

What relationship does supernatural evil have in contemporary society? Some reflections

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Abstract

Supernatural evil has always been one of the most present social phenomena in society but also among the least studied. What are its impacts on society? What are the main forms? What consequences does this type of belief have? What are some of the most famous demons? These are some of the questions that this paper attempts to answer, with only one awareness: this type of evil is first and foremost, like any other form, a human product, culturally transmitted and socially structured. Through an analysis of international literature, the following relationships emerged between supernatural evil and the various social dimensions: the relationship between supernatural evil and social position, the relationship between supernatural evil and mental health, the relationship between supernatural evil and gender issues, the relationship between supernatural evil and the education of children, the relationship between supernatural evil and intolerance towards minorities and sexuality, the relationship between supernatural evil and gun policy, the relationship between supernatural evil and punishments. Therefore, this list of reports summarizes and adds to a small yet growing literature on the relationship between belief in evil and its impact on society. The potential role of belief in supernatural evil in shaping attitudes and orienting actions deserves constant attention from social scientists, therefore, it is hoped that this list, with the respective methodologies, can be applied in the field, through subsequent and more in-depth empirical research, to possibly compare the results obtained.

Keywords Supernatural evil; Evil; Social sciences; Social position; Education; Religion; Belief

1. Introduction

The theme of evil has always been deeply felt by theology and philosophy, and the social sciences proper have rarely dedicated themselves to the study of this phenomenon (Costa, 2024). Even less studied has been supernatural evil (Costa, 2024). But what is supernatural evil? Supernatural evil can be defined as a type of evil, perceived and considered by an individual or a community, which is presumed to transcend the limits of human knowledge and experience, of the principles of the laws that govern nature, physics, etc., and which is somehow related to a form of belief (Ellison et al., 2021; Costa, 2024). This is a very general usage of this concept (Spiro, 1967). Another definition does not conflict with that one general notion but explains and perfects it, although in doing so, he embodies or suggests certain anti-metaphysical prejudices that the first definition does not support any deliberate consideration. In this regard, Durkheim (1965) argues, as well as Evans-Pritchard

(1937) and Hallowell (1960), supernatural evil presupposes a concept of “natural” evil and according to Durkheim "In order to say that certain things are supernatural, it is necessary to have the sentiment that a natural order of things exists, that is to say, that the phenomena of the universe are bound together by necessary relations, called laws"(Durkheim, 1965, p. 41).

Therefore, it is a type of evil that comes from confessions, religions, etc., according to which there are entities and realities not directly visible and tangible capable of acting in the real world, mediating and perpetrating, directly and/or indirectly, evil. In general, the belief in supernatural evil has remained a staple of many cultures (Saler, 1977; Costa, 2024). For example, within Christian doctrine, demons, in general, have been consistently represented as antagonists of Christians since they wish to tempt people into committing sins, and above all to lead them away from Yahweh (Martinez, 2013). However, the belief that a form of supernatural evil exists is not limited exclusively to the Christian tradition. In fact, it is found in the Hebrew Bible, the Koran, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. (Gagliardi, 2012).

Supernatural evil is present in most of the world's religions and constitutes an important component of the overall fabric of a religious belief that can have important associations with other types of beliefs, including acceptance of or intolerance towards specific groups of individuals (Martinez, 2013).

The belief in the main forms of supernatural evil concerns phenomena such as:

- 1) Extrasensory perceptions consist of para-cognitive experiences which includes clairvoyance, telekinesis, and precognition. They are the phenomena that fall under parapsychology, a discipline with aim of providing recordings of these seemingly supernatural events. This area of research is not necessarily linked to the supernatural evil. However, some people claim that their extrasensory powers come from a demon or Satan (Exline and Wilt, 2023);
- 2) demons are defined as entities capable of causing harm, a source of possession. Cases of possession are characterized by the presence of self-harm, profane language, excessive force and bodily symptoms such as vomiting and uncontrollable convulsions (Costa, 2024). Although there is a belief that the concepts of demons and possession are beliefs of the past still used today as horror film plots, belief in demonic activity is widely reported throughout the world (Levack, 2014). Evidence of demonic activity would not only demonstrate the existence of a supernatural realm but would strongly suggest the existence of God (Routledge, 1998). Many of the world's major religions include doctrines that describe a battle between good and evil (Leezenberg, 2019). The existence of evil forces at work (demons) would confirm the beliefs about this spiritual warfare held by millions of people around the world (Wille, 2007);
- 3) satanic activity describes supernatural evil that are thought to have been caused by the worship of the devil, offers presented to the devil, or other rituals and traditions

carried about by those in the satanic church. The Judeo-Christian devil is referred to as Satan, Lucifer, or simply the devil. Jewish and Christian versions of the devil are what is most widely known (Costa, 2024). However, various belief systems have differing names for evil forces. At this regard, there was a variety of names for the chief of the evil spirits, Shemihazah, Asael and Mastema. And, as we will see, the chief of the demons will also be known as Beelzebul, Lucifer and Belial. But it was the name Satan or its Greek form διάβολος and Latin form diabolos, rendered in English as 'Devil' (French as Diable, German as Teufel) that came to predominate (Frankfurter 2003);

4) witchcraft is a concept whose semantic field is so broad that it certainly cannot be treated and exhausted here. It consists of a set of practices, among the most recognizable, that attempt to reach the supernatural realm. Defining these spiritual practices can be difficult. Just as there are many denominations within a religious belief system, so there are different interpretations of what defines witchcraft. The previous items on this list have contributed to beliefs about supernatural evil. Likewise, witchcraft is further evidence of belief in supernatural evil (Costa, 2024).

From the point of view of the social sciences, beliefs of this type are defined as specific ideas, values and norms that members of a given religion hold as real; these beliefs in turn fall within the definition of religion (Lanzetti, 1985). In this regard, for Durkheim, religion consists of a set of things that exceed the limits of our knowledge, and more specifically he defined it as, a unified system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred things, that is, beliefs and practices that unite all those who adhere to it into a single moral community (Durkheim, 1965).

There are many definitions of these social phenomena, but the main and common element lies in the consideration by which, as recalled by the anthropologist Geertz, the religious world of the supernatural is made up of a system of symbols that operates by establishing deep, widespread and lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating concepts of a general order of existence and by coating these concepts with an aura of concreteness such that the moods and reasons seem to be absolutely realistic (Geertz, 2017). What must be clear, concerns the human construction of all these aspects, and, in any case, these beliefs have concrete and real effects in everyday life. What has been stated finds significant confirmation especially regarding the relationship between beliefs relating to supernatural evil and their impacts on society (Costa, 2024).

Stark and Bainbridge (1987) proposed a theory according to which belief in supernatural evil is an essential component of religious behavior. According to these scholars, the ability to obtain significant exchanges between the faithful and religion presupposes a certain predictability of the divinity, that is, the bifurcation of the figure of a god between "good" and "evil" which allows individuals to be more certain of this which they should expect to receive from a god, and therefore more devoted. Therefore, if supernatural evil were desacralized, we would quickly arrive at

a situation in which a religion would no longer be able to offer supernatural compensators as part of its cultural system, and therefore the effectiveness of the religion itself would be weakened. Consequently, according to Stark and Bainbridge (1987) there would be a strong correlation between individuals who believe in supernatural evil and those who are devoted to their religion.

As Martinez (2013) stated, belief in supernatural evil is a fundamental component of religious commitment. Thus, the belief that there is a supernatural evil translates both into a more heartfelt form of social cooperation and into the production of a greater sense of well-being and devotion towards one's religion, which is forcefully manifested in various areas of social life. But at the same time, this belief tends to exacerbate relationships with "other" individuals or communities, increasing forms of intolerance and aggression (Martinez, 2013).

The role of belief in supernatural evil in shaping social life has been little studied. However, after an in-depth analysis of the international literature, despite appearing fragmented over the years, it is possible to state that correlations have been documented between belief in this type of evil and a series of social and policy dimensions. It is an interesting area as it allows us to draw a whole series of important considerations. Starting from all these preliminary and introductory considerations, this article starts from a research question: What impact and relationship does supernatural evil have within society?

Therefore, the purpose of this article is precisely to investigate the impact and role that supernatural evil has within society.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Sources

This article was structured as a narrative literature review. A focused search of international bibliographic sources was conducted using the electronic databases WOS, PubMed, Scopus and Google scholar, tailored to the objectives of a narrative review. The aim was to facilitate the analytical integration of studies that highlight the relationship between medical anthropology and cardiovascular disease.

2.2. Search Strategy

Boolean operators AND was employed to refine the search. The keywords used in the search were: "supernatural evil" AND "society"; "supernatural evil" AND "sociocultural* variable*"; "supernatural evil" AND "social sciences".

2.3. Screening and Selection

The retrieved records were evaluated based on their titles and abstracts. The criteria shown in Table 1 were used for the selection or exclusion of articles

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Articles published in peer-reviewed journals, Books, etc.	Articles published in other sources (e.g., conferences)
Articles published without time limits	None
Documents focusing on the role of supernatural evil in society	Other topics
English and Italian languages	Other languages

3. Results

The results obtained have been organized into subparagraphs in which the most salient aspects are analyzed.

3.1 The relationship between supernatural evil and social position

Although there are few studies that systematically address supernatural evil, it is possible to note how social position influences 1) how people are religious and 2) provides information on the belief in this form of evil (Bainbridge, 2021). Those who occupy social positions and play lower roles, but also members of marginalized social groups, are more likely to choose a religion that gives more space to the supernatural rather than an “earthlier” religion. This difference in religious focus is attributed to relative deprivation, or the idea that, in an environment rich in various forms of inequalities, those who are most deprived will try to compensate with more rigid religious preferences that emphasize the world spiritual and the afterlife (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). This is the central tenet of deprivation theory, according to which individuals from marginalized social groups tend to form a closer personal relationship with God to compensate for their difficult lives and to obtain otherwise unattainable rewards (Flynn and Kunkel 1987).

In addition to these status-based variations in levels of divine beliefs, social scientists have advanced this theory by examining how the effects of divine beliefs vary depending on location within a system of social stratification (Costa, 2024).

Davidson (1977), for example, has shown how high socioeconomic status (SES) is associated with reduced belief in the supernatural. Norris and Inglehart (2011) proposed a theoretical model according to which existential security, understood as the condition in which survival is sufficiently certain to be taken for granted, is the result of a mechanism of interrelation between social status and religiosity. They argue that as this security increases, religiosity decreases. Although their study is based on a macro social approach and focuses on overall economic development of a nation as evidence of security, a theoretical correlation is also

created between existential security and religiosity at the individual level (Norris and Inglehart, 2011).

A similar theorization has been proposed in social science studies applied to religion, which suggests that disadvantaged groups are more likely to turn to religion as a mechanism for adaptation and acceptance of their condition; in particular, it is ethnic minorities, individuals with low social status and women who are more likely to face life's difficulties by resorting to some form of belief in the supernatural (Hood, Hill and Spilka, 2009).

Pagels (1999), for example, arguing that people, in conditions of social or economic precariousness, affected by misfortunes, losses, or more generally by very negative experiences, often attribute such events to the direct intervention of some form of supernatural evil.

Thus, traditionally less wealthy groups are more likely to endure difficulties due to social position and, therefore, are more likely to express religiosity through belief in supernatural and otherworldly deities, and in particular, members of these groups are more likely to believe in the existence of supernatural evil (Lupfer, Tolliver, and Jackson, 1996).

Furthermore, according to Baker's study (2008), low SES plays an important role in determining how much an individual believes in the existence of supernatural evil, while those with a higher SES believe much less in this type of evil. However, according to Baker (2008), these effects are also conditioned by the frequency with which one attends a parish. For those who show a high level of participation in parish activities, the influence of SES is neutralized. For those who do not actively participate, however, the influence of SES is more marked. Furthermore, according to this social scientist, ethnic, cultural, etc. minorities they show a strong belief in supernatural evil (Baker, 2008). Difficult life circumstances and suffering often lead this type of community to search for meanings that go beyond the tangible. Suffering often forces these individuals to conceive of a god as one who can remove, or causing, some form of evil (Baker, 2008). In this regard, for example, in African Americans, the belief in supernatural evil has taken root over time, in a series of cultural symbols present in their religious traditions. Thus, the history of racism and oppression experienced by African Americans in the United States has influenced the view of evil within black Protestantism (Baker, 2008).

3.2 The relationship between supernatural evil and mental health

The way in which the supernatural evil can influence mental health is explained by the Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems Theory (ETAS theory) since it is an approach that supports the existence of real interrelationships between religious beliefs, the evaluation of possible threats and psychiatric symptoms (Flannelly, Flannelly, and dos Santos, 2017). One of the main foundations of this approach concerns the fact that psychiatric disorders are defined as a real function of threat

assessment systems that have evolved over time as self-protection tools (Jung, 2020). For example, according to this theory, anxiety disorders are the product of brain mechanisms that concern any particular situation perceived as a source of insecurity and/or danger (Beck, Emery, and Greenberg, 2005).

However, these beliefs can lead one to think that the entire world is dangerous; this may in part be a useful adaptation mechanism for survival (Costa, 2024); but it may happen that this situation can considerably increase the fears associated with anxiety disorders, which in turn increase the desire for vigilance to recognize, and prevent, potential threats from the external environment, encouraging individuals to treat something harmless as if it were dangerous, rather than treating something dangerous as if it were harmless (Flannelly, Flannelly, and dos Santos, 2017).

In other words, individuals' beliefs related to the dangerousness of the world can "serve" as causes of psychiatric symptoms. Within the ETAS theory, religious beliefs play an important role. For example, belief in the existence of supernatural evil influences one's assessment of possible threats from the outside world and increases one's sensitivity to what constitutes a threat to which evil people pose a threat (Martinez, et al., 2018).

Therefore, believing in the existence of supernatural evil can also contribute to the notion of dangerousness in the world, with consequent impacts on mental health. Demons are often conceptualized as supernatural forces that combat the order created by God, especially in Christian traditions. Thus, these adversary supernatural agents seek to inflict pain and trouble on people, actively working to the detriment of humanity. However, these are beliefs that can cause or aggravate conditions that harm mental health (Lupfer, Brock, and DePaola, 1992). Jung's (2020) recent study on the influence of beliefs in supernatural evil on mental health provides several interesting findings. First, this research reveals empirical evidence that belief in supernatural evil is harmful to mental health because it encourages the development of beliefs that human nature is evil and dangerous. Second, Jung (2020) documents that belief in supernatural evil has different associations with different mental state outcomes. Although belief in supernatural evil is not related to mental health problems overall, it does carry positive associations with some of the anxiety-related symptoms, including general anxiety and paranoia. Because general anxiety is a response to threats that cannot be identified, belief in supernatural evil may be relevant in the development of anxiety. Furthermore, to the extent that paranoia represents a form of distrust in people, belief in supernatural evil can increase paranoid ideation because it implies the belief that supernatural agents can act through people to carry out evil actions. What Jung proposed is largely congruent with the ETAS theory since supernatural forces of evil represent a threat of some form of harm, and therefore, the belief in the existence of supernatural evil once again increases anxiety-provoking conditions (Jung, 2020). Third, this study shows how belief in the existence of a god attenuates

the association between belief in supernatural evil and mental health. If one believes that demons pose a threat, causing symptoms of anxiety, this effect is mitigated by beliefs that offer a sense of security and protection, such as belief in a good God (Jung, 2020). This causes believers to feel a sense of protection at least against potential environmental threats posed by supernatural evil agents. Therefore, Jung argues that although belief in the male supernatural is associated with greater mental health problems, it is less distressing for people who feel securely connected to a god. Therefore, the study findings suggest that attachment to a god is beneficial to mental health by counteracting the harmful effects of fear of supernatural evil on mental health (Jung, 2020). Fourth, Jung (2018) demonstrated how belief in a god has a buffering function almost exclusively for women when it comes to general mental health issues. Furthermore, it argues, as seen previously, that SES affects both belief in supernatural evil and mental health (Jung, 2018; Costa, 2024). The beneficial effects of religion on mental health are greater for individuals who belong to marginalized social groups. Furthermore, Jung (2018), taking up gender issues, underlines how women, being more religious, can reduce the deleterious impact of believing in supernatural evil on mental health.

3.3 The relationship between supernatural evil and gender issues

As regards the gender issues just mentioned, the firm belief relating to the existence of supernatural evil, as for faith in general, is more marked in women. There is a growing literature and ongoing debate about why women tend to be more religiously active than men (Schieman, Bierman, and Ellison, 2010). It is currently unclear whether this higher level of engagement and belief is due to socialization or other factors. Regardless of the underlying cause, women have stronger religious beliefs about evil than men. Furthermore, cultural and relational aspects also impact how gender conditions the perception of supernatural evil (Jung, 2018).

The socialization approach to gender roles can be useful here: while men are socialized to strive for independence and be competitive, women are taught from early childhood to be devoted to care and protection. This leads women to value interactions, to the point of defining themselves in the context of their relationships (Ozorak, 1996). As women are raised to place more emphasis on helping others, they feel more comfortable asking a god for help when facing problems. Furthermore, the theory of deprivation compensation can also be applied in this case, according to which, especially in the past, women found compensation mechanisms in faith to compensate for the deprivations imposed by the male-dominated culture. (Costa, 2024).

These models of socialization, therefore, impact the relationship with the supernatural world. This is why women tend to be more inclined towards religion, as it helps them develop bonds and more supportive exchanges with a god and with others. In line with this view, women are more likely than men to believe in a good

God rather than a punitive one (Ozorak, 1996; Schieman, Bierman, and Ellison, 2010). Thus, in women, supernatural evil occupies, in a more relevant way, a central place in their religious thoughts. Furthermore, given that women may gain greater psychological and physical health-protective benefits from having a strong interest in and belief in a god (Schnabel, 2015).

Another research is very interesting in this field by Silva and Woody (2022) show how women have a higher marginal score than men regarding beliefs about supernatural human abilities (estimate of marginal difference = 0.48, $p < .001$) and had a higher predicted probability (PP) than men to fear ghosts (.167, $p < .001$) and zombies (.146, $p < .001$) and to believe in hauntings (.232, $p < .001$) and Atlantis (.092, $p < .05$), and women did indeed have higher marginal estimates than men on all of the nonmaterial or spiritual beliefs or fears.

In this regard, as Bader, Baker and Mencken (2017) argued, gendered differences in belief reflect how women are more likely to be interested in supernatural phenomena and evil that provide a greater understanding of the world. In contrast, men may be more interested in phenomena that can be scientifically established with the correct evidence, although we did not find that men were more likely than women to believe in any phenomena (Bader, Baker and Mencken, 2017).

3.4 The relationship between supernatural evil and the education of children

Parents who believe in the existence of supernatural evil, in general, not only believe in the existence of a world full of natural dangers (for example, due to beliefs that there are harmful social influences, violence and discrimination, etc.) but they are also convinced that in everyday life there is a further level of risk, namely the supernatural one. These parents are likely to use child-rearing practices to mitigate these additional dangers by using supernatural risk management (Martinez et al., 2018). Therefore, believing in supernatural evil can create situations in which parents believe they have to deal with malevolent forces, which can have consequences on their children's education. The relationship between supernatural evil and educational processes is particularly important, since the family is the first agent of socialization, and therefore of learning behavioral models, norms, values, etc. also, concerning the concept of evil (Beferani, 2015).

The relationship between supernatural evil and the education of children has been analyzed by Martinez et al. (2018) in research that turns out to be particularly interesting. These authors start from the hypothesis according to which the belief in supernatural evil can shape the education imparted by parents to their sons. Ellison et al. (1996) have already demonstrated how belief in supernatural evil is linked to more severe parental behavior and attitudes. These authors also argued that parents who believe in supernatural evil are more likely to have rigid moral beliefs and to apply them to children to prevent them from becoming objects, for example, demons or being condemned to hell. All this means that in many cases, parents choose

educational models in which there is a more marked influence on the control of autonomy to manage this additional level of risk in their children's lives. Therefore, these are parents who monitor their children more and/or assume greater levels of authority towards them in daily life. (Ellison et al., 1996; Beferani, 2015; Costa, 2024). If, for example, the devil exists as an entity that seeks to harm the child, the rational response will be an approach to parenting that aims to minimize the exposure and influence of supernatural evil. Martinez et al. (2018), in this regard, argue that this can be understood as a type of supernatural risk management. These social scientists, in particular, have demonstrated the presence of high levels of belief in supernatural evil in parents who prefer control rather than autonomy for their children. This result would be related to another variable, namely the favorable view towards corporal punishment. Furthermore, Martinez et al. (2018) have demonstrated a correlation between the belief in supernatural evil and the careful monitoring of the location of children who can only move in a limited set of places such as their home, church or school so that parents have to carry out fewer checks. However, regarding the relationship between the belief in supernatural evil and the monitoring of children's entertainment, it was noted that parents who impose strict limitations on entertainment such as: not having cable television, not allowing them to listen to music considered as demonic as rock, and using parental control settings on devices, means that such parents may not feel obliged to monitor their children's entertainment because they do not believe they are potentially exposed to harmful forms of entertainment (Martinez et al., 2018). These are two peculiar associations because, as the authors (Martinez et al., 2018) point out, it would be an unexpected relationship between supernatural evil and fewer mechanisms for monitoring children's activities. This could allow the affirmation of other forms of evil, conveyed by human beings, rather than by supernatural entities: think of the many cases in which Catholic parents were sure that the parish breathed a holy and healthy air, reducing very much control of the psychological state and not only of their children, so much so that they did not realize that they were victims of sexual violence by the parish priest (Martinez et al., 2018; Costa, 2024). However, this observation indicates that what these types of parents desire the most are obedience and submission. Finally, Martinez et al. (2018) underlined the correlation between the belief in supernatural evil and a greater approval of corporal punishment as an educational tool for one's children. Therefore, these educational models will, in most cases, be perpetrated by the children when they become parents.

3.5 The relationship between supernatural evil and intolerance towards minorities and sexuality

Wilson and Huff (2001) were two pioneers in the study of this type of relationship; in fact, the few subsequent studies confirmed their results. These two authors started from a famous conceptualization introduced by Pagels in his essay *The Origin of*

Satan (1999), according to which Christians, but in general believers in the existence of supernatural evil, tend to be more intolerant towards others, and when perceiving these others as a source of threats. According to Pagels (1999), for example, Christians would be led to demonstrate intolerant behavior aimed at demonizing others as a defense against the continuous attacks received over the centuries from other social groups such as the Romans or the Jews. Wilson and Huff (2001) have therefore demonstrated how belief in supernatural evil is significantly correlated with some forms of intolerance. According to Wilson and Huff (2001), intolerance towards gays and lesbians is more marked in those who believe in forms of supernatural evil. In the same study, they also found a statistically significant correlation between belief in supernatural evil and intolerance towards ethnic minorities. This occurs because in these minorities, they see the reflection of the typical characteristics of demons or other forms of supernatural evil, i.e., diversity, sexual variability, etc. The belief in supernatural evil has a very peculiar relationship with the world of sexuality and some types of minorities, especially within religious cultures of Christian origin, according to which the sexual act, except in the case in which it has reproductive purposes, is considered a form of sin, and therefore the bodily manifestation of a superior evil will (Costa, 2024).

In this regard, consider some statements made by the lawyer Jerry Lamon Falwell, son of a former television preacher and for over 10 years president of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, until his resignation in August 2020 due, however, to a scandal sexual: "I believe that Satan himself is the main force behind every modern movement that wants to destroy children. When we offer condoms and birth control pills to middle and high school kids, we tell them that adults approve of what they are doing, and we deceive them into believing that what they do can be done safely. This is satanic because it ultimately destroys their bodies, their souls, and their spirits. Abortion is an infernal doctrine that allows for the total destruction of a generation of children. Free sex, anti-family values, and immorality are as old as Satan himself. We are in a spiritual war, and the Church is the only answer for our society" (Falwell, 1992, p.117). Although this is an old statement, today more than ever, the controversy in the sphere of sexuality, abortion, etc. persists, and their relationship with supernatural evil. This is because the long tradition of Christian theology identifies the world, the flesh, and the devil as the primary sources of temptation and sin (Wenzel, 1967).

Even today, gender, sexuality, and religion are at the center of countless debates (Griffith, 2017). Right-wing exponents continue to consider "immoral" sexual behavior as a form of manifestation of supernatural evil (Baker et al., 2020). Even currently, therefore, it is hypothesized that supernatural evil and sexuality are intimately connected to pathological conditions such as sexually transmitted diseases, which would be defined as forms of sexually transmitted demons. It is hypothesized that supernatural evil and sexuality are intimately connected to pathological

conditions such as sexually transmitted diseases, which would be defined as forms of sexually transmitted demons. This last hypothesis was proposed by Wier and Carruth (1999) in the essay, unpublished in Italy, *Holy Sex: God's Purpose and Plan for Our Sexuality*, whose authors maintain, as already mentioned, that sexually transmitted diseases are, in reality, demons that dwell in the genetic material that can be transferred through body fluids and therefore written into the DNA.

The claims about “demonic biology” made throughout the book are certainly extreme and would be rejected by most readers. In any case, however, this essay, although marginal, is not an irrelevant text. It profoundly reflects how much the concept of supernatural evil is still a source of fear today, how much anxiety there is regarding sexual bodies, but also regarding spiritual concerns and illnesses. Peculiar as it may seem, *Holy Sex* taps into broader uncertainties about supernatural evil and its relationship to sexuality. For example, Wier and Carruth (1999) argue that a sexually polluted body displays demonic corruption through the presence of diseases that can reveal the fact that some subjects are unknowingly carriers of demonic genes inherited from sinful ancestors, which is reminiscent. In the essay in question, for example, there is a table (Wier and Carruth, 1999) which provides a series of indications on how, the supernatural evil related to sexually transmitted diseases should be identified. According to these authors there are three types of symptoms attributable to infection by a sexually transmitted demon:

- 1) the spiritual symptoms are hearing, seeing, or sensing demonic spirits;
- 2) mental/emotional symptoms consist of an uncontrollable compulsion to repeat a sexual sin, despite the risk of contracting a disease, being arrested, being publicly exposed, losing your job, or destroying your marriage; relentless negative feelings, such as depression, anxiety, fear, and unrelieved guilt; obsessive and disturbing thoughts that cannot be silenced;
- 3) bodily symptoms: unusual, unpleasant, or disturbing sensations in the body; unexplained pain that does not respond to medications; symptoms of some disease that do not respond to medical treatment.

Furthermore, the authors state that "some of these symptoms may have causes other than demonic ones. Having even one of these symptoms does not mean that you have a demonic infestation. But having one or more in each category is a strong indication that you may be a victim. We recommend seeking help from a reputable Christian counselor who has extensive experience in dealing with mental, emotional and spiritual problems and expertise in relieving them"(Wier and Carruth, 1999, p.83). These statements, but in general, the essay *Holy Sex* provides an interesting example of the connection between sexual practices and policies with views relating to the existence of supernatural evil.

Perry (2019), on this issue, noted the fact that issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and the use of pornography represent a threat to family values and to the

religious power structures that support traditional views of family life, gender roles, and sexuality.

If this is not enough, think of what was stated by the now retired archbishop of Bologna, Carlo Caffara, who in a speech, entitled *How Satan destroys God's creation through abortion and homosexuality*, argued that Satan attacks the sanctity of marriage through "the ennoblement of homosexuality", and that abortion is also part of his evil plans: "By ennobling the killing of human beings, Satan has laid the foundations for his "creation": eliminating the image of God from creation, to obscure his presence"(<https://www.lifesitenews.com/opinion/how-satan-destroys-gods-creation-through-abortion-and-homosexuality>). Based on these considerations Baker et al. (2020) with their research demonstrated how, after analyzing many other aspects of religiosity, beliefs about supernatural evil remain strong and consistent predictors of attitudes regarding issues involving sexuality, including abortion, homosexuality, premarital sex, extramarital sex and the use of pornography. Furthermore, they noted how the effects of being practicing believers' impact on attitudes towards sexuality, which is subjected to real forms of moral condemnation; condemnation which appeared significantly higher among practicing believers convinced of the existence and dangerous effects of supernatural evil, compared to those who do not believe in supernatural evil, as well as compared to people who are not practitioners. And as with previous reports, beliefs about supernatural evil are central to understanding the connections between society, religion and sexuality (Costa, 2020).

3.6 The relationship between supernatural evil and gun policy

Recently Ellison et al. (2021) studied the relationship between the supernatural evil and policies on the use of weapons in America, a nation where the issue of firearms is particularly sensitive. The authors first ask how and why might belief in supernatural evil be linked to attitudes that support firearms policies? This question can be answered first by starting from the assumption that individuals who believe in the existence of supernatural evil are convinced that on earth, every day there is evidence of the battle between good and evil, for which the spiritual kingdom manifests in the social world; these are subjects who can be particularly fearful and vigilant (Costa, 2024). However, they believe that this conflict manifests itself in everyday life where supernatural evil is unlikely to be restrained by social norms or conventions, laws, formal social controls, and/or individual behavior (Ellison et al., 2021).

Indeed, this perspective that supernatural evil makes daily life unpredictable, risky, and potentially very threatening leads one to believe that we need tools to deal with it. Therefore, for individuals who perceive the world in this way, gun ownership can be seen as a necessary strategy to reduce any form of risk (Baker, 2008).

Viewed from this perspective, any law that limits the type or possession of firearms for the defense of oneself, loved ones, and community members may seem

unnecessary at best and dangerous at worst, because individuals, for example, possessed by evil will probably not obey such laws (Vegter and Kelley, 2020). Indeed, laws expanding gun rights are fundamentally based on the belief that the institutions meant to protect are incapable of doing so. This type of debate, although deeply felt in America, has also been raised several times in Italy (Steidley, 2019).

When the perception develops according to which a government is not able to guarantee safety from crime and other "evils", many people try to protect themselves and their families by resorting to the use, even illicit, of weapons. In fact, governments passing laws that expand access to weapons, when they are unable to guarantee adequate systems and policies for the safety and protection of citizens (Steidley, 2019). Furthermore, in the face of growing evil and destructiveness, potentially unlimited, having access to all types of possible means may seem like an essential risk reduction strategy. Indeed, recent research argues that beliefs about a) an imminent danger of victimization and b) more widespread perceptions of uncertainty and chaos in social life combine to promote gun ownership (Stroebe et al., 2017).

Furthermore, believers tend to provide explanations inherent to human events based on supernatural aspects rather than considering concrete and real factors (Grasmick and McGill, 1994).

Therefore, it may be easier for people to accept the use of weapons against another person if the latter is perceived as both an evil and foreign being. Therefore, believers can feel within them the influence of the moral imperative to fight against the forces of evil, especially to protect "good" or innocent people from demonic threats. Furthermore, among believers, there is a fear that religious values will be replaced by secular values. This creates a form of anxiety, which has been shown to increase the demand for firearms (Steidley and Kosla, 2018).

Although for different reasons, in the film released very recently in theaters, *The First Omen*, the same principle of protection from secular values is adopted, resorting to a "weapon" other than a gun, namely the creation of the Antichrist. In fact, Father Brennan goes so far as to state that «The Church has held power for thousands of years, it will stop at nothing as long as it stays that way! How do you control those who no longer believe? Something is created to be afraid of" that is, the Antichrist (Costa, 2024).

Returning to Ellison et al. (2021), they studied this relationship between supernatural evil and the use of weapons, arriving at a series of interesting considerations:

1) belief in supernatural evil is a consistent and robust indicator of most political attitudes in favor of liberalizing gun ownership. This is especially true if respondents would like to use guns to defend themselves and/or their loved ones. These authors are therefore keen to underline how, despite political ideology playing a central role, in almost all cases belief in supernatural evil presents itself as a fundamental variable

in influencing the relationship with gun ownership. On the other hand, associations between beliefs in supernatural evil and attitudes toward forms of psychosocial assessment before handing over weapons (e.g., mental health screening for gun buyers) are negligible;

2) when asked why people who strongly believe in supernatural evil might be more likely to support the increased availability of a weapon, the authors responded by arguing that the belief that there is a battle on earth between good and evil, as well as in the spiritual realm, they can make the world seem uncertain, risky, and even threatening;

3) individuals can demonstrate their propensity for evil in every moment of daily life, since supernatural evil can hardly be curbed by conscience, customs, social norms, informal social controls, etc. Therefore, believers may perceive a moral imperative to fight evil, especially if some form of threat to the well-being of innocent people (oneself, loved ones, or others) is perceived or imagined. In such circumstances, individuals may feel the need to have access to weapons to fight evil;

4) it may be easier to use weapons against others when they are seen as the embodiment of evil;

5) To justify a murder, the belief that dangerous individuals, such as murderers, can be proof that supernatural evil exists, thus driving believers to want to own a weapon to try to fight the evil, which they consider real and can possess, and therefore act through human beings. These themes, if intersected with each other, according to the authors, can help explain the strong associations between the belief in supernatural evil and Americans' opinions on the policy of gun liberalization (Dawson, 2019).

3.7 The relationship between supernatural evil and punishments

Supernatural evil has a particular relationship with the concept of punishment, since punishment is the instrument with which, following any form of sin, we try to eradicate the evil itself. Through the fear of punishment, obedience and subjection of believers to the will of the divinity is obtained; this is theoretically present in most religions, and at the same time, from a historical and anthropological point of view, it has mediated, and continues to do so, social order and control (Baumer and Martin, 2013). To better understand the relationship between supernatural evil and punishments, reference will be made to some concepts of control theory; this will also be very useful to further understand the other relationships with supernatural evil (Costa, 2024).

By establishing that individuals are selfish and rational, control theorists such as Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that punitive action is necessary, intended as a deterrent to unwanted behavior that can undermine the well-being of a community. Regarding this action there is the belief that outsiders, i.e. those who are outside social conformity, constitute a threat to society and its cohesion, therefore punishment has the task of strengthening the boundaries of the social group that imposes it. By

legitimizing negative sanctions linked to deviant behaviors, one is less inclined to commit other or the same deviant acts (Stack, 2003). Thus, society strengthens reward systems for compliance with established norms and at the same time punishes violation of these norms through sanctions. Sanctions, with the excuse of strengthening the hegemonic power of a group, are not simply corrective responses to unwanted behavior, but a symbolic tool for those who must be "right" in fighting the evil. Belief in the supernatural evil and religion in general are among the most influential institutions due, in large part, to their ability to erect and enforce barriers between groups, as well as define social values (Haidt, 2012).

When individuals come together, it becomes necessary for groups to distinguish between what Durkheim defines as sacred and everything that is profane (Durkheim, 1965) whereby the sacred is understood as an object of veneration and perceived as a form of fear and respect, and the profane, as what is every day and ordinary. These distinctions are spread among group members through rites, rituals and legends. In this way, individuals living in religious environments learn the scope of acceptable behavior through the reinforcement of sacred values and the sanctioning of deviant behavior, in which the concept of supernatural evil becomes a central discriminant for understanding and defining what is religiously, and socially, good or evil (Baker, and Booth, 2016). These definitions serve to reinforce barriers between in-group members and non-group members, mediating rigorous forms of social differentiation. In fact, by the process of differentiating between internal and external members, religious belief systems encourage the individual to desire higher levels of homogeneity within the group (Haidt, 2012).

In particular, beliefs about the existence of supernatural evil that can be spread by external subjects reinforces the idea of superiority and protection of one's own values compared to those outside the group, and this explains the various forms of intolerance that this mechanism underlies. Furthermore, the beliefs that individuals have about their god's response to evil play an important and significant role in how believers interact with other individuals. Differences in individual conceptions of a god have been linked to significant variability in worldview and social and political beliefs. These beliefs influence decisions, choices, etc. in a social context (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2004).

Unnever et al. (2006), for example, found that individuals who are less affected by the punitive idea of God towards evil are less likely to support capital punishment. In addition to influencing an individual's worldview, religion and belief in supernatural evil can be used to determine and shape opinions about more specific issues such as criminal behavior in which believers may see clear evidence of some form of supernatural evil. On the other hand, as has been seen in the relationship between supernatural evil with sexuality and with ethnic minorities, stronger religiosity has been linked to a more conservative and authoritarian political ideology,

furthermore, to greater ethnic homogeneity and less tolerance towards "others" (Davis, 2018).

Conservative Christian values are more likely to endorse ideologies related to punitive justice in response to criminal behavior. Religion, being an instrument of socialization, and therefore of transmission of values, norms, etc. teaches individuals the absolute delimitation between good and evil and, in doing so, allows the individual subject to legitimize more severe and condemnatory beliefs towards those who violate the sacred boundaries which are almost always violated by supernatural evil (Unnever et al., 2006).

Baker and Booth (2016) demonstrate how as belief in supernatural evil increases, approval of both capital punishment and more severe sanctions for criminal conduct increases. These authors found that belief in supernatural evil is positively associated with punitive attitudes.

These authors found that belief in supernatural evil is positively associated with punitive attitudes. In a relatively recent study, Davis (2018) demonstrated how belief in religious evil is a strong predictor of support for capital punishment as well as approval for more severe criminal sanctions. This indicates that regardless of an individual's religious identity, the convergence effect increases the desire to impose a homogeneous identity by harshly sanctioning transgressors of social and supernatural norms.

4. Conclusions

Therefore, this list of reports summarizes and adds to a small yet growing, literature on the relationship between belief in evil and its impact on society. The potential role of belief in supernatural evil in shaping attitudes and orienting actions deserves constant attention from social scientists, therefore, it is hoped that this list, with the respective methodologies, can be applied in the field, through subsequent and more in-depth empirical research, to possibly compare the results obtained.

One aspect is clear: the belief in and the fight against supernatural evil do not consider the concrete consequences that take on the contours of intolerance, the use of forms of evil worse than those we try to face, or as Nietzsche argued, "He who fights against monsters must be careful not to become a monster himself. And if you look for a long time into an abyss, the abyss will also want to look into you" (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 146), therefore when we are so busy researching and fighting against supernatural evil we risk being involved in its dynamics and obeying its laws, which are cultural and social products, therefore human.

The most dangerous risk, which as we have already seen and will be explored in depth in this chapter, consists in the fact that in the attempt to drive away supernatural evil, paradoxically, human and real evil emerges and manifests itself in a

particularly aggressive manner, and therefore we will have to pay close attention because there is a high risk that we could inevitably bend to being scrutinized (and perhaps defeated) by it.

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