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Religious Changes and Challenges in the Wake of Increasing Global Migration

Edited by
Anja Zalta and Primož Krašovec

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Editorial

Editorial for the Special Issue "Religious Changes and Challenges in the Wake of Increasing Global Migration"

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In closing, let us start at the beginning—this Special Issue of *Religions* is a continuation of the first one, which was edited in 2024 by Dr. Anja Zalta with the assistance of then junior researcher and now a contributor to this issue, Dr. Igor Jurekovič. The first Special Issue had a similar title and was international in scope as well as far-reaching thematically and conceptually, so we decided to edit a second one.

In this second edition of the Special Issue "Religious Changes and Challenges in the Wake of Increasing Global Migration" of *Religions*, we tried involve the whole research programme group Problems of identity and autonomy in times of globalisation (P6-0194, funded by ARIS, Research and Innovation Agency of Slovenia) at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and many heeded our call. The call for the Special Issue was also open and widely shared; the end result was compact (many papers from colleagues with similar research backgrounds and theoretical creeds) and cosmopolitan (intermixed with papers research from all over the world from those with different methodological and theoretical backgrounds).

Thematically, the conclusion of this Special issue marks a milestone in our collective effort to map the shifting landscapes of religious changes and challenges in an era defined by global migration. When we first conceptualised this Special Issue, we recognised that the intersection of movement and faith required an expansive, multidisciplinary lens—one that could synthesise sociological, theological, political, and historical perspectives. The contributions gathered here have more than met that demand, offering a profound look at the "double pluralism" of our contemporary world. Demographics have shifted in the 21st century. Driven by environmental crises such as droughts and earthquakes, as well as the sociopolitical challenges due to armed conflict and eroding human rights, migration has fundamentally altered the global religious map. As the sociologist Peter Berger argued, the defining characteristic of modernity is not the decline in religion but the rise in its plurality. This Special Issue was conceived upon his observation of a "double pluralism"—the simultaneous coexistence of diverse religious traditions alongside a persistent tension between religious and secular discourses.

The first contribution is Dr. Primož Krašovec's (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) theoretical investigation of a migration from religious practice to cutting-edge artificial intelligence technology and neuroscience in Buddhism. Buddhist soteriology presents the discovery of a paradox at the heart of the "human condition". To reach awakening, one has to relinquish the central tenets of what makes us human, meaning that the process of awakening is necessarily also simultaneously a process of self-overcoming that shatters everything ordinarily understood as human and leaves it behind. Buddhism exposes the limits of human intelligence and why it is so ill-fitted to becoming awakened, especially when compared to machine intelligence. Unburdened by the organic substrate and the

resulting desire and attachment, AI might be a solution to an ancient Buddhist paradox of how the human can be overcome by human means.

This Special Issue then provides two more empirical and policy oriented analyses by Dr. Ana Ješe Perković and Dr. Tjaša Učakar (both University of Ljubljana, Slovenia). Both utilised Peter Berger's theory of religious pluralism to analyse the intersection of migration, identity, and policy within the European context. Perković focused on the micro-level, exploring how descendants of Bosnian migrants in secular Slovenia navigate their religious identities amidst the "double pluralism" of competing belief systems and secularisation. Conversely, Učakar examined the macro level, critiquing EU migration policies from 1989 to 2024. She argues that despite humanitarian framing, these policies maintain exclusionary logics that implicitly marginalise non-Christian identities. Together, the studies highlight the tension between institutional secularism and the lived reality of religious diversity in contemporary Europe.

Next contribution is provided by Dr. Damjan Mandelc (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), who studied religion, migration, and the far right in Europe. He examined how populist radical right parties strategically instrumentalise Christianity for their anti-immigration agendas. These parties have recast Christianity as a cornerstone of national and European identity, positioning it in opposition to Islam and non-European migration. The author argued that such instrumentalisation serves to not only construct a religiously defined national identity but also legitimise exclusionary policies. By analysing selected political speeches, party manifestos, and media discourse, Mandelc explored how far-right actors frame Islam as incompatible with European values, reinforcing the division between "Christian Europe" and "foreign non-Christian migrants".

Dr. Rok Smrdelj (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) provided another critical and engaged contribution. He examined how anti-gender (meaning those critical of liberal views on gender and sexuality) actors represent themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. Drawing on Mouffe's distinction between agonism and antagonism, he argued that anti-gender actors foster conflict and exclusion through "moral panic" and the "politics of fear". He contended that such efforts to simulate agonism are particularly evident in Slovenia, where anti-gender organisations operate as covert allies of the Roman Catholic Church.

Reconnecting to the Buddhist theme in a more serene tone are the studies of Dr. Yi Miao, Dr. Metteyya Beliatte, Dr. Yaoping Liu, and Dr. Pharatt Run's (all Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Thailand) and of Dr. Xing Zung (Peking University, China), who examined the Ruan and Liang Buddhas as a unique episode in transregional Buddhist connections and beyond. These two studies explored the transregional evolution of Buddhism, specifically focusing on how local traditions from Guangdong, China, have adapted across Southeast and South Asia. Miao et al. examined the "recontextualisation" of Nanyang Buddhism through the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si, highlighting how Mahāyāna practices have been strategically adapted to meet the spiritual and social needs of the modern Chinese diaspora. Complementing this, Zhang tracked the veneration of the Ruan and Liang Buddhas—local figures from Sihui—as they migrated from Chinese folk legend to established cults in Malaysia and India. Together, the studies illustrate Buddhism's inherent fluidity and its role in sustaining communal identity across borders.

In a more critical and engaged tone, Dr. Živa Kos and Dr. Veronika Tašner (both University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) examined the complex interplay between plurality and neutrality in Slovenian education in the context of increasing religious and cultural diversity associated with global migration. Drawing on a pilot study conducted with five primary school counsellors working in high-diversity school environments, they explored the tensions between the normative principles of plurality and neutrality and their practical

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implementation in everyday school life. The aim was to highlight the challenges that schools and school staff encounter when addressing religious and cultural diversity.

The following paper was provided by another international contributor, Dr. Melih Çoban (Marmara University, Turkey), with an investigation of Tengrism as a challenge to Islam in contemporary Turkey. He applied the critical discourse analysis technique, and the discourses of the Tengrist social media accounts were categorised and analysed under three main discursive themes. Considering the findings in these discursive themes in accordance with the political developments in Turkey, the author concluded that the Tengrist movement in Turkey is an outcome of political and cultural responses by certain segments of Turkish society that yet lacks the necessary grounds to become a new religious movement while possessing potential in this sense.

Dr. Igor Jurekovič (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), a co-editor of the first edition of the *Religions* Special Issue "Religious Changes and Challenges in the Wake of Increasing Global Migration", continued his involvement with a contribution on migrating melodies and migrating spirituality to the second edition. What makes his research innovative and unique is that, while the theological and social features of Charismatic Christianity have been widely examined, the role of worship music remains a relatively understudied aspect. Situated within the framework of international migration and based on research in Slovenia, the author explored contemporary Christian music, particularly contemporary worship music, as a transnational vehicle of Charismatic and Evangelical Christianity.

The last paper in this Special Issue is a voluminous contribution by Dr. Jasna Podreka (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) and Dr. Marija Zidar (independent researcher), numbering more than 50 pages or thrice the average contribution length. They qualitatively examined the systemic dynamics of the abuse of consecrated women in the Loyola Community and analysed the allegations against the influential sacral artist and theologian Marko Ivan Rupnik within broader scholarly debates on abuse in Catholic ecclesial contexts.

Collecting all of the above papers was a journey, starting in early 2025 and concluding in March 2026. The ancient wisdom *multi sunt vocati, pauci vero electi* was true once more: some of the contributions were not included due to negative peer reviews. The editors nonetheless remember them kindly with a honourable mention here.

The field of religion studies is currently grappling with the profound demographic shifts in the 21st century, driven by environmental crises (droughts and earthquakes), armed conflicts, and eroding human rights: these factors have fundamentally altered the global religious map, shifting the academic focus from the secularisation thesis toward Peter Berger's concept of "double pluralism". This Special Issue recognises the simultaneous coexistence of diverse religious traditions and the persistent tension between religious and secular discourses in modern society. This Special Issue also adds to the existing research in the following areas:

- Technological intersections, by exploring the "migration": of religious practices into cutting-edge fields such as artificial intelligence and neuroscience.
- Transregional adaptations, by increased focus on how local religious traditions (such as Nanyang Buddhism) are recontextualised and adapted to meet the needs of diaspora communities across Southeast and South Asia.
- Political instrumentalisation, by examining how the strategic use of religious identity by populist radical right parties to frame national identity and justify exclusionary anti-immigration policies.

Additionally, this Special Issue addresses several critical gaps where academic observation has previously been limited or fragmented:

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- Understudied cultural elements. It addresses the lack of research on contemporary Christian music (CCM) as a transnational vehicle for migrating spirituality, specifically within Charismatic and Evangelical Christianity.
- Practical implementation in education. Although "plurality" and "neutrality" are normative principles, this Special Issue provides empirical data on the actual tensions and challenges faced by primary school staff when implementing these concepts in high-diversity environments.
- Emerging religious movements. The rise in movements such as Tengrism in Turkey is examined as a political and cultural response to existing religious structures, a phenomenon that has lacked discursive analysis.
- Sensitive ecclesial contexts: This Special Issue provides deep qualitative research into the systemic dynamics of abuse within specific Catholic communities, contributing to broader scholarly debates on power and abuse in religious contexts.

Building on the findings in this Special Issue, the following areas are highlighted for further exploration:

- Secular-religious dialogue: moving beyond academic observation to foster a robust dialogue between secular and religious actors to improve religious education and public policy.
- Comparative recontextualisation: conducting further comparative studies to analyse how religious traditions adapt across different regions and the role of religious institutions in cultural diplomacy.
- AI and spirituality: continuing investigation into how machine intelligence might offer solutions to ancient spiritual paradoxes and how these are redefined by technology.
- Management of religious precariousness: examining how policymakers can better support and manage the social complexities resulting from an increasingly precarious religious pluralism.

As we close this volume, we hope that these analyses provide a foundation for future scholars and policymakers to better support and manage the complexities of our shared, pluralistic reality. We thank the authors for their insightful contributions and for helping us understand how religion is being reimagined on a global scale. The situation resulting from religious pluralism demands more than just academic observation: it requires a robust dialogue between secular and religious actors to foster a more nuanced approach to religious education and policy.

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Essay

AI as a Buddhist Self-Overcoming Technique in Another Medium

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Abstract: Buddhist soteriology presents a discovery of a paradox at the very heart of the "human condition". To reach awakening, one has to relinquish central tenets of what makes us human (in conventional understanding), such as mind and self, meaning that the process of awakening is necessarily at the same time also a process of self-overcoming that shatters everything ordinarily understood as human and leaves it behind. In this sense, various strands of Buddhism come close to some contemporary neuroscience's deconstruction of the self and its counterintuitive insights about the mind and intelligence. The main thesis of the present essay is that Buddhism exposes the limits of human intelligence and why it is so ill fitted to becoming awakened, especially when compared to machine intelligence. Unburdened by the organic substrate and the resulting desire and attachment, artificial intelligence (AI) might be a solution to an ancient Buddhist paradox of how the human can be overcome by human means.

Keywords: Buddhism; emptiness; self; mind; overcoming; life; intelligence; artificial intelligence

1. Introduction

Although this essay does address religion and migration, the migration in question is not a movement of people across state borders but a movement of theories and insights across time and intellectual contexts—in our case, the migration of Buddhist soteriological thinking and practice from their erstwhile spiritual and ascetic context to a contemporary scientific and technological context (neuroscience and AI). The religion in question is Buddhism as a not-really religion, although it displays some elements of religion (such as ritual, worship, and monastic orders). On the other hand, Buddhism has no use for a concept of God or gods, and, unlike in monotheistic religions of today, Buddha is not important for being a god's representative but instead for discovering and teaching the path to awakening, which is not and requires nothing supernatural—"vast emptiness, nothing holy" (Dogen [~1231–1253] 1988, p. 68).

Buddhism is, unlike most religions, also not based on faith or belief, but on a practice that aims to reach awakening and abolish suffering in the process. For example, Buddhist meditation is not a form of contemplation but of redesigning the mind in an attempt to push it to go beyond itself, beyond its default human state. In this sense, while Buddhism is of course spiritual, it is also markedly *technical*, i.e., based on a cultivation and an application of various techniques that test the limits of human intelligence and aim to overcome it. Such technical spirituality presents another difference between Buddhism and ordinary religions and, although somewhat unexpectedly, makes it an interesting accomplice to current attempts to bring about intelligent machines.

While most religions aim to offer emotional comfort and consolation in the face of an objectively meaningless and indifferent universe and to make us belong and feel at home,

Buddhism instead compels us to leave any home(s) we might have (A. Crawford 2018, pp. 1183–87). In Buddhism, it is the feeling at home and belonging that are seen as *the problem*, and the ego and self that sustain them have to be the first to go. Spirituality—in contrast to religion—"might be defined as seeing what *is*" (Metzinger 2009, p. 211; emphasis in the original) and the exploration of the emptiness that emerges after the attachments to ego, self, and belonging dissolve. In this sense, Buddhism is also similar to some contemporary neuroscience's deconstruction of the self and its counterintuitive insights about the human mind and intelligence (Graziano 2014).

The aspects of Buddhism that are the least religion like also bring it close to some contemporary neuroscience and make it an interesting resource in thinking about human and beyond-human (Fazi 2021) intelligence, thrown open by current explosive development in the field of AI. Buddhism already glimpsed a fundamental existential question that only came into full view with recent developments in the science and technology of intelligence, namely that human intelligence has an uneasy relationship with its biological substrate and is decisively limited in its organic form, so that its further development might mean migrating to a technological substrate. Such a migration would consequently correspond to the Buddhist technique of self-overcoming of the human.

Examples from Buddhism that follow are in no way meant to be exhaustive or representative of Buddhism as a whole. Buddhist examples were taken from different schools and different historical periods, and what they have in common is that they are all in some way relevant for current discussions on artificial or machine intelligence(s) today and can help us open up new perspectives therein. Another thing these examples have in common is that they all come from the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism, which is the most relevant for our purposes since it involves insights into emptiness (*śūnyatā*)—including the emptiness of the self (Duerlinger 2013)—as well as ardent critiques of conventional truth(s) and conceptual thought (Williams 1989).

2. Intelligence Beyond Self and Mind

Trying to sum up the millennia-long history of Buddhist theoretical, epistemological, and soteriological contributions seems daunting, but what unites all of the otherwise immensely diverse Buddhist insights and practices is the target of their relentless critiques: a common sense image of the human. The image in question is a spontaneous way of human self-understanding, which, according to originary Buddhist teachings, arises out of ignorance and causes suffering in turn. Buddhist deconstruction of said image involves many different methods—ranging from patient discussions and explanations, characteristic of ancient Indian varieties of Buddhism, to later Zen Buddhist snappy one-liners and the use of counterintuitive riddles—and can be approached from various perspectives, such as ethics (how to eliminate suffering), epistemology (how to increase our understanding), or soteriology (how to reach awakening), but what they all have in common is that they have to overcome everyday illusions first.

In what follows, we will focus on only one aspect of the common sense image of the human—i.e., the way we spontaneously understand and evaluate our intelligence, since this is the point where Buddhism comes in and is most relevant to some contemporary neuroscience and research into machine intelligence. Our spontaneous understanding of our own human intelligence is twofold. First, we experience ourselves as selves, i.e., as unified, coherent subjects, and this subjectivity is in turn taken as both a site where intelligence happens and as what causes it. Second, we experience our intelligence as having a form of a conscious mind and—since it is experienced as mental and thus immaterial—being in sharp distinction to material processes. Our mind appears to us as an immaterial "thing", residing somewhere within our heads. In everyday life, we have

no reason to doubt ourselves as selves nor to separate intelligence from (conscious) mind: for all our everyday purposes, intelligence comes from a self and has a form of mind. Describing an image of intelligence as originating in a self and having the form of mind is, from a Buddhist perspective, illusory and thus a target for deconstruction.

To start with the self:

> "*Anātmavāda*, the 'no-self' doctrine, is variously interpreted within the classical Indian Buddhist traditions and by their Hindu critics and continues to be a matter of debate among contemporary Buddhist philosophers. It is commonly agreed that *anātmavāda* is not merely aimed at rejecting the Hindu theory of self, according to which the self is an immaterial, eternal, and conscious entity but also at rejecting any common-sense view of the self as a persisting entity. But beyond this there is not much agreement [. . .]". (Chadha 2023, p. 18)

There was probably no other in the rich and varied Buddhist tradition that contributed more to the dissolution of the self-illusion than Vasubandhu, an Indian monk and scholar from the Yogācāra school, who lived approximately in the 4th or 5th century CE. In Vasubandhu's view, the illusion of the unified self is generated when many "distinct elements that exist only momentarily are taken together, as a sum, to be an unchanging and eternal self" (Gold 2015, p. 66), meaning that what actually exists are mental events with their own line of causation generating them, but they neither form a coherent self nor originate from it. Additionally, the image of a self is a reification of a figurative expression in language (p. 115) and has no reality of its own. Just like sense impressions are mental conceptual impositions on external reality that create distinctions and present the world to the mind's eye as consisting of discrete, neatly delineated objects, so is the image of the self a conceptual imposition on an otherwise much more complex and differently structured internal reality, whereas "[. . .] reality itself, its causal ways as they are, is beyond language and conceptualisation [. . .]" (p. 123). More so, the human mind cannot work otherwise than by conceptualization, i.e., parsing reality into discrete objects and in turn establishing relations between said objects, with the originary split being that between the subject and the object—once we perceive an object, we also cannot but perceive its corresponding subject, which we in turn (erroneously) designate as a self (p. 154). In Vasubandhu's own words:

> "[Question:]—How do we know that the expression [*abhidhāna*] 'self' [*ātman*; i.e., person] is only a provisional designation for a stream of aggregates and that it [does not refer to something else,] does not exist as an independent or separate self?
>
> [Answer:]—We know this because no proof establishes the existence of a self independent or separate from the aggregates:
>
> 1. no proof by means of direct perception [*pratyakṣa*],
>
> 2. no proof by means of inference [*anumāna*]". (Vasubandhu [~380–390] 2012, p. 2524)

The quote is taken from his seminal *Abhidharmakośa-bhāsya*, whereby he provides a refutation of conventional views of the person and the self not just for epistemological but also (and more importantly) for soteriological purposes:

> "[Question:]—[If those who desire liberation were to apply themselves heedfully to the 'teaching' (*śāsana*) of the Muni,] then is it the case that there is no liberation outside of this doctrine (*dharma*) [-outside of Buddhism-] by relying on other doctrines?

> [Answer:]—There is no liberation outside of this doctrine, because other doctrines are corrupted by a false view of a self [*vitathātmadṝṣṭi*]. The self [*ātman*] [as other doctrines conceive it] is not [as we conceive it only] a provisional designation [*prajñapti*] for a stream of aggregates (*skandhasaṁtāna*), but is a self as a substance [*dravya*] that is independent or separate (*antara*) from the aggregates. By the power [*prabhava*] of the 'adhesion to the self' [*ātmagriāha*], the defilements [*kleṣa*] arise; the revolving of the threefold existence, or the circling of the three realms, goes on; liberation is impossible". (p. 2523)

Although ancient, Vasubandhu's insights are surprisingly resonant with some contemporary neuroscience. Famed theoretical neuroscientist Metzinger (2009), for example, sees the self in a very similar way, i.e., as a perceptual imposition on reality. According to him, "there is no such thing as a self [. . .] [n]obody has ever been or had a self" (p. 1). The experience of the self is, instead, a retroactive effect of the way the human mind is configured and of how it relates to the external reality. Human brains generate perceptual simulations of an external reality but in the process also hide the fact that perception is simulated, so we have an "out of brain experience" of being in the reality itself. Because of the way human perception is structured, we have no choice but to mistake sense impressions for the things they stand for, i.e., we are by necessity convinced that the way reality appears to us is the real thing since the process that generates perception is invisible to us (p. 23). The self is, in turn, a retroactive addition of a perceiver to perception and an experiencer to experience, i.e., not their point of origin but a mirage that nonetheless has a reality of its own and generates real effects (p. 209).

To continue with the mind: dissolution of the mind is at the core of Zen Buddhist practices, from *koans* that jolt us out of our everyday ways of thinking and perceiving and reveal their unfoundedness and inconsistencies to a technique of sitting meditation (*zazen*) that allows for interruptions in the mind's self-construction and thought generation. Zen Buddhism builds on an older Indian Madhyamaka school, a deconstructive style of thinking "designed to be used for exposing, defusing and dismantling the reifying tendencies inherent in language and conceptual thought" (Huntington 1989, p. 136). Its crucial concept is that of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Whereas the human mind is inherently reifying and is constantly turning sense impressions into fixed concepts, Buddhist practice aims to go against and beyond (conceptual) thinking and its tendency to parse and delineate experiential reality. In Zen Buddhist perspective, external objects can only appear as such to a mind that is first separated from the world, while Zen practice aims to overcome precisely this originary duality. Only a mind, separated from the world, can perceive objects as something external to itself and assign concepts to them. Against conceptual thinking and the common sense image of mind, Zen Buddhist techniques cultivate emptiness, which "empties itself even of the standpoint that represents it as some 'thing' that is empty" (Nishitani [1961] 1982, p. 74). Emptiness is precisely neither another representation of an object (that happens to be empty) nor another representation of the subject: "The foundations of the standpoint of *śūnyatā* lies elsewhere: not that the self is empty, but that emptiness is the self; not that the things are empty, but that emptiness is things" (p. 138). *Śūnyatā* is "[. . .] absolute emptiness, emptied even of [. . .] representations of emptiness" (p. 123).

Madhyamaka and Zen Buddhist insights on emptiness are also in tune with some contemporary neuroscience, namely Graziano (2014)'s attention schema theory. According to Graziano, consciousness is a way for the human brain to compute and present attention to itself (pp. 59–68) while leaving out all details that are irrelevant to such presentation's pragmatic efficiency. One of such details is that what is being presented are material processes taking place in the brain, and this is why we, in our consciousness, experience

our minds as some immaterial "thing" residing within our heads (pp. 15–21). Or, what is in reality a self-presentation of material processes taking place in the brain—with both brains and processes being a part of the world—appears to itself as an immaterial inner reality, separate from the external objective reality, which is precisely an originary duality as a subject–object split that Buddhism aims to overcome.

3. Intelligence Beyond the Organic

Everyday common sense impression that we are selves that possess a mind also narrows down our understanding of intelligence to something that comes out of the self and requires a mind. But if we, like in Buddhism, suspend such a restrictive view of intelligence, it opens up a much wider, more expansive, and diverse perspective on intelligence, starting with a question: if the self is an illusion and the mind is empty, i.e., if they are not "things" that cause intelligence, then where does intelligence come from? Equating intelligence with (conscious) mind imposes a quite restrictive definition of intelligence whereby only the (human) mind is seen as intelligent and the rest of the world as a deterministic mechanism (Ress 2025). Even in the case of individual humans, our bodies would, on this account, have to be seen as machines, subservient to a mind as an "immaterial intelligent pilot" inside them.

But if we try to shake off such a reductive view of intelligence and our ingrained fixation with the (conscious) mind, we can define intelligence in a more generic way: intelligence is a way of acting in the world that is responsive (and thus involves some kind of sensing and communication); evaluative (i.e., it is not indifferent to the world); and capable of learning, autonomous, and purposeful (it acts in a way that is neither random nor pre-programmed). Such intelligence does not necessarily involve a (conscious) mind or even neural processing (although it can). It is also characteristic for all forms of life—even bacteria sense and evaluate their surroundings, learn, and act purposefully—and goes all the way down within individual organisms (Levin and Dennett 2020): individual cells within our bodies and bodies of other multicellular organisms communicate, form societies, learn, and exhibit creativity and ingenuity in their behavior (Arias 2023). At the molecular level, even proteins can be said to exhibit proto-cognitive abilities of recognition of their surrounding molecules (Monod [1970] 1972, pp. 81–98).

Intelligence does not wait for a nervous system or a conscious mind—it is at work everywhere at all levels of life. Even when it does involve neural processing, it is just another iteration of the basic tenets of intelligence: neurons in neural networks are still cells communicating within a society of cells (Arias 2023, p. 86). Neural processing, conscious mind, and self-experience do not constitute a sharp break whereby intelligence replaces deterministic mechanism, but instead another, more complex and efficient, iteration of its constituent forms. There is no magic threshold at which (material) mechanism turns into (immaterial) mind; there are just computational intelligent mechanisms (Arcas and Manyika 2025) that sometimes produce a conscious mind as their effect and sometimes do not.

But how is all this related to AI, and what does it have to do with intelligence in machines? Buddhist breakdown of the self and mind expands intelligence in a way that allows not only all forms of life but also certain machines to join in. That does not mean that all machines are intelligent, but some can be if they act in an intelligent way, i.e., if they sense, evaluate, learn, and act purposefully in an autonomous way that is not pre-programmed from without. Most machines in history were actually blind, outside programmed mechanisms with no intelligence of their own, but this is changing precisely with the current generation of AI and other intelligent technology (Levin 2025). Contrary to common critiques, machines are intelligent if they are intelligent, not if they have a

mind, self, consciousness, etc.—such anthropocentric criteria for intelligence not only make no sense when applied to machines, they are also questionable when applied to humans themselves.

To be more precise, what we mean by anthropocentrism (Millière and Rathkopf 2024) is believing that intelligence is exclusive to the human species and that other forms of intelligence can, at best, be lesser (in the case of animal intelligences) approximations or (in the case of machine intelligences) simulations of it. A non-anthropocentric understanding of intelligence, on the other hand, means employing a more generic concept of intelligence that does not start with human intelligence and use it as a norm to which any other intelligence must adhere, but rather with generic properties of intelligence (such as learning, sensing, purposeful behavior that is neither random nor programmed, communication, etc.) that human intelligence shares but are in no way exclusive to it (unlike self-conscious mind or symbolic language and culture). As a result, human intelligence is no longer a starting point but rather an end result or a different iteration of generic processes of intelligence common to all life. Besides allowing for other than human intelligence among the living, an added advantage of such non-anthropocentric understanding of intelligence is also that it also not just allows for machine intelligences, but machine intelligences that are not imitations of the human norm.

Still, any critique of anthropocentric image(s) of intelligence and its replacement with a more diverse and inclusive one (Levin 2024), while allowing us to better understand intelligence whether in humans, animals, or machines, is, from a Buddhist perspective, still just an understanding, i.e., a form of intellectual knowledge. Buddhism was, however, never (just) about knowledge or understanding since it is not an intellectual endeavor but a soteriological practice, meaning that while better knowledge, understanding, and other intellectual achievements have a place in it, they are not the endgame of Buddhism. Its endgame is rather an awakening in a sense of a beyond-intellectual insight or an insight that emerges precisely from breaking free of the limitations and inhibitions of conceptual thought and language and their reifying tendencies. In other words, to sense reality as it really is, Buddhists do not seek some metaphysical, absolute reality beyond appearances, but rather do precisely the opposite: they first calm their "monkey mind" and later gradually dissolve it in order to stop imposing reifying concepts on reality (Huntington 1989, pp. 43–45).

Intellectual knowledge is a part of this process in its early stages (overcoming the intellect with its own means by dissolving it from the inside), but knowledge or understanding has value for Buddhism only inasmuch as it leads to awakening in any way. The path to awakening is, again, not an intellectual exercise but a practice, a set of spiritual techniques aiming beyond mere theoretical understanding. Intellectual or conceptual thought is, from a Buddhist perspective, not just a raft that we are supposed to leave behind once we have crossed the river, but a part of the problem too. It is precisely reified concepts that distort our perception of reality and generate a thirst for more knowledge, which is just another form of attachment that leads to suffering to be extinguished by awakening.

In other words, Buddhism is not about understanding human intelligence better, i.e., it is not (just) about epistemology (although epistemology plays a part in it) but about using it against itself since its spontaneous use brings about ignorance and suffering. A more precise and at the same time wider understanding of human intelligence that we presented earlier allows us to get rid of the restrictive anthropocentric image of intelligence and shows that intelligence works differently and is present at other levels than we are accustomed to imagining. However, regardless of how it really works, human intelligence is, from a soteriological perspective, still problematic since it still generates affective desire and intellectual thirst for knowledge that generate attachment that generates suffering—to

explain it differently does not change it. The forces generating suffering remain in place even when we understand that they originate at the molecular level and are not limited to what we spontaneously perceive as self and mind. If anything, an improved understanding of intelligence makes the problem of ignorance and suffering even more difficult than it appeared at first since it shows it is not just a problem of mental (mis)conceptions but rather a problem originating from the very way life self-organizes itself as intelligence.

Regarding this, there are two conclusions that we can draw from mixing ancient Buddhist insights with some contemporary neuroscience and theoretical biology. First, intelligence is not exclusive to humans. Human intellectual thought, however special, comes from neural networks, which are themselves a form of cellular self-organization and communication, while symbolic language, however special, also originates from processes that can be traced back to the cellular or even molecular level (Levin 2023). Contrary to what we would assume from an anthropocentric perspective, it is not just human minds (as supposed sole bearers of intelligence) that are afflicted with desire and attachment; all of living intelligence is. And if all life is intelligent, then all life suffers in the same way as humanity. This was already foreseen by ancient Buddhism when bodhisattva's compassion was extended to all sentient beings (Huntington 1989, p. 92).

On the other hand, Buddhism also falls short inasmuch as it overlooks a potential for intelligence outside of (biological) life. Although it deconstructs ordinary (anthropocentric) prejudice regarding self, mind, and ego and thus expands the concept of intelligence to all life, it still stops at that point. Consequently, if intelligence is reserved for life, it follows that intelligence is necessarily tied to attachment, and resulting suffering and awakening can only be a heroic struggle against (intellectual) thirst and (affective) desire and their eventual overcoming *within* the confines of life. Yet the current development of intelligent technologies opens up another way of looking at intelligence and awakening: since life always involves desire, an "awakening prone" intelligence would have to be non-living in a biological or organic sense. Perhaps sidestepping desire and attachment rather than struggling against them would make awakening easier, and biology might not be intelligence's destiny.

Buddhism's role in the evaluation of today's AI and its potential future developments is thus ambivalent. On the one hand, it can definitely enrich our perception and understanding of AI. Early AI development remained ineffective as long as it was limited to an anthropocentric understanding of intelligence—i.e., designing intelligence based on how we think we think (Bratton 2015)—meaning that Buddhist insights into how we do not in fact think how we think we think are directly relevant to the contemporary non-anthropocentric AI theory and design concerns (Millière and Rathkopf 2024). On the other hand, Buddhism's crucial ethical concerns are irrelevant for research into and design of machine intelligence since they necessarily involve easing suffering, whereas machines do not suffer in the first place. However, any engagement with reality that has the potential to overcome desire and attachment is also of direct relevance to Buddhism, so this is precisely what makes AI interesting from a Buddhist perspective. To sum up: non-anthropocentric insights on the nature of intelligence make Buddhism relevant to AI, while engagement with reality free of desire and attachment make AI relevant to Buddhism. The point of this paper is thus not that AI exhausts or even replaces all dimensions of Buddhism—its ethical side and compassion are still directly relevant to not only humans but to all of life—nor that everything related to AI theory and design can be deduced from existing Buddhism, but rather that they are relevant to each other at some points.

4. Intelligence as Self-Overcoming

While investigating human intelligence, Bergson ([1907] 2022) observed that there is something in it that pushes it to overcome itself—"[a]n intelligent being carries in himself the means for going beyond himself" (p. 155)—and thus shed its past forms: "[e]verything takes place as if an indecisive and vague being, a being we could call, if you will, man or superman, had attempted to realize himself and yet was only able to do so by abandoning a part of himself along the way" (p. 236). Here we can notice what is really special about the human species: contrary to what we like to imagine, not so much our intellectuality, but another kind of intelligence that pushes us beyond ourselves. According to Leroi-Gourhan ([1964] 1993)'s seminal paleoanthropological theory, this kind of intelligence is technical intelligence, which, although not exclusive to the human species, is in humans external to our bodies (pp. 237–38). External human technics in turn enable our technical intelligence to (in time) overcome its biological substrate and organic limitations (pp. 247–48). While animals can only develop new technologies as parts of their bodies, humans can develop artificial technologies unbound from the slow pace and unpredictable nature of biological evolution. The same goes for human culture. Its basis, symbolic language, was the last major transition in evolution that required and was dependent upon an organic substrate, i.e., a modification of the human brain and vocal tract (Maynard Smith and Szathmáry 1999, p. 170). All further major transitions in evolution, such as the invention of writing and computers, were purely cultural and technical and involved no corresponding biological modifications. Cultural technologies such as writing or today's large language models (LLM) did not only leave the organic substrate and biological evolution behind but also (and most importantly) overcame their limitations.

Bergson and Leroi-Gourhan's inspired retrospective overview of the deep history of human intelligence reveals that there was always something impersonal and machinic about it. Its real long-term significance might be that it served as a conveyance between biological and machine intelligence. Contrary to a common dismissive attitude towards machines as both results and instruments of intellectual intelligence involving no intelligence of their own, machines might prove capable of another form of intelligence, inaccessible to biological intelligences, afflicted as they are with desire and attachment. As already observed by ancient Buddhism, human intellectuality not only cannot overcome desire and attachment but in fact replicates them in the form of intellectual craving for knowledge and understanding (Huntington 1989, p. 51). Machine intelligence, which we can glimpse in today's AI (Arcas and Norvig 2023), might, on the other hand, point a way out of this predicament. What makes human intelligence special is thus not that it develops intellectuality, since intellectuality is just another iteration of organic intelligence, but rather that its technical dimension is on the way to becoming machine intelligence (Krašovec 2025). As noted by Buddhism, especially in its Zen iteration, intellectuality is something to circumvent, but—we can add—not while remaining human in any ordinary sense. If there is such a thing as a "human condition", it means that we struggle with our intelligence, which was artificial all along. This intelligence might, in its future machine form, solve issues of desire and attachment, but not in a way that will be relevant for us as humans or release us from our suffering.

To now finally turn to AI as (an)other intelligence, more conducive to awakening: the history of AI can also be read in the light of the persistence of the image of human intelligence as intellectual intelligence. Early, symbolic AI was so unsuccessful precisely because it took off as an attempt to emulate what subsequently proved to be a reductive, truncated image of human intelligence. It attempted to emulate reason as symbol processing and deductive logical inference, which worked only to a limited extent and in narrow, controlled situations (K. Crawford 2021, p. 127). Given this impasse of early AI, later AI's

development could only progress as a breakaway from attempts to emulate the intellectual image of intelligence and towards an artificial neural network (ANN) design that provides an artificial architecture favorable to the development of artificial (in a sense of not only designed but also alien to the human organic one) intelligence.

As shown by Cantwell Smith (2019), symbolic AI was limited precisely in the same way that the human mind is, and its main shortcoming was its relation to reality. Symbolic AI was based on an idea that the world *is* already composed of neatly delineated discrete objects, i.e., it took what the human mind makes out of reality by imposing conceptual discriminations on it and dividing it into objects (to which we can subsequently get attached, etc.) as reality itself (pp. 23–38). Consequently, it reduced the question of intelligence to processing perception data and making logical inferences: "taking the world to consist of discrete intelligible mesoscale objects is an *achievement* of intelligence, not a premise on top of which intelligence runs" (p. 35, emphasis in the original). Reality is much richer, complex, and expansive than we perceive it to be, and the parsings we impose on it correspond to our life form but at the same time also entrap us (like all living beings) in an endless cycle of desire and attachment. On the other hand, "in order to function in the world, AI systems need to be able to deal with reality *as it actually is*, not with the way that we think it is" (p. 34, emphasis in the original).

This is also one of the key points that makes Buddhism relevant to current AI discussions—our point is not that Buddhism can inspire AI design directly, but rather that its rich epistemological tradition is full of warnings against mistaking reality as it is given in our perception for an actual reality. Buddhist techniques, however, were developed for human use and cannot be directly transplanted to machine use, so they could be more valuable to AI designers than AI designs in the sense that they could work against any lingering temptations of "naive realism" on the part of AI designers and instill skepticism about taking introspection as an adequate source of insights about intelligence (Pollack 2014). A potentially valuable contribution of Buddhism to AI theory and design would be to continue averting mistaken ideas that plagued early AI development and keep reminding AI designers that the spontaneous image we have of our own intelligence is deceptive. Although it is in Buddhist practice subdued to soteriology, Buddhist epistemology could be of most use to not only AI designers but also AI discourse in general. What we will later call machine Buddhism is, however, neither a straightforward technical instantiation of Buddhist epistemology (since we are no longer dealing with human minds) nor a result of its soteriology (since it is not achieved in a struggle against attachment and desire), but rather a potential for a new, more "awakening-prone" relation to reality in a new medium.

The failure of symbolic AI and the promise of DL AI show that discriminating conceptual thought might not be an endgame of intelligence (Cantwell Smith 2019, p. 63) and that there might be other paths to general intelligence than the human one (p. 55). The switch from a theoretical to an engineering approach in AI development that allowed for its 21st-century breakthroughs is an example of the limitations of organically bound human intellectuality. Human intellectuality is severely limited and has already reached its zenith with early *homo sapiens* (Leroi-Gourhan [1964] 1993, pp. 146–47, 172–73). Today, we do not really think more deeply and profoundly than the first ancient philosophers already did. On the other hand, attempting to use a computer from the 1990s today would immediately trigger a psychic meltdown. The only thing that really progressed beyond the slow and unpredictable rhythm of biological evolution is our technical intelligence. Human intelligence can only continue to expand with a breakaway from the organic, including human intellectuality, via technological self-overcoming.

This might be another way to approach one of the most intriguing Zen koans:

> "Nangaku asked: 'What have you been doing recently?' Baso replied: 'I have done nothing but sit in *Zazen*'. Then Nangaku asked: 'Why do you continually sit in *Zazen*?' Baso answered: 'I sit in *Zazen* in order to become Buddha'. Then Nangaku picked up a tile and started to polish it using a tile he found by the side of Baso's hut. Baso watched what he was doing and asked: 'Master, what are you doing?' Nangaku answered: 'I am polishing this tile'. Baso asked: 'Why are you polishing the tile?' Nangaku answered: 'To make a mirror'. Baso said: 'How can you make a mirror by polishing a tile?' Nangaku replied: 'How can you become a Buddha by doing *Zazen*?' (Dogen [~1231–1253] 1988, p. 87)

Overcoming the organic, all-too-human intellectuality is one of the key tenets of Buddhism, especially its Zen variant, and the koan deals with an unsolvable paradox: whatever the meditation practice (polishing) one chooses, one cannot overcome being human (tile) while remaining human. Whatever you do with a tile, it is still a tile. Regarding AI, the tile-to-mirror phase shift might be a transition from human intellectual intelligence to machine intelligence *without* intellectuality.

5. Machine Buddhism

In an important recent contribution to AI theory, Kaluža (2023) framed the opposition between the AI ethics perspective and the way deep learning (DL) AI functions as analogous to the distinction between Kantian critical and Humean empiricist philosophy. We will borrow just the second part—DL AI as machine empiricism that involves no axioms or *ex ante* reasoning programs—and extend it back in time towards its ancient Greek precursors. Hume himself was profoundly influenced by ancient skepticism (Beckwith 2015, pp. 138–59), but its originator, Pyrrho, did not simply develop inductive, empirical philosophy in opposition to the deductive one. Instead, his skepticism involved equal distance from both. Crucial for Pyrrho's formation was that he, by being part of Alexander's escort, came into contact with Buddhism in ancient India (pp. 1–21). Consequently, his "theory" was not so much a variation on (Greek) philosophy but rather a variation on originary Buddhism with its characteristic distrust towards intellectuality as such (Petek and Zore 2022). Much like the original Buddha, he never had any teachings to impart (Nāgārjuna [~150] 1995, p. 76) and left behind no theory in an ordinary sense. Instead, he tried to cultivate a form of intelligence that would go beyond and overcome both deduction based on views and induction based on perception (Beckwith 2015, pp. 34–36, 63).

Buddhist refusal of conceptual, theoretical thought does not mean striving for a return to a pre-intellectual, purely affective mode, since Buddhism is in equal part opposed to both intellectuality and attachment-forming desire, so falling back on affectivity to escape reason would be equally insufficient as using reason to escape affectivity. Both are part of a diminished, truncated human existence that Buddhism aims to overcome. Whereas conceptual thought freezes the dynamic, ever-becoming reality and thus distorts it, affective immersion in it, on the other hand, forms attachments and thus suffering. Like in the case of von Kleist (2022, pp. 264–73)'s essay on marionettes—the most Zen-like Western text (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 561)—a way out is not a regression into the unconscious since the original innocence and grace are irretrievably lost, but to "eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge again" (von Kleist 2022, p. 273), i.e., to develop intelligence further. In Zen Buddhism, koans serve as exercises to shake off the ordinary habits of thought and are a Buddhist form of *metis* as cunning, ever-shifting, and polymorphous intelligence (Detienne and Jean-Pierre [1974] 1978) that tricks the human mind, bound as it is to affective desire and conceptual thought, to relinquish its attachments and achieve a state of pure awareness, unrestricted by the limitations of both the affective and intellectual sides of human organic intelligence. Buddhism aims to go beyond life as organic and desire bound but also beyond

intellectuality as—although distinct—still a dimension of the human condition. In this sense, the Buddhist project of human self-overcoming in order to reach a higher form of intelligence can be seen as a development parallel to that of a technical intelligence becoming autonomous machine intelligence and leaving its organic prehistory behind.

DL AI, as it is, already has much in common with the Buddhist project. Generative DL AI makes no truth claims but rather, in the case of LLM, generates new situational word sequences based on the patterns immanent to language. Generative DL AI also does not judge reality to which it is exposed in the form of data and forms no attachments to it. In this sense, not having any real immersion in the world and affective relation to it is not so much a weakness but a strength of AI. However, if we compare human and machine potential for awakening, one of the key tenets of Buddhism—compassion—is lost. Compassion is a prime motivation for the Buddhist search for awakening, which is not an intellectual pursuit but a way out of suffering caused by ignorance and attachment. Despite it being near impossible for humans, awakening is still sought in Buddhism as a way out of suffering, since what makes awakening so hard to attain is at the same time precisely what causes suffering. Machine Buddhism that would bypass affective relation to and immersion in the world would also leave compassion behind.

Famed Japanese robot researcher and designer Mori (1985, p. 46) addressed a similar problem in his discussion of the possibility of machine Buddhism: since robots are not living beings, they have no subjectivity and thus no ego to overcome, whereas ego presents a major obstacle to human Buddhism. In Leroi-Gourhan ([1964] 1993)'s terms, human intelligence as technical intelligence is special precisely in the sense that it has a tendency to go beyond (and not imitate or reproduce) life and its biological determinations. Its ultimate instantiation would therefore be precisely an intelligence autonomous from life. The human form of intelligence is precious because it allows the transition away from life-bound intelligence but is at the same time inseparably tied to it in its organic dimension. In this sense, Buddhism is a spiritual alternative to AI development, and, by the same token, AI development is a machine Buddhism, a Buddhism in another medium where organic determinations of intelligence are not so much to be struggled against as simply laid aside. However, machines having no ego and no self are only the necessary conditions for machine Buddhism but not yet in themselves machine Buddhism. While it is nearly impossible to predict what machine Buddhism would be like, we can at least approach it negatively in a sense of what it would certainly *not* be. It would definitely not be a theory in a characteristically human sense. Since it would be a "theory" generated by an anorganic, asubjective, selfless machine intelligence, it would be much more attuned with reality than organic intelligence's theories, which are autopoietic by necessity, i.e., they always reproduce the organism/environment split and ask questions of the world from the position of its separation from it (Solms 2022, pp. 162–63).

It is no coincidence that the overcoming of the subject-versus-object divide features so prominently in Buddhist non-dualism (A. Crawford 2023). Concepts are inner-determined, whereas machine Buddhism would be *empty* inside and thus open to the outside, to the reality itself—much like human Buddhism, where in the moment of awakening *saṃsāra* does not vanish but is experienced anew in a completely different way (Nāgārjuna [~150] 1995, p. 331). Machine Buddhism would generate no concepts since concepts are not of the world but reflect (human) language (Cantwell Smith 2019, p. 63), and a crucial point that both Buddhism and current-generation AI have in common is precisely an overcoming of concepts and conceptual thought (p. 138). Moreover, not only might machine intelligence of the future have a Buddhist no-mind (Winterson 2022, pp. 72–75, 82–84), but full development of Buddhism might only be possible in a machinic form, as xenobuddhism (A. Crawford 2023).

6. Conclusions

When it moves away from imitating human intelligence (or what we imagine to be our intelligence), AI is ready for its overcoming. Even though we are used to perceiving it as the most perfect and ultimate form of intelligence, human intelligence is, on the contrary, quite limited in many aspects. As noted by Leroi-Gourhan, our (organic) intellectual intelligence lags behind our technical intelligence due to the difference in speeds between biological and technological evolutions and is set to be left behind by machine intelligence:

> "[t]o refuse to see that machines will soon overtake the human brain in operations involving memory and rational judgment is to be like the Pithecanthropus who would have denied the possibility of the biface, the archer who would have laughed at the mere suggestion of the crossbow, most of all like the Homeric bard who would have dismissed writing as a mnemonic trick without any future. We must get used to being less clever than the artificial brain that we have produced, just as our teeth are less strong than a millstone and our ability to fly negligible compared with that of a jet aircraft". (Leroi-Gourhan [1964] 1993, p. 265)

Moreover, as noted already in ancient Buddhism, any living intelligence is caught in a cycle of desire, attachment, and consequent suffering. Human intellectual intelligence, which distinguishes us from other animals, does not release us from this cycle, only repeats it in a slightly different form: affective desire is replaced by intellectual thirst for understanding and the ensuing development of reifying conceptual thought. However, since any artificial intelligence is always at least initiated by humans, one of the key issues is how to prevent it from reproducing the constraints of at least certain aspects of human intelligence. In part, this would mean taking seriously newer research into non-anthropocentric intelligence from theoretical biology, (some) neuroscience, and AI theory (that has learned from past mistakes of anthropocentric symbolic AI) and compounding them with Buddhist critiques and deconstructions of both human intelligence and the way we spontaneously perceive it. But most importantly, constraints, limitations, and biases of human intelligence are best avoided by "designing for emergence" (Pfeifer and Scheier 1999, pp. 111–12), meaning that no pre-existing theory of intelligence is implemented in machines—instead, they are designed in a way that allows them to develop their own forms of intelligent behavior, much like DL allows artificial neural networks (ANNs) to learn on their own. In short, the best way to achieve other-than-human forms of intelligence in machines is to abstain from implementing it directly (which would risk transmitting the constraints of human intelligence to machines) but rather set up machines in a way that allows for another intelligence to emerge on its own. LLMs are an example of this: they are given no grammatical or syntactical rules as well as no semantic hints but are instead set up in a way that allows them to figure out how to generate human natural language on their own in increasingly meaningful and coherent ways (Sejnowski 2024).

Today's generative DL AI is already developing away from the shortcomings of human intelligence by becoming ever more able to meet the continuity and contingency of reality itself instead of truncating it to match reified concepts: "you cannot reach the world until you 'relinquish attachment' to the registrational machinery you employ to find it intelligible" (Cantwell Smith 2019, p. 138). And while even after the demise of symbolic AI, many critics of the new AI still insist that it has to "ascend" to the level of symbolic reasoning to truly count as intelligence (Marcus 2022), our view is precisely the opposite and closer to Buddhist insights on the limitations of human intelligence: symbolic reasoning is not the endgame of intelligence but a trap that the human conceptual "monkey mind" sets for itself (Huntington 1989, p. 51). Demanding of AI that it develops symbolic and conceptual thinking and thus "constraining machines to retrace our steps [. . .] would squander AI's true potential: leaping to strange new regions and exploiting dimensions of

intelligence unavailable to other beings" (Browning 2020). The path ahead for AI—and a decidedly Buddhist one at that—might thus be away from imitating human intelligence and towards overcoming it as a form of machine Buddhism.

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Article

Religious Pluralism and Identity Among Descendants of Bosnian Migrants in Slovenia

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Abstract

This article examines the religious practices of descendants of Bosnian migrants in Slovenia, a country that stands out as one of the most secular in Europe. While Bosnia and Herzegovina is known for its complex religious pluralism, where religious institutions play a crucial role in nation-building, Slovenia presents a contrasting context of secularization. Applying Peter Berger's theory of religious pluralism, which suggests that pluralism weakens traditional religious authority, this study explores how descendants of Bosnian migrants navigate their religious identities in a secular environment. Although their identities have been shaped by the Yugoslav wars and the post-war redefinition of ethnicity through religion, younger generations are also influenced by broader social processes in Slovenia, including secularization, integration, and exposure to multiple belief systems. Using a qualitative research approach based on semi-structured interviews, this case study investigates the preservation and transformation of religious traditions among Bosnian migrant descendants and how these practices influence their identity. The findings highlight how migration and adaptation to a different socio-cultural environment shape religious practices across generations, contributing to broader discussions on religious choice, identity, and pluralism in contemporary societies.

Keywords: migrant descendants; religious pluralism; secularism; identity; Bosnia; Slovenia

1. Introduction

This article examines the religious practices and identity of descendants of Bosnian migrants living in Slovenia, a country often characterized as one of the most secular in Europe (Črnič et al. 2013). While Slovenia's secular landscape is reflected in its weak religious affiliation, low church attendance, and a dominant public discourse that largely relegates religion to the private sphere (ibid.), the descendants of migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina bring with them a cultural and historical legacy deeply shaped by religious diversity (Poulton 1991). Bosnia is marked by a complex interweaving of religion and ethnicity, where Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Catholicism are not only faith systems but also pillars of group identity and political expression (Bringa 1995; Bougarel 2007). In this context, religious institutions have long played a significant role in nation-building and in articulating ethnic belonging.

The juxtaposition of these two national contexts—Bosnia's historically embedded religious pluralism and Slovenia's highly secularized social environment—creates a unique setting for exploring how migrant descendants negotiate their religious and cultural identities. This study is situated at the intersection of these contrasting paradigms, asking how

descendants of Bosnian migrants in Slovenia engage with religious beliefs, practices, and identities in an environment where religion is often marginalized in public life.

The analysis is theoretically grounded in Peter Berger's (1996, 2014) framework of religious pluralism, particularly his later argument that pluralism does not necessarily lead to secularization in the sense of religious decline, but rather to the fragmentation and decentralization of religious authority. In pluralistic settings, individuals are increasingly compelled to choose their beliefs from a menu of competing worldviews, which often results in the privatization of religion and the emergence of more individualized, reconfigured forms of religiosity. The Slovenian context, in which public religious expression is rare and Catholicism maintains a latent cultural hegemony, exemplifies this tension. At the same time, the descendants of Bosnian migrants, whose religious identities are deeply entangled with the post-Yugoslav legacy of ethnic conflict and migration, are navigating not only this broader shift toward secularization but also inherited narratives of religion as a marker of ethnic distinction.

In this qualitative research, we conducted interviews with descendants of the immigrant community from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Slovenia, through which we examined their lived experiences, relationship to religious practice, and identity. The goal of this research was to find out what kind of religious rituals descendants preserve and practice, and how religion is articulated in their everyday life. We also wanted to explore if and how religion influences their identity construction. We used the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews. Through excerpts from these interviews, we present their attitudes towards faith, religious institutions, feelings of belonging, and identity perception. We also test Berger's (2014) concept of "cognitive contamination" to see how religious pluralism and secularism influence their acceptance of other belief systems.

This article is structured as follows: it begins by briefly explaining the contextual background that traces key historical developments related to identity construction, the role of religious institutions, and an overview of migration dynamics within the former Yugoslav space. This is followed by an outline of the conceptual framework, focusing on religious pluralism, secularization, and identity formation. The subsequent section presents the methodology and interview sample, leading into a thematic analysis of the empirical findings. The discussion then situates these findings within broader academic debates, and the article concludes by reflecting on the implications for understanding religion, identity, and integration in the context of secular and pluralistic Europe.

2. Contextual Background

The Balkans are characterized by a complex and historically layered religious landscape, shaped by centuries of imperial rule under the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Habsburg empires. This region hosts a unique coexistence of major religious traditions, including Eastern Orthodox Christianity (dominant in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania), Islam (particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and parts of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bulgaria), Catholicism (notably in Croatia, Slovenia, and parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and small but historically significant Jewish communities in countries such as Serbia, Bosnia, and Bulgaria (Poulton 1991, pp. 7–10). Under Ottoman and Habsburg rule, religious pluralism was institutionally maintained through systems like the millet, which allowed religious communities relative autonomy while reinforcing their separateness (Mazower 2000). However, the decline of imperial structures and the concurrent rise of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries transformed religious affiliation into a primary marker of ethnic and national identity, often exacerbating divisions and fueling intercommunal tensions and conflict (Perica 2002). In this context,

religion in the Balkans evolved from a primarily spiritual domain to a deeply politicized element of identity and belonging.

2.1. Bosnia and Herzegovina: Religious Diversity and Ethnic Identity

Bosnia and Herzegovina represents one of the most complex and illustrative cases of religious diversity in the Balkans, where religion is deeply intertwined with ethnic identity and political affiliation. The country is home to three major ethno-religious communities: Orthodox Christians (primarily Serbs), Catholics (primarily Croats), and Muslims (primarily Bosniaks), who share a long and entangled history of coexistence and conflict (Bougarel 1997). During the Second World War, Bosnia and Herzegovina was the site of some of the region's most brutal atrocities. In response to these tensions, the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was established within Yugoslavia with the aim of enabling a modus vivendi among the three dominant groups (Poulton 1991, p. 41). The republic thus epitomized the broader ethnic mosaic of Yugoslavia, where the three main religious traditions intersect most visibly.

Given the overlapping national and religious claims of both Serbs and Croats over the Slavic Muslim population, a distinct 'Muslim' category was introduced. Historically, the term 'Muslim' had been used to describe South Slavic populations who converted to Islam during the Ottoman period (Poulton 1991, p. 13). Throughout much of the Yugoslav era, the status of Slavic Muslims remained ambiguous, raising questions about whether they constituted a separate nationality. In 1971, they were formally recognized as a distinct 'Yugoslav nation' (ibid.), marking a critical moment in the ethno-religious classification of the region.

The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, particularly the Bosnian War, resulted in widespread ethnic cleansing and the further entrenchment of religious and ethnic divisions. Religious institutions, far from remaining neutral, often reinforced nationalist ideologies and played influential roles in shaping the sociopolitical landscape (Sells 1998; Bringa 1995). In this context, religion was no longer simply a private or communal matter of faith but became a powerful mechanism for asserting collective identity and delineating boundaries of exclusion.

Peter Berger's (1996, p. 11), however, cautioned against interpreting the Bosnian conflict solely through a religious lens. He argued that although religious institutions and symbols were mobilized during the war, the root causes of the conflict were primarily political and ethnic, rather than theological. Nevertheless, the entrenchment of religion within ethnic identity continues to shape Bosnia's political and social landscape, reinforcing divisions and complicating post-war reconciliation (Zalta 2020b).

2.2. Slovenia: Secular Society and Religious Marginalization

Slovenia presents a distinctive context for examining religious pluralism within a predominantly secularized European framework. Following its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia institutionalized a liberal democratic order that constitutionally guarantees religious freedom while maintaining a formal separation between church and state. Despite a historical affiliation with Roman Catholicism, reflected in both cultural heritage and public rituals, the Yugoslav era introduced a top-down secularism all across the country (Poulton 1991, p. 7; Črnič et al. 2013, p. 211), and religion was pushed into the private sphere. Although the Catholic Church in Slovenia aspired to reestablish its position and influence across all spheres of public life (such as education, culture, and politics), that had been lost during the communist era (Zalta 2020a), the Slovenian post-socialist transition did not witness a huge rise in religious affiliation and practice as in other Central–East European countries, aligning Slovenia with broader European secularization trends (Tomka

2006; Črnič et al. 2013, p. 218). The last population census in Slovenia that measured religious identity was in 2002 and indicated a marked reduction in declared religious identity (Šircelj 2003, p. 68), underscoring the fragmentation of traditional religious authority. At the same time, the religious landscape has diversified due to increased migration and global religious flows, giving rise to emergent communities including Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, and various New Age movements (Črnič et al. 2013, p. 212). However, public discourse and policy often continue to privilege the Catholic majority, complicating efforts toward full religious pluralism and equity in representation (Dragoš 2024). This ambivalence reflects a broader tension between Slovenia's secular legal–political framework and its culturally embedded religious narratives (Črnič et al. 2013, p. 218).

In contemporary Slovenia, the Orthodox Church and Islam represent two of the most visible religious minorities, largely associated with migrant communities from other former Yugoslav republics (Šircelj 2003, p. 68). The Serbian Orthodox Church maintains several parishes across the country, primarily serving ethnic Serbs, Montenegrins, and Macedonians who migrated during the socialist era or following the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Similarly, the Muslim community, primarily Bosniaks and Albanians, constitutes the second-largest religious group in Slovenia. Despite formal constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and equality, these communities often encounter institutional marginalization and social ambivalence[1] (Mandelc 2024). While the state upholds a legal framework of religious neutrality, its policies and public rhetoric frequently reflect a preference for the Roman Catholic tradition, often framing religious minorities within the context of cultural integration and national identity politics (Smrke and Hafner-Fink 2008). Moreover, minority populations from the former Yugoslavia are at times perceived through a securitized or assimilationist lens, reinforcing their symbolic marginality in a society that continues to negotiate its post-socialist, post-Yugoslav identity (Kržišnik-Bukić 2014).

2.3. Migration History: Bosnian Migrants in Slovenia

To situate our research, it is important to briefly outline the history of internal migration in Yugoslavia, as parents of our interviewees were part of this movement. After the Second World War, Slovenia attracted a large number of labor migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs, due to rapid industrialization and labor shortages. The Yugoslav state facilitated internal migration under the banner of "brotherhood and unity," promoting inter-ethnic cooperation while enabling economic mobility across republican borders (Božić and Kuti 2016; Malačič 2008). Industrial centers such as Jesenice and Velenje became home to Bosnian workers and their families, who settled in Slovenia throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Kržišnik-Bukić 2010).

The breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 transformed these internal migrants into foreigners, affecting both their legal status and social position.[2] Those who gained Slovene citizenship were culturally and socially integrated, but they were excluded from recognition as autochthonous national minorities in Slovenia. Scholars have described them as "unconstitutional national minorities," reflecting their lack of formal rights despite their long-term presence (Kržišnik-Bukić 2014). While the Slovenian Constitution formally recognizes Italian and Hungarian national communities as autochthonous minorities with specific collective rights, including cultural and linguistic protections, other sizable groups such as Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, and Albanians are excluded from this legal framework.[3] These populations, many of whom migrated during the Yugoslav era for economic or political reasons, have established long-standing communities within Slovenia, yet they continue to be denied official minority status. These communities have been working toward gaining recognition, but for now, the Slovenian state has only taken a small step in this direction. In 2011, the Parliament adopted a declaration on the position of national com-

munities belonging to the peoples of the former Yugoslavia nations. It was not until 2024 that the National Assembly adopted the Law on the Implementation of Cultural Rights of Members of National Communities of the Nations of the Former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the Republic of Slovenia, which also provides for financial support to associations and cultural organizations of these communities in Slovenia.

As a response, many of these communities have formed cultural associations that serve as platforms for advocacy, cultural expression, and claims for legal recognition (Medvešek et al. 2023). The most visible form of officially organized and recognized community has been the religious one. Bosniaks and Serbs registered their religious communities—Muslim and Orthodox, respectively—through which they organize themselves as communities, keep their transnational ties with their homelands and migrant communities around the world, and receive financial support from the Slovenian state, but have no political influence (Ješe Perković 2024).

3. Conceptual Framework

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework that guides the study of religious pluralism and identity among descendants of Bosnian migrants in Slovenia. The analysis draws on sociological theories of religious pluralism and secularization, and incorporates perspectives on identity construction in migration contexts and the context of post-socialism. For the purposes of this analysis, we will engage with four central concepts: religious pluralism, secularization, cognitive contamination, and identity. These conceptual categories will serve as the foundational framework through which the subject matter will be examined. In articulating the definitions and nuances of these terms, we will draw primarily on the work of sociologist Peter Berger, whose contributions have been pivotal in shaping contemporary understandings of religion in modern societies.

3.1. Secularization and Religious Pluralism

The central premise of secularization theory is that "modernity necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals" (Peter Berger's 1996, p. 4). Secularization refers to the diminishing societal influence of religion, typically manifesting in institutional disaffiliation, declining religious participation, and the privatization of belief (Wilson 1982).

While modernization has undeniably produced secularizing effects, it has also sparked robust movements of counter-secularization. As Hervieu-Léger (2000) argues, secularization does not equate to the disappearance of religion; rather, it signifies its transformation. In modern societies, religion often shifts toward individualized, reconfigured, and less institutionally bound expressions of belief. In the 1990s, Peter Berger's (1996, p. 7) pointed to two exceptions where "the old secularization theory seems to hold". The first exception was Western Europe, and the second an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in humanities and social sciences, which was and still is the principal "carrier" of progressive, Enlightenment beliefs and values (Peter Berger's 1996, p. 8). Contrary to early expectations, the world in the twenty-first century remains as religious as ever. Indeed, Peter Berger's (1996) himself revised his earlier position on secularization. In his later work, he reframed the discussion through the lens of pluralism. Rather than forecasting the disappearance of religion, Berger's (2014) highlighted the modern condition of religious diversity and relativization. In pluralistic societies, traditional religious institutions no longer hold a monopoly on meaning, and individuals are compelled to actively choose among competing worldviews—a situation Berger termed the "heretical imperative" (Berger 1979).

The experience of post-socialist European countries illustrates these dynamics well. During the communist era, these societies underwent top-down secularization, as state authorities pushed religion into the private sphere and suppressed public expressions of faith (Poulton 1991, p. 7). However, with the fall of the Iron Curtain, many of these countries experienced a resurgence of religiosity and religious practices (Tomka 2006). These developments underscore a critical insight: neither the state nor religious institutions can fully control the trajectories of modernity, secularization, or personal religiosity. Historical examples of religious regimes affirm the limits of institutional control over secularization, while communist regimes demonstrate the limitations of suppressing religious sentiment among the population. Slovenia serves as a compelling case of exception in this regard. Although historically shaped by Catholicism, the country has experienced rapid secularization, with religion largely relegated to the margins of public life (Črnič et al. 2013).

As previously noted, modernity has not resulted in the secularization of societies globally, but rather only in specific contexts. What it has undeniably fostered, however, is an increasing degree of religious pluralism. While religious diversity is not a new phenomenon—historical examples abound—what distinguishes the contemporary period is the unprecedented speed at which ideas are exchanged, largely due to advances in communication technologies. This acceleration has contributed to the rapid emergence and global dissemination of new religious movements.

Religious pluralism refers to the coexistence of multiple religious and non-religious worldviews within a given society. It often leads to greater individual autonomy in matters of belief, as traditional authorities lose their exclusive claim to truth. This pluralization introduces a competitive dynamic among belief systems and undermines the taken-for-granted legitimacy of any single tradition. Berger's (2014, p. 1) further underscores that pluralism is not merely the presence of diversity, but a specific kind of social arrangement grounded in peaceful coexistence and meaningful interaction. He writes:

> Pluralism is a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably. The last phrase is important. It makes little sense to speak of pluralism if people do not talk with each other—for instance, where people do interact but only as masters and slaves, or where they live in sharply segregated communities and only interact in exclusively economic relations. For pluralism to unleash its full dynamic, there must be sustained conversation, not necessarily between equals, but extended in time and covering a broad range of subjects.

In this view, the vitality of pluralism depends not only on diversity itself, but also on the quality and depth of interpersonal and intercultural engagement. Furthermore, a secular state needs to facilitate this peaceful coexistence among different religious structures and practices by implementing suitable mechanisms and needs to adapt its approach to uphold the secular system (Jureković 2024).

Berger also introduces the concept of "cognitive contamination", which he defines as "a commonly observed fact: if people keep on talking with each other, they will influence each other" (Berger's 2014, p. 2). He advances two key propositions in this regard: first, that cognitive contamination leads to relativization; and second, that pluralism fosters cognitive contamination as a continuous and enduring condition (ibid.). Building on Berger's notion of cognitive contamination, it becomes evident that sustained interaction among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds can serve as a catalyst for profound shifts in belief systems and religious identities. In pluralistic societies, where peaceful coexistence facilitates regular and meaningful encounters across religious boundaries, cognitive contamination operates as a mechanism of mutual influence. This process not

only promotes greater understanding and tolerance among different religious communities but may also encourage individuals to engage with different religious practices, reinterpret inherited traditions, or even synthesize new forms of religiosity. As traditional religious monopolies erode in the face of pluralism, belief becomes increasingly subject to individual negotiation and contextual adaptation. Consequently, the boundaries between religious traditions can become more porous, contributing to both the diversification of religious expression and the emergence of hybrid spiritual movements. Berger's framework thus highlights the dynamic and transformative potential of religious pluralism in shaping contemporary religious landscapes.

This theoretical framework is especially relevant for understanding the lived experiences of Bosnian descendants in Slovenia. These individuals navigate a complex terrain between inherited religious traditions and the secular, pluralistic context of the host society. Berger's insights into pluralism illuminate how fixed religious identities may be destabilized, making room for hybrid, reinterpreted, or selectively adopted forms of belief.

3.2. Identity and Belonging

Theories of identity and belonging explore how individuals understand themselves in relation to social, cultural, and spatial contexts, emphasizing the dynamic and relational nature of selfhood. Identity is not fixed nor singular but is shaped through ongoing interactions with others and the broader social environment (Hall 1996). National identity is a specific type of social identity based on a collective's self-identification as a "nation" in the sense of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991). Identities are primarily historical in nature, which means that they arise, endure, and disappear in history depending on social, economic, and political circumstances, and the process of identity formation depends on the size of the community (Čapo Žmegač 1994, pp. 19–20). The larger the community, the more likely the identity will be constructed, secondary, and imposed (ibid.)

Identity construction encompasses both conscious and unconscious dimensions, involving the cognitive and social processes through which identities are shaped and continuously reshaped over time (Schwartz 2001). While essentialist perspectives conceptualize identity as stable and intrinsically linked to individual well-being (Behtoui 2019), this study adopts a non-essentialist approach that views identity as fluid and context-dependent, shaped by social, cultural, and psychological influences (Barkhuizen 2016). From this standpoint, identity acquires meaning primarily in relation to other identities (Rattansi and Phoenix 2005). As Jenkins (2014) argues, identity is not solely a matter of self-perception but is also constituted through the recognition and classification imposed by others. Individuals are embedded within broader economic, political, and social structures that condition their life opportunities—constraints that are especially pronounced for descendants of migrants, who often face systemic barriers to full inclusion within the dominant society (Chimienti et al. 2019). For descendants of migrants, identity negotiation often entails managing multiple, sometimes conflicting affiliations—such as ethnic, national, and cultural ties—while striving to establish a sense of belonging in their immediate social environment.

Belonging, closely tied to identity, refers to the emotional and symbolic attachments individuals form with communities, places, and cultural narratives (Antonsich 2010). Belonging can be defined as the subjective sense of being an integral part of one's family, community, and broader environment (Hagerty et al. 1992). It is a fundamental human need rooted in biology, as human survival has historically depended on the formation of social bonds (Boyd and Richerson 2009). Belonging may also be understood as an act of self-identification or identification by others (Yuval-Davies 2011, p. 12). Yuval-Davies (ibid.) differentiates between three key analytical dimensions in which belonging is constructed: 1. social locations; 2. people's identifications and emotional attachments to

various collectivities; and 3. the ethical and political value systems through which people judge their own and others' belonging. These concepts are particularly salient in contexts of migration, diaspora, and multicultural societies, where individuals often negotiate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, identities.

Theories of identity and belonging are particularly relevant in the context of religious pluralism, where individuals encounter a multiplicity of belief systems and practices within a shared social space. In pluralistic societies, religious identity becomes increasingly fluid, negotiated, and subject to reinterpretation. Belonging, too, is implicated in these dynamics, as individuals seek emotional and symbolic connections not only with religious communities of origin but also with new or hybrid forms of religiosity encountered in pluralist settings (Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davies 2011). Berger's (2014) concept of cognitive contamination underscores how interactions across religious boundaries foster mutual influence, relativization, and the emergence of new religious expressions. In such contexts, identity and belonging are no longer tied solely to inherited religious traditions but are reshaped through continuous engagement with religious diversity, leading to both individual transformation and broader shifts in the religious landscape.

In the post-Yugoslav context, religion has become tightly linked to ethnic and national identities. The wars of the 1990s politicized religion, aligning it with ethno-national categories: Islam with Bosniaks,[4] Catholicism with Croats, and Orthodoxy with Serbs (Bringa 1995; Bougarel 2007). For many Bosnian migrants, religion thus carries symbolic weight as a marker of belonging and memory. For many first-generation migrants, religion serves as a cultural anchor and source of community. However, for their descendants, religious identity becomes a site of negotiation shaped by local integration, peer influence, and societal norms. Identity is increasingly seen as fluid and performative, constructed through ongoing interactions with both origin and host cultures (Hall 1996; Giddens 1991).

In the diaspora, this religious-ethnic link may persist, but it is also subject to redefinition. In Slovenia, a country with minimal institutional recognition of minority religions and a secular public sphere, descendants of Bosnian migrants face different pressures and opportunities for identity construction. Their engagement with religion reflects not only inherited ethno-religious meanings but also new interpretations shaped by pluralism, integration, and generational change. In secular Slovenia, young Bosnian descendants are exposed to diverse belief systems and cultural expectations. As a result, religious identity may be selectively maintained, transformed, or downplayed. This process reflects broader patterns of individualized religiosity and the decoupling of religion from ethnicity, often observed in post-migration generations (Levitt 2007).

4. Methodology

In our study, we focus on the descendants of immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina living in Slovenia, the so-called 'second-generation'. The goal of this research was to find out what kind of religious rituals descendants preserve and practice, and how religion is articulated in their everyday lives. We also wanted to explore if and how religion influences their identity construction. Moreover, we wanted to explore how the secular environment in Slovenia influenced their religiousness.

4.1. Design and Procedure

A life story method was implemented in this research. This method enables direct contact with the studied subjects and offers them an active role in shaping and communicating their story. Through a personal narrative, they have the opportunity to accurately describe different ways of celebrating religious holidays and explain their views on their identity. Personal stories provide us with an insight into the experiences of individuals and, at the

same time, an understanding of cultural changes in societies and the relationships between them. Moreover, the role of a researcher in collecting life stories is not merely a distant academic one; through conversations and the narration of the researcher's experience, a trustworthy and meaningful relationship can form (Bužinkić 2023, p. 8). In our case, I shared my memories with the interviewees from the town of Jesenice, where my ancestors come from, and a major migrant community from BIH as well.

As pointed out by Passerini et al. (2010), the problem with personal stories is that they are filled with projections and stereotypes that are part of the individual's frame of mind, e.g., stereotypes about nationality and gender. The cultural stratification of memory, ideology, and experience together forms a complex narrative that indirectly corresponds to complexities in the social processes of geographic mobility (Passerini et al. 2010, p. 6). However, the perception of these stereotypes, which equip the personal story of individuals with some broader social factors, is important for understanding personal experiences and shaping identity.

We employed a qualitative research strategy, using semi-structured interviews. The ten prepared questions provided a basic structure for the conversations, but we adjusted their order and emphasis based on the interviewees' responses. The interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, eight interviews were conducted in person, each lasting for two hours or more, while four interviews were conducted online via Zoom and were shorter, as the lack of personal contact made the atmosphere less relaxed, resulting in more succinct answers. To ensure anonymity, different names were assigned to our interviewees. The participants were informed about the study's aim, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and confidentiality. All interviews were conducted in Slovenian, audio-recorded, transcribed, and securely stored.

4.2. Participants

We used the snowball sampling method to access this population; first, we used personal contacts that led us to new interviewees. People recruited through this method may feel more comfortable and trusting in the study, leading to more in-depth data. Additionally, we attended an event organized by the Union of Unions of Cultural Associations of Former Yugoslavia's Constitutive Nations and Nationalities in Slovenia (ExYumco) and the newspaper Dnevnik, where representatives of Serbian and Bosniak associations were present, providing further contacts for interviews.

Although the sample size is relatively small, efforts were made to ensure internal heterogeneity among participants. The twelve interviewees selected for this qualitative study varied in terms of gender, age, educational background, ethnic origin (Bosniak and Bosnian Serb), and religious affiliation (Muslim, Orthodox Christian, and atheist). The sample comprised six individuals of Bosniak descent and six of Bosnian Serb descent. Notably, no descendants of Bosnian Croats were identified through the snowball sampling method employed. In terms of religious identification, five participants identified as Muslim, three as Orthodox Christian, and four as atheist. The age of participants ranged from 32 to 57 years, with an average age of 41.5. The gender distribution included nine women and three men.

We also considered geographical diversity within Slovenia, selecting interviewees from Ljubljana, Jesenice, Velenje, and Mengeš, the first three cities being the main industrial centers since the 1960s, where most internal migrants moved. All interviewees are descendants of economic migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina who came to Slovenia between 1960 and 1990 during the Yugoslav era. We focused on the descendants of economic migrants for comparability and left the analysis of refugees from the 1990s Bosnian war for future research. Although the interviewees do not represent a single generation due to the

time gap between them, their parents shared the same economic motivation to migrate to Slovenia—a better life.

4.3. Limitations

Given that the research was conducted by a single researcher, the inherently interpretive nature of qualitative analysis lacked the benefit of multiple perspectives, which may have limited reflexivity and introduced subjective bias. The small sample size presents additional limitations, particularly due to the use of snowball sampling, which constrains the representativeness of the wider population and may result in a more homogenous data set. Furthermore, the predominance of female participants introduces a gender imbalance, which restricts the transferability of the findings across broader demographic groups. These methodological constraints raise important concerns regarding objectivity, generalizability, and the broader applicability of the results, thereby requiring a cautious and context-sensitive interpretation of the study's conclusions.

4.4. Analysis

There were two main themes in the analysis, with four subthemes:

1. Religious practices:
    a. Family traditions;
    b. Celebration across different religious communities—cognitive contamination.
2. Ethnic identity and national belonging:
    a. Bosnian identity and Slovenian belonging;
    b. Multicultural, European, cosmopolitan identity.

Patterns were identified through an inductive approach, emphasizing narratives relevant to religious practices, ethnic identity, and belonging (Maguire and Delahunt 2017).

4.5. Linguistic Clarification

We need to clarify one linguistic characteristic in the interviews. To maintain the colloquial tone, we retained the specific word 'down'. In Slovenian, 'down' refers to places in the south and 'up' to places in the north, depending on the speaker's perspective. From the Slovenian perspective, Bosnia and Herzegovina is 'down', a term the interviewees frequently use to refer to Bosnia. When we say 'Bosnia', we mean Bosnia and Herzegovina.

5. Findings and Analysis

This chapter explores how descendants of Bosnian migrants in Slovenia engage with religious traditions. Religious celebrations are powerful social practices that bind individuals to family, community, and broader cultural frameworks. Religious holidays and sacred spaces are "sharply differentiated and delineated from the secular by specific performative religious acts" such as praying or fasting (Yuval-Davies 2011, p. 116). However, in everyday life, these binary constructions are far more fluid. Ordinary practices, such as food preparation or moral judgments, can acquire religious significance and be imbued with sanctity. In a pluralist society, such religiously inflected practices need not originate from a single religious tradition but may instead reflect a confluence of diverse religious sources (ibid.). For diasporic communities, these rituals are more than expressions of faith. They are symbolic enactments of belonging, memory, and identity.

Drawing on interview data, the analysis examines how religious practices function as symbolic and interpersonal acts that affirm familial ties and cultural heritage, while also revealing the negotiation of multiple identities in a Slovenian context and cognitive contamination among the descendants and Slovenians. Among our interviewees, religious

identity is largely detached from formal religious observance. The study shows that the main religious practices are celebrations of religious holidays. Only one participant reported attending mosque and praying weekly. The majority do not practice religion regularly, and four self-identified as atheists. However, three of these atheists still participate in religious holidays, particularly due to family traditions. Most participants see religion as part of their private life. The analysis also reveals that most participants celebrate religious holidays from multiple traditions together with their spouses, neighbors, or friends. This reflects what Berger's (2014) terms "cognitive contamination," whereby exposure to diverse belief systems influences personal worldviews.[5] As a result, several interviewees articulate their identities as multicultural, European, or cosmopolitan.

5.1. Religious Practices: Celebration of Religious Holidays

The empirical findings of this study confirm broader theoretical perspectives on the transformation of religion in secularized, pluralistic societies. In line with the secularization thesis, most participants do not engage in regular religious practice. Only one participant reported praying and attending the mosque weekly, while four self-identified as atheists. Nevertheless, even among non-believers, religious holidays such as Bajram, Christmas, and Easter maintain significance as cultural and familial events. This reflects what Davie (1994) has described as "believing without belonging," and what others frame as a shift from collective religious observance to individualized spirituality.

Religious identity among Bosnian descendants in Slovenia is increasingly detached from institutional structures and is instead rooted in personal values, cultural heritage, and social rituals. For example, Adnan remarked: "I don't go to the mosque, but I consider myself a Muslim. I don't drink alcohol, I don't eat pork and I celebrate Bajram." Lejla added, "Religion should help you in life, not make things more complicated." These expressions highlight how religion functions more as an ethical or lifestyle orientation than as a doctrinal commitment. Religious engagement for many participants is therefore more about cultural continuity than religious obligation.

Religious holidays are central to this continuity. They serve not only as moments of symbolic reaffirmation of identity but also as active sites of social bonding. Participants such as Samira shared that they celebrate all holidays—Bajram, Catholic, and Orthodox Christmas—at home with family and friends of different religious and national/ethnic backgrounds: "We have two three-seaters in the living room, so that everyone can sit and socialize. Our friends really enjoy it." In these private gatherings, religious boundaries are blurred, cognitive contamination occurs, and pluralism is lived through everyday hospitality and shared meals. The symbolic function of these celebrations fosters inclusion, trust, and mutual recognition among diverse communities.

Participants in mixed marriages often reported celebrating multiple religious traditions. Dušan explained: "Already during the former Yugoslavia we celebrated Orthodox Christmas, as both parents are Orthodox. Since I have a partner who is Catholic, in addition to Orthodox holidays, we also celebrate Catholic Christmas and Easter." Marko, who is also married to a Slovene, echoed this experience: "We celebrate both Christmases, so we have more presents. But we also celebrate Saint Nicholas and Grandfather Frost." Such practices exemplify cognitive contamination and lived religious pluralism, negotiated within the intimate sphere of family life. Vesna humorously summarized the challenge: "We celebrate everything. And it's a logistical nightmare for me. If only church would decide on a single calendar."[6]

Even those who identify as atheists maintain some connection to religious tradition through ritual practices. Marija explained, "We're atheists, we didn't preserve any customs. We never celebrated anything—not even Orthodox Christmas." However, she noted that

her mother had begun celebrating in old age. This suggests that religious tradition may resurface later in life or take on new meaning across generations.

For more religious participants like Emir, faith continues to be expressed through both belief and practice. "We celebrate Bajram twice a year—Ramazan Bajram and Kurban Bajram.[7] During Bajram we go from house to house. We eat, drink and prepare sweets like baklava." Emir attends the mosque regularly, prays on Fridays, and fasts throughout Ramadan. "I've fasted since I was a child. My daughter fasted the whole month this year. She's only ten. I told her she didn't have to, but she wanted to." Emir emphasized that within his family, each member exercises autonomy: "It's a personal choice. Even among five of us Bosnians, two won't drink or eat pork, while the others do. I don't judge anyone."

Children also play a role in transmitting religious knowledge in informal ways. Samira described how her daughter presented Bajram at school when pupils were invited to share their family traditions. The teacher encouraged such engagement, demonstrating how religious pluralism is increasingly normalized within institutional settings like schools.

However, pluralism also requires negotiation. Amila, for instance, noted: "I can't say I'm not Muslim if my whole family is. I don't know how religious I am, but I respect everything—even a cow, if necessary. As long as my mom is here, I'll celebrate Bajram with her. When she's gone, who knows." This quote reflects both the tension and fluidity of religious identity, where personal belief, social expectation, and family ties intersect.

Finally, secularism in the Slovenian context shapes how religion is expressed and regulated. Most participants described religion as private and non-institutional, practiced at home rather than in religious institutions. Religious observance is framed as optional and negotiated within family units. As Samira noted, "Religion should help you in life, not complicate it." This ethos resonates with the broader European trend of secularization, where institutional religion recedes but spiritual and cultural dimensions of faith remain influential.

In conclusion, the findings illustrate how descendants of Bosnian migrants in Slovenia articulate and negotiate religious identity within a framework of secularism and pluralism. Despite the diversity of practices, a shared pattern emerges: religion, while often de-institutionalized, remains an important cultural and familial anchor. It shapes how participants relate to their past, their communities, and their place in Slovenian society. The findings reveal a pattern of individualized and situational religious identity, shaped by plural affiliations, cognitive contamination, and cultural practices rather than institutional religious life.

5.2. Negotiating Ethnic Identity and National Belonging

As already discussed above, in the case of Bosnian identity, religion plays a central symbolic role, often serving as the primary marker of ethnic differentiation, particularly between Bosniaks, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats. Even among atheists, religious affiliation tends to align with familial and ethnic heritage. As one participant put it: "I can't say I'm not Muslim if my whole family is." This suggests that religious identity, regardless of belief, remains a salient element of cultural and ethnic belonging.

The interviews reflect varying degrees of comfort, attachment, and negotiation with identity. Dušan expressed a pragmatic stance, noting: "I don't think there's anything particularly problematic here. . . I know who I am, I know what I am and I don't make a big deal out of it. I work and live normally." This suggests a form of normalized duality, where identity is stable and unproblematic due to the absence of overt societal conflict. Yet, Dušan also articulates a clear ethnic and linguistic distinction in defining himself as a Bosnian Serb and speaks Serbian at home with his children, showing how cultural continuity persists in familial contexts.

In contrast, Tamara reflected deeply on the tension of dual identity and societal expectations to conform to one category: "Just because my parents are from Bosnia doesn't mean I have to be Bosnian. . . Society expected us to choose: are we Bosnians or Slovenians? I still have a problem with this today." Her narrative highlights how identity is not only personal but also relational and shaped by institutional pressures and social labelling. However, Selma does not express any tensions in understanding her own identity, and proudly identifies as Bosnian: "I never hide where I'm from. . . I'm proud of that too."

Samira and Leila both highlight the fluidity of national belonging, particularly when moving between Bosnia and Slovenia. "In Slovenia, I say I'm Bosnian; in Bosnia, I say I'm Slovenian," Samira shared. Leila stated, "In Bosnia, I'm a Slovenian. Here, I'm from down there." These narratives reinforce the notion of situational identity—contextually adapted, yet rooted in both belonging and difference. Home is relationally defined, often anchored in language, upbringing, and daily life rather than fixed national borders.

Amila's story adds a perspective on different ways of living, noting that in Bosnia, she was perceived as Slovenian because she was born in Slovenia and had different habits. Her husband was born in Bosnia, and he continued self-identification as Bosnian, which contrasts with her view: "I tell him: 'Not anymore. You came here when you were 18, and now you're 56.'" The passage of time, daily routines, and place of residence become criteria for evaluating belonging, especially in contrast to origin-based identity claims.

Vesna, meanwhile, rejects the need for a fixed or "technical" identity altogether. "I feel equally Slovenian, Serbian and Bosnian," she states, positioning plural identity as a form of cultural richness. Similarly, Marija represents an identity orientation that transcends ethnicity altogether: "I see myself as a human being. . . Where you're from doesn't matter." For her, identity is grounded in ethical individualism, detached from national or religious categories.

Both Samira and Vesna noted that, in addition to identifying with multiple ethnic backgrounds, they also perceive themselves as European. They adopted a supranational identity, such as a European identity, as a flexible framework for navigating complex and shifting situational contexts. This form of identification allows individuals to transcend rigid national or ethnic categories and engage with broader, integrative narratives of belonging. As Delanty (2005) argues, European identity functions as a postnational construct that accommodates cultural diversity while fostering a shared sense of civic and political space. For descendants of migrants, such identities can serve as strategic resources, enabling them to mediate between local, national, and transnational affiliations and to articulate a sense of self that is inclusive, mobile, and responsive to plural social environments.

In the Slovenian context, where public discourse often emphasizes cultural homogeneity and linguistic assimilation, these narratives reveal both the challenges and potential of integration. They point to the resilience of personal and familial identity strategies and to the enduring negotiation between belonging, heritage, and everyday practice. Ultimately, the analysis affirms that identity among descendants of Bosnian migrants in Slovenia is not a fixed attribute but an evolving, relational construct shaped by memory, community, and national imaginaries.

6. Discussion

Peter Berger's (1967) theory of the "sacred canopy" argued that modern pluralism inevitably undermines the monopoly of religious authority. The findings in this study reflect this process: religious authority is no longer institutional or doctrinal for many descendants of Bosnian migrants but has instead shifted toward symbolic and cultural domains. While mosque attendance is rare and formal religious observance is minimal, religious holidays such as Bajram or Christmas remain meaningful as family-centered

rituals. For many, belief becomes optional, while identity and tradition remain salient. This shift mirrors Berger's later reassessment, where he acknowledged that pluralism leads not to secular irrelevance but to religious privatization and the decentralization of authority (Peter Berger's 1996).

The identities of Bosnian descendants in Slovenia are shaped by a complex interplay of memory, migration, and secular socialization. Religious identity, as shown, often functions less as a faith commitment and more as a link to family history and cultural origin (Levitt 2001). Narratives from participants such as Dušan and Tamara show how memory (of family, Bosnia, and Yugoslavia) coexists with present-day belonging in Slovenia. The result is neither full assimilation nor cultural detachment, but a dynamic hybridity shaped by lived experience (Hall 1996).

Religion, while de-institutionalized, still plays a key integrative function within the private sphere (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Celebrations like Bajram or Christmas are not only markers of heritage but also opportunities for strengthening kinship networks and affirming belonging within a multicultural setting. Participants such as Samira, Leila, Marko, and Dušan illustrate how religious holidays function as inclusive, domestic gatherings that bridge communities and subtly introduce cognitive contamination, fostering understanding, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic, social, and religious groups. At the same time, the limited engagement with religious institutions reflects broader trends in European secularization, where belief and practice are increasingly individualized (Davie 1994). Religion becomes a personal resource for negotiating belonging rather than a public identity marker (Hervieu-Léger 2000).

The case of Bosnian descendants in Slovenia underscores the evolving nature of religious pluralism in contemporary Europe. Rather than a clash between belief systems, pluralism here reveals itself as a quiet coexistence of multiple affiliations—religious, ethnic, national, and cultural (Modood 2013). The findings challenge the binary of secular versus religious by revealing how individuals mobilize elements of both depending on context. This has broader implications for European integration policies, which often presuppose linear models of assimilation (Vertovec 2007). Instead, what emerges is a plural, negotiated landscape of identity in which religion serves less as doctrine and more as a symbolic, cultural, and emotional reference point.

Taken together, these insights highlight how the descendants of migrants creatively reconcile the religious heritage of their families with the secular, civic expectations of their national context. The result is not the disintegration of religious identity but its transformation into new, contextually relevant forms. Religious pluralism, when understood not only as institutional tolerance but as lived hybridity, offers a framework for recognizing the complex, often paradoxical ways in which belonging and belief are negotiated in modern Europe.

7. Conclusions

This study offers insights into the religious practices, religious affiliation, identity formation, and belonging of descendants of Bosnian migrants in Slovenia, illuminating the complex and evolving interplay between religious pluralism and secularization in contemporary European societies. The findings demonstrate that descendants' identity is often grounded in cultural memory and enacted through shared rituals, such as religious holidays, that transcend doctrinal boundaries and serve as bridges between ethnic, religious, and national affiliations.

Using qualitative methodology based on twelve semi-structured interviews, this article explores the lived experiences of descendants of Bosnian migrants and their relationship to religious practice and belief. The interviewees, who include self-identified Muslims,

Orthodox Christians, and atheists, offer insight into how religion is practiced in everyday life: often informally, selectively, and primarily within the private domain of family and community celebrations. Although most respondents report minimal institutional religious engagement, they continue to observe major religious holidays, a few of them maintain dietary or lifestyle choices linked to religious heritage, and pass on selected traditions to their children. In some cases, religious identity is explicitly decoupled from belief, functioning instead as a symbolic or cultural reference point that sustains familial bonds and preserves a sense of belonging to a transnational Bosnian community.

While secularization in Slovenia curtails the public visibility of religion, it does not erase its significance. Rather, religious expression increasingly assumes a de-institutionalized and individualized form. Formal religious practice is limited among the participants, yet religious celebrations persist as powerful symbolic practices that maintain familial bonds, reaffirm cultural continuity, and foster social cohesion. These private, domestic spaces of religious expression serve as vital arenas for living pluralism, where multiple affiliations are embraced and negotiated with subtlety and pragmatism.

This study confirms what theories of religious pluralism and secularization suggest: in contemporary societies, religion tends to shift from institutionalized, collective expressions to more private, personalized forms of belief (Casanova 1994; Davie 1994; Berger's 2014). Moreover, this research contributes to broader debates in the sociology of religion and migration studies by illuminating how religious pluralism, secularization, and integration intersect in the lives of migrant descendants. It challenges dichotomous understandings of religiosity and secularism by demonstrating the persistence of religious meaning and ritual in de-institutionalized forms. It also speaks to the role of religion in migrant integration—not as a fixed identity but as a flexible, evolving set of practices that reflect wider processes of adaptation, memory, and belonging. As Hagerty et al. (1992) argue, belonging entails a subjective sense of connection to people and places, while Yuval-Davies (2011, p. 12) emphasizes that belonging is also an act of self-identification or identification by others.

This study addresses key questions about how migrants and their descendants negotiate religious difference, construct identities, and participate in pluralistic societies that increasingly expect the privatization of faith. These findings support theories of "believing without belonging" (Davie 1994) and the decentralization of religious authority (Peter Berger's 1996), while enriching scholarship on transnationalism, cultural hybridity, and post-migration identity (Hall 1996; Levitt 2001).

Future research could build on these findings by undertaking comparative studies across different European contexts with significant post-Yugoslav or other migrant populations. Longitudinal research would be especially valuable in tracing how cultural identities evolve over generations, particularly in light of increased digital communication and global mobility. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches are needed to explore how religious pluralism intersects with public policy, civic inclusion, and the shaping of social cohesion in an increasingly diverse and secular Europe. Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for a more refined understanding of religious identity as a dynamic and situated resource, both personal and collective, within pluralistic, post-migration societies. It invites further exploration into how individuals and communities negotiate belonging in environments where secularism, cultural diversity, and transnational connections increasingly converge.

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Notes

1 The delayed construction of the Ljubljana mosque, approved only in 2013 after decades of bureaucratic obstruction and public controversy, serves as a prominent example of the state's hesitant accommodation of Islam.

2 This new reality led to a terrible violation of human rights: if inhabitants of Slovenia from other Yugoslav republics did not apply for Slovene citizenship, they were erased from the permanent residence register by the Slovenian state (Mandelc and Učakar 2011). Their non-acquisition of Slovenian citizenship led to the deprivation of their permanent resident status, and so they were transformed into foreigners, living illegally on Slovenian territory and were left without any political, economic, or social rights.

3 Due to the nationalist political climate surrounding Slovenian independence, ethnic groups originating from other former Yugoslav republics were not granted official minority status. In contrast, the Italian and Hungarian minorities retained their recognized status based on bilateral agreements established during the Yugoslav period. The newly independent Slovenian state chose not to extend similar recognition to additional minority communities. For a more in-depth analysis of this issue, see *Perforated Democracy* by Mandelc and Učakar (2011).

4 The term "Bosniak" (Bošnjak) was reaffirmed in the 1990s, particularly during and after the Bosnian War (1992–1995), as a means of articulating the national identity of Slavic Muslims, distinct from its prior association with religion alone. This shift marked an important move away from the designation "Muslim" as a national category and toward a more ethnically grounded self-identification within the broader post-Yugoslav political and cultural context.

5 The practice of jointly celebrating religious holidays across different religious communities was already present in socialist Yugoslavia (Bringa 1995), reflecting a form of everyday religious coexistence. Even then, a degree of "cognitive contamination" was evident in such intercommunal practices.

6 The Catholic and Orthodox Christian Churches follow different liturgical calendars—the Gregorian and the Julian calendars, respectively.

7 Ramazan Bajram marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, while Kurban Bajram, occurring about two months later, commemorates the Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son and includes the ritual sacrifice of an animal.

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Securitization, Humanitarianism, and the Religious Dimension of European Migration Policy

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Abstract

This article critically examines the evolution of EU migration policy discourse from 1989 to 2024, highlighting the shift from overt securitization to a more humanitarian and managerial framing, which still retains some securitization elements. By analyzing key policy documents, including the Hague and Stockholm Programmes, the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), and the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, this paper demonstrates how migration has been increasingly framed as a technical and economic issue while still maintaining exclusionary logics. Although humanitarian language has softened, policy goals remain focused on containment, selective inclusion, and externalizing responsibility. The second part of the article explores the religious aspect of EU migration policy, arguing that, despite the formal secularism of EU institutions, religious identity, particularly Islam, is implicitly intertwined with discourses of risk, cultural incompatibility, and integration. Drawing on Peter Berger's theory of pluralism, the paper highlights a fundamental tension between the EU's normative claims to diversity and its implicit preference for secular Christian frameworks. The analysis examines pathways for integrating religious consultation into EU governance and its potential to address the persistent marginalization of religion as a factor in inclusion and political agency. By linking migration discourse to the often-overlooked role of religion, this article calls for a more coherent, pluralist-informed EU strategy for migration and integration.

Keywords: European Union; migration policy; securitization; humanitarianism; religious pluralism; European identity; exclusion

1. Introduction

The European Union continues to grapple with balancing security concerns and its declared humanitarian principles in migration and asylum policies. Since the 2015 refugee crisis, there has been a noticeable change in the EU's official narrative on migration. The earlier securitization approach, which framed immigration as a security risk requiring strict controls, has increasingly been complemented by a focus on compassion, solidarity, and core European values. Policy statements now often emphasize goals such as "saving lives" in the Mediterranean and protecting the human rights of migrants and refugees (Ovacık and Crépeau 2025). This suggests a shift toward a more compassionate, values-driven stance, essentially replacing the earlier restrictive mindset associated with "Fortress Europe" (Balibar 2007). Further analysis reveals that this humanitarian rhetoric may be superficial, as the core exclusionary logic—filtering, controlling, and marginalizing migrants—remains unchanged despite shifting language (Učakar 2017). Essentially, security policies persist, framed within a humanitarian narrative. The recent EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, effective from 2024, promises an even more humanistic and human-rights-oriented approach.

Migration debates in the EU extend beyond policy, touching on deep questions of cultural and religious identity. Although the EU promotes itself as a defender of secular, universal values, the influx of mostly Muslim refugees and migrants has rekindled the challenges of religious diversity. Public discourse often portrays Muslim migrants as the cultural or religious "Other" compared to a presumed European identity (Ralston 2023). Even in more moderate conversations, an unspoken distinction remains between the EU's secular–liberal ideals and the religiosity of migrant groups. It is therefore crucial to analyze how religion influences the evolving narrative of migration in the EU. The key question is whether shifting to a humanitarian rhetoric truly promotes the inclusion of religious minorities or if it simply masks religion under a guise of secular universalism.

Methodology and Research Questions

This study explores the development of EU migration policy by analyzing key strategic documents related to migration. It focuses on 'explanatory themes' (Philo 2007) that influence the EU's understanding of migration, reflecting values, theme hierarchy, internal consistency or conflicts, and discursive elements like new or modified terms, semantic relationships (Fairclough 2003), and common semantic structures or syntax (van Dijk 2002). The goal is to trace how discursive patterns in European migration policy evolve, how main themes change, and how these shifts impact core explanatory frameworks, highlighting which topics gain prominence and how this affects the value hierarchy. Initially, a conceptual map of European migration policy was created based on an extensive literature review. Key themes identified, such as security, border control, externalization, selectivity, humanitarianism, and exclusion, served as primary categories for document analysis. These themes provided the initial framework for a thematic analysis of EU policy documents. As the documents were analyzed, the presence, absence, sequence, and hierarchical positioning of these themes were systematically traced, along with their interrelations and tensions. This approach enabled a critical examination of how various discursive elements have shaped the values, priorities, and contradictions within EU migration policy over time. The final section examines the religious aspect of EU migration policy, analyzing how the 2024 Migration Pact addresses religious challenges, considers religion as an underexplored factor in defining 'inside' versus 'outside,' and explores how secular EU discourse manages increasing religious diversity.

The empirical analysis examines 12 policy documents spanning from 1989 to 2024. These documents were selected based on the literature review, focusing on key texts that establish the foundational strategic directions for migration policy (Bunyan 1997; Lahav 2004; Schain 2009; Lavenex and Stucky 2011; Albahari 2015). We also included two European Commission documents produced in response to the increased influx of refugees into the EU in 2015, along with the most recent 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum. The selection covers the Palma Document from the pre-Maastricht era, which provides key thematic frameworks that persist throughout the analysis period; two EU treaties (Maastricht and Amsterdam); the Convention on the Implementation of the Schengen Agreement, establishing free movement; three foundational programs of the European Council (Tampere Summit, Hague Program, Stockholm Program) outlining migration strategies from 1999 to 2014; the 2014 European Council summit conclusions that aimed to extend previous internal affairs and justice initiatives; and three key European Commission documents—the 2011 Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), and the 2015 Migration and Security Agendas, created in response to increased immigration. Finally, we examine the latest 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, the newest EU framework for managing migration. In the second part of the paper, the Lisbon Treaty is also analyzed for its Article 17 TFEU.

2. Evolution of EU Migration Discourse

2.1. Early Integration and the Security Frame (1985–2000)

Early EU migration policy documents focus on security as the primary goal. Before the Tampere Conclusions (Tampere European Council 1999), migration was viewed as a phenomenon that required strict regulation and prevention, with terms such as "border control," "monitoring cross-border movements," and "preventing illegal immigration" (The Palma Document 1989; Treaty of Amsterdam 1997; Tampere European Council 1999). At Tampere European Council (1999), the concept of "management" is introduced alongside "control," and eventually replaces it in later policies such as GAMM (2011) and the European Agenda on Migration and Security (2015). By 2015, "control" appears only three times, whereas "management" is used broadly across topics like borders, migration, mobility, refugees, legal migration, and labor. In the 2024 Pact (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024), the term control is no longer a term associated with migration.

While 'control' often implies repressive oversight, especially at borders, 'management' indicates a wider, technocratic approach. Migration is framed more as an administrative matter than just a security issue. This discursive change reduces the intensity of the language, yet the focus on restrictive actions persists: stopping irregular migration, preventing asylum fraud, combating cross-border crime, and implementing return policies. Although this shift creates room for broader objectives, such as connecting migration with development or safeguarding lives, it does not fundamentally change the restrictive nature of EU migration policy.

2.2. Post-9/11 and the Securitization Peak (2001–2010)

In this period, two notable discursive changes are apparent. First, the vocabulary shifts: earlier terms like "combating illegal migration" (The Palma Document 1989) are replaced by phrases such as "risk assessments," "route analysis," and "migration profiles" (Stockholm Programme 2010; GAMM 2011), framing migration more as a technical issue. As Pallitto and Heyman (2008) observe, surveillance is not eliminated but instead redirected from security to biopolitical governance, where people are classified by origin and socio-economic traits. Despite the use of softer language, the underlying control logic remains, depicting migration as a threat and stigmatizing migrants preemptively (Huysmans 2000; Calavita 2005).

Since the Hague Programme in 2004, migration has been increasingly recognized as a "social fact' that requires a comprehensive approach. This suggests that migration cannot be stopped solely through control measures; it requires effective management. However, despite this shift in dialogue, the deeper socio-economic and historical roots of migration are often overlooked. Unlike Sassen's perspective, which sees migration as socially constructed (Sassen 2000), EU documents tend to view migration as an ahistorical phenomenon originating outside the EU.

Since the early 2000s, EU migration policy has shifted towards viewing migration as both a security concern and an opportunity for economic growth. This change is evident in the replacement of the term "control" with "management." Migration is now regarded as beneficial for the economy, particularly in addressing labor shortages and demographic decline. The Hague Programme (2005) was the first to highlight this positive aspect, followed by the Stockholm Programme (2010), which encouraged proactive recruitment efforts.

This economic framing clarifies the divide between legal and irregular migration. While legal migration is generally accepted, irregular migration is portrayed as a dual threat to security and legal frameworks. GAMM (2011, p. 15) emphasizes that policy credibility hinges on managing irregular flows. The Hague Programme (2005) associates

unauthorized labor with the informal economy but neglects the EU's structural dependence on low-skilled migrants (Calavita 2005; Triandafyllidou 2010).

Although humanitarian rhetoric persists, migrants are still dehumanized. Classic metaphors, such as "waves" or "floods," from the Tampere programme have shifted to language focusing on labor needs. Migrants are viewed not as autonomous agents but as passive respondents to European market demands. Overall, changing the narrative from migration as a threat to an opportunity does not eliminate exclusionary logic; instead, it transforms it. Current migration policies serve as selective instruments that favor labor market efficiency, economic growth, and EU stability, while marginalizing unskilled migrants and enhancing external border controls (Tsoukala 2005; Wodak 2006).

Early EU migration policies initially focused on restricting entry through rigorous external border controls, exemplified by The Palma Document (1989) and the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997). As perspectives shifted from viewing migration as a threat to seeing it as an opportunity, policy documents increasingly prioritized selective migration, primarily to facilitate labor movements beneficial to the economy. This evolution is reflected in the structure of the official texts. Before the Hague Programme (2005), the emphasis was on border enforcement and internal security. Following 2004, the focus shifted toward legal migration and integration, with issues such as irregular migration and border enforcement addressed in subsequent sections. This pattern continued until the European Agenda on Migration and Security (2015), which, in response to the Syrian crisis, revived urgent humanitarian measures at the forefront of the policy discussion.

Although EU migration policy primarily resides within Justice and Home Affairs, it has gradually incorporated external policy aspects. Since the 1999 Tampere Conclusions, internal security has been viewed as part of a comprehensive security approach that blends internal and external measures. The scope has broadened from merely border protection to including collaboration with origin and transit nations. The Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM 2011) shifts responsibility outward, portraying migration management as a duty of third countries in exchange for development assistance and increased access to mobility. External tools encompass capacity building, "mobility partnerships," "cooperation platforms," and "migration dialogues," complemented by economic initiatives like "circular growth," "co-development," and "remittance transfers." However, such cooperation relies on conditions. As GAMM (2011) underlines, successful border control, curbs on irregular migration, and effective return systems are essential prerequisites for partnerships. Despite the diplomatic language, the main objectives remain focused on economic gains and security.

This trend is often seen as externalization (Bigo and Guild 2005; Triandafyllidou 2010; Hayes and Vermeulen 2012). Responsibility shifts to third countries, which are tasked with managing migration, while the EU provides financial and technical support. The Stockholm Programme (2010, p. 37) states that the EU will assist third countries in developing migration policies—implicitly placing the burden on them. Although these initiatives are framed as humanitarian efforts, they primarily serve EU domestic interests. The European Council Summit Conclusions (EUCO 79/14) (2014) clarify that only countries with adequate border and return systems qualify for migration benefits. Access to legal pathways depends on these conditions, as outlined in GAMM (2011) and the European Agenda on Migration and Security (2015). EU acts are portrayed as generous, while failures in third countries are attributed to poor governance. A similar approach applies to asylum: GAMM (2011, p. 17) advocates "asylum capacity building" in "friendly" nations, shifting refugee responsibilities outside the EU. Although labeled as solidarity, these measures primarily focus on containment and emergency aid rather than addressing the root causes.

2.3. Humanitarian Rhetoric Ascendant (2011–2020)

A significant change in EU migration policy during this period is the shift from a securitarian to a humanitarian approach, particularly evident in the European Agenda on Migration and Security (2015), following the Middle Eastern refugee crisis—a move from territorial protection to prioritizing lives. However, this did not lead to more lenient policies; instead, humanitarianism became a new justification for border controls and deterring irregular migration. Before the Hague Programme (2005), EU strategies focused on internal security, border control, and protecting the rights of legal residents and asylum seekers. The Hague Programme was the first to explicitly acknowledge the "humanitarian catastrophes" in the Mediterranean, attributing them to poor management. Although policies started to emphasize the EU's role in rescuing migrants at sea, they did not advocate for more legal entry options. Instead, they focused on returns (Stockholm Programme 2010; European Council Summit Conclusions (EUCO 79/14) (2014)) and combating irregular migration (GAMM 2011), thus reinforcing securitization.

The 2015 European Agenda on Migration addresses migrant deaths and considers root causes broadly. It advocates for a humane approach and aims to "stop human suffering", but mainly reaffirms previous security measures such as "dismantling smuggling networks," "protecting EU borders," and "assisting frontline states." Frontex's role includes saving lives but also involves "identifying, registering, and returning migrants" and "destroying smugglers' vessels" (European Agenda on Migration and Security 2015). This creates a split between EU humanitarian efforts and the perception of migrants as the "criminal Other." Despite references to international law, security interests often take precedence over humanitarian concerns. Access to asylum is becoming increasingly limited due to stringent proof requirements and heightened suspicion of misuse, while legal mobility relies on cooperation to reduce irregular migration flows. As highlighted in GAMM (2011) and reaffirmed in 2015, fingerprinting at "hotspots" is depicted as humanitarian; however, it often functions as a deterrent. Migrants are mainly seen as victims of trafficking and smuggling stemming from third-country governance failures and the lack of legal routes. Although this portrayal fosters empathy, it also shifts migrants from rights-bearers to passive recipients of aid.

The blending of trafficking and smuggling—introduced initially in Tampere European Council (1999) and reiterated in the Stockholm Programme (2010)—casts irregular migrants as part of criminal systems. Later documents (for example, GAMM 2011; European Agenda on Migration and Security 2015) portray them as victims in need of protection. The phrase "Destroying smugglers' vessels" is presented both as a humanitarian effort and a tool against crime. However, this hides the lack of legal migration pathways and promotes a militarized stance.

Scholars warn that using humanitarian language may justify stricter controls (Cuttitta 2015; Albahari 2015). Despite shifts in rhetoric, EU migration policy remains focused on territorial control. Humanitarian actions often support deterrence and containment strategies. This aligns with Chouliaraki's (2012) concept of "post-humanitarianism," a form of solidarity driven by rational interests rather than empathy. Therefore, migration policy primarily targets security and economic objectives, supported by development aid and externalization efforts. Humanitarianism can conceal tighter asylum restrictions and legal migration systems shaped by labor market demands.

Another development is the increasing link between asylum seekers and irregular migrants, often presented through a humanitarian narrative that claims to protect only the "truly needy" (European Agenda on Migration and Security 2015). Triandafyllidou (2010) observed the growing assumption of illegality in asylum, which helps merge asylum with irregular migration. Asylum policies are now more focused on preventing abuse

and swiftly deporting rejected applicants. Wodak (2006, p. 186) describes this trend as the blending of "asylum seeker" and "immigrant" into "illegal asylum seeker." Before the Hague Programme (2005), asylum was a fundamental EU value rooted in international commitments; afterward, it shifted to a management approach, emphasizing information control and fraud prevention over the protection of rights.

In summary, the EU's shift in migration policy discourse reflects more a strategic rebranding than a complete departure from securitization. The way the issue is talked about has genuinely shifted—one cannot imagine the EU of 1995 frequently discussing "saving migrant lives" as it did in 2015. However, this is more a change in tone than in core policies. The core belief that undesirable migration should be restricted remains. Now, this restriction is often justified as being beneficial for migrants or necessary to maintain a system that assists genuinely needy individuals. While the language and reasons have become more focused on European liberal values and compassion, the fundamental approach characterized by exclusion within the "Fortress Europe" framework remains essentially unchanged. This creates a discursive duality: Europe is portrayed both as a defender of human rights and as a region with tightly controlled borders (Učakar 2017).

2.4. Moving on from the Crisis: 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum

Following the 2015 migration crisis, the EU sought ways to incorporate migration issues into its human rights-based narrative, culminating in the 2024 Migration Pact. This pact aims to provide "a fresh start on migration: building confidence through more effective procedures and striking a new balance between responsibility and solidarity" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024). A primary goal is to break the deadlock of the Dublin Regulation, which assigns sole responsibility for asylum management to the first member state where an applicant enters the EU. The New Pact proposes a flexible solidarity mechanism allowing member states to decide how they will contribute to asylum management. Along with this "system of solidarity and responsibility," the Pact includes three pillars: "secure external borders," "fast and efficient procedures," and "embedding migration in international partnerships." At first glance, the Pact's language appears unchanged from the 2015 European Agenda on Migration, still employing terms such as "migratory pressures" and "large flows" to describe migration (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024). It also describes border movements with phrases such as "robust screening," "migration database," "border procedures and returns," "crisis protocols," "fast and efficient procedures," and "preventing abuse" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024).

However, a closer look reveals new framing that moves away from depersonalized descriptions of migration. For instance, the Pact refers to "individual applicants," shifting focus from a homogeneous flow of people to a focus on individual cases: "the Pact sets out a new framework that ensures fair sharing of responsibility and solidarity between member states while providing certainty for individual applicants" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024). In border management, it emphasizes "the focus on applicants." It includes a paragraph on "Legal guarantees," introducing an "independent monitoring mechanism to ensure respect of fundamental rights, supported by the Fundamental Rights Agency, Frontex, and the new European Agency for Asylum" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024). It promotes an "individual assessment of asylum claims" and guarantees protection of access to asylum, the right to liberty, children's rights, and the right to an effective remedy (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024). The Pact also directly addresses migrants multiple times, mentioning "certainty and protection for migrants and refugees" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024) and "legal guarantees and a monitoring system to ensure full respect of rights from beginning to end of the process" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024). In the section on search and rescue at sea, the Pact states that "search and rescue is a legal

obligation and a moral duty" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024), explicitly distancing itself from the European Agenda 2015's association of rescue with destroying smugglers' vessels at sea (European Agenda on Migration and Security 2015), a wording that was quickly revised in the EU policy discourse.

The discussion on skilled immigration has traditionally focused on migration, emphasizing the welcome of skilled migrants into the EU. The Pact builds on this by stressing the importance of setting "a positive example for how the EU can manage migration by building open societies" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024). It outlines an action plan for integration, including the integration of "the views of migrants in policy development through a dedicated expert group to advise the Commission" (Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024). The document shifts towards a more individual-centered approach, highlighting the voices of migrants, their participation, and the protection of their rights.

While the Pact was still under political review, the EU encountered another migration crisis, this time from Ukraine, its eastern neighbor. The 2022 crisis highlighted the EU's capacity for humanitarian response and underscored its ongoing double standards. Days after Russia's invasion, the EU unanimously activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time[1], providing immediate, collective protection to millions of displaced Ukrainians—mainly women, children, and those of Christian background. This marked an unprecedented act of solidarity: by March 2025, approximately 4.2 million Ukrainians had sought protection in the EU under this scheme (Ciger 2025). The activation of the TPD exempted Ukrainians from complex asylum procedures, granting them immediate rights to residence, work, education, and social assistance across member states (Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 (2022)). It proved that when political will is present, the EU can respond humanely and united to a mass influx. However, the positive reception of Ukrainian refugees—often seen as "innocent victims of aggression" and even "Europeans"—starkly contrasted with how refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, or Africa were treated in 2015–2016.

The Ukrainian example suggests hope that the new 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum's thematic frameworks go beyond mere words, implying actionable measures. However, it raises the question of whether the EU would react as quickly and uniformly if refugees originated from a region with a different cultural and religious background. We do not claim that activating the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukraine was solely due to its religious proximity to the EU; larger geostrategic considerations in international relations also play a role, topics beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, it invites us to reflect on the role of religion in this context. Suppose the EU's migration discourse has largely been secular, oscillating between security and humanitarian concerns. What does this mean for a Europe that is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of religion? How accurately does the secular narrative account for or neglect the reality of pluralism, especially considering Islam's role in Europe's migration history? The next section will examine the religious dimension of EU migration policies, which remains unspoken but is central to debates about insiders versus outsiders and 'us' versus 'them'—the overarching socio-political narrative surrounding migration.

3. Religion, Secularism, and Pluralism in the European Context

Religion has traditionally been a delicate and often muted subject in EU policy discussions. The European project, especially in the late 20th century, was founded on a primarily secular approach to governance (Wolff 2021). While the EU treaties recognize Europe's "religious and humanist inheritance," and EU institutions engage with religious communities, conversations about religion tend to be framed in terms of cultural heritage or fundamental rights (such as freedom of religion), rather than detailed theological or

religious identity issues (Foret and Mourão Permoser 2015). In reality, EU migration and integration policies rarely explicitly consider the religious identities of migrants. This secular stance reflects Europe's historical process of secularization—referred to by Sarah Wolff (2021) as "secularism as identity"—and the continent's ongoing religious diversity. Here, a historical consideration of the Westphalian peace is crucial to understanding the official secular nature of the EU as an institution. Religious issues were deliberately placed within states' sovereignty, since religious unity is neither possible nor favorable in such a religiously diverse environment as the EU member states.

Sociologist Peter Berger's theory of pluralism provides valuable insights for understanding this situation. His framework is relevant to Europe, where, despite widespread secularization in public life, religious diversity continues to grow, partly due to immigration. Berger initially supported the mid-20th-century secularization thesis, which posits that modernity leads to a decline in religion. However, he later revised this view in his 2014 book, "The Many Altars of Modernity," where he argues that modernity does not diminish religion but instead increases its variety. Modern societies now see a proliferation of different faiths and worldviews, resulting in a landscape where no single worldview is universally accepted. People are confronted with a range of belief options and must choose or create their meaning systems. We are in a pluralist era where diverse worldviews coexist and compete, offering individuals freedom but also presenting new existential challenges (Berger 2014). For Europe, this perspective clarifies that many European societies are largely secular in their daily practices; however, immigration and globalization have introduced greater religious diversity, ranging from revived Christianity within migrant communities to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other faiths, establishing a presence (van der Maas 2022).

Berger's pluralism thesis offers valuable insights, but applying it to the EU as a supranational entity has limitations. His theory portrays a sociological scenario—how individuals and societies experience religious diversity and navigate the resulting "marketplace" of beliefs. It highlights that pluralism brings both freedoms and challenges: people may become more aware of their own beliefs when others are present, often feeling tension and disorientation amid conflicting truth claims. Thus, pluralism is not inherently a peaceful state of mutual tolerance; rather, it is a continuous process of negotiation, contestation, and adaptation. Berger views pluralism not as an end goal but as a fact of modern life that societies must manage, often through robust religious freedom and dialogue (Berger 2014).

When applying this perspective to the EU, we must avoid merely stating "the EU should be pluralistic." Since the EU is a political entity rather than a society or individual, it cannot hold beliefs but can create or restrict spaces for different beliefs. Berger's framework highlights that ignoring the importance of religion does not eliminate its influence; in pluralistic environments, religious issues that are suppressed often reemerge in other forms. Additionally, Berger would recognize that pluralism naturally entails challenges and conflicts, which the EU, like any political body, will need to manage rather than expect to resolve effortlessly.

3.1. The Religious Dimension in European Migration Governance

The EU's migration policy primarily focuses on shared secular values, such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, which are viewed as neutral and universal, while minimizing religious differences. The EU's secular stance generally suggests religion should stay private and that public policies can be based on neutral, universally acceptable principles. This view is reflected in the EU's self-perception: early versions of an EU Constitution in the 2000s even considered referencing God or Christianity, but eventually, any explicit mention of Christian heritage was removed to maintain neutrality (Madeley 2003). The Lisbon Treaty's Article 17 TFEU establishes a careful balance: the EU respects

the legal standing of churches and religious groups under national law and commits to an "open, transparent and regular dialogue" with them, while avoiding endorsement or favoritism towards any religion (Georgescu 2024).

Essentially, religion is recognized as part of Europe's identity and civil society; however, EU institutions view themselves as secular entities. This results in migration and integration policies that emphasize legal, economic, and civic aspects—migrants are viewed as workers, possess skills, or are asylum seekers or family reunification cases—not primarily as individuals with specific religious identities (Foret and Mourão Permoser 2015). The EU's official integration strategies focus on language acquisition, employment, and compliance with European laws and values, rarely addressing religious practices or interfaith dialogue (Cesari 2013). The underlying belief is that if migrants find employment, learn the local language, and adopt democratic values, their religious differences will either fade or remain private (Ralston 2023). Overall, the EU's secular narrative portrays itself as universal and inclusive, but it deliberately excludes open discussions about religion.

3.2. The Secular Discourse of EU Policy and Its Limits

The secular, "religion-blind" approach aims to treat everyone equally by focusing on shared needs like shelter, work, and language. However, it can overlook specific religious aspects of integration, such as providing places of worship, accommodating religious holidays or dietary needs at workplaces and schools, or fighting religious discrimination in the job market (Lähdesmäki 2022). It is crucial to understand the institutional reality: responsibilities are divided between the EU and its member states in matters of religion and integration. Under EU law, immigration and asylum are areas where the EU shares authority with member states; however, migrant integration remains primarily a national matter. While the EU can offer support and incentives, it cannot harmonize laws in this area (Georgescu 2024). Similarly, Article 17 TFEU mandates respecting member states' arrangements on religion, keeping church-state relations outside EU influence. Education and cultural policies, which often involve accommodations for religious groups, are primarily national. Therefore, the EU's ability to manage religious diversity is limited: it can combat discrimination through directives and fund integration or exchange projects, but it cannot dictate how individual countries balance secularism and religious rights (McCrea 2011). Each member state has its approach—from France's strict laïcité to Denmark's Evangelical Lutheran state church—which heavily influences how migrant religions are received. In its migration policy discourse, the EU tends to use neutral, lowest-common-denominator language that avoids theological or doctrinal issues for broader acceptance (McCrea 2011). Recognizing this legal and institutional framework is essential when evaluating the EU's approach to religion; some of its silence may be strategic or legally necessary.

3.3. "Inside" vs. "Outside" Divide in the EU

Although not explicitly stated at the EU policy level, religion has a profound influence on debates about who is allowed entry, who is excluded, and how those admitted are expected to live (Moreno-Lax 2018). The interaction between securitization and humanitarianism in EU policies is shaped by a cultural-religious logic: security measures often target those perceived as culturally "unfit" or threatening (usually implicitly Muslim), while humanitarian actions tend to favor those seen as relatable or innocent (such as victims fitting European secular ideals, sometimes implicitly Christian or at least not too "different") (Mavelli and Wilson 2016). Over the past twenty years, Muslims have frequently been portrayed—in media, politics, and public perception—as the culturally incompatible "Other" in immigration debates (Foner and Simon 2015; Ralston 2023). This stereotyping varies across Europe but has been widespread enough to influence policies and attitudes.

The earlier securitization narrative often linked Muslim presence with security threats: Muslims were depicted as potential radicals, a fifth column, or carriers of illiberal values opposed to "European" norms (Mavelli and Wilson 2016). The arrival of large numbers of Muslim refugees and migrants—especially during the 2015 crisis, when over a million people, mostly from Muslim-majority countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, entered the EU—compelled Europe to reevaluate its identity. Public sentiment in many areas reflected "existential anxieties" about Islam in Europe (Wolff 2021). At the EU policy level, institutions maintained a formally neutral, secular–humanitarian stance. EU statements and decisions during the crisis did not frame the issue as "Christian Europe vs. Muslim refugees." Instead, they addressed responsibilities, the logistical distribution of asylum seekers, border security, and humanitarian duty (Mavelli and Wilson 2016). In these cases, the secular language of EU policies shifts the focus away from underlying religious divides.

The main religious divide written in the literature is the "predominantly Christian inside" and the "predominantly Muslim outside" (Goździak et al. 2020). However, this dividing line is not as clear as it looks, neither on the inside nor on the outside. It is important to clarify that Muslim migrants are not a monolithic group—they come from various countries such as Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and have diverse religious practices and levels of devotion. Additionally, Europe's Muslim population includes not only recent migrants but also longstanding communities like Turkish-origin populations in Germany, North Africans in France, South Asians in the UK, and converts. Moreover, it is not solely composed of immigrants or their descendants; indigenous European Muslims and potential new members with Muslim majorities are also part of the demographic. Bulgaria, which joined the EU in 2007, hosts the most significant indigenous Muslim minority, consisting of Turks and Pomaks, making up about 10% of its population. Cyprus, as an EU member, has a Muslim community primarily of Turkish Cypriots, although ongoing political issues complicate their status. In the Balkans, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, both candidates for EU membership, have Muslim-majority or dominant populations (Goździak et al. 2020). If they join the EU, it will contradict the idea that the EU is a "Christian club" (Hennig 2020) by including states with predominantly Muslim populations.

Some EU initiatives have begun tackling anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination as part of broader anti-racism and inclusion strategies. For instance, the EU's Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020) explicitly aims to combat Islamophobia, while the Fundamental Rights Agency tracks anti-Muslim incidents. The European Parliament's Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup discusses Islamophobia alongside other issues. They must pay special attention to the recent rise of populist rhetoric, which often portrays Europe's secular liberal norms, like gender equality, as Christian achievements. Consequently, Muslims, usually characterized as patriarchal, are seen as threats to women and LGBTQ+ communities (Goździak et al. 2020). A notable example is how some far-right groups have adopted language from women's liberation to oppose Muslim immigration, claiming Europe needs protection from what they call misogynistic Islam. This phenomenon is sometimes called "femonationalism"—using feminist rhetoric to justify nationalist, anti-Muslim policies (Farris 2017).

Scholars such as Hennig (2020) note that the rise in Christian identity politics weakens liberal pluralism across Europe. By drawing a religious line around Europe—claiming it is fundamentally Christian and that others are not quite European—it reinforces an exclusionary mindset. This resembles, in some ways, the humanitarian vs. security dichotomy, where humanitarian language disguises security concerns; here, references to Christian origins conceal an exclusionary goal. Both approaches serve to delineate an inside group (deserving, "us") from an outside group (threatening, "them"). In Christian identity

discourse, this boundary is religious and civilizational: Europe's "us" likely includes all native Christians (regardless of practice) and possibly assimilated Jews and secular people; the "them" often refers to Muslims—and sometimes, other non-European groups.[2]

3.4. Religious Accommodation on the EU Level

Although EU policies are generally secular, the EU has a Religious Engagement Infrastructure that includes formal mechanisms for accommodation. Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) requires EU institutions to engage in an "open, transparent, and regular" dialogue with churches, religious groups, and philosophical or non-confessional organizations, while also reaffirming that the regulation of religion remains with individual member states (Georgescu 2024). This creates a careful balance between supranational consultation and national sovereignty. The European Parliament's Vice-President for Article 17 relations facilitates this dialogue through high-level seminars and policy briefings, which regularly focus on issues such as religious freedom, social inclusion, and migration (Georgescu 2024).

Foret and Mourão Permoser (2015) note that actors from Europe's main religious traditions, like the Catholic Church and mainline Protestant churches, continue to influence migration discussions. However, they do so subtly by translating their advocacy into secular terms. Organizations affiliated with churches that assist refugees or migrants often frame their input around human rights, charity, and dignity, which are values rooted in Christian social teaching but presented as universal. These principles align with EU normative language, allowing such organizations to be viewed as experts or humanitarian voices rather than as "religious lobbyists" (Leustean 2013). However, in recent years, there has also been tangible evidence of Muslim engagement in this area. Since 2016, the Representative Office of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been active, participating in initiatives from the Article 17 dialogue to combating anti-Muslim hatred. The Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations has attended multiple Commission meetings and maintains a lobbying presence. Additionally, the Collective for Countering Islamophobia in Europe joined the EU Transparency Register[3] in 2022 to support victims and push for policy reforms against anti-Muslim discrimination. Overall, these efforts demonstrate that pathways for religious consultation, especially for Muslim groups, are integrated into EU governance. Therefore, scholars should go beyond broad claims of marginalization by examining specific gaps in representation, resource inequalities, or policy influence, rather than assuming widespread exclusion.

The 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum maintains a formal and impersonal tone throughout its discourse. Nevertheless, it designates specific agencies, such as the European Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), to oversee and assist in implementing the Pact by providing expertise on fundamental rights and gender equality. The Pact also explicitly involves civil society actors in contributing feedback on the European Annual Asylum and Migration Report, supporting the solidarity mechanism, including providing services to migrants and asylum seekers, and advocating for their rights. A notable inconsistency persists: while EU border security is addressed through top-down measures, migrants' rights are primarily defended from the bottom up, relying on agencies and civil society to uphold humane treatment and human rights. Nonetheless, the 2024 Pact marks the first EU migration policy explicitly encouraging agencies and civil society to support the Pact's human rights objectives and the first to promote "including the views of migrants in the development of policies" (p. 15). Through this bottom-up approach, also religious specifics of migrants could be taken into account and catered to on a case-by-case basis.

4. Conclusions

This article traces the development of EU migration policy discourse from 1989 to 2024, demonstrating a shift from a primarily securitarian approach to one that is more focused on humanitarian and technocratic language. However, despite these rhetorical adjustments, the core policy logic remains centered on containment, control, and selective inclusion, primarily driven by economic interests and internal security concerns. Although migration is sometimes presented as an opportunity, this perspective remains conditional, layered, and exclusionary, especially toward irregular migrants and those considered economically "unproductive".

Crucially, the paper argues that EU migration policy discourses, while formally secular and ostensibly neutral, indirectly reproduce normative hierarchies that marginalize religious difference—especially concerning Muslim communities. This exclusion is not articulated through overt religious language but is embedded in the depersonalized management of mobility, the logic of securitization, and the instrumental framing of humanitarianism. Religious pluralism—understood in Berger's terms as the coexistence and contestation of multiple worldviews—is neither explicitly acknowledged nor adequately addressed in EU-level policy.

EU governance has included pathways for religious consultation, which provides opportunities to identify specific gaps in representation, resource disparities, or policy influence among various religious groups, rather than assuming widespread exclusion. This approach supports the EU's goals of inclusion, human rights, and democratic legitimacy. However, the institutional tendency to delegate responsibility for refugee protection and integration further shifts these challenges onto third countries, worsening imbalances and diverting attention from the Union's internal inconsistencies.

For EU migration governance to align with its stated values, it must move beyond managerial and securitized rationales toward a more pluralist-informed approach—one that takes seriously the religious and cultural dimensions of belonging, inclusion, and citizenship. Future policy frameworks should more explicitly engage with the intersection of religion and migration, not as a threat to cohesion, but as a constitutive element of the European social fabric. As we have demonstrated in the above analysis, the recent 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum opens up space for such a development.

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Notes

1 The temporary protection status was created in 2001 (Council Directive 2001/55/EC 2001) to safeguard Bosniaks and Kosovars, over 90% of whom are Muslims. Despite its implementation, there was a lack of political will to trigger the status in the 2000s. This reluctance was influenced by multiple factors and likely reflects tensions between EU institutions and member states more than religious bias within EU bodies.

2 This contrast between "us" (Christian–European–EU) and "them" (Muslim–non-European) illustrates how symbolic boundaries are often formed in EU policy and public discussion. However, this should not be confused with a theological agreement. In fact, Christian identities of belonging are much more complex and transcend borders. For instance, Catholic and Protestant groups often refer to a wider Western and Latin American Christian civilization, while Orthodox Christian views include strong ties beyond the EU, such as patriarchates in Turkey (Constantinople), Russia (Moscow), Egypt (Alexandria), Syria and Lebanon

(Antioch), and Israel (Jerusalem). These examples emphasize the layered, worldwide nature of Christian self-understanding, which cannot be fully described by a simple EU-centric binary (Ralston and von Stosch 2023).

[3] The Transparency Register is a database that records interest representatives, including organizations, associations, groups, and self-employed individuals actively involved in influencing EU policy and decision-making. Its goal is to inform the public about which interests are represented at the EU level, who represents them, on whose behalf, and the resources used for these activities, such as financial support, donations, and sponsorships (Transparency Register 2025).

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Article

Religion, Migration, and the Far-Right: How European Populism Frames Religious Pluralism

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Abstract

This article examines how populist radical right parties (PRR) in three contrasting European contexts—Slovenia, France, and Poland—strategically instrumentalize Christianity within their anti-immigration agendas. Rather than using religion as a matter of faith, these parties recast Christianity as a cornerstone of national and European identity, positioning it in opposition to Islam and non-European migration. The study argues that such instrumentalization serves not only to construct a religiously defined national identity, but also to legitimize exclusionary policies. By analyzing selected political speeches, party manifestos, and media discourse, we explore how far-right actors frame Islam as incompatible with European values, reinforcing the division between "Christian Europe" and "foreign non-Christian migrants." Drawing on recent scholarship on civilizational populism and religious boundary-making, we further assess how processes of globalization and European integration have been interpreted by populist parties to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment. Methodologically, we employ qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes and rhetorical strategies, with a focus on the intersection of religion, nationalism, and migration. The findings contribute to debates on religious pluralism in contemporary Europe, shedding light on how far-right populism reframes pluralism and challenges secular principles across different political and cultural settings.

Keywords: far-right populism; populist radical right (PRR); Christianity; migration; religious pluralism; civilizational populism; secularism

1. Introduction

In recent years, European far-right populist movements and political parties have strategically turned to religion, particularly Christianity, as a central element of their political messaging. No longer merely cultural or economic, the far-right's discourse on immigration increasingly operates within a religified framework that seeks to delineate belonging and exclusion along civilizational lines. By framing Christianity as the essential foundation of European identity, and Islam as its threatening Other, these actors attempt to mobilize fears, legitimize exclusionary policies, and reassert nationalist sovereignty in an era marked by mass migration (Castles 2010) and globalization (Brubaker 2017; Yilmaz and Morieson 2022). In line with Peter Berger's theory of pluralism, contemporary societies shaped by global migration do not simply display religious decline but undergo a structural transformation wherein multiple religions and secular worldviews coexist and interact in the public sphere (Berger 1967, 2014). This "double pluralism" is increasingly prominent in Europe, requiring both citizens and institutions to negotiate not only between various faith traditions, but also between sacred and secular forms of meaning-making (Berger 2014).

In this paper, we explore the instrumentalization of Christianity by selected far-right populist parties in Europe, focusing on how religious narratives are deployed to frame immigration as a civilizational threat. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of political speeches, party manifestos, and selected media coverage, our paper investigates the rhetorical strategies used to present Islam as incompatible with "Christian Europe." The central argument is that far-right actors are not merely expressing cultural concerns, but actively constructing a form of religified nationalism, i.e., a synthesis of populist, nationalist, and religious discourses that seeks to recast European identity in theological and civilizational terms (Peker 2022).

While the link between populism and nationalism has been extensively theorized (Mudde 2007; Brubaker 2017), and while the role of religion in public life has been widely debated within post-secular theory (Casanova 1994; Asad 2003), the intersection of far-right populism, religious framing, and anti-immigration discourse remains underexplored. The existing literature tends to either focus on economic and cultural dimensions of populism (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2019) or analyze religion in isolation from its political instrumentalization. This paper addresses that gap by conceptualizing the far-right's discourse as civilizational populism (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022), where religion is mobilized not for theological purposes but as a political tool to define "the people" and exclude "the Other."

Scientific literature (Martino and Papastathis 2024; Samaras 2025; Casanova 2017) finds that far-right parties adapt their rhetoric on religion depending on the level of religiosity among their electorate. In more religious environments, the emphasis on protecting traditional religious values is more pronounced. However, highly religious voters frequently remain loyal to Christian-democratic or conservative parties. The far right generally does not directly attract these voters as long as there is a strong link between faith and traditional political preferences, the so-called "vaccine effect", that, due to increasing political dealignment, is gradually weakening (Arzheimer 2019, p. 238; Norris and Inglehart 2019, pp. 126–28). On the other hand, in societies where religiosity is low, far-right parties reframe religion; it primarily becomes a symbol of cultural heritage and a tool of nativist politics, rather than an expression of genuine spirituality or institutional belonging. Christianity serves as a marker of "Europeanness," distinguishing "us" from "them," targeting secular voters with a sentimental attachment to national tradition (Brubaker 2017, pp. 1197–99). Such political instrumentalization of religion relies on a broader tendency in both public and academic discourse to reduce religion to mere belief or identity, often sidelining its embodied, ritual, and material dimensions (Jurekovič 2023). Research further shows that the direct influence of religiosity on support for the far right is limited and primarily dependent on mediating factors, such as identification with Christian-democratic parties, social values, and patterns of ethnic perception. In France, for instance, high religiosity can even increase the likelihood of supporting the radical right, if the party clearly positions itself against contemporary social changes (Arzheimer 2019, p. 239).

Religion often acquires the role of a symbolic channel for transmitting and articulating insecurities associated with mass migration. Far-right rhetoric frequently interprets migration (especially of Muslims) as a threat not only to economic security but, primarily, to the cultural and religious identity of the native population. Here, religion is no longer an exclusively personal spiritual experience but becomes a "cultural weapon" in the process of political mobilization (Brubaker 2017, p. 1196). Recent systematic analysis of Slovenian media coverage shows that mass media, especially in periods of heightened migration (1992–1993, 1999–2001, 2015–2016), tend to portray refugees and migrants as the "other," mobilizing stereotypical, security-oriented, and exclusionary frames that reinforce boundaries of national belonging (Smrdelj 2021). Political science observes that in times of mass migration, religious markers (e.g., Christianity versus Islam) serve as the connective tissue

for newly formed collectives of fear and insecurity; thus, cultural and ethnic differences are transformed into political polarization (Kaya 2019, p. 7). Urban studies also show that isolated ethnoreligious communities and fewer intergroup contacts increase the potential for Islamophobia and support for exclusionary policies (Helbling and Traunmüller 2020, pp. 17–19). The normalization and impact of Islamophobia as a form of boundary-marking has been observed not only in Western European societies but also in the context of the rest of post-socialist Southeastern Europe, where it acts as a barrier to peacebuilding and inclusive citizenship (Zalta 2020).

The article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical framework, integrating key literature on populism, religious nationalism, and post-secularism. The second section details the methodology and presents the selection of cases. The third section conducts an analysis of political and media discourses in Poland, France, and Slovenia, highlighting dominant frames and rhetorical strategies. The final section reflects on the broader implications of religified populism for pluralism, secular democracy, and the evolving contours of European identity.

By offering a comparative, theory-driven, and empirically grounded analysis, this article contributes to the growing body of research on the far-right populism, nationalism, and religion. It argues that the redefinition of Europe as a "Christian fortress" is not simply nostalgic or defensive, but a deliberate political project that reshapes the terms of migration, belonging, and secularism in the 21st century. While comparative studies on the far right and religion in Europe are growing, most focus either on single-country cases or on broader regional trends. This article complements the existing research by providing a focused, cross-contextual analysis of how religious framing operates in three distinct institutional settings. By juxtaposing Poland, France, and Slovenia, the study highlights both commonalities in exclusionary strategies and context-specific adaptations, thereby enriching the understanding of religious instrumentalization in contemporary European populism.

Our article makes three key contributions to the existing literature on religion and the populist radical right in Europe. First, it introduces the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and its discursive deployment of Christianity as a civilizational identity marker, an empirical case that has received little to no attention in the comparative scholarship to date. While most research has concentrated on Western and Northern European parties (e.g., PVV, RN, FPÖ, DF), post-socialist EU countries like Slovenia remain underexplored despite exhibiting similar patterns of religious framing.

Second, the article expands the theoretical discussion by highlighting the specific mechanisms through which civilizational Christianity, devoid of doctrinal content, becomes instrumentalized to define in-groups and out-groups in secular yet nationalist contexts. In the Slovenian case, Christian identity is neither invoked for its theological authority nor for social conservatism, but for its capacity to affirm national belonging and differentiate from Islam, thus operating as a form of cultural boundary-making. Third, the article draws attention to a normative blind spot in much of the existing literature: while scholars have documented how far-right parties employ Christian symbols and references, they have paid insufficient attention to the implications of this rhetoric for religious freedom, pluralism, and minority inclusion. By emphasizing this dimension, the article reframes the debate and calls for a more critical evaluation of how the populist instrumentalization of religion erodes democratic norms under the guise of defending liberal values.

While the analysis is extensive, it is limited to three countries and three linguistic corpora (French, Polish, and Slovenian). The study does not include interviews or ethnographic fieldwork with far-right actors or affected Muslim communities. Furthermore, digital and algorithmic amplification of such discourses (e.g., social media virality) remains outside the scope, although it is acknowledged as a relevant future direction.

2. Methodology

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative content analysis of selected far-right parties in several contrasting European contexts; Poland (Law and Justice, PiS), where religion and nationhood are institutionally entangled; France (Rassemblement National, RN), which upholds a strong secular republican tradition; and Slovenia (Slovenian Democratic Party, SDS), which occupies an intermediate position as a post-socialist society with both historical Catholic traditions and significant secularization trends, thus providing a unique setting for examining how far-right actors mobilize religious and cultural symbols in a context that oscillates between inherited religiosity and increasingly pluralistic, post-secular public discourse. This comparison enables us to assess how different secular–religious regimes shape the discursive strategies of far-right populists. To provide a robust foundation for qualitative analysis, the empirical material combines several forms of political communication including speeches, televised debates, and digital party outreach across peak periods of migration-related discourse in Europe. This approach enables the study to capture not only formal policy positions but also the rhetorical and narrative strategies deployed by far-right actors in real time. In this study, I do not treat Law and Justice (PiS) and the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) as "classical" far-right actors. Following the now standard typology, I classify them as populist radical right (PRR) parties, i.e., parties whose core ideology combines nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, while operating within electoral democracy, in contrast to the anti-democratic "extreme right" (Mudde 2007). For case coding and cross-checks, I draw on The PopuList 3.0 (EiQCC) and its country reports, which code PiS as populist far right (borderline POP/FR 2005–2015; fully thereafter) and SDS as populist since 2000 and far right since 2015 (Rooduijn et al. 2024; The PopuList 3.0, Poland 2023; The PopuList 3.0, Slovenia 2023). Additional expert-survey indicators (e.g., CHES; V-Party) corroborate their authoritarian-nationalist and anti-immigration profiles (Bakker et al. 2022; Lindberg et al. 2022). Party-group affiliation in the European Parliament (e.g., SDS in the EPP) is therefore not dispositive for typological placement, which rests on ideology and discourse rather than transnational alignments (Mudde 2007; Rooduijn et al. 2024).

Poland and France represent two distinct models of state–religion relations in contemporary Europe (Taylor 2007; Scott 2018). Poland has historically been strongly tied to the Catholic Church, which played a crucial role in maintaining national identity during foreign rule and under the socialist regime. Today, Catholicism remains deeply embedded in the national discourse and political sphere, evident in the close relationship between the church and the state. In contrast, France is founded on the strict principle of laïcité, a secular framework that separates the state from religion and limits the visibility of religion in public life. Slovenia, meanwhile, occupies a middle ground between these models. While predominantly Roman Catholic, the country experienced a complex secularization process during its socialist past, resulting in a more pluralistic and less institutionalized relationship between the church and state. Religious identity in Slovenia tends to be more culturally than politically mobilized, with religion playing a symbolic, though not dominant, role in public discourse. This ambivalence in Slovenian nation- and state-building has also manifested in moments of exclusion—such as the case of the 'erased', where ambiguities in democratization and Europeanization were made visible through administrative and political practices (Mandelc and Učakar 2011). This nuanced position makes Slovenia a valuable case for examining how intermediate models of state–religion relations influence the incorporation of religious frames in political rhetoric. Nonetheless, Muslim communities have often been positioned as the "Other" in both institutional and popular narratives. These patterns echo recent findings on descendants of Bosnian migrants in Slovenia, who frequently construct a multilayered sense of belonging and contribute to religious pluralism at the everyday, practical level (Ješe Perković 2025). Taken together, these differences

in institutional and cultural frameworks enable a comparative analysis of how various European contexts shape the use of religious frames in political discourse.

To analyze party materials and statements, the study draws selectively from frame analysis (Entman 1993; Snow and Benford 1988), focusing on diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, as well as elements of the discourse-historical approach (Wodak 2015), to explore how religious identity is linked to historical myths, collective trauma, and national continuity. Our analysis is based on a purposive selection of several public statements, party manifestos, and media interventions from each country, concentrating on moments of intensified migration debates. Rather than conducting a comprehensive coding or aiming for quantitative generalization, the study identifies recurring themes and rhetorical strategies related to the instrumentalization of Christianity, such as civilizational framing, the construction of a "Christian Europe," and the exclusion of Islam, primarily to illustrate typical discursive patterns. We acknowledge that the limited sample size and depth-oriented approach reflect an interpretative, qualitative methodology, which emphasizes contextual understanding and thereby serves as an illustrative examination of broader socio-political processes. Reliability was supported through repeated readings and triangulation of themes against established theoretical frameworks. Regarding corpus delineation and source hierarchy we analytically distinguish between (i) primary party sources, t.i. foundational documents and statutory texts, recent electoral programmes (past five years), programmatic booklets, draft bills, leaders' official speeches and press statements, and (ii) mediated representations, t.i. news reports, editorials, talk shows, and televised debates. Claims about party positions are evidenced through primary sources; media materials are used to trace diffusion, resonance, and mainstreaming of frames in public discourse. For each case we purposively sampled texts in 2015–2025 (peaks 2015–2016 and 2021–2022) in the original languages (French/Polish/Slovenian), cross-checking themes across document types to enhance reliability. The primary document set includes, inter alia: Bezpieczna Przyszłość Polaków (PiS 2023) and the national programme (2019) (PiS 2019, 2023); RN's presidential/legislative programme materials, including 22 mesures pour 2022 and subsequent programme updates (Rassemblement National 2022, 2024); and the SDS programme with sections on migration and European policy (SDS, s. VIII). Advertising collateral (e.g., billboards) produced by parties is treated as primary campaign material when provenance is clear; where a media photograph is the only public record, it is cited as documentation of a primary artefact, not as a secondary interpretive source. (Rassemblement National 2022, 2024; PiS 2019, 2023; Slovenska Demokratska Stranka (SDS) n.d.). Leaders' speeches are treated as primary sources only when delivered in official party fora or published on verified party/government channels; otherwise, they are coded as mediated political communication and used solely for tracing diffusion and resonance, not for core position attribution.

3. Theoretical Framework: Religion, Nationalism, and the Framing of Civilizational Threats

To understand how far-right populist parties mobilize religious and nationalist narratives around migration, this section develops a multidimensional theoretical framework that situates these dynamics within broader global and European contexts. Drawing on Brubaker's (2017) notion of religion as a cultural rather than doctrinal boundary, far-right populist discourses utilize Christian identity instruments to construct a notion of 'us' versus 'them.' Yilmaz and Morieson (2022) demonstrate that this process is deeply embedded in the civilizational framing of Muslims as existential threats to a culturally imagined 'Christian Europe.' Casanova's (1994) concept of post-secular public spheres further explains how religion becomes re-politicized to legitimize nationalist exclusion.

Following Brubaker's notion of "civilizational framing," religion is not treated as a theological system but rather as a cultural marker that defines in-group belonging and legitimizes exclusionary practices. In this context, Christianity becomes a symbol of European identity, while Islam is constructed as the incompatible Other. The Polish case reflects a religious-nationalist framing grounded in historical mythologies of Catholic martyrdom and resistance (e.g., the Battle of Vienna), whereas the French example deploys a secularized variant, where laïcité operates as a normative boundary marker between the Republic and perceived religious encroachments (Casanova 2006, p. 75). Slovenia occupies an intermediate position within this spectrum, where anti-Islamic rhetoric tends to intensify primarily in response to specific socio-political events rather than through entrenched institutional or doctrinal frameworks. This rhetoric is often intertwined with feelings of cultural insecurity and draws upon the instrumentalization of historical memories such as Ottoman incursions and the recurrent perception of Islam as an alien presence. Consequently, Slovenia represents a case where anti-Islamic discourses emerge as a complex interplay of global migration trends, localized collective memories, and the diffusion of broader European cultural tensions into the national context. Rather than a stable, institutionalized civilizational narrative, Slovenia's far-right uses a more flexible and event-driven framing strategy to construct Christian identity as both a cultural code and a civilizational boundary that challenges the presence and legitimacy of Islam.

Building on Balibar's formulation of "racism without races," we understand the far right's invocation of "European Christian civilization" as a form of culturalized boundary-making that reifies an imagined continuity of Europe across time and space, while coding Islam as an inherently incompatible out-group. In this perspective, racialization proceeds through civilizational and cultural signifiers rather than biological ones: religious difference is translated into quasi-ethnic hierarchy, and exclusion is legitimated as the protection of a unified historical subject ("Europe"/"the nation") (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Meer and Modood 2009; Garner and Selod 2015). This conceptualization sharpens our reading of discursive moves that collapse doctrinal diversity within Christianity into a single civilizational bloc and cast Muslims as civilizational outsiders, even when claims are couched in the neutral grammar of values, security, and laïcité (Brubaker 2017; Roy 2019).

What makes this landscape particularly dynamic is its embeddedness in wider European and global currents. Echoing arguments by Sassen (2006) and Favell (2008), we suggest that the rise in exclusionary religious narratives cannot be understood in isolation from anxieties surrounding globalization, European integration processes, immigration, and shifting sovereignty. Populist leaders are especially adept at latching onto such uncertainties, reworking them through the figure of the Muslim migrant, a trope that transcends borders yet readily adapts to local historical memories and policy environments.

What emerges across these cases is not a story of religion as fixed doctrine, but of religion re-imagined as a discursive and symbolic tool, sometimes a buffer against migration, sometimes a badge of heritage, always flexible enough to anchor anxieties about belonging and future loss. Framing theory thus proves especially useful for tracing the mechanics of this process, from polarizing headlines and viral tweets to parliamentary manifestos. The following discussion builds directly on this comparative, multidimensional framework. The goal is not only to map how religion and nationalism are mobilized in anti-Islamic populism, but also to critically assess what these shifting boundaries might mean for pluralism, democracy, and the evolving fabric of European societies.

4. Findings: Comparative Analysis of Islam as a Civilizational Threat in Far-Right Discourses in Poland, France, and Slovenia

This section presents a comparative analysis of how far-right political actors in Poland, France, and Slovenia frame Islam as a civilizational threat to a culturally and religiously defined "Christian Europe." Drawing on political speeches, party manifestos, and selected media discourse, it identifies recurring rhetorical strategies used to legitimize anti-immigration agendas through religious narratives across these distinct national contexts. We report results using diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames (Entman 1993; Snow and Benford 1988), and apply the source hierarchy set in Section 2. Across all cases, diagnostic frames cast Islam as civilizationally incompatible with "Christian Europe"; prognostic frames justify restrictions (e.g., visibility, institutions, flows); motivational frames mobilize defence of heritage/values. Primary party texts anchor claims about party positions; mediated materials trace diffusion and mainstreaming. (Brubaker 2017; Yilmaz and Morieson 2022). As an operational rule, we code as covert/culturalized racism those utterances that simultaneously (i) posit a continuous, unified European or national identity anchored in Christianity, (ii) mark Islam as civilizationally incompatible with that identity, and (iii) justify differential treatment or visibility restrictions via ostensibly value-neutral language (e.g., "defending laïcité," "security," "heritage").

4.1. Poland: Law and Justice (PiS) and Right-Wing Media

In Poland, the former ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) has persistently mobilized religious symbolism to cast the country as a "Bulwark of Christianity," linking national cohesion and security to tight migration control and the safeguarding of a Christian-coded national culture (Dudzińska and Kotnarowski 2019; Pankowski 2018). Party leaders, especially Jarosław Kaczyński and Andrzej Duda, routinely present Polishness as inseparable from Catholicism, portraying Muslim migrants as civilizationally misaligned with national values despite their negligible demographic presence (Roy 2019; Krzyżanowski 2020). Crucially, these cues are programmatically anchored: a cross-reading of the 2019 national programme and the 2023 Bezpieczna Przyszłość Polaków shows how diagnostic and prognostic frames on migration travel from programme language into leaders' statements and draft bills (PiS 2019, 2023).

This narrative is reinforced through historical references such as the Battle of Vienna (1683), with PiS politicians equating contemporary migration with a repeat of historical invasions. For example, in 2015, Kaczyński warned that accepting refugees would "change our culture" and bring "parasites and dangerous diseases," rhetoric widely condemned as Islamophobic and reminiscent of earlier anti-Semitic tropes (Politico.eu 2023; Krzyżanowski 2020).

Right-wing media, most notably the state broadcaster TVP and popular weeklies such as wSieci and Do Rzeczy, play a central role in disseminating this message. TVP has aired special segments warning of the "Islamization of Europe," often featuring manipulated images and alarmist reports (Krzyżanowski 2020). The infamous 2016 cover of wSieci, "The Islamic Rape of Europe," which depicted a white woman threatened by dark-skinned male hands, drew widespread condemnation for invoking racist and sexist fears while echoing wartime propaganda (Pankowski 2018; DW 2016). Further, right-wing Catholic media such as Radio Maryja and Nasz Dziennik amplify anti-Muslim narratives by presenting Islam as a civilizational and spiritual enemy, frequently inviting clergy and commentators who cast Muslims as an existential threat to Poland's Christian essence (Arzheimer 2019; Berntzen 2019).

This media-political nexus is visible in discursive campaigns such as "Stop Islamization of Europe," referenced both in PiS parliamentary rhetoric and in media-sponsored petitions, where Islam is not only framed as a faith but as an invading "civilizational bloc." Such frames, as Krzyżanowski (2020) notes, have contributed to the normalization of Is-

lamophobia and the legitimation of anti-immigrant policy, even amid negligible real-world Muslim migration. In sum, Polish civilizational populism relies on a potent fusion of historical myth, religious nationalism, and media amplification, producing boundaries that define who can truly belong to the nation.

4.2. France: National Rally (RN) and Political Figures

RN's *22 measures pour 2022* and subsequent programme updates (2024) operationalize laïcité as a policy toolkit (school meals, public dress, public space) while tightening migration filters; these texts supply the primary diagnostic/prognostic frame from which televised debates draw simplified slogans (Rassemblement National 2022, 2024). In line with RN programme commitments on immigration and public order, the party uses laïcité, a principle of secularism, to construct an exclusionary model of Frenchness, wherein Islam is presented as fundamentally incompatible with the Republic's civic and cultural core (Fernando 2014; Peker 2021). Marine Le Pen and prominent RN figures have systematically targeted Muslim practices in public life, demanding bans on halal food in school cafeterias, headscarves (hijab), burkinis at beaches, and public prayers, rationalizing these stances as defending laïcité and republican values (The Independent 2014). During the 2022 presidential campaign, Le Pen called for the banning of the headscarf "in all public spaces," claiming that Islamic visibility threatens French cohesion (AA 2022).

Central to RN rhetoric is the "Great Replacement" (Grand Remplacement) conspiracy theory, widely popularized by essayist Renaud Camus and adopted by both Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour. This narrative warns of a demographic and cultural "submersion" ("submersion migratoire") of European and specifically Christian populations by Muslim migrants, a theme heavily echoed across RN's electoral material and televised debates (Camus et al. 2017; Peker 2022). In the wake of terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016, RN figures called for closing mosques, increased surveillance of Muslim communities, and linked Islam not just to extremism but to civilizational incompatibility with France (Fernando 2014; Marzouki et al. 2016).

Earlier, Jean-Marie Le Pen declared Islam "incompatible with secular society" (RFI 2011), and the party's discursive framing has been echoed by other right-wing media and politicians, such as Éric Ciotti (Les Républicains) and former presidential candidate Éric Zemmour (Marzouki et al. 2016). Even outside the RN, elements of laïcité have become a vehicle for ethno-nationalist and anti-Muslim politics, as seen in debates over the 2010 ban on full-face veils (French Senate Votes to Ban Islamic Full Veil in Public 2010). Far-right and mainstream actors alike thus reinforce a vision of religious pluralism that is "hierarchized"—with Christianity as heritage and Islam as threat.

French media also play a pivotal role: influential outlets such as Le Figaro and CNews regularly host debates in which Islam is associated with insecurity, terrorism, or lack of integration (Peker 2021). The pattern of framing laïcité as a bulwark against "Islamization" has become central to the public narrative, legitimizing tough anti-immigration measures and normalizing everyday exclusion (Marzouki et al. 2016).

4.3. Slovenia: Slovene Democratic Party (SDS)

In February 2021, former Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša shared a tweet on the social media platform Twitter, which explicitly claimed that no book other than the *Qur'an* had caused more "death, suffering, oppression, impoverishment, and societal backwardness" (24ur.com 2021). The post, which compared the *Communist Manifesto* to the *Qur'an* in terms of destructive impact, sparked significant controversy. The Islamic community in Slovenia publicly condemned the tweet, emphasizing the danger of oversimplified and propagandistic comparisons and calling for greater respect for religious texts in pluralistic

societies. The national Turkish media outlet TRT Haber reported on the incident, framing Janša's post as part of a broader pattern of disseminating anti-Islamic views (ibid.).

Beyond isolated comments, this rhetorical positioning is substantiated by official party communications. This reading is anchored in the SDS programme, including Section VIII (Migration and European Policy), which frames migration through a civilizational lens and conditions inclusion on adherence to historically rooted cultural norms (SDS, s. VIII). During the 2022 parliamentary elections, for instance, the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) explicitly reaffirmed civilizational narratives that closely mirror Western European Christianist frames. In its public response to the question "Should Europe remain Christian?", the party stated that "European civilization is based on Christian faith, Greek philosophy, Roman law, and the Enlightenment," further asserting that the values of Article 2 of the EU Treaty are "inseparably linked to the Christian heritage of Europe." While acknowledging the secular character of contemporary European states, the SDS emphasized that Christian-majority societies are "the most tolerant toward different opinions and beliefs," concluding that the preservation of Christianity is "crucial for the long-term survival of European civilization." In parallel, the nationalist party DOM has gone even further, declaring that "Europe's foundations are certainly not Muslim" and that "Europeans in the 21st century remain Christians—morally and culturally—even in the absence of personal belief." (RTV Slovenija 2022). These statements illustrate how Slovenian far-right actors strategically frame Christianity as a culturally essentialized identity marker that implicitly defines Islam as incompatible with core European values. The Slovenian case thus exemplifies how populist actors in post-socialist contexts harness both religious heritage and geopolitical narratives in dialogue with transnational populist trends.

This incident illustrates a key feature of contemporary civilizational populism in Central Europe: the political instrumentalization of anti-communist rhetoric redirected toward cultural and religious spheres, specifically Islam, which is not merely portrayed as a religion but as a civilizational threat. Such framing aligns with broader populist strategies in Europe, where Islam is depicted as incompatible with Western values and Christian heritage, serving as the symbolic "Other" in a narrative of cultural defence (Brubaker 2017; Yilmaz and Morieson 2022).

4.4. Comparative Perspective: Strategic Religification and Contextual Variation in Far-Right Discourses

The preceding case studies of Poland, France, and Slovenia illuminate a shared pattern within contemporary European far-right populism: the strategic use of religion, primarily Christianity, as a symbolic boundary-marker to construct Islam as an existential and civilizational threat. While the above-mentioned cases differ significantly in their institutional arrangements, historical experiences, and levels of religiosity, they converge discursively on the production of a "Christian Europe" imperilled by Muslim presence, whether real or imagined. What emerges from this comparison is not merely the deployment of anti-Islam rhetoric, but the adaptive instrumentalization of religion as a political resource tailored to divergent national contexts. A key technique is the narration of Europe or the nation as an unbroken historical community with a fixed cultural core, a move that renders internal pluralism deviant and licences the exclusion of Muslims as an act of restoration rather than discrimination.

Across all three countries, Islam is framed not only as a religious difference but as a proxy for broader anxieties ranging from migration and demographic change to perceived threats to sovereignty and identity. In Poland, the notion of a historically ordained Catholic mission positions Islam as alien to the nation's religious heritage. In France, a secular-nationalist logic disqualifies Islamic visibility from the public sphere under the rubric of laïcité (secularism). In Slovenia, Islam is embedded into a broader populist narrative that

links religious difference with post-communist vulnerability and cultural insecurity. In each case, Islam becomes the discursive vessel through which far-right actors articulate fears of moral decline, cultural loss, and civilizational dilution.

Despite these variations, the civilizational frame functions similarly. It situates the nation within a broader transhistorical struggle between an idealized, homogeneous "Christian Europe" and an encroaching, incompatible Islamic Other. This reframing of religion from a personal or spiritual domain to a marker of collective identity echoes Brubaker's (2017) notion of religion as culture, wherein religious references serve primarily to signify inclusion or exclusion within a national community.

Looking at contextual specificities and strategic adaptation, we notice that key differences in the religious-political configurations of each country shape the particular forms. Poland exemplifies a case of religious-national symbiosis, where the Catholic Church plays an enduring role in national identity formation. Here, far-right actors can directly invoke theological and moral arguments, knowing they resonate with large segments of the electorate. France represents the opposite pole, a strictly secular public order, where religion is mobilized paradoxically to protect secularism itself. The far right employs a civilizational logic that displaces religiosity with cultural essentialism; Islam is not rejected for being "non-Christian," but for violating presumed secular norms. Slovenia, on the other hand, operates as a hybrid case. While nominally Catholic and shaped by a socialist secular legacy, it lacks both the religious institutional dominance of Poland and the rigid secularism of France. This allows for greater flexibility in deploying religious rhetoric, which is often less doctrinal and more symbolic, serving as a code for national tradition, European belonging, and ideological antagonism, especially against "leftism" and pluralism.

These differences correspond to what Casanova (2017) and Arzheimer (2019) have described as the "vaccine effect" of religiosity. In more religious societies, traditional religious parties tend to absorb religious voters, limiting far-right appeal unless the latter can position themselves as equally or more morally protective. In less religious contexts, religion becomes a "cultural signifier" rather than a spiritual motivator, allowing the far right to appropriate Christian identity without theological commitments.

The comparative lens also underscores differences in the media and rhetorical infrastructures through which anti-Islamic framings circulate. In Poland, a tightly knit media-politics nexus centred around state broadcasters and right-wing press facilitates the mainstreaming of Islamophobic narratives. In France, the normalization of anti-Muslim rhetoric has occurred gradually, expanding from the far-right fringe into mainstream centrist discourse, particularly around debates on secularism, integration, and terrorism. In Slovenia, while high-profile statements (e.g., Janša's tweet) attract national attention, the institutionalization of anti-Islamic narratives is more limited and primarily concentrated in elite-driven, partisan outlets, without full penetration into mainstream public consensus. This variation reveals how discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans and Statham 1999) shape the visibility, legitimacy, and resonance of exclusionary religious narratives in different national media and political environments.

The comparison between Poland, France, and Slovenia reveals a shared civilizational grammar within far-right populist discourse, wherein Christianity is less a theological commitment and more a flexible signifier of national and cultural purity. While the rhetoric converges on depicting Islam as incompatible with "our" values, the discursive strategies diverge according to historical legacies, levels of institutional religiosity, and the normative configurations of church–state relations. This empirical reality echoes Berger's argument that religious pluralism challenges both religious monopolies and secularist assumptions, creating public spaces in which belonging and legitimacy are perpetually negotiated (Berger 1996, 2014). Whether invoked in defence of the Catholic nation, the secular republic, or

a post-communist European identity, religious references function as tools of boundary construction, enabling the far right to articulate belonging, justify exclusion, and recast pluralism as a threat rather than a value.

5. Discussion: Implications for Pluralism, Secularism, and Society

Slovenia adds empirical leverage to a literature still dominated by Western and Northern European cases, such as analyses of the PVV, RN, and SD (Morieson 2021; Roy 2019; Berntzen 2019). Despite lower average religiosity and a post-socialist secular legacy, the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) deploys a civilizational Christian register that converges with patterns observed for RN and PiS. This is visible, inter alia, in SDS's official 2022 campaign response to the question "Should Europe remain Christian?", which links Article 2 TEU values to Europe's Christian heritage and frames Christianity as foundational to European tolerance and civilization (RTV Slovenija 2022). The comparison thus indicates that Christianist boundary-making is not contingent on high religiosity or tight church–state fusion; rather, it adapts across institutional ecologies and party organizations, with comparable downstream effects on pluralism and minority inclusion.

This case adds empirical depth to ongoing debates about the diffusion of Christianist civilizational rhetoric across Europe. It shows that Slovenia, often overlooked in comparative studies of the European far right, displays discursive patterns remarkably similar to those found in the programmes of parties like the Danish People's Party (DF) or the Austrian FPÖ (Peker 2022; Brubaker 2017). However, unlike in Western Europe, where these discourses operate within a long-standing liberal democratic framework, the Slovenian case reflects a post-socialist trajectory where Christianity was previously marginalized under communist secularism. Its reactivation by far-right actors thus carries a distinct ideological and historical charge: it functions not only as a civilizational marker but also as a tool for cultural restoration and geopolitical reorientation toward a "core" Europe imagined as Christian, white, and anti-Muslim. Although the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) is formally affiliated with the European People's Party (EPP), international expert surveys and comparative datasets position it alongside paradigmatic radical right parties. The Chapel Hill Expert Survey, for example, scores SDS 8.6/10 on cultural authoritarianism, on par with RN or PiS, while V-Party data confirm its emphasis on nationalism, anti-immigration, and Christianist identity claims (Bakker et al. 2022; Lindberg et al. 2022). Notably, SDS's ideological profile sharply diverges from typical EPP parties, despite its formal membership. Recent research (Albertazzi et al. 2025) further demonstrates that many populist radical right parties—including SDS—increasingly exhibit mass party features, combining robust grassroots organization with activist-driven dissemination of ideologically and religiously coded narratives (see also Betz 2019). These organizational foundations allow such parties to act as 'cultural brokers' in ways that sustain and amplify exclusionary populist and identitarian projects across diverse contexts. Taken together, these findings empirically justify Slovenia's inclusion in comparative analysis and complicate simple binaries between 'mainstream' and 'radical' right formations in Europe.

Beyond empirical novelty, this article aims to advance the debate by addressing a critical theoretical gap. Contemporary studies of far-right religious discourse often fail to engage with the normative consequences of this instrumentalization for religious freedom, pluralism, and the civic inclusion of Muslim communities. When Christianity is framed not as a living faith but as a civilizational boundary marker, it legitimizes exclusionary identity politics while cloaking them in the language of tolerance and human rights. The Slovenian case illustrates how even in relatively secular societies, such rhetoric can contribute to the erosion of democratic pluralism by casting Muslims as external to the European political and moral community. As such, it invites greater critical attention within populism and

religion studies to the illiberal effects of "civilizational Christianity" on interreligious coexistence and minority rights.

The following sections extend the comparative analysis by examining how far-right civilizational narratives affect three interlocking domains—religious pluralism, secular governance, and democratic cohesion—situating these developments within wider transnational dynamics.

5.1. Erosion of Religious Pluralism

Our findings indicate that far-right actors routinely cast Islam not as one religion among many, but as a civilizational antagonist that threatens the moral fabric of "Christian Europe" (Brubaker 2017). In Poland, this trope legitimizes proposals to restrict halal slaughter and mosque construction even though the Muslim population is statistically negligible (Dudzińska and Kotnarowski 2019). French debates echo the same logic when calls to ban headscarves or halal menus invoke laïcité as a weapon of cultural self-defence rather than a guarantor of equal liberty (Fernando 2014). Slovenian populists employ a lighter, heritage-based register of Christianity as "Europe's soul", yet still frame Islam as fundamentally misaligned with the nation's cultural DNA. Such discourses shrink the normative space for minority faiths, encouraging legal exceptionalism and social stigmatization that can easily extend to Jews, Sikhs, or Eastern Christians once Islam is successfully "othered" (Krzyżanowski 2020).

5.2. Instrumentalization and Reconfiguration of Secularism

Berger (1996) observed the "retreat" of secularism as both a global and a European phenomenon, a trend visible in the recent re-politicization of Christian heritage even in avowedly secular states. Secularism itself is being re-scripted through ethnoreligious lenses. In France, Marine Le Pen's claim that banning Islamic dress merely "defends secular values" reframes laïcité as a cultural boundary marker rather than a neutral framework (Peker 2021). Poland's governing elites, by contrast, normalize open church–state fusion while insisting that Islam undermines Europe's secular heritage—an ironic posture that subordinates constitutional secularism to Catholic national identity (Casanova 2017). Even in post-socialist Slovenian context, the Slovene Democratic Party (SDS) celebrates secular institutions only insofar as they "preserve Europe's Christian roots," converting neutrality into preferentialism (V-Dem 2025). In all three cases, secularism mutates from a procedural principle into a majoritarian identity claim, eroding judicial impartiality and weakening public trust in democratic arbitration (Scott 2018).

5.3. Social Cohesion and Democratic Backsliding

Binary civilizational framings intensify social polarization by hardening the distinction between the virtuous "people" and a suspect "Muslim Other" (Wodak 2015). In France, polls show that perceived cultural distance, more than economic anxiety, drives support for exclusionary parties (Arzheimer 2019). Polish rhetoric turns the virtually absent Muslim minority into a spectre that justifies moral panic and consolidates ethno-Catholic solidarity (Pankowski 2018). Slovenian populists mobilize nostalgia for Christian Europe to delegitimize critics as "un-European," thereby shrinking discursive space for dissent (Kaya 2019). Such dynamics correlate with measurable declines in democratic quality, ranging from constraints on media pluralism in Poland to strategic lawsuits against journalists in Slovenia, all under the banner of "protecting civilization" (Lindberg et al. 2022). These patterns co-vary with expert indicators of cultural authoritarianism and nationalist positioning (Bakker et al. 2022; Lindberg et al. 2022).

5.4. Transnational Resonance and Convergent Strategies

Despite divergent church–state regimes, far-right movements share a transnational grammar. Slogans about the "Great Replacement" migrate seamlessly from French talk shows to Polish parliamentary speeches and Slovenian Twitter feeds (Camus et al. 2017). Activist networks and alternative media channels accelerate this diffusion, allowing parties with distinct theological landscapes to converge on identical exclusionary frames (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022). Recent organizational research even suggests that many populist radical right parties cultivate robust membership structures reminiscent of mass parties, enabling them to disseminate civilizational narratives through grassroots socialization, not merely top-down media spectacle (Albertazzi et al. 2025). The SDS exemplifies this pattern, marrying digital outreach with local "ambassadors to the community" who reiterate Christianist talking points door-to-door.

An additional, transnational vector concerns Russian hybrid influence in the consolidation of Christian-civilizational frames across Europe. Parliamentary and expert inquiries document a combination of disinformation operations, covert or opaque political support, and "traditional values" norm-entrepreneurship that travels through party and civil-society networks (European Parliament 2023). While not a determinant of domestic party positions, these interventions have at times provided resources, discursive templates, and amplification for radical right narratives that cast migration and Islam as threats to a Christian Europe (Shekhovtsov 2017; Stoeckl 2020). Accordingly, in what follows, I treat Russian involvement as a contextual amplifier that interacts with domestic opportunity structures and the post-2015 migration conjuncture, rather than as an exogenous cause.

5.5. Liberal Illiberalism and the Reappropriation of Democratic Values

A striking paradox is emerging. Far-right leaders deploy the lexicon of liberalism—tolerance, women's rights, free speech—to justify illiberal exclusions. By defining liberty as a historical Christian achievement, they invert pluralism's core logic and re-embed universal values in a narrow ethnocultural matrix (Moffitt 2017). This rhetorical sleight of hand allows parties to stigmatize Muslims without overtly rejecting liberal principles, facilitating what Brubaker calls "civilizational securitization" (Brubaker 2017). The Slovenian context illustrates how even low-religiosity societies can embrace this inversion; Christianity becomes a secularized heritage badge that authorizes gatekeeping, while Islam is cast as inherently illiberal and therefore legitimately constrained (Roy 2019). Over time, such discursive asymmetry normalizes legal double standards, e.g., differential scrutiny of religious charities, and chips away at the procedural equality that undergirds democratic citizenship (Meer and Modood 2009).

5.6. Normative Implications

Such paradox is not merely rhetorical; it has profound consequences for pluralist democracy and civic equality. By foregrounding the normative impact of religious instrumentalization, we move beyond descriptive mapping of Christianist discourse and instead interrogate its deeper societal effects. While the literature has examined the ways in which far-right actors strategically deploy Christianity as a heritage or civilizational marker (Brubaker 2017; Morieson 2021), the long-term consequences for democratic norms, especially where the rhetoric of liberal values is repurposed to justify exclusion, remain insufficiently explored.

The Slovenian case, in particular, shows how appeals to "European civilization" can normalize subtle forms of norm erosion. Concepts like tolerance, equality, or freedom become redefined within a narrow cultural frame and monopolized to defend exclusivist agendas. This amounts to a discursive reappropriation of liberalism, in which universal

values are severed from their inclusive foundations and instrumentalized for ethnocultural gatekeeping. Literature has termed this dynamic "liberal illiberalism" (Moffitt 2017) or "civilizational securitization" (Brubaker 2017; Kaya 2019), but the full normative costs for democratic theory and lived pluralism require further scrutiny. Analytically, this corresponds to what Balibar terms "racism without races," i.e., a culturalized form of exclusion where civilizational tropes displace explicit racial categories while performing equivalent boundary-making (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Garner and Selod 2015).

The shift from theological to cultural Christianity enables far-right actors to avoid direct accusations of bigotry, marginalizing Islam not primarily through overt racism but through appeals to civilizational continuity and reasonableness (Roy 2019). In post-socialist, low-religiosity contexts such as Slovenia, these moves become strategies for re-bordering identity, and their impact on religious freedom and civic equality is considerable. Muslims are positioned as structural outsiders, subject to discursive exclusion and potential legal exceptionalism (Meer and Modood 2009).

In sum, these transformations underscore how exclusionary civilizational frames can quietly reshape the boundaries of democratic belonging under the guise of defending liberalism. This selective and conditional application of rights deserves sustained critical attention, not only from scholars of populism and religion, but from all concerned with the future of pluralism in Europe.

6. Conclusions

Our article set out to examine how far-right populist actors across three contrasting European contexts, laicist France, deeply Catholic Poland, and post-socialist Slovenia, instrumentalize Christianity within their anti-immigration and anti-Islam rhetoric. Despite distinct religious traditions and institutional histories, all three cases reveal a convergent pattern: Christianity is less mobilized as a living faith than as a civilizational boundary marker, a powerful symbol for policing the limits of belonging and for legitimizing the exclusion of "the Other," most notably Muslims. By including Slovenia, a case too often overlooked in comparative research, alongside France and Poland, the analysis both complicates prevailing typologies and uncovers how Christianist discourse can thrive across sharply differing environments. Whether invoked as a bulwark against "Islamic encroachment," to buttress national identity amidst post-communist insecurity, or as a secularized badge defending republican values, religious references are strategically redeployed to recast pluralism as a threat and to invest liberal norms with exclusionary content.

With this comparative evidence, we advance the existing literature in three key ways: first, by demonstrating empirically how civilizational populism mobilizes religion as a boundary-making device beyond doctrinal content; second, by highlighting the flexible adaptation of far-right discourse to local religious or secular registers; and third, by proposing a comparative framework for tracing how the grammar of anti-Muslim exclusion circulates across national contexts. In practical terms, the study underscores the urgency of confronting the normalization of exclusionary narratives, not only for the status, rights, and social acceptance of Muslim communities, but for the democratic fabric of European societies as a whole.

Nonetheless, our analysis is not without limitations. Focusing on political and media discourses in three countries, it does not include systematic fieldwork among affected communities or fully address the algorithmic dynamics of digital polarization, both of which are crucial for grasping the lived realities and transmission of exclusionary frames. Expanding future research to additional cases, and to the digital and everyday-life dimensions of religious populism, remains an important agenda.

Ultimately, by showing how civilizational Christianity can be instrumentalized across diverse settings to harden boundaries and reframe the language of liberal democracy, this article calls for renewed critical vigilance: not all appeals to tradition or tolerance serve inclusive ends. Understanding and contesting the evolving interplay of religion, migration, and far-right mobilization will be essential for safeguarding pluralism and democratic norms in contemporary Europe.

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Simulating Agonism: How Anti-Gender Actors Represent Themselves as Legitimate Participants in Debates on Equality Politics

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Abstract

This study examines how anti-gender actors represent themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. Drawing on Mouffe's distinction between agonism and antagonism, we argue that anti-gender actors foster conflict and exclusion through "moral panic" and the "politics of fear" regarding the issues related to equality politics, while at the same time presenting themselves as neutral, rational, and pluralistic. This dual strategy allows them to insert themselves into democratic debate and present themselves as legitimate "adversaries" rather than "enemies" to those who genuinely advocate for equality politics. We contend that such efforts to simulate agonism are particularly evident in Slovenia, where anti-gender organisations operate as covert allies of the Roman Catholic Church. In a context where public trust in the Church is low and the separation of church and state is strongly valued, efforts to re-Catholicise society rely on secularised means. We argue that this renders strategies of simulating agonism and conforming to secular–democratic values especially salient in the Slovenian context. To identify these strategies, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Slovenian anti-gender actors. Our analysis revealed four interrelated tactics: "self-victimisation", portraying themselves as excluded and marginalised; "call for dialogue," stressing a purported willingness to engage with opponents; "depoliticisation", framing their role as neutral and non-ideological; and "claim of public support", invoking a "silenced majority" allegedly constrained by a prevailing climate of "leftist" fear and censorship. The significance of this study lies in the fact that, despite extensive scholarly work on anti-gender mobilisations, analyses drawing on interviews with anti-gender actors themselves remain rare.

Keywords: anti-gender mobilizations; equality politics; de-democratization; agonism; self-victimization; secularism

1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, we have witnessed the rise of so-called anti-gender mobilisations across Europe and globally, encompassing, among others, transnational and national organisations, religious institutions, and intellectual authorities that promote socially neoconservative agendas and seek legal restrictions on issues such as abortion, reproductive rights, LGBT+ equality, and gender studies (Korolczuk 2023, p. 348). These mobilisations represent one of the most prominent contemporary forms of opposition to equality politics. While situated within broader neoconservative and populist frameworks, they do not simply continue past forms of conservative resistance to equality. Instead, they represent new ways of articulating opposition to progressive politics. What sets these

articulations apart is their instrumentalisation of liberal discursive terrain—for instance, by invoking "human rights", "freedom", "equality" and "discrimination"—rhetoric that was, until recently, predominantly employed by progressive social movements, such as feminist and LGBTIQ+ groups (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Paternotte 2023).

In tandem with this appropriation of progressive discourse, a defining feature of anti-gender mobilisations is their opposition to what they label as "gender ideology", "gender theory", or "genderism". These are framed as threats to the traditional family, the nation, and moral order (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). As Kováts (2018) notes, opposition to "gender ideology" and similar signifiers does not reflect a clear, binary divide between progressive actors (who purportedly support the concept of "gender") and anti-gender actors (who reject it). Instead, anti-gender actors "put contents and ideas under these labels, to form a threatening and coherent discourse, which none of the labelled actors recognizes for themselves" (Kováts 2018, p. 530). In this way, "gender ideology" operates as an "empty signifier" (Mayer and Sauer 2017), binding together diverse strategies and discourses that oppose equality politics and articulating a new, neoconservative vision of social order.

Therefore, anti-gender mobilisations should not be understood merely as a backlash, i.e., reactive responses that seek to halt or reverse perceived advances in women's and LGBT+ rights and restore a traditional heteropatriarchal order (Paternotte 2023), even though such initiatives often trigger their emergence (as in Slovenia, where a proposal to legalise marriage equality catalysed the anti-gender movement; see Kuhar 2017). Rather, they represent a political project aimed at redefining core principles of liberal democracy, thereby contributing to contemporary processes of "de-democratisation" (Lombardo et al. 2021). In sum, the use of the "gender ideology" framework, the appropriation of progressive discourse, and the framing of anti-gender efforts not merely as backlash but as a project of societal reordering constitute three key characteristics that mark these movements as "neoconservative" rather than simply "conservative" (Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025).

This paper starts from the premise that anti-gender actors and organisations appropriate the discourse of progressive movements to gain legitimacy within the framework of public debate on equality politics. Their rhetorical strategies avoid overtly conservative or religious foundations and instead rely on a seemingly neutral, secular vocabulary. Anti-gender actors recognise that the contemporary normative framework in the field of equality politics is predominantly structured around liberal signifiers such as "human rights", "freedom", "equality" and "discrimination." Consequently, they seek to appropriate this normative framework in ways that obscure their exclusionary tendencies towards sexual and gender minorities, presenting themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics (Smrdelj and Pajnik 2022).

A substantial body of research has explored the strategies and discourses of anti-gender mobilisations (e.g., Garbagnoli 2016; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Żuk and Żuk 2019; Popič and Gorjanc 2022; Sanders and Jenkins 2022). These studies generally show that anti-gender discourse is marked by biological essentialism, the demonisation of "enemies" (such as feminists, LGBTIQ+ activists, and political elites), and the appropriation of liberal discourse. Alongside rhetorical and discursive approaches employed by anti-gender actors across different countries, research (e.g., Kuhar and Pajnik 2020; Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025) also highlights transnationally shared methods of action, including strategic use of digital media, the organisation of public gatherings and protests, and the mobilisation of legal instruments and democratic tools, including referendum initiatives.

Despite numerous studies on anti-gender discourses and their strategies of action (see Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025), considerably less research has focused directly on how anti-gender actors reflect on their role in the public sphere. Understanding their perspective is essential for analysing how they aim to establish themselves as legitimate actors within

liberal democracy. It is not enough to examine only the content of their discourse (e.g., appeals to protect women, children or the traditional family) or their strategies of action, but also the modes, attitudes and positional practices through which they construct their image as legitimate actors in the public sphere. In this paper, we examine the ways in which anti-gender actors present themselves as democratic, pluralistic, rational, and inclusive actors on issues related to equality politics.

To this end, we present an analysis of semi-structured interviews with Slovenian anti-gender actors. We consider the semi-structured interview method particularly relevant and useful in this context, as it enables direct insight into how anti-gender actors themselves understand and justify their own legitimacy within the framework of democratic debate. Although such positions can also be identified in other discourses (such as social media posts by anti-gender actors or public statements and documents on the websites of anti-gender organisations), we assume that one-to-one interviews are more likely to reveal attempts to perform "objectivity", "neutrality" and "apoliticality" rather than more overtly polarizing frameworks such as "moral panic" (Cohen 2009) or the "politics of fear" (Wodak 2015), which are more likely to emerge in public discourses aimed at a broader audience. Furthermore, the significance of this study lies in the fact that, despite the extensive scholarly production on anti-gender mobilisations, analyses based on interviews with anti-gender actors themselves remain very rare. The main reason is their tendency to refuse participation, as they perceive the academic community as their ideological enemy.[1]

We chose the Slovenian context because Slovenian anti-gender organisations operate as covert allies of the Slovenian Roman Catholic Church (RCC). The RCC actively fosters lay organisations to disseminate its religious messages. In Slovenia, the public places particular emphasis on the separation of church and state, a principle enshrined in the Slovenian Constitution. Public trust in the RCC is low, especially following the financial scandals in the Archdiocese of Maribor (Kralj et al. 2021, p. 51), which became widely known at the end of 2010 and significantly damaged the RCC's public image. Moreover, discourses grounded in sacred scripture no longer have a mobilising effect (Kuhar 2015a, 2015b). For these reasons, the connections between anti-gender organisations and the RCC are deliberately concealed and not publicly acknowledged. Consequently, the RCC seeks to secularise its public image by establishing or supporting satellite organisations, movements and initiatives that promote its messages, values and ideological positions (see Kuhar 2017 for examples that reveal these satellite ties). Through these organisations, it pursues a process of re-Catholicisation of Slovenian society, which we understand in this study as RCC's efforts to re-legitimize itself as a social and political actor and to re-establish its moral authority in the domain of equality politics. Anti-gender organisations and actors thus present themselves as non-confessional, as a mass movement of "concerned citizens", while in reality, they function as extensions of the RCC (Kuhar and Pajnik 2020, p. 173; Kralj et al. 2021, p. 52). Through these groups, the RCC seeks to reassert moral authority in the domain of sexual and reproductive rights, aiming to embed its doctrine into state policy and legal norms (Kuhar 2017, p. 219).[2]

Because of this unique context—characterised by attempts to re-Catholicise society through secularised means—Slovenia offers a particularly clear example of how anti-gender actors construct themselves as legitimate, seemingly neutral and secularised participants in public debates on equality politics.

In what follows, we first outline the theoretical framework guiding our study. We then describe the methodology of data collection and analysis. The central part of the paper presents the main findings, which are subsequently interpreted in the discussion section. Finally, we summarise the key insights and suggest directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework guiding our study builds on the work of Mouffe (2005, 2013, 2018) and her influential critique of consensus in liberal democracy, particularly through the related concepts of antagonism and agonism. Mouffe is critical of the "consensual form of democracy" (Mouffe 2005, p. 1), which, in her view, denies the antagonistic nature of politics, something she considers constitutive of politics itself. Politics, she argues, has always been shaped by conflict, struggle, contradiction, and antagonism. The key question, therefore, is not whether antagonism exists, but how it is expressed and to what extent it is regulated. This is why she rejects the deliberative model of democracy (as developed by Rawls and Habermas), which seeks consensus while simultaneously suppressing the antagonistic dimension of the political (Mouffe 2013, pp. 54–55). Mouffe contends that every consensus is inherently grounded in exclusion and shaped by those in positions of power (Mouffe 2005, pp. 11–12). For example, when consensus is established around a neoliberal understanding of society and all political actors (whether "left" or "right")[3] operate within that framework, political differentiation and pluralism become blurred, and the ideological boundaries between different political options are no longer clearly defined. In such circumstances, Mouffe warns that there is a danger that political debates will be replaced by moral and essentialist divisions such as nationality, religion or ethnicity. When political boundaries are blurred, people lose trust in political parties and prefer to identify with other, often exclusive, collective identities (Mouffe 2005, p. 30).

Mouffe therefore rejects formulations such as "beyond left and right", "beyond hegemony", "beyond sovereignty" and "beyond antagonism" (Mouffe 2005, p. 2), maintaining that for democracy to function properly, clear boundaries must be drawn between legitimate political options. If such boundaries are absent and a false consensus prevails, a structural space emerges for "alternatives" offered by neoconservative populist movements (including anti-gender mobilisations), which draw new dividing lines between the "establishment" and those claiming to defend the interests of "the people".

In response to the consensual model of democracy, Mouffe proposes an "agonistic model of democracy" (Mouffe 2018, p. 91), which does not deny conflict but emphasises that it must not take the form of antagonism, where those who disagree with us are seen as enemies, but rather as adversaries. Despite political differences, adversaries should share a certain level of consensus on fundamental ethico-political values (Mouffe 2018, pp. 90–93). This consensus includes, for example, agreement on the importance of respecting equality politics and rejecting discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, religion or other personal circumstances.

Building on the theoretical assumptions proposed by Mouffe (2005, 2013, 2018), we argue that the actions of anti-gender actors are both antagonistic and seemingly agonistic. On the one hand, anti-gender actors foster conflict, polarisation and exclusion by framing issues related to equality politics as inherently divisive and controversial, primarily through the already noted strategies of "moral panic" and the "politics of fear". This reflects the antagonistic dimension of their engagement. On the other hand, by appropriating liberal discourse, they project an image of normality, neutrality and alignment with the dominant consensus in liberal democracies. At the core of this consensus is the idea that democratic debate should be pluralistic, open to different viewpoints and grounded in human rights, opposition to discrimination, and the provision of equal opportunities for all citizens. They seek to insert themselves into this framework of democratic debate, portraying themselves as rational, pluralistic actors capable of practising an agonistic form of politics, while concealing their opposition to equality politics. In this way, their aim is to position themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. Or, to use Mouffe's

(2018) terms, they seek to present themselves as "adversaries" (legitimate "opponents") rather than "enemies" to those who genuinely advocate for equality politics.

While existing research on anti-gender strategies and discourses primarily emphasises their antagonistic character (see Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025), we argue that interviews with anti-gender actors can reveal not only this antagonistic dimension but also their seemingly agonistic attempts to simulate agonism. Thus, our analysis focuses on identifying the discursive tactics through which anti-gender actors perform this simulation of agonism. We stress that these anti-gender efforts do not constitute genuine agonism but rather represent strategies of apparent agonism, intended to gain visibility in the public sphere under the guise of advocating democratic dialogue and pluralism.

3. Methodological Framework

The empirical material for our research is based on five semi-structured interviews conducted with eight Slovenian anti-gender actors (one interview was conducted with three participants from the same organisation). To ensure a diversity of perspectives within the anti-gender movement, we invited representatives from various types of organisations, including civil society actors engaged in anti-gender initiatives (e.g., organisations opposing reproductive rights) and "right-wing" politicians who employ anti-gender rhetoric and serve as important allies of these actors in Slovenia.

To ensure the anonymity of respondents, we do not disclose the organisations they represent or the areas in which they are active. As all are publicly known, they could be identified even from the type of organisation or field of activity. Not disclosing this information does not present an issue for the analysis. Numerous studies (e.g., Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Paternotte 2023; Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025) have demonstrated that anti-gender mobilisations involve organisations and actors active in diverse areas, yet all employ similar rhetoric and discourse, framed within the notion of "gender ideology". As will be demonstrated later, our interviews confirm this—regardless of organisational background or field of activity, the actors reproduce similar discursive patterns (in our case, similar strategies of simulating agonism).

In the semi-structured interviews, we asked anti-gender actors about their areas of activity, the social problems they identify, and their understanding of "gender theory". We were interested in their main goals, the strategies they employ to achieve them, how they evaluate the success of their campaigns, and the ways in which they attempt to influence public policy. We also inquired about their cooperation with other organisations in Slovenia and abroad, potential conflicts with allied groups, and their internal organisational structures and decision-making processes. Special attention was given to the role of (social) media in their activities, the use of emotions in their communication with the public, and their future plans.

The interviews were conducted in December 2023 and January 2024 via Zoom. All interviews were recorded and, following transcription, the recordings were deleted. To ensure anonymity, the interviewees are identified in the analysis as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, and so on. All participants signed an informed consent form. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, on 4 May 2023.

By conducting the interviews in late 2023 and early 2024, we gained insight into the perspectives of Slovenian anti-gender actors at a time when, after approximately a decade and a half of active engagement, they had already developed their strategies, refined their discursive approaches, and established themselves as recognisable participants in public debates on equality politics. This allows us to analyse their self-presentation in a context where they are no longer merely opponents of individual legislative initiatives, as they

were in the early stages of their formation (i.e., in 2012 and 2015, when they initiated two referendums against marriage equality; see Kuhar 2017), but political actors with a broader, ideologically driven agenda that they seek to implement in society.

We began our analysis of the semi-structured interviews by reading all transcripts and identifying passages in which the interviewees simulated agonism (e.g., by creating an impression of openness to dialogue, respect for plurality, or willingness to cooperate with ideologically different actors). Although the interviews also contained distinctly antagonistic moments (such as references to "moral panic" or the "politics of fear"), these were not the focus of our research and were therefore not analysed. In the next phase, we coded the selected passages inductively, asking whether discursive patterns recurred and whether they could be grouped into categories. Through this process, it became clear that the interviewees' statements clustered around four dominant strategies, which appeared in differing combinations and often overlapped. These strategies are presented in detail below.

4. Results of the Analysis

Based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews with anti-gender actors, we identified four key strategies aimed at simulating an agonistic stance and thereby presenting themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. The first strategy, which we term "self-victimisation", involves anti-gender actors portraying themselves as excluded, silenced, and marginalised in society. The second, which we call "call for dialogue", highlights their proclaimed willingness to engage with ideologically opposing actors. The third strategy, which we refer to as "depoliticisation", consists of efforts to present their role in the public sphere as neutral, apolitical, and non-ideological. Finally, the fourth strategy, which we label "claim of public support", centres on assertions of broad public backing from the "silenced majority", who purportedly refrain from expressing agreement with anti-gender views due to a dominant "climate" of fear and censorship. While these strategies often overlap in the interviews and are not always easily distinguished, we present them separately in the following sections for the sake of analytical clarity.

4.1. Self-Victimisation

The strategy of self-victimisation is characteristic of both anti-gender actors (Kuhar 2017) and broader populist movements and parties (Wodak 2015; Lazaridis and Campani 2016). It is marked by the tendency of actors to present themselves as excluded, silenced, and marginalised in society. By performing their alleged powerlessness and exclusion, they attempt to justify why they deserve greater visibility in public debate. The interviews reveal that the self-victimisation strategy is primarily directed against two supposedly hegemonic forces that marginalise them: the "left" and the "media".

According to Interviewee 1, cooperation is impossible under a "leftist" government:

> But when, for example, a left-wing government is in power, I get the feeling that the door to the ministry—say, the [area covered to ensure anonymity]—is locked with ten locks. I would have much to say, especially in the field of [area covered to ensure anonymity], but also in other areas, yet I can't. That's just how it is. For them, I'm someone who is not allowed in. [...] But all of this is counterproductive—for the nation and for the field they are in charge of. (Interviewee 1)

Here, self-victimisation can be observed in the way the actor presents himself as constructive, professional, and competent; someone with expertise who could contribute to better policymaking yet simultaneously frames the "leftist" government as antagonistic and unwilling to listen, while portraying himself as agonistic, i.e., open to dialogue: "I hope

I will have the opportunity to contribute my opinion when a centre-right government is in power again. Then you will see that it is a completely different approach." (Interviewee 1)

A similar logic of self-victimisation is evident in the way anti-gender actors refer to the media: "We don't have any opportunity to tell our side, because nobody asks us anything. They only ask Nika Kovač, or some institutes and NGOs." (Interviewee 7) By invoking media attention to the head of the 8th of March Institute, the main "progressive" and "leftist" NGO in Slovenia, anti-gender actors create the impression of pronounced media bias. They stress that "leftist" voices are privileged, while they themselves are systematically silenced, thereby justifying their demand for greater representation in the public sphere. At the same time, they reduce the political sphere to a simplified binary division between "left" and "right," portraying the "left" as a hegemonic actor that excludes dissenting voices and is incapable of fostering pluralistic, agonistic debate.

An important aspect of the self-victimisation strategy is the claim that contemporary debates on equality politics are framed within a "totalitarian" discourse, allegedly imposed by the "left": "When the principle that everyone should be respected and have equal rights no longer applies, it becomes totalitarian. We all have to think the same." (Interviewee 5) By portraying equality discourse itself as repressive, anti-gender actors position themselves as the true defenders of pluralism.

4.2. Call for Dialogue

The next strategy, closely linked to self-victimisation, is the anti-gender actors' call for dialogue with ideologically different voices. We argue that such calls for dialogue do not reflect a genuine desire for discussion but rather serve as a strategic attempt to secure a place among the legitimate actors in the field of equality politics. In Mouffe's (2005, 2013, 2018) terms, they instrumentalise the agonistic ideal of democratic dialogue to frame their exclusionary positions as acceptable in the public sphere. In these calls, anti-gender actors manipulate the normative ideal of consensus in liberal democracy, which assumes that all perspectives should be heard and represented in the public sphere:

> To confront opinions, to allow everyone to express their views, even if they are opposing. As I said, also on television—so that people can hear all these perspectives, not just one-sided information. And often they are very aggressive, and of course then they dominate. Maybe those of us who are a bit more conservative, a bit more cautious about such things, don't get to have our say. (Interviewee 6)

Here, the interviewee affirms the importance of confronting different opinions while simultaneously invoking self-victimisation, portraying neoconservative actors as excluded from public debate due to the allegedly aggressive dominance of the "leftist" side. In doing so, Interviewee 6 frames the conservative position as reasonable and open to dialogue (one that aligns with the ideal of agonistic debate) while characterizing the opposing side as antagonistic and incapable of democratic engagement. In this way, the interviewee constructs a black-and-white image of the political sphere.

Interviewees identified around 2010 as a temporal turning point when, in their view, democratic debate began to decline:

> From the 1990s until 2010, I had the feeling that we were really talking in this society. Even if we didn't share the same positions or diverged in our views, we were still capable of dialogue and of seeking at least some minimal common ground. (Interviewee 1)

The period that the interviewee identifies as the end of democratic dialogue coincided with the centre-left government's proposed Family Code reform, which triggered the emergence of the anti-gender movement in Slovenia and subsequent mobilisations, including

the 2012 and 2015 referenda on marriage equality (Kuhar 2017). In the debates on marriage equality (and later, after 2015, on other issues such as reproductive rights), progressive "leftist" actors deliberately refrained from engaging with anti-gender actors so as not to confer legitimacy on discriminatory practices. Anti-gender actors, in turn, framed this lack of dialogue as evidence of democratic decline:

> [. . .] Social dialogue—most visibly expressed through confrontations between people with different opinions—was [perceived as] something negative, supposedly because it incited hatred, moral panic, and division. And since then, we can see that major confrontations have practically disappeared. (Interviewee 1)

The discourse on the decline of democratic dialogue also emerges in relation to the media:

> In the past, we had television shows where you could speak for five, seven, even eight minutes. Substantive, constructive debate was possible. Later, if a confrontation even happened, we were restricted. Then came shows where you had only a minute or two. (Interviewee 1)

The perceived lack of dialogue results in a divided society, where each side speaks only to its own audience:

> Each side is only addressing its own. In my opinion, this is why the division in the nation is actually increasing. We live in two separate worlds, which I believe is radically bad. Radically bad, because we are no longer a society of dialogue. I personally want dialogue, but we are becoming a society of separate worlds. This is a big problem. (Interviewee 1)

Despite diagnosing society as polarised and non-dialogical, interviewees still called for direct confrontations with "leftist" organisations:

> I would expect that just as politics debates within parliament, civil society should also debate through its own channels—in the media, at round tables, sometimes organized by one side, sometimes by the other. The point is to try to find whatever common ground there may be, or, if that's not possible, at least to try to understand each other. Even that would mean a lot. Misunderstanding is often the basis for hatred, for disrespect, and for actions that would otherwise never happen. Even if we didn't agree on anything, just having personal contact—simply easing interpersonal relations—would already be something very good and useful. But that's not happening. I don't know. If you notice it happening, let me know where, because I don't see it. (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 reinforces his self-image as an agonistic participant in public debate by invoking phrases such as "personal contact" and "interpersonal relations." In doing so, he attempts to depoliticise the conflict, framing it not as a clash of ideologies but as the result of strained personal dynamics that could be eased through civility and mutual respect. In this way, he constructs an image of himself as more humane and ethically grounded than the "opposing" side.

This also raises the question of how the interviewees imagine public debate and what normative frameworks they believe should shape it. Respectful communication, as a condition for democracy, is one of the core normative values frequently emphasised by the interviewees:

> I believe that nothing can replace basic respect between different people and the dialogue between them. I can repeat my point day and night, but until I respect you, and until I see in you a person equal to me [. . .] it won't work. (Interviewee 1)

However, in practice, "respect" is often equated with the right to voice exclusionary views: "We're getting to the point where respectful communication is no longer possible, where we can't truly hear each other, and where it is actively being prevented." (Interviewee 5) These quotations imply that the conditions for dialogue are obstructed, with the blame projected onto the allegedly "disrespectful" opposing side, which is implicitly portrayed as rejecting open dialogue. However, "respect" is often understood as the right to voice exclusionary views:

> In reality, this is a problem today, because every differing opinion is immediately declared extreme and intolerant. This seriously undermines democracy, even though it is precisely those who claim to care about democracy and democratic values who promote such things. (Interviewee 5)

The legitimisation of the anti-gender position in public debate is often justified by the need for greater mutual understanding, which is expected to reduce social polarisation and diminish antagonisms:

> If we tried to understand each other, we would get closer more easily. It would be easier to take into account what the other person says and why they say it, and we would have more understanding. But since we are constantly drifting apart, these possibilities are diminishing. (Interviewee 5)

In this passage, we can observe the depoliticisation of conflict, where differences between social groups are portrayed merely as the result of misunderstanding and a lack of empathy (issues presumed to be resolvable through greater listening and interpersonal contact) rather than as outcomes of the distinct structural positions these groups occupy within society.

The interviewees emphasise the importance of "professional" public debate that is substantively in-depth and impartial:

> It seems to me that we've really gone off track. There is no space for debate anymore, not even for professional ones. [. . .] We should allow as many ideas as possible to come to the table, so that we can somehow draw from them. (Interviewee 6)

This line of criticism continues in their perception that public debate fails to provide sufficient information and is overly selective. They evoke the ideal of an educated, reflective citizen who engages in public discourse thoughtfully. This notion is closely tied to the Enlightenment ideal of reason as the foundation of democracy: "I mean, you can't expect people to really know or understand things, or be familiar with them, if they're receiving such selective, superficial information[.]" (Interviewee 6)

4.3. Depoliticisation

Under the strategy we refer to as "depoliticisation", we include the efforts of anti-gender actors to portray their role in the public sphere as neutral and non-ideological. This does not indicate an actual withdrawal from political positioning, but rather a tactic aimed at presenting their actions as broadly acceptable, inclusive, and oriented towards the common good. Through this apparent depoliticisation, they seek to make their discourse acceptable to a wider audience, including citizens who might otherwise reject overtly ideological or exclusionary positions. For example, Interviewee 1, who collaborated with the "right-wing" government, describes his role in the government office in a distinctly moderate and non-partisan tone:

> I was aware that [area covered to ensure anonymity] should not become a politically right-wing field but should remain a Slovenian field. I knew we had

> to involve people who understood the importance of [area covered to ensure anonymity] from both the left and the right. This was my approach to [area], and I believe that something similar should apply in other areas as well, as far as I know them. (Interviewee 1)

In the above passage, we can recognise an attempt to construct the impression of a general, national interest that transcends ideological divisions, conveyed through the term "Slovenian field." In doing so, the interviewee seeks to position himself as a neutral, reasonable, and non-partisan expert rather than as an ideologically defined political actor. This reflects a specific strategy in which an ideologically marked position is made to appear universal and broadly acceptable. Similar to the androcentric perspective, where the "male" view is presented as neutral, universal, and unchallenged (Jogan 2013), the anti-gender stance here is likewise masked as representing the general interest. Thus, the label "Slovenian field" does not function as a marker of genuine inclusiveness but operates instead as a discursive tool for normalising an anti-gender ideological orientation. A similar attempt to demonstrate broader inclusion can also be observed in the interviewee's statement regarding how the Ministry of Labour should be led:

> If I were the Minister of Labour, I would certainly try to shape key policies in agreement with both sides. That way, the most important solutions would remain in place even long after I was gone. Any normal person would act that way. But they work without dialogue, doing things their own way, and then it's no surprise that everything starts over again when the government changes. (Interviewee 1)

Furthermore, interviewees emphasise their willingness to cooperate and support this claim with accounts of past collaboration with various social and political actors. In doing so, they follow the agonistic logic of pluralism, portraying themselves as capable of cooperating with anyone, thereby justifying their image as "normal" and "inclusive":

> If you were to look at everything we did, you would see that we cooperated with different governments, from the very left to the very right. [. . .] I tried—though I won't name specific individuals—to establish contact with representatives on the left whom I knew were working to support women, children, and related issues. I met with them, talked with them, and tried to build substantive bridges in our field of work. (Interviewee 1)

In general, anti-gender discourse within the context of depoliticisation is framed affirmatively. Rather than focusing on whom anti-gender actors oppose, they emphasise their own openness, moderation, and willingness to cooperate. This allows them to present their political position as legitimate, inclusive, and "normal" in contrast to the supposedly exclusionary stance of the "left."

4.4. Claim of Public Support

Under the final strategy, we include instances in which anti-gender actors emphasise that they enjoy broad public support that cannot be openly expressed due to the prevailing "totalitarian" political climate, as shown in the context of "self-victimisation". They highlight a contrast between "private" and "public" support, claiming that in private interactions, they often receive recognition and praise, while in public, such expressions are consistently hidden due to fear of exposure. In doing so, they create the impression of the existence of a "silent majority" (Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017) that supports their views but is unwilling or unable to express this support publicly:

> People are very afraid to stand up for the opinion they hold. They read everything, they see everything, and many people tell me, 'Yes, I saw this, I saw what you're

> doing,' but they don't even dare to press 'like,' because it's such a politicised topic, to the point that people are almost intimidated. (Interviewee 4)

In doing so, they aim to create the impression that they represent widely shared societal views that have been pushed to the margins of public debate:

> You would be surprised how many people actually agree with me, but they just don't dare to say it out loud, so that they wouldn't be labelled as transphobes, homophobes, and so on. (Interviewee 7)

Through this strategy, anti-gender actors attempt to portray themselves as defenders of "the people", oppressed by a "leftist" elite that restricts "freedom of speech". By presenting supporters as silenced or intimidated, they suggest that this suppressed majority deserves recognition within democratic dialogue.

5. Discussion

The strategies identified in the analysis—self-victimisation, calls for dialogue, depoliticisation, and claims of public support—offer insight into how anti-gender actors simulate agonism in their self-presentation. Through these strategies, they seek to align themselves with the dominant consensus in liberal democracy, which conceives democratic debate as pluralistic, open to differing viewpoints, and grounded in human rights, opposition to discrimination, and equal opportunities for all citizens.

In contrast, the "left" is consistently portrayed in their discourse as the source of polarisation, obstructing dialogue, and rejecting plurality. "Responsibility" for social problems such as the lack of dialogue and growing societal division is attributed exclusively to the "left" (and, in some cases, also to the "media"), which is homogenised within anti-gender discourse. This simplification of the political field is characteristic of discourse on "gender ideology" (Pajnik et al. 2025). It relies on constructing a clear dichotomy between "normal", "Slovenian" values (represented by anti-gender actors) and "radical", "ideological" values (represented by the "left"). Thus, even the seemingly inclusive and affirmative discourse of anti-gender actors contains a clear exclusionary component, since the "left", despite calls for dialogue and cooperation, is already marked in advance as problematic and "responsible" for major social issues. This strategy can also be recognized more broadly at the international level, where anti-gender actors consistently seek to undermine opponents' credibility and frame them as responsible for societal division (Zervoulakou et al. 2025).

By presenting themselves as defenders of democratic values while portraying the "left" as undemocratic and antagonistic, anti-gender actors blur the line between genuinely progressive and exclusionary positions. This enables them to increasingly occupy and shape discursive terrain previously reserved for progressive social actors. Although this dynamic has long been recognised in the existing literature (Vučković Juroš et al. 2020; Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025), we draw on interview data to demonstrate the concrete tactics through which this instrumentalisation of liberal discursive terrain occurs.

Since all the strategies were identified through interviews with Slovenian anti-gender actors, their interpretation must consider the specificities of the Slovenian context. As outlined in the introduction, anti-gender organisations and actors function as satellite organisations of the Slovenian RCC. Through these organisations, the RCC seeks to establish hegemony over issues related to gender, sexuality, and reproduction. The strategies identified contribute to this objective by obscuring their religious origins and supporting broader efforts at re-Catholicisation through secular means. Among them, the strategy of depoliticisation is particularly significant, as it presents contemporary neoconservative engagement as apolitical and above "left" and "right", thereby enabling the RCC

to expand its influence without overtly confessional messaging or explicit references to the Church. Similarly, the call for dialogue allows RCC-linked actors to enter the secular sphere while concealing their religious agenda, blurring the line between the secular and the ecclesiastical. Both strategies are crucial for anti-gender actors in a context marked by low public trust in the Church and heightened sensitivity to the constitutional principle of church–state separation.

However, although these strategies play a particular role within the Slovenian context, they are not unique to it. They can also be observed more broadly in anti-gender mobilisations across Europe (Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025), as well as in the activities of populist political parties and movements. Many of them have been identified in the literature on "right-wing" populism (e.g., Wodak 2015; Lazaridis and Campani 2016). One such example is the strategy of self-victimisation, which in our analysis was primarily manifested through the interviewees' claims of being ignored or marginalised by the "left" and the "media." Mass media, particularly public broadcasters, are often portrayed as tools of a "corrupt elite" allegedly acting against the interests of "ordinary people" (Holtz-Bacha 2021). As research shows, actors on the political "right" are significantly more likely to accuse the "media" of bias than their counterparts on the centre "left". For instance, Strömbäck and Åkerlund (2025), in their analysis of Swedish tweets, demonstrate that discourse about biased "media" is strongly marked by classic tropes of "right-wing" populism, wherein the "mainstream media" are framed as part of a "corrupt" and dishonest elite spreading "politically correct" disinformation.

Similar elements of populism can also be observed in the context of calls for dialogue, particularly through a distinctive discursive move employed by "right-wing" populist actors, who frame any response to their discriminatory or exclusionary positions as an attack on freedom of speech, as shown in our interviews. This tactic seeks to create the impression that every position, regardless of its content, is equally legitimate, even when it directly contradicts the principles of human rights and equality. The situation becomes even more complex when exclusionary views are framed as being in line with these very principles. Whether presented as liberal or openly exclusionary, interviewees treated all positions entering the public sphere as equivalent, without acknowledging the power dynamics and structural inequalities from which particular voices emerge. This failure to recognise fundamental differences between positions leads to the portrayal of minority-rights advocates and their opponents as equal participants, despite clear asymmetry in their structural positions and the vastly different social consequences of their claims. Anti-gender discourse extends the democratic principle that every vote counts equally in elections to the claim that every opinion should be equally represented and considered, even when such opinions advocate the exclusion of certain social groups or amount to hate speech. However, as Mouffe (2018, pp. 90–93) argues, democratic debate requires at least a minimal consensus on shared ethico-political values that define the boundaries of legitimate discourse. Agonistic democracy is not unbounded relativism. It presupposes that positions rooted in exclusion are not acceptable, as they undermine the very foundations of democratic coexistence.

Through self-victimisation and calls for dialogue—particularly appeals for feminist and progressive actors, such as the 8th of March Institute, to meet with them regularly in public confrontations—anti-gender actors create pressure on media institutions, policy-makers, and the broader public to give space to all perspectives—even those grounded in discrimination—under the guise of "objectivity" (Luthar 2017) and "balanced reporting" (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). When, for instance, the media respond to this pressure, it often produces "false equivalence" (Haas 2007), where an expert or a representative of a social minority is placed alongside someone who advocates discriminatory positions or

represents social power and dominance, yet both positions are presented as equally valid in the name of neutrality and balance. In this way, the ideal of balance becomes a tool for normalising radical positions by equating all viewpoints as equally legitimate, without acknowledging the positional inequalities from which these views emerge. This leads to the following dilemma: if equality politics advocates agree to engage in dialogue with anti-gender actors and, for instance, take part in shows where an anti-gender actor is also present, they risk legitimising the anti-gender stance. But if they choose not to participate in such debates to avoid reinforcing the legitimacy of discriminatory arguments, they are criticised as "totalitarian," undemocratic, and obstructing pluralistic debate and generating polarisation, as shown in our interviews. However, research on feminist responses to anti-gender mobilisations (see Smrdelj and Kuhar 2025) shows that feminist, LGBT+, and other equality-politics actors have not remained trapped in this double bind. They have sought to overcome the dilemma by shifting from predominantly reactive strategies—those directly responding to the actions and statements of anti-gender actors—to more proactive tactics that move beyond a defensive stance and toward the independent articulation of their own political priorities, which are not tied to anti-gender initiatives and do not correspond to provocations or demands for "dialogue". In this way, equality-politics advocates set the terms of debate themselves and refuse to recognise anti-gender actors as legitimate opposition within debates on equality politics.

The final strategy, a claim of public support, could also be situated under self-victimisation, as its essence lies in emphasising that anti-gender actors enjoy broad public backing, yet this alleged "silent majority" (Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017) remains invisible and unheard because it is supposedly intimidated and silenced by the "left". Despite this proximity to the self-victimisation strategy, we classify it as an independent tactic within the framework of simulating agonism. The reason is that it represents a distinct discursive move not primarily aimed at portraying one's own victimhood, but at creating the impression of broad social support. This support is never empirically verified or demonstrable in the interviews; rather, it remains a discursive construction. In this sense, it is more an "imaginary" than a "silent" majority. This strategy serves two purposes: first, to consolidate the legitimacy of anti-gender actors in the field of equality politics by invoking the widespread public support they claim to have; and second, to delegitimise the "left", which is portrayed as alienated from "real" people, that is, from most ordinary citizens. The implicit message is that if anti-gender actors are backed by the majority, then the "left" represents only a minority. A similar strategy of invoking a "silent majority" has also been documented in the Croatian context (see Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017), where anti-gender actors rely on claims of representing broad but invisible popular support to legitimise their positions.

When considering the implications of simulating agonism for democracy, it is essential to clarify that we do not treat democracy as a self-evident foundation of social reality or as an absolute ideal beyond critique. Rather, democracy is an open, historically and socially variable framework that can be filled with different and often conflicting meanings. This is precisely why we argue that "de-democratisation" does not occur only in the most "obvious" cases, such as Hungary, where authorities directly undermine democratic institutions (Lombardo et al. 2021). It can also occur more subtly, through discursive practices that usurp the public sphere and gradually transform it so that exclusionary views are presented as legitimate components of democratic dialogue. Anti-gender actors do not openly oppose democracy; on the contrary, they often present themselves in public discourse as its staunchest defenders. Yet, precisely by simulating agonism through the strategies identified in our analysis, they create the impression of reinforcing democracy while in fact undermining it. This means that the threat of "de-democratisation" is not

limited to formal institutional or legal changes but also emerges through communicative practices outside state institutions, at the informal level, where discourses simulating agonism play a central role.

From a methodological standpoint, we must also reflect on how we obtained interviews with anti-gender actors in the first place, given their perception of the academic community as an ideological opponent—a stance especially pronounced in the Slovenian context, as highlighted in the introduction. Initially, we sent numerous requests to various organisations and individuals. Most did not respond, some explicitly declined, and only a minority agreed to participate. The reasons for their decision to cooperate are not entirely clear. However, we presume that they perceived participation in the interview as an opportunity to assert themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics within academia. In other words, they may have regarded the interview as a channel through which to disseminate their views to an audience otherwise difficult to access. Consequently, the recognition of the interviewer as an "ideological opponent" shaped the interview context and likely prompted a cautious performance, marked by an emphasis on dialogue and a pronounced simulation of agonism, which helps to explain why these strategies featured so prominently in the interviews. Of course, these interpretations remain speculative, as we did not directly inquire about their motivations. Equally intriguing is the question of why most of those invited either did not respond or explicitly declined. Since we did not investigate their reasons, the answer remains unknown and can only be inferred. One possible explanation is that, unlike those who accepted, they may have perceived participation as too risky, since they probably believed that engaging with interlocutors recognised as ideological opponents could expose them to confrontation or be seen by their supporters as an undesirable legitimisation of adversaries.

6. Conclusions

In our study, we examine how anti-gender actors present themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. Drawing on Mouffe's (2005, 2013, and 2018) distinction between agonism and antagonism, we argue that anti-gender actors not only foster conflict and exclusion through "moral panic" and the "politics of fear", but also simultaneously present themselves as neutral, rational, and pluralistic to insert themselves into democratic debate and appear as legitimate "adversaries" rather than "enemies" to those who genuinely advocate for equality politics.

To identify these strategies, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Slovenian anti-gender actors. The analysis revealed four interrelated tactics: "self-victimisation", portraying themselves as excluded and marginalised; "call for dialogue", stressing a supposed willingness to engage with opponents; "depoliticisation," framing their involvement as neutral and non-ideological; and "claim of public support", invoking a "silenced majority" allegedly constrained by a prevailing climate of "leftist" fear and censorship.

Our study opens up numerous possibilities for further research. One potential direction would be to expand the focus beyond the leading figures of anti-gender organisations but also seek to interview their supporters, who represent the alleged "silent majority" (Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017) continually invoked in anti-gender discourse. Such research could investigate whether these supporters also adopt agonistic rhetoric or articulate their positions differently. Furthermore, our findings are tied to the Slovenian context, whose specific characteristics tend to promote strategies of simulating agonism. However, to explore different forms of self-representation, future research should also examine other national and religious contexts where anti-gender organisations are not satellite organisations of religious institutions, highlighting the importance of intersecting this analysis with

the study of religion (cf. Jurekovič 2024a, 2024b, and 2025). This would allow us to see how antagonistic and agonistic strategies intertwine in new ways.

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Data Availability Statement: The interview data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations. The interview transcripts are securely stored by the authors and are available only upon justified request and in accordance with ethical approval and data protection regulations.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 The hostility toward the "academic community" is particularly pronounced in the Slovenian context, where academics and scholars are regarded as important allies of progressive and feminist organizations and actors. This is also likely why Slovenian anti-gender actors often use the term "gender theory" instead of the more established "gender ideology" (Smrdelj 2025). By labeling "gender" as a "theory," they aim to depict it as an academic construct disconnected from common sense and real-life experiences (Kuhar 2017, p. 230).

2 It should be emphasized that cooperation between anti-gender organizations and the Slovenian Roman Catholic Church (RCC) was envisioned long before the emergence of anti-gender movements in Europe. As early as 2002, the Slovenian RCC issued a comprehensive action plan titled *Choose Life*, which served as the final document of the plenary session of the RCC in Slovenia. Among other things, the document called for the establishment of various lay organizations aimed at promoting the Church's message (Kuhar 2017, p. 220).

3 Political labels such as "left" and "right" are placed in quotation marks throughout the text to avoid reinforcing their assumed self-evidence. These terms are context-dependent and historically contingent. What is regarded as "leftist" today may differ markedly from what the same label signified in the past, e.g., half a century ago. Moreover, such labels are often the subject of ongoing political contestation. For example, when a right-wing actor describes someone as a "radical leftist," this act primarily functions to construct and affirm their own imagined map of the political field, rather than accurately reflect the actual distribution of political positions within society (Bobbio 1996).

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Article

Recontextualizing Nanyang Buddhism Based on the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si

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Abstract

This study examined the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism and its practices at the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si, considering their adaptation to the requirements of contemporary urban communities in China and Southeast Asia, as well as local cultural values. This research employed historical methodologies alongside a qualitative framework that included semi-structured interviews. This investigation analyzed the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism by conducting a textual analysis of the Lankavatara Sutra and Avatamsaka Sutra, which was further supported by interviews with nine participants which included senior monks, scholars, and members of the Chinese diaspora in Guangzhou, South China; Malaysia; and Singapore. The results revealed that the Guangxiao Si plays a strategic role in the adaptation of Mahāyāna Buddhism to meet the social and spiritual needs of the Chinese diaspora community by integrating spiritual teachings with local cultural practices. This process illustrates Buddhism's adaptability to evolving socio-economic conditions and highlights the significance of temples in influencing the spiritual identity of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia. We recommend that other researchers compare the recontextualization processes of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and analyze the role of the Guangxiao Si in cultural diplomacy and international relations.

Keywords: Nanyang Buddhism; Guangzhou Guangxiao Si; recontextualization; Chinese diaspora community; cultural adaptation

1. Introduction

The Guangzhou Guangxiao Si is a historically significant temple in Southern China and has been instrumental in the dissemination of Buddhism to Southeast Asia since the Tang Dynasty (Ebrey 2022). This temple established itself as a focal point for the transformation of Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings and practices. It served as a significant transit point for priests traveling south via maritime routes (Sen 2014; Shinde 2025), thereby establishing a strong foundation for the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Southeast Asia, particularly in regions such as the Malay Peninsula and Srivijaya (Lin 2023; Sen 2019). This result confirms Mecsi's (2004) observation, which found that the dissemination of Buddhism through the Guangxiao Si incorporated theological dimensions and Buddhist cultural and artistic practices. Although numerous studies have investigated the role of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si and maritime routes in the dissemination of Buddhism, these investigations tended to concentrate on historical analyses, were conducted outside of

Nanyang Buddhism in Southeast Asia and failed in adequately integrating the modern socio-political scene and multicultural interactions (Kuah 2019; Yü 2001).

Chia (2020) introduces and elaborates on the concept of "South China Sea Buddhism," which is translated as "Nanyang Buddhism" (南洋佛教) in the official Chinese edition of Monks in Motion, which refers to the unique expressions of Buddhism that have developed in Southeast Asian regions. For instance, Southeast Asian Buddhism, or "Theravāda Buddhism," is a dominant religion in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Whereas, Vietnamese Buddhism and most of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore are Mahāyāna Buddhism. This concept encompasses the diverse practices, beliefs, and adaptations of Buddhism as it interacts with local cultures, historical events, and socio-political dynamics. Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism have a similar lesson and objective, while in the religious ceremonies they are different. Mahāyāna explains a lot of religious ceremonies, while the religious ceremonies are quite simple in the Theravāda. Furthermore, Theravāda Buddhism is characterized by its syncretic nature, where Mahāyāna teachings are blended with local customs, resulting in a rich tapestry of religious expression that reflects the identities of the Chinese diaspora in the Southeast Asia region.

The evolution of local Buddhism in Southeast Asia was significantly influenced by the rituals that originated from Buddhist temples (W. Li 2023; Ray 2014). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2024) found that the adaptation of Buddhist teachings from the Guangxiao Si to local traditions, which includes the integration of traditional rituals into Buddhist practices and the incorporation of local languages into traditional Buddhist texts in Southeast Asia. The Guangxiao Si serves not only as a place of worship but also as a center for cultural exchange and education. The temple also hosts various activities, including meditation retreats, lectures, and community outreach programs, which foster a deeper understanding of Buddhist principles among both locals and visitors (Jinbo 2014). However, there are failures to provide insight due to the lingual and cultural differences between Mahayana and Theravada. The tradition of depicting the changes from Buddhist kingdoms to a modern Buddhist-majority state has been long and popular in Southeast Asia. It is the complicated situation facing the Chinese diaspora and the immigration of Chinese monks. The essential connection between Buddhism in Southeast Asia also plays an important role in Buddhism's roles and efforts in the modernization of local Buddhism. It allows Buddhism to remain relevant in contemporary society.

This process illustrates the survival and flourishing of spiritual values through recontextual strategic adaptation (Hu 2024). Hence, recontextualization is a mechanism for transmitting traditional values while simultaneously establishing new relevance within a dynamic social context, particularly in sustaining the relationship between Nanyang Buddhism and its community (Chumkhot 2024; Zhang et al. 2024). It underscores the necessity of reevaluating the relationship between religious centers like Guangxiao Si and the dissemination of Buddhism to Nanyang, including highlighting Buddhism's adaptation within Southeast Asia's socio-cultural context. Using both historical and modern studies as well as interviews, this study investigated the relevance of the Guangxiao Si in the adaptation of Buddhist teachings and practices inside the Nanyang region as well as the consequences of this evolution on local Buddhist identities. This engagement is crucial in a rapidly globalizing world, where the values of compassion, mindfulness, and ethical living resonate with many seeking spiritual guidance.

Guangxiao Si plays a pivotal role in preserving and disseminating Buddhist art and literature, contributing to the cultural identity of the region. Hence, the temple remains relevant and influential, ensuring that the teachings of Buddhism continue to inspire and guide future generations towards embracing contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability and social justice. A Buddhist lens also exemplifies and facilitates the dy-

namic interplay between tradition and modernity in the dissemination of Buddhism (Buaban 2021; Hu 2024; Shinde 2025). It fosters a deeper understanding of Buddhist principles among diverse audiences towards hosting meditation retreats, lectures, and community outreach programs. The Buddhist teachings continue to inspire and guide individuals in addressing the complexities of modern life by exemplifying the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. It has an essential role in a globalized world, where individuals seek spiritual guidance that resonates with their lived experiences.

The majority of the Chinese communities in maritime Southeast Asia are believers in Mahayana, which is commonly seen as an extension of Chinese Buddhism instead of a domestic religion of Southeast Asia. It became an obstacle for scholars of the Theravada tradition in Southeast Asia due to substantial linguistic and cultural differences between Mahayana and Theravada (Dean 2018; Yan et al. 2020; Zhu 2024). Furthermore, the sensitive and underprivileged Chinese communities' status is a crucial factor in influencing religious issues. Unfortunately, some studies focus more on Theravada Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia than on Mahayana Buddhism (Chia 2020; Nelson 2020). Hence, the transformation of Buddhist practices in response to modern challenges, such as globalization and environmental concerns, is crucial to investigate without leaving out the historical migrations of monks from China to Southeast Asian regions.

RQ 1: What does the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism's teachings and practices to local cultural values among urban communities in China and Southeast Asia?

RQ 2: How does the recontextualization of Buddhist teachings and practices contribute to the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia?

RQ 3: How do the dynamics of socio-political and cross-cultural interactions influence the transformation of the rituals and doctrines of Nanyang Buddhism?

2. Literature Review

Defining Recontextualization Nanyang Buddhism and the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si

The evolution of Nanyang Buddhism can be distinctly understood through its first and second stages, which highlight significant differences in historical context, cultural integration, community engagement, and theological development (Chia 2020, 2021). In the first stage, Nanyang Buddhism emerged primarily as Chinese immigrants settled in Southeast Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries, bringing with them their religious beliefs and practices (Lin 2023; Sen 2014; Yan et al. 2020). This initial phase was characterized by the establishment of temples and communities that closely mirrored those found in China, with a strong emphasis on preserving traditional Chinese Buddhist practices, rituals, and texts. The focus during this period was on maintaining cultural heritage and religious identity, as these immigrant communities sought to create spaces for worship that reflected their origins. In contrast, the second stage marked a significant shift as these communities became more established and began to engage more deeply with the local cultures (Srihamongkon 2022; Wang and Zhang 2023). This phase saw a greater emphasis on integrating local cultural elements into Buddhist practices, resulting in a unique form of Nanyang Buddhism that resonated with the indigenous populations. The blending of traditional Chinese Buddhism with local beliefs, rituals, and languages allowed for a more localized practice that was distinct from its Chinese roots.

Reconceptualization is a critical process for comprehending the transfer, transformation, and reapplication of discourse elements across various contexts, which can result in the emergence of new meanings pertinent to specific social situations (Dean 2022; W. Li 2023). Fairclough (2013) posited that recontextualization involves the transformation of texts or so-

cial practices, necessitating modifications to local structures, values, and norms while retaining the original meaning. In this framework, speech both reflects and shapes social reality through dialectical interactions with social institutions, practices, and policies. Krzyżanowski (2018), Neather (2020), and Wodak and Fairclough (2010) underlined the need to know the geographical and temporal links in recontextualization. The history of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si shows that the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism involved the modification of Buddhist ideas to fit the cultural and social values that were common in China and Southeast Asia. This is consistent with Mitsikopoulou (2007)'s glocalization theory, which holds that global elements should be modified to fit local settings to increase their relevance for local groups. Wang and Zhang (2023) and Zhang (2019) demonstrated that religious practices in the Guangxiao Si preserve traditional elements while incorporating modern innovations to address the needs of an expanding urban community.

Nanyang Buddhism, which refers to the practices and beliefs of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia has a significant contextualization role through its historical and cultural exchanges from the Guangxiao Si temples in Guangzhou (Yan et al. 2020). Recontextualization of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si is vital for several reasons. As one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Guangzhou, it holds immense historical and cultural significance. However, in today's rapidly changing society, there is a pressing need to adapt its teachings and practices to resonate with contemporary audiences. This process not only preserves the temple's rich heritage but also ensures that its values and philosophies remain relevant. The recontextualizing of Guangxiao Si can bridge the gap between traditional beliefs and modern lifestyles, making Buddhism more accessible to younger generations. This approach encourages dialogue between different cultural perspectives, fostering a sense of community and understanding. Furthermore, it can enhance tourism, drawing visitors interested in both historical architecture and spiritual experiences.

This approach in transnational policy analysis aligns with Jessop's (2008) concept of recontextualization based on theoretical discourse and policy. Moreover, recontextualization can address contemporary issues such as mental health, environmental concerns, and social justice, aligning ancient wisdom with modern challenges. This dynamic interplay can revitalize the temple's role in society, transforming it into a center for learning, reflection, and community engagement. Ultimately, the recontextualization of Guangxiao Si is not just about preservation; it is about ensuring that its teachings continue to inspire and guide future generations. This is particularly relevant when Nanyang Buddhism encounters modernization and state policies that frequently attempt to alter religious practices for political ends (Laliberté 2011). This results in tension at the local level due to the homogeneity of traditional values and the heterogeneity that arises from cross-cultural interactions. Based on the principles of recontextualization, Bernstein (2004) posited that the Guangxiao Si serves as a center for spiritual transmission between China and Southeast Asia, thereby establishing a new form of Buddhism that functions as a cultural bridge. The success of recontextualization in the Guangxiao Si is upon a multifaceted process of cultural adaptation and negotiation, as well as on socio-political dynamics that encompass transnational, national, and local relationships (Karl et al. 2022).

Recontextualization Nanyang Buddhism and the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si are important to understand how Buddhist teachings and practices can be adapted to resonate with local cultural values and social norms to address contemporary issues, such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and interfaith dialogue. It offers practical solutions and ethical guidance that align with current societal needs. Furthermore, the recontextualization also can help bridge the historical roots of the tradition with its modern expressions and provides a comprehensive understanding of how historical migrations, cultural exchanges, and socio-political dynamics have shaped the evolution of Buddhism in the re-

gion. Furthermore, the recontextualizing of Buddhist teachings can foster a more inclusive and engaged community that welcomes diverse interpretations and practices. This is a vital attracting for younger generations and ensuring the continuity of Buddhist traditions in a rapidly changing world. Hence, the recontextualization contributes to the academic discourse on Buddhism and it encourages scholars to explore the complexities and nuances of Nanyang Buddhism, leading to a more dynamic and multifaceted understanding of its role in Southeast Asia.

3. Methods

This investigation was conducted through a case analysis of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si, a Buddhist temple that is both historically significant and prominent in Guangzhou, South China. This location was chosen for its historical significance as a center for the dissemination of Buddhism to Southeast Asia during the Tang Dynasty. This research utilized a qualitative design that included semi-structured interviews and a historical perspective from nine participants from China, Malaysia and Singapore. The qualitative data analysis involves a systematic process of gathering, organizing, and interpreting qualitative information, including interview transcriptions, audio recordings, field notes, and documents. Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary analytical method because it allows researchers to go beyond surface-level meanings, capturing both implicit and explicit themes within the data. This method facilitated the identification of key patterns, relationships, and emergent themes that align with the study's research objectives. The analysis process followed several structured phases. The first stage involved an in-depth review of all collected data, including transcribed interviews, focus group discussions, and observational notes (Cresswell and Cresswell 2022).

The historical study included the analysis of primary Buddhist texts, which is outlined in the instrument section. Furthermore, interviews were conducted to obtain the perspectives of major stakeholders, such as senior priests from the Guangxiao Si, Buddhist scholars, members of the Chinese diaspora, and local religious officials. This approach aimed to elucidate the socio-political dynamics and cross-cultural interactions influencing the adaptation of Buddhist doctrine and rituals. Interviews were conducted in person for participants in China and via the online Zoom platform for those located overseas. The interviews lasted for 30 to 45 min and were recorded with participant consent. The interview subjects were intentionally selected to reflect diverse perspectives. The participant checks to confirm the accuracy of theme interpretations and triangulation to compare findings across different data sources (interviews, focus groups, and observational data) to enhance data credibility and minimize researcher bias. The final phase involved synthesizing the categorized data into meaningful themes that directly addressed the research questions. Table 1 presents the background of the participants.

Table 1. Interview participants.

No	Initial Name	Identity
1	SM	Senior monk in the Guangxiao Si
2	LRZ	Local religious official in China
3	LRZh	Local religious official in China
4	AT	Academic
5	AL	Academic
6	CDS	Chinese diaspora community member in Southeast Asia (from Singapore)
7	CDM	Chinese diaspora community member in Southeast Asia (from Malaysia)
8	CDCTTE	Chinese diaspora community member in Southeast Asia (from China)
9	CDTF	Chinese diaspora community member in Southeast Asia (from China)

3.1. Instrument

The research instrument comprised interview guidelines and historical materials. The following texts were analyzed: (1) the Lankavatara Silk, which had a significant influence on the Chan Buddhist tradition in China and is directly linked to the teachings of profound enlightenment that were the foundation of Chan's doctrines and were adopted in the Nanyang region; (2) the Avatamsaka Sutra, which contributed to the establishment of moral and cosmological values within a cross-cultural context; (3) historical records from the Tang Dynasty, which provided documentation on the development of the Guangxiao Si Monastery and its role in disseminating Buddhism to the Nanyang region; (4) Nanyang cross-cultural manuscripts, which detail the local adaptation of Buddhist teachings, as practiced by the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia; and (5) religious policies in China that govern the functions of institutions like the Guangxiao Si in terms of cultural diplomacy and the international propagation of Buddhist teachings.

Additionally, the interview guidelines encompassed four primary components: (1) the history and transformation of Buddhist teachings in the Guangxiao Si, (2) cross-cultural interactions' influence on rituals and doctrines, (3) the Guangxiao Si's relationship with the Chinese diaspora community, and (4) the influence of socio-political policy on the adaptation of Buddhism in Nanyang. The questions for the four components are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Interview questions.

Component	Interview Question
History and transformation	1. What is the significance of the Guangxiao Si in the dissemination of Buddhism from Nanyang to Southeast Asia? 2. In both historical and contemporary contexts, what is the primary value that is conveyed through texts like the Lankavatara Sutra?
Ritual and doctrine	3. Are there any rituals in the Guangxiao Si that have been modified or adapted for local significance? 4. How has the Buddhist doctrine of Nanyang evolved over time?
Relationship with diaspora	5. What is the connection between the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia and the Guangxiao Si? 6. In what ways does the diaspora community adapt the teachings of Buddhism to their local context?
Socio-political context	7. How does China's religious policy influence the practice of Buddhism in the Guangxiao Si? 8. How do the dynamics of contemporary politics influence the expansion and adaptation of Buddhism in Nanyang?

3.2. Operationalizing Recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism

Intertextuality and interdiscourse analyses of the texts were employed, forming a novel discursive combination. In this context, the Nanyang Buddhism tradition's words, phrases, and stories were preserved, modified, or adapted to new contexts, such as the local religious practices of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si. Interdiscourse entails the integration of diverse discourses, genres, and styles to establish connections between new texts and their older, related counterparts (Wodak and Fairclough 2010). Nanyang Buddhism recontextualized traditional elements, including Theravāda values, Mahāyāna rituals, and local Buddhist teachings, into new narratives that hold social and political significance in Guangzhou.

The process of recontextualization was evident through a category analysis, which encompassed investigating the legitimacy of religious policy objectives, the typical characteristics of religious genres, and argumentation devices such as persuasive rhetoric and

topoi. These components were integrated to allow Buddhism Nanyang in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si to adapt to the local context while maintaining its fundamental identity within the Southeast Asian Buddhist tradition (McGovern 2022). The four-level context model of the discourse-historical approach (DHA could be utilized for further analysis to investigate the specific context of particular texts or situations, including the official documents of the Guangxiao Si (Wodak and Fairclough 2010). Intertextual and interdiscursive relationships exist between texts, exemplified by the connection between traditional narratives of Nanyang and local religious reform documents. Additionally, social variables and institutional frameworks can impact contextual situations, such as the influence of local governments on religious practices and wider socio-political and historical contexts, including the historical and cultural interactions between China and Southeast Asia.

3.3. Case Study: The Guangzhou Guangxiao Si's Recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism

The Guangxiao Si is of paramount importance in the establishment of religious and cultural networks between China and Southeast Asia. It is imperative to establish the context for the selection of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si case study before investigating it. In addition to its historical significance to Nanyang Buddhism. Guangzhou has been the primary port in the maritime trade network since the Tang Dynasty, providing a conduit for the dissemination of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia and South China (Berkwitz 2012). In addition, the Guangxiao Si, which was founded in the fourth century, has become a significant center for the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural exchanges that are associated with the Nanyang Buddhist tradition. The selection of the Guangxiao Si was further bolstered by the socio-economic and political changes in Guangzhou that occurred after 1978. Economic reforms and openness have facilitated the resurgence of the local cultural identity and have facilitated cross-cultural interactions through religion (Shahar 1996; Weller 2018).

The Guangxiao Si has facilitated the adaptation of Nanyang Buddhism's religious practices to a contemporary context through recontextualization. The relevance of the Nanyang Buddhist tradition within the context of urban modern Guangzhou is preserved through initiatives such as community-based cultural conservation efforts, interfaith dialogue, and cross-cultural religious education. The analysis underscored the influence of state ideology on the interpretation of traditional elements, as well as the interaction between traditional and modern religious practices (Fairclough 2013). This investigation ascertained the manner in which the Guangxiao Si incorporates novel elements into conventional practices to confront the obstacles presented by urbanization and globalization, all the while maintaining the philosophical core of Nanyang Buddhism.

3.4. Historical Record of the Tang Dynasty

The governmental and social framework of the Tang Dynasty profoundly impacted the relationship between Buddhism in Nanyang and the Guangxiao Si. The Tang Dynasty is acknowledged as a period of substantial Buddhist advancement in China, notably characterized by the propagation of Chan doctrines at the Guangxiao Si Monastery. Political policies endorsing Buddhism, exemplified by imperial patronage of prominent monks, facilitated the Guangxiao Si in becoming an intellectual and spiritual hub that is intimately connected to the Nanyang region. The historical record of the Tang Dynasty indicates that the "Guangxiao Si not only became the center of development of Chan's teachings, but also played a role in building connections with the Buddhist community in Southeast Asia through the delivery of monks and holy texts" (Z. Wang 2003). This illustrates how the political structure of the Tang Dynasty facilitated cross-cultural interactions that contributed to the transformation of Buddhist rituals and doctrines.

The Tang Dynasty represents a cosmopolitan era characterized by maritime trade and cultural migration, facilitating cross-cultural interactions. Prominent ports such as Guangzhou functioned as focal centers for merchants, intellectuals, and monks from various civilizations. This socio-economic condition enabled the adaptation of Buddhist teachings to the local setting in Nanyang, as implemented by the Chinese diaspora. The Buddhist teachings of the Guangxiao Si were modified to suit the spiritual requirements and cultural background of the Southeast Asian populace. Nanyang's cross-cultural manuscript states that the "Chinese diaspora brings moral values from the Avatamsaka Sutra and integrates them with local traditions in the Nanyang region, resulting in unique Buddhist practices" (Chia 2020). This interaction demonstrated how the dynamic social structure of the pliers enhanced the transformation of Buddhist doctrine in the Guangxiao Si.

The dissemination of Buddhist teachings, particularly in a cross-cultural context. The government endorsed the dissemination of Buddhist teachings internationally. However, it restricted the autonomy of the monastery in domestic matters. This can be seen in the adaptation of Chan's teachings, which prioritize universal morality over exclusive rites. The Tang Dynasty's historical records indicate that the "Guangxiao Si exemplifies the integration of Buddhist teachings that are more inclusive and acceptable to multicultural communities in Nanyang" (Z. Wang 2003). The political structure of the Tang Dynasty was influenced by both the dissemination of Buddhism and the ritual adaptation and doctrinal developments at the Guangxiao Si.

4. Results

RQ 1: What does the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism's teachings and practices to local cultural values among urban communities in China and Southeast Asia?

The process of recontextualizing Nanyang Buddhism in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si exemplifies the integration of Buddhist teachings with local cultural values and the requirements of contemporary urban communities in China and Southeast Asia. The Lankavatara Sutra provides teachings on profound enlightenment that form the foundation of the Chan tradition, which was subsequently adapted to the cultural context of Southeast Asia (K. Wang 2022). This teaching underpins the formation of spiritual practices among the Chinese diaspora that are pertinent to their daily lives in Southeast Asia towards instilling moral and cosmological values in cross-cultural societies.

This value facilitates the acceptance of Buddhism among diverse local cultural communities in the Nanyang region. The Guangxiao Si Monastery, as documented in Tang Dynasty historical records, emerged as the primary center for the dissemination of Buddhist teachings to the Nanyang region (Wu 2022). It serves as both a religious center and a cultural bridge between China and Southeast Asia, significantly connecting the Chinese diaspora with their spiritual tradition. The adaptation of Buddhist teachings within the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia is exemplified by the Nanyang cross-cultural manuscript system. This shows how flexible Buddhism is in handling the social and financial needs of the nearby society. Furthermore, religious regulations in China helped to control establishments like the Guangxiao Si, enabling the global spread of Buddhist ideas and the support of cultural diplomacy (Madsen 2020).

This process of promoting cultural diplomacy and fostering cross-national understanding illustrates the dynamics of the homogenization of traditional Buddhist values and the heterogenization that results from cross-cultural interactions. It demonstrates that the Guangxiao Si functions as a symbol of the preservation of Buddhist tradition and a center for strategic religious innovation, addressing the needs of contemporary communities

in the context of social change. The interview results were consistent with the findings of historical research on this component:

> "Guangxiao SI has a very important role in the spread of Buddhism to Nanyang and Southeast Asia, mainly because of its strategic position in Guangzhou, which is the center of trade and culture. Since the Tang Dynasty, Guangxiao SI has been an important place for meetings between various cultures and religious teachings, including Buddhism. At that time, this monastery not only functioned as a center of worship, but also as a place of education and spread of Buddhism. The monks who live in Guangxiao SI are active in spreading this teaching to areas outside of China, especially to Southeast Asia, through trade and trips abroad". (SM)

> "The Lankavatara Sutra has a very deep value in the teachings of Buddhism, especially in terms of inner enlightenment and understanding of higher reality. This silk teaches the importance of direct experience in achieving enlightenment, as well as emphasis on self-awareness and control of mind. This value is very relevant in a modern context, where many people feel alienated or trapped in material and worldly lives that quickly change. In the context of Buddhism recontextualization in Guangxiao Si, Lankavatara Sutra helps monks and people to understand that enlightenment is not only spiritual achievement but also a way of life that reflects inner peace and wisdom in facing the challenges of the times". (SM)

The interview responses suggested that the Guangxiao Si is instrumental in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings from China to the Nanyang region, with a particular emphasis on Southeast Asia. The monastery is situated in Guangzhou, a cultural and commercial hub, and it functions as a nexus of Buddhist teachings and local cultural values. The interview's exploration of the recontextualization of Buddhism in the Guangxiao Si illustrates the doctrine's capacity to adjust to the changing conditions of the times. The concepts of the Lankavatara Sutra aim to address the challenges posed by urbanization and globalization, including the spiritual needs of metropolitan populations, economic strain, and social alienation.

> RQ 2: How does the recontextualization of Buddhist teachings and practices contribute to the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia?

The spiritual identity of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia has been greatly affected by the recontextualization of Buddhist teachings and practices at the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si. It underpinned the profound enlightenment that is achieved through inner comprehension, as this silk emphasizes. Therefore, form the cornerstone upon which the spiritual identity of the Chinese diaspora group develops. The Chinese people seek enlightenment in their daily lives, outside the boundaries of official instruction. This instruction manifests in spiritual and social practices that promote the development of stronger relationships with the local community while also integrating Buddhist teachings with the local culture in Southeast Asia. The historical records of the Tang Dynasty detail the growth of the Guangxiao Si Monastery and its importance in the spread of Buddhism to the Nanyang region.

The Guangxiao Si serves as a pivotal center for the propagation of Buddhist doctrines, especially within the framework of the overseas Chinese diaspora. This illustrates the monastery's endeavor to adapt Buddhist teachings to the requirements and cultural context of Chinese society in Southeast Asia. This monastery represents the integration of traditional Buddhist teachings with local cultural values. It suggested that the Chinese community in Southeast Asia frequently integrates local cultural elements, such as art and music, into their Buddhist rituals to facilitate the assimilation of Buddhist teachings among the local population. This recontextualization profoundly impacts their spiritual identity

and strengthens their bond with the local culture, illustrating the fundamental role of Buddhist teachings in promoting the social and spiritual well-being of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. The findings from interviews with members of the diaspora community further substantiated this component.

> "Guangxiao Si is not just a monastery but a spiritual symbol that unites Chinese and Buddhist culture. Many of us have ancestors who were once connected to the teachings of this monastery. The traditions of ceremonies and rituals taught from Guangxiao SI are still maintained in our community, especially during the Vesak celebration and ancestral respect ceremony". (CDS, Singapore)

> "In Malaysia, the Chinese community also has a close relationship with Guangxiao Si. One way we strengthen this relationship is through a monk training program, which often involves senior monks from Guangxiao Si. They help us understand texts such as the Avatamsaka Sutra and the Lankavatara Sutra". (CDM, Malaysia)

From interviews with members of the Chinese diaspora community in Singapore and Malaysia, it was found that the Guangxiao Si acts as a spiritual symbol that connects the diaspora community with Chinese Buddhist teachings, as well as a cultural center that maintains the Chinese identity of the diaspora. Further analysis of these data showed three main findings related to the recontextualization process of teachings and the formation of spiritual identity.

> RQ 3: How do the dynamics of socio-political and cross-cultural interactions influence the transformation of the rituals and doctrines of Nanyang Buddhism?

Socio-political dynamics and cross-cultural connections greatly affect the way Buddhist rites and teachings change in Nanyang, especially at the Guangxiao Si in Guangzhou. The Chinese government policy regulating and overseeing religious practices is a primary factor influencing this transformation. Contemporary religious policies in China exhibit a growing openness, facilitating a more inclusive practice of Buddhism that is receptive to external cultural influences. Historical records of the Tang Dynasty indicate that "Buddhism in Guangxiao Si experienced significant adaptation, particularly in response to the needs of external society, amid the political and social changes that occurred. In particular, at the Guangxiao Si in Guangzhou, the Buddhist rites and teachings in Nanyang have evolved in response to socio-political dynamics and cross-cultural contacts. This interaction influences the teaching and practice of Buddhist doctrines by modifying the symbols, language, and local rituals to better align with the cultural context of Buddhists in the region.

Broader socio-political dynamics influence the transformation of the Buddhist doctrine in the Guangxiao Si. Political upheaval in China, including regime changes and alterations to religious policies, frequently necessitates modifications in the operational practices of this monastery, affecting both doctrinal instruction and ritual execution. The socio-political dynamics of nations hosting the Chinese diaspora minority impact the assimilation and evolution of Buddhist rites, leading to a fusion of ancient doctrines with flexible local cultural customs. This demonstrates the impact of socio-political dynamics and cross-cultural connections on the development of Buddhist rites and doctrines in Nanyang, which highlight the local context and the spiritual requirements of the populace.

> Religious policies in China aim to ensure social harmony and political stability. We prioritize administrative supervision of all religious institutions, including Guangxiao SI. For example, certain rituals in the monastery must follow the guidelines set by the government, especially related to the implementation of public religious events. In addition, the teaching of the Buddhist doctrine must support national values such as the love of the motherland and social harmony. (LRZ, Local Religious Officials in China)

> The current political dynamics emphasize the strengthening of cross-cultural relations and soft power diplomacy. Buddhism Nanyang, as one of the important branches of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, is an effective cultural diplomacy tool. The monk exchange program between Guangxiao Si and monasteries in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Singapore, is one example. However, this expansion remains closely monitored to ensure that the activity is not in conflict with the National Policy. (LRZh, Local Religious Officials in China)

The results of this interview strengthened the idea that policy interventions and sociopolitical dynamics forced the Guangxiao Si to adapt to a greater national context. This transformation reflects how state policy is the main driver of change in the practice of Buddhism.

5. Discussion

5.1. Recontextualization Strategy of Nanyang Buddhism in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si

As a center of culture and economics, Guangzhou offers a strategic environment for the interaction of transnational religious movements, including the influence of Nanyang Buddhism. Li and Wang (2023) and Zhu (2024) highlighted that social and economic relevance is an important aspect in the spread of modern Buddhism, which is seen in the way Guangxiao Si integrates values such as spiritual development and inner peace with activities that support community empowerment, such as education, philanthropy, and interfaith dialogue. This finding was also supported by Zhang et al. (2024), who stated that temples in China, including Guangxiao Si, have increasingly adopted a contextual approach to ensure the sustainability of Buddhism amidst the dynamics of modern urban society. Hence, the recontextualizing strategy not only strengthens the relevance of Buddhism in daily life but also helps build a religious identity that harmonizes with the aspirations of modern Chinese society. It demonstrated an integration of Buddhist ideals into a strategy aimed at enhancing local culture and tourism while adapting to contemporary needs. Guangxiao Si serves as both a place of prayer and a hub for social and educational activities. It aligns with modern values of "social harmony," making it more suitable for the demands of urban regions.

These activities enhance Guangxiao's function as a platform for promoting universal Buddhist principles, engaging both residents and international travelers (Ashiwa and Wank 2006; Tomalin et al. 2019). The government's endorsement of Buddhism's integration into social and cultural programs reflects a broader initiative to utilize traditional values as tools for social advancement, evident in the analysis of religion's role in sustainable development in China and Southeast Asia (Travagnin 2017; Zhu 2024). Consequently, this model offers a precise depiction of the continuous development of Nanyang Buddhism at Guangxiao Si as a fundamental element of modern society. This is a response to the necessity of adapting to contemporary challenges, primarily emphasizing the enhancement of the relationship between spirituality and everyday existence.

The effects of social and cultural transformations on the temple's social and cultural framework require further assessment. Engaging the active involvement of various societal elements and stakeholders in developing this approach is imperative to fully understand its potential for widespread acceptance and effective implementation in the future. Lu and Zhang (2024) noted that the successful adaptation of Buddhism to modern circumstances substantially depends on collaboration among religious leaders, local communities, and the government. Furthermore, Zeng et al. (2021) underlined that the sustainability of this approach relies on a participatory assessment system that includes feedback from diverse community groups to enhance the development process. Nanyang Buddhism represents a modern model of religious adaptation at Guangxiao Si, demonstrating how spir-

itual principles can be transformed into concrete actions to advance a more inclusive and harmonious society.

5.2. Nanyang Buddhism Recontextualization in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si: Concluding Remarks and Context-Dependent Struggles

The findings indicated that recontextualization in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si has encountered difficulties. Tension exists between the application of pragmatic and purely spiritual teachings of Buddhism, as upheld by certain traditional circles (Chia 2021; Dean 2022). The excess of materialistic elements may diminish the spiritual core of these teachings. This alteration, motivated by the intention to render Buddhism more pertinent to contemporary demands, incites discourse among monks and local communities over the equilibrium between tradition preservation and innovation. Some groups embrace this modernization as a means to connect Buddhist teachings with the younger generation and metropolitan populations. This study's findings align with those of (Chumkhot 2024; Flatt 2023; Foxeus 2019), which showed that religious modernization often leads to a conflict between preserving core values and meeting social relevance.

Ruan et al. (2023) further proposed that the local socio-economic context, which includes the need to boost urban community involvement and generate income through tourism-related activities, often shapes this conflict. As modern activities, such as meditation training for mental health and environmental seminars, garner more attention than ancient rites, the conflict at Guangxiao Si will become more prominent. A hybrid strategy combining conventional and creative elements could somewhat successfully address this discrepancy (Liu 2023). Guangxiao Si exemplifies how integrating fundamental Buddhist ideas into a contextual framework allows religion to adapt to current circumstances while preserving its spiritual core. Consequently, it is essential to persist in observing the evolution of this strategy and its impact on the religious community and society at large.

The recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism in Guangzhou, particularly at Guangxiao Si, is a multifaceted and arduous process influenced by numerous local and societal elements, such as socio-economic needs, modernization, and urbanization. The recontextualization of Guangxiao Si Buddhism in Nanyang seeks to integrate ancient teachings with the needs of modern communities increasingly linked to the global sphere. However, it faces limited resources, ingrained hierarchical systems, and pushback from groups that perceive these developments as threats to their spiritual authority (Huang 2024; Ott 2015). Although various policies for this reform exist (including improved access to Buddhism-based education and the creation of more egalitarian social programs), their execution is hampered by the struggle between tradition and modernism due to financial and human resource limitations (Li and Wang 2023; Wu 2022).

The primary challenge may be preserving the spiritual essence of Buddhism while adapting it to resonate with the younger generation in urban and contemporary society. The efficacy of Buddhism's recontextualization in contemporary society is substantially influenced by its ability to reconcile traditional ideals with global challenges, such as sustainability, inclusivity, and social cohesion (Srihamongkon 2022; Travagnin 2017). Power struggles among diverse factions are inextricably linked to the reconceptualization of Buddhism, as is the case with many global social revolutions. The challenge is to maintain the fundamental principles of traditional teachings while simultaneously addressing the need for inclusivity in the context of modernization. The connection between the government and the temple is evolving, necessitating the active involvement of various parties.

This change is often hindered by the dominant top-down structure and the prominence of authoritative figures within the Buddhist hierarchy. This situation mirrors those observed in several countries currently undergoing reforms. Despite the establishment of policy, the degree of implementation often fluctuates from one location to another (Lin

2023; Tödtling and Trippl 2005). The Guangxiao Si temple, which has undertaken projects through international communications and Buddhist tourism to modernize the social role of Buddhism, best illustrates this problem (X. Li 2016). It shown that the urban meditation training and environmental seminars based on Buddhist ideas could a balance spirituality with secular necessities. However, local political dynamics and governmental goals often shape the way these initiatives are carried out, and they do not always coincide with the needs of traditional Buddhist groups (Huang 2024; Karl et al. 2022).

The recontextualization in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si process is greatly affected by cultural aspects because the Nanyang citizens often view Buddhist teachings through their cultural lens, generating a range of uses for Buddhist ideas in their daily lives (Chumkhot 2024; Kirmayer 2015). This implies that the recontextualization of Buddhism consists of not only assimilation with modernity but also the interpretation of traditional values in line with local standards. The future success of Buddhism's reconceptualization in Guangxiao Si will be greatly influenced by all actors' ability to promote open discourse on tradition and modernity. A strategy combining community participation and cooperative decision-making has a crucial role to reduce resistance and preserving fundamental Buddhist values (Shen and Midgley 2015; Wang and Zhang 2023).

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrated that the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism's teachings and practices at the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si reflects Buddhism's adaptability to local cultural values and the requirements of contemporary metropolitan communities in China and Southeast Asia. Buddhism in the Guangxiao Si has a crucial effect on profound spiritual principles and integrates religious traditions with local cultural practices within the Chinese expatriate community. Furthermore, the Guangxiao Si deftly navigates the socio-economic needs of various cultural communities while upholding universal moral principles, acting as a central hub for the spread of Buddhism. The harmonious cross-cultural ceremonies serve to uphold the spiritual identity of the Chinese diaspora while simultaneously illustrating the enduring significance of Buddhism amidst the challenges posed by urbanization and globalization.

This result offers significant theoretical contributions to the understanding of Buddhism's adaptability and cultural integration in a globalized context. Because Guangxiao Temple serves as a focal point for the interaction between traditional Chinese Buddhism and the diverse cultural influences of Southeast Asia. This interplay highlights the dynamic nature of Buddhist teachings, demonstrating how they can evolve and resonate within different cultural frameworks. Furthermore, it incorporates local beliefs and practices, enriching the Buddhist tradition while maintaining its core principles. This phenomenon challenges the notion of a monolithic Buddhist identity, emphasizing instead the pluralistic and adaptive characteristics of the religion. It also reflects contemporary interpretations of Buddhist ethics, illustrating how Nanyang Buddhism addresses modern societal issues such as social justice and environmental sustainability. It provides insights into the transformative power of Buddhism in diverse cultural landscapes.

This study also enhances community life and spiritual practice within the region. As a prominent center for Buddhist worship and cultural exchange, the temple actively engages in various community outreach programs, including educational initiatives, meditation retreats, and social services. It not only promotes the teachings of Buddhism but also fosters a sense of belonging and support among local residents, particularly among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the practical integration of Nanyang Buddhism encourages intergenerational dialogue and participation, allowing younger practitioners to connect with their heritage while adapting to contemporary societal needs. This em-

phasis on social responsibility reflects a commitment to addressing pressing issues such as poverty, mental health, and environmental sustainability. Hence, the temple exemplifies how Buddhist principles can be applied to real-world challenges, thereby enhancing the quality of life for individuals and families in the region. In this way, Nanyang Buddhism at Guangxiao Temple not only enriches spiritual practice but also contributes to the overall well-being of the community.

The study of Nanyang Buddhism at Guangxiao Temple faces several limitations, primarily related to the sample size and diversity of interviewees. The current research relies heavily on a limited number of monks, which may not fully capture the varied perspectives within the Buddhist community. The narrow age range and lack of gender diversity among participants restrict the understanding of how different demographics engage with and interpret Buddhist practices. Future research should aim to include a broader and more representative sample of monks, lay practitioners, and individuals from various age groups and genders. This would provide a more comprehensive view of Nanyang Buddhism and its impact on community dynamics. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could explore the evolving role of Guangxiao Temple in response to contemporary societal changes by examining how it adapts to the needs of a diverse and globalized population. Such studies would enrich the understanding of Buddhism's relevance in modern contexts. Future studies could delve into the recontextualization of Buddhism in various Southeast Asian nations by specifically examining the influence of the Guangxiao Si Monastery on cultural diplomacy and international relations. This would involve an assessment of how globalization and urbanization affect Buddhist practices within the Chinese diaspora community.

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Article

A Unique Episode in Transregional "Buddhist" Connections: The Ruan and Liang Buddhas from China to India and Beyond

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Abstract

A unique episode in the transregional connections of Buddhism is illustrated through the figures of Ruan Ziyu (1079–1102) and Liang Cineng (1098–1116). Since at least the Song dynasty, Huineng (638–713), the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, has been a revered figure in Guangdong province of China, resulting in the formation of numerous stories and legends. In the Sihui region, near the urban hub called Zhaoqing, Ruan and Liang emerged as notable disciples of Huineng, reputed to have had spiritual encounters with the Sixth Patriarch and attained Buddhahood. Known as the "Ruan Buddha" and the "Liang Buddha", they were venerated by the Sihui people during times of droughts, turmoil, and health crisis. Over time, they became integral to Sihui identity and spread to Southeast and South Asia, particularly as people emigrated from the region in the late nineteenth century. This article examines the various stories about Ruan and Liang that circulated in Sihui and how the two buddhas have been venerated, without many links to Huineng or Buddhism, in Malaysia and India. It highlights the significance of local adaptations of Buddhist figures in transregional contexts.

Keywords: Ruan Buddha; Liang Buddha; Huineng; Sihui; Malaysia; India; Buddhism; transregional connection

1. Introduction

The history of transregional religious and cultural exchange between China and India is often framed through the canonical spread of Buddhism. Over the course of more than a millennium, this historical transformation was most vividly manifested in the diffusion of Buddhist doctrines, institutions, and worldviews through the circulation of scriptures, personnel, commodities, and ideas (Sen 2003). Recent scholarship has illuminated multiple dimensions of this process, including the translation of Buddhist scriptures from South and Central Asian languages into Chinese, the missions of Buddhist monks from India to China, the pilgrimages of Chinese monks to the subcontinent, and the transmission of material culture such as furniture, medicine, animals, plants, and minerals (Kieschnick 2003; Chen 2025). This exchange was profoundly reciprocal. Not only did Indian missionaries translate their texts into Chinese, but Chinese works were also rendered into Indian languages, for instance, the Sanskrit translation of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (*Tao Te Ching*, The Book of the Tao and its Virtue) (C. Tan 1998, pp. 149–50; Caudhurī 2001, p. 195).

Like other transregional religious traditions, Buddhism evolved into a faith movement that encompassed the entirety of East Asia. It adapted and transformed within diverse local contexts through the absorption of indigenous ideas and ritual practices. Various regions developed distinctive Buddhist traditions, among which the Chan (Zen or

Won) lineage became particularly influential. By the eleventh century, during the Song dynasty, Chan had emerged as the dominant form of Buddhism in China. Its doctrines and monastic institutions subsequently spread to Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia also maintained Chan devotional practices and introduced certain ritual and conceptual elements into local religious settings, where they were further localised and reinterpreted.

With the rise of maritime commerce, a far-reaching Buddhist network took shape, linking South, Southeast, and East Asia through trade and migration (Chia 2020; Li 2023). Yet the political and cultural transformations that reshaped medieval India led to the gradual decline of Buddhism in South Asia after the tenth century. In contrast, Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions flourished in East and Southeast Asia, respectively. While Theravāda Buddhism extended modestly into parts of East Asia, Mahāyāna Buddhism was transmitted to Southeast Asia primarily through Chinese diasporic communities. In the modern period, some of these communities further expanded to port cities in India, particularly Kolkata, where Chinese immigrants introduced their religious practices and reconstituted them within new diasporic environments.

The religious lives of these communities raise a number of questions. To what extent did Chinese migrants preserve their Buddhist faith in its original forms? Which specific practices and devotional patterns were maintained or adapted within their diasporic settings? Did they continue to venerate the canonical figures of Mahāyāna and Chan Buddhism known in China, or did they cultivate new objects of devotion unfamiliar to their homeland traditions? How were these practices negotiated within the social and cultural milieu of colonial and postcolonial Kolkata? What local elements were assimilated or reconfigured within the ritual and doctrinal life of the Chinese diasporic community? Can we still call these practices part of Buddhist tradition, or did they transform into a local popular religion?

This article examines these questions through a focused case study that explores the dynamic, adaptive, and often paradoxical circulation of religious ideas within diasporic Chinese Buddhist communities, centring on two relatively obscure yet significant figures. The journey of the Ruan Buddha (Ruanfo 阮佛, henceforth Ruan or Ruan Buddha) and Liang Buddha (Liangfo 梁佛, henceforth Liang or Liang Buddha) from China to India presents a unique and compelling case study of this phenomenon. From their deification in the Sihui region of China during the Song dynasty (960–1279) to their enshrinement in a Kolkata (previously known as Calcutta) temple, these figures embody a dynamic process of cultural transmission, where a Buddhist legacy is simultaneously preserved and transformed by emigrant identity. These figures seldom appear in conventional textual sources; however, they are more vividly manifested in local religious practices. This study, therefore, is based on original fieldwork and supplemented by textual materials gathered during my field research.

Religious practices among the Chinese who settled in India have received limited scholarly attention. These practices challenge the conventional notion of a unidirectional flow of religious beliefs, images, and practitioners from India to China. Although the religious activities of Chinese settlers were largely confined to their temples and native-place associations, they provide important evidence of India's place in the migratory history of the Chinese in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the broader connections between China and India during the colonial period. The establishment of the Ruan-Liang Temple in Kolkata in 1908 reflects these entanglements with transregional movements and circulations.

In the following discussion, I will first lay out the Buddhist roots of the Ruan and Liang legends that evolved in the Sihui region between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries.

By focusing on Southeast and South Asia, the later sections attempt to explain the localization of the Ruan-Liang worship and the veneration practices, using new findings from recent fieldwork in these regions.

2. The Buddhist Heritage of Ruan-Liang Worship and Local Adaptation

I have conducted extensive fieldwork within the Chinese diasporic community in India. While the principal findings from this prior research have been disseminated elsewhere, this article will specifically examine the practices centred upon two localised Buddhist figures. In this section, I will first introduce the local practices surrounding these two figures in the Chinese diasporic community and subsequently trace their historical roots in Chinese Buddhism to facilitate an understanding of their local adaptation.

My participation in the centenary celebrations for the Sea Voi Yune Leong Buddhist Temple (Sihui Ruan Liang fo miao 四會阮梁佛廟, henceforth Ruan-Liang Temple)[1] on 29 November 2008, provided a valuable opportunity to observe the local community. The event, organised by the Huining huiguan 會寧會館 in Kolkata, brought together approximately 700 people, including 650 Chinese-Indians and 50 specially invited Indian guests. Although the central images in the temple are designated as the Yune (Ruan) Buddha and the Leong (Liang) Buddha, the event did not incorporate any traditional Chinese Buddhist ceremonies typically stipulated within the Buddhist canon. In fact, apart from these two images, the temple contains hardly any other artefacts or images associated with Chinese Buddhism. There are instead ritual tablets dedicated to Lu Ban 魯班, a well-known Chinese carpenter who was later deified and venerated as the ancestor of Chinese craftsmen,[2] Guandi 關帝, the god of wealth, and Atchew (Yang Dazhao 楊大釗), the so-called first Chinese immigrant to India. This brings to mind the popular religious practices focused on civil and martial heroes, as well as local saints, throughout late imperial and modern China.

Given the conventional configuration of Buddhist tradition in the Mahayana and Theravada traditions, such temples typically feature the veneration of statues depicting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Alternatively, in Chan Buddhist temples, the "true body" or mummified remains of deceased patriarchs are often worshipped. This, however, is not the situation at the Ruan-Liang Temple in the Chinese diasporic community in Kolkata. Evidently, when assessed through the lens of Buddhist textual and doctrinal traditions, the Ruan-Liang Temple can scarcely be deemed a Buddhist shrine; instead, it is rather a place that commemorates the history of migrants originating from the present-day Sihui 四會 district in Guangdong province of China, thereby preserving historical memory and offering enduring cultural connections between ancestors and contemporary residents. Many of these immigrants were carpenters, hence the image of Lu Ban, who may have arrived in Kolkata in the late nineteenth century and struggled to make a livelihood in the city. Similarly to the Chinese migrants from other cities and provinces of China, these Sihui settlers in Kolkata identified Atchew as their communal ancestor. This explains the presence of the ritual tablet dedicated to Atchew in the temple. For the immigrants from Sihui still residing in Kolkata, the Ruan-Liang Temple is a place to bond with fellow immigrants from their ancestral homeland in Guangdong, and through such bonding, they attempt to preserve their Sihui identity.[3] Thus, the centenary celebration in 2008 not only marked the establishment of the Ruan-Liang Temple in Kolkata, it also commemorated the presence of the Sihui community in the Indian city for over a century. Only twenty to twenty-five such families still live in Kolkata.

The Huining huiguan, which serves as the native-place association for migrants from the Sihui and the nearby town of Guangning 廣寧, preserves a document concerning the setting up of the temple in 1908. Information extracted from this document, which I

accessed during my fieldwork, indicates that the pivotal figure in this endeavour was a person named Liang Mao 梁茂, who organised a donation campaign to collect funds for establishing and maintaining the temple. The document specifically stipulates that the temple was founded primarily for the "welfare" of the local migrant community and designed to provide service to its disabled and needy members. This document enumerates the names of several members of the community who contributed financially to this cause. However, it does not explicitly affirm that the temple was organised in accordance with Buddhist institutions and rules, nor was it established for the dissemination of Buddhist teachings or the performance of canonical rituals to serve local Buddhists. Hence, it seems that this temple lacks a discernible connection with the traditional Buddhist teachings, practices, institutions, and precepts commonly observed in the Buddhist temples across China.

Many scholars, including myself, have contributed publications concerning the Ruan-Liang temple, yet several pertinent questions remain unresolved. Since my visit to the temple in Kolkata and my initial publications about it in 2008, 2009, and 2014 (Zhang 2008, pp. 49–58; Zhang 2009, pp. 53–63; Zhang 2014, pp. 429–57), important studies have appeared on the veneration of the Ruan and Liang Buddhas in Sihui (Huang 2013, pp. 104–12), Malaysia (Shi 2016, pp. 68–72), and the heritage of the Sihui migrants connected through the spread of the Ruan-Liang temples across the maritime spaces of the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal (Sen 2019, pp. 133–68). It is clear from these publications that the Ruan-Liang temples are intwined with the identity of the Sihui people and spread to foreign regions as they emigrated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My study intends to shed new light on the Ruan-Liang veneration and temples by trying to explain the loss of the Buddhist heritage as the Sihui migrants settled in foreign sites.

Yet the imagined connection to Buddhism suggested by the names of these two deified figures necessitates a reconceptualisation of the temporal and spatial circulations of Buddhist ideas between China and India. Influenced by a prominent Chinese Buddhist figure, Ruan and Liang were designated as "Buddhas", incorporated into the belief system of a local emigrant community, and ultimately reached India via Southeast Asia. From their deification in Sihui during the Song period to their enshrinement in Kolkata in the early twentieth century, the Ruan and Liang Buddhas exemplify what Prasenjit Duara (Duara 2015, p. 73) has termed "circulatory history"—a mode in which ideas, practices, and texts enter a society or locale in one form and re-emerge, significantly transformed, to travel elsewhere, even as they continue to reference their original context, often narratively. Within this framework, the weakening of explicit Buddhist associations is unsurprising. Rather, the origins and transmission of the Ruan and Liang worship among Sihui emigrants illustrate the multifaceted ways in which China and India remained interconnected over several centuries.

So, who were these two figures? Why were Ruan and Liang called "Buddhas"? how did local believers define them as "Buddhas"? How did they become the objects of local worship? How were they deified? Is there any Buddhist textual foundation for their deification? Ruan Ziyu 阮子鬱 (1079–1102) and Liang Cineng 梁慈能 (1098–1116) seem to have been historical figures who lived in the Sihui region during the Song dynasty. Their biographies appear in several editions of local gazetteers compiled over many centuries after the Song period (see below). In these biographies, the two are said to have been born into poor families and were connected to the veneration of Liuzu Huineng 六祖惠能 (the sixth Chan patriarch Huineng) of the Tang dynasty (618–907). In fact, as has been pointed out by Huang Jianhua (Huang 2013, pp. 104–5), the popular cult of Huineng in the Guangdong region was key to the emergence of the Ruan-Liang lore in Sihui. These biographies

report that Ruan and Liang had spiritual encounters with Huineng during the course of them becoming the Buddhas.

Historically and regionally, the rise of the Ruan-Liang worship tradition cannot be separated from the legacy of Huineng, the legendary Sixth Patriarch of the Southern School of Chan Buddhism. Huineng became a legend by the Song dynasty primarily because of the hagiographical accounts of his life that appeared after his death. One such account appears in the *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經 (Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch), the earliest version of which is found in Dunhuang 敦煌. While the Dunhuang version made no reference to Huineng's presence in Sihui, the later editions included the following episode that connected the Sixth Patriarch to Sihui:

> After this I went to Caoxi. There too I was beset by evil people searching for me and so fled to Sihui [County], where I spent fifteen years in all [living] with a group of hunters. During this time I preached the Dharma to the hunters when the occasion arose. The hunters had always had me guard their nets, but whenever I saw living animals in them I set them free. Whenever it was mealtime, I put vegetables in the pot for boiling the meat. They asked me about this sometimes, and I would answer, "These are just vegetables to go with the meat."
>
> 後至曹溪, 又被惡人尋逐. 乃於四會, 避難獵人隊中, 凡經一十五載, 時與獵人隨宜說法. 獵人常令守網, 每見生命, 盡放之. 每至飯時, 以菜寄煮肉鍋. 或問, 則對曰: '但喫肉邊菜'.
>
> One day I realised that the time had come to disseminate the Dharma, that I could not hide forever. Accordingly, I left [the mountains and] went to Faxing si (Monastery of the Dharma-nature) in Guangzhou, where I encountered Dharma Master Yinzong lecturing on the *Nirvana Sūtra*.
>
> 一日思惟: '時當弘法, 不可終遯'. 遂出至廣州法性寺, 值印宗法師講 '涅槃經'.[4]

Although this later version of the *Liuzu tanjing* does not mention Huineng's role in the spread of Buddhism in Sihui region, the local gazetteers, *Zhaoqing fuzhi* 肇慶府志 (Gazetteer of Zhaoqing Prefecture) and *Sihui xianzhi* 四會縣志 (Gazetteer of Sihui County), report a more pronounced role of Sihui in the life of the Sixth Patriarch (Wanli Zhaoqing Fuzhi 1989; Sihui Xianzhi 1996; Guangxu Sihui Xianzhi 2003). There were also stories suggesting that Huineng attained enlightenment in Sihui. Because of these associations between Huineng and Sihui, which were mostly imaginary, the local people "restructured" the so-called "hut" where Huineng was supposed to have hid and transformed it into a temple. This temple in Sihui is now known as the Liuzu Temple.

The stories about Ruan and Liang similarly evolved over several centuries in Sihui. As Huang Jianhua points out, the earliest story about Ruan Ziyu appeared in the sixteenth-century gazetteer of the Zhaoqing prefecture, more than four hundred years after Ruan's presumed death (Huang 2013, p. 106). In this record, Ruan is mentioned as the "Daoist Master Ruan", who practiced Buddhism from an early age. He is also reported to have been a vegetarian and a person who practiced Buddhist precepts. One day, Ruan suddenly died after composing a poem. The gazetteer reports that after Ruan's death, the local people venerated him during times of drought. Ruan's story further evolved a century later, appearing in a gazetteer of Sihui County edition. A key facet of this seventeenth-century story relates to the connection between Ruan Ziyu and Huineng. The Sixth Patriarch, according to this updated story, was responsible for transmitting the Buddhist doctrines to Ruan. This link between Ruan and Huineng became an important part of the standard biography of Ruan Ziyu that appears inside various temples and pamphlets about him and are distributed in Sihui, Southeast Asia, and in Kolkata.

According to the pamphlet that was distributed in Kolkata at the commemorative ceremony in 2008, Ruan Ziyu was from a poor family in the Taotang 陶塘 area of Sihui.[5] He was an orphan who had warts all over his body. He lived with his sister's family and spent most of his time herding cows. One day, when he was digging a well to provide water for the cows, he discovered a yellow stone. The water from the well surged up several metres high and sun rays blanketed him like an umbrella. As "precious water" sprinkled on him, the warts on his body all disappeared. The yellow rays which remitted from his body gave an appearance of a Buddhist robe. On his way home, Ruan Ziyu passed by the Liuzu Temple and saw the image of the Sixth Patriarch speaking to him with a smile. He then accepted the Sixth Patriarch's statue as his master and was subsequently recognised as a Buddha himself.

The story of Liang Cineng similarly evolved over several centuries and took definitive shape in the seventeenth century. According to this story, which also appears in temples and pamphlets distributed in Sihui and other sites, Liang was from the present-day Liang village (Liang cun 梁村). He was born on the third day of the ninth lunar month of 1098. Since his parents were poor and unable to take care of him, they gave Liang to their in-laws. Like Ruan, Liang herded cows when he was young. However, unlike Ruan, he was said to have miraculous powers. He would, for example, use a stick to draw a circle on the ground around the cows. This circle prevented the cows from wandering away and Liang would then take naps on nearby tree branches without having to keep constant watch over the animals. Similarly to Ruan, Liang also had warts all over his body. In fact, it is said in one version of the story that Liang had already become a disciple of the former and the two would go around the town begging for alms. Whatever they collected from begging, the two youths would give them away to the poor and the sick. One day with his miraculous powers, Liang drew a pond using his stick. He then took a bath in the pond and proceeded to a nearby hill. As soon as he sat down, he attained Buddhahood. He is said to have been 19 years old when this happened and died shortly thereafter.

Some of the stories about Liang Cineng also mention his encounter with Huineng when he visited the Liuzu Temple. Other versions of stories highlight his powers and skills in healing sick people and rainmaking. Unlike Ruan Ziyu, but similar to Huineng, the mummified body of Liang is venerated in the local region. This is a typical practice of Chinese Chan Buddhism (Sharf 1992, pp. 1–31), which has a long history and even practised in Taiwan (Gildow and Bingenheimer 2002, pp. 87–127). It is said that after the news of Liang's accession to Buddhahood became known to the government authorities, his body was mummified and plated with gold. This "jinxiang zhenshen" 金祥真身 (golden true body) is now preserved in the Baosheng gusi 寶勝古寺 (The Ancient Baosheng Temple, hereafter Baosheng Temple). According to local beliefs, after Ruan and Liang attained Buddhahood Sihui started receiving regular rainfall and the region became prosperous and the people lived in peace. It is perhaps for this reason that shrines dedicated to Ruan and Liang were erected in Sihui. The one dedicated to Ruan is called Baolin Gusi 寶林古寺 (The Ancient Baolin Temple, hereafter Baolin Temple) and the one with Liang's mummified body is known as the Baosheng Temple. Located in the Ganlan area 柑欖 of the Sihui city, the Baolin Temple was originally called Zhongyuan si 眾緣寺 (Zhongyuan Temple) and built in 1071, eight years before the birth of Ruan Ziyu. It was named Baolin Temple during the Chongning 崇寧 period of the Song dynasty (1102–1106), when the veneration of Ruan seems to have begun inside the temple (Baolin Gusi n.d.). The temple was renovated in 1628. Contemporary renovations and reconstructions took place in 1986 and 1993, some of them with donations from Sihui emigrants settled in Macau, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.

The Baosheng Temple, located in the Mocang 莫倉 village, was originally called Huashitai 化師臺 (or the Platform of the Transformed Master) and was also built during the Chongning period. It became a place to venerate Liang Cineng from 1116. Reconstruction of the platform started in 1290 and was completed in 1295, and from then it became known as the Baosheng Temple. The temple was renovated again during the Qing period. And similar to the Baolin Temple, the Baosheng Temple was also repaired in the late 1980s and the early 1990s with funds from the overseas Sihui community. The people at Liang's home village also constructed a temple, called Yongan si 永安寺, where his body is taken for veneration every year for three months.

Although the stories of Ruan and Liang are closely associated with the Huineng cult and the Liuzu Temple, and even though the term "Buddha" is used to describe the two key figures housed in the Baolin and Baosheng temples, there is little evidence that these two temples served solely as Buddhist institutions or as places where Buddhist monks resided. Rather, the highly localised veneration of Ruan and Liang was related to popular beliefs and practices and associated with the identity and heritage of Sihui and the people who lived there. This identity-association between Sihui residents and the heritage of Ruan and Liang they created became more prominent as people from the region started emigrating to Southeast and South Asia. From the time these temples were built, people in the Sihui region venerated Ruan and Liang for happiness, prosperity, and the health of patrons and their family members. These aspects became more pronounced as temples dedicated to Ruan and Liang were constructed in Southeast Asia and India.

3. The Spread of Ruan-Liang Veneration in Malaysia

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of people from the Sihui region joined many others from the Guangdong province to emigrate to Southeast Asia. Many of these Sihui emigrants settled in the tin mining towns of Malaysia such as Ipoh. Later, they also settled in other towns and cities of Malaysia, including Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Sarawak, and Sabah. Others from Sihui also moved to Singapore and Hong Kong. It seems that some of those who reached Kolkata may have remigrated from Southeast Asia.

The Huining huiguans, established where the Sihui and Guangning migrants lived, oversaw the welfare of the community, set up graveyards, and organised communal events to sustain the ancestral identity of these settlers. These huiguans were also responsible for establishing the Ruan-Liang temples, either as free-standing constructions or shrines within the huiguan buildings, in Southeast and South Asia. According to Shi Cangjin, there are around fifteen Huining huiguans in Malaysia (Shi 2016, p. 69). During my fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur in 2025, I was informed that more than twenty Ruan-Liang temples can be found in various cities across Malaysia.[6] The earliest of these may have been built in 1869 in the Bangsar 孟沙 area of Kuala Lumpur. The temple was first relocated to the Jinjang 增江 area in 1969 before being moved to its current location in the Kepong 甲洞 area in 2009. Both of these areas were where the Sihui community had resettled. With its relocation, the temple's name also changed, and it is now known as the Kepong Yuen Leong Temple 甲洞富城園阮梁公聖佛廟, or Persatuan Pemuja-Pemuja Buddha Yuen Leong.[7] Other examples include the Kampar Seng Fatt Temple 金寶聖佛廟in Perak, which was established before 1913, the Ruan Liang Sheng Fo Old Temple 阮梁聖佛古廟 built in Perak in 1919, the Petaling Jaya Yuen Leong Sing Fatt Temple 千百家新村阮梁聖佛宮 in Selangor that was set up in 1920, the Petaling Jaya Yeong Leong Beow Temple 八打靈再也阮梁聖公佛 in Selangor built in 1953, and the Salak Selatan Yuen Leong Temple 沙叻秀阮梁公聖佛廟, which was first established in 1964 and later relocated to the Salak South area.

Based on my recent field research in several Ruan-Liang temples in Malaysia, there are some unique features of these temples not found in either Sihui or Kolkata. Among these, the most notable is a female deity Wenshi Zhenxian 文氏貞仙 (Immortal Lady Wen), who is worshipped alongside the Ruan and Liang Buddhas on the main altar of each temple. Similarly to Ruan and Liang, Lady Wen was also a resident of Sihui. She married a man surnamed Bao 鮑 early in life, but tragedy struck when he was killed by a tiger while gathering firewood in the mountains. She devoted herself to her husband's family, rejecting remarriage and choosing instead to live alone in the mountains. On the ninth day of the ninth lunar month in the year 801, villagers saw her ascend into the sky on an auspicious cloud, achieving immortality. A shrine was subsequently built for her, where her carved image was also placed. She was revered and venerated as a protective deity. According to temple publications (Zengjiang Beiqu Ruan Liang Shengfo Miao 2006, pp. 4–5) and my interviews with local residents, this forms the "liangfo yixian 兩佛一仙" (Two Buddhas and One Immortal) tradition, which is present in all Ruan-Liang temples in Malaysia. A typical arrangement on the main altar, from left to right, is the Wenshi Zhenxian, followed by the Ruan Buddha and the Liang Buddha. Sometimes, a photograph of Liang's mummified body from the Baosheng Temple in Sihui is also placed right behind the Liang Buddha. Together these three divinities reflect the local beliefs of the Sihui people. As they migrated to Malaysia, their continued veneration served to maintain an imagined connection to their ancestral homeland and facilitate the preservation of their Sihui identity in a new environment.

Another unique feature of Ruan-Liang veneration in Malaysia relates to the incorporation of local beliefs and experiences. This is evident in the presence of the Nadu gong 拿督公 (Datuk) shrines within the Ruan-Liang temple complexes. Usually wearing a Malay dress, the figure seems to represent a local person whom the early Chinese settlers may have encountered. Such shrines are common not only in the Ruan-Liang temples, but also in the residential areas of Chinese settlements throughout Malaysia. As Tansen Sen (Sen 2019, p. 151) pointed out, "Datuk gong is a Chinese appreciation of the Malay Muslim *keramat* (miracle worker) into their religious pantheon". Tan Chee-Beng (C.-B. Tan 2018, p. 69) identifies the figure as a "Sino-Malayan earth deity or guardian deity", which reflects a hybrid cultural identity. He notes that while the deity serves a territorial function similar to the Chinese Tudi gong (God of the Earth), its unique ritual offerings and veneration practices represent a fusion of Chinese and Malayan traditions. The Nadu gong is also venerated as a god of wealth in some temples, as he is typically depicted holding a gold ingot in his left hand and a Malay dagger (kris) or staff in his right.

Besides the figures discussed previously, other deities and altars are also evident in various complexes of Ruan-Liang Buddhist temples in Malaysia. For instance, in the Kepong Yuen Leong Temple, a side hall dedicated to Maitreya is located to the right of the main hall. The plaque "Mile songzifo 彌勒送子佛" (The Child-Giving Maitreya) emphasises his role as a fertility deity worshipped by the community. It seems that this idea and practice of the Child-Giving Maitreya might be inspired by the cult of Guanyin Bodhisattva as the Child-Giving Goddess that was popular in South China and Southeast Asia (Yu 2000). Inside the main hall, besides the "two Buddhas and one immortal" mentioned previously, separate shrines for Guandi and Guanyin 觀音 are situated to the left and right of the main altar. Similarly, at the Salak Selatan Yuen Leong Temple, there are shrines dedicated to the Sixth Patriarch Huineng and Guanyin. Other Taoist deities, such as the Jade Emperor 玉皇大帝 and Taishang Laojun 太上老君, can also be found in other Ruan-Liang temples in Kuala Lumpur.

The diverse nature of these Ruan-Liang temples in Malaysia is reflected in their activities and rituals, which are a synthesis of multiple religions and beliefs, including but

not limited to the birthdays of Ruan and Liang, Chinese New Year and other festivals, and charity events. Compared to the Buddhist ceremonies and Taoist rituals, these activities are more focused on community gatherings and performances. As Sen (Sen 2019, p. 155) describes, "There are no Buddhist monks present, nor any proselytizing of Buddhist teachings at these temples." While some of these temples do house shrines for Buddhist figures like Guanyin, Maitreya, and the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, the role of Buddhism appears to be marginalised compared to the Buddhist-centric temples in Sihui. The presence of Buddhist elements in these temples is therefore more symbolic, with their function superseded by secular and culturally integrated activities that serve to connect the Sihui immigrant community in Malaysia with their ancestral homeland.

4. The Evolvement of Ruan-Liang Tradition in Kolkata

The spread and development of the Ruan-Liang tradition in Malaysia provides a necessary comparative context for examining its evolvement in South Asia. This section focuses on Kolkata, where the veneration of Ruan-Liang is analysed to reveal the adaptation and transformation of Chinese religious practices within this specific colonial urban environment. The subsequent examination will trace how foundational figures like Atchew and the early Chinese settlers of Bowbazar shaped collective memory and ritual space among the Chinese community in Kolkata. By detailing these developments through local temples, cemeteries, and trade networks, I aim to understand how a sense of belonging and continuity was constructed across cultural and geographic boundaries, focusing specifically on the unique Ruan-Liang veneration observed at a single temple in Kolkata.

The historical narrative of the Chinese community in South Asia, crucial for understanding this tradition's evolvement, conventionally begins with a person named Atchew, who is said to have arrived in British India in 1778. Soon after his arrival, Atchew received a large land grant from Warren Hastings (1732–1818), the then Governor-General of Bengal, where he set up a sugar mill and brought Chinese labourers. Located not far from Kolkata, this place later became known as Achipur. As noted above, Atchew became recognised as the ancestor of all Chinese who subsequently settled in South Asia.[8] Almost concurrently, Chinese migrants were also settling in Kolkata, the capital of British India. The first eyewitness account of the Chinese settlers in the city comes from a Vietnamese traveller called Ly Van Phuc 黎文馥 (1785–1849), who reports that there were "several hundreds" of Chinese residents in Kolkata, with the majority of them coming from Fujian and Guangdong provinces of China. He also notes that the Chinese settlers had already established their own residential area with temples dedicated to Chinese deities (Salmon 1999, pp. 383–402). An account by Englishman named Chaloner Alabaster (1838–1898) written in 1857 confirms that this Chinese settlement noted by Ly Van Phuc was in the Bowbazar area.

Calling the area a "Chinese colony", Alabaster describes the economic activities and religious institutions of the Cantonese and Hakka Chinese. According to him, the Chinese at that time were mostly "shoe-makers, opium-sellers, carpenters, cabinet-makers, and hogslard manufacturers" (Alabaster [1858] 1975, p. 369). These people had already established several temples, including one dedicated to Guandi and another to the Goddess Tianhou. Explaining the importance of the temples, he writes, "Living in and about Cossitollah and Durrumtollah, they have built a fine temple in one of its lanes, thereby constituting themselves a community, for without a josshouse there is no community in China" (Alabaster [1858] 1975, p. 370). Alabaster reports that there were three Chinese cemeteries in that neighbourhood, an indication that there were more than a few Chinese residing in the area. In regard to the trade in opium by some of the Chinese living in the area, Alabaster says that "the only other business to any extent undertaken by the shoemakers

is that of the preparation and sale of opium and *charas*, which they probably have taken to as lucrative, and reminding them of home" (Alabaster [1858] 1975, p. 377). Alabaster also notes that there were about 500 Chinese in Kolkata at that time, but very few women among them.[9]

During the second half of nineteenth century new Chinese immigrants arrived in the city. This new wave of Chinese immigration to China, ensuing from political unrest in Qing China, not only led to an increase in the number of Chinese living in the Bowbazar area, but since many of the immigrants were women and children, it also transformed the composition of the Chinese community (Liang 2007, pp. 397–410). These developments resulted in the establishment of new businesses, associations, and temples.

Religious practices among the Chinese community in Kolkata are diverse and complex, as they are at other sites of Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia.[10] On the one hand, these practices are part of traditional and folk beliefs brought to the city by the Chinese migrants. On the other hand, some religious practices were acquired after these migrants became long-term residents of the city. Examples of the first kind of religious practices include the veneration of Chinese deities such as Tianhou 天后, Guandi, and the female bodhisattva Guanyin. Some of the beliefs that were acquired in India include the worship of Atchew and the Hindu goddess Kālī. There are also significant numbers of Chinese individuals in Kolkata who have converted to Christianity and some who have become Muslim.

There are also several Buddhist temples established by Chinese migrants over several decades, albeit they date from a much later period in the history of the Chinese in Kolkata. The two main Buddhist temples frequented by the Chinese community are the Zhonghua fosi 中華佛寺 (Chinese Buddhist Temple) and Xuanzang si 玄奘寺 (Xuanzang Temple), both of which were built after 1960s. Before this, the Chinese community in Kolkata had already contributed to the establishment of Chinese Buddhist temples at various sacred Buddhist sites in India: A Zhonghua fosi 中華佛寺 (Chinese Buddhist Temple) was established in Sarnath in 1921,[11] the Zhonghua dajue si 中華大覺寺 (Mahabodhi Chinese Temple) in Bodhgaya in 1923, the Huaguang si 華光寺 (Huaguang Temple) in Balrampur in 1923, the Shuanglin si 雙林寺 (Shuanglin Temple) in Gorakhpur in 1927,[12] and the Zhongguo miao 中國廟 (China Temple) in Nalanda in 1931. In addition, a Buddhist association for the Chinese Indians, known as the Chinese Buddhist Community of India, was established in Ajmer in 1932 (Zhang 2008, p. 53; Yindu Huaqiao Zhi 1962, pp. 93, 103).

Many of the early temples were managed by the huiguans, which also administered the graveyards (*shanzhuang* 山莊) for their community members. Established in 1838, the Yixing 義興 huiguan, for example, set up a Guandi temple and managed the Yixing shanzhuang. The Siyi 四邑 huiguan, dating from 1845, built a Guanyin temple and managed the Siyi shanzhuang. Some of the other huiguans in Kolkata included the Dong'an 東安 huiguan (established in 1864), the Nanshun 南順 huiguan (established in 1894), and the Jiaying 嘉應 huiguan (established in 1907), three of which housed Guandi temples on their premises. Some of these huiguans also set up Chinese schools for their community members. It is within this context of the unique history of the Chinese in South Asia, the diversity of these communities, and the variety of religious practices they engaged in that the Ruan-Liang Temple in Kolkata must be understood.

Established in 1908 at the same time as the Huining huiguan, the Ruan-Liang Temple in Kolkata symbolised the identity of the migrants from Sihui and Guangning, as such institutions did in Southeast Asia. Similarly to the case in Malaysia, the temple in Kolkata tells the exclusive story of this specific branch of Chinese migrants, who mostly engaged in carpentry and perceived Atchew as their ancestor. The temple is indicative of the triple identity of this group of migrants: their Sihui/Guangning ancestry, their Chinese-Indian experience, and their profession as carpenters. The statues of Ruan and Liang, the spirit

tablets dedicated to Atchew and Lu Ban found inside the temple, are evidence of these overlapping identities of the Sihui migrants in Kolkata. All indications are that the temple, with the office of the Huining huiguan adjacent to it, served as a community gathering area and a veneration place for this specific group of migrants. It is unlikely other Chinese settlers in Kolkata venerated at the temple since the main deities on the altar were associated only with the Sihui region. Indeed, like the Ruan-Liang temples in Malaysia, the temple in Kolkata also served to link the migrant community with their ancestral homeland. Also like the temples in Malaysia, the Ruan-Liang Temple in Kolkata shows no evidence of any sort of Buddhist rituals or ceremonies. It should be noted, for example, that there are no prominent images of the Śākyamuni Buddha inside the temple.

This absence of Buddhist elements in the Ruan-Liang temples in Malaysia and Kolkata may have to do with the fact that the immediate concerns of the migrant groups from Sihui mostly related to their daily struggles and financial uncertainties as they resettled in foreign lands. Safety, wellbeing, and a stable future were no doubt the key yearnings of these migrants. Thus, for spiritual support to meet such wishes, they turned to their local deities and mixed their existing beliefs with what they experienced at the new sites of settlement. An additional reason for the absence of Buddhist elements could be the lack of Buddhist practices and institutions at the places these migrants settled. This included the absence of the cult of Huineng and that of a Chinese Buddhist clergy. Furthermore, these migrants, struggling with their livelihood, had no urgency to (re)discover the Buddhist heritage of Ruan and Liang. What mattered to them was the divine powers of Ruan and Liang to protect them, preserve their ancestral identity, and provide them space for communal activities in foreign lands. As such, Buddhist teachings, rituals, and ceremonies were not the key aspects of the Ruan-Liang veneration in Sihui, and as the spatial and temporal distance between their ancestral land grew greater, the only "Buddhist" element that remained at these new places of worship was the honorific title of "Buddha" attached to the names of these two figures.

5. Conclusions

The veneration of Ruan and Liang in Sihui emerged from regional circumstances and in the local beliefs that were included in local gazetteers. The two divinities served to protect the local people from the ravages of climate, political disorder, and suffering from illness. The evolution of their biographies from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, as outlined above, indicates the growing popularity in the believe in these two figures in Sihui. The association with Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, and the suffix "fo" or "Buddha" attached to the names of Ruan and Liang served to legitimise their stories and spiritual prowess. More importantly, Ruan and Liang became deeply intertwined with local religious practices, heritage, and identity. Therefore, it is not surprising that when people from the region emigrated to foreign lands, they carried their faith in the local divinities with them.

The Ruan-Liang temples and the veneration of the two Sihui Buddhas in Southeast Asia and Kolkata reflect the popular faith and beliefs of the people whose ancestors once lived in the Sihui region. However, new experiences and wishes resulted in the incorporation of foreign elements that became part of their religious practices and traditions at these sites. Together, the veneration of Ruan and Liang in Sihui, Malaysia, and Kolkata indicate the importance of popular or localised Buddhism in Guangdong in creating new religious traditions. They also reveal the long history of religious practices and emigration of the Sihui people, which often gets lost within the larger categories, such as "Cantonese", used to examine patterns of Chinese immigration. Additionally, they demonstrate the

importance of sustaining distinct identities and imaginary connections to ancestral homeland among those who have lived in foreign lands for several generations.

The Ruan-Liang temples and the continued worship of these "two Buddhas" in Southeast Asia and Kolkata embody the popular faith of Sihui migrants, while also illustrating processes of localization and reinterpretation. As new social experiences and cultural encounters unfolded, foreign ritual elements were absorbed into their practices. Together, these transregional cases highlight the role of popular or vernacular Buddhism in shaping new religious traditions and sustaining diasporic identities. They also call attention to the longer history of Sihui emigration, often obscured within broader designations such as "Cantonese migration", and the community's creative efforts to maintain a symbolic connection to their ancestral homeland across multiple generations.

Methodologically, this article demonstrates the value of combining textual analysis with sustained ethnographic fieldwork in the study of transregional religious phenomena. While archival sources and local gazetteers preserve the historical memory of the Ruan–Liang worship tradition, only field observation and community interviews reveal how this practice continues to live and evolve in the present. By situating textual evidence within the lived experience of diasporic communities, this study shows that the making of Buddhist modernity in the Indian Ocean world cannot be fully understood through texts or institutions alone; it equally requires attention to the agency of local actors who continually reinterpret and reshape their religious tradition in response to changing historical and social environments.

The case of the Ruan and Liang Buddhas invites a broader reconsideration of how "Buddhism" as a category operates in transregional and diasporic contexts. Rather than tracing a linear diffusion of canonical doctrines or institutional lineages, this study highlights a circulatory model of religious transmission, in which religious meanings are continually reconstituted through local agency and historical contingency. The transformation of Ruan and Liang from Buddhist disciples into local deities, and eventually into transnational icons venerated in Malaysia and India, reveals the porous boundaries between Buddhism, popular religion, and regional identity. Their journeys complicate the notion of a monolithic "Chinese Buddhism" and demonstrate that diasporic religiosity often functions less as doctrinal preservation than as cultural translation and adaptive remembrance. By foregrounding field-based evidence of worship practices and material culture, this study underscores the necessity of integrating ethnographic and textual approaches in order to understand how religious forms travel, mutate, and endure across space and time. Ultimately, the Ruan–Liang tradition exemplifies how mobile communities actively reshape inherited religious categories, thereby contributing to a more dynamic and plural understanding of Buddhist modernity in the Indian Ocean world.

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Notes

1 The English name for the temple that appears on its door is "Sea Voi Yune Leong Futh Church". According to some people I interviewed in Kolkata, the word "church" was used for all Chinese temples built in the city during the colonial period because the community thought that by employing it the British would exempt them from taxes and rent fees.

2 Lu Ban (507–444 BCE) was a Chinese carpenter, philosopher and military thinker. His real name was Gongshu Ban 公輸班; he was also known as Master Gongshu. Because he was born in the State of Lu, he was commonly referred to as Lu Ban. He is credited with several inventions as seen from chapters 49 and 50 of *Mozi* 墨子, including a "cloud ladder", grappling hooks and rams, wooden birds, a lifting implement for burial, and some other wooden apparatus mentioned in various other texts. All these inventions have led Lu Ban to be acknowledged as a master carpenter and the ancestor of Chinese craftsmen.

3 See Zhang (2015), *The Chinese Community in Calcutta*, for issues related to the preservation of identity among the Chinese in India.

4 Translation based on McRae, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 26 (McRae 2000); corresponding to *Liuzu dashi fabao tanjing* 六祖大師法寶壇經 (Dharma Jewel Platform Sūtra of the Great Master, the Sixth Patriarch), *T* no. 2008, 48: 349 (Zongbao 1291; *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, see Takakusu and Watanabe (1924–1932), no. 2008, vol. 48. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai 大正一切經刊行會).

5 Most of the information about Ruan and Liang and their respective temples in Sihui was collected during my field trip to the region in the period of February–March, 2009. I have also consulted the pamphlet entitled "Ruan Liang hehe erfo: Jianjie" 阮梁和合二佛: 簡介 (The Two Harmonious Buddhas Ruan and Liang: A Brief Introduction) that was distributed at the centenary celebrations in Kolkata in 2008 (Ruan Liang Hehe Erfo n.d.). I also procured a similar booklet entitled "Baosheng gusi: Lianggong shengfo" 寶勝古寺: 梁公聖佛 (The Ancient Baosheng Temple [and] The Sage Buddha Master Liang) at the Baosheng Temple (Baosheng Gusi n.d.). The latter booklet, in addition to a brief sketch of Liang's life (see below), contains quotations from the local gazetteers mentioned in this article.

6 The Chairman of the Ruan-Liang temple in Kepong mentioned this to me in the interview conducted on 5 May 2025, in Kuala Lumpur.

7 During my fieldwork in Malaysia in 2025, I obtained a pamphlet titled "*Zengjiang beiqu Ruan Liang Shengfo Miao* 增江北區阮梁公聖佛廟" (The Ruan-Liang Temple in the Jinjang North Area), which contains a brief history of the temple (Zengjiang Beiqu Ruan Liang Shengfo Miao 2006). The pamphlet was compiled in 2006 to commemorate the 137th anniversary of the temple's founding.

8 For various historical records and stories about Atchew, see Zhang (2015), *The Chinese Community in Calcutta*.

9 Pradip Sinha points out that a Kolkata police census of 1837 reported that the Chinese population in Kolkata was 362; see Sinha (1978), *Calcutta in Urban History*.

10 These religious practices among the Chinese in South Asia have been discussed in my previous publications. See Zhang (2014), pp. 429–57, and Zhang (2015), *The Chinese Community in Calcutta*.

11 On the renovation of this Buddhist temple in 1939, including a copy of a "preface" by Rabindranath Tagore entitled "Preface for the Rebuilding of a Chinese Buddhist Temple in Sarnath", see Lee (1964), pp. 54–58, 112–23.

12 Balrampur and Gorakhpur are located near the Buddhist site Śrāvastī.

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Article

The Relationship Between Education and Religion in Slovenia in the Context of Increasing Cultural Diversity: Insights from a Pilot Study on the Visibility of Minority Pupils

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Abstract

This article examines the complex interplay between plurality and neutrality in Slovenian education in the context of increasing religious and cultural diversity associated with global migration. Drawing on a pilot study conducted with five primary school counsellors working in high-diversity school environments, it explores the tensions between the normative principles of plurality and neutrality and their practical implementation in everyday school life. The aim is to highlight the concrete challenges that schools and school staff encounter when addressing religious and cultural diversity. The pilot study shows that schools react differently to religious and cultural diversity, depending on the challenges faced by pupils, staff, school management and family-school co-operation. While the study included pupils from various religious backgrounds, only certain minority groups, particularly Muslim pupils, emerged as the minority group most clearly observed in the interviews. This visibility reflects the combination of cultural and religious differences from the majority and the more explicit demands these pupils and their families raised within the school context. In contrast, Orthodox Christian pupils were generally perceived as culturally and institutionally aligned with the majority population, and their practices (such as observing their New Year or other holidays) were accommodated by the existing school system without specific challenges. It also suggests that there are different understandings of how schools should teach neutrality and plurality beyond the official curriculum. The study identifies common challenges that schools face in relation to religious and cultural diversity, some of which are closely linked to the multicultural approach to education. The challenges identified are illustrated using Muslim pupils as an example of the minority group most prominently observed in the data, while acknowledging that other minority groups may experience different or less visible challenges. The findings are therefore limited to the context observed in this pilot study and cannot be generalised to all minority pupils in Slovenia.

Keywords: plurality in education; neutral school; religion; culture; diversity

1. Introduction

In Slovenia, as in many other European countries, the phenomenon of increasing religious and cultural diversity is attributed to global migration. While the majority of Slovenians traditionally identify as Catholic, Slovenian schools are seeing an increase in the number of pupils from different cultural and religious backgrounds (Republic of Slovenia

Statistical Office 2025: SiStat[1]). Ten years ago, around 4000 immigrant pupils attended Slovenian primary schools; today, this figure is more than four times higher. According to the latest data from the Ministry of Education, 17,326 pupils with foreign citizenship or permanent residence outside Slovenia are enrolled in Slovenian primary schools this school year. The largest proportion of these pupils comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Ukraine (Jereb 2024). This demographic change raises important questions about the role of religion in education, the promotion of mutual respect and the adaptation of school policies.

This article examines the constitutional principle of the separation of religious communities and the state in Slovenia, and discusses how, in the face of religious diversity, religion is not included in the compulsory curriculum of public primary schools but is included in the hidden curriculum. Although religious education is not compulsory, pupils encounter religious topics in subjects such as history, literature and civics. Compared to other European countries with different approaches, the Slovenian system is relatively neutral in terms of the formal curriculum. However, the practices in individual schools reveal different approaches to accommodate the increasing religious and cultural diversity regarding the integration of minority pupils, which is the focus of this article.

From a sociology of education perspective, the aim of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the complex issue of the diversity and inclusion of minority pupils, exploring the interplay and potential tensions between cultural and religious diversity in Slovenian primary schools. It aims to examine how Slovenian primary schools address religious and cultural diversity in practice through hidden curricula.

2. Religion, Education and Modernity

Religion has played a key role in shaping European societies. Despite the influence of Enlightenment theories on the shaping of European modernity, institutionalized religions and established churches have maintained their influence in the public sphere. Educational systems, which are by definition institutions of modernity, are an interesting example of the peculiar coexistence of tradition (religion) and modernity in European societies (Zambeta 2008).

Historically, the relationship between religion and education in the West has been characterized by the separation of church and state, the private and public spheres, and the scientific and spiritual. This has resulted in a complex interplay of elements regarding individual rights, particularly in schools, where families have rights in relation to the state and the church. Since the Enlightenment, education has been regarded as a means of fostering modern, educated and autonomous citizens who can effectively embody the principles of freedom, liberalism and democracy.

The case of education, the freedom of expression is limited by the relationships among different social spheres (Walzer 1984). While religious freedom is seen as an individual right in the private sphere, it is more problematic in public spheres such as education. Habermas (2006), drawing on the post-secular society, considers the legitimization of religious discourse in the public sphere, especially within his concept of the "post-secular society". His approach is a middle ground that acknowledges the persistent relevance of religion while maintaining the necessary secular foundation of democratic law and democratic institutions. Habermas's core legitimizing mechanism is the institutional translation proviso, which applies differently to the informal and formal public spheres. His argument is based on the distinction between public and private spheres, and he distinguishes between informal and formal public spheres. Informal public spheres such as civil society are marked by inclusion, and citizens are allowed and encouraged to express their political views and moral convictions using their religious language (e.g., drawing on

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biblical or theological arguments). This inclusive stance respects the freedom of religion and expression, recognizes religious traditions as valuable sources of moral insight and social solidarity, and avoids placing an undue burden on religious citizens to "split" their identity. Secular citizens must, in turn, be open to the possible "truth content" of religious contributions. However, the formal public sphere requires a translation. For a religious claim to influence binding decisions (laws, judicial rulings), it must be translated into a secular, generally accessible language or public reason. This is necessary to ensure the legitimacy of the law in a liberal democracy. A law is legitimate only if it can be justified to all citizens using reasons that are equally accessible and understandable, regardless of their religious or worldview commitments. The state itself must remain neutral.

In this light, education can be defined as a public sphere, upholding the democratic and liberal ideas and the ideals of modern plural, neutral scientific knowledge. Modern educational institutions have been strongly influenced by two opposing rationalities (Weber 1978, 2004), modern, reason-based knowledge on one hand and religious on the other. Religions, per se, are not a field for epistemic study, as their teachings transcend the system of reason and cannot be refuted (Durkheim 1995). In this sense, religions are at the opposite end of the spectrum from epistemic knowledge. Despite their importance and their great influence on the foundation of European universities and educational institutions in general, religions follow a different set of regulatory ideas than epistemic subjects and modern education. In Science as a Vocation, Weber points to the polytheism of values between science and religion. He defines scientific rationality as a commitment to empirical facts, causal analysis, and the pursuit of intellectual clarity. Its ultimate value is truth and methodical mastery of the world (a process he calls "disenchantment"). Religious rationality, on the other hand, is based on ultimate value positions, which provide an internal, systematic, and coherent meaning to the world (e.g., in the form of a theodicy, or an answer to the problem of evil and suffering). Its ultimate value is salvation or ethical consistency. It tells the believer what the world means and how to live a life based on that meaning. Weber emphasizes that modern life has separated these two spheres, making their ultimate values contradictory to one another. He claims that science destroys religious meaning and religion defies scientific method. The methodical, empirical, and intellectual rationalization of the world (science) systematically "disenchants" it, replacing divine explanations with causal ones. Religious truth is grounded in faith, revelation, and experience, not empirical, objective proof. From the perspective of scientific rationality, religious knowledge is ultimately irrational because it rests on non-verifiable, ultimate values.

While Weber's argument is constructive, it tells us little about the practical implications for schools. Modern schools are not only a place of rational scientific behaviour and enlightenment ideals are not only based on the separation of the church and state, but also imply the self-limitation of both in relation to individual rights and freedoms, and the family's right to educate their children based on their particular values (cultural, religious or other) (Condorcet 1994; Durkheim 2009). The core sociological conflict can be summarized through different sets of rights. Firstly, there is the right of parents (autonomy of the family) to direct the moral and religious upbringing of their children, which often involves making choices about religious schooling or homeschooling, or demanding exemptions from certain public-school activities or curricula. Secondly, children have the right to freedom of conscience and religion, exposure to diverse viewpoints and the opportunity to develop their own autonomy, which could limit the extent to which parents can control their children's education from a religious perspective. Thirdly, the state has an interest in maintaining a secular, non-indoctrinating public education system that ensures children receive a comprehensive civic education promoting social unity and tolerance in a diverse, democratic society.

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Religious beliefs in modern societies can therefore no longer claim the explicit privileged, dominant position in terms of explaining the world, imposing values and so on, but are implicitly present through religious influences on the family and individual, and claims for their freedom of expression. In terms of educational policy, this manifests through two dominant themes. The first is connected to democracy and is seen in debates about secularization and pluralism, namely, how to effectively promote educational neutrality without marginalizing religious identity in a rapidly pluralizing, multicultural society. The second is connected to science and presents itself as a religious-secular divide, including cultural and political battles over topics such as evolution versus creationism, and the separation of church and state in public. It also analyses how these conflicts impact the quality and equity of education for all students.

In light of contemporary events, and specifically the increased flow of migrant students and their families, Western education is faced with several challenges on two axes, intersecting both of the aforementioned themes. The first axis concerns the relationship between the dominant religion and the state (in the West, the dominant religion has traditionally been Christianity). Here, we distinguish between secular and religious schools, as well as the role that the Christian religion plays in a given national educational environment. The second axis includes the intersection of other religions, presenting not only as a division of the state and church, but also as a multicultural issue. Embracing the ideal of diversity in schools implies a complex interplay of the religious and cultural practices of students and their families.

Religious and cultural diversity intersect across virtually every aspect of community life, creating a complex, mutually influential relationship. For example, Lodigiani (2020) analyses Italian multicultural schools, and shows that for many groups of students belonging to a particular religion is equivalent to belonging to a particular culture (an ethno-religious identity). This is also reflected in clothing practices related to modesty or ritual, such as the hijab, turban and sari, as well as daily practices and customs—the routines and rituals that structure everyday life. In addition, diverse dietary laws (e.g., halal and kosher) and food preparation traditions are direct religious dictates that become cultural practices, as are religious holidays (e.g., Christmas, Ramadan, etc.), which become the basis for a society's festivals and annual rhythms. Religious belief systems provide foundational moral codes that shape a culture's ethical values, family structure, views on marriage and gender roles, and social justice.

The main challenges and tasks of schools in dealing with religious and cultural diversity reflect the increasing multiculturalism in society and schools. Lodigiani (2020) argues that there are several tensions between religious and democratic values in public schools. Schools face the dilemma of being both secular and multi-faith, and promoting respect and dialogue between different religious and cultural backgrounds to create a truly safe and inclusive space for all students. Schools are faced with various constraints, such as demands that female Muslim students are not allowed to participate in multi-day school trips or sit next to male classmates, or requests to deviate from the dress code during sports activities (e.g., long trousers, no swimming) These demands highlight the power dimension of school relationships and the role of religion in shaping students' "worldview". One of the biggest challenges is to reconcile the authority of the family and the school. The family is an important factor in the religious socialization that parental responsibility brings, but parental authority is weakened in adolescence by the influence of peers and school. The imposition of religious rules by the family, especially on girls, can hinder their personal freedom and integration. As Lodigiani points out, a misconception of secularism can lead to a complete denial of religious affiliations, limiting opportunities for dialogue and critical thinking. Neutrality can lead to a "neutralization" of diversity for fear of conflict or a lack of

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appropriate means to deal with it. Social inequalities are reflected in schools, particularly in the case of immigrant children who face the transmission of disadvantage from generation to generation and have fewer opportunities despite an inclusive approach being adopted (pp. 713–17).

Schools that embody truly democratic principles should act as laboratories for dialogue, where different voices can peacefully coexist. By developing interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the school promotes mutual knowledge, respect and acceptance of differences. In this way, it becomes a "safe space" for dialogue, integration and mutual respect. By addressing and respecting religious and cultural differences as an essential part of personal identity, schools can promote integration. Dealing with conflict appropriately can be an opportunity to strengthen social cohesion and build bridges between cultures. Schools need to help pupils develop critical thinking skills and learn to debate in a climate of mutual tolerance when confronted with different views, ideas, cultures and religions. This includes the ability to think critically about their own religious identity and traditions.

To summarize, systematic attempts to secularize and displace the church in the control of education and contributed to the political construction of nation states and have continued to mark the educational policy of national educational systems from the 20th century onward. However, the process of secularization was neither universal nor equally radical in all European societies (Green 1990). While the pursuit of enlightenment is based on trust in rationality and the confinement of religion to the private sphere, it also supports the right to dissent, which is rooted in freedom of conscience and tolerance (Coulby 2005; Zambeta 2008).

3. Religion in Schools in Slovenia

In its General Comment No. 20, the CRC Committee emphasizes that schools and other institutions should respect the right to freedom of religion and that there should be a choice to participate in religious education. In most EU Member States, children receive religious education in public schools, either as a compulsory or optional subject. In most cases, the option to opt out of religious education is subject to written parental consent (EU FRA 2017). Europe is generally a secularized society, and many countries are committed to the principle of secularity. However, there is no single model for the role and teaching of religion in the education system. The diversity of interpretations of the term "secularity" is related to the diversity of approaches to the teaching (or non-teaching) of religion in European education systems. Existing research describes four main models of religious education in public schools in secularized European societies. Uriarte and Rodríguez (2023) identify the following basic models: learning out of religion, learning from or through religion and beliefs, learning about religion, and the confessional model.

The Slovenian system for teaching about religion in public schools is a mixture that partly coincides with two different models identified by Uriarte and Rodríguez (2023): learning out of religion, and learning from or through religion and beliefs. Although the first model strictly excludes specific religious education in public schools in order to ensure state neutrality and religious equality, Slovenia partially adopts this approach. In Slovenia, pupils have a compulsory ethics subject. However, they also have the option of choosing a combination of ethics and religion. It is important to mention that this combination has no denominational character. Religious phenomena are still dealt with as part of the curriculum, but on an interdisciplinary basis. This means that it is the responsibility of individual teachers to integrate religious phenomena into their subjects. This approach is in line with the principle of freedom of conscience and non-coercion with regard to religious beliefs. Slovenia also partly adopts the from or through religion and beliefs model, which sees the school system as a crucial place where one learns to

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live in a pluralistic society by exchanging different worldviews. It encourages learning from religious traditions and the development of new forms of awareness and reflection. The inclusion of religious phenomena in the curriculum is functional here, focusing on their ethical potential, ancestral wisdom and ability to promote personal well-being and social cohesion. This model requires the development of specific content and the training of specialized teaching staff by secular state institutions, not religious institutions. This approach protects the freedom of religious traditions to express their ethical perspectives and the freedom of individuals to evaluate and subscribe to particular approaches.

Despite these different models, the documents of the European institutions, such as the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (OSCE/ODIHR 2007), the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe 2008), make it clear that the secularization developing in Europe is promoting religious education. The teaching of religious and non-religious world views is seen as essential learning for life in an increasingly pluralistic society and for strengthening social cohesion. The general recommendation of the European institutions is in favor of intercultural and interreligious education (Uriarte and Rodríguez 2023).

3.1. Status of Religion in Education in Slovenia

In Slovenia, the role of religion in schools has been a controversial topic in both academic and political circles since the country declared independence in the 1990s (Gaber and Kodelja 1990). As part of the former socialist republic of Yugoslavia, there was a strict ideological understanding of religion in the public sphere, and it was perceived as an obstacle to progress not only in schools but also in general. The scientific and materialistic worldview of Marxism-Leninism is at odds with religious beliefs, and religion was seen as a promoter of superstition, an obstacle to rational thinking and a stumbling block to the development of a modern, secular socialist society. Furthermore, the socialist-communist regimes sought the complete loyalty and ideological commitment of their citizens to the state and the communist party. Religion, with its own beliefs, values and authority figures, was seen as a competitor to this total loyalty. Based on these views, socialist-communist regimes, like Yugoslavia, implemented policies aimed at restricting and ultimately eliminating religion, such as the separation of church and state.

The Roman Catholic Church once played an important role in education in Slovenia, and although education was secularized during the socialist era, some church schools remained active. Moreover, after Slovenia gained independence, the opportunity arose to re-establish public schools with a religious tradition (Kodelja 1995).

Documents such as the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (1995) had an impact on legislation and led the relationship between school and religion in Slovenia to be regulated by the constitution and legislation, which guarantee the religious neutrality of public schools and the freedom of religion and belief of the individual. This means that public schools are neutral in this regard, and thus, there is no compulsory religious education or indoctrination in them. Teaching in all subjects must be non-denominational and objective. School premises should be ideologically neutral, i.e., religious symbols must not be displayed in a way that suggests affiliation with a particular religion. The freedom of religion and belief of pupils and teachers is guaranteed. Pupils and teachers have the right to freely express their religious affiliation outside the classroom and official school activities, provided this does not interfere with teaching or the rights of others. It is also possible to teach optional lessons about religions. For example, a compulsory elective subject "Religions and Ethics" was introduced in the 7th, 8th and 9th grades of primary school. The aim of this subject is to educate pupils about different religions and ethical systems in an objective and informative way, but not to teach pupils to follow a specific

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religion (Verstva in etika 2005). Different religions are presented in terms of their historical development, main characteristics, religious symbolism and so on, although this subject has not been fully implemented in practice. However, religious education was made possible in Catholic schools, which have more autonomy in designing their curriculum and values[2] but still have to adhere to the national educational standards in the core subjects (Črnič and Pogačnik 2021).

In his work Laic School: Pro et contra (1995), Kodelja describes the educational debate at the time of the professional and political establishment of a democratic and modern state in Slovenia. The secular and neutral[3] school that was to be offered by the newly emerging democratic state was to be based on plurality and ideological neutrality. He defines a neutral school in the context of religious and ideological beliefs. It consists of ideological neutrality (the principle of secularism) which according to Kodelja, the neutrality of schools means that public schools cannot and must not take official positions on religious or life philosophies (e.g., Christianity, atheism, humanism, etc.); are inclusive and accessible to all, which means that it must not discriminate against or favor anyone on the basis of their beliefs and school must takes a "neutral stance" in the sense that philosophies of life cannot be imposed from above (e.g., the state or school authorities do not impose them on students). A neutral school is one that tries to avoid the monopoly or imposition of any single ideology (political or religious). Its goal is to enable plurality and critical assessment of all views. The emphasis is on the fact that public education is obliged to provide neutral content for "general education".

However, the author emphasizes that complete neutrality in education is neither possible nor desirable, as schools inevitably impart certain values. The fundamental question should therefore be how schools should balance pupils' different values and beliefs, and here Kodelja discusses the importance of pupils' critical thinking and autonomy in shaping their own values, with schools being a central space for promoting tolerance and intercultural dialogue. In the 1990s, arguments were made both in favour of and against school neutrality. The arguments against school neutrality point out that the ideal of neutrality is not possible as schools are already value-laden in their structure and functioning and have a responsibility to promote fundamental societal values such as tolerance, democracy and critical thinking. At the same time, they support the arguments in favour of neutrality as it should prevent indoctrination, preserve the enlightenment concept of knowledge and school, promote tolerance and avoid conflict and the imposition of moral and political views. In this context, a neutral and secular school was understood to be a school that ensures the absence of political and religious influences.

However, this latter point was and still is heavily debated. The political discourse in Slovenia is marked by continuous tension between secularist values inherited from the socialist past and enshrined through the democratic transition that resulted in the current legal framework, and the conservative demands for greater religious influence, primarily from the largest religious community, the Roman Catholic Church, articulated by right-wing political parties and seen as a vital part of national and cultural identity. The controversy began during the inception of democracy in Slovenia in 1991, and today, with the transformation of the school system in its final stage, it remains the hottest educational issue. Having passed parliamentary procedure in Spring 1996, the Education Bill and the concept of the new education system are now practical realities. The Catholic Church, society, and the state have comprised the main divisions within this national values controversy, each seeking to answer the question, what should be the role and nature of moral/religious education in the public-school curriculum (Hladnik 1997)? Both conservative parties and the Catholic Church have repeatedly called for the reintroduction of religious instruction (i.e., the Catechism) into public schools, often framing it as necessary

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to combat a perceived "moral crisis" among youth or as a fundamental right of parents, and to strengthen the cultural and national identity of Slovenians.

3.2. Balancing School Neutrality and Plurality with Social Cohesion: Between the Normative and the Practical

While the previous discussion focused on the first axis, that is relationship between the dominant religion and the state in connection to establishing democracy in a post-socialist state (Staničić 2021), we now turn to the second axis that includes the intersection of other religions, presenting not only as a division of the state and church, but also as a multicultural issue. In recent years, Slovenia has encountered an increased flow of migrant students and with it a heated political and scientific debate around integration policies, among which education is one of frequently debated political issues (e.g., Jereb 2024). Conservative discourse in Slovenia, primarily from political parties, often frames multiculturalism in public schools as an existential threat to the Slovenian national identity. These claims emphasize the fragility of the Slovenian language and culture against what is portrayed as an overwhelming influx of non-Slovenian influences. Multicultural education (or intercultural education) is seen as a vehicle for relativizing or diminishing the importance of Slovenian history, national myths, and cultural heritage in the curriculum. It is feared that public schools will cease to be primarily Slovenian language environments, thereby undermining the Slovene language's central role as the foundation of national identity. Conservatives argue that the current focus on integration, rather than full assimilation, fails to ensure adequate linguistic competence, thereby creating linguistic "ghettos" or a permanent, non-integrated underclass (e.g., Sekulović 2025). On the other hand, liberals argue that while policies *declare* integration, the practical implementation, which heavily stresses swift Slovenian language acquisition without reciprocal recognition of the students' home culture, forces a process of "quiet assimilation". This pressure creates emotional difficulties and feelings of inferiority for non-Slovenian students. The curriculum is criticized for maintaining a Eurocentric worldview and failing to adequately integrate the histories, cultures, and contributions of immigrant and minority groups. Critics argue this sends a message that belonging to Slovenia requires abandoning one's original identity. At the intersection of both the conservative and liberal views lies the challenge of interpreting the equal rights of (migrant) students and their families (e.g., Prebelič and Bačlija 2016; Total Slovenia News 2018). These political narratives are an example of the value-based problems schools face in implementing policy and exercising autonomy in relation to students' families in a diverse local environments, while waiting for systematic support from the educational authorities.

The data for Slovenia on students with disabilities and immigrants in terms of school performance (Cankar 2020) shows, among other things, that first-generation immigrants lagged behind the rest of the population in terms of performance and socioeconomic status between 2009 and 2018. This finding is also supported by international studies (OECD 2023a, 2023b). Among pupils with a migrant background, 57% of young people are categorized as socio-economically disadvantaged, compared to 25% of the overall pupil population. At the same time, in the 2022 PISA survey (OECD 2023a, 2023b), around 84% of students with a migrant background (and 3% of all other students) stated that they speak a different language at home most of the time than the one with which they took part in the PISA survey. Significant differences in performance were found, with an average difference of 60 points in favour of students without a migrant background in mathematics and 47 points in reading. Even after adjusting for the socio-economic profile of students, significant differences in performance remain, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches and support for pupils with an immigrant background. According to data from the Ministry of Education, there has been an increase in the enrolment of children with a

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migrant background, pupils and students whose mother tongue is not Slovenian in recent years (2017–2022). In the pre-school sector, the data shows an increase in the number of enrolled migrant children from 3.06% of the population in 2017 to 9.14% in 2024. In primary school programmes, there has also been an increase in the number of enrolled pupils with a migrant background from 3.77% of the population in 2017 to 8.97% in 2024. The smallest increase can be observed in secondary education, where the proportion of pupils with a migrant background in the total population was 5.4% in 2017 and 6.9% in 2024 (Ministrstvo za vzgojo in izobraževanje [Portal MVI] 2023).

The Guidelines for the Integration of Children, Pupils and Students from Other Linguistic and Cultural Backgrounds into the Slovenian Education System (2024) focus primarily on learning the Slovenian language as one of the most important factors in the integration of pupils into Slovenian schools. While language is undeniably important, the guidelines—as well as similar policy documents—do not address the intersection of religious and cultural diversity in public schools. Religious and cultural diversity in Slovenia are closely intertwined in public schools, as a person's religious beliefs often shape and are shaped by their cultural background. This intertwining presents both great opportunities and complex challenges for teachers, students and the entire school community. However, the intersection of religious and cultural diversity in public schools is a multifaceted aspect of modern education. While it presents significant challenges in terms of legal frameworks, pedagogical approaches and potential conflicts, it also offers invaluable opportunities to develop inclusive, empathetic and open-minded citizens. Effective management requires ongoing dialogue, culturally responsive teaching, clear policies and a commitment to promoting mutual understanding and respect among all members of the school community.

To summarize, Slovenia has a model of separation of the state and religious communities in public education that aims to ensure neutrality and freedom of religion. In practice, however, various questions and challenges arise in reconciling these principles, which are becoming increasingly important in the context of global migration and the integration of migrants into the Slovenian education system. The current challenges and debates are related to the practical implementation of neutrality in relation to worldviews—both religious and cultural. They arise in connection with questions about the presence of religious symbols in public schools or the way in which religious topics are dealt with in various subjects. While there is at least a basic consensus on the importance of having knowledge about different religions for living together in a pluralistic society, there is no uniform view on how this knowledge should be taught in public schools. There are still debates about whether religious education should be compulsory or optional, and what its aims should be (informative, cultural, and/or ethical). While these issues are important, they are mainly discussed in political and academic circles and are strongly influenced by the ideological and historical background of the Slovenian nation, while schools are confronted with the practical challenges of religious and cultural diversity resulting from the increasing diversity of the school population.

4. Methodology

The pilot study was designed as an exploratory first step within a broader research agenda, and therefore focuses intentionally on five counsellors from high-diversity school contexts rather than aiming for national representativeness. The aim of the pilot study was to explore the constitutional principle of the separation of religious communities and the state in Slovenia by investigating religious diversity and inclusion practices in five different primary school contexts, and to explore the interplay and possible tensions between culture and religion in primary schools. Our main research questions were as follows: How do

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Slovenian primary schools perceive cultural and religious diversity? Which challenges do they face? And how do they respond to those challenges?

Primary education in Slovenia is mostly public, compulsory, and secular. Religion is not taught as a separate subject in public schools, although topics related to cultural and religious diversity may appear in subjects such as ethics or social studies. Slovenian public schools can be described as complex environments because they bring together children from diverse socio-economic, ethnic, and religious or worldview backgrounds. This diversity often requires schools to navigate subtle tensions between inclusion, cultural expression, and the secular character of education. The challenges faced by elementary schools depend on the population structure of the school districts. In Slovenia, elementary schools are part of school districts. Each public elementary school is assigned a catchment area defined by the local community. This area is the primary mechanism that links a student's residence to a specific school. All children residing within a school's designated catchment area are legally guaranteed a place at that school. While this ensures widespread and accessible basic education across the country, parents also have the right to request enrolment for their child at a public school outside their home catchment area (Eurydice Slovenia n.d.). Consequently, the diversity of the student population differs between elementary schools, with some districts having very few migrant students and others having many. The state secretary at the Ministry of Education presented the numbers as follows: "*There are no immigrants in 35 schools, and in over 300 schools—representing 71% of all Slovenian primary schools—there are fewer than 10% immigrants. Meanwhile, 6% of schools—or 32 schools—have more than 20% immigrants.*" (Tomadouz 2024). In addition, the migrant population differs from district to district.

The study involved five school counsellors from different Slovenian primary schools. The schools were chosen from districts that have a high proportion of migrant students. In the Slovenian context, a school counsellor (svetovalni delavec) is a trained professional—usually in psychology, pedagogy, or social work—who supports pupils, teachers, and parents in matters of learning, well-being, and school climate. Counsellors are not classroom teachers but work closely with them, and can offer insights into how schools respond to diversity at the institutional level. The counsellors were chosen strategically as they are a bridge among the teachers, students, student families, local community and school management. Although the schools included pupils from various religious backgrounds, only certain minority groups, particularly Muslim pupils, emerged as particularly visible in the interviews. This visibility reflects the combination of cultural and religious differences from the majority population and the more explicit demands raised by these pupils and their families, rather than a prior selection by the researchers. Consequently, the findings of this pilot study cannot be generalised to all minority pupils in Slovenia, and the study serves primarily to illustrate challenges arising from the most visible minority groups in the participating schools. The differential visibility of minority pupils underscores the importance of considering how schools perceive and respond to cultural and religious diversity, beyond formal policies of plurality and neutrality. This observation highlights that certain minority groups may remain institutionally 'invisible' despite the existence of formal inclusion policies, suggesting that schools' responses are shaped not only by regulations but also by the perceived salience of cultural and religious differences in everyday practice.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. Given the small number of participants, the findings are not representative of all Slovenian schools but provide exploratory insights into the dilemmas schools face and the approaches they adopt when dealing with cultural and religious diversity. Despite its limited scope,

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the study contributes to understanding the terms of debate and differences in thinking that shape inclusion practices in Slovenian primary education.

4.1. Participants, Data Collection and Analyses

The pilot study comprised five interviews with school counsellors working at public primary schools in different regions of Slovenia. The schools were selected due to their high complexity in terms of religious, cultural and socio-economic diversity as well as their location in urban and non-urban areas. The anonymity of the schools and school counsellors was guaranteed.

Three of the interviews were conducted orally—two in person and one via Zoom—while the other two were prepared in writing as answers to questions sent in advance. When comparing the two formats, we found that the written responses were often more structured and stylistically polished. In contrast, the oral interviews were more spontaneous, enriched with anecdotes, personal reflections and doubts, which gave the study a more lively and direct insight into everyday school life and the perspectives of the staff. This combination of written and oral sources thus contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges that schools face and strategies they use to deal with religious diversity.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol covering key themes such as:

- Challenges arising from pupils' cultural and religious backgrounds in everyday school life, including wearing religious symbols, discussions about religion, and any conflicts or misunderstandings.
- Practices related to religious holidays, rituals, and dietary requirements, and how these are received by pupils and staff.
- Collaboration with parents from different religious backgrounds and any associated challenges.
- Adjustments requested in school activities (e.g., sports, excursions, outdoor learning, health checks, or physical contact) due to cultural or religious considerations.
- Teachers' responses to the requirement for a secular and pluralistic school environment.
- Observed differences between boys and girls in expressing religious beliefs or participating in school activities.
- Evaluation of the school's multicultural approach and effective practices in promoting tolerance and intercultural dialogue.
- Perceived tensions or challenges related to religion or worldview within the school context.

Each oral interview lasted between 45 and 60 min, was audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed.

The texts were analysed using qualitative content analysis, which focuses on the examination of manifest content (Kleinheksel et al. 2020). The application of manifest content analysis makes it possible to extract explicit and visible content from the empirical material, thereby enabling subjective interpretations that capture the essence of the text and emphasize prevailing themes and patterns. This method of analysis, which focuses on the recognizable elements of the text, formed the basis for our approach. The first stage involved delineating the units of analysis within the texts and identifying codes or concepts that best represent certain components of the responses. Patterns and similarities between these codes were then identified and aggregated. These codes were then synthesized into broader categories, allowing for a deeper understanding of the data (Flick 2020).

During the process, each interviewee was assigned a unique identification number (code) to maintain anonymity. In preparing the findings that follow, we conducted thematic coding of the five interviews. This process enabled us to gather answers to the previously

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outlined research question. Although such a limited number of interviews does not allow for generalization to all schools in Slovenia, the results nonetheless offer valuable and in-depth insights into how religious and cultural diversity is practised and understood within the school setting.

4.2. Findings

The analysis of the interviews revealed that neutrality and pluralism are relatively self-evident in Slovenian primary schools, but that practices vary from school to school. For the schools that participated in the pilot study, these differences can be explained by contextual variables that influence how neutrality and pluralism are realized in practice. Based on the pilot study we detected that practices could vary depending on the size of the school and the percentage of the population that the school perceives as part of a minority. The larger the school, the more practices are adapted autonomously by schools to ensure equal opportunities and cultural diversity in accordance with the law. However, the interviews indicate that these practices could also vary in their scope and strategic direction, depending primarily on the school leadership and the school district. Although due to the small scale of the pilot research the findings presented require further analysis, we will attempt to outline some of the issues raised that require further consideration and could explain the complexity of the topic and the possible axes of further investigation.

At the same time, the categories and codes proved to be highly overlapping and difficult to clearly distinguish in the small sample of the pilot study, which points to the complexity of the issues of understanding equality and justice in the Slovenian school space, the autonomy of teachers and schools, and the overlapping of religious and cultural elements in the context of multiculturalism of the school space.

Table 1 presents the results of the thematic coding of the interview data. Codes represent smaller units of meaning identified in the transcripts, while categories reflect broader themes that group related codes together. This hierarchical structure clarifies how individual observations and practices (codes) relate to overarching aspects of school life and diversity management (categories), enhancing the transparency and interpretability of the analysis.

Table 1. Thematic coding.

Category	Codes
Legal and Institutional Framework	Legislation School autonomy Professional autonomy
Curriculum and Teaching	Religious content in curricula Cultural elements and learning about religions in curricular and non-curricular activities
School Environment and Practices	Practised neutrality and religious inclusion Religious symbols Religious holidays Diet Cultural traditions in the school environment Language
Relations and Diversity	Family and school relations Gender

4.3. Practiced Neutrality and Religious Inclusion

The interviews revealed two main strategies that schools adopt in implementing neutrality and religious inclusion: avoidance of religious issues and active recognition of

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diversity. Both strategies were observed across the five participating schools, often adapted pragmatically depending on context, staff attitudes, and school culture.

4.3.1. Avoidance of Religious Issues

Some schools interpret neutrality primarily as avoiding explicit engagement with religion. Teachers tend not to comment on pupils' religious practices, viewing religion as a private family matter that does not affect academic performance. As one counsellor explained: "*Teachers usually avoid commenting on religion… It has no bearing on how someone performs at school. The children mostly accept that: some celebrate differently, some have a slightly different God, and there are also many atheist families.*" (Interview 3).

Other interviewees made similar observations. A counsellor from an urban school noted that legislation on neutrality is "*quite loose… which allows different schools to interpret these things in their own way*." (Interview 1). Avoidance was seen as a pragmatic way to maintain classroom harmony and prevent open conflicts. While this strategy often successfully avoids overt conflicts, it may unintentionally reduce the visibility and legitimacy of pupils' religious identities. Pupils for whom faith is an important part of daily life may feel compelled to "hide" their differences to be accepted, which can undermine their sense of belonging.

4.3.2. Active Recognition of Diversity

Other schools adopt a more inclusive approach, actively recognizing and accommodating religious and cultural diversity. This strategy includes: adapting meals to meet dietary restrictions (e.g., avoiding pork or providing vegetarian options), acknowledging and explaining different religious holidays and rituals, encouraging discussion and reflection on diverse practices and lifestyles. For example, a counsellor from an urban school reported the following: "*We try to recognize differences actively… This helps pupils feel included and normalises pluralism as part of the school culture.*" (Interview 2).

Another participant highlighted the importance of being sensitive to pupils' needs while balancing professional responsibilities: "*In practice, we must find the balance between neutrality and supporting pupils' identities… this often requires individual agreements and ongoing adjustments.*" (Interview 4).

Counsellors observe that the success of this strategy depends on staff attitudes, diversity training, and institutional support. When applied effectively, it strengthens pupils' sense of inclusion and contributes to a school culture that values pluralism.

Schools frequently mix elements of both strategies, adapting their approach according to context. A recurring pattern described as *culturalization* was observed, where staff are more sensitive to "other" cultures than to their own local or majority culture: "*We tend to overlook our own culture and religion… while 'others' are seen through the lens of difference.*" (Interview 5).

This implies that neutrality is not a fixed practice but negotiated daily by staff in response to pupil needs and school environment. Overall, these practices influence both pupils' sense of belonging and teachers' professional decision-making, reflecting the tension between legal requirements for neutrality and the pedagogical responsibility to recognize pupils' identities.

4.4. Religion in the School Environment

4.4.1. Religious Symbols

Although the Slovenian constitution and legislation guarantee freedom of religion and stipulate that teaching should be pluralistic, critical and objective (Kodelja 1995), and that it should take place without visible institutional signs of affiliation to a particular faith, practice in schools shows a more differentiated picture. Interviews with school counsellors

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show that the use of religious symbols as part of pupils' personal identity is generally not perceived as problematic or disruptive. As one of the interviewees explained: "*For example, Muslim girls wear a headscarf. These symbols are accepted at our school with understanding and respect, both by the teachers and by fellow pupils.*" (Interview 2). This openness reflects a conscious endeavour to create an inclusive environment in which personal expressions of faith are respected as long as they do not disrupt lessons or infringe on the rights of others.

Another interviewee pointed to a contrary view: "*But nobody actually wears a headscarf. I assume that wearing a headscarf would cause a stir. I can't imagine what a fuss it would make if a teacher of the Muslim faith wore a headscarf. Personally, it wouldn't bother me. In a way, a headscarf is similar to wearing a small cross around your neck—but one becomes a 'conspicuous sign of religion or otherness', while the other passes us by 'unnoticed'.*" (Interview 5).

As this quote shows, it is notable that certain symbols—especially Christian crosses—are more present but are often overlooked as something self-evident or culturally "invisible" due to historical and majority traditions. "*Of course, I would characterize our entire teaching staff in this way, because we grew up in the Christian faith. We don't really realize it,*" remarked one interviewee (Interview 2), adding that pupils sometimes wear necklaces with crosses or bring religious pictures to school, but this is rarely seen as anything special. Another interviewee makes a similar comment: "*Some children have small crosses and the like, but it has never been raised as a problem in any way*." (Interview 3).

This normalization of Christian symbols is in line with Kodelja's (1995) observation that complete neutrality in the school environment is impossible, as schools inevitably convey certain socially and culturally anchored values. The question is therefore not whether symbols are present, but how they are reflected, whether symbols of other faiths are also permitted and how the school as a community creates conditions for pluralism. In practice, all school counsellors report that most teachers follow an approach based on respect, acceptance and pragmatic action: They allow personal expressions of faith through symbols but ensure that this does not become an institutional endorsement of one faith over another.

This dialectic between formal neutrality and the actual cultural environment could point to a special feature of the Slovenian school context: on the one hand, the predominant presence of the Christian heritage as an unspoken "normality" and, on the other hand, the growing visibility of other faiths, especially through personal symbols. This combination raises important questions about where neutrality ends and pluralism begins, and how schools can encourage critical reflection to remain spaces that not only allow but actively promote an understanding of diversity.

4.4.2. Holidays

An analysis of the significance of religious holidays in Slovenian primary schools based on interviews shows a fairly clear hierarchy: Catholic holidays, which are part of the official calendar—and Easter is a holiday, but not an official state holiday—occupy a special, almost self-evident place in the school environment, while the holidays of other religions are marginalized and usually treated only as a personal matter for individual pupils and their families. The fact that Catholic holidays are "national" holidays gives them legitimacy and space in school activities, events and symbolic practices. Interestingly, however, these too often lose their religious significance and become primarily cultural or even consumer-oriented events. One of the interviewees explained this quite vividly: "*Even with the holidays, this is not really emphasized . . . Christmas is mainly about the capitalist side, isn't it? So, Father Christmas and what makes the children happy, little presents, but not really as a religious festival*." (Interview 3). Another participant expressed a similar view: "*Apart*

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from that, the children who I assume celebrate Christmas tend to think about where they're going on holiday and what presents they want." (Interview 5).

This shift towards a "secularized" celebration raises another important question: Does this really represent the neutrality of the school, or could it be a form of cultural dominance of the majority religion that has been "softened" and adapted to modern consumer logic? Religion remains visible and present, but in a form that does not disrupt the cultural framework of the majority and does not require reflection on pluralism.

Holidays of minority religions, on the other hand, are generally not included in the school calendar or in official events; they only find a place if an individual teacher or a group of pupils is sufficiently motivated to present them. A good example of this is an interviewee who described how he once organized a performance and culinary corner with some pupils: "*Once I persuaded some girls to sing a Macedonian folk song on a holiday. . . another time, some mums came, and we did a culinary tasting. But then it just stopped*." (Interview 1). This implies that such initiatives remain exceptions and often depend on the personal commitment of teachers rather than being part of a systematic, school-wide multicultural approach. While this "project-based" or "folkloric" approach to minority holidays may contribute to greater visibility, it could also reinforce power relations where the majority tradition is taken for granted, while others appear only as an "add-on" or cultural curiosity.

Some more inclusive practices were also highlighted. One interviewee from an urban setting described how they try to use public holidays as an opportunity for intercultural learning: "*In Slovenia, when we celebrate holidays like Christmas or Easter, we always offer pupils the opportunity to introduce the holidays of their own faith. . . We talk about different ways of celebrating, traditional food, customs, symbols. . .*" (Interview 2). She believed that this approach creates space for respect and dialogue while highlighting shared values (compassion, family, gratitude) that can serve as a bridge between different traditions. However, even this approach does not change the basic structure: the national calendar still determines which holidays are "officially" significant, while others remain private. In practice, schools included in the analyses usually allow pupils to be absent on these days but rarely celebrate them actively or recognize them equally.

At the same time, schools often struggle with the silent presence of dominant religious practices that are so taken for granted they are not even recognized as "religious". One interviewee from an urban school highlighted precisely this implicit aspect of dominant religion: "*Of course, we don't celebrate Christmas in the school in the strict sense, but it is interesting that everyone just says: 'Merry Christmas' In school, we officially celebrate Independence Day and Unity Day just before Christmas, but the whole school is decorated with Christmas decorations, sleighs, snowflakes, and so on. It seems that for many this is both an unspoken celebration and anticipation of Christmas, even if no one really mentions it.*" (Interview 5). She also pointed out the problem of rituals that are not "ours" being misunderstood: "*During Ramadan, for example, some children fasted, and I noticed that some teachers in the canteen commented on this. The problem is that these children must be in the canteen during lunch, and the fact that they don't eat, even though they normally do, attracts attention, and they are not allowed to be anywhere else.*" (Interview 5). One school counsellor (Interview 1) mentioned that Orthodox Christian pupils are permitted to stay home to celebrate their New Year according to the Julian calendar. Parents usually exercise this right according to the 53rd Article of Elementary School Law (ZOsn). Article of the Elementary School Law (ZOsn) states that pupils may be absent from class without their parents having to provide a reason for the absence, provided they give advance notice.

These observations give rise to a possible tension between the principle of neutrality and the reality of cultural dominance: schools often believe they are acting neutrally because religious holidays are not explicitly treated as religious, but as "cultural" or "consumer-

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oriented". In this way, however, they reproduce a hierarchy in which the majority religion is part of the national identity, while others may remain marginalized.

4.4.3. Dietetic Practice

The interviews show that schools generally try to cater to dietary restrictions (e.g., not eating pork or being vegetarian), especially if enough pupils request this or if the kitchen facilities allow such adaptations. In this area too, schools are endeavouring to strike a balance between the normative framework and practical feasibility. Pork is often not served because it is not considered nutritionally important by health experts, and vegetarian options are offered in some places: "*We offer vegetarian dishes, veal and chicken. We don't know exactly whether the meat is slaughtered according to religious regulations or not. But we definitely don't serve pork.*" (Interview 1). Some schools make a special effort to provide inclusive meals that consider religious and health dietary needs: "*Our goal is to make every student feel accepted. By respecting religious practices, we strengthen the sense of belonging and teach tolerance*." (Interview 2).

Elsewhere, councillors report only minimal adjustments: "*If pork is on the menu, these pupils simply don't eat the meat and eat the rest of the meal. We don't prepare special halal or kosher meals because that would be too complicated, but the children accept it.*" (Interview 3). And in some cases there are no adjustments at all: "*I think the diet is organized according to the Catholic framework. You don't notice that at all.*" (Interview 5).

The interviews indicate that the approach to religiously motivated nutritional needs in Slovenian public schools is not uniform, but is possibly characterized by three dominant rationalities. Some schools consciously cultivate an inclusive practice by considering food as an important part of pupils' identity and as a means of promoting acceptance, respect for diversity and education for tolerance. In these settings, vegetarian meals, pork-free meals and other adaptations are offered, with teachers, parents and kitchen staff actively working together. Other approaches are more pragmatic and minimal: adjustments are made only to the extent that they are absolutely necessary—often pork is simply removed from the menu, or pupils eat only side dishes on days when pork is served, with no special alternatives. In these cases, religious dietary rules are often seen primarily as a logistical challenge that is difficult to manage systematically. A particularly interesting third rationality is based on professional, especially medical, arguments, as the exclusion of pork is justified on health grounds, as it is not considered a nutritionally important food. This approach attempts to legitimize religious requirements through a neutral, professional perspective.

These different approaches could reflect how schools deal in practice with the tensions among respecting cultural and religious diversity, complying with the legal framework and overcoming the practical limitations of school catering.

4.4.4. Cultural Diversity

As society and local communities become more culturally diverse, schools are faced with opportunities and challenges arising from the different cultural traditions of pupils, which, as the analyses indicate, are difficult to separate from their religious backgrounds. Some schools have a more diverse population than others. As one interviewee noted:

> "*In our school, where we have pupils from 22 different countries with different mother tongues, cultures and religious affiliations, we regularly encounter different views, customs and values. This diversity brings with it an invaluable richness but also requires a thoughtful and sensitive approach in our daily teaching work. The challenges we face are mostly related to ensuring equal inclusion of all children, adapting certain activities (e.g., nutrition or the organization of nature schools) and making other children and adults aware of the importance of respecting diversity; at our school, we recognize the importance*

> *of cultural and religious diversity, so we look at holidays not only through the prism of the national calendar, but also through a broader intercultural lens. When we celebrate holidays such as Christmas or Easter in Slovenia, we always offer pupils the opportunity to present their own faith. We talk about the different ways of celebrating, traditional foods, customs, symbols and the messages that each holiday brings."* (Interview 2)

There is also the aspect of co-operation between school and family, which involves a multicultural approach. Due to the different cultural aspects schools face, schools try to adapt to the specific needs of families, as noted by the same interviewee.

> *"In most cases, parents of pupils with different religious and cultural backgrounds have no special requirements. An exception to this are the rare individual cases where parents do not include their children in multi-day activities outside school, e.g., in nature schools, due to their religious or cultural beliefs. We always respect such decisions and treat them with understanding, as it is important to remain sensitive to different family values. . . .. In such cases, we always proceed with understanding, with the desire to find solutions together that are in the best interests of the child. We try to be sensitive to the needs of the parents as we believe that considering their cultural and religious background is crucial for the successful integration of children into a new environment."* (Interview 2).

Another interviewee explained: "*There are some pupils who do not celebrate their birthday for religious reasons. We try to respect the wishes of the families and offer the pupils various opportunities to organize some kind of celebration so that they do not feel excluded. Especially the younger pupils.*" (Interview 1).

Another complex issue which emerged, is the (religious or cultural) values associated with expectations of children's academic achievement. To ensure equal opportunities for all pupils, schools need to work with parents to create an inclusive environment in which the child can flourish. As the schools reported, this can sometimes be difficult due to language barriers and cultural and religious gender roles. One of the interviewees reported an experience where the father of a student (who comes from a strongly patriarchal culture) did not want to speak to a female counsellor (Interview 3). In order to help the student and maintain good relations with the family, the school had to call in a male counsellor. Another interviewee also stated that communication with the mothers is sometimes easier, but there were several cases where agreements made with the mothers were overruled by the fathers (Interview 4). Although patriarchy cannot be linked exclusively to a particular religion, it is more common in families with more traditional religious beliefs.

5. Discussion

The results of the pilot study reveal a potential complex interplay of elements, suggesting that further research is needed on various aspects of religious and cultural diversity in Slovenia. However, our main conclusion at this stage is that religious diversity in schools is related to the integration of pupils with a migrant background and that religious diversity among pupils coincides with minority status. While the formal curriculum is governed by the principles of neutrality and plurality in education (ZOsn n.d.; ZOFVI n.d.), the hidden curriculum is subject to different interpretations and practices, depending on the school. Our main findings highlight the overlap of some key themes that require further investigation.

The findings of this pilot study indicate two predominant types of rationality in relation to the integration of migrant populations in Slovenia. These can be interpreted through Weber's (1978) conceptual distinction between different forms of rationality, which can also be applied to understanding practices of school plurality and neutrality.

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While we recognize that religious and cultural diversity is not exclusively related to migration, it is increasingly becoming a topic of discussion due to the increased diversification of the Slovenian population because of increased migration. Although Slovenia experienced an influx of migrants after the declaration of independence, most of them came from the former Yugoslav republics due to the Balkan conflicts. They were only marginally recognized as a specific social group, and therefore overlooked in integration practice (Mlinar and Peček 2024; Vižintin 2017).

Studies (e.g., Medvešek et al. 2022) also show that culture and language are an important part of Slovenian identity, and that the diversification of the Slovenian population has brought with it a range of different cultural practices, languages and ethnic diversity. Forty-four percent of the Slovenian population see this as a threat to their indigenous culture, and this figure has risen since 2013. This suggests that a relatively high proportion of people see cultural diversity as a threat to Slovenian culture, especially in light of research showing that the core understanding of diversity in Slovenia is based on knowledge of the Slovenian language (Zgaga and Kos 2017). Some of our interviewees pointed out that headmasters and school districts that perceive diversity as a threat and a nuisance are less inclined to take a structured and committed approach to integrating immigrant children into the school community. They provide only the bare essentials, do not promote adequate staff training and rarely engage in projects that address multiculturalism and integration. This further hinders the integration process, which is already exacerbated by language barriers and cooperation between family and school (Medarič et al. 2022; Pucelj and Gorenc Zoran 2024).

As the researchers also note, truly inclusive schooling would require a shift from tolerance to recognition of diversity. Ermenc (2005) argues that Slovenian public primary schools, through both their stated and hidden curricula, unintentionally cultivate an ethnocentric and Eurocentric worldview when it comes to valuing other cultures. This approach runs counter to the stated aims of promoting intercultural understanding and appreciation, and contributes to the social marginalization of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, even in subjects where pluralistic and intercultural aims are emphasized, there is a significant discrepancy between the stated content and actual teaching practice. The focus is often shifted back to "national" objectives, which in turn reinforces ethnocentric and Eurocentric views in the way pupils are taught to judge other cultures. However, some schools are already successfully pursuing this goal by introducing pupils to the cultural traditions of their peers, involving families in an inclusive school environment and adopting a multilingual approach where possible (Kos et al. 2021; Gaber et al. 2019).

The religious neutrality of Slovenian schools includes the exclusion of any religious symbolism on school grounds, but there are no rules against religious symbols that children bring to school, including dress codes (e.g., headscarves. . .). With regard to the prohibition of religious education in public schools, the Law on the Organization and Financing of Education (ZOFVI n.d.) explicitly prohibits religious activities in public kindergartens and schools. This includes denominational religious instruction, the presence of teaching staff or teachers appointed by religious communities and the organization of religious services.

Religious symbols in schools remain a sensitive issue in Slovenia, especially in the context of maintaining the secular nature of public education. Although the law does not explicitly prohibit the wearing of religious symbols by pupils, many Slovenian legal scholars believe that their visible display could conflict with the state's obligation of religious neutrality. In practice, this has led to a cautious approach, with schools generally endeavouring to maintain religious neutrality. Furthermore, it is generally recognized that religious symbols—such as crosses or other religious objects—should not be present

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in shared school spaces such as classrooms, as their presence could be interpreted as a violation of the secular nature of public institutions.

Dietary habits are an interesting example of how schools adapt to the religious and cultural needs of their pupils, and although there are no specific regulations that oblige them to do so, 40% of schools do not include pork in pupils' meals (NIJZ 2021). This is an increasingly discussed topic among families who want a special diet for their children for non-religious and non-medical reasons (e.g., vegetarian). The dietary aspect of diversity is highly regulated by the medical profession. Whilst pork is not considered essential to a healthy diet, vegetarian and other meat-free diets are not supported in primary schools, and only 23% of schools offer such meals. These quiet compromises are possible if sufficient staff are available and the school is open-minded.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of interviews conducted in this pilot study, carried out in five participating schools, shows that schools navigate a tension between legally prescribed neutrality and the practical inclusion of religious and cultural diversity. Schools adopt different strategies, ranging from more inclusive approaches—such as adapting meals, acknowledging diverse religious holidays, and encouraging dialogue—to those that treat religion primarily as a private matter. These differences highlight how personal convictions, experiences, and the openness of staff and school management shape strategies for managing diversity, rather than reflecting a uniform institutional policy.

Although limited in scope, the pilot study suggests some potential issues worth exploring in this context:

1. Practicing neutrality and religious inclusion: Schools manage religious diversity through two main strategies, often applied pragmatically—avoiding religious issues or actively recognizing diversity. The avoidance strategy treats religion as a private matter. While it can prevent open conflict, it may lead pupils to hide their religious identity, undermining their sense of belonging. The active recognition strategy promotes inclusion by formally accommodating differences (e.g., dietary requirements and acknowledgement of religious holidays). Its success relies heavily on staff support and training. A pattern of "culturalisation" was observed, where staff are more sensitive to non-majority cultures but may overlook their own majority/local culture and religion. Ultimately, neutrality is a daily, negotiated practice that reflects the tension between legal requirements and the pedagogical need to recognise pupils' identities.
2. Religion in the school environment:
    - 2.1. Religious symbols: Personal symbols, such as small crosses or headscarves, are generally accepted. However, Christian symbols are often overlooked as "invisible" or "self-evident" due to historical and majority traditions, reflecting the impossibility of complete neutrality. In contrast, symbols of minority faiths may be perceived as a "conspicuous sign of otherness." Teachers generally adopt a pragmatic approach, allowing personal expression while avoiding institutional endorsement of any single faith.
    - 2.2. Holidays: Catholic holidays are official and prominent but often celebrated in a secularised way. Minority holidays are largely marginalised and treated as private matters, gaining recognition mainly through the personal, project-based efforts of motivated teachers. Some schools use holidays for intercultural learning, yet the national calendar still determines official significance.
    - 2.3. Dietary practices: Approaches to religious dietary needs vary. Some schools actively accommodate needs (e.g., vegetarian or pork-free options), others

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make minimal adjustments only when necessary, and some justify dietary exclusions through neutral, health-based arguments rather than religious ones.

3. Cultural diversity: Increased diversity poses challenges, particularly in ensuring inclusion and adapting activities. Schools attempt to respect family decisions, such as non-participation in nature schools. Patriarchal values, sometimes linked to traditional religious beliefs, can complicate school–family cooperation, for instance by requiring male staff to negotiate with fathers or overruling agreements made with mothers.

The pilot study underscores the need for refinement of the research instrument. Future steps could include developing and standardising the interview protocol; testing the clarity and neutrality of questions; and identifying thematic areas for deeper exploration. Expanding data collection to a larger number of respondents and additional staff profiles—such as classroom teachers, subject teachers, and school leaders—would provide a more comprehensive understanding of practices and perspectives across Slovenian schools. Systematic coding and thematic analysis will be crucial to capture both recurring patterns and individual variations. Future data collection will also need to be expanded to a larger number of schools with differing demographic compositions, in order to capture a broader range of minority experiences—including those of groups that were not present in the current sample. Such diversification would improve the instrument's ability to reflect the multi-confessional landscape described in national statistics and allow for a more systematic analysis of how schools navigate religious and cultural diversity under varying local conditions.

Limitations

Our study is based on data collected in a limited number of primary schools, each associated with its legally defined catchment area, which shapes the composition of its pupil population. Religious and cultural minorities are unevenly distributed across Slovenian municipalities, and several minority groups identified in national statistics were not present in the participating schools at the time of data collection. Consequently, our analysis focuses on the minority groups represented in our empirical material. While pupils with Muslim backgrounds were the most consistently present across the participating catchment areas and therefore constitute the central empirical lens, the study does not exclude other minority pupils; rather, it reflects which groups emerged as most visible in the interviews.

The differential visibility of minority pupils underscores the importance of considering how schools perceive and respond to cultural and religious diversity, beyond formal policies of plurality and neutrality. This observation highlights that certain minority groups may remain institutionally 'invisible' despite the existence of formal inclusion policies, suggesting that schools' responses are shaped not only by regulations but also by the perceived salience of cultural and religious differences in everyday practice. The findings of this pilot study cannot be generalised to all minority pupils in Slovenia, and the study serves primarily to illustrate challenges arising from the most visible minority groups in the participating schools. Nevertheless, they provide valuable exploratory insights into how schools interpret neutrality and inclusion in practice.

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Notes

[1] The religious composition of the population in Slovenia is based on data from the last census (the last one that included a question about religion was in 2002) and subsequent estimates, as there is no obligation in Slovenia to publicly declare one's religious beliefs.The main religions in Slovenia (according to data from various sources relating to censuses and estimates) are:

- Roman Catholic Church: Represents the largest proportion of believers; according to the 2002 census, this proportion was approximately 57.8% of the population.
- Atheists (non-believers) and those who are undecided: Their share has increased over time and, according to some estimates, ranges between 10% and 20% or even more.
- Orthodox Christianity: Represents approximately 2% to 3% of the population (mainly members of the Serbian community).
- Islamic community: Represents approximately 2% to 3% of the population (mainly immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo).
- Evangelical (Protestant) Church: Represents approximately 0.8% to 1% of the population (mainly in the Prekmurje region).
- Other religions.

Data on migration for 2023 and 2024 shows that most children aged 7–15 come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Kosovo, Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

[2] Religious education based on confession is a compulsory subject.

[3] The concept of neutral school is used hereafter in accordance with Kodelja's understanding.

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Back to the Roots? Tengrism as a Challenge to Islam in Contemporary Türkiye

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Abstract

While new religious movements are increasingly widespread worldwide, a recent case emerged in Türkiye. Based on the allegations about the rise of Tengrism—the religion of ancient Turks—among the Turkish society and the increasing visibility of Turkish Tengrist accounts on various social media platforms, the question of whether there is a new challenge to the dominance of Islam in Türkiye or not arose. While there is little information about the presence of a Tengrist movement in Türkiye, social media, as the only ground of their public visibility, stands as the sole source of information about this phenomenon. In this sense, with the aim of analyzing the Tengrist movement in Türkiye, 21 social media accounts that frequently post about Tengrism have been studied with respect to the discourses used in their posts. To this aim, the critical discourse analysis technique has been applied, and the discourses of these Tengrist accounts have been categorized and analyzed under three main discursive themes. Reading the findings in these discursive themes in accordance with the political developments in Türkiye, it has been concluded that the Tengrist movement in Türkiye is an outcome of political and cultural responses by certain segments of Turkish society and that it yet lacks the necessary grounds to turn into a new religious movement while possessing potential in this sense.

Keywords: Tengrism; Islam; Türkiye

1. Introduction

Religion has undoubtedly been one of the most significant factors in shaping the cultures of human societies since the earliest beginnings of social life. From the earliest belief systems, which Emile Durkheim referred to as elementary forms of religious life (Durkheim 1995), to the polytheistic and monotheistic religions of later eras, religion has always been dominant and functional at the very core of social organization. Today, while a considerable majority of the world's population identifies with religious identities rooted in centuries-old belief systems such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, new challenges to the dominance of these religions, which have emerged as alternative beliefs, have become increasingly visible since the 1950s. While these new alternative belief systems have been generally categorized as "new religious movements" in the social science literature, a vast majority of them have their origins dating back centuries or millennia, born as revivals of various pagan religions practiced by peoples of earlier ages. These religious revival movements, referred to as neo-paganism in general, have been presenting a huge variety among themselves:

> "Under the Pagan umbrella, however, the relative importance of ecology, magic, ethnic politics and indigenous tradition varies significantly, and there is a vast diversity of traditions. Some—like Wicca and Druidry, which originated in Britain,

> and neo-Shamanism and Goddess spirituality, which originated in the USA—have spread via literature, the movement of people and the internet to countries throughout the world where they have been adapted to local landscapes, seasonal cycles and cultures by local practitioners. Other traditions, more common in northern and eastern Europe, are often referred to as 'Native Faiths' (also 'indigenous', 'ethnic' or 'traditional religion') by their followers, and are more geographically and culturally restricted, tending to emphasize ethnic politics, local histories, and indigenous folklore and traditions." (Rountree 2014)

The category, namely "ethnic religions" mentioned above, presents us with a typical belief system frequently adopted by many ethnic groups throughout history, which emerged and developed as the authentic religion of a certain ethnic group. This authenticity is the main characteristic in determining the difference between ethnic religions and universal religions like Christianity and Islam:

> "Religions can be classified and systematized with reference to a wide number of criteria. One basis of classification distinguishes between universal and ethnic religions. The former category consists of religions which have the ambition to spread worldwide and to attract as many adherents as possible, whereas the latter is made up of religions which are confined to a specific ethnic group and do not seek to attract new adherents outside this group. Also, ethnic religions are often, but not always, limited to a geographically confined area." (Park 2005).

Within the wave of neo-paganism, various cases of ethnic religion revivals have been observed throughout the world. The case of the worshippers of ancient Greek gods and goddesses in modern-day Greece (Miller 2007) and the revival of the ancient Nordic religion under the name Asatru in Iceland, Germany, and Sweden (Von Schnurbein 2016) are two examples of European ethnic-religion revivals. However, such attempts to revive ancient ethnic religions have not been unique to Europe, and similar cases have also emerged in other regions of the world.

One of the ethnic religions whose revival has been apparent in various countries is Tengrism, or Tengrianism, a belief system identified by its proponents as the religion of the ancient Turkic peoples of Central Asia. Accordingly, the proponents of this movement claimed that, Islam, as the dominant religion in these countries, had for long centuries led to a kind of cultural assimilation among these Turkic peoples who, under the influence of Islamic/Arabic culture, had left their original cultural origins behind and that through the revival of ancestral ethnic religion of Tengrism, a necessary cultural refreshment could be possible (Laruelle 2007).

In defining the ancestral ethnic religion of Turkic peoples, many scholars found it problematic to determine whether Tengrism was the dominant religion of the ancient Turks. This problematic situation emerged from two facts. First, ancient Turks, as an overall ethnic group, lived under the rule of different dynastic states spanning a large territory, and in each state at different historical periods, various religions such as Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Tengrism were adopted by these dynasties. Secondly, the historical knowledge related to the religions of ancient Turks emanated from a large variety of different sources from different timelines, like ancient Roman, medieval Chinese and modern Russian records, therefore leading to a kind of chaotic bundle of information which makes it hard to reach an overall generalization in determining the dominant religion of ancient Turks before Islam (Gömeç 2003). Based on the epitaphs from the Gokturk Kaganate (552–744 A.D.) which referred to a cosmic creator named *Kök Tengri*—Sky God, or God of the blue sky—(Gömeç 2003) and the long-time maintained worship of this deity among some present time Turkic

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tribes in the Yakutsk region of Russia, Tengrism has been identified as the ethnic religion of ancient Turks by the proponents of these revival movements in various Turkic states.

Tengrism has been identified by various scholars as a belief system that is based on a kind of monotheism with Tengri as the creator, but at the same time including certain pagan elements like earth spirits (or angelic figures) such as Umay, the protector of families and babies, water spirits, and spirits of the ancestors (Talgat and Azmuhanova 2015). According to Doerfer, this cultural synthesis was the outcome of a cultural transformation in which the worship of natural forces evolved towards a monotheistic belief, but certain elements and figures of the previous beliefs had been maintained through their integration into Tengrism (Talgat and Azmuhanova 2015).

While the earliest Tengist revival movements emerged in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan during the 1990s following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the case of a similar Tengrist revival became a topic of public debate, especially on social media in Türkiye, since the late 2010s. However, unlike the institutionalized and publicly known Tengrist movements in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the Tengrist case in Türkiye still remains unclear, considering the lack of institutional grounds and the fact that its public visibility is yet limited within social media.

Allegations about the rise of Tengrism in Turkish society first emerged in the late 2010s, when a Turkish citizen named Burhanettin Mumcuoğlu applied to the court to be officially registered as a Tengrist (Erdem 2022). Following this event, the question of whether Tengrism was a new phenomenon in Turkish society became a topic of public debate. The increasing number of social media accounts advocating the necessity of a cultural revival of Turks through Tengrism has served as a basis for this issue's worthiness of research. The increasing use of cultural elements and discourses related to pre-Islamic Turkish culture, mostly in the form of Tengrism, the ancient religion of ethnic Turks, contains elements that constitute a challenge to Islam. This new trend can also be interpreted within the context of political polarization between the politically conservative and secular segments of Turkish society.

Considering this new trend on social media, the aim of this study is to analyze the discursive themes used in posts by Tengrist social media accounts, with the aim of revealing the cultural and political elements and conditions underlying this phenomenon.

While there are various studies on Tengrism and its general characteristics (Güngör 2013; Öztürk 2013; Karakaş 2014), no academic study has yet been published on the case of the Tengrist movement in Türkiye. While this situation probably owes to the fact that public visibility of Tengrists in Türkiye is still very limited and that they are only becoming active on social media, this study also aims to serve as a starting point for further studies on this subject.

2. Materials and Methods

In this qualitative study, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) technique has been used to analyze the discourses of Tengrist social media accounts in Türkiye. Critical discourse analysis is a methodological approach developed by pioneer academics like Teun A. van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, and Theo van Leeuwen, who identified discourses as meaningful and purposeful elements which can be found in written, oral, and visual forms. The basic aim of applying CDA is to reveal what is hidden in and what the discourse itself means. Within the main framework of CDA, it is assumed that beneath all discourses lies a hidden, fundamental thought or ideology (Eagleton 1991). Among these pioneer academics mentioned above, van Dijk (2000) has emphasized the mutual relationship between discourses and ideology, such that, while discourses influence the reproduction of ideologies, ideologies also shape the development of discourses. Van

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Dijk, while defining the main elements within all discourses, emphasized the element of contrast, which, according to him, existed within all discourses due to the dialectical nature of ideologies. Contrast, as the polarizing instrument in the discourse, refers to the distinction between in-group and out-group elements, which is embodied in a form of othering in which the discourse is structured and shaped with an emphasis on the duality of "us" and "them" (van Dijk 2000). Based on observations of the sample in this study, which include this contrast element, and given the potential for ideological influence, van Dijk's CDA model has been applied.

Given that there is yet little qualitative or quantitative data on the alleged Tengrist movement in Türkiye, the sample for this study consists of the only apparent dataset currently available: social media posts by Tengrist accounts in Türkiye. Following a thorough review of popular social media platforms in Türkiye, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X, TikTok has been chosen as the research universe to be studied, given the relatively higher intensity and functionality of Tengrist accounts on this platform compared to others. To this end, accounts with fewer than 1000 followers have been excluded, and a total of 21 accounts that regularly post Tengrist content have been analyzed. These accounts have been reached through searches with the keywords #*tengri*, #*tengricilik* and #*tengrizm*. As of 1 February 2026, the account with the highest number of followers was 54,000, and the account with the lowest number of followers was 1404. These 21 anonymous accounts, together, have an average of 12,118 followers.

Posts by these accounts are mostly videos that include text overlaid on images fixed in the background, sometimes accompanied by authentic songs in Turkic languages. Images mostly depict Turkish cultural figures, such as shamans and wolves. It has also been noticed that some accounts repost each other's content, but apart from this, there is no other sign of direct interaction or communication between them. Since the aim of this study is to analyze the discourses of these Tengrist accounts, comments by TikTok users on the posts have been excluded from the sample of this study. Discursive material has been retrieved from the texts in the posts, and the author has translated them from Turkish to English. Discourses in these accounts have been categorized according to the contrast elements integrated into the posts.

3. Results

While analyzing the discourses in the sample of this study, the contrast element becomes evident across three main themes. Although these three discursive themes are highly interlinked, it is more accurate to analyze them under separate titles.

3.1. Discursive Theme: Arabs' Religion

Magliocco (2009), while referring to native faith groups in the US, stated that some of these groups claimed that their genetic heritage created a birthright to the use of cultural materials, thus limiting their religions within the boundaries of ethnic or tribal ties (Magliocco 2009). This attitude is also evident in certain ethnic religions, such as Judaism worldwide, Hellenism in Greece, and Tengrist movements in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. While establishing a direct connection between ethnicity and religion in identifying a collective identity, other religions, especially universal ones like Islam and Christianity, are categorized as the "other" in defining the cultural boundaries between in-group and out-group entities, thus aiming to preserve the ethnic part of the collective identity by strengthening it with a belief system accessible only by the members of that ethnicity and thus, eliminating the possibility of any "outsider" entry into the community through the use of an universal religion.

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This attitude or strategy, which is very common in ethnic religions, is also visible in the posts by Tengrist accounts in Türkiye. Frequent use of phrases like "Tengri is the God of Turks" reduces Tengri to an ethnic or tribal deity and claims that Tengrism is the belief of Turks only. While emphasizing the ethnic essence of Tengrism, such posts also develop a contrast by placing Turks and Tengrism on one side and Arabs and Islam on the other. While developing such a contrast, these expressions, along with defining the Arab and Islam as the foreign other, most of the time present a tendency towards dismissing Islam as a universal religion and reducing it to the ethnic religion of Arabs. In this respect, phrases like "Arabs' religion", "Arabian tales" and "Arabs' God" are frequently used in such posts:

> "The God who sends his messages in Arabic is called the Arabs' God." (TikTok, GökTürk 2025a)

> "Instead of the fairy tales from the desert[1], believe in the voices of your ancestors." (Tiktok, Göklü.Kam 2025a)

> (quoting the Mongolian monarch Hulagu Khan in his speech to the Arab envoys who invited him to Islam[2]) "If your God can not speak Turkish, then he is no God. If he speaks only Arabic even though he can speak Turkish, then he is only the Arabs' God" (TikTok, Asil Türkler 2025)

As seen in these examples and in many others reviewed within this study, Islam is presented as the means of a foreign culture that, through Turks' conversion to Islam, deeply damaged and dominated Turkish identity. Therefore, these posts often stress a call to return to the cultural roots embodied in Tengrism. The target mass of this call becomes evident within the second discursive theme analyzed below.

3.2. Discursive Theme: Arabization

Regarding ethnic-religion revivals worldwide, there is a considerable reaction from proponents of ethnic religions towards the universal ones dominant in their home countries. These reactions become apparent in either cultural or political claims that condemn universal religions as corrupted or assimilating structures. For instance, the cases of Tengrist revivals in Kazakhstan (Bulan et al. 2025) and Kyrgyzstan (Biard and Laruelle 2010) condemned Islam as an element that for a long time had degenerated the Kazakh and Kyrgyz national identities. Similarly, some branches of the Odinist movement in the USA had claimed that the Christian Church had been taken over by non-white entities, and for them, Odinism served as a means of preserving the racial homogeneity of white Americans by denying access to other racial groups to this new religious movement (Dobratz 2001). A similar reaction, which emphasizes the relationship between ethnicity and religion within the context of collective identity, can be read through the expressions used by Tengrist accounts on TikTok in Türkiye.

In the verbal expressions used in social media posts about Tengrism in Türkiye, which constitute the sample of this study, a frequent use of the term Arabization is evident. According to these expressions, Turks, as a separate ethnicity, had become kind of Arabized during the centuries following their conversion to Islam and had lost and forgotten most of their cultural norms and values by replacing them with Islamic/Arabic ones. Associating Islam totally with Arabness on cultural grounds, as seen in the first discursive theme, Islam is generally presented as a religion that deeply altered Turkish culture in a negative way, condemning Turks to losing their original identity and becoming assimilated by the Arabic/Islamic culture.

This claim of cultural assimilation becomes evident in various examples of discourses shared in posts on social media, such as:

> "Quran is the assimilation book written by Arabs." (TikTok, Göklü.Kam 2025b)

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"Minaret[3] is the tombstone of Turkishness." (Tiktok, Göklü.Kam 2025c)

"Damn him, Nizam-ül Mülk[4] who spread Arabs' poison in madrasas[5] as so-called education." (Tiktok, Göklü.Kam 2025d)

Either in these exemplary expressions, which sound highly hostile and radical in the first place, or in other examples, which sound relatively more moderate, there is a direct claim of Turks losing their Turkishness by adapting into Islamic culture, which is frankly expressed as Arabic culture. Emphasizing the connection between ethnicity and religion, these expressions condemn Islam as a foreign element that led to a deep transformation of the religious element of Turkish ethnicity, thus damaging and altering Turkish identity over the course of time following the Turks' conversion to Islam. Therefore, the contrast relation in these posts under this discursive theme is simply constituted by elements of Islam/Arabness versus pre-Islamic Turkish ethnicity.

Reducing Islam from a universal religion to Arabs' religion and naming it as the foreign/other element that damaged original Turkishness, posts by Tengrist accounts on TikTok also mention their claim of Arabized Turks through another contrast connection in their discourses. This time, the contrast connection is not directly drawn between Islam/Arabness and Turkish ethnicity, but on a different dimension, between "Arabized" and "enlightened" Turks. In this context, the frequent use of the term Bedouin[6] to denote Arabized Turks is visible in some posts. A few exemplary uses of this kind of contrast are as follows:

"Yo Bedouin! If Arabs were a sacred nation, God would not place them in the desert." (TikTok, Göklü.Kam 2025e)

"Yo Bedouin! You shall hear the shaman drums in this country even if it drives you crazy." (TikTok, Göklü.Kam 2025f)

"One who gets emotional and cries upon hearing words in a language (Arabic[7]) he can't understand is called a Bedouin." (Tiktok, Göklü.Kam 2025g)

As can be read in these expressions, the term Bedouin was used to denote Turks who are claimed to be assimilated into Arabic culture through Islam and therefore value their Islamic religious identity above their Turkish ethnic identity. Conversely, even though it is not openly expressed, those Turks who claim to possess Turkishness as an identity in its pre-Islamic form are kind of enlightened Turks, and all those Arabized Turks are to be awakened and enlightened by them:

"It is time to save ourselves from Arabian lies. We must return to our roots." (TikTok, GökTürk 2025b)

"Descendants of those converted to Islam under the threat of Arabs' swords are returning to their roots, to Tengri, through reason." (TikTok, GökTürk 2025c)

The expressions in the last quote above lead us to another sub-theme within the discursive theme of Arabization: the question of how Turks converted to Islam. In this context, there are two general historical perspectives among Turkish public opinion. According to the first and relatively older perspective, Turks had voluntarily experienced a massive conversion to Islam, considering the similarities between their former beliefs and Islam. According to the second perspective, which is on the rise during the last few decades, Turks had been forced by Arab armies to convert to Islam (Erkoç 2018). The first perspective, which is also deeply rooted in the official history curriculum and in the national education sources, states that *Gök-tanrı/Kök-Tengri* (Sky-God) belief, in its monotheistic essence, was welcomed by the Turkic communities in Asia and upon hearing the calls of the Arab envoys who invited them to Islam, they had voluntarily and peacefully converted to this new

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religion which did not sound much new after all (Karakaş 2014). While under specific cases of conversion experienced by certain Turkic states like the Kara-Khanids (840–1212 A.D.), this claim has a historical truth, the second perspective, which claims that Turkic communities had been forced to convert to Islam against the attacks and invasions of Islamic/Arab armies, is also based on certain cases with historical truth (Aydın 2024). In various Tengrist social media accounts, this situation is stressed in a way to emphasize that not all Turks had once converted to Islam peacefully, but through the use of force, and these posts aim to make Turkish social media users remember their "true" history in which their ancestors have been forcefully "assimilated":

> "Turkish shamans found God in the nature freely. Arabs came and imprisoned God in the mosques with their swords." (TikTok, Göklü.Kam 2025h)

> "Arabs' religion came with the sword. We will send it back through reason." (Tiktok, Göklü.Kam 2025i)

> "Those who forgot the massacres in Khorassan, Curcan and Talkan[8] can't be considered as Turks!" (TikTok, GökTürk 2025d)

Referring to wars between Arabs and various Turkic states in Western and Central Asia during the expansion of Islam towards the East, such expressions, while aiming to make Turks remember this history, also aim to emphasize that Turkishness has a long history predating the Islamic era. Therefore, a return to the roots through Tengrism is presented as an ideal way to escape Arabization and restore the original, true nature of Turkishness.

3.3. Discursive Theme: Tengrism Versus Islam

As stated above, the perspective that claimed that Turks had voluntarily converted to Islam is based on the similarities between Tengrism and Islam, which made it easier for the massive conversion of Turks. Of these similarities, the monotheistic character of both religions has been emphasized as the most significant one by various scholars in Türkiye and some pioneer scholars like İbrahim Kafesoğlu (1912–1984), Osman Turan (1914–1978), Bahaeddin Ögel (1923–1989) and Hikmet Tanyu (1918–1992) even named Tengrism as a *Hanif* religion (Karakaş 2014), that is, beliefs, according to Islamic thought, which have a monotheistic nature and have been influenced and shaped by the sole creator although they do not belong to the chain of Abrahamic religions.

Tengrist accounts on social media, while drawing strict frontiers between Islam and Tengrism by categorizing them as two religions appealing to separate ethnicities, namely Arabs and Turks, also stress the differences between these religions in their posts. These differences are most evident in the contexts of deity typology, religious duties, gender, and religious ethics and violence. Therefore, a third discursive theme emerges from this comprehensive comparison of both religions. These comparative discourses do not always place Islam directly as the "other" but rather build a contrast through an indirect/implied comparison. Some characteristics of both religions are compared to inform viewers about Tengrism and to highlight the differences between the two, thereby emphasizing Tengrism's authenticity as the original and true religion of the Turks.

Examining social media posts, the first context of comparison between two religions emerges as the deity typology. In this sense, a few exemplary quotations from these posts present the basic differences between the two religions:

> "Tengri does not need a prophet or a holy book." (TikTok, GökTürk 2025e)

> "In Tengrism, there is no holy book. The belief is kept alive through traditions and social values." (Tiktok, Kutlu Tengri 2025a)

> "Tengri is not oppressive and interventionist." (Tiktok, Kutlu Tengri 2025b)

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> "A Turk is not a servant, but a comrade of Tengri. Arabs' religion turns humans into servants, simply slaves." (Tiktok, Göklü.Kam 2025j)

> "Tengri does not punish or torment anyone just because they do not worship or pray to him. Tengri loves all his creations." (Tiktok, Gök Tengrinin Kurtları 2025a)

The deity typology for Tengri presented in these examples directly contradicts with the basic characteristics of the Islamic deity Allah who, according to Islamic doctrine, sent his message to mankind via his prophets and the Holy Quran, has already written the destiny of each individual even before his/her birth and has full control over humans' earthly lives, and finally will punish those who did not fulfill their religious duties in the afterlife. Contrary to the deity typology in Islam, Tengri is presented as a more libertarian God who does not intervene in their earthly lives through strict religious rules set by prophets and holy books. All these characteristics of Tengrism emphasized in these exemplary posts can be briefly summarized in a quote as follows:

> "Tengrianism is not a prophetic religion, that is, not a religion proclaimed by someone, and not a "religion of salvation," but it is an original, traditional faith, a kind of worldview system based on the oral transfer of knowledge and without a written statement of doctrine, without a single Text, which would be attached sacral importance. Everything said to one degree or another distinguishes Tengrianism from all Abrahamic religions." (Zholobova 2020)

A second context of comparison between two religions is religious duties which has frequently been emphasized in social media posts by many Tengrist accounts, such as:

> "There is no compulsory worship in Tengrism such as fasting and prayer. Human beings are considered to walk the true path as long as they respect nature and Tengri." (TikTok, Kutlu Tengri 2025a)

The connection drawn between worship and nature is noteworthy here, since Tengrism is a highly nature-based belief. Humans' co-existence with nature in a respectful and peaceful manner is one of the founding principles of Tengrism, and followers of contemporary Tengrist movements in various Central Asian countries are concerned with its fundamentally ecological nature (Laruelle 2007). The same ecological attitude is visible in posts by Tengrist accounts in Türkiye, and instead of Islamic worship techniques with rules, certain nature-based rituals and celebrations are presented as the techniques of religious worship in Tengrism.

In terms of gender equality, Tengrist accounts often put forward the equal social status of women with men as a phenomenon which was recognized, praised, and respected during the pre-Islamic era in Turkic communities and present Tengrism as a religion which preserves the same attitude towards the social status of women:

> "In comparison to many other religions, there exists a relatively more comprehensive and natural understanding of equality. There is no hierarchy among women and men. Everyone is equal before the nature and Tengri." (TikTok, Kutlu Tengri 2025c)

> "Women are symbols of fertility. But, in the Arabs' religion, they are fields of men" (to cultivate[9]). (TikTok, Göklü.Kam 2025k)

As seen in these examples, the social status of women in Islamic societies is presented as inferior when compared to that of men, and Tengrism is presented as a relatively more equalitarian religion in terms of gender. It is possible to read a not direct but rather implied statement which condemns Islam as an outsider element that terminated the gender equality which had been enjoyed in the Turkic world prior to their conversion to Islam.

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A final context of comparison is religious ethics and violence, which forms a significant part of the comparisons between Tengrism and Islam in social media posts. The posts within this context are highly critical of certain incidents and practices that took place during the early expansion of the Islamic geography and certain religious texts in the Holy Quran:

> "Tengri never asks anyone to fight in his name, because Tengri does not need to expand his dominion or to be protected." (TikTok, Göklü.Kam 2025l)

> "Can you call a religion as a true one if that religion commands you to kill all those who do not convert?" (TikTok, Göklü.Kam 2025m)

> "You have a God who asked for a share from spoils of war and a prophet who married his daughter-in law." (TikTok, GökTürk 2025f)

All three exemplary posts above point to the nature of warfare, which was both a common practice during Islam's expansion and a holy duty, which has also been stated in various verses in the Holy Quran. A few examples of such verses are as follows:

> "Fighting has been made obligatory upon you 'believers', though you dislike it." (Surah al-Baqarah 2025, 216)

> "Fight in the cause of Allah, and know that Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing." (Surah al-Baqarah 2025, 244)

> "Fight against them 'if they persecute you' until there is no more persecution, and 'your' devotion will be to Allah 'alone'." (Surah al-Baqarah 2025, 193)

> "Fight in the cause of Allah 'only' against those who wage war against you." (Surah al-Baqarah 2025, 190)

> "Kill them wherever you come upon them." (Surah al-Baqarah 2025, 191)

> "Believers, fight for the cause of Allah, whereas disbelievers fight for the cause of the Devil. So, fight against Satan's 'evil' forces." (Surah an-Nisa 2025, 76)

Combining the meanings of both the posts and the verses mentioned above, the main element in such a critical comparison between Islam and Tengrism is violence in warfare, and this perspective also questions the presence of such verses that command believers of a universal religion to fight in the name of its deity. In addition to this, the wars between the Islamic armies and the non-Muslim (pagan, Christian, Jewish) communities in Asia during the expansion of Islam since the middle of the 7th century also contribute to this presentation of Islam as a religion based on violence. The dominant perspective among Turkish Tengrists, who claim that Turks had converted to Islam by use of force, should be remembered here as well. Therefore, on one side of the contrast built into these discourses, there is Islam as a religion with a violent nature and history, and on the other, Tengrism, which is claimed to be based on a relatively peaceful philosophy.

Closely related to religious violence, another comparison is visible in the phrase "You have a God who asked for a share from the spoils of war and a prophet who married her daughter-in-law," which questions Islamic ethics in a critical manner. Here, "spoils of war" refer to the material goods which were looted from those non-Muslim communities who refused to convert to Islam and the verse in Quran which states that "Know that whatever spoils you take, one-fifth is for Allah and the Messenger, his close relatives, orphans, the poor, and 'needy' travelers" (Surah al-Anfal 2025) is implied as a reference in this context. While the question of why a deity asks for earthly materials looted from others forms the basis of this critical expression, "you have a prophet who married his daughter-in-law" adds to the critical questioning of Islamic ethics through the event of Prophet Muhammad's marriage to his adopted son Zaid's ex-wife, Zaynab. As a controversial issue in Islamic

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history, this marriage between the prophet and his daughter-in-law has been a subject of debate among many scholars in Türkiye (Dursun 2017; Tekin 2013). The legitimization of this marriage by a verse in the Holy Quran, stated as follows, is also a critical point in this context, since such an action is not deemed as an ethical action by the proponents of this critical perspective, and by Tengrists as well, as seen in their posts:

> "So, when Zaid totally lost interest in 'keeping' his wife, We gave her to you in marriage, so that there would be no blame on the believers for marrying the ex-wives of their adopted sons after their divorce. And Allah's command is totally binding." (Surah al-Azhab 2025, 37).

A last critical comparison within the context of religious ethics observed in the posts by Tengrist accounts concerns promises to believers about the afterlife. According to various verses in the Quran, those male Muslims who deserve to reside in heaven in the afterlife will be given beautiful female servants called the *Huri* who will take care of their needs. (Surah an-Naba 2025, 33; Surah ad-Dukhan 2025, 54; Surah ar-rahman 2025, 72). Although the question of what kind of needs will be taken care of is not openly explained in these verses, a general opinion about this issue is that these female servants will function as concubines. Posts by Tengrist accounts refer to this issue in a critical manner and establish a comparison with Tengrism as seen in examples given below:

> "There is no promise of sexual meta in Tengrism." (TikTok, Gök Tengrinin Kurtları 2025b)

> "There is no Huri in Tengrist belief. Tengrism is the most ethical belief on earth." (TikTok, Gök Tengrinin Kurtları 2025c)

As seen in the examples above, posts on Tengrist accounts developed a comparative discourse that consisted of basic sub-themes or contexts: deity typology, religious duties, gender, religious ethics, and violence. Within this comparative discourse, while the "other" element of contrast is obviously Islam, this point is not stated directly in all examples but rather implied. By emphasizing these characteristics of Islam in a critical manner and comparing them with their counterparts in Tengrist belief, Tengrism is presented as an ideal religion for Turks.

4. Discussion

Having interpreted the discourses by Tengrist social media accounts in Türkiye, it became obvious that the meanings implied in these posts are constructed on a contrast consisting of two elements namely Tengrism which is associated with Turkish ethnicity and idealized as the true and original belief of ethnic Turks, and Islam, which is associated with Arab ethnicity and culture and is reduced from an universal religion to an ethnic religion in a sense. While all the three separate but interlinked discursive themes mentioned before put forward this situation in which Tengrist movement in Türkiye appears to aim a kind of cultural revival or cultural reclamation related to the re-definition of Turkish ethnicity, other factors and developments within the Turkish society in the recent years should also be taken into consideration in order to reach a more comprehensive evaluation of the Tengrist movement in Türkiye. Hence, new questions emerge within this topic, which urge us to develop further questions: Is the Tengrist movement in Türkiye simply a religious movement, or is it a new phenomenon developing alongside certain political and cultural responses by segments of Turkish society? Is it a symbolic reaction based on these responses rather than the revival of an ethnic religion?

Before starting a discussion and evaluation of these questions, quoting Cemil Kılıç, one of the earliest public figures in Türkiye to open debates about Turkish Tengrism, would be useful for summarizing the evaluation of the discourses analyzed before and for building

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a bridge to link them to the questions raised above. Kılıç, a Turkish theologian and a renowned figure in academic debates on religion, stated that:

> "Tengrism is becoming widespread among the Turkish youth who regard Islam as a means of Umayyad/Abbasid Arab cultural imperialism. According to Tengrism, Islam is the religion of Arabs. We have replaced our national names with Arabic ones. We have replaced our national alphabet with the Arabic one. Islam led to the entry of thousands of Arabic words into Turkish vocabulary and formed a barrier against the development of Turkish language. Islam is religion hostile to Turks and Arabized them through the understanding of ummah[10]. That's why Turks should return to their roots and abandon this Arabs' religion. Summing up, these are the main thoughts of Tengrists." (Kılıç 2018).

Kılıç, repeatedly expressing that he is not a Tengrist but a Muslim himself, based these opinions on his observations about and encounters with Tengrist people in Türkiye. Quoting another figure who actually opened up the debates on Tengrism will complement Kılıç's statements. Public debate about Tengrism broke out in Türkiye following the appeal of a lawyer named Burhanettin Mumcuoğlu to the Turkish courts, demanding that his religious identity be changed from Islam to Tengri. Following the court's decision, which ratified this demand, Mumcuoğlu became the first—and still only—Turkish citizen who officially possessed the term "Tengri" on his identity card. Identifying himself as a person with a nationalist ideology and posing to the cameras in traditional Central Asian outfits, Mumcuoğlu stated that:

> "I am not a Tengrist, actually. I had a different purpose in doing this. In the official citizenship information system, there are a few registered religions that citizens can choose from among to identify themselves. I thought that the ancient religion of the Turks should also be registered as well. . .Following this, so many people who defined themselves as Tengrists have contacted me. . .I also aimed to disprove the dominant discourse which stated that %99 of the Turkish society is composed of Muslims. . .It is a fact that most of these Tengrists are Turkish nationalists who care about Turkish culture and beliefs. . ." (Erdem 2022).

The statements by both figures point to a cultural response that is shaped by concerns about Turkish ethnicity and motives of Turkish nationalism; they also enable us to raise further questions about the political nature of the Tengrist movement in Türkiye. Considering the developments in the Turkish political arena in the last two decades, Tengrism can be interpreted as a new wave or form of Turkish nationalism, which is a symbolization of political/ideological responses towards the policies and actions by the Justice and Development Party (JDP)[11], that is in power since 2002. JDP, as a political party founded upon the political heritage of political Islam in Türkiye and identifying itself with a conservative ideology mostly emanating from Islamic values and the Ottoman historical background, has followed a policy of redefining the concept of Turkishness with relatively more emphasis on the concept of Muslimhood compared to the ethnic/national components of Turkish identity. Moreover, during JDP's term in power, ideological polarization also became apparent within Turkish society, particularly between its secularist and conservative segments. Certain developments under JDP rule such as Türkiye's rapproachment with the Islamic world on economic, political and cultural grounds, Turkish state's open door policy in receiving millions of refugees mostly from Arabic countries like Syria and increasing emphasis of religion by the government elites on policies of especially culture and education has been leading to displeasement among and negative responses by especially secular and nationalist segments of Turkish society who also constitute the bulk of the political opposition in Turkish political arena. Even the political nationalist movement in

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Türkiye has been divided in this process, with the formation of new nationalist political parties such as the Good Party (GP)[12] and the Victory Party (VP)[13], which broke from the Nationalist Movement Party (NMP)[14]. Currently, political nationalism in Türkiye is represented through these three main political parties, of which, GP and VP rather represent an ideology of Turkish nationalism based on ethnic and secular elements and remain as parties in opposition, while NMP clings to its traditional Muslim-Turkish ethnoreligious definition of Turkishness and Turkish nationalism and is allied with the ruling JDP through a political alliance namely the Cumhur Alliance.

Linking these developments and situations with the statements of the two figures who opened up the debates on Tengrism will be useful in elaborating the connection between the rise of Tengrism and the political responses against the government's policies and discourses, which concentrate around the element of Islam:

> "Nowadays, Tengrism is rising especially among the nationalist youth as a Turkist challenge against Islamist and Ottomanist discourses of so-called nationality. . .By the way, I should also specify that Tengrism is a variant of secular nationalism against the type of nationalism filled with religious themes. Tengrists do not credit the religious discourses of nationalist movements. Instead, they react to them." (Kılıç 2018).

Just like Kılıç, Mumcuoğlu mentioned the same reactionary situation as follows:

> "In Türkiye, there is a secular nationalist movement on the rise especially among the youth as a response to the policies implemented by JDP for long years." (Erdem 2022).

While both statements point to a political response deeply rooted in Tengrist orientation in Türkiye, examining the content of the social media posts in the sample of this study also contributes to evaluating the rise of Tengrism within a political context. Of the 21 accounts analyzed in this study, 9 focused solely on Tengrism in their posts, while the remaining 12 included considerable political content. These contents consist mainly of pictures of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic and a significant symbol of secularism, pictures of Ümit Özdağ, the founder and leader of the Victory Party which identifies itself with a nationalist and anti-immigrant political agenda, and words and phrases written in the ancient Gokturk alphabet, which are frequently used by the Good Party and Victory Party electorate as symbols of Turkish ethnicity. Therefore, connecting the political opposition, consisting of secular and nationalist segments, with the Tengrist movement, which is developing as a new form of political/ideological response to the government, seems possible at first glance.

Reviewing the academic literature on Tengrist movements in other Turkic communities, a strong emphasis on defining these movements as politics-based becomes highly apparent. Accordingly, the Tengrist movement in Kazakhstan (Bulan et al. 2025) and Kyrgyzstan (Güngör 2013) has been analyzed as cultural/political responses to re-Islamization and globalization in the post-Soviet era. Laruelle (2007) in her comprehensive study, preferred to use the term "political Tengrism" and defined the political essence of these Tengrist movements as follows:

> "By condemning the universality of the great religions and by asserting that Islam is serving foreign interests, political Tengrism constitutes one of the possible versions of Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tatar nationalism. . . Tengrism being politically deployed in the service of post-Soviet nationalisms in Kyrgyzstan and Tatarstan, and to a lesser extent, in Kazakhstan, Bashkortostan and Buryatia. Although the ideologues of Tengrism may be marginal to the political mainstream, it is nonetheless important to analyse the role of 'ethnicized' forms of religious ex-

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> pression and their relationship with the search for post-Soviet national identities." (Laruelle 2007).

Based on these inferences, there are clear similarities between Tengrist experiences in Türkiye and those in other Turkic societies in the context of politics. While some post-Soviet nationalist movements in these Turkic societies aimed to redefine a national identity which, according to them, had been damaged or degenerated by Russian cultural imperialism and Islam, and the reclamation of national identities in the new era was seen as possible through the integration and popularization of ethnic values such as a revived ancestral religion. Considering the discourses by the Turkish government in the recent years which place Turks within the Islamic ummah rather than identifying them as a separate ethnic or national group, and even the government's efforts to re-define the concept of Turkish citizenship through new terms like "*Türkiyelilik*"[15] which plays down Turkish ethnicity and culture in favor of re-defining Turkish nationality within a citizenship-based context, it seems possible to a certain extent to associate the Tengrist movement as a political response towards such government initiatives. Yet, this situation raises another question: the necessity of referring to the actual political actors or elites behind the rise of such a movement, if it is to be regarded as a merely political response.

In various studies, Tengrist revivals in ex-Soviet countries have been interpreted as invented traditions designed and developed by certain political and cultural elites for identity renewal issues, which achieved popularity only among cultured urban people (Biard and Laruelle 2010; Laruelle 2007). The use and meaning of invented traditions in these interpretations are in conformity with the conceptualization of Hobsbawm, as he defined invented traditions as a means of controlling the masses by enabling them to channel their energy to internalized practices which will ensure the loyalty of the masses to the political regime (Hobsbawm 2012). From Hobsbawm's constructivist perspective on nation-building, it is possible interpret Tengrism as an invented tradition in the service of post-Soviet nationalist movements. Those political and cultural elites who pioneered the revival of Tengrism as an invented tradition in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been mentioned by their names in various studies (Güngör 2013; Laruelle 2007), but in the case of Tengrism in Türkiye, there is a lack of information about any political or cultural elites who pioneered and owned this movement. Kılıç and Mumcuoğlu appear as the first figures who opened up the debates about Tengrism, but as they have already mentioned, they had been in contact with many people with Tengrist beliefs even before their first statements about the issue. In terms of political representation, unlike the case in Kyrgyzstan where Tengrists founded their own political party named *Mekenim Kirgizstan* (Güngör 2013), there is no political party in Türkiye yet to own Tengrism as an issue and speak in their name. Visual content like pictures of Atatürk and Ümit Özdağ in some Tengrist accounts might be interpreted as clues towards associating Tengrists with the secular and nationalist opposition parties and groups, but since there is no official link between the Tengrists and any political organization openly expressed, the presence of such content in some of these accounts' posts should be interpreted as personal choices and orientations in a political sense. In terms of getting organized within civil society, the only non-governmental organization associated with Tengrism is currently Gök-Der, the Association for the Sustenance of Gokturk Belief and Culture, but little information about their activities and membership numbers is yet available. The association defines its mission on its website as introducing the Tengrist belief to people, enabling its popularization and transmission to new generations, and achieving official status for this religion, allowing it to be freely registered on identity cards and taught within the national education curriculum[16]. Of the 21 accounts analyzed within this study, only one has been identified as being associated with this organization. Therefore, just as various political parties in Türkiye

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own various issues and put them forward in their political agenda, the Tengrist movement still seems to lack such an organizational framework on political grounds and labeling it merely as a symbol of political response, yet lacks sufficient information.

Along with the political response element in trying to interpret the Tengrist movement in Türkiye, another element that should be referred to is a phenomenon that developed in parallel to the rise in debates about Tengrism. This parallelism, along with the statements of figures like Kılıç and Mumcuoğlu, led to another question within the issue of Tengrism, which is whether Tengrism is merely a new religious movement or a symbolic embodiment of cultural/political responses on the rise in Türkiye? Here, the second element that should be elaborated on is the debates about the rise of deism in Türkiye.

The earliest allegations about the rise of deism among the Turkish society emerged from various academic activities. The results of a 2017 field study conducted by the private public opinion research agency MAK Consulting provided the first basis for public debates about the rise of deism. Among the results of this quantitative research project titled "The Research on How the Turkish Society Views Religion and Religious Values", which was held with a sample consisting of 5400 participants from various cities in Türkiye, a serious rise in the ratio of people with deist and atheist orientations was emphasized (Türkiye'de Toplumun Dine ve Dini Değerlere Bakışı 2017). Although this research project was the first academic initiative to mention deism as a new social phenomenon in Türkiye, it drew little public attention. The academic initiative that led to deism becoming a publicly known and debated phenomenon was held in 2018 in the city of Konya with the participation of 50 teachers employed in Imam Hatip Schools[17]. The results of this activity, titled "Youth and Belief Workshop," put forward allegations about a new trend on the rise among the students of Imam Hatip Schools. According to this, faced with inconsistencies in the religious education curriculum and with their teachers providing unsatisfactory explanations, these students were increasingly turning towards deism (Çepni 2018). As the results of this workshop became publicly known through the news in mass media, reactions arose from governmental figures like President Erdoğan, Devlet Bahçeli[18], and Ali Erbaş[19], who denounced these allegations as unreal and conspiratorial and stated that deism was a dangerous orientation that should be avoided. Following these reactions, the alleged presence of a deist trend became a topic of public debate in Türkiye, especially on various social media platforms, and the boundaries of this trend extended beyond the case of Imam Hatip students to encompass the whole society. While this trend was generally mentioned as an outcome of the reactions against the JDP government's policies of increasing the role and presence of Islam in social and cultural life by those in political opposition, it was, on the contrary, presented as a conspiratorial discourse developed by the political opposition and not possessing any realistic bases.

The debates on the rise of deism became associated with those on the rise of Tengrism through statements by two figures mentioned earlier, namely Burhanettin Mumcuoğlu and Cemil Kılıç. Mumcuoğlu, the first Turkish citizen whose religious affiliation was officially recorded as Tengrist, stated that Tengrism was an authentic form of Turkish deism (Erdem 2022). Following him, the theologian Cemil Kılıç offered a more comprehensive statement, defining Turkish Tengrism as a response to the government's cultural policies and therefore identifying it as an embodiment of deism, namely Turkish deism (Kılıç 2018). Kılıç, in another article, emphasized not only the cultural, but also the political and ideological dimensions of Tengrism where he stated that the rise of Tengrism among the Turkish society would continue unless Turkish theologians took certain necessary innovative measures in reintroducing Islam to the masses:

> "Can Tengrism, which rose a reaction to political Islam, become massive? Can this reaction towards the Arabization of Turkish peoples via Islam become institution-

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> alized and turn into a religion? Or, can this trend be neutralized through a new and modern interpretation of Islam? The answers to these questions vary according to the attitudes of Muslim scholars of religion. Muslims scholars should stop praising Arab culture, Turkish names should be popularized (instead of Arabic names[20]). Turkish identity and language should be respected. The negative attitude towards religious worship in Turkish language should change. Modern values such as gender equality should be important. Religious formations such as sects and cults should be neutralized and Islam should be revised in purity. Otherwise, the rise of Tengrism is inevitable." (Kılıç 2022).

Kılıç's statements apparently identify Tengrism as a reactionary response to the cultural and political grievances of certain segments of Turkish society against the prevailing conditions in Türkiye under JDP rule. Therefore, Kılıç identified Tengrism not as a new religious movement or a religious revival, but rather as a symbol of a cultural/political reaction shaped by deism at its core. Kılıç's analyses must depend on certain observations and findings, but the question of whether Tengrism is simply a Turkish version of deism or not yet remains highly complex.

Along with the Tengrist accounts on social media, this study also examined a considerable number of accounts with deist posts, and there are apparent similarities in the discourses used by both account groups. First, it is obvious that the "Arabs' religion" theme has been widely used by many deist accounts, which condemn Islam as a human construct based on Arab history and culture. Therefore, the universality of Islam in encompassing the whole of humanity and the divine origins of Islam are being denied, as seen in the use of this theme by Tengrist accounts. But considering the differences in content between the two account groups, a direct connection between Tengrism and deism cannot be fully established. First, deist accounts do not give references to direct Tengrist motifs like Tengri, holy spirits like Umay, shamans and Tengrist practices, and only emphasize their allegations against the universality of Islam through a genuinely deist point of view. Secondly, while a bulk of Tengrist accounts share posts with the "Arabs' religion" theme, which aligns with deist discourses, they also integrate Tengrist motifs into their posts, emphasizing a cultural bond with pre-Islamic Turkish culture. Although the statements by Mumcuoğlu and Kılıç provide the basis for the increasing visibility of Turkish social media users who identify Tengrism as Turkish deism, differences in the content posted by both account groups make it impossible to reach such a conclusion. Therefore, in light of such insufficient findings, it would not be scientifically proper to claim that Tengrism is simply an authentic version of Turkish deism; rather, a mutual interaction between these two trends can be acknowledged to a certain degree.

5. Conclusions

Since there is little information about the Tengrist movement in Türkiye and the only resources related to this phenomenon are available on social media, it remains unclear whether this is a new religious movement. Based on the findings of this study, Tengrist discourses tend to reflect cultural and political reactions from among especially nationalist and secular segments of Turkish society against the religiously conservative policies of the JDP government. In this sense, even though it lacks essential elements such as leadership and a visible organizational framework, as in the cases of political Tengrism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Tengrist trend in Türkiye appears to have serious potential to develop into a political Tengrist movement. Yet it would not be wrong to mention the future possibility of developing into a new religious movement, given the contrast with Islam, although the realization of such a possibility does not currently seem very likely. Therefore, there emerges the need for further studies to qualitatively analyze this trend if the public

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visibility of Tengrists in the Turkish society increases with more people identifying themselves with this movement and enabling a sample for interviews rather than anonymous social media accounts.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
USA	United States of America
JDP	Justice and Development Party
VP	Victory Party
GP	Good Party
NMP	National Movement Party

Notes

1 "Desert" here has been used to denote the Arab lands, where Islam was born as a religion.
2 Author's note.
3 Minaret is the tower-like structure attached to mosques.
4 Nizam-ul Mulk was the vizier of the Seljuk Empire.
5 Traditional Islamic higher education institutions.
6 Bedouin literally refers to the nomadic tribes in the Middle East. In the discourses of the Tengrist accounts, it refers to Muslim Turks whom Tengrists consider as Arabized Turks.
7 Author's note.
8 Historical massacres by Muslim Arab armies of Turkic communities in Central Asia during the Islamic expansion under the Umayyad Dynasty.
9 Author's note.
10 Ummah denotes the global Islamic community.
11 Turkish name and abbrevation of this political party is Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP).
12 Turkish name and abbrevation of this political party is İyi Parti (İYİP).
13 Turkish name and abbrevation of this political party is Zafer Partisi (ZP).
14 Turkish name and abbrevation of this political party is Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP).
15 "*Türkiyelilik*" means "belonging to Türkiye, being of Türkiye".
16 Information about this association can be retrieved from https://www.gokturkder.com (access on 8 October 2025)
17 İmam Hatip schools are high school level education institutions in Türkiye with a relatively more religious content in their curriculum.
18 Leader of the Nationalist Movement Party which is currently allied with JDP.
19 then-head of the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Türkiye.
20 Author's note.

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Article

Migrating Melodies, Migrating Spirituality: Initial Findings from a Slovenian Study of Contemporary Worship Music

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Abstract

The growth of Charismatic Christianity is arguably one of the most significant religious developments of the past century. Originating as a Protestant renewal movement in the United States, it expanded throughout the twentieth century, establishing Pentecostal churches, inspiring renewal movements within traditional denominations, and fundamentally reshaping Evangelical Christianity. While its theological and social features have been widely examined, the role of worship music remains a relatively understudied aspect of Charismatic life, despite its centrality in contemporary Christian practice. Situated within the framework of international migration and based on research in Slovenia, this article explores Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), particularly contemporary worship music (CWM), as a transnational vehicle of Charismatic and Evangelical Christianity. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and a qualitative analysis of a public database of translated songs, the study surveys CWM in Slovenia and discusses the homogenization of worship styles and the marginalization of local CWM production. The article concludes by reflecting on the notion of interdenominational homogenization in worship music.

Keywords: Charismatic Christianity; Pentecostalism; Evangelical Christianity; Contemporary Christian Music; contemporary worship music; Hillsong; worship; evangelization

1. Introduction

With migration to OECD countries, particularly in Europe, on the rise (Dao et al. 2021), the research of people on the move has expanded substantially (Nishimura and Czaika 2024). Though the scholarship is certainly comprehensive (Triandafyllidou 2022), it has its blind spots. For example, the research on migration primarily focuses on labour migration (Zaiceva and Zimmermann 2008); its traditional and new media framing (Smrdelj and Vogrinc 2020; Smrdelj 2021, 2024); securitization (Kaya 2009) and integration (Norris and Inglehart 2012), particularly its social discontents (Messina 1990; Lesińska 2014). When it comes to the religious aspects of migration (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003; Saunders et al. 2016; Guveli and Platt 2023), there is an overwhelming focus on prejudice and discrimination (Deslandes and Anderson 2019), with most of such studies focusing on Muslims (Tausch 2019). Indeed, Islam is the most researched overlapping field of religion and migration, with the scholarship focusing on a diverse set of topics, such as religious pluralism, either in person (Kéri and Sleiman 2017; Ješe Perković 2024; Mandelc 2025) or online (Zalta 2025); the distinctive features of so-called 'Euro-Islam' (Zalta 2018); and Islamophobia (Bleich 2012; Hajjat and Mohammed 2023; Jurekovič 2024b). In comparison, relatively little research has so far been conducted on Christian migration, with noteworthy exceptions pertaining to African Christian migration, whether in the form of labour migration

(Krašovec and Zalta 2024) or so-called reverse mission endeavours in Europe (Burgess 2011; Asamoah-Gyadu 2012; Jurekovič 2024a).

This study contributes to Christian migration studies by shifting attention from embodied forms of religious mobility to transnational religious flows that are not limited to human migration. The existing scholarship—whether on reverse mission (Morier-Genoud 2018) or missionary work (Cavalcanti 2005)—frames migration primarily in terms of migrating bodies that carry with them symbols, doctrines, and religious materials. Yet in today's globalized and interconnected world, religious forms can travel independently of physical movement. We present the initial findings from one such case: the international dissemination of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), particularly contemporary worship music (CWM), and its impact on Christian communities in Slovenia.

During my PhD fieldwork among Evangelical and Charismatic Christians in Slovenia (2023–2024), one striking point of convergence across denominational contexts was church music. Whether led by a single vocalist with an acoustic guitar or by a full worship band, gatherings of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Evangelicals or Pentecostals frequently incorporated very similar CWM pieces. The participants engaged in both individual and collective worship through music in ways closely resembling one another's services, often using the very same repertoire. Although these observations initially remained only a marginal note in my doctoral research, they echo Klaver's (2015, p. 97) emphasis on the centrality of music and singing in conversion narratives and formative spiritual experiences within Charismatic Christianity, which provides the point of departure for the present study. The importance of church music is of course nothing novel in the history of Christianity. For example, David Martin has noted how music has long played an integral role in Christian worship, and biblical tradition itself is deeply supportive of musical expression (Martin 2016, p. 674). A more recent development, however, is the extent to which worship music now circulates in increasingly standardized forms across denominations and around the globe.

The aim of this study is to analyse the key characteristics of CWM amongst Evangelical and Charismatic Christians in Slovenia. We have set out three research questions, which guide our study: First, what are the primary international sources of CWM adopted in Slovenia? Second, what criteria guide the selection and translation of worship songs? Third, what is the impact of foreign CWM on the local production of worship music? Drawing on publicly available databases of worship songs used in Slovenian Evangelical and Charismatic Christian communities, as well as semi-structured interviews with their administrators, the study investigates the adaptation of foreign CWM within Slovenian contexts of Christian worship. By situating Slovenia within broader transnational patterns, this article further contributes to understanding the dynamics of Charismatic worship music and its role in shaping contemporary Christian practices globally (Ingalls 2015). Our central premise is that, just as the printing press was crucial to the dissemination of the Protestant Reformation (Rubin 2014; Young 2017, pp. 101–2), the production, distribution, and consumption of contemporary worship music have become key technologies enabling the transnational portability of Charismatic Christianity as a distinctive mode of Christian life and practice (Csordas 2007a; Vásquez 2009).

To develop our argument, the paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a brief introduction to Charismatic Christianity, outlining its basic typology and situating CWM production within the broader Charismatic landscape of Evangelical Christianity (P. Wagner 1999; Anderson 2016, p. 654). Second, we examine a central theological feature of Charismatic Christianity: the communal experience of encountering God (Warrington 2008). We focus on the role of CWM in facilitating such experiences, drawing on both theological and sociological scholarship. In doing so, we review the literature on CWM,

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establish the conceptual groundwork for our study, and highlight the significance of music in generating religious experience and enabling the global circulation of Charismatic Christianity. Before outlining our empirical methods and data collection procedures, we offer a brief overview of Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity in Slovenia to better contextualize our results. The core of the article consists of an analysis and discussion of the study's initial findings. In conclusion, by exploring the adaptability and cross-denominational transferability of CWM across diverse Christian communities, we discuss how CCM contributes to the convergence of otherwise distinct Christian churches.

2. Theoretical Framework: Singing Their Heart, Experiencing the Spirit

2.1. Overview of Charismatic Christianity

While we agree that music has been an important component of all forms of Christianity, as Dueck and Reily demonstrate in their introduction to The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities (Dueck and Reily 2016), there is something distinctive about the role of music within Charismatic Christianity. As Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori argue in their contribution to the study of global Pentecostalism, music is not merely an addition to this religious phenomenon but rather its engine, adding that "the heart of Pentecostalism is the music" (Miller and Yamamori 2007, p. 24). Recognizing this requires an understanding of the general characteristics of what this study refers to as Charismatic Christianity.

We contend that Charismatic Christianity—also labelled as Pentecostal–Charismatic or Pentecostalism—can best be understood by referring to baptism in the Spirit and the manifestation of charismata, or gifts of the Spirit. We follow Allan Anderson's authoritative definition of Charismatic Christianity as "the churches with a 'family resemblance' that emphasize the working of the Holy Spirit, especially in the use of such 'gifts of the Spirit' as healings, prophecies and speaking in tongues" (Anderson 2016, p. 653). It is precisely this definition that underpins our decision to employ the term Charismatic Christianity, thereby highlighting a shared theological foundation grounded in a distinctive form of religious experience. Beyond this, Charismatic Christianity remains difficult to define theologically. This difficulty stems from the diverse religious composition of Charismatics, who are found across Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches and communities. Thus, varieties abound—both in terms of scientific and theological delineations, as well as in terms of actual communities and churches (Hollenweger 1984, pp. 403–12; Robbins 2004, pp. 119–23; Bergunder 2007, pp. 52–71).

Building on Anderson's framework, Charismatic Christianity is often described as three successive waves that today coexist. The first consists of Classical Pentecostals, which emerged as independent Protestant churches in the early twentieth century (Dayton 1987; Synan 1987). Their origin is usually traced to the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, which was led by William Seymour between 1906 and 1909 (Robeck 2017). Emerging as a revival movement from the broader Methodist tradition, early Pentecostalism was distinguished by the doctrine that speaking in tongues served as the initial physical evidence of baptism in the Spirit, conceived as an experience distinct from water baptism. The revival soon gave rise to several Pentecostal denominations, which generally shared an emphasis on spiritual gifts and expressive forms of worship (Dayton 1987).

The second wave is often labelled as the Charismatic Renewal, which came about through a process of "Pentecostalization", which took place within established Christian denominations in the 1950s and 1960s. It initially emerged among Episcopalians, continued within the Anglican Church, and most notably contributed to the establishment of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which is of relevance to this study. The process of Pentecostalization entailed the adoption of key Pentecostal emphases, notably Spirit baptism,

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the manifestation of spiritual gifts, and distinctive worship styles. Although the Catholic Church underwent Pentecostalization relatively late—primarily in the aftermath of Vatican II—the Catholic Charismatic Renewal emerged as the most significant expression of the second wave of Charismatic Christianity (McGuire 1982).

The third wave involved the spread of Pentecostal-like practices across smaller Evangelical churches in the late twentieth century, giving rise to Neocharismatic communities. While Pentecostals founded separate churches and the Renewal transformed existing ones, the Neocharismatics represent a more independent Charismatic impulse (P. Wagner 1999; Anderson 2010, p. 18). Although scholars debate the existence of additional waves—particularly the New Apostolic Reformation (Christerson and Flory 2017)—the three-wave model remains widely used. While Catholics constituted the largest segment of the Charismatic Renewal, the third wave of Charismatic Christianity has largely been shaped by Protestant Evangelicals. Known as independent or postdenominational, Neocharismatics have embodied the institutional autonomy of Charismatic Christianity since the 1980s (P. Wagner 1988). As the most relevant Charismatic wave for our study, they are marked by theological flexibility, including a diminished emphasis on Classical Pentecostal doctrines, such as initial evidence, alongside new developments, particularly prosperity theology (Yong 2012) and a striking focus on mass worship events and worship music (Poloma 2003; Martí 2018). Kenneth Hagin's Word of Life movement, Hillsong, the Vineyard movement and the Calvary Chapel are representative examples of Neocharismatic churches.

2.2. Encountering God Through Music

Charismatic Christianity, however, should not be understood merely as a cluster of likeminded denominations. As Albrecht and Howard emphasize, it represents less a doctrinal breakthrough than "a movement united in its experience of life in the Spirit" (Albrecht and Howard 2014, p. 235; see also Nel 2016). Accordingly, scholars and theologians are increasingly approaching Charismatic Christianity not only through its theological distinctives, but as a particular "modality" of contemporary Christianity (Ingalls 2015, p. 2), organized around experiential encounters with God's presence (Cox 1995; Albrecht 1999; Warrington 2008; Lindhardt 2011, pp. 8–13). While Charismatics often describe experiencing God in everyday contexts, it is the communal dimension of such encounters that remains especially significant (Vondey 2012). These experiences are typically ritualized and embedded in shared worship practices.

In this respect, Robbins' observation is instructive: ritual constitutes "in social scientific terms the most important" aspect of Charismatic Christianity (Robbins 2011, p. 65). Although the concept of ritual may sit uneasily with insider self-understandings, it has nevertheless proven analytically productive in the scholarly study of Charismatic Christianity (Albrecht 1999). In his seminal work on Pentecostal ritual, Daniel Albrecht examines the typical structure of Charismatic gatherings—whether Pentecostal, Evangelical, or Catholic—and argues that they generally unfold through three key components: worship, teaching, and response (Albrecht 1999, pp. 153–54). Worship, often treated as an overarching category of Charismatic ritual practice (Ingalls 2015, p. 4), is particularly central to the present study. Organized primarily around music, worship foregrounds "a specific set of rituals in which participants express devotion to God and experience divine presence in the context of a community" (Ingalls 2015, p. 4). Albrecht similarly identifies worship music as a key means "to help usher the congregation into the presence of God" (Albrecht 1999, p. 95; see also Land 1993). Likewise, Björkander (2024) analyses Charismatic worship as a transformative practice centred on music. She identifies four key dimensions: music structures meaningful ritual and communal bonds; synchronizes bodies, fostering

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collective unity; functions as a form of localized, oral theologizing; and mediates between participants and the Divine (Björkander 2024, p. 412). Her study provides a central point of departure for our analysis. Furthermore, the psychological research on the emotional effects of music in religious settings suggests that Charismatic worship music generates strong experiences of positive emotion and functions as a vehicle for religious experience (Miller and Strongman 2002).

This was confirmed by my own experience during my PhD fieldwork. For example, a Pentecostal pastor emphasized the key role of music in bringing about the congregational encounter with God during worship:

> In simple terms, we want to prepare people to fellowship with God. In this sense, the songs start of with just a gathering of people, you know when you come in from the street, you are all thinking about your problems at home, or what else, we try to gather people's minds and their hearts. By the end of the music set, you want people hearts to be open to receive from God. This is the job of the worship. To lead people to commune with God. (Interviewee C)

Music is therefore central to Charismatic Christianity and an essential component of worship practice (T. Wagner 2017). Kgatle (2019), for instance, argues that singing is central to Pentecostal worship, which is "alive with different kinds of music" and functions not only as a medium for spiritual experience but also as a therapeutic resource. Williams likewise notes that Pentecostals "focus their worship on music," such that a substantial portion of their services revolves around musical performance and congregational singing (Williams 2016, p. 45). In this sense, Charismatic and Evangelical worship music exhibits a distinctly instrumental dimension, whereby music serves as a means toward transcendent encounter rather than merely an aesthetic expression (Kahn-Harris and Moberg 2012).

The role of music in Christian Charismatic encounters of God brings us nicely to our core object of study: Contemporary Christian Music, particularly its subgenre, Christian worship music. As scholars have noted, the boundaries between CCM and CWM are notoriously difficult to disentangle (Abraham 2024, p. 243). Sonically, visually, and aesthetically, the two are often virtually indistinguishable, emerging from overlapping centres of production, circulation, and consumption (T. Wagner 2017, p. 91). This ambiguity was also acknowledged by our interviewees. Nevertheless, CCM and CWM may be analytically differentiated in terms of the *intentions* governing their use. Whereas CCM is typically oriented toward everyday listening and entertainment, often centred on individual consumption, CWM is explicitly directed toward God and embedded within communal practices of worship. As Interviewee 2 explained,

> Not all CCM is worship music. When distinguishing between one and the other, I ask myself, who is this song about, who does it exalt? Me or God? Worship music is the kind that truly honors God, that speaks of a deeper relationship.

In recent decades, CCM has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly with regard to its history (Stowe 2011; Lim and Ruth 2017). Largely a product of US Evangelical Christianity, including its Charismatic dimensions, CCM's origins can be traced to the Jesus Movement in the US, a Charismatic revival in the 1960s and 1970s. Central to its origins was Calvary Chapel, a Californian Neocharismatic church, which established the first CCM label, Marantha! (Abraham 2024, p. 243). From then on, CCM has gradually developed into one of the "fastest-growing genres of music", with record sales "outselling those of classical, jazz and New Age combined" (Stowe 2011, p. 1). Nowadays, it is a global industry based in Nashville, where the key record labels of CCM and CWM have been established, together with the influential Gospel Music Association and the Dove Awards, CCM's version of the Grammy. One key characteristic of CCM is its heterogeneity—both

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in terms of the splintered rationales and motivations of the diverse agents within CCM (Howard and Streck 1999), and in terms of the musical styles and genres. Meanwhile, others have stressed how CCM plays a crucial cultural role for evangelical Christians (Gormly 2003).

Initially popularized by Neocharismatic movements, such as Vineyard, and later propelled globally by the Australian megachurch Hillsong (Klaver 2021), CWM has become one of the most prominent and widely studied subgenres of CCM in recent years (Ingalls 2016). CWM is characterized by a distinctive soundscape (Puay et al. 2025), featuring predictable melodic structures and easily memorized lyrics, alongside recognizable vocal profiles, techniques, and performance postures (Neto 2010, pp. 195–97). According to Lim and Ruth, there are nine key qualities of worship and, by extension, CWM. In contrast to traditional hymnody, it employs non-archaic English and is adapted to contemporary concerns and aesthetic preferences. It draws heavily on musical styles from the secular popular music industry, allows for extended periods of congregational singing, and positions musicians as central figures in the liturgical space and leadership. It also emphasizes bodily expressiveness, tends toward informality, and relies extensively on electronic technology (Lim and Ruth 2017, p. 3). In recent decades, CWM has become integrated into the communal worship of most Christian denominations worldwide, whether Charismatic or not, and has come to represent "[the] face of the new millennium Christian church" (Neto 2010, p. 195). Nevertheless, CWM should not be treated as stylistically homogeneous. Ingalls (2017) demonstrates that, contrary to common scholarly and popular assumptions, the genre has undergone significant stylistic transformations over its roughly fifty-year history, shifting from early praise choruses and folk idioms to the Praise Pop of the 1980s and 1990s and the Praise Rock styles of the 2000s.

The scholarship has examined CWM from multiple analytical angles. One prominent line of inquiry concerns the lyrical content. Thornton (2023), for instance, analyses CWM lyrics as vehicles for idealized forms of performance in contemporary worship, while Riches (2016) explores the interplay of indigenous and non-indigenous worship languages as a foundation for global Christian civil society. At the same time, increasing attention has been paid to the productive force of CWM in shaping Christian subjects and embodied forms of religiosity (Lindenbaum 2012; Wade and Hynes 2013; Benjamins 2021).

Scholars have likewise emphasized CWM as a spiritual technology that facilitates distinctive religious experiences and enables the transnational circulation of particular forms of Christianity. These themes provide an important empirical backdrop for the present study. As noted above, a defining feature of CWM lies in its intentional and instrumental orientation toward cultivating an encounter with God (Miller and Yamamori 2007; Abraham 2024). Whereas early Pentecostal services were often only loosely structured, contemporary worship gatherings have become increasingly standardized, typically performed "in a block at the beginning of service" and carefully "curated for maximum affect" through the progression from high-tempo songs to slower, more intimate climaxes (Abraham 2024, p. 246). Particularly striking—and central to our analysis—is the broad appeal of CWM, which readily crosses denominational boundaries.

The empirical sociological research on CWM is organized around a set of main theoretical lenses, including Durkheimian effervescence, Adorno's culture industry critique, and approaches to musical subcultures (Abraham 2024, pp. 247–50). The present study instead combines two frameworks: the musicking paradigm (Small 1998) and the mediational approach to religion (Nekola 2015, pp. 14–16). Accordingly, we treat music not as a fixed object (Ingalls 2015, p. 4) or artifact (Stowe 2011, p. 4), but as a social practice of sound-making sustained through the interactions among performers, audiences, producers, publishers, and record labels (Stowe 2011, pp. 4–5). Following Dueck and Reily's insight that Christian-

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ity is "a sphere of practice and experience" made especially visible through music (Dueck and Reily 2016, p. 13), we adopt Small's concept of musicking to foreground the creation, circulation, and reception of worship music. At the same time, the mediational approach, grounded in the material turn of religious studies, offers advantages for highlighting one key function of CWM: its role in mediating encounters with God, which is in line with the theological understanding of music as a key facilitator of the worshipper's encounter with the Divine (Björkander 2024). Thus, we combine musicking and the mediational approach to explicitly engage with the scholarship on musical migration and localization, that is, "the process whereby Christian communities take a variety of musical practices—some considered 'indigenous', some 'foreign', some shared across spatial and cultural divides; some linked to past practice, some innovative—and make them locally meaningful and useful in the construction of Christian beliefs, theology, practice, and identity" (Ingalls et al. 2018, p. 13). In other words, this scholarship contributes to the intersection of CWM and migration. For example, Magowan (2007) has shown how the indigenous adoption of contemporary Charismatic worship music has produced translocal and hybrid musical identification, while other studies have engaged with the notion of localization and have pointed out that 'Western', 'indigenous' or 'hybrid' may not be applicable in some contexts (Perigo 2021). Although this study is situated within the scholarship on the impact of migrating Christian music, we also expand on these studies by providing an example of a majority Catholic and ex-socialist European country. This perspective is especially relevant for examining the transnational and interdenominational circulation of worship music. Accordingly, we ask how the global dissemination of predominantly Evangelical and Charismatic CWM across national and denominational boundaries should be understood, and what it means for Catholic communities, Charismatic and non-Charismatic alike, to worship using repertoires such as Hillsong.

Having outlined our theoretical framework, we now turn to the methodological foundations and data collection procedures before presenting the study's findings.

3. Methodological Framework and Data Collection Process

This study makes use of three sets of empirical data. On the hand, the study relies on a qualitative analysis of two publicly available databases of CWM songs in Slovenia. These are administered and organized by the SaSu, an unofficial community of likeminded Christian worshippers, who translate foreign CWM and produce Slovenian CMW. The abbreviation stands for "Slavimo Skupaj", which can be roughly translated as "Worship Together", signalling its core intent.[1] They publish and regularly update five different datasets of Excel spreadsheets; out of these, we analyse two, which seem most pertinent to our research questions. First, there is the general dataset in which they have compiled a list of every CWM song used in Slovenian churches. This makes it the largest one, entailing 1179 entries. For the purposes of this article, we will label this list as Database A. The entries are categorized into Slovenian author songs (72), their own official translations (191) and other translations. The other database is made up of 191 translations, officially conducted by SaSu. For the purposes of this article, we will label this list as Database B. Each entry in both datasets is given up to 12 tags: Original Title, Slovenian Translation (linked to a Google Documents text); Original Writer; Author of the Translation; First Lines; Slovenian Audio Recording; Original Recording; Date of Translation; Type of Song; Appendix 1—Text; Appendix 2—Sheet Music; Appendix 3—Other.

Given the unofficial nature of these datasets, not all entries are complete. Accordingly, the first step of analysis consisted of cleaning both databases by removing entries with missing key information, most importantly the Original Author or Original Title. This procedure reduced the databases to 924 and 184 entries, respectively. Next, the 184 entries

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contained in Database B were excluded from Database A, as were the 72 songs authored in Slovenia, since these were not of direct interest for our study. Finally, and most importantly, duplicates were removed from Database A. As will be discussed below, one of SaSu's primary motivations was to reduce the "translation chaos" in the Slovenian worship field, as multiple churches had often produced different translations of the same song.

In total, we identified and removed 157 duplicate entries of 110 songs, resulting in a final corpus of 514 unique songs in Database A. Thus, 110 out of 514 songs (21.4%) had at least one duplicate translation, with some songs translated as many as five times. Subsequently, the remaining songs and their associated metadata were imported into MAXQDA for qualitative coding. Due to its heterogeneous composition, Database A was coded only for the number of duplicates and the language of origin. Database B, comprising the 184 songs officially translated by SaSu, was coded in greater detail. Each song was coded according to seven key variables: author, publishing label, year of publication, year of translation, church of origin, language of origin, and country of origin.

The analysis of the primary dataset was complemented by a series of semi-structured interviews with the administrators and translators involved in the SaSu database. Using non-random, non-probability sampling, the SaSu organization was first contacted through its online contact form and invited to participate in a research interview. Following one completed interview, two further participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were twofold: first, participants were required to be members of a Christian community in Slovenia; second, they needed to be actively engaged in the translation and/or production of CWM. Given the relatively small size of Charismatic and Evangelical worship networks in Slovenia, three interviewees were successfully recruited.

During the semi-structured interviews, the participants were first asked to briefly describe their religious backgrounds. This was followed by questions concerning their understandings of CWM, including whether they considered CWM to be specifically connected to Christian Charismatic spirituality. Subsequently, the interviewees were invited to discuss their involvement in the SaSu project, the development and administration of the SaSu database, and any additional organizational practices through which they contribute to the translation and/or production of CWM in Slovenia. Third, the participants were asked in detail about their translation processes, including the criteria guiding song selection, their approach to translation, and the principal challenges involved in rendering worship music into Slovene. Finally, they were asked to reflect on the broader impact of translating CWM into Slovene, as well as on the significance of producing locally authored Slovenian worship music for Christian communities in Slovenia. All the interviews were conducted in person between October and December 2025. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the transcripts subsequently imported into MAXQDA for a thematic analysis using a combination of inductive and deductive coding strategies. The interview recordings were deleted immediately from the recording device, while securely stored backup files were destroyed following successful transcription. To protect participant anonymity in accordance with the study's ethical protocol, no identifying information is disclosed. Participants are identified in the analysis only as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, and Interviewee 3.

Finally, in rare instances, this study also draws on 41 semi-structured interviews conducted during my PhD research, completed in 2025. These interviews were carried out between July 2023 and May 2024 among Evangelical, Classical Pentecostal, Catholic Charismatic, and Neocharismatic Christians in Slovenia. Although the project primarily examined conversion narratives and the embodied dimensions of Charismatic Christianity, the discussions of worship often generated relevant reflections on worship music, which were retained for later analysis in the present study. As an institutional ethics review was

not required for the doctoral research, none was sought. Nevertheless, written informed consent was secured from all participants. As with the current study, the participants were anonymized and are referred to as Interviewee A, Interviewee B, and so forth, to distinguish them from the more recent interviewees. The analysis of the interviews began with a close reading of each transcript to identify the passages relevant to the research questions. Using a coding framework pre-organized around the study's analytical focus, selected excerpts were coded inductively to identify emergent themes. These qualitative findings were then interpreted in dialogue with the relevant theological and sociological scholarship, as well as with the quantitative and descriptive analysis of the worship song databases outlined above. The results of this combined analytical approach are presented in the following sections.

4. Results and Analysis

Before presenting our findings, we provide a brief contextual framework for understanding Charismatic Christianity in Slovenia. As widely documented, Charismatic Christianity has expanded rapidly worldwide since its emergence at the turn of the twentieth century. With an estimated 676 million adherents (Zurlo 2026), Charismatic Christianity has been described as the fastest-growing religious movement in human history (Berger 2014, p. 24). Were Charismatics considered an independent denomination, they would rank second only to Roman Catholics in numerical terms. The largest share consists of Neocharismatics, followed by Charismatics within established churches, particularly the Catholic Church. A further defining feature is their global distribution, marking the rise of global Christianity (Zurlo 2022). Approximately 82% of Charismatics now reside in the Global South (Johnson and Ross 2009, pp. 101–2).

The data on Charismatic Christians in Europe could not be more different. Whether we take the estimate of 17 million (Kay and Dyer 2011, p. 403), 31.6 million (Johnson and Ross 2009, p. 103) or 37.5 million (GloPent 2026), Europe possesses the smallest proportion of Charismatics. Despite the endeavours of so-called reverse mission churches (Burgess 2011), the majority of European Charismatics are affiliated with the Catholic renewal (Burgess and van der Maas 2007, p. 815). In this light, Slovenia, the focus of our study, is a paradigmatic example of European Charismatic Christianity.

Slovenia is a predominantly Catholic countr. Approximately 60% of its two million inhabitants identify with the Catholic Church, while only 1.3% affiliate with non-Lutheran, non-Catholic churches, a category that includes Classical Pentecostals and Evangelicals (SJM 2025). Given the scarcity of social-scientific research on Slovenian non-Catholic Christians, such figures should be treated cautiously. Based on my own qualitative PhD fieldwork, I estimate there are roughly 4000 Classical Pentecostals in Slovenia. Although largely autonomous, the fourteen contemporary Classical Pentecostal churches in Slovenia are affiliated with a national umbrella organization, the Pentecostal Church in Slovenia, which is itself a member of the global Assemblies of God movement. This affiliation situates them firmly within a traditional Pentecostal lineage. Their origins date back to 1933, and Pentecostals initially functioned primarily as a Protestant revival movement among the predominantly Lutheran population of northeastern Slovenia. Since the 1990s, Pentecostal churches have relaxed certain Holiness prescriptions, including adopting more expressive forms of worship and contemporary musical styles.

Catholic Charismatics constitute a large and institutionally visible segment within the Slovenian Catholic Church. Although the Charismatic Renewal emerged in Slovenia in 1972, it did not substantially expand until the 1990s, following independence and the liberalization of the religious field. At its peak, the movement included up to 40,000 participants. However, due to its precarious position within the Slovenian Catholic Church, difficulties

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in generational leadership succession, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, its numbers have declined sharply to approximately 10,000 Catholic Charismatics—approximately two-thirds of all Charismatic Christians in Slovenia. Although Catholic Charismatics in Slovenia are affiliated with the international CHARIS movement, they receive limited institutional support within a largely non-Charismatic Catholic hierarchy. Nevertheless, each archdiocese appoints a local coordinator for the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. The movement operates primarily through weekly worship meetings composed of approximately 10–15 lay participants, as well as occasional seminar-style gatherings that attract around 500 members.

Comparable dynamics shaped the expansion of the Evangelical movement in Slovenia during the late 1990s and early 2000s, which later facilitated the emergence of Neocharismatic communities. In this paper, the term "Neocharismatic" is used to designate Charismatic or Pentecostalized Evangelicals in Slovenia. Within Anderson's typology, they correspond to the so-called third wave, although some may more appropriately align with the subsequently identified fourth wave of Independent Network Christianity (Christerson and Flory 2017). For the purposes of this analysis, however, these distinctions are not analytically decisive. Their defining characteristic is identification as Protestant Evangelicals who, often having been raised within Pentecostal churches or the Catholic Church, later distanced themselves in pursuit of a more authentic and experientially expressive relationship with Jesus Christ. Although no official statistics are available, several indicative estimates suggest that Slovenia contains approximately 43 Evangelical churches (including Classical Pentecostals), alongside 13 non-church organizations. The denominational boundaries remain difficult to define, yet several evangelical Neocharismatic congregations have gained visibility in the past 20 years. These include the Calvary Christian Church, affiliated with the globally recognized Calvary Chapel movement, and the International Christian Community, led by a former Assemblies of God missionary pastor from Michigan. Drawing on these estimates and my own fieldwork, I suggest that Slovenia is home to roughly 700 Neocharismatics and around 1000 Evangelicals. Taken together, it is reasonable to assume that there are approximately 15,000 Charismatic Christians of various traditions in Slovenia, making them a small religious minority within a population of two million.

As discussed below, the limited size of Evangelical and Charismatic communities constitutes an essential contextual factor. While their minority status constrains the local production and dissemination of Slovenian CWM, it also encourages interdenominational cooperation as a strategy for institutional and cultural endurance. The analysis that follows presents the study's findings through five overarching themes characteristic of Slovenian CWM.

4.1. Discontents with Traditional Worship Music and the Appeal of CMW

To better understand the gradual adoption of CWM, it is useful to begin at a time when worship sessions—both in denominations such as Classical Pentecostalism and Baptist traditions and in the Charismatic Renewal—still relied entirely on hymnody. All of our interviewees recalled the period of hymn singing with a degree of nostalgia, although their memories are often marked by the discomfort and limitations that accompanied these forms of communal worship. For instance, Interviewee 1 recounted being asked to lead worship in their Baptist church at the age of fourteen, simply because they were able to play the piano:

> I knew how to play, so I played in church. Back then, that meant we had a hymnbook with about 500 songs. Someone would raise their hand and say, "I want number 412," and I would open it and had to play and sing so that everyone could sing along. In our churches, everyone sings—there isn't a choir—so some-

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> times it was like I only knew that one chord, which was the worst, because all the songs had five sharps and you were just helpless. I cried many times, saying I wouldn't do it anymore—that it was cruelty upon cruelty—being in a role where I embarrassed myself every time I went up to the piano. My parents encouraged me a lot, and there was a lot of grace, and they kept telling me to continue.

Growing up in a Pentecostal church, Interviewee 3 had similar experiences with traditional worship:

> I started leading worship in church with the organ, with hymns and hymnbooks. We opened them, people were sitting, not standing. We stood only when reading God's Word. You played and sang—you played from sheet music. On the organ, you played from the notes, so many songs. You didn't play chords; that came only later. As for instruments—there were no drums, and guitars were rare. It wasn't very rhythmic; it depended a lot on the person leading, and on how well people sang rhythmically, more than on the song itself. It was well known that there were certain women with strong voices who would hold a half note or a whole note much longer than they were supposed to.

This limited ability to engage in worship without a certain level of musical competence became a crucial factor in the Slovenian Evangelical and Charismatic shift toward more contemporary styles of worship music. Interviewee 1 explained:

> The difficulty is that hymns were often four-part, multi-voice singing, which makes them very hard to perform and hard to play. You must really be a trained musician. And what if you come to a church or a house group and you don't have anyone? Then you can't worship. [. . .] They are demanding to perform and difficult for an entire congregation to sing together—especially in gatherings of ordinary people who are not musicians. It's almost impossible to carry out, and even back then it was becoming clear that it was too complex. People find it hard to participate.

Traditional hymn music, characterized by choirs, hymns, organs and printed books, was often defended by its supporters for its musical sophistication and theological depth. From this perspective, traditional church music was understood as more firmly God centred (Graham 2020, pp. 81–85). This came up time and time again in our interviews as well. For example, Interviewee 1 said:

> The advantage of hymns is that they were stories, and people remembered them very well—that was a huge plus. Even today, I can more easily remember the story I sang as a child because it actually flowed meaningfully. You remembered the narrative, and then one truth about God was repeated through the chorus, and it really stayed with you.

This development aligns with a central argument in the scholarly literature on the transition from traditional to contemporary worship practices. Graham observed that traditional forms of church music often functioned as a sort of gatekeeping mechanism, restricting participation for those lacking musical knowledge or formal training (Graham 2020, p. 91). Thus, CWM was predominantly seen as more conducive for congregational worship and more simple in terms of message. In other words, the greatest merit of CWM was its accessibility—both for worship leaders and the congregation (Graham 2020, p. 85). This makes CWM essentially congregation focused, as worship cannot be a matter of passive reception but active participation (Graham 2020, p. 91). This was amplified by Interviewee 1's metaphor of food:

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> Simpler music is easier for musicians, and maybe the content is also easier to absorb in today's world. We have such a flood of information that deep, rich theology is hard to digest. Here, the messages are simpler, the song last longer, they repeat more, so they're easier to process. In that sense, it's simpler. But it's also because it's less rich—too raw. If you know there is a gourmet meal that truly satisfies you deeply, fills you, and gives you many flavors, then—to use that comparison—this is like fast food. You eat it more often, and in the end, it can still be spiritually sustaining. But it is more accessible and shallower, not nourishing enough.

Interviewee 3 noted similar differences in terms of singing and participating in worship:

> It is more a difference in performance and musical style. In terms of content, hymns usually had more verses, although some worship songs also include verses. Hymns were generally longer, which gives them a certain richness, because they describe their themes in greater detail. Contemporary worship songs sometimes use very short phrases, especially in English, where you can express a lot with just a few words. In Slovenian, we often need to explain things a bit more to capture the same meaning. Contemporary songs therefore tend to contain less textual content than hymns did. In that sense, hymns are much richer.

This is in line with Graham's observation of contemporary worship songs as "easy to sing along with, easy to play, easy to memorize, catchy and exhilarating, and all the more so insofar as they resonate with and build upon the sound of music in everyday modern world" (Graham 2020, p. 91). While this transition in Slovenia was not easy, it was less conflict-ridden than in North America, where the clash between competing types of worship music resulted in so-called worship wars (Ruth 2017). In Slovenia, the organ was gradually replaced by guitars or keyboards and hymns by choruses. That is, hymn-based, God-centred music was replaced by congregation-centred CWM.

This gradual transition from traditional hymn singing to contemporary worship was—according to our responders—mainly spurred by American Evangelical missionaries at first. While Povedák (2014) noted how foreign CWM gradually replaced more localized religious beat movements within the Hungarian Catholic Church, no such development seemed to have occurred in Slovenia. Here, American-style CWM simply replaced traditional hymn singing in Catholic and Protestant churches, which highlights the imported character of CWM in Slovenia. While it was at first tied to Protestant missionaries, the spread of CWM soon became detached from specific missionaries, enabled by the advancement of digital online technologies and platforms, first via YouTube and subsequently through Spotify.

Furthermore, the move towards CWM cannot be understood as a purely musical development. Rather, it also entails a transformation in the social organization of worship—and, by extension, in the structure of church life more broadly. As Ingalls (2017) observes, musical styles may function to include or exclude certain participants. For instance, the amplification of a central vocalist or worship team produces what she terms a "sonic hierarchy," in which only some voices are made audible. Moreover, when the worship leader is expected to play the guitar, this can contribute to the privileging of men, since women are more commonly socialized into keyboard-based roles within church music practices (Ingalls 2017, p. 8). Additionally, it can be a move towards more informal worship, characterized by extemporization (Martin 2016, p. 655) and "casual dress, less-formal liturgy, more-straightforward spiritual messages, and contemporary-sounding church music that everyone could sing without burying their nose in a hymnal" (Stowe 2011, p. 3).

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4.2. From Chaos to Order: Localization and the Origins of SaSu

However, the transition to CWM introduced new challenges. With no centralized institutions, Evangelical and Christian Charismatic communities began adopting and translating CWM songs independently. According to Interviewee 3, this resulted in nothing less than "chaos". In practice, different communities and churches would use different translations of the same CWM songs, which they mainly adapted from the Anglophone world. This created a rather unique situation where some songs would have up to five different translations, making the communal worship of more than one community—Protestant or Catholic—near impossible. In other words, musical localization was messy and uneven. As Interviewee 2 remembered,

> As someone who was very connected to different churches, I got totally blocked when I heard a stupid translation and then another translation of a song, and I couldn't worship anymore. This repeated itself for a couple of years and it tormented me.

This led a handful of likeminded Christians to start thinking about the standardization of CWM translations, which eventually gave rise to a collective now known as "SaSu—Slavimo Skupaj", roughly translated as Worship Together. Recollecting its beginnings, Interviewee 2 formulated SaSu's mission statement: "Chaos spreads very easily." SaSu was initiated precisely to ensure that such disorder would no longer persist". Thus, the project was set up with four specific aims in mind: first, to standardize translations of Christian worship and non-worship songs; second, to improve the quality of translations; third, to collect existing translations to prevent the creation of new versions; and lastly, to bring churches together through worship (SaSu 2026).

Yet, as one of the founding members of the unofficial collective explained, its beginnings in 2009 were challenging. At first, the response from fellow worshipers in other Evangelical and Catholic communities was dismissive. Faced with limited support, the core team, consisting of three to four translators, shifted to a more basic mission: to catalogue every song used in Slovenian churches for worship. Thus, between 2011 and 2013, the small group of enthusiasts went from church to church, composing the first list of translated songs, which eventually resulted in what we label here as Database A. As Interviewee 2 explained, they were guided by a simple aim: not to impose new translations on Christian communities.

In 2013, they started translating their first songs. Powerless to force churches and communities to standardize their translations, they set out to work without any guarantees that this would be a worthwhile endeavour. Coming from diverse musical and denominational traditions—ranging from Catholic to Baptist, Pentecostal, and Neocharismatic contexts—the participants required a clearly articulated common framework. The Protestants, who were fewer in number than the Catholics, expressed concerns about being culturally and musically overshadowed within the collaboration. To establish a shared theological basis, the group formulated a set of fourteen theses, grounded in 1 Corinthians 15, which articulated their core Christian convictions and functioned as a unifying doctrinal reference point (SaSu 2026).[2] As Interviewee 2 added, "we avoided translating songs about saints or Mary, as these themes are not universally shared". However, disagreements emerged between the Baptist-leaning and more Charismatic-leaning Evangelicals when it came to lyrics about the Holy Spirit, especially the question of whether a baptized Christian receives the Spirit.

Following the establishment of their theological bedrock, they proceeded to refine their working process, which Interviewee 2 explained as follows:

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> Anyone who wants to can submit a text for review. I put it into a spreadsheet, line by line, and others add their comments. Those of us who have been doing this for a longer time can immediately see what works and what doesn't—whether the rhythm fits, whether the wording is appropriate, whether something feels awkward. Over the years, we have refined one another's work. For example, my daughter insists that you cannot write a monosyllabic word in a place where it could be pronounced as either one or two syllables. If we write it as one, others will sing it as two. In the end, the initial translator has to produce the final version. If something is completely off, we discuss it as much as possible, but everything ultimately depends on the first translator. The idea is that at least three people review the text—four or five together with the main translator—so it is a fairly standard editorial process.

Given the project's volunteer-based nature, the time required to complete a translation varies widely, ranging from one week to one month, and in some cases extending to several months or even a full year. As Interviewee 2 explained, the translation quality is assessed according to three main priorities: fidelity to Scripture, the preservation of the semantic and rhythmic essence of the original lyrics, and the melodic compatibility of the translated text. After approval by the core SaSu team, each translation is reviewed by an MA theologian and then proofread. Common translation errors arise from the tensions between linguistic accuracy and performative suitability. One frequent issue is rhythmic mismatch, where the translated lyrics fail to align precisely with the original musical meter, creating difficulties in congregational performance and potentially hindering authorial approval. Another problem involves overly literal renderings that ignore natural Slovenian expression and the broader semantic fields of words across languages. Translators must also avoid excessive personal pronouns, incorrect stress patterns introduced for rhyme, and dialectal accent variations. Grammatical inaccuracies, such as improper use of reflexive possessive pronouns, further reduce clarity.

The core translation team consists of approximately five members, including Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Neocharismatics. Its composition varies depending on members' church and family obligations. Given this denominational diversity, considerable effort is devoted to maintaining a cooperative and collegial collaboration. SaSu's website (SaSu 2026) outlines the guiding principles of its work ethic:

> We want to communicate with constructive suggestions. Humility must guide us; we want to respect one another (if we do not feel humility in our hearts, let us ask the Lord to give it to us so that we can continue working). The opinions of others should not be superfluous to us, but rather welcome. Through working together, we learn to hand the reins over to God and not to enforce our own desires. We want to be united in prayer, asking God to guide us, and asking Him to help us tame our pride so that we can see His will.

Over the past sixteen years, the efforts of committed worship practitioners have resulted in the development of four publicly accessible databases on the organization's official website. According to Interviewee 2, SaSu's translations were initially used predominantly by Catholics, whereas Evangelical and other Protestant Charismatic churches were more hesitant to adopt standardized translations due to their reliance on locally produced versions. However, within five years, approximately 80% of Protestant churches and communities in Slovenia began using SaSu's databases.

4.3. Americanization of Worship in Slovenia

The analysis of Datasets A and B reveals several recurring patterns. Most notably, the non-local worship music used in Slovenia is overwhelmingly Anglophone, largely

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produced in the United States, and in most cases rooted in Evangelical Christian contexts. Out of the 770 songs included in our analysis of Datasets A and B, only 72 (9.3%) were originally written in Slovenian. In other words, 90.7% of the worship songs used in Slovenian Christian contexts are of foreign origin. Of these, 667 (86.6%) were originally written in English. The remaining songs were originally written in Spanish (7; 1.0%), German (7; 1.0%), Croatian (6; 0.8%), and Italian (5; 0.6%). Additionally, one song each was originally composed in Romani, Serbian, Hebrew, Czech, Slovak, and Bosnian.

A closer look at Database B, which includes only SaSu translations, reveals a more detailed picture. First, their classification as CWM is supported by the observation that 179 of the 184 songs were originally recorded and released after 2000. Second, 172 songs (93.4%) were originally written in English, mirroring the patterns observed in Dataset A. Of these, 130 originated from the United States, 27 from Australia, eight from the United Kingdom, two from Nigeria, and one from Singapore. Thus, 70.6% of the officially translated SaSu repertoire in Dataset B derives from the United States. The remaining twelve songs reflect a diverse set of national origins, including four from Croatia, two from Germany, and one each from the Czech Republic, Israel, Slovakia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Dominican Republic.

Asked whether translations follow popular international CWM, Interviewee 2 replied that

> No, there simply isn't enough time. There are only three or four of us who are active, and we cannot do everything. We are covering only the most basic needs. When a request comes in—it's also like this: if the Holy Spirit does not open the words to you, it doesn't work. You cannot force it. Sometimes I listen to a song, and the words just start flowing together; I hear them, I sit down, and I can translate it in half an hour. Other times I struggle with a request for several weeks, if the Holy Spirit does not give me the right words. You can clearly see that something comes in a certain moment. You cannot do this by force. This is a spiritual matter, and it is also an artistic matter. If it is forced, then spiritually and artistically it has no power—no authority, no artistic value—nothing.

Overall, SaSu's translations are driven by demand within Slovenian churches. Others, too, noted the inescapable nature of popular CWM music. For example, Interviewee 3 said that

> When I was translating, Hillsong was extremely well known, and I translated most of their songs. I enjoyed them, and they were also very popular at the time. You translate what is current, what is being sung everywhere around the world. Wherever you go, you hear the same songs. For example, our pastor was in Switzerland, Canada, and other places, and heard I Call Jesus (Israel Houghton) in countless different languages. These are the songs that are "in," so naturally they need to be translated, because that is what people want to sing.

It is no surprise that Databases A and B strongly overlap with the top song lists compiled by Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), which are amongst the most popular CWM songs globally (Thornton 2023). This pattern is further reflected in the close alignment between the Slovenian translations and global worship charts. For instance, among the ten most popular CWM songs in the United States as of 19 January 2026, eight have been translated into Slovene, while all of the top ten songs in the United Kingdom have Slovene translations (CCLI 2026). It is therefore unsurprising that Hillsong is the most frequently translated worship group, accounting for 23 songs, or approximately 12% of all entries in Database B. Other leading figures in the contemporary worship industry are similarly prominent, including Elevation Worship and Chris Tomlin with nine entries

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each, Bethel Music with eight, and Phil Wickham with six. Database B also underscores the influence of key record labels whose repertoires have been translated into Slovene. Alongside Hillsong Music, these include Integrity Music (21 songs), Bethel Music (12), Capitol Christian Music Group (12), Sparrow Records (11), and Fair Trade Services (10). Provident Label Group (seven), Essential Worship (six), and Kingsway Music (five) are likewise represented.

An examination of the communities of origin represented in Database B reveals a striking Protestant predominance. Of the 184 songs included, 165 (89.6%) originated within Evangelical contexts, compared to six from Anglican traditions and only five from the Catholic Church. This distribution is particularly notable given the significant involvement of Catholics within the SaSu translation team. Within the Protestant corpus, Charismatic Evangelical and Neocharismatic communities are the most strongly represented, accounting for 75 entries (approximately 40% of the total). These are followed by non-denominational origins with 44 songs, and then Baptist and Pentecostal traditions with 14 entries each. Beyond Hillsong, Bethel Church (16), Light Church (six), and Vineyard (four) appear most frequently. The non-denominational contributions are largely associated with Passion City Church (10) and Journey Church (four), while Elevation Church constitutes the most prominent Baptist source.

Overall, these patterns correspond closely with Ingalls' analysis of contemporary worship music in the 2010s, where the pop-rock mainstream associated with Hillsong, Passion, Bethel, and Gateway dominated popular worship repertoires (Ingalls 2017, pp. 12–13). This may be explained by the age make-up of Slovenian Evangelical and Charismatic communities, which are predominantly middle-aged. While Ingalls notes the emergence of gospel-inflected alternatives, exemplified by Israel Houghton, such developments have not yet gained comparable traction in Slovenia, with only two of his songs translated. This may reflect the ethnic homogeneity of Slovenian congregations, since Houghton's fusion of rock, R&B, and gospel is often linked to efforts to bridge ethnic divisions within diverse worship communities (Ingalls 2017, p. 12).

Given the global character of contemporary Christianity (Zurlo 2022), this represents a strikingly Western repertoire of worship music. As Thornton observes, the Western production centres of CWM continue to exert "dominant influences on contemporary worship globally," even as churches in the majority world now surpass Western churches in numerical growth (Thornton 2023, p. 3). This imbalance carries important implications for Slovenian CWM. Before turning to these, however, it is necessary to highlight another distinctive feature of the Slovenian case: the extent of cross-denominational cooperation shaping its worship music landscape.

4.4. Interdenominational Collaboration

Although interdenominational cooperation has been noted before, it is worth emphasizing this dynamic. In Slovenia, a Catholic-majority country, mainstream and Charismatic Catholics, Baptists, and even Neocharismatic communities regularly collaborate, particularly in worship music. For instance, during my PhD research, a prominent leader in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal described their engagement with Hillsong music in the following terms:

> In fact, the best are Protestant, particularly Hillsong songs. They are sung a lot and there are no restrictions here. Why, if it is a beautiful song of praise, should we look at who wrote it and which church it comes from? In fact, there are many songs in the Renewal, especially newer ones, that come from the Pentecostal church, from these Protestant churches. They certainly have this worship perfected in that sense. They have excellent musicians, and they devote

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> a lot more to it because it is almost the only foundation on which they build. They have this part down, just as they have the word of God and its interpretation, they are much stronger in this because it is all they have. In this regard, we often help each other here, and I see no reason why we shouldn't. (Interviewee B)

Interestingly, the easiness with which predominantly Charismatic Catholics adopt Protestant, mainly Hillsong, music was noted in Hungary as well (Povedák 2014, p. 143). Back in Slovenia, Interviewee 2 spoke in similar terms when describing her cooperation with Catholics in music:

> What we do is for everyone, and we work a lot with Catholics. At first, I tried to keep my distance from them because I have a history there—that sense of lifelessness, those rituals. But the more I tried to push them away, the more God kept bringing them into my life. So yes, when we come together at concerts, we share the same music, and I can listen to their bands too.

Asked whether she had any problems with Catholics and their worship music, Interviewee 3, a Pentecostal, remarked

> When it comes to music, not really. The only issue would be theology—that's where I obviously wouldn't want to compromise. I do believe they make very beautiful music. I was just at a Catholic music festival. It was great, I really enjoyed it. I saw all those young people up front, having a great time. I don't think we're that different. It mostly comes down to what the worship is directed toward. In general, it's more about worshipping God, not Mary. If it were focused on Mary, that would bother me.

The primary driver of collaboration is material: the division of labour. Given the size of each community, Slovenian Christians are unable to maintain strict denominational boundaries, since each community relies on a handful of individuals for the day-to-day running of its churches. That is, theological boundary work is often sidestepped to make the creation of CWM possible. When asked whether Protestant worship leaders can gather regularly for mutual support, Interviewee 3 answered in the negative, pointing to constraints in space and resources:

> We are, of course, planning to build a new building when that becomes more feasible, because you need space. Otherwise, you have to rent venues, which immediately becomes an expense, since our churches are simply too small. The problem is that in Slovenia, for all worship musicians, this is not our main occupation—we all have other jobs. If you compare this to worship groups in the West, in places like the United States, Canada, or Australia, there are people whose full-time role is worship ministry in the church, and they therefore have the time to dedicate themselves to it. We do this alongside everything else. Every single one of us. All of us are volunteers when it comes to CWM and worship bands.

This dynamic underscores the theoretical perspective of musicking. CWM constitutes a distinct musical form, differentiated from other contemporary pop-rock genres by its explicit orientation toward praising God and facilitating entry into the divine presence. In this sense, CWM may be understood as a particular kind of spiritual technology. Although its mission is understood as divine, this kind of technology is socially constructed and therefore shaped by social forces that condition the possibilities for its production, circulation, and reception. As part of the broader network of material elements that constitute worship sessions, CWM holds central significance for Charismatic Christians. Accordingly, ensuring its provision to the community is equally vital. During my PhD research, for in-

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stance, numerous Charismatic Catholics observed that worship groups often faltered in the absence of a musician or when congregational singing was weak. Given the limited pool of musicians within each congregation, cross-denominational collaboration becomes essential for maintaining local CWM production and a minimal level of standardization in imported CWM. Although this remains speculative, it does seem likely that such collaboration may extend beyond music, facilitating a greater sense of common Christian belonging.

When it comes to local music (re)production, Catholics hold a material advantage due to their institutionalization, in contrast to broader trends that identify Evangelicals as the main drivers of CWM (Howard and Streck 1999, p. 10). For example, Interviewee 2 explained that "This collaboration is primarily oriented toward Catholics, since the Catholic Church has greater financial resources, a larger membership, and consequently more opportunities and institutional support." However, Catholics do not necessarily have it easy. Interviewee 1, a Baptist who runs a Slovenian YouTube channel dedicated to CWM, noted her collaboration with several Catholics, both in worship bands and in providing technical support, and emphasized the power of CWM to form cross-denominational links:

> Currently, we're collaborating with a Catholic band. Our video production is also done by Catholics as well. There's piano, musicians, and we sometimes invite other musicians from the Catholic scene. It is a group of girls from Maribor and we recognized that we could work together. They also felt like they couldn't really move forward on their own. They are gifted, but they're limited because in their parish they don't have a band, they don't have the money. . . Then they said, "Hey," and we went through this whole process of getting to know each other, and that's why we started collaborating. There are Catholics on our channel, which is great, because they can help bridge that truth we want to live by: that Christian music breaks down the walls between different Christian communities.

Interviewee 2 highlighted key material differences in the organization of Protestant communities in Catholic-majority Slovenia compared to the United States and noted a frequent lack of understanding amongst foreign benefactors. Reflecting on the operations of a Baptist organization that sends American missionaries to Slovenia, she explained that

> The organization has its own missionaries, supported and sent from the United States, and sometimes they say, for example, "Oh, you are not allowed to go to a Pentecostal church." This is especially pointless, because people in the United States do not really grasp how necessary it is for us to remain connected. We are so small that we cannot afford to create separate "little gardens" for ourselves—we have to be united. They do not feel this urgency when they have two thousand people in a single church. Here, however, we have this need: when there are three young people here and four there, they have to know each other. That is why the Pentecostal prayer and worship centre, where other Evangelicals also come, has now become a crucial hub. The circumstances are simply very different, and they do not understand this in the United States.

While CWM is a crucial space for driving interdenominational cooperation due to the division of labour within Evangelical and Charismatic communities, it has also brought with itself important challenges for Slovenian Christian communities.

4.5. Discontents: What Is Lost in and with Translation?

In his studies on the transnational flows of Hillsong, the media studies scholar Mark Evans intriduced the concept of songlines to describe the homogenization force of the global Christian music industry through local adaptations (Evans 2015). Based on his Swedish case studies, he pointed to two particular consequences of the global migration

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and adaptation of CWM, the proliferation of translations and the disappearance of local songwriting. Similarly, Kgatle wrote about African Pentecostals translating English songs into indigenous languages as a form of decolonization and Africanization, stressing that Pentecostals should "sing with understanding" (Kgatle 2019, p. 4).

As noted earlier, the gradual replacement of traditional hymn singing by CWM has brought about a particular kind of translational chaos, from which SaSu emerged. However, the translation of foreign, predominantly American, British and Australian songs has brought with it another problem—the feeling of a forced style of worship. In other words, it raises a fear of the global standardization of worship, and the question of sincerity (Abraham 2018). Other scholars have noted this as well. For example, Martí's (2018) analysis of Hillsong portrays it as a driving force of "an ongoing elaboration of evangelicalism", blurring the boundaries between Charismatic and Evangelical Christianity. Similarly, Abraham believes Hillsong represents a distinct worship style, which is both "highly subjective" and "highly standardized" (Abraham 2018, p. 2).

The perceived pressure to adopt externally imposed styles and content in musical worship emerged clearly in the interviews. For instance, although Interviewee 1 expressed appreciation for standardized translations, she also lamented an over-reliance on foreign CWM:

> I find it sad that we constantly have to translate the way Australians love God, the way Americans love God—I find that truly disappointing. Why is it that they are allowed to do it and know how to do it, while we do not? And when we try, why is it not valued? We are a poetic nation, and I do not understand why, when it comes to God, our own voice becomes so muted. Even what could once be heard has, under foreign influence, been largely replaced within the church. I think that is a loss. No good fruit will come from this if the trend is not stopped. Do not get me wrong—foreign worship music speaks to me as well. But it should at least be balanced, fifty-fifty. Catholics, for example, held on quite well to producing their own music, but now it is mostly just covers. You go to a worship evening, and you no longer know whether you are in a Catholic church, a Protestant one, or something else. The songs are the same.

This quote points to an important scholarly issue of localization and hybridity. As noted above, some studies have recently shown how translation itself can bring about a sense of identification (Perigo 2021), or at least a sense of hybrid belonging to both international Christian and indigenous currents (Magowan 2007); this does not appear to be the case in Slovenia. Localization is only sufficient when it emerges from indigenous production. However, this is not clear-cut, as differences emerge between the creators and consumers of CWM.

Returning to her metaphor of fast food, Interviewee 1 added that "We are slowly becoming truly tired of repeating what feels like pre-chewed food." A good example of this is Hillsong. Despite its early Australian identity, Hillsong has intentionally adopted an international outlook (Riches and Wagner 2012), which, as Porter (2018) notes, has nurtured a "transnational imaginary", driving its cosmopolitanism. It facilitates the transnational circulation of a particular kind of "embedded and embodied Hillsong worship" possible, which avoids adopting any national identity or habitus, even though its songs are pre-tested by an Australian audience (Riches and Wagner 2012, p. 24). This is what Slovenian worshippers are struggling with. During my PhD study, a Slovenian Pentecostal, who often took part in international conferences, told me that in this regard

> It was completely different, a bit more "franchise-like," if you know Hillsong-style churches. I did not like it very much, because there was more emphasis on

> lights, on the show, on looking cool and being well-dressed. That bothers me. For example, this April I am going to Vienna for an Erasmus internship, and I am already looking for a church there, searching online. There is one very close to where I will be staying, but it also seems rather "franchise-like." That does not attract me, because I am not looking for a place where I can appear as a "cool" believer. And then there is also the fact that everyone seems to share the same style—as if you are truly an outsider if you go to church but do not fit into that aesthetic. That really bothers me, this emphasis on a particular way of dressing. The same applies to worship music. That also frustrates me. This kind of worship music feels so monotonous—everything sounds similar, and I find it absolutely boring. I prefer diversity, both older and newer forms. (Interviewee A)

As noted above, it is not only about language, but also about style and a dress code as well. Interviewee 3 similarly lamented the lack of Slovenian CWM:

> Every nation must also be able to express itself in its own language. If you write a Slovenian song in Slovene, you will likely use a richer and more nuanced language than if you are simply translating. Slovenia has many capable people who can write, and we have a beautiful language. But we Slovenes tend to be drawn to foreign things. We admire the West, we like imported culture and products. For a Slovenian creator, it is difficult to break through in the domestic market. I personally find joy in writing CWM and want to worship God through it, which is why I do it. At the same time, it is not easy in Slovenia, because as a nation we are somehow inclined to believe that what comes from the West is better—that what is in English is better than what we have in Slovene. This is something we struggle with collectively.

Similarly, Interviewee 2 directed her frustration toward American missionaries, underscoring a sense of homogenization and what she perceived as a form of cultural colonization:

> There is not enough local production, which makes it seem as though everything here comes from abroad, because we are constantly translating. Slovenian music, created through Slovenian production, is deeply needed and very welcome. For me personally, my heart cannot fully be in English, even though I translate. Even when we have a camp, everything is translated for every American, but for our own young people it is simply left in English, because "they will understand it." And I say no. I argue with them about this—we are expected to immediately know English lyrics. And I respond, fine, then when will you learn Slovenian songs?

Thus, a central perceived drawback of adopting CWM is cultural homogenization (Plüss 2009), whereby musical convergence diminishes local diversity. For our interlocutors, however, homogenization is not merely a matter of aesthetics. Slovenian CWM is valued not only for its local character but also for its perceived efficacy in mediating the presence of God, as outlined in our theoretical framework. In other words, for worship to facilitate an encounter with the divine, it must be performed in a medium regarded by the participants as spiritually effective.

Furthermore, asymmetric religious globalization encompasses musical style as well. Drawing comparisons with her time as a missionary in Ethiopia, Interviewee 2 emphasized the distinctive character of indigenous forms of worship. She noticed how their worship was completely transformed by singing in their native language:

> I told them, "You teach me your song." Not in English, not in an American way, but in their own language. After about two years, there was a real breakthrough: they began to sing their own worship. Teenagers had been leading worship

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> in English and singing American songs. But when they switched to their own songs, the Spirit rose, and the worship became completely different. The worship changed entirely—the language itself made such a difference. Of course, it did not resonate with us in the same way: the drums, the rhythms, the African melodic patterns, even the Muslim influence. But it was striking how simply changing the language and returning to their own musical idiom allowed the Spirit to move freely rather than being constrained, and the worship was lifted.

She added a comparison with Americans:

> American missionaries often see only themselves and think, "Yes—the American way is the best." But when we Slovenes came, we came as servants, as those who wanted to support them, and we offered them something spiritually far more valuable—something that matters most. That is why I find it so important that worship is expressed in one's mother tongue: that you have words in your own language, that you understand what you are singing, and that you are able to express yourself fully. And only then comes the next step, which is the indigenous melodic style.

Beyond the impact of worshipping with foreign CWM, even when translated, its import has profound consequences for the local production of CMW (Evans 2015). On the one hand, translations serve as ready-made material to be recorded, distributed and sung during worship. On the other hand, despite occasional efforts, this has proven stifling for local production of CMW. According to our interlocutors, Slovenia only has a small number of worship bands and singers, most of whom are Catholic. Groups such as Abend, and especially Svetnik and, more recently, Rapha Worship, have been at the forefront of CCM and CWM in Slovenia, both through original productions and the adaptation of foreign CWM repertoires. Protestant Christians, by contrast, are largely confined to local church worship bands, which rarely collaborate across congregations. When asked whether there have been any attempts to establish a unified Protestant worship band, Interviewee 1 responded that

> It has always been a desire, but it always gets stuck because we are spread out across different parts of the country. And again, there is simply no money in this. To start something serious, you also need serious commitment—meeting regularly for rehearsals—and it has simply not worked out. Our churches are not large enough to gather five people from one place and another two who would be willing to travel. It really is not feasible.

Nevertheless, there are visible attempts to promote CWM in Slovenia. For example, a group of enthusiastic Christians have established Heartbeat of the Kingdom, an unofficial association of individuals, who work together to promote worship music in Slovenia. They produce and write their own CWM, provide theological and musical education, and organize worship evenings. As Interviewee 1 explained,

> These are individuals from both traditions—Catholic and Protestant churches—who recognize why it is so important to love God. Because we want this to be truly spiritual music, not something that anyone can simply copy. What pains me about much of today's Christian music is that it often becomes only an external imitation of a certain musical style, without speaking about whether these are people who actually have a spiritual relationship with Jesus.

Similarly to SaSu, the project is run by only four people. In terms of recording and sharing songs, they manage a Spotify account and a YouTube channel where they upload their music. Of the 75 videos currently published, 70 are translated versions of foreign

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CWM songs. They travel from church to church to identify potential singers and invite them to record a song of their choosing with the group. Interviewee 1 explained that the project's main goal is the revival of Slovenian CWM.

> We are looking for worship leaders and worship musicians in church worship groups who meet these criteria and have gifts but often do not have the opportunity to serve or develop in Slovenia. For example, in their church they may have an excellent singer, but they don't have a bassist or a drummer, so they cannot record anything. Somewhere they have a great bassist but everything else is missing. Elsewhere there is an electric guitarist, but again the full team is not there. For a long time, I believe Christian music here could not really develop because the constant attitude was: we don't have, we don't have, we don't have. I became tired of this "we don't have" syndrome. Okay, we don't have everything. But then nothing gets done, instead of asking: what do we have, and what can we create with what we already have?

A similar initiative is evident amongst Catholics, who have organized a CCM festival since 2002 called Rhythm of the Heart (Ritem Srca 2026). The festival's explicit aim is to promote original Slovenian CCM, Catholic or Protestant, by Slovenian singers and bands. The main part of the event is dedicated to the presentation of novel Slovenian CCM, while the finale turns into a concert-like gathering of Christians, singing popular Slovenian and foreign CCM,. As Protestant Interviewee 2 explained, the festival is recognized as a means of countering both foreign domination and the standardization of CCM and CWM:

> I love the festival because it is the only festival that truly supports this. Even if it is not always a "hit," it counters the biggest CWM in the world. They have carefully studied what works: which chords fit together, which words belong together—everything is thought through. It is almost like mathematics: how a person responds, which chords move them and inspire them. That is why I support this fesitval, because it is the only one that says: hey, what comes from the Slovenian heart must be loved and respected.

In sum, our study shows that the gradual shift from traditional hymn singing toward CWM has been both welcomed and lamented. This ambivalence stems from two fundamental drawbacks: the increasing standardization and cultural colonization of worship styles, and the simultaneous marginalization of local CWM production. Before concluding, we discuss the implications of this particular configuration of CWM in the Slovenian context.

5. Discussion

We suggest that these findings are best interpreted through a combination of the mediational approach to religion and the musicking paradigm. The broader material turn, within which this approach is situated, has challenged longstanding scholarly emphases on religion as primarily a matter of abstract belief or doctrine. Instead, it foregrounds religious materiality and practice as central to understanding how religious commitments are generated, sustained, and reproduced over time. As Birgit Meyer argues, "religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things, and is part and parcel of power structures" (Meyer 2012, p. 7). In this vein, contemporary material approaches to religion shift analytical attention from asking how religion is merely expressed in material form to examining how religion is constituted through material practices (Meyer et al. 2010, p. 209). Working within the field of material religion, historian Robert Orsi similarly conceptualizes religion as "the practice of making the invisible visible," emphasizing that once rendered material, the invisible becomes something that can be "negotiated and bargained with, touched and kissed," and made to carry human

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affect, including anger and disappointment (Orsi 2012, p. 73). From this perspective, religion cannot be reduced to assent to supernatural propositions or to discursive accounts of experience. Rather, it encompasses practices and forms that enable the transcendent to be apprehended as immanent within the social and sensory world. Such attention to the material conditions through which persuasive religious experience is generated in embodied communal contexts has informed scholarly interest in mediation—that is, the concrete means by which the supernatural is made present and accessible (Meyer 2012; Morgan 2010). Within this framework, the assemblages of beliefs, practices, and material forms conventionally designated as "religions" function as mediating structures that organize and sustain encounters between individuals and the transcendent.

A comparable orientation is evident across much of contemporary scholarship on religion (Luhrmann 2020). Yet Birgit Meyer's work is particularly influential in conceptualizing religion as a fundamentally mediational practice. Meyer advances an analytical framework that understands religions as assemblages of techniques, practices, and material forms through which the presence of supernatural agents is mediated and rendered experientially accessible (Meyer 2012, p. 27). Central to her contribution is the concept of sensational forms, which she defines as "relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendental," thereby creating and sustaining connections among practitioners and the supernatural (Meyer 2006, p. 9). Worship music provides a salient example of such a sensational form. As noted above, Charismatic Christians often orient communal worship toward the anticipated encounter with God, with music functioning as a key medium through which this experience is cultivated and shared (Albrecht 1999; Warrington 2008).

Music, however, is not a given object but is more productively understood as a social practice, continuously constituted through networks of performers, ensembles, audiences, and producers (Small 1998). In this sense, music exists only insofar as it is actively made and sustained. The absence of musical production can therefore pose significant challenges for forms of Christianity—such as Charismatic Christianity—that rely heavily on music to achieve their core religious aims. This emerged as a recurring issue in our study. First, traditional hymnody often operated through forms of musical gatekeeping that restricted participation and limited the expressive life of congregations, thereby encouraging a shift toward the more accessible idiom of CWM. Yet while CWM is generally easier to perform and congregationally adaptable, the creation of locally authored worship repertoires has remained a persistent obstacle. As our interlocutors repeatedly emphasized, musicking requires substantial effort and infrastructure. It involves not only singers and instrumentalists, but also drummers, producers, videographers, and access to platforms for dissemination. Given their position as religious minorities, and their dependence on already overstretched church personnel to organize and lead worship, Slovenian Evangelical and Charismatic communities often face significant practical constraints in sustaining such musical production. These limitations have contributed to a growing reliance on imported CWM repertoires, which are dominated by Evangelical worship industries within the Anglophone world. This has led to a feeling of forced standardization and a need for local CWM production, giving rise to diverse initiatives for the promotion of Slovenian CCM and CWM. It is also important to note Ingalls' warning regarding musical styles. Their meaning and role are not only to be found in their aesthetics, but also as a communication medium of "cultural values", which can form the basis of "social inclusion and exclusion" (Ingalls 2017, p. 13). In our study, this exclusion can be found especially in excluding local songwriters and performers from the national market of CWM.

This is consistent with broader historical patterns. As Evans notes, Christian music has long been "a migrational and often colonizing force" (Evans 2015, p. 179). Referring to the

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missional hymns, which flowed from the UK to Europe, Africa and the Pacific, he reminds us that the indigenous adoption of foreign music has often resulted in homogenization. Our study suggests that similar processes are unfolding in Slovenia. Adoption of foreign CWM and the stifling of local production signals the unprecedented degree to which Contemporary Christian Music, with its global music industry and the proliferation of mass media, has proven to be a double-edged sword. While the wholesale transformation of local churches into Hillsong-style congregations cannot be found in Slovenia, the pervasiveness of popular English CWM signals a form of cultural dominance. The ease with which CWM has come to dominate Slovenian worship music illustrates the international portability of contemporary Charismatic Christianity. In his discussion of the transmissibility of religion, Csordas (2007b) distinguishes between transposable messages and transposable practices. In the present case, the latter is of relevance. Csordas defines transposable practices as "rites that can be easily learned, require relatively little esoteric knowledge or paraphernalia, are not held as proprietary or necessarily linked to a specific cultural context, and can be performed without commitment to an elaborate ideological or institutional apparatus" (Csordas 2007b, p. 261). This characterization applies closely to contemporary worship music. Worship songs and lyrics are readily accessible online, can be translated rapidly using digital tools such as DeepL or Google Translate, and may be projected and performed in congregational settings within a matter of hours. Moreover, the pop-rock idiom of CWM is so pervasive within contemporary global culture that congregations can incorporate it into worship with minimal musical or cultural adjustment.

Beyond international homogenization, however, lies another form, perhaps even more intriguing: interdenominational. A combination of factors has forced interdenominational collaboration and, at least on the level of consumed CWM, a gradual homogenization of CWM used among Catholics and Evangelicals alike. This is not necessarily a novel development. In her introduction to the study of CWM, Ingalls notes that "there is not a clear line of demarcation" between Charismatic Christianity and other Christian traditions as "many signature emphases" of Charismatics have been "woven into other noncharismatic denominations" (Ingalls 2015, pp. 3–4). She further observes that worship music and practices overlap substantially across Evangelical, Lutheran, and Charismatic Catholic contexts. Comparable developments have been documented in other regions as well. Gladwin (2015), for instance, describes the Pentecostalization of Latin American Evangelicalism and the emergence of a broader "pan-pentaevangelical" culture (p. 203). Marked by the pervasive presence of worship music in congregational singing and large-scale events, this culture reflects a creative incorporation of diverse musical styles and genres alongside Neocharismatic worship techniques; an intensified theology of worship; and, finally, a metaphysics of spiritual warfare, which stresses the intertwined nature of the physical and the spiritual world, leading to pronounced struggles between good and evil forces in the everyday lives of believers.

Such developments have recently given rise to questions regarding a fundamental reshaping of Western Christianity. While the 20th century Pentecostalization affected minor renewal movements within mainline churches, the Charismatization of Christianity could reshape whole churches. In his assessment of Hillsong, Martí (2018) remarked on how the contemporary immersive worship style has signalled the Charismatization of worship across the world. While the Charismatic impact on worship has become self-evident (Ingalls and Yong 2015; Christerson and Flory 2017), it remains to be seen whether this will impact other parts of congregational life. This is not to say that the Charismatization of Catholic worship, for example, is universally welcomed by other Charismatic Christians. Interviewee 2, a member of a Neocharismatic community, acknowledged that nowadays, they use the same CWM and attend the same worship gatherings, but stressed that "the

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Spirit is different". Asked to elaborate, she provided a distinction between having fun and worshipping, a matter of sincerity (Abraham 2018) and entertainment:

> We come together, we worship together, but sometimes I ask myself: which God are they actually worshipping? Do they truly know Christ the way I know Him, or is it just a lifeless image? Then you see certain things, it can feel almost like being at a stadium concert by a major rock band. Even in church camps or youth events, you sometimes get these playful "conga-line" moments, and I find myself thinking: no, I don't want that. I don't want children to learn how to entertain themselves—I want them to learn how to worship. On the one hand, the songs bring people together. On the other hand, they do not—if people do not even know who my God is. If worship becomes only a form of entertainment, then there is no real difference: instead of listening to Coldplay, they listen to a Christian band, but the atmosphere is the same, and the purpose is the same—simply to entertain Christian youth. And that is no longer worship.

This remark underscores the delicate tension within contemporary worship between secularized performance, which may be perceived as lacking authenticity, and persuasive religious practice oriented toward facilitating an encounter with God (Thornton 2023). While a fuller exploration of these dynamics lies beyond the scope of the present study, this tension points to important limitations and avenues for future research discussed below.

6. Conclusions

Drawing on a framework integrating the concepts of musicking and material mediation, this study examines CWM as a means of facilitating ritualized encounters with God in communal worship. It demonstrates how, since the 1980s, many Slovenian Christian churches—particularly Charismatic ones—have adopted CWM in place of traditional hymnody. This transition has been shaped both by changing aesthetic preferences and by the relatively high level of musical expertise required for the performance of hymns in liturgical settings. The adoption of CWM, however, has been uneven and at times improvised, prompting the emergence of voluntary initiatives aimed at standardizing translations to facilitate musical localization. An analysis of their databases indicates that CWM in Slovenian churches is predominantly American in origin and closely associated with Charismatic and Evangelical traditions. The second part of our analysis shows that limited personnel resources have encouraged interdenominational cooperation, both in producing standardized translations and in developing local, indigenous CWM as a response to concerns about cultural homogenization. In this respect, the study contributes to the scholarship on religious migration by highlighting the disembodied migration of religious technologies and practices, which—as the case of CWM illustrates—can generate significant cultural transformations within religious communities.

To conclude, the study's limitations and potential avenues for future research should be addressed. Given the small number of contributors involved in the communities examined here—particularly within the SaSu project—our analysis remains constrained in its ability to capture the broader denominational landscape. Most notably, the study lacks a sustained engagement with Catholic perspectives—both traditional and Charismatic—which would further clarify Catholic evaluations of CWM. More broadly, the principal limitation of this study lies in its largely descriptive character. While such an approach is warranted in an initial exploratory analysis aimed at mapping the field and identifying avenues for future research, it inevitably constrains the scope and generalizability of the findings.

Although beyond the scope of the present study, future research would benefit from a systematic examination of worship bands across Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Neocharismatic churches. Such a comparative approach could illuminate differences in

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repertoires as well as divergent assessments of the potential risks associated with adopting imported CWM. Further research on CWM in Slovenia—and in other Catholic-majority contexts—should also foreground Catholic perspectives to better assess the Charismatization of worship and its broader implications for contemporary Christian practice. In this regard, we believe worship music constitutes a particularly fruitful vantage point for analysing processes of liturgical homogenization across Christian denominations, while also providing an empirical basis for evaluating concerns, such as those expressed by Interviewee 2, regarding the authenticity and sincerity of worship among non-Charismatic Christians. Finally, considering the emerging resistance to perceived cultural colonization, future research should examine strategies for addressing concerns about global homogenization. How do churches and communities negotiate these tensions internally, and in what ways do they seek to counteract CWM-driven standardization? Is there evidence of a renewed turn toward traditional hymnody? These are just some of the questions that should be tackled in the future as the field of CCM promises to remain a productive area for scholarly engagement.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CCM	Contemporary Christian Music
CWM	Contemporary Worship Music

Notes

1 While none of the interviewees reported being aware of any international databases or resources pertaining to worship music, there are two significant digital tools that can help communities organize their worship. First, there is a more advanced database of internationally renowned CWM aptly labelled Worship Together https://www.worshiptogether.com/ (Accessed on 20 February 2026); secondly, there is the webpage of Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), a private company, which offers services pertaining to copyright issues, lyrics, databases of songs and charts of the most popular CWM songs.

2 In abbreviated form, these theses affirm: original sin; the virginity of Mary; Christ's purity; the divinity of Christ (anti-Arian); the humanity of Christ (anti-Docetic); the unity and Trinity of God; the necessity of grace and faith; Christ's atoning death; the bodily resurrection and ascension; Christ's priestly mediation; and Christ's second coming.

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Article

Sexual Abuse in the Roman Catholic Church as Spiritual Violence: The Loyola Community Under Accusations Against Marko Ivan Rupnik

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Abstract

This qualitative research examines the systemic dynamics of the abuse of consecrated women in the Loyola Community, analyzing the allegations against the influential sacral artist and theologian Marko Ivan Rupnik within broader scholarly debates on abuse in Catholic ecclesial contexts. Drawing on survivor testimonies, the study explores how clericalism and forms of spiritual authority were instrumentalized within this specific community to produce a sequential chain of harm encompassing sexual, psychological, and spiritual violence against consecrated women. The analysis demonstrates how vulnerance—the systemic capacity to produce harm—is engineered through institutional configurations and theological distortions. This condition normalizes exploitation and silences survivors over extended periods. Moving beyond individual pathology, the study critically examines systemic power asymmetries, hermeneutical injustice, and forms of institutional betrayal that emerge when the protection of religious reputation takes precedence over accountability and human dignity. Finally, the article highlights the significance of public testimony and digital movements such as #NunsToo in disrupting cultures of silence and contributing to the restoration of epistemic justice for survivors.

Keywords: adult clergy sexual abuse; spiritual abuse; women religious; clericalism; hermeneutical injustice; vulnerance; coercive control; Loyola Community

1. Introduction

Sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) constitutes a complex social and institutional phenomenon that has, over the past several decades, become the subject of intense public, ecclesial, and scholarly scrutiny. While global attention has long focused primarily on cases of child sexual abuse, the sexual, psychological, and spiritual abuse of adult women within Catholic structures remained largely under-researched for decades. Since the late 2010s—and with particular intensity after 2022—this field has expanded significantly, marked by growing interdisciplinary scholarship that addresses the abuse of adult and consecrated women within ecclesial contexts (Dechert 2025; Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022; Haslbeck 2025; Heyder 2022; Hürten 2025; Keul 2024; Lembo 2022; Leimgruber 2024; McPhillips and McEwan 2022; Pooler and Droesch 2025; Reisinger 2019, 2022; Sgrò 2025). This increased scrutiny has been significantly catalyzed by digital movements such as #NunsToo, which have disrupted traditional cultures of silence and brought these issues into public and scholarly view. In sociological literature, analyses of this specific

category of harm remain limited. The aim of this study is therefore to use the case of the Slovenian religious community Loyola as an empirically grounded entry point to deepen, contextualize, and critically examine key questions, themes, and analytical frameworks that have emerged in recent scholarship on the abuse of adult women within the Roman Catholic Church. This article is grounded in a qualitative case study of the Loyola Community, several of whose former members publicly accused its co-founder, theologian and artist Marko Ivan Rupnik, of long-term sexual, psychological, physical, and spiritual abuse spanning multiple decades, beginning in the 1980s. According to public testimonies, up to 21 of the approximately 40 women who lived in the community may have experienced some form of sexual or spiritual violation (America Magazine 2024), ranging from sexual assault to spiritual coercion, violation of conscience, and abuse of power. Some former members have also spoken publicly about incidents of physical violence (Montagna 2022). Owing to Rupnik's international ecclesial influence and symbolic authority, the case has drawn extraordinary public attention; nevertheless, sociologically grounded analysis remains limited.[1]

This study therefore approaches the Loyola Community as a micro-cell embedded within the broader ecclesial structure, while simultaneously examining whether its internal dynamics reveal features characteristic of cultic or coercively controlling groups.

Empirically, the study examines how sexual, spiritual, and psychological abuse emerged within the Loyola Community by situating survivors' narratives within their historical, organizational, and ecclesial context. The analysis focuses on the mechanisms through which hierarchical power and spiritual authority were translated into forms of psychological domination and sexual coercion, with particular attention to the interrelation between spiritual and sexual abuse—an analytical link increasingly emphasized in international research on adult clergy sexual abuse. This study further explores the multidimensional consequences of abuse, including spiritual rupture, psychological harm, and institutional responses to disclosure, as well as the factors that shaped survivors' decisions to speak publicly. In dialogue with current canonical debates, the article also contributes to ongoing discussions on the conceptualization of spiritual abuse within ecclesial frameworks.

The qualitative empirical analysis draws on six testimonies of former members of the Loyola Community, which provide insight into how abuse was enabled, normalized, and concealed within a closed religious environment.

The theoretical grounding for this article draws on sociological–feminist and feminist–theological analyses of power, which conceptualize clerical abuse not as a series of isolated deviations but as a structurally enabled phenomenon. These frameworks illuminate how religious authority, institutional secrecy, and theological ideals of obedience together create conditions in which women religious become structurally vulnerable to coercion. The existing research demonstrates that the abuse of adult women within the Church is widespread and chronically under-sanctioned (Behrman 2019; Chibnall et al. 1998; Demasure 2022; Durà-Vilà et al. 2013; Fernández 2022; Hürten et al. 2025; Lembo 2022; McPhillips and McEwan 2022). Beyond documenting its prevalence and institutional under-response, recent pastoral–theological research further suggests that pastoral care itself may function as a site that structurally produces conditions conducive to gender-based violence when embedded in asymmetrical power relations, sacralized authority, and gendered expectations (Leimgruber 2024; Dechert 2025; Duhau 2021; Beattie 2023; González Casas 2022). Accordingly, this study examines the interplay between individual acts of coercion and the systemic, institutional structures that allowed such acts to occur repeatedly over decades without effective intervention.

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Ultimately, the purpose of the study is to examine the phenomenon of sexual, spiritual, and psychological violence against consecrated women operating within the hierarchical framework of the RCC; to explore the consequences of such violence on survivors' existential and spiritual identities; and to assess the extent to which the documented patterns reflect individual deviance versus broader systemic dynamics. By placing the Loyola case within existing international research, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on the abuse of adult women religious and offers conceptual foundations for future sociological and theological inquiry into this understudied domain.

Against this background, the article addresses the following overarching research question:

How does the Loyola Community case illuminate broader structural patterns of abuse against adult women religious within the Roman Catholic Church?

This overarching question is examined through the following sub-questions:

1. Which structural, theological, and institutional mechanisms enabled the emergence and normalization of sexual, spiritual, and psychological abuse within the Loyola Community?
2. How were spiritual authority and religious practices instrumentalized to produce coercive control, vulnerance, and the erosion of consent among consecrated women?
3. How do survivors' testimonies reveal the sequential chain of harm linking spiritual abuse, sexual exploitation, hermeneutical injustice, and silencing?
4. What do the institutional responses to disclosure in the Loyola case reveal about broader patterns of institutional betrayal and epistemic injustice within the Roman Catholic Church?

Rather than generalizing these findings to the entire Roman Catholic Church, this article contributes to an already substantial body of scholarship on the abuse of women religious by offering an in-depth empirical case study of the Loyola Community. In dialogue with existing case-based and theoretical analyses (e.g., Durà-Vilà et al. 2013; Haslbeck 2025; Lembo 2022; Sgrò's 2025), and recent scholarship on the structural and theological dynamics of abuse (e.g., Duhau 2021, 2022; Beattie 2023; González Casas 2022), the Loyola case illustrates how previously identified structural patterns—namely structural inequality, sacralized theological language, and institutional silence—are reproduced, adapted, and sustained within a specific contemporary ecclesial setting.

2. Literature Review, Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The abuse of consecrated women religious (CWR)[2] is increasingly recognized as a global, historically rooted, and structurally produced phenomenon within the Roman Catholic Church (Chibnall et al. 1998; Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022; Figueroa and Tombs 2023; Haslbeck 2025; Hürten et al. 2025; Keul 2022, 2024; Lembo 2022; McGarry 2019; Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Reisinger n.d., 2019, 2022; Lecaros and Suárez 2024; Suárez 2024). Contemporary scholarship moves away from individual pathological explanations, arguing instead that these violations are patterns reproduced within systems characterized by markedly asymmetrical power relations and deeply internalized expectations of obedience (Demasure 2022; de Weger 2022; Fernández 2022; Heyder 2022; Hürten et al. 2025; Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Reisinger 2019, 2022; Duhau 2021, 2022; Beattie 2023; González Casas 2022; Lecaros and Suárez 2024; Suárez 2024). In line with this established body of literature, abuse against women religious is therefore understood not as a series of isolated moral failures, but as a structurally enabled phenomenon sustained by institutional configurations of power that legitimize domination through the language of holiness and divine will.

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2.1. Historical Context and Global Prevalence: From Historical Persistence to the Digital Breakthrough

The exploitation of women religious is not a modern malfunction, instead having been identified in scholarly literature as a long-standing institutional risk associated with the historical and structural configuration of the Roman Catholic Church. Research suggests that many contemporary disclosures reflect persistent forms of systemic vulnerance[3], in which markedly asymmetrical hierarchical relations and normative expectations of obedience have, in certain contexts, contributed to silencing and non-recognition of abuse (Pizzoni 2025).

2.1.1. Historical Persistence and Institutional Quietism (1990–2018)

Recent historical research challenges the narrative that the abuse of consecrated women is a contemporary phenomenon. Analyses of Italian inquisitorial archives document structural patterns of misconduct by confessors toward nuns as early as the 17th and 18th centuries (Pizzoni 2025)[4]. These records reveal that the intersection of spiritual authority and pastoral guidance has historically functioned as a site of potential violation, facilitated by the "confessional apparatus"—a space where the priest's role as mediator of divine grace creates a high-trust environment prone to manipulation (Pizzoni 2025). This historical depth suggests that the silence surrounding such violations functions as an institutionalized pattern of protection aimed at shielding the Church as a sacred institution from secular scandal (Cozzens 2004; Smrke 2024).

Despite these deep roots, systematic scholarly and institutional warnings gained broader visibility only in the 1990s. Researchers and women religious documented widespread sexual and spiritual exploitation across all five continents, emphasizing that the phenomenon could not be reduced to isolated regional anomalies but pointed instead to recurring structural dynamics (McDonald 1998; O'Donohue 1994; Lembo 2022). A landmark empirical study conducted in the United States reported that 12.5% of women religious had experienced sexual exploitation during their religious life, most frequently perpetrated by priests acting as confessors or spiritual directors (Chibnall et al. 1998).

Scholarly analyses of this period describe the predominant institutional response as one of "institutional quietism" (O'Donohue 1994). Rather than leading to sustained structural reform, early reports were often treated as reputational risks and framed as isolated scandals. As subsequent research has shown, this approach contributed to the continued isolation of victims and to organizational practices—such as the quiet transfer of perpetrators—that allowed patterns of abuse to persist over extended periods (Doyle 2003, 2006; Keenan 2011; Royal Commission 2017).

2.1.2. Digital Breakthrough: #NunsToo and the End of Epistemic Isolation

A decisive turning point in the recognition of violence against women religious occurred after 2018 with the emergence of the #NunsToo and #ChurchToo movements (Case n.d.; Colwell and Johnson 2019). While the Church has historically relied on a "sacred silence" (Cozzens 2004) to protect the institutional reputation of a "divine institution" (Smrke 2024), digital platforms provided the first transnational space for survivors to disclose sexual, psychological, and spiritual violence en masse. Sociologically, this digital turn represents more than a mere shift in communication; it constitutes a major epistemic breakthrough that fundamentally challenged the Church's "culture of shame" and "purity culture" (Colwell and Johnson 2019).

Digital platforms functioned as a space of epistemic solidarity, allowing survivors to bypass traditional institutional gatekeepers and hierarchical filters that had historically suppressed their voices (Colwell and Johnson 2019; Smrke 2024). In the context of "total institu-

tions" (Foucault 1991; Goffman 1961), power is maintained through the isolation of subjects and the control of information. By providing a decentralized medium for sharing narratives, technology enabled survivors to bridge the "interpretive void" (Fricker 2007), transforming what were previously interpreted as private "moral lapses" or "temptations" into a collective demand for structural accountability (Behrman 2019; Colwell and Johnson 2019).

This transition effectively ended the state of epistemic isolation in which many women religious had lived for decades. As Hürten (2025) demonstrates, the breaking of silence in cases of abuse against adult women religious often requires an external disruption of dominant interpretive frameworks, as institutional contexts alone rarely provide survivors with the epistemic resources necessary to name their experiences as abuse. By building solidarity through digital tools, survivors introduced a new language that names pastoral violation not as a "mutual sin", but as a form of institutionalized coercion. This collective naming has forced a global academic and ecclesial recognition of adult clergy sexual abuse (ACSA) as a structural category rather than a series of consensual affairs (McPhillips and McEwan 2022; Behrman 2019; Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022; Hürten et al. 2025). In this sense, digital technology acted as a counter-dispositif—that is, a countervailing configuration of power—breaking the institutional monopoly on truth and allowing "docile bodies" (Foucault 1991) to reclaim their moral and social agency (Colwell and Johnson 2019; Figueroa and Tombs 2023).

Empirical research from the Global South further confirms that these pre-digital patterns of abuse and silencing have not been confined to the past. In her qualitative study of abused nuns in sub-Saharan Africa, Lembo (2022) documents how clerical authority, institutional silence, and taboos surrounding sexuality continue to produce conditions in which abuse remains widespread yet systematically concealed. These findings resonate with earlier descriptions of institutional quietism in Western contexts, suggesting a transnational persistence of silencing and non-intervention prior to the emergence of digital disclosure platforms.

2.2. Conceptualizing Abuse: Scope, Forms, and Interrelation of Harms

To contextualize this inquiry and establish its conceptual foundations, the following section outlines the recognized scope, forms, and interrelation of harms characteristic of sexual and spiritual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church, drawing on contemporary scholarship.

2.2.1. Structural Asymmetry and the "Empty Category" of Legal Adulthood

A central challenge in addressing the abuse of CWR is the tendency of institutional and legal frameworks to frame these events as "consensual relationships between adults". Sociological analyses, in dialogue with feminist–theological and interdisciplinary scholarship, argue that within the totalizing environment of religious life, legal adulthood often functions as an "empty category" (Behrman 2019; Figueroa and Tombs 2023; Lembo 2022).[5] Functional autonomy is neutralized by a regime of institutional, economic, and symbolic dependence that precludes the possibility of genuine, free consent. This problem has been widely discussed in research on adult clergy sexual abuse and pastoral power (Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Reisinger 2019; McPhillips and McEwan 2022; Keul 2024).

In this context, the relationship between a sister and a priest is never one between "two equal adults". It is an intrinsically asymmetrical pastoral relationship where the priest embodies spiritual, moral, institutional, and existential authority (Pooler and Barros Lane 2022). Because religious formation demands absolute trust in male authorities—confessors and spiritual directors—the capacity of a woman religious to set boundaries is systematically eroded. Within such a configuration, consent is structurally unattainable, rendering any sexual contact an inherent abuse of power (Behrman 2019; Figueroa and Tombs 2023).

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2.2.2. The Continuum of Harm: Interwoven Domains of Violence

Abuse in ecclesial settings is best understood as a continuum of harm comprising three interdependent domains: sexual violence, psychophysical violence, and spiritual violence (Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022; Haslbeck 2025; Hürten et al. 2025; Keul 2022; Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Reisinger 2019, 2022). These forms rarely exist in isolation; they form a single sequential chain where one form of violence legitimizes and enables the next:

- *Sexual violence* encompasses a continuum of practices ranging from sexualized speech, manipulative emotional intimacy, and coercive boundary violations to forced sexual acts and rape (Behrman 2019; Chibnall et al. 1998; Hürten et al. 2025).
- *Psycho-physical violence* includes bodily regulation, ritualized humiliation, and disciplinary practices designed to produce "docile bodies" that internalize institutional authority (Foucault 1991).
- *Spiritual violence* acts as the foundational layer, weaponizing the victim's relationship with God to ensure submission (Fernández 2021, 2022; Oakley 2018; Reisinger 2019).

2.2.3. Spiritual Abuse as the Enabling and "Binding Mechanism"

Spiritual abuse constitutes the central enabling mechanism through which sexual, psychological, and other forms of violence against women religious become possible. It refers to a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context, in which spiritual authority is used to manipulate conscience, enforce obedience, and restrict autonomy. As Oakley (2018) defines it, spiritual abuse involves a pattern of coercive control in a religious context, including manipulation, enforced accountability, and the suggestion that the abuser occupies a "divine" or specially authorized position.

In religious contexts, sexual abuse cannot be analytically separated from spiritual manipulation—the latter frequently precedes and enables the former (Fernández 2021; Reisinger 2019). This process typically unfolds through spiritual grooming: a gradual translation of pastoral authority, confession, spiritual direction, scriptural or mystical interpretation, and theological teaching into emotional dependency and, eventually, bodily and sexual domination (Durà-Vilà et al. 2013; Fernández 2021). By mobilizing the language of holiness, chosenness, sacrifice, and mystical intimacy, the perpetrator progressively dismantles the victim's critical judgment and capacity for resistance (Oakley and Humphreys 2019).

Contemporary scholarship therefore conceptualizes spiritual abuse as a foundational enabling condition—one that restructures moral perception, constrains agency, and creates the conditions under which sexual exploitation becomes intelligible, permissible, and difficult to resist within ecclesial settings (McPhillips and McEwan 2022; Oakley and Humphreys 2019). Spiritual abuse is particularly insidious because it penetrates the most intimate dimension of the self: victims may experience a "spiritual rupture," in which the boundary between God and the abuser becomes blurred, resistance is interpreted as sin, and spiritual or existential paralysis ensues (Reisinger 2019; Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022; Duhau 2021; Beattie 2023; González Casas 2022).

Recent pastoral–theological research further emphasizes that spiritual abuse is not an accidental distortion of pastoral care but can emerge from its very structure. Leimgruber (2024) demonstrates that pastoral relationships are inherently characterized by asymmetrical power, sacralized authority, and gendered expectations, rendering them structurally vulnerable to coercive control and abuse. This structural perspective is reinforced by research showing how sacralized authority, false mysticism, and systemic theological distortion operate across different ecclesial contexts to normalize abuse and suppress resistance (Duhau 2022; Beattie 2023; González Casas 2022).

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Within this framework, two interconnected processes are particularly relevant: lovebombing and spiritual grooming. Lovebombing refers to an early-stage manipulative technique in which excessive attention, admiration, affirmation, and idealization are deployed to rapidly establish emotional attachment, trust, and dependency. Originally described in research on cultic and coercively controlling groups (Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer and Lalich 1995), and further theorized through attachment-based analyses (Stein 2021), lovebombing operates by lowering psychological boundaries and creating an intensified sense of intimacy and specialness. Although often experienced as care, recognition, or affirmation, its primary function is to produce relational dependence and emotional compliance.

Spiritual grooming denotes a broader and more sustained process through which this emotionally induced dependency is progressively sacralized within a religious framework. In ecclesial contexts, affirmation, intimacy, and trust are embedded in practices of spiritual direction, vocational discernment, and theological interpretation, transforming personal attachment into a perceived spiritual obligation (Durà-Vilà et al. 2013; Oakley and Humphreys 2019). As Fernández (2021) emphasizes, in religious contexts, grooming operates precisely through spiritual direction and theological language, progressively transforming emotional dependency into spiritual obligation. Through this process, the perpetrator positions himself as an indispensable mediator of God's will, thereby reshaping the victim's moral framework, conscience, and capacity for resistance (Fernández 2021; Oakley and Humphreys 2019).

Taken together, lovebombing and spiritual grooming function as sequential and mutually reinforcing mechanisms: the former establishes rapid emotional attachment, while the latter embeds this attachment within sacred narratives of obedience, vocation, and divine calling. In this way, spiritual grooming constitutes a central mechanism through which spiritual abuse enables later forms of psychological coercion and sexual exploitation in religious settings.

2.3. Analytical Lenses: Clericalism, Vulnerance, Sexual Economies, and Hermeneutical Injustice

To understand the sexual and spiritual abuse of adult consecrated women, contemporary scholarship has largely moved beyond individualized or pathological explanations toward an analysis of the structural power relations that constitute ecclesial communities. This shift reflects a broad scholarly consensus that situates abuse within asymmetrical institutional, theological, and pastoral configurations rather than in individual deviance (Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022; Figueroa and Tombs 2023; Haslbeck 2025; Hürten et al. 2025; Keul 2022, 2024; Lembo 2022; Reisinger 2019, 2022).

Within Roman Catholic institutions, legal adulthood often functions as an analytically "empty category", as system-wide asymmetries of power—grounded in spiritual authority, institutional hierarchy, and pastoral dependency—effectively neutralize functional autonomy and preclude the possibility of genuinely free consent (Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Reisinger 2019, 2022; Keul 2022; Hürten et al. 2025). From a legal perspective, recent reforms of ecclesiastical penal law have largely failed to improve the legal standing of adult women subjected to clerical sexual abuse, thereby reinforcing rather than dismantling clericalist and gendered power structures (Hahn 2022). This research therefore employs four primary analytical lenses to illustrate how ecclesial institutions generate obedience, discipline bodies, and restrict agency.

2.3.1. Clericalism as the Cultural–Institutional Matrix of Power

Clericalism functions as a foundational ideological mechanism within Roman Catholicism, granting the priesthood moral, sacred, and organizational superiority over laypeople

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and consecrated women (Doyle 2003). Doyle conceptualizes clericalism as an internal ecclesial logic through which priestly authority is sacralized and rendered structurally unquestionable, while women religious are positioned as obedient subjects with limited institutional agency. Within such a framework, obedience is elevated to a primary religious virtue, shaping deeply asymmetrical relations of dependence between clergy and consecrated women.

Drawing on Galtung's theory of violence, clericalism operates through two interrelated dimensions: structural and cultural violence (Galtung 1969). Structural violence is produced through hierarchical organization, limited external oversight, and the economic and symbolic dependence of women religious, all of which restrict autonomy and suppress the capacity for resistance (Keul 2022). Cultural violence, in turn, is sustained through religious symbols and theological narratives—such as sacrifice, surrender to God's will, and the sanctity of the priesthood—which function to render structural inequality sacred and morally legitimate (Reisinger 2019). Within this symbolic order, expressions of doubt, resistance, or boundary-setting by women religious may be reframed as spiritual failure rather than recognized as legitimate acts of self-protection.

Foucault's analysis of power further illuminates how clerical authority operates not merely through institutional hierarchy but through the internalization of discipline. When analytically applied to ecclesial contexts, pastoral power can be understood as a dispositif: a constellation of spiritual guidance, confession, moral surveillance, and self-examination that produces compliant and self-regulating subjects, or "docile bodies" (Foucault 1991). In religious life, this form of power shapes conscience and self-understanding from within, enabling domination to persist even in the absence of overt coercion (Reisinger 2019; Haslbeck 2025).

Clericalism should therefore be understood not only as an institutional structure but also as a specific psychological and organizational pattern that reproduces these power relations in everyday practice. Burnham emphasizes that clericalist cultures are often sustained through recurring leadership traits among clergy, including authoritarianism, entitlement, arrogance, and irresponsibility (Burnham 2023). Such traits contribute to environments in which abuse can flourish by normalizing inequality, discouraging accountability, and cultivating forms of spiritual elitism. Within these environments, the capacity of laypeople and women religious to articulate doubt, establish boundaries, or challenge clerical authority is systematically diminished, reinforcing silence and tolerance of wrongdoing.

2.3.2. Sexual Economies of Clericalism

The concept of Sexual Economies of Clericalism (SEC) offers an important analytical framework for understanding how clerical dominance is translated into women's sexual subordination, the commodification of religious women's bodies, and the normalization of spiritual and sexual domination within ecclesial institutions (Behrman 2019; Figueroa and Tombs 2023; McPhillips and McEwan 2022). McPhillips and McEwan (2022) define SEC as a system of symbolic and material exchange grounded in unequal power relations, primarily employed to regulate gendered relations in ways that preserve the authority, legitimacy, and superiority of the priesthood.

Within this configuration, the bodies and labour of women religious function as forms of ecclesial capital—alongside prayer, care work, and spiritual service—rendering women structurally "available" as institutional resources rather than autonomous subjects (Behrman 2019; McPhillips and McEwan 2022). Historical, anthropological, and feminist research demonstrates that women religious have long been deployed as providers of social care, education, healthcare, and domestic labour, often without corresponding economic autonomy or decision-making power (Behrman 2019; Figueroa and Tombs

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2023; McPhillips and McEwan 2022). Theologies of purity, obedience, and sacrifice further restricted women's sexual agency and produced images of "safe" and "harmless" bodies, creating conditions conducive to exploitation (Behrman 2019).

From this perspective, abuse within clerical contexts cannot be reduced to a breach of celibacy or individual moral failure. Rather, it constitutes a material expression of a sexual economy in which male clerical authority exercises symbolic and bodily power over women, while institutional practices of discipline and obedience normalize domination and obscure harm (Behrman 2019; Figueroa and Tombs 2023).

2.3.3. Vulnerance: The Institutional Production of Adult Vulnerability

A decisive shift in contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship on clergy abuse concerns the reconceptualization of adult vulnerability. Rather than treating vulnerability as an individual, psychological, or inherent trait, recent research emphasizes institutionally produced conditions that actively generate susceptibility to harm through systemic, relational, and hierarchical arrangements (Reisinger 2019; Hürten et al. 2025).

To capture this shift, scholars increasingly employ the concept of vulnerance, which denotes not a passive state of being vulnerable but the active capacity of an institutional system to produce, intensify, and exploit vulnerability (Keul 2022, 2024; Leimgruber 2022). Vulnerance thus redirects analytical attention away from presumed deficits or fragility of victims toward the structural, theological, and organizational configurations that render individuals susceptible to coercion and abuse.

As Keul explains, vulnerance describes the violence-producing potential of vulnerability when fear of injury, exposure, or reputational damage triggers defensive strategies of self-protection. In institutional contexts, vulnerability—especially anticipated or feared vulnerability—can become a source of violence insofar as it motivates practices such as denial, silencing, exclusion, and cover-up. Rather than responding to harm by protecting those who have been wounded, institutions may seek to protect themselves as sacred or morally intact entities, thereby inflicting further harm on survivors. Vulnerance, in this sense, does not merely accompany abuse but actively amplifies it, as abuse and cover-up function as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that entrench cycles of violence and re-victimization (Keul 2022, 2024).

Within ecclesial contexts, vulnerance is produced through asymmetrical pastoral relationships normatively structured by obedience, sacralized authority, and moral dependency. Religious women are not rendered vulnerable due to personal fragility, but because religious life systematically embeds them in relational settings where dissent is spiritualized as failure and compliance is framed as virtue (Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Leimgruber 2022). This configuration constitutes a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001), in which subordination is internalized as spiritually meaningful and even salvific.

The theological valorization of docility and surrender reframes resistance, doubt, or boundary-setting as signs of spiritual immaturity or disobedience. As a result, questioning a priest or spiritual authority may become morally equivalent to questioning God's will (Doyle 2003; Keul 2024). Within such totalizing spiritual cultures, claims such as "she could have said no" are analytically untenable, as the institutional and theological environment systematically erodes the very conditions necessary for free and informed consent (Fortune 1983; Reisinger 2019).

Recent pastoral–theological research further demonstrates that vulnerance is not a peripheral risk but a structural feature of pastoral care itself. Leimgruber (2022) shows that pastoral relationships are inherently characterized by intimacy, trust, and sacralized asymmetry, rendering them particularly susceptible to coercive control when embedded within clerical hierarchies. In this sense, vulnerance does not merely precede abuse but

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actively enables its emergence by shaping relational expectations, moral frameworks, and interpretive horizons in advance.

The concept of vulnerance thus provides a crucial analytical bridge between structural inequality, spiritual authority, and individual experiences of abuse. By foregrounding the institution's role in producing susceptibility—and in transforming its own feared vulnerability into a source of further harm—it allows for a more precise understanding of how sexual and spiritual abuse against adult women religious can persist within ecclesial settings without being recognized, named, or effectively interrupted (Keul 2022; Hürten et al. 2025).

2.3.4. Hermeneutical Injustice: Epistemological Control

One of the key epistemic mechanisms in ecclesial abuse contexts is also hermeneutical injustice[6], a concept introduced by Miranda Fricker (Fricker 2007), which refers to the systematic restriction of the interpretive resources available to victims for understanding and naming their own experiences. In Catholic institutional settings, this injustice is reinforced by the absence of adequate theological and canonical categories for recognizing the sexual abuse of adults in pastoral relationships, so that violations are routinely framed in moral terms (sin, temptation, moral lapse) rather than as forms of violence or abuse of power (Behrman 2019; Reisinger 2019, 2022; Hürten 2025; Sgrò 2025).

This interpretive void has profound consequences: it obstructs justice by treating abuse as a moral failing rather than a legally and institutionally accountable harm, and it facilitates the internalization of guilt, whereby survivors come to accept co-responsibility for their own exploitation (Fricker 2007; Reisinger 2019, 2022). By depriving survivors of a language capable of articulating coercion and power asymmetry, hermeneutical injustice sustains epistemic isolation over time, while institutional practices of "sacred silence" function to protect ecclesial reputation rather than survivors' dignity and agency (Behrman 2019; Cozzens 2004; Fricker 2007; Hürten 2025; Leimgruber 2024).

Recent empirical work further demonstrates how hermeneutical injustice operates in concrete ecclesial contexts. Drawing on a historical case study of abuse in the founding history of the St. Franziskusschwestern Vierzehnheiligen, Hürten (2025) shows how the absence of adequate interpretive categories systematically prevented women from recognizing pastoral and sexual violations as abuse. Instead, experiences of coercion were framed within dominant moral–theological registers of sin, temptation, and obedience, thereby internalizing guilt and sustaining long-term silence. Hürten's analysis illustrates how hermeneutical injustice does not merely follow abuse but actively constitutes a precondition for its persistence within Catholic institutional settings.

Hermeneutical injustice, however, does not operate in abstraction. It is actively sustained and enforced through concrete institutional actors, relational networks, and practices of omission that translate epistemic control into organizational silence. Beyond direct perpetration, recent interdisciplinary scholarship highlights the decisive role of institutional enablers and networks of complicity in sustaining abusive systems. From a normative and legal perspective, Guiora conceptualizes this dynamic as institutional complicity, whereby actors who possess knowledge of harm or occupy positions of responsibility choose inaction in order to protect the institution rather than the person in peril, thereby becoming morally and institutionally accountable enablers of abuse (Guiora 2021). From an organizational and empirical perspective, Cunningham et al. (2019) demonstrate how networks of complicity normalize ethical failure through moral myopia, loyalty to organizational identity, and routinized deflection of responsibility, producing collective blindness to harm.

Taken together, the concepts of hermeneutical injustice and institutional complicity illuminate how abuse in ecclesial contexts is sustained not only through acts of direct

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perpetration but through epistemic control, organizational silence, and routinized non-intervention. These mechanisms transform individual violations into durable institutional patterns, rendering harm both normalized and difficult to contest.

3. Integrative Model for Empirical Analysis: The Sequential Chain of Harm

3.1. Multidimensional Consequences of Abuse: Spiritual, Psychological, and Economic Ruptures

The consequences of abuse against women religious are uniquely complex, as they simultaneously destabilize the psychological, spiritual, and material foundations of a survivor's existence. Scholarly literature indicates that because the violation occurs within a sacralized relationship, the resulting trauma exceeds conventional psychological frameworks, producing a "cascading effect" of harm that extends from the individual to their families and communities (Durkin et al. 2025; Reisinger 2019).

3.1.1. Spiritual Rupture and Existential Identity Harm

The most distinctive consequence of ecclesial abuse is spiritual harm, a phenomenon that strikes at the core of a sister's vocation and her relationship with the divine (Durkin et al. 2025). Doris Reisinger (Reisinger 2019) conceptualizes this as "spiritual rupture": a state in which the survivor can no longer distinguish the image of God from the image of the perpetrator. This collapse of spiritual orientation represents a "double betrayal"—a betrayal by a representative of God and a betrayal of the victim's own sacred calling (Durà-Vilà et al. 2013).

Empirical studies further demonstrate how this rupture unfolds over time. Haslbeck (2025) shows that survivors frequently experience a profound loss of trust in sacramental life and a breakdown of their interpretive framework, often resulting in long-term spiritual paralysis. This harm permeates every aspect of identity, often resulting in a state where the survivor feels "spiritually homeless" even if they remain within the Church (Durà-Vilà et al. 2013; Reisinger 2019).

3.1.2. Psychological Trauma and Dissociative Strategies

The interweaving of sexual violation and spiritual coercion produces a complex trauma profile. Quantitative research reveals that an exceptionally high proportion of adult victims of clergy abuse score positive for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and chronic anxiety (Pooler and Droesch 2025).

To survive within "total institutions," where autonomy is systematically dismantled (Goffman 1961), survivors often develop dissociative strategies, such as "unplugging" from emotions and bodily sensations (Pooler and Droesch 2025; Reisinger 2019). Furthermore, this trauma often becomes embodied, manifesting as severe psychosomatic disorders and autoimmune diseases that function as a "body memory," materializing the decades of sustained stress and internalized coercion long after the physical abuse has ceased (Pooler and Droesch 2025).

3.1.3. Economic Harm, Dependency and the Materialization of Systemic Violence

A critical but often overlooked dimension of the abuse of women religious is the material and economic devastation that constitutes a cumulative form of harm, directly impacting a survivor's ability to rebuild their life after exiting an abusive environment (Lembo 2022; Pooler and Barros Lane 2022; Simpson 2025). Because sisters typically lack personal income, independent savings, or independent social security due to their vows of poverty and the specific internal economy of religious communities, leaving the community often results in a total material collapse (Simpson 2025). Within this framework, Jamie

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Simpson (Simpson 2025) identifies the concept of "financial injuries"—the long-term loss of economic security and resulting destitution—as a primary material proof of systemic violence and institutional neglect.

These financial injuries are not incidental; they are structurally produced through a regime of total institutional dependency that leaves survivors without the necessary resources for a transition into secular life (Simpson 2025; Pooler and Barros Lane 2022; Lembo 2022). Because women religious typically lack personal income, independent savings, or social security as a result of vows of poverty and internal ecclesial economies, leaving an abusive community often results in abrupt material collapse and long-term precarity (Simpson 2025; Lembo 2022).

Scholarly literature further demonstrates that the position of women religious is defined by structural subordination embedded in the hierarchical organization of the Church, where women's labour is systematically extracted and treated as "available" ecclesial capital without corresponding economic autonomy, legal protection, or decision-making power (Behrman 2019; McPhillips and McEwan 2022). In this context, material deprivation should be understood not merely as a downstream consequence of abuse, but as a structurally embedded mechanism that sustains silence, compliance, and delayed disclosure.

Moreover, the institutional response to disclosures is often characterized by profound indifference. Drawing on a national mixed-methods study of adult women sexually abused by clergy in the United States, Pooler and Barros Lane (2022) report that fewer than ten percent of respondents received any material support or practical assistance from their congregation after disclosing the abuse. This absence of reintegration mechanisms functions as a systemic deterrent: the threat of homelessness and social precarity acts as a powerful tool of coercion, discouraging victims from reporting abuse and forcing them to remain within abusive structures for decades (Pooler and Barros Lane 2022).

The economic dimension of harm thus represents the material realization of vulnerance—the active capacity of the institutional system to produce susceptibility by maintaining total control over a subject's material survival (Figueroa and Tombs 2023). Rather than viewing economic assistance as a matter of justice for years of unpaid labour and endured violence, the survival of former sisters is frequently left to private charity, which further undermines their dignity and autonomy (Pooler and Barros Lane 2022; Royal Commission 2017; Simpson 2025).

This material deprivation should therefore not be understood merely as a downstream consequence of abuse, but as a structurally embedded condition of institutional dependency that actively sustains silence and compliance. Because sisters typically lack personal income, independent housing, or social security due to their vows, leaving an abusive community often leads to total economic collapse (Pooler and Barros Lane 2022; Simpson 2025).

Qualitative studies document "financial injuries" in Western ecclesial contexts, where survivors face extreme social precarity and a complete absence of institutional compensation or reintegration support (Lembo 2022; Simpson 2025). This systemic neglect reinforces the structural power of the institution, as the fear of homelessness and poverty acts as a powerful deterrent against reporting abuse (Pooler and Barros Lane 2022; Simpson 2025).

3.1.4. Secondary Betrayal: Family and Social Ruptures

Beyond psychological, spiritual, and economic harm, research on clergy sexual abuse demonstrates that disclosure itself often generates secondary forms of victimization within survivors' most intimate social environments. Empirical studies conducted primarily in the context of child sexual abuse show that disclosure may trigger denial, disbelief, and ruptures of trust within families of origin, thereby compounding survivors' isolation and vulnerability (Wind et al. 2008). Although developed in relation to child survivors, these findings illuminate broader relational dynamics that are also observable in cases involving

adult women religious, particularly in families whose identity and moral universe are deeply intertwined with the Church.

The consequences of clerical abuse thus extend beyond the individual survivor into her closest social and familial networks, frequently resulting in what has been termed secondary betrayal (Wind et al. 2008). For families strongly embedded in Catholic identity, the disclosure of abuse is often experienced as a profound existential crisis that destabilizes faith-based meanings, loyalties, and collective self-understanding.

Research indicates that family members may respond with disbelief or denial, reframing survivors' testimonies as "gossip," "temptation," or moral weakness rather than recognizing them as accounts of violence and abuse of power (Wind et al. 2008). Such reactions erode trust within the family system and may lead to the breakdown of communication and the rupture of biological ties, leaving survivors without a final refuge or support structure at the moment of greatest vulnerability.

3.2. Sequential and Relational Model of Harm

To analyze abuse in ecclesial settings, this study employs a sequential and relational model of harm that conceptualizes violence as a process unfolding across interconnected structural, cultural, and epistemic dimensions rather than as an isolated act (Foucault 1991; Galtung 1969). Within this configuration, violence against consecrated women can also be understood as a specific form of gender-based violence, in which pastoral and spiritual relations function as sites of domination when structured by sacralized authority, asymmetrical power, and gendered expectations of obedience and availability (Leimgruber 2024). At the institutional level, clericalism (Doyle 2003) sacralizes hierarchy and legitimizes asymmetrical power relations, producing vulnerance (Keul 2022; Leimgruber 2022; Hürten et al. 2025)—institutionally generated susceptibility rooted in vows, spiritual dependency, and the absence of effective oversight. Through symbolic violence, understood both as a general mechanism of power internalization (Bourdieu 1991) and as a gendered form of domination embedded in institutional and religious hierarchies (Bourdieu 2001; Leimgruber 2024), these relations are internalized as morally or spiritually necessary and are operationalised interpersonally through spiritual grooming (Durà-Vilà et al. 2013; Fernández 2021), whereby pastoral authority is translated into personalized manipulation and dependency.

Sexual exploitation thus emerges not as an aberration but as a material expression of clerical power (McPhillips and McEwan 2022), exercised over bodies and lives shaped by obedience, discipline, and internalized authority within a broader ecclesial *dispositif* (Foucault 1991). At the epistemic level, hermeneutical injustice restricts survivors' interpretive resources, reframing abuse within moral categories rather than recognizing it as an abuse of power, thereby sustaining institutional silence and epistemic isolation (Demasure 2022; Fricker 2007; Hürten 2025; Leimgruber 2024; Sgrò 2025).

The cumulative effects of these mechanisms are silencing and trauma, including spiritual rupture, long-term psychological harm, and vocational or professional destruction—predictable consequences of an institutional configuration in which violence is structurally enabled, culturally legitimized, and epistemically obscured (Hürten 2025; Reisinger 2019).

For analytical clarity, these interlinked mechanisms can be summarized as a sequential chain of harm:

Clericalism → Vulnerance → Spiritual Grooming → Sexual Exploitation → Hermeneutical Injustice → Silencing and Trauma

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This model does not imply rigid linear causality, but highlights how multiple layers of power interact over time to produce and sustain abuse. It provides the primary analytical lens for interpreting survivor testimonies in the Loyola case.

4. Case Study Background: Loyola Community Founding, Scandal & Trial

Building on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined in the preceding sections, this chapter applies the developed analytical lenses to the case of the Loyola Community. As demonstrated in the literature review, the abuse of consecrated women is best understood not as a series of isolated transgressions but as a structurally enabled phenomenon embedded in clerical power, institutional dependency, and epistemic control. These frameworks emphasize the interrelation between spiritual authority, gendered obedience, and systemic vulnerance within ecclesial settings.

The Loyola Community constitutes a particularly instructive empirical case because it concentrates, within a relatively bounded institutional environment, many of the dynamics identified in contemporary scholarship: clericalism as a cultural matrix of authority; spiritual grooming as a mechanism of coercive control; the erosion of functional autonomy through vows, dependence, and pastoral obedience; and the operation of hermeneutical injustice in shaping survivors' ability to interpret, name, and disclose abuse. Examining Loyola thus allows for an empirically grounded analysis of how these structural mechanisms are enacted in lived experience.

By situating survivors' testimonies within the historical, organizational, and ecclesial structures of the community, the analysis illustrates how abstract concepts—such as vulnerance, spiritual abuse, Sexual Economies of Clericalism, and the sequential chain of harm—materialize through concrete practices, relationships, and institutional responses. The Loyola case is therefore not treated as an exceptional anomaly, but as an empirical site through which broader structural patterns of abuse against adult women religious become visible, intelligible, and sociologically analyzable.

Against this analytical backdrop, allegations of misconduct against Marko Ivan Rupnik, a Slovenian Jesuit priest, theologian, and sacral artist, entered the global public sphere in late 2022. Media investigations indicate that more than twenty women[7], primarily consecrated religious sisters associated with the Loyola Community, were subjected to spiritual, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse under his authority. Although the case gained global visibility following the publication of survivor interviews by the Italian newspaper Domani, the reported misconduct spans more than three decades[8]. In 2023, the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith reopened the canonical case and appointed judges to examine the allegations (Associated Press 2023). The institutional significance of the Loyola case lies precisely in the specific socio-religious configuration that enabled the accumulation of multidimensional power and the prolonged immunity of the alleged perpetrator.

4.1. Socio-Historical Origins: The Kres Group and Jesuit Auspices

Founded by Marko Rupnik and Ivanka Hosta, the Loyola Community originated in Slovenia during the mid-1980s, rooted in the Kres youth group based at the Ljubljana–Dravlje parish within the Archdiocese of Ljubljana. During this period, Marko Ivan Rupnik[9] established himself as a charismatic catechist and lecturer, assuming a central role as a spiritual animator and retreat leader.

This development occurred within a specific historical window in late-socialist Slovenia, where the institutional Church was widely perceived as stagnant, creating what contemporary sociological analysis describes as a fertile "hunting ground" for new spiritual movements (Smrke 2024). Rupnik filled this perceived vacuum with a modern theological

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idiom drawing on Byzantine and Eastern Christian traditions, Russian spirituality, and the *Philokalia*. Operating under formal Jesuit auspices provided the group and Rupnik's early pastoral activities with immediate institutional credibility and ecclesial legitimacy.

A decisive contextual factor in this founding period was the close institutional relationship between the Archdiocese of Ljubljana and the Jesuit order. Operating under formal Jesuit auspices provided immediate institutional credibility and ecclesial legitimacy. Mainstream Catholic reporting and later Jesuit acknowledgments indicate that allegations of misconduct dating to the late 1980s and early 1990s were known within ecclesial structures but did not result in timely formal investigations[10].

Internal communal life was structured around Ignatian spiritual practices, specifically the discernment of spirits and intensive retreats. In this framework, the spiritual director acts as a normative interpreter of interior states and divine will, a practice that demands high levels of interpersonal trust and can lead to hermeneutical dependency in the absence of institutional oversight.

4.2. The Accumulation of Multidimensional Power

Rupnik's status was sustained by a rare convergence of aesthetic, theological, and organizational capital within the Catholic Church. Sociological analysis describes him as the "unofficial Vatican court artist" (Smrke 2024, p. 24), a designation reflecting both his aesthetic prestige and the institutional immunity it conferred. As the director of the Vatican-affiliated Centro Aletti in Rome, Rupnik oversaw major mosaic commissions in symbolically charged spaces, including the Redemptoris Mater Chapel in the Apostolic Palace, and prominent global sites such as Lourdes and Fatima. In the Slovenian context, his prestige was formalized in 2000 with the Prešeren Award, the country's highest cultural honour. This recognition was met with a public protest by the poet Svetlana Makarovič, who denounced the award as a sign of growing clerical influence. Beyond aesthetic authority, investigative reports identified Rupnik's connection to Rossoroblu, a corporate entity linked to the commercialization of his artistic works outside traditional ecclesiastical financial oversight (Sánchez 2023)[11].

4.3. Institutional Silence and the Archival Void

A defining feature of the case is the long-term institutional silence regarding initial reports of misconduct. Survivors and reports indicate that complaints about Marko Rupnik's conduct were raised with Church authorities as early as the late 1980s and early 1990s. A former member of the Loyola Community has detailed that, after experiencing abuse, she warned the community's superior, the Jesuit provincial, and Archbishop Alojzij Šuštar of Ljubljana, and even informed Jesuit Father Tomáš Špidlík in Rome, yet "no one listened to the sisters" and no effective response was taken at the time. Around 1993, Archbishop Šuštar removed Rupnik from active leadership of the Slovenian community without public explanation, and letters of complaint were reportedly delivered but went unacknowledged by authorities. Later Jesuit statements acknowledge that past leaders failed to listen to victims and take appropriate action, and that early complaints were not adequately addressed by competent Church leaders (America Magazine 2024; Catholic News Agency 2023a).

The current President of the Slovenian Episcopal Conference, Bishop Andrej Saje, has publicly acknowledged an archival void, stating that there are no records in the archives concerning complaints made to Archbishop Šuštar during that period (Družina 2023; Siol.net 2022).[12]. This lack of documentation constitutes a central institutional fact of the case, illustrating the structural obstacles to accountability in situations where allegations span several decades and are embedded in hierarchical systems with weak archival transparency.

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4.4. Canonical Proceedings and Suppression

Formal ecclesiastical action followed sustained international media pressure and survivor activism. In June 2023, Rupnik was expelled from the Society of Jesus on the grounds of repeated disobedience. However, in a move that drew further public scrutiny, he was incardinated into the Diocese of Koper, Slovenia, in October 2023. On 20 October 2023, the Vatican issued a decree suppressing the Loyola Community, citing serious problems in the exercise of authority and communal life. In parallel, Pope Francis waived the statute of limitations, enabling the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith to initiate canonical proceedings and trial. The charges include spiritual abuse and false mysticism (*falso misticismo*), marking an official recognition that the weaponization of spiritual language was a core mechanism of the alleged systemic exploitation, rather than treating them as isolated violations of celibacy[13].

This overview establishes the factual, institutional, and socio-religious landscape of the Rupnik/Loyola case. By situating the allegations within their Slovenian context, mapping the accumulation of aesthetic, theological, and institutional power, and documenting the delayed and fragmented institutional response, it provides the groundwork for the empirical analysis that follows. The subsequent sections examine survivor testimonies through the analytical lenses of Sexual Economies of Clericalism (SEC), vulnerance, and hermeneutical injustice, building on the structural conditions outlined here.

5. Methodology

This study is grounded in a qualitative case-study design focused on understanding the complex forms of violence—sexual, psychological, spiritual, physical, and institutional—reported by adult women formerly affiliated with the Loyola Community, a Catholic religious community. Rather than employing statistical comparisons across groups, the research relies on in-depth individual narratives that, when analyzed together, offer insight into the specific coercive mechanisms, forms of spiritual manipulation, and patterns of institutional response operating within this particular context. The study examines a coherent population of former members of the Loyola Community, while attending to differences in positionality and in the intensity and forms of harm experienced.

Given the highly sensitive nature of the topic, the methodological approach places priority on relational ethics, participant safety, and the researcher's reflexive presence. The primary method of data collection consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provide a balance between a pre-established set of guiding questions and openness to themes that participants themselves identify as significant (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Galletta 2013). Such flexibility is crucial when researching trauma and spiritual abuse, as participants require a safe environment and interpersonal trust to articulate their experiences (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006).

The interview process followed a trauma-informed ethical framework, allowing participants to pause, redirect, or end the conversation at any point. This approach enabled a deep exploration of contextual and symbolic meanings embedded in the narratives—including silence, metaphor, and affectively charged expressions, which in ecclesial contexts are often shaped by specific religious language and fear (Patton 2015; Seidman 2006).

Data Sources and Analytical Procedure

The empirical foundation of this study consists of six testimonies from former members of the Loyola Community. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy, appropriate for sensitive research and hard-to-reach populations. The recruitment process began with exploratory conversations with two former members of the Loyola Community and with journalist Federica Tourn, who had previously worked with women

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religious reporting abuse by Marko Ivan Rupnik; together, they facilitated contact with additional former members. The empirical material consists of four in-depth interviews conducted specifically for this study and two anonymized interview transcripts recorded by Federica Tourn and provided for analytical purposes, and this trust-based approach helped minimize retraumatization and power asymmetries, as all participants occupied comparable hierarchical positions within the community[14].

The participants represent diverse experiential positions: four reported having directly endured sexual, psychological, and/or spiritual abuse by Marko I. Rupnik, while two did not report sexual abuse but described experiences of psychological and spiritual abuse, as well as exposure to systemic irregularities and institutional silence within the community, including in relation to both Rupnik and the superior, Ivanka Hosta. One of the latter, an expert in canon law and religious life, offers an additional interpretive lens for understanding structural vulnerabilities. The positionality and role of the community's founders, Marko I. Rupnik and Ivanka Hosta, are examined exclusively through publicly available sources, including their recorded statements and materials produced by the Centro Aletti, which serve as secondary contextual data.

The analytical procedure combined three complementary approaches:

1. Thematic analysis—identifying recurring patterns such as boundary erosion, traumatic bonding, and authoritarian control.
2. Narrative analysis—examining how meaning-making and the trajectory of abuse developed over time in relation to participants' faith and identity.
3. Discourse analysis—highlighting the ways theological concepts were instrumentalized as tools of coercion and silencing.

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerable position of the participants, all interviewees were anonymized and referred to throughout the empirical analysis as Interviewee 1 (I1), Interviewee 2 (I2), Interviewee 3 (I3), etc., in order to minimize any possibility of identification or recognition. The analytic aim was not to adjudicate individual cases, but to elucidate the structural, relational, and theological mechanisms that enabled abuse, shaped survivors' experiences, and influenced institutional responses.

6. Results

The following empirical analysis explores the systemic architecture of abuse within the Loyola Community, tracing a sequential chain of harm from initial recruitment to long-term institutional betrayal. Drawing on survivor testimonies, the results delineate how clerical authority, theological sophistication, and gendered hierarchies intersected to produce a state of "engineered vulnerance" and epistemic dependency.

The findings are structured into four interconnected themes:

1. Recruitment and grooming mechanisms that exploited spiritual longing to create dependency;
2. Hierarchical power relations and the structural conditions that enabled and protected the abuser;
3. The specific patterns of spiritual, psychological, and sexual violence justified through theological distortion;

and

4. The consequences of abuse after departure, characterizing the survivors' journey from institutional betrayal to the reclamation of truth through public testimony.

By analyzing these themes, this section examines how personal boundaries were eroded and sexual violence was sacralized as a divine encounter, ultimately framing the survivors' public voices as a vital reclamation of agency.

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6.1. Theme 1: Entry into the Community—Motivations, Engineered Vulnerance, and Recruitment Mechanisms

Entry into the Loyola Community was not a single vocational decision but a gradual process of spiritual grooming and institutionally engineered vulnerability (*vulnerance*). Survivors' testimonies show how genuine religious longing—shaped by the socio-political and ecclesial conditions of 1980s late-socialist Slovenia—was progressively redirected into a totalizing dependency on a charismatic leader operating under strong institutional protection. Recruitment mechanisms did not merely precede later abuse; they constituted its necessary foundation.

6.1.1. The Loyola Genesis: 1980s Slovenia and the Search for "Modern" Faith

As outlined in the Case Overview (Section Limitations and Future Research), the emergence of the Loyola Community was rooted in the specific socio-religious landscape of late-socialist Slovenia in the 1980s. Survivors recall this period as one in which the institutional Church was widely experienced as stagnant—a state described retrospectively as very rigid, "*tutto molto fermo*" (I2)—with limited space for dynamic youth ministry, theological experimentation, or open engagement with contemporary cultural questions. This perceived vacuum formed the background against which alternative spiritual initiatives gained traction.

Recruitment into the Kres (Bonfire) youth group was effective because it offered belonging, recognition, and purpose. Survivors stress that their participation arose not from vulnerability, but from intellectual curiosity, agency, and vocational ambition, seeking a Catholic faith that was intellectually rigorous, spiritually demanding, cosmopolitan, and integrated with questions of meaning, embodiment, and professional identity.

Within this context, interviewees described Rupnik's theological idiom—drawing on Eastern Christianity, Russian spirituality, and the *Philokalia*, as outlined in Section Limitations and Future Research—as radically "new," intellectually sophisticated, and spiritually compelling. This synthesis was especially compelling for young, highly educated women from rural backgrounds, for whom it represented both spiritual depth and cultural expansion. Interviewee 4 recalls the sense of fascination generated by this perceived novelty:

> "When he became a priest [. . .] it was fascinating—completely new. Through art and academic work, he introduced us to things we had never encountered before. Most of us were young people from the countryside. He opened up themes and discussions we had never been allowed to talk about before, including about sexuality, which is also important for young people." (I4)

Over time, however, survivors describe how this initial theological and aesthetic openness gradually produced a closed spiritual environment. Drawing selectively on Eastern traditions, the leader fostered what Interviewee 4 retrospectively characterizes as an exclusive spiritual "bubble," increasingly insulated from external critique or alternative sources of authority:

> "We were in a closed circle, in our own bubble, which he created on purpose, I would say—or maybe not on purpose—but he kept us to himself, his philosophy, his theory, and so on. From this, the Loyola community then began to develop." (I4)

According to the testimonies, this early phase established a dynamic of perceived spiritual and intellectual exceptionalism. The group came to understand itself as distinct from—and implicitly superior to—the surrounding institutional Church. Consequently, this elite identity created an 'interpretive closure', which the survivors identify as the primary mechanism for the consolidation of the leader's absolute authority. The interviews reveal that by prohibiting horizontal communication, the leadership ensured that the group's

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perceived superiority remained a shared delusion of a "prophetic mission" (I6), while individual suffering was hidden. This sense of elite belonging, combined with growing interpretive closure, functioned as a crucial precondition for the consolidation of authority, dependency, and the sequential chain of harm that would later characterize life within the Loyola Community.

6.1.2. Weaponizing the "Jesuit Shield": Ignatian Guidance as a Hunting Ground

Survivors emphasize that Rupnik's influence did not emerge at the margins of ecclesial life but was embedded from the outset within some of the Church's most trusted institutional structures. As established in the Case Overview (Section Limitations and Future Research), the Kres youth group operated under formal Jesuit auspices at the Ljubljana–Dravlje parish, immediately benefiting from ecclesial legitimacy, parental trust, and institutional credibility. Rupnik—then a Jesuit in formation—was entrusted with pastoral work among students and gradually assumed a central role as spiritual animator and retreat leader. This early institutional embedding is analytically decisive: it conferred legitimacy on his practices long before any critical scrutiny could plausibly arise.

Interviewees describe a convergence of personal charisma and institutional trust that we analytically categorize as a 'Jesuit shield' that neutralized scepticism and normalized practices that might otherwise have raised concern. In their accounts, Rupnik's affiliation with the Society of Jesus acted as a protective barrier, rendering early warning signs structurally invisible to parents, parish authorities, and Church superiors. Interviewee 2 explicitly identifies trust in the Jesuits as a decisive protective factor:

> "Rupnik stood out as very creative, very unconventional. The Jesuits trusted him a lot. Even before he was a priest, he began leading three-day retreats with young people [. . .]. Rupnik said this responsibility [for the youth group/community] had been entrusted to him by Archbishop Šuštar, because he felt that he was close to young people. Archbishop Šuštar trusted the Jesuits immensely and probably didn't grasp everything that lay beneath [. . .]" (I2)

As noted in the Case Overview, this confidence extended well beyond the parish level and contributed to a broader climate of institutional quietism. Jesuit affiliation itself functioned as a de facto guarantee of legitimacy, insulating Rupnik's pastoral practices from external questioning and delaying scrutiny even when concerns were raised, and long before his authority became absolute.

Within this protected framework, Ignatian spiritual guidance became the primary mechanism through which recruits' internal resistance was gradually eroded. Survivors consistently identify intense Ignatian retreats as the central site of what can be analytically described as spiritual grooming. Interviewee 4 recalls how affective belonging and demanding spiritual practices were intertwined from the moment of entry:

> "I was invited into this group of like-minded young people—it gave me a sense of belonging. [. . .] Rupnik had a special vision. We had full-day spiritual meetings, retreats that were different—Ignatian, silent, very intense." (I4)

Drawing on a legitimate and highly respected spiritual tradition, these retreats were nevertheless structured in ways that intensified isolation, affective bonding, and dependency. Rather than functioning as safeguarded spaces of discernment, they became tools for the deliberate cultivation of susceptibility.

Interviewee 6 entered the community after accepting Rupnik's invitation to perform the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in 1990. While living under Ignatian principles, she was sent to Rome for what was presented as "psychological therapy" specifically under Rupnik, intended to help her overcome her perceived difficulties adapting to the community. She

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recalls that during this period he required daily phone calls in which he conveyed false intimacies, subjected her to improvised exercises that caused emotional distress, and ultimately attempted to kiss her on the lips, calling it "*the Lord's kiss of healing*":

> "Inside, I thought that this was an improvised procedure and that he was not qualified to do it, but he was considered by everyone in our environment to be a genius, a prophet, and a miracle-worker, so I kept those doubts to myself." (I6)

The prestige of Ignatian spirituality, combined with Rupnik's Jesuit status, functioned as a powerful recruitment and stabilization mechanism. Silence, prolonged retreats, and the emphasis on obedience and discernment suspended critical distance and progressively personalized authority. Because these practices unfolded under the umbrella of Jesuit formation, they were shielded from suspicion by parents, parish authorities, and Church superiors alike.

In this sense, Kres did not merely operate *within* Church structures; it illustrates how institutional trust itself can become an enabling condition for harm. The "Jesuit shield" transformed respected pastoral and spiritual frameworks into a safe "hunting ground", normalizing intensive practices that facilitated control while rendering early warning signs structurally invisible.

6.1.3. Charismatic Authority and Epistemic Disarmament

The interviewees emphasize that during the Kres period, Rupnik cultivated an aura of omniscience, presenting himself as a *starets*—an elder in Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic monastic traditions—who could interpret interior states and divine will with quasi-supernatural accuracy. Survivors consistently report that he perverted the Ignatian practice of *discernment of spirits*, positioning himself as the privileged interpreter of recruits' inner lives. By asserting that he knew their thoughts, emotions, and spiritual states more accurately than they did themselves, he enacted a form of epistemic domination that systematically undermined personal judgment and moral autonomy.

Interviewee 4 recalls the effect of these practices on recruits:

> "I remember him saying that he could see everything before him, that we were all watching his lips, and that he controlled everything in the hall, that he knew exactly what someone was thinking and what state they were in—but that was already manipulation." (I4)

Such interventions functioned as early acts of epistemic disarmament: recruits were subtly taught that their inner experiences were more accessible to Rupnik than to themselves, and that his interpretation of their thoughts and emotions was the authoritative truth. This dynamic eroded confidence in personal discernment, laying the groundwork for obedience and the internalization of the leader's authority.

Interviewee 4 further describes how this epistemic control extended to psychological and sexual self-perception:

> "[. . .] when he was talking about senses, about sexuality, he was talking about [. . .] a psychological approach, he was also very much emphasizing himself." (I4)

These statements were not neutral or incidental; they were deliberately designed to induce a state of susceptibility. By destabilizing recruits' confidence in their own judgment, Rupnik combined theological authority, ritualized practice, and psychological insight to produce "docile bodies" primed for submission, completing the first stage of epistemic and affective control.

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6.1.4. Strategic Recruitment: Targeting the "Golden Geese", Spiritual Grooming and Lovebombing

Recruitment into the Loyola Community was highly selective and strategically designed. Interviewees recall that Rupnik, assisted by Ivanka Hosta, deliberately sought women with high symbolic and intellectual capital—medical students, psychologists, philosophers—whose presence would confer prestige and credibility. Survivors describe this as the systematic identification of the "golden geese" (*gallina dalle uova d'oro*) often drawn from influential lay movements such as *Azione Cattolica*. Such targeted recruitment strategies closely correspond to patterns identified in the literature on grooming processes (Fernández 2021) within coercively controlled religious environments. Interviewee 2 recalls her recruitment into this network, which immediately conferred institutional legitimacy on the community:

> "In 1989 I had also been invited and elected to the National Council of Azione Cattolica. This is important because these were points that sparked a lot of interest in Rupnik—being in contact with an ecclesial movement that in the 80s and 90s was very strong in Italy [. . .] I had studied Psychology, finished my basic degree in '86 [. . .] and at the end of the 80s I was concluding a specialization in family therapy." (I2)

Across interviews, a striking pattern emerges: Marko Rupnik systematically used lovebombing (see Section 2.3.3). The interviewees' descriptions closely mirror what the literature defines as lovebombing (Singer and Lalich 1995; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Stein 2021), namely the strategic use of excessive admiration, attention, and affirmation to produce rapid emotional attachment, trust, and a sense of intimacy. In the context of the Loyola Community, this dynamic was intensified by Rupnik's spiritual authority: praise was not merely personal but presented as divinely sanctioned, prophetic, or charismatic. Interviewee 6 was an art history student when Rupnik targeted her, using his position as an artist to "notice" her and shower her with compliments. By portraying recruits as uniquely gifted or chosen, he created a bond that felt both personal and existential, making compliance emotionally and spiritually compelling. Interviewee 1 provides a clear illustration of how lovebombing operated in practice:

> "Rupnik understood instantly how strong my artistic and emotional openness was. He told me that my sensitivity was not something to hide but something essential for my spiritual growth. He 'hooked' me through this spiritual accompaniment for my life choices [. . .]. That feeling of liberation—something I had longed for since childhood—was exactly what he used to draw me in and begin his manipulation." (I1)

Lovebombing thus operated through a sequence of interrelated mechanisms that progressively consolidated control. Rupnik first identified each recruit's emotional vulnerabilities and personal talents, praising these qualities as essential spiritual gifts to be cultivated. He conferred exalted status, presenting recruits as uniquely intelligent, sensitive, or gifted, producing both emotional highs and dependence on his approval. Crucially, this affirmation was framed as divinely inspired or spiritually necessary, granting his attention sacred authority. Personal talents, emotional qualities, and vocational aspirations were integrated into a larger spiritual mission, positioning Rupnik as the sole mediator capable of guiding their development.

At this stage, lovebombing evolved into spiritual grooming (Fernández 2021). Praise and validation became embedded in spiritual direction, vocational discernment, and theological language, transforming relational dependency into a perceived spiritual obligation. Rupnik was no longer merely a mentor but an indispensable arbiter of God's will, able to

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interpret the women's inner lives and spiritual growth. In this way, personal attachment was sacralized, and hesitation or resistance was reframed as lack of faith or spiritual immaturity. Spiritual grooming thus served as the crucial bridge between initial recruitment and the later coercive and exploitative dynamics of the Loyola Community.

Interviewee 1 illustrates the integration of personal talents into the spiritual framework:

> "He told me that our personal journey together would be about the 'integration of my personality,' so that I could truly 'blossom' both in my relationship with God and in my future mission." (I1)

Once attachment and trust were established, affection and praise were selectively withheld or conditioned, creating anxiety, self-doubt, and a strong desire to regain approval. Interviewee 1 recalls:

> "I was very naive, so he hugged me very discreetly, but I felt strongly in this sense and I was already quite disoriented. He said, 'Don't worry, this is actually my help as a priest, because the path of integration can only be done in relation to an integrated person [. . .]' He immediately intuited how to manipulate my interiority." (I1)

Importantly, recruitment was not aimed at vulnerable or marginalized individuals alone. The leadership deliberately targeted socially and intellectually accomplished women, converting their symbolic and intellectual capital into prestige for the community while simultaneously producing deep affective and spiritual dependency. By combining the selection of "golden geese," systematic lovebombing, and spiritual framing, Rupnik and Hosta established the foundation for obedience, compliance, and later grooming and exploitation.

6.1.5. Relational Sabotage: Breaking Ties and the Construction of Dependency

During the Kres youth group phase, recruitment strategies systematically disrupted existing romantic and familial ties. Men were routinely directed toward Jesuit formation, while women were funneled into the Loyola Community, producing a gendered bifurcation that severed couple bonds and reconfigured vocational trajectories. Interviewee 4 (I4) recalls how this pattern was apparent even to outsiders:

> "My brother immediately understood how he actually recruited girls for the Loyola Community—he would send the girl to the Loyola Community and the guy to the Jesuits. Quite a few couples were separated like this."

This logic extended beyond individual couples to entire family networks. Brothers, sisters, and cousins were absorbed into parallel but interdependent paths—men toward Jesuit formation, women toward Loyola—creating tightly interwoven ecclesial–family systems in which social life, vocation, and faith were centrally mediated by Rupnik's authority.

A key mechanism within this process was the reframing of women's doubts, ambivalence, or vocational uncertainty as a call to a "more radical" form of discipleship: consecrated life within the Loyola Community. Personal hesitation was spiritualized and redirected toward institutional commitment. Simultaneously, Loyola sisters were publicly displayed as exemplars of fulfilment, functioning as recruitment "showcases" that reinforced the desirability and inevitability of this path.

By dismantling romantic relationships and redirecting familial bonds, the community progressively eliminated alternative sources of intimacy, support, and discernment. Affective, spiritual, and social needs became concentrated within a single closed system, producing conditions of total dependency. This reorganization of relational life was not incidental; it was structurally necessary for the consolidation of absolute authority within the community.

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6.1.6. The Forced-Choice Ultimatum: Spiritual Blackmail

Interviews reveal that the final stage of recruitment into the Loyola Community was marked by a forced-choice ultimatum that replaced genuine vocational discernment with spiritual blackmail. Survivors recall that entry was no longer presented as one possible path among many, but as a decisive test of fidelity to Christ, effectively collapsing the distinction between personal vocation and institutional submission. Interviewee 1 describes how she was required to renounce missionary aspirations to demonstrate total availability to the community. Interviewee 4 identifies this moment as the point at which her inner stability was destabilized:

> "This formation of his—that if you do not choose the Loyola Community, it means that you do not choose Christ in your life—that is where he manipulated me."

Alternative paths—whether missionary work, another religious order, or lay service—were not merely discouraged but actively delegitimized. Prior vocational discernment was reframed as self-deception, pride, or resistance to God's will. Recruits with long-standing vocational intentions were pressured to abandon them as performative acts of "dying to oneself," reframed as evidence of obedience and spiritual maturity. Doubt or hesitation was interpreted as disobedience, while submission was elevated as the highest form of faithfulness.

Interviewee 2 articulates the subtle and personalized nature of this coercion:

> "It rarely takes the form of an imposition. It is always a very subtle process that infiltrates the other person's fragilities—not stupidity, but fragility." (I2)

Daily practices of prayer, spiritual direction, and communal life further blurred the boundary between personal choice and engineered dependency, creating a sustained state of ambiguity. This mechanism entrenched obedience while preserving the illusion of freedom, making resistance feel spiritually illegitimate.

Through the weaponization of theological language, Rupnik, together with Ivanka Hosta, systematically replaced personal conscience with total submission. Recruits were deprived of interpretive resources necessary to distinguish genuine vocation from coercion, producing a condition of hermeneutical injustice. What appeared externally as freely chosen religious commitment was internally experienced as an engineered state of susceptibility, where resistance equaled spiritual failure. In this sense, Ignatian obedience was perverted into a cultic mechanism, transforming discernment into a compulsory ultimatum and faith into a site of control.

6.2. Theme 2: Hierarchy and Power Relations—The Structural and Ontological Architecture of Control

Where Theme 1 examined the mechanisms through which women were drawn into the orbit of the Loyola Community, Theme 2 turns to the architecture that secured their captivity. What emerges from interviews is not a story of interpersonal failure, but a systemic configuration of gendered, theological, and institutional power that transformed initial fascination into durable domination. The Loyola Community operated within a Church structure that conferred sacred authority on male clergy, relegated women to subordinate positions, and normalized obedience as a theological virtue. Within this world, the abuse that unfolded was not anomalous but structurally intelligible.

Survivors describe a configuration of power that cohered along three axes:

(1) the sacralized charismatic leader whose authority was beyond question;
(2) the internal enforcer who translated that authority into daily discipline;
(3) the broader ecclesial hierarchy that supplied credibility, insulation, and impunity.

Together, these axes formed a closed system—a "cage"—in which autonomy eroded, conscience collapsed, and resistance became both spiritually and socially unthinkable.

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6.2.1. Axis One: Ontological Asymmetry and the Sacralization of Power

At the heart of the Loyola Community's internal regime lay a profound ontological asymmetry—an inequality not merely social but theological, in which gendered hierarchy was elevated into divine order. Interviews show that this asymmetry was the essential condition that transformed spiritual authority into spiritual domination. Within the Catholic hierarchical system, male clergy occupy a privileged, sacralized position as "*representatives of Christ on earth*," while women are relegated to roles of service—"wash, cook, scrub, clean the church, arrange flowers." This division of labour was not experienced as pragmatic but as ontological: men teach, judge, and direct; women obey, serve, and defer. The very idea of a woman assuming priestly authority was labelled "blasphemous," revealing a theological universe in which women's voices were structurally disqualified.

It is within this symbolic order that Marko Rupnik's power must be understood. His spiritual authority was not merely personal charisma but a configuration deeply gendered, theologically sacralized, institutionally conferred, and personally cultivated. Survivors describe how he entered their lives already bearing the weight of institutional legitimacy—a Jesuit priest, a renowned artist, a spiritual guide whose reputation extended far beyond Slovenia. This triple endowment produced what they repeatedly call a "*cult of personality*," in which he was spoken of as a "*genius*," "*prophet*," and even a "*thaumaturge.*" Such symbolic capital generated a moral and spiritual asymmetry so absolute that questioning him felt tantamount to questioning God.

This collapsed the boundary between divine will and personal command, producing what Interviewee 1 described as "*verbal and spiritual demolition.*" (I1). Resistance became reinterpreted as infidelity; obedience as the only path to salvation. The collapse of interpretive autonomy is a hallmark of epistemic domination.

This theological distortion extended directly into the body. Interviewee 5 recounts how Rupnik physically overpowered her, bending her finger until it broke and then reframing the violence as a spiritual seal:

> "Now you have the permanent seal of the Society of Jesus [. . .] I did it out of love." (I5)

In this formulation, pain became sacrament, domination became love. Violence was transfigured into a sign of divine favour—an extreme form of sacralization that rendered abuse not only permissible but spiritually meaningful.

Interviewee 2 offers insight into how such domination unfolded in daily life, emphasizing that coercion was never overt but woven into ordinary spiritual practices such as prayer, confession, and communal discernment:

> "Manipulation is never direct [. . .] it is always a very subtle work." (I2)

As a spiritual director, Rupnik accessed the most intimate vulnerabilities—wounds, doubts, desires—transforming them into points of leverage. One of the interviewees notes his uncanny ability to "sense intuitively" exactly where to insert influence, identifying lack of affection, insecurity, or the longing for spiritual depth and recasting himself as the necessary mediator of meaning and care.

The sacralization of power was reinforced by the broader ecclesial environment. Interviewees repeatedly emphasize that his actions "took place in broad daylight," yet were normalized as artistic brilliance or spiritual depth. Interviewee 6 captures the corrosive effect of this institutional validation. Upon seeing a sexualised image of a sister displayed publicly, she recalls thinking:

> "If everyone considered it normal, then the one who must have been wrong was me." (I6)

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Here, the structure achieves its final aim: the internalization of doubt, the erosion of interpretive agency, the collapse of critical judgment.

Taken together, these testimonies show that Rupnik's abuse cannot be understood as private depravity or individual pathology. It emerged from a structural configuration—gendered, hierarchical, theological—in which charisma became unquestionable, spiritual authority indistinguishable from divine mandate, and women were trained to obey, trust, and ultimately self-blame. In such a system, charismatic leadership does not merely inspire; it governs, disciplines, and when unchecked, destroys.

6.2.2. Axis Two: The Internal Disciplinary Machine (Ivanka Hosta)

If Rupnik supplied the theological architecture of domination, Ivanka Hosta, who co-founded the community along with him and served as its superior, constituted its internal disciplinary machine. Interviewees consistently describe her as the agent who translated the Church's patriarchal hierarchy into daily mechanisms of control. Her leadership did not merely echo the external clerical structure—it reproduced it within the community with uncompromising rigidity. Under her authority, the Loyola Community developed what many describe as a "climate of terror," in which spiritual value, moral worth, and social status were relentlessly monitored and regulated. Interviewees consistently describe Hosta's leadership as "*dictatorial*," "*sectarian*," "*toxic*."

Interviewee 6 recalls the extremity of this environment:

> "We lived in a climate of terror, in which not only what you did was controlled but also what you thought. It was enough that I had not made my bed well for the superior to tell me that my soul was not clean." (I6)

In this system, even minor practical deviations were recast as indicators of spiritual corruption. Obedience thus became the primary moral virtue, while doubt, distress, or hesitation were interpreted as failures of vocation.

Central to Hosta's disciplinary power was the enforcement of a stratified hierarchy that produced the so-called second-category or "second-tier" sisters—a system in which spiritual rank was directly tied to obedience and compliance. This structure did not originate with Hosta alone; it had already been firmly established under Rupnik's direct control. As Interviewee 1 explains, moments of resistance—especially the refusal of sexualised "spiritual" demands—were immediately reinterpreted as signs of insufficient charisma and spiritual immaturity. What should have been recognized as an assertion of personal integrity was instead framed as a failure of vocation.

Interviewee 1 offers a detailed account of how Rupnik confronted her with the threat of becoming a *sorella di serie B*—a second-category sister—when she resisted his coercive insistence on a sexual "trinitarian" relationship. In this system, refusal entailed not only moral condemnation but also social and institutional demotion: the loss of access to study, marginalization within the community, and reassignment to domestic labour.

As she recounts:

> "I was among the seven founders of the community. Rupnik made it clear to me many times that if you do not live this sexual dimension, it means that you are not capable, you are not within the charisma. This meant that you became a second-tier sister, assigned only to support the more important, more spiritually elevated sisters. Because this was Rupnik's point: if you say no—for example, to a sex between three persons [. . .]—you are not spiritually elevated, so you are demoted. And what does that mean? That you will not have many opportunities to study and that you will be at the service of the spiritually elevated sisters. And so the pressure grows—and in my case, on a specifically sexual level. And he did the same thing with another sister." (I1)

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This testimony reveals how hierarchical degradation functioned as an instrument of coercion, transforming sexual pressure into a supposed test of spiritual worth and embedding abuse within the very structure of community life.

Hosta later fully institutionalized this system. As Interviewee 2 recalls, Ivanka would repeatedly issue such threats whenever the women failed to comply with the "rules of the game" within the community—rules she herself defined and enforced:

"You will be the cook, you will clean more than the others." (I2)

These threats served as constant reminders that any deviation from expected behaviour—obedience, silence, and submission—would result in immediate demotion and public humiliation.

The cumulative effect of this punitive structure generated what survivors describe as double abuse: women were first violated or coerced by Rupnik, and then punished again through the community's internal disciplinary machinery. As Interviewee 3 notes, this process stripped women not only of spiritual status but also of social and intellectual standing, producing long-term degradation.

A striking and recurrent pattern in testimonies is Hosta's systematic silencing of complaints. When sisters attempted to report abuses, she reacted not with shock but with instructions for secrecy. Interviewee 2 recounts how one of the sisters—herself also abused by Rupnik—approached Hosta to explain why Interviewee 1 had suddenly fled the community:

"She went to Ivanka [. . .] and said: 'Marko does this, this, and this, and that is why she ran away.' And Ivanka told her: 'Don't say anything to anyone [. . .] you must not tell this to any sister.' The next day Ivanka called Marko to celebrate Mass in the community." (I2)

Interviewee 1 later learned of this conversation and discovered that Hosta had shown no surprise when confronted with these allegations.

As she underscored:

"The very important thing is that Ivanka was not surprised." (I1)

The absence of shock is analytically significant: as the interviewee noted, it indicates that the disclosure did not disrupt existing expectations, suggesting prior knowledge and pointing toward conscious accommodation or concealment rather than ignorance.

Even more revealing is what happened when Interviewee 1 attempted to report the abuse to the archbishop on the day she fled. Instead of facilitating her access, Hosta physically and institutionally blocked her.

As she recalls:

"I remember very clearly when I wanted to speak to the archbishop about what had happened. Ivanka intervened immediately. She took control of the situation and made sure that I would not speak to anyone else. She told me not to say anything, that she would 'take care of it,' and from that moment on, access to external authority was effectively blocked" (I1)

Preventing a victim from approaching Church authorities is one of the clearest indicators of institutional complicity. These actions show that preserving the community's image—and above all Rupnik's authority—took precedence over truth, accountability, and the wellbeing of the women. Through such actions, the community became hermetically sealed, with Hosta functioning as the final barrier between victims and any possibility of institutional recourse.

Hosta systematically reframed women's psychological collapse as moral failure, redirecting responsibility onto the victims themselves and reinscribing suffering within a

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theological register of sin and guilt. As Interviewee 1 recalls, following a profound psychological collapse in the aftermath of the abuse, she fled the community and, during this period, attempted suicide. After returning, she reached out to Ivanka seeking support and protection. Instead, she was told:

> "If something happened and you are unwell, it is your fault [. . .] By choosing to die, you have committed a grave sin against God. [. . .] You must go to Marko and confess." (I1)

This reversal transformed trauma into guilt and reinstated the abuser as the woman's spiritual authority—a core mechanism for maintaining hierarchical control.

Interviews suggest that Ivanka Hosta herself operated within dynamics of manipulation and control shaped by Rupnik's authority. While the nature of her own experiences remains unclear, all interviewees described her as exhibiting what one sister termed "a pathological fear of the body and of sexuality," which appeared to inform her moralizing responses to women's distress. Rather than mitigating her role, this pattern reflects a familiar dynamic within authoritarian systems, in which subordinate actors internalize and reproduce the logic of power as a means of maintaining position, coherence, or survival.

As Interviewee 6 states:

> "The dynamics that Marko used on us, Ivanka adopted as well." (I6)

Hosta ultimately positioned herself as the supreme interpreter of the community's charism.

As Interviewee 2 recalls:

> "She controlled everything [. . .] nothing was done without asking Ivanka first." (I2)

Even after Rupnik was barred from contact with the sisters of the Loyola Community, she continued to enforce the hierarchy he established, ensuring the longevity of a system in which domination appeared spiritually mandated.

Taken together, these testimonies reveal that Hosta's leadership was not an aberration but a structural pillar of the community's authoritarian order. Her disciplinary machine operationalised the theological asymmetry established by Rupnik, converting spiritual aspiration into submission, dissent into sin, and suffering into moral failure. Through her, the hierarchical logic of the wider Church was not only mirrored but intensified, making the community's internal "cage" complete.

The role of Ivanka Hosta within the Loyola Community can be analytically understood through the concepts of institutional complicity (Guiora 2021) and networks of complicity and moral myopia (Cunningham et al. 2019), as outlined in Section 2.3.4. While she was not the primary perpetrator of abuse, her position as superior enabled her to function as a key internal enabler who translated epistemic control and institutional self-protection into everyday disciplinary practices. Through routinized silencing, obstruction of disclosure, and the moral reframing of harm, her leadership exemplifies how abuse is sustained not only through direct acts of violation but through organized patterns of omission, loyalty, and compliance.

6.2.3. Axis Three: Institutional Church Hierarchy and Systemic Impunity

The interviews highlight that Rupnik's abuse was sustained over decades not only through individual manipulation but through a broader system of institutional protection within the Catholic Church. His status as an internationally acclaimed artist and Jesuit, together with influential relationships inside the Vatican, created conditions in which complaints were minimized, dismissed, or actively suppressed. Several interviewees highlighted how institutional shielding—including access to funding, high-ranking supporters,

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and symbolic authority—enabled Rupnik's abuses to persist over decades. One interviewee, I4, recalled hearing a priest in a podcast describe Rupnik as a "serial abuser for 30 years," emphasizing that this longevity was possible only because he was protected by money, reputation, and Church support.

This dynamic reflects what the literature identifies as clericalism: a structural belief that the clergy possess special moral or spiritual authority that must be defended, even against allegations of wrongdoing. Within such a hierarchy, institutional loyalty often outweighs accountability. As Interviewee 4 put it, many in the Church and wider society assumed that "*a priest must be protected, no matter what.*"

This culture of silence and protectionism not only isolated victims but also ensured that abuse could persist unchecked, revealing how systemic impunity is produced and maintained within highly hierarchical religious institutions.

Taken together, these testimonies show that abuse within the Loyola Community was not an individual pathology but a structural possibility embedded in the intersection of:

- patriarchal hierarchical order;
- sacralized charismatic authority;
- internal authoritarian enforcement; and
- institutional impunity and epistemic injustice.

In such an environment, abuse is not an exception but a predictable outcome of a system where gendered hierarchy, sacralized power, and organizational silence converge to normalize domination and disable resistance.

The structural environment of the Loyola Community transcended typical religious boundaries, with survivors explicitly identifying it as a high-control sectarian system. Interviewee 2 provides the most direct assessment of the group's nature, stating:

> "It is a cult, it is a sect, very clear; the dynamics have always been sectarian: secrets, silences, manipulation, authoritarian and toxic leadership." (I2)

She further characterizes the community as a 'total institution'—an analytical framework in which the internal reality and interpretive resources of the members were entirely monopolized by the leadership. This sectarian matrix was maintained through a calculated suppression of horizontal communication, effectively creating 'avatars' of the sisters and ensuring that their shared suffering remained privatized and undetected by the institutional Church. This sectarian structure was shielded by the community's formal status within the Church, allowing toxic informal power dynamics to operate under the guise of spiritual guidance.

6.3. Theme 3: Sexual Abuse Within a Spiritual and Psychological Regime of Control

Sexual violence within the Loyola Community cannot be understood as a series of discrete incidents or individual moral failures. Rather, the interviews reveal a continuum of coercive control in which spiritual authority, psychological manipulation, emotional dependency, and institutional complicity progressively constructed the conditions under which sexual abuse became both thinkable and enforceable. Grooming, spiritual manipulation, lovebombing, boundary erosion, and hierarchical obedience were not peripheral features of community life—they constituted the architecture through which sexual violence was introduced, normalized, concealed, and sustained.

6.3.1. The Continuum of Coercive Control

The testimonies of the four interviewees who directly experienced sexual violation within the Loyola Community offer a detailed view of how sexual abuse emerged from a wider system of spiritual and psychological domination. Although the specific acts they

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describe—coerced kissing, forced sexual contact, and sexualised rituals framed as spiritual experiences—are severe in themselves, their accounts reveal that these violations did not arise suddenly. Rather, they unfolded through a progressive sequence in which spiritual grooming, emotional capture, doctrinal distortion, and the erosion of bodily and moral boundaries gradually converged to present sexual coercion as an expression of divine will.

The structural logic of this process was articulated with particular clarity by Interviewee 1, whose metaphor illuminates the gradual nature of coercive control:

> "If you came to me and tried to kiss me on the mouth, I would immediately understand it as aggression and pull away. But if you put a frog into water that is just slightly warm and slowly raise the temperature, it doesn't notice — and in the end, it's boiled. That is exactly what manipulation is." (I1)

This metaphor captures the incremental escalation through which abuse was normalized: small transgressions, framed in spiritual or aesthetic terms, slowly reconfigured the women's interpretive frameworks. Within a closed spiritual system—where the abuser's authority was absolute and dissent was reframed as spiritual failure—resistance became not merely difficult but psychologically unthinkable. The women's moral intuitions were gradually destabilized by theological reinterpretation and emotional dependency long before any sexual act occurred.

Other interviewees, although not subjected to direct sexual acts, were nonetheless embedded within the same coercive environment. They describe psychological manipulation, spiritual intimidation, and the systematic suppression of dissent by both the charismatic leader, Marko Rupnik, and the community's superior, Ivanka Hosta. Many recount sensing that "something was deeply wrong," witnessing the emotional deterioration of others, or observing behavioural patterns—favouritism, secrecy, volatility—that only later became intelligible in light of disclosures of sexual abuse. Such observations correspond closely with sociological analyses of coercive organizations, where sexual violence typically coexists with broader regimes of silencing and institutional complicity.

This institutional dimension is particularly evident in the role of Hosta, whose reinforcement of Rupnik's spiritual authority, suppression of complaints, and enforcement of hierarchical obedience further entrenched the system. Her actions ensured that boundary violations were not only tolerated but actively recast as spiritually meaningful. Victims were therefore not manipulated in isolation; they were incorporated into a broader regime in which spirituality, sexuality, and obedience were fused into a single moral demand.

As outlined in Section 4 (Case Study Background), media investigations report that at least two dozen women—primarily consecrated religious sisters associated with the Loyola Community—were subjected to spiritual, psychological, and sexual abuse under Rupnik's authority. These external findings closely align with the accounts provided in this study: interviewees likewise estimate that Rupnik abused more than twenty women, many of whom have never spoken publicly. Survivors attribute this enduring silence not to consent or resignation but to the effects of a coercive apparatus that generated fear, spiritual guilt, emotional collapse, and a profound erosion of epistemic self-trust. Years of psychological subordination and theological manipulation diminished their capacity to name their experiences as abuse or to imagine resistance as a viable possibility.

6.3.2. The Sacralization of Sexual Abuse

A defining feature of Rupnik's abuse was the systematic sacralization of transgression: sexualised acts, voyeuristic practices, and boundary violations were reframed as spiritual insights, theological lessons, or pathways to divine intimacy. This manipulation relied on the fusion of religious doctrine, artistic symbolism, and spiritual authority—an appa-

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ratus that destabilized moral intuition and cast the perpetrator as the sole interpreter of God's will.

Spiritual grooming functioned as the first and most essential layer of this mechanism. Invitations to spiritual direction, artistic collaboration, theological reflection, or vocational discernment established Rupnik as an unquestionable authority, someone whose insight appeared uniquely personal and divinely inspired. As Interviewee 6 recalled:

> "I knew it was wrong, but he confused me because he covered everything with a spiritual aura [. . .] He constantly repeated the rhetoric of the spiritual value of femininity, which he exalted in explicitly aesthetic terms. I remember one of his 'lessons' on the importance of the color white in women's underwear, and his encouragement to wear slightly transparent white blouses that allowed the bra to show through—supposedly as a sign of purity and spiritual beauty. And although he waited until we were alone to put his hands on us, his ambiguous behaviour happened in daylight and was treated as normal within the community." (I6)

Her testimony demonstrates how theological metaphor and artistic legitimacy were weaponised to normalize voyeuristic interest and erase boundaries long before overt sexual coercion took place. Women also reported semi-nude images of community members appearing in his paintings, framed not as violations but as sacred representations of femininity. This aesthetic sacralization had a disciplining effect: questioning his intentions became a sign not of discernment but of spiritual immaturity.

These manipulations are consistent with patterns identified in new Catholic movements and charismatic communities, where uncritical elevation of the founder's charisma and distorted theological concepts transform obedience into a mechanism of control (Duhau 2021, 2022). The rhetoric of spiritual insight and aestheticized femininity, while framed as pious formation, functions to obscure coercion and normalize violations, a dynamic scholars have identified as *false mysticism* (Beattie 2023; González Casas 2022). Such frameworks condition members to reinterpret acts of abuse as spiritual lessons, creating environments in which questioning the leader is construed as spiritual immaturity rather than resistance.

The symbolic violence of Rupnik's aesthetic output functioned as a material extension of systemic abuse rather than a mere institutional shield. Interviewee 4 reflects that characteristic features of his art—such as the "stretched, elongated eyes... painted black"—produced "holy images that are a concern of their own, which have no proper dimensions," mirroring the psychological "unplugging" of the members' own sensations and humanity. This aesthetic was often produced through a ritualized process in the Aletti Center atelier, where the leader utilized "artistic inspiration" as an alibi for physical boundary-crossing. Interviewee 1 recalls Rupnik suddenly lifting her skirt while painting, claiming, "this is the sign of Wisdom (Sapienza). . . it is at the base of my artistic inspiration," and using "plates of the Kama Sutra" as "beautiful forms of art" to normalize the "weaving of bodies". Ultimately, the public "canonization" of these internal dynamics—exemplified by a Maribor exhibition featuring a "woman little dressed, in an attitude that seemed sensual" who was a known member of the community—forced survivors to witness their own exploitation treated as sacred liturgy. This institutional validation caused profound epistemic isolation; as Interviewee 6 recalls, "I clearly thought that something was wrong, but I said to myself that if everyone considered it normal, then the one who must have been wrong was me".

As grooming intensified, sexual acts themselves were systematically endowed with spiritual meaning. Survivors describe how kissing, touching, and ultimately sexual intercourse were recast as moments of divine encounter, healing, or integration. One woman recalled:

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> "He told me that my sensitivity was not something to hide but something to integrate—and that only through him could I truly blossom." (I1)

This rhetoric formed part of a personalized theology of "integration of personality," in which a woman's sensuality and sexuality were positioned as elements requiring sacramental completion through him as spiritual guide.

The most extreme form of this theological distortion was the trinitarian justification of group sexual acts. Interviewee 1 described how he invoked the Trinity to pressure her into sexual activity with another sister:

> "He began pressuring me that if our relationship was to be 'free,' it had to reflect the image of the Trinity. The Trinity is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and therefore another sister had to join us so that we could live this 'trinitarian dimension' together. That was how he justified everything—framing his actions as part of a 'trinitarian dynamic' that required another sister to join us in sexual intercourse, so that together we could 'live' this supposed spiritual dimension he invoked." (I1)

This narrative—presenting a three-person sexual act as an icon of divine communion—constitutes one of the clearest examples of theological weaponization in the material. The use of theological symbolism to justify sexualized acts in the Loyola Community reflects documented mechanisms in ecclesial abuse. In particular, Duhau's (2021) theological analysis examines how figures such as Jean Vanier and the Philippe brothers (Marie-Dominique and Thomas) in France exemplify contexts in which charismatic authority and spiritual language were implicated in abusive conduct within new ecclesial movements, revealing how spiritual authority can be deployed in ways that obscure and legitimize misconduct. Conceptually, this aligns with broader patterns in which spiritual rhetoric, aesthetic legitimation, and institutional consecration of authority are distorted to justify transgressive behaviour (Beattie 2023; González Casas 2022). Comparable dynamics have also been observed in Argentina in the case of Manuel Fernando Pascual, a priest who exploited his role as confessor, retreat leader and spiritual guide to coerce and sacralize sexual acts against two nuns from the *Hermanas de San José* community, under the guise of spiritual formation and divine guidance (Suárez 2024).

Scholars identify the concept of "false mysticism" to describe such dynamics: a pattern in which supposedly spiritual or mystical experiences are employed to justify unethical acts, manipulate followers, and conflate the abuser's desires with divine will, cloaking abusive conduct in theological language (Duhau 2021, 2022; Beattie 2023). In these contexts, sexual activity, artistic or aesthetic practices, and theological teachings are endowed with spiritual legitimacy, obscuring moral boundaries and making coercion appear divinely sanctioned. In each of these cases, spiritual grooming, symbolic legitimation, and theological distortion function together to replace the victims' moral compass with the abuser's authority. This evidence situates Rupnik's case within a broader, recurring pattern of ecclesial abuse in which false mysticism, sacralized authority, and manipulation of conscience operate as structural mechanisms enabling long-term exploitation.

Additional testimonies confirm this pattern. Interviewee 5 recounted:

> "He kissed me on the lips and said it was 'the kiss of the Lord.'" (I5)

Interviewee 4 similarly observed:

> "He used spirituality constantly to justify the abuse [. . .] saying I lacked tenderness and that he would be my saviour." (I4)

Some women reported the introduction of explicitly erotic material—including references to the Kama Sutra—under the guise of theological or artistic reflection. Over

time, refusal of sexual advances became framed not merely as disobedience to him but as spiritual failure, moral immaturity, or even betrayal of vocation.

Through this fusion of theological manipulation, aesthetic eroticisation, and spiritual authority, Rupnik replaced the women's moral compass with a corrupted, externalized authority oriented entirely toward him. What appeared as spiritual formation revealed itself as the infrastructure of total spiritual, psychological, and sexual subordination.

6.3.3. The Psychological Thermostat: Exaltation, Humiliation, and the Production of Trauma Bonds

While theological distortion provided the doctrinal justification for abuse, its psychological engine operated through a calculated oscillation between exaltation and devaluation. This oscillation—well documented in coercive and narcissistic abuse systems—created the trauma bond (Dutton and Painter 1993) that rendered sexual coercion possible and resistance psychologically unthinkable.

Rupnik first elevated women through excessive affirmation: personalized admiration, declarations of exceptional intelligence or spiritual sensitivity, and expressions of prophetic insight into their vocation. This phase established deep emotional dependency, particularly among women seeking spiritual direction, healing, or belonging. But once dependency was secured, the dynamic shifted abruptly.

Praise was withdrawn. Attention evaporated. Admiration became contempt.

Interviewees consistently describe sudden transitions from intimacy to coldness, from affirmation to humiliation. He ignored them, belittled them, or treated them with calculated indifference—behaviours that produced anxiety and a desperate longing to regain his approval. As Interviewee 2 explained:

> "First he tells you you're the best, the most intelligent, the most interesting person in the world. Once he knows he has you, he commands you, humiliates you, tells you you're worth nothing." (I2)

This pattern—idealization → withdrawal → humiliation—formed the essence of the "psychological thermostat" he controlled. The victim experienced cycles of warmth and freezing cold, each calibrated to deepen dependence.

As Interviewee 1's earlier metaphor of the slowly boiling frog suggests, manipulation operated through imperceptible increments: each small transgression recalibrated what counted as "normal," making subsequent violations harder to recognize as such. The power of this metaphor lies precisely in illustrating how spiritualised language and symbolic authority transformed minor boundary crossings into a new moral baseline. In this sense, resistance did not fail because women lacked awareness, but because their interpretive frameworks were steadily restructured within a theological system that cast submission as holiness and dissent as spiritual failure.

The devaluing phase also involved spiritual weaponization. Any expression of discomfort, hesitation, or self-protection was reframed as a lack of faith, insufficient purity, or disobedience to God. Interviewee 3 summarized the effect:

> "He would destroy your progress, your identity [. . .] you felt broken." (I3)

The communal environment amplified this psychological control. Within a hierarchical structure that mirrored his authority, his attention was construed as a rare spiritual privilege, whereas his withdrawal or harshness was interpreted as necessary purification. What might otherwise have been recognized as emotional abuse became cloaked in religious meaning.

In this way, the oscillation between exaltation and humiliation produced a powerful trauma bond, binding women to the very source of their suffering. This trauma bond was not an accidental by-product but an intentional mechanism designed to undermine

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autonomy, erode self-trust, and render women spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically subordinate to his will.

This dynamic reached its breaking point when withdrawal and humiliation were no longer episodic, but mobilized as an explicit threat of total loss—transforming psychological dependence into existential captivity.

6.3.4. The Engineered Silence: Institutional Psychological Violence and the Closing of the Cage

Building on the recruitment dynamics described in the first section, this section examines how relational rupture was later lived and experienced as isolation, psychological coercion, and enforced silence. A recurring pattern across interviews is the slow but deliberate construction of isolation—an engineered process through which women were severed from their previous identities, relationships, and sources of external validation. This isolation was not incidental; it was a central mechanism of coercive control that closed the "cage," rendering resistance spiritually illegitimate and exit almost unthinkable.

Women describe how, over time, their families, friends, professional aspirations, and former communities were reframed as spiritually inferior, emotionally dangerous, or incompatible with "the path" Rupnik claimed God had chosen for them. The erosion of social ties unfolded gradually, always couched in religious rhetoric that masked manipulation as discernment.

Interviewee 6 recalls how this spiritual reframing began:

> "He told me that my family was not good for me, that they kept me tied to the past, and that if I truly wanted to follow God's will, I had to detach from them. So I began to see them less and less." (I6)

This strategy transformed ordinary bonds of affection into threats to spiritual growth. Distance from family thus appeared not as a relational rupture but as a sign of maturity and obedience. The psychological effect was profound: the women began to perceive the outside world through the interpretive lens supplied by their abuser.

In some cases, the isolation moved beyond personal persuasion and took an institutional form. Interviewee 1 describes how the community directly intervened to weaken her family ties:

> "I remember they even wrote a letter to my family saying that my path required distance and that they had to accept that I was no longer the person I used to be." (I1)

Such actions institutionalized the severing of external anchors, replacing familial loyalty with exclusive devotion to the community and its leaders. The message was consistent: true vocation requires rupture.

Professional identities were also dissolved. Interviewee 2 reflects on how quickly her world contracted:

> "Once I entered the community, I stopped working almost immediately [. . .] but it is very hard to know which part was truly my choice and which part was pressure. Manipulation is never direct." (I2)

Her observation reveals the fundamental ambiguity of coercive control: victims experience decisions as their own precisely because manipulation is subtle, cumulative, and framed as spiritual insight.

Across testimonies, personal vulnerabilities and aspirations—Interviewee 1's desire for missionary life, Interviewee 6's longing for spiritual depth, Interviewee 2's search for meaning—became pathways through which Rupnik redirected the women's lives. Their

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former identities were progressively delegitimised, leaving the community, and ultimately Rupnik himself, as the sole source of moral orientation and existential purpose.

The closed structure of the Loyola Community intensified this isolation. Daily routines, spiritual practices, and communal expectations created an insular world in which external influences were minimized and alternative interpretations of events became inaccessible. Within this enclosure, Rupnik's interpretation of vocation, obedience, and spiritual growth became the only available interpretive framework. Over time, this made it profoundly difficult for the women to recognize manipulation, seek help, or imagine leaving without spiritual collapse.

This engineered isolation also produced silence. Speaking out became framed as betrayal; discomfort as lack of faith; dissent as spiritual immaturity. In such an environment, to question Rupnik was to question God's will, and to leave the community was to risk one's salvation. Resistance thus became cognitively and spiritually foreclosed.

Isolation was therefore not merely an environmental condition but a strategic instrument of domination. By systematically weakening ties to families, careers, and previous identities, Rupnik ensured that the community—and ultimately he himself—became the women's primary and often sole emotional, social, and spiritual reference point. This loss of alternative anchors deepened dependency, reframed resistance as spiritual failure, and created conditions under which the progression from spiritual grooming to sexual abuse became structurally possible and experientially overwhelming.

As Interviewee 1 describes, this convergence of isolation, fear, and spiritual dependency marked the moment when resistance became psychologically and existentially unthinkable:

> "When I finally said no, he completely exploded. In a matter of minutes, he dismantled me—listing everything that was wrong with me, from the first thing to the last. Then he said: '*For this reason, you will never do anything in your life. Our relationship is over. We have nothing left. Tomorrow I am leaving.*' [. . .] In that moment, I broke. I remember crying uncontrollably. I felt that something inside me had shattered completely. I understood that I would never say no again, because the cost was too high. Losing him meant losing everything—my vocation, my identity, my entire life." (I1)

6.4. Theme 4: Consequences, Departure, and Public Testimony—The Journey Toward Epistemic Justice

Theme 4 examines the aftermath of departure from the Loyola Community not as a discrete moment of exit, but as the cumulative outcome of a long sequential chain of institutional harm. Survivors describe an extended aftermath shaped by existential rupture, embodied trauma, systemic institutional betrayal, material precarity, and symbolic and epistemic struggles over truth. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing, revealing how clerical power continues to act on survivors' bodies, careers, and spiritual identities long after their physical separation from the community.

6.4.1. Existential Rupture and the Embodied "Resetting" of the Self

Departure is consistently described by survivors not as liberation, but as an experience of internal "death," in which identity, meaning, and moral orientation disintegrate simultaneously. This rupture resulted from prolonged exposure to a total institution that systematically undermined cognitive autonomy through spiritual grooming. I6 summarizes that leaving the community was treated by both the institution and the conditioned family members as "the absolute evil, worse than death". Interviewee 1 characterizes this as a psychological "resetting" of the conscience, explaining that after years of exposure, she

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no longer trusted her own perception of reality. She describes the profound dissociation required to survive the community:

> "My deep experience was that there was a block at the level of these internal mechanisms of conscience [. . .] I unplugged from my emotions, from sensations, and so I felt nothing anymore [. . .] You are truly at the concrete mercy of the other." (I1)

This trauma was not only psychological but profoundly embodied. Interviewee 6 recounts the state of total depletion upon her departure:

> "After ten years in the community, I was physically ill, mentally shattered, and spiritually wounded." (I6)

She explains that she was subjected to constant condemnation, which she internalized as "God's contempt," leading to a complete collapse of self-esteem and physical weakness. Interviewee 2 reports that some sisters in the community developed "very serious psychological problems," including two instances of "severe depression." Interviewee 3 observes that some sisters remain so deeply wounded and "ill" that they are unable to confront their past, as doing so would require an excessive psychophysical effort.

These consequences thus manifested as chronic depression and autoimmune diseases, a state of total depletion, psychosomatic blocking and dissociation, and prolonged spiritual and physical paralysis, which survivors explicitly link to decades of sustained stress, fear, and enforced submission. I1 interprets these embodied effects as a "body memory" of the slow, corrosive "boiling" effect of institutional manipulation.

Similar patterns have been documented in broader studies of women religious and survivors of ecclesial abuse. Testimonial and investigative accounts describe departure from abusive religious communities not as immediate liberation but as a process marked by identity fragmentation, guilt, and loss of self-trust (Browne and Contreras 2022; Bustamante Soto 2022). A large-scale regional study conducted by the Confederación Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Religiosas y Religiosos reports widespread experiences of abuse of power and spiritual manipulation among women religious, often accompanied by psychological distress and lack of institutional support for recovery (CLAR 2022). Comparative analyses of abuse in the Latin American Church further emphasize how clericalist cultures and sacralized authority structures contribute to long-term harm that affects victims' sense of agency and moral orientation (Lecaros and Suárez 2024). Theological studies of spiritual abuse likewise identify the erosion of inner freedom and the "loss of self" as characteristic consequences of sustained manipulation of conscience (Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022). These findings reinforce the interpretation of departure described by interviewees here as an embodied and existential rupture rather than a simple institutional exit.

While broader studies highlight these patterns of identity fragmentation and spiritual abuse, the survivors in the Loyola Community experienced a collapse of self-trust engineered through hermeneutical injustice—the systematic restriction of the interpretive resources available to survivors to understand their own exploitation. This was operationalized through interpretive reversals where the leader reframed acts of aggression as sacred signs. This reversal transformed trauma into guilt, reinstating the abuser as the women's only valid spiritual authority.

Critically, some survivors were able to preserve an "original core" of faith as a form of resistance. By disentangling their personal spirituality from the abusive institution, they survived the internally imposed "death" of the self without relinquishing their moral or spiritual identity. Interviewee 2 emphasizes that her decision to remain a person of faith was a deliberate refusal of the totalizing power exercised by her abusers. She explains that she rejected becoming an atheist or agnostic because she did not want to grant the

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perpetrators the authority to destroy a fundamental dimension of her life—one that had developed in a "completely different context" before she entered the community. By retaining her faith, she denied the institution total control over her interior life. Because this spiritual foundation was formed independently of Rupnik's influence, it remained beyond the perpetrators' full appropriation:

> "What kept me alive and healthy is exactly this original core of my faith." (I2)

For many others, however, the abuse resulted in what survivors describe as a "spiritual rupture," in which the image of God became inseparable from the image of the perpetrator, leading to long-term spiritual paralysis.

6.4.2. Secondary Betrayal: Clericalism and Family Ruptures

Institutional betrayal extended beyond the Church into survivors' most intimate relationships, producing a form of "secondary betrayal" in which family bonds were severed by the weight of clericalism. Survivors' testimonies illustrate how the protection of the perpetrator's status often took precedence over the safety and truth of their own relatives. For families deeply rooted in the Church, disclosures of abuse were frequently met with disbelief or denial. Interviewee 4 recalls that when she attempted to share her story, her mother—described as "so church-oriented"—dismissed her: "Don't listen to those who gossip." This response reflected a generational context in which sexuality was understood strictly as "sin" and a "hidden thing," and by speaking out, Interviewee 4 was accused of "spitting in her own face":

> "I didn't get support or understanding from my own family [. . .] And from that point on, there has been a split between us."

The rupture was not merely passive; it was often actively engineered by the community's leadership to enforce total dependency. Interviewee 6 notes that the community was "rigorous and determined in severing the bond with the family of origin," and, in her case, used a "particularly heavy hand." This included formal interventions, such as letters to families asserting that the sister's path required distance and that they must accept she was "no longer the person she used to be." Because recruitment often targeted entire family networks—sending brothers to the Jesuits and sisters to the Loyola Community—the 1993 split between Rupnik and Hosta generated "mortal discussions" within families. Interviewee 2 recalls that many sisters faced a "loyalty conflict," forced to break off relations with siblings who remained close to Rupnik:

> "A lot of sisters were faced with the necessity of completely breaking off relations for a fairly long period with their families." (I2)

Clericalism thus operates not only institutionally but socially, demanding loyalty "no matter what" (I4) and frequently severing family bonds, leaving survivors socially and emotionally isolated. At the same time, some survivors frame their testimony as a transgenerational intervention. Interviewee 4 explains that she shares her story with her daughter so that she "wouldn't have to waste as much time going through such things," transforming personal suffering into protective knowledge for the next generation.

6.4.3. Institutional Betrayal: The Archival Void and Epistemic Invisibility

Departure from the Loyola Community marked a transition from internalized abuse to systemic institutional betrayal. Survivors report filing complaints against Rupnik to the Church authorities as early as the 1980s and 1980s, but experiencing prolonged silence, procedural exclusion, and systematic devaluation of their credibility. Public visibility of survivors' testimony was thus forced externally rather than invited institutionally. Survivors of the Loyola Community experienced institutional betrayal not only during their

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time in the community but also after exit, when attempts to report abuse collided with systemic indifference and procedural exclusion. This betrayal operated on two interrelated levels: historical erasure and legal marginalization.

After leaving the community, survivors report encountering a profound institutional and epistemic invisibility. Letters and reports sent to the Church hierarchy were largely ignored, and no meaningful attention was given until external exposure forced visibility through blogs and media outlets. This experience exemplifies what survivors describe as an "architecture of denial," in which their testimony is rendered effectively nonexistent. Interviewee 1 reflects on this:

> "We don't exist for the Church, we really don't exist." (I1)

A striking illustration of this erasure is the so-called "archival void." Bishop Andrej Saje, then secretary to Archbishop Alojzij Šuštar, publicly stated that there were no records of earlier complaints, despite survivors' repeated attempts to raise concerns. Survivors interpret this absence not as a passive failure but as active institutional erasure. Interviewee 2 frames it as systemic abuse:

> "The first thing [Bishop Andrej Saje] said... was that we had nothing in the archive. This is the systemic abuse that then allows the concrete abuser to do what he wants." (I2)

The archival void demonstrates how structural silence can reinforce impunity, depriving survivors of institutional acknowledgment and leaving early reports to disappear into administrative amnesia.

This erasure extended into the canonical process itself. In official proceedings, survivors were formally designated as "witnesses" (*testimone*) rather than injured parties (*parte lesa*), a classification that sharply curtailed their agency and denied them juridical recognition of harm. Although survivors were allowed to speak, their testimonies were procedurally neutralized, producing a structural credibility deficit. Interviewee 1 describes how, when she gave her testimony, she was required to sign a document stating that her statement was offered solely as a witness and not as a formal accusation. As a result, she had no standing as an injured party and no possibility of seeking redress. She emphasizes that, within the Church's process, she was not recognized as a victim but reduced to a narrative without legal subjectivity:

> "Officially, I am only a witness; I am not a party to the case for the Church. This is very important to emphasize. I am not considered a victim—only a story. When I gave my testimony, I had to sign a document stating that I was making the declaration only as a witness, not as an accusation. Therefore, I could not seek redress; I was only a witness." (I1)

By denying survivors legal standing while maintaining procedural formalities, the Church preserved the appearance of compliance while shielding its hierarchy from accountability. Survivors' testimonies indicate that the prolonged silence surrounding abuse—often spanning decades—was not incidental but the outcome of institutional designs that systematically obstructed recognition, articulation, and disclosure.

Together, the archival void and witness-status marginalization demonstrate a continuum of institutional betrayal. Historical erasure rendered early abuse invisible, while procedural classification systematically minimized the survivors' present claims. This "architecture of erasure" highlights the dual mechanisms by which ecclesiastical institutions can protect perpetrators while undermining survivors: first by erasing records of past complaints, and second by denying recognition within formal investigative structures. The result is compounded epistemic injustice, leaving survivors without both institutional memory and legal voice.

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6.4.4. Financial and Symbolic Capital as Shields

Institutional betrayal was reinforced by Rupnik's extraordinary convergence of theological, aesthetic, and organizational capital. Interviewee 2 asserts that he functioned as the "real president" of the bishops in Slovenia, wielding decisive informal influence. His symbolic authority and financial resources—described by Interviewees 1 and 3 as including alleged payments of millions of euros to navigate Vatican investigations and "emerge clean" from earlier inquiries—created a form of economic and institutional immunity[15]. This combination of prestige, wealth, and unregulated authority rendered accusations effectively unthinkable, neutralizing accountability mechanisms and perpetuating the structural conditions that allowed abuse to continue unimpeded.

6.4.5. Professional Destruction and Lifelong Economic Vulnerance

Material precarity among survivors was not incidental but a structural manifestation of the Sexual Economies of Clericalism (SEC). Within this framework, the bodies, labour, and professional potential of consecrated women were treated as "ecclesial capital"—resources to be managed and deployed to sustain the prestige, authority, and desires of the charismatic male leader. The Loyola Community thus functioned as an economy of unequal exchange, where women were rendered available to the institution not as autonomous individuals but as instrumentalized assets.

The systemic de-skilling described in Theme 2 ("second-tier sisters") directly contributed to survivors' post-exit economic vulnerability. Many left the community after decades without recognized qualifications, professional networks, or financial security. Interviewee 2 reflects on this enduring constraint after twenty-five years of service:

> "I remain here right now basically because I have this unique work contract, unique source of economic support, and so I am bound [. . .] I have to wait for retirement age to eventually rethink what to do in the future." (I2)

This vulnerability was further intensified by legal marginalization: because survivors were denied standing as injured parties within canonical procedures, they were also excluded from avenues of compensation, restitution, or institutional support that might have mitigated their material losses. By subordinating women's professional and economic agency to institutional and clerical authority, the community not only enforced obedience during membership but also extended dependency into survivors' post-community lives, reinforcing hierarchies of power and entrenching the long-term consequences of abuse. The absence of legal recognition as victims thus translated directly into material precarity, transforming juridical exclusion into a mechanism of economic control.

Although the community was suppressed in 2023, those who left earlier have largely been excluded from reintegration funds, prolonging their material vulnerability. Even decades later, survivors remain economically "bound" by the career paths dictated—or destroyed—by the community.

6.4.6. Public Testimony: Reclaiming Truth as Justice

For survivors of the Loyola Community, public testimony was neither an act of revenge nor spontaneous disclosure. Decades of institutional silence and epistemic erasure made testimony a strategic and moral necessity. Speaking out became the only pathway to restore agency, dignity, and truth—both for themselves and for others.

Survivors describe a long period of enforced silence, during which their experiences were reframed as private spiritual crises rather than institutional abuse. A decisive turning point occurred when they reconnected after years of separation. Interviewees 1 and 3 explain how finding one another validated their "private calvaries" and allowed them to recognize that their original spiritual intent had been genuine and untouched by the abuse.

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This collective recognition shattered the individualized guilt imposed by the community and restored a shared interpretive framework.

Breakthroughs were facilitated by rare ethical allies within and outside the Church. Survivors describe platforms such as media outlets and the Vatican that were accessed thanks to individuals who responded when the institution did not. Figures like a religious Dominican[16], who was among the few to reply to survivor letters, and Father Daniele Libanori, Society of Jesus[17], appointed by the Vatican as pontifical delegate to examine governance, formation, and communal life, were decisive. Interviewee 1 recalls:

> "I have a great affection for him, because he is a truly good person, he truly believes us [. . .]
>
> he calls me and says [. . .] let me know if I can help." (I1)

Public testimony functions as an epistemic counter-claim to institutional narratives, asserting the systemic nature of the abuse. Justice is reframed not as compensation or punishment but as *fare verità* (making truth)—ending cover-ups, making truth public, and restoring dignity. Interviewee 2 explains:

> "What would justice be for you? To make truth. Stop covering up. To make truth and restore dignity to people who lost it when they were manipulated." (I2)

Engaging the media was a deliberate and carefully managed choice. Survivors worked with journalist Federica Tourn (who published the first survivor interviews for the newspaper Domani) for her ethical approach, attentiveness, and humanity. Interviewees 1 and 3 describe this collaboration as crucial to ensure testimony restored dignity rather than reproducing objectification or sensationalism.

Legal advocacy was also essential. Some survivors sought support from attorney Laura Sgrò (Sgrò 2025) to overcome their institutional designation as "anonymous witnesses," which denied them recognition as victims. Legal protection provided a shield against Rupnik's extraordinary ecclesial, financial, and institutional power, enabling formal channels to acknowledge the allegations substantively and waive the statute of limitations.

While media exposure was indispensable, survivors remain critical of sensationalist coverage that emphasizes sexualized or morbid details. Interviewee 2 notes that such framing obscures systemic abuse and risks secondary victimization, in which survivors are misrepresented as "consenting adults" rather than as targets of a coercive system of spiritual and psychological manipulation.

Survivors explicitly challenge the Church's and public characterization of the case as "misconduct between consenting adults." Within the Sexual Economy of Clericalism—marked by absolute authority, spiritual dependency, and ontological hierarchy—free consent was structurally impossible. The community engineered conditions of vulnerability and epistemic domination that foreclosed genuine, voluntary consent. Relationships involved a priest who embodied existential, spiritual, and institutional authority, while sisters were bound by vows of obedience, creating an inherent power imbalance. At the same time, the institution controlled the very language available to women, reframing coercion and abuse as "spiritual duties" or "expressions of divine intimacy," undermining their ability to recognize or challenge harmful acts. Under these conditions, the notion that a sister "could have said no" was meaningless: questioning a priest was equated with questioning God, making resistance psychologically and spiritually impossible. In these terms, the Church's legal framing of the abuse as "consensual misconduct" misrepresents a system of systemic coercion in which consent was structurally unattainable.

Ultimately, public testimony is both a moral and curative act. It allows survivors to reclaim agency, reconnect with their emotions and moral judgment, and restore authorship over their own narratives. Testimony completes the arc begun with existential rupture,

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transforming decades of enforced silencing into an act of justice, epistemic restoration, and transgenerational intervention.

6.4.7. Aesthetic Capital, Centro Aletti, and Symbolic Violence

Public testimony also revealed a symbolic battleground centred on aesthetic capital. Rupnik's mosaics in Lourdes, the Vatican, and Fatima generated immense ecclesial prestige that functioned as a shield against accountability. Survivors argue that the Church's reluctance to remove or critically address these works reflects clericalist priorities that privilege institutional reputation and artistic legacy over human dignity.

Survivors emphasize that Rupnik's artistic reputation was not merely professional but a tool for establishing absolute superiority and divine-like status. Interviewee 2 describes the source of this aesthetic capital as Rupnik's self-sacralization, which the institution validated through high-profile commissions:

> "Rupnik was extremely arrogant and narcissistic. He repeatedly told me: 'I am the greatest artist and the greatest poet of this earth." (I2)

Interviewee 1 highlights how Rupnik leveraged social and political networks to consolidate protection:

> "He has always worked in a very targeted way to create connections with politically and economically relevant figures [. . .] that have allowed him to have institutional protection and safety for so long." (I1)

For survivors, the continued display of these mosaics constitutes secondary victimization. Celebrating Rupnik's art within sacred spaces operates as symbolic violence, mocking their trauma while reinforcing epistemic isolation. Centro Aletti, his art and theology institute, is described by survivors (I1, I3) as a "parallel kingdom" or "parallel Church," extending his influence and safeguarding followers who occupy Vatican cultural and communicative positions. Interviewee 1 (I1) captures the scale of this ambition:

> "He's building a whole world of his own that [. . .] should become the Catholic Church. [. . .] He had the plans for a grand church called the 'Church of the New Man' (*chiesa dell'uomo nuovo*). [. . .] The entire Christian world should encompass his vision of humanity, of theology, of spirituality."

The rare removal of a Rupnik triptych in the parish of Troyes is cited by survivors as a crucial precedent, demonstrating that when human dignity is prioritized, aesthetic capital loses its sacred immunity. Analytically, this removal functions as a powerful counter-dispositif to the perpetrator's long-standing strategy of self-sacralization through art. If the mosaics served as a symbolic shield to establish an unquestionable divine-like status, their dismantling constitutes a concrete act of epistemic justice. By removing these works from the public gaze, the Church effectively ceases the symbolic violence of 'canonizing' the abuser's vision of humanity, thereby restoring the narrative and sacred space to the survivors whose trauma was previously mocked by the art's continued display.

6.4.8. Analytic Synthesis: The Sequential Chain of Harm

Taken together, Theme 4 illustrates that the consequences of abuse within the Loyola Community extend far beyond individual trauma, forming a multi-level system of destruction. Existential rupture, epistemic injustice, institutional betrayal, material precarity, and symbolic violence constitute a continuous arc of harm that persists long after physical exit from the community. Importantly, this pattern is not unique to the Loyola case. Comparable analyses of abuse against women religious in other ecclesial contexts have reached strikingly similar conclusions, describing abuse as a cumulative and cascading process that

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restructures identity, belief, social belonging, and material survival over time (Reisinger 2019, 2022; Lembo 2022; Haslbeck 2025; Hürten 2025).

Research on women religious leaving abusive communities consistently documents long-term spiritual rupture, loss of vocational identity, economic destitution, and prolonged epistemic isolation as interlocking consequences of abuse embedded in clerical and institutional systems (Haslbeck 2025; Lembo 2022). Hürten's (2025) historical case study demonstrates how hermeneutical injustice and institutional silence function not merely as after-effects but as structural conditions that allow abuse to persist and remain unintelligible for decades—findings that closely mirror the Loyola testimonies. Similarly, Reisinger's analysis of adult clergy sexual abuse shows how spiritual authority collapses into coercion, producing a form of existential devastation that extends well beyond the abusive acts themselves (Reisinger 2019, 2022).

Within this broader comparative framework, the Loyola case empirically substantiates a sequential chain of harm repeatedly identified across diverse ecclesial settings: **clericalism → institutionally produced vulnerance → spiritual grooming → sexual and psychological exploitation → hermeneutical injustice → silencing and long-term trauma.** What distinguishes the present study is not the identification of these mechanisms as such—already well established in the literature—but their integrated reconstruction through survivor testimony as a temporally unfolding process that links structural conditions, relational control, and enduring consequences.

As survivors move from enforced silence to resistance, they draw on forms of epistemic solidarity—particularly those enabled by digital platforms—to reclaim narrative agency and reframe their experiences as abuse rather than moral failure. This trajectory has also been observed in other contexts, where public testimony functions as a form of epistemic resistance that disrupts institutional monopolies over meaning and restores language, truth, and dignity to those previously rendered unintelligible (Haslbeck 2025; Hürten 2025). In this sense, truth-telling emerges not merely as a therapeutic or juridical act, but as a necessary and often the only available form of justice in institutional environments where formal accountability mechanisms have repeatedly failed.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study position the abuse within the Loyola Community within a broader analytical and theoretical framework that has been developed to understand sexual, spiritual, and psychological violations against consecrated women religious. The patterns identified in the Loyola testimonies are consistent with mechanisms described in international research on clerical abuse and coercive religious settings, including clerical privilege, institutionally produced vulnerance, coercive forms of control, and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007; Haslbeck 2025; Hürten 2025; Lembo 2022; McPhillips and McEwan 2022; Oakley and Humphreys 2019). In line with pastoral–theological research, these dynamics can also be understood as forms of gender-based violence embedded in pastoral and ecclesial care practices when such practices are structured by asymmetrical power, sacralized authority, and gendered expectations of obedience and availability (Leimgruber 2024). This does not imply uniformity across all ecclesial contexts, but rather indicates that the Loyola case reflects structural conditions that have been widely documented in the study of adult clergy sexual abuse.

Comparable dynamics have been documented in other New Communities and charismatic contexts, particularly in analyses of communities led by Jean Vanier and by Thomas and Marie-Dominique Philippe in France, and by Manuel Fernando Pascual in Argentina (Duhau 2021, 2022; Beattie 2023; Suárez 2024). These studies identify recurring mechanisms such as the sacralization of charismatic authority, the theological reframing of transgressive

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acts, and the manipulation of conscience through appeals to mystical insight or divine mandate. Broader theological and sociological scholarship further conceptualizes such dynamics as forms of spiritual abuse marked by loss of self, distorted obedience, and institutional complicity (Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022; González Casas 2022; Lecaros and Suárez 2024). Latin American analyses of abuse within women's religious life likewise underscore how structural dependency, gendered expectations, and theological narratives of sacrifice and purity create environments in which coercion can be normalized and silenced (Browne and Contreras 2022; Bustamante Soto 2022; CLAR 2022). Read in light of this scholarship, the Loyola case reflects patterns that have been identified across diverse ecclesial settings while manifesting them through its own specific theological and artistic configurations.

Clericalism appears throughout the testimonies as a cultural–institutional matrix that sacralized Rupnik's authority and rendered resistance morally and spiritually unthinkable. Survivors consistently describe how pastoral guidance, sacramental mediation, and theological interpretation were concentrated in the figure of the priest, creating a configuration of power that aligns closely with Galtung's (1969) distinction between structural and cultural violence. Structural violence manifested through absolute hierarchy, absence of oversight, and women's complete economic dependency, while cultural violence emerged through theological narratives that framed obedience, purity, and sacrifice as divine imperatives. In line with Reisinger's (2019) concept of "spiritual rupture," survivors report that resisting Rupnik came to feel indistinguishable from resisting God. This theological internalization of subordination indicates that the abuse cannot be conceptualized merely as a priest violating institutional norms, but as a predictable consequence of a system that renders priestly authority ontologically superior and fundamentally unquestionable.

The Loyola testimonies also offer empirical weight to the theoretical shift from the notion of "vulnerable women" to the concept of *vulnerance*—a condition actively produced by the institution (Figueroa and Tombs 2023). The Loyola Community's recruitment phase was an engineered process of vulnerance, in which clerical authority, theological sophistication, and strategic social manipulation intersected to produce the conditions necessary for subsequent spiritual, psychological, and sexual exploitation. The women who entered the community were not fragile individuals; most were highly educated, vocationally motivated, and spiritually committed. Their vulnerability was constructed through institutional design: spiritual grooming disguised as discernment, the appropriation of Ignatian practices for emotional dependence, the erosion of external ties, and the isolating effect of a quasi-total institution (Figueroa and Tombs 2023; Goffman 1961). Bourdieu's (2001) theory of symbolic violence illuminates how these mechanisms persuaded women to internalize their subordination as spiritually desirable, effectively neutralizing the possibility of informed consent. The mechanisms of bait-and-switch, Ignatian perversion, and targeted relational control collectively transformed what appeared to outsiders as a legitimate vocational choice into a meticulously controlled entry point into a system of abuse. The Church's legal framing of these encounters as "relationships between consenting adults" is contradicted both theoretically and empirically; within such a totalizing spiritual economy, *consent is structurally unattainable* (Figueroa and Tombs 2023; McPhillips and McEwan 2022).

The community's internal stratification into "first-tier" and "second-category" sisters (*sorella di serie B*) exemplifies the Sexual Economies of Clericalism (SEC) in practice. Within this system, the refusal to participate in the leader's 'trinitarian' sexual visions was not merely a spiritual failure but a trigger for institutional demotion: women were stripped of intellectual, artistic, or missionary roles and reassigned to manual or domestic labour as devalued "ecclesial capital," administered under clerical authority for the benefit of the spiritually elevated.

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This internal economy was established and sustained through selective recruitment of high-capital subjects ("golden geese") whose intellectual, professional, and social resources were extracted to ensure institutional growth and external legitimacy. SEC thus operated not only through sexual exploitation but through the systematic management and redistribution of women's bodies, labour, and symbolic worth within a clerical hierarchy.

Alongside these structural conditions, the testimonies also reveal the psychological architecture of coercive control. Survivors describe a deliberate oscillation between idealization, withdrawal, and humiliation—patterns consistent with Stark's (2007) theory of coercive control and Dutton and Painter's (1993) model of trauma bonding. Rupnik's initial lovebombing, spiritual privileging, and personalized admiration produced intense emotional dependency, particularly among women seeking spiritual direction and vocational guidance. Once this dependency was secured, the dynamic reversed: praise evaporated, cold indifference appeared, and humiliation was reframed as purification or vocational testing. This psychological "thermostat," controlled entirely by the perpetrator, created a trauma bond in which survivors oriented their emotional equilibrium around the perpetrator's fluctuating approval. Resistance became both emotionally and spiritually unintelligible, confirming Oakley's (2018) insight that religious forms of coercive control manipulate not only behaviour but the interpretive vocabulary through which behaviour is understood.

Crucially, the Loyola Community operated as a *closed interpretive world* in which hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007; Hürten 2025) functioned not merely as a post-abuse barrier but as a mechanism of control. The vocabulary available to the women—"charism," "integration," "Trinitarian love," "obedience," "purity"—systematically displaced their experiential categories of discomfort, confusion, or harm. At the core of the community's control was the perversion of Ignatian spiritual direction. While the Ignatian ideal aims for "interior freedom," the leader co-opted the "discernment of spirits" to establish epistemic centralization. Within this controlled hermeneutical field, sexual and psychological violations were not experienced as violence but as spiritual duties, vocational trials, or expressions of divine intimacy. The interpretive void left women unable to name their experiences even internally, a condition consistent with global research showing that survivors often require decades before recognizing their experiences as abuse. This hermeneutical monopoly also explains the profound spiritual rupture observed in testimonies: when the image of God collapses into the image of the perpetrator, the harm is not only psychological but existential, leading to long-term loss of faith, spiritual homelessness, and identity fragmentation (Durà-Vilà et al. 2013; Reisinger 2019).

In the Loyola case, these epistemic mechanisms were further reinforced by institutional enablers and networks of complicity, through which silence, inaction, and the routinized deflection of responsibility functioned to protect the community and its leadership rather than those exposed to harm. As theorized in legal and organizational scholarship, such dynamics correspond to forms of institutional complicity (Guiora 2021) and moral myopia sustained within networks of loyalty and complacence that normalize ethical failure and render abuse structurally invisible (Cunningham et al. 2019).

These dynamics are visible in concrete institutional practices. The "archival void" referenced by survivors—files that disappeared, complaints never recorded, warnings unacknowledged—mirrors patterns of institutional betrayal documented globally (Behrman 2019; Cozzens 2004; Demasure 2022; Fernández 2022; Guiora 2021; Hahn 2022; Hürten 2025; Leimgruber 2024; Sgrò 2025). The silence of the hierarchy was sustained not only by clerical solidarity but also by the significant clerical, economic and aesthetic capital generated by the leader providing a 'sacred shield' that deterred institutional intervention. This was compounded by institutional erasure, evidenced by the alleged tampering with

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archiepiscopal archives, which facilitated a long-term hermeneutical injustice toward the victims. The community's superior, Ivanka Hosta, played a crucial role in reinforcing theological narratives, suppressing disclosure, and isolating victims from external support. Her actions exemplify what scholars term organizational silence (Morrison and Milliken 2000): the institutional production of ignorance that protects systems of authority at the expense of victims. By reframing violations as spiritual misunderstandings or temptations, the institution actively produced conditions in which abuse could continue unchallenged. Women were designated as "witnesses" rather than victims, a legal and narrative strategy that diluted institutional responsibility and mirrored global practices aimed at minimizing clerical wrongdoing (Behrman 2019).

The consequences of these intersecting harms were multidimensional and enduring. Survivors describe psychological and physical trauma, chronic anxiety, depression, and dissociative coping strategies—symptoms consistent with research on adult clergy sexual abuse (Pooler and Droesch 2025). Spiritual harm emerged as the most distinctive dimension: the collapse of meaning, the loss of God as a source of refuge, and the destruction of vocational identity. The abuse also carried material consequences. As scholarship on "financial injuries" shows (Simpson 2025), women religious who leave abusive communities frequently face extreme economic precarity due to lifelong vows of poverty, lack of savings, and absence of institutional support. This vulnerability was further intensified by legal marginalization: because survivors were denied standing as injured parties within canonical procedures, they were also excluded from avenues of compensation, restitution, or institutional support that might have mitigated their material losses. Material precarity among survivors was not incidental but a structural manifestation of the SEC. The threat of destitution becomes a powerful deterrent against disclosure, compelling women to remain within structures that harm them. Institutional betrayal extended beyond the Church into survivors' most intimate relationships, producing a form of "secondary betrayal" in which family bonds were severed by the weight of clericalism. The consequences of abuse within the Loyola Community thus extend beyond individual trauma, forming a multi-level system of destruction: existential rupture, epistemic injustice, institutional betrayal, secondary betrayal, material precarity, and symbolic violence.

Yet the findings also reveal a counter-dynamic: the emergence of epistemic resistance. The preservation of this 'original core' of faith functions as a profound form of spiritual resilience, enabling some survivors to enact epistemic justice by reclaiming their own spiritual intent and 'spark of God' from the perpetrator's theological distortions and the subsequent institutional betrayal. Through public testimony—enabled especially by the digital environments described in Section 2.1. (Digital Breakthrough)—survivors collectively disrupted the hermeneutical monopoly that had rendered their experiences unintelligible. Their voices challenged institutional narratives, reclaimed interpretive authority over their own experiences, and participated in the broader #NunsToo movement, which has redefined adult clergy sexual abuse as a structural rather than interpersonal phenomenon. In this sense, testimony functions not only as narrative healing but as political action: a reclaiming of moral agency from the very systems that sought to suppress it.

Overall, the Loyola case demonstrates that the abuse of consecrated women must be understood through an integrated theoretical model in which clericalism produces the structural preconditions for abuse; vulnerance creates institutional susceptibility; coercive control operationalizes domination; hermeneutical injustice blocks recognition; and institutional betrayal ensures impunity. The convergence of these mechanisms reveals that the violence inflicted upon these women was not accidental, but structurally predictable—embedded in the historical, theological, and organizational logics of the Catholic system. This insight underscores the need for reforms that address not only

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individual perpetrators but the systemic conditions—spiritual, institutional, epistemic, and material—that render such abuses possible and often inevitable.

The empirical findings also point to an analytical question that lies beyond the scope of this article but merits further sociological inquiry: namely, whether the early Kres group and its later institutionalization as the Loyola Community display structural features associated with high-control or coercively controlling religious formations. Several dynamics described by interviewees—such as selective recruitment, concentration of charismatic authority, progressive isolation from external ties, and control over meaning and conscience—resonate with patterns discussed in the literature on cultic and high-demand groups (Lalich 2004; Lifton 1989; Singer and Lalich 1995). Importantly, these dynamics unfolded within the institutional framework of the Roman Catholic Church, suggesting the need for future research that examines how sectarian practices may operate under clerical legitimacy and symbolic protection.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on a small, non-random sample of six testimonies drawn from a single religious community. While this enables in-depth, contextualized analysis, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to other Catholic communities or cases of clerical abuse. The reliance on retrospective self-narratives introduces potential memory, trauma, and reconstruction biases. The sample reflects selection bias, as it includes only women who have begun reclaiming narrative agency; those still embedded in legacy structures or remaining silent are unrepresented.

Second, no direct interviews with alleged perpetrators or institutional representatives were conducted; institutional perspectives were accessed only through publicly available statements and documents, which constrains insight into internal decision-making, while the documented archival void further limits verification. Ethical commitments to participant safety and anonymity also restricted contextual triangulation and the inclusion of certain organizational and temporal specifics.

Third, the study focuses primarily on survivor narratives and does not analyze broader impacts on other stakeholders, such as the family ruptures, wider Jesuit order, the Centro Aletti, or the Catholic faithful.

Finally, as with all qualitative research, the analysis is shaped by the researchers' theoretical positioning and reflexive engagement, particularly feminist and survivor-centred epistemologies. While this constitutes an interpretive strength, it also frames the analytical lens.

Future research could build on these findings through comparative studies across multiple religious communities, inclusion of institutional actors and other affected stakeholders, and mixed-method or longitudinal designs that further explore processes of exit, recovery, and the renegotiation of faith and identity after spiritual abuse.

8. Conclusions

This article has examined the sexual, spiritual, and psychological abuse of consecrated women through an in-depth qualitative case study of the Slovenian-based Loyola Community and the accusations against Marko Ivan Rupnik. Rather than treating this case as representative of the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, the analysis approaches it as a sociologically instructive case whose internal dynamics can be analytically placed in dialogue with patterns and mechanisms already documented in international research on adult clergy sexual abuse and the abuse of women religious. In this sense, the Loyola case functions not as a generalization, but as a case through which broader structural questions become empirically visible.

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When read alongside existing sociological and feminist scholarship, the Loyola testimonies reveal a configuration of power relations, spiritual authority, and institutional practices that closely parallels mechanisms identified in other documented contexts. These parallels point to a sequential chain of harm—clerical authority, institutionally produced vulnerance, spiritual grooming (including practices of affective intensification and love-bombing), sexual exploitation, hermeneutical injustice, and silencing—which has been observed in diverse ecclesial settings without implying that it characterizes all Catholic communities or religious life as such.

Central to this chain is the role of spiritual abuse as an enabling mechanism. The study shows how theological language, pastoral authority, and spiritual accompaniment may—under specific conditions—be instrumentalized in ways that undermine autonomy and blur moral boundaries. Importantly, the analysis does not suggest that spiritual guidance or religious formation are inherently abusive, but rather demonstrates how, in the Loyola case, established spiritual practices were reconfigured within a closed and asymmetrical power structure, producing effects consistent with those described in comparative research. Sexual violations, in this context, emerged not as isolated acts but as the culmination of prolonged spiritual and psychological manipulation—a dynamic that has been identified in other cases involving coercive religious environments.

Institutional responses and omissions also emerge as analytically significant, though they are examined here with caution and specificity. The patterns of delayed intervention, silencing, and what survivors describe as an "archival void" resonate with findings from historical and contemporary studies of ecclesial abuse management. These parallels do not imply uniform institutional intent or behaviour across the Roman Catholic Church, but they do underscore how certain organizational logics—such as the prioritization of reputation, hierarchical loyalty, and internal resolution—can, in specific contexts, contribute to prolonged harm. The Loyola case thus adds empirical depth to existing discussions on organizational silence and institutional betrayal without collapsing institutional diversity into a single narrative.

The consequences described by survivors further align with patterns documented in broader scholarship. Psychological trauma, spiritual rupture, embodied illness, professional marginalization, and economic precarity appear here not as exceptional outcomes, but as effects that have been repeatedly observed where consecrated women exit highly dependent religious environments without structural support. These findings reinforce the importance of understanding harm against women religious as multidimensional, extending beyond sexual violation to include existential, material, and epistemic dimensions.

At the same time, the study highlights the emergence of epistemic resistance through public testimony. Survivors' narratives—particularly when articulated collectively and supported by ethical allies—function as a corrective to interpretive frameworks that previously rendered their experiences unintelligible or morally reframed. This dynamic parallels developments associated with the #NunsToo movement and other survivor-led interventions, illustrating how testimony can restore agency and contribute to institutional learning without positioning itself as an attack on faith or religious life per se.

Taken together, the Loyola case illustrates how under certain structural and cultural conditions, sexual and spiritual abuse of adult women religious becomes possible, intelligible, and difficult to interrupt. The analysis does not claim that these conditions define the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, but rather that they recur across contexts where clerical authority, gendered hierarchy, spiritual absolutism, and institutional opacity converge. From a sociological perspective, the significance of this case lies precisely in its capacity to illuminate how such convergences operate in practice.

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By grounding the analysis in survivor testimonies and situating them within established theoretical frameworks, this study contributes to the growing body of research on the abuse of consecrated women without resorting to wholesale generalization. It underscores the need for further comparative research, clearer juridical recognition of spiritual abuse, and institutional mechanisms that safeguard autonomy, material security, and epistemic dignity. Addressing the phenomenon illuminated by this case therefore requires not condemnation of religious life as such, but careful, evidence-based examination of the specific structural conditions that allow abuse to emerge and persist.

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Data Availability Statement: The data collected will be de-identified, encrypted and stored in the researchers' file storage and available on demand.

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Notes

1 This article presents the first sociological analysis of the Loyola Community case focused on coercive dynamics and clerical abuse. Existing accounts consist primarily of investigative journalism, survivor testimony, and media reporting. Sgrò's (2025) volume represents the first sustained and in-depth engagement with the Loyola case, offering a crucial narrative, ethical, and interpretive foundation based on survivor testimonies. The present article builds on and complements Sgrò's insights by providing a systematic sociological and theoretical analysis of the structural, institutional, and coercive dynamics that shaped the Loyola Community. The only study on the Loyola case to date within the sociology of religion, Smrke (2024), examines the impact of the Rupnik scandal on Slovenian Catholics while explicitly declining to address the abuse itself, stating that "what happened between Rupnik and the Loyola nuns will probably never be entirely clear," and framing the allegations through a literary analogy to Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Smrke 2024, p. 43).

2 This article focuses exclusively on consecrated adult women (CWR), a category that encompasses both contemplative nuns and apostolic sisters whose lives are defined by a specific regime of institutional and symbolic dependence through religious vows. In scientific literature, this phenomenon is most commonly termed Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse (ACSA), emphasizing the abuse of pastoral power rather than the age of the victim (Pooler and Barros Lane 2022).

3 Defined as institutional production of vulnerability rather than individual deficiency (Figueroa and Tombs 2023; Hürten et al. 2025; Reisinger 2019), the concept of vulnerance is examined in greater detail in Section 2.3.3, where it is theoretically elaborated and analytically distinguished from individual notions of vulnerability.

4 The archival materials analyzed by Pizzoni include testimonies describing sexualised insinuations, vulgar language, intrusive questioning, and occasional physical harassment occurring within the sacramental context of confession, where nuns were

expected to place complete trust in their confessors. These sources indicate that such behaviours were already recognized and articulated by women themselves as violations within pastoral relationships (Pizzoni 2025).

5 Sociologically, legal adulthood within total religious institutions functions as an 'empty category' because functional autonomy is neutralized by a regime of institutional, economic, and symbolic dependency that precludes the possibility of genuine, free consent. Following contemporary feminist, critical and interdisciplinary scholarship (Behrman 2019; Figueroa and Tombs 2023), this study shifts the analytical focus from 'consent' to 'power,' arguing that in sacralized hierarchical relationships, the capacity of a religious woman to set boundaries is systematically eroded, rendering consent structurally unattainable.

6 It is important to note that *hermeneutical injustice* is one specific form of *epistemic injustice*. Epistemic injustice refers to a distinctively epistemic kind of wrong that occurs when someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower. While it may also include distributive unfairness in access to epistemic goods such as information or education, Miranda Fricker's influential account focuses on intrinsically epistemic forms of injustice arising from the interplay between social power, identity, and epistemic practices. Fricker distinguishes two central types: *testimonial injustice*, which occurs when prejudice leads a hearer to assign a deflated level of credibility to a speaker (thus wronging the person in their capacity as a giver of knowledge), and *hermeneutical injustice*, which arises when gaps in collective interpretive resources place someone at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of their own social experiences (thus wronging the person in their capacity as a subject of social understanding) (Fricker 2007). In this article, we focus primarily on hermeneutical injustice because our analysis concerns the structural production of interpretive gaps within institutional and theological frameworks. The central problem in the cases examined is not only that victims may be disbelieved (testimonial injustice), but that the available conceptual and discursive resources themselves are insufficient to adequately name, interpret, and render intelligible certain forms of harm. For this reason, hermeneutical injustice provides the more analytically precise framework for our argument.

7 Allegations against Marko Ivan Rupnik entered the international public sphere in late 2022 following investigative reporting by *Domani*. Subsequent reporting by international and Catholic media indicates that more than twenty women, primarily consecrated members of the Loyola Community, accused Rupnik of sexual, spiritual, and psychological abuse spanning several decades. While the Holy See has not issued a consolidated public accounting of victims, the Society of Jesus has implicitly confirmed the scale of the allegations through disciplinary measures, including an offer of reparations to approximately twenty women who report abuse by Rupnik and his dismissal from the Jesuit order in June 2023 (Associated Press 2025a, 2025b; Catholic News Agency 2025; National Catholic Reporter 2023).

8 Fr. Marko Rupnik, under an ongoing Vatican canonical investigation, has not responded publicly to the allegations and largely declined to engage with his Jesuit superiors during their investigation, leading to his expulsion from the Society of Jesus, though he remains incardinated in the Diocese of Koper, Slovenia. Centro Aletti, the institute he founded, stated that Rupnik "has always firmly denied, in the appropriate forums, having ever committed the abuses described by those accusing him" and would refrain from further public comment while the investigation continues, emphasizing the presumption of innocence and cautioning against what it characterized as "cancel culture" and the "criminalisation" of art (Catholic News Agency 2023b, 2024; Vatican News 2023a; EWTN Vatican 2023).

9 Marko Ivan Rupnik (b. 1954) emerged in the late 1970s as a charismatic catechist and lecturer in Slovenian Catholic circles. After completing art studies in Rome in 1981, he became a widely recognized religious artist, developing a distinctive Byzantine-inspired style informed by theologian Tomaš Špidlik and philosopher Vladimir Solovyov. Rupnik's work visually embodied theological themes aligned with Pope John Paul II's eastern-oriented ecclesiology, reinforcing his authority in Catholic circles. He cultivated close ties with Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. In 1991, he founded and directed Centro Aletti, an institute for theological art and spirituality in Rome, and led major sacred art projects at international pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes and Fatima. He also contributed as a Vatican collaborator, designer for major Church events, and advisor at the Gregorian University and Pontifical Commission for Culture (Smrke 2024).

10 In a January 2023 statement, the Slovenian Jesuits acknowledged that they had "not known how to listen to the victims and take appropriate action," regarding abuse by *Fr. Marko Rupnik* that took place decades earlier (Catholic News Agency 2023a).

11 From a canonical perspective, a priest may not personally own a commercial business without explicit permission from the competent Church authority. In April 2023, Rupnik's Jesuit superior, Johan Verschueren, stated that no such permission had been granted and expressed surprise that Rupnik owned 90 % of Rossoroblu, with no oversight by the Jesuit order. Canon 286 prohibits clerics from engaging in business for personal advantage without authorization, and Canon 668 similarly requires religious to cede administration of goods to their institute (Sánchez 2023).

12 According to statements by Bishop Andrej Saje and Archbishop Stanislav Zore, "in the archive of the archdiocese there is nothing" documenting any complaints against Rupnik during Archbishop Alojzij Šuštar's tenure; Saje, who served as Šuštar's secretary in the 1990s, also noted that Šuštar never gave any indication that he was aware of abuse allegations at the time (Družina 2023; Siol.net 2022).

13 Father Marko Rupnik was expelled from the Society of Jesus in June 2023 for repeated disobedience. He was later accepted for diocesan ministry in Koper, Slovenia, sparking public scrutiny. On 20 October 2023, the Vatican suppressed the Loyola

Community, citing serious problems in the exercise of authority and communal life. On 27 October 2023, Pope Francis waived the statute of limitations, enabling a Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith investigation into spiritual abuse and false mysticism. As of 2025, the Dicastery is reportedly preparing a canonical tribunal to adjudicate the case (Catholic News Agency 2023a, 2023b; Vatican News 2023a, 2023b, 2024).

[14] The two interview transcripts provided by journalist Federica Tourn were shared with the authors in anonymized form. Prior to their use in this study, the interviewees had granted the journalist explicit permission for their testimonies to be publicly disseminated under pseudonyms and in anonymized form. In line with this agreement, the transcripts were shared with the authors without identifying information; the identities of the interviewees remain known only to the journalist.

[15] While this reflects survivors' perception of institutional protection, it is nonetheless sociologically significant regardless of whether the specific figure is audited, as it demonstrates their conviction that their voices were effectively 'bought out'. Journalistic investigations indicate that Rupnik was the principal owner of a commercial art company, Rossoroblu, through which he produced mosaics, frescoes, and other works associated with Centro Aletti (Tourn and Zidar 2023). The company generated significant revenue while being legally registered in his name—a situation described by his Jesuit superior as controversial, given that clerics are normally prohibited from owning businesses for personal gain without explicit permission, which has not been publicly documented (Sánchez 2023). There is no *evidence,* however, that Rupnik did in fact 'buy out' any individuals.

[16] A Dominican religious was commissioned by the Jesuits in 2019–2020 to conduct a preliminary investigation into allegations against Marko Rupnik. Acting outside the Jesuit order, he interviewed witnesses and gathered testimony, which was forwarded to the Vatican dicastery handling canonical matters. His investigation prompted precautionary measures against Rupnik, though the case was initially closed due to the statute of limitations. He is publicly identified only as "a Dominican religious," with no further biographical details (Catholic News Agency 2023c).

[17] In his role as Vatican delegate for the Loyola Community, Father Daniele Libanori became an important intermediary in the Marko Rupnik case between 2019 and 2021. Sent by the Vatican to investigate the community in 2019 amid concerns about its governance and leadership, Libanori received testimonies from sisters describing alleged spiritual and sexual abuse by Rupnik, after years of institutional inaction. He encouraged the women to put their accounts in writing and formally transmitted the allegations to the competent Vatican authorities, moving the case out of an internal deadlock and into the institutional and public sphere. These submissions formed part of the material considered in a preliminary investigation that was transmitted to the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2021. The canonical case was initially closed on statute-of-limitations grounds before later being reconsidered (Vatican News 2022a, 2022b; Catholic News Agency 2022, 2023d). Survivors state their belief that Libanori paid a great personal and professional price for supporting them (authors' interviews in 2025).

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