: the Spaniards established the legitimacy of their rule over the Philippines as the spread of the 'Gospel', while the Americans proclaimed the legitimacy of their rule as the spread of 'civilization' to the Filipinos. In order to spread the 'Gospel', the Spanish colonial government responded to the missionaries' criticism of the institution of *encomienda* by sending a large number of friars to the Philippines, granting them lands to support their missionary work and allowing them to supervise local politics in order to spread Christian doctrines to the Filipinos. Similarly, in order to spread 'civilization' and establish Philippine society on the basis of individualism similar to that of the United States, the Americans advocated the separation of church and state, the privatization of land through the purchase and auction of church property and the reduction in church interference in government through administrative reforms. Much as the Spaniards molded the Filipinos in the image of the Christians of the Reformation era, the Americans sought to mold the Filipinos into the American version of the individualist 'Christian' citizen who follows the convictions of his own inner heart. In short, in the context of the overseas expansion of the United States, the separation of church and state led by the United States colonial government in the Philippines was in fact part of an imperial construct, a manifestation of imperial cultural hegemony in dealing with church–state relations in the overseas territories.

In essence, the legitimacy of empire and its cultural hegemony are maintained mainly through a series of constructions of 'difference'. The empire defends 'good governance' against the breakdown of order; the empire popularizes 'civilization' and 'real religion' to get rid of 'barbarism' and 'superstition'; the empire encourages 'evolution' and 'de-

velopment' and curbs 'decline' and 'decay'. The consolidation of U.S. colonial rule in the Philippines after the Spanish–American War followed the same logic. The separation of church and state it led in the Philippines was not only intended to settle the specific disputes between the Filipinos and the Spanish friars but also to introduce the American concept of religious freedom and to emphasize the absolute 'difference' between American-style 'democracy' and Spanish autocratic 'theocracy'. It was also an attempt to replace the 'declining' Spanish Empire and restore the legitimacy of the rule in the overseas territories.

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Notes

- ¹ Other related monographs include Von Der Mehden (1968); May (1984); Golay (1997); and Abinales and Amoroso (2017).
- ² In fact, unlike the generalized view of the colonial officials, not all the natives were in serious conflict with the Spanish friars. One of the reviewers of this article provided an important historical case that could show the good relations that existed between the natives and the Spanish friars in some areas. In the town of Baler, the Spanish parish curate, Fr. Jose Esparragoza, was in a good relationship with the inhabitants there. He helped them to build the town's irrigation canals and fathered several children in the town. This led us to an important question: Why would the American officials neglect these complex facts? There is evidence that American colonial officials were aware of the fact that not all Spanish friars aroused the resentment of the Filipinos. The Taft Commission, for example, cited in its report the fact that "There were also in the islands engaged in missions and missionary parishes 42 Jesuits, 16 Capuchins, and 6 Benedictines" and that "they do not seem to have been assaulted or imprisoned for any length of time". However, the American officials did not seem to pay much attention to these facts, but why? In my opinion, this is because the American officials adopted a perspective of what James Scott called "seeing like a state", i.e., they ignored local variations and simplified the complexity of the facts in various provinces of the Philippines by adopting the American version of the 'separation of church and state' framework to which they were accustomed.
- ³ Calls for the secularization of the parish and anti-clericalism had already emerged in the Philippines in the later period of the 19th century, and these calls were an important historical background for the emergence of the 'separation of church and state' clause in the Malolos Constitution. One of the reviewers of this paper pointed out that, even before the arrival of the Americans, the Catholic priests, represented by Father José Burgos, had called for the secularization of the parish, with native Filipino clergy replacing the Spanish friars in the administration of the diocese, while the Filipino *ilustrados*, represented by Marcelo H. Del Pilar, launched the propaganda movement for the introduction of Enlightenment values and the rejection of the Church's assumption of political power. The 'separation of church and state' clause in the Malolos Constitution was the culmination of these nationalist appeals. In other words, before the Americans arrived in Manila, Filipino nationalists were actively pursuing the Filipinos' own goal of the separation of church and state.
- ⁴ In addition to Henry Parker Willis's account, other treatises on Aglipayans doctrines and their development can be seen: Stuntz (1904); Robertson (1918); and Victoriano (1960). One of the reviewers of this paper pointed out that not all Aglipayans reject the doctrine of Trinity. This article refers to doctrines endorsed by the Isabelo Delos Reyes group, who believe that the rejection of the Trinity is a rational purification of the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.
- ⁵ See note 3 above.

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Article

Is Religion Personal or Social?—Reading Yanaihara Tadao's "The Ideal of the State" (1937)

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Abstract: The question, “Is religion personal or social?” prompts a profound reflection on the essence and role of religion. The personal and social aspects of religion are clearly inseparable and inherently complementary. However, in an era where the privatization of religion is increasingly prevalent, if religion remains confined to providing psychological comfort or moral edification for individuals, it risks losing its fundamental meaning. In this context, Yanaihara’s case serves as a significant study of the dual nature of religion—both personal and social. Yanaihara argued that religion must play a pivotal role not only in individual salvation but also in advancing social responsibility and justice. While his faith was rooted in personal intuition, it led him to challenge the subordinate peace enforced by submission to strong state authority and to critique the wars waged under Japanese imperialism. This paper explores the role of religion and its responsibilities toward both individuals and society through an analysis of Yanaihara’s “The Ideal of the State”.

Keywords: Yanaihara Tadao; “The Ideal of the State”; Japanese Christianity; a good believer; social responsibility

1. Introduction

Is religion personal or social? This question is both a classical inquiry and one that must be continually revisited in light of evolving societal conditions. There is generally little disagreement that religion can contribute to social activities such as societal improvement, reduction of inequality, peace, and human rights. Indeed, it is well established that religions have engaged in various social activities throughout history. However, since the late 19th century, there has been a substantial body of opinion suggesting that powerful states, equipped with advanced technology and institutions, would effectively address a wide range of social problems, while religion’s influence in the public sphere would diminish, ultimately becoming an ‘invisible religion’ (Luckmann 1967) or undergoing ‘privatization’ (Berger 1967). As is well known, Christian believers in modern Japan were compelled by the powerful state to remain confined to the private sphere, effectively discouraged from engaging in political and social matters. Alternatively, unquestioning support for state policies was often extolled as the hallmark of true religious devotion. In this context, Yanaihara’s emphasis on the social responsibility of religion serves as a significant example that highlights the dual nature of religion, encompassing both its personal and social dimensions.

The government, which embarked on building a modern centralized state “from above” through the Meiji Restoration in 1868, declared *Saisei Itchi* (祭政一致, the unity of ritual and government), designating the Emperor—a living deity (現人神, *Arahitogami*) of

an unbroken imperial line (万世一系, *Banseiikkei*)—as the *Kokutai* (国体, national body) of Japan, through this, it established a unique political system known as the Emperor system. Simultaneously, by actively adopting policies of “civilization and enlightenment” (文明開化, *Bunmei Kaika*) and “rich country, strong military” (富国強兵, *Fukoku Kyōhei*), the government aimed not only to maintain national independence but also to achieve successful modernization and stand shoulder to shoulder with Western powers (Ebisawa and Ouchi 1980, p. 156).

In this process of modernization, Christianity, which had been transmitted to Japan, inevitably faced difficulties under the shadow of the “*Kirishitan* (切支丹, Christian) *Jashūmon* (邪宗門, heresy)” that had persisted in Japanese society for over 250 years since the Tokugawa shogunate. The term “*Jashūmon*” referred to a “heretical religion that deceives people’s minds and harms society”, a name used to refer to Christianity (Catholicism) during the Tokugawa period (Lee 2003, p. 13). The Meiji government also continued the Tokugawa shogunate’s policy of prohibiting Christianity by issuing a nationwide edict through the *Dajōkan* (太政官, Great Council of State) in March 1868 (Ebisawa and Ouchi 1980, p. 157). The reason the Meiji government maintained the policy of banning Christianity was that they believed Christians blasphemed against Japanese gods, corrupted morals, and caused discord between parents and siblings. This understanding stemmed from the deep-rooted perception of Christianity as a heretical religion, which had persisted for a long time. In other words, for the Meiji government, which was promoting the policy of “Shinto as the national religion” to establish a governing structure with the Emperor at its apex, Christianity was a religion that did not align with this goal (Dohi 2004, pp. 37–38).

In this context, Christianity (Protestantism) asserted itself as both a transmitter of Western culture and a leader in advancing civilization and enlightenment, actively claiming that it could contribute to Japan’s modern state formation. As clearly shown in the “Statement of Purpose for Accepting Christianity” (奉教趣意書, *Hōkyō Shuisho*) by the Kumamoto Band—one of the “Three Bands” that formed the three main streams of early Japanese Christianity—early Christian converts understood Christianity as a means of serving the nation (報国, *Hōkoku*) (Park 2015, pp. 309–30).¹ Thus, the idea that Christianity was essential to making Japan a modern state suggests that their faith was connected to modern nationalism, and conversely, it could be said that nationalism played a mediating role in the acceptance of Christianity.

Furthermore, in February 1889, the Meiji government established the legally guaranteed Emperor system through the *Dainihon Teikoku Kenpō* (Constitution of the Empire of Japan), subjugating everything under the Emperor’s authority. This constitution, as stated in Articles 1 and 3,² asserted the Emperor’s sovereignty as an immutable doctrine stemming from a lineage of “gods” and emphasized the Emperor’s sanctity and inviolability. Thus, this constitution positioned the Emperor’s absolute authority as the central spiritual and political axis. Consequently, it did not recognize universal human rights for the people, but only acknowledged rights as subjects (臣民, *shinmin*) (Miyata 2010, p. 271).

The Meiji government began vigorous efforts to establish this system and national ethics. While promoting the establishment of a capitalist system on one hand, they sought to rebuild and strengthen the internally collapsed feudal ethics through the establishment of the Emperor system on the other (Sumiya 2008, p. 110). The “*Kyōiku ni Kansuru Chokugo*” (教育ニ関スル勅語, Imperial Rescript on Education), often abbreviated as “*Kyōiku Chokugo*” (IRE), promulgated in October 1890, was a national ethical device aimed at building a system of absolute obedience to the Emperor and ultimately creating a pyramidal, unitary order of rule with the Emperor at its apex (National Archives of Japan 1890). The IRE made it clear that the Emperor had the authority to determine how people should live and to demand their full loyalty. It was intended not just to elicit outward obedience, but to

inspire a spirit of active service and devotion through the subjects' voluntary submission, and it became the foundation of school education (Dohi and Tanaka 1996, p. 18). The spirit underlying this constitution and the IRE was, as can be seen from the assessment that it "strengthened absolutism while donning the guise of Western modern society" (Sumiya 2008, p. 111), an absolutist subject ethics centered on the Emperor, which ultimately concealed a spirit of rejection towards Christianity.

In particular, Article 28 of the Constitution, which is commonly understood as a provision guaranteeing "freedom of religion", served as the foundational legal framework governing the relationship between the Japanese state and religion for about half a century until Japan's defeat in the Pacific War in 1945. This clause was characterized by two limitations, "within limits not prejudicial to peace and order" and "not antagonistic to their duties as subjects", as well as the vague concept of "freedom of religion" itself, which didn't clearly define its meaning or scope. Consequently, this "freedom of religion" was a provision premised on the religious nature of the state embodied in the Emperor. It did not guarantee freedom of religion as a fundamental right of the people, but merely allowed for religion within the framework of the Empire of Japan as a religious state (Murakami 2007, pp. 152–57). However, rather than questioning the phrase "duties as subjects", which could be broadly interpreted and applied without limitation, the Christian community at the time interpreted this clause as official recognition of Christianity and felt it was a victory for their faith (Anonymous 1889). In the face of the flourishing Emperor system in the 1890s, as various incidents involving Christianity and the state, such as the Uchimura Kanzo *lèse-majesté* incident (January 1891), the debate on the "Conflict between Education and Religion" (November 1892–1893), and the Tamura Naomi "Bride of Japan" incident (July 1893–October 1894), occurred one after another, the mainstream of Japanese Christianity made efforts to prove that Christianity was not a religion that violated the imperial order, but rather a beneficial one, rather than trying to understand the essence of the Emperor system.

The opportunity to concretely demonstrate that Christianity was not anti-state came through cooperation in wars conducted by the Emperor-state system. The Christian community resolved to fulfill their duties as subjects and demonstrate their loyalty and patriotism to the state in the Emperor's sacred wars for the glory of the empire. They actively cooperated in wars from the First Sino-Japanese War and Russo-Japanese War through to the Fifteen Years' War, taking a pro-government stance by promoting the legitimacy of national policies and fostering nationalist ideology centered on state authority (Dohi 2004, pp. 124–25, 212–13). While they may have succeeded to some extent in gaining recognition in Japanese society, they ultimately walked the path of loyal subjects. As they became buried in the process of absolutizing the Emperor-state system, they inevitably diminished Christianity's critical and resistant perspectives, positioning themselves within the state system.

Therefore, the peace advocated by modern Japan's 'Emperor-system state' was ultimately a subordinate peace that could only be achieved through each subject faithfully following the state's commands. In this respect, it is reminiscent of Roman peace. In Rome, peace was called 'pax', and as the term *Pax Romana* suggests, it strongly tended to indicate an orderly state without war. It is important to note that this 'pax' was largely achieved through wars of conquest (Ishida 1972, pp. 25–27). In other words, since this pax was a structure where peace was guaranteed by the stability and strength of a political ruling system created by force, peace could ultimately only be guaranteed through obedience to strong authority.

In such circumstances, questioning the peace maintained through submission to strong state power presents a significant challenge. This paper examines the identity of

a conscious Christian who willingly raised opposition when he perceived that state policies were impeding genuine peace of both individuals and society, and furthermore, the peace of other nations. The existence of such an individual provides an opportunity to reflect on the significance and role of religion as a potential force of resistance against state power that sought to seize individual subjectivity and control inner morality.

2. Yanaihara Tadao: The Individual

Yanaihara Tadao (矢内原忠雄, 1893–1961) was a prominent intellectual who embodied his Christian beliefs in his actions, and represented the second generation of the Non-Church Movement, having received direct teachings from Uchimura Kanzō (内村鑑三), who was famous as a pacifist (非戦論者, *Hisenronsha*). As is well known, following Uchimura's death, the second generation of his followers largely agreed in situating his thought of anti-war and peace within the realm of "prophetic resistance". However, they clashed over how to establish the relationship between gospel and prophecy in their understanding of Christianity. Specifically, they differed on whether, in the face of escalating war, from the Manchurian Incident to the Second Sino-Japanese War, they should focus solely on preaching the gospel and disregard prophecy, thereby remaining passive toward Japan's wars of aggression, or whether they should combine gospel and prophecy to actively resist these wars (Yang 2011, p. 245). Tsukamoto Toraji (塚本虎二), for example, can be cited as a representative figure of the former position, while Yanaihara Tadao, who actively strived to inherit Uchimura's theory of pacifism, exemplifies the latter.

Yanaihara placed great importance on the Non-Church spirit he had inherited from his mentor, Uchimura, and once stated, "The Non-Church is a spirit. It is a faith. It is a flawless, pure faith. When we live with such spirit and faith, we will face opposition from this world and will undoubtedly be subjected to humiliation and ridicule" (Yanaihara [1961] 1963–1964, vol. 24, p. 559).³ Indeed, Yanaihara's active effort to inherit Uchimura's "prophetic resistance" stance stemmed from his recognition that this represented the core value of Uchimura's Non-Church Movement. Consequently, Yanaihara criticized Tsukamoto, arguing that it was not the true way of a prophet's life for religion to become detached from national concerns and be confined to personal spiritual pursuits, seeking only individual peace of mind and personal sanctification. He clearly expressed his opposition to war, voicing concern about the nation's movement toward militarism and calling for national justice (Dohi 2004, p. 395).⁴

Although Yanaihara raised objections to the wars conducted by the imperial state from a religious perspective, he was, in fact, also a figure who, as a colonial policy scholar analyzing Japan's colonial policies empirically and critically from a social science perspective, became a professor of Colonial Policy at Tokyo Imperial University—the empire's highest educational institution—while in his mid-twenties. Indeed, research on Yanaihara has long been predominantly focused on his social scientific achievements, particularly his theories of colonial policy (Asada 1990), and there has been a tendency to examine his academic and religious aspects separately.⁵ However, as evidenced by his own statement that "my scholarship and my faith have become a unified force", (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964a, vol. 26, p. 92) his social scientific achievements and religious aspects were inseparable, and throughout his life, as a devout person of faith, he emphasized the importance of conducting his actions righteously and considering their consequent effects.

At this juncture, a comprehensive examination of Yanaihara's colonial policy theory lies beyond the scope of this paper, and space constraints must also be considered. However, to understand the aspects that make Yanaihara appear dualistic—his thoughts and actions as both a Christian and as a colonial policy scholar—it is necessary to examine his

position as an academic, albeit briefly. This may provide a better understanding of his work “The Ideal of the State”.

Upon returning from his studies abroad in 1923, Yanaihara became a professor at Tokyo Imperial University and embarked on a research trip to colonial Korea and Manchuria in September 1924. This initial research journey marked a significant turning point in his understanding of the colonies, as it provided his first substantial encounter with colonial “reality” and allowed him to experience firsthand the contradictions inherent in Japanese colonial rule.⁶ However, from the outset, rather than approaching colonization as a form of political aggression—as demonstrated by the imperial powers of the time—Yanaihara perceived it positively by defining “migration” as the substantive rationale for colonization. For instance, Yanaihara firmly believed that the successful modernization and independence of the United States were largely attributable to British colonial policies. Consequently, in his perspective, all social activities emerging within the context of colonization were perceived as the expansion of capitalism aimed at achieving modernization (Yanaihara [1926] 1963–1964, vol. 1, pp. 14–27). Additionally, it is important to note that the primary agents of British migration were Christians. Considering Yanaihara’s active support for the Jewish Zionist movement, it can be inferred that he had in mind a Christian conception of migration (Murakami 1993, pp. 207–8). Therefore, the focus of Yanaihara’s colonial policy was on enhancing the conditions in the colonies and identifying the conditions necessary for peaceful coexistence between the colonizer and the colonized (Yanaihara [1927] 1963–1964, vol. 1, pp. 742–43). His advocacy for granting suffrage to colonial subjects and establishing a parliament was intended to address the contradictions in Japan’s colonial policy, which emerged from the Government-General’s arbitrary rule, thereby practically improving the colonial conditions (Yanaihara [1927] 1963–1964, vol. 1, p. 739). Considering Yanaihara’s assertion that his religious belief in “Seek ye first justice, and all other necessities shall follow” (Yanaihara [1927] 1963–1964, vol. 1, p. 743) was a crucial premise for his colonial governance policy, his identification of suffrage rights in colonial Korea as the “primary requirement” (Yanaihara [1927] 1963–1964, vol. 1, p. 736) for colonial policy decisions—although this was ultimately aimed at strengthening the imperial bond between Japan and colonial Korea—may appear paradoxical. However, this can be interpreted as a result of his attempt to mediate between his faith and scholarship. His call for religious attention to international issues concerning the lack of fair politics toward “weak states”, which will be discussed later, can also be understood in a similar context.

3. Is Religion Personal or Social?

The economic boom brought on by World War I ended with the conclusion of the war, and as rice riots, a stock market crash, and the Kanto earthquake occurred in quick succession, a widespread recession deepened within Japanese society. Moreover, the global Great Depression of 1929 further crippled the Japanese economy, plunging the nation into political instability. Amid these internal and external crises, the military authorities strengthened their control and established a fascist regime. In particular, the Manchurian Incident, which erupted in 1931, became a pivotal moment in the formation of Japanese fascism. From this point, the war rapidly expanded and continued until Japan’s defeat in 1945 with the Pacific War. After successively initiating the Manchurian Incident and the Shanghai Incident to establish the puppet state of Manchukuo, Japan, when faced with the League of Nations’ refusal to recognize this, declared its withdrawal from the League and chose the path of isolation. The Japan Christian Federation at the time evaluated Japan’s withdrawal as inevitable and declared its intention to actively play a role in achieving national unity during this emergency (Dohi and Tanaka 1996, p. 25). Regarding this situation,

Yanaihara, while surveying the political circumstances, expressed the following view on the attitude Christians should maintain:

Is this so-called emergency real, or is it mere propaganda? In such confusion, one who penetrates to the truth of matters and speaks that truth is a person of sorrow. ... When falsehoods flood the world and all others are unable to find genuine resolution, the one person who perceives the essence of the matter, and the one who speaks out when all others remain silent—that person is a person of sorrow. Truth is not something that everyone in this world can easily understand. There is this inherent sorrowfulness in truth itself. Therefore, those who know the truth cannot help but become people of sorrow. (Yanaihara [1933] 1963–1964, vol. 18, p. 529)

Yanaihara believed that even if speaking truth about specific concrete problems of reality brought condemnation and persecution from society, this was a cross that had to be borne as a Christian. Such a person was precisely what he meant by a ‘person of sorrow’. Jesus, who was crucified to atone for the sins of humanity, the prophet Jeremiah, and his mentor Uchimura Kanzō, who preached anti-war, were all persons of sorrow who saw through the realities of the world and spoke the truth (Yanaihara [1933] 1963–1964, vol. 18, p. 530). Through adopting this stance of a ‘person of sorrow’, Yanaihara argued that one could live not as a Christian detached from the real world, but as a Christian who thoroughly confronted reality’s problems based on truth. He expressed this by stating, “Just as Jesus became an eternal light saving the world by bearing the sins of the world on the cross, Christians too must become the light and righteousness of the world by bearing the world’s sins in their bodies. Therefore, those who are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world cannot help but be people of sorrow” (Yanaihara [1933] 1963–1964, vol. 18, p. 536).

Such individual actions and personal decisions of a Christian can influence their society and, furthermore, their nation. Yanaihara had earlier maintained that the direction of one’s personal decisions and actions depends on their ‘view of life’, specifically on each individual’s convictions (Yanaihara [1925] 1963–1964, vol. 16, p. 177). For Yanaihara, these convictions were fundamentally religious in nature, and only decisions made after contemplating what God desires as good, based on each individual’s direct relationship with God, could eventually have a positive impact on society. That is, for Yanaihara, religion plays a role in continuously mediating between the individual and society, maintaining mutual tension between them. Specifically, figures like Jeremiah and Isaiah from the Bible were exemplary individuals who maintained critical stances toward social and political issues based on their faith. They possessed religious intuition directed toward God, through which they could attack social corruption and ultimately maintain God’s way (Yanaihara [1925] 1963–1964, vol. 16, p. 178).

Yanaihara criticized the indifference of religious figures who failed to propose paths toward righteous politics, despite the existence of both domestic issues—where politics was not conducted fairly for orphans, widows, the poor, the weak, and laborers—and international issues characterized by unjust treatment of weaker nations (Yanaihara [1935] 1963–1964, vol. 18, pp. 234–35, 240). While Yanaihara stated that “religion saves individuals through their relationship with God” and affirmed that “it is undeniable that saving individuals is the essence of religion” (Yanaihara [1935] 1963–1964, vol. 15, p. 237),⁷ he simultaneously expressed the following:

Religion is personal because it is spiritual. Being spiritual means that it is not governed by worldly powers. Because religion is spiritual, it judges this world but is not judged by it. It is the power to judge and criticize the world. The

prayer “Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven” itself contains a penetrating criticism of the current state of society. It represents an ardent attachment to earthly society. This world, which has forsaken God, must return to Him. The public spirit that demands this is contained in the prayer, “Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven”. (Yanaihara [1935] 1963–1964, vol. 15, p. 238)

Thus, by actively asserting religion’s social and political role, Yanaihara declared that “the failure to achieve just and fair politics in society goes against ‘God’s will’” (Yanaihara [1935] 1963–1964, vol. 18, p. 237) and emphasized the need to awaken the Christian spirit—that is, the Christian ‘ideal’—in individuals, society, and the nation, which were either indifferent to or unaware of the injustices occurring in reality. What, then, was the ‘ideal’ that he envisioned?

The ideal (理想, *risō*) is a sacred will that is realized by God, not yet actualized on earth, and represents the ultimate culmination of God’s systematic plan conceived with great ambition, which is still in progress on earth. The ideal is the essence of all things... The ideal is the future of history... Thus, faith is the capacity to perceive the ideal. Faith is the power that presents the end of history in the present moment and actualizes the fundamental nature of things, and through such insight, one can understand the plans and systematic design within God’s sacred will, that is, the ideal. In other words, it is through faith that we know God. ... Faith is neither fantasy nor imagination; it is the realistic recognition of the ideal. Therefore, faith forms the practical foundation of one’s worldview and perspective on life. (Yanaihara [1938] 1963–1964, vol. 15, pp. 96–97)

The salvation of individuals, the completion of society, and furthermore the prosperity of humanity all depend on God’s righteous will. For Yanaihara, faith was the capacity to realistically grasp the ideal of the future, and he believed that the foundation of understanding reality must necessarily be based on God’s sacred will. In this sense, faith is not merely belief, but also the “knowledge” and “power” to perceive, grasp, and articulate the ideal (Yanaihara [1938] 1963–1964, vol. 15, p. 98).

In response to witnessing the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Yanaihara published a critical essay titled “The Ideal of the State” (国家の理想, *Kokka no risō*) in the September issue of *Chūōkōron* (中央公論), a leading monthly magazine. For Yanaihara, succumbing to current political policies out of fear of the national situation was nothing other than false loyalty to the state. The prominent Japanese historian Kano Masanao (鹿野政直) evaluates this essay as a crystallization of Yanaihara’s Christian convictions (Kano 2004, p. 282). The publication of this essay subsequently led to the questioning of his qualifications as an imperial university professor at the Faculty of Economics Council meeting of Tokyo Imperial University in late October of the same year.

4. “The Ideal of the State” and Criticism of War

Yanaihara begins his essay with the following statement:

When the actions and attitudes of a real-world state become confused, we must reflect on the ideal of the state, and when a real-world state acts frenzied, we must contemplate the ideal state. This is not an escape from reality but, rather, a necessary leap to make the most potent critical approach to reality. (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964b, vol. 18, p. 623)

Yanaihara argues that criticism of reality is not possible from within reality itself, and that it is the ‘ideal’ realized through God’s righteous will that makes such criticism possible. Given this, what specifically does Yanaihara mean by the “ideal of the state”?

The ideal of the state is justice. Therefore, national policy that aims to achieve the ideal of the state must take justice as its indicator. This means, domestically, defending the rights of the weak constituents of the state from being suppressed by the strong, and internationally, refraining from breaking the rights of other countries, especially weak nations, through the power of the strong. (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964b, vol. 18, p. 630)

For Yanaihara, justice means asserting one's own dignity while simultaneously defending the dignity of others, or in other words, asserting one's own dignity only to the extent that it does not harm the dignity of others. Therefore, society, which is composed of individuals, and furthermore the state, which is the sum of societies, must fundamentally stand on the principle of justice (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964b, vol. 18, p. 626). It is also noteworthy that Yanaihara extends the application of justice beyond domestic affairs to encompass "international justice" among nations. For him, the suppression of weaker nations' rights by more powerful ones constitutes a violation of justice, and war that occurs in this process is also fundamentally contrary to the principle of justice (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964b, vol. 18, pp. 630–31).

Therefore, Yanaihara maintained that unless government policies clearly express the ideal of the state, any superficial, monolithic national unity actually hinders the pursuit and achievement of the state's ideal. Distinguishing between obedience to state will and criticism of government policy as a state institution, Yanaihara states:

The government is not synonymous with the state. A change in government does not alter the state's self-identity, nor does policy disagreement between the government and any citizen undermine the state's unity. ... Concerning the decisions of state institutions, individuals and groups within the citizenry retain the right to provide input from a national perspective, exercise criticism, and express their aspirations. (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964b, vol. 18, p. 632)

Yanaihara argues that the absence of critics in government policy implementation should be cause for concern, and that the existence of minorities among citizens is fundamentally necessary for achieving the state's ideal (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964b, vol. 18, pp. 633–34). Thus, when the state deviates from its ideal path, Yanaihara advocated that each individual should become a critic of reality through careful reflection on what constitutes the true ideal of the state. For this critical capacity, he maintained that individuals must cultivate and preserve a sense of justice. Yanaihara states:

Justice, while serving as the foundation of the state, is an objective spirit that exists transcendent of the state itself. In other words, justice is not a principle created by the state; rather, justice is the fundamental principle that enables the state's existence. It is not the state that designates justice, but justice that should guide the state. ... While state commands possess coercive force over state constituents as legal and political power, the policies that a state declares as just cannot automatically be considered infallible justice. Whether these align with justice as the state's ideal, or rather contradict the state's essence and compromise its dignity, must be judged through philosophical intuition or religious revelation. (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964b, vol. 18, p. 627)

Yanaihara believed that religion had the vital role of providing such judgments. That is, the significance of religion's existence lay in presenting the 'ideal', in other words, adopting a prophetic stance based on 'divine justice'. Through this, individuals could maintain and clearly grasp a correct sense of justice and the ideal. If the implementation of a state's policies contradicts the nation's ideals, it becomes imperative for an individual, as a mem-

ber of the state, to resist in order to safeguard the state's very existence. Yanaihara wrote with conviction:

The absence of criticism does not stem from a lack of knowledge. It comes from a deficit of ideals, a loss of the sense of justice. It arises from poverty of intuition, from the exhaustion of revelation. (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964b, vol. 18, p. 645)

As a Christian, Yanaihara constantly strived to judge right from wrong and urged others to cultivate a sense of justice and ideals. This was also a critique of whether Christianity itself was fulfilling its religious mission adequately. “The Ideal of the State” was regarded as a criticism of the Second Sino-Japanese War in a reality demanding national unity, and subsequently subjected to full censorship.

5. Conclusions: The Good Believer and the Good Citizen

In his essay “The Kingdom of God”, Yanaihara stated:

Today, in this world of falsehood, we stand at the funeral—either of Japan's ideal which we so dearly love, or of Japan itself which has lost that ideal. I am angry, yet I cannot express anger. I want to cry, but I cannot cry. If you understand my words, then for the sake of reviving Japan's ideal, first perform the funeral rites for this country. (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964c, vol. 18, pp. 653–54)

Yanaihara was deeply concerned about the moral decay of religion, which had grown complacent in the face of the world's injustices, failing to engage in critical reflection grounded in “God's will”. He argued that Christianity had lost its credibility by abandoning its prophetic role, focusing solely on individual salvation while neglecting its responsibility to address societal issues. Yanaihara likened this to “salt that had lost its flavor”, incapable of fulfilling its essential purpose (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964c, vol. 18, p. 649). He ultimately criticized Japan's loss of its ideal, attributing this failure to the absence of robust Christian “ideals”. Therefore, this conviction enabled him to proclaim, “Stop the war immediately!” (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964c, vol. 18, p. 652) and “for the sake of reviving Japan's ideal, first perform the funeral rites for this country”, (Yanaihara [1937] 1963–1964c, vol. 18, p. 654) while reminding people of policies devoid of justice and the sins of imperialism.

After publishing *The Ideal of the State* and *The Kingdom of God* in quick succession, Yanaihara was forced to resign from his position as a professor at Tokyo Imperial University in December of that same year, which constitutes what is now referred to as the full scope of the ‘Yanaihara Incident’.⁸ Although Christianity is a religion and politics is traditionally considered the domain of political leaders, Yanaihara believed that religion's true significance lies in its concern for society and its ability to raise a critical voice. In this context, it is worth reflecting on John 16:33 from the New Testament:

I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

The peace mentioned here does not simply refer to a quiet state where nothing happens. It is crucial to note that this grand promise of peace is paradoxically linked with the concept of tribulation. Jesus promised peace that coexists with suffering, suggesting that when His words encompass us, we can maintain steadfast rest and peace even amid rough winds and storms. Yanaihara's ability to relativize earthly authority stemmed from this religious intuition. He maintained that when the state commits injustice and becomes demonized, one must boldly adopt a stance of criticism and resistance based on divine justice, and the hardships encountered as a result were a natural progression for conscious Christians pursuing the path of peace.

As Howard Zinn, the American historian, noted, the most catastrophic wars and massacres in history occurred not because of disobedience but because of obedience (Jinn 1997, p. 420). Rather than practicing his personal faith within the confines of a subordinate peace secured through obedience to strong state power, Yanaihara actively advocated for religion's social role as a force for critiquing injustice, positioning himself as a responsible agent before God who governs history.

Is religion personal or social? We live in an era where it is difficult to assert that a good believer necessarily equates to a good citizen. This is one reason why Christianity faces societal criticism today. However, a good believer cannot be less than a good citizen. Amidst the ongoing global conflicts and wars, Yanaihara's "The Ideal of the State" serves as a powerful reminder of the need to be both good believers and good citizens, actively working to realize the state's ideal of justice and peace.

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Notes

- ¹ It is well known that in modern Japan's reception of Christianity (referring to Protestantism), unique religious groups called "bands" emerged. Rather than denoting specific denominations, these bands were essentially 'covenants' formed by young people who shared religious solidarity and expressed their faith through a form of pledge. The so-called three major bands were the 'Yokohama Band' (横浜バンド), the 'Kumamoto Band' (熊本バンド), and the 'Sapporo Band' (札幌バンド).
- ² Article 1. The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal. Article 3. The Emperor is sacred and inviolable (National Diet Library 1889, <https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c02.html> accessed on 10 February 2025).
- ³ All source materials from Yanaihara are taken from *The Complete Works of Yanaihara Tadao* (矢内原忠雄全集), Iwanami Edition (1963–1964). The year inside the square brackets indicates the original publication year, while the number following the year represents the volume number of the Complete Works.
- ⁴ For research on Yanaihara Tadao's wartime criticism and peace thought during the Fifteen-Year War period, refer to Park (2016).
- ⁵ Kevin M. Doak has noted that while Yanaihara is often cited but rarely discussed in depth, this can be attributed to his seemingly paradoxical life trajectory—being both a colonial policy scholar and someone who did not hesitate to criticize the state's imperialistic behavior, making his position unusual and complex (Doak 1995, p. 79).
- ⁶ For instance, his chronological record reveals that during his visit to Korea, he heard testimonies regarding the actual circumstances of the March 1st Independence Movement and engaged in various activities, including tours of multiple cities, attendance at Christian gatherings, and participation in lectures.
- ⁷ This point is also evident in Yanaihara's own account of why he became a Christian. According to him, from a young age, he was deeply preoccupied with the problem of sin and dedicated himself to rigorous self-discipline in an attempt to resolve it. However, he later recalled that he was able to attain freedom from sin upon believing in the atonement through Christ's crucifixion—the forgiveness of sins. In fact, when explaining the faith of his mentor, Uchimura, the aspect Yanaihara valued most highly was precisely this notion of atonement and the forgiveness of sins (Yanaihara [1940] 1963–1964, vol. 24, pp. 332–33).
- ⁸ For further details on the "Yanaihara Incident", see Shogimen (2014). Shogimen examines multiple factors that contributed to the incident, with particular emphasis on press censorship and the suppression of autonomy.

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Article

Affective Governance Through Ritual Praxis: A Comparative Study of Confucian Sacrificial Systems and Western Social Cohesion Theories

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Abstract: Sacrificial rituals provide a critical perspective for examining the fundamental characteristics and evolutionary trajectory of Chinese civilization. The Functionalist and Annales schools, through theoretical frameworks such as “natural necessity theory” and “social-centric theory”, have explored the origins of sacrificial practices and their role in social cohesion. When these schools investigate Chinese sacrificial rituals, they identify significant differences in the humanistic and ethical dimensions compared to in Western intellectual traditions, thereby revealing how these distinctions propelled China onto a unique civilizational path. The sacrificial system underwent a process of humanization and moralization during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, culminating in the recognition of benevolence–righteousness attributes within human nature, primarily characterized by affection and reverence. The interplay between intrinsic human dispositions and ritualized sacrificial practices established the foundational structure for the social order, spanning from familial units to political society in China. This synthesis ultimately shaped the distinctive philosophical characteristics of Chinese civilization, emphasizing the principles of benevolent love, reciprocal loyalty, and harmonious coexistence.

Keywords: religion; sacrificial rituals; emotions; social order

1. Introduction

Chinese civilization exhibits a distinctive attitude towards others, deities, and the cosmos, embodying a unique approach to interpersonal relationships. Unlike the individualism prevalent in modern societies, Chinese culture places particular emphasis on the concept of ancestral continuity, manifesting through sacrificial rites (jisi 祭祀). Within this framework, the individual is regarded as a crucial link connecting ancestors and descendants, imbuing human relationships with a permanence transcending life and death (Hsu [1948] 2023)¹. Fei (2021) observed that “living in a world inhabited by spirits and deities can also be a form of happiness” (p. 128). At the cosmological level, Chinese civilization neither perceives nature as an object for exploitation nor pursues its conquest. Instead, it embraces the principles of the unity of Heaven and Humanity (tianren heyi 天人合一)² and harmonious coexistence (p. 146). In our conflict-ridden modern world, the emphasis that Chinese civilization places on harmony and solidarity holds significant value. To understand the origins and essence of these core characteristics, it is essential to trace their foundations and developmental trajectory, particularly the religious traditions that endowed this civilization with its unique character.

Religion, as the bedrock of indigenous civilizations, profoundly shapes the social order and systems of knowledge. Max Weber (1951, p. 477) argued that “world-images”, constructed by “ideas”, function like “switchmen” on a railway, determining the tracks along which action is pushed by the dynamic of interest. Consequently, he dedicated his work to exploring how the religions of different civilizations shaped their secular realities. In contrast, the Annales school, represented by Émile Durkheim (1915) and driven by concerns over modern crises like social disintegration, sought through comparative religious studies to identify the sacred bonds that sustain human solidarity. These theoretical perspectives highlight the pivotal position of Chinese civilization within East–West academic discourse.

Sacrifice (jisi 祭祀) constitutes a critical analytical entry point. The diverse array of sacrificial rituals fundamentally reflects how a community negotiates its relationship with ancestors, deities, and cosmic forces, revealing underlying value orientations and interpersonal attitudes. Deeply influenced by Confucian thought, China’s sacrificial tradition expresses sincere gratitude, remembrance, and reverence towards the recipients of the sacrifices. In traditional society, sacrificial rites held supreme importance. As recorded in classical texts such as *The Book of Rites*, Jitong states “Governance of the people prioritizes ritual (li 礼). Among the five canonical rites, none surpasses sacrifice (ji 祭). Sacrifice does not originate from external things; it arises from within the heart”. The *Zuo Commentary* declares the following: “The great affairs of the state lie in sacrifice (si 祀) and warfare (rong 戎)”. The *Discourses of the States—Discourses of Chu* notes “Sacrifice (si 祀) serves to manifest filial piety, give rest to the people, pacify the state, and settle the populace”.

These passages clearly indicate that sacrificial rituals constituted a vital mechanism of governance for cultivating social virtues and maintaining political order. The fundamental attitudes towards life and value judgments initially formed within a religious framework, particularly through institutionalized practices like sacrifice, profoundly shaped the patterns of interpersonal interaction, life institutions, and organizational structures within the civilization.

Western scholarship on Chinese religion and sacrificial practice often stems from concerns about modern predicaments, such as social alienation, seeking to uncover its profound humanistic value and sacred potential for social cohesion (Bellah 1967; Mauss and Hubert [1902] 2001; Geertz 1973; Stark 1999). Their in-depth exploration and high appreciation of the unique connotations of Chinese sacrificial tradition provide invaluable insights into the deep-rooted structures of Chinese civilization. According to the classical categorization in the *Rites of Zhou—Spring Offices*, the Zhou dynasty’s sacrificial system encompassed Heavenly Deities (tianshen 天神), Earthly Spirits (diqi 地气), and Human Ghosts (rengui 人鬼), with gratitude (gan’en 感恩) and reverence (jingwei 敬畏) as its core emotional elements. This human sentiment towards cosmic forces is fundamentally akin to filial affection and reverence towards parents and ancestors, representing a natural extension of familial love and respect (H. Lin 2024). Ancestor worship forms the cornerstone of the Chinese sacrificial system. This article employs a comparative Sino–Western perspective, using ancestral sacrifice as its analytical thread, to examine the origins and evolution of Chinese ritual institutions and to explore the foundational elements of Chinese socio-political order.

2. Literature Review

Ritual sacrifice, as a core practice of human civilization, has undergone a profound transformation in its scholarly interpretation—from functional analysis to a fundamental reflection on its essence. In early anthropological studies, the Functionalist and Annales schools established the foundational framework for ritual analysis, yet found themselves

in an interpretative impasse due to their presupposition of Western centrism. This theoretical bottleneck spurred the late 20th-century wave of deconstructing civilizational essentialism, subsequently propelling theories of Multiple Modernities and Cultural Memory to reconstruct the dynamic nature of civilization. Against this backdrop, contemporary Chinese scholars, through in-depth excavation of the ethical transformation during the Shang–Zhou transition, have revealed a unique pathway for constructing a mind–nature-based (xinxing lun, 心性论) order, offering a new interpretation of the foundations of Chinese civilization. This chapter will conduct a systematic investigation tracing this trajectory of intellectual history.

Although the Functionalist and Annales schools pioneered a scientific approach to the study of sacrifice, their theoretical limitations became increasingly apparent in cross-civilizational comparisons. Malinowski, proceeding from individual psychological needs, interpreted the funeral rites of the Trobriand Islanders as a “psychological compensation mechanism” for coping with death anxiety, emphasizing the role of collective performance in maintaining community sentiment. This naturalistic perspective was developed by Radcliffe-Brown into the more structurally significant concept of “ritual efficacy.” While analyzing Chinese funeral rites, he praised Confucianism for stripping away “illusory beliefs” from sacrifice, yet he reduced the relationship between “ritual propriety (li 理) and emotion (qing 情)” to one of external norms suppressing innate tendencies within the framework of Xunzi’s theory³ of innate human badness. This interpretation exposes three dilemmas:

1. Reducing sacrificial motivation to biological fear fails to address the requirement for subjective virtue (de 德) emphasized in *The Book of Rites: Meaning of Sacrifices* (“致其诚信与其忠敬”, zhi qi chengxin yu qi zhongjing—cultivating sincerity and reverence);
2. It overlooks the revolutionary ethical reconstruction of sacrifice during the Zhou dynasty through the concept of “matching Heaven with virtue” (yi de pei tian 以德配天), thereby reducing the dynamic civilizational process to a static framework;
3. The naturalistic framework struggles to accommodate the ethical primacy of “repaying the source and returning to the origin” (bao ben fan shi 报本反始) in China, let alone interpret the generative logic of the mind–nature (xinxing 心性) oriented towards benevolence (ren 仁) and reverence (jing 敬).

Simultaneously, the Annales school’s sociocentrism faced similar challenges. Durkheim’s theory of “collective effervescence” profoundly revealed how sacrifice forges collective consciousness through shared feasting and offering rituals. However, its presupposition of the social origin of the sacred encountered challenges from Chinese experience. Granet was the first to apply this paradigm to Chinese studies, proposing a three-stage evolutionary model—primordial emotional outbursts at festivals, cosmological integration during the feudal era, and Confucian moralization in the imperial period—aptly capturing the ethical turn in Zhou dynasty sacrifice (Granet 1922). Yet, he simplified this transformation as an instrumental manipulation by the scholar-official class. His blind spots include overemphasizing the social as the sole source of the sacred, thereby obscuring the transcendent ethical foundation expressed in “What Heaven imparts is called nature” (tianming zhi wei xing 天命之谓性); neglecting how Confucianism transformed sacrifice into a moral practice through the conscious self-cultivation of the mind–nature, exemplified by Confucius’s proposition of sincerity and reverence in “If I do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice at all” (wu bu yu ji, ru bu ji 吾不与祭, 如不祭); and failing to grasp the distinctive trait of Chinese civilization—vertical integration through the bond of “filial piety-reverence” (xiao-jing 孝-敬). This “vertical collective consciousness”,

summarized by Fei Xiaotong, positions the individual as an ethical intermediary linking ancestors and descendants.

While these schools contributed the socio-psychological foundations for ritual analysis, their reductionist tendencies led them into interpretative impasses: Functionalism compressed sacrifice into an expression of biological instinct, while Sociocentrism reduced it to a tool for power integration. Both failed to grasp the tripartite interaction of “Heaven’s Way (Tiandao 天道)—Mind-Nature (Xinxing 心性)—Ritual Law (Lifa 礼法)” within the Chinese ethical transformation.

The critical theories that emerged in the late 20th century opened up new vistas for sacrifice studies through a radical rethinking of the category “civilization”. Mazlish pioneered the deconstruction of the reified myth of “civilization”, revealing how it was shaped by colonial discourse into a static label of the “Other” (Mazlish 2004). Asad further dismantled the modern construction of “religion/ritual”, emphasizing the inseparability of ethics, law, and sacrificial practice in pre-modern civilizations, such as the Zhou ritual’s integrated model of “emerging from ritual, entering into punishment” (Asad 1993). This deconstructive movement revealed two key propositions:

1. Sacrifice is inherently a field of power contestation—during the Shang–Zhou transition, the Zhou people transformed theocratic rule into a source of moral legitimacy by monopolizing the right to sacrifice to Heaven and reconstructing the discourse of “Heaven’s Mandate—Virtue”;
2. Cross-cultural translation harbors pitfalls—the Western concept of “sacrifice” emphasizes the God–human dichotomy and the logic of atonement, failing to correspond to the ethical integrative function embodied in the Chinese concept of “ji” (祭), as expressed in “carefully attending to the funeral rites of parents and following them when gone with due reverence, the virtue of the people will resume its proper excellence” (shenzhong zhuiyuan, minde guihou 慎终追远, 明德归厚).

Just as the essentialist paradigm faced challenges, Eisenstadt’s theory of “Multiple Modernities” injected new vitality into civilizational comparison. This framework emphasizes how Axial Age civilizations creatively transformed rituals through their “transcendental visions”, forming unique pathways of order construction (Eisenstadt 2000). His student Arnason specifically elucidated the Chinese model of “immanent transcendence”: Confucius’s famous dictum “sacrifice as if present”, marking the transformation of sacrifice from a medium for communicating with spirits into cultivation of virtue, where the subject’s sincerity and reverence became the core measure of ritual value (Arnason 2022). Assmann’s “Cultural Memory” theory further complemented the institutional dimension: inscriptions on Western Zhou bronze vessels, such as “dwelling here in the Central State” (zhai zi Zhongguo 宅兹中国), cast “virtue” as a symbol of ethnic identity; the ancestral temple Zhao–Mu system, through its spatial arrangement, gave corporeal transmission to the ethical principle of “honoring the honorable and cherishing the kin” (Assmann 2011). The significance of this constellation of theories lies in breaking free from functionalist–structuralist dualism, placing sacrifice within a dynamic network of “civilizational dialogue—institutional innovation—memory formation”, thereby providing a comparative historical fulcrum for understanding the Chinese ethical transformation.

Inspired by these new perspectives in civilizational theory, contemporary Chinese scholars have embarked on groundbreaking explorations of the Shang–Zhou sacrificial transformation and the construction of a mind–nature-based order. Reconstructing the Shang–Zhou transition became the primary focus: Chen Lai proposed the theory of “Pre-Axial Breakthrough”, revising the Jaspers paradigm, arguing that the core of this transformation was an ethical revolution from “spirit-centered shamanism” to “virtue-centered humanism”. Oracle bone inscriptions like “sacrificing ten Qiang captives” or “burning

one hundred oxen” reveal the Shang logic of a “divine covenant”, where human sacrifices and offerings were exchanged for the “Di’s” (帝, high god) protection. In contrast, the Zhou reconstructed the Heaven–human relationship with “Heaven’s Mandate is not constant; it rests with those who possess virtue”, shifting the focus of sacrifice to “revering and illuminating virtue”. Wang Hui’s findings based on bronze inscriptions provide crucial material evidence—the appearance of the “heart” is radical in the character for virtue during the mid-Western Zhou, marking the change in the internalization of de from an external behavioral norm to an inner quality of mind–nature (jingshen qixin 敬慎其心). The practical mechanism of this transformation manifested as a dual movement:

Politically, the Duke of Zhou’s “instituting rites and music” stripped shamans of their privilege to communicate with spirits, transforming the sacrificial prerogative into a moral exemplar for the nobility. The declaration in the Book of Documents: Announcement of Shao (“王其德之用，祈天永命”, wang qi de zhi yong, qi tian yong ming—“Let the king use his virtue, praying to Heaven for an enduring mandate”) exemplifies this communication between Heaven and Humanity through virtue.

Ethically, lines like “the filial grandson has blessings” (xiao sun you qing) in the Book of Songs: Chu Ci show rituals shifting from placating spirits to expressing the descendants’ sincerity and reverence, making sacrifice a field for “tempering natural human feelings through cultural refinement” and moral cultivation.

The theory of mind–nature, as the philosophical cornerstone of order construction, has gained ontological depth in contemporary research. Based on the Guodian Chu bamboo text Xing Zi Ming Chu (“The Way begins in feelings; feelings are born of nature”—dao shi yu qing, qing sheng yu xing 道始于情，情生于性), Liang Tao refuted the Song Neo-Confucian dichotomy⁴ of “nature as substance, feelings as function”, arguing that familial affections are the source of benevolence and righteousness (T. Liang 2008). Chen Shaoming further elucidated the emotional transformative mechanism of ritual: Mourning rites (sangli 丧礼) such as “regulated weeping and jumping” (ku yong you jie 哭踊有节) sublimate natural grief into the virtue of reverence through formalized emotional expression (S. Chen 2008). Zhang Xianglong’s phenomenological interpretation reveals the temporal essence of sacrifice—when a filial son practices “serving the dead as if serving the living” in the ancestral temple, the repetitive act of bowing makes him realize his role as an intermediary in the “ancestor-descendant” chain. This vertical temporal consciousness breaks the boundaries of individual life and death, making the family an eternal ethical field, constituting the foundation of Chinese order and identity.

How are such mind–nature-based constructions externalized into the social order? Yu Zhiping analyzes the tripartite structure of the “temple system (miaozhi 庙制)—patrilineal clan system (zongfa 宗法)—well-field system (jingtian 井田)”: The Zhao–Mu system materializes hierarchical ethics through ancestral placements; the Song dynasty ancestral hall sacrificial fields (citang jitian 祠堂祭田), as communal property, sustained the lineage (zongzu 宗族), providing material support for “revering ancestors and binding the clan” (jingzong shouzu 敬宗收族). Wang Guowei had long pointed out that the Zhou temple system balanced blood ties and hierarchy through the principle of “cherishing kin and honoring the honorable” (qinqin zunzun 亲亲尊尊); the Song gentry’s promotion of popularized ancestral halls, while ostensibly “modifying” the form of Zhou rites, actually preserved the spiritual essence of “carefully attending to the funeral rites of parents and following them when gone with due reverence”, demonstrating the dialectical unity of institutional adaptability and ethical continuity. Huang Chin-shing’s Sino–Western comparison offers a reflective path: The Confucian Temple’s “enfeoffment system” (peixiang zhidu 配享制度) sacralized historical figures like Yan Hui and Zengzi, embodying a “this-worldly transcendence” based on “establishing virtue, establishing merit, establishing words” (lide ligong

liyan 立德,立功,立言), fundamentally different from the logic of divine grace in the Christian Eucharist; and the Ming–Qing gentry-led popularization of ancestral halls further proves that ritual practice can actively shape social structure, rather than merely passively reflecting power relations (Huang 2010).

From the classical interpretations of the Functionalist and Annales schools and through the deconstruction and reconstruction of civilizational essentialism to the profound excavation by Chinese academia of “virtue internalization” and the “mind-nature-based order”, the study of sacrifice has broken through the unidimensional perspective of social integration. It has formed an interactive framework encompassing “ethical consciousness—institutional practice—civilizational dialogue”. The philosophization of “virtue” and the establishment of mind–nature theory during the Shang–Zhou transformation not only reshaped the ethical core of sacrifice, but also laid the logical foundation for the generation of order in Chinese civilization through the bond of “benevolence–reverence”. This unique pathway is neither Durkheimian social sacralization nor Malinowskian psychological compensation. Instead, it involves transforming the cosmic order into moral mind–nature through ritual propriety, and then externalizing this mind–nature into an ethical community through institutional design.

However, two core questions remain unanswered: How did China’s ethical–humanistic transformation unfold historically? And what specific theory of mind–nature ultimately crystallized through this process? Addressing these questions necessitates a deeper exploration within China’s own historical and intellectual contexts.

3. The Moralization of Sacrifice: The Confucian Reinterpretation of Classical Rituals

As Marcel Granet insightfully revealed through his sociological analysis of Confucian classics as “social facts”, Confucianism guided a humanistic and moral transformation of sacrificial practices. Many scholars of Chinese religion have similarly traced this trajectory of rationalization and humanization. A deeper understanding of this pivotal shift within sacrificial ritual not only elucidates its inherent humanistic implications, but also reveals the profound foundations upon which the Chinese socio-political order was constructed.

Liang Shuming posited that all human cultures originate from and revolve around religion. However, Chinese and Western civilizations diverged at the critical junctures of Christianity and Zhou–Confucian teachings. Confucian scholars, represented by Confucius, propelled Chinese civilization towards a turn from religion to morality. Religion emerges at the boundaries of human knowledge to stabilize emotions and dispositional nature (S. Liang [1949] 2011, p. 239). Within systems of religious belief, people rely on imagined external forces; however, all virtuous qualities attributed to these objects of worship fundamentally stem from human self-cultivation (S. Liang [1949] 2011, p. 234). Confucius and his followers focused on enlightening human rationality, nurturing moral character, and encouraging introspection, by weighing up human emotions to discern proper conduct.

Approaching this from an institutional history perspective in his study of Zhou dynasty political systems, Wang Kung-peng points out that the Confucian reinterpretation of sacrificial rites was not an isolated intellectual movement, but was deeply intertwined with contemporaneous political transformations (K. Wang 2022). Following the establishment of the Western Zhou, land and people were enfeoffed to nobles through the feudal system (*fengjian*), and the patriarchal clan system established hierarchies based on bloodlines. Within this institutional framework, sacrificial rituals were imbued with a new mission. Nobles of different ranks adhered to strict regulations regarding the scale of sacrifices, the types of offerings, and the procedures of ceremonies. Sacrifice thus became a crucial means of upholding the hierarchical system and reinforcing political authority. For instance, only

the Son of Heaven (Tianzi 天子) could sacrifice to Heaven, Earth, and ancestors; feudal lords sacrificed to the mountains, rivers, and ancestors of their domain; ministers (dafu 大夫) sacrificed to the Five Household Sacrifices (wusi 五祀) and ancestors; and lower nobles (shi 士) could only sacrifice to their ancestors. This institutional design tightly linked sacrificial ritual with moral norms, making adherence to ritual propriety a vital expression of practicing morality and maintaining social order.

Confucianism systematically reinterpreted existing religious ceremonies: “From sacrifices to Heaven and ancestors to rituals for various spirits, the Confucian Way strenuously avoided any abrupt abolition that might alarm contemporaries, instead actively endowing these rites with appropriate emotional expression. These ceremonies could evoke lofty sentiments or sustain profound traditional affections, enabling individuals to cultivate virtue through sincere devotion and solemn practice” (S. Liang [1949] 2011, p. 89). Ding Sixin, in his research on pre-Qin philosophical thought, further elaborates that the Confucian infusion of emotion into sacrificial rites was not arbitrary, but grounded in a deep understanding of human nature (Ding 2015). They believed that human emotions require suitable vessels for expression, and that sacrificial rituals provided precisely such a platform. Through the solemnity and normativity of ritual, feelings of reverence, gratitude, and others were evoked within participants, thereby guiding them to practice morality in daily life.

Concretely, the Shang–Zhou transition constituted a pivotal turning point in the evolution of Chinese civilization. Chen Lai, drawing on Karl Jaspers’ concept of the “Axial Age”, situates this period accordingly. The so-called “Axial Age” refers to the key historical junctures where human thought and creativity established the fundamental categories and frameworks for subsequent development. Chen locates China’s “Axial Age” in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, while simultaneously emphasizing the existence of an equally important pre-Axial period during the Shang–Zhou transition. This pre-Axial phase involved not only cultural breakthroughs, but humanistic transformation. Chen divides Chinese sacrificial culture into the pre-Xia shamanistic culture, Shang sacrificial culture, and Zhou ritual–music culture (liyue wenhua). The rationalization process of early Chinese culture evolved from magical practices to pious rituals, culminating in the rational normative system of Zhou ritual. The key factor driving this Shang–Zhou transformation was the rise of the concept of “virtue” (L. Chen 2017, pp. 5–15).

Archeological discoveries have revealed that Shang sacrificial remains frequently contain evidence of human sacrifice (rensheng 人牲) and human immolation (renxun 人殉). Oracle bone inscriptions from Yinxu also document numerous instances of frequent sacrifices to spirits, seeking blessings. This corroborates the characteristic Shang belief in divine power while neglecting moral cultivation, subordinating all affairs to the worship of deities. The supreme god “Di” (Di 帝) presided over nature and human affairs, while ancestors served as intermediaries “guests of Di”, possessing the power to bestow blessings or inflict calamities. Consequently, the elaborate annual sacrifices to Di and the ancestors consumed vast amounts of time and resources (Dong 1990, pp. 34–45). Shang beliefs maintained a particularistic relationship with “Di” and other spirits as protectors of the lineage, showing no concern for universal moral standards (Xu [1969] 2013, pp. 178–99). As Gu Jiegang and Liu Qiyu stated, “The Shang dynasty neither developed nor required the concept of de. They ruled by coercive power and theocratic authority, viewing Di’s will as absolute, unconditionally dispensing fortune or misfortune irrespective of human virtue. Their divination sought only to discern the divine will, not to assess moral propriety” (Gu and Liu 2005, p. 109).

Gan Huaizhen’s meticulous study of the Suburban Sacrifice (jiaosi 郊祀) during the Qin–Han period provides a counterpoint for understanding Shang sacrifice. During the Qin–Han era, with the establishment of the unified empire, rulers continuously reformed

the Suburban Sacrifice, tightly integrating it with Confucian-promoted moral concepts and political order. For example, Emperor Wu of Han's reforms incorporated the Confucian idea of "Heaven-Man resonance" (tianren ganying 天人感应), viewing sacrificial activities as vital channels for the Son of Heaven to communicate with Heaven and demonstrate the legitimacy of his rule, emphasizing that the emperor must possess virtue to receive Heaven's blessing. This stands in stark contrast to the lack of moral norms in Shang sacrifice, highlighting the profound impact of the Zhou's moral transformation of sacrifice (Gan 2008).

The Zhou conquest of the Shang catalyzed the conceptualization of "virtue". The Zhou's victory over a stronger adversary generated a deep sense of crisis consciousness, and lessons drawn from the Shang's downfall spurred new conceptions of virtue (de) and the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命). As stated in the Odes (Daya 大雅), "The Mandate of Heaven is not constant" (Tianming michang), and the Zuo Commentary (Xi 5) records "August Heaven has no affections; it assists only the virtuous" (Huangtian wu qin, wei de shi fu 皇天无亲, 惟德是辅). The Zhou revolution severed the Shang bond of divine-king unity, establishing "virtue" as the bridge connecting Heaven and the ancestors. Only those possessing virtue could obtain the Mandate of Heaven and legitimate rulership (Zhang 1993, p. 244). The early Zhou mentality of "reverence" and "revering virtue" gradually internalized into moral consciousness, laying the groundwork for Mencius's theory of innate goodness (Xu [1969] 2013, p. 238).

Ding Sixin further analyzes that the Zhou concept of "virtue" encompassed multiple dimensions. Politically, it demanded rulers to implement benevolent governance (dezheng 德政) and care for the people. On the personal level, it emphasized the cultivation of individual moral qualities, such as integrity and humaneness. The formation of this concept of "virtue" not only altered the meaning of sacrifice, but also influenced the entire society's value orientation. Correspondingly, ancestral sacrifice transformed from utilitarian prayers for blessings to rituals emphasizing sincere remembrance and inner reverence. As recorded in the Book of Rites·Meaning of Sacrifices (Liji·Jitong 礼记·祭统), "Sacrifice does not consist of things coming from outside; it issues from within, born from the heart... The sacrifice of the worthy is to bring to bear his integrity and faithfulness, together with his reverence. He presents the offerings, guides the ceremony with the rites, secures it with music, and times it according to the season; he offers them purely, without seeking anything from them. This is the heart of the filial son".

Through the intellectual efforts of Confucius, Mencius, and later thinkers, orthodox Confucianism excavated and elucidated the inherent moral dimension of human nature, establishing the theory of innate goodness based on the natural human capacities for "love and reverence". As Mencius·Jinxin I states, "That which people are capable of without learning is their innate ability (liangneng 良能). That which they know without reflection is their innate knowing (liangzhi 良知). Among young children, there are none that do not know to love their parents. When they grow older, there are none that do not know to revere their elder brothers. To love one's parents is humaneness; to revere one's elders is righteousness". Thus, humaneness and righteousness are revealed as essential human qualities—the former manifesting as affectionate concern for others, the latter as reverential respect and self-restraint. This orientation, integrating both emotion and cognition, is rooted in family bonds and extends outward to broader social relationships.

Within the family structure, the Book of Rites·Great Treatise (Liji·Dazhuan 礼记·大传) elucidates a dual-axis operation: "Starting from humaneness and tracing back through parents, ascending step by step to the first ancestor, this is called 'light'. Starting from righteousness and tracing down from the first ancestor, descending step by step to the deceased father, this is called 'heavy'. The one light and the one heavy—such is the meaning of

it". The humaneness–kinship (ren-qin 人情) axis centers on the parent–child relationship, with affection diminishing as one ascends generations. Conversely, the righteousness–reverence axis accumulates reverence as one descends generations, because each ancestor carries the respect afforded to their predecessors. This ultimately forms a composite reverence that moves from the near to the distant, ascending to the ancestors.

Wang Kunpeng, from the perspective of institution–thought interaction, notes that this internal sacrificial order within the family complemented the Zhou patriarchal clan system. The patriarchal system, based on blood ties, established rules like primogeniture, while sacrificial rites reinforced the hierarchical order under this kinship structure. Through ancestral sacrifices, family members clarified their positions and responsibilities within the lineage, strengthening clan cohesion and thereby maintaining social stability. Rooted in this intrinsic moral quality, human relationships inherently embody the "affection-respect" (ai-jing 爱-敬) dynamic connecting life and death: "When alive, they are reverently cared for; when dead, they are reverently sacrificed to".

The principles of humaneness–righteousness, the love for kin (qinqin 亲亲), and the reverence for the honorable (zunzun 尊尊) together constitute the foundation for constructing relational order extending from the familial to the socio-political realm. As insightfully noted by Mou Zongsan, "Qinqin and zunzun fundamentally arise from human nature. These principles transform abstract human relationships into ethical constants (lun chang 伦常) with concrete content. Through the interaction between ethical relationships and human nature, moral consciousness manifests itself—in Confucius as humaneness–righteousness, expanded by Mencius into humaneness, righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom as manifested in the heart-minds of compassion, shame, deference, and discernment. Thus, the concept of 'virtue' is brought to completion... The ethical relationships and moral consciousness underlying the ritual-music system constitute eternal principles transcending historical change" (Mou 2010, p. 211).

Gan Huaizhen's research also shows that the evolution of the Suburban Sacrifice during the Qin–Han period was precisely a continuation of this construction of moral order from the family to the socio-political realm. The Suburban Sacrifice evolved from a simple offering to Heaven, Earth, and the spirits, gradually incorporating Confucian moral concepts and political ideals, becoming an important instrument for maintaining the ruling order of the unified empire. As the Son of Heaven, the emperor, through conducting the grand Suburban Sacrifice ceremony, demonstrated his virtue to the realm, he emphasized the legitimacy of his rule, and simultaneously guided the moral ethos of the entire society.

The concept of "virtue" and the principles of humaneness–righteousness within Chinese civilization gradually formed through historical evolution. However, because these concepts originated from the rational reflection and profound experiential insights of ancient sages, they fundamentally resonate with the deepest aspects of human nature. Once established, these concepts acquired remarkable constancy and stability, thereby laying the profound and solid foundation of Chinese civilization. Having elucidated the Confucian theory of human nature centered on ren yi within Chinese cultural philosophy, we can now systematically explore the ontological connection between the rites of ancestral sacrifice and the dispositional nature of humanity. This connection manifests not only in the shaping of human nature by sacrificial ritual, but also in the transmission and development of ritual by human nature.

4. Moral Virtue as the Foundation of Traditional Social Order

Chinese civilization underwent a crucial process of rationalization during the transition from the Shang to the Zhou dynasty. Within this transformation, Confucian sacrificial rituals acquired rationalized and moralized humanistic significance, while their original shamanistic and religious components gradually diminished.

In the Confucian sacrificial system, ancestor worship occupied a central position. Concerns regarding spirits and deities (gui shen 鬼神) within this system were further transformed into a philosophical understanding of the essence of life. Confucians posited that life originates from the union of “hun” (魂, ethereal soul) and “po” (魄, corporeal soul), while death signifies their separation. “Po” refers to the sensory and motor functions of the physical organs, while “hun” denotes the emotional consciousness and spiritual essence derived from the vital breath (qi 气). After death, the physical form returns to the earth, and the “po” transforms into ghosts (gui 鬼); the refined “qi” ascends, and the “hun” becomes deities (shen 神). Following the funeral, descendants, through sacrificial rites, welcome back the deceased’s “po” to reunite with the “hun”. This transitional ritual connecting burial with formal ancestral sacrifice is known as the “Yu” (虞) ceremony. Subsequent periodic sacrifices aimed to attach the spiritual essence of “hun” and “po” to the ancestral tablets in the lineage temple, enabling descendants to communicate with the ancestral spirits in a state of reverential concentration. Essentially, the sacrificial ritual symbolically “resurrected” the ancestors within the consciousness of their descendants, forging a continuity of existence wherein the descendants’ minds and bodies became extensions of their ancestors within the patrilineal lineage (Qian 2004, p. 23).

This ritual system reveals how Chinese life is rooted in an exceptionally dense network of ethical relationships: the body is regarded as a legacy from one’s parents, the spiritual essence is an inheritance from them, and an individual’s actions, virtues, and self-cultivation are intrinsically linked to the ancestors, demanding unremitting diligence. As stated in the “Classic of Filial Piety” (xiao jing 孝经), “Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety. When we have established our character by the practice of the filial way, so as to make our name famous in future ages and thereby glorify our parents, this is the end of filial piety”. Filial piety (xiao 孝), centered on love (ai 爱) and reverence (jing 敬), constitutes the fundamental disposition of the Chinese mentality. All virtues and the attitude of benevolence (ren 仁) towards others stem from this, simultaneously bestowing value and meaning upon Chinese existence.

This psychological orientation formed the deep structural foundation of traditional Chinese political and social organization. The ultimate goal of traditional governance was to cultivate this profound and sincere emotional disposition. “Li” (礼, ritual propriety) served as the primary mechanism for achieving this objective. As stated in the “Li Yun” chapter of the “Book of Rites” (Liji 礼记), “What are human feelings (qing 情)? Pleasure, anger, sorrow, fear, love, dislike, and desire—these seven are what humans are capable of without learning... How then could the sage govern these seven feelings, cultivate the ten cardinal duties (yi 义), promote trust and harmony, esteem courtesy and deference, and eliminate contention—if not by means of “li”?...” Therefore, human feelings are the field of the sage-kings; they cultivate it with “li”. From the Confucian perspective, “emotions” are the activation of human nature; “li” is rooted in the inherent, balanced (zhong 中) emotional state described in the “Doctrine of the Mean” (Zhongyong 中庸): “Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused, it is called equilibrium. When these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony. Equilibrium is the great root of the world. Harmony is its universal path (dadao 大道)”. Through “li”’s restraint of excessive emotions and cultivation of deficient ones, achieving balanced emotional expression became the ultimate political goal. The “Doctrine of the Mean” further asserts the following: “What Heaven (Tian 天) imparts to humans is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way (Dao 道). Cultivating the Way is called education (jiao 教). True governance (zhi 治) lies in guiding people, through educa-

tion, to return to the harmonious nature endowed by the cosmos, thereby allowing their innate nature to fully develop”.

Similarly to Radcliffe-Brown’s (1952) theoretical framework, “li” and “qing” held central positions in traditional Chinese social thought. However, Radcliffe-Brown failed to recognize their shared ontological foundation in humanity’s innate, perfectly balanced nature.

Ancestral sacrificial rituals emerged within the liminal space between life and death, where human emotions find their most authentic expression. They were institutionalized as crucial instruments for political cultivation. The Zhou dynasty’s replacement of the Shang marked a shift in sacrificial practice from theocratic rule to humanistic moral cultivation, establishing ethical education as the fundamental political principle. The sacrificial system encompassed three cosmic realms: Celestial Deities (tianshen 天神), Earthly Spirits (diqu 地祇), and Human Ancestral Spirits (rengui 人鬼).

The Son of Heaven (Tianzi 天子) monopolized the privilege of sacrificing to Heaven, symbolizing the resonance between the ruler’s moral virtue and the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming 天命). His governance aimed to internalize the Way of Heaven (Tiandao 天道) as personal virtue, and through timely governance and modeling Heaven, to nourish the people’s livelihoods and guide human nature (S. Lin 1997, p. 244). Earth sacrifices (di ji 地祭) primarily expressed communal gratitude for material sustenance while reinforcing the political hierarchy (S. Lin 1997, p. 125). Ancestor worship extended familial affection to clan ethics. Political morality based on loyalty was disseminated through institutional implementation and the ruler’s exemplary conduct, embedding ethical education within religious practice (S. Lin 1997, pp. 129–53).

These humanized rituals ultimately revealed the tripartite cosmic order of Heaven–Earth–Humanity and their harmonious symbiosis, embodying an attitude towards life that integrated reverence for nature with remembrance of the ancestors. Consequently, the connotation of sacrifice completed its turn from superstition to humanistic philosophy, expanding into a cosmology of reverent coexistence among all things.

However, some scholars invert this causality, arguing that actual power dynamics constituted the fundamental basis of sacrificial practices. Zhang Hequan contends that “beneath the veneer of deity worship, sacrificial activities essentially manifest social relationships between humans” (Zhang 1993, p. 10). He proposes that Zhou rulers utilized sacrificial rituals to consolidate their rule.

Sacrifices to Heaven (ji tian 祭天): The Son of Heaven’s monopoly on this rite deified royal authority, strengthening imperial power and enhancing control over subordinate society (Zhang 1993, p. 38).

Cult of the Earth God (She Shen 社神): The Earth God, originating from agrarian land worship, evolved into a territorial deity governing social life. The hierarchical establishment of royal and feudal lords’ altars (she tan 社坛) directly linked land ownership with governance, with sacrificial privileges symbolizing political dominance. Distributing sacrificial meat (fen zuo 分胙) maintained relations between rulers and nobles, while state-controlled public altars became a crucial mechanism for controlling the rural populace (Zhang 1993, p. 69).

Ancestral Temple Sacrifices (zongmiao jisi 宗庙祭祀): These were inseparable from political needs. The ruler’s political–economic status and power were encoded in sacrificial privileges; policies were implemented under the guise of honoring the ancestors; temple sacrifices maintained noble alliances. For scholar officials, kinship ties superseded political connections, with clan patriarchs maintaining patrilineal cohesion through the control of sacrificial rights (Zhang 1993, p. 117).

At the same time as acknowledging historical instances of utilizing the sacrificial system for governance, reducing it entirely to utilitarian power mechanisms reflects a reductive anthropological presupposition. As Liang Shuming insightfully observed, human na-

ture encompasses both corporeal desires for status/power and transcendental spiritual aspirations. The former satisfies superficial cravings, while the latter provides existential fulfillment (S. Liang [1949] 2011, p. 88). Religious and sacrificial practices precisely respond to this latter dimension of human need. Confucian ritual propriety particularly emphasizes inner sincerity and devotion. Confucius himself disdained perfunctory ritual performance: The “*Analects*” (Lunyu 论语) records, “As for the “*Di*” sacrifice, after the libation, I have no wish to look on”, and “Sacrifice as if the ancestor/deity were present. Sacrifice to the spirits as if the spirits were present. The Master said, ‘If I am not fully present at the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice.’” If sacrifice were merely a political tool, public disdain for such manipulation would ultimately undermine its intended effects.

Sacrificial rituals, emerging during the Zhou–Confucian era, underwent formal adaptations throughout history while retaining their enduring humanistic essence. Temple systems particularly embodied this dialectic of continuity and change. Wang Guowei noted that the Zhou system prioritized moral cultivation through two fundamental principles: familial affection and hierarchical respect. The primogeniture system, derived from “*zun zun*”, formed the patrilineal lineage system (*zongfa zhidu* 宗法制度). Temple institutions based on “*qin qin*” restricted ancestral sacrifices to four generations up to the great-great-grandfather, with the number of temples stratified by rank: the Son of Heaven had seven temples (four for immediate ancestors plus three distant progenitor temples), feudal lords had five, high ministers (*dafu* 大夫) three, and the lower gentry one (*shi* 士), while commoners (*shuren* 庶人) had no temple and sacrificed at home (G. Wang [1917] 2008, p. 211). Later scholars extended this analysis, viewing ancestral law, temple institutions, and mourning regulations (*sangfu zhidu* 丧服制度) as the core of the lineage system. While Zhou dynasty clan cohesion relied on reverence for patriarchal authority, Song dynasty scholars like Zhang Zai, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi reformed temple institutions, allowing commoners to sacrifice to remote ancestors. This move seemingly contravened Zhou ritual form, but preserved its essential spirit. Under feudalism, stratified temples prevented usurpation and ensured hierarchical sacrifice. Post-Song transformations in clan structure necessitated temple reform to revitalize filial piety and clan solidarity, ultimately leading to the ancestral hall (*citang* 祠堂) system that dominated Chinese kinship organization for nearly a millennium (Wu 2012, p. 45). These institutional adaptations demonstrate how the sacrificial system interacted with social structures—its forms evolved with historical conditions, yet its ethical core endured.

5. Conclusions

Through comparative analysis of Chinese and Western traditions, this study discerns the profound foundations and distinctive essence of Chinese civilization embedded within ancestral worship rituals. The ethical transformation during the Shang–Zhou transition established “virtue”, “affectivity”, and “human relations” as the moral bedrock of sociopolitical order, simultaneously cultivating reverence and gratitude of the cosmic–natural order. From a diachronic perspective, the sacrificial institutions of the Zhou dynasty manifested enduring “ethical rationality”; while ritual forms adapted to sociocultural changes, their humanistic core remained continuous. This principle of “adaptive continuity” became internalized within China’s social psyche and structures, crystallizing into the timeless paradigm of “reforming rituals while preserving righteousness”.

First, Chinese civilization developed a unique theory of human nature centered on “*ren*” (仁, benevolence) and “*yi*” (义, righteousness). The legitimacy of ritual systems—exemplified by ancestral veneration—resides in humanity’s “inherent moral nature”. Unlike Western theories of religious origins (e.g., Tylor’s animism, Malinowski’s functionalism, or Durkheimian collective consciousness), Confucianism posits a fundamentally dis-

tinct view: the defining quality of humanity lies neither in natural desires nor abstract sociality, but in the “innate moral consciousness” (liangzhi 良知) and “intuitive moral capacity” (liangneng 良能), manifesting through “loving reverence” (ai-jing 爱敬). Rooted in this moral nature, Confucian rituals express filial piety through sincere devotion to the ancestors, extending this reverential attitude toward communion with cosmic forces, thereby forging an “ethico-affective approach” to nature and existence.

Second, the intellectual innovations of the Zhou era—particularly Confucius’ rationalizing efforts and cultivation of the “ethico-spiritual personality” (dexing renge 德性人格)—fundamentally reconstituted sacrificial practice. This shift replaced the Shang dynasty’s utilitarian supplications and superstitious mentality with moral consciousness as the basis for relational governance. As Confucian thought elucidates, the value of sacrifice derives from the “benevolent virtues” sincerely demonstrated by practitioners. Though historically formed, this moral nature and spiritual personality achieved remarkable stability through empirical embodiment and rational reflection, ultimately becoming an enduring hallmark of Chinese civilization.

Third, China’s collective consciousness primarily manifests as “vertical integration” within familial structures. The moral nature of humanity finds expression through kinship-based “affection” (qinqin 亲亲) and “reverence” (zunzun 尊尊). Ancestral temple rituals perpetuate the spiritual legacy and ethical achievements of forebearers within descendants’ consciousness, generating an “existential imperative”: individuals must preserve their inherited “corporeal-spiritual essence” (shenxin benzhi 身心本质) and enhance familial honor. This vertical orientation resonates with Fei Xiaotong’s insight: “While deeply intrigued by Durkheim’s ‘collective consciousness,’ as a Chinese scholar I find it necessary to reorient its horizontal interpersonal framework vertically. In our tradition, the individual serves as a nexus linking past and future generations. The present, as an intermediary phase, bears eternal responsibility toward the ancestors and future-oriented obligations toward descendants” (Fei 2009, p. 210).

Fourth, the ethical framework embedded in sacrificial rites constitutes the deep foundation of China’s sociopolitical order. Unlike the Annales school’s tracing of social order to primitive religious consciousness or Radcliffe-Brown’s emphasis on the ritualistic “standardization of affect”, the Chinese paradigm diverges fundamentally: the sacredness underlying social structure and ritual origins stems from humanity’s “Heaven-endowed moral nature” (tianming zhi xing 天命之性). The relationship between affect, ritual, and social structure reveals complexities surpassing functionalist interpretations. China’s sociopolitical order ultimately rests upon human “benevolence” and its corollary affective dispositions—“ai-jing” (loving reverence). This inner nature resonates with the “Way of Heaven” (tiandao 天道) and “Mandate of Heaven” (tianming 天命), possessing transcendent sanctity. “Li” (ritual propriety) arises from “modulated affective expressions” grounded in this nature, while institutional frameworks (e.g., lineage systems, mourning rites, and sacrifices) cultivate innate goodness. By harmonizing emotional expression with ethical relationships, they actualize a virtuous social order. Through ritual practice, Chinese civilization continually revitalizes family-centered ethico-affective bonds and extends them to the sociopolitical sphere. Consequently, the “moral triad” of “benevolence-righteousness”, “affection-reverence”, and “loving reverence” constitutes the irreducible core of China’s sociopolitical architecture (Zhou 2021).

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Notes

- ¹ The concept of *xianghuo xiangchuan* (香火相传, lit. “perpetuation of ancestral incense”) encapsulates the Confucian–Daoist synthesis of patrilineal continuity as both a religious duty and social imperative. In traditional Chinese cosmology, male descendants function as ritual intermediaries responsible for maintaining ancestral sacrifices (*jisi*), thereby ensuring the ontological sustenance of lineage spirits in the afterlife. Failure to produce heirs constituted a cosmological rupture, as articulated in the *Book of Rites*: “Those without posterity shall have their sacrifices terminated”. This soteriological framework positioned filial piety (*xiao*) as the mechanism for synchronizing biological reproduction with spiritual perpetuation, transforming domestic ancestor worship into the foundation of societal stability.
- ² The cosmological principle of *tianren heyi* (天人合一, lit. “unity of Heaven and humanity”) constitutes the metaphysical foundation of Chinese traditional thought, synthesizing Confucian ethics, Daoist naturalism, and correlative cosmology. Originating in Zhou dynasty *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*) symbolism, it posits an organic continuum between celestial patterns (*tianwen*), human affairs (*renshi*), and terrestrial phenomena (*dili*). As articulated by Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) in *Chunqiu Fanlu*: “Heaven, Earth, and humanity form a triadic resonance” (*sancai tonglei*), establishing moral cultivation as the means to align human conduct with cosmic order (*li*). Neo-Confucian philosophers like Cheng Hao (1032–1085) later reinterpreted this through *xingli* theory, asserting that “the humane person forms one body with all things” (*renzhe yiti*). This paradigm informed imperial governance (e.g., the Mingtang ritual system), ecological ethics, and artistic traditions, contrasting with Western dualistic ontologies while anticipating modern ecological holism.
- ³ Xunzi (荀子, c. 310–235 BCE), a pivotal Confucian philosopher of the Warring States period, diverged fundamentally from Confucius through his systematic naturalization of ritual theory. While Confucius emphasized innate moral potential (*ren*) cultivated through *li*, Xunzi posited that human nature (*xing*) is inherently predisposed to conflict and requires artificial transformation through ritual institutions.
- ⁴ The Song–Ming Neo-Confucian thinkers Zhang Zai, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi collectively reconstituted Confucian metaphysics through dialectical engagements with Buddhist and Daoist frameworks. Zhang Zai’s *qi-monism*, which posited the Great Vacuity (*taixu*) as the undifferentiated source of cosmic vitality, laid the ontological groundwork for Cheng Yi’s elevation of *li* (principle) as the transcendent ordering pattern underlying all phenomena. Zhu Xi synthesized these positions into a dualistic *li-qi* ontology, asserting that “principle resides in *qi* yet transcends it” (*li zai qi zhong er bu zai qi wai* 理在气中而不在气外), while systematizing the pedagogical canon through his Four Books commentaries. Their intellectual labor redefined ritual (*li*) as both cosmic protocol and ethical discipline, thereby transforming Confucianism into a self-sufficient “sacred secularism” capable of rivaling institutional religions. This philosophical project, later codified as *Daoxue*, established the metaphysical bedrock for East Asian statecraft and literati culture until the 19th century, while prefiguring modern debates about immanent transcendence in comparative philosophy.

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Article

The Tension Between Buddhism and Science Within Contemporary Chinese Buddhists: A Case Study on the Religious Conversion Narrative Among Monastics in Larung Gar Buddhist Academy

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Abstract: This article delves into the perception of monastics from Larung Gar Buddhist Academy of Western China concerning the intertwining relationship between Buddhism and science, along with the impact of this perception on their worldview and life trajectory. Many monastics at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy initially held a high regard for science, dismissing Buddhism as superstition. However, upon gaining a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism through various opportunities, they came to believe that certain tenets of Buddhism are compatible with science, even suggesting that Buddhism could address some of the methodological and epistemological limitations of science and offer solutions to some issues that science is unable to resolve. This ultimately led them to embrace Buddhism and renounce worldly life. This study employs a case study to investigate the understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and science amongst the general public in contemporary China, an area underexplored by previous scholarship that predominantly concentrated on the philosophical scrutiny of the apologetic discourses towards the reconciliation between Buddhism and science of influential Buddhist ascetics and lay practitioners. Also, this study endeavors to demonstrate that despite the ongoing secularization of contemporary Chinese Buddhism in the “public sphere”, within the “private sphere” of Chinese Buddhism, there remain individuals who are pursuing the religious, sacred, and transcendental dimensions of Buddhism.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhism; science; religious conversion; Larung Gar Buddhist Academy

1. Introduction

Thus far, the interaction between Buddhism and science since modern times has been the subject of considerable scholarly investigation. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the theoretical analysis of the philosophical discourse surrounding the relationship between Buddhism and science, as articulated by prominent monks and lay Buddhist practitioners since modern times. Concerning the dynamic interplay between Buddhism and science in modern and contemporary China, current research has predominantly focused on the philosophical analysis of the apologetic discourses towards the convergence between Buddhism and science of influential Buddhist monks and lay practitioners (Jiang 2002; Yu 2015; Sodargye and Yu 2017; An 2024; Wang 2010; Hammerstrom 2011). However, scant scholarly attention has been directed towards the perception of the relationship between Buddhism and science among the general populace, as well as the impact of this perception on their worldview and life trajectory.

Khenpo Sodargye (suodaji kanbu 索達吉堪布; b. 1962), an influential Buddhist master residing at the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy (seda larong wuming foxueyuan 色達喇榮五明佛學院) in Sertar County, Ganzi Prefecture, Sichuan Province of China, has conducted interviews with several dozen monks and nuns there, and compiled their personal experiences into two published works, *You Shenmo Shebude* 有什麼捨不得 (What remains reluctant to relinquish) and *Mei Shenmo Fangbuxia* 沒什麼放不下 (There is nothing that cannot

be put down) (Sodargye 2015a, 2015b). The Larung Gar Buddhist Academy is often acclaimed as the largest Buddhist academy worldwide (Yu 2013). This Institute was initially established in June of 1980 by the Nyingma Sect monk Jigme Phuntsok (1933–2004), who served simultaneously as both the institute’s sole educator and its inaugural student body of 32 individuals. Subsequently, it has witnessed an exponential expansion over time. It now accommodates students from across China and even international locales like the United States, Singapore, and Indonesia (Chen and Deng 2000, p. 113). Its influence extends throughout the Chinese Han region. As can be discerned from these two books of Sodargye, it has also enticed many Han individuals to undertake religious practices and even take monastic vows there.

These two volumes of Sodargye document the spiritual journey of several dozen monastics from their initial embrace of Buddhism to their ultimate decision to ordination. A wide spectrum of motivations underpins their decision, yet many recall that their primary impetus was rooted in their comprehension of the correlation between Buddhism and science. They recognized that Buddhism is not only compatible with but also transcends science, leading them to ultimately convert to Buddhism and eventually become monks or nuns at the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy.

This article investigates the perspective of the monastics from Larung Gar Buddhist Academy regarding the intricate connection between Buddhism and science, coupled with the influence of this perspective on their worldview and life trajectory, by scrutinizing the testimonies of the monastics encompassed in the two volumes by Sodargye. Compared to certain influential Buddhists who employ specific Buddhist doctrines to engage in dialogues with contemporary science, these Chinese devotees of Buddhism have approached the interplay between Buddhism and natural science from a broader spectrum. Simultaneously, it is evident from their recollections that their comprehension of the correlation between Buddhism and science significantly impacts their worldview and life trajectory, culminating in their devout conversion to Buddhism and renunciation of secular life. Prior to their ascetic departure, these monastics hailed from diverse regions of China and possessed an array of ages, vocations, and educational credentials. They serve as an emblematic representation for the vast majority of Chinese Buddhists.

Also, this article attempts to bridge a gap in current studies on contemporary Chinese Buddhism, which typically focus primarily on top–down examination of influential temples and practitioners, textual legacies, and government regulation (Ji 2011; Xue 2015; Poceski 2017; Fisher et al. 2019; Nichols 2022). As postulated by some scholars, contemporary Chinese Buddhism is currently undergoing a process of secularization, characterized predominantly by diminished religious and sacred dimensions of Buddhism (Szonyi 2009; Ji 2011; Li 2017; McCarthy 2019). This paradigm of religious secularization may not be universally applicable to nonpublic and uninstitutionalized domains of religion. In comparison with the “public sphere” of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, its “private sphere”, in other words, the cognition of Buddhism amongst the masses and their religious life, receives minimal scholarly attention. In fact, the Buddhist beliefs and practices within the broad societal populace possessing the largest population may yield a more authentic reflection of the most prevalent trends in Buddhist development during a certain period. This study endeavors to demonstrate that despite the ongoing secularization of contemporary Chinese Buddhism in the “public sphere”, within the “private sphere” of Chinese Buddhism, there remain individuals who are pursuing the religious, sacred, and transcendental dimensions of Buddhism, such as some monastics at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy. These will be discussed in detail below.

2. Buddhism Is “Unscientific” and “Superstitious”: The Perception of Buddhism and Science of Monastics in Larung Gar Buddhist Academy Before Converting to Buddhism

Some monastics of the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy did not embrace Buddhism initially, and indeed harbored a highly negative perspective on it. This is primarily related to their socio-cultural milieu within mainland China. Since modern times, science

imported from the West has frequently been perceived as omniscient, omnipotent, and a harbinger of human salvation. It has consistently been asserted as a supreme authority over religion in China. In comparison to science, Chinese Buddhism has been critiqued by some intellectuals and sections of the societal masses for its incorporation within the spectrum of superstitious beliefs and practices that are inconsistent with modern lifestyles and societal progressions (Hammerstrom 2015, pp. 18–49; Poceski 2017, pp. 81–82). Until present times, a sizable segment of the mainland Chinese populace holds reverence for science and harbors hostility towards religions, including Buddhism. As elucidated by Chen Bing, a Chinese scholar and adept practitioner of Buddhism, science has emerged as the omnipresent yardstick of value and ultimate arbiter in China, with the Chinese masses embracing the perspective of viewing religion as an adversary to science (Sodargye and Yu 2017, p. 95). The widespread reverence for science among the populace has led an array of Buddhist advocates to acknowledge that the advancement of science will pose a formidable challenge to the societal acceptance of Buddhism in contemporary China (An 2024).

Indeed, some monastics in Larung Gar Buddhist Academy initially revered science and detested Buddhism before their conversion to Buddhism. For instance, within Larung Gar Buddhist Academy, a monk bearing the Dharma name of Yuan Bei 圓悲, disclosed his personal experiences:

Nearly two decades of formal education have led me to believe that science is the sole power capable of saving humanity... Due to the enduring influence of atheistic education, I harbor an inexplicable resentment. I not only dismiss Buddhism with disdain but occasionally entertain thoughts such as: Why should a spiritual opiate like Buddhism not be eradicated entirely, yet allowed to persist and harm people on earth? (Sodargye 2015a, p. 100; self-translation)

Similarly, another monk with the Dharma name of Yuan Di 圓諦 narrated his pre-monkhood experiences, noting: “The education I received from childhood has made it challenging for me to associate Buddhism with science and rationality” (Sodargye 2015b, p. 120).

Moreover, there are some monastics in Larung Gar Buddhist Academy who perceived Buddhism as superstition prior to their conversion. In contemporary mainland China, the state delineation of superstition is scientistic in nature. The state systematically equates superstition with idiocy, obliviousness, and deviation from the orthodoxy of modern science (Sodargye and Yu 2017, p. 95). Some recollections of these monastics reflect an inclination to perceive Buddhism as the polar opposite of science—superstition, prior to their comprehensive exploration of Buddhist tenets and subsequent conversion to Buddhism:

Yuan Jian 圓堅: Previously, I had persistently dismissed Buddhism as superstition. Upon observing the rituals of homage conducted by others within temples, I frequently perceived them as instances of folly. (Sodargye 2015b, p. 82; self-translation)

Yuan Li 圓離: The education I have received classifies Buddhism as a vestige of feudal superstition. Professors who teach philosophy in university also argue that religion serves as an anesthetic for the human spirit, with Buddhism serving as an admission ticket for sufferers to confide their hope in posterity. (Sodargye 2015b, p. 97; self-translation)

Yuan Lei 圓磊: As with the majority of Chinese intellectuals, I was indoctrinated with the rigid belief that religion serves as a tool utilized by ruling regimes to anesthetize their populace. I naively equated Buddhism with archaic superstition. (Sodargye 2015b, p. 163; self-translation)

Yuan Dang 圓當: As the Buddhist doctrine does not align with the textbook knowledge I have acquired, it has always been my supposition that this is an antiquated superstition. (Sodargye 2015b, p. 173; self-translation)

Yuan Ce 圓策: Initially, my mind held no perception of Buddhism, let alone any form of faith, and I more or less regarded it as a superstition. (Sodargye 2015a, p. 152; self-translation)

The preceding analysis indicates that the social context in which science and scientism have flourished since modern times, coupled with the secular educational framework in contemporary China, fosters a prevalent inclination among contemporary Chinese individuals to endorse science while dismissing Buddhism. This inclination is similarly observable in the pre-monastic experiences of the monastics at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy. Then, what factors contributed to their subsequent shift in perspectives regarding science, as well as their comprehension of the interplay between science and Buddhism, which ultimately influenced their decision to renounce secular life and pursue monasticism? This will be the focus of the subsequent sections of this article.

3. The Perception of the Interrelation Between Buddhism and Science Within the Narrative of Religious Conversion Experience of Monastics in Larung Gar Buddhist Academy

Undoubtedly, a major impetus for some monastics at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy to modify their negative perspectives on Buddhism and ultimately convert to Buddhism is their own further exploration and contemplation of science and Buddhism. As they intensified their comprehension of these two domains, their attitudes towards them gradually underwent a transformation. Similar motivations for renunciation can be echoed amongst Buddhist monks and nuns in other temples across mainland China. For instance, some monastics in Longquan 龍泉 Temple of Beijing possess doctoral degrees in science and technology. Some of these monks embarked on their monastic journey out of reflection on the nexus between Buddhism and science. For instance, Xian Wei 賢威, prior to his ordination, was a biophysics doctorate at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. As he delved into scientific knowledge, he found that the contemplation of life could not be fully elucidated through science. Upon exposure to Buddhist teachings, he felt that he had discovered a comprehensive and credible explanation of life, subsequently opting for monastic life (Wangyi xinwen 2022). Another analogous example is Yang Li 養立, the abbess of Baoji 寶積 Temple in Yihuang County, Jiangxi, who garnered a medical doctorate in France and subsequently recognized that Buddhism could tackle personal mental and societal moral issues that medical science is powerless to resolve, which became one of the driving forces behind her decision to embrace monasticism (Zaisheng wang 2018).

Due to various factors, as the comprehension and knowledge regarding Buddhism of some monastics at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy expanded, they began to recognize that Buddhist teachings do not conflict with scientific principles or represent a form of anti-scientific superstition; instead, they contend that Buddhism is fundamentally aligned with science. Since modern times, the compatibility between Buddhism and science has frequently been a focal point for some devout Buddhists and even scientists keen on or adhering to Buddhism. For instance, physicist Fritjof Capra attempts to establish the compatibility between doctrines such as the Hua Yan School and Zen Buddhism with contemporary physics such as relativity and quantum mechanics in his book *The Tao of Physics* (Capra 1975). Other discourses on this topic encompass the intersection of Madhyamika Buddhism and quantum physics (Balasubramaniam 1992), the amalgamation of Zen and psychology (Young-Eisendrath and Muramoto 2002), as well as the compatibility between emptiness and relativity (Finkelstein 2003), amongst others.

The monastics of Larung Gar Buddhist Academy also recognized, prior to their renunciation, the compatibility between Buddhism and science. For instance, a nun bearing the Dharma name of Yuan Rang 圓讓 holds a degree in medicine and has served as a physician. Also, she pursued her postgraduate studies in biology. She can be considered an accomplished professional and researcher within the realms of science. Upon reviewing a Buddhist text, she became persuaded by the calculations it provided regarding the lifespan of the Earth, which exhibit “striking similarities” to those derived from contemporary

scientific methods. Furthermore, she was convinced by the intricate processes involved in life and the developmental process of the embryo within the uterus were thoroughly described in The Sūtra On Entry Into The Womb (foshuo rutaijing 佛說入胎經), prompting her to question how the Buddha could have elucidated these discoveries centuries ahead of scientists, without the aid of advanced technological tools or sophisticated equipment. This puzzlement ultimately led her to convert to Buddhism and ultimately choose the path of monasticism (Sodargye 2015a, pp. 81–82).

Similarly, Yuan Se 園穠, a former university instructor in biology, argues that from a biological perspective, the perpetual alteration of human physical appearance and morphology, coupled with incessant cell metabolism, verifies Buddhist conceptions that all entities are continuously fluctuating and have no eternal substance. The apprehension regarding the ephemeral nature of all things motivates him to seek an everlasting immutable substrate and truth. This propels him to convert to Buddhism and embrace monkhood (Sodargye 2015a, pp. 121–22). A similar viewpoint can be observed in the recollection of a nun named Yuan Li 圓離. In her perspective, The Sūtra On Entry Into The Womb and some esoteric Buddhist scriptures have analyzed the process of fetal formation and human anatomy in detail comparable to contemporary science, potentially even more meticulously than contemporary scientific examinations (Sodargye 2015b, pp. 98–99).

The recollections of these monastics indicate that some of them hold the conviction that certain Buddhist assertions can be substantiated across various scientific disciplines, not solely limited to biology. For instance, Yuan Ba 圓拔, prior to his ascetic life as a monk, was a dedicated researcher in physics. As he delved deeper into Buddhism, he discerned that Buddhism is not a “superstition slandered by the masses” (Sodargye 2015a, p. 171). He even firmly believed that several Buddhist doctrines could be corroborated in physics. For instance, he posits that Einstein’s theory of mass–energy conversion is in essence identical to the dependent arising theory of the Madhyamika school:

When discussing the movement and transformation of matter in physics, the focus is on quantitative relations. For example, when discussing fission and fusion, it can be deduced from experimentation that certain quantities of mass can be converted into specific amounts of energy. Its formula is $E = mc^2$. Herein, E denotes energy, m signifies mass, and c represents the speed of light. Observed from a Buddhist perspective, if one employs the grand dependent arising theory (da yuanqi yin 大緣起因) of Svātantrika distinction of the Madhyamika school, since under certain conditions, mass can be transformed into energy, then both are not permanent and unchanging, but are dependent on causes and conditions. Once dependent, they cease to exist as independent, substantial entities. (Sodargye 2015a, p. 174; self-translation)

Since modern times, diverse proponents of Buddhism frequently discern Einstein’s theory of conversion of matter and energy as potentially providing substantial validation to certain aspects of Buddhism. For instance, the Tibetan monk Gendun Chopel (1903–1951) has asserted that Einstein’s equation $E = mc^2$ furnishes robust empirical corroboration of the fundamental Buddhist insight on the ceaseless fluctuating, impermanent nature of phenomena (Jinpa 2003, p. 73). The contemporary Chinese monk Da An (b. 1959) contends that the mystical narratives of materials spontaneously emerging from nowhere in Sukhāvātī of Pure Land Buddhism are merely an embodiment of Einstein’s theory of mass–energy conversion (An 2024). Yuan Ba’s perspective aligns with Gendun Chopel’s, to a certain extent, but he focuses more on utilizing the theory of dependent arising to establish the commonality between Einstein’s mass–energy conversion theory and Buddhist doctrines.

Another figure who recognized that physics could elucidate certain doctrines in Buddhism is a Buddhist monk named Yuan Yin 圓因. He posits that the higher-dimensional space theories of theoretical physics could corroborate certain aspects of Buddhism:

Scientists have recently acknowledged the existence of an eleven-dimensional space, which effectively elucidates the non-obstructive realm where size can be adjusted at will in Buddhist scriptures. For instance, in a three-dimensional spatial configuration, an individual is protectively presented onto a two-dimensional plane, and individuals in this two-dimensional space are incapable of discerning the size or directionality of this projection, finding it bewildering. Similarly, walls, perceived as formidable obstructions within the three-dimensional domain, can effortlessly be traversed in a four-dimensional space. Consequently, the higher the dimensionality of a space, the more transparent and unexplainable it appears. The Buddha was an individual who had the capacity to perceive all spatio-temporal dimensions, hence his magical transformations were limitless. (Sodargye 2015b, p. 133)

The concept of higher-dimensional space originates from the superstring theory within theoretical physics. In accordance with superstring theory, in order to reconcile the established laws of physics in a coherent manner, it is mandatory to posit that the dimensionality of space is immutable at ten (Kaku 1995, p. 172). Moreover, superstring theory posits that the cosmos initially manifested in ten dimensions. However, due to the cosmos being unstable in ten dimensions, it “diverged” into two parts, with a compact, four-dimensional universe (three spatial dimensions and one temporal dimension) disengaging from the remainder of the cosmos. The remaining multi-dimensional universe has diminished to such an immensely minute scale (approximately 10 billion billion times smaller than the nucleus of an atom) that it can never be accessed by humans (Kaku and Thompson 1995, pp. 13–14). The contemporary Chinese Buddhist monk Da An believes that the proposition of multiple dimensions coiling into a compact point in superstring theory parallels the Buddhist assertion that in a mere speck, there exists an unfathomable number of lands (An 2024). Yuan Yin proposes that superstring theory may corroborate the “non-obstructive realm where size can be adjusted at will” in Buddhist texts, echoing Da An’s assertion. Moreover, the higher-dimensional space is an unimaginable realm to humans in three-dimensional space. Therefore, Yuan Yin posits that the supernatural powers of the Buddha, which are beyond human comprehension, are indeed realized in a higher dimension, which does not contradict science (Sodargye 2015b, p. 134).

Significantly, the high-dimensional space theory remains in the realm of speculation within contemporary theoretical physics and has yet to be conclusively verified. It seemingly provided Yuan Yin with additional avenues for interpretation and speculation. Convinced that the assertions in Buddhist texts corroborate the concept of high-dimensional space, Yuan Yin acknowledges the “greatness” of Buddhist teachings and subsequently embraces monasticism (Sodargye 2015b, p. 134).

Some monastics (including the aforementioned figures) affiliated with the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy have not only posited a compatibility between Buddhism and science, but they also staunchly assert that Buddhism surpasses science as they perceive some scientific theories and methodologies to be deficient in certain respects when compared to Buddhist teachings.

Some of these monastics hold the belief that while science can elucidate the truth of the world, it exhibits significant limitations in methodology. The approach of Buddhism to comprehending the world is perceived as superior to science. For instance, a monk bearing the dharma name of Yuan Gen 圓根 perceives that psychology, dedicated to the scrutiny of the human mind, fails to transcend the “sixth consciousness” within Buddhist teaching (Sodargye 2015a, pp. 23–24). According to the Yogacara School, the human’s sixth consciousness is recognized by laypeople as consciousness, while subsequent to the sixth consciousness are the seventh consciousness and the eighth consciousness (Alaya consciousness) (Lin 2020, p. 45). Some Buddhist sects even maintain the existence of a “ninth consciousness” or an absolute ontological consciousness that transcends all contradictions (Wu 2008, p. 390). Yuan Gen ostensibly leans on these doctrines, opining that contemporary psychology, devoid of understanding the consciousness beyond the “sixth conscious-

ness” in Buddhism, is inherently flawed for its analysis of the human mind, and is incapable of attaining the transcendence and spiritual liberation of Buddhism. This perspective of Yuan Gen echoes a certain similarity to the cognizance of consciousness in modern Chinese psychology as articulated by the modern Chinese monk Tai Xu 太虛 (1890–1947). Tai Xu contends that the consciousness propagated in psychology is incapable of encompassing the sixth consciousness of the Yogacara school, let alone subsequent seventh and eighth consciousnesses (Wang 2010, p. 58).

Similarly, the aforementioned monk Yuan Yin contends that the act of “observation” as science could be problematic itself. He believes that science highly values observation, but in the process of studying observed objects, it neglects the observer himself. He pointed out that scientific observation equipment possesses countless functions, but it is ultimately passive, fixed, and finite. On the other hand, human intelligence is proactive, enlightened, and infinite. “Once there is a problem with human intelligence, no matter how observation is done, one cannot escape bias and errors, just as viewing the world through tinted glasses, one can never restore the original color” (Sodargye 2015b, p. 131). In his perspective, Buddhism possesses a distinct advantage in its methodology of observation over science: “Buddhism, on the contrary, is devoid of this bias. It both emphasizes the observation of reality and the observer himself, with the observed object and the observer as equal entities interdependent and dialectically unified” (Sodargye 2015b, p. 131).

Besides the perceived shortcomings of science in comparison to Buddhism regarding methodology for exploring the world, some monastics have argued that science is incapable of comprehending or explaining certain domains, whereas Buddhism can. For instance, the monk Yuan Luo 圓洛 maintains: “The fundamental essence of material composition that scientific inquiry has managed to discern in the microscopic realm is still profoundly inferior to the theoretical profundity of ‘paramānu’ as elucidated by early Buddhism, let alone a comparison with Mahayana Buddhism” (Sodargye 2015a, p. 59). A monk named Yuan Bei 圓悲 was once a fervent proponent of science and viewed Buddhism as superstition. However, upon delving into Buddhism, he realized that science possesses limitations: “Numerous cognitive realms in this world are beyond the ambit of science, not to mention the construction and secrets of the universe, space-time, and even human hearts.” For instance, concerning fortune, a scientist might employ probability statistics for elucidation. However, he deems it challenging to persuade any individual. Nonetheless, he firmly believes that the doctrine of karma in Buddhism can flawlessly explain fortune: “Your fortuity arises not from an elevated probability of good fortune, but from the harvest of virtuous karma; adversity does not significantly reduce the likelihood of fortune, but rather exposure of unvirtuous karma” (Sodargye 2015a, p. 101.) The aforementioned nun, Yuan Rang, also holds a similar perspective. She perceives that it is unreasonable for biology to interpret some innate human diseases as “incidental occurrences”, and they should be interpreted via the Buddhist notions of karma and reincarnation (Sodargye 2015a, p. 81).

In addition, there are also monastics who posit that from a pragmatic standpoint, science is not omnipotent due to its inability to resolve some problems. A similar viewpoint has emerged among modern noted Buddhist practitioners. For instance, the modern Chinese Buddhist Luo Wuxu 羅無虛 opined that science possesses conspicuous deficiencies in spiritual exploration and achievements when contrasted to Buddhism, necessitating the implementation of Buddhist principles to bolster scientific deficiencies to ensure peaceful and contented human life (Wang 2010, p. 154). Such a trend is also discernible among certain monastics at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy. For instance, a monk with the Dharma name of Yuan Xue 圓學 was an electronics technologist prior to his ordination. After ordination, he maintains responsibility for managing and repairing electrical equipment at the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy. As he recollects, upon observing the tragic demise of a close friend owing to heartbreak, he began questioning the efficacy of science and technology: “Has anyone ever invented a love success machine, a pain treatment apparatus, or an instrument to eradicate vexations? Why can we explore outer space but remain

helpless in confronting our inner abyss?” (Sodargye 2015a, p. 136). Ultimately, he concluded that only Buddhist teachings could provide solutions to these issues, leading him to renounce worldly life (Sodargye 2015a, pp. 138–39). The monk Yuan Di 圓底 shares a similar perspective. He initially assigned an unshakeable status to science within his sphere of comprehension. However, he subsequently recognized the inability of science to alleviate human mental anguish, leading him ultimately to direct his attention towards Buddhism and take up the path of monasticism (Sodargye 2015b, pp. 138–43).

It is evident that a majority of these monastics were scientific researchers or professionals who initially upheld science and belittled Buddhism. However, their experiences throughout life afforded them an opportunity to further comprehend Buddhism, which resulted in a reversal in their views on Buddhism and science. They discovered that certain teachings in Buddhism resonate with science, even feeling that Buddhism has already anticipated some of the most significant breakthroughs in contemporary science, forecasting discoveries that would only surface more than two millennia later. This left them astounded by the “grandeur” of Buddhism. They also recognize that science suffers from limitations in methodology, epistemology, functionality, etc., and firmly believe that Buddhist teachings can compensate for these deficiencies, thereby recognizing the superiority of Buddhism over science. These are all significant catalysts in their conversion to Buddhism and eventual ordination.

4. Conclusions

The preceding discourse delves into the cognitive perception of monastics from Larung Gar Buddhist Academy concerning the intertwining relationship between Buddhism and science, along with its transformative trajectory and its impact on their life trajectories. Previous scholars have typically concentrated on top-tier monks and lay Buddhists who unveiled the correlation between Buddhism and science as an apologetic discourse or a missionary strategy. This article, however, commences from the tension prevalent amongst the masses in contemporary China regarding Buddhism and science, offering a novel perspective to scrutinize the nexus between Buddhism and science. It is evident that most monastics at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy initially held a high regard for science, dismissing Buddhism as superstition amidst the prevalence of scientific knowledge and scientism, coupled with secular scientific education. However, upon gaining a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism through various opportunities, they underwent a transformation in their perception of the correlation between Buddhism and science. They came to believe that certain tenets of Buddhism are compatible with science, even suggesting that Buddhism can potentially supplement science’s limitations in methodology and epistemology, as well as resolve issues science cannot solve. This ultimately led them to embrace Buddhism and renounce worldly life.

Furthermore, it is evident that while contemporary Chinese Buddhism is undergoing a process of secularization in some “public domain”, as postulated by some scholars in the past, within the “private domain” of Chinese Buddhism, there remain individuals who seek to uphold the religious, sacred, and transcendental aspects of Buddhism. Significantly, science, along with rationality, has been identified as a catalyst for hastening religious secularization, with some scholars even suggesting that the ascendancy of science and rationality could ultimately lead to the demise of religion (Ji 2016, p. 10). Nevertheless, the religious conversion narrative among monastics in Larung Gar Buddhist Academy suggests that although a portion of them had initially viewed science as an ultimate secular truth and authority utilized to dismiss religion, including Buddhism, before their conversion to Buddhism, their life experiences subsequently led to the disintegration of this perceived truth and authority. Then, science paradoxically emerged as a catalyst for their transition into a religious lifestyle rather than furthering their life towards “secularization”.

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Article

Roots of 20th-Century Western Counterculture: From Guillem Roviro's Catalonia to Its Antipode

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Abstract: The point of departure for this essay is the first part of the life of Guillem Roviro (1915–1934), before he became one of the most important social activists in post-war Spain. During those years he abandoned his Catholic faith and, accompanied by a few friends, embarked on a journey of exploration through Esperanto, naturism, spiritualism, and theosophy. This essay proposes the application of comparative microhistory to religious sociology. The author has sourced similar combinations from around the world in the same period and concludes that this melting pot was not unique. Quite the contrary, from Europe to the Far East, many people underwent similar experiences, usually of a countercultural nature and often linked to the idea of anti-authoritarianism and to its possible religious foundations.

Keywords: Esperanto; naturism; spiritualism; theosophy; anarchism; counterculture; Guillem Roviro

1. Introduction

One day in 1933, almost by chance, a 33-year-old Spanish electrical engineer working in Compiègne, France, found his life changed by a sentence he overheard as he walked past a church in Paris. He saw many people near the temple; he asked what was happening and was told that Cardinal Mercier preached at that time. Mercier was a prelate who was much discussed for his daring pastoral initiatives. Out of curiosity, in order to see the controversial archbishop, Roviro opened the door of the church and, at that moment, Mercier said that they were in the age of 'specialists' and that Christians have to be 'specialists in Christ' as eye doctors are specialists in eyes.

Roviro had abandoned his Catholic faith as a young man in the belief it was simply a repository of bourgeois morality and pietistic comforts for the weak. He had embarked on a search for truth which led him through a range of countercultural, religious, and even esoteric experiences: between 1917 and 1930, he tried Esperanto, naturism and spiritualism before arriving at theosophy. But he considered himself a very good 'specialist' (in electrical mechanics), and that day in 1933 he understood that he knew nothing about Christ, even though he knew a lot about Christianity and had a very bad idea of its way of being. Converted in 1934, between 1946 and 1957 he became the heart and soul of one of the first and stronger Catholic anti-Franco movements in Spain, la Hermandad Obrera de Acción Católica (HOAC), thereby ensuring himself a significant place in 20th-century Spanish history (García Soler 1977, 2014).

Our primary subject in this research is not his conversion, but his previous countercultural journey. It is all about finding out whether Roviro's interest in these countercultural elements between 1917 and 1930 was simply a personal accumulation of experiences, or

a sequence of choices that was also relatively common to others like him. Our study was therefore not conceived as a conventional—or unconventional—biography or institutional history, but as a vision of the social context (of a biography and institutions). It could be said that our aim was to delve into the life of the microcosm of a specific person—Guillem Rovirosa—and to ask whether it signals a sociohistorical shift in the wider culture of his time. We know from experience that this can be effective. Perhaps the most important achievement of “microhistory”—to mention a well-known historiographical and sociological method—is precisely that it reveals aspects which may be overlooked with general historical methods and yet are just as relevant as for any global vision of a community.

Obviously the first step was to document and trace Rovirosa’s life, and this task was performed—in my view—in the critical edition of his biography written by Garcia Soler (2014). It is a splendid book, whose original version was banned in 1971 by Franco’s censors before its publication was finally authorized in 1977 with several corrections. We found its original draft—the one prohibited by the censors—in the Spanish government’s general archives (AGA, [3]50,73/1088); then, in the author’s own archives (ACPHOAC/FXG), we discovered the successive extensions up to 1977 when he was allowed to publish a still-censored edition. With all this material, we recreated what might have been his “ideal” final version under the supervision of his son, Xavier Garcia Pujades, who was also a writer. Here, we repeat only the essential facts required to support our present sociological hypothesis, which is the following:

The world’s cultural fracture in 1968 had certain specific and very important characteristics, which we have ourselves attempted to outline elsewhere (2005). It was the public eruption of a melting pot, a mixture that had been brewing for many years. We researched its origins and published our conclusions (2010) in a work in which I placed great importance on the concept of “identity” and showed using documents how this word served as a major lexical support for the attitudes of 1968.

The two studies I have mentioned—from 2005 and 2010—were both research works carried out *a posteriori*. The first was on the actual events of 1968, and the second on the origins of the 1968 demonstrations. My second step was to proceed in the reverse direction, working not *a posteriori*, but *a priori*. I did not begin with the circumstances of 1968, but with the circumstances of Rovirosa and his friends, in order to seek out the similarities with their specific environment in Spain. The findings have already been published (Andrés-Gallego 2014). In this new paper I want to cast my net still wider and cover all Iberian countries—as far afield as the Philippine antipodes—and compare them with other countries in the world in order to shed more light on the phenomenon. In short, I want to find out whether Rovirosa’s melting pot was something more than an individual or limited experience confined to a small group of friends. Only then would we be able to venture a little further and ask specifically whether we are witnessing one of the very first origins of 20th-century counterculture.

2. Results

Rovirosa studied electrical engineering at the then recently established School of Industrial Electromechanical Managers in Barcelona, as one of the twenty or so young people admitted in its first year in 1917 (Garcia Soler 2014, pp. 125–30). The institution was perhaps the first in Spain dedicated to training managers, and specifically managers for electromechanical companies. The curriculum was designed by its first principal, Esteve Terradas, a Spanish mathematician and scientist, a doctor in mathematics and physics, and a graduate of the School of Industrial Engineering in Barcelona, where he had been born in 1883 (Roca Rosell 2004). Terradas had completed his studies in Charlottenburg and Madrid, and set up the new school in 1917 for the purpose of imparting to future company

managers solely and exclusively subjects involving the practical application of electricity to mechanics, in which all theoretical aspects were directly applicable to industrial processes (*Escola* 1917). He was of the view that a manager should be required to master every function in any electromechanical process, from how to insert a plug into a wall through to the incipient pragmatic possibilities of quantum physics and the theory of relativity. In fact, in those years he invited to Barcelona scientists such as Jacques Hadamard and Hermann Weyl in 1921, Arnold Sommerfeld and Tullio Levi-Civita in 1922, and Albert Einstein in 1923 (Del Colombo and Roca Rosell 2005). The results were excellent. Of the thirty pupils in the first class, only four completed their studies. However, about ten became leading experts in different fields, and played a part in advancing those areas in Spain. As far as possible, we have traced the life of each member of this first class—Rovirosa’s—from 1917, and observed several affinities between them: they all had a deep interest in any new technical development and were exceptionally skilled at innovating (highly creative). Rovirosa was himself an inventor of the most widely diverse types of electromechanical solutions, from mechanical toys to cinematographic projectors, even including an electromechanical method for aging wines faster—perhaps much faster—than usual (Garcia Soler 2014, pp. 201–24).

His friend Josep Grau was an exponent of the use of X-rays in Spain in the early 20th century. He had begun working as a stoker on the Catalan railways at an early age (*LV* 10 August 1904, p. 3), but had a great natural talent for mathematics and took full advantage of a cultural and technical project sponsored by Eusebio Güell, the wealthy Catalan businessman. Güell had taught his collaborator Ferrán Alsina, an eminent textile technician, and in 1907 they set up what they called an “experimental physics office” called Mentora—probably from an Esperanto word meaning “mentor” in the sense of “master”. The office was inaugurated in 1907 and was intended as a sort of public exhibition space consisting of an area where everyone could see all the latest devices and their functions (*Indice* 1907; Valentines-Alvarez 2006). The young stoker Josep Grau did not let this opportunity pass. He frequented this experimental physics office and its machines, and eventually went so far as to organize guided tours of Mentora before finally focusing on the field of X-rays, in which he became a genuine expert. After the Spanish Civil War, he worked as a senior executive at Siemens in Spain.

He was a good reciter of Esperanto poems, which he himself translated. There was sufficient interest in Esperanto in Catalonia for an unknown *Sr. Grau*—without any doubt, Josep Grau himself, then aged only 21—to give a talk in the *Paco kaj Amo* (“Peace and Love”) Esperanto association in Barcelona in 1910 on such a singular matter as X-rays (*DVG* 19 February, 1910). But it was his brother Jaume who became a proficient and original writer in the language. Jaume was a poet, a journalist, an amanuensis, and the author of an important “Catalan Anthology” in Esperanto (*Kataluna Antologio*, Grau Casas 1925–1931). He did not study but worked at the School of Industrial Electromechanical Managers—where his brother and Rovirosa studied—and became a town clerk. He installed a chemistry lab in his home for his own entertainment and, as a good poet, took pleasure in seeing chemical reactions as esthetic manifestations (Jaume to Josep Grau, 10 April 1941, in KEFD/FJGC/C).

A fourth friend—Frederic Pujulà i Vallès—was the oldest in the group and wielded considerable influence over them all. He had already completed his studies in law at Barcelona University before his future companions embarked on their own professional training in 1917. That year, Rovirosa—at 20—was the youngest, while Jaume Grau was 21, Josep Grau was 29, and Pujulà was 40. The latter was already a highly creative and innovative modernist writer. He knew nothing of electromechanics or chemistry, but was well versed in Esperanto; like the Grau brothers, he was a poet and, probably—in view of

his subsequent aptitudes—shared with his three companions the fact that he had lost his Catholic faith (Gelabertó et al. 2007).

The group of friends and companions was more numerous. We have chosen to single out these four because of the abundance of detailed documentation on Rovirosa, in addition to the personal archives of Pujulà (conserved in the Biblioteca de Catalunya, Barcelona) (BC/FFPV) and Jaume Grau (in the Katalano Esperanto Federacio archives, Sabadell, Spain), in the last of which there is also extensive information on his brother Josep (KEFD/FJGC). In short, we have enough documentary material to know their life, feelings, and thoughts.

2.1. Their First Coincidence: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Esperanto

It is clear that we cannot carry out a similar study on everyone who followed similar paths in other parts of the world. But we know enough about some to conclude that they shared several common features with the four Catalan friends, especially in regard to their creativity and technical capabilities. Zamenhof, the well-known Russian–Polish Jew who created Esperanto—the starting point for Rovirosa’s and his friends’ unique journey—had finished his project for a universal language by 1878 when he was only 19 years old and, according to his biographers, spoke Yiddish, Russian, German, French, Hebrew, and could pass muster in Polish, Aramaic, Latin, Greek, and English (Centassi and Masson 1995). Ferrán Alsina, the eminent textile technician who designed Mentora in 1907, was also commissioned by Güell (the businessman mentioned in connection with the professional transformation of the stoker Josep Grau) to manage a colony—a community of homes—for the workers at Güell’s factory in Santa Coloma de Cervelló in Catalonia. Alsina had a sound knowledge of physics and economics. Some of his scientific writings had been translated into French (Alsina 1905; also, Güell y López-Bacigalupi 1930; D’Esplugues 1921; Gual Villalbí 1953), which was quite unusual in the Latin culture of the period, when it was more common to translate from French into Spanish.

Rovirosa and his friends’ point of departure was certainly not Esperanto. It is worth noting that the four companions were *Catalanistas* (Catalan nationalists) and that *catalanismo* had (and has) a very strong linguistic basis (Andrés-Gallego 2012). Among *Catalanistas* in the late 19th and early 20th century, Esperanto was seen as the best hope of becoming free from any linguistic dependence: first, from Spanish (*id est*: Castilian) and then from French, which, as is well known, was at that time the *lingua franca* for diplomatic and international relations throughout the world. In 1905 Pujulà—the modernist writer—convinced Unió Catalanista, the first great *Catalanista* political coalition in history, to undertake to teach Esperanto. In a future independent or autonomous Catalonia, children would study Catalan as their first language and Esperanto as their second (Poblet i Feijoo 2004, pp. 26, 28), thus requiring neither Spanish nor French.

We should not assume this to be either the sole reason or predominant reason for desiring the triumph of Esperanto in Catalonia. Esperanto was seen as a beacon for anyone aspiring to a universal understanding and a more empathetic view of the whole human race. The relationship between internationalism and Esperanto was clear, despite certain exceptions such as *Catalanismo* in Spain. In general—and not only in Spain—the rise of Esperanto, which was published by Zamenhof in 1887, coincided with a violent reaction against nationalism, an event which caused the triumph of Esperanto by association (Humphrey 1997, pp. 72–73). Zamenhof himself launched a weekly journal in Saint Petersburg called *La Internaciulo* (“The Internationalist”) in order to drum up a feeling of international community among Esperantists, but it was closed down in 1888. He continued in 1914 to reiterate his conviction that all nationalism represented nothing but the greatest misfortune for humanity (Korzhenkov 2009, pp. 12, 46).

A nationalist Esperanto was thus somewhat of a contradiction. But inconsistency was not the monopoly of just a few Catalans. In 1906, the Esperanto Universal Congress met in Geneva, and Rovirosa's future friend Pujulà i Vallès spoke at the keynote session. When the meeting began to drag on, Pujulà opted to amend his speech and stated that all he wanted was for the audience to hear Esperanto spoken by a son of the "Catalan nation". Immediately, a Spanish Esperanto military officer who was presiding the session claimed: "It is not a nation!" Pujulà, by his own account, remained silent, stared at him, and continued with his short speech (Pujulà i Vallès 1906; Poblet i Feijoo 2004, p. 31).

We find similar processes in other countries that were devoid of linguistic issues, but where there was also a strong desire to avoid any linguistic dependence on any other national language in their foreign relations: for example, Portugal. Here, Esperanto developed rapidly starting in the late 19th century when Zamenhof's proposal was translated into Portuguese (Zamenhof 1892, 1896; Proença 1900, 1907). Some cases of parochialism—if not nationalism—can be found in the practice of Esperanto outside Europe. Brazilian Esperanto promoters, for instance, revealed a hint of chauvinism in their insistence on having more members, or more books, or more of everything than any other country (Warren 1968, p. 403). But the opposite was more common. It has been said that one of the main factors in the development of the Japanese Esperanto movement—the largest in the world outside Europe—was the potential to control one's own interior universe by means of a "neutral" language. But even in Japan, this movement was led by anarchists and had a clearly transnational flavor, especially in the demonstrations of solidarity with Russia in the 1920s, the years of the Russian Civil War (Konishi 2007, pp. 128–29).

Naturally, there were other major differences: Western international politics had promoted European imperialism and colonialism precisely in Asia, including China. Here, anarchism was a way to clean up the corruption of national imperial power and also to call for national liberation. It was thus paradoxically an internationalist and—because of this—a nationalist movement. They demanded the abolition of national boundaries, but also excluded the presence of foreign authorities. The real preoccupation of Asian anti-anarchists was often its implication for internal national liberation. In China, it was believed that because it set out to abolish all politics, anarchism undermined the general anti-Manchurian opposition and rendered China—in weakening itself—much more vulnerable to further aggression by other nations.

It is worth noting that precisely such a country as China is a good example of the variety of objectives pursued by the adoption of Esperanto. The Chinese people had not forgotten that the Manchu dynasty was of foreign origin and came from Manchuria. Anti-Manchurianism therefore involved a degree of ethnic struggle, considered by anarchists to be a form of racism. Certainly, the majority of Chinese anarchists were fairly steadfast in their anti-Manchurianism and determination to overthrow the emperor. But they also rejected racism and condemned the ethnic revanchism that they observed in other revolutionary—or at least republican—forces. They only supported patriotism if it did not lead to hatred of other ethnic groups (Dirlik and Krebs 1981, pp. 139–40).

This was also the reason they did not hate Western imperialism for its geographic, ethnic, or cultural origins, but because of its political imposition and oppression. Chinese anarchists subscribed to the general view of "the West" as being new and—note—modern, the most appealing feature for the young (Dirlik 1985, p. 293).

Some anarchists and non-anarchists believed that ancient Chinese culture, and particularly rural culture, offered forms of unregulated life in small communities which could be seen as the best way to improve the situation in China. In other words, Chinese traditionalism could be found even among anarchists.

Comparisons between Spanish and Chinese anarchism are not very productive. Spain was an ethnically cohesive country, and China was a hotchpotch of different peoples dominated by one, the Manchurians. It was easier to draw parallels between China and Russia, for instance, both of which were political empires with an assortment of languages and peoples, for whom Esperanto could offer a way of making themselves understood without recourse to Russian. It was probably no coincidence that Zamenhof lived in Russia, a country with precisely these characteristics. However, we must reiterate the universal character of Esperanto. This was perhaps the last great universal, idealistic—and rationalist—new development in linguistics (Passini 1993). Its simplicity, its rationality, and the scope of the change it could bring about in the world as a whole was highly attractive to a wide variety of people, which in Spain included Catholic priests, army officers, freemasons, anarchists, and even vegetarians (Poblet i Feijoo 2008, p. 35).

2.2. Relationship Between Esperanto and Anarchism

We mention these five human groups, but it is important to highlight that they are not five human compartments into which to classify Spanish Esperanto. We should think rather in terms of four options and a multitude of possible combinations of two or more: (i) anarchism (widespread among republicans in a monarchical country like Spain); (ii) idealism (which could be found in almost any creed—of course, Catholicism—as well as in atheism or freemasonry); (iii) the aspiration to universal linguistic understanding for anyone in the world; (iv) faith in progress and the possibility of universal happiness. The diversity of options and the mixtures of these options perhaps explain certain curious aspects of this story. For instance, in 1909, the Universal Esperanto Congress was held in Barcelona, and the Bishop of Barcelona saw fit to grant a special dispensation, allowed under Catholic canon law, to eat meat on the two Fridays during the period of the congress (Poblet i Feijoo 2008, pp. 33–34). There were a considerable number of Catholic priests who were practitioners of Esperanto. This was irrespective of whether the participants at the congress were Catholic; the idea was to ensure that the Catholic ban on consuming meat during Lent should not pose a problem to anyone (see “Los esperantistas”, *LV* 28(13,191):1, on the Sunday mass and Protestant congress-goers).

In fact, Zamenhof was a Jew, but he had proposed a new religion which was neither Jewish nor Christian. He introduced it as a form of Judaism stripped of its ethnic elements, accessible to all. He studied medicine in Moscow and Warsaw and became an ophthalmologist in 1886. He endured Russian anti-Semitism and, after taking part in the early Zionist movement of Hibbat Zion, he thought it worthwhile to develop the pre-Christian Jewish humanitarianism of Hillel the Elder, who had died in Jerusalem in year 10 of our era. Hillel proposed an open Judaism based on love. For Zamenhof, “Hillelism” offered a way to universal peace, love between all human beings, and the unity of all religions. However, this could only be brought about by removing the ethnic component—so deeply embedded in Judaism—from religion. Zamenhof also believed that his own original religion had to be simplified. Three “religious” laws were enough for him: (i) love our neighbors; (ii) do unto others as we would have them do unto us; (iii) never commit acts that our conscience tells us are displeasing to God. Any other law would not be divine but human (Künzli 2010; Garvía 2013).

Actually, the history of this international language—Esperanto—cannot be understood without also understanding Zamenhof’s personality, which included this important religious element. Zamenhof’s linguistic internationalism involved political internationalism too. He neither defended the existence of the Jewish people nor believed in their existence as a real “Jewish people”. For him, being a people implied living in a given territory and speaking the same language (besides practicing the same religion and having political inde-

pendence), and Jews were dispersed all over the world and spoke very different languages. There were many Jews who spoke neither Hebrew, the maternal Yiddish shared by many, nor the Ladino of the Sephardim (“Spaniards” in Spanish Hebrew Romance).

Zamenhof proposed that Jews should abandon their determination to maintain their ethnic identity and simply promote their religious beliefs among anyone who wished to live with them, thereby forming a single people worldwide. In other words, this new “people of God” would no longer be Hebrews, but a people comprising all those who shared these beliefs and wanted to live in harmony. And herein lay the usefulness of Esperanto: if the people who formed this first community spoke Esperanto—and Esperanto really became an international language—a universal union would be possible (Korzhenkov 2009, p. 53).

From this point of departure, it was not surprising that Esperanto did so well among anarchists. We have said precisely that Zamenhof started from the assumption that being a people implied speaking the same language, living in a fixed territory, practicing the same religion, and having political independence. This definition of “people” was not new. It had been proposed by theorists of Germanism at the end of the 18th century, and spread throughout Europe in the 19th century. In fact, Catalan separatism was another version of that reasoning (whose adherents included the young Rovirosa, Pujulà i Vallès, the brothers Grau, and many others in the early 20th century). This description of what constitutes a people was also used by Irish and Polish movements, along with Italian unionists and a number of separatist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries (Putzu and Mazzon 2012).

The European origin of this way of thinking was no coincidence. It made no sense in the Americas, where people essentially spoke three European languages—English, Spanish and Portuguese—and which by the end of the 19th century had become independent from England, Spain and Portugal. Only the singularity of the Hebrew people—still a nation without a fixed territory and with several languages—broke both patterns, one common to Anglo-Saxon and Iberian America, and the other European. It also generated two vital alternatives: one emphasizing its ethnic component (a trend that was especially strong among Sephardim), and the other aimed at an internationalist—and often agnostic or even atheist—world view (stronger among the Ashkenazim, particularly in the opinion of the Sephardim (González 2014, pp. 274–318)). Perhaps the second explains the abundance of Jews among European socialist leaders in the second half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. Zamenhof himself was an Ashkenazi Jew.

In 1921, the Spanish socialist Manuel Burgos endorsed the value of Esperanto as a means of redemption for the working classes and raised the possibility of reconciling language with historical materialism (Burgos 1933, pp. 24–29). In 1924, philosopher Léon Denis he thought the same although in favor of Jaurès’ socialism, which was more faithful to the French Jacobin tradition (Denis [1924] 2006). However, the success of Esperanto was certainly greater among anarchists than among socialists. In Spain, the anarchist movement itself had spread more widely than socialism among workers. Barcelona and its surroundings formed one of the most important urban centers of anarchism in the world at the time, and the daily newspapers often carried news linking both the anarchist and Esperanto movements. In January 1909, for instance, a team of workers formed the *Laboro Esperanta* in the Catalan town of Villanueva y Geltrú—precisely where Guillem Rovirosa was born (Garcia Soler 2014, p. 76)—and one of the founders of this association was the teacher Teresa Rosell, who taught Esperanto and Catalan in her small private school (Virella 2001, p. 62; Poblet i Feijoo 2004, p. 43). Some months later, when an Esperanto speaker—Francisco Ferrer Guardia—arrived in Barcelona to take part in the Universal Esperanto Congress of 1909, he was arrested and accused of being the main instigator of what came to be known as the “Semana Trágica” (Tragic Week), so-called because of the outbreak of “libertarian” violence (Poblet i Feijoo 2004, p. 26; 2008, pp. 27–28).

The “Semana Trágica” occurred in the last week of July 1909—some weeks before the Congress—and was the first eruption of anti-Catholicism in 20th-century Spain; it began as a general strike and degenerated into the systematic destruction of religious buildings and the persecution of clerics and nuns (Corts i Blay 2009). Ferrer Guardia was in fact a modest railway employee and autodidact, and the promoter of schools—he called them “Modern Schools”—where children received an anarchist education, according to documents read out in the Spanish Parliament during the debate that took place when he was condemned to death (DSCC, 6–18 July 1910; also *RP* 14, 21 and 28 June 1906). He had inherited a fortune from his dealings with a Frenchwoman, which he used to publish anticlerical, anti-militaristic, and republican books and pamphlets in favor of free love and universal happiness, but also—if the need arose—violence against the state, the army and the church. It is inconceivable that he could have been responsible for an incident such as the *Semana Trágica*. But the judicial and government authorities were not of that opinion, and he was sentenced to death and executed, thus becoming a martyr and a symbol of free thought throughout all Europe (La Cierva, DSCC 19 October 1909; Marín 2009).

The *Semana Trágica* jeopardized the existence of the 5th Universal Esperanto Congress in Barcelona. Many European Esperantists feared that Barcelona would not offer the minimal necessary safety conditions, but no one thought to associate it with anarchy. The Esperanto movement attracted very different people and Barcelona’s candidacy as the venue for the 1909 Universal Congress had been supported by the main public and private institutions in the city, including those of a clearly conservative nature: the Municipal Council, the Provincial Council, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and a number of cultural associations. When it appeared the congress would not take place, the organizers went to the same government official—the Minister for Internal Affairs—responsible for the repression that put an end to the *Semana Trágica* and which was now busy prosecuting the suspects. He gave them his fullest assurance and the congress went ahead as planned (Poblet i Feijoo 2004, p. 26; 2008, pp. 17–18, 27–28).

All this is simply an example of the heterogeneity of the Esperanto movement. Its spread among anarchists was equally clear. This was not peculiar to Spain. Like many Europeans and Americans, the claims of Chinese anarchists also included the abolition of marriage, property, family, and familial relations, the private ownership of land, national boundaries, and so on. The main difference was that the Chinese linked these concerns to Confucianism and the ideology of “familism”, considered to be the two main pillars of authority in Chinese society. In Spain the concern was obviously Christianity.

But for our purposes, it is more interesting to note that Esperanto also features in this combination, and so there can be said to be a triple coincidence in this case. Around 1906–1907, Chinese anarchism had emerged practically simultaneously with Esperanto among Chinese intellectuals studying abroad in Paris and Tokyo. In 1906, a team of Chinese scholars in Paris formed the New World Society (*Xin shijie she*) and saw fit to publish a minimally bilingual journal—Chinese-Esperanto—in 1907, entitled *Xin shiji* in Chinese and *La Tempoj Novaj* in Esperanto (both titles meaning “New Era”). They supported the ideals of Kropotkin, Bakunin, Malatesta, and Reclus (Dirlik 1986, pp. 126–36). They immediately began to set up Esperanto schools in China, and it was not always clear which were primarily Esperantist or anarchist. By 1914, there were said to be Esperanto schools in Tianjin, Fuzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and Chengdu, among others, and several of them were also considered anarchist. Precisely the singularity of Esperanto permitted the spread of the ideals of anti-authoritarianism—even in textbooks—with certain impunity from the civil authorities (Dirlik 1985, p. 268; also, Dirlik 1991, pp. 124–37, 173, 290).

2.3. Anarcho-Naturism and Other Naturisms

It is not surprising that a young person like Guillem Rovirosa between 1917 and 1922 would also be attracted to naturism (Garcia Soler 2014, pp. 201–2). Naturism was more than merely a dietary alternative. Ultimately, it responded to the conviction that there is a natural order, and the best thing is to include human life in it. Naturists did not seek to eliminate artifice—Esperanto was artificial—but they confined artifice to what was necessary, including food and attitudes. For a naturist, therefore, it not only made sense to nourish oneself by eating vegetables without killing animals, but existence as a whole had to be conceived in terms of peace and non-violence. They were peaceable and hence also opposed to constraint—including from the forces of authority—however legitimate it might appear. Many of them in fact reached the conclusion that all natural ideals of life were anarchistic, and thus set out to conduct their own life in small communities like the so-called “Naturist Cultural Society” in the Valencian town of Alcoy.

I mention this particularly as it was one of the first naturist societies in Spain, and because Rovirosa and his wife became members in 1922, albeit for only a few weeks—perhaps for two months. In 1920, Rovirosa had fallen ill and had to abandon his studies, and in 1921 he married Caterina Canals, a young woman from the Catalan *haute bourgeoisie* who became a “convert” to the ideals of her husband (Garcia Soler 2014, pp. 198–201). Years later, she proved to be very discomfited by sexual matters, and in the streets of Paris in 1930 would become embarrassed by seeing young couples embracing in public (Rovirosa to Parellada, 15 August 1930, ACPHOAC/FXG). But in 1921, she resolved to follow her husband wherever he went.

The formal constitution of the Naturist Cultural Society in Alcoy coincided with a Naturist Assembly held in Valencia in 1923, which gave greater resonance to the Alcoy initiative (Roselló 2003, p. 46). Alcoy naturists practiced both vegetarianism and nudism in a waterfall near the town. The surviving pictures, however, show them discreetly attired in their underwear (see Belda 1984, p. 27), perhaps for the sake of caution. Possibly, in 1923, being dressed only in one’s underwear was already sufficiently revolutionary and even on a par with being naked (even in a country like Spain, where there was no lack of erotic imagination). There were certainly no signs of that modest inhibition in seen *Iniciales* (*Initials*), the naturist monthly edited in Barcelona in 1929–1937. It was self-defined as “the eclectic review for free spirits” about “anarchism, sexual education and conscientious procreation, naturism and nudism, free love”, with graphic information on nudist camps (Cleminson 2008, p. 168; some copies in BC).

Rovirosa was probably aware of the existence of the movement known as *Nacktkultur* in Germany at the beginning of the century (Hau 2003; Williams 2007; Dickinson 2011). In any case, it was in the 1920s when nudism became genuinely widespread in the Western world, including in the Iberian countries of Latin America and Europe. This was also the time of the book *Man and Sunlight* (1925) by the German writer Hans Surén, which we shall mention later on; *Integral Nudism* (1931) by the female Spanish writer Laura Brunet (Brunet 1931); the French edition of *Nudity* (also 1931) by Simone May (May 1931)—translated into Spanish as “the passionate romance of nudism” in 1933 (May 1933)—and *Nudism comes to America* by Frances and Merrill (1932). A fondness for naturism was also an element in Chinese anarchism in the early decades of 20th century.

It should of course be recalled that the concept of “naturism” was broader, and also embraced naturist medicine, which had been developed many years before. The relationship between naturism and anarchism began before the German idea of *Nacktkultur*. Anarcho-naturism had been defined in France in the 1890s and in Spain in the early 20th century (Cleminson 2008), and from here spread through Latin America and all of Europe—including Portugal. The Portuguese Naturist Society was founded in 1912, and

its staunchest supporter was the anarcho-syndicalist José Peralta. From 1922 on, he edited the society's monthly journal, entitled *A Cultura da Vida* (*The Culture of Life*), renamed in the same year as *Natural Life: Journal of Integral Culture of Human Life* (Freire 1992).

At the time, nudism was beginning to gain popularity; there were already anarcho-naturists who followed a vegetarian diet—sometimes combined with nudism, sometimes not. In these years, for instance, the anti-authoritarianism of the Costa Rican writer Alberto Mas Ferrer appeared to be reduced to the right to breathe free, pure, and sufficient unpolluted air and to live in a hygienic environment that would allow any human being to obtain the necessary amounts of air, food, work, rest, and warmth (Casaús Arzú 2011, p. 111). In 1920s Cuba—according to Shaffer (2005, p. 12)—the anarchist counterculture was based on three main dialectics: nationalism versus internationalism, health and nature, and education and gender. There were also proposals in favor of anarcho-nudism (Hiergeist 2024).

In any case, the relationship between anarchism and naturism was not without problems. Some anarchists criticized naturism precisely because of its individualist, “commercialist”, and even capitalist aspects. People needed a social change which had to include health, of course, and for natural anarchists, the best way to achieve this was through a natural life. Anarcho-naturism therefore became largely a criticism of industrial civilization (Shaffer 2005, pp. 127–28) and, by embracing it, anarcho-naturists were advancing the ideas of some of *Nacktkultur*'s German pioneers.

Here, in Germany, nudism was seen as a means to achieve a future society—a modernity that saw in nature an alternative to that other modernity, dominated by a newly industrialized and urbanized Germany. This point of view was shared by anarchists, communists, social democrats, and even political moderates (Williams 2007, p. 20).

In relation to naturist medicine, there were of course naturist trends without anarchist implications. But it was not only the mere coincidence of the word “naturism”. There were differences, but also similarities. The 4th Spanish Naturist Congress (Barcelona, September 1929) was divided into two parts: the first dealt with “integral philosophical naturism” and the second with “therapeutic naturism” (*ABC*, 23 August 1929, p. 20). For our purposes—considering the Catalan team formed by Pujulà i Vallès, the brothers Grau, and Roviroso in 1917—it is interesting to note that there were people who even linked health and naturism to their national concerns. By this I do not mean the health policies of any national government; I am referring to political movements which—especially in the 20th century—began to be termed “nationalist”. We have mentioned *Catalanismo*. However, there was also a naturist *Catalanismo*. At the end of the 19th century, naturism was so well known in Catalonia that a Catalan entrepreneur was able to place newspaper advertisements for his shop in Barcelona (*Camisería Kneipp*, or the Kneipp shirt shop) claiming to be “the first hygienic shirt shop in the Kneipp system” (*DVG*, 10 August 1895, p. 3). He was referring to the German naturist Sebastian Kneipp, widely known because of his book *My Water Cure*, 1886, which had been translated into French in 1892 and Spanish in 1894. Several books on his method were published in Spanish, especially by Neuens (1892, 1893, 1895), and there was even a *Kneipp Almanaque* in circulation from 1894. Kneipp's reputation gave rise to literary fiction and dramatic satires such as *A devotee of Father Kneipp*, written in Catalan by Vidal (1896). Kneipp was a Catholic priest.

It was also in 1896 when Doctor José Falp y Plana first published his article on vegetarianism and morality in *La Vanguardia* (*LV*, 13 June: 4), the newspaper with the largest circulation in Barcelona. In 1908, he promoted the foundation of the Vegetarian League of Catalonia, whose explicit pillars were—according to Falp—the corporative organization of the movement (as a union) and the dissemination of the practice of vegetarianism (linked to

the universal bases of science, nature and ethnics). It had the expressed aim of regenerating and recovering Catalan vigor (Arteche García 1999).

Even in this case, however, great importance was given to expanding vegetarianism among the workers. Falp himself gave several lectures on this subject in *Ateneos obreros* (Catalan workers' athenaeums) and organized free vegetarian dinners for the poor. At the end of each meeting, they would listen to the *Vegetarian Hymn* sung by the Barcelona *Schola Orfeónica* (Choir School) (LV, 18 December 1908, p. 5; also Arteche García 1999).

In Germany, and especially from 1936, Himmler promoted a nationalist nudist movement. It should be recalled that debates about youth, nature, and politics were especially intense in the Nazi era. Indeed, this was merely the culmination of the process which gave rise to *Nacktkultur*. It was partly a response to an awareness of the social and cultural crisis, whose solution was sought by German naturists by turning to nature. They believed that people could be improved by a "natural" life and that this would then emanate from people to the whole social organization and the entire nation. Some of the advocates of this idea would be led to wholesale racial nationalism and to acceptance of the Nazi regime (Williams 2007, pp. 15, 62–63, 222).

There were also movements that catered to workers from the outset. One of the most significant was the *Naturfreunde*, promoted by Professor Albert Koch, who ran a school in the Moabit district of Berlin. He had developed a system of remedial gymnastic exercises which his students performed in the nude. This scandal forced him to leave Moabit and encouraged him to found several gymnastics schools—a genuine network of schools—for workers in major German towns. In them, Koch set out to alleviate the mental and physical affliction suffered by some workers as a result of their industrial labor and the unhealthy urban environment in which they lived. Koch organized nude exercise hikes and discussions on health and hygiene. He never abandoned his commitment to social justice, pacifism, and gender egalitarianism as an explicit statement of feminism (Williams 2007, p. 1ss).

Lastly, for all of the above—Nazis in Germany, *Catalanistas* in Spain, socialists, anarchists, communists, moderates and others—and in the naturist world as a whole, the concept of "nature" worked as a metaphor which highlighted the human body and its appearance, sexuality, education, and even human interrelationships (Williams 2007, p. 58). This required a new conceptualization to describe this attitude to the relationship with nature and was not far removed from the nascent phenomenological method in philosophy and its literary expression in books such as *Man and Sunlight* by Hans Surén (1925) (Morris 2009). It is perhaps sufficient to say that by the end of the 19th century, we see the emergence of the concept of "adolescence", which encapsulated all these ideas. This took on unprecedented cultural significance and was seen as a distinct stage in human development between childhood and adulthood, endowed with a unique psychological and physical identity (Williams 2007, pp. 107–30).

This reveals something else, namely, that the cases we are discussing here do not provide an answer to the cultural crisis, but a path of purely personal liberation, closer to anarchism, but which also involves many more ideologies, including conservatism. Attitudes in the Hispanic world were closer to those documented in Britain, France, and Belgium (Peeters 2006). Above all, nudists discussed their experience of personal liberation, the natural joy provoked by the unveiling of one's sex and seeing the unveiling of other people's. Here, sensual feelings were perhaps a priority.

Belgium and France were to a large degree Catholic countries, as were the Hispanic peoples generally speaking. We should note, however, that the dialectics between Protestantism and Catholicism cannot be subordinated to the dialectics between sexual Puritanism and Christianity that come into play in sexual relations. This route can lead us far from

our objective. It may be worth taking into account that moral Puritanism had influenced Catholic morals since the 17th century and was already well entrenched—in the educated classes—at the end of the 18th century. Educated Catholics in the 19th and 20th centuries were perhaps as puritanical as any other Westerner in sexual matters (Andrés-Gallego 2021a, pp. 162–63, 244–47, 416–20, 497–502, 544, 563–64; 2021b, pp. 134–35). Things were different for common people, although there were also significant differences between them that are too numerous to consider here. It is perhaps sufficient to say that nudism in Chile was only tolerated from the 1960s, and the inauguration of the first nudist beach in Peru in 2010 was a news item whose repercussions can still be seen on many websites today. The question is whether, in such different countries as Chile and Peru, the taboo of nudity—and female nudity above all—was as powerful as in Britain or France in the first third of the 20th century. The first nudist camps in the Far East were organized in the inter-war period of the 20th century, but only in countries colonized by Protestants. They were located in private sites in forests—as opposed to on beaches—in an attempt to avoid scandal and public debates. Indeed, these private camps were explicitly introduced as prelapsarian Gardens of Eden where nudists could recapture a childlike purity and original human values. Paradoxically, they were ridiculed by critics who rejected their aim of evoking original innocence and controlling sexuality. And this rejection was one of the reasons why nudists opted to site nudist camps on mainstream beaches, especially after the Second World War in Australia (Daley 2004). Catholics in the Philippines, Muslims in Java, Hindus in Bali, Buddhists in Thailand—to mention only several key tourist destinations—were more reluctant, and this practice remained forbidden for years or was restricted to private or isolated areas. The question then arises as to whether this reluctance was evidence of the strength of the enemies of naturism or of more lenient social pressure.

2.4. *Esperanto, Anarchism, Naturism, Spiritualism... In the Antipodes*

We have commented that Conan Doyle wrote in 1919 that spiritualism, socialism, and Christianity should go hand in hand and make an “idealist socialism” emerge (Conan Doyle [1919] 1997). Now, we must remember that Rovirsa, the Spanish engineer of whom we spoke at the beginning, had also practiced spiritualism. In 1924, he suffered a serious setback: this was the death of his brother-in-law Josep Canals, with whom he was very friendly and had planned far-reaching and ambitious joint professional enterprises. This led Rovirsa to turn to this practice that was already widespread in Spain (Garcia Soler 2014, pp. 227–28). As is well known, spiritualism involves private meetings with a medium—generally a woman—who enables those seated around the table to make contact with the deceased.

If we had followed a different method in this essay—namely a chronological exposition of the countercultural elements manifested in Rovirsa’s and his friends’ life—we would have begun at this point. Spiritualism was a very ancient practice, existing prior even to the existence of the West and the beginning of our era. We need only recall the biblical phrase from *Leviticus* 20, p. 6, where Yahweh explicitly condemns any person who turns to “the mediums” (*h’bt* in Hebrew) and diviners to prostitute themselves. However, a certain scientific spiritualism emerged in the Western world in the 18th century, when studies on animal magnetism were conducted in several countries towards the end of the century (González de Pablo 2006b). From the early 19th century, phenomena such as the “tables tournantes” and the disintegration of the personality drew the attention of many Western scientists, including Spaniards (González de Pablo 2006a; Graus 2014). The rigorous scientific explanation of some of these facts tended to point to magnetism. However, some peculiarities of this or other phenomena induced some people—even

rigorous scientists—to imagine the possibility of a kind of spiritual influence (Plas 2012) and contributed to the acceptance of spiritualism among the educated classes.

In the United States, some people saw genuine scientific spiritualism in Andrew Jackson Davis' works (first, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelation, and a Voice to Mankind*, 1845), which rapidly became popular in Britain (Davis 1857), whereas in Spain and other Latin countries, the French influence was greater. But there were some important exceptions. The Andalusian town of Cadiz maintained a special relationship with the new British ideas—as it was a major port—and had prior knowledge of spiritualist theories, as we shall see. Some historians (González de Pablo 2006a, 2006b) see a strong connection between the French and Spanish processes and a similar trajectory in both countries in terms of linking (i) the rejection of animal magnetism in the 18th century, and (ii) the first attempts to implant British Mesmerism—a feature of hypnotism and a means to obtain direct personal contact with the afterlife—at the height of the Spanish (and Western) post-Napoleonic counterrevolution in around 1816. Later on, (iii) scientific spiritualism would reappear in the rejection of phrenology in 1842 (which we see in the Spanish Philippines in the works of Zeferino González (1864), one of the pioneers of the neo-Thomist philosophy). It continued (iv) with the recent arrival of hypnotism, starting in the 1860s, and (v) became associated with the acceptance of Kardec's spiritualism.

Certainly, in Cadiz, the first spiritualist c may have appeared in 1853 according *El Criterio espiritista*, a newspaper of 1869 (Vila and Antonio 2007, p. 237; see Espino 1872, p. 191), although *The Spirits' Book* by Professor Allan Kardec (1857) was perhaps the most influential text in the world, and also in Spain. Actually, spiritualism had an even older history in France itself (Bensaude-Vincent and Blondel 2002; Edelman 2006; Brower 2010) and throughout Europe, as shown in 1883 by Emma Hardinge Britten in her pioneering synthesis (Britten 1883). Popular French writers such as Victor Hugo (Chambers 2008), and—in the following generation—the astronomer Camille Flammarion (who died in 1925), the psychical researcher Gabriel Delanne (d. 1926), and the philosopher Léon Denis (d. 1927), who took an interest in the doctrines of spiritualism and in its possible links to oriental beliefs such as reincarnation, began to be heard and read. All this had a significant influence on Latin countries.

Initially, spiritualism spread astonishingly fast among cultivated Westerners. In 1861, Kardec claimed in his journal (*Revue Spirit*) that he had received requests to authorize the translation of *The Spirits' Book* and *The Mediums' Book* into Spanish, English, Portuguese, German, Italian, Polish, and Russian, and even into Tartar (RS 4[12]:374). In the same year and the same journal, the Portuguese version of his *Spiritualism in its simplest expression* was announced for Portugal and Brazil, and was probably printed in Paris on the initiative of Kardec himself (together with editions in German, Polish, and modern Greek) (RS 5:2). In the following year (1862), the same booklet became available in Italian and Spanish (RS 6:2); this became available in Russian in 1863 (RS 7:2) and in Croat in 1865 (RS 9:2). Kardec's enterprising spirit and the fact he was received in French foreign circles was probably a determining factor (for instance, in Barcelona, Spain, in 1863) (RS 6[2]:68).

Was he successful? According to the reports of Kardec himself in the *Revue Spirit*, this was the case. In Rio de Janeiro, spiritualism had “numerous fervent and devoted representatives” by the end of 1863 (RS 7[7]:213). The Spanish Catholic theologian Aguilar publicly proclaimed in 1864 that Catholics in Spain were excluded from academic degrees if they did not attend classes by Darwinist, spiritualist, or Krausist professors (Guerrero Carot 2013, p. 324). The Spanish and German translations of *The Spirits' Book* had been announced at the beginning of the same year (RS 7:2), and were probably the first. But the booklet mentioned previously—*Spiritualism in its simplest expression*—was probably also the main instrument of dissemination in Spain. Three years later, in September 1868, a democratic

and anticlerical revolution broke out precisely due to the “clerical” educational politics of the government of Queen Isabella II of Spain. This marked a new point of departure, under the protection of the consequent proclamation of freedom of worship, expression, and the press. In November 1868, the Madrid fortnightly *El Criterio* (*The Criterion*) changed its name to *El Criterio espiritista: Revista quincenal de espiritismo* (*The Spiritualist Criterion*). Another fortnightly journal, *El Espiritismo* (*Spiritualism*) appeared in Seville, along with the *Revista espiritista: Periódico de estudios psicológicos* (*Spiritualist Journal*) in Barcelona, both in 1869. The same year saw a veritable boom in spiritualist bibliography—and “counter-bibliography”—in Spain. It is symptomatic that in those months alone (*Catalogue* 1869) Kardec himself commissioned the Spanish translation of several of his books and gave preference to the Spanish versions (*The Spirits’ Book*; *The Mediums’ Book*; *The Gospel according to spiritualism*; *Hell and Inferno*; *Genesis, miracles and predictions*); in that same source, the German version of *The Spirits’ Book* and the Polish version of *What is Spiritualism?* were also announced.

Public debate rapidly ensued. In the 1880s, a well-known Catalan theologian—Alonso Perujo (1882)—publicly refuted the works of Camille Flammarion, whose *Lumen: History of a Comet in Infinity* had been translated and published in Spain in 1874 (Flammarion 1874), two years after its original French edition. Flammarion, as the reader will recall, was a popular writer given to esoteric scientific and astronomical speculation. Also in the 1880s, another Catalan, a popular priest—Félix Sardá y Salvany (Sardá y Salvany 1884)—published two slim volumes, one against liberalism—political liberalism—and the other against spiritualism (*Refutación* 1887). The first—*Liberalism is a sin* (1884)—was translated into several languages and became a major best-seller in the late 19th and early 20th century (Moliner Prada 2000).

It is important to note at this time that the influence of spiritualism penetrated the foundations of the Masonic–spiritualist lodges, where a certain scientific spiritualism prevailed. In Spain, at the end of the 19th century, there were educated people who were still unsure about the relation of magnetism to electricity, but not to spirits. In the general written regulations of the Spanish Spiritualist Grand Orient (1891), its objective is explicitly stated as the theoretical and practical study of spiritualism and its related fields such as “magnetism, hypnotism, occult sciences” (Alvarez Lázaro 1985, p. 188). A similar relationship can be found in British society (Stolow 2009) and in Portugal some years later (Gouveia 1908).

In 1874, however, the North American psychologist Frederic Rowland Marvin observed that spiritualism had lost its hold on the higher classes and was rapidly spreading among the illiterate and coarser classes (Alvarado 2012, p. 237; also Alvarado 2007, 2013). After the 1880s, the development of mind sciences—especially psychology, psychiatry, and ultimately psychoanalysis—steered many cultivated people away from spiritualism (Oppenheim 1985; McGarry 2008).

In spite of this, spiritualist practices gained ground among the lower social classes and workers (Sharp 2006). Even in decline, scientism still offered strong resistance. Some of Alfred Russel Wallace’s most important writings on spirit photography date from 1887 and after. He was seriously troubled by the theories of the psychologist Frederic Myers, who claimed the human psyche has a subliminal or second self and is thus incapable of being a reliable witness to its own experiences. But Wallace’s own research into photography and spiritualism provided him with (personal) evidence of the truth of spiritualist phenomena. A photograph did not have a second self, but permitted the effective invocation of the spirit of the person photographed (Pels 2003; Mitchell 2014, p. 16).

In any case, spiritualism was becoming a popular—albeit usually clandestine—practice, and polemicists were aware of the potential relationship between political and

religious freedom, even for a cult as singular as spiritualism. It is also worth noting that this relationship between political and religious freedom was actively defended and practiced by anarchists, especially in Catalonia. Among Catalan and other European anarchists, spiritualism genuinely became a mystical aspect of universal love and happiness. And these beliefs were peculiar neither to the Spanish nor Europeans. For example, in the town of Pelotas in Rio Grande do Sul, two Spanish immigrants—the dentist José Aguilera and the architect Antonio Baxeras—had disseminated spiritualism since 1877, and in the 1930s it became widespread among other liberal professional practitioners and among craftsmen and workers (Gil 2011, p. 65).

Some Brazilian homeopaths and other students who had trained in Europe may have introduced spiritualism shortly after 1848. But its true development was linked to Kardec's works, and the first known Brazilian spiritualist journal was "The Echo from Beyond the Grave" (1869) (Bragdon 2004).

In Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, spiritualism had already begun as an elitist movement in the 1860s and had become popular by the end of the 19th century (Damazio 1994). But here, the melting pot reappears: Kardec's *The Spirits' Book* was published in Esperanto in Rio de Janeiro in 1930. The publishers—the Brazilian Spiritualist Federation—had previously issued a Portuguese translation by Guillon Ribeiro, which was in its tenth edition by 1914, and its 23rd in 1952 (Kardec 1914).

The spiritualist movement spread throughout the whole of Latin America, and by the late 19th century, the Spanish translation of Kardec's works had reached the Philippines, which was politically linked to Spain until 1898. Spanish officials and public servants had begun to introduce masonry since the mid-19th century, and this led to the implantation of free thinking, including many kinds of religious or esoteric practices. The development of spiritualism in the islands was hindered by the overriding importance and social weight of the religious missionaries and the civil administration, which practically spanned the entire archipelago. But the spiritualist revival of the Spanish revolution of 1868 reached the Philippines, and the immediate development of a clandestine separatist movement also fostered the advance of masonry, spiritualism, theosophy, and a wide diversity of channels of opposition to the Spanish Catholic establishment.

Especially important was the opening of the Suez Canal. From the 1870s, well-to-do Philippine families would send their children—especially their sons—to complete their education in Europe. These young men discovered a very different world. To simplify somewhat, it could be said that they found their own culture but without so many friars. They had been educated—in the Dominican University of Saint Thomas or in the Jesuit Athenaeum, both in Manila, and in their own families—in a genuine Western culture, but where forms of counterculture were unknown. In Paris, Barcelona, London, and Madrid they had the sensation of breathing the air of freedom. They were among the first to publicize the existence of a libertarian lifestyle, even if they themselves did not live in such a way. José Rizal was one such individual.

Thus, Kardec's books came to the Philippines in the returning travelers' baggage. In the end, the definitive uprising that achieved Philippine independence broke out in 1896, and years later it would be claimed that many revolutionaries were devoted spiritualists. We should note that fact that the occult nature of spiritualist practices requires us to resort to oral history (Pew 2011; *History* 2014), perhaps with the exception of *The Secret Teachings of the Espiritistas* by Harvey Martin (1999) and the work of Sagandoy (2017), and we should be especially wary of its statements. We find factual mistakes in its assertions. In any case, in 1898, the Spanish army was not defeated by Philippine insurgents, but by North American marines, and Philippine separatists therefore continued the war against these new rulers. It was under those circumstances—according to oral history—that a religious

network based on the spiritualist teachings codified by Kardec evolved in the islands. At least, we know a spiritualist center was established in Manila in 1900 at the initiative of Agustín de la Rosa, an important member of the *Liga Filipina* (Philippine League), a public association founded in 1892 by José Rizal as a benefit society and cooperative association. From Manila, spiritualism spread outwards to the provinces of Bucalan, Pampanga, Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, and Quezon.

In 1901, Juan Alvear founded a similar center—*La Perseverancia* (Perseverance)—in San Fabián, Pangasinan, and began to write and disseminate books on the subject throughout the archipelago. Along with other members, he propagated the movement in Pangasinan itself, Ilocos, Tarlac, Nueva Ecija, Quezon, and Nueva Vizcaya.

Thus, with Brazil at the head, the Philippines would become the second great Iberian spiritualist country, perhaps until today. In 1909, representatives of De la Rosa and Alvear and others founded the Christian Spiritualist Union of the Philippines in order to coordinate the entire movement. In its first congress that same year, fifteen Philippine spiritualist centers were already affiliated to the Union. With the passage of time, Philippine emigration to America (particularly Canada and the US) decisively contributed to endowing the Union with its international character. In fact, it became a member of the International Spiritualist Federation.

It was not a peculiarity of the Philippines. In the Asian territories of the British Empire and in Australia, the extension of telegraph networks since the 1860s decisively contributed to the expansion of spiritualism, just as all telecommunications networks influenced the development of mass markets for printing and encouraged the growing penetration of new media into almost all the different spaces of social life. In the case of telegraphy, many people refused to believe the electrical explanations and assumed there was analogy between telegraphy—as electromagnetism—and the existence of the soul (Stolow 2009, pp. 84, 89–90).

2.5. From Spiritualism to Theosophy... And Agnosticism

Rovirosa's interest in spiritualism lasted two years, until around 1926. An avid reader, he devoured all the spiritualist literature he could lay his hands on. He understood French and some English and Italian, as well as Catalan and Spanish, and set out to discover the theoretical foundation of any issue he studied. He applied this same rigorous approach to his readings on spiritualism, and failing to find a serious—and above all demonstrable—explanation of spiritualism, reverted to theosophy (Garcia Soler 2014, pp. 202–3).

Paradoxically, his frustration with spiritualist literature was all the greater due to the credentials of his main source: the French doctor Charles Robert Richet (Richet [1923] 1925), the 1913 Nobel laureate and one of the first real experts on parapsychology. His *Treatise on Metapsychics* was published in French in 1922, translated into Spanish in 1923, and reprinted—and debated in Spain—in 1925 (Mülberger and Balltandre 2012, 2013) in the months when Rovirosa was seeking a solution to his religious concerns outside Christianity. This study by Richet was perhaps the first major scientific study on spiritualism; Rovirosa was greatly impressed by this work, but the impossibility of experimentally verifying Richet's theories ultimately led to disappointment. It was then that he heard of theosophy.

In Germany, naturism in its nudist and vegetarian versions was not far removed from theosophy at turn of the century and throughout the Wilhelmine era. These latter movements often showed a certain interdependence with the new religious trends, including esoteric and especially theosophist groups. Many of their members—and followers—joined two different associations to reconcile both practices. The totality constituted a true “methodical lifestyle” which Max Weber could have called an “ethos” (Bigalke 2008). Other people followed a different path. In Central America, for example, there was a

genuine “theosophist vitalism” with Buddhist and Hindu influences, as well as socialist and anarchist elements (Casaús Arzú 2011).

There is no doubt that theosophists claimed to have strong oriental roots. Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society in 1875, had spent a large part of her life traveling throughout both the East and the West, and maintained that the Tibetan *Mahatmas* (“masters”) had profoundly influenced her theosophical thought. She had also ventured into *Mahāyāna* esoteric Buddhism, and—aided by the reading of Allan Kardec’s writings—into spiritualism, which she explored further during her stay in Cairo in 1871, before abandoning it. Theosophy became to some degree a melting pot of magnetism, spiritualism, and heliosophic and Masonic elements. Some of its practitioners subscribed to Jinarajadasa, Vivekananda, and Gandhi Hinduism, all mixed with a clearly socialist and anarchist tendency. But even their socialism referred to Kropotkin’s libertarian version or to a Fabianism influenced by anarchism (Casaús Arzú 2011), and became encapsulated in a type of anarchist communism similar to that which could be found in many places in Europe (Manuel and Manuel 1981).

Blavatsky settled in England, where the oriental echoes and occult practices of her theosophical ideas inspired a fervent following in the late 19th century, especially among the more educated and prosperous classes. An association emerged from these theories which linked the Orient, women, and primitive spirituality, in contrast with the male and scientific West (Dixon 2001).

In Costa Rica, as in other Hispanic countries, there was a link between the spread of masonry and the introduction of theosophy, but with important differences that were explicitly debated. There were also cases of dual affiliation, such as that of Antonio Quesada Blanco, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Costa Rica in 1906, who was simultaneously a member of the theosophical lodge *Virya* (Martínez Esquivel 2010). The intellectual Brenes Mesén worked to introduce theosophy and played an active role in the important confrontation with Catholic town leaders in 1907. The educational projection of his theosophical activities was seen as a serious attack on hegemonic Christianity (Molina Jiménez 2001, 2011).

In the antipodes of the Iberian world, the Philippines, the dynamics were different. Spanish masons helped to introduce spiritualism, although not theosophy. This other movement, at first, was an American initiative and took time to have native followers. According to its own records, the Manila Theosophical Society in Escolta was founded in Manila in 1892 by B.C. Bridger (an Anglo-Saxon name of a person of whom we know nothing), but this association did not survive the wars that began in 1896; this lodge was no longer listed in the 1903 annual report of Adyar (V.H.C. 2024). An Oriental Theosophical Society was constituted in 1911, independent of the International Theosophical Society, which was important because internationalism was a key feature of the theosophical creed. They avoided—actually refused to engage in—any national controversy. There was only one Theosophical Society in the world—founded in 1875—and in any “country” there could only be a section, with lodges in any towns where there were enough theosophist adherents (Crow 2012).

Thus, its definitive foundation had to wait. In 1925, Devereux M. Myers, a lieutenant in the US air corps, set up a lodge in Manila belonging to the Theosophical Society of America. It was only in 1933, when the movement had seven lodges with 112 members in the Philippines, that the Philippine section of the international Theosophical Society was founded (Brief 2014).

Rovirosa began to meet with theosophists in Barcelona—the location of the Spanish section—and devoured Helen Blavatsky’s works, whose most important texts had been translated into Spanish since at least 1893, two years after her death. In Rovirosa’s day,

in 1925, her main work, *The Secret Doctrine on the Creation*, was available in a Spanish translation (Blavatsky 1925; also Jinarājādā 1927).

Theosophy had become popular in Spain very early on, by the 1870s, in part thanks to the protection of the wealthy Catalan José Xifré Hamel, a confirmed theosophist. He financed the magazine *Sophia*, which was published between 1893 and 1914, and was soon joined by other journals in Seville, Barcelona, Madrid, and many other lesser publications. By then, Xifré had made the acquaintance of the engineer Francisco Montoliú and Doctor José Roviralta, both of whom were also Catalan. Xifré had inherited his father's fortune. Xifré père had been one of the numerous Catalans who became rich in Cuba, whence he returned in the mid-19th century. Once back in Catalonia, Xifré's father became friends with the French consul in Barcelona—Ferdinand de Lesseps—who talked to him about his projects to link the Red Sea with the Mediterranean through the Isthmus of Suez, and Xifré was indeed one of the first shareholders in this famous project (Guardiola 1957; Vilar 1969). Quite unrelated to his involvement with the canal—as far as we know—he was already a keen follower of occultism and several types of novel beliefs, as was his son later on.

When we recall the new religion proposed by Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto, we can observe its theosophical background. He reached a similar conclusion to Blavatsky, although by a different route. As we know, Zamenhof proposed a universal religion that was acceptable to anyone, including those who had been educated in another religion. For Blavatsky, no religion held the whole truth; it was therefore necessary to keep and reserve only the best part of each religion and reconcile it all.

This perhaps explains how Rovirosa reached the conclusion that theosophy was ultimately on the path to conciliation with pantheism (Garcia Soler 2014, p. 192). He began to study all historical religions, except Christianity, which he considered to have already been exhausted. Others, in contrast, brought new and more pleasurable discoveries, as he recalled later on. But his preferences soon turned to the religion of the ancient Parsees—based on the wisdom of Hermes—and to Buddhism, with its poetry, and above all to Hinduism. He was also entranced by Confucius' wisdom, although in his opinion the associated practice could not be considered a true religion (Rovirosa 1956; 1995–2011, pp. 548–49). Finally, in 1928 he abandoned his theosophist convictions. He was not a rationalist; he acknowledged the continuous presence of mystery in his life and in any life he examined. But at the same time, he was highly systematic and analytical in his method of thinking and working. He always sought a way to apply learning and advance further in any knowledge he acquired. As a theosophist, he started by studying the main theosophical writings, and then set out to conduct a thorough investigation; this led him to the conclusion that all religions that resisted theosophical criticism were pantheistic. Specifically, Hinduism proposed the idea of the origin of the universe that could be reconciled with evolutionism, but—like evolutionism—raised the problem of origin. According to a verse in the Vedas that was considered key by theosophists, a particle of Brahma—an atom of Brahma, we could say—began to expand and, by emanation, created the universe. Thus, Rovirosa understood that one atom of his own being was sufficient to build the universe, while at the same time remaining himself; we are not diluted in the universe. He found all this hard to believe (Garcia Soler 2014, p. 192).

Sometimes of course the melting pot worked in the opposite direction, and this occurred in Catalonia too. For instance, in 1927 the Catholic and *Catalanista* priest Joan Tusquets (Tusquets 1927) published his work *Theosophism* with an introduction by Miquel d'Esplugues, a Benedictine monk from Catalonia's main Marian sanctuary of Montserrat and also a *Catalanista*, in which he compared Catalan and Castilian Catholicism. One year later Pius XI sent an "apostolic visitor" to Catalonia to report on its religious situation, particularly from a political point of view. The informant found Tusquets to be a professor

of philosophy and catechetical pedagogy at the Barcelona Seminary, which he considered to be a case of poor judgment by the bishop of Barcelona; he had appointed as professor a priest who had good qualifications—educated in neo-Thomist theology at Louvain under the future cardinal Verdier—but who was politically dangerous because of his *Catalanismo* (Corts i Blay 2010, pp. 77–78). Actually, Tusquets’ subsequent writings made no allusion to politics, but attacked heterodox types of religious feelings, especially theosophy (Tusquets 1927, 1928) and masonry (Tusquets 1939). He also criticized the “ratiovitalism” of the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset (Tusquets 1932a, 1932b) and the Catalan—and Falangist—philosopher Eugeni d’Ors (Tusquets i Terrats 1984, 1989). During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), Tusquets joined the “nationalist” cause, and paradoxically became one of the first mentors of Catholic Francoist fundamentalism, and opposed any “separatism”—even Catalan (Tusquets 1937). In 1936 (Tusquets 1936), in Burgos—the Generalissimo’s headquarters—he collaborated in the creation of the *Ediciones Antisectarias* (*Anti-sectarian Editions*), in which his own writings appeared until 1939.

3. Preliminary Conclusions

The moment for conclusions has arrived. Our starting point was a team of Catalan friends who, since 1917, had shared certain ideological experiences. Now, a comparative account of their experience and the historiography of other people and countries has shown—I believe—that Rovirosa’s path (his rejection of Christianity in favor of a libertarian stance, in a broad sense of the concept of “libertarianism”, and towards Esperanto and naturism, and subsequently spiritualism and theosophy) was not merely an personal conjunction of ideas. It was a relatively common route throughout the West and in countries influenced by Western culture and politics and—perhaps—can be seen as something that is embodied in the whole of the international cultural history of our times.

Obviously, this does not resolve all the questions that would bring our study to a close. We also asked at the start of the essay if these countercultural elements were linked to the 1968 watershed. It is evident we are not only speaking of similar theories, but also of the possibility of a process without an ongoing solution. Answering this question would require additional research and certainly demand a different study. This essay only tries to show the need to study the relationship between culture and counterculture as we have: from “above” (Andrés-Gallego 2005, 2010) and from below (2014 and in this article). From above, a phenomenon can show us the ideological and sociological importance of concepts such “identity” and “modernity” concepts. From below, this same phenomenon gestates by means of a very different “melting pot”. It is necessary to look for more groups like the team formed around Guillem Rovirosa to see if the phenomenon began with different combinations which finally converged in an almost global event.

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- AGA: Archivo General de la Administración (Alcalá de Henares, Spain).
- DSCC: *Diario de las sesiones de Cortes: Congreso* (Madrid, Spain), Parliamentary acts.
- DVG: *Diario de Villanueva y Geltrú* (Villanueva y Geltrú, Spain), daily newspaper.
- BC/FFPV: Biblioteca de Catalunya (Barcelona, Spain), Found Frederic Pujulà i Vallès.
- KEFD/FJGC/C: Katalano Esperanto Federacio Dosiero, Found Jaume Grau Casas, Correspondance (Sabadell, Spain).
- LV = *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona, Spain), daily newspaper.
- RP = *Revista popular* (Sabadell, Spain), weekly review.
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