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David Frankfurter: Evil Incarnate

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1 *Introduction*

BASQUE VILLAGERS of the sixteenth century had always known that some people could be malevolent, dangerous; and they had long speculated on how such people perverted human custom and brought catastrophe down on their neighbors, how they got their powers to strike ill, what made them *different*. But as rumors filtered up the mountain valleys that French judges to the north were discovering organized *groups* of witches, and then when, around 1610, Franciscan friars arrived with the first, horrific details of a witches' *aquellare*, or Sabbath, with its orgies, feasts on infant flesh, desecration of Christian sacraments, and obscene contracts with the Devil, people grew anxious: malevolence was much bigger than anyone had thought—much worse than one or two village malcontents. It was coordinated by Satan himself, in the form of an anti-Church; and women were particularly bound to the sect through their sexual pleasure with demons. So when children began to let it be known that they had seen these *aquellares*, that they had been taken to them by strange means, and that they had seen people there—neighbors, playmates—panic swept the mountain villages. Lynch mobs formed to deal with those whom the children accused, to root out this Satanic conspiracy from their midst. Local judiciaries tortured those whom the mobs brought in, extracting some of the details of what was going on and how far the conspiracy reached.

By early 1611, responding to the mountain villages' appeal for official help against the witch conspiracy, a formal inquisition was established in a number of towns, using the most authoritative books on the witches' Sabbath. The Inquisition also drew on the best means of extracting testimony, so that the confessions demanded of each village suspect could be fit to a scenario of widespread Satanic conspiracy and witch-evil that had riveted ecclesiastical minds since the late fifteenth century. Hundreds in Basque country were tortured and burned to

death as examples of the Inquisition's omnipotence in saving Christendom from Satanic corruption.¹

The Basque case is but a microcosm of a much broader series of Satanic witchcraft panics that took place in many parts of Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Of course, there were no witches or Sabbats or Satanic conspiracies, just the typical village tensions and suspicions—that one person has the evil eye, another has the power to bless; that one has always borne a cloud of hostility, another enjoys mysterious fortune. How such rudimentary, even inchoate beliefs about evil people or people's consort with spirits could be transformed into the terrifying Satanic conspiracy epitomized in the Sabbat has been the subject of extensive historical analysis for each witchcraft panic. Historians have gone far to comprehend what intellectual, judicial, and political circumstances framed this kind of transformation and why other cultures (like early modern England) could be gripped with witch-fears without any rumors of the Sabbat to integrate them.²

But there have been other historical cases as well whose resemblance to these early modern witch-panics cannot but strike us: Roman rumors about Christians, that they engaged in infant-feasts and orgies and sought the collapse of the moral order, sparking lynchings and executions in the second and third centuries CE. Once again, there was no substance to these rumors in real Christian practice.³ And in the early 1990s a region in southwest Kenya erupted in a witch-panic following an evangelical Christian preaching campaign that equated traditional witchcraft ideas with the Satanic power that Kenyans were increasingly perceiving around the government and new wealth. Witches abducted children, ate corpses, ran naked at night, killed, corrupted village life with their secret poisons, and—most frighteningly—were now in league with that new global power, Satan. At least sixty people died of burns as local youth, encouraged by other villagers, took the expulsion of Satanic power into their own hands, beating and incinerating those they believed to be Satanic witches.⁴

This book, however, stems not from these distant events but rather from some in the most recent decades of American history. Beginning in 1987, a series of television specials broadcast around the country the idea that a large and insidious network of Devil-worshippers were committing a range of atrocities—from cannibalism and human sacrifice to

especially lurid forms of child sexual abuse. These cults, it was said, had enslaved thousands of women to breed babies for sacrifice, and they had insinuated themselves into the upper levels of government to conceal their crimes. Quickly this Satanic conspiracy was adopted as an explanation for the massive day care abuse panics in California, North Carolina, and elsewhere; and Satanic cult details came to figure prominently in the “memories” that a phalanx of psychotherapists were eliciting from patients across the country. These patients—now “Satanic Ritual Abuse survivors”—and the parents of children reporting weird Satanic rites in nursery schools, along with self-proclaimed ritual abuse experts and police cult experts, all began to troop across the nation’s television screens, popular magazines, and instant paperback shelves. They even went on international tours, such that the United Kingdom itself succumbed to the SRA panic by the late 1980s. By the mid-1990s, one could buy Joan Baez’s CD *Play Me Backwards*, with a song about recovering real SRA memories, and one could read articles and reviews in professional journals that premised SRA as a real “cult” scourge and source of trauma.⁵ Meanwhile, charismatic Christian leaders, for whom the rise of Satanism signalled both the reality of Satan and the imminence of the Last Days, communicated the features of Satanic cult conspiracy even further abroad, such that Nigeria and Kenya absorbed rumors of Satanic cults even while the panic began to subside in the Anglophone West.⁶

This SRA panic repeated many of the ancient and early modern features of evil conspiracy panics, yet it erupted among—and was led by—*secular* groups like social workers, police, and psychotherapists; and in this way it confronts us with the real endurance and power of rumors of evil conspiracy, right down to the atrocities performed, its pseudo-religious cast, the wide reach of the conspirators’ malicious deeds, the utter depravity and perversity of their habits and central rituals, and their basic opposition to everything moral and human. From rumors as far back as second-century BCE Rome concerning the atrocities of the Bacchanalia, through panics in medieval and early modern Europe about Jews’ ritual murders of Christian children, to these recent SRA panics, it would seem that rumors about an evil conspiracy, especially of a pseudo-religious character, can take form in almost any ideological system, not simply a Christian one. Furthermore, it would

seem that such evil conspiracies can be extended to almost every aspect of experience, from child abduction to moral decline, from sick livestock and storms in the sixteenth century to police departments and day care centers in the late twentieth. All these realities become tentacles of the conspiracy.

Such a conspiracy—of witches, Satanists, Jews, Christians, heretics, or whatever—has never existed, even if (as chapter 7 will discuss further) violent, even homicidal, rituals have certainly been recorded. (Such rituals, it must be said, have been recorded most vividly and extensively in *public religious circumstances* and by those *purging* evil rather than celebrating it). So is there something common to all these incidents of conspiracy rumors and panics, a *myth* of evil conspiracy that, if not transcending history, kicks into action under certain circumstances? How do we explain the similarities across cultures and time periods? And what exactly is similar: the beliefs? The social dynamics of conspiracy panic? Are we “hardwired” to believe in monsters or demonic enemies? Or do the patterns we observe across history and cultures come down simply to influences—books and ideas passed across territories and down through centuries?

Sorting Out Resemblances

Fundamentally, each incident must first reflect a particular situation, an historical and social context, before it can be said to be an example of a pattern. Rumors about early Christians as orgiastic cannibals in the Roman Empire of the second and third centuries CE, for example, clearly reflect Roman traditions of imagining foreign cults as antithetical to Roman morality.⁷ The representation of witches in 1692 Salem and the ensuing community panic about diabolical witchcraft must certainly be understood in relationship to the region’s experiences of the Indian wars, social tensions in the community, and the lives of the “afflicted” women.⁸ Witch panics in contemporary Africa cannot be understood apart from individual regions’ particular encounters with modernity, with global economies, and with the new notions of power and exploitation that these forces present to ordinary Africans.⁹ A modern American community’s inclination to embrace the Satanic

cult conspiracy—in a day care center or local families—depends on the books and television shows in circulation and the theories (and even conference attendance) of local detectives and social workers.¹⁰ No myth of evil conspiracy arises apart from distinct historical stresses.

But do these immediate contexts exhaust our understanding of the events or the rumors—the very images of demonic corruption and demonic rituals? How far do they go to explain the passions involved in the panics: the *terror* communities experienced by facing unseen conspiratorial forces, or the *fascination* with which people who are beset by these panics bring to contemplating “ritual” perversions and atrocities they believe to take place at the center of conspiracy? We know that the great early modern European witch-panics, for example, arose not simply because of ecclesiastical politics or village tensions but, perhaps most centrally, because of the stark power of the witches’ Sabbat, a picture of Satanic conspiracy broadcast through much of Europe through popular preaching and torture. The Sabbat image had a curious hold on audiences, as have Satanic conspiracies in modern America and Kenya, and others before.

So rather than attributing every incident to its particular social, political, and intellectual context, this study suggests that there are meaningful patterns across them: “something” about abducted and abused or sacrificed children, “something” about a secret counter-religion bent on corruption and atrocity, “something” about people whose inclinations and habits show them to be not quite people, and “something” about the authoritative way these stories are presented. There exists, in some sense, a *myth of evil conspiracy*—using “myth” in the sense of master narrative rather than false belief. The problem is how to explain this myth and its patterns with due regard to their contexts: not as timeless, omnipotent archetypes but—as I will argue—ways of thinking about Otherness, of imagining an upside-down world that inverts our own, of encountering local malevolence suddenly in universal scope, and of sensing the collapse of vital boundaries between “us” and those monstrous “others.”

There is, furthermore, a depth to these ways of thinking and imagining. The universality of a child-eating, backwards-walking, misshapen witch, the anthropologist Rodney Needham points out, cannot be explained simply through influences or historical circumstances. The

consistency of such witch-figures across time and space, from ancient Mesopotamia and traditional Asia through early modern Europe and modern Africa, bespeaks some kind of “psychic constant,” he concludes, some “autonomous image to which the human mind is naturally predisposed.” Witches represent the cross-cultural tendency to construct images of *inversion*—the opposite of what “we” do and are—for diverse social purposes. The historian Norman Cohn, in the first edition of his magisterial study of the roots of the witches’ Sabbat, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, proposed some tentative links between the relentless perversity of the Sabbat, so gripping to judges and inquisitors, and the preoccupations with cannibalism and inverse sexuality in the Grimms’ tales and children’s fantasy. Witches and the fascinated horror that surrounds them seem to correspond to what psychoanalysts call “primary process” thinking.¹¹ When we describe cross-cultural and transhistorical patterns of a myth of evil conspiracy, we must be as open to this kind of depth as to the immediate contexts. We must also frame the patterns not as immutable archetypes but as *clusters of related images or social dynamics*, comparing (for example) various images of perversion and savagery, or comparing various forms of charismatic expertise in identifying evil, rather than *the* child-eating myth or *the* witch-hunter. (The night-witch, on the other hand, is cross-culturally so consistent an image of predatory monstrosity that we can speak of this image in more monolithic terms). Defining patterns in this way allows us to compare and contrast the discrete historical occurrences—ancient Christians and early modern Jews, putative Nigerian Satanic cults and South African sorcery cults—more productively than simple *impressions* of resemblance would allow. This book, then, is about the patterns that frame the differences. For we will always understand better the meaning of cultural and historical differences, especially among such conspiracy panics, when we have some framework by which to compare them.

Circumstances for Imagining Evil

Obviously much about these historical occurrences will *not* subscribe to patterns. Why one culture can hold myths of evil conspiracy

as latent assumptions about reality for decades without acting to expel it, while another will become so gripped with fear that it launches full-scale exterminations, are questions that come down to many social and historical factors. The latent patterns that this book addresses, however, do seem to be activated—to shift from legend to preoccupation—in the encounter between local religious worlds and larger, totalizing, often global systems. In those local worlds, experiences of misfortune and dangerous people are negotiated through customs and landscape, often (as we will see in chapter 2) in improvised, situationally specific ways rather than by handbooks or institutionally established procedures. When such worlds come into contact with some larger ideology, like the centralizing Church of fifteenth-century European heresy-hunts or the global capitalist discourse of twentieth-century colonial powers in Africa, several shifts in worldview take place. First, that global or totalizing ideology is granted the authority to define what is sacred, what is prestigious, and often what is subversive or evil—in the sense of counterhuman. Secondly, as a consequence of this authority, those in local worlds begin to think in terms of that global ideology, to appropriate its symbols and terms and even accoutrements (like books or medical instruments, for example) in order to reframe the misfortunes and pollutions of the local world.

By assuming to itself what we may call the “totalizing discourse” of that global ideology, the local world comes to recast the bad or suspicious people in their midst. Their *tools* for harm, for example, come to resemble the tools of the global system: they are *like* the Church’s sacraments, they are *like* computers or radios, and they are the more insidious for their modernity. The *celebrations* of evil people sound like perversions of what the global authorities enjoy. They participate in a global organization, with links to foreign countries.¹² They are *organized* in just the kind of hierarchies that integrate the global system. Indeed, this encounter of worlds and their worldviews produces notions of *conspiracy*—of a quintessentially “modern,” hierarchical kind of subversion—where beforehand there was seldom more than individual maliciousness and capricious spirits to mobilize communities. What produces panics and mass purges, then, is thinking about familiar

anxieties—witches, foreigners, immorality, even economic inequality—in newly ramified terms, and especially (although not exclusively) in the radically polarized Christian terms of Satanic evil.

In some of these encounters, such as those in colonial Africa, local worlds confronted with a global system of modernity and capitalism readily appropriated that totalizing discourse, producing the distinctive witch-cleansing movements of the later twentieth century, in which wealth, exploitation, commodities, and often the Devil were prominent features of the feared witchcraft power.¹³ In other cases—those of early modern Europe and the Roman Empire, for example—the sheer might behind the totalizing, transnational (if not actually global) system simply forced that worldview and its sense of conspiracy into local worlds. But synthesis would follow enforcement, such that one eventually finds, in many places, local authorities trying witches (or *magoi* in the Roman world) as cosmic enemies—that is, in the ramified terminology of the totalizing system. And in still other cases, such as the modern United States and United Kingdom, the very erosion of the local world as a real social entity capable of maintaining traditions for the resolution of misfortune—indeed, an anxious tendency to frame every misfortune or deviant behavior in global terms—led communities to seek ever new totalizing frameworks for local crises. Conspiracies, as we well know, have historically figured large in this regard.¹⁴

And in these encounters—these representations of local crisis and anxiety in totalized, cosmic terms—monstrous images rise from the depths of the cultural imagination, from story and fantasy, to become organizing devices—the faces of evil. Evil itself becomes a context, a theater, for individuals to simultaneously, project and repudiate, uncomfortable spectacles of immoral, perverse behavior (cannibalism, incest) and everyday pollutions (menstrual blood, death, sexuality). But the terror of evil seeks some kind of *organization*, albeit inverted or distorted from familiar institutions like the Church, to make the “worst thing” somehow comprehensible. Organized conspiracies always have a peculiar reassurance, for they suggest that not just misfortune but *evil* exists and has its own horrific intentions. Indeed, it is by our discovery of organized evil that we can obliterate it—at least through the bodies of those who manifest it.

Evil in the Perspective of This Book

The chapters that follow work comparatively across the various historical incidents of a myth of evil conspiracy, from Roman fears of subversive cults up to the Satanic Abuse panic of the early 1990s, laying out some clear patterns through which terror expresses itself in notions of organized, pseudo-religious evil. Beginning with the historical and social origins of demonology itself, the very idea that misfortune can be understood through a hierarchy or geography of demons (chapter 2), I focus in chapter 3 on the role of independent professionals in the identification of evil in broadcasting notions of organized, widespread evil. Whether for the sake of some new religion or merely by their own convictions, these figures lead audiences first to see the same widespread demonic conspiracy that they themselves do, and then to enter states of anxiety about organized evil—the only solution to which anxiety is public expurgation in the form of exorcisms, witch-hunts, or other forms of purification. Chapters 4 and 5 shift to those core atrocities of Satanic conspiracy myths that the professionals in evil lead audiences to contemplate: first, *rituals* that celebrate evil, especially in blood-sacrifice; and secondly, *perversions* like cannibalism, infant-murder, orgy, and the whole panoply of inverse habits imputed to the truly monstrous.

In chapter 6, I look at how these wild ideas about evil conspiracy become real, as it were, through individuals who act “as if” a Satanic or witch-conspiracy and its core atrocities were actively tangible. This is an important feature in the vitality of these myths of organized evil, for people’s very experience of—not to speak of credulity in—the myths inevitably comes down to such allegedly direct testimony. Because this phenomenon has not before been addressed comparatively, I offer a classification for comparing the different ways that individuals and groups “perform evil,” either *directly*, as confessing witches or demons in the process of exorcism, or *indirectly*, as (alleged) victims or witnesses of Satanic atrocity. I describe their functions in “realizing” and situating evil as types of *mimetic performance*. Never have these performances constituted reliable proof for the historical or forensic reality of Satanic conspiracy—witch-cults, Satanic cults, Jewish ritual

murderers. They have only been performances: sincere ones, we can be confident, arising from complex social and psychological backgrounds, to be sure, but performances nonetheless.

This book emerges at a time when documentation of violent sorcery practices cross-culturally, ritualized slaughter and cannibalism by militias, and extreme forms of child abuse committed under religious auspices have saturated both scholarly literature and popular media. Because contemporary theorists of a Satanic cult conspiracy have often cited such cases to lend plausibility to secret Satanic atrocities otherwise lacking documentation, it is important to clarify the significant differences between, on the one hand, these documented atrocities and their occasional, complicated ritual contexts, and, on the other hand, those ritual atrocities alleged to take place at the center of the various evil-conspiracy panics discussed in this book. I address these differences in chapter 7, drawing on a wide range of documented atrocities and with attention to the meaning of “ritual” in each case.

Evil in this book, then, is not something out there, organized and corrupting, but something constructed and acted out—a myth that can take on a life of its own, gripping us with terror and fascination, impelling us to purge it from our midst. This book examines the forms and the allures of that myth as it has played out in history. It takes seriously, too, the rationality of these images of organized evil, offering the reader a generalized sense of how they are experienced, what types of fantasies and fears give shape to them, and how, as extreme as the stories might be, they gain a kind of presence in the world through the gestures and voices of real people. Indeed, to express the worldview of those consumed by the myth of evil conspiracy, I will occasionally move into the first-person “we”—not to endow this worldview with credibility but rather to suspend the judgment, the incredulity, that comes from distanced description, to allow some temporary participation in the encounter with organized evil: to experience it as a mode of human religious experience rather than a bizarre form of collective delusion. It is, in the words of William Ian Miller, “an invitational we . . . the voice of attempted sympathy and imagination”—even in such disturbing encounters as this book demands.¹⁵

Of course, there might be some irony in trying to explain, even to imagine sympathetically, a conviction in evil forces during a time when

our own culture is preoccupied with the evils of terrorism. Indeed, we ourselves very much crave a rhetoric of evil—and the certainty that follows the deployment of a word like “evil,” signifying what is absolutely inhuman, beyond the pale of comprehensible behavior, and of a nature that transcends the individual atrocity. We feel a comfort in the clarity the word offers: that the mother who kills her children, the commander of genocide, the unrepentant mass murderer need not be “understood” but be called for what he or she is; and it seems like we are always encountering these personifications of evil in the news. The contemporary evangelical Christian rhetoric of our leaders, commentary on our television and radio shows, the bestselling *Left Behind* book series—all of these strong voices encourage us to see evil “for what it is” and to feel comfortable applying the term. It is a familiar, useful word, “evil,” so is it not obvious what it means? Is it not obvious what it describes?¹⁶

Yet this book rests on the fundamental humanistic stance that evil is a *discourse*, a way of representing things and shaping our experience of things, not some force in itself. The most horrible atrocities—and those of us who have studied religion under the shadow of Auschwitz, Jedwabne, Srebrenica, and Kigali can hardly ignore their significance—can and must be rendered sensible as human actions with proper contexts. The application of the term “evil” to some horrible act or event renders it *outside* the realm of human comprehension and identification—in many ways “safely” outside that realm, where we no longer need to contemplate our own inclinations to such acts or to understand events as part of some cycle of misfortune (as in recent tragic cases of mothers who killed their children). This observation, that applying the word “evil” amounts to a strategy for setting things apart from comprehension, is not in any way original. Dividing deviant acts between human and monstrous—setting an implicit boundary beyond which acts are no longer worthy of context or empathy—is a common phenomenon of cultures. The word “evil” may have a distinctly modern absoluteness but such moral divisions, such zones beyond which is only monstrosity, are the habits of national leaders and small groups equally. Still, I start this book from the position that for the interpreter of cultures, the critic, or historian, or social scientist, the use of the term “evil” amounts to intellectual laziness, shutting off inquiry and the proper

search for context. Indeed, the gravity of the panics discussed in this book suggests that the discourse of evil inevitably takes on a life of its own, shifting into large-scale myths of evil conspiracy and Satanic rituals, and almost never with any forensic basis at all. Perhaps for that reason alone, evil should be scrutinized as a way of thinking rather than held up as a reality for our time.¹⁷

If there is irony, then it lies not in my having to describe the experience of evil in its extreme but rather in the fact that, in every one of the historical cases I address, it was the myth of evil conspiracy that mobilized people in large numbers to astounding acts of brutality against accused conspirators. That is, the real atrocities of history seem to take place *not* in the perverse ceremonies of some evil cult but rather in the course of *purg*ing such cults from the world. Real evil happens when people speak of evil.