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Mapping the Territory of the Devil: Roman Catholicism, the Satanism Scare, and the Origins of Contemporary Demonology

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Abstract: In 1980 a book appeared which caused a considerable stir across the globe: *Michelle Remembers* by Lawrence Pazder and Michelle Smith. This book helped set in train what was later referred to by scholars as the “Satanic Panic” or the “Satanism Scare”. While the book became infamous, little analysis by scholars has been given to the authors’ Roman Catholicism, or more importantly to the wider way in which Catholicism contributed to this moral panic. While the influence of Christians more generally has been noted, sparse attention has been given to the ways in which a variety of distinctly Catholic vernacular beliefs and subcultures fed and spread this panic. This article seeks to map some of the contours of the specifically Catholic contribution to the wider Satanic Panic mythology, contextualising this against the backdrop of a wider ecclesial shift in a conservative direction during this period and the Church’s longer history of demonology. The paper concludes by suggesting that this Satanic Panic mythology persists and forms one important reservoir of ideas drawn on in contemporary demonology.

Keywords: Satanic Panic; Satanism Scare; Roman Catholicism; contemporary exorcism; possession; Satanism; demonology; moral panic



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1. Introduction

With the recent emergence of the Pizzagate and later the QAnon conspiracy theories, and a wave of 1980s and 1990s nostalgia exhibited in forums like the popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* or the ostensible docudrama *Sons of Sam*, journalists and podcasters have once again become interested in the wider cultural matrix which helped to drive what has become known as the “Satanic Panic” (Victor 1993) or “Satanism Scare” (Bromley 1991; Richardson et al. 1991) of the 1980s and 1990s (see e.g., Beres et al. 2022; Rundle 2020; Sword 2020), a widespread cultural phenomenon surrounding (largely unfounded) fears about the imminent social threat posed by Satanism. This “Satanic Panic” was composed of a combination of “beliefs and practices of satanic churches, urban legends, rumor panics, animal mutilation cases, satanic themes in heavy metal rock music, homicide cases, and accusations of ritual abuse of children by Satanists” often driven by a conspiracy theory logic which saw these components as inter-related and evidence of “an international, secret, hierarchically structured and tightly organized cult network that is actively engaged in a variety of nefarious activities” (Bromley and Ainsley 1995, p. 405). It suffices to say that the overwhelming scholarly consensus has been that no such cult network exists and that, in most cases, the proposed “links” between these various components and some organized forms of Satanism were tenuous at best, though aspects of the wider mythology (or cultural demonology) which emerged during this period persist in various quarters (Dyrendal et al. 2016).¹

One major aspect of this cultural matrix, which has historically received a considerable amount of attention, and not a little moralistic ridicule, has been the contribution of the Christian churches as both conduits and contexts for the spread of these ideas (see e.g., Carlson and Larue 1989; Ellis 2000; Hicks 1991; Jenkins and Maier-Katkin 1992; Victor 1994). Numerous books emerged over the course of the 1980s and 1990s penned by Christian

authors who saw Satanism as a ubiquitous threat and, along with other factors, played a considerable role in feeding and disseminating the ongoing controversy (see e.g., [Anderson and Russo 1990](#); [Cooper 1990](#); [Johnston 1989](#); [Larson 1989](#); [Passantino and Passantino 1991](#); [Pulling and Cawthon 1990](#); [Raschke 1990](#)). As evangelical apologists Gretchen and Bob Passantino ([Passantino and Passantino 1992](#), p. 301) observed, “gullible Christian audiences were ready to believe full-blown SRA [Satanic Ritual Abuse] stories, not only for reasons common to the general population but also for reasons peculiar to the Christian Church”. Religion scholar and United Methodist Minister J. Gordon [Melton](#) (1986, p. 76) was more emphatic, noting the following: “the Satanic tradition has been carried almost totally by the imaginative literature of non-Satanists, primarily conservative Christians, who describe the practices in vivid detail in the process of denouncing them”. Sceptical law enforcement professionals were more pointed, with [Robert Hicks](#) (1990, p. 279) writing as follows:

Fundamentalist Christianity drives the occult-crime model. Cult-crime officers invariably communicate fundamentalist Christian concepts at seminars. They employ fundamentalist rhetoric, distribute literature that emanates from fundamentalist authorities and sometimes offer bibliographies giving many fundamentalist publications, and they sometimes team up with clergy to give seminars on satanism.

While this role played by evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal churches has received significant attention, and not a small amount of soul-searching by Christian participants like the Passantinos and others (see e.g., [Hertenstein and Trott 1993](#); [Peters 1991](#)), one rather large Christian contributor has been surprisingly under analysed both historically and in terms of the current resurgence of interest in the Satanic Panic: Roman Catholicism. Jeffrey Victor’s eponymous study, *Satanic Panic* ([Victor 1993](#), p. 232), nicely captured this scholarly lacuna when he suggested that “as far as I can determine from my research, the Catholic subcommunity has been much less caught up in the Satanic cult scare”.

Victor’s tentative remark here, which he qualified in subsequent comments, related to his sampling. Put simply, Victor, for completely understandable reasons, just was not looking in the right places. Later scholars (e.g., [Cuneo 2001](#); [Ellis 2000](#); [Introvigne 2016](#); [Laycock and Harrelson 2024](#)) have offered more informed appraisals, highlighting some of the ways in which Catholics slotted into wider narratives of how the panic emerged, but there has been little attempt to map the various byways which mark the Catholic contribution to the wider Satanic Panic. This is intriguing, and surprising, not least because, as one perceptive and well-informed Canadian journalist, David [Lafferty](#) (2020), opined (with some justification), “the Satanic Panic had Catholic origins, even if it was more often associated with the protestant “Christian right”, moreover, Lafferty continued, “its lingering influence can be felt in the Church today”. It may indeed make better sense if we begin to speak about a series of Satanism Scares or Satanic Panics which have waxed and waned between the 1960s and the present—as well as note that concern over Satanism appears to be somewhat endemic to Catholicism.

This article is a modest contribution to mapping some of this seldom explored and largely uncharted territory and seeks to partially address a series of interrelated questions: How did the “Satanic Panic” play itself out within the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in the United States? Where did Catholic claims-makers in the “Satanic Panic” get their ideas? Why were some Catholics so ready to believe ideas about “Satanic Panic”? and what do “Satanic Panic” ideas indicate about the underlying anxieties and fears experienced by contemporary Catholics, in particular those most receptive to these ideas?

2. Why Catholicism?

Before moving on to address any of these questions, however, it is important to answer a first basic question, why look at Catholicism here at all? Here I offer four preliminary observations which I believe are important for orienting any subsequent discussion.

First, historically, Catholicism has had a long and unbroken history of interest in diabolical phenomena (see e.g., [Bonino \[2007\] 2016](#)). From medieval witchcraft to modern spiritualism, the Church has made the preternatural its business and Satanism, broadly conceived, has been a significant facet of this (see e.g., [Introvigne 2016](#); [van Luijk 2016](#)). Indeed, it is possible to trace much of the mythology of the Satanic Panic directly back through the history of the Church in a coherent trajectory of what the celebrated historian Norman Cohn dubbed the “myth of Satan and his human servants” ([Cohn 1970](#); [Victor 1993](#)). This infernal interest has manifested itself not just in the official teachings of the church, but also in aspects of vernacular religion, ranging from popular culture influenced by Catholicism, including films, and in subcultural conspiracy theories, through to the contemporary fascination with the paranormal (see e.g., [Chavez 2021](#); [Doherty 2020a, 2022](#); [Laycock and Harrelson 2024](#)).

Second, theologically, Catholicism has maintained an unbroken tradition of affirming the existence of both the spirit world and of fallen angels. From a theological perspective these are part of God’s creation and thus an appropriate topic for inquiry. Indeed, while it is often blamed by conservatives for the current woes of the Catholic Church, the documents of the Second Vatican Council feature more references to the devil than any other conciliar document in church history (see, e.g., [Balducci 1990](#), pp. 42–6). While some doubts emerged among theologians over the course of the twentieth century (see e.g., [Burton Russell 1988](#); [Doherty, forthcoming](#); [Kelly 2006](#)), the consistent position of the Church’s magisterium has been to reaffirm these beliefs in the face of scepticism (see, e.g., [Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993](#), section 391):

Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy. Scripture and the Church’s Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called “Satan” or the “devil”. The Church teaches that Satan was at first a good angel, made by God: “The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing”.

Third, demographically, Catholics have remained, overall, one of the most likely Christian groups to hold traditional beliefs about personal evil, that is, a significant portion of Catholics still believe in the existence of the devil, and when data are further interrogated, they are more likely than most other Christian groups to believe in a personal devil ([Baker 2008](#)). Even when radical theologians challenged this during the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Catholics were generally unreceptive (see e.g., [Nunn 1974](#)). By way of example, in a readers’ poll taken in 1973 in response to a sceptical article questioning the existence of the devil published in *U.S. Catholic* magazine, 28 percent of respondents still held that the devil was a personal being, compared with only 8 percent who considered such beliefs “a useless superstition” ([Riga 1973](#), p. 14). In 1986, in response to the wider “Satanic Panic” a reader poll in the same magazine similarly found that 77% of readers held that the devil exists, with 42% holding he was a personal being ([Maafa 1986](#), p. 16). While both these statistics are crude measures, more scientific polling during both periods had similar findings and this has been consistently the case in most major polls taken since (see e.g., [Giordan and Possamai 2016, 2018a, 2018b](#)). Moreover, these two historical straw polls are particularly significant because they have been taken from a source which, in terms of American Catholicism, would be considered on the progressive side of the theological spectrum.

Fourth, of importance when treating the Catholic contribution to the Satanic Panic is, as suggested in the abstract for this article, the distinctly Catholic cultural mooring of *Michelle Remembers* ([Smith and Pazder 1980](#)), the book which is often seen as the proximate origin of the concept of so-called “Satanic Ritual Abuse” and the launch pad for the wider Satanism Scare (though this is contestable on both counts). Without becoming bogged down in this thoroughly unpleasant piece of writing, it is worth observing that little has been made of the opening prologue of this book which contextualises Michelle’s narrative distinctly within a wider interest in the diabolical which swept Roman Catholicism from

the mid-1960s through to the present and which has resulted, among other things, in the full-scale revival of the largely moribund rite of exorcism (see, however, Ellis 2000; Laycock and Harrelson 2024). In this prologue, set in February 1978, Michelle, accompanied by her doctor, and later husband, Lawrence Pazder, her parish priest and her Diocesan bishop, visits the heart of the Vatican for an audience with Cardinal Pignedoli, then Pro-President of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions, in which they inform the senior Cardinal about Michelle's purported recovered memories. The Cardinal, upon hearing Michelle's story, exclaims "this is serious. This is a matter that will require our most careful attention" (Smith and Pazder 1980, p. xiv)—whether this recollection is an accurate account of a genuine meeting or not, the Cardinal's words were certainly to prove the case. As more than one analysis of the book has demonstrated, Smith's narrative is thoroughly enveloped in the sulphurous smoke of the Satanic seventies, when, in various quarters, Catholicism was undergoing a renewed interest in the diabolical which spread all the way to the highest echelons of the church (see below). Moreover, the recent documentary *Satan Wants You* (Adams and Horlor 2023) has suggested, not implausibly, that the Church was involved in the financing of the publication of *Michelle Remembers*, seeing its evangelistic potential (Sword 2023). Given this atmosphere, Catholicism—as much or perhaps even more than other Christian denominations—was well-and-truly primed to accept Michelle's "revelations" and the wider ideas of the Satanic Panic.

One final important caveat to bear in mind in any discussion of the Satanism Scare is a frequent confusion made between the existence and the extent of Satanism as a social reality. This is what I would call the "What about the real Satanists?" question. While, throughout history, including during the period under review, isolated cases can be cited where some form of self-styled Satanism was a factor in the perpetration of violent or petty crimes, the salient point here is that the reaction to these kinds of cases during the Satanic Panic was demonstrably out of all proportion and the addition of imaginary organizational layers to the problem, by positing a wider Satanic cult conspiracy, heightened public concern while simultaneously ignoring what was widely known about actual self-identifying (and for the most part, law-abiding) Satanic churches. By confusing existence and extent, concerned observers attributed to various (often very minor) acts of deviance and types of ostension much wider significance than they warranted. Put in more anecdotal terms, a teenager spray-painting an inverted pentagram or cross or kicking over a headstone in a cemetery is a far cry from a homicidal serial killer who believes they are conducting murder on behalf of Satan, and neither of these are necessarily (nor even probably) evidence for a vast global and primeval conspiracy of multigenerational Satanists. In studying the component parts of the Satanism Scare, then, I suggest it is important for Catholics to be careful to apply the important (but unattributable) Dominican axiom for discernment and debate: "never deny, seldom affirm, always distinguish".

3. The Satanism Scare in Roman Catholicism

The remainder of this article utilizes a series of theoretical insights drawn primarily from Victor's book *Satanic Panic* (Victor 1993) and his later study of fundamentalist Christian moral crusading (1994) to map some of the factors which influenced how the Satanic Panic spread, and became increasingly organized, within a broad Catholic sociological milieu. This analysis draws on a series of representative qualitative examples drawn from a wider survey of a variety of disparate sources drawn from across Catholic periodicals, books, popular culture, and other cultural artifacts. In his study, Victor (1993, p. 8) discussed at length some of the social processes by which Satanic rumours spread and become increasingly organized within certain social subgroups:

First, isolated local rumor stories need to find a channel to reach a broad, mass audience. These stories need to become "marketable" for the mass media. Second, it is necessary for some kind of "carrier" groups to take up the rumor stories as a cause and disseminate them over many years, even persisting in the face of strong skepticism. In order to disseminate the rumours widely these carrier

groups need to employ pre-existing grass-roots communication networks. Finally, it is necessary for some kinds of authority figures to legitimize the rumor stories by publicly endorsing them as being true, or at least plausible.

Writing a year later, Victor (1994) added to these four factors two additions: a receptive ideology and organizational resources. From Victor's work, then, it is possible to identify six overlapping factors which can be variously grouped to analyse the kinds of social processes which drove the Satanism scare: channels and claims-makers, carrier groups, communication networks and organizational resources, authoritative endorsements and a receptive ideology. Examining each of these factors allows us to identify the specific Catholic contribution here and to show how various aspects of the panic came together within a Catholic milieu.

3.1. Channels and Claims Makers

As the first factor, Victor identifies channels by which rumours or stories about Satanism reached a wider audience. To this might be added the role of claims-makers, who became the chief sources and promoters of these rumours. Within Catholic circles the kind of local rumour stories about Satanism which marked the Satanic Panic circulated early and widely, alongside the occult revival of the late 1960s and early 1970s, with many authors drawing on more traditional Catholic ideas which had a much older pedigree and were widely discussed during this period (see e.g., Doherty 2020b; Miceli [1981] 2021; Truzzi 1972; Woods 1971, 1973; Sheed 1972). This became clear in a perfunctory survey conducted by the author of Catholic periodicals for the years 1965 through to 2000, utilizing keywords like "devil" and "devil-worship", in *The Catholic Periodical and Literature Index* published yearly by the Catholic Library Association. What this very crude qualitative survey of this content shows is that, by the early 1970s, the rumours about a rise in "Satanic Cults" that were appearing in local newspapers across the United States often had either their origins, or parallels, in a Catholic milieu, even *before* the book and film of *The Exorcist* brought this topic more firmly into the public eye. While there are several other examples, one particularly notable claims-maker here is worth looking at in depth as he brings together in his career several of the important channels by which these rumours were disseminated.

Father John J. Nicola (1929–2022) was a diocesan Catholic priest first in the Archdiocese of Chicago and later at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. Father Nicola, however, also had something of a sideline in paranormal investigation (or as he preferred to term it, "Demonology") and, during the period between the 1950s and 1980s, Nicola was "principal investigator" (Cuneo 2001, p. 21) for the American Catholic bishops of suspected cases of demonic possession and other things that go bump in the night. Nicola received a doctorate from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome on the topic "Is solemn public exorcism a viable rite in the modern Western world?" (1976) and authored one of the few (at the time!) English language books on the topic of demonic possession, *Diabolical Possession and Exorcism* (Nicola 1974), publishing with the traditionalist TAN Books. In this book, Nicola outlined at length his approach to cases of suspected preternatural phenomena—a cautious approach drawing on a traditional Aristotelian "principle of economy"² and contemporary approaches drawn from parapsychology. While Nicola was—at least when compared with more recent exemplars (e.g., Amorth [1994] 1999)—relatively discreet about this aspect of his priestly ministry, he was still often contacted by the media and his commentary, even if quite sober by later standards, lent itself to good news copy (see e.g., Wolf 1973).

By way of example, in November 1972 reports appeared in both the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* highlighting what Nicola suggested were links between Pope Paul VI's notorious Advent homily, in which he preached on the importance of standing firm against the devil (see below), and a perceived upsurge in Satanism.³ These comments echoed earlier comments Nicola (1971, p. 36) had made in a review of William Peter Blatty's best-selling novel *The Exorcist*, where he suggested that:

For the third time in the Christian era, the Devil seems to have decided to show his face. We are now experiencing a violent outbreak of Satanism reminiscent of New Testament times and the early patristic age, when exorcism was frequently used by Christ Himself and by those authorized to preach His gospel. It happened again in the Middle Ages—a revival of Satanic activity on a broad scale, this time in the form of witchcraft. Today the diabolical is visibly active again: Satanists and demonologists, Black Masses and seances, witches and warlocks are everywhere.

Nicola's comments were taken up in a variety of places, but especially in traditionalist circles, not least in the flagship American traditionalist journal *Triumph*, which ran one of the first substantive Catholic pieces on Satanism in its next issue. This piece was to be a sign of things to come, with the purported upsurge in Satanism firmly linked to the various bugbears of contemporary Catholic conservatism, ranging from "the contemporary campaign to destroy the family and attack the very person of man through unbridled promiscuity and sexual deviation", through to "the wanton destruction of life in the womb, genetical manipulation, euthanasia, and, generally, by means of the legal disestablishment of family life and the promotion of over-population mania" (Miller 1972, p. 13).

Aside from his own writings and interviews, Nicola also brought other influential books to a wider Catholic audience with positive reviews of some of the key source texts of the Satanic Panic. In May 1976, for example, he reviewed Malachi Martin's *Hostage to the Devil* for the conservative *National Review*. Surprisingly, given his delicate scruples about sexual aspects of the film *The Exorcist*, Nicola thoroughly approved of Martin's borderline pornographic work as an admonitory sermon against what he believed were the modern errors of exaggerated subjectivism, naturalism, psychological personalism, and what he euphemistically referred to as "the fashionable probings of human sexuality to its darkest depths" (Nicola 1976, p. 567). While, for reasons of probity (and prudery), Nicola had some doubts about aspects of Martin's claims, the positive aspects of his review lent credibility to Martin's work that it did not merit.

A few years later, Nicola was one of the first Catholic reviewers of *Michelle Remembers*, writing in the *Washington Post* in October 1980. While by no means affirming the truth of much of the narrative, Nicola did note that, "one thing I can bear witness to is that the atrocities associated with perhaps the most infamous modern practitioner of Satanism. . . are not anomalies in the modern world". Nicola invokes his own experience here, further writing that "because of my work in the field of demonology I have been called on by vice squads and other law-enforcement agencies to help explain certain unusual circumstances involving apparent ritual desecrations". Nicola declared that "meetings of witches covens, human and animal sacrifices, and sexual orgies, as well as black masses and other Satanic rituals, are known to occur in our modern western world". It was on the basis of these claims that Nicola cautiously concluded his review by stating that "it is not impossible that Michelle was a victim of atrocities 22 years ago". (Nicola 1980)

I have spent some time on Nicola here, but my reason for this is not only because it is representative, but rather because his influence, if indirect, on the Satanic Panic was significant through another role he played. Father John J. Nicola was hired as a technical advisor for *The Exorcist*. This solidified Nicola's ongoing reputation as a "demonologist" and meant that he was frequently sought out in subsequent decades—making him a key example of what Laycock and Harrelson have called "the Exorcist effect" (2024). Indeed, it is difficult underestimate the cultural impact of *The Exorcist* had both in Catholicism and in wider society in setting the tone for the subsequent Satanic Panic (see e.g., Cuneo 1998; Doherty 2023). Moreover, Nicola was by no means the only Catholic priest who acted as a channel and claims-maker in this regard. A series of other priests took up the mantle, including several involved with the anti-cult movement, like Father James LeBar, Father Lawrence Gesy, and Father Joseph Brennan, all of whom actively promoted aspects of the Satanism Scare in both the Catholic and mainstream media and considered combatting Satanism (and other "cults") an important part of their pastoral ministry (see e.g., Brennan 1989, 1992; Gesy 1993; Knoblauch 1991a, 1991b; LeBar 1989). Even the Catholic

media darling, and current Bishop of Winona-Rochester, Robert Barron, briefly acted as a fresh-faced spokesperson for one exorcist on *60 Minutes* in 2002 (Martin and Glauber 2002). In this regard, what Victor (1994) observed with regard to the role fundamentalist moral crusaders played in the Satanism Scare equally applies to Catholicism.

3.2. Carrier Groups

In terms of carrier groups, Catholicism provided three primary constituencies which assisted in the dissemination and retention of the key ideas behind the Satanism Scare, some of which overlapped to a degree with Protestant groups which similarly acted as carriers: traditionalists, charismatics, and Marian devotional networks.

From the outset, Catholic traditionalist groups—that is, those groups who held predominantly negative attitudes toward the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)—often held, to quote Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1979, p. 101), that the council was “Satan’s masterstroke” and the result of a deep conspiracy stretching back to the Protestant reformation. As such, traditionalists have taken a strong interest in theories of diabolical causation and conspiracy theories of a distinctly Satanic hue (see esp. Doherty 2022), with Bill Ellis (2000, p. 109) noting the importance of “a small but intense body of literature” which linked “these changes to satanic elements that had penetrated the Vatican”. As already mentioned, *Triumph* magazine was one of the first to take up the key themes of the Satanism Scare in the early 1970s, and it was in dissident traditionalist networks that Malachi Martin’s writings—with their combination of Satanism, Vatican intrigue, and conspiracy theory—attracted their most vocal supporters (see e.g., Kennedy 2004; Stalker 2016). In the updated preface to his seminal 1976 text *Hostage to the Devil*, entitled “Possession and Exorcism in American in the 1990s”, M. Martin ([1976] 1992, p. xi) had no qualms claiming that “in point of fact, there are few families not already affected in some way by Satanism”, and further asserting that:

We know, for example, that throughout all fifty states of the Union, there are now something over 8000 Satanist covens. We know that in any major American city or large town, a Black Mass—almost always organized by covens—is available on a weekly basis at least, and at several locations. We know that the average membership of Satanist covens is drawn from all the professions as well as from among politicians, clergy, and religious.

(Martin [1976] 1992, p. xii).

Moreover, Martin’s popular novel *Windswept House* (Martin 1996)—which brought together many of the key themes of the Satanic Panic—remains the subject of considerable commentary and speculation in traditionalist circles into the present.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR)—which emerged from a wider Pentecostal revival amongst Protestant groups in the late 1960s—borrowed heavily from Pentecostal ideas about deliverance ministry and from their similarly outré ideas about demonology (see Csordas 2017; MacNutt 1995; and Suenens 1983). Charismatic periodicals like *New Covenant* became a major source of material on demonology from the 1970s (see e.g., Martin 1974; Desmarais 1991) and, as a result of the spread of deliverance ministry, sectors within the renewal remained active carrier groups for various ideas related to the Satanic Panic (see esp. MacNutt 1995). The degree of this interest is perhaps best indicated by the book, *Renewal and the Powers of Darkness* (Suenens 1983), in which Belgian Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens (1983, p. 62), the major patron of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Church hierarchy, cautioned against what he called an “immoderate demonism” which emerged by “osmosis” between Pentecostal ideas and those of Catholic charismatics and of “the contagious effect of the exuberant, overconfident literature which invaded us”. He further noted that “the excesses we are witnessing today in the sphere of demonology initially stem from that situation” but he also conceded “some Catholic popularizers have helped to aggravate it”. Suenens was clear who he has in mind here—referring specifically to Francis MacNutt and pointing out that the renewal—“can only gain in credibility if it takes the first step and denounces such a demonology” (p. 67). Over a decade later, however,

MacNutt had clearly not heeded this advice, and his book, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits: A Practical Manual* (MacNutt 1995), still contained full chapters on the threat of the occult and on Satanic Ritual Abuse which drew heavily from Protestant spiritual warfare literature (see Ellis 2000). Major Charismatic publishers, like Servant Publications in Ann Arbor, Michigan, similarly continued to publish books which fed the Satanism Scare, notably (then) Father Jeffrey J. Steffons' *Satanism: Is It Real?* (Steffon 1992, p. 20), which described its purpose as follows:

My hope is that priests, ministers, counsellors, and parents will find this book helpful as a resource in understanding and then combating satanism and the occult. Priests and ministers could use this book as an aid in educating their congregations about the dangers and deceptions of the face of satanism today. It might prove useful in counselling situations and in helping pastoral staff discern whether young people in the parish are being lured into satanism and the occult.

Steffons' book, however, also highlights the pastoral dimension which was often involved here, much of which was targeted toward wayward teenagers and offered sincere, if misguided, advice and guidelines to members of the Catholic flock to assist in dealing with the supposed threat (see e.g., Baldwin 1990; Knoblach 1991a, 1991b; Mulloy 1989), much in the same way as some psychological literature (e.g., Moriarty 1992; Gallagher 2022). Indeed, it would be uncharitable not to acknowledge that, while traditionalist literature from the Satanism Scare was predominantly of a conspiracist bent, charismatic literature was (generally) more pastoral in tone and only secondarily did it disseminate some of the more questionable aspects of the Satanic Panic mythology. Regardless, the impact was much the same in spreading the Satanism Scare. The third carrier group, that of Marian devotional networks, is most interesting in terms of the spread of these ideas and brings me to the next aspect of Victor's model: communication networks and organizational resources.

3.3. Communication Networks and Organizational Resources

The Catholic subculture referred to by anthropologist Peter Jan Margry (2004, p. 98) as the "global network in divergent Marian devotion" has proven a vast repository of Catholic lore and vernacular piety related to preternatural phenomena. Initially spread over the 1960s through to the 1980s through a loose-knit subculture of photocopied flyers, faxed "messages from heaven" (or private revelations), periodicals tied to specific apparitions (e.g., Garabandal or Fatima), prayer groups, and unapproved shrines and pilgrimage sites, this subculture developed over the course of the 1990s to include a vast number of online dissemination networks with a global reach (see Apolito 2005; Matter 2001). One major aspect of this network is its fascination with diabolical phenomena, with Mary's traditional role opposing Satan playing a major role in much contemporary Catholic Marian devotion (see Doherty 2020a). These kinds of Marian apparition groups have served as an ideal communication structure for spreading the ideas of the Satanic Panic.

The effectiveness of these networks is perhaps best demonstrated by an unlikely source, which also highlights another important facet of the Satanic Panic: the role of law enforcement and claims about satanic serial killers (see e.g., Hicks 1991; Jenkins 1994). Writing in his 1987 purported "true crime" book *The Ultimate Evil: An Investigation into America's Most Dangerous Satanic Cult*, journalist Maury Terry provides a textbook example of Satanic conspiracy theorizing surrounding serial killer David Berkowitz. This book went on to become one of the bestselling texts of the wider Satanic Panic and the basis for the recent Netflix series *Sons of Sam*. While Terry's book is a fascinating case study of the types of logic which informed the Satanic Panic, here I want to highlight a single aspect of this, Terry's account of the strange involvement of Veronica Lueken, the infamous Seer of Bayside who claimed from the 1960s to receive regular apparitions of the Virgin Mary:

As part of his personal investigation into the networks of Berkowitz, Terry encountered a flamboyant Australian-born journalist with the *New York Post*: Steve Dunleavy. Dunleavy, who gained notoriety in the Berkowitz investigation for impersonating a doctor to interview the family of one of the victims, had, in Terry's words, become "preoccupied with a phantom

telephone caller who was regularly regaling him with lurid tales of a satanic cult to which she insisted Berkowitz belonged” (Terry [1987] 2021, p. 200). It took some time to get to the point, but in his usual prolix, twisted, and detailed narrative Terry eventually outs this anonymous telephone informant as none other than the seer of Bayside, Veronica Lueken herself. Terry, himself a one-time altar boy and lapsed Catholic, was sceptical and quite scathing about Lueken, but he (Terry [1987] 2021, pp. 207–8) makes several very interesting comments about Lueken’s extensive networks among disenchanting Catholics:

Lueken’s society, which did not discourage contributions from believers, issued a variety of literature, including a newspaper called *Michael Fighting*, which was named for the Archangel Michael. The publications fervently reported the Sacred Word, as spoken by Veronica. . . During these public pronouncements, thousands of ears heard and thousands of eyes read the Blessed Mother’s words from Veronica herself. . . Veronica-Mary-Jesus frequently bemoaned the dangers of temptation in the modern world, and did so by reminding her disciples that Satan was very much about in the twentieth century. The evil serpent, who lost a heavenly battle to the Archangel Michael, was seeking an earthly inroad via infiltration of the media, the entertainment business and certainly world government.

Satanic conspiracy theories, then, played a key role in Bayside apparitions (see e.g., Ellis 2000), and as Joseph (Laycock 2015b) observed—as something he had to leave out of his outstanding ethnography of the Bayside movement (Laycock 2015a)—“the Baysiders had a major role in disseminating urban legends that serial killers are part of an organized network of murderous cultists”.

The Bayside communication network was, however, only one example and what is interesting is how frequently articles discussing Satanism appeared across the Catholic media spectrum, from conservative publications like those of *Our Sunday Visitor* and the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* and charismatic publications like *New Covenant*, through to more progressive forums like *U.S. Catholic*, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Even the official Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* ran a six-part feature on Satanism in 1997 (a point to which I will return). The considerable organizational resources of the Catholic media, then, helped to disseminate Satanic Panic ideology to a receptive network of readers.

Similarly, at the height of the Satanism scare in Catholic circles in 1991, following a televised exorcism on 20/20, even Catholic theological journals began to address the topic of Satanism. The *New Theology Review*, for example, dedicated an entire issue to the matter in August 1991 (see Fragomeni 1991; Hickey 1991; Pawlikowski 1991; Schreiter 1991). While some scepticism about these claims filtered through—Dominican priest Richard Woods, who had followed the controversy from the 1970s was a notable voice here, calling the televised exorcism a “regressive trek into the murky recesses of our barbaric past” (Woods 1991a, p. 14; see also Woods 1991b)—what is most notable about this material is the tone of seriousness with which the topic was treated. Indeed, in one case, a respected theologian, Charles Meyer—who had been at the vanguard of sceptical theologians calling for a revision of Catholic doctrine regarding the devil during the 1970s (see e.g., Meyer 1975)—noted in the official journal of the Archdiocese of Chicago, *Chicago Studies*, that, while much of the Satanic popular culture material produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s was “rather silly”, he still believed that “the fact is that worshipers of Satan do exist, and exist in every echelon of our society, even in our schools, and are creating considerable problems” (Meyer 1991, p. 335). Unsurprisingly, Catholic popular culture was not free from this diabolical frisson, and alongside Malachi Martin’s *Windswept House* was sociologist and priest Andrew Greeley’s (1993) paperback *Fall from Grace*, which features among its cast of clerical villains a Satanic paedophile priest. (The chronological coincidence of the Satanic Panic and the exposure of the extent of clerical abuse in the Archdiocese of Chicago was not lost on Greeley!)

While the Bayside apparition network, then, was by no means an approved or mainstream feature of Catholicism, given the ubiquity of Satanic themes in various Catholic media during this period it is now worth turning to the final aspect identified by Victor,

that is, the endorsement by authority figures. While perhaps (most) Catholics could not or would not invoke the dubious mystic Lueken to support their beliefs regarding the Satanic threat, they could certainly look to their own leadership both at a local, national, and international level.

3.4. Authoritative Endorsements and a Receptive Ideology

In part as a reaction against the perceived excesses of the counterculture, from the late 1960s many Catholics, from the pope down, were starting to believe some of the hype around “Satanic Cults”. By late 1970, writing in *Commonweal*, Henry Ansgar Kelly (1970, p. 148), could reasonably ask “are we experiencing a new age of Satan?” before surveying some of the evidence. Kelly himself was somewhat sceptical about the ontology of the devil, preferring a demythologised reading, but he also saw the revival of interest in the topic in Catholic circles and suggested that “the devil will remain an important scapegoat for many more years to come” (see also Goetz 1973). The March 1972 issue of *Time* magazine further highlighted this growing trend in its article “Raising the Devil”, reporting that “after years of being dismissed or ignored by theologians and ordinary believers, the devil is making a startling comeback” (Raising the Devil 1972, p. 52). Among the evidence produced for this claim, drawn from across the mainline/conservative, Catholic/Protestant theological spectrum, was a discussion of a “Devil Day” held at the Gregorianum in February of 1972, with the staff writer summarising as follows:

The panelists did not evoke the medieval image of a devil with horns, forked tale and cloven hoofs. But they did uphold the orthodox Christian view that devils are personal evil spirits, angels who fell from God’s grace by their own exercise of free will. God permits their evildoing among men because it is part of the natural disorder of things, a necessary consequence of their original rebellion against God. Though the panelists agreed that the existence of personal devils is a firm part of Catholic dogma, a number of other Catholics believe that Satan and his demons are simply symbols for an impersonal force of evil in the universe.

Time was not alone in highlighting this Satanic vogue (see e.g., Pochin-Mould and O’Grady 1973), nor was this the last time it was to be mentioned over the coming years or for the bifurcation of opinions among Catholics to be highlighted. What is clear, however, was that a receptive audience clearly existed for this kind of material.

In November 1972, Pope Paul VI gave an infamous advent homily, the implied target of which was both those involved in the occult revival and those theologians who were questioning traditional teachings regarding the devil, in which he maintained that “the question of the devil and the influence he can exert on individuals persons as well as on communities, whole societies, or events, is very important”, further noting that “it should be studied again” (Pope Paul VI 1972, p. 3). Pope Paul VI certainly got his wish here, and his words were quoted as an epigraph of the beginning of *Michelle Remembers* and *ad nauseam* by the media. Three years later, in 1975, largely in response to a flurry of controversial reflection by theologians, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF 1975), the chief doctrinal authority within the Catholic Church, issued a startling document entitled “Christian Faith and Demonology”, perhaps one of the most substantive theological treatments of the topic since the Middle Ages, which condemned—along with any kind of theological scepticism regarding diabolical ontology—“obsessional preoccupation with Satan and the demons, and the different kinds of worship of them” (p. 456), citing in support a series of biblical injunctions, historical encyclicals, and other documents related to witchcraft and spiritualism. While this document largely ended the serious theological discussion, the fascination with exorcism, primarily occasioned by the book and film of *The Exorcist*, continued for the remainder of the 1970s, attracting comment from some of the Church’s most esteemed (male) theologians, particularly in Germany, including Karl Rahner and Walter Kasper. This trend continued into the 1980s (see Hauke 2006; Modras 1977).

By 1985, the then prefect of the CDF, a German theologian by the name of Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), was able to claim to journalist Vittorio Messori that, “...Satanic cults are spreading more and more in the secularized world” (Ratzinger and Messori 1985, p. 139) and in response to the hype in 1986, Pope John Paul II preached a homily about Satan, affirming the Church’s traditional position (see Gesy 1993, pp. 287–90). Over the course of the rest of the 1980s and into the 1990s various Catholic dioceses in America set up taskforces and ministries to investigate Satanism. However, perhaps the most widely known endorsement of “Satanic Panic” ideas came from Cardinal John O’Connor in New York. In an infamous homily in early 1990, Cardinal O’Connor blamed that most avuncular servant of the dark lord Ozzy Osborne for an upsurge in satanic activity, with anticult activist Father James LeBar capitalizing on the response to the Cardinal’s comments to arrange the filming of a prime-time exorcism on ABC’s *20/20*, an event which polarized Catholics (see Ryan 1991, also, the discussion in Laycock and Harrelson 2024).

While the Satanic panic receded somewhat in America from the mid-1990s, it spread elsewhere, with the semi-official organs of the Church, like the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*, featuring extensive material on Satanism—including a six-part feature series on “Sects and Satanic Cults” in 1997 that was based on a conference held by the Italian anticult Group for Research and Information on Sects (GRIS) (see Ferarri 1997; Fizzoti 1997; Musti 1997; Porcarelli 1997; Rodriguez 1997; Scola 1997). Indeed, in Italy, two episcopal conferences (Campania and Tuscany) issued official statements on the perceived threat posed by Satanism in 1994 and 1995 (see Magie et démonologie 1994; Superstition, magie, satanisme 1995). Cumulatively, this kind of attention and perceived endorsement—while often couched in more cautious and equivocal language than the media—provided far greater legitimacy to claims about the threat posed by Satanism than was warranted and certainly helped to solidify its place within a wider Catholic demonological imaginary.

4. Conclusions

While by no means exhausting the topographic detail of this infernal territory, this article has sketched a provisional map of the Catholic contribution to the Satanic Panic. What is clear from the foregoing analysis is that the Satanism Scare was by no means absent from Roman Catholicism, nor were its effects necessarily marginal or short lived. Evidence suggests that, with various emphases, the Satanism Scare has been part of Catholicism since at least the 1960s. Combined with earlier currents of Catholic anti-Satanism and anti-occult tradition, Catholic claims-makers were often at the source of major channels whereby the ideological foundations of the Satanism scare spread to a wider audience. For similar reasons, Satanic Panic ideas found a ready reception in a Catholic milieu and easily spread through preexisting communication networks to reach a wide number of Catholics, capitalizing on similar antecedent carrier groups who were already primed to accept much of the Satanic Panic mythology. Finally, Catholicism also had elements within its diffuse leadership who were willing to countenance part or whole of the wider mythology of the Satanism Scare, providing authoritative endorsement to some of the more outré claims circulated over the course of this moral panic. While it may not have affected every parish or diocese equally, one can readily identify its wider spread in some often-unlikely places and at various levels within the Church.

Embarrassing as this material might be for some Catholics, in many ways the findings presented in this article are predictable, and it is worth bearing in mind that the Catholic church is a vast entity and by no means as monolithic as it is sometimes portrayed. That as widespread a social phenomenon as the Satanic Panic impacted Catholics is to be expected, and, as Victor observed, there is a considerable amount of overlap and flow of ideas between fundamentalist and conservative Catholic religious constituencies. Paradoxically, there is a considerable amount of ecumenism at the extremes. Moreover, many of the ideas of the Satanic Panic already had a long pedigree in Catholicism, which has historically shown itself acutely susceptible to conspiracy theories and theories of diabolical causation. The issue, then, is not about the existence of susceptibility to these ideas, but rather their extent—

which was much greater than Victor had earlier suspected. Despite this, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that, alongside some of the, at times startling, credulity exhibited above was a fair degree of discernment and scepticism among other Catholic writers.

On a similar note, it would be equally careless not to acknowledge the subjective sincerity of many of those surveyed above. One aspect which is clearly borne out in much of the material surveyed by the author is a genuine pastoral concern for what was viewed as a serious threat to the wellbeing of congregation members—particularly teenagers and children. Given the degree of wider societal concern over child abuse it is unsurprising that Catholics became caught up in this, though there remains some question as to whether at least some Catholics projected what was happening in their midst onto an imaginary external enemy. Woods (1991b, p. 352), commenting in a sceptical article published in *Doctrine and Life*, was depressingly prescient when he wrote that “a feverish preoccupation with supposed satanic ritualism eclipses the real and urgent issue—the actual extent and seriousness of child abuse in society today, especially in the family”, and, given subsequent revelations, he might well have added the church here as well. The impact of the clerical sexual abuse crisis continues to be felt by Catholics across the globe and the degree to which the Satanism Scare distracted from this very real abuse requires further reflection (see McGreevy 2022). As David Frankfurter (2006, p. 223) starkly noted on the findings of an important study by the National Center for Abuse and Neglect in the mid-1990s, “the focus on unfounded atrocities by Satanic cults against children obscured the numerous and well-documented ritual atrocities against children committed in the course of mainstream religious ceremonies”.

While scholars have noted the decline of the Satanic Panic that occurred over the course of the late 1990s (see e.g., Reichert and Richardson 2012; Richardson et al. 2009), it is worth noting that it never completely abated and the recent revival of these ideas in the Pizzagate and QAnon conspiracy theories only scratch the surface of an extensive underground where these ideas continue to thrive. Indeed, a significant amount of recent scholarship has strongly demonstrated the persistence of these ideas across a significant cross-section of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly considering the phenomenal revival of the sacramental of exorcism (see esp. Bauer 2022; Bauer and Doole 2022; Chavez 2021; Doherty 2020a, 2022; Laycock and Harrelson 2024; Young 2018, 2022). In this atmosphere, it is unsurprising that the ideas of the Satanic Panic have continued to grow apace in Catholic circles. Moreover, the recent revolution in self-publishing has brought to the fore a whole new market of Catholic anti-Satanist and anti-occult writings with a distribution capacity far exceeding anything present during the Satanism Scare of the 1980s and 1990s. If Catholic YouTube is anything to go by the popularity and influence of figures like Taylor Marshall (2019) and Chad Ripberger (2022) and self-styled demonologists like Charles Fraune (2019) and Adam Blai (2017) will only grow. Here one is reminded of an astute observation by sociologists Colin Campbell and Shirley McIver (Campbell and McIver 1987, p. 51) about the symbiosis between Christian critics of the occult and occultists themselves, which emerged during the last occult revival:

It is certainly possible that ecclesiastical warnings against occultism may actually serve to promote it, for whilst they might function to deter committed members of the church, the additional publicity could well attract others, especially as the suggestion of a real danger in the occult could be seen as an endorsement of its claims. Alternatively, the attempted prohibition of this field by church authorities may include those who dislike religion, or are jealous of the freedom, to experiment for themselves.

In this case, the rise of the Satanic Temple and its public conflicts with traditionalist Roman Catholics are one instance of this intriguing dynamic which warrants continual monitoring and analysis (see Laycock 2020, 2021).

While this resurgence in demonology since the 1990s has been the subject of extensive commentary, more research remains to be undertaken, in particular on the ongoing role played in the dissemination of core features of the Satanic Panic ideology by semi-official

organizations like the International Association of Exorcists (AIS), whose training-courses and members often explicitly endorse many of these ideas and perpetuate many of the demonstrably false aspects of the wider Satanism Scare (see esp. [Bauer 2022](#)). The involvement of the anticult group GRIS in the course is indicative as to the perspective taken, and the earlier observation regarding the AIS made by [Kelly \(2006, p. 320\)](#) is worth repeating, “Christians who strongly believe in the active malevolence of Satan in the World find it easy to believe that *other people* worship the devil, usually in connection with the practice of Diabolical Sorcery/witchcraft”.

Finally, this revival of exorcism in recent years has well and truly solidified the place of a new demonology within Catholicism (see [Bauer and Doole 2022](#)), which foregrounds the activity of demons in perhaps the most forceful way in centuries and which revives many of aspects of the Satanism Scare and its instantiation of an earlier Catholic obsession with “Satan and his human servants”. What is also clear, however, is that this revival of demonology has not been apparent in all quarters, and what is also markedly clear is the near complete absence of serious theological discussion of the topic of Satan amongst reputed Catholic theologians since the 1970s (see here [Doherty, forthcoming; McGill 2021](#)). In the absence of responsible theological reflection, the field has been ceded to less critical voices. As sociologists Giuseppe Giordan and Adam Possamai have astutely observed, “belief in the devil, like many other traditional religious beliefs, has been rationalized during the last decades to the point where it has nearly disappeared from the scope of theological deliberation”, but that “in people’s everyday lives, this belief has spread considerably, so as to force religious authorities to restore the profession of exorcism that had virtually disappeared” ([Giordan and Possamai 2018b](#), p. 75). It would be unwise to underestimate the popular appeal of this new demonology, or to assume, as theologians often do, that underplaying or rationalizing problematic aspects of the tradition will make them go away—if the 1970s and the Satanism Scare have taught us nothing else, it should be that the devil is not good at goodbyes!

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Notes

- ¹ An earlier version of this article was presented under the title “*In Nomine Satanas: Roman Catholicism, Satanic Panic, and the Dark Side of the Religious Imagination*”, at the Australian Association for the Study of Religion (AASR), Annual Conference, University of Notre Dame (Sydney), 30 November 2023.
- ² On the economical approach see [Kelly \(1965\)](#). For Nicola’s account see ([Nicola 1974](#), pp. 23–32).
- ³ On these reports see [Bielski \(1998\)](#); [Miller \(1972\)](#); [Woods \(1973\)](#).

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