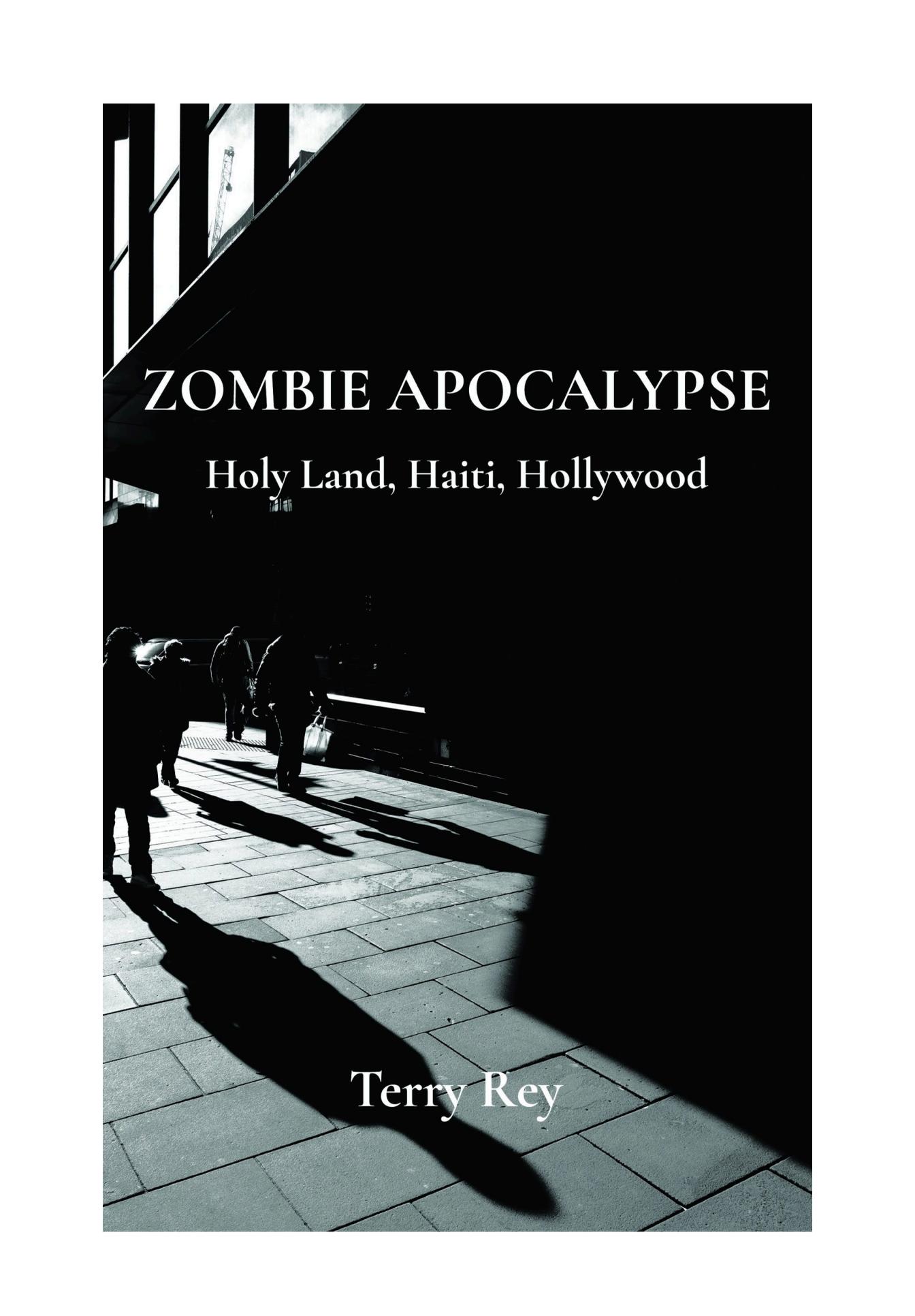


Zombie Apocalypse



ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

Holy Land, Haiti, Hollywood

Terry Rey

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TERRY REY



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In loving memory of María de los Ángeles Antón de Rey

Descansa en paz, mi amor.... Nos vemos en el jardín.... Inshallah...

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Acknowledgments

2020 proved to be an (in)auspicious year to launch a class on the zombie apocalypse and to start writing this accompanying book. For the COVID-19 pandemic has seemed apocalyptic, as infected humans are—like zombies—contagious, dangerous, breathing heavily, lurking, and reminding us of our mortality and of the sobering fact that neither we nor the world itself can last forever, as evinced by the millions who have died from the coronavirus. I had no idea that such was on our horizon when I first thought of teaching and writing about the zombie apocalypse, that the whole effort would be encased by a pandemic. But it all now seems rather providential and has really made the class, and hopefully this book, more compelling. It certainly is more timely, thanks to the virus.

Thanks to the virus? What a strange phrase to write, but here we are. Since launching into all this, I've often contemplated Slavoj Žižek's observation that "the point is to reflect upon the sad fact that we need a catastrophe to be able to rethink the very basic features of the society in which we live." The course was first taught to about a hundred students in a lecture hall at Temple University, my intellectual home and alma mater. During that class, all of a sudden the lights went off. It was Friday the Thirteenth in March of 2020, and the university shut down and all classes went online because of a deadly virus, as did thousands of schools around the world. Time to hoard toilet paper, stock up on Spam and tequila, learn Zoom, and hunker down, I guessed—and contemplate catastrophe and fate.

Two months later I was awarded a generous grant and a contract to write this book, and I am so grateful to the good folks at North Broad Press, Temple University Press, and Temple University Libraries for supporting the cause. North Broad Press has the coolest conference room on campus, at the Charles Library; it is such an inspiration to sit and confer with super smart colleagues while surrounded by copies of every book that Temple University Press has ever published. Thanks especially to Annie Johnson, a wonderful editor and sage counsel. Open Access is a new thing to me, but this has been such a refreshing way to write, and Annie's insights were illuminating all along the way. Gratitude is also extended to Mary Rose Muccie and Alicia Pucci, who ably took over the editorial stewardship when Annie left Temple for another university. I am also indebted to Stephanie Marshall Ward for her outstanding copyediting of the manuscript and insight. It has been a pleasure working with all of them/you. And, at the library, I have long enjoyed working with Fred Rowland, whose expertise and guidance have helped craft this book in many ways and made the class a better experience for my students and for me.

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welcoming me to do some of my research and writing in the Krauskopf Memorial Library at Delaware Valley University, even if at times I was mesmerizingly distracted by Rabbi Krauskopf's amazing collection of books and the wonderful room in which it is housed.

Above all, I thank my undergraduate students at Temple, especially those in that fateful semester of spring 2020. When the pandemic hit and we all went home on Friday the Thirteenth, their journals morphed like viral variants, their reflections turning to COVID, like "Wow, this is really happening now! This is the apocalypse!" And some were overwhelmed with concern or grief as friends or relatives were ailing or died, and I am so, so sorry for that. My sincerest condolences. Hopefully, this class provided some perspective, like this: That people have always thought that the world was/is about to end, and that contagion is fearsome and fairly frequent. And that we should never give up hope or give up on love, and that we really can find deepened ways to love through tragedy.

I am especially grateful for my students' feedback on earlier drafts of the chapters that comprise this book and for the sage advice that each chapter really needs a glossary. So thank you, dear students. Apologies for having thrown terms from over a dozen languages at all of you, but it has been quite a journey, and I am happy and appreciative to have had co-pilgrims along the way. This is in large part yours, and I wish that I could list you as coauthors. But it is Open Access, so have at it. You can download, change things up, add images, mpegs, screen grabs, links, and such, comment, and so on and so forth. Though there are others I would like to acknowledge by name here but have unfortunately lost notes of their contributions, among my students I would like to thank particularly Lee Bryant, Adam Kelly, Felix Makalintal, Maya Posecznick, Austin Smith, and Wendy Stanga, who have taught me much about zombies, popular culture, video games, movies, and the meaning of it all. Additional thanks to my former doctoral student Minjung Noh for having lectured in the class on Korea's rich zombie apocalypse culture. *Yeoleobun deoghun-e*.

Several friends and colleagues at Temple, erudite scholars and fine people all, read parts of earlier drafts of the manuscript, hence *gratias tibi valde* to Professors Zain Abdullah, Khalid Blankinship, Mark Leuther, and Vasiliki Limberis. Putting this class and textbook together benefited from the administrative support of Annette McMenammin Bakely and Jemina Quarles; were I English, I would say "Ta, very much." In terms of understanding zombies, meanwhile, I have been blessed to have befriended, over many years, learned scholars who know a lot about them, especially Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, Leslie Desmangles, Benjamin Hebblethwaite, Joel Jean-Baptiste, Alissa Jordan, Ira Lowenthal, Randy Matory, Elizabeth McAlister, Karen Richman, James Sweet, and Drexel Woodson. Plenty of other folks in Haiti and the Congo to thank, also, but they have asked not to be named, and I get and respect that.

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Introduction

I am Cap'tain Zombie

I drink with my ears

I hear with my ten fingers

I have a tongue that sees all

A radar of smell that captures

The waves of the human heart ~ René Depestre

~

Mountains will crumble, but the emptiness of space . . . will never crumble away because it was never born. The world you see is just a movie in your mind. ~ Jack Kerouac

~

*God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else?
~ C. S. Lewis*

~

This is how the world ends; not with a bang or a whimper, but with zombies knocking at your backdoor. ~ Amanda Hocking

~

One day the world will end. How, when, and why this might happen are questions that have captivated humanity for thousands of years. What are the signs of this impending doom? Earthquakes? Locusts? Wars? Demons? A moon split in two? Crumbling mountains?¹ The universe melting?² The sun rising in the west? Zombies who eat with their ears and bang at your backdoor?³ COVID? Beliefs surrounding such signs portending the apocalypse and the judgment of souls have enthralled humanity and shaped lives throughout history, perhaps more so than any other belief but that in God, a God who is behind all of this. That there might be an almighty God who will destroy the world as we know it, judge us, and thereby determine our eternal fate is especially relevant as I write this book, as by the summer of 2024 nearly seven million human beings have died of COVID-19 across the globe, nowhere more so than in the United States of America.

Is this a sign that the end is near? Will there be a rapture, leaving tribulation saints on earth

to struggle against the wicked and the afflicted? Will zombies be part of the apocalypse? They are contagious, after all, quite viral, and, like the afflicted and the wicked, they were once fully human and had a chance at salvation. Are they still human, the wicked, the afflicted, the zombies? Is it okay to kill them? What does it all mean, and how did zombies gain a role in the apocalypse in popular imagination in the first place? This book seeks to provide answers to these and related questions, along with some urgent historical perspective on what we are going through today, during the COVID pandemic and its sputtering aftermath, even if that wasn't the initial plan, and even if some officials have declared the pandemic over, although one never knows when the next variant of the virus will surge.

Because the idea of the apocalypse is much, much older than the idea of the zombie, our story opens at that very place on Earth where the idea of the end begins. Today this place straddles Iran and Afghanistan. Most historians of religion agree that the oldest recorded teachings about the apocalypse are those of Zoroaster (c.1500–1000 B.C.E.), a mystical priest of an ancient Persian religion, for whom is named the great faith tradition of Zoroastrianism. His teachings would be amplified by later Zoroastrian prophets and absorbed into and adapted by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As of 2021, more than half of all people on Earth belong to the latter two religions. The four chapters in Section One thus introduce each of these religions and provide analyses of their respective eschatologies—their teachings about the end of time, the end of the world as we know it, the apocalypse, Judgment Day, and the afterlife.

The idea of the zombie has mostly African roots, though a few of its first sprouts were European. That said, the *zonbi* is originally and really a Haitian phenomenon, embedded in and emerging from the African-derived Caribbean religion of Vodou. Therefore, the four chapters in Section Two will introduce Vodou and explore its notion of the soul and the ways in which zombies are made and understood in Haiti. Thus, five religions are covered in the first half of our study. By way of introducing them, the late great Scottish scholar Ninian Smart's "seven dimensions of religion" will be selectively employed in discussions of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Vodou.⁴ The seven dimensions are as follows.

Practical and Ritual: What people do in a religion, especially rituals, but also practices that are not necessarily ritualistic, like spontaneous and solitary prayer, yoga, meditation, chanting, sacrificing chickens, and such.

Experiential and Emotional: One's experience of the transcendent or of divinity, "the food on which all other dimensions of religion feed," especially mysticism (the personal experience of the sacred) and collective rituals that stir deep emotions in one's heart and soul.

Narrative and Mythic: Myths and beliefs as recorded in scripture, art, or memory, which Smart refers to as "the story side of religion."

Doctrinal/Philosophical: This dimension of religion is largely interpretive and codifying. Myths are interpreted in the pursuit of truth, and the results often become codified as doctrinal beliefs, doctrines and creeds to which religious people adhere and authoritative teachings by which they live.

Ethical and Legal: Some religions feature laws that are central to the orientation of their

believers, while others might “be less tied to a system of law, but still display an ethic which is influenced and indeed controlled by the myth of doctrine and of the faith.”

Social and Institutional: This dimension consists of the ways in which religion “is embodied in a group of people” (e.g., a church, synagogue, or mosque) and the social relations and shared beliefs that intertwine them.

Material: The “social or institutional dimension of religion almost inevitably becomes incarnate in material form, as buildings, works of art, and other creations.” On a smaller but no less important scale, other material things like wax, bread, wood, water, metal, and incense are required for some of the holiest rituals in most religions.

The point of Smart’s scheme of categorization is “to help characterize religions as they exist in the world.” However, these categories are not necessarily universal across humanity’s vast religious landscape and through the course of its deep and amazing religious history, for “there are religious movements or manifestations where one or other of the dimensions are so weak as to be virtually absent.”⁵ In Haitian Vodou, for example, there is no single creed that all believers recite, nor any scripture to which they refer, nor a collection of codified doctrines to follow. Hence the doctrinal dimension of this religion will not be explored—there simply is none. In Zoroastrianism, meanwhile, the ethical dimension will be foregrounded because the entire religion revolves around the belief that all will be judged in the end based on their negotiation of and participation in the cosmic struggle between good and evil that frames our existence and our ultimate fate.

There are no zombies in Section One of our book, as its four chapters “only” treat the end of the world as understood in four of the greatest religions in world history; historically, that is, way before there were really any zombies. The first chapter treats Zoroastrianism, the second Judaism, the third Christianity, and the fourth Islam. All these momentous religions are deeply apocalyptic, and this dimension is the main focus throughout Section One. At the same time, the chapters serve as basic introductions to these religions, which is necessary because of the diversity of the student population for which this book was designed. In 2007 the *Princeton Review* ranked Temple University as the most diverse institution of higher education in the United States.⁶ Hence, some of this book’s first readers are lifelong devout Muslims from countries far from the United States who know much more about Islam than I, while others are from small American towns who may have never met a Muslim nor had the opportunity to learn about Islam. In Section One, this diverse readership meets. At least that is the hope.

In Section Two, zombies finally appear—and rather forcefully at that—as we largely move away from Smart’s categories of religion, save for in the chapter on Haitian Vodou. Vodou is an African-derived religion that emerged in the eighteenth century in the French Caribbean plantation colony of Saint-Domingue, which would become the independent Republic of Haiti following the triumph of the Haitian Revolution in 1804, the only successful national slave revolt in human history. The practice of African religions was outlawed in the colony, with Catholicism being the only recognized and legal faith tradition. But that did not stop African spirituality from flourishing and blending with Catholic practices, symbols, and beliefs, a process known among anthropologists and historians as “syncretism.” To understand the

origins of the zombie, it is thus necessary to consider the African ethnic and religious composition of victims of the transatlantic slave trade who wound up in Saint-Domingue. That is the focus of Chapter 5, the first chapter of Section Two. Beyond that discussion and the aforementioned introductory chapter on Vodou, two other chapters round out Section Two, one on notions of death, dying, and the soul in Haitian Vodou and the other on the varieties of zombies that one might encounter, or at least hear rumors about, in Haiti.

As will become abundantly clear in Section Three, following the cultural theft of a ghoulish “monster” from Haiti—from its lucrative launch on the Hollywood silver screen to its presence on zombie walks—this victim has been transformed into a fearsome sort-of-human being, the undead, that millions around the world have come to dreadfully cherish. This creature is altogether different from its culturally stolen Caribbean ancestor. Zombies in Haiti do not eat brains, nor do they swarm in hordes or seek to turn normal living people into the walking dead or the living dead. Historically speaking, the zombie was a replacement slave, someone who was poisoned, ostensibly died, and was then exhumed from the grave to sluggishly and mindlessly labor without pay or to do the bidding of a sorcerer. They would be carefully but sparsely fed—carefully, because if they could eat salt, they would gain awareness of their zombic state and either revolt against their masters or return to their respective tombs. Haitian zombies are also not fast, but in their abducted and capitalized forms—in cinema, fictional literature, and video games, ad infinitum— they surely and profitably have become rapidly mobile in places.

These and other ideas and developments in zombie history, profit, globalization, and lore are covered in Section Three, which also includes four chapters: Chapter 9, “How Did the Zombie Wind up in America?”; Chapter Ten, “History of Zombie Cinema and Literature”; Chapter Eleven, “Gaming and Walking the Undead”; and Chapter Twelve, “Why Zombies? Sociophobics, Contagion, Othering.” Like the chapters in Sections One and Two, each of these four chapters contains extensive citations, a bibliography, and a glossary. I have my students to thank for suggesting the glossaries, as we counted terms from over a dozen languages that are introduced throughout the manuscript and during our class, which is a bit sprawling, admittedly. Then again, so is the end of the world, which implicates all of us—in countless languages—whether we are dead or alive. And so is contagion: a sprawl that speaks all languages. The end of the world and pandemics are, by definition, universal and polyglottic, after all.

This textbook is long, so I have kept the introduction short rather than providing an extensive preview of the twelve chapters that follow. *Zombie Apocalypse: Holy Land, Haiti, Hollywood* is structured for a fifteen-week fall or spring semester class, with each chapter read during a particular week. The class was launched in the spring semester of 2020—great timing, I know!—and I am the sole designer, though I did have the good fortune to review materials from courses on zombies already being taught at several other colleges and universities. My class differs from the others in first exploring historically the idea of the apocalypse; this is, after all, a class in a department of religious studies, though it is quite interdisciplinary and draws on a wide range of fields of academic inquiry, including biblical studies, Africana studies, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, historiography, literary criticism, and feminist theory.

Finally, this is an open access textbook, meaning that it is gratis not only to students at

Temple University but to anyone in the world with internet access. All are free to read the whole thing or only portions, revise sections, swap out images and maps—whatever they wish and however they wish—just as I might make changes to the text down the road. (I doubt that, though, as I am tired of zombies and doom.) Hence, though the book is primarily intended as a text for a course called “Zombie Apocalypse,” it will hopefully be of interest and use to a wide and diverse range of readers, teachers, and seekers, and maybe even to recovered zombies.

Bonne lecture!

Notes

1. Jack Kerouac, *The Portable Jack Kerouac*. Ed. Anne Charters. New York: Penguin, 1955. The quote is from a 1957 letter by Kerouac to his first wife, Edie Kerouac Parker. [↵](#)
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996 (1952), 38. [↵](#)
3. René Depestre, *Un arc-en-ciel pour l'occident chrétien: Poèmes, mystère vaudou*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1967, 55 (my translation); Amanda Hocking, *Hollowland*. Charleston: Createspace, 2011 (2010), 5. [↵](#)
4. Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 11. [↵](#)
5. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
6. “[Temple Student Body Ranked Most Diverse in Nation](#),” Temple University, September 12, 2007, <https://news.temple.edu/news/temple-student-body-ranked-most-diverse-nation>; last accessed October 13, 2021. [↵](#)

PART I
HOLY LAND

Preface

There are no zombies in Section One of our book, which might be a good thing, as its four chapters are already terrifying enough in and of themselves. Terrifying, because the world will end one day and some of us, depending on the ways in which we have lived, thought, and spoken, will be cast eternally into a pit of fire, into hell. That is one of the central teachings of ethical monotheism, the most popular form of religion in the world, which holds that God is one and that long ago the Supreme Creator established laws that we are to follow, and if we do not, we are doomed, condemned. It is unclear what is to happen to zombies, or whether they will be pardoned for having already suffered enough, but the apocalypse is a much older idea than they and collides with the zombie only in the twentieth century. This is a notion that we cover at length in Section Two. Section One, meanwhile, looks closely at four great monotheistic religions and their eschatologies, or their teachings about the end of the world, the cataclysmic apocalypse, judgment day, and the afterlife. Chapter One begins with the beginning of the end, found in the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, and focuses on the teachings of its founder, Zoroaster, and those of a later prophet named Arda Viraf. Their eschatological insights were well known among Jews in the region and influenced confluent notions in Judaism and its apocalyptic theology, the central subjects of Chapter Two. Chapter Three does the same with Christianity, which sits squarely in this apocalyptic lineage but diverts significantly by claiming Jesus Christ to be the very messiah spoken of previously in Zoroastrianism and in the Hebrew Bible, the scripture at the very heart of his own faith tradition. Chapter Four turns attention to Islam, the world's fastest growing religion and soon to be its largest, which is heir and torchbearer to this remarkable history of apocalyptic prophecy, practice, and fascination. Before journeying into the depths of hell and the lofty heights of heaven, each chapter opens with a brief and basic introduction to one of these extraordinary and world-transforming faith traditions, considered in chronological order in terms of apocalypticism. We now proceed to the first, Zoroastrianism.

I. Zoroastrianism: The Beginning of the End

Whence Begins the End?

Our book begins with Zoroastrianism because in Zoroastrianism begins the end. Named for its founder, [Zoroaster](#) (Greek translation of the Persian “Zarathustra”), this ancient religion emerged in what is today Iran, sometime between 1700 and 1000 B.C.E..¹ In the mythological telling the first prophet is said to have appeared in the year 3000 B.C.E., “2,970 years after the Onslaught of Evil” and 3000 years before the apocalypse.² Other ancient thinkers had contemplated the end of the world independently of Zoroastrianism, of course. “The capacity for humans to imagine their own annihilation is an old one,” Christopher Star explains in a fascinating study of notions of the end of the world in classical Greek and Roman philosophy. “Some of the earliest written texts we have, preserved on clay tablets from Mesopotamia and dating back to the second millennium B.C.E., tell the story of the repeated attempts by the gods to finally gain peace from all the noise generated by an ever-growing human population.”³ But these notions have had little lasting influence on humanity compared to Zoroaster’s prophecy of the Onslaught. Furthermore, they were not tied to a single creator God who established laws. In other words, Zoroaster’s is the first prophecy of the apocalypse emerging from [ethical monotheism](#), which would become the religious faith of most humans on Earth, especially in the forms of Christianity and Islam.

In his visions, Zoroaster came to understand that the Onslaught had been initiated when one of God’s two sons, the source of evil, killed the first human being, an androgynous person named [Gayomard](#).⁴ God’s second son is the source of good, and all of history, until its inevitable end, involves an epic struggle between these two sons and all their forces in creation, especially in the human soul. In Zoroastrianism, that struggle underlies the saga of life, death, and the end of the world and explains their meanings and the ultimate meaning of life. Thus, “religious history was an eschatological history, a necessary means to achieve the final victory of good over evil.”⁵ Zoroaster was chosen by God, created by God as His prophet, to proclaim this to the world.

Zoroaster’s birth was auspicious, as signaled by a number of miracles. For instance, as soon as the prophet was born, he chanted prayers against the forces of evil. This prompted Satan to seek to eliminate him, as Carlo Cereti explains: “Zoroaster’s youth was marred by [evil priests trying] to do away with him, but the attempts failed.” This included placing the child atop a blazing fire, “but the fire refused to burn him. Then he was laid in the path of cattle, but the largest of the bulls stood by him and did not allow any damage to be done to the child.” Subsequently, the evil priests tossed the baby prophet into a den of wolves, but the gods

enabled Zoroaster to smash their fangs.⁶ Thus by the grace of God did Zoroaster survive and reach adulthood to become the world's first prophet and to meet with God, [Ahura Mazda](#).

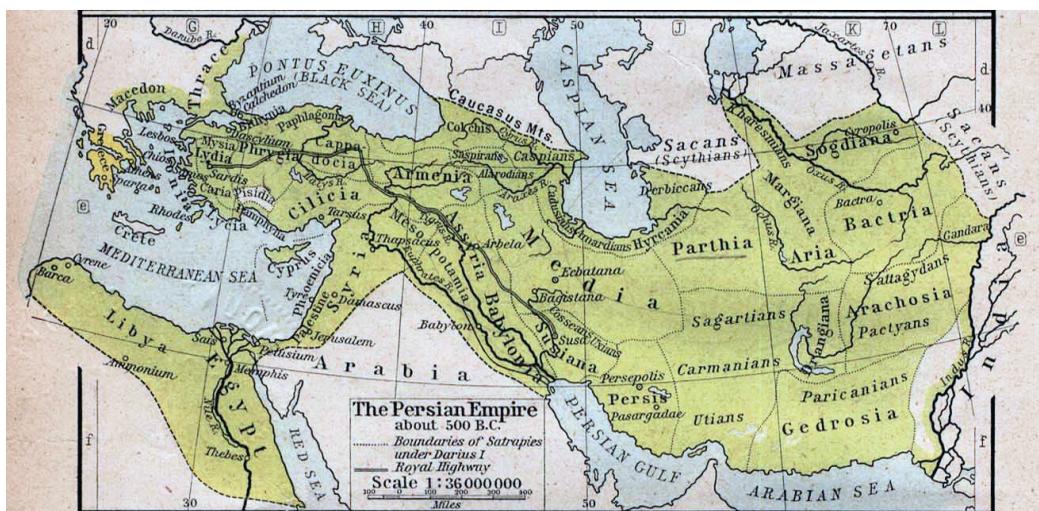
The single most important event in Zoroaster's life is his meeting with Ohrmazd [Ahura Mazda], when God reveals to him the religion . . . in its wholeness and the prophet accepts it in order to spread it among humankind. This took place when Zoroaster reached the age of thirty. . . . The god was in human form, but as tall as three men, each a spear length. . . . Once back from his meeting with Ohrmazd, Zoroaster proclaimed the truth of the religion, incurring the wrath of the [evil priests].⁷

The wrath of evil priests and the forces that drove them would not deter the prophet, however, who since birth had been protected by Ahura Mazda to fulfill his divine mission. Despite being persecuted and imprisoned for his teachings, Zoroaster managed to get kings to accept the new religion. This man would thereby change the world, a mystic and a prophetic visionary who spoke with God on multiple occasions and wrote down much of what he heard and saw during his transcendental sojourns in ancient scriptures called the [Gathas](#).⁸

Seventeen hymns comprise the Gathas, "presumably the earliest part of the" larger Zoroastrian textual corpus known as the [Avesta](#),⁹ which is also the name of the language in which he wrote them. Avestan, the root of modern Kurdish, is a historically close relative of Sanskrit.¹⁰

Perhaps Zoroaster's most compelling vision was of the one True and Wise God, Ahura Mazda, "surrounded by six radiant figures."¹¹ Another was of the end of the world and the final judgment of the souls of the living and the dead. Zoroaster has thus been called "the world's first prophet," one "to whom we owe the ideas of a single god, the cosmic struggle between good and evil, and the Apocalypse."¹²

Although today Zoroastrianism is a relatively minor religion (practiced by roughly 125,000 people),¹³ it was once the religion of mighty kings and held a place of prominence in Persian empires, especially the Achaemenid dynasty (550–330 B.C.E.), which had been founded by King Cyrus the Great. The religion declined considerably, however, when Muslims conquered Persia in the seventh century C.E., prompting most of the Zoroastrian faithful to flee Iran and settle in India, in a community known as the [Parsis](#). However, by then the religion's ideas had spread far and wide, especially along the Silk Road,¹⁴ and its influence had become indelible on Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and even Buddhism.



The Achaemenid Empire circa 500 B.C.E. | [Map of the Achaemenid Empire](#) by [William Robert Shepherd](#) is in the [public domain](#).

The World's First Prophet

Who was this Persian prophet named Zoroaster? That is a difficult question to answer, as historians cannot pinpoint the century in which he existed. Most likely Zoroaster lived sometime between 1500 and 1200 B.C.E. With more certainty it can be said that he and his people were pastoralists, occasionally settled nomads whose subsistence relied largely on herding, as reflected in the prophet's very name, which means "he who can manage camels."¹⁵ The place of Zoroaster's birth is also unclear, as the great prophet might have hailed from what is today Afghanistan rather than Iran. But exist he did, and his teachings would be as influential as any offered by Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Muhammed, or Marx.

Having likely been trained from a young age to serve as a learned priest of his people's faith tradition, Zoroaster was steeped in the polytheistic religion of ancient Persia. His visions are believed to have come to him while he was conducting a purification ritual for one of their divinities. The *Avesta* celebrates him as not only the first priest but also the first warrior and the first farmer.¹⁶ Zoroaster's original belief system, before his prophetic reforms, bore many similarities to Hinduism as it is expressed in the oldest of all religious scriptures, the [Vedas](#), the earliest of which were composed in Sanskrit before 1700 B.C.E. For example, "One of the greatest of the Iranian gods, [Mithra](#), is the Vedic Mitra. Other Indo-Iranian gods are Zoroastrian devils, like Indra,"¹⁷ Sarasvati, the river goddess, Agni, the god of fire (called Atar in the Avestan language), and so on.

Zoroaster lived during a time of great social upheaval, as is often the case, in religious history with influential prophets. When a people's culture, well-being, and identity are threatened by social, political, or natural forces, when chaos threatens order, when despair grips the masses, the time is ripe for prophets to rise and advocate their ways and the

reformation of the world and its renewal. In a classic and widely debated 1956 article, Anthony Wallace coins the term “revitalization movement” for any major “deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.”¹⁸ If we can accept Norman Cohn’s assessment of Zoroaster, the founder of the world’s first apocalyptic, ethical-monotheistic religion certainly fits the bill as a revitalization prophet:

He is the earliest known example of a particular kind of prophet – the kind commonly called millenarian. . . . Prophets who promise a total transformation of existence, a total perfecting of the world, often draw their original inspiration from the spectacle not just of suffering, but of one particular form of suffering: that engendered by an ancient way of life, with its familiar certainties and safeguards.¹⁹

Among the prophet’s people, the gods were called *daevas* and were worshipped popularly with hymns and sacrifices. The aromatic and hallucinogenic *haoma* plant, ground up, was an offering of choice.²⁰ But Zoroaster proclaimed that there was only one Supreme God, Ahura Mazda (Ahura = Lord; Mazda = Wise). Ahura Mazda was the eternal creator and source of all that exists. The prophet’s calling was to awaken humanity to this fundamental truth and inspire all to worship and obey Ahura Mazda alone and to do right (*asha*, also meaning “truth”). Right and wrong, good and evil (*druj*),²¹ are awesome forces in the universe and in our souls, and Zoroaster implores us to opt for and to ethically battle on behalf of *asha* in this cosmic struggle that implicates us all. To do so in thought, word, and deed is to be saved; to fail and allow oneself to be seduced by *druj* is to be condemned, for we will all ultimately be judged in this vein at the end of time, on the heels of the *apocalypse*.



The world's first apocalyptic prophet and founder of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism. Lived sometime between 1500 and 1200 B.C.E. | [Zoroaster](#) by Isaac Adams is in the [public domain](#).

God, Good, Evil, and the Meaning of Life and Death

Zoroastrianism calls upon humanity to reject false gods and to worship and obey Ahura Mazda exclusively, so Zoroastrians refer to themselves as “worshippers of Mazda, the Wise God.”²² Evil is all around us, within us, within nature, within society, but we must faithfully endeavor to side with God and with *asha* to ensure that *druj* is ultimately defeated and that *asha* prevails. Good is driven by a pervasive divinity known as [Spenta Mainyu](#), while evil is driven by an opposite and equally pervasive divinity known as [Angra Mainyu](#), both of whom emanate from Ahura Mazda, the Supreme. According to the *Avesta*,

Now two primal spirits, who revealed themselves in a vision as Twins, are the Better and the Bad in thought and word and action. And between these two the wise one chose aright, and the foolish not so. And when these twain spirits came together at the beginning, they established the Life and Not-Life, and that at the last the Worst Existence shall be to the followers of the life, but the Best Thought to him that follows Right.²³

Often in religious history, monotheistic insistence—or, in the case of the Buddha, nontheistic insistence—among the founders and elders inevitably cedes to the people's fundamental need for more than one god. The great German sociologist Max Weber perhaps says it best in stating that “all religions and religious ethics have had to reintroduce cults of saints, heroes or functional gods in order to accommodate themselves to the needs of the masses.” This, furthermore, amounts to “the real religion of the masses in everyday life.”²⁴ The ancient Persian masses, like most people who have ever walked the face of the earth, simply needed more than one god, despite the *Gatha's* monotheistic insistence. Enter Mithra.

At the time of Zoroaster's prophecy, one of the most popular of the daevas was Mithra (Mitra). The giver of cattle in a culture that venerated them, as in Hinduism, Mithra is a formidable deity born with a knife and a torch in his hands, whose power would be enhanced and eternalized when he “rode, and later killed, the life-giving bull, whose blood fertilizes all vegetation.”²⁵ Popular devotion would eventually elevate Mithra to the role of Supreme Judge, who on Judgment Day indicates the eternal fate of all, depending on the aggregate moral balance of our thoughts, words, and deeds. In this regard, Mithra is quite similar to Jesus Christ, and it is possible that Christ's fashioning, in Christianity, as judge and redeemer drew considerable inspiration from the Zoroastrian cult of Mithra, a widespread cult that was a serious competitor to early Christianity, especially during the Roman Empire.²⁶ In ancient Iranian religion, even after the spread of Zoroaster's teachings, Persians generally believed that Mithra was created by God as an “equal to himself in respect to his worship.”²⁷ There is a clear echo here in the Christian belief that God and Jesus Christ are one and the same, as expressed in the Gospel of John (10:30): “My Father and I, we are one.”

Ahura Mazda's oneness is further complicated in Zoroastrian theology by a series of modalities through which this supposedly unitarian God can be known, the *amesha spenta*. Six in all, the *amesha spenta* (“holy immortals,” the “radiant figures” in Zoroaster's aforementioned vision) are the attributes of God that can be known and experienced by humans, though Ahura Mazda's true essence transcends them and is, to us, imperceptible. Powerful traces of such an understanding of the Supreme—One whose attributes are knowable but whose essence is not—can be found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, further underscoring the profound influence of Zoroastrianism on religious history. Concerning Ahura Mazda, three of these attributes are masculine (knowledge, love, service) and three are feminine (piety, perfection, immortality), and they are each the caretaker of various aspects of nature (e.g., the sky, the earth, water, animals, plants, the sun), thereby infusing them with *asha*. Hence, nature is generally considered to be pure and sacred in Zoroastrianism; however, creatures that are

harmful to human beings – insects such as ants, beetles, locusts, reptiles such as scorpions, lizards, and snakes, beasts of prey such as wolves – are . . . instruments of

Angra Mainyu, brought into being to serve as his allies in his struggle to impair the ordered world. It is the duty of a Zoroastrian to destroy such creatures.²⁸

Furthermore, Zoroaster identified anything in nature that “harmed cattle or blighted crops” as being demonic, as are “those tendencies in human beings – such as wrath, envy, and sloth – that lured them to offend against the principle of order.”²⁹ The earth itself, meanwhile, is pure, and fire is even purer, though they are respectively defiled by rotting corpses and smoke, the infiltration of the forces of druj. Reflecting these central beliefs, Zoroastrians constructed “towers of silence” (*dakhma*) atop cliffs and cast the dead thereupon, to be dried out by the sun and devoured by raptors. Periodically, the bones of the dead are swept into a circular pit in the middle of the dakhma.



Tower of silence in Iran, atop of which the dead are laid to rest, unburied, their flesh to be consumed by vultures and the sun. | [Dakhma](#) by [ParsaBalalaie](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

Among the evil daevas, it is [Nasu](#), or [Druj Nasu](#), who is most closely associated with death, the dead, and dreadful fear during funerary climbs up the dakhma. Conceived of as “a female

bearer of physical decay. . . who takes the form of a fly with protruding knees;³⁰ Nasu is among the most feared beings in Zoroastrianism and the basis for believers' revulsion toward human corpses and the formidable threat of impurification that they pose. And although there are no zombies in Zoroastrianism, Nasu's supernatural repertoire includes penetrating human bodies, both dead and alive. This carries unmistakable zombic overtones, especially insofar as she lurks about the dead and seeks to contaminate the living, as reflected by Mahnaz Moazami.

The most evil manifestation of the demons is *Nasu-/Nasus*, which attacks the body when it comes into contact with dead matter, especially human and animal dead bodies, with bleeding, notably menstruation, and the trimming of hair and nails. The affliction of corpses by *Nasu-/Nasus* provided the basis for Zoroastrian abhorrence for everything that is dead. As soon as a dying person loses consciousness, Nasu rushes upon the body, generates pollution from decaying bodies, and contaminates all that come in contact with it.³¹

Those who carry a corpse to the dakhma are especially vulnerable to penetration by Nasu through every orifice, and elaborate purification rituals are performed on pall bearers so they will be cleansed of her dreadful contaminants.

Whereas the dakhma is a place of dread, Zoroastrian temples (**dar-I Mihr**, meaning the "gate of Mithra" or "house of Mithra") are warm places of divine spirit. Furthermore, they all house fire, kept perpetually ablaze by priests wearing masks. The oldest example is in the religion's most important temple in Yazd, Iran, whose fire has been burning constantly now for over 1,500 years. When Ahura Mazda created the world, "fire came last, and it took two forms – as visible fire and as an unseen force pervading all the animate 'creations,'" and Zoroaster prescribed that the faithful are to pray and meditate before fire. There are, furthermore, three degrees of sacred fires in Zoroastrianism, and their consecration involves "an immensely long, elaborate, and costly undertaking."³²

In preparation for the overarching cosmic struggle between good and evil—asha and druj—that He set in motion, which is our reality and our world, Ahura Mazda created other allies besides Spenta Mainyu and the amesha spenta. Over and above creatures like dogs, whose gazes have spiritually purifying powers; owls, who are esteemed "as the bird beloved of *asha*",³³ and cows, revered by Zoroastrians in ways similar to those of Hindus; are the **fravashi**. The fravashi have been compared to Valkyries and are female "winged warriors," the spirits of the ancestors who watch over and protect the living and provide us with water. So powerful an ally and purveyor of asha are they, that even "Ahura Mazda himself pays tribute to them."³⁴

Dimensions of Zoroastrianism

Let us now invoke a few of Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion to organize and amplify our introduction to this remarkable faith tradition. When considering the nature, history, and scope of Zoroastrianism, with its emphasis on ethics, worship of one God, and prayer, Smart's

categories Narrative/Myth, Doctrinal/Philosophical, Ethical, and Ritual will structure the next section of this chapter, before we proceed to carefully consider Zoroastrian eschatology. In his writing on Zoroastrianism, Smart underscores the ethical: “This dimension was integral to the fabric of Zoroastrian thinking, which focused on the struggle between good and evil.”³⁵

Narrative/Myth

At the risk of tempting redundancy, our attention here to Zoroastrian myth inexorably returns us to a discussion of Mithra.

The prophet Zoroaster was raised in a culture that was steeped in mythology, of stories about the many daevas his people worshipped, though his turn toward monotheism and his subsequent theological influence somewhat deflated the importance of this mythology among his followers.³⁶ This was because the great prophet rejected their many gods and warned that they should devote themselves entirely to Ahura Mazda, worshipping Him alone, and focus on doing good rather than serving deceitful spiritual beings who are, for the most part, satanic traps. Thus, Zoroaster denounced literally thousands of ancient Indo-Persian myths about the daevas. However, as is usually the case in religious history, the masses have preserved tales and divinities that monotheistic prophets intended to cast away. Such was the case with Zoroastrianism, as it would also be in Christianity and Islam.

At the very beginning of creation, Ahura Mazda, the one eternal God and single source of all, created one of everything in existence, including one human being, Gayomard (“mortal life”), or Gaya (lit. “life”), an asexual man who was intended to be immortal and perfect. A giant being who roamed the earth accompanied by the original ox, God’s first human lived for three thousand years in primordial human perfection. Then Gayomard “was attacked and killed by the Evil Spirit Ahriman.” **Ahriman** created death and intended to “destroy the Wise Lord’s culminating creation,” including Gaya, who would live for only thirty more years after Ahriman’s creation of death.³⁷ Upon his death, Gaya’s sperm fell out of his body to the earth, out of which were born the second man and the first mortal woman in the world, “a primordial brother and sister,” who procreated and hence set human history in motion.³⁸ Also out of Gaya’s death and semen, “purified by the light of the moon,” were created “the vegetal and animal worlds.”³⁹ This new and now complete creation was divided into six regions, and human diversity eventually emerged by virtue of variations in climate, topography, etc. Thus, despite our differences, all humans are members of a single family, blood relatives one and all.

Initially, God made an entirely spiritual world to preempt the influence of evil, only to create and populate our material world—the world in which you are reading this book—3,000 years later.⁴⁰ Though Ahura Mazda made one of each plant and each sentient being in nature, the Creator also made two demigods to respectively rule over good and evil and pitched them into the world to engage in a battle whose outcome God had already written. This overrides and underscores all existence until the end of time. In relation, one interesting myth has it that Ahriman, the Devil, set out to alter the course of the sun and to disrupt the arrival of Judgment

Day,⁴¹ though Zoroastrian mythology and scripture provide assurances that in the end good will prevail and the Devil will be thwarted.

Many important Zoroastrian myths concern Mithra, whose cult spread widely throughout the ancient Mediterranean world and much of premodern Europe, and whose traces are found in ruins from Algeria to England. Spelled variously, “Mithra” is first mentioned as a god in the oldest of all religious scripture, the *Rig Veda*, which was written in Sanskrit likely sometime between 1800 and 1500 B.C.E., the foundational text in Hinduism. In this text, the name Mithra is “a noun as well as a name,” while here “the word could mean variously ‘contract,’ ‘promise,’ ‘oath,’ ‘alliance,’ or more abstractly, a moral obligation.” By the time Mithra gained prominence in Persia, the word also came to mean “‘seal,’ ‘love,’ or ‘kindness,’ as well as acting as a synonym for the sun.” Thus, Mithra would be considered a sun god on the eve of the prophecies of Zoroaster, one commonly understood to be “invincible.”⁴² This trait became especially pronounced during the Roman Empire. When gods and religions travel, they adapt, and, given the remarkable expansion of the veneration of Mithra throughout India, Persia, the Mediterranean world, and much of Europe, the diversifications of Mithraic mythologies are too vast to even summarize here. In fact, it is likely that these diversifications are so numerous that it is untenable to speak about a single god by that name. Let us instead focus on Mithra in Zoroastrianism proper.

In ancient Persia, Mithra was associated with justice and with war, and he was often the recipient of animal sacrifices. While some scholars have opined that Zoroaster found cause in such rituals and associations to reject the cult of Mithra, Mary Boyce argues that there is nothing in the Gathas to suggest that he did. Though the name Mithra does not appear in the Gathas, as already noted, prophetic recitations of hymns in India and Persia were largely personal affairs that did not “imply the rejection of other divinities in the pantheon.” In fact, in his religion “Mithra’s worship was so closely associated with that of Ahura Mazda” that it might not have occurred to Zoroaster to denounce it.⁴³ The Avesta speaks of Mithra as

He who first, of the heavenly gods, reaches over the Hara [Alburz Mountains], before the undying, swift-horsed sun; who, foremost in a golden array, takes hold the beautiful summits, and from then looks over the abode of the Aryans [Iranian peoples] with a beneficent eye.⁴⁴

Mithra thereby brings the sun to rise every morning, behind him, as he crosses the mountains in a luminous chariot “drawn by white horses” and “armed with a silver spear, a bow and arrows of gold, daggers, axes, and [a] mace, which symbolizes his role as guardian of the cosmic order and the god who legitimizes kingship.”⁴⁵

In addition to these roles, Mithra has long been believed to be a god who watches over humanity protectively and records all our deeds, with which we will be forced to reckon on Judgment Day. This reckoning will be overseen by Mithra, along with the **Saoshyant (Saoshyan)** (the Savior), in his role as judge as we walk across the **Chinvat Bridge**. The bridge spans over hell, the destination of the wicked, but because of his role as protector, Mithra wields his mace over it to prevent demons from seizing any of the righteous making their way across.⁴⁶ Smart underscores how influential this mythology has been on other religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam: “The imagination of other traditions was haunted by

the Chinvat Bridge, and the resurrection of the glorified bodies, and the coming of a Savior, and the thought of life as a struggle between good and evil.”⁴⁷



Sixth-century line drawing on a sarcophagus in China depicting the Chinvat Bridge, with Mithra depicted above right and encircled (though some scholars have identified this figure to be the Buddha or Ahura Mazda).⁴⁸ | [Drawing of the Eastern Wall of the Sogdian Wirkak's Sarcophagus](#) by Uriel1022 is in the [public domain](#).

These key aspects of Mithraic mythology in Zoroastrianism would absorb additives over time, transforming him into a variegated and multifaceted divinity. The cults and myths of this god spread throughout the ancient world, becoming especially popular among soldiers in the Roman Empire. One of the most common myths is that of Mithra having emerged at birth out of stone and slain a cosmic bull. Such features, however, have nothing to do with Zoroastrianism,⁴⁹ a religion in which Mithra has nonetheless maintained a place of pantheonic prestige, second only to God Himself, Ahura Mazda. It should be noted here that

all religions change over time, some quite radically, and such is the case with Zoroastrianism. And although Mithra has ancient origins in the religion, his cult has fluctuated in popularity over time and has taken on elements throughout the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Europe that are unrelated to the teachings of Zoroaster.

Notwithstanding these variations and changes in his hagiography, what is key about Mithra to all Zoroastrians is the role that he plays on Judgment Day, but he is not alone here. John Hinnells outlines the crucial features of the Zoroastrian Savior as contained in the *Avesta* and a later body of scripture called the *Bundahishn (Primal Creation)*, which was compiled in the eighth and ninth centuries C.E. in the Pahlavi language, or Middle Persian. The name of the Savior, Saoshyant, means “one who will bring benefit,” and in Zoroaster’s teaching that benefit is identified as *sava*, or salvation. The term in the Gathas “is used in the plural, apparently to denote the future benefactors of the Good Religion. So, for example, in one *Gatha* Zoroaster asks Ahura Mazda when the time of piety, justice, peace and generally prosperity is to come,” and in response God refers to the Savior as “the appointed suppressors of passion.”⁵⁰ Thus, Zoroaster did prophesize that a Savior would emerge at the end of time, but the notion in the Gathas is somewhat vague. This is clarified, however, in the later Pahlavi literature, which provides the important details described above about the timing and the virgin birth of the Savior, “the last of the three brothers born towards the end of the world, as benefactor *par excellence*.”⁵¹

More importantly still, in Zoroastrian eschatology the Saoshyant (Savior) takes on the task of the “restoration of the world,” one that, in the *Avesta*, entails that “ageing ... dying ... decaying ... rotting” and all suffering will be eliminated and evil extinguished forever. In this role, the Saoshyant is referred to as “the ‘fiend smiter,’” and with a number of helpers he is to succeed as “the destroyers of demons,”⁵² including Ahriman, the chief of them all. And, of course, this restoration involves the resurrection of the dead and the judgment of all souls. For in the *Avesta* it is written that:

In the Earth shall Ahriman hide

In the earth, the demons hide.

Up the dead again shall rise,

And within their lifeless bodies

Incorporate life shall be restored.⁵³

It is further stated that “Sosyant, at the command of the creator, will give all men their reward and recompense suiting their actions.”⁵⁴

Doctrinal/Philosophical

Zoroastrian doctrine centers upon the notion that there is one God and one God only, Ahura

Mazda, the original creator of all and the will of the fate of all. In addition to the world in which we find ourselves and everything around us, Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd) created the forces of good and evil, which are ruled over by demigods named, respectively, Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu. The latter is also known as the Devil, Ahriman.⁵⁵ Depending upon the balance of our alignment with these forces—upon the measure of the good or evil of our thoughts, words, and deeds—ultimately we will all be judged and either cast into hell or welcomed into heaven. The Saoshyant, one of three posthumous sons of Zoroaster,⁵⁶ will be decisively instrumental in this process, assisted “in their respective regions of the earth” by fifteen male and fifteen female servants.⁵⁷ “One will appear at the end of each of the three last millennia of the world, miraculously conceived by a maiden who has swum in a lake where Zoroaster’s seed has been preserved,”⁵⁸ guarded by “no less than 99,999 fravashi over the ages.”⁵⁹ Meanwhile,

After 57 years Saoshyans, aided by 30 great persons of the departed who have remained linked with bodily existence, will break the demonic power and resurrect the bodies of the dead. Saoshyans and six helpers will then lead the work in the seven zones of the world, communicating with each other miraculously. When all souls have been cleansed, including those of the damned, Saoshyans will prepare for them white *haoma*—the ritual drink of the Zoroastrians—which will bestow eternal perfection on their bodies.⁶⁰

Let us consider three fundamental laws that are ascribed to Zoroaster:

1. That the law of Ahura Mazda is true and that anyone who denies such will be “excluded from the light”
2. That there will exist at the end of the world as we know it a “Land of the Light,” and anyone who denies such will be excluded therefrom
3. That ultimately there will be a “restoration of the infinite time of God and of Light.”⁶¹

Much more will be said on the ethical dimension of Zoroastrianism, but here its doctrine of free will is to be noted: that all are free to choose good or evil in life and to participate accordingly in the cosmic dualistic struggle between these two forces. One’s acts, deeds, and thoughts are all recorded and will determine one’s entry into the “Land of the Light” or one’s banishment into hell, pitched off the razor-thin bridge into a dark, putrid, narrow pit full of demons, torments, poisons, intense heat (but not fire), terrible food, and horrible weather.⁶² Ultimately, however, the earth will be renewed and perfected, and even those souls who were initially banished to hell after their deaths will ultimately be welcomed into paradise on the purified, heavenly earth for post-apocalyptic eternity. In some interpretations, their torment will have lasted only four days. This relates to the Zoroastrian doctrine of the soul and of a generalized/divinized/angelic principle of the Conscience—an inner self called *Daena*—as the forces of good and evil vie for our soul, and on Judgment Day, *Daena* will greet the soul “personified as a lovely maiden or a hideous hag.”⁶³

Ethical

As should be clear by now, Zoroastrianism is “an eminently ethical religion, both in its idea of God and of what God requires” of humanity, as George Foot Moore explains. Centrally, God requires us to renounce “false gods” and to “serve the Wise Lord alone, and contend on his side for the defeat of evil and the triumph of all good in nature and society and in the character of the individual.”⁶⁴ As put by A. V. Williams Jackson, “The incessant warfare and constant struggle of these primordial principles is evinced at every turn in human life. This cardinal doctrine is one of the hinges on which the entire system of Zoroastrian ethics turns.”⁶⁵ Zoroastrian ethics may thus be called *dualistic*, insofar as two diametrically opposed forces, good and evil, vie for control over all of creation and, most importantly, over our souls. We have free will, furthermore, meaning that we may choose to follow, or be swept up by, either force in everything that we say, do, and think.

Thankfully, we are not alone in navigating good and evil as we go through life. Not only are there good spiritual beings to help us, but there is also a divine element in one’s soul (*urvan*) like a guardian angel, but rather than hovering over us, it exists within us. As Joshua Mark explains,

At birth, the soul (known as the *urvan*) enters the body at the direction of the *fravashi* so that it can experience the physical world and take part in the struggle between good and evil. Throughout one’s life, *the fravashi* would encourage the soul on the on the right path of following the light and resisting the lies of darkness and evil.⁶⁶



The chief symbol of Zoroastrianism that represents God, Ahura Mazda, and the fravashi, or female “winged warriors” and the spirits of the ancestors who watch over and protect the living and provide us with water. | [Faravahar](#) by Babak Farrokhi is used under a [CC BY 2.0 License](#).

For many Zoroastrians, this idea is reflected in their religion’s master symbol, the [faravahar](#), though it is more often taken to be an image that represents Ahura Mazda. Yet even if the symbol is essentially intended to represent the fravashi instead, they are an element of God, a divine spark, that exists in our souls to inspire and guide us on the path to righteousness, truth, light, and blissful eternal life.

In some respects, Zoroastrianism is thus the most fundamentally ethical of all religions and, significantly, the root of ethical monotheism itself, without which the world likely would never have witnessed the development of the ethical centrism of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are all major religions that pivot upon the belief in one God who communicates laws to humanity, with the expectation that believers will live ethical lives, in accordance with said laws, toward gaining eternal life. Additionally, Moore has rightly referred to Zoroastrian ethics as hinging upon the “doctrinal triad” of thoughts, words, and deeds. Everything that we think, do, and say are forces in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Ultimately, we will be judged for eternity on how we employed our free will to navigate this struggle, one for which we are created and in which we are called to engage. That is the meaning of life, along with worshipping Ahura Mazda, who created us and set this entire saga in motion. This is clearly

stated in the *Avesta*: “One who practices this triune doctrine of the holy faith is the [Ashavan](#), or righteous . . . as opposed to the [Anashavan](#) . . . the follower of falsehood.”⁶⁷

The dualistic foundation of this teaching is thus clear: Truth and goodness are one, while falsehood and evil are one, and we must choose between the two. The former path leads to light and bliss, whereas the latter leads to darkness and suffering. Thus are we called to seek to be good, pure, charitable, honest, upright, and compassionate, as opposed to bad, impure, selfish, dishonest, hostile, and uncompassionate. The ancient Greek writer Herodotus recorded that Zoroastrian parents “taught their sons three things, ‘to ride horseback, to use the bow, and to speak the truth,’” underscoring the great value that the religion places on honesty as one of the cornerstones of goodness.⁶⁸ This is the root of ethical monotheism everywhere and the ultimate reason most people in world history have differentiated between right and wrong, just as they do today. Reflecting this, one of the most eminent scholars of Zoroastrianism, Mary Boyce, states that “Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed world-religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind than any other single faith.”⁶⁹

Ritual

As with any religion, in Zoroastrianism there are both communal and individual rituals that the faithful perform, some in private, others in congregational gatherings that are usually orchestrated by priests (and today, priestesses). Others, especially offerings for the souls of the dead, are largely family based.⁷⁰ The central rituals are as ancient as the religion itself, especially leaving offerings to the Divine and reciting prayers. Two of the most important communal Zoroastrian rituals are the [Yasna](#) (“worship” or “sacrifice”) and the [Afrinigan](#) (“blessings”). The former, which “for two thousand years . . . has been the main feature of Zoroastrian identity,”⁷¹ constitutes the religion’s “High Liturgy,” while the latter is performed to invoke the blessing of a range of benign and guardian spirits.⁷²

Insofar as it “situates the participants in a cosmic struggle, the battle between good and evil,”⁷³ as Ron Williams and James Boyd explain, the Yasna is deeply rooted in and inspired by Zoroastrian eschatology and a daily reminder thereof to all who partake. Zoroastrian temples all house fire, kept perpetually ablaze by priests. In Zoroastrian scripture we read “When Ahura Mazda, who resides in the endless light, created fire, he joined the radiance of this endless light with fire himself.”⁷⁴ Thus for Zoroastrians, to gaze upon fire is to be in the presence of God; indeed, “the fire exemplifies the son of God, and epiphany of the Lord of Wisdom.”⁷⁵

The Yasna ritual is conducted by a “priest [who] maintains contact with the *barsom*, a bundle of metal wires symbolizing connection between the mundane and spiritual worlds.”⁷⁶ A second priest assists in the ritual’s orchestration, which is

essentially a priestly act of worship celebrated on behalf of the whole community. The liturgy is celebrated to please the great Lord of Wisdom, Ahura Mazda, and all spirit

beings of his good creation. They are invited to be present at the liturgical celebration and are asked to receive the offerings and bestow their blessings.⁷⁷

Passages from the Gathas are recited by the priests (who commit them to memory), and the words from this great scripture are themselves believed to bestow additional blessings on the ritual space and the participants.⁷⁸ All partake of sacred bread and holy water.

Also celebrated by priests, who usually dress in white and undergo purifications prior to conducting the ritual, the Afrinigan may be performed in honor or veneration of any designated spiritual being (*yazad* – lit., worthy of worship),⁷⁹ and it can take place in a temple, at one's home, or near the towers of silence. Like the Yasna, it is always accompanied by fire, before which are placed various fragrant offerings, such as “flowers, wine, and fruit,” for the yazad.⁸⁰ The flowers are also important symbols, as at one point in the ritual the priest twirls three of them to represent words, thoughts, and deeds, the vectors of one's devotions to Ahura Mazda and of one's performance of good in spurning evil's advances. The offerings, which always include pomegranate and sometimes eggs and meats, are placed on silver trays and covered with white cloth, while the priests recite passages from scripture. This ceremony is performed both in memory of the deceased and in the hope that the yazad will accept the offerings so that “joy, delight, auspiciousness, prosperity, and goodness may come to the house, and that disease, sickness, discomfort, pain, and pestilence leave it.”⁸¹

“Water and fire are central agents and elements in Zoroastrian ritual,” observes Michael Stausberg. Historically, “the domestic hearth fire was the ritual/religious focus of the homes, and the development of the first temples . . . can be seen as an extension of the cult of the domestic fire.”⁸² At first, fire temples in Zoroastrianism were open to the air, often situated atop mountains and hills, based on the belief that no structure could possibly contain the spirit of God as manifest in the sacred flame (*Atash Bahrman*). Eventually believers began constructing sanctuaries and gathering in them under the ritual leadership of priests (*magi*, *mobedyār*). As Jamsheed Chosky explains,

By the Sasanian period, the basic architecture of fire-temples had been established as had the rites conducted therein. The . . . ‘four arches’ style became the quintessential form for fire precincts. That style is seen in ruins (some restored) at hundreds of locales in Iran. Each precinct's four columns supported a domed roof, forming a court whose four sides were open to ambulatory corridors and other indoor ritual precincts and congregational halls.⁸³

The most famous of all Zoroastrian fire temples is the main one (there are several others in the city) in Yazd, which, at least since the twelfth century C.E., may be considered the *axis mundi* of the religion, as reflected by the images of this temple that adorn the homes of many Zoroastrians.⁸⁴ This temple thus functions much like the Kaaba in Mecca for Muslims,⁸⁵ because “every Zoroastrian who is able is expected to make the pilgrimage to Yazd once in his lifetime, [and] he must await an inspiration or an auspicious time to do so.”⁸⁶ Per Norbert Brockman,

The pilgrim offers special prayers, burns incense, and then lights a candle in front

of the sacred fire. The pilgrims stay for the night in prayer or singing chants. A goat or lamb is prepared and then sacrificed. The meat is cooked and divided among the family, other pilgrims, and the poor.⁸⁷



Zoroastrian temple in Yazd, Iran, the holiest site in the religion. | [Yazd Fire Temple](#) by [Maziart](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 3.0 License](#).

Charity is highly esteemed as a form of *asha* in Zoroastrianism, and just as pilgrimage involves providing food to the poor, so do family-based rituals for the departed souls of the righteous. As such, the religion’s “striking . . . sense of community extends to a remarkable degree to the righteous dead, to the souls ‘who have overcome for righteousness,’”⁸⁸ as it also extends to the poor. This is evinced in one of the most cherished prayers in the religion, derived from the Gathas, the Ahuna Vairya: “Just as the ethical (measure), so the soteriological measure of the actions of existence is assigned to Mazda, and to Ahura the power of good thought, whom (that power) will make the pastor for the needy.”⁸⁹

So common are ritual celebrations of the dead, forms of communion in which the souls of the departed righteous are invited to join the living in a feast, that “very pious Zoroastrians may be said to live for the dead” and that “piety for the dead, cheerfulness, and charity combine in a way that is wholly Zoroastrian.”⁹⁰ The living also perform rituals for the departed

ashavan to assist their souls as they approach the Chinvat Bridge on their initial Judgment Day. (Shortly after death, one's soul is initially judged and will be again after the apocalypse).⁹¹ In large part this is done by propitiating the Savior to “protect them from evil influences.” Hence “since Sasanian times onwards great importance is attached to the ceremonies in his honor during the period while the soul is presumed still to remain in this world,” but whose judgment is already underway.⁹²

Zoroastrianism is thus a highly ritualistic religion, such that we have no space here to describe some of its many other ceremonies and practices. But besides tending to and praying before fire, several others more than deserve at least a passing mention here. For instance, “The festival of Mithrakana (also known as Mithragan) is held yearly in Mithra’s honor (at the autumn equinox),”⁹³ while “the day of Zoroaster’s death is commemorated each year in India and Iran, on Ruz Khorsed . . . with a special intention for the soul of Zoroaster.”⁹⁴ Other important rituals (rites of passage) are performed for the initiations of priests and priestesses in Zoroastrianism, and these too are tied to Mithra, for the initiate “receives the Mace of Mithra, symbolizing his responsibility to fight against the forces of evil and darkness.”⁹⁵ And, of course, fighting against such forces is what all Zoroastrians are called to do until the end of the world as we know it, to which our attention now turns.

The End and the Renewal of the World

Put simply, eschatology is the study of the end of time, of the ultimate fate of humanity and the world, and of all that awaits us in the afterlife. This is reflected in the Greek origin of the term: *eschatos* (“last”) + *ology* (“the study of”). A key belief in Zoroastrian eschatology is that in the very end God will triumph over Satan, good over evil, and all human souls will be judged for eternity according to their obedience to God (or lack thereof) and their thoughts and deeds and words. Reflecting on the momentous influence of these Zoroastrian ideas on later religious developments, Moore offers,

The main features of this eschatology were adopted by Jews and adapted to the premises of their own religion; through Judaism it passed to Christianity, where it was fused with elements of diverse origin. From Judaism and Christianity, and to some extent later Zoroastrianism, Mohammedism [Islam] inherited it.⁹⁶

It is that profound, and Moore’s comment here underscores an essential point about human religious history: the apocalypse and the notions of one God, angels, Satan, good, evil, the end of time, and the judgment of the living and the dead are Zoroastrian in origin. As such, Smart could reasonably assert that Zoroastrianism “is probably the most important influence on the way human beings have thought of history, as having an *Urzeit* [primordial time], a main, middle period, and an *Endzeit* [end time].”⁹⁷

And just what will the end be like? What happens when we die and when we are resurrected to be judged? Much of the Zoroastrian insight into these and related questions derives not

from the teachings of the first prophet but from those of a subsequent mystic, [Arda Viraf](#). He existed sometime between the third and seventh century C.E., likely during the Sasanian Empire (224–651 C.E.), a period that saw Zoroastrianism flourish and enjoy state support. Whatever the years of his life, Arda Viraf emerged as a religious visionary of considerable renown in Persia. He recorded his visions in the Pahlavi language in a text called, appropriately, *Vision*,⁹⁸ which provides details of his mystical journey to heaven and into the depths of hell. Arda Viraf was sent by God on these tumultuous journeys “in order to verify (1) Zoroastrian belief about the invisible worlds and (2) the efficacy of the rituals of the Zoroastrian community.”⁹⁹

Because he was considered holy, Arda Viraf was chosen by his people to go on this spiritual sojourn. “Having fulfilled a series of religious duties,” as M. A. Barthélemy explains, “he ingested a narcotic and lied down to sleep on a sofa that had been prepared for him in the temple.” From there, things got really interesting: “During the seven days and nights of his journey into the other world, he was watched over by the faithful disciples, who continued to perform the requisite rituals.” Accompanied by “[Séroche \(Sraosha\)](#), protector of the righteous... and by [Ized Atar](#), the holy fire,” Viraf is first brought to the Chinvat Bridge, where he sees the righteous dead, “whose death lasted but three days and nights,” in the company “of a beautiful young woman, a reflection of their goodness and piety.” Once the bridge is crossed, Viraf’s spiritual guides “allow him to see the joys of paradise and the pains of hell.”¹⁰⁰

Many key features of Zoroastrian eschatology derive from Viraf’s visions, like the soul’s remaining near its deceased body for three days to contemplate its life while awaiting judgment on the fourth day. “At the dawn of the fourth day the soul awakens to consciousness to the new life amid the breath of a balmy wind fragrant with scents and perfumes.” The sinful soul, though, awakens to “a foul, chill wind blast heavy with sickening stench.”¹⁰¹ These winds portend what is to come, for if one’s sins outweigh one’s good deeds, thoughts, and words, one will simply fall off the Chinvat Bridge and into hell. In the Avestan language, the word for sin is [wināh](#), whose roots are “to expire” and “to ruin,”¹⁰² reflecting the dire sense that to sin is to expire in the struggle for good and to ruin one’s chances of reaching paradise. Such was the fate of one of the condemned souls that Viraf met in hell, who had been judged guilty and punished for adultery. Another, who was judged to have denied parenting his children, was seen with “a few children shouting and begging at his feet, and devils devouring him like savage dogs.”¹⁰³ In Zoroastrian eschatology, one can atone for one’s sin during the here and now, which is “the ultimate purpose of life;”¹⁰⁴ however, if one fails to do so they are destined to plunge off the bridge and into “darkness” (*tamah*) or the “House of Lie” (*drujo demana*), as the terms for hell are rendered in the Gathas.¹⁰⁵ Other grave sins that cause one to expire to such a fate are slander, the unnecessary killing of draught animals, hoarding material goods without sharing them, lying, sloth, perjury, excessive/expressive mourning, fasting, harming one’s parents, parsimony, jealousy, wasting seeds intended for planting, and inhospitality.¹⁰⁶

Over and above these sins are three that are especially “abominable” and were identified by Ahura Mazda for Arda Viraf, as explain Golnar Ghalekani and Abas Hoqemi Aqiqi,

Ahriman (Satan) created three types of evil in this world: ‘one who is blind to truth, one who is deaf to truth, and one who is hostile, wrathful and vengeful to others.’

What makes self-imposed deafness and blindness a sin is in fact the tendency to ignore the truth and ignore one's potentials to comprehend the truth. The third sin in this tripartite division is vengeance that has been morally but not legally banned. Vengeance ends in the empowerment of Ahriman and devils and amiability between people would disempower Ahriman and his gang.¹⁰⁷

At what might be considered the nadir of his visions during this part of his journey, Viraf “sees Ahriman at the depths of hell flogging the damned with his bitter taunts.” It sounds to the prophet like a pit that constantly echoes the screams of the tormented below. Before returning to Earth, Viraf is brought once again before God, who instructs him that “there is no path but the path of purity and heeding the laws of Zoroaster and the recitation of the Ashem Vohou are the only ways to assure one's resurrection to eternal life.”¹⁰⁸ The Ashem Vohou (or [Achem Vohou](#)) is thus understandably the most important and most frequently recited prayer in Zoroastrianism: “Asha is true joy most supreme. Happiness embrace those who embrace Asha. and are full of praise for Asha Vahishta.”

Viraf's visions of heaven suggest a paradise of boundless pleasure and eternal light, the abode of Ahura Mazda. He is seated on a throne in its highest reaches, a celestial sphere called [Garotman](#), surrounded by the amesha spentas, saints, and prophets. This is the fourth sphere of heaven, which is illuminated by the Infinite Light, while the three lower spheres, one of good thoughts, one of good words, and one of good deeds, are illuminated by stars, the moon, and the sun respectively.¹⁰⁹ Viraf never sees Ahura Mazda, but he does hear His voice and the voices of “choirs of Saints and Angels [who] take the form of a crown or of an eagle, dangling on an infinite ladder and giving voice to delicious harmonies.”¹¹⁰ The righteous that he sees, those saved, are shrouded in robes of divinely shimmering gold.

There is, too, a purgatory in Zoroastrianism, “a third place suited to the special cases in which the good deeds and the bad counterbalanced,” a place called [Hamistikan \(Hamestegan\)](#), “the ever stationary’ or ‘equilibrium.’” There is no suffering here, nor is there bliss, and the souls in Hamistikan must simply await the end of time, the apocalypse, and the final judgment foretold by Zoroaster.¹¹¹ Then they will be fine, received into eternal paradise.

Arda Viraf's prophetic journey provided Zoroastrianism with a fuller picture of the fate that awaits us all and a recertification from God of the original teachings of Zoroaster. This is not our ultimate destiny, however, because, as had been previously revealed to Zoroaster, in the end Satan, druj, and all their agents of evil remain to be eliminated. As Cohn explains, “When the beginning of the cosmic struggle was revealed to Zoroaster, so was its outcome. At the end of ‘limited time’ ... the world is to undergo a sort of ordeal, through which it will be purged of all evil.”¹¹² The living and the dead of all times and ages will be gathered and escorted to face the record of their deeds, thoughts, and words, as a destructive battle ensues, an Armageddon for all the ages, with eternity in the balance. But Zoroaster foretold the outcome, so the followers of his teachings have always known that Ahura Mazda and all things asha would ultimately triumph.

This will not happen overnight, but over the course of a thousand years. The process of the end begins with the birth of the first of the three Saviors, which occurs after a virgin bathes in a lake where Zoroaster's semen has been preserved and guarded by spiritual beings over

time for this purpose. (The other two Saviors will follow in similar ways.) Upon the birth of the first Savior, “the sun will stand still for ten days and nights and vegetation will blossom for three years,” as Cereti explains.¹¹³ A millennium ensues, during which “a huge demonic wolf will appear, only to be destroyed by the followers of the Good Religion” upon the Savior’s offering of a sacrifice. Following this will be an unimaginably long winter so severe that life on Earth temporarily ends, but once the weather improves, life returns and there is no more illness. Things get dreadful once again, though, when “all serpents will unite into a gigantic dragon,” requiring the Savior to perform a ritual and lead the followers of the Good Religion to rise to fight and defeat this ultimate agent of druj, thereby also defeating human death by old age. The faithful next become vegetarians for fifty-three years, then consume only water, and then only spirit, as the sun shines over the earth indefinitely without setting. With the Savior, the righteous followers of the True Religion finally defeat *Ahriman* once and for all, and the Saoshyant performs a final ritual that brings forth the resurrection of the dead, Final Judgment, and Ahura Mazda’s restoration of the earth.¹¹⁴

Zoroastrian eschatology calls these cataclysmic events *frashokereti* (“making wonderful” or the “rehabilitation”).¹¹⁵ It is the first known articulation of the apocalypse in religious history, making *frashokereti* the cornerstone for future apocalyptic beliefs and movements, whether in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Etymologically speaking, the Zoroastrian notion is truly apocalyptic. In the original Greek, *apokatastasis* means “to restore,” and Zoroaster foretold a restoration of the earth and of all humanity following the absolute and definitive clash between good and evil at the end of time. During this great battle, mountains will melt into a river that will feel to the righteous as warm milk, but to the wicked as searing lava of molten iron. The river will flow into hell and exterminate Angra Mainyu and all of his evil forces and minions once and for all, while liberating the souls of the condemned, purifying and delivering them to unification with Ahura Mazda and all the righteous in heaven.

Conclusion

It may have surprised some readers that a book on the zombie apocalypse begins with a chapter on the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, but we hope the reason for this is now clear. Though it is impossible to say how differently religious history might have unfolded had it not been for the visions and mystical journeys of Zoroaster and Arda Ziraf, most scholars agree that their teachings, especially the former’s, have been of fundamental and foundational importance to the development of the idea of the apocalypse across ages and religions, an idea that has perhaps held more power over human consciousness than any other. There are also Zoroastrian roots to the ideas of one God, angels, Satan, heaven, hell, a Savior, and judgment, all of which are central to the idea of apocalypse. It is on the latter that this book focuses on, in addition to zombies, but first we will follow the trail of the apocalyptic idea as it leads through Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and highlight some of its spectacular dangers and magnificent triumphs, its remarkable tragedies and daunting wonders.

Notes

1. Some scholars believe that Zoroaster actually lived in what is today “northern Kazakhstan” or “western Afghanistan. But all are agreed that the people from whom Zoroaster came eventually settled in eastern Iran.” Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993, 77. [↵](#)
2. Carlo G. Cereti, “Myths, Legends, Eschatologies,” in Michael Stausberg, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, and Anna Tessmann (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, 259. [↵](#)
3. Christopher Star, *Apocalypse and Golden Age: The End of the World in Greek and Roman Thought*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021, 13. [↵](#)
4. Cereti, “Myths, Legends, Eschatologies, 259. [↵](#)
5. *Ibid.*, 261. [↵](#)
6. *Ibid.*, 266. [↵](#)
7. *Ibid.*, 266–267. [↵](#)
8. It should be noted, meanwhile, that many scholars today believe that these texts are actually “sacrificial poetry rather than the sermons of a prophet.” Michael Stausberg, “[Zoroastrian Rituals](#),” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 2000, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrian-rituals>, last accessed June 24, 2020. [↵](#)
9. Michael Stausberg, “Hell in Zoroastrian History,” *Numen* 56, 2009, 220. [↵](#)
10. Originally, Avesta “probably meant something like ‘Authoritative Utterance.’” *Ibid.*, 79. [↵](#)
11. *Ibid.*, 78. Ahura Mazda (also spelled Ohrmazd or often simply called Mazda) was perhaps a Persianized adaptation of the Vedic god Varuna. Marijan Molé, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l’Iran ancien: Le problème zoroastrien et la tradition mazdéenne*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963, 4. [↵](#)
12. Paul Kriwaczek, *In Search of Zarathustra: Across Iran and Central Asia to Find the World’s First Prophet*, New York: Vintage, 2004 (2002). Citation from subtitle and back cover. [↵](#)
13. Roshan Rivetna, “[The Zarathushti World: A 2012 Demographic Picture](#),” FEZANA

Journal, Fall 2013, http://fezana.org/downloads/ZoroastrianWorldPopTable_FEZANA_Journal_Fall_2013.pdf, last accessed July 7, 2020. ↵

14. On religious encounters and meanderings along the Silk Road, see Richard Foltz, *Religions on the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999. ↵
15. Or “he who has active camels.” Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come*, 77. ↵
16. Mary Boyce, “On Mithra’s Part in Zoroastrianism,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 32, 1, 1969, 12, n18. ↵
17. George Foot Moore, “Zoroastrianism,” *Harvard Theological Review* 5, 2, 1912, 182. ↵
18. Anthony F. C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* 58, 1956, 265. ↵
19. Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come*, 95–96. ↵
20. *Haoma* is a cognate of the Sanskrit *soma*, a plant that is also an offering of choice in Hinduism. In the ancient Persian religion in which Zarathustra was trained, it was also personified as a deity, Hōm Yazad. On this, see David Stophlet Flattery and Martin Schwartz, *Haoma and Harmeline: The Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen “Soma” and its Legacy in Religion, Language, and Middle Eastern Folklore*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. ↵
21. *Druj* literally means “falseness” or “the Lie.” Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come*, 82. ↵
22. *Ibid.*, 180. ↵
23. *Yasna* 30, 4, 4. The *Yasna* is the chief liturgical text of the *Avesta*. It is also the name of the principal worship ceremony in Zoroastrianism, whence this text and those surrounding it are received. ↵
24. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Talcott Parsons, Boston: Beacon, 1963 (1922), 103–104. ↵
25. Anonymous, “[Mithra: Iranian God](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mithra),” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mithra>, last accessed July 2, 2020. ↵
26. On the cult of Mithra, see Franz Valerie Marie Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack, New York: Dover, 1956 (1903). ↵
27. William W. Malandra (trans. and ed.), *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 55. ↵

28. Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the End of the World*, 89. [↵](#)
29. *Ibid.*, 91. [↵](#)
30. Jenny Rose, "Gender," in Michael Stausberg, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, and Anna Tessmann (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*. Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, 280. [↵](#)
31. Mahnaz Moazami, "[Nasu](#)," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 2016, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nasu-demon>, last accessed May 8, 2023. [↵](#)
32. Mary Boyce, "On the Sacred Fire of the Zoroastrians," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 31, 1, 1968, 52. [↵](#)
33. Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the End of the World*, 92. [↵](#)
34. *Ibid.*, 90–91. [↵](#)
35. Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 225. [↵](#)
36. David Leeming, "[Zoroastrian Mythology](#)," *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, 2005, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195156690.001.0001/acref-9780195156690-e-1747;jsessionid=01E96D661489FD9B136E52EB34D34145> , last accessed May 26, 2020. [↵](#)
37. Carlo Cereti, "[Gayomard](#)," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 2015, n.p., <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gayomard>, last accessed June 22, 2002. [↵](#)
38. Bruce Lawrence, "Human Unity and Diversity in Zoroastrian Mythology," *History of Religions* 50, 1, 2010, 7–8. [↵](#)
39. Cereti, "Myths, Legends, Eschatologies," 261. [↵](#)
40. Leeming, "Zoroastrian Mythology." [↵](#)
41. Antonio Panaino, "The End of Time and the 'Laws of Zoroaster': A Zoroastrian Doctrine in the Manichean Reception," *Il Limine: Studi e Ricerche*, 2017, 65. [↵](#)
42. Philippa Adrych, Robert Bracey, Dominic DalGLISH, Stefanie Lenk, and Rachel Wood, "Introduction," in Philippa Adrych, Robert Bracey, Dominic DalGLISH, Stefanie Lenk, Rachel Wood, and Jas Elner (eds.), *Images of Mithra*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017, 1–3. [↵](#)
43. Boyce, "On Mithra's Part in Zoroastrianism," 18–19. [↵](#)

44. Yasht 10:13. As cited in Joshua J. Mark, "[Mithra](#)," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.ancient.eu/Mithra>, last accessed May 29, 2020. [↵](#)
45. Mark, "Mithra." [↵](#)
46. Boyce, "On Mithra's Part in Zoroastrianism," 23–24. [↵](#)
47. Smart, *The World's Religions*, 226. [↵](#)
48. Zoroastrian ideas, symbols, and beliefs reached China along the [Silk Road](#) in the sixth century. For a fascinating analysis of the meanings and representations in the sarcophagus featured in this image, see Bing Huang, "Deciphering the Si Jun Sarcophagus Using Sodigan Religious Beliefs, Tales, and Hymns." *Religions* 12, 12, 2021. [↵](#)
49. Mark, "Mithra." [↵](#)
50. John. R. Hinnells, *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies*, London: Routledge, 2000, 49. [↵](#)
51. *Ibid.*, 51. [↵](#)
52. *Ibid.*, 52. [↵](#)
53. In *ibid.*, 53. [↵](#)
54. In *ibid.*, 54. [↵](#)
55. Abraham Valentine and Williams Jackson, "[The Zoroastrian Doctrine of Free Will](#)," Paper presented to the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, April 22, 1920, https://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Religions/iranian/Zarathushtrian/freedom_will.htm, last accessed May 25, 2020. [↵](#)
56. Anonymous, "[Saoshyans](#)," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saoshyans>, last accessed July 6, 2020. [↵](#)
57. A. V. Williams Jackson, "The 'Fifty-Seven' Years in the Zoroastrian Doctrine of the Resurrection," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1, 1928, 1–6. [↵](#)
58. Anonymous, "Saoshyans." [↵](#)
59. Smart, *The World's Religions*, 224. [↵](#)
60. Anonymous, "Saoshyans." [↵](#)
61. Panaino, "The End of Time and the 'Laws of Zoroaster,'" 61–62. [↵](#)
62. Philippe Gignoux, "Hell in Zoroastrianism," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 2003, last accessed July 13, 2020. Interestingly, hell in Zoroastrianism, though featuring "atmospheric

calamities” that include “burning heat,” is not a place of blazing fire as found in other religions. This is perhaps because of the sacredness of fire in Zoroastrianism; it is simply too pure to be part of hell. [↵](#)

63. Jackson, “The Zoroastrian Doctrine of Free Will.” [↵](#)
64. Moore, “Zoroastrianism,” 180. [↵](#)
65. A. V. Williams Jackson, “The Moral and Ethical Teachings of the Ancient Zoroastrian Religion,” *International Journal of Ethics* 7, 1, 1896, 55–56. [↵](#)
66. Joshua J. Mark, “[Faravahar](#),” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.ancient.eu/Faravahar>, last accessed July 10, 2020. [↵](#)
67. Jackson, “The Moral and Ethical Teachings of the Ancient Zoroastrian Religion,” 57. [↵](#)
68. *Ibid.*, 57–58. [↵](#)
69. Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, 1. [↵](#)
70. Mary Boyce, “The Pious Foundations of the Zoroastrians,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 31, 2, 270. [↵](#)
71. Alberto Cantera, “The ‘Sacrifice’ (Yazna) to Mazda: Its Antiquity and Variety,” in Allan Williams, Sarah Stewart, and Almut Hintze (eds.), *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History, and Identity*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2016, 61. [↵](#)
72. F. M. Kotwal and J. W. Boyd, ĀFRĪN, *Encyclopedia Iranica* 1/6, 1984, 580–581. [↵](#)
73. Ron G. Williams and James W. Boyd, *Art and Ritual Knowledge: Aesthetic Theory and Zoroastrian Ritual*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993, 55. [↵](#)
74. In *Ibid.*, 37–38. [↵](#)
75. *Ibid.*, 37. [↵](#)
76. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
77. *Ibid.*, 160. [↵](#)
78. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
79. *Ibid.*, 179. [↵](#)
80. *Ibid.*, 167. [↵](#)
81. *Ibid.*, 174. [↵](#)
82. Stausberg, “Zoroastrian Rituals,” n.p. [↵](#)

83. Jamsheed K. Chosky, "Religious Sites and Physical Structures," in Michael Stausberg, Yuhon Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, and Anna Tessmann (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*. Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, 397. [↵](#)
84. Ibid, 400. *Axis mundi* (Latin: axis of the world) is a term coined by Mircea Eliade for the geographic, ethical, and spiritual focus and orientation of a religion, like the *Kaaba* in Islam. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. William R. Trask., New York: Harvest, 1959. [↵](#)
85. The word *Kaaba* means "cube" in Arabic, and the black *Kaaba* in Mecca is especially revered in Islam for the stone that was placed in it by the prophet Muhammad (pbuh), which was sent to Earth by God to indicate to Adam where to mount the first temple for worship. *Kaabas* were widespread and served as temples in the ancient Middle East, and one in Iran is attributed to Zarathustra and seemingly housed fire. On this particular *kaaba*, see Martin Sprengling, "Zur Parsik-Inschrift an der 'Kaaba des Zoroaster,'" *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 91, 4, 1937, 652-672. [↵](#)
86. Norbert C. Brockman, "Zoroastrian Fire Temples," in Norbert C. Brockman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Sacred Places*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011, 628. [↵](#)
87. Ibid., 629. [↵](#)
88. Boyce, "The Pious Foundations of the Zoroastrians," 270. [↵](#)
89. There are many translations of this important prayer. This one is from Amir Ahmadi, "The Syntax and Sense of the 'Ahura Vairiia,'" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, 3/4, 2012, 538. [↵](#)
90. Boyce, "The Pious Foundations of the Zoroastrians," 270. [↵](#)
91. Ibid., 271. [↵](#)
92. Jal Dastur Cursetji Pavry, *The Zoroastrian Doctrine of the Future Life: From Death to the Individual Judgment*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1929, 15-16. [↵](#)
93. Mark, "Mithra." [↵](#)
94. Boyce, "On Mithra's Part in Zoroastrianism," 25. [↵](#)
95. Mark, "Mithra." [↵](#)
96. Moore, "Zoroastrianism," 180-181. [↵](#)
97. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 64. [↵](#)
98. The text is often simply referred to as *The Book of Arda Viraf*. [↵](#)

99. Ph. Gignoux, "[ARDĀ WĪRĀZ](#)," *Encyclopedia Iranica* II, Fasc. 4, 356–357, 1986, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/arda-wiraz-wiraz>, last accessed May 23, 2020. [↵](#)
100. M. A. Barthélemy, "Introduction," in M. A. Barthelemy (trans.), *Arta Vîrâf-Nâmâk, ou Livre de Arda Vîrâf*, Paris: Leroux, 1887, iii–liv, vii–xii. [↵](#)
101. A. V. Williams Jackson, "The Ancient Persian Doctrine of a Future Life," *The Biblical World* 8, 2, 1896, 153. [↵](#)
102. Golnar Ghalekani and Abas Hoqemi Aqiqi, "Sins Whose Punishment Is Postponed to the Hereafter in Some Zoroastrian Texts," *Washington International Law Journal* 28, 2, 2019, 521. [↵](#)
103. *Ibid.*, 529. [↵](#)
104. *Ibid.*, 523. [↵](#)
105. Stausberg, "Hell in Zoroastrian History," 221. [↵](#)
106. Ghalekani and Aqiqi, "Sins Whose Punishment Is Postponed to the Hereafter in Some Zoroastrian Texts," 527–534. [↵](#)
107. *Ibid.*, 534. [↵](#)
108. Barthélemy, "Introduction," xiii–xiv. [↵](#)
109. *Ibid.*, xlix. [↵](#)
110. *Ibid.*, li. [↵](#)
111. Williams, "The Ancient Persian Doctrine of a Future Life," 153. [↵](#)
112. Cohn, "*Cosmos, Chaos, and the End of Time*," 97. [↵](#)
113. Cereti, "Myths, Legends, Eschatologies," 270. [↵](#)
114. *Ibid.*, 271. [↵](#)
115. Gherardo Gnoli, "*Frashōkereti*," in Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Detroit, MI: Macmillan, 2005, 3189. [↵](#)

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Glossary

Achem Vohou

The most important and oft-chanted/recited prayer in Zoroastrianism: "Asha is true joy most supreme. Happiness embrace those who embrace Asha and are full of praise for Asha Vahishta." [↵](#)

Afrinigan

A ritual performed in honor/veneration of any designated spiritual being, whether in temples, homes, or funerary spaces. [↵](#)

Ahriman

Satan. The devil and chief adversary of God and the righteous faithful. Identified with [Angra Mainyu](#) and the progenitor of all evil in existence. [↵](#)

Ahura Mazda

lit. "The Wise Lord"; the one and only creator of the universe. The Supreme God in Zoroastrianism. [↵](#)

Amesha Spenta

lit. "The Holy Immortals." The six modalities or qualities through which God is manifest to human beings and in the world. Seen as "radiant figures" surrounding God in one of Zoroaster's visions. [↵](#)

Anashavan

A "wicked" human being who neglects the Truth and the Good and instead follows the path of Darkness and Deceit. [↵](#)

Angra Mainyu

Divinity that emanates from God and who is identified as the devil ([Ahriman](#)) and thus as the source of all evil in existence. ↴

Arda Viraf

Persian prophet and visionary who lived sometime between the third and seventh centuries C.E. Recorded his influential visions of the apocalypse in a book called *Vision*, often referred to simply as the *Book of Arda Viraf*. ↴

Asha

lit. “Truth” or “Righteousness.” The cosmic force of goodness and the key ethical principle by which the Zoroastrian faithful seek to live. ↴

Ashavan

A “righteous” human being who follows the Truth and the Good and walks the path of the Light and the Divine. ↴

Atash Bahrman

The Sacred Flame found in all Zoroastrian temples. ↴

Avesta (Avestas)

lit. “Authoritative Utterance.” The most important scriptures in Zoroastrianism, written in the language by the same name, which contain the [Gathas](#) that were penned by Zoroaster. The compilation developed for over one thousand years but was completed by the seventh century C.E. ↴

Chinvat Bridge

The bridge that all the living and the resurrected dead must attempt to cross on Judgment Day, following the apocalypse. The righteous cross easily into paradise, while the sinful find the bridge to be as thin as a razor blade and fall off it and into hell. ↴

Dakhma

lit. “Towers of Silence.” Constructed atop mountains and hills, open-air, arena-like spaces. Each one has a pit into which the human dead are placed, to be devoured by carrion and dried to bones by the sun, thereby preventing rotting corpses from defiling the pure earth. ↴

Dar-I Mihr

lit. “gate” or “house” of Mithra; the name used for Zoroastrian temples. ↴

Druj

The cosmic force of Evil, Dishonesty, and Sinfulness, which the faithful are to shun and combat in life, thereby contributing to its ultimate defeat at the end of time. [↵](#)

Ethical Monotheism

A form of religion that features belief in a single creator God who establishes, through revelations to humanity, laws and guidelines as to how to live a righteous life and avoid the pitfalls of sin. [↵](#)

Faravahar

Chief symbol of the Zoroastrian religion, often seen on temples. Widely thought to depict God, [Ahura Mazda](#). [↵](#)

Frashokereti

lit. “Making Wonderful” or “The Restoration.” The apocalypse and the subsequent restoration of the world and eternal gathering of the righteous into heaven, which entails the elimination of evil, Satan, sin, and pain. [↵](#)

Fravashi

Powerful Valkyrie-like divinities, female “winged warriors” and the spirits of the ancestors who watch over and protect the living and provide us with water. [↵](#)

Garotman

The highest sphere of heaven and the abode of Ahura Mazda. [↵](#)

Gathas

Seventeen hymns attributed to the founder of Zoroastrianism, Zarathustra, and the oldest and most important component of the *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian Bible. [↵](#)

Gayomard (Gayo)

lit. “Mortal life,” the original and singular giant asexual man from whom we all derive. [↵](#)

Hamistikan (Hamestegan)

lit. “The Ever Stationary” or “Equilibrium.” Purgatory. Place of neither suffering nor bliss, where those neither righteous enough to merit direct entry into heaven nor sinful enough to be cast into hell await the apocalypse and Judgment Day, before transferring to heaven. [↵](#)

Haoma

Hallucinogenic plant used frequently, in ground form, as an offering to Ahura Mazda and other, lesser, divinities. Related to *Soma* in Hinduism. [↴](#)

Ized Atar

The Holy Fire; also, a cognate name for a divinity of fire identified as Mithra. This fire accompanied Arda Ziraf on his mystical journey to heaven and hell. [↴](#)

Mithra (Mitra)

One of the most important divinities in Persian and Mediterranean history. Associated with the sun, justice, and war, and the giver of cattle, Mithra is second in importance in Zoroastrianism only to Ahura Mazda. [↴](#)

Nasu (Druj Nasu)

Demonic, fly-like female supernatural being who invades human corpses and defiles those of pall bearers. Among the most feared beings in Zoroastrianism and a source of revulsion to death, burial, and the resting places of the dead. [↴](#)

Parsis (Parsees)

Name of the Zoroastrian community that migrated from Persia to India following the Muslim conquest of their homeland in the seventh century C.E. [↴](#)

Saoshyant (Saoshyan)

Zoroastrian savior(s), “fiend smiter,” who intervene or intervenes on Judgement Day on behalf of those deserving of salvation. The chief Saoshyan is a descendant of Zoroaster himself, the third of his three posthumous sons to be born on the eve of the end of time. [↴](#)

Séroche (Sraosha)

“Angel of Conscience” who is “Protector of the Righteous” and who accompanied the prophet Arda Ziraf on his mystical journey to heaven and hell. Previously attested to by Zoroaster in the [Gathas](#). [↴](#)

Spenta Mainyu

High-ranking divinity, demi-God, created by Ahura Mazda to channel and rule over all goodness and righteousness in creation. Akin to the Holy Spirit in Christianity, an aspect of God. [↴](#)

Vedas

Oldest of all written religious scriptures in the world, the foundational texts of Hinduism, containing much material about divinities (*deavas*; *devas*) that are also important in Zoroastrianism. [↴](#)

Wināh

lit. “to expire” or “to ruin.” Essentially the word for “sin” in Zoroastrianism. [↵](#)

Yasna

lit. “worship” or “sacrifice.” Important Zoroastrian ritual (and the title of a book in the *Avesta*), conducted daily in temples and in homes, to remind the faithful of the cosmic struggle between good and evil in which they participate. [↵](#)

Yazad (Yazata)

lit. “worthy of worship”; term applied to any good spiritual being or divinity. [↵](#)

Zoroaster (Zarathustra)

Persian prophet and founder of the Zoroastrian religion; lived sometime between 1700 and 1000 B.C.E.; presumed author of the [Gathas](#). [↵](#)

2. Enoch, Daniel, and Jewish Messianism

Overview

Today's preeminent authority on Jewish apocalyptic literature, John Collins, says "several key features of the historical apocalypses were paralleled in Persian writings already in the Hellenistic age, notably the periodization of history, eschatological woes, resurrection, and the supernatural forces of good and evil." Notwithstanding such Zoroastrian influences, which over time were "adapted to the needs of Jewish monotheism,"¹ Judaism has made extraordinary, foundational, and expansive contributions to humanity's conceptualizations of these notions, which are also cornerstones of Christian and Islamic [eschatology](#). These contributions and some of their spectacular influences across the ages are the focus of this chapter.

Its scriptural taproots are found in the [Tanakh](#), or the Hebrew Bible (which Christians often refer to as the "Old Testament"), especially in the [book of Daniel](#). Daniel was the last text to be incorporated into the Tanakh, making it part of the [canon](#), or canonical. It was predated by a similar apocalyptic text called the "[book of the watchers](#)" (the first thirty-six chapters of the [book of Enoch](#)). For whatever reason, the "book of the watchers" was not included in the Hebrew Bible, making it an apocryphal text, or part of the vast body of religious literature known as the [Apocrypha](#). Called by Collins "a major collection of apocalyptic literature,"² the book of Enoch was well known to many authors of the Bible and is cited therein. After centuries of Jewish contemplation of ritual practices related to these texts, the notions of the apocalypse and the resurrection were amplified in the [Zohar](#), a thirteenth-century C.E. compilation of mystical texts. The Zohar helped inspire several messianic movements in medieval and modern Judaism, none more notable than that led by [Sabbatai Sevi](#) (1626–1676), "The Mystical Messiah."³

This chapter considers all of this, but first let us introduce the remarkable and influential religion of Judaism, oriented by three of Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion: Narrative and Mythic, Ethical and Legal, and Social and Institutional.

Dimensions of Judaism

Narrative/Mythic

Spanning millennia and countless geocultural/ethnic milieus, Judaism is a rich and diverse

religion, and its diversity cannot be fairly reflected in an introductory text, but let us try. Unifying this diversity is an anchoring in texts, as Judaism is a profoundly scriptural religion (or, as one leading scholar says, “Jews love their books”).⁴ Although Judaism has an exceedingly rich philosophical history, one would be mistaken to think of it as an extensively doctrinal religion, hence our omission of Smart’s doctrinal/philosophical category. To quote the eminent late scholar Solomon Schechter, “With God as a reality, revelation as a fact, the [Torah](#) as a rule of life and the hope of redemption as a most vivid expectation, they [Jews in antiquity] felt no need for formulating their dogmas into a creed – which is repeated – not because we *believe* but that we *may believe*.”⁵ Still, laws and ethics, to which we turn our attention later in this chapter, are of great importance in Judaism. And many of these laws are expressed in the religion’s rich scriptures, especially the Tanakh.

Composed of twenty-four books, including the Torah, or [Pentateuch](#)—the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers)—the Hebrew Bible is the source of some of the most widely known and beloved stories and beliefs ever recorded. From a scientific or historiographical perspective, many of these stories are mythic, but that does not change the fact that they have for ages offered humans profound lessons on the meaning of life and how we should live. The first of these stories that involves human characters, of course, is that of Adam and Eve, in the book of Genesis. Mythology is an important component of most religions, and it generally functions to foster meaning, to establish values and guidelines by which to live rightly, and, especially in Judaism, to create and perpetuate collective identity—in this case, across millennia, continents, cultures, and ethnicities. The question of whether myths in religion are “true,” or if the stories recounted in the Bible actually occurred, is less interesting than the values and orientational senses that they bring to people’s lives across the ages, for religion is much more about meaning than truth.

The great Spanish philosopher George Santayana defines mythology simply as “an observation of things encumbered with all they can suggest to a dramatic fantasy. It is neither conscious poetry nor valid science, but the root and raw material of both.”⁶ Philosophically speaking, its “function was [is] to show us some phase of experience in its totality and moral issue . . . to present and interpret events in terms relative to spirit.”⁷ In the case of Judaism, it is also “the root and raw material” of law and collective identity, a common function of mythology in the human religious experience. According to Smart, “That sense of a collective past gives identity to a group.”⁸ Take the Garden of Eden story, for instance, in which the first humans, Adam and Eve, are created by God ([Yahweh](#)). They are provided for and instructed about the importance of law, in the form of the prohibition against eating the apple. Their breaking of this law has consequences, of course, and the rest is history. Noah, meanwhile, kept faith in God’s word and warning and saved humanity and the animal kingdom during the Flood. Moses received the most important of God’s laws while leading his people in exile, circa 1446 B.C.E., and parting the Red Sea to liberate the Israelites from bondage. For our purposes, it is notable that each of these myths reflects not only the upmost importance of divine laws, but also the promise of redemption, and that ultimately redemption will occur at the End of Time, with the coming of the [Messiah](#) (*mashiach*) and the restoration of God’s kingdom on Earth.



Pages of a fifteenth-century Bible in Italy | [Image of the Hebrew Bible](#) by [Sailko](#) is used under a [CC BY 3.0 License](#).

Judaism's narrative arc is fluid, living, deeply historical, and vast, but much of it cannot be categorized as mythology. Narratives take many forms in religious scriptures, and some of the most important in Judaism are the proclamations of the prophets. The most important of these prophets is Moses, as stated by the great medieval philosopher Moses [Maimonides](#) (1135?-1204). He summarizes the thirteen key principles of Judaism as follows:⁹

1. That God exists
2. That God is one
3. That God is incorporeal
4. That God is eternal
5. That God alone may be worshipped
6. That prophecy exists
7. That the prophecy of Moses is superior to all other prophecy
8. That the Torah was divinely revealed

9. That the Torah is immutable
10. That God knows the deeds of men
11. That God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked
12. That the Messiah will come
13. That the dead will be resurrected

It is noteworthy for our purposes that the last four of these principles pertain to eschatology—that God knows our deeds, that the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished, that the Messiah will come, and that the dead will be resurrected. No prophet, even Moses, left us teachings about the End of Time more captivating than Daniel, who was not a prophet per se, nor is the book of Daniel a prophetic text “in the Jewish canon.”¹⁰ But his apocalyptic vision is of momentous importance in Judaism, so we discuss Daniel at length in this chapter. But first, let us turn to the ethical dimension of Judaism, something of paramount and literally global and eternal importance.

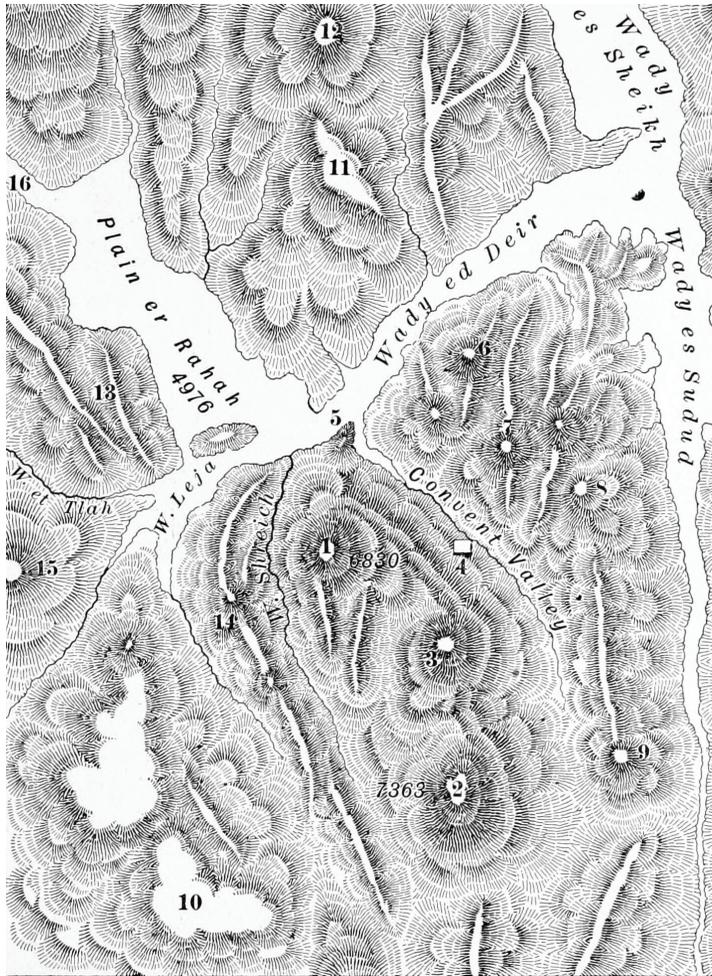
Ethical/Legal

Judaism is an ancient monotheistic religion that pivots on four fundamental concepts: God, land, law, and people. The land, Israel, was promised to the chosen *people*, the Israelites (the [Promised Land](#)), while they were in exile under the leadership of Moses, who, on Mt. Sinai, received the most important component of the *law*, the [Ten Commandments](#) (Exod. 20: 3–17):

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.
3. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.
4. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.
5. Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.
6. Thou shalt not kill.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.¹¹

Prophetic echoes of Judgment Day are clear in the third commandment, while in the Bible these world-transforming, divinely decreed laws are immediately followed by a passage that powerfully presages the apocalypse: “And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.”



- | | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| 1 <i>Ras Sufsafeh</i> | 9 <i>Jebel Moneyah</i> |
| 2 <i>Summit of Jebel Musa</i> | 10 <i>Jebel el Hamr</i> |
| 3 <i>Jebel Arremziyeb</i> | 11 <i>Jebel Sona</i> |
| 4 <i>Convent of St. Katharine</i> | 12 <i>Jebel el Djar</i> |
| 5 <i>Hill of the Golden Calf</i> | 13 <i>Jebel Ghubsheh</i> |
| 6 <i>Jebel ed Deir</i> | 14 <i>Jebel Fara</i> |
| 7 <i>Jebel Aribeh</i> | 15 <i>Jebel Kathrina</i> |
| 8 <i>Jebel Abu Madhi</i> | 16 <i>Nagb Hawa</i> |

Mt. Sinai, Egypt, formerly Mt. Horeb, where Moses received the Ten Commandments. | [MACCOUN\(1899\) p057 MT. SINAI OR JEBEL MUSA](#) from the British Library is in the [public domain](#).

There are literally hundreds of other laws ([mitsvah](#)) in Judaism (613, to be exact), but these

ten are clearly the most important. They also serve as an ethical foundation for Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam. A key point here is that since before the biblical era, Judaism has placed “emphasis . . . upon deeds, the *Halakha* [Jewish law], and external behavior,”¹² which are oriented by the mitzvah put forth by God and God’s prophets in scripture.

While the Ten Commandments and other laws are found in the Tanakh, many later laws are stated, often debated, and updated in a later body of Jewish scripture known as the [Talmud](#). The word *Talmud* means “teaching,” and the text was written by learned rabbis and completed by the fifth century C.E., though commentaries were added for the following two centuries:

It includes the Mishnah (oral law) and the Gemara (“Completion”). The Mishnah is a large collection of sayings, arguments and counter-arguments that touch on virtually all areas of life. The Gemara is known as a “sea” of learning, a collection of stories about biblical characters, sober legal arguments and fanciful imaginings of the world of old and the world to come.¹³

Too vast and complex to adequately summarize here, let us consider briefly the Talmud’s eschatology and its remarkable teachings about the meaning of life and how God commands us to live it. In this vein, importantly, the text speaks of “sins that incur divine punishment,”¹⁴ while offering reflections on resurrection, judgment, and the afterlife, “the world to come.” More so than the Torah, the Talmudic “eschatological speculations are extensive and intensive.”¹⁵ Here, the world to come is described as follows, per David Novak:

This world is not like the world-to-come. In the world-to-come there is no eating, no drinking, no mating, no trading, no jealousy, no hatred, and no enmity; instead, the righteous [tsaddiqim] sit with crowns on their heads and enjoy the splendor of the divine Presence [ziv ha-shekhinah]. As it is said: “They beheld God and they ate and they drank” (Exodus 24:11).¹⁶

This Talmudic notion of heaven ([samayim](#), pronounced shamayim), “the realm of the gods” or “the atmosphere or celestial realm,” expands upon ideas found in the Hebrew Bible. This includes diverse representations and is a place ruled by God and a host of angels and other divine beings (and, at one point in the history of Judaism, of other gods). This concept is rather vague.¹⁷ Likewise, the Talmud also amplifies the somewhat nebulous notion of hell ([she’ol](#)) in the biblical texts, in which it “means a kind of amorphous oblivion, having no specific opprobrium attached to it; rabbinic teaching, with its more intensive concept of hell ([gehinnom](#)), sees she’ol as the place where the otherworldly punishment of the wicked will take place,” as Novak explains.¹⁸ Alan Bernstein outlines the rabbinic, or Talmudic, teachings about *gehinnom*:

The Talmudic sources present four main positions: 1) Wicked people may be excluded from the world to come, but it is unclear whether they will be annihilated or punished. 2) There is an actual place for postmortem suffering called Gehinnom, which is the locus of eternal punishment for some but purification for others. 3) Gehinnom truly

exists; it has three gates and seven names, but there are ways to get out. 4) There is no physical Gehinnom; its functions are accomplished by other means.¹⁹

Like in Zoroastrian eschatology, here our ultimate fate is determined by how we choose to live, even if God already knows the outcome. As one of the greatest rabbis recorded in the Talmud, [Akiva](#) (50–135 C.E.), puts it, “Everything is foreseen [by God], but free will is given [to man].”²⁰

As in Zoroastrianism, in Judaism it is widely believed that the dead will be resurrected for final judgment. Overseeing this momentous drama will be the Messiah, the “anointed one,” who is a descendant of [King David](#). The Messiah is a human being, a priest and a prophet, and the one who leads the righteous on the path to the world to come. This will be a new world on the earth we now inhabit with a heavenly orbit for the redeemed. This is a central theme in Talmudic eschatology, based on extensive rabbinic reflections on passages in the Hebrew Bible that mention the messianic idea, especially in the book of Daniel, which we summarize later. For now, the key point is that God provides humanity with laws, and whether we follow them will determine our ultimate fate. The laws are many, of course, but are powerfully summed up by another key Talmudic author, [Hillel the Elder](#) (110 B.C.E.–10 C.E.): “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is *the whole of Torah* and the remainder is but commentary. Do and study it.”²¹

Social/Institutional

Hillel places the [Golden Rule](#) at the heart of Judaism; it is a religion that on a fundamental level is about respect for humanity, respect for all of God’s people, and social justice, for God is a God of laws and calls the faithful to be righteous and to love one another. Both the mythic/narrative and the legal/ethical dimensions that were just covered are deeply intertwined with the social/institutional dimension, so this section will be short and perhaps a bit redundant. For Judaism is not a centralized religion and takes numerous forms, normally and nominally categorized as [Orthodox](#), [Conservative](#), [Reform](#), and [Reconstructionist](#). The latter is the most liberal, and it emerged in the United States, home to more Jews when it emerged there in the twentieth century than any other country.

The chief institution in Judaism is the [synagogue](#), which is usually a space where Jews gather for worship, a temple, but the meaning of the word *synagogue* is much broader than that. The term may also refer simply to “a collective of Jewish community members who constitute a congregation.” Hence, it refers not just to a constructed temple but also a gathering of the faithful, as reflected in its Greek etymological origin: “gathering” or “assembly.”²² There are also numerous Jewish seminaries, universities, and colleges throughout the world, as Judaism highly values learning, but there is no centralized hierarchy in the religion, unlike Roman Catholicism.

For the sake of brevity, let us conclude this section with the teachings of one of the most influential Jewish leaders of our age, [Mordecai Kaplan](#) (1881–1983). Though raised Orthodox and having served as a rabbi in that tradition, Kaplan “recognized that Judaism is not simply a

'religion' in the conventional sense of the word – meaning a system of beliefs and practices. In his brilliant explanation of the origins and nature of religious identity, Kaplan recognizes that all religious identity is formed from the three “B’s” of “Believing, Behaving, and Belonging.”²³ Belief is foregrounded in Roman Catholicism, for instance, where at every Mass believers recite the Apostle’s Creed. Islam emphasizes the belief that submission to Allah is the chief orientation for life. For Kaplan, Judaism instead foregrounds belonging and behaving, as beliefs are varied, and even the belief in a supernatural, supreme God is unnecessary to be a faithful Jew. Furthermore, Kaplan identifies God as the “power that makes for salvation.” As Rebecca Alpert puts it:

Kaplan’s most influential idea, which was central to his platform of reconstruction, was that the Jews were neither solely a religious group nor a nation, as they were constituted in prior eras, but a people. He suggested that belonging to the Jewish people was what bound Jews together, even if they disagreed about belief and practice.²⁴

Of course, there are many other interpretations of what Judaism centrally means, but for Kaplan it is belonging and behaving that are foregrounded, with believing less emphasized than in, say, Catholicism or Islam. But belief in the validity of the law and of divinely ordained values is a taproot of both belonging and behaving in Judaism, for which the Hebrew Bible is the foundation, its ultimate scripture.

The Book of Enoch

Also called 1 Enoch, the book of Enoch “is actually a collection of ancient booklets written at different times by several authors, almost all of them composed in the Aramaic language.”²⁵ Despite its multiple authorship, the book has long been widely attributed to Enoch, as reflected in its title, making it, like many biblical texts, an example of [pseudepigrapha](#), books written by unknown authors but attributed to kings, prophets, patriarchs, and apostles. Pseudepigraphic manuscripts are “texts that were cast as the word of famous deceased figures” throughout the Ancient Near East.²⁶

Though neither the book of Enoch nor the accounts of his “otherworldly journeys” are in the Bible, Enoch is mentioned several times and inspires a great deal of apocalyptic contemplation among authors and readers of the Hebrew Bible. This is true despite Enoch’s being “a highly enigmatic” figure in the biblical texts.²⁷ The book of Genesis, for instance, tells us that Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, was his father, while this is twice contradicted later in the text. Such unclarity notwithstanding, for our purposes what is most important is the passage in Genesis (5:24) that states that “Enoch walked faithfully with God, then he was no more, because God took him away.” While this might be interpreted to mean that Enoch lived a very long life (over three hundred years)²⁸ and that it ended when “God took him away,” Collins argues that “this

brief notice does not imply the full account of Enoch's otherworldly journeys which we find in 1 Enoch, but is rather the seed from which later [Jewish apocalyptic] speculation grew."²⁹

Though not compiled in its entirety until the period between 200 and 50 B.C.E., the earliest texts in the book of Enoch were likely written as early as seven hundred years prior.³⁰ A complete copy of the text has never been discovered by biblical historians or archaeologists. The first section of the book, one of the oldest, is often referred to as the "book of the Watchers" and opens with a declaration that Enoch was "blessed" to have his "eyes opened by God" to receive a "vision of the Holy One in heaven," which was orchestrated by angels.³¹ With that, Enoch launches into his dramatic prophecy of God descending onto Earth from the heavens, smiting all who live with fear, and "the Watchers will quake," as recorded in verses 6–9:

And the high mountains shall be shaken,
And the high hills shall be made low,
And shall melt like wax before the flame

And the earth shall be wholly rent in sunder,
And all that is upon the earth shall perish,
And there shall be judgment upon all.

But with the righteous He will make peace.

And will protect the elect,
And have mercy upon them.
And they shall all belong to God.

And they shall all be blessed.
And He will help them all,
And light shall appear unto them,
And He will make peace with them.

And behold! He cometh with ten thousand of His
holy ones
To execute judgment upon all,
And to destroy the ungodly:
And to convict all flesh
Of all the works of their ungodliness which they have
ungodly committed.
And of all the hard things which ungodly sinners have
spoken against him.³²

With these opening verses, Enoch captivates its reader with both terror and hope, poetically emitting a clear message of the End of Time and the fate of us all, which are central ideas

in apocalyptic thought to this day. The Persian, or Zoroastrian, influences on these passages are clear, from the melting hills and judgment to the light brought to the righteous and the destruction of the wicked.

Remarkably, sections of the book of Enoch were unknown to modern biblical historians until they were found in a cave in the Holy Land, a place called [Qumran](#). These were among the most important of the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#), which were discovered from 1947 to 1956, shortly after World War II. Eleven copies of Enoch were among them. They were evidently made for the apocalyptic Jewish monastic community that lived and meditated in this cave and adjacent ones, the [Essenes](#).³³ Members of the community were known as the “sons of light,” hermits who immersed themselves in asceticism and prayer in preparation for the End of Time, which would be heralded by an “earthly war” that “was to last no less than forty years, with a sabbatical interlude every seventh year.”³⁴ Norman Cohn summarizes the Essenes’ apocalyptic vision:

Angelic armies under the command of Israel’s patron angel Michael . . . would fight demonic forces led by Beliar, also called Melkiresha (‘my king is unrighteousness’). . . . In the end, God would intervene to annihilate all evil . . . [and] there would be a Last Judgment, when Michael/Melchizedek would recompense the ‘holy ones of God’ and exercise vengeance on Satan and his lot.³⁵

The Essenes “expected its final victory to be immediately followed by a messianic age” and a “Renewal,” when sinners will be cast into hell and the righteous “will be rewarded with ‘healing, great peace in a long life, and fruitfulness, together with every everlasting blessing and eternal joy in life without end.’”³⁶ Many of these reflections were inspired not only by Enoch but by Daniel, to whom our attention now duly turns.

The Book of Daniel

“Judaism, in all of its forms and manifestations,” writes Gershom Scholem, “has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community.”³⁷ This redemption has, furthermore, a “catastrophic character” that “finds manifold expression: in world wars and revolutions, in epidemics, famine, and economic catastrophe.”³⁸ In other words, it will happen in the here and now, on Earth and during someone’s lifetime, and it will be explosively dramatic, to say the least. Judaism’s greatest expression of this is found in the book of Daniel, the last book to be incorporated into the Hebrew Bible.

During a half millennium, from 250 B.C.E. to 250 C.E., apocalyptic literature flourished among Jewish and early Christian authors, yet Daniel is the only one represented in the Hebrew Bible (the “book of the watchers” missed out), with Chapters 7–12 being the climax. There are, to be sure, other apocalyptic references in the Tanakh (e.g., Zech. 9–14), but Daniel is the most forceful and influential, historically speaking. Interestingly, the most important

apocalyptic book in the Christian Bible, Revelation, was also the last text to be incorporated into the canon, a subject to which we return in the next chapter.

Apocalyptic and messianic references are found in rather scattered form throughout the Hebrew Bible, though early on “the notions of chaos, cosmos and the world to come that they express had no place in official Judaism as it had developed since” the reception of the Torah, as Cohn explains: “The earliest of the writings to which modern scholars have attached the label ‘Jewish apocalypses’ were produced in Palestine in the third and second centuries” B.C.E.³⁹ The book of Daniel is the most important of these writings, a text that “has had a powerful effect on the religious imaginations of Judaism and Christianity.”⁴⁰

Who wrote this momentous book and when? As Martha Himmelfarb explains, “Daniel takes as its hero a famous figure of the past, a wise and righteous man about whom many stories were already in circulation.... But whatever his origins, by the middle of the second century B.C.E. Daniel had been naturalized as a Jew.”⁴¹ *Daniel* means “God is my judge” in Hebrew, and the visionary by this name was seemingly a legendary heroic figure who was well known in tales in Aramaic and Hebrew throughout the region.⁴² Many beliefs and aspirations among Jews (and it is possible that the original Daniel was actually not Jewish) were grafted onto him in the Hebrew Bible and in subsequent Christian scripture.

The book of Daniel is written largely in the first person, as is often the case with pseudepigraphic literature. Early sections of Daniel are also examples of what scholars call “court tales,” for they are stories that Daniel recounted, in exile, to the Babylonian court, like “Daniel in the fiery furnace” and “Daniel in the lion’s den.”⁴³ The book of Daniel is the culmination of Jewish apocalyptic literature, most important because of its canonical status, and contains all of the eight clusters of this literature identified by Collins:

- 1) urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future
- 2) The end as a cosmic catastrophe;
- 3) periodization and determination;
- 4) activity of angels and demons;
- 5) new salvation, paradisaic in character;
- 6) manifestations of the kingdom of God;
- 7) a mediator with royal functions;
- 8) the catchword ‘glory.’⁴⁴

With any apocalyptic text, it is important to consider the historical/political context in which it was written. Sociologists and social historians have established that distressing social conditions, like colonization, slavery, and other acute forms of oppression, fertilize communities with an expectant receptivity toward doomsday prophecy.⁴⁵ Daniel writes in Chapters 2 and 7 of “four kingdoms,” seemingly reflecting on political changes that he viewed as signs of the End of Days. As Himmelfarb explains, Daniel’s “visions ... place great emphasis on the evil of the eschatological villain Antiochus IV” who had “issued a decree prohibiting the practice of Judaism.”⁴⁶ **Antiochus** was a Macedonian Hellenistic king of the **Seleucid Empire** from 175 to 164 B.C.E. As for the four kingdoms: “The idea of four world kingdoms to be followed by a final kingdom in which righteousness triumphs probably originated in Persia.”⁴⁷ This final kingdom would be bequeathed by God to the “holy ones”—to angels, who would gather the righteous to join them eternally in paradise on Earth.

Furthermore, “there are two strands of tradition in the Jewish apocalypses, one of which is characterized by visions ... while the other is marked by otherworldly journeys.”⁴⁸ Both are

also found in earlier Persian tradition, though scholars debate their influence on Judaism. Take Arda Viraf, for instance, whom we met in the previous chapter, “a [Zoroastrian] priest who drugged himself to release his spirit to explore the fate of the dead.”⁴⁹ Visions have been received by select mystics throughout the ages, and on occasion they are described in writing, as in the book of Daniel. While in bed, Daniel receives a vision of a tumultuous sea, from which emerge four beasts, one of which has ten and then eleven horns. And a vision of thrones, one occupied by the “ancient of days,” who orders that the horned beast be burned to death. Next, he sees a ram, a vision interpreted for him by the angel Gabriel, then Gabriel himself, and finally a figure robed in white linen, whose eyes are “like torches of fire.”



Daniel's vision of the four beasts; seventeenth-century etching by Rembrandt. | [Rembrandt van Rijn – Daniel's vision of the four beasts](#) from the Rijksmuseum is in the [public domain](#).

The terrifying visions of beasts subside, and then Daniel sees God, called here “the one ancient of days” (7:9). God resides in a palace, seated on a throne with books open before Him.

The throne has wheels, furthermore, and its occupant is robed in white and has a long white beard. Thousands are gathered before God, and the whole scene is overwhelmingly bright. By then, “the fourth beast is destroyed and eternal dominion is given to ‘one like a son of man’” (7:13), who rides on clouds.⁵⁰ A key passage in the text concerns judgment:

And all the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and *among* the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou? (4:35).

Another of the crucial lessons for Daniel is that his God delivers the faithful, whether from a furnace, a lion’s den, or [Armageddon](#). Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refuse to worship at the statue of [King Nebuchadnezzar](#), and the latter three are tossed into a furnace to suffer and die. (It is not clear where Daniel is when this happens.) Daniel is later pitched into the lion’s den because he worships his own God instead of the king. In both cases, these faithful Jews are delivered by YHWH, one of the most important teachings not just of Daniel but of the entire Bible. This is reflected in Chapter 10, where Daniel is told: “Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous.” Daniel takes this quite to heart and goes off to fight on behalf of his people, transmitting for the ages this extraordinary message of redemption (12:1):

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Sabbatai Sevi and Apocalyptic Kabbalah

Multitudes in Europe and the Middle East thought that the end was at hand in 1666, when one of the world’s largest cities, London, burned, leaving nearly 100,000 people hungry in the charred streets. “What happened on the streets of London,” writes Charlotte Sleigh, “had significance for the fate of the earth – the cosmos.” The Dutch and the English, the Spanish and the Portuguese, and the Polish and the Lithuanians were at war, furthermore, hurricanes swept the Caribbean, and a church steeple in Riga collapsed, killing eight people. “Catholics and Protestants, and their royal proxies, had slaughtered one another around Europe, and bubonic fleas crawled from body to body as fast as heresy could be whispered.” Those fleas especially proliferated in England, where the plague then killed 100,000, the same year the strongest tornado in English history devastated County Lincolnshire. All surely signs that the end was nigh, that “the Jews would be restored to Zion and ‘wicked empires’ destroyed,” yet above all it was the number of the year that signaled the dawn of the apocalypse.⁵¹

Though the number 666 has no significance in Jewish scriptures, by the Middle Ages its Christian conceptualizations, rooted in the book of Revelation, had become well known to many Jews and stirred their apocalyptic reflections, especially during times of tumult, oppression, and uncertainty. By then, certain Jewish sages had become steeped in the Zohar, the basis of Judaism's remarkable mystical tradition [Kabbalah](#) (lit., "tradition"; "receive," "accept"). This spiritual movement "appears to have emerged suddenly in the thirteenth century,"⁵² though earlier influences are believed to have been revealed to and by the prophet Elijah.⁵³ In due course, Kabbalah's apocalyptic inflections inspired one of the most popular messianic movements in Judaism's long history, that led by Sabbatai Sevi in the seventeenth century. It is to Sabbatai and [Sabbatianism](#) (or Sabbateanism), "the most important messianic movement in Judaism since the destruction of the second temple,"⁵⁴ that our attention turns in this section, but first some important historical background.

"When the Messianic idea appears as a living force in the world of Judaism – especially in that of medieval Judaism – which seems so totally interwoven with the realm of the [Halakhah](#) – it always occurs in the closest connection with apocalypticism," writes Scholem.⁵⁵ This erudite scholar rightly attributes the emergence of messianic movements in Judaism to prophecy and social conditions. The great biblical seers, like Daniel, and apocryphal prophets, like Enoch, offer "predictions and messages" that "come to an equal degree from revelation and from the suffering and desperation to those whom they addressed."⁵⁶ Furthermore, though such prophets "do not yet give us any kind of well-defined conception of Messianism," they do provide the basis for a "utopian impulse – the vision of a better humanity at the End of Days – [which] is interpenetrated with restorative impulses like the reinstatement of an ideally conceived Davidic kingdom."⁵⁷

When believers in the coming of the Messiah and the End of Time are persecuted, expectancy of the End of Days is fertilized. Under the oppressive rule of the Greek emperor Antiochus IV, Jews were prohibited from openly practicing their faith. This occurred at a time in Judaism when "there rose an emphasis upon apocalyptic social movements and ideologies, which escalated and excited group philosophies and their emphases upon boundaries between member and nonmember and upon a divine battle between good and evil being fought on behalf of the righteous community," as Jeremiah Cataldo explains. This led to a popular conceptualization of the Messiah and the prophet being one.⁵⁸ Enter [Judah Maccabee](#), who from 167 to 164 B.C.E. led a revolt against the oppressors that resulted in the restoration of the kingdom of Judea and the return of the beloved temple in Jerusalem to Jewish control, an epochal event that is celebrated during [Hanukkah](#).

Under subsequent Roman rule, some two hundred years later, after the Christian movement had begun within Judaism, Jews had tragically lost the temple, while Romans imposed a harsh system of crop taxation on peasants in the region surrounding Jerusalem, or [Judea](#). Thus provoked, a largely peasant revolt ensued, in 66 C.E., tinged with apocalyptic and messianic fervor, with "independent armed militias [springing] up across the country."⁵⁹ Some of these Jewish militias stationed themselves in the hills and effectively repelled Roman counterattacks with "javelins and slingshot,"⁶⁰ setting up the fateful Battle of Beth-Horon, a victory of resistance against oppression for the ages, as Neil Faulkner explains: "It was the greatest Jewish victory for 200 years, and it sounded through the hills of Palestine like

a clarion call to holy war. This, surely, was God's work, the beginning of the End of Days, the inaugural event of the Rule of the Saints."⁶¹ Roman counterinsurgencies would be met with Jewish guerrilla resistance in the ensuing years, culminating in the events at [Masada](#) in 73 C.E. Since the uprisings against Roman oppression began, a fortified commune of roughly a thousand Jews, known historically as [Zealots](#) and the Sicarii, lived for several years atop a mountain called Masada, in the Judean Desert. "They were the last holdouts of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome, which had ended three years earlier, in 70 C.E., with an unimaginable disaster," Jodi Magness explains. "The destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple."⁶² Much earlier, under [King Herod](#), the Romans had built a garrison there, high atop Masada, which was seized by Jews during the uprisings. Among them were guerrilla warriors poised to carry on with the resistance struggle. Stormed by a force of 15,000 Roman soldiers, who finally breached the walls surrounding the summit of Masada, however, the entire commune committed redemptive, revolutionary mass suicide, though much of this story may be shrouded in myth.⁶³

The Maccabean Revolt and Masada are important historical contexts for understanding the rise of Christianity. Christianity began as a Jewish messianic movement under the heels of colonialist oppression, with "restorative impulses" spurring the emergence of what is today the largest religion in the world. Jesus was a faithful Jew throughout his life, a rabbi and an apocalyptic visionary who preached more about the End of Days than anything else. Though he never claimed to be the Messiah, this role was thrust upon him posthumously by his followers. Hence, the Gospel of Matthew opens with an attempt to place Christ in the lineage of King David, as a redeemer who will see through "the reinstatement of an ideally conceived Davidic kingdom." Jesus did not achieve the long-standing Jewish aspiration that the Messiah would restore the kingdom and the temple, however, or go forth to rule the new era among the righteous from Jerusalem. This is the principal reason that Judaism and Christianity have been different religions since the period when the Gospels were written. Most Jews could simply not accept that the anticipated Messiah would arrive in Jerusalem so humbly on a donkey only to be crucified three days later. No kingdom restored, no heaven on Earth, no redemption, no liberationist aspirations realized. So the hope carried on, and most Jews looked elsewhere.

For several hundred years after Masada and the rise of Christianity, Judaism witnessed sporadic millenarian movements, like one in Crete in the sixth century,⁶⁴ but this all changed dramatically in the Middle Ages. Stephen Sharot defines [millenarianism](#) as follows:

Millenarianism is the belief that the world will undergo a fundamental transformation, ultimate and irrevocable. This change is immanent, to occur during the lifetime of most believers, this-worldly, involving the union of the terrestrial and the transcendental on this earth, and collective, merging the redemption of the individual with the group of the faithful or with all of humanity. Millenarianism often includes the figure of the Messiah who will bring about redemption.⁶⁵

These beliefs captivated Jews, especially from the eleventh century to the seventeenth century C.E., with significant millenarian movements emerging among them in Iberia and Italy. For example, early during the twelfth century in Cordoba, "Jews in the city had calculated

by astrology that the Messiah would appear in a certain year and they had chosen a one [Ibn Aryeh](#) as the messiah.”⁶⁶ Meanwhile, in the late thirteenth century, “in Avila a reputed illiterate indicated that angels had revealed a treatise to him indicating the imminent future kingdom. . . . Many prepared themselves by fasting, prayer, and giving charity; and on the announced day they rose early, dressed in white, and went to the synagogue to await the signal.”⁶⁷

But, excepting nascent Christianity, no Jewish millenarian movement was as captivating as that led by a Sephardic rabbi from Turkey named Sabbatai Sevi in the seventeenth century. Some scholars consider the material causes of the Sabbatian movement, especially attuned to “the terrible catastrophe that had overtaken Polish Jewry in 1648–1649 and had shaken the very foundation of the great Jewish community in Poland.”⁶⁸ But it was descendants of Jews from Spain—who had settled in Turkey after being expelled from Iberia during the Inquisition of 1492—who became “the main bearers of the Sabbatian movement.”⁶⁹ The movement was thus international, drawing into its vortex Jews from as far as Tangiers, Sevilla, and Amsterdam—“the rich and the poor ... the ruling class and the masses” alike. They traveled to the Holy Land, Jerusalem, driven by the hope of redemption and the belief that the Messiah, Sabbatai Sevi, had been chosen and that the End of Days was at hand.⁷⁰ What the diverse Jewish population throughout Europe and North Africa had in common was a culturally and spiritually rich sense of identity, faith, and inspiration derived from Kabbalah. They were especially inspired by the Zohar and its interpreters from [Safed](#), a small city located in Galilee, in today’s northern Israel, the highest city in the nation.



Sabbatai Sevi, the mystical (or some would say false) Messiah of seventeenth century Judaism. | [Sabbatai Sevi](#) by an unknown author is in the [public domain](#).

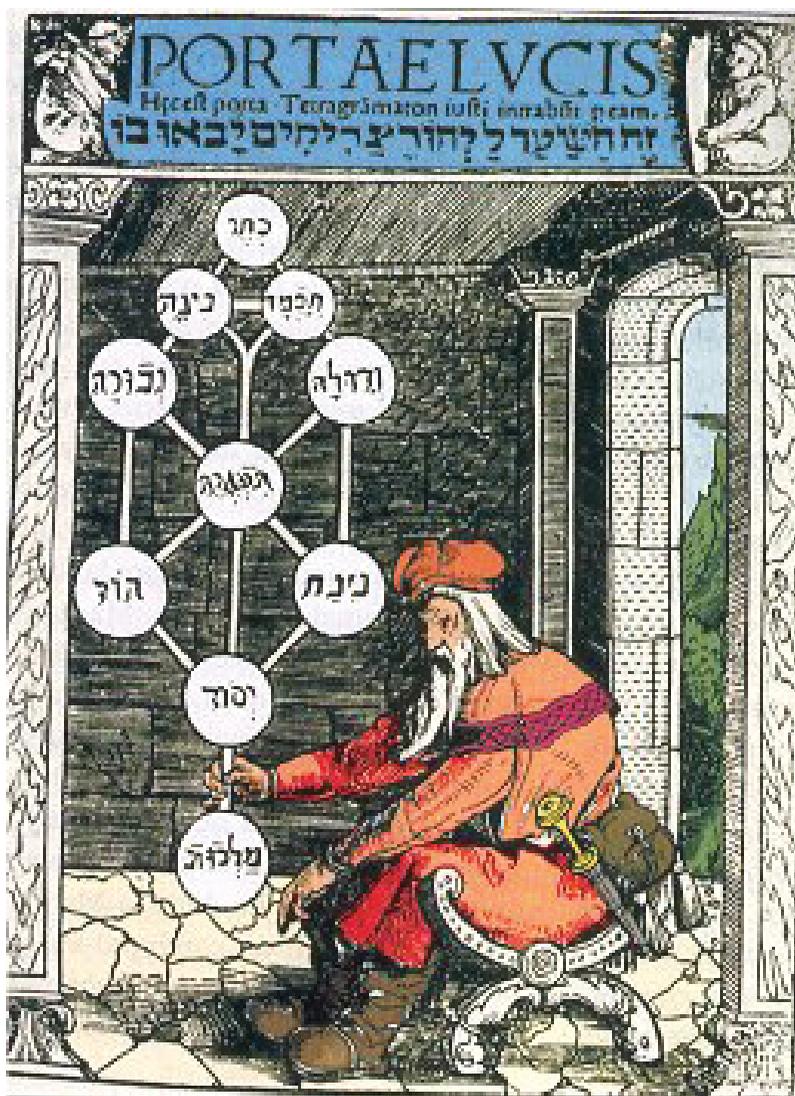
The Zohar is Judaism's greatest mystical work and has been momentously influential in the religion. There is no way to understand Kabbalah or Sabbatianism without considering its central teachings. A complex text that is attributed to a second century C.E. Palestinian rabbi named [Shimon bar Yohai](#), the Zohar was most likely written by numerous sages across hundreds of years. It is composed of "rambling compositions" that "fill well over a thousand pages of densely written Aramaic," as Pinchas Giller explains.⁷¹ The texts had been in circulation for generations but not compiled until the late thirteenth century, by a Sephardic Jew in Spain named [Moses De León](#) (1250–1305), who may have authored the book in its entirety. Two centuries later the Zohar would be taught by its most important interpreter, the Jerusalem-born, Safed-based rabbi [Isaac Luria](#) (1534–1572). His teachings on the text were so dominant that the term "Lurianic Kabbalah" is commonly used to discuss subsequent Jewish mysticism, especially the form that served as the philosophical and spiritual foundation and fuel for Sabbatianism.⁷² This is true, although Sabbatai was more of an original interpreter of the Zohar than a Lurianic acolyte. As Scholem explains, "When Sabbatai began his kabbalistic studies, Lurianic kabbalism was in the ascendant and practically all students of kabbalah immersed themselves in the writings – printed and in manuscript – of the Safed mystics."⁷³

Initially Kabbalism was not primarily concerned with eschatology, for “in its original setting it concentrated less on the end of the world than on the primordial beginning of creation.”⁷⁴ This would change dramatically, however, in the late Middle Ages, when it became deeply apocalyptic. Most of the key ideas in Kabbalism lent themselves very well to messianic and millenarian thought and inclinations. It holds, after all, that God’s essence, [Ein Sof](#) (the Infinite), is unknowable but that God’s knowable manifestations are the [sefirot](#), which Giller characterizes as follows:

These sefirot are the emanating aspects of the divine. They make up the metaphysical underpinnings of the created world, the processes of the divine, and the human soul. The interplay of the sefirot underlies the dance of the divine into corporeal reality.⁷⁵

Unfortunately, the sefirot, in the form of immanent divine sparks, are widely contained and restrained in material shells, [kelippot](#), that need to be burst open for the Messiah to complete the work of redemption and for God to become wholly self-realized. Most importantly, we humans have a role to play in making this happen. We are called to struggle against kelippot and bring forth the liberation of the sefirot, and thus the End of Time and the restoration of God’s kingdom of heaven on Earth for all eternity. The righteous will be ever gathered there, led by the Messiah. In the seventeenth century, that Messiah was widely believed, among Jews throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, to be Sabbatai Sevi. Word of his appearance spread rapidly, and the faithful abandoned everything to flock to the Holy Land, Jerusalem, to prepare for the End of Time.

A notion with Talmudic roots, the sefirot are collectively symbolized in Kabbalah as the [shekhinah](#), a Hebrew word meaning “presence” or “indwelling,”⁷⁶ which was conceived of as a feminine aspect of God and sometimes as the bride of God. It is portrayed in Kabbalah as something of a divine tree, the linked attributes of God that dwell in the world and are intrinsically and historically present in the lives, plights, and redemption of His people, the Jews. These ideas witnessed such an eschatological intensification with the growth in popularity of the Zohar and the teachings of Luria that by the seventeenth century the symbol of the shekhinah was as prominent among Jews as the Star of David.



The Divine Tree of Kabbalism, mystical Judaism, representing the ten potencies or attributes of God. | [The Divine Tree](#) is in the [public domain](#).

Who was Sabbatai Sevi? In August of 1626 the future Kabbalist was born on the Sabbath, a day of rest in Judaism, just as God had rested on the seventh day after creating the world. He was born in the Greek port city of Smyrna, in what is today Turkey, on the Aegean Sea; the city is now called Izmir. His father, Mordecai Sevi, was “a poulterer and egg dealer but later became a broker and agent for some English merchants in Smyrna,” a place that was “an important center for trade with Europe, and the insignificant Jewish community rose to prominence there in the years 1625–30.”⁷⁷ Little is known about Sabbatai’s mother, Clara, unfortunately, though she would become mythologized in Sabbatianism, while his two

brothers would become important members of the messianic movement that Sabbatai was destined to lead, which emerged after the deaths of their parents (1663).⁷⁸

Either as a mystic or as a sufferer of mental illness (or some combination thereof), from very early in life, Sabbatai Sevi received remarkable visions, some of which were apocalyptically inflected and surely heralded to him that he was being called by God to an important mission:

When he [Sabbatai] was six years old a flame appeared in a dream and caused a burn on his penis; and dreams would frighten him but he never told anyone. And the sons of whoredom [the demons] accosted him so as to cause him to stumble until they beat him, but he would not hearken unto them. They were the sons of Na'amah, the scourges of the children of man, who would always pursue him so as to lead him astray.⁷⁹

The dualism between good and evil, between divinity and demons, is clearly reflected in this vision, but the demons—even their queen, Na'amah—would not succeed in leading Sabbatai astray. He immersed himself in study and spirituality, eventually having another vision of himself being anointed as the Messiah by the patriarchs.⁸⁰ While growing up in Smyrna, Sabbatai “seems to have passed through all the stages of a traditional education and to have been encouraged to concentrate on his rabbinic studies when he showed signs of talent.”⁸¹ This he did, as Sabbatai became a rabbi while a teenager and a scholar of some renown in his young adulthood. When Sabbatai had completed his studies, he was inspired to embark on a path of “abstinence and solitude.”⁸² His family by then had become wealthy and evidently supported him, as the future false messiah never took up a formal post as a rabbi or engaged in any other form of employment. Instead, he immersed himself in the study of Kabbalah and developed a “habit of taking frequent ritual baths,” perhaps also fasting often and self-flagellating, as was then common practice among Kabbalists and would later become hallmark rituals in the Sabbatian movement that he was soon to lead.⁸³

By the time he turned twenty, Sabbatai Sevi had developed a following of Kabbalist disciples and took the first of his three successive wives, though his asceticism never permitted the consummation of any of his marriages. One of them was declared by the “Holy Spirit” to be “not his predestined mate,” hence she was spurned. But Scholem argues that by this point in his life Sabbatai was suffering from mental illness: “There is no doubt that Sabbatai Sevi was a sick man.... His contemporaries speak of him as a madman, a lunatic, or a fool, and even his followers admitted that his behavior . . . provided ample reasons for these appellations.”⁸⁴ Although psychiatry did not yet exist and mental illness was, in his day, often assumed to be the result of demonic possession, it is likely that Sabbatai Sevi suffered from bipolar disorder, formerly called manic depression.⁸⁵ People with bipolar disorder sometimes experience intense episodes of mania, during which they are hyperactive, exalted, and exuberantly confident, and intense episodes of depression, during which they are withdrawn and agonized, and they might feel persecuted and perhaps suicidal. For a brilliant bipolar rabbi to immerse himself in deep meditations on an apocalyptic, dualistic text such as the Zohar amounted to a recipe for the disaster that the Sabbatian movement would become. We know today, for instance, that “hyper-religiosity” is often one of the symptoms of mania.⁸⁶ This

could be why Sabbatai Sevi was known to frequently recite Isaiah 14:14 from the Hebrew Bible: “I will ascend above the heights of the cloud; I will be like the most high,’ and once it happened that he recited this verse with such ecstasy that he imagined himself to be floating in the air.”⁸⁷

One of his most important disciples, [Nathan of Gaza](#) (1643–1680), helped Sabbatai come to realize that his radical fluctuations in mood and his visions made perfect sense spiritually: “All the sufferings of Job really refer to him [Sabbatai] who has suffered many great afflictions by all kinds of *qelippoth* [*kelippot*].”⁸⁸ Recall that *Kelippot* are shells or “husks that imprison divinity and must be broken open in order to bring forth God’s completion and the messiah on earth.”⁸⁹ As Nathan, also a brilliant scholar and respected rabbi, became close to Sabbatai Sevi, he convinced the latter that Sabbatai Sevi was the Messiah and was waging the final war against *kelippot* to bring forth the End of Days and lead their people to redemption. Nathan interpreted Sabbatai’s episodes of mania and depression through applying Kabbalistic explanations—mania was a form of ecstatic experience of the *sefirot*, while depression was a necessary form of the Messiah’s culminating struggle to shatter the *kelippot* and to usher in redemption.

Many great religious leaders throughout history have been considered to be mad, of course, including Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and Sabbatai’s manic behavior did not deter the growth of his following. His periods of depression and anxiety compelled his self-seclusion for sometimes weeks on end, and his followers began interpreting all of this in decidedly Kabbalistic terms. He was suffering such “severe afflictions, immense to be conceived,” as one contemporary observer and follower put it, “on behalf of the Jewish people.” By 1648 Sabbatai seemingly experienced inklings that he might actually be the Messiah and revealed as much to his followers. In 1651 they, along with their beloved, erratic rabbi, were banished from Smyrna for heresy and excommunicated. They made their way to Salonika, then an important center of Kabbalism. Sabbatai’s erratic behavior there—like performing a wedding ceremony between himself and the Torah—soon so “deeply shocked” the rabbis that he was once again banished,⁹⁰ but not without having gained many new followers. He went from there to Athens, then to Constantinople (where he was whipped for his “strange actions”),⁹¹ and to Cairo. He lived in Cairo for two years before moving on to Jerusalem in 1663, on the eve of the explosion of his movement, where he intensified his ascetic practices.

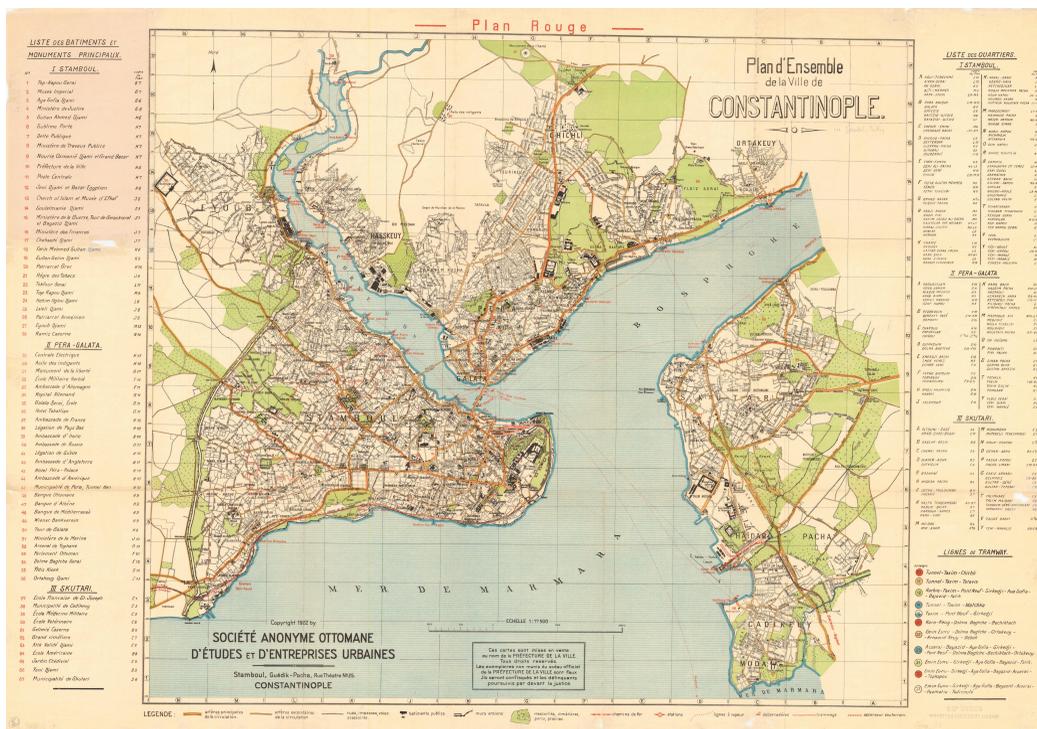
Though initially accepted among the rabbis in Jerusalem, Sabbatai also managed to get himself banished from the Holy City for his unusual and seemingly heretical behavior. Eventually, he made his way back to Smyrna, now enjoying a considerable amount of political power, thanks to his ever-amplifying reputation as an ascetic sage and as the Messiah. His return to his hometown was short-lived, however, and early in 1666 he returned to Constantinople, only to be promptly arrested by the Islamic caliph, [Mohammed IV](#). By then, tens of thousands of Jews had left their homes in far-off reaches in Europe and North Africa for the Holy Land to await the resurrection of the dead, Judgment Day, the Messiah’s defeat of evil, and the restoration of God’s kingdom on Earth. Per Scholem:

The movement had swept the whole Diaspora into its orbit and had struck deep roots in the soul of the masses. The sheer quantitative magnitude of the revival had become

a qualitative factor. Something had happened in the souls of the believers, and these new, inner “facts” were no less decisive than the external historical happenings.⁹²

These historical happenings included the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, as many of Sabbatai’s followers in Turkey were descendants of that purge. They also included the massacre of Jews in Poland in 1648, known as the [Chmielnicki massacres](#), during which as many as 100,000 Jews were killed,⁹³ and “subsequent disturbances that continued until 1655, [which] fell as a stunning blow upon Polish Jewry.” Remarkably, and adding fuel to the messianic fire, the Zohar had predicted that 1648 was to be the year of the resurrection of the dead and Judgment Day.⁹⁴

For numerological and biblical reasons, 1666 was also a year of apocalyptic expectation, among not just Christians but also Jews, who had suffered tremendous persecution in Eastern Europe in previous decades and their expulsion from Iberia two centuries prior. The number 666 is indicated to be satanic in the book of Revelation, which is not part of the Hebrew Bible. The number has no tumultuous meaning in Jewish scripture, but it was taken up among Kabbalists, making 1666 a ripe year for the End of Days. It was an expectant time, and signs that the End of Days was at hand abounded. This contributed to the “penitential enthusiasm” that Scholem identifies as one of the key “inner ‘facts’” explaining the emergence of the Sabbatian movement. This enthusiasm grew as Nathan of Gaza’s writings circulated throughout the Diaspora, especially a text titled *Treatise on the Dragons*, which has been lost to history. It evidently foregrounded apocalyptic and messianic notions in Kabbalah.⁹⁵ Nathan also emphasized the crucial importance of repentance, which “appealed to the noblest longings in every Jewish heart, but this time it was coupled to the very specific purpose of shortening the messianic woes and hastening the advent of redemption.”⁹⁶



Early twentieth-century map of Istanbul, then called Constantinople. | [Map of Istanbul](#) from Societe anonyme ottomane d'etudes et d'entreprises urbaines is in the [public domain](#).

Such a hastening required repentance, fasting (sometimes for an entire week), self-flagellation, purification baths, frequent prayer, meditations, and the confession of sins, both to prepare one's soul for judgment and to contribute to the breaking open of kelippot and the advent of redemption. The Sabbatians also courted controversy by flouting many traditional Jewish laws and because of allegations of sexual libertinism. Sabbatai also raised eyebrows by marrying a sixteen-year-old girl, a reputed "harlot" named Sarah ("Queen of Palestine"), who had received visions that she was called to marry the Messiah. Occasionally he also demanded that his adult followers send their virgin daughters to him, although Sabbatai evidently remained celibate throughout most of his life. Nonetheless, Sarah bore him a son around the fateful year of 1666.⁹⁷

That year was critical both for Sabbatai Sevi and for Judaism. Following the "mystical Messiah's" arrest in Constantinople, the caliph sought to bring Sabbatai's movement to an end, as it was proving to be a strain on the economy of the Ottoman Empire. Its cities, especially Jerusalem, were being overwhelmed with expectant Jews from all over Europe awaiting the End of Days and the resurrection of the dead. There was also some uproar over the Messiah's peculiar behavior and frequent receptions of the virgin daughters of his followers.⁹⁸ In September of that year, he was sent to prison in Adrianople (today Eirdne, Turkey), some 200 kilometers northwest of Constantinople, where authorities contemplated

his execution, “lest they make a new religion.”⁹⁹ They relented, however. Sabbatai was then brought before a jury and “offered a choice between being put to death forthwith or converting to Islam, ‘in which case we shall petition the padishah (the sultan) to have mercy on you.’”¹⁰⁰ He was also invited to prove that he was the Messiah by performing a miracle, though during his trial Sabbatai denied ever having claimed to be the redeemer. As this choice was presented to the would-be Messiah, throngs of his Jewish followers gathered outside the prison, on prayer rugs in the city streets, and awaited the next twist in this incredible saga.

It is fascinating to contemplate what might have been running through Sabbatai’s mind when faced with this decision. The miracle proposed was that he be fired upon with arrows by the sultan’s archers and survived unharmed, so that must have seemed uninviting to the potential Messiah, to say the least. Like Jesus before him, who evidently had an opportunity to escape his crucifixion, Sabbatai might have considered accepting the fate of execution, in which case Judaism, and likely the entire world, would have taken quite a different course since 1666. After all, had Jesus not been crucified, Christianity would likely never have happened, or it would have developed in considerably different forms, devoid of central Christian notions of redemptive sacrifice and the resurrection. There was literally an entire world at stake in Sabbatai’s decision.

So, what did Sabbatai Sevi decide? “Sabbatai made a simple declaration signifying his readiness to embrace Islam.” And with that, one of the greatest messianic movements in world history came crashing down, as few of his followers could believe that the Messiah could be a Muslim, an apostate. (Nathan kept the faith, though, and worked hard to explain it all in his writings): “The sultan graciously accepted the convert, permitted him to assume his name, and appointed the onetime Sabbatai and now Mehemed Effendi . . . to the honorary office of *kapici bashi* (keeper of the palace gates).” He was taken to bathe and given new robes and a turban, more fitting for a Muslim, and he would spend the rest of his life either at the royal palace in Adrianople, as a gatekeeper, or as an exile in Albania. He died in 1676 in what is today Montenegro. This hardly seems to befit King David’s messianic descendant, who was prophesied to appear on Earth to reconquer Jerusalem by force and bring forth redemption. It was an utter tragedy, underscoring the dangers of apocalypticism and messianism.

Conclusion

Martin Kavka writes, “Anticipation of a messianic figure who brings peace and political autonomy to Israel is also anticipation of God’s nearness to the nation, mediated through the human figure of the messiah.”¹⁰¹ It is also anticipation of redemption, a redemption rooted in thousands of years of hope in the faithfulness of God. As the calamity of seventeenth-century Sabbatianism illustrates, furthermore, it is a dangerous form of anticipation, one that has led so many people across the ages to abandon everything, including their lives, in its name. This eschatological expectancy has gone far in governing the course of world history, though, as

without it there would be no Christianity, the religion to which our attention turns in the following chapter.

Notes

1. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984, 40–41. The Hellenistic Age was the period of three centuries between the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E. and the rise of the Roman Empire in 31 B.C.E. [↵](#)
2. *Ibid.*, 36. [↵](#)
3. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, trans. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973. Earlier Kabbalistic texts have seemingly been lost to history, and the Zohar, per Scholem, is not composed of any “ancient” material. Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. Allan Arkush, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, 5. Sabbatai Sevi’s name is often written as Shabbatai Tsvi in scholarly texts. [↵](#)
4. Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of Kabbalah*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 3. [↵](#)
5. Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, New York: Schocken Books, 1961, 12. [↵](#)
6. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason and the Phases of Human Progress*, In Marianne S. Wokeck and Martin A. Coleman (eds.), *The Works of George Santayana*, Volume VII, Book 3, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014 (1905–1906), 31. [↵](#)
7. *Ibid.*, 33–34. [↵](#)
8. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 132. [↵](#)
9. As cited in Menachem Marc Kellner, “Rabbi Isaac Abravanel on Maimonides’ Principles of Faith,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought*, 18, 4, 1980, 343–344. [↵](#)
10. Mark Leuchter, personal electronic correspondence, September 15, 2021. Leuchter is a leading expert on the Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism, and I am deeply grateful for his collegiality, insight, and friendship. [↵](#)
11. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages in this book are from the King James Version. [↵](#)

12. Shubert Spero, *New Perspectives in Theology of Judaism*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019, 26. [↵](#)
13. The British Library, "[Babylonian Talmud](#)," n.d., <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/babylonian-talmud>, last accessed July 22, 2020. The entirety of a thirteenth-century Babylonian Talmud can be viewed via this link. [↵](#)
14. Ibid. [↵](#)
15. David Novak, "Jewish Eschatology," in Jerry L. Walls (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, 2009 (2007), 114. [↵](#)
16. In Ibid., 118. [↵](#)
17. J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 52. [↵](#)
18. Novak, "Jewish Eschatology," 7. [↵](#)
19. Alan E. Bernstein, *Hell and Its Rivals: Death and Retribution among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Early Middle Ages*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017, 246–247. [↵](#)
20. Spero, *New Perspectives in the Theology of Judaism*, 26. [↵](#)
21. Hillel, *Shab* 31. As cited in Robert Elliott Allinson, "Hillel and Confucius: The Prescriptive Formulation of the Golden Rule in Jewish and Chinese Confucian Ethical Traditions," *Dao* 3, 2003, 29. [↵](#)
22. Annalise E. Glauz-Todrank, "Synagogue," in Mark Juergensmeyer and Wade Clark Roof (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Global Religion*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012, 1248. [↵](#)
23. Greg Hersh, "[What is Reconstructionism: Behaving. Belonging. Believing](#)," Temple Emmanuel of Wakefield, n.d., <https://www.wakefieldtemple.org/about-reconstructionism>, last accessed July 25, 2020. [↵](#)
24. Rebecca T. Alpert, "Reconstructionist Judaism," in Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Detroit, MI: MacMillan, 2005, 7635. Preceding Kaplan quote in *ibid.* [↵](#)
25. James V. VanderKam, "The Book of Enoch and the Qumran Scrolls," in John J. Collins and Timothy H. Lim (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook to the Dead Sea Scrolls*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, n.p. [↵](#)
26. Christopher B. Hays, "The First Apocalypse (Daniel 7–12): A Story Told Backward," in Kelly J. Murphy and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler (eds.), *Apocalypses in Context: Apocalyptic Currents through History*, Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Fortress, 2016, 31–32. [↵](#)

27. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 36. [↵](#)
28. “Actually, tradition has it that Enoch’s lifespan is 365 years . . . which corresponds to the 365 days of the solar Babylonian calendar, so the number is symbolically relevant.” Leuchter, personal electrical correspondence, September 15, 2021. [↵](#)
29. Ibid. [↵](#)
30. VanderKam, “The Book of Enoch and the Qumran Scrolls,” 3–5. [↵](#)
31. 1 Enoch 1:1–2. [↵](#)
32. [Book of Enoch 2–5, The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament](#), https://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH_1.HTM, last accessed July 19, 2020. This link provides an English translation of the “book of the watchers”. [↵](#)
33. Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993, 176. [↵](#)
34. Ibid., 192. [↵](#)
35. Ibid, 192–193. [↵](#)
36. Ibid., 193. [↵](#)
37. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York: Schocken, 1971, 1. [↵](#)
38. Ibid., 12. [↵](#)
39. Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come*, 163. [↵](#)
40. Carol Newsome, *Daniel: A Commentary*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, 1. [↵](#)
41. Martha Himmelfarb, *The Apocalypse: A Brief History*, Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 31. [↵](#)
42. Ibid. [↵](#)
43. Hays, “The First Apocalypse (Daniel 7–22),” 21. [↵](#)
44. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 15. [↵](#)
45. See, for instance, Anthony F. C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* 58, 1956, 264–281. [↵](#)
46. Himmelfarb, *The Apocalypse*, 33. [↵](#)

47. Ibid., 34–35. [↵](#)
48. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 7. [↵](#)
49. Ibid., 41. [↵](#)
50. Himmelfarb, *The Apocalypse*, 37, 39. [↵](#)
51. Charlotte Sleight, “[Devilry and Doom in 1666.](#)” Welcome Collection, January 27, 2022, <https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/Ye6wxBAAACMAXbr1>, last accessed March 8, 2023. [↵](#)
52. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 3. [↵](#)
53. Ibid., 11. [↵](#)
54. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, ix. [↵](#)
55. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 4. [↵](#)
56. Ibid., 5. [↵](#)
57. Ibid. [↵](#)
58. Jeremiah W. Cataldo, *A Social-Political History of Monotheism: From Judah to the Byzantines*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018, 87. [↵](#)
59. Neil Faulkner, “Apocalypse: The Great Jewish Revolt against Rome, 66–73 C.E.,” *History Today*, October 2002, 52. [↵](#)
60. Ibid., 51. [↵](#)
61. Ibid., 52. [↵](#)
62. Jodi Magness, *Masada: From Jewish Revolt to Modern Myth*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019, 1. [↵](#)
63. “On the Masada residents . . . the mass suicide is certainly the normative tradition, but many scholars of 1st century Roman Palestine argue that this is more of a myth of Jewish martyrdom than the accurate recounting of an historical event.” Leuchter, personal electronic correspondence, September 15, 2021. On this, see Magness, *Masada*, 194–200. [↵](#)
64. Stephen Sharot, “Jewish Millenarianism: A Comparison of Medieval Communities,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, 3, 1980, 396 n.8. [↵](#)
65. Ibid., 395. [↵](#)
66. Ibid., 396. [↵](#)

67. Ibid., 397. [↵](#)
68. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 1. [↵](#)
69. Ibid., 2. [↵](#)
70. Ibid., 4. [↵](#)
71. Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 4. [↵](#)
72. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 118. [↵](#)
73. Ibid., 115–116. [↵](#)
74. Ibid., 15. [↵](#)
75. Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 5. “The Sephirot are also regarded by Kabbalists as ‘the tree of life’ from Genesis 2 and various other passages” in the Hebrew Bible. Leuchter, personal electronic correspondence, September 15, 2021. [↵](#)
76. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 163. [↵](#)
77. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 107. [↵](#)
78. Ibid., 109. [↵](#)
79. Ibid., 113. [↵](#)
80. Ibid., 139–140. [↵](#)
81. Ibid., 110. [↵](#)
82. Ibid., 112. [↵](#)
83. Ibid., 114, 117. [↵](#)
84. Ibid., 125. [↵](#)
85. Ibid., 126. [↵](#)
86. Timothy D. Brewerton, “Hyperreligiosity in Psychotic Disorders,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 182, 5, 1994, 302. [↵](#)
87. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 127. [↵](#)
88. Cited in Ibid., 131, bracketed term in original, second mine. [↵](#)
89. Ariel Evan Mayse, “Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge: Halakha and Theology in *Ma'or va-Shamesh*,” *Tradition* 51, 1, 2019, 12. [↵](#)
90. Ibid., 159. [↵](#)

91. Ibid., 161. [↵](#)
92. Ibid., 688. [↵](#)
93. Sarah E. Karesh and Mitchell M. Hurvitz, "[Chmielnicki Massacres](#)," in S. E. Karesh and M. M. Hurvitz (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Judaism (Encyclopedia of World Religions)* (2nd ed.), 2016 (2007), credoreference.com/content/entry/fofjudaism/chmielnicki_massacres/0?institutionId=1644, last accessed August 8, 2020. [↵](#)
94. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 88. [↵](#)
95. Ibid., 297. [↵](#)
96. Ibid., 466. [↵](#)
97. Ibid., 413. [↵](#)
98. Ibid., 670–671. [↵](#)
99. In Ibid., 673. [↵](#)
100. Ibid., 678. [↵](#)
101. Martin Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 7. [↵](#)

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Glossary

Akiva (50–130 C.E.)

Rabbi and one of the greatest contributors to the [Talmud](#) and to the understanding of Judaism. A mystic and brilliant legal mind. Born and died in the Holy Land; lived to nurture thousands of students. [↵](#)

Antiochus IV (215–164 B.C.E.)

“Antiochus the Great” ruled the [Seleucid Empire](#) from 175 to 164 B.C.E.; suppressor of Judaism, which led to the Maccabee revolt for Jewish independence. [↵](#)

Apocrypha (Greek adj: Apocryphal)

From the ancient Greek word *apokryptein*, which means “to hide away,” the apocrypha are texts in a range of religions that were never incorporated into **canonical** scripture; in the case of Judaism, such texts, including the book of Enoch, are not in the Hebrew Bible. [↴](#)

Armageddon

The catastrophic battle at the end of time between the forces of God and good and the forces of Satan and evil. Likely derives etymologically from the Hebrew term for Megiddo, a place between Syria and Egypt; in today’s Israel, it is likely Tel Megiddo. Mentioned in the book of Revelation (16:16). [↴](#)

Book of Daniel

A book in the Hebrew Bible. The most important apocalyptic text therein; likely **pseudepigraphic**, or written by others but attributed to Daniel, a pious and righteous Jew in the Babylonian diaspora, in the second century B.C.E. [↴](#)

Book of Enoch

Apocryphal text and an important source of Jewish eschatology. Though not in the Hebrew Bible, it is cited therein and was well known to some of the Bible’s authors. Written by multiple authors in Aramaic between 900 and 50 B.C.E. [↴](#)

Book of the Watchers

The first section of the apocryphal **book of Enoch**, this apocalyptic text prophesies that at the End Time “the watchers will be awakened,” hence its title. [↴](#)

Canon (adj: Canonical)

From the Greek *canon*, meaning “cane,” “stick,” “measure,” “rule”; in religion this connotes texts that are formally recognized as authoritative and incorporated into scripture. [↴](#)

Chmielnicki Massacres

As many as 100,000 Jews were massacred in Poland in 1648. This tragedy in part led to the messianic movement of Sabbatianism. [↴](#)

Conservative Judaism

Emerging in Germany in the nineteenth century, Conservative Judaism is a major branch of the religion that seeks to balance tradition with ever-changing social and cultural realities. [↴](#)

Dead Sea Scrolls

Also referred to as the Qumran Scrolls, after the place that they were discovered, above the Dead Sea, these biblical-era texts were found in the late 1940s; scrolls full of the wisdom of the monastic community that resided in the caves, the Essenes. [↵](#)

De León, Moses (1250–1305)

Sephardic Jew and influential rabbi who compiled a range of Kabbalistic teachings into a single text known as the Zohar, one of the most influential books in the history of Judaism. He may have been the actual author, although he attributed the writings to others. [↵](#)

Ein Sof

Literally “the Infinite.” In Kabbalah this is the ultimately unknowable essence of God. [↵](#)

Eschatology

Religious teachings and beliefs about the End of Time and the hereafter. [↵](#)

Essenes (“Sons of Light”)

The apocalyptic monastic community that lived in the caves of Qumran during the biblical era; authors and keepers of the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#). [↵](#)

Gehinnom

A purgatorial destination of most souls after death, where they are purged and prepared to enter heaven. A hell of sorts, where one is punished for one’s sins, but it is a temporary experience (though evidently permanent for the most wicked). More a Talmudic than a biblical notion. [↵](#)

Gemara

Part of the Talmud that contains legal arguments and philosophical interpretations of Jewish law and history; the “Completion.”

Golden Rule

A central ethical teaching of Judaism, based on this passage in Leviticus (19:18): “Love your fellow as yourself.” [↵](#)

Halakhah (Halakha)

Derived from a root term meaning “to walk,” the totality of Jewish law, according to which Jews strive to live. Touches upon all facets of life. [↵](#)

Hanukkah

High Jewish holiday that commemorates the success of the 162 B.C.E. [Maccabee revolt](#)

against oppression; also known as the Feast of Dedication, a celebration that involves the lighting of the menorah (lit: “lamp”). [↵](#)

Hillel the Elder (110 B.C.E.–10 C.E.)

One of the most influential of all authors and interpreters of the Talmud, Hillel placed the Golden Rule at the very center of Judaism. [↵](#)

Ibn Aryeh

A pious Jew and rabbi who was thought to be the Messiah in the twelfth century in Spain. [↵](#)

Judea

The ancient Jewish community in and surrounding Jerusalem, descendants of Yehuda; roughly from the tenth to the sixth century B.C.E. [↵](#)

Kabbalah

Leading school of Jewish mysticism. Emerged in the late Middle Ages and remains the preeminent consortium of mystical knowledge into the Divine in Judaism. [↵](#)

Kaplan, Mordecai (1881–1983)

Influential rabbi and Jewish theologian who founded the [Reconstructionist](#) branch of Judaism in the United States. Emphasized behaving and belonging as more central to Judaism than belief. [↵](#)

Kelippot (Qelippoth – various spellings)

Mystical concept in [Kabbalah](#); material shells or husks that need to be burst open for the Messiah to complete the work of redemption and for God to become liberated and complete. Often associated with evil. [↵](#)

King David

Biblical figure believed to have been the leader of Judea and Israel during the eleventh and tenth centuries B.C.E. Prophesied to be the progenitor of a future king who would restore the Jewish nation and become the Messiah. [↵](#)

King Herod

Also known as Herod the Great, appointed Roman king of Judea in the first century B.C.E. Learned of the birth of the future king of the Jews, and hence ordered all Jewish newborns slaughtered, an event called the Massacre of the Innocents. [↵](#)

King Nebuchadnezzar

Seventh and sixth century B.C.E. Babylonian king who is believed to have conquered Judea, destroyed King Solomon's temple, and initiated the Babylonian captivity. A figure of significance in the book of Daniel. [↴](#)

Luria, Isaac (1534–1572)

A rabbi and the most influential interpreter of the [Zohar](#), or the key mystical text of Kabbalah. So influential that scholars speak not just of Kabbalah but of Lurianic Kabbalah. Also known as Ha-Ari, or the Lion; the key figure among the Safed mystics. [↴](#)

Maccabee, Judah (190–160 B.C.E.)

Leader of a revolt against Roman oppression that resulted in the restoration of the kingdom of Judea and the return of the beloved temple in Jerusalem to Jewish control, an epochal event that is celebrated in Judaism as Hannukah. [↴](#)

Maimonides, Moses (1135? –1204)

One of the greatest of all Jewish philosophers (of all philosophers, really); author of the influential *Guide to the Perplexed* (circa 1190, original in Arabic) and outliner of the Thirteen Principles of Judaism. [↴](#)

Masada

A fortified compound of Jews, atop a mountain of the same name, staving off Roman oppression; first-century C.E. insurgents also known as [Zealots](#), who may have committed mass suicide rather than succumbing to defeat. [↴](#)

Messiah (Meschiach, or Mashiach)

A future king of the Jews who is expected to appear on Earth and usher in and rule during the messianic period of redemption. A descendant of [King David](#), as well as a prophet and priest. [↴](#)

Millenarianism

The belief that the world is going to end soon. Tied to the notion of the millennia (1000 years), though open to a wide range of interpretations; often understood in terms of the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

[↴](#)

Mishnah

Part of the Talmud, or extra-biblical Jewish scripture; literally means “oral argument” and is composed of debates and reflection on the laws of Judaism, or the Mitzvah and its totality, the [Halakhah](#). [↴](#)

Mitzvot (Pl. Mitzvah)

Literally meaning “commandment,” laws that Jews are commanded by God to obey, 613 in all, including the Ten Commandments; collectively they and commentaries/interpretations thereof are known as [Halakhah](#). ↴

Mohammed IV (1642–1693)

Also known as Mehmet IV; Ottoman emperor, or sultan, who had Sabbatai Sevi arrested in Istanbul under the pretext that the latter was a false messiah and that his movement was threatening the stability of the former’s rule. ↴

Moses

The greatest of all prophets in Jewish history, believed to have received the Ten Commandments from God in the fifteenth century B.C.E. and to have led his people from bondage to liberation.

Nathan of Gaza (1643–1680)

Influential seventeenth-century Kabbalist theologian and rabbi who proclaimed [Sabbatai Sevi](#) to be the Messiah and wrote extensively about the latter’s meaning and teachings. ↴

Orthodox Judaism

The oldest and most conservative branch of Judaism; one of the four major forms of Judaism in the world today, along with [Conservative](#), [Reform](#), and [Reconstructionist](#). ↴

Pentateuch

Literally “five books” or “five scrolls,” in the Greek original; the Torah, or the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. ↴

Promised Land

Key theological concept in Judaism; the land promised to God’s chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, in the book of Genesis. The Promised Land is described as “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Also promised to [Moses](#) in the book of Exodus. ↴

Pseudepigrapha (adj. Pseudepigraphic)

Literally “written under a false (name)” in the Greek original; biblical and extra-biblical texts written by unknown authors but attributed to kings, prophets, patriarchs, apostles, or other esteemed ancestors. ↴

Qumran

Name of a village inhabited by Jews in biblical times; located on the northwestern shore

of the Dead Sea; in its caves were discovered the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#) in the 1940s, one of the greatest archaeological finds of all time. ↵

Reconstructionist Judaism

Founded in the United States by [Mordecai Kaplan](#) in the 1920s, the youngest and arguably most liberal branch of Judaism, placing an emphasis on culture and community over and above doctrine and belief. ↵

Reform Judaism

A liberal branch of Judaism that began in Germany in the eighteenth century; generally questions traditional notions like the authority of the [Talmud](#) and relaxes ritual obligations among its congregants; also promotes cultural assimilation among Jews wherever they happen to live. ↵

Sabbatai Sevi (1626–1676)

Sephardic Jew and ordained rabbi from the ancient Turkish city of Smyrna (today's Izmir). Sevi (also spelled Tzvi, Zevi, etc.) was a renowned and charismatic [Kabbalist](#) who was identified by Jews around him as the [Messiah](#), meaning that the End of Days was at hand. Converted to Islam in 1666 while under arrest. ↵

Sabbatianism (Sabbateanism)

The largest messianic movement in Jewish history after the emergence of Christianity, Sabbatianism flourished in the mid-seventeenth century, centered on the belief that [Sabbatai Sevi](#) was the Messiah and that the End of Days was at hand. ↵

Safed

Small hilltop city located in Galilee in the north of the modern nation-state of Israel. Home to an ancient community of Jews whose leaders would become the most influential interpreters and teachers of [Kabbalah](#) by the sixteenth century. ↵

Samayim

Heaven, the eternal realm of the righteous ruled by God after the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead and the judgment of the living and the dead. This notion originates in the Hebrew Bible but is expanded considerably in the [Talmud](#). ↵

Sefirot

The ten characteristics or qualities of God, from the Hebrew *safar* (“to count”); these include Crown, Wisdom, Mercy, etc. and are what we can know mystically about God. Connected, they make up the substance of the central [Kabbalist](#) notion of the [shekhinah](#). ↵

Seleucid Empire

Vast Macedonian empire centered in Babylon that emerged after the collapse of Alexander the Great and endured from 312 to 64 B.C.E. [↴](#)

Shekhinah

Literally in Hebrew “dwelling” or “settling,” the collective emanations of God that infuse the universe. The idea does not appear in the Hebrew Bible but emerges in the Talmud and becomes the central notion in Kabbalist thought, symbology, and apocalypticism. Uniter of the [sefirot](#) and the female aspect of God. Conceptualized as a Divine Tree. [↴](#)

She'ol

Hell in Jewish belief, a place of punishment for the wicked; only vaguely discussed in the Hebrew Bible but expanded upon considerably in the Talmudic discussions of [gehinnom](#), a purgatory of sorts where the wicked are purified or punished eternally. [↴](#)

Shimon bar Yohai

Second century C.E. Palestinian rabbi to whom the authorship of the [Zohar](#) was attributed in the thirteenth century by [Moses De León](#). A preeminent disciple of [Akiva](#) and among the most influential rabbis of his age. [↴](#)

Synagogue

In some circles also called a temple, a synagogue is a place of gathering for Jews to worship, study, and commune with one another. The Greek origin of the term simply means “gathering” or “assembly,” and it need not be a building (the usual association of the word today), but simply a gathering of at least ten adult (usually male) Jews. [↴](#)

Talmud (adj: Talmudic)

Literally meaning “teaching,” a vast corpus of rabbinic commentaries, teachings, and debates on a wide range of topics of concern in Judaism. A scriptural corpus surpassed in importance in Judaism only by the Hebrew Bible. Compiled by the fifth century C.E., though commentaries were added for the following two centuries. Consists of the [Mishnah](#) (Oral Law) and [Gemara](#) (Completions). [↴](#)

Tanakh

Hebrew term for the Hebrew Bible, which is commonly referred to by Christians as the “Old Testament.” [↴](#)

Ten Commandments

The most important of all Jewish laws; believed to have been received by the greatest of

all of Judaism's prophets, [Moses](#), inscribed on tablets by God on Mt. Sinai, as recounted in the book of Exodus (20:1–17) and the book of Deuteronomy (5:1–21). [↵](#)

Torah

The first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers; account of history from God's creation of the world through the prophecies of Moses, as well as a compilation of definitive Jewish law. Original Hebrew meanings: "teaching," "instruction," or "law." [↵](#)

Yahweh (YHWH)

The name of God in ancient Hebrew, as revealed to Moses. [↵](#)

Zealots (also known as the Sicarii)

Community of roughly a thousand Jews who occupied a garrison atop Mount Masada in the Judean desert and resisted Roman oppression by collectively committing suicide rather than being further oppressed by their invaders/occupiers. [↵](#)

Zohar

The most influential collection of Jewish mystical texts; compiled (or authored) in Spain by [Moses De León](#) in the thirteenth century, though many of its sections and teachings had been in circulation among Jews for generations. [↵](#)

3. Christianity and the Book of Revelation

Jesus Christ and the Emergence of the World's Largest Religion

Thus far we have explored the religions and apocalyptic teachings of Zoroastrianism and of Judaism, and our next chapter delves into Islam. Christianity, the world's largest religion today, is rooted in the former, while the teachings and person of Jesus remain integral to the latter. Yet Christianity departs from all three other faiths in its proclamation that Jesus Christ is God and the Messiah. As Hans Küng writes, "It is the belief in Jesus as God's Christ which distinguishes Christians from other believers and non-believers. Alongside these two structural elements there is a third ... the power of the Spirit."¹ Küng refers, of course, to the [Holy Spirit](#), the third person of the Christian [Trinity](#). The Trinity is a cornerstone of the faith in which God is three entities in one essential union: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Along with the [incarnation](#), this belief differentiates Christianity from the other ethical monotheistic religions discussed in this book—from all other major religions in the world, in fact.

"Christ" is a title derived from the Greek [christos](#), meaning "the anointed one"—essentially a translation of the Hebrew term *mashiach*—and Jesus's followers would stake their lives on the belief that he is the lord and the fulfillment of messianic prophecies in the [Hebrew Bible](#), the savior and king, the redeemer. Israel had long conceived of a divine monarch who would rule the kingdom of heaven on Earth for eternity, one in the lineage of King David, of "the enthronement of the Davidic ruler as the birth of the son of God."² In the Psalms (2:7–12) we read, for example:

I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto Me, Thou art My Son; this day

Ask of Me, and I shall give Thee the heathen for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession.

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

Be wise now therefore, O ye kings; be instructed, ye judges of the earth.

Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling,

Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and we perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him.

So stirred were they by Jesus's teachings and charisma that his followers identified him as the Son spoken of here by God. Following the Sermon on the Mount, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority" (Matthew 7:28–8:1). As Jaroslav Pelikan explains:

The identification of Jesus as prophet was a means of both affirming his continuity with the prophets of Israel and of asserting his superiority to them as *the* prophet whose coming they had predicted and to whose authority they had been prepared to yield. In the Pentateuch (Deut.: 18:15–22) the God of Israel tells Moses, and through him the people, that he "will raise up a prophet from among you," to whom the people will pay heed.³

The early Christians would thus also come to identify Jesus with God—not only as the Son of God, not only as rabbi and prophet, but as God Himself, since he is divine—incarnate in human form. "In the beginning was the word, and the word was made flesh" (John 1:1). This passage from the Gospels reflects one of the most important of all Christian beliefs, that of the incarnation. Priests and kings had long been anointed with oil in Judaism, as would one day be the Messiah, hence the name given to Jesus—Christ, the anointed one.

"Christianity is a religion with a Jewish soul, a Greek mind, and a Roman body."⁴ So taught the late, great Greek Orthodox theologian and Church historian Demetrios Constantelos. By "Jewish soul" is meant that the founder of Christianity, **Jesus Christ** (0 C.E.–33 C.E.),⁵ was a deeply spiritual Jew, a mystical rabbi, who was also steeped in Jewish eschatology and the belief that the End of Days was at hand. By "Greek mind" is meant the influences of Greek thought and language on the Judaism in which Jesus was imbued; scholars agree that the entirety of what Christians refer to as the **New Testament** was written in Greek. Furthermore, the early Church Fathers, who laid a cornerstone for Christian theology, were highly educated and well versed in Greek philosophy. By "Roman body," finally, is meant the importance of the infrastructure of the Roman Empire to the spread of Christianity, especially beginning in the mid-fourth century, when state persecutions of members of this then-new religion ceased and it became the official religion of the empire itself. This was largely due to the realization of **Constantine the Great** (272–337 C.E.) that the new faith was not only to be tolerated but admired and even adopted, though this great emperor "was not even baptized until shortly before his death."⁶

Whether or not Jesus understood himself to be the Messiah is widely debated among scholars, but it should be underscored here that "Jesus was born, lived, and died in Israel and was a Jew in every respect."⁷ The land promised to Jews by God in the Hebrew Bible, home to their majestic temple, their **axis mundi**, was occupied by the Roman Empire during the life of Christ. For all the thousands of books that have been written about him, little is actually known about Jesus, and almost all of it is contained in the New Testament,⁸ whose texts were most likely written by later believers who never actually knew Jesus. So they are testimonies of faith more than historically reliable chronicles. They have been taken by most Christians across the ages as the Word of God, though, and most importantly they contain the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a small city about six miles south of Jerusalem, during a time of mounting persecution for his people, a “period of disturbance and confusion which befell Judaea under the Herods.”⁹ The Herods were a dynasty (the [Herodian dynasty](#)) of Jewish men appointed by the Roman Empire to govern [Judaea](#), or the Jewish community of the age. [Herod the Great](#) (72 B.C.E.–4 B.C.E.), “King of the Jews,” occupied this post from 34 to 4 B.C.E. “When [magi](#) (wise men) from the east came to Jerusalem looking for a child who was born ‘king of the Jews’ (Matthew 2:1–2; see also Luke 1:5), the elderly Herod the Great carefully questioned them,” as Lawrence Mykytiuk explains. Thus, King Herod “wanted to locate, identify and assassinate his new rival,” so he ordered the execution of “all the boys born in and around Bethlehem who were two years or younger,” based on information that he had received from the Zoroastrian priests, the magi, whom he had detained and interrogated.¹⁰ This event is called the [Massacre of the Innocents](#) in Christian lore, even though it “has been droned with doubt by historians, biblical commentators, and biographers of Herod the Great.”¹¹

Fearing that Jesus, as a Jewish infant, fit the profile for elimination, his parents whisked him off to Egypt, becoming a refugee family. According to the Gospels, Jesus had been born in a manger to a Virgin mother, Mary, and her betrothed, Joseph, a carpenter. There he had been visited by the magi, who believed that this was the Messiah. These stories are central to the [infancy narratives](#) found in the Gospels (e.g., Matthew 1:2–2:23), which sometimes contradict one another on a number of points but trace Jesus’s genealogy back to King David—a condition for identifying the Messiah in Judaism.¹² However, beyond the infancy narratives, the Bible mentions nothing of Jesus’s early life until he is around twelve years old, when he astonishes the distinguished rabbis of Jerusalem with his knowledge of the Torah (Luke 2:39–52).



The geographic cradle of early Christianity | [Spread of Christianity Map \(up to 600 CE\)](#) by Karyna Mykytiuk is used under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 License](#)

Around the time that he reached age thirty, Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by a wandering preacher named **John the Baptist**, who had been imploring Jews to repent in preparation for the End of Time. In the Gospel of Matthew (3:4) we read that “John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.” Many were flocking to him at the river to be baptized, and Jesus did the same. One of John’s messages foretold the coming of the Messiah: “I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3: 11). When Jesus arrived from Galilee to be baptized, John hesitated, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matthew 3:14). But Jesus insisted, and:

as soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16–17).

The symbol of the dove would come to represent the Holy Spirit in Christianity. However,

the dove's action of "descending" is as important as the dove itself and has echoes in several places in the Hebrew Bible, where "the Spirit hovers (like a bird) over the righteous," as Alexey Somov explains. "This symbolism was adopted by the pre-Gospel tradition about Jesus' baptism to specify the manner in which the Spirit descended upon Jesus."¹³ Those who witnessed this and heard the voice of God would be among the first Christians, the first to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. "From that time on," as we read in the Gospel of Matthew (4:17), "Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

With this as his core message, Jesus embarked on his world-changing ministry, one that would last for some three years before his death. During his ministry he healed the sick, performed miracles, exorcised demons, and, above all, implored all those who heard him to repent and prepare for the End of Days and the coming of the kingdom of heaven on Earth—for Judgment Day. Most rejected him, however, for Jesus's first followers were a tiny minority of Jews, who gradually but surely became alienated from Israel. As the eminent scholar of Hebrew literature Joseph Klausner explains:

The more numerous and powerful of the Jews . . . rejected the teaching of Jesus: they rose up against it during his lifetime and, even when all the world drew nearer and nearer to Christianity, would not become Christians. Christianity was born within Israel, and Israel as a nation did not embrace it.¹⁴

And, over time, Christians would change the world like nothing else in human history ever has, a world that has not yet ended as Jesus seems to have prophesied that it would: "Assuredly I say to you, that this generation will by no means pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34). However, just two verses later Jesus proclaims that the "day and hour, knoweth no *man*, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only." Plenty of room is left for speculation here, thus for over two thousand years there has been great and varied deal of it in Christianity, conjecture and preaching about when the world will actually end.

Just what are "all these things that [will] take place"? Jesus's teachings are Jewish through and through, rooted in his deep knowledge of the Hebrew Bible (there was no Talmud yet), and this informs his answers to a question that is essentially about signs of the End of Days. These signs' purposes were perhaps best summed up by [St. Thomas Aquinas](#) (1225–1274), one of the greatest of all Christian thinkers: "in order that the hearts of men be brought to subjection before the coming judge, and be prepared for the judgment, being forewarned."¹⁵ In Matthew 24 (6–31) we read Jesus's key teachings on the End of Days:

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all *these things* must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. . . . Therefore when you see the "abomination of desolation," spoken of by Daniel the prophet. . . .

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the

tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

As these biblical passages compellingly reflect, though Jesus was an apocalyptic thinker, he was also a prophet and a messenger of love, teaching that God is love (1 John 4:8) and that we are called by God to love one another. When asked by one of his followers “which commandment was the most important of all,” Jesus responded by citing one of the most beloved of Jewish prayers (“[Shema](#),” meaning “hear”) and a passage from the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 9:18): “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29–30).

Love and repentance and obedience to God. That is the meaning of life, and that is how we are to prepare for eternity during the short time that we have on Earth. And while here, how are we to pray, as Jesus was also asked? This response is known as the Lord’s Prayer, which is also inflected with apocalypticism in its statement “thy kingdom come”:

Our Father

Who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our trespasses

As we forgive those who trespass against us

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory

World without end (Matthew 6:9–13).

It did not take long for Jesus and his disciples to be confronted by the scorn of both Jewish elites and Roman authorities, in part because he “had, before large numbers of people, said things that were not lawful.”¹⁶ To the former, his teachings were blasphemous, while to the latter, they were seditious. And thus was Jesus “condemned and executed in a collaboration

between the Jewish authorities and the Roman procurator [Pontius Pilate](#).¹⁷ This execution, the crucifixion, was brutal and public, with Jesus nailed to a large wooden cross to dangle until death. His being tortured and forced to carry the cross for his own execution is referred to in Christianity as the [Passion of the Christ](#).

Though it is difficult to imagine the anguish and fear that this tragedy caused his followers, they certainly sought explanations in scripture. Fleming Rutledge makes this point eloquently, underscoring the centrality of the Hebrew Bible for Christian conceptualizations of [redemption](#), [sacrifice](#), and [atonement](#), and for the emergence of their conviction that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah:

The early Christians had no New Testament. Their single source for discovering the meaning of the strange death of their Lord was the Scriptures they had always known. Imagine the attention with which early Christian leaders searched every syllable of the Hebrew Bible how the terrible death of the Son of God had been in the mind and plan of God all along.¹⁸

Following the crucifixion of Jesus and his [resurrection](#) three days later—a key belief in Christianity—the risen Christ revealed himself to his disciples, and the Holy Spirit descended upon them, an experience known as [Pentecost](#), receiving the gifts ([charism](#)) of the spirit:

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1–4).

Seeing the apostles thus transfixed and speaking in tongues, observers simply thought that they were drunk, but Peter disabused them of that notion by saying that it was only 9:00 in the morning and citing the prophet Joel's apocalyptic foretelling from the Hebrew Bible:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God,

That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh;

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

Your young men shall see visions,

Your old men shall dream dreams.

And on My menservants and on My maidservants

I will pour out My Spirit in those days;

And they shall prophesy.

I will show wonders in heaven above

And signs in the earth beneath:

Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.

The sun shall be turned into darkness,

And the moon into blood,

Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.

And it shall come to pass

That whoever calls on the name of the Lord

Shall be saved (Acts 2:17–21).

This is the true beginning of Christianity, a religion centered upon the faith that Jesus is God and redeemer—the savior, the Messiah, God incarnate—and that his resurrection was a clear sign that the End of Days and the coming of the Kingdom of God were nigh. Note the central place of the kingdom and the world without end. That is the aftermath of the Apocalypse, and Jesus warned humanity that we are fast heading there, so one should repent in order to be saved.

Before advancing to a discussion of the book of Revelation, Christianity’s most important apocalyptic text, let us employ one of Ninian Smart’s dimensions of religion in discussing this remarkable faith: *Doctrinal/Philosophical*.

Doctrinal/Philosophical Dimensions of Christianity

We begin this section by considering Smart’s important observation about the Trinity and its centrality to the emergence and history of Christianity:

The structure of the Divine in Christianity has to reflect the narrative of the faith. That narrative postulates certain crucial episodes – the creation of the cosmos, the covenant with Israel, the life of Christ, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the second coming, and so on.¹⁹

Most of these “episodes” occurred before Jesus’s followers’ own eyes, yet some of them were not elemental to Jesus’s teachings, to his ministry. Enter **Paul of Tarsus** (5 C.E.–67 C.E.?), the most influential interpreter of the teachings and meanings of Jesus Christ, author of several crucial texts in the Bible, and one of the most important Christian saints. Paul was a Jew and had been an active participant in the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire: “As for Saul, he made havoc in the church, entering every house, dragging off men and women,

and committing *them* to prison” (Acts 8:3). But one day, while on his way to Damascus, Saul (Paul) had a conversion experience that would change not only his life but the course of world history, without which it is likely that there would be no Christianity today. On that road, Saul heard the voice of Jesus denouncing the persecution of his followers. And then? “Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). In effect, Paul became the first Christian theologian and set a cornerstone for Christian doctrine throughout the ages, penning by his own hand nearly half of the books in what Christians refer to as the New Testament. For our purposes, perhaps Paul’s most important contribution to Christianity is his solidification of the belief that Jesus Christ is “the benefactor and savior, now exalted at God’s right hand in heaven, from whence he will speedily come to earth again.”²⁰ This is a crucial notion in Christian apocalypticism known as the **Second Coming**. Paul’s influence on the world’s largest religion, particularly its eschatology, is thus so important that we do well to consider the insight of a leading interpreter, Leroy Waterman:

Paul’s scheme of things to come is explicitly stated in Cor. 15:22–28 and set in a clearly apocalyptic frame of thought. This plan hinges upon Christ’s Second Coming, an apocalyptic concept that Paul never questions. When that event takes place, Christ’s followers who are not alive will rise from the dead, as in Daniel 12:2. Then will come the end, when Christ will turn over the kingdom to God the Father, thus destroying all other government, authority, and power.²¹

For its first three centuries, Christianity was a persecuted religion in the Roman Empire. Its adepts were often tortured and executed, which led to one of the most important foundations of the faith: the **cult of martyrs**. The first of the martyrs were **Saints Stephen, Peter, and Paul**. St. Stephen was stoned to death circa 36 C.E., an execution in which Paul played a role, prior, of course, to his conversion to the Christian faith. St. Peter was one of Jesus’s closest disciples and would become the first bishop of Rome, leading the early Christian community there before his martyrdom. This is the taproot of the lineage of the papacy in which Roman Catholics believe. Paul would be martyred around the year 65 C.E., just before the fall of the Temple. By this time Christians cherished the bones of those who died for, rather than renouncing, their faith, which is the foundation of the **cult of relics** in Roman Catholicism and in Orthodox Christianity.



St. Paul, imprisoned, writing his Letter to the Ephesians, shortly before his execution and martyrdom. Seventeenth-century painting by Rembrandt. | [St. Paul in prison, writing to the Christian faithful](#) by [Staatsgalerie Stuttgart](#) is in the [public domain](#).

In contrast to Zoroastrianism and Judaism, Christianity is a highly doctrinal religion, its far-reaching diversity notwithstanding. And while Paul the Apostle established the foundation for Christian doctrine, early Church leaders (most of them referred to as “Church Fathers”) would continue his work. These Church Fathers included [Irenaeus](#) (130–202), [Clement of Alexandria](#) (150–215), [Origen](#) (185–254), [Eusebius of Caesarea](#) (260–339), and [Athanasius](#) (293–372). (We consider [St. Augustine’s](#) later massive influence in another section.) They extended Paul the Apostle’s ministry throughout the Mediterranean Roman Empire: the Middle East, Southern Europe, and North Africa. Crucial to Christianity were their gatherings in a series of councils to map out the meaning of their faith. This was of tremendous and unifying importance, as dissent has existed in Christianity for as long as Jesus’s teachings have been known, and dissent would lead to several major schisms in the religion, from the very beginning of the Church and throughout its history. This goes far in explaining the religion’s resplendent diversity today.

Arguably the two most important of the early Church councils were the First Ecumenical Council, held in Nicaea (325), and the Third Ecumenical Council, held in [Chalcedon](#) (451). The former, per Waterman, “was faced with the perplexing problem of trying to show how three persons were really not three persons, but one, and yet at the same time it was unable to deny the reality to any of the three.” The questions of Christ’s humanity and divinity and His relationship to God, as well as that of the Holy Spirit, were indeed perplexing, and Nicaea’s answer to this puzzle was to declare that the Son is one essence with the Father, as is the Holy Spirit. God was henceforth to be symbolized by the “Trinity”—“a symbol used to prevent the charge of polytheism.”²² Jesus’s eternity was further cemented at the [Council of Nicaea](#) (Nicaea is today’s İznik, Turkey), in its declaration that Jesus is “begotten, not made.” This belief is repeated at every Roman Catholic Mass around the world to this day, in the [Nicene Creed](#):

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

There were many other councils in the history of Christianity, and we allude to a few of them later in this chapter. Although they were generally intended to centralize Christian doctrine, combat heresy, and ensure Church unity, theological disputes at several junctures in Christian

history have led to major schisms and are central reasons why there is so much multiplicity in the world's largest religion today. The most notable of these schisms occurred in 1054, 1592, and 1684. In 1054,²³ a long-simmering debate between “Western” and “Eastern” churches (Rome versus Constantinople, centrally) over several issues, especially the use of statues in sanctuaries —“graven images,” per the Ten Commandments—could not be reconciled. This led to the division between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. To this day the latter, in its many forms, prohibits the use of statues in worship and prayer. The dispute also centered on the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharistic service.²⁴

Five hundred years later, controversies surrounding church wealth and other matters sparked protests, none more influential than that led by a German Catholic monk named [Martin Luther](#) (1483–1546). “The Reformation broke out as an appeal from the authority of the institutional church to the authority of the historical Jesus,” writes Pelikan. “Luther’s principal contribution was certainly his doctrine of justification,” that humans can be saved only by the grace of Jesus Christ and not by their own works.²⁵ In addition to his doctrine of justification, Luther taught that divine revelation is contained only in the Bible—*sola scriptura*—and that all believers can by the grace of God serve as priests, as partakers in the [priesthood of all believers](#). When Luther tacked his plaintive [95 Theses](#) on the door of the All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg in 1517, he changed the world, as many by then had become disconcerted by the Roman Catholic Church and were prime for reform. The [Protestant Reformation](#) was thus launched and further fueled by the teachings of [John Calvin](#) (1509–1564) and other reform-minded theologians.

Though not as momentous, later that century another schism would further divide Christianity. King Henry VIII was refused an annulment of his marriage, so he simply took the entire Catholic Church in England and left the Roman Catholic fold, in 1534, establishing the Church of England. The ramifications of this would become especially far-reaching as Britain rose to prominence in the European endeavor to rule the world, colonizing much of it and spreading the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church to every corner of the globe. Though not linked to Luther or Calvin, this branch of Christianity would come to be counted as a form of Protestantism, whose “diversity and belief is a striking part of the Protestant heritage,” according to John Dillenberger and Claude Welch. “Protestantism accepts this ambiguity as part of its heritage. It accepts its diversity as a sign of health and of sickness.”²⁶ Further explaining this ambiguity and diversity, they add that “Protestantism is the story of individuals and groups who have taken their understanding of the gospel so seriously that they have been willing to make new forms of the church.”²⁷ And so they did, and so they continue to do in ways far more myriad and complex than can be summarized here. Instead, let us move on to the book of Revelation, Christianity’s most important apocalyptic text, and to consideration of the teachings of its leading interpreters.

The Writing of the Book of Revelation

“Apocalyptic . . . was the mother of all Christian theology,” in the sage words of Ernst Käsermann.²⁸ Bernard McGinn adds, in equally sage words, “Whatever the debates about Jesus’ own views, there is fairly broad agreement that the ‘Jesus movement,’ that is, the groups of Jews who accepted him as messiah in the years immediately after his death, understood him in primarily apocalyptic terms.”²⁹ Subsequent Christian understandings of such terms have centered upon the book of Revelation. Also called *Apocalypse* (Greek: “unveiling”) and *Revelation to John* (or *Revelation to John the Divine*), Revelation is the final book of the Christian Bible. As we shall see, the book has at times been marginalized in Christian history, for initially it appealed primarily to the marginalized of the Church, a new religion whose identity was far from crystalizing at the time. It quite puzzled many of the early Church Fathers, and as time has unfolded without the end coming, many Christians have turned their backs on Revelation and the eschaton.³⁰ Certainly not all have done so. The end will come. How and when remain mysteries, but as the world teeters on the brink of extinction, the text will be further scoured by the devout and detractors alike. It is the Christian go-to source for all things apocalyptic.

Abounding in fantastic symbolism, lurid violence, and tumultuous visions, Revelation is one of the most important examples of the apocalyptic literature that was widely popular between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. in the part of the world where the Bible was written. According to Richard Draper, apocalyptic literature of this era exhibited three common traits:

1. *Eschatology* – The flow of history is interrupted by God to bring on the End of Time and ultimately usher in the Kingdom of Heaven for the righteous, with evil defeated once and for all.
2. *Dualism* – Good versus Evil ultimately manifest as God versus Satan, locked in a universal struggle on Earth and in heaven over absolute, eternal rule.
3. *Predetermination* – All of this is preordained, and God will ultimately win in this struggle with Satan and sin.³¹

The book of Revelation (16:12–16) speaks of a violent struggle at the End of Time, known as **Armageddon**, and portends the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ and his righteous followers over Satan, his beasts, and his hordes of unrepentant sinners. Originally written in Greek, it is composed of 22 short chapters and 404 verses, most drawing inspiration from the Hebrew Bible. In part, it is a letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor, warning them about the impending Apocalypse, and a recording of the extravagant visions that an intriguing early Christian mystic named John received.

Who was John? Though early interpreters believed that the authors of the Gospel of John and Revelation were one and the same—a misunderstanding that may have influenced the latter’s inclusion in the Bible—most biblical scholars agree that Revelation was written by **John of Patmos**, a Jew-cum-Christian who may have been a disciple of John, the disciple of Jesus. Because of his faith, he had been exiled, banished as a punishment, by Roman authorities to

the island of Patmos, hence the name John of Patmos. Evidently, the author of Revelation was a member of one of the seven churches of Asia Minor (in what is today Turkey) to be victimized by a series of persecutions at the hands of the Roman Empire. Located in the Aegean Sea, Patmos served, in effect, as a penal colony for persecuted Christians.

John of Patmos probably wrote Revelation near the end of the first century C.E. This was plausibly during the reign of the Roman emperor [Domitian](#), who is likely the “Beast from the Sea” referenced in John’s text. Domitian was a brutal emperor (81–96) who, like Nero and other Roman rulers before him, ruthlessly persecuted Christians. He was assassinated in 96, and the Roman senate voted his memory into oblivion. He had, after all, instituted an ancestor cult in Ephesus for his family. Nero’s name spelled in Hebrew numerically equals 666, furthermore, making yet another cruel emperor Revelation’s beast and an early foil to Christian apocalyptic thought.



John of Patmos, author of the book of Revelation. Sixteenth-century painting by Titian. | [John of Patmos, author of the Book of Revelation](#) by [Titian](#) is in the [public domain](#).

The author was clearly a mystic, someone who receives visions from the divine, and John's came to him while meditating and praying in a cave. He was kneeling with his head stationed in a hole on the cave's wall, his right hand clinging to a smaller hole nearby. Few things ever written have so inspired humanity, though the text needs to be understood in its historical context, otherwise it can become rather dangerous. This is the main reason it has for centuries served as "an othering machine" par excellence, legitimating the scapegoating of various non-Christian others for all the woes that befall humanity as we await the Second Coming of the savior, Jesus Christ. Timothy Beal explains:

In the process, such apocalyptic monster-making has the potential to deny the one being monstrositized – the visitor, the immigrant, the foreigner, the marginal. Denying their humanity can help justify violence against them. Indeed, it can not only help justify violence, it can ordain and bless it as part of a cosmic battle of good versus evil, God versus Satan, which will culminate in a final judgement, for which we had better be ready.³²

The book of Revelation thus sinks demonization into the core of universal history, the core of its ultimate outcome, providing fire and fury to the Second Coming. This is all the more reason to learn about its historical context. "At the time John wrote Revelation, a power struggle raged within the Christian community," Draper explains. The book also makes Christianity victorious, rather than fading into oblivion as some ill-fated doomsday cult:

John wrote his work for those who yet clung to the truth. A careful reading of Acts through Jude leaves the thinking reader saddened, if not downhearted. The Epistles' combined witness suggests that Jesus and his Apostles failed. By the end of that era, the gospel was no longer being preached (see Jude 1:3), many antichrists reigned in various branches of the Church (see 1 John 2:18-19; 3 John 1:9-10), and false teachers abounded (see Revelation 2:14-15; 20-23). Is that the end of the story? If it were not for Revelation, one could only conclude from these scriptures that God lost. John's masterwork, however, tells the rest of the story. It reassured the Saints of his day that, no matter how bad conditions looked, Jesus was still in charge, history was playing out according to God's will, and the Christians would, in the end, triumph.³³

Key Features of Revelation

Christianity thus comes full circle with the book of Revelation. Without it, the religion would have remained an obscure historical fringe group and probably would never have survived. You are, of course, encouraged to read this great apocalyptic text in its entirety, but please make sure that you are sitting down. Before considering some of the book's most important interpreters, here is a summary of some of Revelation's key features: *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*; *Christ as Savior*; *Revelation of the Kingdom of God's Great Enemy*; *Satan in Revelation*

and His Helpers; War in Heaven, Fallen Angels; Sin, Seduction, and the Whore of Babylon; The Antichrist.³⁴

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The book of Revelation reveals Christ to be the Almighty (Rev. 1:1), as **Pantokrator** (Rev 1:8), rounding out the foundation for Christian theology in ways that earlier books of the Bible do not: “The title emphasizes one important point: Jesus rules history and governs its outcome.”³⁵

Christ as Savior

Robed as king and priest, in Revelation 1:13–16, Christ brandishes a dual-edged sword in his mouth and holds the power of “the keys of hell and death” (Rev 1:18).

Revelation of the Great Enemies of God’s Kingdom

Another key theme of Revelation is the enemy of God’s Kingdom, who is identified in Chapter Nine as having fallen from a star and as dwelling in a bottomless pit atop an army to be unleashed in the last days with a mission to destroy the people of God; locusts are part of that army:

The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women’s hair, and their teeth were like lions’ teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails with stingers, like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek is Apollyon (Revelation 9:7–11).

Satan in Revelation and His Helpers

The enemy is, of course, identified with Satan, who takes the form of a red dragon with seven heads, in Chapter Thirteen, and is aided by the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land, the latter transformed into the **Whore of Babylon**. Battle breaks out in heaven, and this dragon is repelled by **St. Michael the Archangel**.

War in Heaven, Fallen Angels

No comment is needed here:

Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him (Rev 12:7–9).

Sin, Seduction, and the Whore of Babylon

The Whore of Babylon, often understood in early Christianity to be the Roman Empire, is especially cunning and capable of seducing people into sin, thereby drawing them into the forces of Satan and turning them away from God in the cosmic struggle, and ultimately the apocalyptic struggle, between good and evil:

And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand filled with abominations and filthiness of her fornication. And upon her forehead was a name written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATION OF THE EARTH (Rev. 17:4–5).

The Antichrist

When the [Antichrist](#) becomes central in Christian eschatology and concretized by relevant readings, Revelation's power of othering gets really serious. Though the word *Antichrist* does not appear in the book of Revelation, earlier beliefs about such a being of evil incarnate were easily identified with the beast that is central in the text. The beast becomes the long-prophesied false messiah, the Lord's satanic doppelgänger. As McGinn explains:

The origins of the Antichrist legend are inseparable from the history of Jewish speculation about the end time and its proximity. Jewish scribes and seers created a powerful new religious vision of the meaning of history in the last three centuries before Jesus, one that was in full bloom during his lifetime.³⁶

The Antichrist, during the End Time, is an absolutely evil human being and a world leader who does Satan's bidding. The End Time is said to occur between the beginning of the Millennium and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, though not in Revelation, the word does appear elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., 1 John 2:18; 1 John 2: 22). Matthew 24 warns that "false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect," and it was an easy stretch for interpreters of Revelation to

identify the Antichrist as Revelation's "charismatic beast who would take his mark . . . a Satanic false messiah predicted to arrive before the Second Coming of Christ to seduce the masses into following and worshipping him."³⁷

The Seven Seals (and Seven Trumpets and Seven Bowls)

In Revelation, John of Patmos writes at the opening of Chapter Five (5:1–2): "And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with [seven seals](#). And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?" John is overcome with sadness and terror because of the declaration that no one can, but the Revelator is reassured that the Lion of Judah, one in the lineage of King David, will do so, and it will be done by the Lamb. The first seal releases a rider on a white horse (crowned Christ as conqueror), the second another on a red horse, the third another on a black horse, and the fourth, death itself, on a pale green horse. These are [the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#).

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

In addition to John's visions, much of the book of Revelation is based on prophecies in the Hebrew Bible, and the Four Horsemen are a case in point. In the book of Zechariah (1:8–11), for instance, we read:

I saw by night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse, and it stood among the myrtle trees in the hollow; and behind him were horses: red, sorrel, and white. Then I said, "My lord, what are these?" So the angel who talked with me said to me, "I will show you what they are." And the man who stood among the myrtle trees answered and said, "These are the ones whom the LORD has sent to walk to and fro throughout the earth."

In Revelation (6:1–8), the Four Horsemen thrust forth the Apocalypse in all its holy terror and devastating violence, pestilence, and famine. They have been variously interpreted across the ages, sometimes literally and sometimes allegorically, but were especially gripping during the period of Roman persecution of the early Christian community.³⁸

The Book of Revelation and Its Interpreters³⁹

Perhaps no other text in human history has been so thoroughly and so broadly interpreted—or so influential in shaping this history—as the book of Revelation. The interpretations of this text have for nearly two thousand years been as diverse as they have been dangerous, comforting, and terrifying, and we cannot thoroughly explore them here.

Instead, let us outline the key ideas of some of the most significant interpreters of the book of Revelation, beginning with the great Church Father St. Irenaeus.⁴⁰

Irenaeus (130–202 C.E.)

A Greek evangelist with a skill for developing Christian community and a mission to combat heresy, Irenaeus rose to prominence as bishop of Lyon, France. He was the first known Christian theologian to interpret the number 666 and to opine that the end of the world would occur upon the fall of the Roman Empire. The Antichrist, he taught, would then reign for 3.5 years, followed by a second Advent and the resurrection of the righteous.

In his most important book, [Against Heresies](#), Irenaeus denounces various forms of Gnosticism (alternative interpretations of Christianity) and opines at length on the book of Revelation:

We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of the Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign.

Irenaeus further speculates at length about the number 666, engaging in historical and theological reflection, with some measure of numerology mixed in for good measure. This is “the [number of the beast](#)”—it will correspond with the beast's name—a notion that has sparked endless speculation across the ages. For example, per Beal, “The number 666 often circulates ... as simply the encoded identity of a diabolical world leader, from United States President Ronald Wilson Reagan, with six characters per name (= 666), to Adolf Hitler, whose name adds up to 666 when one uses an alphanumeric key.”⁴¹

So terrifying is the number 666 that there is actually a long word in English for the fear thereof, one that derives from Greek: [hexakosioihexekontahehexaphobia](#). In most religions, numbers play important roles and are often the source of speculations, symbolisms, enthusiasms, and dread. To further illustrate this in the context of the book of Revelation, we turn to the observations of Eugen Weber:

Scriptural numbers, likewise, symbolize spiritual messages: three stands for the Trinity, four for Creation, three plus four equal seven, perfection. Three times four equal twelve, plenitude. Jerusalem has twelve gates. The number six, which falls short of seven, is incomplete; and 666 is the culmination of incompleteness: the Beast ever yearning for divine truth but never able to attain it. Seven, in contrast, seems omnipresent: seven seals, seven trumpets, seven visions, seven vials, seven angels with trumpets, seven angels with last plagues, and even a seven-headed dragon testify to its powers.⁴²

This certainly gives a different twist to the clichés that there is “power in numbers” and that seven is a lucky number.

Augustine (354–430 C.E.)

Born in North Africa in the middle of the fourth century, Augustine was one of the greatest thinkers in Christian history, and his influence on the world’s largest religion has been far reaching and profound. As Beal explains, “Doctrines such as original sin, creation *ex nihilo*, salvation by grace alone, not to mention the church’s deep distrust of human sexuality, all owe their early formations to him.”⁴³ Augustine devoted his magnum opus, [*City of God*](#), largely to interpreting the book of Revelation. After Jesus and St. Paul, one would be hard-pressed to identify a more determinative influence on Christianity or its apocalypticism than St. Augustine.



St. Augustine, one of the greatest and most influential thinkers in the history of Christianity. Seventeenth-century painting by Philippe de Champaigne. | [St. Augustine](#) by [Philippe de Champaigne](#) is in the [public domain](#).

In *Dē civitatē Deī contrā pāgānōs* (Latin for *City of God against Pagans*), Augustine deviated from the millenarianism of his time, which was steeped in belief that the end was at hand. Instead, he interpreted the book of Revelation as indicating that the end was centuries away and that we could not know when it might arrive. Augustine is thus somewhat unique among early Christian theologians in devoting so much attention to the text. But ultimately he felt that the Apocalypse will be the culmination of history, unifying the people of God to “rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This shall be in the end without end” (*City of God* 22.30), in the City of Heaven, not the City of Earth.⁴⁴ The City of Heaven and that of Earth will coexist for a figurative thousand years between the End of Time and the Second Coming of Christ, when all will be judged and good will triumph over evil. Yet Augustine sought to tone down the influence of Revelation and the expectations of the masses by saying such things.

Ultimately, Augustine writes that all the righteous dead will one day be resurrected and gloriously restored to enter the pure City of God for eternity, with their bodies perfected. The aged will have no physical limitations, while those who died as children will enter as adults in their prime. “Bald people,” furthermore, “will get their hair back, but not all its length. Likewise people who were obese or emaciated in life will be restored to their ideal proportions.... Also, blemishes, scars, and other marks on the body will be removed ... with the singular exception of the wounds of martyrs.”⁴⁵ Much to look forward to, should you be among the righteous.

Two key elements to Augustine’s demystification of the book of Revelation are his reasoning about signs of the End Time and the notion of predestination. The signs mentioned in the book are, as Karla Pollmann explains, for Augustine “unreliable guides because of their omnipresence throughout history. The world had always been scourged by wars, floods, or earthquakes at different periods and places,” and furthermore, “there had never been a lack of morally decadent, ungodly individuals, or even nations.”⁴⁶ Augustine also adhered to a doctrine of predestination, or that everything humans do has been predetermined by God.⁴⁷ Hence, the notion of faith and religious practice is not of one’s own volition, and who is saved and who is condemned is preordained and unchangeable. Therefore there is no reason to fear the book of Revelation.⁴⁸

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

There is a rich legacy of female mystics in the medieval Church; almost all of them who are known to us were monastics, nuns, or anchoresses. [Hildegard of Bingen](#) is perhaps the most extraordinary, and she had much to say (and draw) about the book of Revelation. A nun by the age of eight and of a noble family, Hildegard was a German mystic, hymnologist, playwright, artist, and scientist, who throughout her life received wondrous visions. Her earliest writings and illustrations of some of her most powerful visions appear in a book that she wrote in the 1140s titled *Scivias* (from the Latin [Scivias Domini](#), “Know the Ways of the Lord”). Several of these visions concern Creation and the End.



Hildegard von Bingen, one of the most influential interpreters of the book of Revelation in the history of Christianity. | [Hildegard von Bingen – Public domain portrait drawing](#) is in the [public domain](#).

Art historians debate whether Hildegard painted the images in *Scivias* herself, but she did draw her visions shortly after receiving them, also writing about them in great detail, so they were at least the bases for the remarkable images in her book. For our concerns, the most important is “Vision of Last Days.” As Richard Emmerson explains, this image depicts the Antichrist “in the form of a demonic head integral to the body of the Church. . . .

Hildegard clearly sees evil coming from within the Church. This is not some attack from without, whether led by the traditional Antichrist born of the Jews or an Antichrist supported by Islamic military power, as others feared.⁴⁹ Hildegard's own description, reflective of a sickened Church, is as shocking as it is graphic:

From the navel to the groin she had various scaly spots. In her vagina there appeared a monstrous and totally black head. . . . Lo, the monstrous head removed itself from its place with so great a crash that the entire image of the woman was shaken in all its members. Something like a great mass of much dung was joined to the head; then, lifting itself upon a mountain, it attempted to ascend to the height of heaven.⁵⁰

In this fashion, her interpretation of Revelation goes down in history as the first to de-other the text: instead of perceiving the Antichrist as Jewish or Muslim, Hildegard identifies the prophesied deceiver as a Christian birthed by a Church riven by corruption, a Church that she sought to reform. This medieval mystic envisioned this reform and return to purity as being deeply tied to the Apocalypse.⁵¹ Of course, as discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter, Protestant interpreters would later re-other the text by perceiving the Catholic pope as the Antichrist, departing entirely from Hildegard's more forgiving perspective.

Hildegard also wrote some of the most beautiful music in Church history and was recently (in 2012, by Pope Benedict XVI) declared a "Doctor of the Church," the fourth woman among thirty-five said doctors of all time. (The other women are Saints Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, and Therese of Lisieux.) She was exceptional for much more than her work on Revelation, as are all the interpreters covered in this chapter. "But for a woman of the twelfth century, hedged by the constraints of a misogynist world, her achievements baffle," Barbara Newman explains. For Hildegard was:

the only medieval woman who preached openly, before mixed audiences of clergy and laity, with the full approval of church authorities; the author of the first known morality play and the only twelfth-century playwright who is not anonymous; . . . the first scientific writer to discuss sexuality and gynecology from a female perspective; and the first saint whose official biography includes a first-person memoir.⁵²

In addition, Hildegard leaves us with some of the most provocative images of the Apocalypse in Church history, and that is really high praise, as few biblical scenes have captivated artistic geniuses over the years more than the End of Days. These include Michelangelo's masterpiece on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and Albrecht Dürer's remarkable late-fifteenth-century woodcut illustrations. Let us now move on to another medieval mystic, painter, monastic, and writer who was captivated by the Apocalypse and offered his own influential interpretation of the book of Revelation, [Joachim of Fiore](#).

Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202)

Joachim of Fiore was a native son of Calabria—in very southern Italy, on the toe of the

peninsula's boot—a person of deep faith who at one point went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and take up a monastic vocation, eventually becoming abbot of his monastery. His writings about the book of Revelation and his mystical visions about the End of Days echo Hildegard's in certain respects. For example, he vividly illustrated his manuscripts by painting his visions, and he softened the animosity toward Jews and Muslims that was so prevalent in medieval apocalypticism. Brett Whalen writes:

In the captivating realm of speculation about the apocalypse, Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) numbers among the most creative and controversial of medieval Christian figures. Through his inspired – one might say revolutionary – interpretation of the Bible, Joachim believed that he had discovered a template for understanding the totality of God's plan for history.... Joachim's vision of the future emphasized the harmonious conversion, rather than grudging assimilation or destruction of the Jews.⁵³

In this respect, Joachim's interpretation of the book of Revelation is, though not as strongly as Hildegard's, de-othering, even if he never went so far as to assert that the Church would give birth to the Antichrist. He also believed that, in addition to Jews, Muslims and pagans would convert to the Christian faith at the End of Time.⁵⁴

Joachim of Fiore devoted his life to an intense and constant study of the Bible, especially Revelation. He articulated most of his insights in his manuscript [Exposition of the Apocalypse](#), teaching that history is trinitarian, so there are three eras: The Age of The Father, The Age of the Son, and The Age of the Holy Spirit. For Marjorie Reeves, this is “the spearhead of Joachim's original thought,” a “great imaginative step which he took when he threw the full manifestation of the Third Person of the Trinity forward into the period ahead.” Here, “the Trinity is progressively drawing mankind on to a higher spiritual level ... the ongoing work of the living God.”⁵⁵

Joachim “was one of the leading figures of this age,” per Craig Koester, “a time of ferment, in which reform movements arose within the church.”⁵⁶ In his preaching and writing, the main point was clear: “The end was near, very near, and the need to prepare the way of the Lord was urgent.”⁵⁷ So compelling was this message, and so palpable were the signs of the End of Days in their world, that Joachim's “followers had the sense that the people of his own time had an important role to play in the final acts of the drama of world history.”⁵⁸ This is a notion that we have seen before in our consideration of Jewish messianism and Christian apocalypticism, and it takes on new force following the Protestant Reformation. Hence, we now turn to the first and most influential Protestant reformer's interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

A German, like Hildegard before him, but never forgotten for long periods of time like she (and never so mystically inclined), Martin Luther is arguably one of the most influential people who has ever walked the face of the earth. Luther was a monk who sparked the Protestant Reformation by railing against corruption in the Catholic Church and posting his world-transforming 95 *Theses* on the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517. Remarkably, Luther

was also a fierce critic of the book of Revelation and felt that it had no place in the Bible, being “neither apostolic nor prophetic.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Luther was seen “by his Protestant contemporaries” as “the prophet of the original gospel sent by God.”⁶⁰ And “the centre of Luther’s theology is the theology of the justification of the sinner”⁶¹—that humans are saved through faith alone, and not by their works—a notion that countered over 1400 years of Roman Catholic sacramental ritual.

The question of justification, of the forgiveness of God, whether in Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox contexts, is central to Christian apocalypticism, as who is to be saved will be determined on Judgment Day, at the End of Days, with the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether that is predetermined by God, as the great French Protestant reformer John Calvin held, determined by faith alone, or determined by immersing oneself in the Catholic sacraments is one of the key questions that has divided the Church since Luther’s teachings.

Luther’s world was fraught with sickness, suffering, and poverty, all widely taken as signs that the end was near, as he believed, even if he was hardly a fire and brimstone prophet or visionary. Yet, though “Luther saw the entire plane of human existence as a battleground fought over by God and the devil,”⁶² his disdain for the book of Revelation made him hesitate to include it in his landmark 1522 German translation of the New Testament. The printing press had been invented by Johannes Gutenberg, in Mainz, just a generation before Luther’s momentous theses were publicized, and it produced the first printed Latin versions of the Bible by 1456. The appearances of both the 1456 Latin Vulgate Bible and Luther’s translation were paramount moments in the history of Christianity, yet Luther wanted to exclude Revelation from his translation.

However, when Luther invited his friend Lucas Cranach the Elder to illustrate his project, the latter chose to mostly provide pieces on Revelation, largely based on the earlier work of Albrecht Dürer.⁶³ Upon Luther’s translation of the entire Bible in 1534, “soon nearly every German household had a copy . . . including the Cranach-based depictions of the visions from Revelation,” as Beal notes. “Whether they were reading the text of Revelation or not, they were very likely looking at its pictures.”⁶⁴

Sadly, in addition to his infamous antisemitism,⁶⁵ Luther drew upon Revelation’s power of othering to target Muslims and the Catholic Church as the progenitors of the Antichrist and all things evil that Jesus would surely defeat at the End of Time. Specifically, Luther associated Turks with the Antichrist. The likes of Cranach and Dürer were beginning to draw the Antichrist wearing a tiara, representative of the pope, and some of these representations appeared in Luther’s Bible. Whereas antisemitism had long shaped Christian imaginings of the Antichrist, by the late Middle Ages and the Reformation, increasingly such imaginings among Protestants would be shaped by anti-Catholicism and Islamophobia. All of this makes Hildegard’s earlier visions of the Church’s complicity in the birth of the Antichrist even more striking.

Joseph Smith (1805–1844)

Mormonism is one of the newest and fastest growing forms of Christianity. Though a recent

entrant into the Christian faith, like all other Christian traditions it is based on belief in Jesus Christ, salvation, and the afterlife. Formally known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it was founded in America by the influential prophet [Joseph Smith](#). At the age of twenty-four, Smith received divine visions in a forest in Upstate New York and was visited by an angel named Moroni, the son of the angel Mormon, who transmitted to the prophet a new corpus of scripture, the [Book of Mormon](#). The corpus had been supernaturally written on a set of gold plates and buried on an upstate New York hillside, and Smith was called to discover and translate them. As a hundred revelations comprise the Book of Mormon, published in 1830, it should not surprise us that Smith offered influential and rather original teachings about the book of Revelation and about the afterlife. Since Smith's reception of the revelations, they and his teachings have spread across the globe, and today the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints counts nearly twenty million members worldwide and actively missionizes to spread the faith.

Just what did the prophet Joseph Smith teach about the book of Revelation? After receiving the Book of Mormon, Smith continued to experience divine visions and insights for several years, which are recorded and interpreted in his book [Doctrine and Covenants](#). It is here where one finds his most concise interpretation of the book of Revelation, focusing on its fourth through eleventh chapters. For example, the seven seals discussed in Chapter Five are metaphors for seven periods of time, the last two constituting the present age and the future. Smith also explains that Revelation is best understood as part of a panorama of revelations to prophets from Moses through John of Patmos, and that all previous prophets were also shown the end of the world but were forbidden to share those visions, which were left to John to write down in a cave on Patmos Island. Smith was especially taken by this passage from Revelation, a book that he felt called to demystify: "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10). The Prophet Nephi, as recorded in the Book of Mormon, had visions similar to those of John of Patmos.⁶⁶

Prior to his martyrdom in 1844, Smith and the first Mormons who were drawn to his teachings often heard the voices of angels, saints, earlier prophets, and Jesus, and the most important messages from the Lord and Savior were decidedly apocalyptic. "I COME QUICKLY," was Jesus Christ's constant message to Joseph and his early followers." As a result:

Early Mormons believed that Jesus Christ would soon return, and they expected to reign with him on the earth. The wicked, meanwhile, would suffer unless they repented. "Mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to th[e]ir ungodliness," Jesus Christ warned, according to the history Joseph Smith wrote in 1832. When the Son of God came, he would slay the vast majority of humankind, a wave of destruction that would cleanse the earth of all wickedness. Then, proclaimed an 1842 summary of the church's beliefs, "Christ will reign personally upon the earth, and . . . the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisaic glory."

Smith's consideration of the location of some of these apocalyptic events is as unique as it is interesting, furthermore. "In 1831, Joseph Smith declared Independence, in Jackson County, Missouri, as Zion, the site of the New Jerusalem to which Jesus Christ would return."⁶⁷ After

Jesus's appearance, the Lord would defeat the satanic armies that are prophesied in the book of Revelation. All are judged upon their deaths from the material realm, when their respective bodies and souls are separated, then judged again upon the resurrection of the dead, when the souls and bodies are reunited, and then finally on the Day of Final Judgment, when one is delivered one's eternal fate. In a uniquely Mormon conceptualization, those who have died without having been baptized may receive "proxy baptism after death."⁶⁸

Bob Marley (1945–1981)

Thus far, our interpreters have been Church leaders or well-embedded Church insiders who, except for Augustine, a North African, would all today be considered to have been "white." But the book of Revelation, though clearly "of" the Church, does not belong "to" the Church, and myriad extra-ecclesiastical interpretations of the text have captivated believers over the ages. None is more interesting (to me, at least, a Caribbeanist by trade) than that of Rastafari. Emerging in Jamaica in the 1920s, Rastafari is a profoundly biblical religion. It is also Christian and reinterprets the book of Revelation in ways gravitating toward questions of racial injustice and the enslavement, deception, and oppression of Black people everywhere by "Babylon," the world of white power and privilege.

The most distinctive belief in Rastafari is that the late emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie (1930–1974) was the Second Coming of Christ the King, the Conquering Lion of Judah. Why Haile Selassie? Rastafari is not a doctrinal religion, nor is it centralized, relying instead on frequent *reflections* on the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible. As Randy Goldson explains:

Archibald Dunkley, one of the Rastafari pioneers, spent two and a half years studying the Bible "to determine whether Haile Selassie was the Messiah whom Garvey had prophesied. Ezekiel 30, I Timothy 6, Revelation 17 and 19, and Isaiah 43 finally convinced him." The pattern of validating Selassie's divinity and messiahship from scripture continues to be a feature of Rastafari theological discourse.⁶⁹

A key element of this discourse is the identification of Selassie as one of the aforementioned Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the one to be revealed when the first of the seven seals is unveiled, the Lion of Judah, situated in the lineage of King David, Crowned Christ as conqueror.



Legendary reggae musician and Rastafarian prophet Robert Nesta Marley. | [Bob Marley](#) by Paul Weinberg is used under a [CC BY-SA 3.0 License](#).

Rastafari is thus also an intensely millenarian religion and is especially inspired by these biblical passages:

Judah is a lion's whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he crouched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? (Gen 49:9).

And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof (Rev. 5:5).

No Rastafarian has been more influential than the late, great reggae musician [Bob Marley](#), who is considered a prophet among many Rastas today. His music is replete with biblical references, some 137 across nine studio albums, 17 of which are decidedly apocalyptic. The cover of one Bob Marley and the Wailers album, the 1983 classic *Confrontation*, depicts the Rasta in more messianic terms, riding a white horse and slaying a dragon.⁷⁰ Marley equates the struggles of Black people throughout the world with those of Daniel and his fellow Jewish prisoners, especially in his 1979 song "Survival aka Black Survivors": "We're the survivors, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Black survivors). Thrown in the fire, but-a never get burn." And although Marley "never directly quotes Revelation," Dean MacNeil explains, some of his "songs are rich in allusions to Revelation." Furthermore, "Marley 'enacts' Revelation in

song rather than directly quoting it.” Marley references Revelation more often than any other biblical text except for Psalms.⁷¹ MacNeil concludes:

If there was an optic through which Marley read the Bible, it was the stereoscopic optic of resistance and redemption. This optic, influenced by the Book of Revelation, was applied throughout Marley’s Bible reading, whether it was Old Testament Wisdom or New Testament Pauline literature.⁷²

The righteous “a-never get burn” in Marley’s eschatology, which is quite consistent with the notions of the **rapture** (the assumption of the faithful up to heaven before the End of Time) and of redemption in the Bible. As in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, in Rastafari fire awaits the wicked following Judgment Day, for in hell one finds a “Lake of Fire.”⁷³ In 4 Ezra (3:37–38) we read one of the most gripping descriptions of what awaits us all, the sinner and the righteous alike: “The pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of hell shall be disclosed, and opposite it the paradise of delight.” But there is a softer tone to Rastafarian eschatology, one that unwittingly hearkens to the original liberative Zoroastrian eschatological predestination. (In the end, all will be delivered into paradise). As Patrick Taylor notes:

Rastafari is essentially different from the classical millenarianism . . . (i)n that it is essentially non-violent and teaches “peace and love.” Through divine intervention in history black people will enter into eternity and the conflicts of history will be left behind forever.⁷⁴

Conclusion

This is a wonderful idea, that “the conflicts of history will be left behind forever.” Let us all hope that is the case, though not at the expense of efforts to resolve such conflicts while we are still here on Earth. Christianity is the world’s greatest religion, in terms of number of adherents, and it is rooted in conflict and portends an end: that Jesus will return to the earth, defeat Satan, and establish an eternal heavenly kingdom on Earth—the Kingdom of God, his Father, with whom he is One. How long this will take and how it will all unfold have been the sources of endless speculation among believers, many of whom expect the rapture, as well as a seven-year period of tribulation, to precede the event. This is mentioned in the long passage from the book of Matthew quoted above, garnished forcefully in chapters 4–18 of the book of Revelation, which “describe in the most graphic language possible the great catastrophic time of trouble that is ahead for the world.”⁷⁵ The Church is to be spared, assumed into heaven prior to this time of trouble, while those who are not quite righteous enough to join them will be left here on Earth to engage in this epic struggle, the last in universal history. Though widely debated in Christian theology,⁷⁶ tribulation is generally believed to be a period during which those of us not assumed into heaven during the rapture can either join the forces of Satan and

the Antichrist, and be marked with the number 666, or militate on behalf of Jesus, the Church, and the righteous, and thereby secure our own salvation, by the grace of God.

This chapter has only briefly summarized the history and scope of Christianity. It is interesting to me that despite having been born and raised Catholic, of all the chapters in this book about specific religions, I found this one the most challenging to write. Nonetheless, I hope this summary has provided a helpful platform for considering the book of Revelation and some of its leading interpreters in this religion's remarkable history, from St. Augustine to Bob Marley. Let us now turn our attention to the religion expected to soon overtake Christianity as the world's largest, Islam. Though Rastafari is a minor religion on the global scale, Christianity—from which it draws so much—will soon be surpassed as the world's largest by a major one: Islam. It, too, is profoundly apocalyptic, as we will see in the following chapter.

Notes

1. Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, trans. John Bowden, New York: Continuum, 1995 (1994), 41. [↵](#)
2. Joachim Schaper, "The Persian Period," in Markus Bockmuehl and James Carelton Paget (eds.), *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hope of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, London: T and T Clark, 2007, 5. [↵](#)
3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985, 16. [↵](#)
4. From my notes in Professor Demetrios Constantelos's class "Introduction to Christianity," Stockton State College, 1984. [↵](#)
5. Some biblical historians believe that Jesus was actually born "around 6 C.E." Morten Hørning Jensen, "Antipas: The Herod Jesus Knew," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 38, 5, 2002, 42. It is also debated among historians and theologians whether Jesus ever intended to "found" a church or religion distinct from Israel. I had the privilege of taking a graduate seminar in Catholic ecclesiology at Villanova University, many years ago, with the distinguished Catholic Church historian Professor Bernard Prusak, and the one question on the final exam was "Did Jesus intend to establish a church distinct from Israel?" Based on a close reading of the Bible (albeit just in English), my answer was no. I got an A. [↵](#)
6. Küng, *Christianity*, 202. [↵](#)
7. Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby, Boston: Beacon, 1964 (1925), 9. [↵](#)
8. There are also brief and scattered references to Jesus in Greek and Latin sources, as

well as in many apocryphal texts and, scantily, in the Talmud. See Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 67–70. [↵](#)

9. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 19. [↵](#)
10. Lawrence Mykytiuk, “New Testament Political Figures Confirmed,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 43, 5, 2017, 50. [↵](#)
11. Paul L. Maier, “Herod and the Infants of Bethlehem,” in E. Jerry Vardaman (ed.), *Chronos, Kairos, Christos II: Chronology, Christology, and Religious Studies in Memory of Ray Summers*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998, 170. [↵](#)
12. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. [↵](#)
13. Alexey Somov, “The Dove in the Story of Jesus’ Baptism: Early Christian Interpretation of a Jewish Image,” *The Bible Translator* 69, 2, 2018, 240. [↵](#)
14. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 9. [↵](#)
15. Thomas Aquinas, “[Question 73: The Signs That Will Precede the Judgment](#),” *Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province, 1920, online edition 2017, n.p. <http://www.domcentral.org/summa/summa-suppq73.html>; last accessed August 11, 2023. [↵](#)
16. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 341. [↵](#)
17. Küng, *Christianity*, 70. [↵](#)
18. Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015. [↵](#)
19. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 44. [↵](#)
20. Leroy Waterman, *The Religion of Jesus: Christianity’s Unclaimed Heritage of Prophetic Religion*, New York: Harper, 1952, 168. [↵](#)
21. *Ibid.*, 120. [↵](#)
22. *Ibid.*, 191–192. [↵](#)
23. This date is conventional, “but the schism between the Eastern and Western churches cannot really be dated. There is not an individual date of separation, but there is a long history of separation.” Küng, *Christianity*, 243. [↵](#)
24. Henry Chadwick, *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church: From Apostolic Times to the Council of Florence*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 206. [↵](#)

25. Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 157–159. [↵](#)
26. John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity: Interpreted through Its Development*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954, 1. [↵](#)
27. *Ibid.*, 3. [↵](#)
28. Ernst Käsermann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," trans. W. J. Montague, *Journal for Theology and Church* 6, 1969, 40. [↵](#)
29. Bernard McGinn, *Anti-Christ: Two Thousand Years of Human Fascination with Evil*, San Francisco: Harper, 1994, 36. [↵](#)
30. I am indebted to my friend and colleague Vasiliki M. Limberis for enlightening me about this aspect of Revelation's history, reception, and interpretation. Vaso cemented her reputation as one of the world's leading scholars of the early Church Fathers with her landmark publication *Architects of Piety: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Cult of the Martyrs*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. [↵](#)
31. Richard D. Draper, "Teaching the Book of Revelation: Five Considerations," *Religious Education* 14, 1, 2013, 83–107. [↵](#)
32. Timothy Beal, *The Book of Revelation: A Biography*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018, 154. [↵](#)
33. Draper, "Teaching the Book of Revelation." [↵](#)
34. In outlining these themes, I am following Draper in *ibid.* [↵](#)
35. Draper, "Teaching the Book of Revelation." [↵](#)
36. McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 34. [↵](#)
37. Beal, *The Book of Revelation*, x. [↵](#)
38. Abel Rios. "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," in Wendell G. Johnson (ed.), *The End of Days: An Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017, 136–138. [↵](#)
39. This subtitle is inspired by a now classic study by another of my former teachers. Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur'an and its Interpreters*, Volumes I and II, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984, 1992. [↵](#)
40. For almost all of this section, I take my cue from Beal in choosing and profiling these interpreters. [↵](#)
41. Beal, *The Book of Revelation*, 130. [↵](#)
42. Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages*,

- Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, 36. [↵](#)
43. Beal, *The Book of Revelation*, 57. [↵](#)
 44. Augustine, *City of God*, 22–30. [↵](#)
 45. Beal, *The Book of Relation*, 67. [↵](#)
 46. Karla Pollmann, “Moulding the Present: Apocalyptic as Hermeneutic in *City of God*, 21–22,” *Augustinian Studies* 30, 2, 1999, 168. [↵](#)
 47. Scholars debate how rigid or absolutist Augustine’s idea of predestination actually is. On this, see John M. Rits, “Augustine on Free Will and Predestination,” *Theological Studies* 20, 2, 1969, 420–447. [↵](#)
 48. Pollmann, “Moulding the Present,” 173. On contradictions of Augustine’s writings on predestination, see Alexandra Pârvan, “Augustine on the ‘Book of Life,’ and the Conflicting Picture of Predestination in *Dei civitate dei* 20,14–15,” *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 21, 3, 2017, 472–495. Of note, Augustine wrote an entire book titled *On Free Will*, in which he grapples extensively with the relationship between free will and predestination. [↵](#)
 49. Richard K. Emmerson, “The Representation of the Antichrist in Hildegard of Bingen’s *Scivias*,” *Gesta* 41, 2, 2002, 101. [↵](#)
 50. Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1979, 101. [↵](#)
 51. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, “Prophet and Reformer: Smoke in the Vineyard,” in Barbara Newman (ed.), *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 70–89. [↵](#)
 52. Barbara Newman, “‘Sybil on the Rhein’: Hildegard’s Life and Times,” in Barbara Newman (ed.), *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 1. [↵](#)
 53. Brett Whalen, “Joachim of Fiore, Apocalyptic Conversion, and the ‘Persecuting Society,’” *History Compass* 8, 7, 2010, 683. [↵](#)
 54. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
 55. Marjorie Reeves, “The Originality and Influence of Joachim of Fiore,” *Traditio* 36, 1980, 288–289. [↵](#)
 56. Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001, 8. [↵](#)
 57. Beal, *The Book of Revelation*, 97. [↵](#)

58. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 9. [↵](#)
59. Beal, *The Book of Revelation*, 121. [↵](#)
60. Küng, *Christianity*, 525. [↵](#)
61. *Ibid.*, 527. [↵](#)
62. Ken Sundet Jones, “The Apocalyptic Luther,” *Word and World* 25, 3, 2005, 309. [↵](#)
63. Beal, *The Book of Revelation*, 124. [↵](#)
64. *Ibid.*, 136. Beal continues: “Indeed, in the early copies I have been able to examine, the high concentration of finger staining on the edges of the pages of Revelation alone is evidence of just such special attention from users (if not necessarily readers) of Luther’s Bibles.” [↵](#)
65. See Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther’s Antisemitism: Against His Better Judgement*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012. [↵](#)
66. David A. Edwards, “[Joseph Smith and the Book of Revelation](#),” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, n.d, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2015/12/joseph-smith-and-the-book-of-revelation?lang=eng>, last accessed November 3, 2021. [↵](#)
67. John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, 121. [↵](#)
68. Donald N. Wright, “Judgment Day, Final,” in David H. Ludlow (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, New York: MacMillan, 1992, 774–775. [↵](#)
69. Randy R. Goldson, “Jah in the Flesh: An Examination of Spirit, Power, and Divine Envesselement in Rastafari,” Ph.D. diss., Department of Religion, Temple University, 2020, 135. [↵](#)
70. Dean MacNeil, *The Bible and Bob Marley: Half the Story Has Never Been Told*, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 154–155, 203. The album cover is the artwork of Neville Garrick. See Chris Morrow, *Stir It Up: Reggae Album Cover Art*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999, 87. [↵](#)
71. *Ibid.*, 27. [↵](#)
72. *Ibid.*, 145. [↵](#)
73. Justin W. Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ’s Descent into the Underworld*, Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2014, 45. [↵](#)
74. Patrick D. M. Taylor, “Perspectives on History in Rastafari Thought,” *Studies in*

Religion/Sciences Religieuses 19, 2, 1990, 196. [↵](#)

75. John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957, 45. [↵](#)

76. On these debates, see *ibid.*, 39–68. [↵](#)

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Glossary

95 Theses

A series of grievances against the Roman Catholic Church that were tacked to the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517 by a German monk named Martin Luther, which sparked the Protestant Reformation. [↵](#)

Against Heresies

A book written by Church Father Irenaeus, published circa 180 C.E., which seeks to unify Christianity by denouncing heretical movements then taking form. Contains an important commentary on the book of Revelation. [↵](#)

Antichrist

Supernatural imposter, a false messiah and employee of Satan, who seeks to dupe the world into believing that he is Christ and who will appear at the End of Time. A world leader who will ultimately be defeated by the real Messiah, Jesus Christ. [↵](#)

Armageddon

Battle prophesied in the Bible (Revelation 16:16) at the End of Time pitting the forces of God against the forces of Satan; also the name of the place where this battle will occur, literally Mountain of Assembly, associated with Mt. Zion. [↵](#)

Athanasius (230–292 C.E.)

Church Father and theologian who was one of the most influential voices at the 325 [Council of Nicaea](#). [↵](#)

Atonement

An act of penance for one's sins; a pursuit of forgiveness that entails remorse and faith in the salvific power of Jesus Christ. [↵](#)

Axis Mundi

Literally, the axis of the world, a term coined by Mircea Eliade in his effort to demonstrate the common core of all religions, a geographic and ethical point of orientation. [↵](#)

Book of Mormon

Considered scripture and a supplement to the Bible in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism); an 1830 text that recounts revelations received by the prophet Joseph Smith in a forest in Upstate New York. [↵](#)

Calvin, John (1509–1564)

French theologian based in Geneva who was one of the most influential figures of the early Protestant Reformation. His teachings and the important current of Christianity that they inspired are known as Calvinism. ↵

Charism

Literally, from the Greek for “gift.” In the biblical context, it refers to the blessings of healing, tongues, and the like, as received by the apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ at the Pentecost event, shortly after His crucifixion and resurrection. ↵

Christology

The study of Jesus Christ and his meaning and teachings.

Christos

Classical Greek term meaning “Anointed One”: the Messiah (*mashiach* in Hebrew), who would be anointed with oil in Judaism, the title given to Jesus of Nazareth, hence “Jesus Christ.” ↵

City of God

One of the greatest books in the history of Christian literature, penned by St. Augustine and published in 426 C.E.; an extensive commentary on the apocalypse and its aftermath, the hereafter. ↵

Clement of Alexandria (150–215 C.E.)

Church Father and one of the greatest architects of Christian theology; heavily influenced by classical Greek philosophy. ↵

Constantine the Great (272–337 C.E.)

Roman emperor who ended the persecution of Christians and later became a Christian himself, thereby opening the door for Christianity to become a world religion. Convoker of the [First Council of Nicaea](#) in 325 C.E. ↵

Council of Chalcedon

Important gathering of Christian bishops convened in 451 to establish orthodox doctrine and unity. Pivotaly established the full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. ↵

Council of Nicaea (First)

One of the most important gatherings of bishops in Christian history, the first ecumenical council, convened by the emperor Constantine in 325. Established that

Jesus Christ is one with God and developed the [Nicene Creed](#), which is said at every Roman Catholic Mass to this day. ↴

Cult of Martyrs

Martyrs are people who die for their faith, and in Christianity they are venerated, or at least celebrated as model Christians, much like saints. ↴

Cult of Relics

The veneration of the bones of martyrs and saints in Christianity. Highly popular in the early Church, it remains especially important today in Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. Relics may also consist of clothing or other items that touched the bodies of martyrs or saints. ↴

Cult of Saints

Most forms of Christianity venerate saints, holy people who lived religiously faithful lives and provide examples of righteousness for living believers to follow. Some are believed to have access to the Grace of God to intervene in our lives.

Doctrine and Covenants

Scripture of great importance in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Written by the church's founder and prophet [Joseph Smith](#) and first published in 1835. ↴

Domitian (51–96 C.E.)

Ruthless Roman emperor (ruled 81–96 C.E.) who is likely the “Beast from the Sea” referenced in the book of Revelation. Persecutor of Christians who was assassinated in 96, and subsequently the Roman senate voted his memory into oblivion. ↴

Eusebius of Caesarea (260–339 C.E.)

Bishop and early church historian of considerable theological influence, particularly in determining biblical canon. ↴

Exposition of the Apocalypse

Twelfth-century apocalyptic treatise written by the influential Italian monastic theologian [Joachim of Fiore](#). ↴

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Supernatural figures on horseback, one white horse, one red horse, one black horse, and one pale horse, who are depicted in the book of Revelation (6:1–8) as arriving on Earth one day to usher in the apocalypse in all of its catastrophic destruction and to presage the [Second Coming](#) of Jesus Christ. ↴

Hebrew Bible

The earlier part of the Christian Bible, which Christians often refer to as the “Old Testament.” Originally written in Hebrew, in which it is called the Tanakh. [↵](#)

Herodian Dynasty

The Herods were a dynasty of Jewish men appointed by the Roman Empire to govern [Judea](#), or the Jewish community of the age. [Herod the Great](#) (72 B.C.E.–4 B.C.E.), most famous among them, was called “King of the Jews” and occupied this post from 34 to 4 B.C.E. [↵](#)

Hexakosioihexekontahexaphobia

Fear of the number 666, designated as the “number of the beast” (generally understood as an agent, or agents, of Satan) in the book of Revelation (13:18). [↵](#)

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

German mystic, nun, hymnologist, playwright, artist, and scientist, who throughout her life received wondrous visions. Her earliest writings and illustrations appear in a book that she wrote in the 1140s titled [Scivias](#) (from the Latin *Scivias Domini*, “Know the Ways of the Lord”). Several of these visions concern Creation and the End. [↵](#)

Holy Spirit

The Third Person of the [Trinity](#), bequeathed to the world at the [Pentecost](#) experience and symbolized by fire and the dove. [↵](#)

Incarnation (Doctrine of the)

Central Christian belief that Jesus Christ was the Incarnation of God in human flesh, that they are thus one, as reflected in the opening of the Gospel of John (1:1): “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” [↵](#)

Infancy Narratives

Contained in the Gospel of Matthew (1:1–2:23) and the Gospel of Luke (1:5–2:52), accounts of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and the flight of his parents with him to Egypt. [↵](#)

Jesus Christ (1–33 C.E.)

The Lord and Savior in Christianity. One with God, Son of God, and the second person of the Trinity. Believed to come to Earth again at the End of Time to judge the living and the dead; the Messiah. [↵](#)

Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202)

Italian monk and theologian who scripted one of the most influential treatises on the apocalypse, [Exposition of the Apocalypse](#), which outlines the universal and divine unfolding of time itself. ↵

John the Baptist (1st Century B.C.E–30 C.E.)

Jewish ascetic and prophet who baptized Jesus of Nazareth in the River Jordan and prophesied his divine greatness. Arrested and beheaded by the [Herodian dynasty](#) (30 C.E.). A figure of major importance in religious history and a saint in Christianity. ↵

John of Patmos (6–100? C.E.)

Jewish convert to Christianity who was likely from what is today Turkey. While exiled on the Greek island of Patmos, he received intense revelations about the End of Time, which he wrote down in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. ↵

Judaea

The Jewish community in the Holy Land during Roman rule over the region and a province of the Roman Empire. ↵

King Herod the Great (72 B.C.E.–4 B.C.E.)

Jewish ruler of Judea in the service of the Roman Empire. Said in the Bible (Matthew 2:16–18) to have feared the birth of a rival Jewish king, hence commanding that all Jewish boys under age two around Bethlehem be massacred, an event known as the [Massacre of the Innocents](#). ↵

Luther, Martin (1483–1546)

German Catholic monk who in 1517 tacked to the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany, his [95 Theses](#), grievances against the Catholic Church, thereby sparking the [Protestant Reformation](#). His influential teachings are known as Lutheranism, one of the largest branches of Protestant Christianity. ↵

Magi

The three wise men who arrived in Bethlehem to bring gifts to the future king and savior, Jesus of Nazareth, shortly after his birth; Zoroastrian priests who were inspired to do so based on prophecies they had received and contemplated in Persia. ↵

Marley, Bob (1945–1981)

Jamaican reggae musician and practitioner of the Rastafari faith, in which he is widely considered to be a prophet and an important interpreter of the Bible. ↵

Massacre of the Innocents

See [King Herod the Great](#). ↵

Messiah

Derived from the Hebrew term *mashiach* (one anointed with oil), the savior who will redeem the righteous at the End of Time, judging the living and the dead. That this figure is Jesus Christ is one of the central beliefs in Christianity.

New Testament

The latter third of the Bible that Christians believe in, beginning with the Gospels and ending with the book of Revelation. Understood among them to be the extension and completion of the “Old Testament,” or the [Hebrew Bible](#). ↵

Nicene Creed

Formulated by a gathering of bishops at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, a proclamation on the nature of Jesus Christ and a staple prayer in most forms of Christianity. ↵

Number of the Beast

666, designated as the “number of the beast” (generally understood as an agent, or agents, of Satan) in the book of Revelation (13:18). Thought historically to have referred to the cruel Roman emperor Nero. ↵

Origen (185–254 C.E.)

Influential Egyptian-born Church Father and theologian, widely considered to be one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Christianity. Author of one of the most important Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, *Hexapla*. ↵

Pantokrator

Classical Greek term used in the Bible, especially the book of Revelation, meaning “Almighty,” which Christianity declares Jesus Christ to be. ↵

Passion of the Christ

The short period of the end of Jesus’s life on Earth, including his arrival in Jerusalem, the Last Supper, His cleansing of the Temple, and his arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Some Christian traditions limit the Passion to Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and death. ↵

Paul of Tarsus (5 C.E.–67 C.E.?)

Among the most important apostles of Jesus Christ, a Jew from what is today Turkey. Paul (originally Saul) was a functionary in the Roman empire who persecuted Christians until he had a stunning conversion experience that led him to become the most influential interpreter of the meaning of Jesus Christ. The author of several key biblical

texts and thus an architect of the world's largest religion. Likely martyred for his faith, by beheading, under Nero's rule. ↵

Pentecost

The book of Acts (Chapter 2) describes a scene, after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, when his apostles are gathered in the “upper room” of a house and receive the [Holy Spirit](#) and various gifts ([charisms](#)) there, like the ability to speak in tongues, heal, and discern. Fire descends upon their heads, marking the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Christian Trinity, in the world. ↵

Pontius Pilate

Ruthless and vacillating Roman administrator and governor of Judea from 26–36 C.E. who oversaw the trial and execution of Jesus Christ. Years of birth and death unclear. ↵

Priesthood of All Believers

A teaching by Martin Luther suggesting that all of the laity could serve as priests, and not just those who are ordained. Key doctrine of Protestant Christianity claiming that all believers have direct access to God through Christ and do not require ecclesiastical leaders to mediate. ↵

Protestant Reformation

Launched in the early sixteenth century by several theological reformers with grievances against the Catholic Church hierarchy. Key among them were [Martin Luther](#) and [John Calvin](#). Cause of the greatest schism in Christian history, and the source of divergent forms of Christianity beyond Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox Churches. ↵

Rapture

Belief in Christianity that just before the End of Time, living and dead believers will be assumed into heaven by Jesus Christ prior to the Apocalypse and Judgment Day. This notion is not found in the Bible, though subtly intimated in places, like in First Thessalonians 4:16–17. ↵

Redemption

Salvation. The eternal life promised to Christian believers that is effectuated by their faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah and redeemer, and by the Lord's grace. A moment of eternal consequence when one is cleansed of sin and purified for entry into the Kingdom of God. ↵

Resurrection (Doctrine of the)

Key notion in Christianity that is two-fold: the resurrection of Jesus Christ, after experiencing death and remaining in the tomb for three days, and the universal resurrection of all who have ever died between the beginning of the world and Judgment Day. [↴](#)

Sacrifice

Key notion in Christianity: God's offering of His only son, Jesus Christ, to be crucified toward redeeming humanity from sin. [↴](#)

Scivias Domini

The magnum opus authored by the German mystic and nun [Hildegard of Bingen](#) in the 1140s, and perhaps illustrated by her, too. Offers some of the most stunning reflections on the apocalypse in the history of Christianity. [↴](#)

Second Coming (Doctrine of the)

Key belief in Christianity that Jesus Christ, as Messiah and redeemer, will return to Earth from heaven at the End of Time to judge the living and the dead. [↴](#)

Seven Seals

Part of a vision experienced by John of Patmos and recorded in the book of Revelation, these seals enclose a scroll and rest adjacent to the throne of God; the scroll will gradually be unfurled and its contents revealed to the world as the apocalypse proceeds. [↴](#)

Shema

"Hear" in Hebrew, and the first word and title of one of the most beloved prayers in Judaism. Jesus Christ, a faithful Jew, summed up his teachings by citing it: "Hear, O Israel: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul." First recorded in the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 6:4) and later in the Gospel of Mark (12:28-30). [↴](#)

Smith, Joseph (1805-1844)

American prophet who received the [Book of Mormon](#), first published in 1830, and founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which today is one of the fastest growing forms of Christianity. [↴](#)

Sola Scriptura

A teaching by the German Protestant reformer Martin Luther that the only source of divine revelation is the Bible and not the subsequent teachings of the Catholic Church hierarchy, or Magisterium.

St. Augustine (354-430)

One of the most influential theologians in Christian history, from North Africa, who penned his masterpiece *The City of God* as a treatise on universal history, the End of Time, and the ultimate meaning of our existence and fate. [↴](#)

St. Irenaeus (130–202 C.E.)

Influential early Christian theologian and the bishop of Lyon, France, who was the first thinker to deeply analyze the meaning of the number 666 in the book of Revelation. Taught that the apocalypse would occur upon the fall of the Roman Empire. [↴](#)

St. Michael the Archangel

Heavenly angel and Christian saint who will lead a battalion of angels to fight against the satanic dragon in the cosmic war that will break out during the Apocalypse. He will ultimately be victorious, in Christian belief. [↴](#)

St. Paul

See [Paul of Tarsus](#). [↴](#)

St. Peter (1 C.E.?–64 C.E.?)

One of the most important of the Apostles, one of Jesus Christ's closest followers, and a key figure in the establishment of Christianity, serving as the first bishop of Rome. A saint and martyr of towering proportions in Christianity. [↴](#)

St. Stephen

An early Christian leader who served the nascent Church in Jerusalem; first Christian martyr, having been stoned to death around 34 C.E. [↴](#)

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

Highly important medieval Christian philosopher, theologian, and Italian priest of the Dominican clerical order, who is best known for his authorship of *Summa Theologiae*. First published in the 1270s, it draws widely upon Greek, Islamic, and Jewish thought, as well as earlier Christian theology and biblical interpretation. [↴](#)

Theotokos

Classical Greek term meaning “God Bearer,” a term ascribed in early Church councils, like [Chalcedon](#) (451 C.E.) to the Blessed Virgin Mary, as the Mother of God, of Jesus Christ.

Tribulation

Widely debated in Christian theology, tribulation is generally believed to be a seven-year period during which those of us who are not assumed into heaven during the [rapture](#) can either join the forces of Satan and be marked with the number 666, or

militate on behalf of Jesus, the Church, and the righteous, and thereby secure our own salvation, by the grace of God.

Trinity (Doctrine of the)

Central Christian theological notion that God is Three Persons in One: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rooted in the Gospel of Matthew (28:19) and codified as orthodox doctrine at the [Council of Nicaea](#) (325). ↵

Whore of Babylon

Female agent of sin and deception who appears on Earth during the Apocalypse and is capable of seducing people into being evil, drawing them into the forces of Satan, and turning them away from God's struggle against Satan. Described in the book of Revelation (17–21). ↵

4. Islam: Submission to God and the End of Time

Guide us along the straight way

The way of those on whom You have bestowed your grace

Not of those who earn your anger

Nor of those who go astray

~ Quran 1:5-7

Overview

Each dawn across the globe, hundreds of millions of Muslims pray to God, some called to do so by the sound of a human voice echoing from on high: “**Allah hu akbar**” (“God is Great”). Known by some as “the straight path,” from the Quranic verse (*surah*) cited above, Islam is the world’s fastest growing and second largest religion. It centers upon the belief that God (**Allah**) is absolutely One, that there is no other God but Allah, and that we are created to submit to God, through which we will find peace and the assurance of eternal life in heavenly paradise. Reflective of this, the word *Islam* means “submission,” and one who submits to Allah is a Muslim, a submitter. The root of the word *Islam*, *slm*, is also the root of the most important greeting in the religion, **salaam** (a cognate of the Hebrew word *shalom*), meaning peace. Submission to Allah alone is thus a form of peace, from which the believer derives a sense of security, safety, and soundness in life and the promise of entry into heaven. The word for *faith* in Arabic, *iman*, literally translates as “security,” or “certainty,” with etymological roots in the notion of “ascent.” The righteous will reside eternally in a paradisiacal garden after the End of Time, the arrival of the Messiah (**Mahdi**), the resurrection of the dead, and judgment for one’s deeds, words, and thoughts in life. We explore Islamic eschatology in another section. First let us explore the history of this remarkable religion and consider it from the perspective of two of Ninian Smart’s “dimensions of religion”: doctrinal/philosophical and practice/ritual.

Historical Background

Although Islam is often called the youngest of the world’s great religions, founded by the

Prophet **Muhammad** (pbuh) in the seventh century C.E.,¹ its prophetic lineage is traced back through Jesus Christ (**Isa**, a figure of major importance in Islam) and the great patriarchs and prophets of Judaism, like Moses (Musa) and Abraham (Ibrahim), all the way to Adam (Aadam or Âdam), the very first prophet (**nabi**). Following Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity, Islam is profoundly a religion of revelation and scripture. And although Islam's interpretations of the lives and teachings of its earliest prophets and messengers sometimes significantly differ from those in Judaism and Christianity—Islam emphatically rejects the notion that Jesus is God, for example—the **Quran** calls Jews and Christians “people of the Book,” or people who revere the Torah as the first scriptural source of revelation. The Quran is the final revelation to humanity of the will of God. It surprises many Christians who might be unfamiliar with Islam to learn that, in this final revelation, the Quran, no man is mentioned more often than Jesus Christ and no woman more often than his mother Mary (**Miriam**). Just how, when, and where was this final revelation received?

In 610, a pious Arab in his forties retreated into a cave high on Mt. Hira to meditate and pray. Mystically inclined, he would often wander far, “out of sight of houses and into ravines,” when “every tree and stone he passed would say ‘Peace be upon him, Messenger of God.’”² His name was Muhammad, and God was preparing him to be the Final Messenger and for his experiences on Mt. Hira, which would ultimately result in the reception of the Quran and forever change the world. The angel Gabriel (**Djibril**) visited him in the cave with a text on a scroll. It was a Monday during the holy month of **Ramadan**,³ and the angel implored him to recite what was before him. Though he was illiterate, Muhammad miraculously read the first words of the Quran, “The Recitation.” It was nighttime, and in Islam this first moment of recitation is thus known reverently as the **Night of Power**. Thus began Muhammad's call to prophecy, placing him in the illustrious lineage outlined above, as prophet and messenger.⁴ Over the next two decades, he would return to the cave regularly, receiving more revelations there and anywhere else his life took him. Collectively, these recitations are the word of God as recorded in the Quran. Muhammad's ministry and mission are summed up by Ruqaiyyah Waris Masood:

The Prophet Muhammad was a man specially selected by God to communicate His messages to humanity. For the 23 years of his mission he lived in almost continuous prayer, guided day by day by the presence of the angel Jibril (Gabriel). He was to show God's will through the way he lived his life, with nobility, honesty, generosity, compassion, justice, humility, tenderness, courage and determination. He lived, loved, fought, suffered, knew joy, sorrow and frustration – but after his calling he was forever conscious of divine guidance and the responsibility laid upon him.⁵

It is important to note a distinction concerning revelation in Islam. Somewhat unlike the Christian notion that revelation is an “unveiling”—as reflected in the Greek etymology of the word *apocalypse*—in Islam, revelation is not an unveiling but a “sending down” from Allah, through the angels, prophets, and messengers, to all of humanity.⁶ Another key point in Islam is this: the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad was the final revelation, and there will be no others between his reception of the Quran and the End of Time.

The tribal society into which Muhammad was born, in what is today Saudi Arabia, was one of significant religious diversity. There were many Jews, Christians, and polytheists there, so as a young person Muhammad was close to people of all these faiths. As a child he lived for a time in what is today Syria, where a Christian monk foretold that Muhammad would one day be a prophet of great importance. (Later in life, the prophet would frequently visit a Christian monastery on Mt. Sinai, hence Christianity was a great influence on Muhammad throughout his life, as was Judaism). Among the polytheists of his own tribe, the [Quraysh](#), and others, one of the most important divinities was called al-Lah, god of the sky and the highest deity in the Arab pantheon. These divinities were worshipped at shrines, the most important of which were cube-shaped sanctuaries (kaaba). In a desert with wide-open skies, one can well imagine the supplications made to al-Lah in ancient times—for rain, for shade, for light, for a bright moon on a night journey. The [Kaaba](#) in Muhammad's hometown of Mecca was the largest in the area, dedicated primarily to al-Lah.⁷ What Muhammad would come to understand, during the reception of the Quran, was that this was the one and only God, al-Lah. There is no other. Allah is One, and there are no other gods but Him. The prophet sought to bring this message to the entire world. Muhammad and his followers would succeed in doing precisely that.

This insistent monotheistic realization was at first shared with those closest to the Prophet, especially his wife [Khadijah](#) and [Abu Talib](#), an uncle who had raised him since Muhammad was orphaned as a young child. Abu Talib “was connected with the religious rituals of the Meccan sanctuary,”⁸ though it is unclear whether he ever actually became a Muslim. Khadijah was, however, one of the first in history to do so, and this, along with her closeness to the Prophet, amplified her importance to the emergence of Islam. Part of this was deeply spiritual and part of it material, for “it was her wealth that freed him [Muhammad] from the need to earn a living and enabled him to lead the life of contemplation that was the prelude to his prophethood,” Leila Ahmed explains. Furthermore, “her support and confidence were crucial in his venturing to preach Islam.”⁹

Abu Talib and Khadijah both recognized that Muhammad's mystical experiences were divinely inspired and that the words that he recited should be faithfully written down exactly as they were received from Allah. Some of these experiences occurred in the cave, while others would overcome the Prophet at any time, at any place. There was always someone faithful nearby to serve as a scribe, to record Muhammad's utterances when the Prophet fell into states of trance. In due course, Muhammad was inspired to preach publicly the Recitation, imploring leaders of his tribe, during his first sermon, to heed the following points, which to this day are epicentral to Islam:

“I am asking you to worship the One Almighty God!” he cried. “Give up your worship of idols, and your evil and corrupt practices. If you do this, you will find success; but if you refuse, you will suffer badly for it, and on the Day of Judgement it will be too late for you to save yourselves! O Quraysh, rescue yourselves from the Fire!”¹⁰

The earliest members of the [umma](#) (Muslim community) were deeply swayed by the power of his message and the validity of his prophecy, and soon Muhammad's community of Muslim believers grew to such an extent that they garnered harsh political opposition in Mecca. Many

left the city for other parts of Arabia, and by 620 few of Muhammad's followers remained near him. That year is known as the Year of Sorrows in Islam, not so much for the persecution suffered by his followers as for the deaths of both Abu Talib and Khadijah, the people dearest to the Prophet. Two years later, Muhammad was forced into hiding and fled Mecca for Medina (a city formerly called Yathrib), an event called the [hijrah](#) (lit. "the emigration"). This also marks the first year of the Muslim calendar (622). Medina was home to a large Jewish community, whose leaders signed a covenant with Muhammad's followers to ensure their acceptance in the city, which is one of the three holiest in Islam, along with Mecca and Jerusalem.

The Prophet would soon ascend to a position of political supremacy in Medina.¹¹ He also gained considerable wealth and began plotting to reconquer Mecca and spread the faith that he so ardently believed was the ultimate truth for all of humanity. His influence had spread throughout much of Arabia by 624, making it the time to take up arms to bring Mecca into the Islamic fold. The Meccans, mostly people of Muhammad's own tribe, the Quraysh, had twice attacked Medina while the city was under the Prophet's rule. They were fearful that the growing Muslim power in the region would disrupt their regional trade, but their raids on Medina were far from successful. The military conflict between the Qurayshi Meccans and the Medinan Muslims escalated to its zenith in 624 at the [Battle of Badr](#), which was a decisive victory for Muhammad. It is also the only battle mentioned in the Quran, and it soon enabled the Prophet and his followers to reconquer Mecca. In 629, Muhammad entered the Kaaba in the holiest of Muslim cities and destroyed the many idols of the gods of his polytheistic ancestors.



The Prophet Muhammad conquers Mecca and expels the idols from the Kaaba, establishing Islam as a monotheistic religion. | [The Prophet Muhammad expelling the idols from the Kaaba](#) by an unknown author is in the [public domain](#).

Mecca has been the [axis mundi](#) of Islam ever since, a place to which Muslims from all corners of the earth make pilgrimages and that they face while praying five times a day, from anywhere and everywhere in the world, however distant from the Kaaba. Within three years, per Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood:

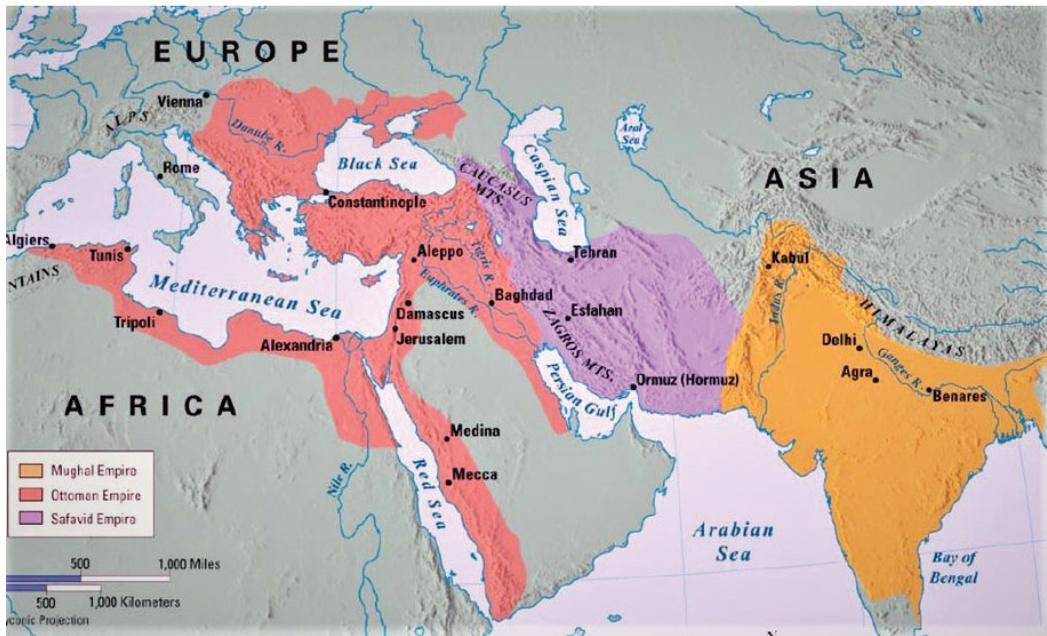
the Prophet led some 140,000 pilgrims to Makkah, during which all the Islamic rules for Hajj followed by Muslims to this day were revealed to him. Pagans were now forbidden access to the Ka'bah, and Makkah became a city dedicated to God alone. After a very moving sermon of farewell, in which he told them of his premonition that he would never be among them again, the Prophet returned to Madinah, and en route was visited by the angel for the last time. The Qur'an was complete.¹²

The Prophet Muhammad died shortly thereafter in Medina.

The subsequent remarkable spread of Islam is far too complex for us to detail here, though several contributing factors should be noted: 1) commerce and the mobility of people and

goods along trade routes, like the [Silk Road](#); 2) Islamic military conquests; and 3) the utter power and accessibility of the principal teachings of Islam. On these factors and the “spread of Islam at a breathless pace since the time of Muhammad,” Stelios Michalopoulos and colleagues explain that “the mode of expansion has differed across time and space ranging from conquests, to trade, to proselytization and migrations.” Initially, “Islam expanded mainly through conquests within a certain radius around Mecca,” which “eventually resulted in Muslim-majority populations occupying large swaths of land,” including “the entire Arab World in the Middle East and North Africa, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and slightly further away in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.” And, in due course, Islam would spread into Asia along the Silk Road and into North Africa by way of trade routes along the Red Sea.¹³

The expansion of Islam was so prodigious that, over time, it would serve as the bedrock and inspiration for some of the greatest empires and dynasties ([caliphates](#), led by caliphs, or rulers) that the world has ever known, along with some of human history’s most breathtaking art, architecture, science, places of worship, and cities. Among the most important of these were the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750), the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), and the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922). It would not take long for the religion to reach the Atlantic Seaboard in North Africa, which it did during the Abbasid Caliphate (which also ruled most of Iberia for some 700 years). Then it captivated the masses in parts of Asia (especially Indonesia), home to roughly 70 percent of the world’s Muslim population today.



[Prodigious expanse of three early Muslim empires](#) by [Pinupbettu](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

Such a remarkable, even stunning, spread across vast and diverse geographies, topologies,

and indigenous religious cultures has resulted in the diversification of Islamic practices and episodes of [inculturation](#), [religious translation](#), [schism](#), and [syncretism](#). These processes had already begun in Islam during the prophet's lifetime, as the religion had maintained, from the very beginning, elements of earlier Arab religious notions. Take, for instance, the [jinn](#), supernatural beings who are either allied with God or with [Shaytan](#) (Satan). They are also invisible and take many forms, and they "are said to inhabit caves, deserted places, graveyards and darkness," while they also "marry, produce children, eat, drink and die but unlike human beings have the power to take on different shapes and are capable of moving heavy objects almost instantly from one place to another."¹⁴

The early *umma* relied upon the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad to guide them as the religion moved forward and spread—a tradition referred to as the [sunnah](#)—but interpretive disputes among them soon emerged after the Prophet's death.¹⁵ The most significant of these disputes concerned the succession of leadership and resulted in the only major schism in Islamic history. Thus, most of the world's nearly two billion Muslims today are [Sunni](#), and some 15 percent are [Shi'a](#), which now comprise a majority of Muslims in Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan. Sunni and Shi'a differ on their interpretations of the sunnah, or the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and in their understanding of the universal Muslim belief that Allah is a just God.¹⁶

That there has been only one such great schism in the history of Islam should not suggest that the religion is largely centralized or homogeneous. On the contrary, Islam is a remarkably diverse religion and has been interpreted and practiced in myriad ways, though the core beliefs and practices, which we discuss in the next section, are almost universal throughout the Islamic world. One of the most popular inflections, or forms, of Islam is known as [Sufism](#), a mystically oriented, introspective, ecstatic tradition that consists of a wide range of [tariqa](#) (lit. path), or brotherhoods, whose members generally live by the teachings of a certain sheik (teacher). A Muslim who practices Sufism is known as a Sufi (devotee). Many of them identify the Prophet Muhammad as the first Sufi. In all its forms, this tradition is especially prominent throughout Muslim Africa, South Asia, and Turkey and is pervasive among Muslims in Europe.¹⁷

Other Islamic movements deserve attention, such as Ahmadiyya and the Nation of Islam,¹⁸ but spatial concerns compel us to move on to a consideration of two of Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion, as applied to Islam: the doctrinal/philosophical and the practical/ritual.

Dimensions of Islam

Doctrinal/Philosophical

The quintessential doctrinal or theological tenet and belief in Islam is contained in a creed

that is said by all Muslims each day. It is called the [shahādah](#) (“bearing witness to faith”): “I bear witness that there is no Lord but Allah; I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” This declaration of faith “is oft-repeated in al-Qur’ān and al-Hadīth as the basic theme of Islam,” Muhammad Abdul Haq explains. “It was formulated in its present form during the lifetime of the Prophet and the historical evidence of this fact is the daily call to prayer ([adhān](#)).”¹⁹ We discuss *adhān* in the following section, but for now let us add that the shahādah is usually also the first thing that a baby born into Islam hears and it is the last thing that a Muslim hears or utters while dying. Across the diversity that Islam has taken on as it has spread throughout the world and been embraced in “over 2300 language or ethnic subgroups,” this creed is the ultimate unifier, and even Muslims who do not speak Arabic, some 80 percent today, generally recite the shahādah in the language of the last Prophet.²⁰



Muslims at prayer in Cairo, circa 1865. Painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme. | [Prayer in Cairo 1865](#) by [Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany](#) is in the [public domain](#).

Two central ideas in Islam comprise the shahādah: 1) the absolute oneness of Allah, [tawhīd](#); and 2) that Muhammad is the messenger ([rasul](#)) of Allah. Concerning the former, Haq states that the Muslim proclamation of the oneness of Allah makes the shahādah itself part of Allah’s very oneness: “The Shahādah as a formulation of Tawhīd means that I bear witness to the unity of Allāh because I see His signs and I feel His presence before and around me.” Allah is thus called in the Quran *shahīd*, the first to bear witness to His own absolute oneness. Furthermore—underscoring the centrality of prophethood/messengerhood in Islam from its

very inception—because “the Prophet’s knowledge of Shahādah is the most perfect of all, he is also called ‘Shahīd in al-Qur’ān’ as the most perfect witness.”²¹

This is not to suggest that the Prophet Muhammad is understood in Islam to be divine. On the contrary, to attribute divinity to Muhammad or to any other human being is the gravest of transgressions, **shirk**. *Shirk* literally means “association,” for “the Qur’an specifies shirk or ‘associating’ partners to God as the ultimate doctrinal sin (Q 4:48),” as Josef Linnhoff points out. “The Qur’an stresses that *shirk* is the one sin that All-Merciful God does not forgive.”²²

More generally, all things “forbidden” in Islam are called **haram**, as opposed to all that is “legal,” or **halal**. These notions are “very simple and clear,” Yusuf Al-Qaradawi explains:

Part of the great trust which Allah offered to the heavens, the earth and the mountains, which they declined but which man accepted. This trust requires man to carry out the duties placed on him by Allah as His viceregent on earth and to assume accountability concerning them. This responsibility is the basis on which the human will be judged by Allah and given his reward or punishment.²³

Though these matters have been extensively debated in Islam’s long and rich history of legal scholarship (**tafsir**), the baseline of knowledge about haram is the Quran, which “forbids people to eat pork, carrion, blood, and food offered to other gods (Q 2:173). With respect to family law, it was forbidden to marry members of the immediate family or their spouses (Q 4:22–24).” Furthermore, “adultery, theft, highway robbery, apostasy, idolatry, consumption of alcohol, and murder” are haram, as are “usury, gambling, and making money related to illicit activities and substances.”²⁴ As for *tafsir*, the origins of the term are unclear and it appears only once in the Quran, but Islam highly values human reason, while “Tafsir claims to ‘clarify’ the divine word, which serves to make the text ‘speak’ to current social, moral, legal, doctrinal, and political conditions.”²⁵ It is closely related to the Islamic tradition of jurisprudence, or **fiqh** (“deep understanding”), a learned tradition that is highly esteemed in the religion.

Like Judaism, which it embraces as prophetic and as a fundamental part of its very self, Islam is a religion of laws. Some of the most cherished Muslim laws are ensconced in the Quran, while others derive from a later body of scripture, **Hadith** (lit.: “speech”; containing the authoritative teachings and doings of Muhammad and his companions). Hadith is the result of an almost mesmerizing tradition of legal and philosophical debate and interpretation.²⁶ Law in Islam is called **sharia**, and “in principle it covers every possible human contingency, social and individual, from birth until death.”²⁷ The word *sharia* literally means “the way,” and Islamic jurisprudence is centered upon the Quran and the sunnah, or the life and teachings of the Messenger Muhammad, as well as the recording thereof in the Hadith, “all of which are considered normative and binding sources of theological, legal and other Islamic beliefs.”²⁸



The Holy Quran, an early version, circa seventh century. | [The Holy Quran](#) by an unknown author is in the [public domain](#).

Islamic beliefs are many, of course, yet the six most principal are these:

1. Belief in Allah
2. Belief in angels
3. Belief in divine books
4. Belief in the prophets
5. Belief in divine judgment
6. Belief in divine decree

Another important belief is **jihad**, or “struggle,” an idea that has been widely misunderstood and maligned in the West and rarely, but sometimes tragically, by Muslims themselves. The attacks of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center in New York were widely interpreted as part of a jihad against America, a holy war. Missing in such interpretations are three key facts, however: 1) that the Quran (4:29) prohibits murder and suicide, so the suicide pilots who orchestrated the attacks, though Muslims, were acting in a decidedly un-Islamic fashion that day; 2) that only a caliph can launch a jihad in the sense of holy war, and there has not been a

caliph on Earth since the demise of the Ottoman Empire; and 3) that the more universal sense of the term *jihād* among Muslims connotes an inner struggle against sin, against anything and everything that might lead one astray from the straight path of submission to Allah, the one and merciful God. Across history, of course, many Muslims have been called to heroic acts on life's battlefields when Islam is threatened, but all Muslims are called to the internal *jihād*, "the battlefield of spiritual struggle."²⁹

Let us now briefly consider the forms of practice in Islam that are based on these central beliefs. Then we shall proceed to a careful consideration of Islamic eschatology, how Muslim theology conceptualizes the end of the world as we know it, Judgment Day, and the afterlife. We will see that in this realm Islam has more in common with the other religions so far considered in this book, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity, than it holds in contrast. One key distinction is that Jesus Christ, Isa, though keeping a place of supreme importance in Islam and playing a key role on Judgment Day, is not God incarnate. Only Allah is divine in Islam, and we are all called to submit to Allah alone. To do so is to be a Muslim.

Practical/Ritual

The beliefs and ideas outlined above merely scratch the surface of Islamic philosophy and theology, but it is a foundation upon which to begin exploring the key ritual practices in Islam. As in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity, prayer—whether communal or individual—is the ultimate form of devotional practice for Muslims. Islamic prayer takes multiple forms, one of the most cherished of which is **dhikr** ("remembrance," as in remembrance of Allah). As Feryal Salem explains, *dhikr* is bequeathed in the Quran by Allah as a form of worship that has "primacy," as in surah 21:50: "And this [Qur'an] is a blessed reminder which We have sent down. Furthermore, the Quran itself, and the recitation thereof, is thus *dhikr*."

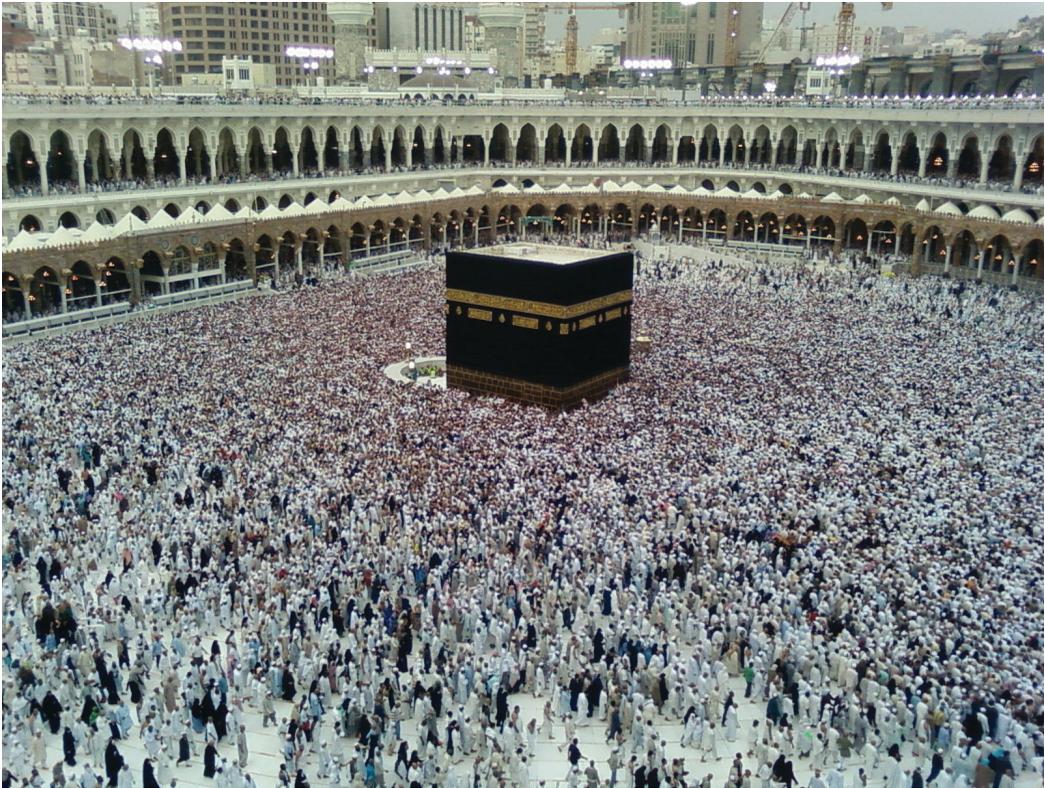
The vital importance of prayer for Muslims is reflected in the second of the Five Pillars of Islam, which encapsulate the heart of Islamic devotional practice and are the chief guideposts for submitting to Allah:

1. *Shahādah* (also known as *kalma*): a decree or proclamation uttered by Muslims every day and considered to be the cornerstone of the faith. (Lit.: "bearing witness to faith"): "I bear witness that there is no Lord but Allah; I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." Per Mehreen Chida-Razvi, "By reciting this on a daily basis, Muslims are continuously reminded of the monotheistic nature of Islam and repeatedly confirm their association with and commitment to the Muslim community."³⁰
2. *Salat*: ritual prayer, five times a day for faithful Muslims: at dawn, at sunrise, at noon, at dusk, and at sunset. "When praying, it is required that one faces *qibla*, which is toward the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca. An act of ritual cleansing must take place

before each prayer,” called *wudu*.³¹ In majoritarian Muslim countries, the *adhān* is ubiquitous, often called by *muezzin* from atop the minarets of mosques (or **masjid**) from Morocco to Mecca to Indonesia, etc.

3. **Zakat**: almsgiving. Islam promotes equality, social justice, and compassion, so all Muslims are called to be charitable, provide for the poor, and thereby embody the mercy of Allah. As recorded in the Hadith, when the Prophet Muhammad was asked what the “best Islam” is, he answered, “to feed the hungry and to spread peace among people you know and those you don’t know.”³²
4. **Sawm**: Fasting from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan, which also requires Muslims to refrain from drinking and sexual activity, avoid “evil thoughts,” and “act as humanely as possible.”³³
5. **Hajj** – At least once in life, Muslims are called to make pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca, normally over the course of several days during the last month of the Muslim calendar. Reflective of Allah’s mercy, though, people too poor or infirm to ever make the hajj are exempt from this ritual requirement. One of the highlights of the pilgrimage is to circumambulate the Kaaba seven times, a ritual called *tawaf*.

Just as Mecca is the destination of the hajj, it is also the geographic and spiritual orientation of Islam. The importance of this cannot be overstated and has no parallel in any other major religion in the world. Muslims pray five times daily facing Mecca because it is home to the Kaaba, a practice dating to the very origins of the religion. In the Messenger Muhammad’s time, “the real attraction of the kaaba to worshippers was a black stone of unfathomable age incased in its walls, whose cult the Prophet felt constrained to adopt into the ritual of Islam.”³⁴ Islam teaches that this stone was sent to Earth by Allah to mark the spot where humans should erect the first altar for worship, making this the axis mundi, the center of the world. In Eliade’s words, it is “a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world. For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation.”³⁵



The Kaaba in Mecca, the holiest place on earth for Muslims, which they face while at prayer five times a day, and to which they make pilgrimage at least once in their lifetimes. It is a large black shrine in the shape of a cube. | [The Kaaba Today](#) by [Bluemangoa2z](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 2.5 License](#).

Every day a quarter of the earth's population wakes up and prays facing this axis mundi, prostrate on a prayer rug (*sajjāda*), positioned toward the qibla (direction of the Kaaba). In doing so, one's head touches the rug at times, hands down, and at times kneeling, all in devotional supplication to Allah. Such prayer can be performed almost anywhere. Congregational prayers at the mosque (or *masjid*) take place on Fridays, a communal ritual for Muslims throughout the world known as [AL-Jumah](#), which also means Friday in Arabic. Friday is designated as sacred in the Quran, in surah 62. And each mosque ideally faces Mecca in such a way that those at prayer face the Kaaba, oriented by the central symbol of the *masjid*, the [mihrab](#), a niche in the wall toward which one prays.

The Kaaba is also central to Islamic ethics. Dietary laws in Islam are oriented geographically: *halal* recommends that an animal slaughtered for food should be facing Mecca when killed, while Allah's name is uttered and the most painless techniques are employed.³⁶ But *halal* is comprehensive, not just concerned with food, as Yunez Ramadan Al-Teinaz explains:

To the non-Muslim, it is a word that is often exclusively associated with the foods that Muslims are allowed to eat, but in reality it is a term that describes everything that it is

permissible for a Muslim to do, both in deed and thought. Halal impacts every aspect of a Muslim's life, from the clothes that can be worn to attitudes towards work, from relations between men and women to the treatment of children, from the way business is carried out to the treatment of a fellow Muslim, the principal [sic] of halal must be applied.³⁷

One could thus say that Islam is a profoundly ethical religion, and rituals and dictates suffuse the life of the Muslim, from when and how one prays, to what one wears, to what one eats. On that note, pork and shellfish are strictly forbidden in Islam, as are intoxicants, all being considered haram. Furthermore, Allah alone establishes what constitutes halal and what constitutes haram, and the whole point is that through worship and mindful adherence to this distinction, “human beings may seek nearness to Him.”³⁸ To be a Muslim is to be one who submits to Allah and whose every living day is about prayer and living in accordance with halal and in avoidance of haram.

Islamic Eschatology

There are no coffins in Islam. Nor is there any belief in original sin, for humans are not sinful by nature, but we are prone to forgetfulness. For this reason, Allah sent the Quran as a “reminder” (dhikr), “which the Quran calls itself.”³⁹ One dies and is cleansed and covered in a white shroud for burial in a grave with enough space to sit up and speak with two angels. And then to await Judgment Day, in a sleeplike state. This is called **barzakh**, the period between death and resurrection. It is Arabic for “separation,” as in the distance between the world of the living and the dead and the world of God and pure spirit.⁴⁰ Presently the Prophet Muhammad is in this state (as are all prophets and messengers). Hence, Muslims say “Peace be upon him” whenever uttering the final prophet’s name. All humans who have died and who will die before the End of Time will be in *barzakh* for a time determined by and known only to Allah, as none of us is divine and we are all in this together, this thing called life. And in death. And in the End. Muslims are buried quickly. Cremation is not an option because of the pending Day of Judgment. Usually only men attend the actual burial, and they toss dirt upon the deceased before the grave is closed. It is always open to angels though.

The angel of death who takes one from this life is named **Azrael** (or ‘Izrai’l, in Arabic). On the first evening of our interment, we are visited by two other angels, whose names are **Munkar** and **Nakir**.⁴¹ They ask us about our faith in God and our awareness of prophecy and scripture and are otherwise “responsible for maintaining the faithfulness or impiety of the dead in the first night of his or her death.”⁴² Our answers to the angels’ questions in the grave have serious consequences. Correct answers about one’s submission to Allah, reverence for the Quran, and the prophecies of the Prophet Muhammad result in a comfortable sleep until the End of Time in a spacious grave, while incorrect answers result in the shrinking of space in one’s grave and its infestation with dreadful creatures like snakes and spiders.

Islamic eschatology is, of course, rooted in the Quran, though also quite influenced by

earlier Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian teachings. Fundamentally, it is “clearly apocalyptic in form and content,” as Todd Lawson explains, “focusing on ultimate judgment of the wicked and the good, another world, and an end to time, and so on.”⁴³ It thus speaks warningly of “the Hour” (*al-sā'a*), “or the day on which all good will be distinguished from all evil.”⁴⁴ This will be catastrophically dramatic, but we have all been forewarned through prophecy across the ages to be prepared, and the Quran details a number of signs that portend the Hour and the resurrection of the dead (*al-qiya*):

the splitting of the moon (Q 54:1), a massive earthquake accompanied by mass terror (Q 22:1–2), disbelievers surrounded by clouds of fire (Q 39:16), mountains crushed and scattered “like carded wool” (Q 20:105)... the earth illuminated by divine light (Q 39:69), the presence of all previous prophets (Q 39:69), the broadcasting of the deeds of all humankind (Q 39:69), universal judgment and dispensing of justice (Q 39:69), believers’ entrance into paradise, and polytheists abandonment by their gods (Q 30:12–16).⁴⁵

The Hour is also referred to in the Quran as “the Appointed time,” a term that appears in the text nearly fifty times and foretells that “heavens and earth that humans experienced will be totally altered” (14:48). This is inevitable, its time known only to Allah, and it will occur suddenly.

The Hour, with natural catastrophes and social upheaval having signaled its arrival, is soon followed by equally cataclysmic cosmic struggles between good and evil at the End of Time, between the Antichrist (*al-Masih ad-Dajjal*) and the *Mahdi*, who in most Islamic theological schools is believed to be Isa. Andrew Waskey describes this period of tribulation:

The arrival of the Anti-Christ will bring a time of spiritual confusion, and many will be led astray. The Anti-Christ will promise to bring new light to the world but instead represents the incarnation of true unbelief. The reign of the Anti-Christ will be a time of self-centeredness in which most people will focus on themselves rather than on spiritual things. The Anti-Christ will also perform “miracles,” which in fact are actually magical illusions: sin becomes virtue and great social upheaval occurs. At this time, Jesus will suddenly appear, and the doors to both paradise and hell will be opened.⁴⁶

Allah’s light is also sent upon the world to reveal the truth about all reality. For those who have been unrighteous or evil in life, this light will be painful to the eyes, though it will be of comfort to the righteous and those who submitted during their lives to Allah.

As is predestined by Allah, Isa ultimately will defeat the Antichrist, and the angel *Israfil* will then descend to Earth to sound the final trumpet from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, signaling to all that resurrection and judgment are at hand. The dead leave their graves, emerging from that state of existence between death and resurrection (*barzakh*), and find themselves naked and facing Allah, their Creator. Resurrection day, *al-qiya*, is also Judgment Day (*Yawm al-Hisab*). On this day, the living and the resurrected are brought before Allah to account for their actions in life. These are recorded on a scroll. Though Isa and Muhammad are present to assist in the judging of the living and the dead, the Quran indicates that there will be no intercession (*shafā'a*) by Jesus or any other prophets or angels

on Judgment Day. However, “Islam quickly expanded this to a more general belief in the possibility of intercession, particularly through the Prophet Muḥammad.”⁴⁷

There is no need for anyone to read their scroll, for, as the Quran states (100:11), “Allah, the one God, sees into the inner being of each person and at the moment of truth will reveal each person, inside and out.” Furthermore, “the day of judgment is an ontological reversal,” Michael Sells explains. “What seems secure and lasting – the skies, the seas, the stars, the reality of death as contained in graves – is torn away. What seemed inconsequential . . . is revealed as enduring and real.”⁴⁸ At the End of Time, even the moon splits in two, but our deeds, thoughts, and words remain, and it is upon these that we will be judged for all eternity. According to the Quran (3:30), one who receives this scroll of deeds in one’s right hand is bound for paradise, while one who receives it in the left hand is bound for the flames of hell.

The Quran (22:5–7) is, furthermore, adamant about the resurrection of the dead and the Hour:

O you people: If you are in doubt concerning the resurrection, know that We created you from dust, then from a sperm-drop, then from a blood-clot, then from an embryo partly formed and partly unformed, in order to make clear to you. We establish in the wombs whatever We wish for an appointed time, then We bring you out as an infant, then [sustain you] until you reach maturity. And among you are those who die and those who return to the infirmity of old age so that, after having been knowledgeable, they now have little understanding. You saw the earth lifeless, and then We poured down upon it water and it quivers and grows and sprouts forth all kinds of beautiful pairs. That is because God is the ultimately real [*al-ḥaqq*]. He it is Who gives life to what is dead; He it is Who has power over all things. Truly the Hour is coming—there is no doubt of it—when God will resurrect those who are in the graves.

For Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazdak Haddad, this means that “all of human history, then, moves from the creation to the eschaton. Preceding the final judgment will come signs (both cosmic and moral) signaling the arrival of the Hour as well as the specific events of the resurrection and assessment.”⁴⁹

Heaven (*jannah*) is depicted in the Quran as a lush green garden teeming with fruit, while hell (*jahannam*) is depicted as a blazing abyss. The former is for the righteous, of course, while the latter is for the unrighteous, and both have many levels and are, for the most part, eternal, though some Muslim scholars believe that, by Allah’s mercy, certain souls in *jahannam* might eventually be saved. In Islamic theology, as in the eschatological traditions of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity, however, heaven and hell are sometimes interpreted as “states, not localities,” as Muhammad Iqbal explains. “The descriptions in the Qur’ān are visual representations of an inner fact, i.e., character. Hell, in the words of the Qur’ān, is ‘God’s kindled fire which mounts above the hearts—the painful realization of one’s failure as a man. Heaven is the joy of triumph over the forces of disintegration.”⁵⁰

And what is heaven like? It contains hundreds of levels and seven skies, and is referred to as a garden in the Quran, a place full of shade and fruit trees and water in many forms. As Muhammad Abdul Haleem explains: “The essential component of paradise is flowing water.

This is logical since God says, 'We made every living thing from water' (Q 21:23). "No garden can exist without water." The Quran describes springs and fountains as "flowing" and "gushing," and even beautifully indicates that "the righteous cause the springs to gush. Such verbs indicate life, energy, and plenty."⁵¹ Adds Nerina Rustomji, "The Garden is not just lush flora and abundant water, but also a multitiered world filled with tents, pavilions, and market places."⁵²

The Quran (47:15) also speaks of rivers: "rivers of water, forever pure, rivers of milk forever fresh, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey clarified and pure." Hell, meanwhile, is quite the opposite, a place of searing heat, as Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson remind us:

But there is also hell, "a wretched destination" (e.g., Q 8:16), and place of dire recompense – "Is there not ample punishment for the arrogant in Hell?" (e.g., Q 39:60), for "the disbelievers" (Q 39:32), and "the wicked" (Q 82:14), who will be roasting therein and branded with hellfire "on their foreheads, sides and backs they will be told, "This is what you hoarded up for yourselves! Now feel the pain of what you hoarded!" (Q 9:35).⁵³

This is all to be deeply feared by the living, and fear (*khawf*) is an important emotion and "pivotal concept in Islam," one that has "a wide range of meanings from slight fear to horror, from caution to dread, or to a form of religiosity based on Allah."⁵⁴

The attentive reader who recalls the first chapter surely sees many Zoroastrian influences on Islamic eschatology. One of the most striking is the notion that upon being judged one must cross a bridge to arrive at one's ultimate destination, heaven or hell. In Zoroastrianism this bridge is called chinvat; in Islam, it is called *sirât al-jahim*, "a bridge that reaches from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem across the great gulf of Jahannum to paradise."⁵⁵ In each instance, the bridge is as thin as a hair and as sharp as a razor. The unrighteous fall off it into the flames of hell, while the righteous successfully traverse to arrive in paradise. A key difference, however, is that in Islam the righteous are led across the bridge *al-Sirât* by the Prophet Muhammad, and in Zoroastrianism there is no fire in hell, only intense heat. Interestingly, the term *sirât al-jahim* does not appear in the Quran, which speaks more generally of "the way" or "the path" (*sirât*), but reflections on *sirât al-jahim* are legion in the Hadith.

As should be evident by now, the Quran is a deeply apocalyptic text, but more extensive Islamic eschatological teachings are found in the Hadith, like commentaries about the bridge. Also, the Hadith includes this important reflection from the Prophet Muhammad: "Remember often the destroyer of pleasure: death." Here is an insightful reflection on Hadith eschatology from Lawson:

The hadith literature also portrays an urgent expectation of an end to history that must be faced by the community. A dramatic example of this is the 'booth like the booth of Moses' hadith, which features the Prophet instructing two of the faithful not to bother making overly sturdy mosques of brick and wood but rather counseling them to use more convenient thatch structures because the apocalypse (*al-amr*) was due to happen at any moment.⁵⁶

In addition, the Hadith provides us with one of the most remarkable glimpses of heaven in the history of religions. Called the “night journey” (*mi‘rāj isrā*) of the Prophet Muhammad, this experience brought him from Mecca to Jerusalem and into all the heavens, accompanied in the latter by the Angel Djibril, where he spoke with previous messengers like Jesus and Moses and dined with Allah at the celestial summit. Traditionally, the night journey is understood in Islam to have taken place before the *hijrah*, and, though described in some detail in the Hadith, it is mentioned only briefly in the Quran (17:1):

Glory to Allah, Who took His Servant for a Journey at night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did bless, – in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who bears and sees (all things).

In terms of eschatology—over and above the affirmation, in this remarkable mystical experience, that there are seven levels of heaven and that messengers speak with Allah—an important point is the Prophet’s vision “of evil being enclosed in Hell, and his mission to announce to Muslims that they were to pray five times a day.”⁵⁷ That was mercifully reduced from the fifty that Allah had originally ordained, a reflection of divine mercy. The importance of the Prophet’s journey cannot be overstated, not only for its eschatology but for Islam as a whole, as put poetically and knowledgably by Annemarie Schimmel: “Beginning with Adam, the Prophet is now introduced by all the messengers of God into the mysteries of God’s beauty and majesty, for every prophet experiences the Divine Essence in a different way; Muhammad alone is granted knowledge of it in its fullness.”⁵⁸

The Prophet Muhammad also had a powerful vision of hell, which is as elemental as his night journey to “one of the central motifs of the Islamic narrative,” the afterworld.⁵⁹ The Hadith contains a discussion of his having fallen into prayer upon witnessing a solar eclipse, hence utterances coming to be known in Islam as the “eclipse prayer.” Though first reaching for the grapes of heaven, the prophet was drawn to a vivid glimpse of the fire of hell and those who would dwell there eternally, a vision in which the sinners mentioned are mostly women, including one Jew thus punished “because of her cruelty in starving a cat,” as Nerina Rustomji explains, along with rejecters of the faith and “thieves and the miserly.”⁶⁰ As such, Muhammad’s “vision during the eclipse prayer not only provided an opportunity to send messages of reform by focusing upon sinners, but it also verified the existence of the afterworld that would be experienced at the end of time.”⁶¹

Islamic eschatology is complex and far more detailed than an introductory summary like this could possibly reflect. Because the Quran is a deeply apocalyptic text, furthermore, thousands of commentaries have been written on this matter. It is the perplexing subject of a wide range of interpretations and debate in Islam. So, in order to get some sense of this, we will discuss eschatological commentaries by two giants in Islamic intellectual history: [Al-Ghazali](#) (1058–1111) and Abu Abdullah [Al-Qurtubi](#) (1214–1273).⁶²

Interpreters of Islamic Eschatology

Al-Ghazali (1058–1111)

Born in 1058 in Tūs (Mashhad), a Holy City that was then part of the Abbasid Empire in the northeast of what is today Iran, Al-Ghazali was a sage and a prolific writer who left deeply philosophical reflections on a range of topics, from God and Sufism to sex and knowledge.⁶³ He had enjoyed “an education as good as any to be had in the Islamic world” at the time.⁶⁴ This philosopher, jurist, mystic, and theologian so impressed authorities with his scholarship that he landed a professorship in Baghdad, where he attracted hundreds of students. Al-Ghazali is especially famous for his work on the relationship between faith and reason, for his wedding of philosophy and theology, and for his masterwork, [The Revival of the Religious Sciences](#), which “made Sufism (Islamic mysticism) an acceptable part of orthodox Islam.”⁶⁵

He was not always a Sufi, however, as early in his career Al-Ghazali’s thought was oriented by rationalism and a critical engagement of Greek philosophy.⁶⁶ But, following “a spiritual crisis,” he turned to Sufism and embarked on an ascetic path to become closer to Allah. This entailed taking up a life of poverty and, as “(a) truly searching religious spirit,”⁶⁷ quite a bit of wandering, through Damascus and Jerusalem, to Mecca. He “first rose to prominence as a teacher of [kalam](#), an Aristotelian approach to metaphysical and theological knowledge,”⁶⁸ but eventually Al-Ghazali became consumed by Sufism and would return to Tūs, attracting disciples and founding an austere, contemplative community there, eventually also returning to more formal methods of lecturing, dying shortly thereafter, in 1111.



Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Islam. Cover image of *The Confessions of Al-Ghazali*, London, 1909, artist unknown. | [Al-Ghazali](#) by an unknown author is in the [public domain](#).

It was a remarkable life of a mystic genius whose influence on Islam is surpassed by virtually no other thinker since the Prophet Muhammad. Few other sages, in any religious tradition, have so ably wed reason with faith, placing him on a plane in the history of “Western” religions with the likes of Augustine, Aquinas, and Maimonides. Some of his writings had considerable influence in contemporary European intellectual circles, and rightly so. In fact, as Montgomery Watt observes, Al-Ghazali’s book [The Aims of the Philosophers](#), published in 1094, “was one of the first to be translated from Arabic to Latin.”⁶⁹ Given the range of his teaching and writing, as well as his intellectual and spiritual meanderings, “Al-Ghazali has puzzled many a modern writer,” Fazlur Rahman explains. “Some have wondered whether he

was essentially a mystic or a theologian, although he is described as both.⁷⁰ Rahman is not puzzled, however, claiming that ultimately Al-Ghazali “was in pursuit of . . . religious morality,” or “of moral purification and the war against the vice that degraded man.”⁷¹

Such vice and degradation have serious eschatological and eternal ramifications in Islam. Thus, it is not surprising that Al-Ghazali would pen one of the most extensive commentaries on these matters in the history of Islam. The last book of his forty-volume masterpiece, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, is dedicated entirely to death, dying, the resurrection, final judgment, and the hereafter. In this long treatise, titled [The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife](#), Al-Ghazali writes chronologically across fourteen sections, listed here to more fully appreciate the complexity of Islamic eschatology:

The Trumpet-Blast, Which Signals the Day of Arising [i.e., Judgment Day]

The Land and People of the Concourse

The Perspiration of the Concourse

The Length of the Day of Arising

The Day of Arising, and Its Calamities and Names

The Inquisition of Sins

The Scales

The Adversaries, and the Restoration of Wrongs

The Traverse

The Intercession

The Pool

The Inferno, Its Terrors, Torments, Snakes and Scorpions

Heaven and the Varieties of Its Bliss

The Number of Heavens, and their Gates, Chambers, Walls, Rivers and Trees

The Raiment of Heaven’s People, Their Furnishings and Divans

Their Food

The Large-Eyed Houris and the Pages

The Vision of God’s Countenance (Exalted is He!)

A Chapter on the Wide Compass of God’s Mercy (Exalted is He!)

And Thus Shall Be Concluded the Book, If God (Exalted Is He!) So Wills⁷²

Al-Ghazali's writing on these matters is crisp, detailed, and gripping. Or, per Tim Winter, one of Al-Ghazali's translators into English, the text "was written in a particularly powerful hortatory spirit, in a lucid and compelling Arabic that throughout appeals to the emotions of the God-conscious believer who 'hopes for God's mercy and fears his own sin.'"⁷³ Fear is evoked in the opening paragraph, in fact, where Al-Ghazali writes of "the agonies of death and how perilous is his condition as he fearfully awaits his fate, as he endures the grave's darkness and worms, and suffers the Questioning of Munkar and Nakir, should he have incurred God's wrath."⁷⁴ He continues, summing everything up quite powerfully:

More fearsome than all of this, however, are the perils which shall confront him subsequently: the Trumpet-Blast, the Resurrection on the Day of Arising, the Presentation before the Almighty, the Inquisition regarding matters both important and minor, the Erection of the Scales in order that men's destinies might be known, and then the passage over the Traverse despite the fineness and sharpness of its edge. These things shall be followed by the awaiting of the Summons to final judgement, and either bliss or misery.⁷⁵

In all of this, Al-Ghazali draws upon his erudite knowledge of the Quran, which he had long committed to memory, and of the voluminous Hadith literature, which he frequently cites. The topics touched upon in this text are too numerous for us to summarize here, but let us consider just a few details before moving on to the eschatological work of Al-Qurtubi. What, for instance, is "the Concourse" and why is an entire section of this text devoted to "perspiration"? *Concourse* does not refer to a place, per se, but the interaction between the souls of the living and those of the dead as each awaits the Day of Arising. As Jane Smith explains, it is akin to sleep, though sleep is much more than a metaphor for death in Islam. It is "a time when the living and the dead share a common circumstance, a time when the departed may communicate to the living information otherwise inaccessible to them as well as make their own wishes known."⁷⁶ It is quite an expansive notion in Islam, for the living receive such communications from the dead while the former are sleeping. For Al-Ghazali, it is also the moment when the dead and the living cluster to await resurrection and judgment.

It is in the latter vein that Al-Ghazali writes of the Concourse as follows:

After the Resurrection and the Arising, they shall be driven barefoot, naked and uncircumcised to the Land of the Concourse, which is white and perfectly smooth. . . . Bring to mind, then, an image of yourself, as you stand naked, uncovered, outcast and ashamed, bewildered and dazed, awaiting the Judgment which will decide your rapture or misery. Make much of this state, for it shall be momentous.⁷⁷

One perspires on the concourse out of terror, and with reason, for *everything* is at stake. As the living and the resurrected dead gather to await judgment under a blazing sun, they perspire, creating a veritable sea of sweat and tears that is a measure of one's fate:

The sun's burning and the heat of their breath conjoin with the conflagration produced in their hearts by the flames of shame and fear, and perspiration pours forth from the

root of every hair until it flows upon the plain of the Arising and rises over their bodies in proportion to their favor with God. It reaches to the knees of some, to the loins of others, and others still, while some well-nigh vanish into it.⁷⁸

One could go on at length considering Al-Ghazali's captivating, poetic, and graphic eschatological writings here, but instead readers are invited to keep this concluding statement in mind, along with a deeply meaningful parting thought: In the End, we shall have "glad news of the wide compass of God's Mercy," writes the sage. "It is our hope that He will not deal with us as we deserve but will rather grant us that which is appropriate to Him, in His generosity, abundant indulgence, and mercy."⁷⁹ Finally, in an article in which she considers Al-Ghazali's teachings carefully, Mona Siddiqui offers the following observation about death, dying, resurrection, and eternity in Islam:

God is real, our sins are real, and divine forgiveness is real. The most dramatic aspect of the Islamic perspective on death, resurrection, and the afterlife is not the potent images of heaven or hell but the ultimate vision of God. However we make this journey to God when we die, and in whatever form, in this life we must always be conscious of and guided by the Qur'anic verse: "We belong to God and to Him we shall return" (2:156).⁸⁰

Al-Qurtubi (1214–1273)

Abdullah Al-Qurtubi was born in Spain in 1214.⁸¹ Despite his "modest social origins," he would receive an excellent education and go on to become the most important interpreter of Hadith (*muhadith*) in Iberia,⁸² as well as the most prominent commentator on the Quran and on Islamic eschatology since Al-Ghazali. He would further deepen his studies in Egypt, never to return to his native Andalusia. To this day, the two thinkers remain unrivaled as experts on eschatology and the apocalypse in Islamic thought. Like Al-Ghazali, furthermore, Al-Qurtubi studied under the finest scholars of his era. It was a golden age for Islamic learning in Iberia, and Al-Qurtubi took full advantage, becoming one of the peninsula's leading Muslim scholars of all time. Also like Al-Ghazali, Al-Qurtubi left a voluminous collection of writings, none more widely studied than his *Tasfir Al-Qurtubi*, a twenty-volume treatise on Islamic jurisprudence and Quranic commentary.

By the time Al-Qurtubi was deeply investing himself in the study of the Quran and Hadith, Al-Ghazali had become famous throughout the Islamic world, and his disciples had brought his work from Persia to the far reaches of the *umma*, including Iberia. In fact, "one of al-Ghazali's prominent students was [Abu Bakr Ibn al-'Arabi](#) (1076–1148) . . . who introduced al-Ghazali's teachings to Muslim Spain . . . [and] was also one of the leading jurists of the [Maliki](#) school, as was al-Qurtubi."⁸³ This is not to suggest that Al-Qurtubi was slavishly devoted to Al-Ghazali's teachings; on the contrary, at one point he accuses Al-Ghazali of heresy, while his own writings are critically analytical and original in their own right. Still, reading Al-

Qurtubi's eschatological treatise, like Al-Ghazali's, is an altogether gripping experience, at times terrifying, poetic, and inspirationally hopeful.

Though more renowned for his work in Islamic jurisprudence, Quranic studies, and interpretation of Hadith literature, Al-Qurtubi also penned one of the most extensive commentaries on death, the grave, resurrection, and judgment in Islam, published during his lifetime, in the thirteenth century. Titled *al-Tadhkirah fī Aḥwāl al-Mawtā wa-Umūr al-Ākhirah* ([Reminder of the Conditions of the Dead and the Matters of the Hereafter](#)), it is paralleled in the history of Islamic eschatological thought only by the earlier work of Al-Ghazali, which is, in fact, cited twice in the text. In his preface, Al-Qurtubi explains his inspiration:

Praise be to Allah, the most High Who created the universe and ordained His creatures to perish, die, be resurrected to their final judgment and finally judged. . . . So, I intended to write a concise book that would benefit people after my death and remind me in this worldly life of the pains of death, the affairs of the dying people and the details of resurrection, heaven, hell, seditions, etc.⁸⁴

For a “concise book,” it has many chapters, albeit quite short ones—167, to be precise. The first is titled “The Interdiction of Wishing for Death Owing to a Physical or Financial Calamity,” and the last is called “The Places Al-Dajjal Will Be Denied to Enter.” Al-Dajjal, as mentioned before, is the Antichrist. We will briefly consider four of these chapters below. But first an interesting reflection on Al-Qurtubi's [martyrology](#) from Asma Asfuruddin:

al-Qurtubi ponders the meaning of “being alive” after having been killed. . . . Interestingly, among those whose “bodies are not consumed by the earth” (i.e., do not decay), al-Qurtubi includes the martyrs with prophets, scholars, callers to prayer, market protectors . . . and Quran reciters. . . . Additionally, he lists the various funerary practices (bathing the body, manner of praying over the deceased, and so on) that developed on account of the special status of the martyr. . . . Their souls will exult in the good things of paradise, a state which will be enhanced when their souls are eventually reunited with their bodies.⁸⁵

The four chapters from Al-Qurtubi's classic eschatological treatise to consider are, in chronological order: “The Attributes of Paradise and Hell Dwellers” (Chapter 74), “Seeing Allah, Glory to Him, is More Loveable and Delightful to the Dwellers of Paradise than Other Delights” (Chapter 136), “Events that Will Happen on Judgment Day” (Chapter 163), and “The Ten Signs of Doomsday” (Chapter 166). As with almost every chapter in his massive tome (the abridged English translation is 400 pages long and I cannot read Arabic), in “The Attributes of Paradise” Al-Qurtubi, like Al-Ghazali before him, frequently cites passages from the Hadith literature. This literature is especially important in Islam for its transmission of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and here Al-Qurtubi opens his discussion with these observations about heaven and hell and their dwellers from the Final Messenger:

The dwellers of paradise are of three types: one who wields authority and adheres to justice, one who gives alms and who has been endowed with power to do good deeds;

one who is kind-hearted towards his relatives and to Muslims; and one who is weak and does not stretch out his hand in spite of having a large family to support.⁸⁶

As for “the dwellers of Hell,” they:

are of five types: the weak who lack power [to avoid evil], who follow others’ steps in regard to bad habits and do not have any care for their family or for their wealth; those dishonest people whose greed cannot be concealed even in minor things; and the man who betrays you morning and evening, with regard to your family and your property; the miser and the liar; and those who are in the habit of abusing people and using obscene and foul language.⁸⁷

These teachings clearly convey that Islam is fundamentally a religion about devotion to God that inspires compassion and justice. How we respond to these callings will determine where we will ultimately dwell, whether in heaven or hell, eternally or quasi-eternally. (There have long been debates in Islam about the eternity and nature of hell).

In Chapter 136, “Seeing Allah, Glory to Him, is More Loveable and Delightful to the Dwellers of Paradise than Other Delights,” Al-Qurtubi treats the most glorious of all spiritual aspirations in Islam: being with God personally, seeing God, speaking with God, and being welcomed by God into paradise for all eternity. Here, once again, Al-Qurtubi turns to the Hadith literature, sharing this remark attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: “Allah would lift the veil, and nothing among the pleasures given to them, would be dearer to them than the sight of their Lord, the mighty and the glorious.” As discussed in Chapter Two, this is a stark contrast to Jewish teachings: Jews could not write the Lord’s name, and they could never see him, either here or in the afterlife. Later in this chapter, again citing the Final Messenger, Al-Qurtubi adds that the righteous in paradise will have their faces “lit up” by Allah, and “that will be greater than anything granted to them.”⁸⁸

The chronology of events in Islamic eschatology is not sequenced consistently in Al-Qurtubi’s tome. He provides extensive details on heaven and hell in earlier chapters but reserves his discussion of Judgment Day and “doomsday” for later in the text. In reality, of course, one is accepted into heaven or cast into hell *after* Judgment Day, but Al-Qurtubi’s placing his discussion of doomsday near the end of the book does have a dramatic effect on the reader. It seems the author’s intention was, as Winter said about Al-Ghazali’s earlier eschatological writings, for this tome on eschatology to be “hortatory,” or as using language and tone that makes the text read much like an exhortation.⁸⁹

“Events that Will Happen on Judgment Day” (Chapter 163) and “The Ten Signs of Doomsday” (Chapter 166), like much of Al-Qurtubi’s book, are composed of sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Hadith literature. The former opens with Muhammad’s prophecy that before the “Last Day” there will be war between two factions, with “many casualties on both sides,” followed by “the appearance of about thirty liars” who claim to be among the prophets of Allah. Next: “earthquakes will increase in number; time will pass quickly; afflictions will appear; and killings will increase.” The sun will also rise in the west.⁹⁰ Though we have seen discussions of earthquakes and afflictions as signs of the End of Days in earlier Jewish and Christian eschatological teachings, to my knowledge, the notion of the sun rising in the

west is unique to Islam (as is the splitting of the moon). Though this is not mentioned in the Quran explicitly, several influential Quranic exegetes include reflections of the “Muslim Sunrise.” Most importantly, once the sun rises in the west, the “Door of Repentance” (*Tawba*) is closed forever.⁹¹ There is no turning back.

Al-Qurtubi’s penultimate chapter, “The Ten Signs of Doomsday,” is one of the shortest in *In Remembrance of the Affairs of the Dead and Doomsday*. It is essentially a single response attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. The Final Messenger heard his followers conversing and asked, “What are you discussing?” Their reply: “Doomsday”:

Thereupon he said: “The Last Hour would not come until ten signs appear: land-sliding in the east, and land-sliding in the west, and land-sliding in the peninsula of Arabia, the smoke, *Al-Dajjal*, the beast of the earth, Gog and Magog, the rising of the sun from the west, and the fire which will emit from the lower part of Aden and drive people to the Land of the Gathering.”⁹²

Al-Dajjal is the Antichrist, while the Prophet’s mention of [Gog and Magog](#), too, reflects an eschatological thread in Islam from Judaism and Christianity, as these evil beings are mentioned in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In the former, they are “the prophesied invader of Israel,” while in the latter they are “evil forces opposed to the people of God.”⁹³ In Islam, they are mentioned in the Quran and later become the subject of many Quranic commentaries and are often discussed in the Hadith literature. Terrifying and horned, they are “an essential part of Islamic eschatology” who rule over “wild armies” that will be unleashed at the apocalypse.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The eschatological writings of Al-Ghazali and Al-Qurtubi are the most prominent in Islamic history, but they are far from alone. Apocalyptic ideas are legion in the Hadith literature, and both sages were deeply invested in the study thereof. Countless other interpreters of the Quran and Hadith have contributed to a massive and dispersed body of eschatological literature in Islam. Surely many other apocalyptic texts have been lost to history.

All of this is to say just two things:

1. This chapter has only scratched the surface of this intellectually and spiritually rich and sprawling history and literary repository of Islamic eschatological thought.
2. Islam is centrally concerned with the apocalypse, the resurrection, judgment, and especially submission to Allah, through which one gains peace of mind and soul in the here and now and the assurance of seeing Allah in paradise after the catastrophic tumult of Doomsday, the ravages of Gog and Magog and of Satan’s armies, the war

between the Antichrist and the Messiah, the earthquakes and afflictions, the splitting of the moon, and the rising of the sun in the west.

To conclude with a key passage from the Quran (3:185):

Every soul shall have a taste of death: And only on the Day of Judgment shall you be paid your full recompense. Only he who is saved far from the Fire and admitted to the Garden will have attained the object (of Life): For the life of this world is but goods and chattels of deception.

Notes

1. It is a tradition in Islam that when uttering or writing the Prophet Muhammad's name in English, in keeping with an ancient tradition in Arabic, one subsequently says "Peace Be Upon Him," which is abbreviated in written form as "pbuh." [↵](#)
2. Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, Volume VI: *Muhammad at Mecca*, trans. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988 (1915), 63–64. [↵](#)
3. *Ibid.*, 62. [↵](#)
4. From an Islamic perspective, there have literally been thousands of prophets throughout the ages, and they are called **nabi**. Messengers (**rasul**) are much, much rarer and are usually associated with revelations that are recorded in scripture. All messengers are also prophets, and in Islam the most important are Noah (Nuh), Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), Jesus (Isa), and Muhammad. [↵](#)
5. Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood, *Need to Know? Islam: Understand the Religion behind the Headlines*, New York: HarperCollins, 2008. [↵](#)
6. Asma Afsaruddin, "The Concept of Revelation in Islam," in Georges Tamer (ed.), *The Concept of Revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020, 144. Todd Lawson, *The Quran: Epic and Apocalypse*, London: Oneworld Academic, 2017, xix. [↵](#)
7. John Baldock, *The Essence of Sufism*, London: Eagle, 2004, 16. [↵](#)
8. *Ibid.*, 17–18. [↵](#)
9. Leila Ahmed, "Women and the Advent of Islam," *Signs* 11, 4, 1984, 665. [↵](#)
10. In Maqsood, n.p. [↵](#)
11. Paul Casanova distinguishes between the Prophet's "Meccan vision" that the world

would soon end and his “Medinan vision,” in which his focus shifted from eschatology to community. This suggests that persecuted communities are more prone to eschatological reflections than communities who enjoy wealth and power, and, concerning nascent Islam, that Muhammad felt compelled to expand his community after achieving authority over Mecca. Paul Casanova, *Mohammed et la fin du monde: Étude critique sur l’islam primitive*, Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1911. [↵](#)

12. Maqsood, n.p. [↵](#)
13. Stelios Michalopoulos, Alireza Naghavi, and Giovanni Prarolo, “[Trade and Geography in the Origins and Spread of Islam](#),” Working Paper 18438, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017 (2012), 3, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18438>. [↵](#)
14. Najat Khalifa and Tim Hardie, “Possession and Jinn,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 98, 8, 2005, 351–353. [↵](#)
15. Michael Sells, [Approaching the Quran: The Early Revelations](#), Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2007, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/templeuniv-ebooks/detail.action?docID=949115>, last accessed January 8, 2021, 14. [↵](#)
16. Najam Haider, *Shi‘r Islam: An Introduction*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 18. There are, of course, many other differences between these two major sects of Islam, and even within them, but they are beyond the scope of this chapter. For a much fuller understanding of this question, Haider’s book is an excellent place to turn. [↵](#)
17. Anonymous, “[Sufi Orders](#),” Pew Research Center, *Religion and Public Life*, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-sufi-orders/#:~:text=Sufism%20mixes%20mainstream%20religious%20observances,the%20whirling%20dervishes%20in%20Turkey>. last accessed August 14, 2023. [↵](#)
18. For insight into these forms of Islam, see Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989; and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961. [↵](#)
19. Muhammad Abdul Haq, “The Meaning and Significance of the Shahādah,” *Islamic Studies* 23, 3, 1984, 171. [↵](#)
20. Anonymous, “[Muslim World Facts](#),” *Encountering the World of Islam*, 2018, <https://www.encounteringislam.org/muslim-world-facts>, last accessed December 25, 2020. [↵](#)
21. Haq, “The Meaning and Significance of the Shahādah,” 173. [↵](#)
22. Josef Linnhoff, “‘Associating’ with God in Islamic Thought: A Comparative Study of

- Muslim Interpretations of *Shirk*,” Ph.D. diss., New College, University of Edinburgh, 2020, 1–2. [↵](#)
23. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, trans. Kamal El-Helbawy, M. Morinuddin Siddiqi, and Syed Shukry, Plainfield: American Trust Publishing, 1999 (1994), 5–6. [↵](#)
 24. Juan E. Campo, “Haram,” in Juan E. Campo, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2nd ed.), New York: Checkmark Books, 2016, 291. [↵](#)
 25. Kathryn Kueny, “Tafsir,” in R. C. Martin (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*. New York: Checkmark Books, 2016, 672–673. [↵](#)
 26. Christopher Melchert, “Introduction,” in Belul-Abu Alabbas, Christopher Melchert, and Michael Dann (eds.), *Modern Hadith Studies: Continued Debates and New Approaches*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 1–8. Most of the multivolume Hadith was written in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., though some of the texts were likely written much later, a subject of wide debate in Islam. Some Muslims today reject it outright as inauthentic and unauthoritative. On this matter, see Aisha Y. Musa, *Ḥadīth as Scripture: Discussions on the Authority of Prophetic Traditions in Islam*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. [↵](#)
 27. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Volume 1: *The Classical Age of Islam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, 74. [↵](#)
 28. Amr Osman, “The Quran and the Hadith as Sources of Islamic Law,” in Khaled Abou El Fadl, Ahmad Atif Ahmad, and Said Fares Hassan (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Law*, London: Routledge, 2019, 128. [↵](#)
 29. Lawson, *The Quran*, 18. [↵](#)
 30. Mehreen Chida-Razvi, “Five Pillars of Islam,” in Cenak Çakmak (ed.), *Islam: A Worldwide Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017, 490. [↵](#)
 31. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
 32. Muhammad Al-Sayed Muhammad, [Islam’s Teachings and How They Solve Past and Current Problems](#), 2009, 99, <https://www.almeshkat.net/books/archive/books/islam%20teachings.pdf>, last accessed February 10, 2023. [↵](#)
 33. Chida-Razvi, “Five Pillars of Islam,” 491. [↵](#)
 34. Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Vital Study of Islam at Its Zenith*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946, 68. [↵](#)

35. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958, 20–21. [↵](#)
36. Mehmet Haluk Anil, “A Practical Guide for Animal Welfare during Animal Slaughter,” in Yunez Ramadan Al-Teinaz, Stuart Spear, and Ibrahim H. D. Abd El-Rahim (eds.), *The Halal Food Handbook*, Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2020, 66. [↵](#)
37. Yunez Ramadan Al-Teinaz, “What is Halal Food?” in Yunez Ramadan Al-Teinaz, Stuart Spear, and Ibrahim H. D. Abd El-Rahim (eds.), *The Halal Food Handbook*, Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2020, 10. [↵](#)
38. Al-Qarwadari, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, 16. Please consult this book for an exhaustive explanation of what is halal and what is haram today. It is widely read in the Islamic world and considered by many Muslims to be authoritative. [↵](#)
39. Sells, *Approaching the Quran*, 17. [↵](#)
40. B. Carra De Vaux, “[Barzak h.](#),” *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, Volume I, E. J. Brill, 1986, 1071–1072. https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/*-SIM_1249; last accessed August 14, 2023. [↵](#)
41. Unless otherwise noted, these observations and the next few paragraphs of this chapter derive from the generous insights of my good friend and esteemed colleague Khalid Blankinship, who kindly shared with me his lecture notes on this topic. [↵](#)
42. Majid Daneshgar, “Munkar and Nakir (Angels of the Grave),” in Cenak Çakmak (ed.), *Islam: A Worldwide Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017, 1104. [↵](#)
43. Lawson, *The Quran*, xxiii. [↵](#)
44. *Ibid.*, xxi. [↵](#)
45. *Ibid.*, xxiii–xxiv. [↵](#)
46. Andrew J. Waskey, “Islamic Eschatology (Sunni),” in Wendell G. Johnson (ed.), *End of Days: An Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017, 188. [↵](#)
47. Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 141. [↵](#)
48. Sells, *Approaching the Quran*, 14. [↵](#)
49. Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Considerations of God, Man, Time and Eternity,” in Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (eds.), *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 5. [↵](#)

50. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012, 98. [↵](#)
51. Muhammad Abdul Haleem, “Quranic Paradise: How to Get to Paradise and What to Expect There,” in Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson (eds.), *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, Volume I, Leiden, NL: Brill, 2017, 57–58. [↵](#)
52. Nerina Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 63. [↵](#)
53. Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, “Introduction,” in Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson (eds.), *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, Volume I, Leiden, NL: Brill, 2017, 13. [↵](#)
54. Murat Ustaoglu and Cenak Çakmak, “Fear (*Khawf*),” in Cenak Çakmak (ed.), *Islam: A Worldwide Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017, 476. Later in this chapter, fear is discussed extensively, in the subsection on Al-Ghazali. [↵](#)
55. Waskey, “Islamic Eschatology (Sunni),” 188. [↵](#)
56. Lawson, *The Quran*, xxiv. [↵](#)
57. Steven J. McMichael, “[The Night Journey \(al-isrāʾ\) and Ascent \(al-miʾrāj\)](#) of Muhammad in Medieval Muslim and Christian Perspectives,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 22, 3, 2011, 293–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2011.586510>, last accessed January 4, 2020. [↵](#)
58. Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985, 197. [↵](#)
59. Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire*, 22. [↵](#)
60. *Ibid.*, 26. [↵](#)
61. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
62. There are many eschatological commentaries, interpretations, and debates in the history of Islam, though Al-Ghazali’s and Al-Qurtubi’s are the most influential. Meanwhile, “the oldest complete Muslim apocalyptic text that has survived to the present” is “Nuʾaym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī’s *Kitāb al-fitan*” (*The Book of Tribulations*), which dates to 820 C.E. David Cook (ed. and trans.) “*The Book of Tribulations*”: *The Syrian Muslim Apocalyptic Tradition*: *An Annotated Translation*, by Nuʾaym b. Hammad al-Marwazi. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, xii. [↵](#)
63. For analyses of these and other subjects on which Al-Ghazali wrote, see Georges

- Tamer (ed.), *The Impact of Al-Ghazali: Papers Collected on his 900th Anniversary*, Leiden, NL: Brill, 2015. [↵](#)
64. W. Montgomery Watt, *Al-Ghazali: The Muslim Intellectual*, Chicago: ABC International Group, 2002, 22. [↵](#)
 65. William Montgomery Watt, "[Al-Ghazālī: Muslim Jurist, Theologian, and Mystic](#)," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2012, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Ghazali>, last accessed January 11, 2021. [↵](#)
 66. The influence of classical Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle, has been profound in Islam, thanks in large part to Al-Ghazali. In fact, Aristotle's work "has had an influence that is unsurpassed by any other philosophical work that is translated from Greek into Arabic. . . . Hence, Muslim philosophers adopted Aristotle's definition of the soul." Eiyad Al-Kutubi, *Mulla Sadra and Eschatology: Evolution of Being*, London: Routledge, 2014, 68. [↵](#)
 67. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979 (1966), 94. [↵](#)
 68. Matthew Levering, "[Providence and Predestination in Al-Ghazali](#)," *New Blackfriars*, 2010, 59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2009.01341.x> , last accessed January 16, 2021. [↵](#)
 69. Watt, "Al-Ghazālī," n.p. [↵](#)
 70. Rahman, *Islam*, 95. [↵](#)
 71. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
 72. Al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife (Book XL of The Revival of the Religious Sciences)*, trans. T. J. Winter, Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 2015 (1989), 171–172. Houris are purified wide-eyed virgin women understood as "companions in heaven." [↵](#)
 73. Tim Winter, "Al-Ghazālī on Death," in David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher (eds.), *Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014, 161–166, 162. [↵](#)
 74. Al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, 173. [↵](#)
 75. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
 76. Jane I. Smith, "Concourse between the Living and the Dead in Islamic Eschatological Literature," *History of Religions* 19, 3, 1980, 224. [↵](#)
 77. Al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, 177, 179. [↵](#)
 78. *Ibid.*, 180. [↵](#)

79. Ibid., 261. [↵](#)
80. Mona Siddiqui, "Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny: Qur'ānic and Islamic Perspectives," in David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher (eds.), *Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny: Christian and Islamic Perspectives*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014, 36. [↵](#)
81. I am most grateful to my esteemed colleague Khalid Blankinship for bringing the work of Al-Qurtubi to my attention and for having read an earlier draft of this chapter. *Shuykran jazilan!* [↵](#)
82. Delfina Serrano Ruano, "Exilio y Desarraigo en la Vida (y Milagros) de Inb Farh Al-Qurtubi, un Exéget Andalusí Universal," *Philologia Hispalansis*31, 2, 2017, 138. [↵](#)
83. Khalid Yahya Blankinship, personal electronic correspondence, January 18, 2021. Bold type added to alert reader to glossary entry. [↵](#)
84. Imâm Al-Qurtubî, *In Remembrance of the Affairs of the Dead and Doomsday* (abridged), trans. Reda Bedeir, Mansoura, Egypt: Dal AL-Manarah, 2004, 15. [↵](#)
85. Asma Asfaruddin, "Dying in the Path of God: Reading Martyrdom and Moral Excellence in the Quran," in Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson (eds.), *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, Volume I, Leiden, NL: Brill, 2017, 171–172. Martyrs, those who die in the name of the faith, are generally believed in Islam to be guaranteed entry into heaven, though the definition of martyrdom has been widely debated among Muslims. At times, tragically, the idea has been exploited by terrorists. On the topic in general, see David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012; on the latter troublesome topic, see Meir Hatina, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power, and Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. [↵](#)
86. Al-Qurtubî, *In Remembrance of the Affairs of the Dead and Doomsday*, 197. [↵](#)
87. Ibid., 197–198. [↵](#)
88. Ibid., 325. [↵](#)
89. Winter, "Al-Ghazālī on Death," 162. [↵](#)
90. Al-Qurtubî, *In Remembrance of the Affairs of the Dead and Doomsday*, 389. [↵](#)
91. Anonymous, "[Rise of the Sun from the West](http://www.discoveringislam.org/rise_of_sun_from_west.htm)," *Discovering Islam*, http://www.discoveringislam.org/rise_of_sun_from_west.htm, last accessed January 29, 2021; Naveed Malik, "[The Meaning of the Prophecy 'The Sun Shall Rise from the West'](https://muslimsunrise.com/2020/04/13/the-meaning-of-the-prophecy-the-sun-shall-rise-in-the-west/)," *The Muslim Sunrise*, April 2020, <https://muslimsunrise.com/2020/04/13/the-meaning-of-the-prophecy-the-sun-shall-rise-in-the-west/>, last accessed January 29, 2021. [↵](#)

92. Al-Qurtubi, *In Remembrance of the Affairs of the Dead and Doomsday*, 395. “Aden” in this passage refers to a port city in what is today Yemen, on the Gulf of Aden, a place of considerable importance in Islamic history. On this, see Esther Pesekes, “[Aden](#),” in Kate Fleet, Kramer Nawas, and Everett Rowson (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Islam THREE*, Leiden, NL: Brill, 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_SIM_0188, last accessed January 29, 2021. [↵](#)
93. Anonymous, “[Gog and Magog](#),” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gog>; last accessed August 24, 2023. [↵](#)
94. Emeri van Donzel and Andrea Schmidt, *Gog and Magog in Early Syriac and Islamic Sources: Sallam’s Quest for Alexander’s Wall*, Leiden, NL: Brill, 2009, xvii. [↵](#)

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Glossary

Abu Bakr Ibn al-`Arabi (1076–1148)

Influential student of Al-Ghazali and prominent figure of the [Maliki](#) school of Islamic jurisprudence, who spread his mentor's influential teachings throughout Muslim Iberia. ↴

Abu Talib (ca. 535–619)

Uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, who raised his orphaned nephew and encouraged him to take seriously the visions and messages from Allah that he was receiving (i.e., the [Quran](#)). ↴

Adhān

The daily call to prayer for Muslims, emitted from a mosque five times a day by a muezzin. ↴

The Aims of the Philosophers

A highly influential text of Islamic philosophy published in 1094 by [Al-Ghazali](#), one that, among many other things, helped center and/or dispute classical Greek thought in Islam. [↴](#)

Al-Ghazali (1058–1111)

One of the greatest Islamic theologians and philosophers of all time, native of what is today Iran; author of the highly influential *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, which contains his important treatise on Islamic eschatology. [↴](#)

Al-Jannah

Paradise, a garden. Heaven in Islam, as discussed in the Quran and the Hadith. The eternal abode in the afterlife of God and all of those who have lived righteously.

Al-Jumah

Congregational prayers at the mosque (or masjid) that take place on Fridays, a communal ritual for Muslims; also means Friday in Arabic. Friday is designated as sacred in the Quran, in surah 62. [↴](#)

Allah

God, the one and only supreme Creator and the ultimate focus of Islam. In pre-Islamic times, the God of the sky and one of the most important in the pantheon of Arab polytheism. [↴](#)

Allah Hu Akbar

Literally “God is Great,” the most commonly stated prayer/proclamation in Islam. [↴](#)

Al-Masih ad-Dajjal

The Antichrist in Islam, the “Beast of the Earth” and false messiah who will appear at the end of time to tempt people into unrighteousness and battle with the Messiah, the [Mahdi](#). [↴](#)

Al-qiyama

Also called *Yawm al-Hisab*, Judgment Day in Islam, the time of the resurrection of the dead. [↴](#)

Al-Qurtubi (1214–1273)

Influential Andalusian Muslim philosopher and theologian. Author of one of the most important treatises ever on Islamic eschatology, [Reminder of the Conditions of the Dead and the Matters of the Hereafter](#). [↴](#)

Al-sā'a

“The Hour” when the end of time arrives and final judgment is at hand. [↴](#)

Axis Mundi

A term coined by Mircea Eliade meaning the “Axis of the World,” around which religions and their adherents turn, ethically, spatially, and spiritually, like the [Kaaba](#) in Mecca. [↴](#)

Azrael

Or ‘Izrai’l, in Arabic; the angel of death in Islam who takes one from this life, escorting the soul and carrying a scroll concerning one’s ultimate fate. [↴](#)

Barzakh

The period between death and resurrection, Arabic for “separation,” as in the distance between the world of the living and the dead and the world of God and pure spirit. [↴](#)

Battle of Badr

Decisive 624 battle during the military conflict between the Qurayshi Meccans and the Medinan Muslims, which was a decisive victory for the Prophet Muhammad; the only battle mentioned in the Quran, and one that enabled the Prophet and his followers to reconquer Mecca. [↴](#)

Caliphate

Umayyad (661–750); Abbasid (750–1258); Ottoman Empire (1299–1922). Muslim community ruled by a caliph (Arabic, lit: “successor”). [↴](#)

Dhikr

Literally “remembrance” (as in remembrance of Allah); a cherished form of prayer and meditation in Islam that is bequeathed to Muslims in the Quran (21:50). Often takes the form of the repeated chanting or reciting of verses or prayerful mantras, sometimes accompanied by the handling of beads. Of especial importance in [Sufism](#). [↴](#)

Djibril

Arabic name for the Angel Gabriel. A figure of major importance in Islam, especially for having visited the Prophet Muhammad to begin transmitting the final revelation and word of Allah to humanity through his prophecy, the [Quran](#). [↴](#)

Fiqh

Literally “deep understanding”; Islamic jurisprudence, a highly esteemed tradition and practice in the religion. [↴](#)

Gog and Magog

Horned and terrifying forces of evil, first mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and later in the [Quran](#), who have been prophesied to appear at the End of Time and lead savage armies during the apocalyptic war between good and evil. [↵](#)

Hadith

Literally “speech,” “discourse,” or “communication” in Arabic; a large body of Islamic scripture that details the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and those of his closest companions, as well as extensive interpretive commentaries and exegesis. Although not accepted by a small minority of Muslims, these texts were written during the Prophet’s lifetime and finally compiled in the mid-ninth century. [↵](#)

Hajj

One of the Five Pillars of Islam, the pilgrimage to the [Kaaba](#) in Mecca to which all Muslims are called at least once during their lifetimes; normally takes place over the course of several days during the last month of the Muslim calendar. [↵](#)

Halal

Literally “permissible”; a corpus of principles of the right way for a Muslim to live, ranging from dietary restrictions and attire to interpersonal relations and business dealings. [↵](#)

Haram

The opposite of [Halal](#), meaning “prohibited.” Similar to the notion of sin in Christianity, unrighteous acts and deeds that Muslims are encouraged to avoid or refrain from. [↵](#)

Hijrah

622 “emigration” of the Prophet Muhammad, when he was forced into hiding and to flee Mecca for Medina, which also marks the first year of the Muslim calendar. [↵](#)

Imam

Learned community leader in Islam; one who leads communal prayers during services at a mosque or a masjid. A sage interpreter of the Quran, a counsel, and a guide for members of the *umma*.

Inculturation

The reception and adaptation of a cultural form, like a religion, in a society to which it is exogenous, where it changes over time due to local needs and languages, as well as indigenous religious traditions and cultural forms. [↵](#)

Isa

Jesus in Arabic. A figure of major importance in Islam, who is mentioned more than any

other human being in the Quran and who is prophesied to have a messianic role during the apocalypse, though he is definitively not equated with Allah, nor is he worshipped in Islam. [↵](#)

Israfil

An angel of major importance in Islam who is prophesied to descend to Earth to sound the final trumpet from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, signaling to all that resurrection and judgment are at hand. [↵](#)

Jahannam

Hell in Islam, a burning abyss in which the unrighteous are destined to find themselves for all eternity after the apocalypse, though some Islamic thinkers teach that they might have the chance to be eventually delivered and brought to heaven. [↵](#)

Jannah

Heaven in Islam, depicted in the Quran (e.g., 47:15) as a lush and joyful paradisaical garden. The eternal resting place of all righteous Muslims. [↵](#)

Jihad

Literally “struggle,” something all Muslims are called to do, on an interior, spiritual level, against temptations to stray from the straight path and other evil forces; also, a military effort to defend the Islamic faith from aggression. [↵](#)

Jinn

Supernatural beings made of smokeless fire who are allied either with God or with [Shaytan](#) (Satan) and are invisible and take many forms. Unlike angels, they are not necessarily good or submissive to Allah, having free will, like humans, in whose lives they are often involved, whether beneficially or destructively. [↵](#)

Kaaba

Also spelled ka'bah or kabah; literally “cube,” in reference to the large cube-shaped black shrine that is the holiest place in the Islamic world and believed to have been constructed by Ibrahim (Abraham). Located at the center of the religion’s most important mosque, Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca. The first place where Allah instructed humanity to build for Him an altar. Site of the annual Muslim pilgrimage, the [hajj](#). [↵](#)

Kalam

An Aristotelian approach to metaphysical and theological knowledge in Islam, largely pioneered by [Al-Ghazali](#). [↵](#)

Khadijah

Beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad and one of the first to accept his message, thereby becoming one of the first Muslims. Her wealth and encouragement helped enable Muhammad's reception of the [Quran](#) and his preaching and political successes.

↵

Khawf

Fear, an important emotion and philosophical/theological concept in Islam, one that takes many forms, the ultimate of which is fear of Allah and of damnation. [↵](#)

Mahdi

Usually understood in Islam to be [Isa](#) (Jesus); the Messiah, who at the end of time will appear on Earth to defeat the Antichrist ([Al-Masih ad-Dajjal](#)), cementing the victory of good over evil and the entry of the righteous into eternal paradise. [↵](#)

Maliki

Founded in the eighth century in Medina, one of the most influential schools of legal thought and Quranic interpretation in Islam, as well as of commentary on the [Hadith](#).

↵

Martyrology

The study of martyrs and their meanings, whether in Islam or in any other religion. [↵](#)

Masjid

Sanctuary and place of prayer in Islam; more commonly called a mosque in English, from a Romanized rendering of the term, which in Arabic literally means “place of ritual prostration.” [↵](#)

Mihrab

A niche in the wall of a mosque or masjid that orients the faithful to face Mecca while at prayer. [↵](#)

Mi‘rāj isrā’

The mystical “night journey” of the Prophet Muhammad, which brought him from Mecca to Jerusalem and into all the heavens, where he spoke with previous messengers, like Jesus and Moses, and dined with Allah at the celestial summit. [↵](#)

Miriam

The Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus ([Isa](#)) and the most oft-mentioned woman in the Quran; a figure of major importance in Islam. [↵](#)

Muhaddith

Name of a learned scholar and interpreter of [Hadith](#) scriptures.

Muhammad (c. 570–632)

Mystic, diplomat, prophet, and messenger from what is today Saudi Arabia; the final prophet, who over the course of twenty-two years received the Quran, God's culminating revelation to humanity. [↵](#)

Munkar

One of two angels who visit us in our graves shortly after we die to ask us about our faith in God and our awareness of prophecy and scripture, and our answers have serious consequences for our eternal fate. [↵](#)

Nabi

A prophet in Islam, a servant of Allah who communicates on His behalf to humanity, beginning with Adam and including Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and the Prophet Muhammad. [↵](#)

Nakir

One of two angels who visit us in our graves shortly after we die to ask us about our faith in God and our awareness of prophecy and scripture; our answers have serious consequences for our eternal fate. [↵](#)

Night of Power

Sometimes also called the Night of Power and Excellence or the Night of Destiny, this was the first night, in 610 C.E., when the Prophet Muhammad was visited by the angel [Djibril](#) in a cave above Mecca to begin receiving the [Quran](#). [↵](#)

Quran

“Recitation,” the final revelation to humanity, as transmitted by the angel [Djibril](#) from Allah to the Prophet Muhammad, in Arabic, over the course of roughly twenty years. Believed in Islam to be the culminating scripture and the word of Allah. [↵](#)

Quraysh

Arab ethnic group, or tribe, to which the Prophet Muhammad belonged. [↵](#)

Ramadan

A month of fasting in Islam, from sunrise to sunset; a religious obligation for all Muslims and one of the Five Pillars of Islam. [↵](#)

Rasul

A “messenger” in Islam, the final of whom to appear was the Prophet Muhammad. Similar to a prophet (**nabi**), though much rarer in history and often associated with divine revelations that are enconced in history, for example, Moses (Musa) and Jesus (Isa). [↴](#)

Religious Translation

The adaptation and reinterpretation of an exogenous faith tradition in a recipient culture and society in local terms and in local linguistics. [↴](#)

The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife

Eschatological commentary by [Al-Ghazali](#), a single long section of his highly influential corpus of writings, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, first published in the eleventh century. [↴](#)

Reminder of the Conditions of the Dead and the Matters of the Hereafter (al-Tadhkirah fī Aḥwāl al-Mawtā wa-Umūr al-Ākhirah)

Written by the Andalusian theologian [Al-Qurtubi](#) in the thirteenth century, one of the greatest Islamic treatises on eschatology. [↴](#)

The Revival of the Religious Sciences

Al-Ghazali’s multivolume eleventh-century magnum opus, one of the most influential theological and philosophical treatises in Islamic history. First published in the eleventh century C.E. [↴](#)

Salaam

Literally “peace,” in Arabic; related to the word *Islam* itself and to the Jewish cognate “shalom.” Part of the greeting that Muslims share whenever they encounter one another: *As-salamu alaykum* (Peace be with you). [↴](#)

Schism

A split, a separation between groups in a formerly unified religion, usually compelled by differences in theological interpretation. [↴](#)

Shafā‘a

Intercession; the notion that the Mahdi or the Prophet Muhammad might intercede on behalf of some of the condemned on Judgment Day. [↴](#)

Shahādah

The creed that is said by all Muslims each day; “bearing witness to faith”: “I bear witness

that there is no Lord but Allah; I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” The most important form of devotion in Islam, its utterance and embodiment. [↵](#)

Sharia

Literally “the way,” Islamic law as centered upon the Quran and the [sunnah](#), or the life and teachings of the Messenger Muhammad, as well as, for most Muslims, the recording thereof in the Hadith. [↵](#)

Shaytan

Satan. The devil. [↵](#)

Shi’a

Minority branch of Islam that emerged out of a [schism](#) over a number of theological issues, like the question of who would be Islam’s chief authority upon the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Roughly 15 percent of Muslims today are Shi’a, and this is the majority Muslim sect in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain. [↵](#)

Shirk

The gravest of sins in Islam, literally meaning “making a partner,” as in associating anything or anyone with God, idolatry, or polytheism, in rejection of Allah’s absolute oneness ([Tawhīd](#)). [↵](#)

Silk Road

Major historical trade route linking the East and the West; an important conduit for the spread of Islam. [↵](#)

Sirāt al-jahim

The bridge that spans from Jerusalem to paradise, to heaven, over which the righteous will journey after Judgment Day, while the unrighteous will fall off into an abyss of flames, or Hell. [↵](#)

Sufism

Emerging very early in Islamic history, some believe as inspired by the Prophet [Muhammad](#) himself, a mystically oriented, introspective, ecstatic tradition that consists of a wide range of tariqa (lit. “paths”), or brotherhoods and spiritual practices, including chanting, music, and perpetual prayer, often led by a sheik (teacher). A Muslim who practices Sufism is known as a Sufi (devotee). [↵](#)

Sunnah

Foundational body of knowledge in Islam based on the life and teachings of the [Prophet Muhammad](#), a model for all Muslims to follow. [↵](#)

Sunni

The main form of Islam globally, comprising roughly 85 percent of all Muslims, as distinct from [Shi'a](#) Islam. Derives from the word *sunnah*. [↵](#)

Syncretism

The blending of two or more religious traditions. [↵](#)

Tafsir

Islamic jurisprudence; the long and rich discourse over the meaning of Islamic law. [↵](#)

Tariqa

Literally “path”; an Islamic brotherhood and/or way of practicing the faith, especially in [Sufism](#). [↵](#)

Tawhīd

The absolute oneness of Allah in Islamic belief. [↵](#)

Umma

The global community of Muslims who are united in their faith. [↵](#)

PART II
HAITI

Preface

Having explored four monotheistic and apocalyptic religions—which have influenced world history perhaps more than anything else, real or imagined—it is time to mine zombies, to see where they come from, and that quest takes us to West and Central Africa. Indigenous religions in this part of the world have never been apocalyptic, just as the religions covered in Section One never featured zombies. But death and the return of the dead are highly important elements in Africana religions. Thus we will explore, in Chapter Five, the African languages spoken in the French Caribbean by victims of the transatlantic slave trade. The intention will be multifold, but our primary concern is to understand the origins of the word zombie and the ideas and cultures of the zombie among Africans in the colonial Caribbean. Chapter Six will introduce the extraordinary Creole religion of Haitian Vodou, which is both African- and Catholic-based, followed by a careful exploration of the religion's pneumatology, or its understanding of the soul, in Chapter Seven. Section Two will then wind down with our consideration of the various forms that zombies take in Haiti, in Haitian Vodou. There is much more going on among zombies in Haiti than Hollywood ever explored, but the silver screen will have to wait until Section Three.

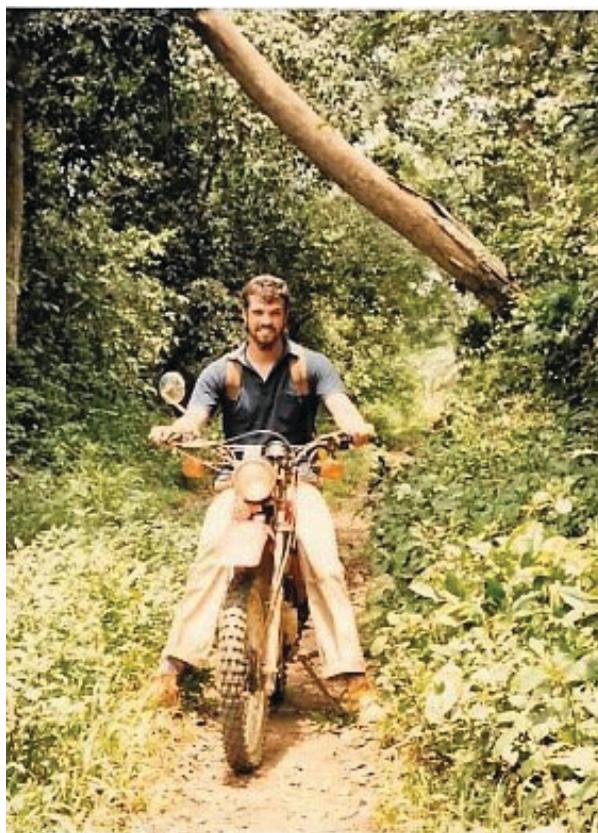
5. The Man with the Empty Head: On the Zombie's African Origins

The Man with the Empty Head

When I learned that I was going to move to Central Africa for three years, in the 1980s, I had little knowledge of the place and only about a month to prepare. So I picked up a few scholarly texts and read voraciously during the weeks prior to my departure: E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Placide Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy*, Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*, and Jan Vansina's *Kingdoms of the Savanna*. I also read the only two novels about Africa that I could then find, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. All these books promised me that I was about to find myself in a very special part of the world, which certainly was the case. Taken together, they were the source of virtually everything I knew about Africa before I found myself in a remote village in northwestern Zaire, living alone in a mud hut whose thatch roof was infested with bats. Actually, I did have one inanimate roommate in the form of a shiny new Yamaha Enduro 250cc dirt bike, which would cause me near-death experiences on more than one occasion and in more ways than one.

Upon arrival in the village, my conversational French was fair and improving, but within a couple of months it was surpassed by my [Lingala](#), the lingua franca of the region and a far more useful language there, one in which I still sometimes dream. Thankfully, this helped me make some very good friends in the local market, like a peanut merchant named Luta and, at a nearby Protestant mission station, a public health *animateur* (trainer) named Kundabu. They would often invite me over to eat dinner, to sip palm wine, and occasionally to visit their fishponds. And they and members of their family—and eventually almost everyone else in the village!—would regularly ask me for a ride somewhere, often with roosters or small vats of palm oil tied to the Enduro.

In retrospect, I have come to realize that my friends' frequent rides on the back of my motorcycle were becoming a source of spiteful jealousy among some of the other villagers. Though it hadn't dawned on me at the time (and I should have been clued in on this by Evans-Pritchard), I now think this was the source of my first experience with [ndoki](#), sorcery.¹ It came to me in the form of a bundle of moistened, oiled herbs wrapped in a worn multicolored handkerchief that was fastened to the handle of the door to my hut. I had been away for two weeks, working in a distant village, and returned just before dark one day to discover the frightful thing. And I knew better than to touch it.



The author on a 250cc Yamaha Enduro, his iron horse, somewhere between Tandala and Bozene, Zaire, 1987. Photo by a stranger who was walking by.

It was a very good time to have friends who cared about me, especially since, in addition to being a market woman, Luta was a herbalist and healer, and since Kundabu owned one of the only shotguns in the village—plus his name means “Death is Wind” in the [Ngbaka](#) dialect. So I hopped back on the Enduro and made the short drive to his house, where one of Kundabu’s wives informed me that he was out in the forest at his fishpond. So I continued to Luta’s. Fortunately, she was home and glad to see me, despite my alarmed state. She listened to what I had to say, made me some strong local black coffee with a ton of sugar, told me to wait inside her hut, and then set off to my house to investigate. It wasn’t long before Luta returned with the bundle that had been hanging on my door, only now it was unraveled. She explained that it was harmless and only meant to scare me.

“The problem is that you live alone,” offered Luta. From the start of our relationship, I had the sense that she pitied me for my relative solitude, and the ndoki episode was evidently the last straw. So Luta invited me to live with her and her extended family nearby. I had been lonely and had grown tired of sweeping bat droppings out of my hut every day, so I gratefully

accepted, thus becoming a member of a relatively large and shifting household in an equatorial African village. The Enduro would spend the rest of its nights in the village without me but with the bats. In retrospect, the vehicle makes me think of “the iron horse” in *Things Fall Apart*, a symbol of modernity, colonialism, and cultural collision that portends the falling apart of things in the rural Igbo world about which Achebe wrote with such mastery and eloquence, in English but in the cadence of his native Igbo language, a language that was brought to the Caribbean by enslaved Africans:

“During the last planting season a white man appeared in their clan.”

“An albino,” suggested Okonkwo.

“He was not an albino. He was quite different.” He sipped his wine. “And he was riding an iron horse. The first people who saw him ran away, but he stood beckoning to them. In the end the fearless ones went near and even touched him. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them.”²

In the novel, the white man is a Protestant missionary, and Protestant missions have done both good and harm throughout Africa, but that is a debate for another day.

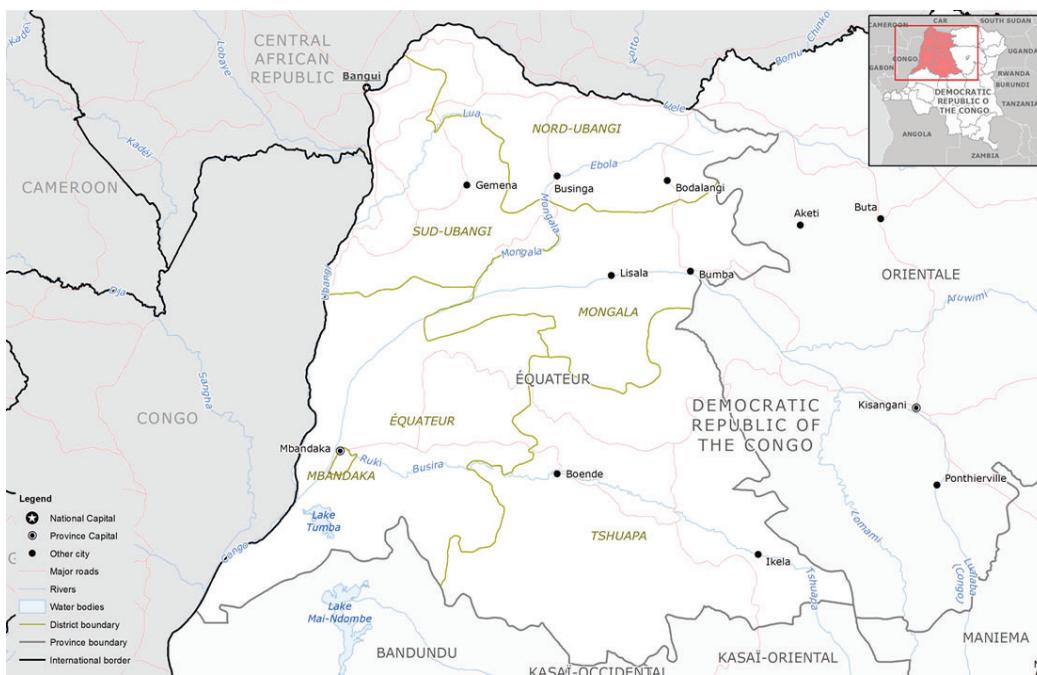
Over the course of my residence at Luta’s home, I earnestly endeavored to participate in the economics and sustenance of our family unit—and I say “family” with much sincerity, for I was wholly embraced as a brother, a son, a nephew, and even an adoptive father. Thus, I occasionally borrowed Kundabu’s shotgun and tried hunting antelopes and monkeys in the bush with the older boys in the household, but usually we could afford only one shotgun shell and none of us had good aim. Hunting expeditions thus quickly became rare and futile. So I tried my hand at peanut farming, going into the fields with the matriarchs to swipe away weeds amid the sprouts with a machete, yet I proved inept at that, being hopelessly unable to distinguish sprout from weed. I was equally worthless at bartering in the marketplace, and gathering water was restricted to women, so those roles were out of the question, and I have always had an unshakable aversion to fishing.

Luta appreciated my intention to contribute to the household and suggested that I could be most useful by watching the children on Saturdays while she and the other adults hunted, fished, worked the fields, gathered water, or tended the market stalls. I gladly accepted. Thus, my Sabbaths in the Congo often consisted of sitting on a bamboo chair in the dirt yard, beneath a massive shady mango tree, sipping palm wine while either staring at the sky or watching the children play spirited matches of a kind of indigenous Subbuteo. In this game a small soccer pitch is traced out in the dirt and bottle caps are used as players. They are flicked with one’s fingers against a round seed, the ball, to score goals against one’s opponent.



Congolese children playing their version of Subbuteo in the author's yard, Tandala, Zaire, 1987. Photo by the author.

Around midday on most Saturdays for over two years I saw the same old man saunter silently along Avenue Mulango, a dirt path flanked by palm trees and mud huts. I never knew his name or conversed with him, but he was tall, somewhat gaunt, and rather light skinned, and I do not recall ever seeing him walking or talking with anyone. Avenue Mulango leads from one of the most important roads connecting the Congo and Ubangi Rivers to the best hospital in the region, one run by American missionaries. Thus the sick, the suffering, the dying, and the dead would often pass by our house at all hours, and dreadful moaning and effervescent wailing were frequently echoing in our midst. This man was different, though, never uttering a word, let alone shrieking. But he seemed half dead, someone who in Haiti, where I later lived for six years, would likely be taken for a zombie. Everyone in the village was scared of him, so one day I decided to ask the children why.



Equateur province of Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. About 50 kilometers north of the city of Gemena is where the author lived and met the man with the empty head. | [Map of Congo's Equator province](#) by JRC, European Commission is used under a [CC BY 4.0 License](#).

I approached the game, which pitted Brazil against Zaire in the World Cup final (Zaire won, 4-1), and raised my question. “He is a ndoki,” the manager of Brazil answered, “and his head is empty, he is *zoba*.” The six or so spectators of the match, all of them youths under fourteen years old, nodded in agreement: “E, *yango wana, azali ndoki ya solo*.” (“Yes, that’s it, he is truly a sorcerer.”) They warned me never to shake the old man’s hand. This was advice that I certainly heeded, even though in Zaire you always shook everybody’s hand at all gatherings, and among the Ngbaka people this was done in an especially hearty fashion. On the following day after church, I had the chance to ask some of the women with whom I worshipped if they knew of this ndoki, and they confirmed what the children had told me. And in conversations with them and with other acquaintances in the market, I would sometimes hear the word *zoba* used in reference to this seemingly odd elderly fellow.

Zoba basically means “stupid” in numerous [Bantu](#) languages, including [Kikongo](#), which is widely spoken in the Central Africa. Most ndoki are well trained and quite focused, entrepreneurial individuals, in my experience, and thus surely not *zoba*, but this old man was a special case, I suppose. He was both ndoki and *zoba*—or at least he had been ndoki-ed into being *zoba*. While stupidity is quite regretted in Central Africa, it is not always something with which one is simply born, as it also might be the result of sorcery. I now interpret this to mean that people in my village used the word *zoba* in reference to the sorcerer not just because he was stupid but because he was ensorcelled, in a contagious kind of way, and had been largely

stripped of agency, much like a zombie, and that his form of sorcery was one that he channeled rather than orchestrated.

Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!

It's no secret that zombies, spooky or otherwise, are all the rage in popular culture and media—not just in American culture, but worldwide. Just type “zombie” into eBay’s search prompt, and a total of 398,486 purchasable items appear for sale: from knives and tee shirts, to skateboards and chia pets; from infant onesies and zombie apocalypse survival kits, to car decals and retractable ID badge holders; from potato chips and salt shakers, to mousepads and the incomparable “midnight zombie tobacco grinder card.”³ Zombie films like *Zombieland* (2009) and *Resident Evil Afterlife* (2010) grossed millions of dollars on their opening weekends, while *World War Z* (2013) eclipsed all others in grossing over half a billion. Furthermore, there is almost no end to the number of video games being played by throngs of people at any given moment, in which zombies must be avoided, mowed down, or cured in order to win. (We discuss zombie movies and video games in detail in later chapters.) Correspondingly, a notable spike in cinematic interest occurred between 1990 and 2000, when more than 300 zombie movies were made, and in the interim more than 200 books with the word “zombie” sauntering somewhere in the title have been published.⁴

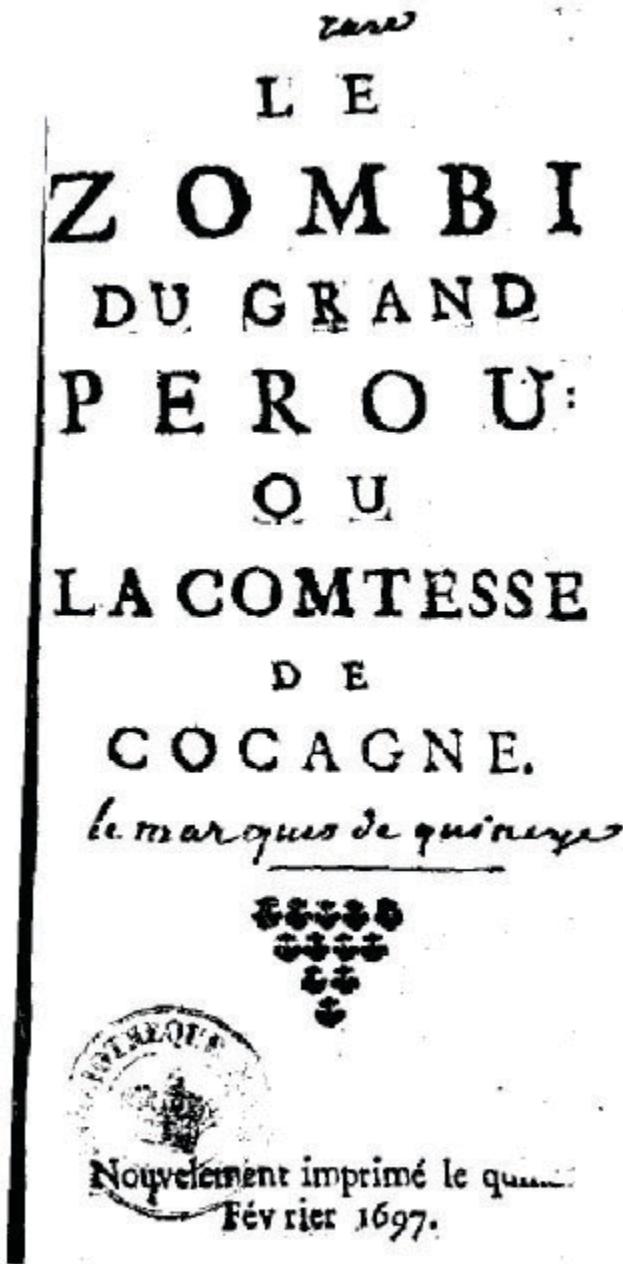
But zombies in such capitalistic/creative marketing and entertainment ventures have almost nothing to do with zombies (*zonbi yo*) in Haitian history and culture. They reflect a great deal more about American “sociophobics” and profit motives than about Afro-Caribbean culture.⁵ Though we know that the idea of the zombie was most notably brought from Haiti to the United States by American literati like Zora Neale Hurston and William Seabrook—and by returning marines (most of whom were not fluent in [Haitian Creole](#)) during and just after the first U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915–1934)—we know much less about whence the Caribbean idea of the zombie originally derived.⁶ This chapter explores the African origins of Haiti’s zombic culture, looking in particular at the likeliest West and/or Central African influences on one of the most haunting features of Caribbean life and worldview.

Several theories have been advanced as to the origins of the word [zonbi](#) (pl.: *zonbi yo*) in Haitian Creole and, by extension, the deepest roots of zombic culture in the Caribbean or Africa. At a 2015 conference on zombies at Duke University, for example, Patrick Sylvain, a Boston-based Haitian Vodou priest and scholar, argued that the term’s etymology could be traced to the Native American [Taino](#) word [zemi](#) (spirit). The American anthropologist of Kongo culture Wyatt MacGaffey disagreed, attributing the term to the Kikongo word *nzambi* (spirit or god). Elizabeth McAlister seems to agree with MacGaffey about the Kongo roots of one particular aspect of Haitian zombic culture, offering that the [zonbi astral](#), about which she has so marvelously written, derives at least in part “from Kongolese religious thought.”⁷ We will briefly explore these possibilities, but first let us take an etymological journey into the heart of zombieland.

The Zombie and the Casanova

Dubbed, for his legendary libertinage “The Casanova of the Seventeenth Century,”⁸ [Pierre-Corneille Blessebois](#) (1646–1700) was the first European writer to ever use the word *zombi* in print. It appears throughout his 1697 novel [Le zombi du Grand Pérou ou La Comtesse de Cocagne](#), his twelfth and last publication. A native of Verneuil, Normandy, Blessebois changed his given first name, “Paul-Alexis,” to “Pierre-Corneille” in 1660 and renounced his Protestant faith.⁹ He was a mysterious personage who was eventually arrested for arson in Alençon, having torched his own mother’s house in an effort to bilk an insurance company. Though subsequently confined and presumably shackled in prison, he managed to entice a wealthy aristocratic woman named Marthe Le Hayer to fall madly in love with him and not only post his bail but open her bank account to her paramour. Once liberated, the gallivanting arsonist quickly pillaged Le Hayer’s fortune and scurried off, for which Blessebois was again arrested. He was sentenced to banishment in the French Caribbean slave plantation colony of Guadalupe, as “an invalid,” in 1686.¹⁰

Shortly after arriving in Guadalupe, Blessebois was auctioned off as an indentured servant to one of the island’s wealthiest planters, Monsieur Dupont, and it did not take long before the exile’s libertine excesses and occultism landed him once again before a magistrate. In 1690, the colony’s royal court reached a verdict against Blessebois, probably for the crime of [necromancy](#).¹¹ He was found guilty and received a sentence that required him to “publicly acknowledge the crime by appearing half-naked, torch in hand before the Church and the palace door, asking pardon before God, the King and Justice, on pain of being hung and strangled on the second offense.”¹² The court’s deliberations had actually begun in 1688, and by the time the verdict was handed down, Blessebois had, unsurprisingly, vanished. What became of him after that is unknown. Fitting into the genre of romantic eroticism, *Le zombi du Grand Pérou* would be republished anonymously seven years later in France and would be attributed to Blessebois in 1829.¹³



Inner title leaf of the first edition of Blessebois's classic 1697 zombie novel. | [Blessebois's *Le zombi du Grand Perrou*](https://gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque_nationale_de_France) by gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France is in [the public domain](#).

What kinds of zombies are portrayed in Blessebois's book? Hailed by Guillaume Apollinaire

as the first French Caribbean novel,¹⁴ *Le zombi du Grand Pérou* also offers the first historical glimpse of just what a zombie was in Guadeloupe, or anywhere else in the Caribbean. So it is of considerable importance to the central question raised in this chapter: Where do zombies come from? According to Doris Garraway: “In portraying the creolized spirit world as a palimpsest of tropes of mixed cultural origin . . . Blessebois’s text forces the modern reader to reexamine assumptions about the meanings and derivation of zombie beliefs in the Caribbean.”¹⁵

The earliest examination of zombic derivation in Blessebois is that of **Marc de Montifaud** (1845–1912), the nom de plume of **Marie-Amélie Chartroule de Montifaud**. In her preface to the nineteenth-century edition of *Le zombi du Grand Pérou* (*Notice sur les harems noirs ou les mœurs galantes aux colonies*), she alludes to, and ultimately rejects, the possibility of Kongolese cornerstones of early Afro-Caribbean zombic culture. Montifaud opines that Blessebois’s “Zombi is quite different. This imaginary personage on which rests the rather vague intrigue of Blessebois’s novel, is nothing other . . . than the vulgar Revenant of our Breton peasants.” Montifaud also argues that Blessebois derived some of his zombic ideas from Paul Scarron’s 1652–1657 novel *Le Roman comique*. A main character is a mistress who receives a potion that she believes makes her invisible, but it does not. Scarron drew upon a rich tradition of the trope of the “invisible mistress” in golden age Spanish literature.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the **revenant** of French folklore found a receptive audience among the enslaved Africans in Guadeloupe who sacrificed animals following funeral services so that the recently deceased would not return to haunt the living, or that they would not “do the zombi.”¹⁷ Moreover, African beliefs “often were implanted in the spirit of some colonists,” so the earliest notion of the zombie in the Caribbean was already quite hybridized. And, as explored later in this chapter, this notion most likely picked up layers of valences as history continued to unfold.¹⁸

Though there is no evidence that Montifaud had ever been to Africa or the Caribbean, she did research African religions. Her reading of Blessebois is insightful on many levels. The notion of the zombie in Blessebois’s novel is indeed “rather vague,” and hybrid undercurrents in the book indicate that although the term *zombie* did not originate in France, most of the zombic ideas in the novel did. The “maker” of the zombie, after all, is a white Frenchman (Blessebois, with a rather obvious pseudonym, “Monsieur C_____”), and the zombie herself is described as being “the color of snow.”¹⁹ Montifaud asserts that Blessebois’s zombie is based entirely upon ideas drawn from European occultism. But these ideas resonated meaningfully with Central African funerary customs in the Caribbean.

Unfortunately, Blessebois’s representation of the zombie provides us with little to no insight into African thought about the undead, so it is quite difficult to gauge here the possible African or Amerindian roots of the notion in the late-seventeenth-century Caribbean. Furthermore, the Breton revenant alluded to by Montifaud is not invisible, whereas Blessebois’s zombie is. And though invisibility is not elemental to the “living dead” kind of zombie in Haitian culture (**zonbi kò kadav**), “in the Creole of the lesser Antilles, however, the term *zombie* is commonly defined as ‘phantom,’ ‘ghost,’ or ‘errant soul’ and refers more specifically to malevolent yet largely invisible nocturnal spirits,” Garraway writes.²⁰ Enslaved Africans and Creoles only rarely enter Blessebois’s novel. When they do, we are given no sense of their understanding of

the ravaging zombie of Grand Pérou, though they seem to know what a zombie is and they are frightened by the creature. In one scene they act to protect their white “master,” the marquis, from “le zombi.”

Here is what one may glean about seventeenth-century zombic culture in the French Caribbean from the book: The story is semi-autobiographical, and the real identity of every character has been convincingly demonstrated by literary scholars. The narrator is none other than Blessebois himself, “Mr. C.,” whose reputation for dabbling in the occult preceded him to Guadeloupe. This seductive trait is what draws the Countess of Cocagne to him in the first place:

Good and evil are both at your command, and you ignite love and hatred with the same ease with which other people light a torch . . . you are a magician, and you have the Devil subjected to your command, and I ask of you some help from that art so that I may regain the Marquis’s affection.²¹

Portrayed as the sexually insatiable mistress of a wealthy plantation owner, the countess wishes to terrify her paramour into being less abusive and more amorous toward her. So she asks Mr. C. to make her invisible one night so that she can go on a rampage in the duke’s household, posing as the zombie of Grand Pérou.

Initially the sorcerer denies having such powers, but he soon realizes that he can gain sexual favors from the beautiful countess should he oblige her. So he pretends to have the mojo to empower her “to do the zombie.” She is gorgeous and lustful, after all, and Mr. C. is decidedly a lecher, as well as a necromancer, so this is a golden opportunity for him. But that is pretty much the extent of what zombification means in the novel: becoming invisible and thereby able to sneak into a house at night to terrify its occupants turbulently and noisily. There is no blood, no corporeal decay, no hunger for brains, no slave labor, no pending apocalypse. Just invisibility, violence, fear, and a lot of shattered plates and toppled furniture. The problem is that the countess, when “doing the zombie,” is actually visible but does not realize it. On one of the two occasions that she storms into the marquis’s mansion, she becomes so violent that she nearly kills a man named Laforest, who is actually Mr. C.’s accomplice.

Later in the novel another form of zombi is introduced, the *zombi de ronde* (round zombie), with whom the allegedly nymphomaniacal countess also seeks an intimate encounter. This, once again, spurs her to seek out the services of Mr. C., of course, and the libidinous sorcerer obliges and arranges for this to happen. He instructs the countess to strip naked and to keep her eyes shut while lying down on the banks of the Grand Pérou River. In a dissolute turn of events, in a saga already replete with debauchery, two of Mr. C.’s accomplices arrive to sexually ravage the countess on the riverbank, and they prick her buttocks with pins. She believes that all of this is the work of the undead and not of real, living men, that this is what having sex with round zombies is actually like.

Thus, the zombie takes multiple forms in Blessebois’s novel, none of them closely related to either the zombi of Haitian culture or the ghoulish darling of American cinema and popular culture, as Sarah Lauro writes: “There are no soulless embodied zombies in this text, though the word is used at various points to mean ‘un fantôme, un esprit, un sorcier,’ as the author of

the introduction writes.” Lauro delineates these forms as “spirits that walk around having left their bodies, resting elsewhere, charms that render the person’s body invisible, and maleficent entities that pester and can lead one to do evil,” as well as “flying zombies that also carry torches.”²²

“Yet,” adds Garraway, “the particular powers attached to the zombie motif in Blessebois are distinct from those of European traditions and arguably bear the imprint of other belief systems, not least because of the zombie name.”²³ Over and above any possible linguistic corollaries in the Kikongo dialect, there are *ideas* in Kongolesé religious thought that seem to resonate with some of the forms that the zombie takes in Blessebois. Despite Montifaud’s rejection of this possibility, it is worth reconsidering the question here. Although Christianity took hold in Central Africa even before the transatlantic slave trade reached the western Congo Basin, it is likely that the notion of raising the dead was already in circulation in the region. In Kikongo, the word *tumbulia* precisely means that: raising the dead. Another zombic-like notion is reflected in the term *vonda o tulu*, which means “to throw into a deathlike sleep.” Someone in such a state is said to be *fwa o tulu*, “in a deathlike sleep.”²⁴ Also, in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue (which would become the independent Republic of Haiti in 1804), Kikongo was widely spoken and the word for “death” was essentially the same, gallicized as *foua*.²⁵ These valences resonate with at least one form of Blessebois’s zombie, the *zonbi* of Haitian folklore, and even with the zombie of Hollywood. But before claiming this is definitive evidence of key Central African influences on early Caribbean zombic culture, we should consider the ethnic composition of the African population of Guadeloupe in the late seventeenth century.

Slavery in the French Caribbean in the Seventeenth Century

Considering the ethnic background of enslaved Africans in seventeenth-century Guadeloupe sheds light on the etymology of *zombi* as Blessebois understood it and early zombic culture in the colonial French Caribbean. Blessebois seems to have brought his zombic ideas with him from Europe, but the word *zombi* was not European and almost certainly African. Unfortunately, “before 1714 . . . we have only fragmentary information about French slaving activities,” as James Pritchard, David Eltis, and David Richardson demonstrate.²⁶ By one estimate, most of the over 35,000 enslaved Africans shipped by the French across the Atlantic in the seventeenth century derived from the Bight of Benin. Four historical factors further complicate efforts to understand African ethnicity in seventeenth-century Guadeloupe:

1. Many slaves brought to the French Caribbean colonies were delivered by British and Dutch ships.
2. French raids on British colonies were the source of many slaves toiling on French sugar plantations.

3. Many people enslaved by the French were purchased from British, Danish, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish American colonies.
4. Most slaves arriving in Guadeloupe had first been brought to Martinique, which was the leading destination of enslaved people brought to the French Caribbean during this period.²⁷



Dead and dying African slaves being tossed into the Atlantic as a storm gathers. J. M. W. Turner, *The Slave Ship*, 1840. | [Slaves tossed overboard during a storm at sea](#) by [J. M. W. Turner](#) is in [the public domain](#).

In any case, an estimated 5,172 slaves were brought from Africa to Guadeloupe between 1640 and 1700, where by then the total enslaved population was roughly 6,855.²⁸ Which part of Africa they hailed from cannot be said with any precision, but we do know that during this period “over half of the French slave vessels sailed by far the shortest of the triangular trade’s roundtrips – the one via Senegambia.”²⁹ *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, an immeasurably important historical project directed by Eltis, records only seven slave ships arriving in Guadeloupe between 1652 and 1683. Two of these ships offloaded slaves from the Bight of Benin, two from “Senegambia and Offshore Atlantic,” and one each from the Gold Coast, the “Bight of Biafra and Gulf of Guinea Islands,” and “West Central Africa and St. Helena.”

As for Martinique, between 1655 and 1693 twenty-five slave ships arrived, ten from the “Bight of Benin and Gulf of Guinea Islands,” four from the Bight of Biafra, three each from “Other Africa” and “West Central Africa and St. Helena,” two each from Senegambia and the Gold Coast, and one from “Windward.”³⁰

Since throughout the early history of transatlantic slavery Martinique was the transferring hub for more than half of the slaves in Guadeloupe, it is reasonable to combine the shipping figures of the two colonies to enhance our consideration of African culture and ethnicity in Guadeloupe at the time Blessebois wrote *Le Zombi de Grand Pérou*. Thus, of a total of thirty-two recorded slave ships that arrived, twenty-five carried victims of slavery from these places: the Bight of Benin (twelve), the Bight of Biafra (six), Senegambia (four), and the Gold Coast (three). During this period, only four slave ships on record arrived in Martinique or Guadeloupe with victims from “West Central Africa and St. Helena,” and still fewer ships arrived with slaves from the Windward Islands or “Other Africa.” In all, between 1651 and 1700 the inventories count 3676 enslaved Africans brought directly to Guadeloupe and 15,427 to Martinique. Given that a considerable majority of ships that brought enslaved people across the Atlantic had abducted them in West Africa, it is safe to say that most slaves in seventeenth-century Guadeloupe were West African, though a significant minority were Central African.

For the entire French Caribbean, meanwhile, slave ship inventories in the seventeenth century report that 29,042 African slaves were transported to the colonies, with their regions of embarkation broken down as follows:³¹

Senegambia	11075	38%
Bight of Benin	9033	31%
Bight of Biafra	3607	13%
West Central Africa	3070	11%
Gold Coast	1106	4%
Sierra Leone	406	1%

This brief analysis of the early history of the transatlantic slave trade in Guadeloupe has clear ramifications for any consideration of the question “Where do zombies come from?” Most obviously, it tips the balance in favor of a West African, over a Central African, origin for the word *zombi*. Yet, interestingly enough, during the entire two-day zombie conference at Duke University, only Central African and Native American origins of the word were offered. However, the argument for Central African roots of the word *zombie* should be brought into question by the ethnic demographics of seventeenth-century Guadeloupe’s enslaved population, which indicate that only 11 percent of the colony’s slaves derived from West Central Africa and St. Helena. Furthermore, between 1671 and 1685, no slave ships arrived in the French Caribbean from West Central Africa, meaning that the influence of Kikongo or other Central African languages on the emergence of Creole language in the French Caribbean was minimal.

The predominance of West African slaves in seventeenth-century Martinique and Guadeloupe aside, caution is warranted before embarking on an etymological exploration of the term *zombie* there, because these kidnapped Africans “must have come from extremely diverse backgrounds.”³² Still, during the last three decades of the century, as the French became more active in the slave trade and decreased their reliance on Dutch shipments, “there came a pronounced shift north in the provenance of slaves sent to French colonies.” As a result, during this period some 80 percent of slaves exported to Guadeloupe and other French Caribbean possessions came from the Bight of Benin. The vast majority of them departed from Ouidah and Senegambia, and most others departed from Saint-Louis and Gorée.³³ Though West Central Africa would, over time, become the point of embarkation for most slaves traded by the French throughout the colonial era—an estimated 1.25 million, or “one-eighth of the total traffic”³⁴—in the seventeenth century this was far from being the case. We should thus look to West Africa for the etymological root of the word *zombie*.

African Languages in Seventeenth-Century Guadeloupe

By 1700, some 10,000 enslaved Africans had been imported to Guadeloupe,³⁵ the majority shipped from Ouidah and Senegambia. What were the principal languages spoken among this population? The answer to this question will shed light on the original meaning of the word *zombie* as understood in the seventeenth-century Caribbean, particularly in Guadeloupe. At the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade in West Africa, the port town of Ouidah was part of the [Kingdom of Hueda](#) (hence its name, also spelled Whydah, c. 1580–1728), and the predominant language of the region was (and remains today) a cluster of the Ewe, [Gen \(Gbe\)](#), [Aja](#), and Fon dialects ([EGAF](#)), which has been spoken there for centuries.³⁶

Located on the [Bight of Benin](#), because of its centrality to the transatlantic slave trade, this part of Africa came to be known among Europeans as the “Slave Coast,” and by 1727 it had been subsumed into the Kingdom of Dahomey. So it is with the EGAF language group that any attempt to understand the etymology of the word *zombie* must begin. This is not to deny other possible sources of the word, nor to gloss over likely multicultural, evolutionary layers of valences to zombic culture over the course of colonial Caribbean history, but in light of seventeenth-century slave demographics, the term probably originated from this language cluster in Dahomey.

Through her critical reading of *Le zombi du Grand Pérou* and a careful consideration of Blessebois’s representation of the zombie, Garraway offers several compelling suggestions for African etymological sources of this “frightful spirit entity in the colonial imagination.”³⁷ Rejecting as unlikely the suggestion that the term derives from an elision of the article and noun *les ombres* (the shadows) in French, Garraway lists the following African terms as likelier sources of *zombie*, as it is spelled in French:

- [Nvumbi](#) – an Angolan word for “body without a soul”

- [Ndzumbi](#) – a Mitsogho (Gabon) word for “corpse”
- [Mrumbi](#) – Kikongo for “‘inner invisible man’ or ‘soul’”
- [Nzambi](#) – Kikongo for god or spirit
- [Zanbibi](#) – [Ewe Fon](#) for “night bogeyman,” deriving from “‘zan’ meaning night, and ‘bibi’, meaning ‘ghost’ or ‘bogeyman.’”³⁸

Lauro’s “hypothesis is that the unnamed ancestral myth closest to what we today consider a ‘zombie’ hailed from West Central Africa, where, in close proximity, there is a region called Zombo, a deity called Nzambi, and a Congo practice of creating bottle fetishes called Zumbi.”³⁹ Both Garraway and Lauro affirm that the term *zombi* likely has a multivalent creolized root system that was inflected not just via African etymology but also via Native American spirituality and European demonology, for “at least three distinct occult systems present in the colonial Caribbean (European, Aja-Fon, and Kongo) could have interacted” in the emergence of the idea.⁴⁰ Though Garraway offers a more nuanced reading of history than Lauro and lends more credence to West African zombic stimuli, I believe that they both overestimate the Central African influences on the earliest linguistic iteration of the zombie, as my deeper explorations of African ethnicity in seventeenth-century Guadeloupe suggest.⁴¹

Besides the revenant, some European layers may have been introduced much later, however, while the rapid and tragic decline of the Taino population surely compromised any Native American influence on zombic culture in the colonial Caribbean. At any rate, there is really nothing about a *zemi* (Taino concept of “spirit”) that would seem to be part of the zombie. So we arrive at the very beginning here and advance a West African word, *zanbibi*, as the most likely etymological source of the word *zombie* in Afro-Caribbean culture, although other African dialects certainly helped ensure the emergence of the region’s zombic culture, one upon which additional forms of signification would be heaped over the course of the colonial period.

The Zombie’s Haitian Debut

It is widely presumed that the idea of the zombie has its origins in Haiti, but judging from textual historical evidence, that is not entirely true. Indeed, it was nearly a hundred years after Blessebois first wrote about a zombie in Guadeloupe that the word first appeared in any French text written in or referencing Saint-Domingue. The word was surely in circulation earlier in the colony, however, as at least two places carried the name Zombi: “Trou Zombi, in the Parish of Cavaillon, and Boucan Zombi, in the Parish of Arcahaie.”⁴² But these place names didn’t appear in print, as far as I know, until 1829, and I’ve uncovered no explanation as to exactly why or when they received these names. (Some ethnographic fieldwork might help answer this question.) By 1791, furthermore, there was a trading ship that had been

christened “Zombie” ported in Cape Haitian, Saint-Domingue’s most important city, which sailed to Salem, Massachusetts. The sloop was then steered to nearby Beverly by Captain Knight, per the “Marine Intelligence” section of the July 21, 1791 edition of the *Salem Gazette*. A shipping announcement published seven years later in the *Antigua Gazette* informs that Le Zombi was “a French privateer Schooner . . . of 8 guns and 72 men.”⁴³

Though rarely, if ever, cited by scholars writing on the history of the zombie, the first instance of the word that I have found published in French concerning Saint-Domingue appears in a short travelogue written by a certain M. de C... and published in the *Mercur de France* in 1788. The author recounts his friendship with one of the few remaining Native Americans in the colony’s north, a place called Limbe. Okano was a Taino chief who was quite popular among the local African slaves, but one day he simply disappeared. M. de C... was paying a visit to Okano’s compound, and though “his hammock was hanging and his calabashes were all in order,” the chief was nowhere to be found. A few days later, the Frenchman returned to find “the air filled with diverse noises over the death of this unhappy Indian. The Blacks who loved him lost themselves in conjecture. Some held that zombies had taken him; others held that he had killed himself; while many believed, more plausibly, that he had been devoured by sharks or caimans.”⁴⁴

Whereas the footnote in M. de C...’s original text is very short, it is curiously expanded in an English translation that appeared in September of 1788 in *Universal Magazine*: “The Zombies make a great figure in the superstition of the Negroes. Like the *Larvae* of the ancients, they are supposed to be spirits of dead wicked men, that are permitted to wander, and torment the living.”⁴⁵ That zombies might kill is as interesting in this footnote as is the comparison to the *Larvae*, who in ancient Greek and Roman mythology were “the ghostly souls of those who had lived evil lives.” These “hideous looking creatures” were “constantly hungry”; the *Larvae* (more commonly known as *Lemures*) “roamed at night searching for food.”⁴⁶ Though this sounds very much like a zombie, living an evil life was not at all requisite to becoming one in Haiti, so I doubt that it was in Saint-Domingue either.

Writing in the colony at around the same time as M. de C..., in 1789 [Médéric Louis Moreau de Saint-Méry](#) uses the term *zombi*, in passing, in the first volume of his famous [Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue](#), toward the end of a section titled “The Creole Slave.”⁴⁷ This section’s title is somewhat misleading, as there is much discussion about Africa and Africans here (“Creole” was a term used for enslaved peoples of African descent who were born and raised in the Caribbean.) Moreau also seems somewhat lost as to whether he is writing about Creole or African slaves. This section of the text is historically significant for containing what is likely the first reference to Vodou in any published Francophone source from Saint-Domingue. Moreau uses the spelling *vaudou* for the name of a serpent cult, its members, and their dance, discussing at some length a communal dance ritual whose purpose is the veneration of a snake.

For our purposes, it is deeply meaningful that Moreau’s solitary mention of the zombie is not contained in his discussion of Vodou but in his discussion of African sexuality. Following his description of the *vaudou* cult, Moreau covers forms of African and Creole dance, both

religious and secular, before reductively and racistly explaining that slaves in Saint-Domingue would stop at nothing to pursue a sexual encounter:

The black who contains in his veins the fire of a scorching climate goes sometimes great distances to carry his desires to his beloved. There is no obstacle whatsoever that his passion cannot overcome; neither the fatigue of that day nor the fear of next; nor pathways, nor flooding rivers; nothing can stop him.

We read here how sexually desirous slaves would signal their needs for potential paramours by whistling before venturing out into the fearsome darkness in search of their presumably likewise keen partners. It is in this context that Moreau refers to dreadful supernatural creatures that lurk in the night, like the zombie. He writes that somehow even this fear cannot deter the “lustful and lecherous” enslaved Black person.

Though Moreau insightfully writes of the African origins of the so-called *vaudou* cult, suggesting that it derives from the Arada people from Ouidah, he does not do so regarding the zombi. Here, in fact, he says little, but what he does write is of great importance, especially in a single footnote that defines *zombi*: “Creole word that means *spirit, revenant*.”⁴⁸ One can perhaps surmise from this that the African origins of the word were not clear to Moreau, though he implies that the term was widely known in Saint-Domingue at the time. He offers four things of import to our inquiry: 1) that the word *zombi* was “Creole” and not African, 2) that the zombi was both a spirit and a revenant, 3) that the zombi was to be feared mostly at night, and 4) that, in addition to the zombi, Black people in Saint-Domingue “who are otherwise courageous, fear ghosts and werewolves.”

Thus, the zombi in Saint-Domingue was a feared creature that took the form of the spirit of someone returned from the dead and was evidently more active at night than during the daytime. This fearsomeness and association with death and the night further suggest that the Fon concept of *zanbibi* has been the most influential African notion on early Caribbean zombic culture. In addition to multiple West African inflections, there might also have been Central African influences on the emergence of the zombie in Haiti, but they were ancillary. However, these influences have surely added layers of meaning over time; this is my central concluding argument later in the chapter. As will be discussed at length in Chapter Eight, this is especially relevant to the notion of *zonbi astral* in Haitian Vodou, which is basically the soul or part of the soul of a dead person that is trapped in a vessel and put to work by a sorcerer.

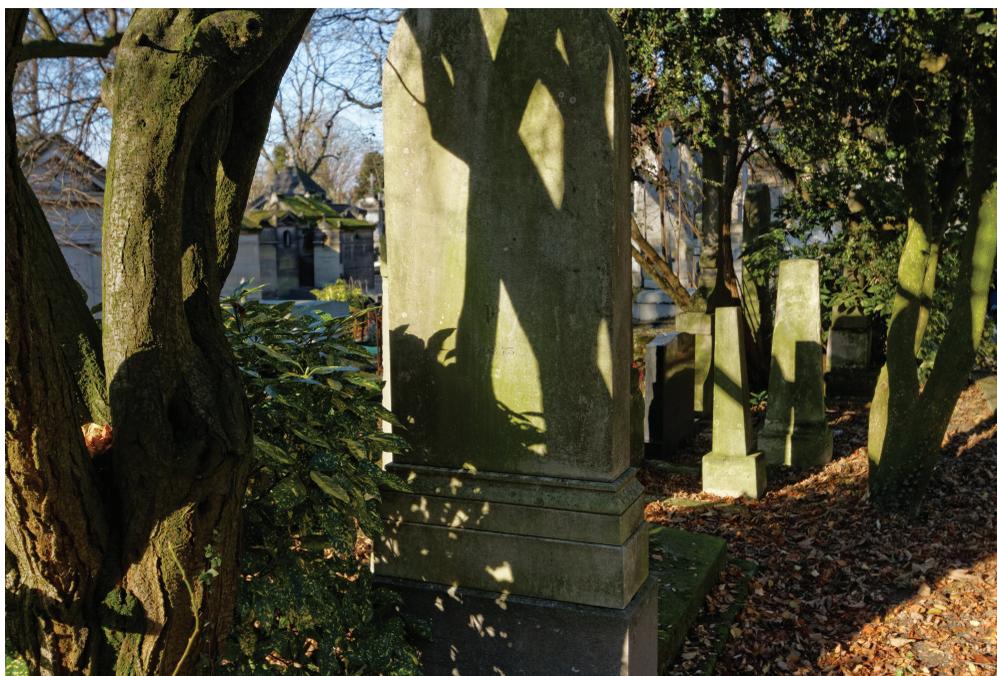
It is important to add that culture is very complicated and does not transfer or diffuse in any uniform fashion. The pioneering scholar of the “survival” of African cultural forms in the Americas, and one of the first to formally research Haitian Vodou, Melville J. Herskovits,⁴⁹ has been criticized by Ira Lowenthal, a later anthropologist whose experience in Haiti is much deeper. For Lowenthal, Herskovits presumes that culture is “a collection of traits, each of which ‘looks’ either European or African. That these elements are integrated into a meaningful system of belief and ritual, and that this integration may itself be the most significant issue of the historical process underlying Haitian culture, are secondary considerations in this type of analysis.”⁵⁰ Following Lowenthal, Karen Richman and I write:

Moreover, the elements purported to merge in the syncretic process are too often

imagined in scholarly discourse to have been parts of implausibly stable, uncontested, and coherent wholes before certain of their elements were selected for syncretic re-combination; more recent historiographies of relevant European, African, and American cultures have revealed this position to be misleading.⁵¹

Lowenthal was a student of the great Caribbeanist anthropologist Sydney Mintz, so it is unsurprising that he would take umbrage at Herskovits's notion of culture and neglect of the complexities of the processes of "creolization" in the Americas, which Mintz had theorized brilliantly and alternatively in his 1976 book with Richard Price.⁵²

Such theoretical debates aside, had the term *zombie* originally carried clear Central African elucidations in Saint-Domingue, it would surely have made its way into Louis-Narcisse Baudry des Lozières's French-Kikongo dictionary, *Dictionnaire ou Vocabulaire Congo*. According to James Sweet, this is "one of only a handful of surviving African-language vocabularies in the Americas writ large, and the only known example from Haiti."⁵³ This remarkable thirty-nine-page document is nested in Baudry's 1803 travelogue *Second voyage à Louisiane*, in which the exiled French slaveholder recalls having learned enough Kikongo to converse with some of his African slaves while living in Saint-Domingue. The word *zombi* is simply not there (though *zoba* is, spelled *ioba*), nor anything like it. Neither are the ideas that Blessebois and Moreau worked with. To be sure, *ndoki* and *nzambi* have entries in Baudry's dictionary, but there is nothing to suggest that they were related to anything like the zombie as it has historically been understood in Haiti.⁵⁴



Cemetery in France. | [A cemetery in France](#) by [Pierre-Yves Beaudouin](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

In their discussions of the zombie, Blessebois and Moreau both seem to have in mind the revenant of Breton folklore, whether by way of cultural comparison or literary imagination. So we may reasonably surmise that there has always been some measure of European influence on Caribbean zombic culture. In comparing Blessebois and Moreau, in an effort to understand the zombie's Caribbean origins, it is, once again, important to consider the ethnic composition of the enslaved population that surrounded the two French writers. Blessebois's Guadeloupe of the late seventeenth century had a majority West African slave population, whereas by the time Moreau wrote the word *zombie* in Saint-Domingue, most of the slaves there were Central African. The idea of the zombie thus surely reflected much greater Kongolese influence in Moreau's world than in Blessebois's.⁵⁵ Yet neither of them writes of any African religious influence on the notion, only reflecting African fears of the zombie. Therefore, besides the word *zombi*, the key similarities in how this idea is treated in the two texts are the themes of darkness and fear, which are both key elements of the *zanbibi*. Given the historical evidence, it appears that the *zanbibi* was the first Caribbean zombie, infused with Breton ideas of the revenant. The foundational notion from Senegambia also surely became hybridized amid the dozens of African dialects and ideas about souls, the dead, dying, and their return then circulating in the Caribbean. Could one of them have been *zoba*?

Conclusion

Let us return to the man with the empty head in Zaire. In a previous section, I stated my case that the Fon word *zanbibi* is most likely the thickest etymological taproot of the zombie. And yet, how is it that *zanbibi*'s first syllable might have gotten linguistically supplanted by the long o in *zombi*, whereas African words in Haitian Creole more often contain alterations to consonants and not vowels? I think here, for instance, of *bunda*, which derives from the Kikongo *mvunda* (both meaning large, round buttocks), while the widespread Bantu word for person, *muntu*, has kept the vowel sound in Creole's *moun*. Interestingly enough, none of the African terms, whether from the Fon, Yoruba, or Kikongo, that have been reasonably suggested as the source of the word *zombi* in Creole has a long o in its first syllable. This is where the man with the empty head might come in, for he is *zoba*, or at least he was in 1988, when he silently, yet repeatedly, distracted me from the Subbuteo matches on those Saturday afternoons in a Central African village.

Finally, a word on speed. At the Duke University conference on zombies, Maria Pramaggiore delivered a wonderful paper exploring the question of when the zombie sped up—how is it, in other words, that the sauntering, catatonic creature of the early films *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* morphed into the frenetic, bloodthirsty acrobat portrayed in recent video games and in films like *Resident Evil*, *House of the Dead*, and *World War Z*?⁵⁶ I conclude here by flipping this question on its empty head: The first zombie on record was in fact fast, the one described in Blessebois's classic novel at the end of the seventeenth century. One

hundred years later, Moreau's account says nothing about the zombie's speed or mobility, but subsequently, and through the earliest zombie films, we're gripped by a persistently slow creature, perhaps one whose pace has been slackened by the zoba. This may be a speculative conclusion, but it should be confirmed that, like virtually all elements of Afro-Creole cultures in the Americas, the zombie surely has a multitude of linguistic, agentival, and religious origins.

Notes

1. In Lingala, *ndoki* signifies sorcery in general or an individual sorcerer. In Zaire in the 1980s, it had also been adopted in the vernacular as something “amazing,” “far out,” or “awesome.” [↵](#)
2. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor, 1959, 138. [↵](#)
3. http://www.ebay.com/itm/V-SYNDICATE-MIDNIGHT-ZOMBIE-GRINDER-CARD-TOBACCO-HERB-SPICE-CREDIT-CARD-/251927975005?pt=LH_DefaultDomain_0&hash=item3aa813d45d, last accessed August 10, 2015. [↵](#)
4. Daniel W. Drezner, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015, 2-3. [↵](#)
5. David Scruton defines sociophobics as “the study of human fears as they occur and are experienced in the context of the sociocultural systems humans have created,” like, for instance, the culture of zombie films. David L. Scruton, “The Anthropology of an Emotion,” in David L. Scruton (ed.), *Sociophobics: The Anthropology of Fear*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986, 7-49, 10. On the sociophobics of zombie films in particular, see Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., *Back from the Dead: Remakes of the Romero Zombie Films as Markers of Their Times*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011. We return at length to sociophobics in Chapter Twelve of this book. [↵](#)
6. On the first U.S. military occupation of Haiti, see Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of Imperialism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. Renda (19) observes that the American obsession with the zombie began in 1929 with the publication of William Seabrook's bestseller *The Magic Island*. “In the next decade and a half, Ethel Mermen sang ‘Katie Went to Haiti,’ Edna Taft wrote *A Puritan in Voodoo Land*, Orson Wells's popular radio show, *The Shadow*, featured Haitian characters and settings, and Hollywood served up films like *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie*.” While Seabrook's sensationalist travelogue did indeed contribute to the emergence of a veritable zombie craze in the United States, the word and the idea were already known in this country, as Ann Kordas demonstrates. Ann Kordas, “New South, New Immigrants, New Women, New Zombies,” in

Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (eds.), *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Traditions*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011, 15–30. Seabrook, it should be noted, was not formally involved in the U.S. military occupation of Haiti, but the occupation brought Haiti to his attention and made his visit there in 1927 possible. He had previously written fantastic stories about Islam and West Africa, where he actually engaged in a stint of cannibalism, so he was predisposed to seek out and find the fantastic in Haiti, even without speaking Creole. Also on Seabrook, see Anonymous, “Mumble Jumble,” *Time* 36, 11, September 9, 1940. Three former Marines who authored accounts of Vodou in Haiti were Faustus Wirkus, A. J. Burks, and John Houston Craige. More on this in Chapter Seven. [↵](#)

7. Elizabeth McAlister, “A Sorcerer’s Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti,” in Donald J. Cosentino (ed.), *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995, 310. [↵](#)
8. Frédéric Lachèvre, *Le Casanova du XVIIe siècle: Pierre Corneille Blessebois*, Paris: Champion, 1927. [↵](#)
9. Doris Garraway suggests that it was not until 1687 that Blessebois denounced his faith, though it is certainly possible, given his riotous exploits, that he did so on more than one occasion. Doris L. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 174. [↵](#)
10. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
11. Marc de Montifaud, “Notice sur les harems noirs ou les moeurs galantes aux colonies,” in Pierre-Corneille Blessebois, *Le zombi du Grand Pérou*, Bruxelles: LaCroix, 1877, i–xxxiii, xxiv. [↵](#)
12. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 174–175. [↵](#)
13. *Ibid.*, 175. [↵](#)
14. Guillaume Apollinaire, *L’Œuvre de Pierre-Corneille Blessebois*, Paris: Bibliothèque des Curieux, 1921. [↵](#)
15. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 191. [↵](#)
16. On this earlier tradition, see Frederick A. de Armas, “Invisible Mistress,” in Janet Pérez and Marueen Ihrle (eds.), *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Spanish Literature*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 304–306; and Frederick A. de Armas, *The Invisible Mistress: Aspects of Feminism and Fantasy in the Golden Age*, Charlottesville, VA: Biblioteca Siglio de Oro, 1976. On Scarron, see Frederick A. de Armas, *Paul Scarron*, New York: Twayne, 1972. [↵](#)
17. Without attribution, though placed in quotation marks, here Montifaud lifts an entire passage about Kongolese funerary traditions from Jacques-Paul Minge’s *Encyclopedie*

théologique, Tome 10: *Dictionnaire universel de mythologie ancienne et moderne*, Paris: Ateliers Catholiques, 1855, 267. Montifaud's introductory essay to Blessebois's classic was first published in 1877. Montifaud, xx–xxi. [↵](#)

18. Montifaud, “Notice sur les harems noirs ou les moeurs galantes aux colonies,” xx. [↵](#)
19. Blessebois, *Le zombi du Grand-Pérou*, 16. [↵](#)
20. *Ibid.*, 179. [↵](#)
21. *Ibid.*, 9. [↵](#)
22. Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and the Living Dead*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 35. [↵](#)
23. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 181. [↵](#)
24. W. Holman Bentley, *Appendix to the Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language: As Spoken at San Salvador the Ancient Capital of the Old Kongo Empire*, London: The Baptist Missionary Society, 1887, 794. [↵](#)
25. Louis-Narcisse Baudry des Lozières, *Second voyage à Louisiane faisant suite au premier de l'auteur de 1794 à 1798*, Volume 2, Paris, 1803, 133. I'm very grateful to James Sweet for bringing this interesting text to my attention and for sharing his work on Baudry. [↵](#)
26. James Pritchard, David Eltis, and David Richardson, “The Significance of the French Slave Trade to the Evolution of the French Atlantic World before 1760,” in David Eltis and David Richardson (eds.), *Extending the Frontier: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008, 205. [↵](#)
27. *Ibid.*, 215. [↵](#)
28. *Ibid.*, 209. [↵](#)
29. *Ibid.* 220. [↵](#)
30. Eltis, David, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, www.slavevoyages.org, last accessed May 6, 2015. [↵](#)
31. Pritchard, Eltis, and Richardson, “The Significance of the French Slave Trade,” 222. [↵](#)
32. *Ibid.*, 221. [↵](#)
33. *Ibid.*, 221–223. [↵](#)
34. David Geggus, “The French Slave Trade: An Overview,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 58, 1, 2001, 121–122. Geggus alludes to the “old question” as to why EWE FON and GBE

- speakers had the greatest influence on the emergence of Vodou, “whose vocabulary are most evident in the lexicon and pantheon of Haitian Vodoo” (32). [↵](#)
35. Philip D. Curtin, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972, 81. [↵](#)
 36. I am grateful to J. Lorand Matory for explaining this linguistic nuance to me. It’s nice to have such learned friends. [↵](#)
 37. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 180. See also Sophie Houdard, “Les Figures de l’auteur-escroc chez Paul-Alexis Blessebois dit Pierre Corneille Blessebois (1646?-1697?),” *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques*39, 2007, 141–159. [↵](#)
 38. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 181. Although she doesn’t entertain the possibility that *zombie* might derive from the French *sans vie* (“without life”), this additional European etymology has been suggested by Christopher Moreman and Cory Rushton, but I don’t find it terribly compelling and I doubt that Garraway would either. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton, “Introduction: Race, Colonialism, and the Evolution of the Zombie,” in Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (eds.), *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2011, 3. The Spanish Wikipedia entry for *zombies* offers a chart of possible African origins of the term that includes all the possibilities listed by Garraway and adds three more, the first two from Central Africa and the third from Yoruba: *nsumbi*, demon; *zombi*, resurrected dead; and *fumbi*, spirit. No Kikongo dictionary that I have seen contains an entry for the word *zombi*, so this bit of information is dubious. Meanwhile, the entry offers that in addition to Fon, the term *zan bibi* is also found in the Mina language. Anonymous, “[Zombi](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombi),” <https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombi>, last accessed July 28, 2015. The French Wikipedia entry states in its opening sentences that the Haitian Creole word *zonbi* derives from the Kimbundu and Kikongo terms *nzumbe* and *nzambé*. While not offering a chart, it does list most of the possibilities indicated in the Spanish entry. Anonymous, “[Zombie \(mort vivants\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombie_(mort_vivants)),” [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombie_\(mort_vivants\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombie_(mort_vivants)), last accessed July 28, 2015. The English language entry in Wikipedia is very cursory in its etymology, basically accepting the Central African thesis. Anonymous, “[Zombie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombie),” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombie>, last accessed July 28, 2015. Add to this Max Brooks’s suggestion, in his wildly popular *The Zombie Survival Guide*, “that the word ‘zombie’ originally comes from the Kimbundu word ‘nzúmbe,’ a term describing a dead person’s soul.” Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*, New York: Crown, 2003, 20. It is not clear that Brooks actually speaks Kimbundu. [↵](#)
 39. Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 38. [↵](#)
 40. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 182. [↵](#)

41. I believe that the Central African influences on the emergence of Caribbean zombic culture are also exaggerated in the most extensive linguistic interpretation of the question yet published: Hans-W. Ackerman and Jeanine Gauthier, "The Ways and Nature of the Zombi," *Journal of American Folklore* 104, 414, 1991, 466–494. While impressive and obviously carefully developed, this article is based almost entirely on secondary sources, including extensive citations of the rather dubious work of Wade Davis, and it provides the reader with no indication as to whether or not its authors were fluent in any African language or in Haitian Creole. Also, their fieldwork was limited to four interviews with paid informants. [↵](#)

42. Anonymous, *Tableau des paroisses de l'ancienne colonie de Saint-Domingue*, Paris: Imprimerie de C. Farey, 1829, 4, 6. Trou Zombi remains the name of the place in Haiti today, while Boucan Zombi seems to have, at some point, been abandoned as a place name. Near Petit Goâve, meanwhile, there seems to have been a location called Roche à Zombi, but there is no indication that this was known as a place name during the colonial era. [↵](#)

43. *Antigua Gazette*, November 20, 1798. Just below the announcement of *Le Zombi's* arrival in Antigua, the name of the ship is spelled *Le Zomby* and it is called "a French republican sloop of war." [↵](#)

44. M. de C... "Histoire d'Okana: Fragment d'un voyage à S. Domingue," *Mercure de France*, May 17, 1788. I thank James Sweet for bringing a later English translation of this article to my attention. [↵](#)

45. Anonymous, "The History of Okan: The Fragment of a Voyage to St. Domingo," *Universal Magazine*, September 1788. [↵](#)

46. Ernest L. Abel, *Death Gods: An Encyclopedia of the Rulers, Evil Spirits, and Geographies of the Dead*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009, 94–95. [↵](#)

47. Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue, Tome Premier*, Philadelphia, 1797, 39–67. In the impressive collection of primary source documents that Moreau collected in the Caribbean while preparing to write his influential three-volume *Description*, the likeliest place where the word *zombi* might appear is in his folder titled "Poisons," but the word does not appear there at all. Archives Nationales Section Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence, Papiers de Moreau de Saint-Méry, F/3/88, "Empoisonnements." [↵](#)

48. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique*. It is interesting to speculate whether or not Moreau had previously read Blessebois. He was, after all, a well-educated man and bibliophile who collected all kinds of literature and who later, during his period of exile in Philadelphia, where *Description* was first published, owned a bookstore. [↵](#)

49. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Boston: Beacon, 1990 (1941). [↵](#)
50. Ira P. Lowenthal, "Ritual Performance and Religious Experience: A Service for the Gods in Southern Haiti," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 34, 3, 1978, 396. [↵](#)
51. Terry Rey and Karen Richman, "The Somatics of Syncretism: Tying Body and Soul in Haitian Religion," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 39, 3, 2010, 380. [↵](#)
52. Sydney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*, Boston: Beacon, 1992 (1976). [↵](#)
53. James H. Sweet, "New Perspectives on Kongo in Revolutionary Haiti," *The Americas* 74, 1, 2017, 83–97. [↵](#)
54. Baudry, *Second voyage à Louisiane*, 118–136. Like Moreau, Baudry also spent a period of exile in Philadelphia. [↵](#)
55. From 1751 to 1775, West Central Africans comprised 56.4 percent of slaves who were captured and shipped to the French Caribbean, and from 1776 to 1800 they comprised 48.4 percent. Geggus, "The French Slave Trade," 135. [↵](#)
56. Maria Pramaggiore, "From the Living Dead to the Walking Dead: Mobility and Mobilization in Contemporary Zombie Culture," paper presented at the *Zombies: The Haitian and American Realities behind the Myth* conference, Duke University, March 21, 2015. [↵](#)

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Glossary

Aja

West African ethnic group mainly from what is today Benin and Togo. Sometimes alternatively spelled Adja. [↴](#)

Bantu

Literally, in numerous African languages, “human people” or “the people”; a collective term for such historically and culturally connected languages and the ethnic groups that speak them. The Bantu inhabit most of Africa south of the Congo River and parts of southern West Africa to its northwest. [↵](#)

Bight of Benin

West African region, spanning from today’s Atlantic coastal Nigeria to Ghana, that was one of the largest sources of enslaved Africans forcibly and inhumanely brought to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. [↵](#)

Blessebois, Pierre-Corneille (1646–1700)

Convicted French criminal and indentured servant; author of *Le zombi du Grand Pérou*, published in 1697 and the first instance of the word *zombie* to appear in print and likely the first novel ever written in the Caribbean. [↵](#)

de Montifaud, Marc, or Marie-Amélie Gartroule de Montifaud (1845–1912)

French author who, in her preface to the 1860 edition of Blessebois’s *Le zombi du Grand Pérou*, is the first on record to have ruminated over the African origins of the idea of the zombie in Blessebois’s seventeenth-century novel. [↵](#)

Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue

See [Moreau de Saint-Méry](#). [↵](#)

EGAF

Acronym for the Ewe, Gen, Aja, and Fon cluster of languages that was central to the development of Haitian Creole language, culture, and religion. [↵](#)

Ewe Fon (Gbe)

Predominant language of the region surrounding and including the [Kingdom of Hueda](#) that was (and remains today) spoken by the Fon people and by others in related ethnic groups who are often collectively referred to as Ewe peoples. Many enslaved Africans who were brought to the French Caribbean were either fluent or conversant in this lingua franca. [↵](#)

Fwa o tulu

Kikongo term for a sleep so deep that it resembles death. [↵](#)

Gen

Ethnic group of West Africa, often called the Mina. [↵](#)

Haitian Creole

The language of the Haitian people, which emerged among enslaved Africans in the eighteenth century in the French Caribbean. Though its vocabulary largely derives from French, most of its grammatical structure and tonality are African in origin, and it is not mutually intelligible with French. ↵

Kikongo

Indigenous language of the Kongo people of West Central Africa, widely spoken among Central African slaves in the French Caribbean by the mid-eighteenth century. A major [Bantu](#) language to this day in the Congo. ↵

Kingdom of Hueda (Whydah, Ouidah)

Located in today's nation of Benin, this kingdom endured from roughly 1580 to 1728 and was heavily involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Its port city of the same name was one of the busiest points of departure for enslaved West Africans. ↵

Le zombi du Grand-Pérou ou La Comtesse de Cogne

1697 novel written in Guadeloupe by a French indentured servant named [Pierre-Corneille Bléssebois](#), which contains the first known instance of the word *zombi* in print. ↵

Lingala

A lingua franca of much of Central Africa; a Bantu language that emerged after the transatlantic slave trade and is today spoken by roughly ten million people, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). ↵

Moreau de Saint-Méry, Médéric Louis Elie (1750–1819)

French lawyer and colonial administrator who was born in Martinique but spent much of his life in Saint-Domingue; author of the multivolume [Description topographique, physique, civile, et historique de la partie française de Saint-Domingue](#), which was first published in Philadelphia in 1797. It is the first known instance of the word *zombi* from what is today Haiti. ↵

Mvumbi

[Kikongo](#) for “‘inner invisible man’ or ‘soul’” (see reference in text). ↵

Ndoki

[Kikongo](#) word meaning “sorcerer” and “sorcery”. Also extant in many other [Bantu](#) languages, including [Lingala](#). ↵

Necromancy

Magical divinatory practice that includes communication with the dead. [↵](#)

Ngbaka

Bantu language of the Ngbaka people, who mostly live in the northwestern Democratic Republic of Congo; spoken by roughly 250,000 people. [↵](#)

Nvumbi

An Angolan word for “body without a soul” (see reference in text). [↵](#)

Nzambi

[Kikongo](#) for “god” or “spirit.” [↵](#)

Ndzumbi

A Mitsogho (Gabon) word for “corpse.” [↵](#)

“Notice sur les harems noirs ou les moeurs galantes aux colonies”

Preface to the nineteenth-century edition of Blessebois’s *Le zombie du Grand Pérou*, written by Marc de Montifaud.

Revenant

A ghost in French folklore; one who returns from the grave. Literally in French: “returning,” yet transformed into a noun in this instance. [↵](#)

Taino

A Native American people who were indigenous to the Caribbean when Europeans began arriving in the late fifteenth century; the majoritarian ethnic group before then in what is today Haiti. [↵](#)

Tumbulia

[Kikongo](#) word meaning “raising the dead.” [↵](#)

Vonda o tulu

[Kikongo](#) word meaning “to throw into a deathlike sleep” (see text for reference). [↵](#)

Zanbibi

Feared nocturnal spirit in West Africa. An Ewe Fon compound word for night (*zan*) and fearsome ghost (*bibi*). [↵](#)

Zemi

[Taino](#) religious notion meaning spirit; three-cornered icons or amulets made of stone,

wood, or ritual items made of bone that were believed to empower nature and watch over human believers in them. [↴](#)

Zoba

“Stupid” in [Kikongo](#), [Lingala](#), and other [Bantu](#) languages.

Zonbi

Haitian Creole word that is the origin of the term “zombie” in English or “zombi” in French. Takes many forms in Haiti, like one returned from the grave or one who postmortem has part of his or her soul captured in a bottle for supernatural work. [↴](#)

Zonbi astral

Haitian Creole word literally meaning “astral zombie”; part of a deceased person’s soul that is captured and placed in a bottle or other vessel so that its spiritual energies can be put to work by a sorcerer. [↴](#)

Zonbi des rondes

Literally, from a combination of French and West African dialects, “ring zombies,” a nondescript form of zombie mentioned in Blessebois’s 1697 novel *Le zombi du Grand Pérou*.

Zonbi kò kadav

Haitian Creole word literally meaning “body dead zombie,” in reference to a human being who died and was buried but has been disinterred by a sorcerer to provide services for him or her, whether simple labor or thievery. [↴](#)

6. What is Vodou?

Short answer: A religion of African origins that blended with Catholicism in [Saint-Domingue](#) and continues to thrive in Haiti. Long answer to follow.

Overview

In 1492 a European ship named *La Santa María* wrecked off the northwest coast of the Caribbean island of [Hispaniola](#), a lush and mountainous place known as Kiskeya to the hundreds of thousands of Native Americans living there. The natives would soon be decimated by ensuing waves of Spanish conquistadors, colonists, and foreign diseases like smallpox and syphilis.¹ Though the Spanish claimed Hispaniola and had designs on exploiting its natural resources to generate tremendous wealth, they never imported many African slaves over the course of the next two centuries, even ceding the island's western third to the French in 1697. Over the next hundred years, though, the French would enslave over one million human beings from West and Central Africa to labor on plantations in their Caribbean colonies, the vast majority in Saint-Domingue, on Hispaniola, mostly to cultivate and process sugar.

La Santa María's wreck was the first instance of Catholicism appearing on the island, albeit in broken form. In time, however, Spanish and then French Catholic missionaries would take part in the lucrative colonial enterprise and ensure the dominion of their faith over free people and slaves alike. Africans' homeland religions, though prohibited in this so-called New World, would survive, blend, and thrive, with a healthy dose of Catholic symbols, prayers, and rituals incorporated into the mix. Thus was Vodou born, an extraordinary religion of artistry, healing, and communion with divinity and nature—and of resistance to oppression.²

Vodou is not, however, a centralized or doctrinal religion, nor can a founder or group of founders be identified. It has no scripture, but it possesses a richness of poetic [orature](#), or teachings, myths, and beliefs that are embodied in stories and especially in music. Historically and presently, most practitioners of Vodou have been illiterate. Many of these stories are committed to memory and performed during lively communal rituals. Though clearly African in spirit and rhythm, they usually open with Catholic liturgical prayers, and spirits of African origin, called [lwa](#) in Haitian Vodou,³ are widely conflated with correlate Catholic saints. In light of this, let us introduce Vodou by employing three of Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion: 1) *Practical and Ritual* – what people do in a religion, especially rituals, but also practices that are not necessarily ritualistic, like spontaneous and solitary prayer, yoga, and meditation, 2) *Experiential and Emotional* – one's experience in a religion of the transcendent or of divinity, “the food on which all other dimensions of religion feed,” especially mysticism (the personal experience of the sacred) and collective rituals that stir deep emotions in one's heart and soul, and 3) *Material* – the “social or institutional dimension of religion almost inevitably becomes incarnate in *material* form, as buildings, works of art, and other

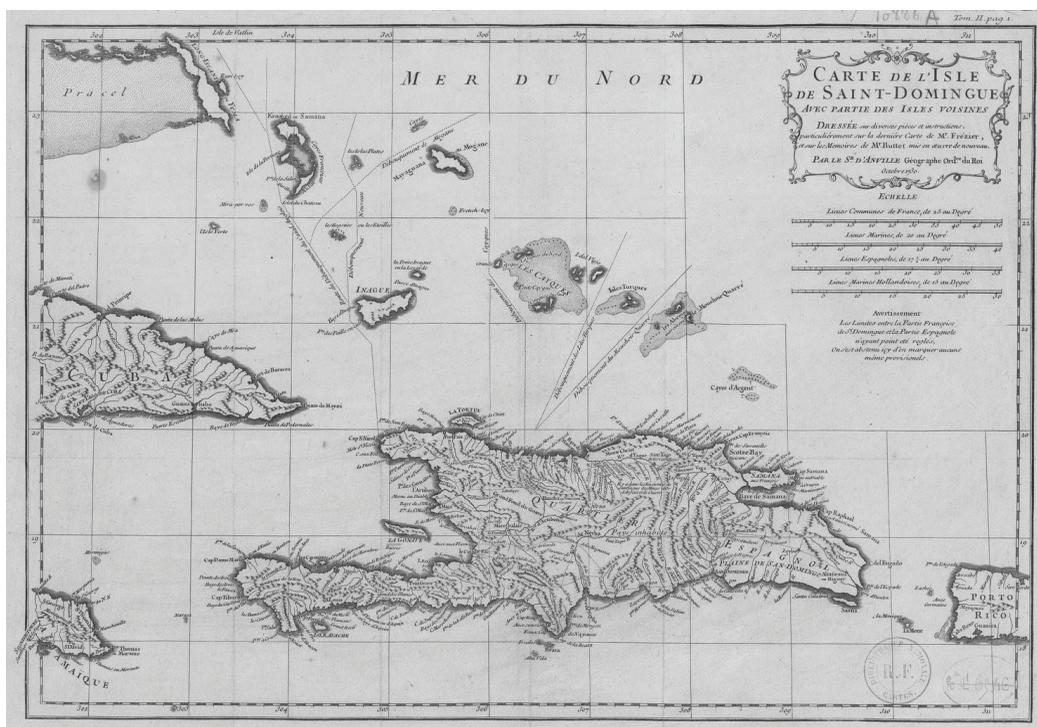
creations.”⁴ On a smaller but equally important scale, other material things, like water, bread, wood, and metal, are required for some of the holiest rituals of any number of religions.

But first an introduction to Haiti and a brief historical exploration of Haitian Vodou. Chapter Seven will subsequently be devoted to death, dying, and the soul in Vodou, the deepest wellsprings of the zombie. In this chapter, we will begin by exploring Vodou’s roots.

A Brief History of Haitian Vodou

A caveat from two of the most erudite scholars of the Caribbean: “To document the history of Vodou is to define as much as to explain it,” Sidney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot point out. “Yet because that history is murky – shrouded not only in myth but also in a million printed pages written by non-practitioners, both infatuated and violently hostile – a comprehensive picture is elusive.”⁵ But we have to try to paint one here, and we will begin to do so with etymology.

The first known appearance of the word *vaudou* in print is found in Méderic Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Mercy’s two-volume tome *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue*, which is the single most important general source of information about Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti). Published in 1797–1799, though completed ten years earlier, *Description* contains the word *Vaudoux* in reference to an ensemble of ritual practices that were “accompanied by such circumstances that placed it on the level of those institutions made up in large part by superstition and bizarre practices.” This is the first of the “million printed pages” to which Mintz and Trouillot refer. Moreau correctly ascribes the religion’s origins in Saint-Domingue to “Arada blacks, who are the true sectarians of *le Vaudoux* in the colony, and who oversee its principles and rules.” Furthermore, by 1788 Vodou had “been known for a long time, especially in the Western part” of Saint-Domingue. The cultic focus of “the *Vaudoux* sect” was a serpent in a box on an altar, which served, in effect, as an oracle and “signified an all-powerful, supernatural being upon whom depended all the events in the entire world.” It is noteworthy that Moreau does not ascribe deific status to the nonvenomous serpent, as God is not present in the rituals that he describes but is channeled through the mediumistic reptile: “Knowledge of the past, science of the present, prophecy of the future—all belonged to this snake.” A priest and a priestess, who carried the titles of king and queen and “claimed to be inspired by God,” conducted these rituals, of [Arada](#) origin, and served as the gatekeepers for what was essentially a secret society.⁶



Colonial map of the island of Hispaniola, the western third of which was the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which in 1804 would become the independent Republic of Haiti. | [Carte de l'isle de Saint-Domingue avec partie des isles voisines, 1730](#) by Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix is in [the public domain](#).

The word *vodou* derives from the West African language of **Fongbe** and originally meant “spiritual being” or “spiritual thing,” which in some parts of the world, like Benin, Brazil, and Cuba, in certain religious communities, it still does (spelled variously as *vodun*, *vodú*, or *vodum*).⁷ In Benin, historically there has been an actual divinity or spirit named Vodun, but, as far as I know, there is no lwa by that name in Haitian Vodou (though there might once have been).⁸ Only recently has the word come to designate an entire diverse and complex religion, whether in the Caribbean or in West Africa—or in New Orleans, where it is called Voodoo. Haitian Vodou is a deeply spiritual tradition of reciprocal service among humans and spirits and the living dead, so practitioners think of it in these terms rather than as a religion that they practice. As Ira Lowenthal puts it, “When asked about their religion, then, Haitian rural dwellers will not respond by saying that they are ‘voodooists,’ or that they practice ‘voodoo.’ A more likely response would be . . . ‘I am Catholic and I serve the lwa . . . or ‘I am a servant of the spirits.’”⁹

Who are these spirits? They are mostly from West Africa and are generally connected to nature, like **Danbala**, a serpent spirit associated with rainbows and waterfalls. **Èzili**, the most popular female spirit in Vodou, is associated with sexuality and motherhood, as well as knives

and tobacco. **Ogou** rules all things metal, like swords, guns, and cars. **Simbi** spirits are from the **Kongo**, and they inhabit fresh waters in nature, like rivers, swamps, lagoons, and springs. Called lwa, the spirits in Haitian Vodou are mercurial and imperfect, much like us, and they serve us and walk with or under or behind us in life.

The lwa first arrived in Saint-Domingue in the hearts, minds, and souls of enslaved Africans, beginning in the early sixteenth century. Hispaniola would be split into Spanish and French colonies in 1697, at the **Treaty of Ryswick**, after which the French would import hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans to Saint-Domingue, the western third of the island. At the time this was the most lucrative colony in the world, producer of massive amounts of sugar and other cash crops. The cultivation and milling of sugar were then very labor-intensive processes, and the French literally worked their African slaves to death, finding it cheaper to import replacements than to care for them or invest too much in keeping them alive. It was cruelty of the most unspeakable kind, as reflected in the following observation by a Swiss visitor to Saint-Domingue in the late eighteenth century:

There were about one hundred men and women of various ages, all of them busily digging ditches in a cane field, most of them naked or covered in rags. The sun beat down directly on their heads: sweat flowing through their bodies, their limbs weighted down by their heavy tools. . . . A deafening silence reigned among them; the suffering etched on their faces The merciless eyes of the slave driver watched over the workforce, and several foremen with long whips stationed among the slaves meted out severe lashes on those who looked too tired to keep up pace or who had to slow down, men and women, young and old alike.¹⁰

Victims of such brutality mobilized spiritual resources to survive and sometimes to resist their oppressors. By the time the Haitian Revolution broke out in 1791, Saint-Domingue counted over half a million slaves, as well as roughly 30,000 white people and 30,000 **free people of color**. Roughly two-thirds of the slaves in Saint-Domingue were Africans, half of whom had arrived in the colony within the previous five years.¹¹ Saint-Domingue had thus become home to a large and diverse population of African peoples, and it was there, among them and among **Creole** (Caribbean-born) slaves, that Vodou took shape, despite prohibitions against African religions in the 1685 royal decree the **Code Noir**. The Code was largely ineffective, and the nascent religion thus richly derived important elements from West African and West Central African traditions, blended with Catholicism, and has flourished in Haiti ever since.

Understanding the genesis of Haitian Vodou, of course, requires careful attention to the ethnic groups from Africa who laid the cornerstones of the religion in Saint-Domingue. Spanish importations of enslaved Africans to Hispaniola were relatively few, especially when compared to the ensuing waves of slave ships hoisting French flags and first carrying mostly West Africans, then mostly Central Africans.¹² The main West African religious foundation of Haitian Vodou would thus be Arada: “From 1669 until 1750, a West African, especially an Arada, baseline was established. This included ritual forms such as **divination**, rainmaking,

amulets, healing, drumming and dance, and [spirit possession](#), with the cult of Danbala likely predominating.”¹³

Danbala remains one of the most important lwa in Haitian Vodou and yet is one of the rare spirits who is not anthropomorphic, unlike Èzili, the most important female divinity in the religion; Ogou, the divinity of iron and metals and all things associated therewith, like warfare; and [Gede](#), ruler of death, dying, and the dead. Karen McCarthy Brown writes that these and other spirits “are not models of the well-lived life; rather, they mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in the particular slice of life over which they preside.” Furthermore, the lwa “are larger than life but not other than life. Virtue for both the *lwa* and those who serve them is less an inherent character trait than a dynamic state of being that demands ongoing attention and care.”¹⁴

A West African, Arada tradition received an infusion of Central African religious forms, especially from the Kongo people as Vodou crystalized. Kongolese religion differed from Arada religion insofar as the spirits in Central Africa were tied to local topographical/natural features, like groves, trees, and hills, and not to universal natural forces like wind and leaves, unlike the spirits of West Africa.¹⁵ Hence they generally did not accompany Africans through the harrowing Middle Passage to the plantations of Saint-Domingue, Brazil, or South Carolina. One significant but often overlooked historical fact is that many Kongolese slaves were also Catholic, as Catholicism had been implanted in their Central African homeland by the late fifteenth century. As such, it was not only French missionaries who brought Catholic saints to Haiti, but Africans themselves and, over the course of the eighteenth century, enslaved Africans blended indigenous African and Catholic traditions to produce Haitian Vodou, a process that anthropologists and historians of religion refer to as [religious syncretism](#).

Vodou is widely, and somewhat mythically, credited for having sparked the Haitian Revolution and for having inspired the founding of the world’s first independent Black republic in 1804: Haiti. Central to this narrative is a story of a supposed Vodou priest named [Boukman Dutty](#). Along with an enslaved West African woman named [Cécille Fatima](#) (given her name, surely a Muslim), on the evening of August 14–15, 1791, Dutty summoned hundreds of slaves from surrounding plantations at a place in the woods called [Bwa Kayiman](#). There, they sacrificed a black pig and fueled an insurrection. The uprising was to start the following day, sparking the overthrow of French rule in Saint-Domingue and liberating the oppressed masses of Africans and Creoles. The veracity of this story is debated among historians, but it has held an important place in Haiti’s national imagination and reflects the power of Vodou to uplift and inspire.



Battle during the Haitian Revolution. Auguste Raffet, 1802. | [Haitian Revolution](#) by [Auguste Raffet](#) is in the [public domain](#).

As the smoke from the Haitian Revolution cleared in 1804, no foreign nation would recognize the Republic of Haiti's sovereignty, and the Vatican withdrew Catholic priests and refused to replace them for the next fifty-four years (1804–1860). This period is referred to as the **Great Schism**. Notwithstanding the absence of orthodoxy, Catholicism as a **popular religion** thrived. This was a continuation of a process from the colonial era when, per Alfred Métraux, “so many Catholic elements were greedily adopted” by Vodouists. Furthermore, because of the Catholic hierarchy's absence, “the entrenchment of Vodou in Haiti” was secured,¹⁶ and it remains the religion of the majority of Haitians today, most of whom are also Catholic. The lwa, moreover, are mostly Catholic and sometimes instruct their **sevitè** (servants; e.g., devotees) to go to Mass or even bring them along to receive Communion, so intertwined are the religions.

Following a **Concordat** signed between the Vatican and the Haitian state in 1860, the return of the Roman Catholic hierarchy changed religious matters in the Caribbean nation dramatically. The Catholic Church enjoyed state support and soon dominated education in Haiti, and in due course its hierarchy would develop campaigns to combat “superstition,” or “**antisuperstitious campaigns**,” presenting a formidable and sometimes violent challenge to Haitian Vodou. As Kate Ramsey explains, “Between 1835 and 1987 many popular ritual practices

were officially prohibited, first as [sortilèges](#) (spells) and later as *pratiques superstitieuses* (superstitious practices).” With the Catholic hierarchy re-entrenched, these prohibitions would intensify toward the end of the nineteenth century:

Given that it was politically impossible for any Haitian government to sustain such an offensive, it is unsurprising that three out of four of the campaigns against *le vaudoux* or “voodoo” . . . were instigated by foreigners in Haiti, namely, the French-dominated Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in the late 1890s and early 1940s and the U.S. military during its occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934.¹⁷

Three of these campaigns were especially harmful, if not devastating, for practitioners of Haitian Vodou and the remarkable and artistic culture they had created to practice their religion: those of 1898, 1913, and 1941–1942. With state and military support, “in its schools, as from its pulpits, l’Eglise [the Church] taught that Vodou amounted to ‘devil worship,’ a shameful cult of primitive people, a collection of archaic African superstitions to be uprooted from among the Haitian masses.”¹⁸

Happily, things would improve in this regard following World War II, though Vodou would soon face ascendant challenges from an influx of Protestant missionaries. Today, Haiti is roughly one-third Protestant, though “the mixture of Protestantism and [sèvis lwa](#) is rare,”¹⁹ as evangelicals especially tend to demonize the lwa.

Another period of difficulty and persecution for Vodouists emerged upon the death of the ruthless despot and “president for life” [François Duvalier](#) (1907–1971), a.k.a. “Papa Doc.” Duvalier was a physician who treated peasants in the countryside and thus got to know their culture, including Vodou, very well, transforming himself into an ethnographer and eventually a dictator—one of the most notorious in the Americas in the twentieth century. Vodou played a key role in Duvalier’s reign, as he fashioned himself to resemble Gede—the lwa of all things related to death, dying, and the dead—dressing and speaking like him. This performance was, in effect, “a bridge that linked representations of religious power and national authoritarian power.”²⁰

During his reign, from 1957 until his death in 1971, Papa Doc further tightened his grip on power by forming a paramilitary death squad called the [Tonton Makout](#). Many peasants became Makouts largely “to shelter themselves from state predation and repression,”²¹ and among them were numerous Vodou priests. In Haitian Creole, *tonton* means “uncle,” while a *makout* is a straw sack that one sees hanging on trees throughout rural Haiti, and they contain offerings for [Loko](#), who is the lwa of trees. Taken together, the terms are rooted in Haitian folk culture; it is the name of a fearsome anthropomorphic being who roams the countryside to steal young children and take them away in his makout. The Tonton Makout dressed in blue denim uniforms, reminiscent of the garb of the Vodou spirit [Azaka](#). They also “managed to increase fear not only by brutal terror like murder and rape,” as Bettina Schmidt explains, “but by deliberately staging certain aspects of Vodou (e.g., [zombification](#)).”²²

Papa Doc’s only son, [Jean-Claude Duvalier](#) (1951–2014), a.k.a. “Baby Doc,” succeeded his father as Haiti’s “president for life” after François Duvalier died in 1971. The repression of political opponents persisted, and the Tonton Makouts continued to be the strong arm for

Baby Doc. But they largely disbanded when popular uprisings ousted Baby Doc from power in 1986. He fled to exile in France with hundreds of millions of dollars from state coffers. Because of the role of Vodou and Vodou priests in the brutal militia, “after the end of the Duvalier regime, several Vodou priests were killed by angry Haitians seeking revenge for the terror by the Tonton Macoutes.”²³

Vodou was finally recognized by the Haitian state as an official religion in 2003, with its baptismal, nuptial, and funerary records thenceforth legally recognized. This was a time when a former Catholic priest, [Jean-Bertrand Aristide](#) (b. 1953), who was widely believed to himself practice Vodou, served as president. Despite this important step toward religious tolerance, the devastating 2010 earthquake, which killed over a quarter million people in a matter of minutes, inspired widespread evangelical denunciation of Vodou for having supposedly caused God to punish Haiti for its sins. The chief sin in this narrative: having sold Haiti’s soul to Satan in exchange for independence during the Haitian Revolution, at Bwa Kayiman.²⁴ Some influential Catholic clerics also seized upon the tragedy to blame Vodou for Haiti’s myriad material woes. This left Vodou on rather shaky ground and charting historically familiar waters of persecution.²⁵ But if Haitian Vodou had a middle name, it would be spirit, and one should expect the religion to persevere spiritedly and perhaps even thrive in the future, despite all the formidable obstacles that have been placed in its way for over four hundred years.

Practical and Ritual Dimensions of Haitian Vodou

“Vodou is a religion of survival, and it counsels what it must to ensure survival,” writes Brown.²⁶ What is more practical than that? But in coining his term “practical” for this dimension of religion, Ninian Smart meant the ways in which any given religion is practiced more than any religious practicality per se. There are many forms of religious practice in Haitian Vodou, a constellation of rituals that range in form from lively communal drumming ceremonies to divination performed for individuals, pilgrimages, and funerary rites. Except for funerary rites, which are discussed at some length in the following chapter, these now attract our attention.

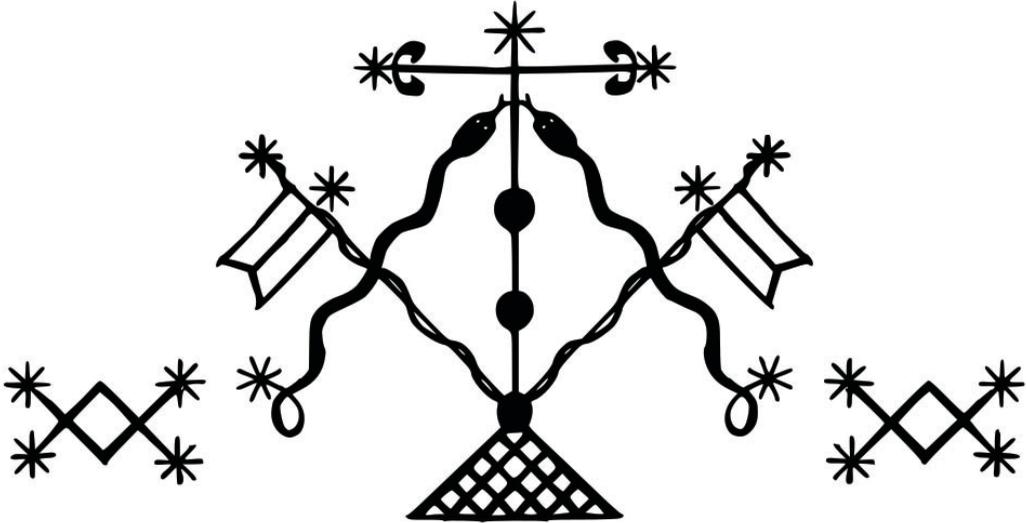
Vodou is a religion of “[diffused monotheism](#),” a term coined by Bolaji Idowu in a treatise on [Yoruba](#) theology, the religious thought of the largest ethnic group in West Africa.²⁷ By this is meant that there is one Creator God in Yoruba traditional religion, [Olodumare](#), whose presence and energies are diffused throughout creation by a pantheon of spirits, called [orishas](#), many of whom are known in Vodou as certain lwa. Likewise, in Haitian Vodou there is one supreme God, [Bondye](#), who is rather distant from humanity but who channels his energies through the lwa.²⁸ Though Bondye, who is also often called [Gran Mèt](#) (Great Master) in Haitian Vodou, is not directly involved in human affairs, He is acknowledged in most ceremonies. For a more direct connection to Bondye, Vodouists often turn to the Catholic Church. As Laënnec Hurbon puts it, the lwa “all act as links between the visible and the invisible. They explain the origin of the world, representing its hidden side, shadowed and deep: the very essence of

life.”²⁹ Bondye is the source of that essence, and the lwa enable us to know and tap into this, thereby being spiritually energized.

We have already introduced a few lwa and list some of the most important of them later in the chapter, but two things should be noted first:

1. The lwa are almost innumerable,³⁰ as many of them take multiple forms and have many names.
2. Although they are the focus of most Vodouist practice, there are other *mistè* (mysteries) who attract the devotional attention of the faithful. These include saints (*sen*), angels (*zanj*), the dead (*lemò*) or the ancestors (*zansèt*), and devils (*dyab*). The word *sen* is often used interchangeably with the word *lwa* or as a diptych noun for both the Catholic saints and the lwa, who are widely conflated in Haitian Vodou. *Zanj* can refer specifically to notions of angels rooted in Catholicism, but more often refers to the lwa themselves “or the spirit of a dead person.”³¹ *Lemò* are the departed ancestors, either in Africa (*Ginen*) or under the water (*anba dlo*), who are venerated in Haitian Vodou as much as the lwa. (See the following chapter for details.). Though literally translating as “devil,” *dyab* is another term that is usually used interchangeably with *lwa*, or “sometimes a reference to malicious, mean, difficult, or mischievous Vodou lwa.”³²

As such, the lwa are imperfect, mercurial divinities. Though conflated with Catholic saints, they are generally not thought of in the same way as those rare former human beings who lived such holy lives that they were canonized by the Catholic Church as role models for the faithful. Their conflation with the lwa is rooted in Saint-Domingue, where Africans reinterpreted Catholic teachings about the saints to inscribe their own homeland spirits with new representations, symbols, energies, rituals, and names. Later in Haitian history, as colorful lithographs of the saints appeared and proliferated, such assimilation between saints and lwa deepened, and virtually every Vodou temple (*ounfò; perstil*) is adorned with them. While scholars debate the reasons for this assimilation,³³ what is perhaps most important is that both the lwa and the saints are to be venerated and served, and in both Catholicism and Vodou, practitioners believe that in return they may receive either the grace of God or blessings and gifts from the lwa and/or the saints.



The vèvè of Danbala, a serpent spirit, and his wife, Wèdo, two of the most important lwa in Haitian Vodou, and the first to have been created by God; associated with rainbows, serpents, creation, and regeneration. | [Vèvè Danbala](#) by [chris 卐](#) is in [the public domain](#).

Serving the Spirits

Among the most prominent spirits in Vodou are the following:

- [Agwe](#): King of the seas. Assimilated with St. Ulrich.
- [Aida-Wèdo](#): A snake divinity who is associated with rainbows and is the wife of Danbala; sometimes assimilated with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.
- [Ayizan](#): “The Vodou lwa of temples, public gates, doors, gates, and roads.”³⁴ Generally associated with St. Claire.
- [Azaka](#) (also called [Zaka](#)): The lwa of all things related to agriculture. Assimilated with St. Charles Borromeo.
- [Bawon Samdi](#): The lwa who rules over cemeteries; a manifestation of Gede. More closely identified with the Christian cross than with any Catholic saint.
- [Bosou Twa Kòn](#): A lwa visualized as a bull with three horns (or three testicles) and associated with wisdom and justice. Assimilated with St. Nicholas and sometimes with Jesus Christ.
- [Danbala](#): A serpent lwa associated with rainbows, waterfalls, and the cycle of life; husband of Aida-Wèdo. Assimilated with St. Patrick.

- **Èzili:** The most popular female lwa in Vodou; associated with love, sexuality, motherhood, and fresh waters. Assimilated with the Virgin Mary.
- **Gede:** The lwa of all things related to death and dying, and to rebirth. Assimilated with St. Gerard.
- **Gran Bwa:** The lwa of leaves and of forests. Assimilated with St. Sebastian.
- **Lasirenn:** The mermaid lwa, sometimes seen as a whale or with a whale. Associated with the sea and is the wife of Agwe. Assimilated with St. Philomena.³⁵
- **Legba:** A lwa associated with crossroads and gates, and the enabler of all Vodou ceremonies. Assimilated with St. Peter.
- **Loko:** The lwa of trees. Associated with St. Joseph, for his love of children.
- **Marasa:** Twins. The lwa of twins. Assimilated with Sts. Cosmas and Damian, who were twins, hence...
- **Ogou:** The lwa of metals and all things related thereto, like warfare, guns, and swords. Thus, assimilated with St. James the Greater (as Matamoros) and sometimes with St. George.
- **Simbi:** Lwa of Central African origin associated with springs and lagoons. Assimilated with St. Christopher and sometimes with Moses.³⁶

The lwa are members of diverse rites, or pantheons, in Haitian Vodou, the most important of which are the **Rada** and the **Petwo**, whose respective lwa are sometimes referred to as “**Zanj Lan Bwa** (Angels in the Woods) and **Zanj Lan Dlo** (Angels in the Water).”³⁷ As Brown explains, “Rada spirits are sweet-tempered and dependable; their power resides in their wisdom. . . . The Petwo spirits, in contrast, are hot-tempered and volatile.”³⁸ Although Rada spirits generally reflect West African origins, while Petwo spirits generally reflect Central African origins, many lwa have manifestations in both rites. For example, Èzili has more than twenty different manifestations, so one thinks here of a family of lwa rather than of a single divinity.³⁹ In Haitian Vodou, Èzili’s most popular Rada manifestation is **Èzili Freda**, while her most popular Petwo manifestation is **Èzili Dantò**. Freda is a promiscuous divinity who enjoys fine wines, perfumes, and lace, while Dantò is a feisty divinity with one child who enjoys knives and smoking.

Serving the lwa takes many forms, even marriage. They love to dance, and the most common Vodou ceremony is a festive communal gathering often referred to as **fèt Vodou**, a term that can be translated as either “Vodou feast” or “Vodou party.” At times such a gathering is simply called a *dans*, dance. Drums (**tanbou**, a term also used in Haiti for such ceremonies) are of central importance, as they infuse the faithful with divine energy and they call the lwa to join the gathering. The *ounfò*, the temple, normally features a center pole called a **poto mitan**, down which the lwa descend and around which their devotees or servants (*sevite*) process and dance.

Like us, and like the dead, the *lwa* must be fed, and two of the most important communal ceremonies in Haitian Vodou reflect this: [Manje lwa](#) (Food for the Spirits) and [Manje mò](#), or *Manjè lemò* (Food for the Dead). We describe the latter in the following chapter; let us briefly consider the former. This ritual can be individual or communal; that is, one may leave offerings of food for “the *lwa* in return for protection, healing, soothsaying, and other benefits.”⁴⁰ This can happen on an altar in one’s home or at a Catholic church, but usually it is performed in Vodou temples. There are also annual *manje lwa* ceremonies, often for spirits that reside in one’s family, which invariably “are intended to pay homage to the *lwa* and to obtain a contact with them, or to appease their anger,” as Hurbon explains:

In most ceremonies, the offering of food is given a central place. The *manje loa* consists in giving food to the *loa*, who, when satisfied, can communicate their strength to the faithful. When the offering has become the property of the *lwa*, the participants can become closer to them by eating the food . . . Drumming, dancing, and songs continue at an ever more accelerated rhythm. As the *lwa* eat, they become happy and can express themselves freely, make announcements about the future, avert accidents and diseases, and offer recipes for healing illnesses. The essence of the ceremony of the *manje loa* is to nourish the spirits.⁴¹

Priests and priestesses ([oungan](#) and [manbo](#)) orchestrate *manje lwa* and other communal rituals in Haitian Vodou, often assisted by their apprentices, [ounsi](#). Rituals often open with Catholic prayers led by a “bush priest” ([pret savann](#)). Papa Legba is the first *lwa* to be addressed at such ceremonies, as he is the gatekeeper, keeper of the keys, who opens the barriers between the sacred and the profane. Communal rites in Haitian Vodou usually also involve [animal sacrifice](#), and the meat of the sacrificial victims is eaten by the spirits and the participants. Most commonly chickens and goats are sacrificed, though sometimes bulls, pigs, or dogs, depending on the occasion. While many readers might find animal sacrifice unsavory and unnecessary, it is important to think of this contextually. Most religions, at times, call for some form of animal sacrifice, while the world’s largest religion, Christianity, would make no sense to any of its believers—indeed, it would not exist at all—were it not for the sacrifice of a human being, the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

The most important communal—in fact national—ritual in Haitian Vodou, [Fèt Gede](#) (the Feast of Gede), is discussed at length in the following chapter. Another of great national and cultural importance in Haiti is the religion’s extraordinary Lenten tradition called [Rara](#). Vodou is a religion that is very attentive to birth, life, death, and rebirth, as reflected in notions of the zombie and, more fully, in the Rara celebrations. They occur throughout the country each spring, starting “on the eve of Lent,” as Elizabeth McAlister writes: Musical “processions walk for miles through local territory, attracting fans and singing old and new songs. Bands stop traffic for hours and perform rituals for Afro-Haitian deities at crossroads, bridges, and cemeteries.”⁴² Furthermore, “Rara is about play, religion, and politics and also about a bloody history and persevering in its face . . . a ritual enactment of life itself and an affirmation of life’s difficulties.”⁴³

Preparation for, understanding of, and assistance with life’s difficulties—and historically

for most Haitians such difficulties have often been dire—are also affirmed and addressed in individual ritual practices in Haitian Vodou. One inherits a *lwa rasin*, a protective root spirit, at birth and over time, if living space permits, they keep an altar in their home for this divinity's veneration. Again, Haitian Vodou is a religion of reciprocal service, and nowhere is this more intimate than in one's personal devotion to the *lwa rasin*. Often, this spirit is so close as to be understood to live in one's very soul, a notion explored in Chapter Seven. For many, such personal devotion “takes place at a prayer altar, a little table covered by a sheet upon which are placed bouquets of flowers and the symbol of the *lwa* or its image in color, usually the image of a Catholic saint corresponding to this *lwa*.”⁴⁴

Communicating with the *lwa* and with *lemò* often relies on divination, or the ritual reading of the unseen world. (Think Ouija boards, crystal balls, tarot cards, etc.) In Africa, such practices have a long and rich tradition. They are quite complex, as in the Yoruba practice of *Ifa*, in which shells or chains are dropped and read in reference to the oracle, otherwise unseen knowledge, to receive insight from the spirits.⁴⁵ These practices and repositories of spiritual knowledge were inherited and adapted in Haitian Vodou, in which divination is often done with a deck of playing cards. Dreams are also an important source of communication with the *mistè*. As Adam McGee writes: “Through divination, perspicacity, and the persistence of the spirits, priests and priestesses must be able to interpret the dreams that others report to them”⁴⁶ and be able to interpret the cards. With my wife and another relative in Port-au-Prince, on a balcony, I once sat with a Vodou priest for a divination ceremony. There was rum, marijuana, cigarettes, and a deck of cards. There were also bees. The *oungan* began reading the cards, and a swarm of bees covered him from head to toe. He spoke—actually, the spirits and the ancestors spoke through him—and that “consultation” has guided my life ever since. The main message that I took from that experience is to be grateful to those who sacrificed for us, whether it be Jesus Christ or your grandmother. Or the *lwa*.

Back to the community: Most communal Vodou ceremonies involve drumming. The drum is sacred in Haitian Vodou, and it is consecrated, as are the hands that beat it. *Tanbou* infuse the faithful with divine force and call the *lwa* to join them, to dance with them, to speak with them. The *lwa* join the gathering by invisibly climbing or sliding down the *poto mitan* in the temple and then possessing one of the dancers, mounting the horse (*chwal*) as its rider, galloping in our midst, sharing secrets of the unseen world, chastising, beckoning, calming, and dancing. These experiences are often highly dramatic and quite exhausting, but they also animate and orient humans in the deepest fashion possible—morally, musically, spiritually—and they reassure us that the *lwa* are with us, that they walk with us, that we are not alone. Diffused monotheism—it is through the *lwa*, with the *lwa*, that we find God, that God finds us, that we imbibe the divine energies of life and death and know ourselves as we are, as immersed in and infused with divinity.

Experiential and Emotional Dimensions of Haitian Vodou

To practice Haitian Vodou is to walk with the lwa, to serve and feed them and the dead, and to find divine energy infused in all of nature, to find God, Bondye. However distant God may be, however uninvolved in human affairs, he is still acknowledged in Vodou as the source of all, the Creator, and is considered to be good, *Bondye bon*. Bondye's energies are channeled through the lwa. The lwa take many forms and often walk together, or behind or under one another, enhancing their power and rendering themselves present in our lives along multiple paths of energy and spirit. Not everyone gets possessed by the lwa, but we are all touched by them and, when others are possessed, we commune with the lwa. Spirit possession is one of the most intense experiences in Vodou, or in any religion, and it usually occurs in a temple, when the lwa descends the *poto mitan* and enters the body of a dancer. It should not be confused with demonic possession of the kind that Jesus exorcised in the Bible, like in the Gospel of Mark (1:21-28). In Vodou one wants the spirits to join the gathering, whereas in the Bible, at least in the New Testament accounts, demonic possessing agents "are understood as thoroughly negative beings intent on harming human beings by seizing control of their bodies."⁴⁷ Brown's reflections on the role of spirit possession in Haitian Vodou tell quite a different story: "These possession performances, which blend pro forma actions and attitudes with those responsive to the immediate situation, are the heart of a Vodou ceremony. The spirits talk with the faithful, hold them, feed them, chastise them. Strife is healed and misunderstanding rectified."⁴⁸

Spirit possession is a form of what psychiatry calls a "dissociative state," an experience in which an individual's personality and awareness are displaced and their body becomes a receptacle for a spirit, a mouthpiece and a dancing vessel. This is part of a broader collective phenomenon in Africana religion that I refer to as [envesselment](#), a term intended to help us appreciate the ways in which "just as bottles, gourds, graves, trees, temples, churches, and amulets serve as vessels for the containment of supernatural power, so, too, do human bodies."⁴⁹ Some people are more inclined to be possessed than others, but they generally do not have any recollection of the experience once they reemerge into a normal waking state of consciousness, usually quite exhausted. In a classic comparative study of spirit possession, I. M. Lewis suggests that women are more often possessed by spirits than men, which, in his view, has much to do with gender-based oppression.⁵⁰ It would take a major research effort to verify or refute Lewis's claim, but from my own experience in Central Africa and in the Caribbean, I can say anecdotally that most occasions of spirit possession have involved women, or sometimes gay men, more often than straight men.



Vodouist dancing before a vèvè in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1976. Photo by Fritz Rudolf Loewa. | [Woman in Transe](#) by [Nlecoro](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

Providing offerings for the lwa is another important religious experience in Haitian Vodou, whether on one's home altar, by a tree, or at a temple. Like the dead, and like us, they must be fed, so routinely rum is poured on the ground for the *mistè* and meals are prepared for them. Danbala, the serpent spirit of fertility and regeneration, usually only accepts offerings of the color white. Èzili Freda, the goddess of love and fertility, is fond of fine French wines, perfumes, and linen and lace. Honey is relatively expensive in Haiti and not widely consumed as a foodstuff among the poor. But because of how wildly popular it is among their spirits, Vodouists will go out of their way to obtain some of the sweet liquid to offer to the lwa, especially Granbwa, spirit of the forest. Honey is also uniquely versatile and can be offered across the two main rites of the Vodou pantheon. Most spirits have a "cool" manifestation in the Rada rite (or "nation," [nanchon](#)) and a "hot" manifestation in the Petwo nation, and "unrefined honey, being darker and heavier, is 'hot,' while refined honey is 'cold,'" as Bryan Freeman explains.⁵¹ In New Orleans, honey also features prominently in the American version of the religion, as reflected in Zora Neale Hurston's description of her initiation into Vodou (Voodoo) there:

On Thursday morning at eleven I was at the shuttered door of the ancient house. He [the priest] let me in cheerfully and led me straight to the altar. There were new candles unlit. He signaled me to help. We dressed the candles and lit them and set three upon tumblers filled with honey, three filled with syrup, and three with holy water, and set them in a semi-circle upon the altar.

She also saw on an altar a piece of “honeyed St. Joseph’s bread.”⁵² Usually, initiation *kouche* (*kanzo*) into Vodou requires a period of seven days enclosed in a small room or chamber called a *djevo*, a feature of many temples in Haiti or sometimes in the homes of oungan and manbo, though I have never heard of the use of honey for such a purpose there.

It is also common in Haiti for folk healers, most of them Vodouists, to prescribe honey for a wide range of ailments, especially stomach and throat conditions, and honey is elemental to a widely used homemade cough syrup.⁵³ Not surprisingly, reflecting European contributions to the religion, it is also a key ingredient in a wide range of love potions, teas, baths, and candles. Considering that in Haitian culture, as in most Africana cultures, healing and religion are largely synonymous, honey, along with water, herbs, and blood, is one of the most important material elements of Vodou.⁵⁴ It heals, and healing is at the heart of Haitian Vodou.

To heal, one must first know what is wrong, what needs to be cured, and Vodou priests and priestesses usually employ divination to make such determinations. A malady could have any number of causes, after all, whether biophysical or spiritual. Disgruntled lwa or ancestors can harm human beings, as can a *bòkò* (sorcerer), so one must consult the *mistè* by way of divination. In Haitian Vodou, the most common form of divination is using a deck of playing cards, which are usually placed in four rows of four and consulted by a manbo or oungan. This can require the healer and/or the client to enter a trance, followed by a dialogue between the diviner and the person seeking a consultation. At times other means are employed, like palm reading, candle reading, or reference to scripture. “Once the diagnosis has been made and the treatment has been negotiated,” explains Nicolas Vonarx, “the first stage of treatment is organized in the *badji*,”⁵⁵ or the inner sanctuary of a Vodou temple or a shed in a temple yard that contains an altar, symbols of the lwa, and human bones representing the ancestors.⁵⁶ Because of the spiritual significance of crossroads—where many lwa reside, especially Legba—and of the presence of the dead in cemeteries, healing rituals are also held in these places. Usually prescribed cures include herbs. As such, herbalism is a rich tradition in Haitian Vodou. While manbo and oungan possess ample knowledge of this tradition, there is also a class of ritual specialists who work exclusively with leaves and other natural elements to heal, called *medsin fèy* (lit: “leaf doctor”). Dozens of different plants or roots are sometimes used in a single cure or prophylactic intervention, like the following that I witnessed in Haiti in 2001.

A Vodou priestess named Marie-Carmel was working on a love potion. Her client was about to propose to a woman and wanted to ensure the proposal’s success. The *maji*, as Marie-Carmel called it—literally, the magic—took two days to prepare in the yard of her temple and home in Léogâne, a city about ten miles from Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince. She orchestrated this before a large white cross made of cinder blocks and cement. An iron cauldron was placed over a low charcoal fire, into which no fewer than twelve herbs were added, meticulously, along with oils and rum, and this *maji* was stirred slowly. By the end, Marie-Carmel, a highly respected manbo in a lineage of powerful priestesses, was totally exhausted. She had produced for her client a sizzling potion in a Gerber’s baby food jar. “This is what it is going to do to her heart,” she said, “make it burn for you.” It worked! “They are now happily married with two children.”⁵⁷

I will conclude this section with a word on emotions: To fall in love, to have and raise a child,

to grieve, to pine, to lack, to be lonely, to be ecstatic, to be forlorn, to be adrift, to be utterly tranquil, and such, are deeply emotional experiences. So is being possessed by a lwa, or simply knowing that a lwa walks with you, under you, or behind you, and that the ancestors need you, just as they gave you life. Hopefully this brief discussion has provided a respectful sense of that. I grew up Catholic in the United States and always found Mass to be so boring, but Vodou is anything but that. The liveliness is literally intoxicating. Spirits dance, we dance, we sing, we pray, the rum flows, and at times cards explain our way to healing and a prescription comes in a small, sizzling baby food jar. Let us now talk further about playing cards and baby food jars as we explore the material dimension of Haitian Vodou. We explore the soul in the next chapter, and then the zombies will come out in full force.

Material Dimensions of Haitian Vodou

Only recently have scholars begun to pay careful attention to the material dimensions of religion. Long captivated by the heady realms of theology, spirits, souls, and scripture, they largely ignored the tactile, the somatic, and the stuff—like the dirt, the walls, the smoke, and the icons—that often captivate the faithful more than does the transcendent. It was only in 2005, for instance, that an entire journal, *Material Religion*, was launched “to explore how religion happens in material culture – images, devotional objects, architecture and sacred space, works of art and mass-produced artifacts.”⁵⁸ For the sake of structuring this last section of our chapter on Haitian Vodou, let us follow that list of material religious things, beginning with:

Images

Images abound in Haitian Vodou. Temples are adorned with them, as are the small buses, called *tap-taps*, that carry people to work or pilgrims to pray. The most common images are colorful lithographs of Catholic saints, a wide range of them—from the Virgin Mary (in many forms) and St. Philomena to Saints Peter and the twins Cosmas and Damien. The *hagiography* of Catholic saints lent itself quite fluidly to their assimilation with African spirits and ancestors, whether in Kongo during the introduction and adoption of Catholicism there, or in Saint-Domingue—or Cuba, or Brazil, for that matter. Icons of saints in churches resonated with Africans in all these places. As Melville J. Herskovits puts it in a classic article, Africans “succeeded in achieving, at least in their religious life, a synthesis between aboriginal African patterns and the European traditions to which they have been exposed.”⁵⁹ This is nowhere more clearly reflected than in the multitude of lithographs of Catholic saints that embellish Vodou temples. Evidently, these first began to appear in Haiti in the early twentieth

century and were inexpensive and already “widely distributed” by the time that Herskovits did his pioneering research in the 1930s.⁶⁰



Sacred rattle and emblem of the priesthood in Haitian Vodou. | [Asson](#) by [DKDHoungan](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

Flags ([drapo](#)) also adorn Vodou temples, usually on the exterior of the *ounfo*, on poles, or hanging over a wall surrounding the temple yard. These are banners, often resplendently

decorated with sequins and, like the lithographs, very colorful. They are “used for rituals and ceremonies” and “may be displayed in a temple in honor of a lwa or of the temple itself.”⁶¹ Usually *drapo* depict Catholic saints in detail, though sometimes they center upon [vèvè](#), often cruciform or geometrical symbols that represent the lwa. They are traced on the ground of a temple in chalk, corn meal, ashes, brick dust, pulverized tree bark, or flour at the beginning of a communal ceremony, only to be danced into the ground by the feet of the faithful. Vèvè take a more permanent form on the *drapo*, but not in communal rituals. Here is Métraux’s marvelous description from the 1950s:

The procedure is as follows: the officiant takes from a plate a pinch of powder or flour which he lets slip between his index finger and thumb in such a way to leave a thin regular line. Thus, he traces out the geographical motifs, objects or animals which may cover fairly large areas. Some *vèvè*, comprising the symbols of several gods, stretch from one end of the peristyle to the other . . . Their function is to summon the *loa*.⁶²

Devotional Objects

Anthropologists sometimes refer to the material things that people use in their religious practice as [ritual paraphernalia](#), and in Haitian Vodou there is a great deal of it. We have already mentioned several examples, like cornmeal for *vèvè* tracings, human skulls and bones for the *badji*, drums for infusing the congregation with divinity, and herbs and oils for healing. We briefly discuss a few others in this section, but, as with imagery, devotional objects in Haitian Vodou are so many and diverse that our summary will per force be greatly simplified. Let us look at a list of ritual items that I discussed in my last book, which focused on religion during the Haitian Revolution.⁶³

- Amulets (charms, fetishes)
- Birds (bird parts)
- Candles
- Chalices
- Ciboriums
- Crosses
- Eggs
- Flowers
- Holy oil

- Icons
- Incensories
- Medals
- Monstrances
- Osculatoriums
- Priestly robes
- Rocks
- Rosaries
- Tabernacles.

That list is from a focused study of religion in Saint-Domingue from 1790 to 1803, which looked at only a few religious communities when Vodou was beginning to crystallize as a religion. One will notice that most of these terms are Catholic, which is indicative of the deep merger of African and European religious forms that was developing in the colony, a veritable cornerstone of Haitian Vodou.

Another form of African/Catholic grafting that has always been central to Vodou is the liturgical calendar of the feast days of saints. This is the basis of Haiti's extraordinary pilgrimage culture, one that dates to 1701.⁶⁴ Two key devotional objects in Haitian Vodouist pilgrimages are the *kòd* (cord) and the *rad penitans* (penitential dress).⁶⁵ The act of tying is sacred in Central Africa and has been perpetuated in Haitian Vodou in myriad ways. Amulets are tied, often as *pakèt* (packets, often small sacks containing herbs, powders, and other items) and *pwen* (points), which are mysterious and sometimes invisible charms widely used in the religion. As Karen Richman explains, "Pwen are ingenuously underdetermined modes of communication . . . Pwen reveal bare truths about persons, situations, powers, and things."⁶⁶ As for *kòd*, as Richman and I explain:

The practice of pilgrims wearing colorful ropes around their waists or heads while traveling to and entering sacred space is one of this tradition's most original features. Ropes can be bought at most pilgrimage sites in Haiti, though they are most popular during Marian feast day celebrations, especially that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel – who is assimilated in Vodou with the religion's leading feminine spirit Èzili Dantò and sometimes Èzili Freda – on July 16.

One Vodou priest explained it to us this way: "When you travel for Mary, she comes to meet you at the crossroads and fills your soul. The ropes . . . make it possible for you to truly hug her and keep her power inside of you."⁶⁷ I have seen Haitian pilgrims use rosary beads, whether strung together to tie around one's waist, worn around one's neck, or wrapped around a wrist

and hand, along with medals of Catholic saints, as “weapons.”⁶⁸ Weapons in the battle against evil, a motif that André Corten identifies as a central discourse in Haitian religion.⁶⁹

Divine power inside you: your body as a vessel. Divine power surrounding you, walking with you, in your head, beneath you, in your home, in your yard. Whether bequeathed to devotees by the lwa or by the dead or by God or sold to you by a merchant sitting on a cinder block somewhere in Port-au-Prince or Léogâne, this is the chief purpose of devotional objects in Haitian Vodou. And, just as the human body is a vessel for divine presence, so is the *govi*, a sacralized bottle, clay gourd, or “pitcher” found in most Vodou temples, sometimes in multitudes.⁷⁰ These harbor the power of the lwa or the dead, *lemò*, or serve as their symbols. Another important form of envesselment in Haitian Vodou is the rattle (*asson*) that priests and priestesses carry and employ in a range of ritual services. It is usually “made of calabash covered with a net in which are enmeshed beads or snake vertebrae,” as Métraux explains. “Spirits who have chosen a man [or a woman] as vessel for supernatural powers” are said in Haitian Vodou to have “taken the *asson*.”⁷¹

In Haitian Vodou there are purveyors of destructive supernatural arts called *bòkò*, or sorcerers. Their work derives mostly from African memory, while at times drawing upon European traditions.⁷² It also incorporates local flora and fauna, as it is usually effectuated by using plants, herbs, or sometimes animal parts or fluids used as poisons. This tradition has deep roots in Africa and was a key element of African resistance to slavery and oppression, during the colonial era, in Saint-Domingue. The most feared, and successful, *bòkò* was Makandal. He was an African, likely from Congo, who led a community of *maroon* ex-slaves and terrorized whites with poisons and *wanga*, destructive amulets and curses, for nearly twenty years before his capture and execution. So powerful was Makandal’s work that, to this day, in Haitian Vodou his name is synonymous with poison.⁷³

Architecture and Sacred Space

We have mentioned Vodou temples, *ounfò*, also sometimes called *tanp* (temple). Along with cemeteries, they are the most important sacred spaces in the religion. They are also called *perstil*: “A covered area partially open at the sides where most Vodou drumming, dancing, chanting, and possession take place.”⁷⁴ Some rural Vodouist communities are centered on *abitasyon* (lit.: “habitat”), a parcel of land, a compound, that is home to the dead and the lwa and that houses a temple. On most *abitasyon*s that I have visited, there are also sacred trees and locations in the earth where the lwa reside.

We have already mentioned the *badji*, an “inner sanctuary” in a Vodou temple that houses the dead and the lwa, as well as the lwa’s clothes and ritual items.⁷⁵ Another important, often temporary, space in a temple or in the home of a Vodou priestess or priest is the *djevo*, a chamber in which an initiand into the religion spends much of a week lying down, usually dressed entirely in white. Métraux offers the following description:

In honour of the *loa* the sanctuary flags are placed around the retreat room. The very

ground is covered with every kind of receptacle all of the *maît-tête loa*'s [a devotee's chief spirit] favorite dishes. The mats on which the initiates are to lie are placed on the *vèvè* of their representative *loa* protectors. For pillows, they are issued with large stones which have been taken into the *hunfo* at night in great secrecy. Small coins ... are put under the stones or knotted into a corner of the cloth of each novice.⁷⁶

Many people who attend Vodou ceremonies and serve the *lwa* in Haiti cannot afford to be initiated in a *djevo*, as it is sometimes pricey, but they remain devoted to the *mistè* in meaningful ways, like going to Vodou ceremonies, Catholic Masses, or going on pilgrimage. Catholic churches in Haiti are also important sacred spaces in Haitian Vodou, as most Vodouists are also Catholic, as are most of the *lwa*. And many natural places on Earth, its seas, trees, groves, and hills, and especially its waterfalls, are sacred spaces in the religion.

For instance, waterfalls in Haiti are sacred repositories of rainbows, the miraculous presence of *Danbala*, among other *lwa*. So are natural springs, pools, lagoons, rivers, and the sea. Most pilgrimages draw the faithful to and around Catholic churches, but elements in nature combine with them in amazing ways. Haiti's two most popular pilgrimages are those to Saut-d'Eau, a waterfall above the rural town of Ville-Bonheur, and Plaine-du-Nord, home to a sacred pool in the north. While *Danbala* resides in all waterfalls, the Saut-d'Eau pilgrimage is primarily about *Èzili Dantò* and occurs on and around July 15, the feast day of her most recognized Catholic counterpart, Our Lady of Mount Carmel.⁷⁷ The sacred pool at La Plaine-du-Nord is home to *Ogou*, the *lwa* of metals and all things associated therewith. This pilgrimage occurs on and around the Catholic feast day of St. James the Greater (July 25), for whom this rural town's Catholic church is named. To exist at all, the pool, like all life, relies on rain. Donald Cosentino observes devotees ensuring that the pool is muddy for the Feast of St. James:

Sometimes during the summer rains these ruts fill in to become a kind of small pond called *trou* or *basin*. Should the rains fall, townspeople will come with pails of water to insure [*sic*] plenty of mud. For them, these are not potholes but St. James's own pond, known as Trou Sen Jak. Its celestial sludge, along with the church, the cemetery, and surrounding countryside, mark the terrestrial emergence point for a saint who is generalissimo of a family of military spirits named *Ogou*.⁷⁸

Thousands of pilgrims flock to these sacred sites each summer, submerging themselves in the sacred, purifying water and mud, bringing offerings to the spirits and the saints, repenting, and finding renewal.

Works of Art and Mass-Produced Artifacts

Vodou has been a central inspiration of one of the world's most extraordinary and celebrated national artistic cultures. Like Vodou itself, it is largely of African inspiration, for in colonial Saint-Domingue, "Africans reassembled the *objets trouvés* according to an aesthetic

they carried in their heads, their hearts, their entire bodies. Out of torn lace, sequins, feathers and empty whiskey bottles they made working models of heaven.”⁷⁹ A Vodou priestess once told me, “You can do *maji* with anything,”⁸⁰ a belief that carries over into Haitian art. You can make art with anything, but, for the sake of brevity, let us just consider painting and metal work.

As I write this, I am surrounded by books and Haitian paintings and metal sculptures. Directly before me is a beautiful, colorful, intensely detailed painting of the Virgin Mary by Saincilus Ismael (1940–2000), a Vodou priest. The Madonna and Baby Jesus are Black and surrounded by blue sky and vegetation. In the infant God’s hand is an *asson*, the sacred rattle of the Vodou priesthood. On another of his paintings of the Virgin Mary—Ismael’s favorite subject—that is in my office at Temple University, the Madonna’s robe is decorated with a *vèvè* that represents Èzili Freda. These reflect the absorption of Catholicism into Haitian Vodou and the remarkable survival of African religion in the Caribbean—against all odds, a true testimony to the human spirit.

Another of Haiti’s most revered painters, André Pierre (1915–2005), also a Vodou priest, says:

For me, the mother of the terrestrial is the Virgin Mary. Honor the saints. Honor the relics of the saints. But honor the holy Virgin more than the angels and saints. The Virgin Mary is Èzili Dantò... for she is the mother of pain. . . All the saints are *lwa*. . . I am married to Èzili Dantò. I sleep at her altar on Tuesdays.⁸¹

Much of Pierre’s work represents the *lwa*, and while painting he would often chant, sing, and, in effect, channel their energies and forms and colors and *vèvè*. Take, for instance, his masterpiece *Annual Ceremony for Agoue and La Siren*. Painted in oil on board, it features the king of the sea, Agwe, and his lover, the mermaid *lwa* Lasirenn. Too rich in detail to faithfully describe here, the painting depicts numerous *vèvè*, while the king holds an anchor and his lover holds a fish. There is a boat in the background, and on shore a Vodou priest holds an *asson*, while a priestess waves a flag and a child tows a goat soon to be sacrificed. Amazing. And currently it is for sale for \$7500, in case you are in the market for a stunning piece of Haitian art.⁸²

Perhaps the most esteemed Haitian painter of all time is another Vodou priest named Hector Hyppolite (1894–1948). As Roberto Strongman explains, Hyppolite “produced an unbelievable amount of work. He left behind over three hundred paintings and fourteen *vèvè* drawings. . . . painting for Hyppolite was an act of religious possession.”⁸³ One of Hyppolite’s pieces, “an old piece of cardboard,” was sold for \$75,000 in New York thirty years ago, then “a record price for any Haitian art.”⁸⁴ Among Hyppolite’s most treasured pieces are paintings of Èzili and the vision of Danbala pictured in this section. The artist is memorialized by a plaza named for him in Haiti, and his work has had an immeasurable influence not just in the realm of art but in the fascinating realm of French surrealist fiction and French art more generally. As Strongman adds, André Breton (1896–1926), one of the giants of French literary surrealism, “saw the literary movement of *negritude* and Haitian art as ways of reinvigorating European surrealism. . . . Moreover, Breton, after buying five of Hyppolite’s paintings in 1946, reportedly said. . . ‘this should revolutionize French painting... it needs a revolution.’”⁸⁵



Oil on board painting by celebrated Haitian master Hector Hyppolite of the Vodou serpent spirit Danbala, the lwa of waterfalls, rainbows, and regeneration. | [Damballah the Torch](#) by [Hector Hyppolite](#) is in [the public domain](#).

Iron and other metals are very important in Haitian Vodou, the stuff of Ogou and the substance of the chains that African and Creole slaves broke during the Haitian Revolution. Metal drums are stripped apart and used by Haitian artists to create sculptures, in a process/genre called *fer forgé*. This is the most prominent of a range of creative forms that emerge out of “the use of recycled materials as an aspect of Haitian aesthetic, necessity, and ingenuity,”⁸⁶ like the sequins that adorn Vodou flags and the bottles that envesse [zombi](#) (zombies), discussed in a later chapter. Speaking of zombies and metal, the great Georges Liautaud (1899–1991) once worked on the train tracks for the Haitian American Sugar Company, which was widely rumored to have employed the living dead, zombi, in their fields and their refinery. Liautaud’s experience with the tracks’ iron enabled him to open his own forgery, from which he made remarkable metal sculptures, often out of discarded metal gas drums. Much of his work is inspired by Vodou, while Liautaud also was a prolific sculptor of crosses installed in Haitian cemeteries, some of which “refer to other worlds, other channels of communication – the same ones reached by the flour cosmographs, *vèvè*, made on the peristyle floor during a Vodou ceremony.”⁸⁷

Conclusion

We return to Haitian cemeteries in the next chapter and again in our discussion of the forms of zombies and zombification in Haiti. To equip us for that journey, we also turn our attention to Vodou [pneumatology](#), Vodouist understandings of the human soul. The present chapter has intended to respectfully introduce Vodou, countering the racist stereotyping and othering that have been so harmful to the religion, issues we discuss in some detail later in the book. As Brown states, “Haitian Vodou is not only one of most misunderstood religions in the world; it is also one of the most maligned.”⁸⁸ It’s impossible to dispute that claim when the very name of this religion has become an adjective in English for all things diabolical, irrational, twisted, dark, dangerous, and weird.

On the contrary, Haitian Vodou is a religion of healing, community, and communion with divinity. The spirits, the ancestors, the angels, and the saints are all part of that community and of that communion, and they walk with us in life, and in death, and they are deeply a part of us, of our soul, our character, our sense of direction, our sexuality, the ways we love, the ways we grieve, the ways we heal. The ways we raise our children, the ways we dance, the ways we smile or frown, the ways we look at the sky, the sea, the trees. The ways we know God and find meaning, strength, and succor in life. And in death and beyond.

Notes

1. Noble David Cook, "Sickness, Starvation, and Death in Early Hispaniola," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32, 3, 2002. [↵](#)
2. Most scholars of Haitian Vodou today reject the English word *voodoo* because of the negative connotations that it carries. *Vodou* is the spelling in Haitian Creole. [↵](#)
3. The etymology of the word *lwa* is unclear and debated among scholars; it is of either West African or French origin. On this, see Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 19–20. [↵](#)
4. Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998 (1989), 14, 21. [↵](#)
5. Sydney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Social History of Haitian Vodou," in Donald J. Cosentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995, 124. [↵](#)
6. Méderic Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue, Tome Premier*, Paris: Société de l'Histoire des Colonies Françaises, 1958 (1797–1798), 64. [↵](#)
7. On the complexity of Fongbe's ethnic roots, see Chapter Five. It is more a cluster of the dialects of at least four related but culturally distinct peoples than a single language per se. [↵](#)
8. "VODUN – "Déité de la religion traditionnelle au Sud du Bénin" (Vodun – A god in the traditional religion of southern Benin). Basiilo Segurolo and Jean Rassinoux, *Dictionnaire fon-français et Dictionnaire français-fon*, Madrid: Ediciones Selva y Saban/Société des Missions Africains, 2000 (1963), 469. [↵](#)
9. Ira Paul Lowenthal, "Ritual Performance and Religious Experience: A Service for the Gods in Southern Haiti," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 34, 3, 1978, 393. [↵](#)
10. Justin Girod-Chantrons, *Voyage d'un Suisse dans différents colonies*, Neufchatel: Imprimerie de la Société Typographique, 1784, 137. [↵](#)
11. James H. Sweet, "New Perspectives on Kongo in Haiti," *The Americas* 74, 1, 2017, 85. [↵](#)
12. David Geggus, "The French Slave Trade: An Overview," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, 1, 2001, 119–138. [↵](#)
13. Terry Rey, "Vodou Genesis: Africans and the Making of a National Religion in Haiti," in Eric J. Montgomery, Timothy R. Landry, and Christian N. Vannier (eds.), *Spirit Service:*

- Vodún and Vodou in the Afro-Atlantic World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022, 35. [↵](#)
14. Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 6. [↵](#)
 15. John K. Thornton, *Africans and Africa in the Making of the Americas*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. [↵](#)
 16. Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. Hugo Charteris, New York: Schocken Books, 1972 (1954), 34, 50. [↵](#)
 17. Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 1, 4. [↵](#)
 18. Terry Rey, "Catholicism and Human Rights in Haiti: Past, Present, Future," *Religion and Human Rights* 1, 3, 2006, 235. [↵](#)
 19. Drexel G. Woodson and Mamadou A. Baro, "A Baseline Study of Livelihood Security in the Southern Peninsula of Haiti," Report Submitted to Catholic Relief Services and USAID, 1996, 54. [↵](#)
 20. Paul Christopher Johnson, "Secretism and the Apotheosis of Duvalier," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, 2, 2006, 422. [↵](#)
 21. Marvin Chochotte, "Making Peasants Chèf: The Tonton Makout Militia and the Moral Politics of Terror in the Haitian Countryside during the Dictatorship of François Duvalier, 1957–1971," *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 61, 4, 2019, 943. [↵](#)
 22. Bettina E. Schmidt, "Anthropological Reflections on Religion and Violence," in Andrew R. Murphy (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, Chichester, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2011, 66–67. [↵](#)
 23. *Ibid.*, 65. [↵](#)
 24. Bertin M. Louis, Jr., "Haiti's Pact with the Devil?: *Bwa Kayiman*, Haitian Protestant Views of Vodou, and the Future of Haiti," *Religions* 10, 2019, 1–15; Elizabeth McAlister, "From Slave Revolt to Blood Pact with Satan: The Evangelical Rewriting of Haitian History," *Studies in Religion: Sciences Religieuses* 41, 2, 187–215. [↵](#)
 25. Terry Rey, "Fear and Trembling in Haiti: A Charismatic Prophecy of the 2010 Earthquake," in Stan Chu Ilo (ed.), *Fire from Heaven: Pentecostalism, Catholicism, and the Spirit World*, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019, 280–299. [↵](#)
 26. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 254. [↵](#)
 27. Bolaji E. Idowu, *Olùdùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, London: Longmans, 1962, 204. [↵](#)

28. On God in Haitian Vodou, see Laënnec Hurbon, *Dieu dans le vaudou haïtien*, Paris: Payot, 1972. [↵](#)
29. Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit*, trans. Lori Frankel, New York: Abrams, 2005 (2003), 67–68. [↵](#)
30. By one account, there are more than 1000 lwa, who are “grouped in seventeen pantheons.” Ama Mazama, “Lwa,” in Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama (eds.), *Encyclopedia of African Religions*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008, 392. By other accounts, there are 401 lwa in Haitian Vodou. Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou: Rasin Figuier, Rasin Bwa Kayiman, and the Rada and Gede Rites*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021, 17. [↵](#)
31. Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012, 302. [↵](#)
32. *Ibid.*, 231. [↵](#)
33. On this, see Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992; and Terry Rey, *Our Lady of Class Struggle: The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Haiti*, Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1999. [↵](#)
34. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 212. [↵](#)
35. On Lasirenn and St. Philomena in Haiti, see Deborah O’Neil and Terry Rey, “The Saint and Siren: Liberation Hagiography in a Haitian Village,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 41, 2, 2012, 166–186. [↵](#)
36. Much of this list, along with this chapter’s glossary below, relies on Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian and Creole*. See this book’s amazing glossary for further introduction to these and other lwa. [↵](#)
37. Hebblethwaite, *Voodoo Songs in English and Haitian Creole*, 302. [↵](#)
38. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 100–101. [↵](#)
39. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 233. [↵](#)
40. *Ibid.*, 263. [↵](#)
41. Laënnec Hurbon, “Vodou: A Faith for Individual, Family, and Community,” *Callaloo* 15, 3, 1992, 791–792. [↵](#)
42. Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 3. [↵](#)
43. *Ibid.*, 23. [↵](#)

44. Hurbon, "Vodou," 787–788. [↵](#)
45. On Yoruba divination, see William Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980. [↵](#)
46. Adam M. McGee, "Dreaming in Haitian Vodou: Vouchsafe, Guide, and Source of Liturgical Novelty," *Dreaming* 22, 12, 2012, 92. [↵](#)
47. Giovanni B. Bazzanna, *Having the Spirit of Christ: Spirit Possession and Exorcism in the Early Christian Groups*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. 25. [↵](#)
48. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 5–6. [↵](#)
49. Terry Rey, "[Saut-d'Eau](#)," in David G. Bromley (ed.), *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, 2017, <https://wrldrels.org/2017/10/24/saut-deau/>, last accessed April 18, 2021. [↵](#)
50. I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, New York: Penguin, 1971, xx. [↵](#)
51. Bryan S. Freeman, *Third World Folk Beliefs: Haitian Medical Anthropology*, Port-au-Prince: La Presse Évangélique, 2007, 64. [↵](#)
52. Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *The Journal of American Folklore* 44, 174, 1931, 358. [↵](#)
53. Jessie M. Colin and Ghislaine Paperwalla, "People of Haitian Heritage," in Larry D. Purnell and Betty J. Paulanka (eds.), *Transcultural Health Care: A Culturally Competent Approach*, Philadelphia: Davis, 2003, 231–247. [↵](#)
54. Karen McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study," in Lawrence Sullivan (ed.), *Healing and Restoring: Medicine and Health in the World's Religious Traditions* New York: MacMillan, 1989, 255–285. [↵](#)
55. Nicolas Vonarx, "Haitian Vodou as a Health Care System: Between Magic, Religion, and Medicine," *Alternative Therapies* 15, 5, 2011, 47. [↵](#)
56. Hebblethwaite, *Voodoo Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 215. [↵](#)
57. Terry Rey and Alex Stepick, *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith: Haitian Religion in Miami*, New York: New York University Press, 2013, 148. [↵](#)
58. [Material Religion](#), <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rfmr20/current>, last accessed March 31, 2021. [↵](#)
59. Melville J. Herskovits, "African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief," *American Anthropologist* 39, 4, 1939, 635–636. [↵](#)

60. Ibid., 637. [↵](#)
61. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 231. [↵](#)
62. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 163–165. [↵](#)
63. Terry Rey, *The Priest and the Prophetess: Abbé Ouvière, Romaine Rivière, and the Revolutionary Atlantic World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 326–327. [↵](#)
64. Terry Rey, “Toward an Ethnohistory of Haitian Pilgrimage,” *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 91, 1, 2005, 161–183. On pilgrimage in Haiti, see also Rey, “Saut-d’Eau.” [↵](#)
65. “Penitence cloths; ritual clothes constructed by sewing strips of different-colored cloth together. Men make multicolored shirts, and women make dresses, The colors represent various lwa . . . worn to overcome a sin. . . . Abstinence is required for those wearing the attire.” Hebblethwaite, *Voodoo Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 282. [↵](#)
66. Karen Richman, *Migration and Vodou*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005, 16. [↵](#)
67. Terry Rey and Karen Richman, “The Somatics of Syncretism: Tying Body and Soul in Haitian Religion,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 39, 3, 2010, 388–389. [↵](#)
68. Terry Rey, “Catholic Pentecostalism in Haiti: Spirit, Politics, and Gender,” *Pneuma: Journal for the Society of Pentecostal Studies* 32, 1, 2010, 86. [↵](#)
69. André Corten, *Misère, religion et politique en Haïti: Diabolisation et mal politique*, Paris: KARTHALA, 2001. [↵](#)
70. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 375, 392. [↵](#)
71. Ibid., 66. [↵](#)
72. Pierre Pluchon, *Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs: De Saint-Dominuge à Haïti*. Paris: KARTHALA, 1987, 220. [↵](#)
73. Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 193–207. On wanga, see Karen McCarthy Brown, “Making Wanga: Reality Prescriptions and the Magical Manipulation of Power,” in Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds.), *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 233–257. [↵](#)
74. Hebblethwaite, *Voodoo Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 278. [↵](#)
75. Ibid., 215. [↵](#)
76. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 201. [↵](#)

77. Rey, "Saut-d'Eau." [↵](#)
78. Donald J. Cosentino, "It's All for You, Sen Jak," in Donald J. Cosentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995, 243. [↵](#)
79. Donald J. Cosentino, "Introduction: Imagine Heaven," in Donald J. Cosentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995, 28. [↵](#)
80. Rey and Stepick, *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith*, 146. [↵](#)
81. André Pierre, with Donald J. Cosentino, "A World Created by Magic: Extracts from a Conversation with André Pierre," in Donald J. Cosentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995, xxiii. [↵](#)
82. [André Pierre, Artist, The Jamieson Collection](#), <https://iartx.com/pierre-andre-2.html>, last accessed April 12, 2021. [↵](#)
83. Roberto Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, 51. [↵](#)
84. Alex Stepick, *Pride against Prejudice: Haitians in the United States*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998, 96. It is worth noting here that Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988), the son of a Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother, had one of his paintings purchased for \$110.5 million, then the most ever for a painting by an American artist, in 2017. [↵](#)
85. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 52. [↵](#)
86. Jennifer Maki, "Vodou Riche: Contemporary Haitian Art," *African Arts*, Autumn 2008, 88. [↵](#)
87. Randall Morris, "The Style of His Hands: The Iron Art of Georges Liautaud," in Donald J. Cosentino, *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995, 382. [↵](#)
88. Brown, *Mama Lola*, xvii. [↵](#)

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Glossary

Abitasyon

A parcel of land, a compound, that is home to the dead and the lwa and houses a temple and/or shrine(s). Often also home to sacred trees and locations in the earth where the lwa sometimes reside, along with graves of the dead. [↴](#)

Agwe

A lwa assimilated with St. Ulrich, the lwa who rules the seas and is married to Lasirenn, the mermaid lwa. [↴](#)

Aida-Wèdo

A snake divinity who is associated with rainbows and is the wife of [Danbala](#). ↴

Animal Sacrifice

Ritual performance in which animals are killed to appease or feed the lwa. In Vodou, this is usually done with chickens and goats. A practice found in many other religions.

↴

Antisuperstitious Campaigns

Efforts by the Catholic Church hierarchy in Haitian history, with state and sometimes military—and American—support, to suppress and ultimately eradicate Vodou from Haitian society, especially in 1898, 1913, and 1941–1942. ↴

Arada

A West African people whose traditional religion profoundly influenced the development of Haitian Vodou. ↴

Aristide, Jean-Bertrand (b. 1953)

Former Catholic priest who served as president of Haiti for nine months in 1991, 1994–1996, and from 2001–2004. Was instrumental in having Vodou recognized as an official religion in Haiti in 2003. ↴

Ayizan

A lwa associated with temples, pathways, entryways, and barriers. Generally associated with St. Claire. ↴

Azaka (also called Zaka)

The lwa of all things related to agriculture. Assimilated with St. Charles Borromeo. ↴

Badji

The inner sanctuary of a Vodou temple or a shed in a temple yard that contains an altar, symbols of the lwa, and human bones representing the ancestors. ↴

Bawon Samdi

The lwa who rules over cemeteries; a manifestation of [Gede](#). Identified with the Christian cross rather than with any Catholic saint. ↴

Bòkò

A sorcerer, a ritual specialist who generally deals in destructive supernatural arts but can also effectuate healing; often the creator of zonbi in Haitian Vodou. ↴

Bondye

The Supreme God in Haitian Vodou; literally means “Good God” and largely based on Catholic theology, though God is more distant from humanity in Vodou than in Catholicism. ↴

Bosou Twa Kòn

A lwa visualized as a bull with three horns (and/or three testicles) and associated with wisdom and justice. Assimilated with St. Nicholas and sometimes with Jesus Christ. ↴

Bwa Kayiman

Forested location in central Haiti where, in 1791, [Boukman Dutty](#) and [Cécille Fatima](#) are believed to have orchestrated a Vodou ceremony to stir the enslaved masses around them to rise up and launch the Haitian Revolution. ↴

Chwal

Literally “horse” in Haitian Creole, a metaphoric term for someone who gets possessed by a spirit during a Vodou ceremony, hence “mounted” by their rider, the lwa. ↴

Code Noir

1685 proclamation by the French crown concerning the treatment of slaves in its Caribbean colonies, which stipulated that Catholicism was the only religion to be permitted and that slaves must be baptized Catholic and given days off to attend Mass on Sundays and to attend feast day services at churches and chapels. ↴

Concordat

Formal 1860 agreement between the Haitian state and the Vatican that led to the return of Catholic priests (mostly French) to Haiti after the church hierarchy had been absent since the end of the Haitian Revolution, in 1804, due to Vatican resistance to recognizing Haiti’s independence. ↴

Creole

A term with multiple meanings. In the Haitian context, it is the language of the people, while in the colonial context, in Saint-Domingue, it was a name for those slaves who had been born in Saint-Domingue rather than in Africa. ↴

Danbala

A serpent lwa associated with rainbows, waterfalls, and the cycle of life; husband of [Ayida-Wèdo](#). Assimilated with St. Patrick. ↴

Diffused Monotheism

A form of religion, like Haitian Vodou, in which there is one Supreme Creator God whose energies and graces are diffused into the world through spirits, like the lwa. ↴

Divination

A ritual practice in which various material elements are employed by a priestess or priest to communicate with the spirits of the dead, predict the future, read the past, and provide counsel to the faithful. Usually in Vodou this involves playing cards, but one can also read palms, candles, and scripture. ↵

Djevo

A small room in a Vodou temple or the home of a priestess or priest that is occupied by a devotee for seven days as a central part of initiation into Haitian Vodou. ↵

Drapo

Literally “flag” in Haitian Creole, an important feature that often flies above and/or adorns Vodou temples, usually dedicated to and/or emblematic of distinct lwa. ↵

Dutty, Boukman

Enslaved African who is believed to, in 1791, with [Cécille Fatima](#), have orchestrated a Vodou ceremony to stir the enslaved masses around them to rise up and launch the Haitian Revolution. ↵

Duvalier, François (1907–1971)

Former doctor and ethnographer who became “president for life” of Haiti in 1957 until his death in 1971. Ruled ruthlessly and exploited Vodou to legitimate his regime and instill fear in his opponents and potential detractors. ↵

Duvalier, Jean-Claude (1951–2014)

Son of [François Duvalier](#) and dictatorial president of Haiti from 1971, when his father died, until 1986, when he was ousted from power by a popular uprising. ↵

Dyab

In Haitian Creole literally “devil,” but the term is just as often used to refer to the lwa as to demons; one category of the mistè. ↵

Envesselment

The entry into, and containment therein, of supernatural powers, spirits, God, or human souls in a vessel, whether a human body, a church, a grave, a gourd, a clay pot, or a glass bottle, etc. ↵

Èzili

The most popular female lwa in Vodou; associated with love, motherhood, and fresh waters. Assimilated with the Virgin Mary. ↵

Èzili Dantò

A lwa; the main [Petwo](#) manifestation of [Èzili](#) in Haitian Vodou. ↵

Èzili Freda

A lwa; main [Rada](#) manifestation of Èzili in Haitian Vodou. ↵

Fatima, Cécille

Enslaved African who is believed, in 1791, with [Boukman Dutty](#), to have orchestrated a Vodou ceremony to stir the enslaved masses around them to rise up and launch the Haitian Revolution. ↵

Fèt Gede

Major feast day celebration for the lwa who oversees all things related to death and dying, Gede, and for the veneration of all the ancestors. Takes place largely in public, whether in cemeteries or in the streets and marketplaces, on November 1 and November 2, which are All Saints Day and All Souls Day in the Catholic liturgical calendar. ↵

Fèt Vodou

Literally “Vodou Feast” or “Vodou Party” in Haitian Creole; designates a communal Vodou ritual. ↵

Fon

West African ethnic group, mostly from what is today Benin, and a language ([Fongbe](#)); major cornerstones of Haitian Vodou and Haitian culture.

Fongbe

Language of the [Fon](#) and the Gbe peoples of West Africa. Widely spoken among slaves in Saint-Domingue. ↵

Free People of Color

In colonial Saint-Domingue, an important community composed of people who had either been born free or manumitted, including Black people and those of mixed Black and white ancestry. Some were among the wealthiest in the colony, others poor. ↵

Gede

The chief lwa of all things related to death, dying, and rebirth. Assimilated with St. Gerard. ↵

Ginen

Africa, both the geographic location and the mythic home of the lwa and the dead, and eventually the destination of part of our own souls, once we pass on. ↴

Govi

A sacralized bottle, clay gourd, or “pitcher” found in most Vodou temples, sometimes in multitudes, that harbors the power of the lwa or of the dead, lemò, or that serve as their symbols. ↴

Gran Bwa

Literally “Great Woods.” The lwa of leaves and forests. Assimilated with St. Sebastian. ↴

Gran Mèt

Literally “Grand Master,” a name for the supreme God in Haitian Vodou. Probably derived from Freemasonry rather than Catholicism. See also [Bondye](#). ↴

Great Schism

Period of Haitian history from 1804 to 1860 when the Vatican refused to recognize Haiti’s independence and thus did not send any priests to the nation, until the signing of the [Concordat](#) of 1860. ↴

Hagiography

Stories of saints and the elements that reflect their lives in icons or portraits of them. ↴

Hispaniola

Large island in the Caribbean that today is divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, with Haiti occupying the mountainous western third, roughly the size of Maryland. The French plantation colony of Saint-Domingue occupied that same third from 1697 to 1804. ↴

Ifa

Massive oracle of [Yoruba](#) religion, which is committed to memory by diviners and consulted during [divination](#) sessions to provide individuals or communities with direction in life, to solve problems, and to foster and share insights from the spirit world and the world of the dead. ↴

Kòd

Literally “cord” in Haitian Creole; Vodou pilgrims often tie colorful ropes around their waists or dangle them around their necks while traveling to sacred sites, sometimes then tying them to statues or trees there. ↴

Kongo

The Kongo people of West Central Africa, thousands of whom were enslaved and brought to [Saint-Domingue](#), and whose religious culture is a cornerstone of Haitian Vodou. Also a language widely spoken in the colony, today called Kikongo. ↵

Lasirenn

The mermaid lwa, sometimes seen as a whale or as swimming with a whale. Associated with the sea and is the wife of Agwe. Assimilated with St. Philomena. ↵

Legba

A lwa associated with crossroads and gates, and enabler of all Vodou ceremonies. Assimilated with St. Peter. ↵

Lemò

Literally in Haitian Creole “the dead,” the ancestors, who are venerated in the religion; central category of the [mistè](#). ↵

Loko

The lwa of trees. Associated with St. Joseph, for his love of children. ↵

Lwa

A spirit in Haitian Vodou, usually anthropomorphic and often assimilated with a Catholic saint; along with the living dead, they are the chief foci of the religion. The word’s origins are disputed. ↵

Lwa Rasin

Protective “root spirit” that one receives at birth; over time, if living space permits, Vodouists keep an altar in their home for this divinity’s veneration. ↵

Maji

Literally “magic” in Haitian Creole; in Vodou, priestesses and priests make and employ a range of material items or elements of nature to effectuate and share supernatural powers, to help people gain luck in life, and/or to heal, among other things. ↵

Manbo

A Vodou priestess. ↵

Manje Lwa

Important ceremony in Haitian Vodou, literally “Food (for the) Spirits,” in which the lwa are fed and provided offerings. ↵

Manje Mò (Manje lemò)

Important ceremony in Haitian Vodou, literally “Food (for the) Dead,” in which the lemò are fed and provided offerings. ↵

Marasa

Twins. The lwa of twins. Assimilated with Sts. Cosmas and Damian, who were twins. ↵

Medsin Fèy (sometimes called doktè fèy)

Literally “leaf doctor,” a ritual specialist in Vodou who is an expert in herbs and herbal healing. ↵

Mistè

The entire collectivity of “mysteries,” or divinities, in Haitian Vodou; supernatural beings that include saints ([sen](#)), angels ([zanj](#)), the dead ([lemò](#)) or the ancestors ([zansèt](#)), and devils ([dyab](#)). ↵

Nanchon

Literally in Haitian Vodou “nation,” a term used for a particular rite or spirit pantheon in the religion, like the [Rada](#) and the [Petwo](#). ↵

Ogou

The lwa of metals and all things related thereto, like warfare. Thus, assimilated with St. James the Greater and sometimes with St. George. ↵

Olodumare

Name of the Supreme and one Creator God in Yoruba religion. ↵

Orature

A repository of stories, hymns, myths, prayers, and oracles that is committed to memory and orally transmitted—oral scripture, in effect. ↵

Orisha

The spirits in Yoruba religion, who are also venerated in Cuban Santería and in Brazilian Candomblé; many are among the lwa in Haitian Vodou. ↵

Ounfò

A Vodou temple. ↵

Oungan

A Vodou priest. ↴

Ounsi

A Vodou novice; one who is initiated and on a path to the priesthood, and who assists priests and priestesses in all matters of religious practice. ↴

Pakèt

Literally “packet” in Haitian Creole, amulets and charms employed in Haitian Vodou, often a sack containing powders and herbs that effectuates healing, luck, and knowledge; also elemental to one’s relationship to and experience of the lwa. ↴

Perstil

Literally in Haitian Creole “peristyle,” a Vodou temple, where communal ceremonies take place, usually involving drumming and dancing. Often an open-air space covered by a roof next to or near an actual temple. ↴

Petwo

Kongo-based division (or rite or pantheon) of the lwa, said to be “hot”; most lwa have a Petwo manifestation. ↴

Pneumatology

The study of the soul and all things related thereto. ↴

Popular Religion

As opposed to “orthodoxy,” the true religion of the people, which often deviates from what is intended by, for example, the Catholic hierarchy and Church doctrine. ↴

Poto Mitan

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “Middle Pillar”; a wooden or cement pole in the center of a Vodou temple, which the faithful dance around and which the lwa are said to climb down to join communal ceremonies. ↴

Pret Savann

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “bush priest,” a ritual specialist who recites Catholic prayers and provides other Catholic liturgical elements during Vodou ceremonies. ↴

Pwen

Literally “point,” in Haitian Creole; amulets and charms employed in Haitian Vodou, sometimes nonmaterial, that effectuate healing, luck, and knowledge; also elemental in one’s relationship to and experience of the lwa. ↴

Rad Penitans

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “penitential clothes,” which pilgrims often wear as they travel to venerate the lwa at any number of sacred sites throughout the country. Pilgrims usually make such garb from torn parts of other garments. [↴](#)

Rada

West African-based division of lwa, said to be “cool”; most lwa have a Rada manifestation. [↴](#)

Rara

A Lenten tradition in Haitian Vodou during which troupes of musicians process noisily through the streets, roads, and paths throughout the country to celebrate life and to bolster the Vodouist faithful to manage the challenges that they face along life’s way. [↴](#)

Religious Syncretism

When two or more different religions encounter one another, often they blend. All religions have syncretic histories, but the term is usually used to identify religions like Vodou that derive from disparate cultural traditions and encounters. [↴](#)

Ritual Paraphernalia

Materials used in religious rituals, whether personal or collective; in the case of Vodou, holy water, shells, sequined flags, drums, etc. [↴](#)

Saint-Domingue

French plantation colony that was founded by the French in 1697 and soon thereafter became the most lucrative colony in the world, due to the forced labor of hundreds of thousands of slaves and the aggressive cultivation of sugar. Saint-Domingue ended upon the success of the Haitian Revolution in 1804, giving birth to Haiti. [↴](#)

Sen

Haitian Creole, literally “saint”; a term used for both Catholic saints in Vodou and the lwa with whom they “walk” or with whom they are assimilated. [↴](#)

Sèvis (Sèvis Lwa)

Haitian Creole for “service to the lwa,” a term that has historically been used to refer to Haitian Vodou, reflecting the centrality of serving the spirits in the religion. [↴](#)

Sevitè

Haitian Creole for “servant,” a term widely used in reference to practitioners of Haitian Vodou, for the religion is primarily about serving the [lwa](#). [↴](#)

Simbi

Lwa of Central African origin associated with springs and lagoons. Assimilated with St. Christopher and sometimes with Moses. [↵](#)

Sortilège

French word meaning “spell”—as in a hex or curse—that was often used by French observers of African traditions in colonial Saint-Domingue to refer to Vodou and later during the Catholic hierarchy’s efforts to eradicate the religion from Haitian society. [↵](#)

Spirit Possession

An experience in which a human being, often a woman, becomes the vessel and mouthpiece for a lwa, usually during lively communal drumming ceremonies in temples; often an effect of the dancing inspired by the [tanbou](#). [↵](#)

Tanbou

Sacred drums that are widely used in Vodou ceremonies to summon the lwa and to inspire the faithful to dance and find communion with them. Also a term for a communal drumming ceremony. [↵](#)

Tap-Tap

Colorful covered pickup truck, van, or other reconfigured vehicle that is a common mode of public transportation in Haiti, especially in urban areas. Often adorned with images of Catholic saints. [↵](#)

Tonton Makout

Brutal paramilitary force created and employed by [François Duvalier](#) (ruled 1957-1971) to terrorize his political opponents and to cement his dictatorial grip on power as “president for life.” [↵](#)

Treaty of Ryswick

1697 treaty signed between Spain and France, in the Netherlands, that ceded the western third of the island of Hispaniola to the French, which would become Saint-Domingue and then, after the Haitian Revolution in 1804, Haiti. [↵](#)

Vèvè

Symbols of the [lwa](#), the product of a range of both African and European influences, which are traced on the ground of a temple in chalk, corn meal, ashes, brick dust, pulverized tree bark, or flour at the beginning of a communal ceremony, only to be danced into the ground by the faithful. [↵](#)

Vodou

The African-derived religion of the majority of people in Haiti. In the West African language of [Fongbe](#), the word *vodun* means spirit or sacred object, but historically it was also the name of a divinity in the pantheon of the [Fon](#) people. ↴

Wanga

Destructive amulets and charms that are usually employed only by sorcerers (*bòkò*) in Haitian Vodou. Capable of causing sickness, misfortune, and even death. At times, they also take the form of powders and can be used for protection or for healing. ↴

Yoruba

The largest ethnic group in West Africa, whose traditional religious pantheon shares much in common with Haitian Vodou, thanks to its historical influence. Most Yoruba today live in Nigeria. ↴

Zaka

The lwa of all things related to agriculture. Assimilated with St. Charles Borromeo. ↴

Zanj

Angels, as they are called in Haitian Creole. A countless cohort of spiritual beings who comprise part of the *mistè*, or “the mysteries.” The term often is used to refer to the lwa. ↴

Zanj Lan Bwa

Literally “angels in the woods,” a general reference to the Petwo manifestations of the lwa. ↴

Zanj Lan Dlo

Literally “angels in the water,” a general reference to the Rada manifestations of the lwa. ↴

Zansèt

Literally “the ancestors,” in Haitian Creole, who are widely venerated in Vodou. See also [lemò](#). ↴

Zombification

A process by which a human being is transformed into a zombie. ↴

Zonbi

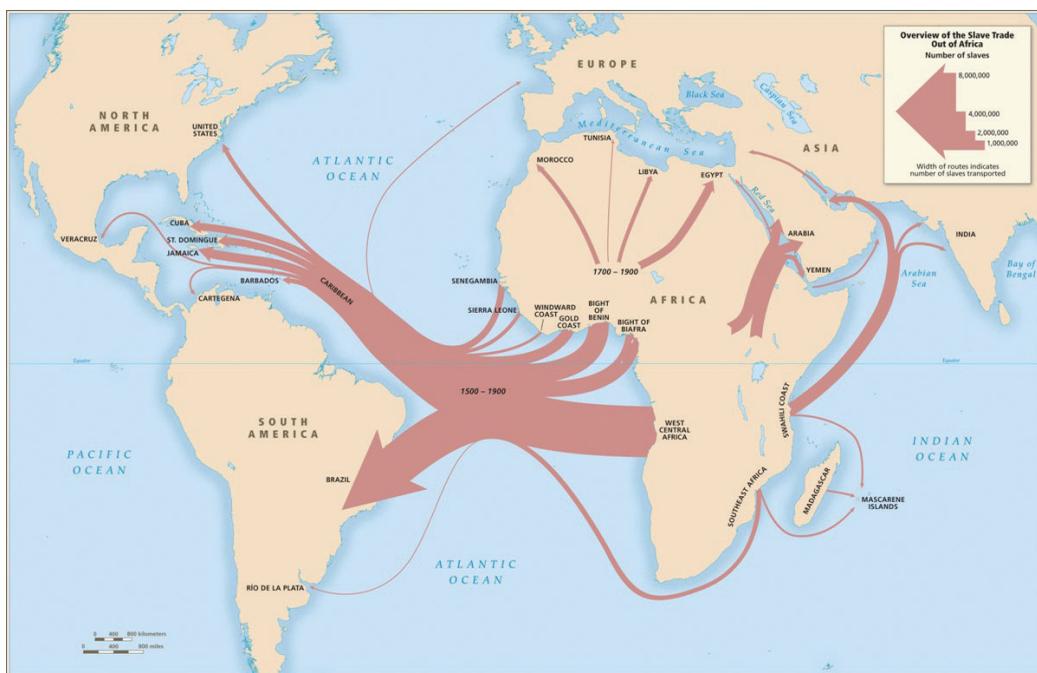
Haitian Creole for “zombie.” ↴

7. Death, Dying, and the Soul in Haitian Vodou

Overview

In the Congo, my closest friend was named Kundabu, which means “Death is Wind.” We met him in Chapter Five. Death comes to all of us, like the wind. A proverb in a friend’s name, and nothing ever said about human existence is truer than that. Africana religions pay careful attention to the dead, who always remain in our community, ideally watching over us to eventually return, alive once again. Their return, our return, to the world of the living can be enabled by effective religious practice. This is a return to the here and now, the best of all possible worlds and one that we are meant to enjoy fully. The dead are venerated and fed and cherished for all that they have given and continue to give us, especially life, wisdom, and protection. In return, we serve them, revere them, feed them, care for their burial sites, and, in doing so, keep them among and within us. Death being wind, as it were, one day we will join them, hopefully to be likewise served by our living descendants, who will keep us alive in the land of the dead and will embody the wisdom and goodness that we taught them while we were their living elders. In the case of Haitian Vodou, for the living dead to return to us they will travel, across or under the water, to either Africa or Haiti. But if things go awry, they can also come back as ghosts or as [zombi](#), zombies. This is not to haunt us per se, but to labor mindlessly or serve sorcerers as destructive supernatural powers. That, of course, is altogether regrettable, the loss of a soul to zombification. It is an end to one’s desired return to this world, the world of the living, taking up one’s place anew in the family.

Haitian Vodou is a deeply African religion, in a distinctly [Creole](#) form. Thus, toward understanding Vodouist takes on death, dying, and the soul (Vodouist [thanatology](#) and [pneumatology](#))—and to understand the zombie—our inquiry must begin in Africa, especially West Africa and the [Kongo](#). This is the homeland of most of Haiti’s African ancestors, as well as most of the [lwa](#). Ogbu Kalu writes, “The influence of ancestral spirits in Africa is pervasive, and devotional concerns over them loom so large in the primal religious structures that emergent religious forms must perforce reflect the encounter with ancestral covenants.”¹ Among the Igbo people, who mostly reside in what is today Nigeria, Kalu finds that the “dominant concerns” of indigenous religion “are nature deities, ancestral deities, and spirit forces – that is, spirits which enhance, preserve, or destroy life and fortunes.”² He concludes that “the core element of the primal religiosity of this culture theater is the cult of the ancestors.”³



Major African routes of the transatlantic slave trade. | [Major Routes of the Transatlantic Slave Trade](#) by [David Eltis](#) and [David Richardson](#) is used under a [CC BY-NC 3.0 License](#).

As a Creole religion, an essentially African but partly Catholic religion in the Americas, Haitian Vodou is one of the “emergent religious forms” to which Kalu refers, and it does “reflect the encounter with ancestral covenants.” This is especially the case during **Fèt Gede**, the annual Feast of Gede, the lwa of all things related to death and dying, and an anthropomorphic **trickster spirit**. In this chapter we explore this feast and the nature of the soul in Haitian Vodou. We also briefly explore its relationship to zombies. But first a journey into the soul of Africa beckons.

The Soul in African Religion

Where is your soul, if it exists at all? Let’s contemplate that for a moment, please. Growing up Catholic, I was imbued with a sense that it must be somewhere in my chest. But in Haitian Vodou the soul is in your head. It also consists of two or three elements, depending on whom you ask. But there are no doctrinal texts or scriptures in the religion that dictate any kind of orthodox pneumatology, or teachings and understandings about the soul. As underscored in the previous chapter, Haitian Vodou also exhibits a great deal of variety, so writing anything definitive about Vodouist pneumatology is difficult. But it helps to begin in Africa, to explore

this topic [Afrocentricly](#), or by orienting our analysis with reference to the African origins of Vodou, including its notion(s) of the soul.⁴

As in Vodou, there is an impressive diversity of understandings of the soul in traditional African religions. Some of them conceive of multiple elements located in various parts of the body, like the head, stomach, or heart. Among the [Fang](#), for instance, who today mostly live in the West African nation of Gabon, the human soul has seven elements or manifestations, per Claude Rivière:

[eba](#), a vital principle located in the brain, which disappears after death; [nlem](#), the heart, the seat of conscience, which inspires the acts of men and also disappears at the time of death; [edzii](#), an individual name that retains a sort of individuality after death; [ki](#) (or [ndem](#)) the sign of the individual and at the same time his or her force that perpetuates itself after disincarnation; [ngzel](#), the active principle of the soul as long as it is in the body; [nsissim](#), both shadow and soul; and [khun](#), the disincarnated spirit, which can appear as a ghost.⁵

That is a rather complex pneumatology, to say the least. Tragically, many Fang people were enslaved and forcibly brought to the Americas during the colonial era, where they were outnumbered by Africans of other ethnic groups,⁶ especially the Fon and the Kongo. So it is to their respective pneumatologies that our attention now turns, albeit briefly.

Fon Pneumatology

Fon, or [Fon-Ewe](#) or Ewe-Fon, traditional religion is a cornerstone and taproot of Haitian Vodou. It is perhaps the most influential of all African sources on this Creole religion that crystalized in the French slave plantation colony of Saint-Domingue, which would become the independent Republic of Haiti following the Haitian Revolution in 1804. Because of [Allada](#) (Ardra), the city and empire that they had built in Dahomey, today's Benin, Fon is the source of the term for the [Rada](#) rite or pantheon of lwa in Vodou. It is also the source of the names of many of the lwa themselves,⁷ like, for instance, Mawou-Lisa, “the female upper god who created the sky and the earth,” who is “reflected in the Marasa (Divine Twins),” among the most popular spirits in the religion.⁸ Furthermore, as Benjamin Hebblethwaite explains, “The Fon and the Haitian people share a fundamental monotheism; the [vodun](#) or the lwa are branches of that trunk.”⁹ They are also the source of a rite in Vodou called [Gede](#).¹⁰

In addition, Vodou's [ancestral spirituality](#),¹¹ as well as the religion's attentiveness to the living dead, derives centrally from the Fon. “The ancestral cult, believed to be necessary for the perpetuation of the clan, is the focal point of Fon social organization and much religious activity,” per Michelle Gilbert:

Funeral ceremonies for dead adults are concluded three years after their death so that their souls are not lost to the clan. Every decade or so the ancestors are “established,” that is, they are deified as [tovodu](#) (family gods) by a rite in which a local group head

must name all the dead group members from the most recently dead back to the earliest. At this rite an ancestral shrine (*dexoxo*) is built. There, the *tovodu* are annually “fed” and honored with dancing and praise songs.¹²

Thus, in Haitian Vodou, the dead must be fed in ceremonies called *manje mò* (food for the dead), and their souls, or at least part of their souls, should be preserved in the cycle of life, in their living families, here and now. As part of his research on Haitian Vodou, Leslie Desmangles did fieldwork in Benin and writes that among the Fon today “reclamation ceremonies serve, among other things, as opportunities for members of a clan to construct a memorial shrine in honor of their ancestors.” In this, Desmangles found “many parallels with similar reclamation rites in Haiti.”¹³ In a deeply interesting commentary on zombies, meanwhile Donald Cosentino reflects another enduring Fon notion in Haitian Vodou: “What zombies represent is a hijacking of the soul . . . so that it cannot rejoin the family, which is the whole purpose of life.”¹⁴ Reclamation rites are thus designed in part to protect the souls of the dead from being zombified.



Fon statue covered with ancient and authentic chains from slavery and ornamented with two crocodile skulls. Late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Private collection of Ji-Elle'. Photo by owner. | [Fon Statue](#) by [Ji-Elle](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

In Fon traditional religion, one's soul is called a *lovu*, though there is a distinction between one's "soul of life" and one's "soul of dreams." Neither has much influence on the idiosyncrasies

of the lives of the living, but “in the case of death, *lovu* definitely left the person; and whereas the soul of life turned into a spirit (*noli*), walking around the living, the soul of death joined the ancestors . . . in the realm of the dead.”¹⁵ There is another element of the soul in Fon-Ewe traditional religion that eludes translation or explanation in English, but that amounts to three different souls or three elements of one’s soul. As Brigit Meyer offers, in Ewe religion “some spirits of the dead remained on earth to frighten or trouble the living.”¹⁶ That does sound like a zombie in Haiti, at least in one form. There are other zombic forms in Haiti, though, as we will see in the following chapter.

Finally, a few other influential notions of Fon pneumatology are central to Vodouist understandings of the soul. For instance, upon death, part of one’s soul, called the *sae*, returns to God, other parts become ancestors, and others can haunt the living, kind of like a zombie. Furthermore, there are ceremonies in Fon religion that must be performed after someone has died, especially a family member, and if these ceremonies are neglected or improperly performed, that part of the soul that should join the ancestors cannot.¹⁷ The dead are to be venerated and can watch over us, but should the living fail to serve their spiritual obligations to serve them, to feed them, and to perform such funerary rites, tragedy can strike. In Haiti, some of among the dead who are neglected in such a way might well be transformed into zombies, thereby breaking “the whole purpose of life.”

Kongo Pneumatology

Kongo pneumatology and *cosmology* are framed largely by the understanding that the universe is divided into two worlds, the world of the living, *nza yayi*, and the land of the dead, *nsi a bafwa*. As in Fon religion, in Kongo the dead are venerated and feared, and they are understood to cycle through this world and the ancestral realm. One important difference between the two African traditions, Fon and Kongo, is that in the latter pneumatology the soul does not return to God (*Nzambe Mpungu*) but to *nsi a bafwa*. In Kongolese religious thought, a human being consists of two elements, as K. E. Laman explains in a classic study:

Man is considered a double being, made up of an outer and an inner entity. The outer body again consists of two parts, the shell (*vuvudi*) which is buried and rots in the ground as quickly as a mushroom, and the inner, invisible part (*mvumbi*) which is eaten by the magic of the *bandoki* [sorcerer].¹⁸

So what transmigrates or reincarnates, then, if one of our elements rots upon burial and the other is eaten by *bandoki*? It’s not entirely clear, to the extent that another early ethnographer, Joseph Van Wing, found Kongolese pneumatology to be somewhat incoherent. But he found that it identifies a dual soul, consisting of a “sentient soul” and a “spiritual soul.”¹⁹ Lilas Desquiron argues that such a “very blurry” idea of the soul is also evident in Fon pneumatology, but that this blurriness contributed to the ease with which West and Central African ideas blended in the genesis of Haitian Vodou.²⁰ Per Wyatt MacGaffey, we also consist

of an “imperishable social identity.”²¹ Such might be conceived of as the soul, which is invisible in Kongolese pneumatology. It separates from the body to embark on a journey from the world of the living to the land of the dead, in a cycle across the “reciprocating universe” or the “spiral universe.”²²

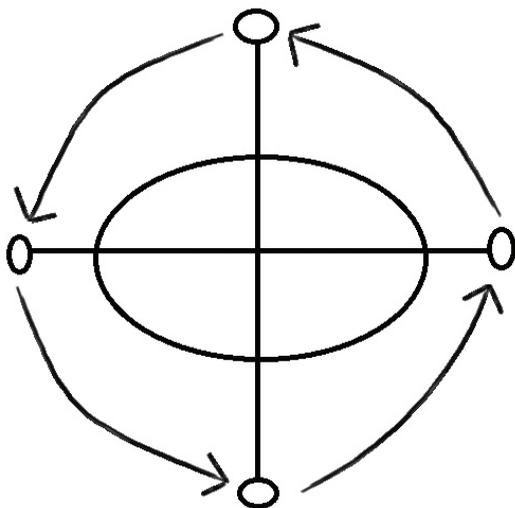
The universe is spiral and reciprocal largely because of the cosmological realities behind the chief symbol used in Kongolese religion to reflect it, an encircled cross (like a sun cross) called the *yowa*. In the *yowa*, the world of the living and the land of the dead are divided by a river, called *nzadi*, which our souls cross when we die on our spiritual journey between these two worlds. The *yowa* is circular in its tracing of the cycle of a human being from birth to death, a cycle that symbolically begins at sunrise, which almost always occurs around 6:00 a.m. in equatorial regions of the globe. In the *yowa*, the rising sun is situated on the *nzadi*, and an upwardly arcing line traces our journey from birth to full adulthood, which also traces the movement of the sun from its rise to noon. From that moment, we start our descent toward sunset, a downward arc that is traced in the *yowa*, toward the river. Once we are there, around 6:00 p.m., we die.



Mboma (an ethnic group closely related to the Kongo) Mintadi funerary statues from West Central Africa. Stone icons of historical leaders/rulers that are placed on the graves of important people to protect them. Private collection of Ji-Elle'. Photo by owner, 2018. Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium.²³ | [Mintandi Funerary Statues](#) by [Ji-Elle](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

But death is not the end, for now it is time for our souls (our “imperishable social identities”) to cross the river, leaving the land of the living and entering the land of the dead, becoming ancestors. Our journey in this land is toward midnight, now symbolized by the moon, a downward arc traced in the yowa from the river to the bottom of the circle. On this journey, our living descendants keep our souls alive, by feeding us, venerating us, naming their children for us, and keeping our graves clean and visiting them often. It is a dark and cold land, *nsi a bafwa*, hence it is symbolized in Kongolese religion by the color black.²⁴ The world of the living, which we left at sunset, is light and warm and is symbolized by the color white. The

river itself is symbolized by the color red. A number of things can happen to our souls at this point, but ideally we will begin to travel on an upward arc as the moon begins its descent and we approach nzadi anew. The circle or the spiral is thereby complete once we reach the river, which happens at sunrise. Some of our souls will cross the river to return to the world of the living, reborn as infants who are our own descendants.



Kongolese yowa cosmogram, depicting the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, between the world of the living and the land of the dead. | [Kongo Yowa Cosmogram](#) by [Hoodooowoman](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

The symbol of this two-world universe is thus a circle, tracing our path from birth to death to ancestorhood and to rebirth. It is a cyclical path that crosses the same river twice, at birth and at death. This brings to mind a passage from the great poem “Éthiopiennes” by Léopold Sédar Senghor, who also happened to be independent Senegal’s first head of state:

*Je ne sais en quels temps c’était, je confonds toujours présent et passé
Comme je mêle la mort et la vie. Un pont de douceur les relie*

I don’t know at what times this was, I always confuse present and past
Like I mix death and life. A tender bridge relinks them.²⁵

Though the bridge does not appear in the yowa, the symbol contains two straight intersecting lines within its circle. One is horizontal, representing nzadi, and the other is vertical and connects noon and midnight. In Kongo traditional religion they are considered the most

spiritual moments of day and night. Despite the lack of a bridge, our souls will one day cross the river into the land of the dead, but not immediately, as MacGaffey explains:

The passage to the otherworld takes a certain length of time. The deceased is considered to hang about, taking part in his own funeral and perhaps seeking vengeance on his enemies. Some say that if you look in a mirror at a coffin you may see the soul of the deceased sitting on it. . . . death is seen as a passage extending in time and place.²⁶

Thus, in both Fon and Kongo religious thought, life and death are part journey and part traversal. Although in each respective pneumatology the soul is conceptualized differently, the ideas of passage and journey are consistent, as is the essential belief that the dead are part of the community of the living, and they are to be venerated. Whether one's soul contains several elements that separate at death, as in Fon pneumatology, or remains unitary beyond the grave, as in Kongo pneumatology, it lives on and moves on, remaining part of the world of the living. We will hopefully one day return to the world of the living, embodying and envesseled by another human being, one close to us, of our own family. And humans have a central role to play in ensuring the passage of our souls to the otherworld, by tending to our graves, feeding and feting us, and aiding our return across the river. In this way they participate in our completion of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

We have only scratched the surface of African notions of the soul, limiting ourselves, for the sake of time and space, to outlining the pneumatologies of the two traditional African religious cultures that are arguably the most influential on Haitian Vodou. Too many members of other African ethnic groups were also victims of the transatlantic slave trade, like the [Mina](#) and the [Yoruba](#) (the latter called [Nago](#) in colonial Haiti, in Saint-Domingue), whose spiritual traditions contributed much to African survival in the Americas and to the genesis and splendor of Haitian Vodou. But hopefully enough has been covered here to foster appreciation of the African roots of Haitian Vodou and Vodou's teachings and traditions related to death, dying, the soul, and ultimately the zombie (zonbi).

Nanm ~ Vodou Soul

An old Jeep whose muffler needs repair can be heard coming from quite a distance away, especially in a rural part of the world with little noise pollution. I am a surfer, and when I lived in Haiti I used to drive over the bucolic green mountains from Port-au-Prince, the capital city, to Jacmel, a city on the nation's southern coast, with a surfboard wedged into the oft-unreliable, misfiring American jalopy. As I rumbled down to the plain approaching the coast, young children would recognize the sound of my Jeep and rush out to the road to give me a surf report. On good days, from the perspective of a surfer, they would say: "*Blan! Lanmè a gen anpil nanm jodi a, wi!*"—literal translation: "White guy! The sea has so much spirit today, yes!" That meant that the surf was up! But, as any good translator or interpreter knows,

literality is not a cardinal rule of allowing languages to make passages across disparate dialects and cultures with sound senses and grounded meanings. As the cliché goes, much is lost in translation.

In the enthusiastic surf report from the kids in southern Haiti, while many of the terms are straightforward, *nanm* is especially elusive to effective translation. While in a “narrow sense . . . *nanm* is a tough force that survives death,” as observes Alissa Jordan, it “is a contextual phenomenon that is situated in the shifting sands of daily life.”²⁷ While Alfred Métraux states that the word “is best translated as ‘energy’ or ‘effluvium,’” usually it is defined simply as “spirit” or “soul.”²⁸ But it is so much more, abundantly present in nature, not just in the heads, hearts, souls, and pulsating blood of human beings. The Vodouist notion of soul and Vodou’s rich healing traditions—and, it should be said, zombification—are all intertwined with natural forces, not just with divinity, as divinity is infused in nature. Consider that in Haitian Vodou the “soul is attributed to the sun, to the earth and to plants.”²⁹ Nourishment in the food that allowed us to grow physically and that sustains us is also *nanm*, as is the force within plants that enables healing. The earth itself has a soul, as do our bean fields, rice plantations, and mango groves.

As in Ewe-Fon pneumatology, in Vodou, souls can contain various components that may separate, or be separated. Furthermore, as suggested by the Jacmel kids’ surf report, nature is full of *nanm*, like the sea when the surf is up. It is a word that in Haitian Creole takes its cue from the French *une âme* (a soul) and, in variegated forms, is a key notion in Haitian Vodou, as reflected in the following explanation by Hebblethwaite:

In Vodou, *nanm* can be an immaterial creature – benevolent or malevolent. *Meté nanm* (putting soul) refers to the process of restoring a soul that has been taken from a body. A *move nanm* (bad soul) can refer to a ghost or a *lougawou* (female werewolf), as they wander around at night. A *nanm zombi* (zombie soul) refers to the soul of a dead person that has been captured by a *benyè* (undertaker) and sold to an unscrupulous Vodou priest or priestess.³⁰

In most anthropological studies, the soul in Haitian Vodou consists of two parts, the *ti bonnanj* (the good little angel) and the *gwo bonnanj* (big guardian angel), though in some accounts these are actually “two souls which everyone possesses.”³¹ At times, the *gwo bonnanj* is itself considered to be the soul, but, just as defining *nanm* as “soul” is problematic, so is defining *gwo bonnanj* as such, as Maya Deren explains:

The exclusive use of the word “soul” . . . would similarly misrepresent the sense of *gros-bon-ange* or *esprit*, which is understood, in Vodoun, as the invisible, non-material *self* or character of an individual, as distinguished from his physical body: i.e., the person John, as a *concept*, distinct from the physical body of John. As a matter of fact, the “psyche” as it is used in modern psychology, conveys some aspects of the Vodoun *gros-bon-ange* more accurately than the word “soul.”³²

Laënnec Hurbon defines the former, *ti bonnanj*, as follows: “one of two spiritual principals of the individual; in general, the support of the *lwa* in a person’s head.”³³ He defines *gwo bonnanj*

as the second spiritual force or “principle” that “directs one’s affective and intellectual life.”³⁴ Hebblethwaite describes the *ti bonnanj* as “the part of the human mind dedicated to thought, agency, awareness, and memory,”³⁵ while the *gwo bonnanj* is “the divine particle and breath of life in all beings.” In my own experience of the religion, there is a third element of the soul called the *mèt tèt*. This term literally translates as “headmaster,” not in the sense of a school principal but in the sense of the spiritual master of one’s head. This is a spirit, a *lwa*, who serves throughout life as “the Vodouist’s protector,”³⁶ and “the loa that is dominant above all others in the psyche of an individual.”³⁷

Upon death, these spiritual elements are to be ritually separated in an important ritual called *desounen* and embark on journeys at various times and to various places. The destination of the *mèt tèt* is to the collective assemblage and energies of the other *lwa* of its identity. The *gwo bonnanj* is believed to hover about the body that it formerly occupied, one’s *ko kadav* (literally “cadaver body”), and it might remain around the living indefinitely as a ghost. But its ultimate destination is God, *Bondye*, as its purpose of animating a person is now finished. Finally, the *ti bonnanj*, essentially one’s consciousness, remains near the corpse and its community for nine days. Then it spends a year and one day (including those nine) under the water, after which a ceremony called *wete mò anba dlo* (bring the dead back from the water) is performed so that it may ultimately return to *Ginen*, to Africa. Though Vodou is not an apocalyptic religion and does not dabble in extensive speculation about heaven and hell, by some accounts the *ti bonnanj* is to be judged by *Bondye*. This separation and successful launch of these spiritual forces and journeys require the careful orchestration of the ritual of *desounen*.

We should pause here to reflect for a moment on water. Water is life, and without it we die, but it is also a connector between the living and the dead in Africana religions. In her fascinating study of water in Afro-Caribbean women’s creative writing and Africana spirituality, Rebeca Hey-Colón shares the following insight: “To engage with Afro-diasporic waters . . . is to erode the border between life and death.”³⁸ Life and death. The spiritual and the material. In Africana spirituality, such dichotomies are indeed eroded. Consider the following observation by Sandra Greene about indigenous religion among Ewe people of West Africa:

The ocean was understood to be a seemingly endless body of water over which one could travel to reach a desired destination. But it was also associated with a number of deities that had the power to both generate bumper harvests of fish and to consume through drowning the lives of those who depended on the ocean for their sustenance. . . . These sites and others were also associated with the sacred. They were sacred locations where the separately and intimately related worlds of the material and the spiritual came together.³⁹

Thus the worlds of the living and the dead come together at, or are separated by, water. Greene’s observations are about the so-called Slave Coast, home to so many ancestors of the Haitian people. Hence, it makes sense that, as I have written elsewhere: “The crossing of water is one of the most powerful symbols in Haitian Vodou. For example, the religion’s spirits and

ancestors live ‘across the water’ (*lot bò a dlo*) or ‘under the water’ (*anba dlo*.)” For such reasons, “commerce between them and their living human devotees implies such traversals of oceans, seas, or rivers.”⁴⁰

In some Kongolesse conceptualizations the soul actually remains eternally under the water following one’s death, or at least one of the elements of the soul does. The “blurriness” of Fon and Kongo pneumatologies notwithstanding, they share, per Desquiron, a key commonality ensuring that “water would thus play a primordial role in the funerary world of Haiti.” For upon death we “enter into contact with water,” whether this contact is “transitory,” traversal, or permanent.⁴¹

Upon death, the elements of the soul must be carefully separated from each other. Otherwise, the living may be haunted or even harmed by the dead, and zombies can be made from one element of the soul. One’s *ti bonnanj* can be captured and placed in a bottle as a *zonbi astral* (astral zombie) and put to work by a sorcerer. In Haitian Vodou, this act of soul theft is usually attempted during the *desounen* funerary ceremony. Perhaps the ceremony can be better understood through etymology, or the study of word origins. Métraux offers that the term derives “from the French *désonner*” and that the ritual is also called “*dégradation*.” The term *désonner* is an infinitive verb meaning “to unseat,” while *dégradation* is the origin of the same word in English.⁴² To unseat elements of the soul from one’s head upon death is clearly one function of the *desounen* ritual. It’s impossible to say when the term first emerged in Haitian Creole or in Haitian Vodou, but could there be other African etymological cornerstones to the word and its meanings?



A tomb for an ancestor in Delatte, Haiti, near the western coastal city of Petit-Goave. Photographer unknown. | [A Large Tomb in Haiti](#) by [Bdx](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

I asked this question of a leading scholar of Haitian Creole and Haitian Vodou, and at first Professor Hebblethwaite thought that it must be “a romance noun with the privative prefix *de*.” But then this: “Well, I busted open my copy of *Dictionnaire Fon-Français* by Seguro & Rassounoux (personal heroes of mine) and looked up Fon words with the sound *soun* out of curiosity.” From this inquiry, he discovered that the word *sùn* means *fixer*, French for to fix or establish. In Fon, the word is used in the expressions for “fixing a price” or “giving someone a name....So, if this etymology is on the right path, then *de-sounen* would be a sort of ritual unfixing of the soul after death . . . the use of *sùn* in the context of naming is also extremely interesting since the *desounen* also involves giving (names of) spirits to a descendant.”⁴³

With that intriguing etymological excursion out of the way, let us explore the *desounen* ceremony itself. Understanding this funerary rite is key to understanding zombic culture and zombic forms in Haiti, and the best description I know is that shared by Métraux.⁴⁴ For Métraux, *desounen* is one of numerous rituals for the dead, arguably the most crucial, which is driven by fear of them: “Fear of the dead is such that their close relatives would never dare, under any pretext whatever, to avoid those duties which custom exacts.”⁴⁵ From my experience in both Zaire and Haiti, I know that fear is indeed a prime mover of ancestor

eneration, but there is also devotion, appreciation, love, commemoration, and a deep sense of lineage that inspires such practices as desouven. You want your loved one's transition to the other world, to the grave, to ancestorhood, to be as pleasant as possible, after all, and we all would like the same from our descendants and loved ones when we die.

The "ceremony begins with appeals to the *loa*," after which the priest or priestess approaches "the death-bed, gets under the sheet, and crouches over" the corpse and uses the [asson](#), or sacred rattle, to summon the spirits. After words are spoken into the ears of the deceased, "a shudder runs through the corpse and slowly it raises its head, or shoulders, as though trying to sit up – then it slumps back – an inert mass." Métraux attributes this to "a muscular contraction" that is triggered by the *lwa* or *mèt tèt* leaving the body of the deceased.⁴⁶

Once the *lwa* has left the body, the priest or priestess traces a cross on the deceased's forehead "then places a tuft of its hair in a little white pot," along with chicken feathers, a practice that indicates that the *ti bonnanj* has been successfully released from the corpse. "The pot containing the soul of the deceased is carefully sealed and placed in a safe place – often in the boughs of a tree." Preparation for burial follows, and this involves washing the corpse with herbs and water, plugging its nostrils and ears with cotton, and tying its big toes together. The jaw is also tied shut with a kind of "sling" wrapped over the top of the head. This prohibits the corpse from leaving and protects it from the entry of evil spirits, [move zespri](#). After the corpse is dressed, the mourners pay their respects and it is taken toward its burial plot. It is blessed by a bush priest ([pret savann](#)) along the way, who recites Catholic prayers. Circuitous routes are taken to the cemetery to confuse the dead so they will not be able to return to their homes should they rise from the grave. Following the burial, the deceased "is regarded as being consumed with dread of his new loneliness and obsessed by a desire to come and fetch someone he was fond of." Finally, nine days of prayer, a novena, take place at the home of the departed, attended by friends and loved ones, many of whom come and go at various times of the day and night.⁴⁷

The children in Jacmel who gave me the surf report will one day die, like all of us. This is a simple fact of human existence, for death is wind. Nanm, soul, life force, is deeply related to African notions of the infusion of God's energies throughout creation. Nanm pulsates through our veins and is heard and felt in our laughter and seen in the play of children, in the rising tide, in the breast milk of a new mother. In Yoruba the word for this is [ashe](#), in Swahili it is [uzima](#), and in Lingala it is [nguya](#).⁴⁸ In Haitian Creole it is nanm. Such energies, being God's very life-giving and -sustaining presence, are eternal, so when their vessels die, when we or the trees die, when rivers run dry, when the bottles are broken, they depart, having served their purposes of animating us and all else that is life. This [ontology](#), this [theology](#), this understanding of being and of God, are cornerstones to everything that we have thus far explored in this and the previous chapter. Let us now turn our attention to the *lwa* in Haitian Vodou who are associated with all things death and dying. Many of them are classified as Gede spirits, though since any *lwa* could be one's *mèt tèt*, all spirits experience the lives and deaths of those whose heads they have occupied over the course of their lives.

Feeding and Reclaiming the Dead in Haitian Vodou ~ *Manje Mò* and *Wete Mò Anba Dlo*

In three of the most important books ever written about Haitian Vodou, Maya Deren, Laënnec Hurbon, and Alfred Métraux each devote many pages to discussing the dead and rituals related to death, dying, and the ancestors. Here are the titles or subtitles of their discussions:

- Deren: “The Rituals of Death” and “The Rites of Reclamation”
- Hurbon: “Dialectic of Life and Death around the Symbol of the Tree”
- Métraux: “The Cult of the Dead”

Rituals, Death, Rites, Dialectic, Symbol, Tree, Cult, the Dead—there is a lot said in those titles and subtitles alone, and it is inconceivable that any book on Vodou could ignore the dead, or that the religion could even exist without the dead and ancestral spirituality. Deren writes that “the rituals of death are designed to restore each successively to its proper province,” meaning the *gwo bonnanj* and the *ti bonnanj*. Concerning the material body, furthermore, “death rituals relating to the body are, in sum, directed against physical resurrection – against, on the one hand, a false decay, and, on the other, a false life.”⁴⁹ Surely, at least in part, the fear of zombification, of the dead being transformed into *zonbi* or of part of their soul being captured and transformed into *zonbi*, drives this obsession with proper burial. Ultimately, though, it is about respect for and veneration of the dead. “The dread *zombie*, the major figure of terror, is precisely this: the body without a soul, matter without morality. To avoid this development, all measures are taken to make certain that the body is truly lifeless and therefore physically useless.”⁵⁰

After discussing *desounen*, Deren outlines an important funerary ceremony called *Wete Mò Anba Dlo*, mentioned above, which literally translates as “retrieve the dead from under the water.” This ritual is conducted by an *oungan* or a *manbo* and their assistants/apprentices (*ounsi*) a year and a day after the death of a loved one and is intended “to reclaim his soul from the waters of the abyss below the earth and to lodge it in a *govi*.”⁵¹ A *govi* is a clay jar, a “sacred vessel” that houses the soul of the dead, while some house the *lwa*.⁵² At the beginning of the ceremony, which takes place in a temple, the *govi* are “consecrated and wrapped in white” and carried on the heads of the *ounsi*, shrouded in white shawls.⁵³ Now the priest or priestess is “functioning as a midwife” and “assists the third birth, the rebirth of the soul from the abysmal waters.”⁵⁴ A *lwa* is summoned by drumming and chanting, as well as by a bell and the *asson* (sacred rattle of the Vodou priesthood) to enter the *govi* to assist with the rebirth. “Some of the souls arrive in anger and are difficult for the *houngan* to handle.”⁵⁵ But, after “several hours,” success is achieved, with, in the case Deren observed, “the seven souls having all been reclaimed.”⁵⁶ The *govi* are then wrapped and placed on an altar in the temple.

Hurbon’s intriguing exploration of the importance of tree symbolism in Haitian Vodou as

pertaining to life and death is well worth contemplating here. Hurbon is, in my opinion, the most important Haitian scholar of religion today, and he observes that “the tree has great symbolic importance in Vodou and appears in countless myths” in the religion. Most Vodouists in Haiti are illiterate, so hymns, myths, and songs are vital repositories of their religion’s wisdom, as is memory. And, for Hurbon and for the Vodouists with whom he has worked over decades, the tree has an “importance as a language of life and death.”⁵⁷ Trees are rooted in the earth, nourished by water, with branches reaching to the sky. They provide so much shade and so much material to Vodou, like drums and fuel for fire. This fire is used for cooking herbal remedies and food for the dead and the spirits—and for the living. After analyzing countless myths in Haitian Vodou, Hurbon concludes:

The Vodouist is lodged, in effect, in the shade of trees as the shade of the *lwa*. . . . Trees are present in the Vodouist’s entire cultural life. . . . On their branches are draped ribbons, cords, and bags. And all of this devotion to trees appears as a celebration of life, a confidence in the spiritual powers that constitute the language in which the Vodouist harmonizes aspirations and organizes the universe . . . a language that allows one to situate oneself in the world . . . to emerge from confusion; a regulatory language of one’s aspirations; a language that offers the possibility of putting into order the forces of life and death that abound.⁵⁸

Trees require nourishment, as do the living and the dead. Like any member of our community, the dead must eat, so we must feed them.

Next to *desounen*, the most important ritual performed in Haitian Vodou for the dead is the *manje mò*, Food for the Dead.



Feeding the dead in Vodou often includes offerings of this famous Haitian rum. | [Barbancourt Rum](#) by [Wapster](#) is used under a [CC BY 2.0 License](#).

Métraux explains that such ceremonies “include offerings to the dead of food cooked without salt and prepared entirely by men.” I am not sure why this is a gendered element of the ritual (I have seen women in Haiti prepare food for the cause), but Métraux adds that African ancestors “get a special stew containing beef, pigs’ trotters, maize, and scarlet beans.”⁵⁹ Following is the great anthropologist’s rich description of this important ritual:

When a meal is served to the dead, a table covered with food is put in a room which is then shut off for a few hours to give them time to feast themselves at leisure. After prayers and appeals addressed to the ancestors . . . the living sit down at the table and

enjoy a banquet. The *manger-mort* ends with dances At dawn a procession wends its way to a crossroads to the strains of hymns: “Go my angel” and “send my soul.”⁶⁰

One would be remiss not to add a word about *zen*—not Zen Buddhism, but pots in Haitian Vodou that go by that name, just to add another ritual twist to our story about death, dying, and the soul in Haitian Vodou. Deren defines “zins” as “ceremonial cooking pots, usually of clay. . . .”⁶¹ Though more often a ceremony that is tied to initiation into Vodou, the *boule zen* (lit.: “boil the pots”) “can be a funeral ceremony for important initiates such as *oungan*, *manbo*, or *ounsi kanzo*,” as Hebblethwaite adds. “In the ceremony, the *vèvè* called *zen* is traced next to the *vèvè* of the main *lwa* of the deceased served.”⁶² And all of this, all *zen*, all cemeteries, all burials, all the dead, are overseen by Gede, to whom our attention now turns.

The Spirits and the Dead

Many *lwa* are centrally involved in death and dying in Haitian Vodou. And they all experience human death and dying when someone whose head they have occupied passes away after a human lifetime of animating them and shaping their ways. Such transcendent inhabitants are released in funerary services, especially *desounen*, and return to their respective spiritual collectivities. The *lwa* are unitary, but they can live in many heads and marry many devotees, and even sleep with them and go to Mass with them, all at the same time, if need be. Diffusion. Unity. Spirit. Death.

But some *lwa* have constant roles in human death and dying, ruling cemeteries, ever reminding us of our mortality, entering our lives and our deaths in myriad ways and forms. Most of these death *lwa* are classified as Gede spirits, for Gede is the ruler of all things related to death and dying in Haitian Vodou, and he has multiple manifestations and rules over an entire host of other *lwa* under his tutelage in the Vodou pantheon. Being the chief *lwa* of death, dying, and the dead, Gede is clearly one of the most important spirits in the religion. He is also quite sexually charged and symbolically represented by an erect penis. Cosentino once attended a Vodou ceremony in Haiti where Gede had arrived, and someone asked the *lwa* why he always wore glasses with one lens missing. Here was his answer: “Because the penis only has one eye.”⁶³ Hebblethwaite affirms that “Gede’s vulgar flair” is usually suggestive and at times driven by hymns and drums, as are most communal Vodou ceremonies.⁶⁴

In addition to sporting such purposely broken eyewear, Gede is always dressed in black, usually wears a top hat, and smokes a pipe. He is associated with human skulls and bones, which are often seen on altars and during rituals, at cemeteries, for the dead, *lemò*. This mercurial *lwa* speaks in “a high pitched nasal voice,” and during Vodou ceremonies, when someone is possessed by and is accoutred as Gede, he sprinkles perfume on the faithful, slaps them on the back, shakes hands, and breaks into highly sexually charged dances (*banda*), often with a cane, whose symbolism speaks for itself.⁶⁵ Cosentino describes Gede’s appearance as follows:

Often he dons a top hat and dress coat, all the attire of an undertaker. His face is powdered white to symbolize the whiteness of the human skull. He needs sunglasses because his work is underground in the tombs of the cemetery and his eyes can't take the light when he comes to manifest himself throughout a possession trance. The single lens is said to symbolize the third eye of Gede that can see into the world of the dead.⁶⁶

Given Gede's provenance over death, it is understandable that his "altars are frequently coffins" and that the most important holiday in Haitian Vodou is his feast day, Fèt Gede, but it is not his alone, however much he might claim it to be.⁶⁷

Gede takes numerous forms, and each November, they multiply in the bodies of people who perform him. For, since death is wind, "everybody got Gede," as one renowned *manbo* (Vodou priestess) puts it. "Everybody!"⁶⁸ Karen McCarthy Brown explains that "Gede is both one and many, but his ranks are more populous than those of other spirits, and they grow more rapidly and more casually." In New York, for instance: "There is a Gede who is a dentist, and one who is an auto mechanic; and now there is even a Protestant missionary."⁶⁹ In his exhaustive glossary, Hebblethwaite lists fifteen Gede:

Gede Drivayè; Gede (Ti) Fatra; Gede Hounsou; Gede Kriyòl; Gede Lensou; Gede Loray; Gede Nibo; Gede Nouvavou; Gede Pikan; Gede Ramase; Gede Rounsou Mazaka; Gede Ti Wawè; Gede Ti Pis Lakwa; Gede Wonsou; Gede Yèhwe. . . . Gedevi; Gede Vi; Gedevi Yawe.⁷⁰

There are even more,⁷¹ and each November they proliferate "rapidly" and "casually." As Hebblethwaite goes on to explain: "While most *lwa* appear when called on, the Gede *lwa*, like death itself, can appear without notice. The Gede family is composed of many members – most notably **Bawon Samdi**, Bawon Simityè, Bawon Lakwa, Grann Brigit, and **Gede Nibo**."⁷²

In Vodou, the distinction between the sacred and the profane, something that features centrally in many religions, entirely vanishes, if it ever existed at all. When one of the most important spirits in your religion takes the form of Gede Little Garbage (*Gede [Ti] Fatra*) or Gede Little Piss Cross (*Gede Ti Pis Lakwa*), the proverbial religious playing field is leveled. Gede is obviously highly complex, diverse, bawdy, and ever shifting, and dizzying are his varieties, but among his underlings listed above we should pay most careful attention to Bawon.⁷³ This is a book largely about zombies, after all, and Bawon's permission is required to make the most common form of *zonbi* in Haiti, the *zonbi astral*.

Like Gede, Bawon loves the colors purple and black, and he rules cemeteries in Haiti and is symbolically associated with the Christian cross. Thus, one of his names/manifestations is Bawon Lakwa, Baron of the Cross, while another is Bawon Simityè, Baron of the Cemetery. Other names/manifestations include Bawon Gede (Baron Gede), Baron Gran Bwa (Baron of the Deep Woods), Bawon Kafou (Baron of the Crossroads), Bawon Kara (not sure what that means, to be honest), Bawon Kriminèl (Criminal Baron), Bawon Lento (also unsure), and Bawon Loray (also unsure, sorry).⁷⁴ Most commonly he is called Bawon Samdi, Baron Saturday. That name derives from French and is a classic example of how enslaved Africans and their descendants in Haiti effectively hijacked the language and religion of their oppressors,

creating a remarkable religion and language of their own. Haitian Creole is spoken today by all Haitians (whereas French is spoken fluently by only 10–15 percent of the national population). Like most lwa, the Gede and their rite derive from West Africa, Benin, to be precise, and Bawon is one of the most important. This is understandable, given the elevated place of ancestral spirituality in Vodou and that cemeteries are among the most sacred places in the religion and the sites of the most important annual holiday, Fèt Gede.

Wherever a Vodouist sees a cross, whether in a church or in a cemetery or dangling from a rosary around someone's neck or wrist, they see Bawon. His vèvè centers upon a cross, and black is his chief color. Hurbon describes Bawon as follows:

Baron Samdi, head of the spirits of the dead called the Gédé, always wears black and a top hat. His lascivious dances, called *banda*, imitate sexual coupling. Under his auspices acts of magic and sorcery, called “expeditions” after Saint Expedite, the Baron's Catholic counterpart, are carried out in cemeteries or at crossroads. . . . For most of the problems of daily life, he is the spirit most often appealed to. . . . altars dedicated to Baron: always a cross, one or more skulls, a hat, glasses, bottles of rum given in offering, candles and so on.⁷⁵

Furthermore, Bawon “is represented as a robust black man with a long white beard. . . . He always carries a *koko makak* stick and a bottle of white rum.”⁷⁶ In many ways, Bawon is Gede, as “Lord of the cemetery . . . and of the magic related to both the Dead and the cross-roads.”⁷⁷

But Bawon cannot handle all his important life and death work alone, so he shares his duties with a female lwa named **Grann Brijit** (Old or Great Brigid), who is often called Manman Brijit (Mother Brigid). With Bawon, Grann Brijit is “responsible for the passage between life and death.” This goes far in making sense of the melding of skulls and sexuality in the general symbolism of the Gede, as well as Bawon's association with the cross, for these passages entail crossroads, as reflected in the Kongolese yowa. Haitian Vodou is a very gender liberal religion, and there is no place of leadership that is elusive to women or members of the LGBTQ+ community with spiritual vocations. The pantheon of lwa reflects this powerfully. Despite being pushy with a voracious ego, Bawon cannot do it all alone, so he has Grann Brijit, and she has him. They are married, after all, and associated with Adam and Eve.⁷⁸

Grann Brijit is “the mother of the Gede” and “is as powerful as her husband,” and here is a description by Hebblethwaite:

She is a very old black woman. Grann Brijit is identified with Saint Brigid, the patron saint of Ireland. Her resting place is a *cirouellier* or a cursed brown fig tree . . . and in cemeteries she is represented by a pile of stones. Her days of consecration are Monday and Friday, and her color is black. Grann Brijit rarely possesses anyone, but when she does, the individual becomes like the dead. Vodouists wrap the possessed person's jaw with a black scarf, put cotton in the ears and nostrils, cover her in a white cloth, sprinkle white rum, and chant for her.⁷⁹

For Grann Brijit, the “ritual meal is composed of potatoes, plantain, salted herring, grilled cod, corn, grilled pistachios, and a sacrificed black chicken.”⁸⁰

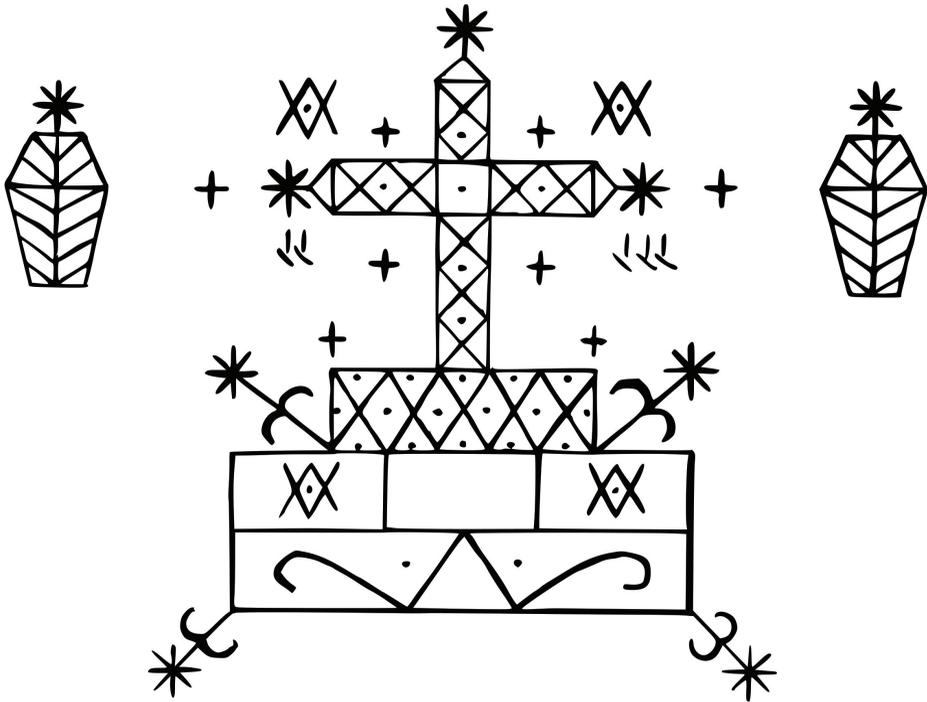
Although Grann Brijit is Bawon's wife and oversees much of their spiritual work together, there is another female lwa who occupies a place of prominence in Vodou understandings of death, dying, and the afterlife, namely [Mayanèt Bwa Seche](#), Marinette Dry Wood. Cosentino describes how at one Vodou ceremony he attended in Haiti, she "arrived in fury, convulsing on the floor in some unspoken rancor."⁸¹ Hebblethwaite adds that Mayanèt "is assimilated with the popular Catholic image of Anima Sola (the Lonesome Soul) . . . Mayanèt is tough and eats pieces of burning charcoal."⁸² Though notions of evil are not as rigid in Vodou as in most other religions, Mayanèt, a fierce divinity of the [Petwo](#) rite or pantheon, is "dreaded" and associated with sorcery and with the screech owl. Venerating her requires building a fire and fueling it with gasoline and salt. "She is particularly respected by werewolves . . . and wanders through the woods and it is there, in secret spaces, that her servants come to leave her offerings."⁸³ She is married to a lwa named [Ti-Jean Zandor](#), "a little man dressed in red, who jumps up and down on one leg and perches at will on the tops of palm trees whence he keeps an eye on the roads and jumps on passers-by to kill them for food."⁸⁴ Whatever their function or appearance, all of these lwa are Gede and fall under his dominion and gaze. And, like most Vodou spirits, he is very festive, as evinced most robustly in Gede's annual feast.

Fèt Gede

Some twelve million Africans were enslaved, enchained, and pressed onto European ships over the course of 450 years to be forced to labor on plantations in colonies throughout the Americas, from Brazil to Virginia.⁸⁵ The brutality of this horrific crime is unspeakable, as were the physical and emotional traumas for its victims. Slavery also caused its victims tremendous spiritual trauma. They were torn from their families, groves, rivers, streams, trees, priests, priestesses, shrines, drums, and the burial sites of the dead in their homeland. To venerate the dead at their graves has for ages been an important religious obligation in West and Central Africa, where the ancestors are buried near or even in their homes. Stripped from those resting places, venerating the ancestors in Africa became impossible for their enslaved descendants across the Atlantic Ocean. Enter Catholic priests in the Americas, who brought not only Catholic saints to the attention of Africans but also feast days, none more important than [All Saints Day](#) and [All Souls Day](#), November 1 and 2. Here was a welcome occasion to venerate all saints, who are all dead, and all souls, including those in Africa and those all around us, within us, in cemeteries or under our feet, beneath the earth or across the water. This would become Fèt Gede in Haitian Vodou.

The dead are not to be messed with or neglected in Haiti; instead, they are to be honored and fed, and hopefully their souls will return into our living lineage. About twenty years ago, I was driving in Port-au-Prince one October day with a couple of my students. We were listening to the local news on the radio and learned about a road project that would require the leveling of part of a cemetery. No provisions were made to preserve or even respect the remains of those entombed there, and within a few days after the project began, and countless

tombstones were toppled and resting places bulldozed, a tropical storm brought torrential rains to the city. I recall my students and I discussing the likelihood that such disrespect would provoke harm wrought by the dead. The next day, I heard a report of human skulls and bones being swept by swelling rainwaters down one of the city's busiest streets. A few days later, during Fèt Gede, a large tomb collapsed in the [Grand Cimetière](#) (Large Cemetery), killing several Vodouists who were there to celebrate the dead and to serve and fete Gede. When crossed or neglected, the dead exact revenge.



Vèvè representing Bawon Samdi, the Vodou spirit (a Gede lwa) who rules over cemeteries. | [Gede Altar](#) by [chris](#) is in [the public domain](#).

Though the spatial and temporal foci of Fèt Gede are cemeteries and those two days, the Gede enter humans' bodies and storm about marketplaces, in the streets, along paths, anywhere really, often with their faces painted white, the color of the dead. They "overrun the countryside and towns, clad in black and mauve."⁸⁶ The Gede like strong liquor and hot peppers, and they abound during this feast, especially in cemeteries. Myron Beasley describes an urban burial ground in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, during Fèt Gede:

I walked through the narrow pathways, surrounded by the gothic statuaries of tombs

– some with bare concrete slabs revealing the empty lots – spaces I imagined as once occupied by a physical body and perhaps once were and sometimes are. On a most-holy of days, 1 November, bodies squeeze through the tight halls of this medina to the shrine of Baron Samdi. . . . I allowed my body to be whisked into the midst of the crowd – body to body, sweating, the smell of rum and chili peppers and moonshine – the libations so generously sprayed on bodies and the tall black cross in the middle of the cemetery mingled with the intense smell of incense and the ever-potent Vodou candles.⁸⁷

The cross was surely once white, but over time it became smudged with candle smoke, blood, rum, herbs, and even semen, especially during such an “anxious and rambunctious” occasion as Fèt Gede.⁸⁸ In Haiti, as Maya Deren notes, such a focal cross “is in every cemetery; and the graves that are under the special protection of his female counterpart, Madam Brigitte, are marked by a mound of sacred stones.”⁸⁹

Thus, though Fèt Gede is about the dead and communing with the dead, and having Gede rampage throughout the world, other lwa, like Manman Brijit, are spiritual dignitaries in the amazing performance that is the Day of the Dead in Haiti. It is somewhat reminiscent of the Day of the Dead in Mexico, but in Haiti things are much more raucous, and there are no mariachis, though in both cases human skulls abound. **Ogou**, the lwa of metals, often also appears, while **Legba** is present at all Vodou ceremonies, as the keeper of the crossroads and the opener of all gates, who must open them for any ritual, whether funerary or initiatory, to proceed. In one sense, per Deren, Bawon is the Petwo manifestation of Legba.⁹⁰ They both are associated with crossroads, after all, and Bawon’s master symbol is the cross. Meanwhile, being perhaps in Haitian Vodou “the first humans, the **Marasa**, the twin lwa, are also the first, the original Dead.” So they are offered one of the first plates of food on All Souls’ Eve, the night before Fèt Gede really begins.⁹¹

The most exuberant, boisterous, and well-attended ceremonies on Fèt Gede take place in large urban burial grounds. These ceremonies are generally not orchestrated by religious leaders per se, though many manbo and oungan are present and lead some offertory and other rites. Instead, Fèt Gede emerges spontaneously among the faithful, in ways that range from solemnity to mayhem, taking myriad forms at any hour of the day or night. Many Vodouists visit multiple graveyards, including ones on privately owned land, venerating the remains of someone dear or otherwise related. “People pull weeds from the tombs,” Hurbon explains. And particularly on November 1 and 2, the lwa take over “and it is imprudent to refuse their attention”:

On the Day of the Dead, however, the appearance of the Gédé provokes laughter, for they are phallic *lwa* who tell dirty stories, perform lascivious and obscene dances, and spend their time playing jokes on the Voodoo faithful, such as stealing their money or personal property. They also like to eat well and drink rum.⁹²

Over and above such staple features of Fèt Gede, whether in the cemetery, at the marketplace, at the crossroads, in a temple, or at one’s home, Vodouists are accustomed to expecting the unexpected on this most important religious occasion of each year. For

instance, one anthropologist saw a man masturbate onto Bawon's cross in a large urban cemetery—"a sacred release of the spirit."⁹³ Another saw the lwa Ogou appear at a temple on Fèt Gede "in the khaki uniform of a US Marine, complete with epaulets and the flat-brimmed hat. Her procession was accompanied by a brass band, led by a bugle, that played US Marine tunes."⁹⁴ All such things notwithstanding, Fèt Gede is a recognition of our mortality and a celebration of life, of regeneration, spirit, and community—community that includes and deeply involves the dead.

Zonbi Prelude ~ In Guise of a Conclusion

From Ancient Persia to the Haitian Revolution, we have covered a lot of ground, and water, thus far, in our books but we are finally rounding the corner to find zombies. We started to do so in Chapter Five with our etymological exploration, but we got much closer in this chapter, beginning with a summary of the notion of the soul and the afterlife in relevant African traditions that are cornerstones of Haitian Vodou: Ewe-Fon and Kongo. We then explored the soul in Vodou, the living dead, the afterlife, and the relationship of the lwa to death, dying, and the soul, along with key rituals related to death and the dead, like desounen and Fet Gede. All of these and related topics are necessary background information for understanding certain forms of the zombie in Haiti. There are many kinds of zombies in Haiti, beyond the one that first sauntered lifeless onto the Hollywood silver screen in the 1930s. And now we turn the page, bringing the dead and the soul with us, to get better acquainted with the zombie.

Notes

1. Ogbu O. Kalu, "Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa," in Jacob K. Olupona (ed.), *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, New York: Crossroads, 2000, 54. ↵
2. *Ibid.*, 61. ↵
3. *Ibid.*, 62. Culturally, the Igbo are closely related to the Yoruba people, and collectively they comprised nearly 10 percent of all African victims of the transatlantic slave trade. In Saint-Domingue, colonial Haiti, they were referred to as Nago. ↵
4. "**Afrocentricity** refers to African agency and the centrality of African interests, ideas, and perspectives in social, historical, behavioral, and economic narratives." Moelfi Kete Asante, "Africology, Afrocentricity, and What Remains to Be Done," *The Black Scholar* 50, 3, 2020, 48–49. ↵
5. Claude Rivière, "[Soul: Conceptions in Indigenous Religions](#)," *Encyclopedia.com*, 1985,

- 2007, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/soul-concepts-indigenous-religions>, last accessed August 16, 2023. ↵
6. Antonio Salas, Ángel Carracedo, Martin Richards, and Vincent Macaulay, “Charting the Ancestry of African Americans,” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 77, 4, 2005, 676–680. ↵
 7. Samuel Nathaniel Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010, 18. The Ewe, who historically and presently are closely related to the Fon, reside mostly in what today is Ghana. ↵
 8. Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012, 266. ↵
 9. Ibid. ↵
 10. On this influence, see Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transnational History of Haitian Vodou: Rasin Figuier, Rasin Bwa Kayiman, and the Rada and Gede Rites*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021. ↵
 11. The term “ancestral spirituality” was coined by Kalu. Kalu, “Ancestral Spirituality.” ↵
 12. Michelle Gilbert, “Fon and Ewe Religion,” in Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Gale, 2005, 3165–3166. ↵
 13. Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, 77. ↵
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20. Desquiron, *Racines du voodoo*, 105. [↵](#)
21. MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 35. [↵](#)
22. *Ibid.*, 42–89. [↵](#)
23. On Mintandi (plural of Ntandi), see also Adenike Cosgrove, “[Ntadi \(Funeral Figure\): The Thinker](#),” *ÌmoDára*, 2021, <https://www.imodara.com/discover/dr-congo-mboma-ntadi-funerary-figure-the-thinker/>. last accessed November 30, 2021. [↵](#)
24. This is oversimplified, as the land of the dead is also called “white” (*mpemba*) because of the white skin that ancestors take on once they leave the world of the living. In the Congo, people engaging with or for the dead in ceremonies often dress in white. [↵](#)
25. Léopold Sedhar Senghor, *Poèmes*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981, 119. [↵](#)
26. MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 53. On death and dying and rebirth in Kongo religion, see also Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. [↵](#)
27. Alissa Jordan, “Atlas of Nanm: Shared Bodies, Babies, Were-Women and Zonbi in a Rural Haitian Courtyard,” Ph.D. diss., Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, 2016, 69. [↵](#)
28. Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. Hugo Charetris, New York: Schocken Books, 1972 (1954), 255 [↵](#)
29. *Ibid.*, 153. [↵](#)
30. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 269. [↵](#)
31. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 377. [↵](#)
32. Maya Deren, *The Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1953, 17–18. [↵](#)
33. Laënnec Hurbon, *Dieu dans le vaudou haïtien*, Port-au-Prince: Éditions Henri Deschamps, 258. [↵](#)
34. *Ibid.*, 257. [↵](#)
35. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 295, 242. [↵](#)
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38. Rebeca Hey-Colón, *Channeling Knowledges: Afro-Diasporic Waters in Latinx and Caribbean Worlds*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023. [↵](#)
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40. Terry Rey, “Vodou, Water, and Exile: Symbolizing Spirit and Pain in Port-au-Prince,” in Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres (eds.), *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, 198. [↵](#)
41. Desquiron, *Racines du Voudou*, 106. [↵](#)
42. This ceremony is also sometimes called *degrade mò*, “degrade the dead.” Deren, *The Divine Horsemen*, 228. [↵](#)
43. Professor Benjamin Hebblethwaite, University of Florida, personal electronic correspondence, September 7, 2020. [↵](#)
44. For another excellent description of this funerary ceremony, see Desquiron, *Racines du voudou*, 224–230. [↵](#)
45. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 244. [↵](#)
46. Hebblethwaite describes a related death ceremony in Vodou called *voye* (“sending), in which “the *oungan* sends the soul under the water to Ginen, briefly channeling the dead’s faint voice.” Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou*, 31. [↵](#)
47. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 243–251. [↵](#)
48. On *uzima*, see Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959. On *ashe*, see Katherine Olukeme Bankole, “Ashe,” in Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama (eds.), *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, New York: Sage Publications, 2009, 74. [↵](#)
49. Deren, *The Divine Horsemen*, 41–42. [↵](#)
50. *Ibid.*, 42–43. [↵](#)
51. *Ibid.*, 46. [↵](#)
52. *Ibid.*, 330. [↵](#)
53. *Ibid.*, 49. [↵](#)
54. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
55. *Ibid.*, 52. [↵](#)

56. Ibid., 53. [↵](#)
57. Hurbon, *Dieu dans le vaudou haïtien*, 129. [↵](#)
58. Ibid., 131–137. [↵](#)
59. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 263. [↵](#)
60. Ibid., 264. [↵](#)
61. Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 338. [↵](#)
62. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 222. [↵](#)
63. Donald J. Cosentino, Keynote lecture, annual meeting of KOSANBA, Harvard University, October 18, 2018. [↵](#)
64. Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou*, 221. [↵](#)
65. Donald J. Cosentino, “ENVOI: The Gedes and Bawon Samdi,” in Donald J. Cosentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995, 400. [↵](#)
66. In *ibid.*, 405. This passage is an aggregation of comments about Gede made by various scholars and practitioners of Haitian Vodou. [↵](#)
67. Ibid., 400. [↵](#)
68. In Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 376. [↵](#)
69. Ibid. [↵](#)
70. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 237, 239. [↵](#)
71. Cosentino, “ENVOI,” 407. [↵](#)
72. Ibid., 238. [↵](#)
73. “underling” might be a misleading term in this regard, as the influential late Haitian painter and Vodou priest explains that to him, and surely many other Vodouists, “Gede is the secretary of the Bawon, who is the judge. Bawon is the father of the family.” In *ibid.*, 406. [↵](#)
74. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 217. [↵](#)
75. Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit*, trans. Lori Frankel, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995 (1993), 74, 95. [↵](#)
76. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 217. Further reflecting the deep and sometimes disconcerting sexual innuendo of the culture of Gede, *koko*

makak, though the name of a stick or a cane, literally translates as “monkey’s vagina.”
[↵](#)

77. Deren, *The Divine Horsemen*, 69. [↵](#)
78. Cosentino, “ENVOI,” 407. [↵](#)
79. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 241. [↵](#)
80. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
81. Cosentino, “ENVOI,” 400. [↵](#)
82. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 266. [↵](#)
83. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 117. [↵](#)
84. *Ibid.*, 118. [↵](#)
85. Estimates of the number of victims of the transatlantic slave trade range from 10 to 15 million. It began in the 1480s, when Portuguese slavers brought enslaved Africans to Iberia, with the first victims arriving in the Caribbean in 1502. (Earlier, there were African slaves on Columbus’s first voyage, in 1492.) The importation of African slaves to the Americas continued until Brazil gained independence in 1882. On the history of the transatlantic slave trade, please see David Eltis, et al. [Slave Voyages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Data-Base](#), <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about#methodology/introduction/0/en/>, last accessed May 15, 2021. [↵](#)
86. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 329. [↵](#)
87. Myron Beasley, “Vodou, Penises and Bones: Ritual Performances of Death and Eroticism in the Cemetery and the Junkyard of Port-au-Prince,” *Performance Research* 15, 1, 2010, 42. [↵](#)
88. *Ibid.*, 44. To get a sense of the sounds that surround the cemetery where Beasley worked, please see [The Grand Rue: Roads as Thoroughfares of Life, Provoke!](#) <http://soundboxproject.com/project-haiti.html>, last accessed May 15, 2021. [↵](#)
89. Deren, *The Divine Horsemen*, 103. [↵](#)
90. *Ibid.*, 69. [↵](#)
91. *Ibid.*, 39. [↵](#)
92. Hurbon, *Voodoo*, 94–95. “To whitewash tombs when weather has made them look faded,” writes Métraux, “and also now and again to weed them, is a mark of affection and devotion to the dead and a way to their goodwill. Such duties are incumbent on all relatives.” Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 257. [↵](#)

93. Beasley, “Vodou, Penises and Bones,” 44. ↵
94. Lauren Derby, “Imperial Idols: French and United States Revenants in Haitian Vodou,” *History of Religions* 54, 4, 2015, 420. ↵

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Glossary

Afrocentricity (Afrocentricly)

Theoretical perspective that places Africa and African ideas, including religious ideas, at the center of one's consideration of Africana cultures anywhere in the world. ↴

All Saints Day

Catholic feast day that is celebrated every year on November 1 in honor of all saints, onto which Haitian Vodou has grafted [Fèt Gede](#), the feast of [Gede](#), chief spirit of all things related to death, dying, and the dead. ↴

All Souls Day

Catholic feast day that is celebrated every year on November 2 in honor of all souls, onto which Haitian Vodou has grafted [Fèt Gede](#), the feast of [Gede](#), chief spirit of all things related to death, dying, and the dead. ↴

Allada (Arda)

Name of a historical African empire and its capital city, which thrived, in various iterations, from circa the twelfth to the nineteenth century C.E. in what is today Benin. A place of origin of many victims of the transatlantic slave trade. ↴

Anba Dlo

Haitian Creole for “under the water,” where souls go for one year and one day after death. ↴

Ancestral Spirituality

All forms of veneration of—and other ritual services, like offerings and funerary ceremonies for—the dead, the ancestors. ↴

Ashe

Yoruba term meaning essentially “divine life force,” the presence and energy of God that is infused throughout creation, enabling and sustaining life and human wholeness and well-being. ↴

Asson

Sacred rattle of the Vodou priesthood. Usually made of a gourd filled with snake vertebrae and adorned with beads and perhaps a kerchief. ↴

Banda

Bawdy dance that commonly breaks out among [Gede](#) and Gede’s devotees, especially during [Fèt Gede](#). ↴

Bawon Samdi (Bawon Simityè; Bawon Lakwa)

A [Gede](#) lwa, sometimes understood to be Gede himself. Ruler of cemeteries who dresses in black and purple, with a top hat and cane, and is associated with the cross. ↴

Benyè

Undertaker, in Haitian Creole. ↴

Bondye

Literally “Good God,” in Haitian Creole, and the name by which God is usually addressed or referred to in Haitian Vodou. ↴

Boule Zen

Literally “burn pots,” in Haitian Creole, referring to a ceremony that is either initiatory or funerary in Haitian Vodou. ↴

Cirouellier

A fig tree, considered cursed, which is the home of the lwa [Grann Brijit](#). ↴

Cosmology

The study of the cosmos and our place and journey therein. ↴

Creole

The blending of African and European languages, cultures, and religions in the Americas. Also the language of the Haitian people and chief language used in Haitian Vodou. ↴

Dégradation

French for “degradation,” a cognate name for the [desounen](#) funerary ritual in Haitian Vodou. ↴

Desounen

Important funerary ritual in Haitian Vodou in which two or three of the elements of the soul are carefully separated and sent on their respective journeys, whether across or under the water, to Africa, to God, or to the lwa. ↴

Dexoxo

Ancestral shrine in traditional [Fon](#) religion. ↴

Eba

Element of one’s soul in [Fang](#) traditional [pneumatology](#). Associated with vitality and located in one’s head. ↴

Edzii

Element of one’s soul in [Fang](#) traditional [pneumatology](#). Associated with one’s individuality, which endures beyond death. ↴

Ewe

See [Fon](#).

Fang

African ethnic group from what is today Gabon, many of whom were enslaved and brought to the Americas, including colonial Haiti. ↴

Fèt Gede

November 1 and 2, grafted onto the Catholic feasts of [All Saints Day](#) and [All Souls Day](#); the feast of [Gede](#), a celebration of the dead and of life. Arguably the most important holiday in Haitian Vodou. ↴

Fon (Ewe-Fon; Fon-Ewe)

West African ethnic group, culture, and language that is a taproot of Haitian culture and Haitian religion; located primarily in what is today Benin, home of the ancestors of many Haitian people. ↴

Gede (Gede Spirits)

The chief lwa of all things related to death, dying, and the dead, but also a lwa of sexuality, regeneration, and life. One of the most important lwa in Haitian Vodou. Gede dresses in black and wears a top hat, carries a cane, and sports eyeglasses with one lens missing. Takes numerous forms and rules over his own pantheon of lwa, who work with him and with the faithful in death, dying, and [ancestral spirituality](#). ↴

Gede Nibo

One of the principal manifestations of the [Gede](#) lwa. A fiercely protective lwa of the Petwo rite or pantheon. ↴

Ginen

Africa, in Haitian Vodou, not just its literal translation as “Guinea.” A residence of the lwa and the destiny of part of our soul once we die. ↴

Govi

Clay pots or gourds into which elements of one’s soul, or sometimes the lwa, are ceremonially placed, which then usually reside on an altar in a Vodou temple, or *ounfò*. ↴

Grand Cimetière

Located in Port-au-Prince, the largest cemetery in Haiti, and one of the largest in the Caribbean. Important site of [Fèt Gede](#). ↴

Grann Brijit (Manman Brijit)

Female lwa who is considered very old; the wife of [Bawon Samdi](#), who plays an important part in [Fèt Gede](#). Also considered to be the mother of all the lwa of the dead. Loves the color purple and is assimilated with Saint Brigid of Ireland. ↴

Gwo Bonnanj

Literally “Big Good Angel,” or “Big Guardian Angel,” a key component of the soul in Haitian Vodou, sometimes considered the soul itself. Associated with one’s self, in the modern psychological sense. A supernatural force that resides in one’s head, shapes one’s person, and is separated from the body ritually upon a person’s death. ↴

Khun

Element of one's soul in **Fang** traditional **pneumatology**. Endures beyond death and is considered capable of morphing into something like a ghost. [↴](#)

Ki

Element of one's soul in **Fang** traditional **pneumatology**. Associated with one's identity and with the supernatural force that enabled one's life; lives on beyond the grave. [↴](#)

Ko Kadav

Literally "cadaver body" in Haitian Creole. Our material bodies, whose souls vacate once we are dead. [↴](#)

Koko Makak

Literally "Monkey's Vagina"; a cane that the lwa **Bawon Samdi** usually carries whenever he appears, whether during **Fèt Gede** or during other periodic, less public Vodou ceremonies, usually at a temple or in a cemetery. [↴](#)

Kongo

Largest ethnic group in the part of West Central Africa from which tens of thousands of victims of the transatlantic slave trade were forcibly brought to colonial Haiti, Saint-Domingue. Kongo culture, religion, and language are key cornerstones of Haitian culture, Haitian Catholicism, and Haitian Vodou. [↴](#)

Legba

A lwa of the crossroads, a gatekeeper who opens the passageways for any ceremony in Haitian Vodou, hence he is the most present lwa of all; has many manifestations, both in the Rada and the Petwo rites or pantheons. Associated with Saint Anthony and with Saint Lazarus. [↴](#)

Lemò

Literally "the dead," in Haitian Creole. Key focus of ritual and devotional attention in Haitian Vodou, a religion steeped in ancestral spirituality. [↴](#)

Lot Bò A Dlo

Literally "the other side of the water," in Haitian Creole, and a key trope in Haitian Vodou, insofar as both the ancestors and the spirits, and eventually our own souls, do and/or will reside across the water, usually understood as the Atlantic Ocean. [↴](#)

Luvo

Name of the soul in traditional **Fon** religion.

Lwa

“Spirit” in Haitian Vodou, though the etymology is unclear. Chief recipient of service and devotion in Vodou, and they take hundreds of forms and are believed to occupy our heads, perhaps our souls, and walk with us and support us through life and dying.

[↵](#)

Manbo

A priestess in Haitian Vodou. [↵](#)

Manje Mò

“Feeding the dead,” in Haitian Creole. Important ritual in service of the ancestors; a feast featuring their favorite foods, and an occasion for communication with and for venerating the dead. [↵](#)

Marasa

A lwa; conceived of as being twins. Once the first humans, and hence the first to have died, they are associated with death and given offerings of food on the eve of Fet Gede. Associated with Saints Cosmas and Damian. [↵](#)

Mawou-Lisa

God in traditional [Fon](#) religion. Also a lwa of high importance in Haitian Vodou.

Mayanèt Bwa Seche

Female lwa whose name translates in Haitian Creole as “Marianet Dry Wood,” a fierce divinity of the Petwo rite or pantheon, associated with sorcery, and thus death, and with the screech owl. Venerating her requires building a fire and fueling it with gasoline and salt. Associated with the Catholic Anima Sola. [↵](#)

Mèt Tèt

Literally “Master of the Head,” in Haitian Creole. In the form of a Vodou spirit, it shapes one’s identity and guides and protects one through life. It is either a key element of one’s soul or separate from the soul. [↵](#)

Mete Nanm

Literally “putting soul,” in Haitian Creole, or the replacement of the soul into a body after it has somehow been displaced. [↵](#)

Mina

West African ethnic group located primarily in what are today Togo and Benin. Speakers of an [Ewe](#) dialect who were widely victimized during the transatlantic slave trade and forcibly brought to the Americas, whether Brazil, colonial Haiti, or elsewhere.

[↵](#)

Move Nanm

Literally “bad soul,” in Haitian Creole, a term often used in reference to a ghost or a werewolf that wanders about at night. [↴](#)

Move Zespri

Literally “bad spirit” in Haitian Creole, essentially a reference to evil spirits in the world. [↴](#)

Mpembe

“White” in the dialect of the Kongo people and in related dialects; reference to the world of the dead, for they are white in Kongolese traditional [cosmology](#). [↴](#)

Nago

Collective term for enslaved Africans in colonial Haiti, Saint-Domingue, who derived from regions in which Yoruba was spoken, chiefly what is today Nigeria. [↴](#)

Nanm

Usually translated as “soul” in Haitian Creole, derived from the French “*une âme*,” “a soul,” though its valences in Haitian Vodou range widely and the term is far more complex. [↴](#)

Nanm Zonbi

Literally “zombie soul” in Haitian Creole, a reference to part of one’s soul that is stolen from the cemetery and sold to a sorcerer for destructive supernatural work. [↴](#)

Ndem

See [Ki](#). [↴](#)

Nguya

Lingala word for “force,” a concept similar to that of [ashe](#) in Yoruba, or divine life energy. [↴](#)

Ngzel

Element of one’s soul in [Fang](#) traditional pneumatology. Endures beyond death and is considered a principal vivifying force during one’s lifetime. [↴](#)

Noli

[Fon](#) term for a soul that has morphed into an independent spirit that wanders about the living community. [↴](#)

Nsala

[Kongo](#) word for “soul.”

Nsi A Bafwa

Kongo term that literally means “land of the dead,” the residence of the ancestors. A dark world where the dead are white and await their return to the living community in this world, [nza yayi](#). ↴

Nsissim

One’s shadow; an element of one’s soul in traditional [Fon](#) pneumatology. ↴

Nza Yayi

Kongo term that literally means “this world,” the residence of the living. A world of light where the living are Black and on a journey to eventually die and cross nzadi, the river, to join the ancestors in [nsi a bafwa](#), the “land of the dead,” a place where everyone is white. ↴

Nzadi

“River” in the [Kongo](#) language, or Kikongo. Metaphorically and cosmologically, that which separates the world of the living and the land of the dead, which we cross when we die. Associated with the color red. ↴

Nzambe Mpungu

“Great God” in Kongo religion. ↴

Ogou

Male lwa of West African origins of major importance in Haitian Vodou; associated with metals and all things related thereto, like warfare and tilling the earth. Often appears during [Fèt Gede](#). ↴

Ontology

The philosophical study of the nature of being. ↴

Oungan

A Vodou priest, male. ↴

Ounsi

A novitiate in the priesthood of Haitian Vodou; assistant to priests and priestesses. Apprentice on a path of spiritual leadership in the religion. ↴

Petwo

Kongo-based or -derived pantheon of lwa in Haitian Vodou. Usually fierce, fiery, explosive, and protective. Most lwa have both Petwo and [Rada](#) manifestations. ↵

Pneumatology

Philosophical or theological study of the soul and all things related thereto. ↵

Pret Savann

“Bush priest,” literally, in Haitian Creole. A ritual specialist in Haitian Vodou who generally recites Catholic liturgical prayers in Latin and French at the opening of many Vodou ceremonies. Blesses a corpse on the way to the cemetery. ↵

Rada

[Fon](#)-based or -derived pantheon of lwa in Haitian Vodou. Usually cool and mellow. Most lwa have both [Petwo](#) and Rada manifestations. Term is rooted in the name of the ancient/early modern West African empire of Allada. ↵

Sae

Element of one’s soul in [Fon](#) traditional religion, which returns to God upon one’s death. ↵

Thanatology

The study of all things related to death, dying, and the dead. ↵

Theology

The study of all things relating to God and God’s relationship to humanity and all existence. ↵

Ti Bonnanj

Literally “Little Good Angel,” or “Little Guardian Angel,” a key component of the soul in Haitian Vodou. Associated with one’s personality and agency, which is ritually separated from the body and the other element(s) of the soul when we die. To be judged by God after one’s death. ↵

Ti-Jean Zandor

A fierce lwa who is husband to [Mayanèt](#) and who kills people for food. ↵

Tovodu

Family spirits or deities in [Fon](#) traditional religion. ↵

Trickster Spirit

A spirit in many religions who is mischievous and keeps people on their toes with all kinds of pranks and tumultuous interventions in life. In Haitian Vodou, Legba is the trickster par excellence. ↴

Uzima

Swahili for divine life force, which derives from God and animates all of creation, including human hearts and souls and drums. A cognate for the [Yoruba](#) word *ashe*. ↴

Vèvè

Intricate symbols of the lwa, usually comprised of intersecting lines and/or circles, but sometimes also sketches of anthropomorphic beings, fish, hearts, swords, etcetera, depending on which lwa is symbolized. ↴

Vodun

The spirits, divinities, deities, or gods of many indigenous West African religions, like that of the Fon peoples. In some parts of the Americas, the word is still used for a class of spirits, rather than an entire religion, like Haitian Vodou, where the spirits are called lwa. Also the name of traditional religion in today's Benin. ↴

Wete Mò Anba Dlo

Literally “reclaim the dead from under the water”; an important Vodou ritual in which the soul, or part of the soul, of the dead is brought back to the community of the living, usually in one's own lineage. ↴

Yoruba

West African ethnic group and a language by the same name, a lingua franca that was known to up to ten percent of all African victims of the transatlantic slave trade. The largest ethnic group in what is today Nigeria and a major cornerstone of Africana religions in the Americas, including Haitian Vodou. ↴

Yowa

Chief symbol of traditional Kongo religion; a cruciform in which a perpendicular cross is contained in a circle, representing the division between the land of the dead and the world of the living, as well as our cycle through life and death, and our rebirth. ↴

Zen

Pots used for cooking meals and herbal remedies for Vodou ceremonies and healing interventions. ↴

Zonbi

Haitian Creole for “zombie.” ↵

Zonbi Astral

Literally “astral zombie” in Haitian Creole; an element of one’s soul that is captured and placed in a bottle, whose force can be employed for destructive supernatural ends by a sorcerer. ↵

8. Making Zombies in Haiti: Technologies and Types

Overview

There is much more to zombies than meets the eye, especially the eye that knows them only from popular horror films, video games, or any other product that has been part of the zombic and apocalyptic spawn of a five billion dollar per annum industry.¹ Although there are moments in zombie cinema and English-language fiction that remain more or less true to *one* type of *zonbi* in Haiti, the vast majority of these horrific creatures that so captivate Americans and others around the world deviate tremendously from even that form, the [zonbi kò kadav](#), literally, the “cadaver body zombie,” upon which “their” zombies are based. In Hollywood, furthermore, by 1968 zombies had become contagious agents and had developed an appetite for human flesh, ideas that are entirely unknown in Haitian zombic culture. That was also the fateful year that the zombie got tied to the apocalypse. Although other types of *zonbi* appear more frequently in Haitian culture, the *zonbi kò kadav* was the only one smuggled out of Haiti by Americans. These Americans, adventure writers, U.S. Marines, and anthropologists, seemed totally oblivious to the other kinds of *zonbi* that were all around them during their time in Haiti. These Americans are the subject of the following chapter, “How the Zombie Came to America.” In this chapter, our task is twofold: to explain the various types of *zonbi* in Haitian religious culture, especially Vodou, and to describe the various techniques and technologies that made them zombies in the first place.

Personal Encounters with Zonbi in Haiti

Zombie in a Bottle

I suddenly moved to Haiti early in 1992, just two days after my beloved mother-in-law was murdered on the road between the capital of Port-au-Prince and a smaller coastal city named Petit Goâve, may her soul rest in peace. It was utterly tragic and heartbreaking, and I had not expected to be in Haiti that year, let alone live there for the following six years, but my Haitian wife and I did precisely that. The first place that I visited upon arrival in Port-au-Prince was the morgue, and the first things I did over the next nine days were to mourn, to meet many members of my new family, to attend a viewing, and to serve as a pallbearer

at the Catholic requiem Mass and then again at [Le Grand Cimetière](#), the nation's largest graveyard. Thousands of tombs haphazardly congest the cemetery, so navigating the narrow walkways with three other pallbearers, carrying my mother-in-law to her tomb, was quite challenging. We stepped over the wreckage of other crypts, fallen statues of saints, and even on occasion human bones. I vividly recall the Catholic priest leading us in prayer prior to the interment, then [Rosicrucians](#) and [Freemasons](#) led prayers and rituals of their own that I did not understand. Finally, the coffin was passed into the large crypt, where two men inside received it, picked up trowels, and began sealing it with cinder blocks and cement. The living left before they had finished.



[Le Grand Cimetière, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 2012.](#) Photo by Stefan Krasowski. | [Le Grand Cimetiere, Port-au-Prince](#) by [Stefan Krasowski](#) is used under a [CC BY 2.0 License](#).

At the time, I knew little about Haitian Vodou and did not realize that I had just spent a couple of hours, under the hot Caribbean sun, in one of the religion's holiest places. Each year, this cemetery is the site of the most resplendent ceremonies in Haiti during [Fèt Gede](#), the Feast of [Gede](#), the [lwa](#) of all things related to death, dying, and the dead in Vodou. I described the Feast in some detail in the previous chapter, but now we are going to focus entirely on zombies, who, in Haiti, also have a lot to do with graveyards. As an American who

grew up watching too much TV and went trick-or-treating every Halloween, I had, of course, heard about zombies. Fast forward to adulthood, and from time to time over my first year or two in Haiti, a friend or relative used the term, usually in reference to a person we passed who seemed catatonic, slowly and vacantly sauntering along a street. These people seemed entirely alone in a bustling city of two million people with two functioning traffic lights, which only worked when there was electricity. My friends and relatives suspected that such solitary saunterers might be zonbi, though in retrospect I believe they were likely bereft of means and suffering from some undiagnosed mental illness.

Because I had lived in Zaire for three years, I was fluent in French and an African language, Lingala, so it didn't take me long to learn Haitian Creole. And because I had begun doing dissertation research on Catholicism in rural Central Africa, with a focus on [religious syncretism](#) or [religious translation](#)—focusing on the Africanization of Catholic symbols and ideas—I was well positioned to learn about Haitian Vodou. Over the first few years into this Haitian odyssey, though I got to know Vodou priestesses ([manbo](#)) and priests ([oungan](#)), went to many temples and communal rituals, and spent countless days on the pilgrimage trail,² I did not see a zonbi. And I did not understand that in Haiti there are countless zombies, and most of them are invisible.

Then one day, while visiting a Vodou priest at his temple in the hills of southern Haiti, I overheard him asking his assistant ([ounsi](#)) to do something for or with the zonbi. She went into the temple, and I was, of course, quite intrigued, so I asked him: “Wait. You have zombies in there, in your temple?” The nonchalance of the oungan's reply was a bit unsettling to me: “Yeah, I've got a bunch of them. Wanna see?” Clearly sensing my discomfort with the idea, he added, “Don't worry. I am with you and would never let any harm befall you, my brother.” We entered the temple and there was a small room in the back, almost like a closet. The ounsi was there, and on a ledge were about twelve bottles (wine and rum, apparently) surrounded by lithographs of Catholic saints. Many candles were burning, and plastic flowers filled a vase, on the floor, in a small zinc basin filled with herbs and water. “There they are, the zonbi.” I shook my head and offered to take him to a nearby town for dinner. Needless to say, it was not what I had expected, and over dinner we really didn't speak of it. But as I learned more about the religion, especially from an amazing article by an anthropologist friend named Elizabeth McAlister, I came to realize that I had seen a collection of [zonbi astral](#), “astral zombies.” It was a far cry from the zonbi kò kadav that made its way to Hollywood in the 1930s.³ We discuss these zombic forms in another section, but first a description of my second encounter with zonbi in Haiti.

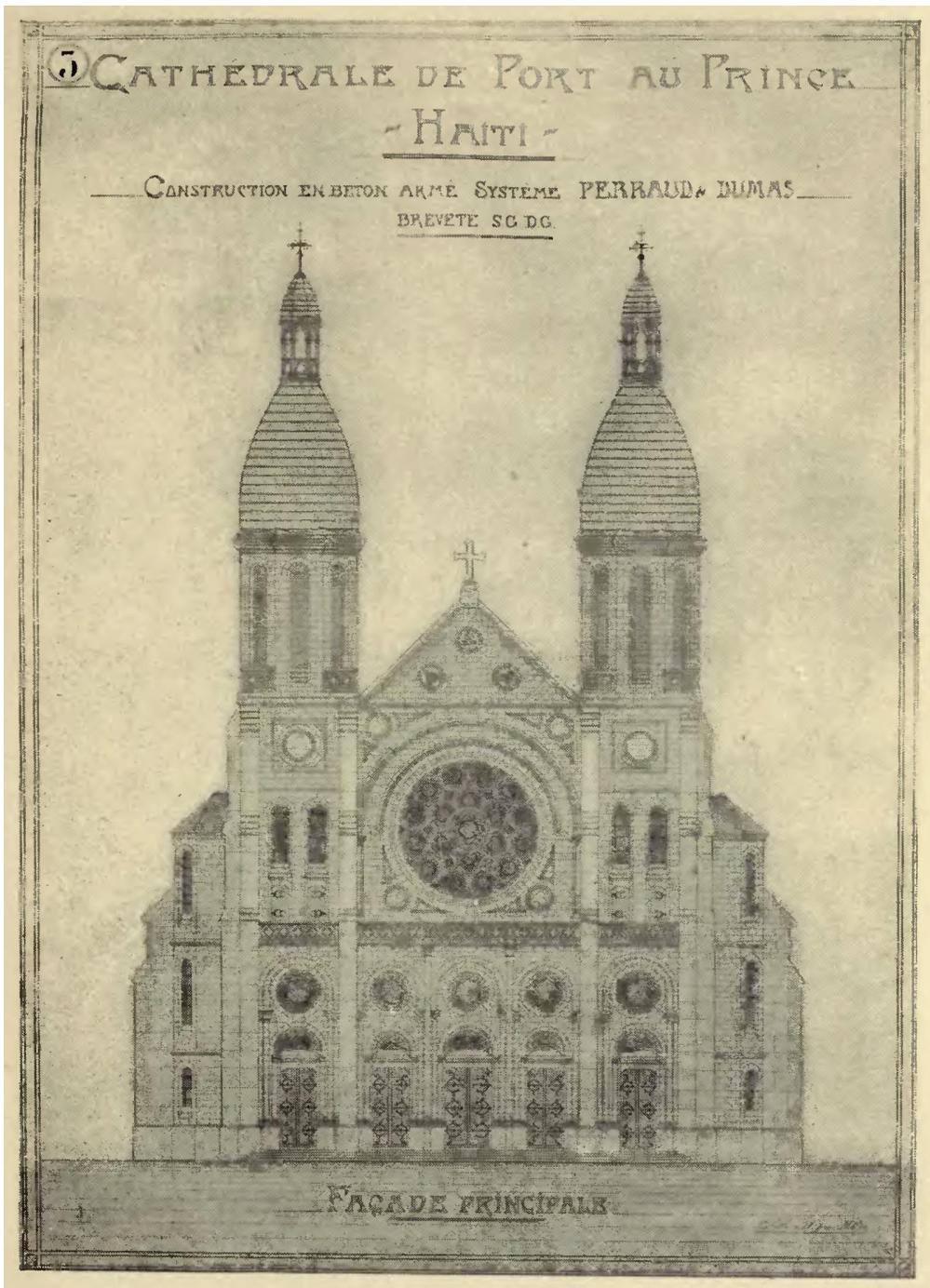
The Pentecostal Cow Zombie

It appears that Vodou is on the decline in Haiti, at least in terms of the percentage of the national population that practices the religion primarily. Generally, the post-WWII boom of [Pentecostalism](#) throughout the Caribbean and Latin America explains this. One reason is provided by Karen Richman, who finds that significant numbers of Haitian immigrants in

South Florida sever their ties to Vodou spirits as part of their integration into U.S. society. Many of them convert to Pentecostal forms of Christianity: “Migrants are turning to conversion to resist their perceived domination by home kin and their spirits, and . . . have rejected the lwa . . . and joined Pentecostal churches.”⁴ Protestantism, whether in Haiti or its large diaspora, thus provides converts refuge from spirits who might strike back at their wayward *sèvitè* (servants) for their *apostasy*.⁵

Adopting a function that historically has been served by Haitian Protestantism, today **Charismatic Catholicism** offers a similar haven from Vodou’s sometimes taxing spiritual commitments. This represents a relatively new phenomenon in Haitian religion, a Pentecostal brand of Catholicism that began in the early 1970s. So abandoning the Vodou spirits no longer requires converting to Protestantism from Catholicism. Alfred Métraux noted this trend in Haiti over fifty years ago: “Protestantism beckons as though it were a shelter, or more precisely a magic circle, where people cannot be got at by *loa* or demons . . . : ‘If you want the *loa* to leave you in peace, become a Protestant.’”⁶ Whereas throughout Haitian history remaining Catholic kept the lapsed or wavering Vodouist too close to the lwa to evade or ignore them, the Charismatic Renewal, *because it is Pentecostal*, offers the same “magic circle” to Haitians Protestantism always has. So today one may remain Catholic while turning one’s back on the ancestral spirits and safely keeping one’s distance without fear of retribution. And you can also keep your saints and rosary beads, things that are dear to most Haitian Catholics—and Vodouists.

In Haiti the faithful often witness or testify, in Charismatic Catholic healing services, to having been “liberated” from the lwa, the ancestors, and even from states of zombification. On February 19, 2002, for example, I saw one young man at a Catholic Charismatic revival, at the Marian grotto behind the Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption in Port-au-Prince, publicly witness to how conversion to Charismatic Catholicism had saved him from a zombified state. During the several weeks that he endured this condition, he lived on a farm, behaving like a cow. He fully believed himself to be a zombie cow, and that he had been rendered as such by a Vodou priest (yon *gangan*) to whom he owed money. Unable to speak or otherwise govern himself as a person, he wandered about on all fours, grazed in a pasture, and drank from a trough, shoulder-to-shoulder “*ak yon pakèt bèf*” (“with a bunch of cows”). Then one day a sympathetic Catholic Pentecostal passerby took pity on the man, laid hands on him, prayed to Jesus, and set him free. The erstwhile zombi quickly committed himself to the Church. His testimony that day at the grotto, to having been liberated not just from a state of zombification but from his taxing Vodouist devotions, was greeted enthusiastically by several hundred worshippers.



Early-twentieth-century drawing of the majestic Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Uncredited, in a book by Jacques Nicolas Léger. Sadly, the Cathedral collapsed during the tragic 2010 earthquake. | [Port-au-Prince Catholic Cathedral](#) from a book by Jacques Nicolas Léger, drawing uncredited is in [the public domain](#).

Beyond Port-au-Prince it has become common for Catholic Charismatic “missionaries” in Haiti’s villages and mountains to exorcise spirits from people who, in their judgment, have been harmed by Vodou, a religion that they strongly demonize.⁷ Such exorcisms sometimes lead to equally dramatic conversion experiences, as in the case described above. Similarly, several Haitian Charismatics have described for me their “liberation” from the lwa upon their acceptance of the Holy Spirit in a Charismatic rite. This represents an attractive strategy for many deeply religious people in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, as they may maintain the familiarity of Catholic practice *and* distance themselves from the mercurial and exigent lwa. Charismatic Catholicism thus places people beyond the reach of spirits and zombies.

Recall that Vodou is a living religion that is not centralized and has no scripture, no doctrine, and a wide array of manifestations, practices, and interpretations. The word *zonbi* thus means different things to different Haitians, whether mistaking an evidently mentally ill person wandering the streets of Port-au-Prince for a *zonbi*, immediately thinking of bottles and captured elements of human souls, or being transformed into a cow zombie by a vengeful Vodou priest. For one last example to further illustrate this point, let us consider the tragic case of Frency Vernet.

Organs and Zombies

On July 10, 1990, a seven-year-old boy named Frency Vernet and his family, all Haitian immigrants, were involved in a horrific automobile accident in Immokalee, Florida. Everyone in the car was seriously injured, but Frency’s condition was the gravest and was life-threatening. When paramedics pulled his broken body from the twisted metal, he was unresponsive and not breathing. The child was urgently helicoptered to Naples Community Hospital, where doctors sustained his life by hooking him up to a ventilator. Tragically, they soon discovered that their patient had suffered irreversible loss of brain function.

The supervisor for organ procurement at Naples Community Hospital asked to approach Frency’s father about the possibility of harvesting his son’s organs, but the man was semiconscious from his injuries, so the trauma surgeon on call would not permit her to do so. After learning that Frency’s mother had been airlifted to Lee Memorial Hospital in Fort Myers, the supervisor called the nurses there and asked them to approach her. One of the ER nurses received the call and, after realizing Frency’s mother couldn’t speak English, she sought help from a coworker who was fluent in French. “Yes, you can donate the organs,” the latter quoted the mother as saying. “I have no problem with that.”

The Fort Myers nurse relayed the dubious consent to Naples Community Hospital, where nurses and the organ procurement supervisor misspelled Frency’s mother’s name on the consent form, which they signed for her as witnesses, noting that permission had been granted telephonically. One serious problem was that *Immaculata*, Frency’s mother, did not speak French but Haitian Creole. Although these two languages share much vocabulary and, to the untrained ear, sound similar, they are not mutually intelligible.

The Vernet family was horrified when they learned what had occurred, and they will never be able to live in peace. As Frency's father put it, "Frency lives in other people. In Haiti, we call that a zombie. My son can never rest in peace because he doesn't have eyes or a heart. In Haiti, we bury the whole body – just as we came into the world."⁸ In Vodou, respectful burial of the entire body is of paramount importance, so organ harvesting is generally considered to be an abomination, even if it is almost unheard of in Haiti.

Frency's father believes that people who receive organs are zombies, as are people who have organs harvested from their bodies. He and his wife sued the University of Miami, the largest organ harvester in the state of Florida, and in 1998 settled out of court to the tune of \$300,000. At the time, I was a professor of African and Caribbean religions at Florida International University in Miami, and when news of the settlement hit, a journalist with ABC's *Nightline* asked me to appear on camera for an interview about the case. I agreed. His and his cameraman's deadline was pressing, so I accepted their invitation to tape an interview on a Saturday, and to have them film me walking across campus pretending that I did not know I was being filmed. As I sat in a university office for the interview, and the cameraman complained that I was wearing a white shirt, I spoke freely. I said something to the effect that had Frency been white, Cuban, or Jewish, this probably never would have happened, but Haitians are expendable, their bodies long exploited, whether as slaves on sugar plantations, zombies in modern factories, or cheap sources of plasma for exportation.⁹ I was trying to lend some historical context, but evidently my comments were a bit too radical for their audience. As my family and I gathered around the TV the next night, we watched the segment, which did not have a single clip from my wasted Saturday with *Nightline*.

I had never heard of any interpretation in Haitian culture of the zonbi being related to organs, nor had I ever heard of zombies being cows. All of this speaks to the diversity and perhaps ever-shifting types of zonbi, the varied interpretations of zonbi in Haiti, the term's myriad valences, and the utter power of the word itself. The cases just considered would not fit neatly into any of the categories of zonbi discussed later in this chapter, but [postmodern](#) and [postcolonial](#) theory have, for the last few decades, been challenging scholars to reconsider the categories of analysis they almost automatically employ in their research. Just as we saw in the previous chapter, with the concept of [nanm](#), which is usually translated as "soul," key ideas and gripping features in Haitian Vodou, like the zonbi, elude neat classification. Take, for instance, the following observation by Métraux:

Near cemeteries and in lonely places, there is risk of meeting *zombi* (which must not be confused with the flesh-and-blood zombie): these are the wandering souls of people who perished as the result of an accident and who are condemned to haunt the earth for as long as God had meant them to live. The same fate is reserved for nubile women who died as virgins. . . . from fear of the terrible ordeal which awaits virgins in the after life – the woman who washes a virgin's corpse is asked to deflower the body before burying it.¹⁰

With those important, disturbing points in mind, let us sketch the chief types of zonbi in Haiti. Because the form of the zombie that made it to the silver screen, the zonbi *kò kadav*,

though rare in Haiti, is usually zombified by way of poison, we begin with a brief discussion of the history of poison in Haiti, with some consideration of its African antecedents.

A Brief History of Poison in Haiti

In 1686, the Reverend Father Jean Mongin, a Jesuit missionary, made the following observation about Africans in the French colonial Caribbean, where he was trying to establish Catholicism in Saint Christophe (today's St. Kitts): "Some of them are sorcerers, others employ sorcery, while still others are jugglers of these things and employ natural remedies."¹¹ There were then relatively few African slaves in the French Caribbean colonies, but that would change dramatically over the next hundred years. When the Haitian Revolution broke out in 1791, there were more than a half-million enslaved people in Saint-Domingue. The Jesuits knew a lot about slavery, as throughout the Americas, from Maryland to Brazil, by 1760 they owned "at least 20,877" slaves, with over 1000 more in the French Caribbean colonies, including Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti).¹² Mongin took such great interest in African sorcery and herbalism that he actually "conducted a survey of twenty-six enslaved healers." Andrew Dial explains that Father Mongin "drew a line between those who 'only applied certain herbs and natural remedies' and those who 'made it their business to cure with actual magic spells.'"¹³ Furthermore, "Mongin claimed to know several enslaved healers who were guilty of poison." Although Jesuits recognized African herbal knowledge as having healing potency, they also greatly feared magic, sorcery, and poison, and Mongin asserted that "what really needs to be done, to provide an example, is to execute one of them."¹⁴ Father Jean-Baptiste Labat, a Dominican friar in Saint-Domingue, would go further a few decades later in stating that "almost all blacks who leave their homeland as adults are sorcerers, or at least they have some tainting of magic, sorcery, and poison."¹⁵ By the middle of the eighteenth century, sorcery had become so feared in the French Caribbean that additional measures were taken among French settlers and administrators to combat it. As one rather macabre example, "methods" to reveal the identity of poisoners "included digging up the heart of a poisoned slave and damaging it with quicklime or a firebrand to make the 'author of poison fall into convulsions.'"¹⁶

"The most significant of the prerevolutionary resistance movements [in Saint-Domingue] was that led by an African named [François Makandal](#), who for nearly 20 years struck fear in the hearts of white Domingans by employing poison and leading his maroon followers on raids of their plantations."¹⁷ Makandal was captured and burned at the stake in 1758, but some believe that he morphed into a fly and escaped execution by buzzing off. To this day in Haitian Creole *makandal* is a cognate for [pwazon](#), "poison,"¹⁸ though the term can also refer to "an evil charm" or "a secret society or members of a secret society" in Haitian Vodou.¹⁹ He is one of the few former human beings to have become a lwa, or a spirit, in Haitian Vodou, and was most likely Kongolesé, though he may have been a West African Muslim. Whatever his origins, evidently Makandal aimed to establish an independent African nation in the Americas, though many details about this legendary Black radical are disputed among historians.²⁰



Haitian coin, now out of circulation, commemorating François Makandal. | [Makandal](#) by Author unknown is in [the public domain](#).

In addition to poison, some amulets in Haiti (usually called [pakèt](#) or [pwen](#)) are referred to as *makandal*, but the entire culture of using objects to do harm is referred to as [wanga](#), as are the objects themselves.²¹ Some are employed to do good, but generally in Haiti they are associated with sorcery and thus greatly feared. One has to pay to have wanga made, and the more you pay, the more likely they are to work.²²

Recall from Chapter Five that in 1793, M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry published his tome on Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti), in Philadelphia. It was the second instance of the term *zombi* appearing in print, and the first pertaining to what is today Haiti. This appears in his discussion of African sexuality—not that the zombie is sexy or sexually active, but, per Moreau, that it is one of the few things that would scare Africans from seeking out their lovers late at night. He compares the zombie to the French [revenant](#) (one who returns to life from the grave), but offers little more in the way of description. There is no indication in the historical documents that zombies became zombies in the colonial era by way of poisoning, but they do in Haiti today. In the French colony of Saint-Domingue (1697–1804), African slaves greatly outnumbered white people, and they were feared for their knowledge and use of poisons, as already noted. A form of resistance, poisons were used against both humans and livestock. Some of this knowledge had been brought from Africa and adapted to the local flora and wildlife, as reflected in earlier observations by Fathers Mongin and Labat. So prolific was poisoning in Saint-Domingue that in Moreau de Saint-Méry’s eighteenth-century papers in the National Archives of France, I found an entire folder of primary source documents—reports, court cases, letters, and such—titled “poison,” documenting the dangers of Africans’ use thereof.

“The fear that Makandal and his fellow slaves created led to a violent backlash against slaves suspected of poisoning,” Karol Weaver explains. “In 1758, the same year that Makandal

was executed, three other slaves named Samba, Colas, and Lafleur were imprisoned and awaited execution on charges of poisoning.²³ In the following decades, the backlash proved ineffective, however, as poisonings continued, not only of white people and their livestock, but of slaves who labored on their plantations. This continued through the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), when “enslaved men and women created a revolutionary identity from Makandal’s life and legend.”²⁴

The independent Republic of Haiti resulted from world history’s only successful national slave revolt, and the new nation’s early leaders sought recognition of its sovereignty from other nations, but it was shunned. The independence won by the United States some twenty years earlier did not lead to the abolition of slavery there, unlike in Haiti. America was loath to affirm the new Caribbean republic’s legitimacy when its national economy depended so heavily on slave labor in the U.S. South. Reflective of efforts to gain recognition on the global stage, Haiti’s early constitutions declare it to be a Christian nation and, to appear as such, its leaders policed Vodou, including promulgating proscriptions against poisoning in its national penal codes. For example, in 1820, a presidential decree called on authorities to “suppress superstitious gatherings known by the names of *gangan* and *vaudou*,” while the penal code of 1826 outlined punishments for “those who work with *macandals*,” which was echoed in the 1835 national penal code.²⁵

By 1864, though, the relationship between poison and zombification was clearly implied in the penal code:

The use of substances that, without leading to death, produce a more or less prolonged lethargic state is also qualified as an attempt on the life of a person through poisoning. . . . If, as a result of this lethargic state, the person was buried, the attempt will be defined as an assassination.²⁶

Here, zombification is clearly associated with poisoning and, by extension, with sorcery and spells, as [*sortilège*](#) (French for spell) is a word that appears frequently in Haitian anti-Vodou legal documents and in denunciatory declarations by the Catholic Church. The Church hierarchy would return to Haiti in 1860, after the Vatican finally recognized the Caribbean nation’s independence. It would not take long for the Church and the Haitian state to embark on a series of campaigns (1896–1900, 1911–1912, and 1940–1942) to weed out things like zombification, poisoning, superstition, and Vodou itself. During the [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#), American marines actively engaged in the attack on Vodou. General Littleton Walker noted in Senate testimony in 1921 that the Haitian Penal Code’s articles prohibiting *sortilège* and *macandal* were rarely enforced, so the U.S. Marines took it into their own hands to do so: “We broke up all their meetings, seized all their drums, etc., and wherever a voodoo drum was heard we immediately got on the trail and captured it, and broke it up, as far as we could.”²⁷

Following the U.S. Occupation of Haiti, which mercifully ended in 1934, and the last formal Catholic [antisuperstitious campaign](#), which concluded eight years later, the zombie came back to life, so to speak. During the last anti-Vodou campaign, some “*zombi* were released by their keepers, who feared they would be targeted by the mobilization.”²⁸ When the dance ethnographer Maya Deren conducted her fieldwork on Vodou in the 1950s, she found

widespread fear of “the dread *zonbi*, the major figure of terror, who is precisely this: the body without a soul, matter without morality.”²⁹ As discussed in the next section, such *zonbi*, the *zonbi kò kadav*, are usually victims of poisoning, even though Deren doesn’t mention poison in this context. By the 1980s, writes Sarah Lauro, in Haiti “zombification becomes a means of punishing those who transgress social mores.”³⁰ In African contexts, many victims of poison are indeed guilty of some transgression, whether it be greed or sexual assault, but it seems to me that people who are poisoned into a “prolonged lethargic state” in Haiti are victims, their bodies dug up from the grave for labor. Meanwhile, adds McAlister, reflecting diverse forms of *zonbi* in Vodou:

20th century reports describe not a returned soul but a returned body – a person bodily raised from the grave and turned into a slave worker. As a spirit or a slave, complex spiritual formulae separate body and soul, and compel one or the other to work. These entities – especially the invisible *zonbi astral* (astral zombies) – continue to be fairly common inhabitants of the unseen mystical world of Haitian Vodouists.³¹

How does zombification in Haiti work? What are the poisons, rituals, and technologies that are involved? We turn now to these questions, but it is important to recall first that in Haitian Vodou, zombies are neither contagious, cannibalistic, nor apocalyptic. People generally do not fear them, but they do fear the possibility of their recently departed loved ones, or they themselves, being transformed into zombies in some way, shape, or form.

Zombie Technologies in Haiti

As reflected in the 1864 Penal Code, zombification in Haiti, at least in one form, is associated with poisons “that, without leading to death, produce a more or less prolonged lethargic state,” a state in which a human being might actually be “buried” only to later be clandestinely exhumed and put to work as a *zonbi*. This pertains only to the *zonbi kò kadav*, the one kind of the zombie that was brought, in literary form, from Haiti in the 1930s, which made its debut in Hollywood in the 1932 film [White Zombie](#). In Haiti, some people are poisoned so they are near death and their burials are conducted. Then the [bòkò](#) and/or his (they are almost always male in Haiti) minions return, revive the inhumed, and either sell them as slaves or employ them themselves. Or, as we saw earlier in this chapter, one might be poisoned into a zombic cow-like state. Again, there is more to the zombie than meets the eye, and scholars of zombification in Haiti are increasingly appreciating the range of meanings of the word *zonbi* in Haitian Vodou.

It takes knowledge, skill, and extensive training to make *zonbi* in Haitian Vodou, so let us revisit the stations of religious leadership and ritual specialization in the religion. All of them, incidentally, are open to women and LGBTQ+ people with requisite vocations. The makers or takers of *zonbi* work closely with the Vodou spirit who rules over cemeteries, [Bawon Samdi](#).

There is really no hierarchy to the list below, as Vodou is a quite egalitarian religion, though elders and spiritual leaders do command a great deal of respect:

- *Manbo* – Priestess
- *Oungan* – Priest
- [Pret Savann](#) – Leader/reciter of Catholic liturgies, some in French, others in Latin
- [Medsin Fey](#) – Herbalist/Healer
- *Bòkò* – A healer and a sorcerer; purveyor of spirits, poisons, and charms
- *Ounsi* – A novice who assists a priest or priestess as part of her/his/their training to one day be a priest or a priestess
- *Laplas* – A “master of ceremonies” in communal Vodou rituals, often carrying a flag or a sword to help in their orchestration³²

Which ones make zombi and what kinds of poisons or potions are employed for the cause in Haiti? Usually it is the *bòkò* (most often male) who makes zombi, someone described by Hebblethwaite as “a Vodou priest who deals with both [fret](#) (cold) and [cho](#) (hot) lwa.”³³ As for the poisons, there are several, actually, and the science behind all this is rather astounding. According to Boston-based Haitian Vodou priest and scholar Patrick Sylvain: We “should think of zombies in terms of science . . . poor Haitians, uneducated, without a lab, have extracted those toxins . . . to put you in a state like death.”³⁴

Surely some of these zombie poisons are entirely secretive and unknown to scholars like the controversial Wade Davis, who wrote his Harvard dissertation on this topic, which was transformed into two books. One of them was a sensationalist anthropological thriller, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, and the other a more seemingly scholarly book with the somewhat spooky title *Passage of Darkness*. The former book was later turned into a horror film by famed Hollywood producer Wes Craven.³⁵ In the latter book we read the following description of the creation of poison used to zombify: “animal constituents,” especially “the puffer fish and the sea toads were sundried, carefully heated, and placed in a mortar.” To these were added dried lizards, spiders, and frogs, as well as human body parts, all of which were “sifted to yield a fine powder.”³⁶ So dangerous is the process of encountering zombies or of making such poisons that following their production the sorcerers (*bòkò*) Davis was observing “rubbed all surfaces of their bodies with oil emulsion, placed cotton plugs in their nostrils, and wrapped hemp sacks around their entire bodies.” They also wore “protective hats.”³⁷

Of the various animals used in the creation of zombie poisons, according to Davis the most important were two kinds of puffer fish (*Diodon holicantus* and *Sphoeroides testudienus*),³⁸ a toad, and a frog, though some *bòkò* indicated that pure magic without powders can zombify and that the most potent of all elements in zombie poisons are ground human body parts.³⁹



The puffer fish, which is said to be the source of a toxin used to zombify humans in Haiti. Photographer unknown, 2012. | [Puffer Fish](#) from [Uploader1977](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 3.0 License](#).

As for the toad and the frog? [Bufo marinus](#) is a sea toad that contains several toxins. It is more popularly known as the cane toad. The largest cane toad on record measured a whopping nine and a half inches. They were brought to Australia in 1935 to eat beetles that were destroying sugar cane, but that didn't work out. They are known to steal pet food left outside for dogs, as well as vittles intended for the teeming herds of cattle and sheep Down Under. Interestingly, the cane toad has no natural predator in Australia and has spread across the continent. Other animals who seek to prey upon the amphibious Caribbean import sometimes die from the toxins that it carries within its body, the very toxins used in Haiti to make zombies.⁴⁰

The frog of truly zombic consequence is the [Hispaniolan Laughing Tree Frog](#), as it is sometimes called, whose Latin species name is *Osteopilus dominicensis*. It spends most of its time in trees, its ribbit sounds like laughter, and it is indigenous to Hispaniola, hence the name. The tree frog secretes a toxic substance through its skin. Though it is not fatal to humans or its predators, it is, according to Davis's research, used in zombie poisons in Haiti. It

is also a symbol of the Dominican Republic today and appears in Dominican folk tales and folk songs.

In addition to substances derived from animals and insects, Davis claims that various plant species are used to zombify in Haiti. For one, [Datura stramonium](#) is a flowery weed originally from Central America that contains hallucinogenic and toxic alkaloids. It is an invasive plant species that can grow in bush form up to five feet high. Davis identified the presence of datura in the “zombie powder” that he acquired in Haiti. In his 1985 book, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, he calls it the “zombie cucumber,” as part of the plant, when alive, does resemble a cucumber. Davis found elements from numerous other plant species in the various zombie powders or poisons that he acquired in Haiti,⁴¹ but datura seems to be the most significant. In terms of administration, such powders can be traced on the floor, in the shape of a cross, at the threshold of one’s house or put “inside the victim’s shoes, down his back, or inside a wound.”⁴² Once the zombie is exhumed, datura is a key element to revive it barely enough to be put to work, combined with a paste that includes “sweet potato” and “cane syrup. . . . A second dose of this hallucinogenic paste is given to the victim the morning after the resurrection, when it reaches its place of confinement.”⁴³

Although practitioners of zombification in Haiti believe that “human remains [are] critical to the preparation” of their poisons,⁴⁴ Davis takes a more scientific view and concludes that one substance, above all, is the ultimate tool for the craft, for in the process such items “are burned almost to charcoal and probably chemically inert.”⁴⁵ [Tetrodotoxin](#) is this ultimate zombifying substance, “capable of inducing a physical state that might actually allow an individual to be buried alive.”⁴⁶ Neurotoxins are found in over a thousand animals, as well as in alcohol, heroin, and cocaine, and once in the human bloodstream they alter the functioning of the nervous system. In Haiti it mainly derives from the puffer fish (fugu), which is a delicacy in Japan, where there are numerous reports of people ingesting the seafood when it is underprepared and appearing to have died, only to return to life. There, “a person declared dead from eating puffer fish must by local law and custom be allowed to lie alongside his or her coffin for three days before burial.”⁴⁷ In Vodou, meanwhile, this tetrodotoxin is “a possible material basis for the entire zombie phenomenon – a folk poison containing known poisons fully capable of pharmacologically inducing a state of apparent death.”⁴⁸

This is all interesting, of course, but it must be asked whether Davis’s findings are scientifically and anthropologically valid. One could, for instance, question his reliance on linguistic interpreters and the relatively brief time during which he traveled about Haiti in search of these “zombie powders.” To write about anything in Haiti, or anywhere else, a responsible anthropologist must, de rigueur, be fluent in the local language(s). David Inghiss has carefully considered these matters and reviewed the relevant literature, some of which decries Davis for “vulgar self-promotion, of outrageous sensationalism, of methodological naivety, of falsifying data, and of setting back the study of Haiti by fifty years.”⁴⁹ Another critic finds that Davis’s work on the zombie “falls into the fuzzy realm of literary anthropology,” while others conclude that in his work on zombies in Haiti the swashbuckling Canadian anthropologist “perpetuated a major scientific fraud.”⁵⁰ In a scathing critique of Davis’s interpretation of the case of [Clairvius Narcisse](#), the most widely documented former zombie in literature and documentaries, C. Y. Kao and T. Yamuoto allude to its “central flaw”: Davis

“is untrained in medical diagnosis” and “an objective reading of Narcisse’s health record . . . revealed that Narcisse had been ill for about a year before his terminal episode,” which seemingly resulted from “chronic congestive heart failure,” rather than from any kind of zombification.⁵¹ Kao and Yamuoto conclude their refutation of Davis’s work on zombies by raising an important moral question about the Harvard anthropologist’s having paid for and participated “in the illegal exhumation of a freshly buried child whose remains were incorporated into a sample of zombie powder. . . . The monstrosity of this moral transgression is in itself overwhelming.”⁵² Ingliss summarizes:

The anthropological critics were no less scathing. The most recurrent criticism was that despite his claims to the contrary, Davis had indeed caricatured Vodou, presenting a closed culture system which had not changed since its inception in the late eighteenth-century, and depicting it in a manner that disconnected it from social and political change, and all forms of empirical practice. . . . His field work was trounced in various ways. He had no grasp of Creole, the language of the peasantry, so his reliance on an interpreter opened up all sorts of hermeneutic pitfalls.⁵³

Be that as it may, Davis was convinced that the most famous zombie of all time, Clairvius Narcisse (1922–1994), had exhibited “the quite particular symptoms of tetrodotoxin poisoning,” adding, for good measure, one “haunting fact. Every indication pointed to the possibility that Narcisse had remained conscious the entire time. Totally paralyzed, he may have been an observer of his own funeral.”⁵⁴ Narcisse “reportedly died in 1962, in the context of a land dispute with his siblings and allegations of stinginess toward them and toward the mothers of his numerous children.”⁵⁵ Ah, jealousy, vindication, quests for some arbitrary notion of justice—the prime movers of sorcery in Africana cultures, Haiti included, and often of zombification. As J. Lorand Matory points out, “A combination of poisoning by a *bòkò* in cahoots with Narcisse’s aggrieved family, Narcisse’s own belief in zombification, and ostracism by his community turned Narcisse into a socially dead, involuntary worker known as a *zonbi*.”⁵⁶ Narcisse was buried one day only to show up in his hometown eighteen years later after laboring for that long, supposedly as a zombie, on a sugar plantation.



Sugar plantation in independent Haiti, circa 1820. | [Planting the Sugar-Cane](#) by [Infant School Society Depository](#) is in [the public domain](#).

So what does it feel like after you ingest tetrodotoxin? Bòkò in Haiti described to Davis—through his presumably reliable interpreter, of course—that its “onset” was akin to “insects crawling beneath the skin.”⁵⁷ Put more scientifically by Paul May and Simon Cotton:

Within a few minutes of ingesting it, there is a tingling or numbness of the lips and tongue. This spreads to the rest of the face, then to other parts of the body, accompanied by a whole range of other distressing symptoms (vomiting, diarrhea, convulsions, etc.). As the paralysis spreads, the victim may become unable to move, but remains conscious and lucid, though speech is affected. Cardiac arrhythmias can occur and the victim eventually dies of asphyxiation. Death usually occurs within 6 h. If the victim is still alive after 24 h, they generally recover.⁵⁸

Bòkò note that “the belly of the victim swells after he or she has been poisoned” and that “even female zombies speak with deep, husky voices, and all zombies are glassy-eyed.”⁵⁹ Narcisse was taken to one of Haiti’s best hospitals when he fell ill with “digestive problems with vomiting, pronounced respiratory difficulties, pulmonary edema, uremia, hypothermia, and rapid loss of weight.” Furthermore, “at one point his blood pressure was an impossibly

low 26/15,” which Davis believes was likely due to the patient’s having been poisoned with tetrodotoxin.⁶⁰ Narcisse would never leave the hospital “alive,” being pronounced dead there three days later, but he remained “fully conscious” during his burial, albeit “unable to speak or move,” Gino Del Guercio explains. “As the earth was thrown on his coffin, he felt as if he were floating over his grave.” It didn’t take long before Narcisse was exhumed and fully (supposedly) transformed into a zombie:

The night he was buried . . . a voodoo priest raised him from his grave. He was beaten with a sisal whip and carried off to a sugar plantation in northern Haiti where, with other zombies, he was forced to work as a slave. Only with the death of the zombie master were they able to escape, and Narcisse eventually returned home.⁶¹

That was eighteen years later, and his family and friends were understandably astonished by his return, having attended his funeral and assumed that he had been dead all those years. He carried a new scar on his cheek, one that he recalls resulting from a nail driven into his coffin.

Narcisse worked in the sugar fields while putatively being a zombie, and sugar is what drove the importation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans to the French plantation colony of Saint-Domingue. The cultivation of sugar is a very labor-intensive process, so many people are needed to work in the fields and the mills to serve humanity’s addiction to the foodstuff. As Sidney Mintz puts it, “Sugar seems to satisfy a particular desire (it also seems, in so doing, to awaken that desire anew).”⁶² Furthermore, and this is centrally relevant to Haiti, “France early developed ‘sugar colonies,’ exported sugar and its related products in enormous quantities in the eighteenth century, and developed a sweet tooth of its own.”⁶³ That sweet tooth was served through slavery, as was the entire French economy at the time, as well as some of the most celebrated French philosophers and the wondrous architecture that, in part, draws millions of tourists to France each year. Yet what happens when the slaves who are forced to cultivate sugar rise up and liberate themselves, as in the Haitian Revolution?

Shortly after the Haitian Revolution, slaves who had labored on sugar and other plantations became peasants, claiming and working the mountainous land and fertile plains to sustain themselves. By 1811, one of the most important leaders of the Revolution, **Henry Christophe** (1768–1820), had himself coronated as king in the north of the newly independent nation, as Henry I, and sought to restore sugar production out of the wreckage and aftermath of the war. In this, he largely succeeded. As Bob Corbett explains, the king “was able to make the fermage system work quite well, at least to re-establish production of the sugar plantations.”⁶⁴ Many resisted, however, as this seemed like slavery in a new form, and the Haitian peasantry grew out of this resistance. By the early twentieth century, foreign corporations, mostly American and German, moved in to take over the lucrative Haitian sugar industry, which was a pretext for the first U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1919–1934). With the serfs absconding and no more slaves, how was one to produce sugar, devoid of such a labor force? Perhaps zombies were the answer.

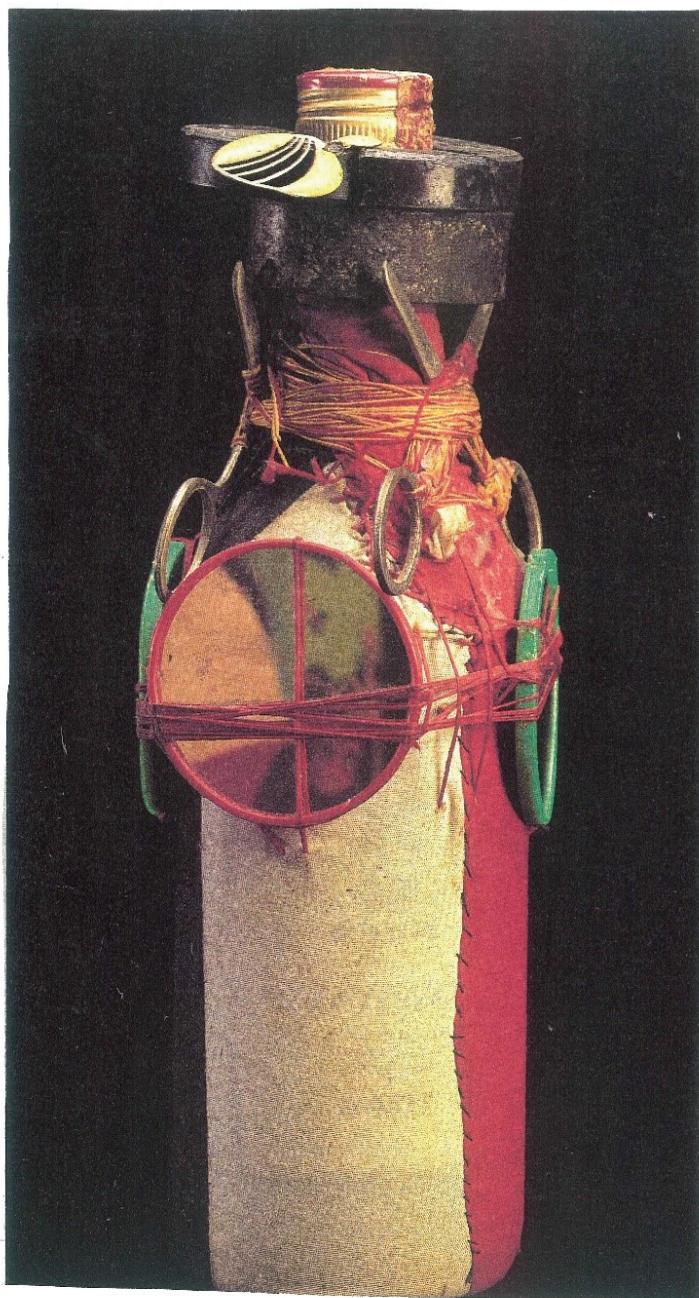
“The spring of 1918 was a big cane season,” writes William Seabrook in his sensationalist and controversial 1929 book *The Magic Island*. The Haitian American Sugar Company (**HASCO**) was then booming, complete with rail lines and factories and rum distilleries, in Port-au-Prince

and sugar plantations in the countryside. Peasants flocked to HASCO in search of work, and they found it, but, per Seabrook, “these were not living men and women, but poor unhappy *zombies* . . . dragged from their graves to slave . . . in the sun.”⁶⁵ In a much more scholarly fashion, Kate Ramsey offers that “the account of *zonbi* slaving at HASCO can likewise be read as relating a powerful social analysis and indictment of the encompassing of rural life in these plains by North American capitalist enterprise after 1915,”⁶⁶ the year that the United States sent marines to occupy Haiti.

With no slaves to work sugar plantations and with sugar in high demand globally, the American-owned HASCO was widely rumored in early- to mid-twentieth-century Haiti to employ a large labor force of zombies, a “band of ragged creatures who shuffled along . . . staring dumbly, like people in a daze.”⁶⁷ The HASCO rumors were likely untrue, but they, among other things, gave the American occupiers of Haiti a means to justify their assault on Haitian Vodou. Rumor also had it that this was all going swimmingly for the company and its zombie master until his wife “made the fatal error of giving them a candy that had salt in it, an ingredient that must be withheld from *zonbi* because it has the effect of awakening them.”⁶⁸ In any case, “this narrative of Hasco zombies becomes the prime example of a zombie myth’s transportation to the United States,” as Lauro observes, something that is “extremely important, as it implicates global capitalism from the very beginning of American interest in the zombie.” For the zombie, in this light, possesses a “dual capacity to represent both the dehumanized slave and the factory worker reduced to the repetition of a mechanized gesture . . . Haiti’s predominantly agricultural economy and its past as France’s cash crop colony.”⁶⁹

Types of Zombies in Haiti

As is hopefully clear by now, the *zonbi kò kadav* is an intermittent reality in Haiti (no hordes of them anywhere) and vastly outnumbered by the *zonbi astral* and other forms of zombies that are either part of one’s soul or manufactured from human body parts in cemeteries to be put to supernatural work, perhaps to bring luck or justice. “Life, in the Vodou view of things,” writes Karen McCarthy Brown, “is . . . characterized by alternating cycles of suffering and the transient relief from suffering that is called ‘having luck’. . . Raising luck is the general rubric under which all kinds of Vodou healing can be grouped, and healing is the main purpose of all types of Vodou ritualizing.”⁷⁰ So *zonbi* can heal, “bring luck” (*chans*, in Haitian Creole). But *zonbi* are more often employed to exploit or to harm.



Zonbi Astral, as made by a sorcerer in Port-au-Prince circa 1988 for Elizabeth McAlister, the photographer. Courtesy of Elizabeth McAlister. | Zonbi astral, or a zombie in a bottle by Elizabeth McAlister is used with the permission of the author.

If his story is true, Clairvius Narcisse was a zombi kò kadav, as were those who labored beside him on a sugar plantation in northern Haiti beginning in the 1960s, victims of poisoning and exhumation who were forced to work. We have explored some of the leading explanations, in terms of poisoning, that might explain such phenomena in Haiti. In reality, though, such forms of zombification are rare, especially compared to other kinds of zombi, like the zombi astral.

To be made, most zombi require the work of a sorcerer, a bòkò. McAlister explains their role in Haitian Vodou:

A bòkò is a Haitian expert in supernatural matters. He is a bit of a man out for himself, a freelancer, unlike the *oungan* or *manbo* who establish religious family networks. A bòkò is an entrepreneur who will “work with both hands,” that is, for healing *and* revenge. Traditional anthropology would call him a sorcerer.⁷¹

Upon visiting a bòkò in Port-au-Prince, the anthropologist was impressed with an ornate bottle in his house. The bòkò kindly asked her, “Do you want me to make you one?”⁷² McAlister accepted, and the bottle, infused with the sorcerer’s wanga, was given to her and it resides to this day on a shelf in her office at Wesleyan University, in Connecticut. The bottle contains a zombi astral, and its appearance is as complex as it is intense, swaddled in cloth, mirrors, scissors, magnets, and pins and wafting an intense smell of perfume. “The lines of scissors and mirrors lead the eye around and around the bottle in a colorful spiral of red, white, and black.”⁷³ Recall from the previous chapter that these very colors infuse Kongolese cosmology with meaning, in terms of birth, death, rebirth, the cycle of life, and the beyond. Ancestors want to return to this world, to our living lineage, which entails crossing the red river, **nzadi**. This Kongolese influence is patent in the bottle’s predominant colors: “The colors black, white, and red are dressing this bottle to indicate that it is a **Petwo wanga**,” explains McAlister. “This broadcasts its ‘hot’ nature and its willingness to ‘do work’ (*fè travay*).”⁷⁴ St. Jean, the bòkò, employed the following techniques in making the zombi astral, or at least its vessel, the bottle:

- *St. Jean had the little boy buy three needles. Asked [my intended’s] name. Took the needles with a magnet and put them on the top of a long green rock.*
- *Then poured some pink powder into the bottle.*
- *Then took from under where I’m sitting two human skulls and a – human neckbone – and set them on the floor!!!*
- *Poured rum over them.*
- *Set them on fire. . . blue flame.*
- *Shaved some bone off the skulls with a knife.*
- *Put the shavings in a bowl with the rock on top.*
- *Burned an American dollar on a knife and mixed with the skull shavings.*

- *Poured into bottle.*
- *Poured in some mixture of liquor and leaves.*
- *Perfume.*
- *Another perfume.*
- *All the while playing a tape of singing and cha-chas. Wrapped the bottle in red cloth, waved the cha-chas and bell at it. Set the bottle in a bowl of rocks.*⁷⁵

The key to the bottle's being effective in bringing "luck" to its owner is its containment of part of a human soul, which is sometimes referred to as zombi. For, once finished, the sorcerer's bottle is, in effect, "alive. . . a living grave; a spirit in a bottle."⁷⁶ The skulls are vital in this regard, and they, and the zombi element of a dead person's soul, are to be found, of course, in cemeteries. For a bòkò to acquire such things for creating zombi astral, he or she (usually he) must gain permission from Bawon Samdi, the Gede lwa who rules all cemeteries. As McAlister explains, in an excellent documentary on zombies in Haiti, such permission is required, and Bawon might respond to the bòkò by refusing altogether, or by permitting "eight" or "three" zombi to be taken. This is "the way people get the spirit of the recently dead into the bottle," all in keeping with "a kind of a mystical technology." For there is energy, perpetual and powerful energy, in us, in human bodies and souls, and Haitian sorcerers who make zombi astral are adept at "capturing part of a human energy after it has died."⁷⁷

We have outlined the technologies that go into making zombi kò kadav and zombi astral, but they both vary in their manifestations. Some of them are probably not widely known or considered, like the Pentecostal cow or the unwitting, tragically deceased organ donor in Florida. Most famous, even if not common in Haiti, is the zombi kò kadav, like Clairvius Narcisse and all those victims of zombification who were rumored to labor for the Haitian American Sugar Company. When did such zombies first appear in Haiti? Judging from Moreau's use of the term in colonial Saint-Domingue, in the eighteenth century they were more or less nocturnal ghouls that Africans greatly feared, but it is not until the following century that zombi kò kadav were notably forced to labor in the fields. When over half a million people were enslaved in a sugar plantation colony that was roughly the size of Maryland, there was no need to poison people into involuntary labor. This all changed with Haitian independence and abolition, however. Then, explains Lauro, the "understanding of the word was expanding . . . by this time the 'zombi' was comprehended as a spirit that could take on flesh or a specter that yet looked identical to the person it once was." She continues:

As a sovereign nation, Haitians would define (and then redefine) the zombie and its role in society; its emphasis would oscillate from the enslavement of the living corpse to the technology of zombie making and its potential as a weapon, depending on the most pressing political, social, and cultural concerns of the Haitian people.⁷⁸

Such concerns always entail economics, of course, so Haitians devised means by which to nearly kill people and resuscitate them to labor on sugar plantations or in other ways, as

illustrated by the various forms that the *zonbi kò kadav* may take. *Kò kadav* literally means “cadaver body, a reference to a visible physical body, in contrast to *gwo bonnanj* and *ti bonnanj*, which are aspects of the soul.”⁷⁹ The poisoned and interred body that has not died quite enough for mortal permanence is revived by a *bòkò*, who poisoned it in the first place. The body is disinterred the following day to work, perhaps on a sugar plantation, like Narcisse supposedly did. Such zombies are victims of sorcery who are enslaved and forced to work for their owners, who can also sell them to make a profit. Once disinterred, the *zonbi kò kadav* “becomes a slave of the sorcerer who zombified it,” per Hans Ackerman and Jeanine Gauthier, “made to work like a robot in a field, on construction sites, in a bakery or a shop.” They can also be accountants or security guards and be “rented out to others.”⁸⁰

Depending on the forms of labor into which they are forced, *zonbi kò kadav* are categorizable as follows, and surely this list is not comprehensive:

- ***Zonbi Zoutil*** (lit.: “Tool Zombie”) – Zombies that are trained to work in mechanical industries, like in railyards or construction, or otherwise “employed in an urban workshop.”⁸¹
- ***Zonbi Savann*** (lit.: “Bush Zombie”) – The origin of this term is somewhat unclear, though its literal meaning is straightforward enough; likely this is a zombie who is forced to labor in fields or to forage for food.
- ***Zonbi Bosal*** (lit.: “African or Wild Zombie”) – Zombies who have gone AWOL and are renegade; in colonial Hispaniola, Africans were called *bosal*, as opposed to slaves who were born in the colony; the term *bosal* carried racist implications of uncivility and wantonness.
- ***Zonbi Grenn*** (lit.: “Seed Zombie”) – similar to the *zonbi jaden*, *Zonbi Grenn* can also be trained to steal items from neighboring farms and fields.
- ***Zonbi Jaden*** (lit.: “Garden Zombie”) – a zombie who is forced to labor in a garden, a field, or a plantation.

Two far more common types of *zonbi* in Haiti are the *zonbi astral* and the *zonbi ekspedisyon*, and the complexities and diversities of Haitian zombic culture are reflected here by Alissa Jordan in her intriguing recent study of Vodou in rural Haiti:

Zonbi are palpable and embodied, belonging in the kinetic realm of multiplicity, portability, bodies, forces, and things. *Zonbi* do things: sometimes they kill people, sometimes that make people rich, sometimes they just make you cross the road. . . . *zonbi* are specifically related to the bodies of their targets. . . . against the throat and the mind, and the *zonbi* itself is drawn from the prime intersections of the body, the crown of the head, the ribs.⁸²

Again, there is more to the zombie in Haiti than meets the eye. But let us wind down our list

of zombic types before moving on, in the next chapter, to follow the zombie from Haiti to the United States.

- **Zonbi Astral (Astral Zombie)** – Part of the soul that is extracted from the dead and placed into a vessel, usually a bottle, which can be put to supernatural work by a bòkò, as we have seen in our summary of McAlister’s work.
- **Zonbi Ekspedisyon (Expedition Zombie)**– Elements of human souls that are “sent” as something like a bòkò’s invisible minions; forces that can harm others once they enter their bodies, almost like poison darts of a supernatural kind. “The **zonbi nanm** which inhabits bodily remains can be made to work as a powerful tool in ekspedisyon (a ritual sending of the dead) [and] . . . other travay (work.)”⁸³

Conclusion

Expedition zombies, cow zombies, cadaver zombies, garden, seed, and tool zombies, astral zombies, zombies in bottles—we have met quite a few zonbi in this chapter and explored the technologies used to create them, focusing almost entirely on Haiti, the zombie’s homeland. The zonbi in Haiti is not monolithic. It did not just appear out of nowhere, as if by magic, even though zombies and magic are deeply intertwined in Haiti and in Vodou. There is a long and intriguing history of the use of poisons in Haiti. It was first instituted by enslaved Africans in the French plantation colony of Saint-Domingue, where surely they heard stories from France about the revenant, someone returned from the grave. Generally no bòkò can make any type of zonbi without permission from Bawon Samdi; some element of poison or herb; or extensive ritual and spiritual knowledge and hard work, supernatural work, with nature and the forces of human souls.

In terms of zombic technologies, salt should be mentioned. If sugar breeds zombies, salt can liberate them. While Clairvius Narcisse and his fellow zombies escaped a sugar plantation upon the death of their owner, other zombies can become aware of their condition, as legend has it, upon consuming salt. Haitian filmmaker Yves Médard explains:

We have a legend that when a zombie tastes salt, he becomes aware of his condition, and rebels against it. So salt is awareness. Zombies have forgotten everything: Their names, their families, they have been turned into objects. But the salt gives them the chance to discover their anger.⁸⁴

Sugar enslaves and zombifies, while salt does quite the opposite. It all makes perfect sense. *Salt is awareness.*

Notes

1. Douglas A. McIntyre, “[Zombies Worth over 5 Billion Dollars to Economy.](https://247wallst.com/investing/2011/10/25/zombies-worth-over-5-billion-to-economy/2/)” 24/7WallSt, October 25, 2011, <https://247wallst.com/investing/2011/10/25/zombies-worth-over-5-billion-to-economy/2/>, last accessed May 27, 2021. [↵](#)
2. Pilgrimage is of great importance in Haitian Catholicism and in Haitian Vodou. On this topic, see Terry Rey, “Toward an Ethnohistory of Haitian Pilgrimage,” *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 91, 1, 2005, 161–183; and Terry Rey, “[Saut-d’Eau](#),” in David G. Bromley (ed.), *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, 2017, <https://wrldrels.org/2017/10/24/saut-deau/>, last accessed March 13, 2003. [↵](#)
3. Elizabeth McAlister, “The Sorcerer’s Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti,” in Donald J. Cosentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995, 304–321. [↵](#)
4. Karen Richman, “The Protestant Ethic and the Dis-Spirit of Vodou,” in Karen I. Leonard et al., (eds.), *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America*, New York: AltaMira Press, 2005, 177. [↵](#)
5. By the turn of the millennium, “roughly one third of the entire national population of Haiti” was Protestant, and they “generally condemn Vodou as diabolical.” That figure is even higher in the capital city of Port-au-Prince, home to two million people, in a country of eleven and a half million. Terry Rey and Alex Stepick, *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith: Haitian Religion in Miami*, New York: New York University Press, 2013, 5–6. [↵](#)
6. Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. Hugo Charteris, New York, Schocken Books, 1972 (1954), 352. [↵](#)
7. Terry Rey, field notes from interviews with Charismatic Catholics in Malfeti, Haiti, February 2002. See also André Corten, *Misère, religion et politique en Haïti: la diabolisation du mal*, Paris: Karthala, 2001. On Catholic Pentecostals in Haiti more generally, see Terry Rey, “Fear and Trembling in Haiti: A Charismatic Prophecy of the 2010 Earthquake,” in Stan Chu Ilo (ed.), *Fire from Heaven: Pentecostalism, Catholicism, and the Spirit World*, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019, 280–299; Terry Rey, “Catholic Pentecostalism in Haiti: Spirits, Politics, and Gender,” *Pneuma: Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies* 32, 1, 2010, 80–106; and, Terry Rey, “*Lavyèj Mari pa sou zafè kawotchou ankò*: Le renouveau charismatique catholique en Haïti,” *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 11, 2, 2005, 46–58. [↵](#)
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18. Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. [↵](#)
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26. Article 246 of the 1846 Haitian Penal Code. In Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 89. [↵](#)
 27. In Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 131. [↵](#)
 28. *Ibid.*, 205. [↵](#)
 29. Deren, *The Divine Horsemen*, 42. [↵](#)
 30. Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 111. [↵](#)
 31. Elizabeth McAlister, “Slaves, Cannibals, and Hyper-Infected Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, 2, 2102, 459. [↵](#)
 32. Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 253. [↵](#)
 33. *Ibid.*, 220. [↵](#)
 34. Patrick Sylvain, Commentary in the documentary [Zombies are Real: The Haitian and American Realities behind the Myth](#), Duke University, 2015, <https://sacredart.caaar.duke.edu/content/zombies-are-real-haitian-and-american-realities-behind-myth>, last accessed June 7, 2012. [↵](#)
 35. Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1985. Wade Davis, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. [↵](#)
 36. Davis, *Passage of Darkness*, 109. [↵](#)
 37. *Ibid.*, 119. In Central Africa, sorcerers are widely called *ndoki*, while in West Africa a diviner is called a *bokòno*. They are the ancestors of the ritual specialist who in Haiti is known as a *bòkò*. A *bòkò*'s work is widely considered to be entirely about sorcery, but a *bòkò* is also able to heal and to divine. It is usually the *bòkò* who makes *zonbi* in Haiti. On this, see Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, 220, 303. [↵](#)
 38. Davis, *Passage into Darkness*, 119. [↵](#)
 39. *Ibid.*, 119, 122. [↵](#)
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- Paulino Albuquerque et. al., "Natural Products from Ethno-Directed Studies: Revisiting the Ethnobiology of the Zombie Poison," *Evidence Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2012, 1–19. [↵](#)
42. Davis, *Passage of Darkness*, 114. [↵](#)
 43. *Ibid.*, 29. [↵](#)
 44. *Ibid.*, 116. [↵](#)
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 47. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
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 61. Gino Del Guercio, "The Secrets of Haiti's Living Dead," *Harvard Magazine*, January–February 1986, 31. [↵](#)

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67. Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 172. [↵](#)
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69. Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 79. [↵](#)
70. Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 345. [↵](#)
71. McAlister, “The Sorcerer’s Bottle,” 305. [↵](#)
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73. *Ibid.*, 308. [↵](#)
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Glossary

Antisuperstitious Campaign(s)

Concerted effort(s) by the Catholic hierarchy, often allied with the Haitian state and military, to eradicate Vodou from Haitian society. The most pronounced were orchestrated in 1896–1900, 1911–1912, and 1941–1942. [↴](#)

Apostasy

The act of leaving one religion and converting to another. [↴](#)

Bawon Samdi

A Gede lwa, sometimes understood to be Gede himself. The spirit ruler of cemeteries in Haitian Vodou. [↴](#)

Bòkò

A sorcerer in Haitian Vodou, usually the one who makes zombi; can sometimes serve as a healer and diviner too. Etymology is West African, from the Ewe-Fon language: *bokóno*, for "master of knowledge." [↴](#)

Bufo marinus

Latin species name of the sea toad, the largest toad in the world, which is the source of a toxin used by [bòkò](#) to zombify people in Haiti. [↴](#)

Chans

Luck, in Haitian Creole, from the French "*la chance*"; in Vodou, generating luck for practitioners is one of the central objectives of ritual. [↴](#)

Charismatic Catholic (Charismatic Catholicism)

Founded in Pennsylvania in the late 1960s and spread throughout the Caribbean and Latin America during the following decade, the form of Catholicism that engages in Pentecostal rituals, like faith healing, speaking in tongues, and witnessing. ↵

Cho

“Hot” in Haitian Creole, from the French *chaud*, an adjective used to describe certain feisty and fiery lwa, especially those of the [Petwo](#) rite or pantheon. ↵

Christophe, Henry (1767–1820)

Great hero of the Haitian Revolution, a general who then became king of a divided independent Republic of Haiti. ↵

Datura stramonium

Latin species name for a plant, simply called datura, that is the source of a toxin used by [bòkò](#) to zombify people. ↵

Ekspedisyon

Literally “expedition” in Haitian Creole, from the French *expedition*, an adjective designating a certain kind of invisible zombi that is “sent” for various reasons, sometimes to harm, other times to bring luck, the *zombi ekspedisyon*. ↵

Fèt Gede

Major feast in Vodou that occurs on November 1 and 2, grafted onto the Catholic feasts of All Saints Day and All Souls Day; the feast of [Gede](#), a celebration of the dead and of life. Arguably the most important holiday in Haitian Vodou. It takes place in cemeteries, temples, homes, marketplaces, crossroads, and elsewhere. ↵

Freemasons (Freemasonry)

Initiated members of a philosophical and spiritual fraternity that draws upon a wide range of mystical and contemplative knowledge from around the world and throughout history to promote human goodness and solidarity, one that is highly popular in Haiti. ↵

Fret

“Cold” in Haitian Creole. ↵

Gangan

Derived from the Kikongo word *nganga*, meaning healer, an alternative word in Haitian Creole for [oungan](#), or Vodou priest. ↵

Gede (Gede Lwa)

The lwa of all things related to death, dying, and the dead, manifest in multiple forms as the Gede lwa, including **Bawon Samdi**. Also a lwa of rebirth and regeneration, hence the highly charged sexual innuendos in his dancing and symbolism. Loves to dress in black and purple, and a trickster spirit who is conflated in Haitian Vodou with Saint Gabriel and Saint Gerard. ↵

Gwo Bonnanj

Literally “Big Good Angel,” or “Big Guardian Angel,” a key component of the soul in Haitian Vodou, sometimes considered to be the soul itself. Associated with one’s psyche, in the modern psychological sense. A supernatural force that resides in one’s head, shapes one’s person, and is separated from the body ritually upon a person’s death. ↵

HASCO

Haitian American Sugar Company, an early-twentieth-century sugar-producing company, complete with rail lines, plantations, a large processing plant, and rum distilleries, all of which was widely rumored to have employed zombies for labor. ↵

Hispaniolan Laughing Tree Frog

Osteopilus dominicensis. It spends most of its time in trees and its ribbit sounds like laughter. Indigenous to Hispaniola, hence the name. The tree frog secretes a toxic substance through its skin, used by **bòkò** in Haiti to zombify people. ↵

Kò Kadav

Haitian Creole term that derives from French, literally meaning “cadaver body,” or our physical human body that will be placed into a grave when we die (at least in Haiti) and from which the elements of the soul will depart.

Le Grand Cimetière

French for “The Big Cemetery,” the largest in Haiti, located in Port-au-Prince, the capital city, and home to many zombic experiences; the largest sanctuary for Haitian Vodou’s most important annual ritual, Fèt Gede. ↵

Lwa

Name for a spirit in Haitian Vodou, and the chief focus of the religion. The etymology of this term is disputed among scholars. ↵

Makandal, François (d. 1758)

Escaped slave and maroon leader in Saint-Domingue, likely Kongolese, who used poison to lead a resistance movement against white oppression in the colony’s northern province for nearly twenty years. So feared were Makandal’s and his

followers' poisons that, to this day, in Haitian Creole a cognate word for *pwazon* (poison) is *makandal*. Captured and executed in public in 1758, but believers hold that he morphed into a fly and escaped this grizzly fate. [↴](#)

Manbo

A priestess in Haitian Vodou. [↴](#)

Medsin Fey

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “leaf doctor,” a key ritual specialist in Vodou, essentially an herbalist. [↴](#)

Nanm

Derived from the French “*une âme*” (a soul), a complex, varied, and important notion in Haitian Vodou, a form of supernatural energy that resides within us and within nature that can be operationalized for spiritual work. Usually translated simply as “soul.” [↴](#)

Narcisse, Clairvius (1922–1994)

The most famous alleged zombie in Haitian history; buried in 1962, only to return to his hometown eighteen years later, claiming to have been dug up from his grave and forced to work on a sugar plantation in the interim. [↴](#)

Nzadi

“River” in the Central African language of Kikongo, which spiritually refers to the body of water that the living cross when being born and the dying cross when dying. Considered to be red in color, a key element of Kongo cosmology and symbology, which are cornerstones of Haitian Vodou. [↴](#)

Oungan

A priest in Haitian Vodou. [↴](#)

Ounsi

A novice or apprentice to the religious leadership in Haitian Vodou. [↴](#)

Pakèt

Haitian Creole for “packet” (from the French *paquet*, lit. “packet or package”), a charm or amulet manufactured to do supernatural work. [↴](#)

Pentecostal (Pentecostalism)

A highly popular form of Christianity based on a careful reading of the Pentecost experience in the Book of Acts, where the apostles of Jesus Christ receive the Holy

Spirit and various gifts (charisms), like speaking in tongues and faith healing. Though Protestant in its origins, it has also swept the Catholic Church in recent decades. A highly emotional and deeply ecstatic form of Christian religious experience. [↴](#)

Petwo

Kongo-based or -derived pantheon of lwa in Haitian Vodou. Usually fierce, fiery, explosive, and protective spirits. Most lwa have both Petwo and Rada manifestations. [↴](#)

Postcolonial Theory

A theoretical reconsideration of the power disequilibrium that resulted in scholarly fields such as anthropology and a way of interrogating the categories that have long been presumptively employed in these fields and assumed to be real. [↴](#)

Postmodern Theory

A theoretical reconsideration of the power disequilibrium that resulted in scholarly fields such as anthropology and a way of interrogating the categories that have long been presumptively employed in these fields and assumed to be real, like “modernity.” [↴](#)

Pret Savann

“Bush priest,” literally in Haitian Creole. A ritual specialist in Haitian Vodou who generally recites Catholic liturgical prayers in Latin and French at the opening of many Vodou ceremonies. Blesses a corpse on the way to the cemetery. [↴](#)

Puffer Fish

Endangered species of spiked fish native to the Caribbean (and elsewhere) that takes its name from its ability to inflate its body. The most prevalent in Haiti are *Diodon holicantus* and *Sphoeroides testudienus*; the source of the most prevalent toxin that is used in processes of zombification in Haitian Vodou, tetrodotoxin.

Pwazon

Haitian Creole: “poison.” [↴](#)

Pwen

Literally “point(s)” in Haitian Creole (from the French *le point*); amulets, sometimes invisible, used in Vodou to do spiritual work. [↴](#)

Religious Syncretism

The blending of two or more religious traditions into one, like Haitian Vodou, which is part West African, part Central African, and part Catholic. [↴](#)

Religious Translation

The process by which foreign or alien religious ideas, symbols, and beliefs are interpreted and often reworked in a receiving culture, as with Haiti's experience of Catholicism. [↵](#)

Revenant

French, literally meaning “returned,” often a reference to a dead person who has somehow reappeared, whether as a ghost or, in the Haitian context, a zombie, though the term is not used in Haitian Vodou. A European influence on zombic culture in the Caribbean. [↵](#)

Rosicrucians (Rosicrucianism)

Medieval form of spirituality from Central Europe that derives wisdom and forms of practice from a wide range of historical traditions, one that is quite common among Haitians, especially Haitian women. [↵](#)

Sèvitè

Literally “servant” in Haitian Creole, reference to a believer in Vodou, one who serves the spirits, the lwa. [↵](#)

Sortilège

French for “spell,” as in hex, not as in grammar. A term that has long been used to denigrate Haitian Vodou. [↵](#)

Tetrodotoxin

A dangerous neurotoxin that is derived in Haiti from the [puffer fish](#), one that some scholars believe to be the ultimate zombifying substance in the transformation of a human being into a zombi kò kadav. [↵](#)

Ti Bonnanj

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “Little Good Angel” or “Little Guardian Angel,” a key component of the soul in Haitian Vodou. Associated with one's personality and agency, which is ritually separated from the body and the other element(s) of one's soul when we die. To be judged by God after one's death. [↵](#)

Travay

Haitian Creole for “work,” from the French *travail*, a term often used in Haitian Vodou for the ritual preparation of amulets, charms, poisons, etc. [↵](#)

U.S. Occupation of Haiti

On the pretext that its national economic interests in the Caribbean were threatened, the United States sent a large segment of its Marine Corps to take over Haiti, which it occupied from 1915 to 1934; this ramped up the persecution against practitioners of Haitian Vodou. [↵](#)

Wanga

A magical amulet or powder that is manufactured by ritual specialists in Haitian Vodou for healing, causing harm, or creating luck or misfortune for their clients and/or their clients' adversaries or loved ones. [↵](#)

White Zombie

First movie about zombies, set in Haiti and directed by Victor Halperin, starring Bella Lugosi. Premiered in 1932. [↵](#)

Zonbi

Haitian Creole for “zombie.”

Zonbi Astral

Invisible zombie that is created by the extraction of part of a human soul, from a cemetery, and its insertion into a vessel, usually a bottle. Literally meaning “astral zombie,” this powerful amulet or charm can be put to work by a sorcerer to either harm or help clients. [↵](#)

Zonbi Bosal

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “wild zombie” or “African zombie,” a term designating a zombie that is renegade, unmoored from its original purpose. Zombies who have gone AWOL and are renegade. In colonial Hispaniola, Africans were called *bosal*, as opposed to slaves who were born in the colony, and the term carried racist implications of uncivility and wantonness. [↵](#)

Zonbi Ekspedisyon

Elements of human souls that are “sent,” as something like a *bòkò*'s invisible minions; forces that can harm others once they enter their bodies, almost like poisonous darts of a supernatural kind. [↵](#)

Zonbi Grenn

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “seed zombie,” similar to the *zonbi jaden*. Zonbi Grenn can also be trained to steal items from neighboring farms and fields. [↵](#)

Zonbi Jaden

Literally, in Haitian Creole, a “garden zombie,” a zonbi kò kadav who is forced to labor in a garden, a field, or a plantation. [↴](#)

Zonbi Kò Kadav

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “zombie cadaver body,” a previously entered human being who is exhumed, stupefied, and forced to labor. [↴](#)

Zonbi Nanm

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “zombie soul,” referring to a spiritual power in the remains of the human dead that can be extracted by a bòkò and put to work to harm or heal for his/her/their clients. [↴](#)

Zonbi Savann

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “savannah zombie” or “bush zombie.” The origin of this term is somewhat unclear, though its literal meaning is straightforward enough; likely this is a zombie who is forced to labor in fields or to forage for food. [↴](#)

Zonbi Zoutil

Literally, in Haitian Creole, “tool zombie,” or a zombie that is trained to work in mechanical industries, like in railyards or in construction, often in urban settings. [↴](#)

PART III
HOLLYWOOD

Preface

In popular culture, zombies are inevitably associated with the apocalypse. Section One dealt with the apocalypse, and Section Two dealt with the zombie. Section Three deals with their collision and with its sprawling and dizzyingly variegated aftermaths. Chapter Nine explores the question of how the zombie wound up in America in the first place, something that is linked to U.S. neo-imperialism and capitalism. After Frankenstein and Dracula had made a fortune for the film industry, Hollywood was primed for a new monster. Enter the zombie, from Haiti, on the heels of the U.S. occupation of the Caribbean nation. The subsequent explosion of zombie literature and cinema are the foci of Chapter Ten. Section Three looks critically at some rather astonishing things concerning how, why, and when people decided to put zombies into video games and then to dress up like them and get drunk and walk like them in places like Asbury Park and Cleveland and Cape Town and Tokyo and Mexico City. It's really creepy and weird, when you think about it, and it is also the focus of Chapter Eleven. Chapter Twelve then plunges us into a philosophical morass to theorize about all of this, through which we may learn something deeply meaningful about ourselves and society and about our present, future, and fate.

9. How Did Zombies Wind Up in America?

Overview

Recall that the idea of the apocalypse—the end of the world as we know it followed by unimaginable catastrophe, Armageddon, and the final judgment of the living and the dead—is ancient and emerged out of the Zoroastrian faith, in Persia. Subsequently the apocalypse became central in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, making it one of the most captivating beliefs in religious history. It was first eternalized in scripture (the [Gathas](#)), revealed to the prophet Zoroaster sometime between 1500 and 1000 C.E. Then, of course, it found its way into the Bible and the Quran. But before discussing how this idea merged with the zombie, we explore how this pitiful, fearsome creature wound up in America in the first place. This story takes us to Haiti in the early twentieth century, a nation militarily occupied by the United States from 1915 to 1934. We will analyze the experiences of Haitian [Vodou](#) of three American writers, [William Seabrook](#), [Zora Neale Hurston](#), and [Faustin Wirkus](#). They were the most influential and articulate initial transporters of the zombie to America.

Is the Zombie that Old?

Technically, the idea of the zombie is not nearly as old as that of the apocalypse. Much more ancient notions of the resurrected dead have been recorded. Some even ate human flesh (the [Epic of Gilgamesh](#) [2100–1400 C.E.], for example), but they are more like ravenous ghosts than fleshy entities. There are also zombic-sounding beings in the Bible, like in the book of Ezekiel (14:12): “And this shall be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths.”¹ In one sense, the resurrection itself, the raising of the dead to life, has a zombic ring to it, although the saved, the redeemed, those brought to eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven, are to find themselves in glorified bodies. They are to be free from suffering or sadness, blissful, entirely different from the zombie that emerged in Haiti. But because of his resurrection, Jesus, though “admired,” is not very important in Haitian Vodou—although the cross certainly is—because, as Elizabeth McAlister explains:

Jesus is admired by Vodouists I have spoken with, but not so much that he paid for the sins of humanity and redeemed all believers. Given their own struggles with poverty

and human wrongdoing, they are not impressed with Christ's effects in the world. Rather, Jesus is admired because he is the first [zombi](#), a person who is killed and then brought back from the dead.²

Fascinatingly, a [bòkò](#) (sorcerer) in Haiti described to McAlister how God's password to enable Jesus's resurrection was stolen and handed down across generations, and this is what enables him to make zombies!³ This is what makes Jesus the first zombie, at least in the minds of some Vodouists.



Rasta Jesus. *The first zombie*. Photo by Terry Rey, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 2003.

Furthermore, although there were earlier notions of zombie-like beings in parts of France and in West Africa—both taproots of Haitian culture—the word itself (rendered in gallicized spelling as *zombi*) did not appear in print until the late seventeenth century. It was written in Guadeloupe by a French indentured servant and occultist, as we saw in some detail in Chapter Five.⁴ The word was subsequently associated mostly with Haiti, where it first appeared in print in the late eighteenth century, in a book published in French in Philadelphia.⁵ In [Haitian Creole](#) the word is *zonbi*, and there is no direct or definitive etymological cognate in any West

African or Central African language, in the Native American [Taino](#) language, or in French or Spanish.

Most historians and literary critics would agree that the question of the zombie's origin really has to be answered in Haiti, the launchpad for the monster's arrival in Hollywood. Earlier zombie-like creatures are the stuff of "protozombie myths" and devoid of "the crucial element of the resurrected's enslavement to a master."⁶ Understanding the emergence of *real* zombies thus necessitates a tour of Haiti and a primer in [neocolonialism](#), especially the United States' military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. During that period and shortly thereafter, novelists, marines, journalists, and anthropologists lived in Haiti and took keen interest in Vodou, and their writings would go far in priming the American public for the exotic and the zombie.

A Brief History of U.S. Imperialism and America's Relationship to Haiti

During the colonial era, the thirteen English colonies that would, following the American Revolution, become the United States of America were deeply connected to the French Caribbean slave plantation colony of Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti). In fact, during the eighteenth century, Saint-Domingue would become America's most important trading partner, and a number of prominent French families who benefited from the colony lived in the newly independent United States. This included one of the wealthiest people in the country, [Stephen Girard](#) (1750–1831). "Prior to the [Haitian] revolution, the United States was a large trading partner to Haiti, second only to its colonial power, France," Ann Crawford Roberts explains.⁷ Scholars debate whether the newly independent United States shipped arms to insurgents during the [Haitian Revolution](#).⁸ Be that as it may, even though upon Haiti's achievement of independence in 1804 the United States refused to recognize the Caribbean republic as a sovereign nation, "by the mid-nineteenth century, the United States exported more goods to Haiti than any other country in Latin America."⁹

The United States also took legal action to protect its political and economic interests in Latin America in the form of a decree. Promulgated in 1823, the [Monroe Doctrine](#) stipulated that "further efforts by European nations to colonize land or interfere with states in North and South America would be viewed as an act of aggression," as Mary Renda explains. This laid the groundwork for President Woodrow Wilson, early in the following century, "to carry out the United States' self-appointed international police power."¹⁰ Ironically, this foreign policy doctrine, aimed at combating any recursion of European colonialism in the Americas, enabled America's neocolonial forays throughout the region, nowhere more so than in Haiti.

Even though by 1910 the United States controlled Haiti's national bank,¹¹ the Banque Nationale de la République d'Haïti, the Wilson administration became increasingly alarmed by continued French and growing German business in Haiti. Also, the Panama Canal, owned by the United States, had been completed just over ten years prior. World trade was thus

being transformed, and the United States saw the Caribbean as a key corridor for dominating twentieth-century global economics.

In July of 1915 the United States found its pretext to take over Haiti militarily, “when an enraged mob killed President [Vilbrun Guillaume Sam](#)” in Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital city, and tore his body to pieces. “Within a week,” Kate Ramsey explains, “1,100 U.S. marines and sailors had landed in Haiti.”¹² Thousands more would follow, and they stayed until 1934. Renda summarizes the results of the Occupation over the next nineteen years:

While in Haiti, marines installed a puppet president, dissolved the legislature at gunpoint, denied freedom of speech, and forced a new constitution on the Caribbean nation – one more favorable to foreign investment. With the help of the marines, U.S. officials seized the customshouses, took control of Haitian finances, and imposed their own standards of efficiency on Haitian debt.

Some Haitians fiercely resisted the Occupation, as their ancestors had resisted slavery, though without any glorious success like the Haitian Revolution. As many as 11,500 resisters to the Occupation ([cacos](#)), considered to be “insurgents,” were killed by U.S. Marines and allied Haitian gendarmes, while forced labor ([corvée](#)), was implemented to “develop” the country and control the population.¹³



Charlemagne Peralte, leader of the resistance against the U.S. Occupation of Haiti, executed by U.S. Marines. Hinche, Haiti, 1919. | [Charlemagne Peralte, leader of the resistance against the U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#), said to be an official production by US occupying forces in Haiti, is [in the public domain](#).

This was in effect the reinstatement of slavery in Haiti, as reflected in the comments that one victim shared with Roger Gaillard during his extensive research into the Occupation:

First, the work isn't paid.

Second, you work under the sun, with but a scrap of pants on.

Third, they don't send you home if you are sick.

Fourth, you don't eat enough, just corn and congo peas.

Fifth, you sleep in a prison or at the construction site.

Sixth, when you try to escape, they kill you.

So, isn't that slavery?¹⁴

Americans did this to Haitians. And in Haiti, the zombie, in the form of the *zonbi kò kadav*, is in effect a slave. The [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#) thus not only reinstated slavery in the Caribbean nation but also provided the springboard for the zombie to eventually be brought to America.

American servicemen also actively took part and often played a leading role in Haitian efforts to eradicate Vodou from the nation, in part because there were laws prohibiting certain elements of the religion, and in part because such "superstition" was keeping Haiti from truly becoming "civilized" or "modern." Consider the following patently racist argument made by U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing on the eve of the U.S. Occupation of Haiti:

The experience of Liberia and Haiti show that the African races are devoid of any capacity for political organization and lack genius for government. Unquestionably there is in them an inherent tendency to revert to savagery and to cast aside the shackles of civilization. . . . It is that which makes the Negro problem practically unsolvable.¹⁵

But in addition to protecting American economic and political interests, an "antisuperstitious" effort to solve this "practically unsolvable problem" was elemental to the Occupation, and that chiefly took the form of combating Vodou. It was the faith of the vast majority of Haitians at a time when Roman Catholicism was the only formally recognized religion in the nation. As one marine general testified before the U.S. Senate in 1921, the Occupation was necessary because, among other things, "Voudauxism was rampant."¹⁶ Thus, from the official American perspective, Haiti was "a country in desperate need of a neocolonial civilizing mission that would rid the nation of the scourges of African tribalism, prevent its descent into wholesale barbarism and bring it back up to speed with Anglo-American modernism."¹⁷

The marines took their anti-Vodou campaign to the far reaches of the country, breaking up communal rituals and confiscating ritual objects, especially drums, which are of fundamental importance to the religion.¹⁸ At least one young marine, evidently new to such raids, thought that he had received "orders to shoot all the Cacos and Voodooes."¹⁹ Another reported "that the result of Voodoo worship is plainly on the faces of those who participate in it, making them

look like devils.”²⁰ In the words of General Littleton Walker, “We broke up all their meetings, seized all their drums, etc., and wherever a voodoo drum was heard we immediately got on the trail and captured it, and broke it up as far as we could.”²¹ Marines who took part in these many raids thus encountered a good deal of Vodou, though without ever considering it to be a religion and without understanding its beliefs and practices or the meaning that it brings to the lives of its adherents, to say nothing of its rich and often effective healing modalities. Some of these marines would return to the United States and write about “[voodoo](#)” in rather sensationalist ways, so rumors of ritual cannibalism, human sacrifice, and the risen dead in Haiti began to captivate the American public.

The U.S. Occupation thus opened the doors for American adventurers, merchants, journalists, and anthropologists to come to Haiti to seek fame, fortune, and fascination. Among such adventurers, William Seabrook’s writings would be the most widely read in the United States and beyond. It was also the chief source for the first zombie movie ever made, [White Zombie](#) (1932). Among the anthropologists, none is more important than Zora Neale Hurston. Seabrook and Hurston would both become initiated into Vodou while in Haiti, giving them something of an insider’s perspective into the religion, though it is not clear if either became fluent in Haitian Creole. Faustin Wirkus, a marine, would gain an especially unique perspective, having been crowned a “voodoo king” in Haiti, and he would become quite fluent in Creole.

The work of these three writers was preceded by that of [Spenser St. John](#), whose *Hayti: or The Black Republic* had been published in 1884 and sold well in America and abroad.²² It primed an American readership for the works of Hurston, Seabrook, and Wirkus. St. John was a British diplomat who in 1863 was appointed chargé d’affaires in Haiti. The book was widely read throughout the anglophone world, was eventually translated into French, and “left a pernicious legacy,” in the words of Alex Goodall. St. John relied primarily on “rumours spread by white planters and European expatriates” to promote “negative stereotypes about Haiti’s people, government, culture and religion, and claimed that Vodou ceremonies commonly involved child sacrifices and cannibalism.”²³

At a time when there was no television or internet, magazines and public speeches, along with radio broadcasts, were so much more influential than one can imagine in our present world of social media and thousands of cable TV stations. St. John’s book whetted the public appetite, and with the U.S. Occupation a flood of texts on Haiti reached American shores, besides those of Hurston, Seabrook, and Wirkus. Most notable among them is a book by a former marine named [John Houston Craige](#), who published in 1933 [Black Bagdad](#). Craige exploited the collaboration of a *bòkò* in his persecutive work against Vodou and absconded with a host of Vodouist ritual items. A few of them were donated to the University of Pennsylvania, while the rest cluttered his house in Philadelphia. *Black Bagdad* was a success, and Craige went on a lecture tour and followed up with another book, published in 1934, [Cannibal Cousins](#).²⁴

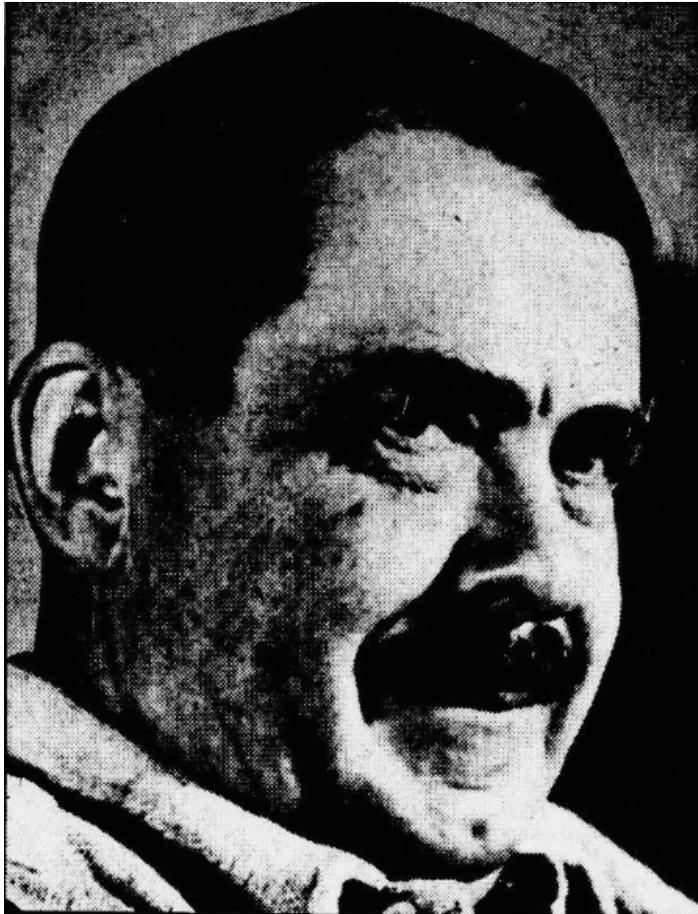
Just as earlier reports, before and during the Occupation, had helped cement popular American support for taking over Haiti, popular publications like these have contributed to justifying U.S. neocolonialism toward Haiti to this day. As John Cussans puts it, such texts, wittingly or unwittingly, “were part of an overarching ideological strategy that helped to

manufacture consent at home for U.S. intervention in the Black Republic of the American Mediterranean.²⁵ Whether or not Hurston, Seabrook, and Wirkus understood their work to be part of such a strategy, they were the most significant authors of such texts because of their closeness to and initiation into Vodou.²⁶

William Seabrook

William Seabrook (1884–1945) introduced the Haitian zombi to American readers in his 1929 book [The Magic Island](#), which sold widely and brought him some measure of wealth and fame. He was born in Maryland, but his family moved to rural Kansas when he was nine. Seabrook, though white, would claim “deep black roots” by virtue of his recollection that “his White grandmother had been wet-nursed by a Black [Obeah](#) slave girl from Cuba.”²⁷ His fascination with Black cultures might thus have begun at a fairly young age and would continue as he went on to be a journalist, first reporting on African American crime for a newspaper in Georgia.²⁸ Possessed by an insatiable wanderlust, Seabrook traveled about Europe, eventually winding up as a philosophy student at the University of Geneva and living for a time in Paris. Once back in the United States, he befriended the famous and influential English occultist [Aleister Crowley](#) (1875–1947), with whom he dabbled in occult rituals. He also traveled extensively in Arabia and West Africa, along the way immersing himself in local religious cultures—even engaging in cannibalism, becoming a [Sufi](#), and apprenticing as a witch doctor. Through it all, Seabrook became “a lay anthropologist, sadist, cannibal, paranormal researcher, dabbler in black magic, raging alcoholic, sensational journalist, and suicide.”²⁹

He would also go to Haiti to study Vodou, being especially fascinated with the religion’s cult of the dead. This is of great importance in the religion, in the form of ancestor veneration or ancestral spirituality. Seabrook was ever captivated by the macabre and the sensational and, unsurprisingly, the chapter in *The Magic Island* prior to the chapter on zombies focuses on the cult of the dead and carries the poetic and haunting title “The Altar of Skulls.” Seabrook also wrote “...Dead Men Working in the Cane Field,” his landmark discussion of zombies. I say “landmark” not because it contains the first mention in English of the zombie but,³⁰ as Sarah Juliet Lauro observes, this chapter “marked the decisive union of the word zombie with the walking corpse – a coupling that would captivate American audiences from the first films in the 1930s to the present day.”³¹



American author William Seabrook (1894–1945). Circa 1934. | [William Seabrook](#) by Author unknown is in [the public domain](#).

Seabrook’s experience of zombies in Haiti was not entirely firsthand. He befriended a Haitian farmer named Polynice, on the island of [La Gonâve](#), who “was familiar with every superstition of the mountains and the plain . . . [and] was very interested in helping me toward an understanding of the tangled Haitian folklore.”³² After he told Seabrook about “fire-hags,” “the vampire, a woman sometimes living, sometimes dead who sucked the blood of children,” and “the werewolf,”³³ their discussion turned to something that “sounded exclusively local – the zombie”:

a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life – it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive. People who have the power to do this go to a fresh grave, dig up the body before it has time to rot, galvanize it into movement, and then make of it a servant or a slave.³⁴

In response to Seabrook's doubts about the existence of such beings, Polynice raised one rhetorical question: "Why do you suppose that even the poorest peasants, when they can, bury their dead beneath solid tombs of masonry?" He then offered to take the American writer to see "dead men working in the cane fields."³⁵

But before taking Seabrook to see these "dead men" at work, Polynice told the American writer about the zonbi who labored for the [Haitian-American Sugar Company \(HASCO\)](#), a large enterprise that milled sugar and made rum in Port-au-Prince, connected by its own rail lines to a network of cane fields and staffed by low-wage laborers. Some of these laborers were alleged to be zonbi, whose owners would pocket their wages and feed them just enough to keep them somewhat alive and working, ever careful not to let them taste salt, lest they become aware of their condition and return to their graves. Polynice described how one of these zombie masters, in 1918, at one of the putatively implicated cane fields, "appeared leading a band of ragged creatures who shuffled along behind him, staring dumbly, like people walking in a daze." The master brought them to work, where "they stared, vacant-eyed like cattle, and made no reply when asked to give their names." They explained to the HASCO foreman that they came from a remote part of Haiti where Creole was not spoken but promised that "under his direction they would work hard in the fields."³⁶

Seabrook never got to see any HASCO zombies, but before he bid Polynice farewell and left La Gonâve, his friend delivered on his promise to bring him to see other walking dead in person. "Polynice reined in his horse and pointed to a rough, stony, terraced slop – on which four laborers, three men and a woman, were chopping the earth with machetes, among straggling cotton stalks, a hundred yards distant from the trail." Once they got close to the zombies, Seabrook noted "that there was something about them unnatural and strange. They were plodding like brutes, like automatons." When Seabrook saw one of their faces it "came as a rather sickening shock":

The eyes were the worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there was nothing behind it. It seemed not only expressionless, but incapable of expression.

Once Seabrook was over the "mental panic" that this sight caused him, he mustered the courage to reach out and touch one of the zonbi. "I reached out and grasped one of the dangling hands. It was calloused, solid, human." Then Seabrook had "seen enough," enough to convince him that this was all real.³⁷



La Gonave, 1825. | Historical Map of La Gonave by Jean Antoine Pierron is used under a [CC BY-SA 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

Shortly after seeing zombies up close and (im)personal and actually touching one, Seabrook returned to the United States and quickly got to work on *The Magic Island*. It was published in 1929 and was a sensation, and thereby “the Haitian zombie was formally introduced to the American imagination,” notes Lauro. The book also “is the entry point through which the walking dead zombie passes into American cinema.”³⁸ Seabrook would publish several other books over the next dozen years, but his alcoholism became so serious that, in 1933, he found himself institutionalized. His book recounting that experience, *Asylum*, was another bestseller, published in 1935. Ten years later he committed suicide.

Zora Neale Hurston

Born in Alabama in 1891 and having spent much of her childhood in Florida, Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) would become one of the literary giants of twentieth-century America, especially for her novels. She also wrote poetry and short stories and for a time was a central figure of the [Harlem Renaissance](#). These were extraordinary accomplishments for an African American woman who grew up in the Jim Crow South, to say the least. Hurston studied at Howard University and went on to Barnard College, the first Black student ever to gain

admission into the elite women's school. There she worked under the mentorship of [Franz Boas](#) of Columbia University (the two schools are closely related). He was the Ivy League university's first professor of anthropology and one of the most influential in the history of the discipline. He is also widely considered to be the founder of the field in the United States. Previously, while at Howard, Hurston had worked with another of the most influential figures in the early history of American anthropology, [Melville J. Herskovits](#), who had done a good deal of fieldwork in Haiti. Her second book, [Mules and Men](#) (1935), which is a rich account of Black folk culture in the South, carries an endorsement by Herskovits on the back cover and a preface written by Boas. As an anthropologist, Hurston's training was thus stellar.

Hurston did more than study and write, of course. She immersed herself, as a veritable spiritual seeker, in Africana cultures in the rural South, New Orleans, Haiti, and Jamaica. She was initiated twice, once in Louisiana into [Hoodoo](#) and later into Vodou in Haiti. Much of that is recounted in *Mules and Men*, based on research done in the late 1920s.

Leaving the United States in 1936, Hurston arrived in the Caribbean in April of that year. First, she did fieldwork in Jamaica for six months and then she made her way to Haiti. Her findings from these visits are written up in her following ethnographic book, [Tell My Horse](#) (1938).³⁹ All of this was funded by a lucrative and prestigious grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. Hurston arrived in Jamaica just two years after the end of the U.S. Occupation of Haiti, while Jamaica remained under the yoke of colonialism, still being a British colony.

In Jamaica, Hurston lived in a [maroon](#) community and took part in [Nine Night](#) communal funerary ceremonies (also called "Dead Yard"). Nine Night involves both song and food "to placate the spirit of the deceased, which roams for forty days and nights before finally resting," according to Benard Burrell. It is also quite festive, driven in part by strong Jamaican rum, "the one thing guaranteed to establish contact links with the spirit of the dead."⁴⁰ This ritual reflects Haitian Vodou in its music, food for the dead, and belief in the soul's floating about nearby after death. It is also evocative of Vodouist notions about ancestor veneration and the zombie because it is designed to keep the dead in their graves, lest they harm the living. Valerie Boyd, one of Hurston's biographers, explains:

At these rituals, usually held at night on the ninth day after death, men and women warmly welcomed the spirit of the dead – the duppy – and sang to it, danced for it, and then bade it farewell forever. At one ceremony, the dancing was so rapturous, Hurston noted, it felt as if the drums had become people, and the people had become drums.⁴¹

A few months later Hurston found herself in Haiti, an experience that would forever change her life. There she learned about Vodou and zombies, actually meeting one that she believed to be real. One might suspect that Hurston's experiences with the Nine Nights ceremony and the *duppy* in Jamaica were not far from her mind as she visited cemeteries and learned about zombi in Haiti. Not so: "As thrilling as her Jamaican studies were, Hurston found the complex voodoo beliefs of Haiti almost overwhelming."⁴² She arrived in September of 1936 and began to learn Haitian Creole and make contacts with Vodou priests and priestesses for the purposes of her fieldwork, first in Port-au-Prince, then on the island of La Gonâve and the central coastal town of Arcahaie. Over time she came to realize how intricate and rich Vodou was and, in

her correspondence, said that explaining this religion would be “like explaining the planetary theory on a postage stamp.”⁴³



American writer Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), playing a Vodou drum. Circa 1937. | [Zora Neale Hurston](#) by [World Telegram staff photographer](#) has no known copyright restrictions.

To more deeply understand Vodou, and to bring to fruition a personal spiritual quest, Hurston became initiated into the religion. Not once, but twice, even though her closest Haitian friends warned her not to undergo the second initiation (*kanzo*) or delve too deeply into certain secrets of the religion. Closest to her was her maid and confidante, a Haitian woman named Lucille, who lived with Hurston in Port-au-Prince and expressed such concerns: “I am well content, mademoiselle, if you don’t run to every drum you hear.”⁴⁴ Undeterred and increasingly fascinated by Vodou, Hurston “went Canzo,” an experience that she found “both beautiful and terrifying.”⁴⁵ Such an initiation is indeed quite a serious ritual, under the direction of a priest or priestess, that “involves isolation and is a path to knowledge about Vodou and the lwa,” as Benjamin Hebblethwaite explains. The isolation lasts for seven days and requires fasting, after which the initiates’ “corpses,’ still wrapped in burial cloth, are resurrected by the *vodun* (lwa) *Sakpata* in a dramatic public ceremony.”⁴⁶

Another drum to which Hurston could not resist running was that of the *zonbi*. The thirteenth chapter of *Tell My Horse* is titled “Zombies” and opens as follows: “What is the whole truth and nothing but the truth about zombies? I do not know, but I know that I saw the broken relic, remnant, refuse of *Felicia Felix-Mentor* in a hospital yard.”⁴⁷ Throughout Haiti, Hurston had heard that *zonbi* “are the bodies without souls. The living dead. Once they were dead, and after that they were called back to life again.”⁴⁸ She had also learned that they could be put to various forms of work, like doing evil, stealing, and mindlessly laboring in the fields, “like a beast.” Even some “little girl Zombies” could be dispatched by their masters at dawn out into the world “to sell little packs of roasted coffee.”⁴⁹

Reasons behind zombification intrigued Hurston, as well as how *zonbi* are made in the first place, so she sought insight into these questions by interviewing several *bòkò*, or sorcerers. As they explained to her, for instance, one *zonbi* was made because someone required a laborer (and presumably paid a *bòkò* to arrange this), another was zombified out of “revenge” and then sent to work, while a third “was given as a sacrifice to a spirit to pay off a debt for benefits received.” How do *bòkò* succeed in doing such things?

I asked how the victims were chosen and many told me that any corpse not too old to work would do. The *Bocor* watched the cemetery and went back and took suitable bodies. Others said no, that the *Bocor* knew exactly who was going to be resurrected even before they died. They knew this because they themselves brought about the “death.”⁵⁰

Hurston was further told that after the burial, around midnight, the *bòkò* and his assistants go to the cemetery to open the tomb, minimally revive the corpse, take it away, and close the grave in such a way as to give the appearance that nothing had happened. They shuffle the victim past its former house and to the temple to be “given a drop of liquid, the formula for which is most secret. And after that the victim is a zombie.”⁵¹

Effectively discouraged from trying to gain knowledge of the mysteries of how zombies are made,⁵² of what might have been in that “drop of liquid,” the intrepid anthropologist set out to find a *zonbi* instead. And she was convinced that she did, in the person of Felix-Mentor,

though her personhood seemed so effaced to Hurston that she writes of her as “it.” However, later in the chapter, the author does recall Felix-Mentor as a “her.” Hurston’s encounter with Felix-Mentor happened in the city of Gonaïves, about 140 kilometers north of Port-au-Prince. Having learned of a zombie there “that had been found along the road” and hospitalized, Hurston left the capital to go investigate and, when she arrived, “found the Zombie in the hospital yard. . . . She was hovering against the fence in a sort of defensive position,” refusing to eat a dinner that had been set there for her. As the anthropologist approached Felix-Mentor, accompanied by two doctors, the supposed zombie grabbed a tree limb and pretended to be sweeping the floor with it, evidently fearful of “abuse and violence.” Felix-Mentor kept her head and face covered the entire time.⁵³



Supposedly, a zombie in a Haitian sugar cane field. Source unknown. | [Zombie in a sugar cane field](#) by Jean-noël Lafargue is used under a [Free Art License](#).

Hurston's photograph of Felix-Mentor has been criticized by some,⁵⁴ and not without reason. Consider the anthropologist's own account of this moment, taking pictures of someone who was "cringing" and pinning herself against the wall, her head covered:

Finally the doctor forcibly uncovered her and held her so that I could take her face. And the sight was dreadful. That blank face with the dead eyes. The eyelids around the eye were white all around the eyes as if they had been burned with acid. It was pronounced enough to come out in the picture. There was nothing you could say to her or get from her except by looking at her, and the sight of this wreckage was too much to endure for long.⁵⁵

Quite disturbing, to be sure, so Hurston tries to understand how Felix-Mentor came to be this way. Felix-Mentor had supposedly died in 1907, only to turn up one day in 1936 on the farm where she grew up. Family members confirmed that this was indeed she; however, Felix-Mentor "was in such wretched condition that authorities were called in and she was sent to the hospital," the very hospital where Hurston photographed her.

Most historians and anthropologists who work on Haitian Vodou believe that Felix-Mentor was really not a zombie at all. As Wade Davis explains:

Hurston became the object of scathing remarks. Alfred Métraux dismissed her as being "very superstitious." Louis Mars noted: "The American writer came to Haiti with no doubt in regard to the belief in the zombie pseudo-science. Miss Hurston did not go beyond the mass hysteria to verify her information." These scholars were correct in exposing the Mentor [sic] case as fraudulent.⁵⁶

Davis adds, though, that such critics missed "the central tenet of Hurston's argument," that "zombies were created, but not by magic"⁵⁷ Métraux acknowledged that in Haiti belief in potions that can zombify was widespread when he did his fieldwork there the following decade.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it is likely that Felix-Mentor suffered from an undiagnosed mental illness.⁵⁹ But the Haitian doctors treating her also believed that she was a zombie. At the same time, there are very few resources in Haiti for people struggling with mental illness, who are often either cared for by friends or loved ones at home or become homeless and wander about urban streets or rural mountain paths. More than once I heard Haitians refer to them as zombi. They might have been speaking either metaphorically or literally.

Although Hurston heeded warnings not to seek knowledge of the potion that supposedly zombifies people in Haiti, her research got her close enough to zombic esoterica that, she believes, revenge on her was exacted by a bòkò. She became dreadfully ill with acute gastric disease and was bedridden for two weeks. At one point she was brought to convalesce at the residence of the U.S. consul in Port-au-Prince. Hurston was fully aware that poisonings are not uncommon in Haiti and that many Haitians scrutinize their food and drink and who prepares it before they consume it. But evidently she did not. She was also "convinced that her illness and her research were directly related."⁶⁰ Fearful that remaining any longer in Haiti might cost the anthropologist/novelist her life, she returned to New York to recuperate, only

to bounce back to Haiti in August of 1937, for about a month, to find additional material for *Tell My Horse*. By her September return to New York, her most celebrated book, which Hurston had written while in Haiti (in pencil!), had been released: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.⁶¹

Faustin Wirkus

Faustin Edmond Wirkus (1896–1945) would be king. A Vodou king, in fact. Far cry from his humble origins as a child coal miner in Pennsylvania.

Though it is certain that Faustin Wirkus was born in 1896, there is some debate whether he was born in Dupont or Pittston, in Pennsylvania, or in Poland. That debate should now be settled, as I have found definitive proof that he was born in his parents' native town of Czystewo, Poland, and brought by his mother to Pittston, while a baby, in 1899.⁶² His father had previously immigrated there, one of thousands of mostly Eastern Europeans who flocked to the region in search of work in the burgeoning coal mining industry. It was a harsh life, one that the young Polish Pennsylvanian wanted to escape, rebelling “against the drudgery of the Pittston collieries.”⁶³ So he joined the U.S. Marine Corps. Wirkus was willing and eager to go anywhere, and, in 1915, he wound up in Haiti, soon believing that he had been delivered to “a land of evil enchantment.”⁶⁴

Wirkus soon fell ill in Haiti and had to return to the United States for two years, but he returned to the occupied Caribbean nation in 1919. Then and there, he learned that the crown of the nineteenth-century Haitian emperor [Faustin I](#) (1782–1867) had been discovered. The young recruit was tasked with guarding the crown for a few weeks. He could not have known that one day he would wear his own crown in Haiti, though not quite as ornate as this one: “as large as a half-bushel basket, fabricated of gold wire and plates . . . with jewels from India, Africa, and Asia.”⁶⁵

Upon first entering the Bay of Port-au-Prince on a naval vessel, Wirkus asked one of the other grunts about a large island that they were passing on their way into port. The reply: “No white man has stepped foot on that island since the days of the buccaneers, until this here occupation. . . . That place is full of Voodooos and God knows what else.” The young coal miner-cum-soldier was intrigued but went on with his duties, unaware that one day he would rule that very “misted, menacing, and mysterious” island, La Gonâve.⁶⁶ His eventual subjects on La Gonâve probably never saw the splendid crown that Emperor Faustin I had once worn, but they would be “perfectly content with the splendiferous headpiece of silk, feathers, and seashells with which they had invested me.”⁶⁷ In retrospect:

I never dreamed that I was to be adopted as the play-king of the people and that they would make my military and temporary authority that of a reincarnation of a past emperor, or that I was to be the regent for their sometimes amiable, always efficient black Queen.⁶⁸

How could this happen? How could a young U.S. Marine from Pennsylvania mining country wind up being the Vodou king of La Gonâve? The Haitian people living on the island clearly did

not think of Wirkus as a “play-king” at all, and he was correct in understanding that they saw him as the reincarnation of Faustin I, in large part because of his first name, but there is much more to the story than that. Let’s trace Wirkus’s earlier steps in Haiti before considering some of his discussions of Haitian Vodou and his life after his return to the United States, when he became a major contributor to America’s fascination with Haiti in all its “evil enchantment” and with all its zombies (something Wirkus never wrote about, incidentally, though surely he knew about them and would speak of them on the lecture circuit).

Part of the answer to the question of how this could have happened: An elderly prophet who lived in a seaside cave had a vision that one day a white king would rule La Gonâve. He had reported an earlier vision, while on the mainland: “emperor Faustin ride off to war on a white horse.”⁶⁹ The prophecy captivated the most powerful Vodou priestess on the island, [Ti Memenne](#), queen of La Gonâve’s [Kongo](#) society. The prophecy is also seemingly based on the book of Revelation, 6:2: “And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer” (King James Version).⁷⁰

During his military service in Haiti, Wirkus so impressed his superiors with his dedication that he quickly rose to the rank of sergeant. In January of 1920, he was appointed sub-district commander at Archahaie and, therefore, nominally in charge of La Gonâve, “a God-forsaken hole inhabited by savages and infested by mosquitos and all sorts of poisonous insects.” Though previous marines posted on La Gonâve could not wait to leave and returned to the mainland with stories of horror, Wirkus “was filled with curiosity. . . . The fact that nobody seemed to know much about this mysterious island made it all the more worth knowing about to me.”⁷¹ He would soon have the chance not only to know La Gonâve, but to rule it.



Faustin Wirkus (1896-1945), a Polish American from Pennsylvania coal country who joined the U.S. Marine Corps and rose to the rank of sergeant. While stationed on the Haitian island of La Gonâve during the U.S. occupation (1915-1934), largely because of his first name, he was believed to be the reincarnation of Emperor Faustin (1782-1867), who ruled Haiti from 1849 to 1859, and thus was he coronated as the Vodou king of the island. | [Faustin Wirkus \(cropped\)](#) by U.S. Marine Corps Association (from original by USMC photographer, published) is in [the public domain](#).

This has everything to do with prophecy on the island and with a prisoner who came to Wirkus while he was at Archahaie on the mainland, “a massive person, short in stature and compactly built . . . all hard flesh and muscles and had eyes like a tied-up hawk.” She wore “a clean white dress, a brilliant and also clean kerchief around her shoulders, and a bright red bandana on her head.”⁷² She also wore gold earrings and shoes, hardly the typical prisoner in

the custody of the U.S. Marines during the Occupation. When Sergeant Wirkus told her his first name, she lit up: “Faustin! . . . That is not the name of a *blanc*. Where did you get it?” Wirkus released her, then unaware that the prisoner was Ti Memenne, Vodou queen of La Gonâve, and she gratefully said, “If the good God pleases, we shall meet again.”

They would indeed meet again five years later, in 1925, on La Gonâve, where Wirkus had been transferred to assume the post of marine commander, the only white person on the island. The sergeant later reflected: “Just how it came about that I fulfilled the prophecy of Queen Ti Memenne. . . is the sort of stuff that dreams are made of.”⁷³ Once he assumed his post, the queen came to greet him, regally arriving on a donkey and flanked by two members of her court. One of them was [La Reine Julie](#), Queen Julie, a person who “mystified” the sergeant, who thought she was more Native American than African in appearance.⁷⁴ Evidently, Memenne was the supreme, but there were sub-queens like Julie on La Gonâve. Declared Memenne, “There has never been on La Gonave a king.”⁷⁵ As of 1925, there was though. At least for a few years. And he was white. Faustin Wirkus was the reincarnation of Emperor Faustin I, the second coming of the king. The cave sage’s prophecy was evidently so widely known around the island that its inhabitants often referred to him as “he who was to come.”⁷⁶

Once he had come, the people had to coronate Wirkus. “The time has come now, to-night,” reported Queen Julie. “We are going to make you the king of La Gonave.”⁷⁷ Then, surrounded by about two hundred people, Wirkus was hoisted up in his chair and thus “escorted into the initiation chamber.” Torches abounded, and “people were leaping up into the air, hugging themselves and one another, and shouting ‘*Le Roi, le Roi, le Roi!*’ and then my name, ‘Faustin!’”⁷⁸ Drums began to play in the crowded sanctuary, while hundreds of people outside joyfully danced. Once flags were brought to the coronation party, Ti Memenne declared that “‘The king will now be crowned’ . . . ‘Bring me the crown.’” The crown was brought “on a platter covered with a red silk cloth.” Here is the sergeant/king’s description:

It was made of cream-colored silk with the brim turned up all around. Across the crown and around the outer edge of the brim were seven seashells, in a double row. They had been colored with juices of red and yellow and blue berries or herbs. All over the surface of the satin were stitched tiny bits of mirrors and between them ribbons and paper flowers. Humming-bird feathers and the flame-colored wing and tail feathers of larger birds were tucked in wherever there was space for them.⁷⁹

None of the gold that the crown Faustin I wore at his own coronation was part of this, but Ti Memenne, the queen, placed it on the sergeant’s head and here was a newly anointed Vodou king of La Gonâve.

As king, Wirkus was privy to a range of Vodou ceremonies on the island, and he writes about them extensively in [The White King of La Gonave](#), evidently with an effort to be respectful, though frequently he resorts to racist and exoticist language. The book also includes reflections on Vodou elsewhere in Haiti and on the raids of temples and Vodouist communities in which the soldier had previously participated. But he was deeply interested in the very religion that he had been ordered and paid to suppress:

As an enforcer of the law it was for me to learn all I could about these rites which I

was sworn to suppress. In honesty I must admit that it fitted very well with my urgent curiosity about these secretive people that such was my duty. To satisfy my personal curiosity I preferred gaining friendly admission into voodoo ceremonies, but by raiding them I found out a great deal that would otherwise have taken many months and infinite patience.⁸⁰

Being the only marine commander on an island that is larger than Barbados and Martinique combined, then home to some 13,000 people, and especially being king afforded Wirkus not only friendly admission to Vodou ceremonies but literally royal admission. He was also initiated into a Kongo society, a Vodou congregation of Central African origins. There is not time, space, or need to summarize Wirkus's rich and sometimes misinformed discussions of Vodou in any detail. So instead we turn our attention to what the sergeant did with his knowledge of this remarkable religion: he wrote his memoirs. They appeared, in a two-part series, in one of America's most widely read publications, *Harper's*, carrying the alluring title "The Black Pope of Voodoo."⁸¹

Upon returning to the United States, Wirkus went on a lecture tour and eventually became something of an international celebrity, even being "invited to speak before the National Geographic Society."⁸² This would be a tough act to follow, but follow it the king did, returning to Haiti to shoot a film on Vodou. Wirkus did this in 1930/1931, producing the first film on the religion, *Voodoo* (1933), which premiered in New York City at the Cameo Theater in April 1933 and was reviewed in the *New York Times* to be an "authentic, if technically unskilled travelogue" about "a weird reality."⁸³ Sadly, though, the film has been lost to history. Ramsey has carefully considered the reviews and traces of this film:

Voodoo seems to have been fashioned as a kind of documentary travelogue showing, as one reviewer noted, "in some detail the surviving rituals of voodoo as practiced by the natives of this island." . . . fragmentary evidence gleaned from both reports on the "raw" footage and from reviews of the complete film suggests that one or more of the *sosyete kongo* into which Wirkus was inducted organized their members to stage decontextualized ritual performances, including the sacrificial offering of fowl and a goat, as the camera rolled.⁸⁴

It would seem that when the king returns to your island with a camera crew and asks you to act out your religion, you do it. The film's final scene was "universally lambasted" by reviewers though. It featured a person who had been taken off to the jungle only to be rescued by the intrepid white savior.⁸⁵ It's almost a prelude to the film *World War Z*, the most expensive zombie film ever made, in which Brad Pitt plays that white savior at another point in history, a savior of humanity against hordes of globalizing zombies. As Wirkus's film made the rounds across the United States in the 1930s, it was hailed for being the "First Authentic Film Record of the Forbidden Ritual of Voodoo Held by Primitives of Haiti." Ramsey adds that the poster promoting the film "featured a diaphanously clad woman, apparently white, with one arm halfway tucked into the maw of an amorphous, wile-eyed monster, and a masked figure who seems to direct the scene from below with ritual gestures."⁸⁶

When word filtered back to the United States that a U.S. Marine had been crowned the

king of a “voodoo island,” people were fascinated, and, while on La Gonâve, Wirkus began receiving letters from some of them. One came from Seabrook, who was then in Haiti and was so intrigued that he arranged a visit with the sergeant on the mysterious island. He was sure to bring along a box of chocolate for the former Pennsylvania coal miner, who did not drink but enjoyed chocolate, something one could not find on La Gonâve. Once parachuted in with a marine commander, Seabrook was received by Wirkus at his humble abode in the island’s capital of [Anse-à-Galets](#). He spent several weeks on La Gonâve with Wirkus, who was generous with his time, shared stories with him, and took him all around the island, whether on horseback, on foot, or in Sergeant Wirkus’s motorboat. Wirkus’s book includes a picture of the two men relaxing on wooden chairs outside the sergeant’s house in Anse-à-Galets, underscored by the caption “Two great authorities on the magic rites of black races.”⁸⁷

But Might There Already Have Been Zombies in America? A Salty Conclusion

This interesting question demands our attention before we make our journey to Hollywood. One clue might lie in salt! As there have been Africans and peoples of African descent in America since the seventeenth century, and as Voodoo and related African-based spiritual traditions have long histories in the country, especially in Louisiana and the Low Country South (coastal Georgia, South Carolina, the Gullah Islands), it is quite feasible that notions of the living dead were already gripping believers in America before Seabrook, Hurston, and Wirkus published their work on Haiti. After all, as Lauro points out, “Many African religions have beliefs that involve the stealing of souls, both of corpses and live persons.”⁸⁸ In Kongolesé traditional religion, for instance, one’s soul can be “removed from its ordinary container,” per Wyatt MacGaffey, “and enclosed in another in such a way that its energy is at the witch’s disposal,”⁸⁹ which sounds a great deal like the Haitian Vodouist notion of the *zonbi astral*. There were thousands of Kongolesé slaves in the United States, so might the notion of the zombie have already been part of African American religious culture prior to the U.S. Occupation of Haiti?

The importation of slaves from West Central Africa, primarily the Kingdom of Kongo, “began in the early eighteenth century and increased during the 1720s and 1730s,”⁹⁰ with nowhere, except for Haiti, receiving more Central Africans than the Low Country South. While steeped in Catholicism, Central African traditional religions, whether in Haiti, Brazil, or South Carolina, featured beliefs in sorcery, [kindoki](#), something that we visited in Chapter Five in the Congo. The *nodki*, the sorcerer, is an ancestor of the *bòkò* in Haiti, the manufacturer of zombies. So, if there were *nodki* in the United States as early as the eighteenth century, might there also already have been zombies? After all, they were well versed in extracting souls from bodies and envesseling them in other ways to employ their powers for a range of supernatural ends.⁹¹

Historically in the Low Country South, per Jason Young, “many . . . blacks maintained a deep trepidation regarding the presence of witches and hags in the community, for which they

often sought the aid of conjurers.⁹² Witches would shed their skin to embark on such raids, attacks that “reflect the idea of the body as a mere shell for resident spirits,”⁹³ a vessel:

Tales of witches in flight recall the perceptions of both Africans in Kongo and slaves in the Lowcountry who perceived of *minkisi*, medicine bottles, and conjure bags – and in some cases human beings themselves – as mere vessels housing abiding animating spirits. . . . Like *minkisi* or other ritual objects . . . the shell is but a container, not unlike other containers. The true nature of the object is revealed in the spirit.⁹⁴

But how to protect one’s spirit from being victimized, contained in such ways as this? Why salt, of course! For, in Kongolese religion, “salt warded off witches and evil doers.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, salt was integral to the sacrament of baptism in precolonial Kongolese Catholicism, and its consumption was widely considered among West Central Africans to be a powerful form of protection: “Catholic baptismal ritual called for the priest to place a small amount of salt on the tongue” of the one being baptized, Young continues. “Though priests proved terribly unsuccessful in the conferring of other rites – marriage, confession, the last rites – they were successful at baptism, or the eating of salt, *yadia mungwa*, as it was called locally.”⁹⁶

Salt in African American folk traditions in the South is also used in something of an opposite way, at least in Hoodoo, that “inhibits a person’s freedom: throwing salt in someone’s direction, for example, can encourage him to leave town.”⁹⁷ Salt does quite the opposite to zombies in Haiti, liberating them from their slumbers, inciting self-awareness of their wretched state. Lauro has carefully sought answers to the question of whether there were zombies in America before ideas about them came from Haiti in the 1930s, and she turns to Hurston’s analysis. There simply is no better place to turn, for in addition to her pioneering work in Haiti and Jamaica, Hurston wrote extensively on African American folklore, folk beliefs, and folk practices in the rural American South, as well as in New Orleans, which might be called the Vodou, or Voodoo, capital of the United States. Lauro observes, “Although Hurston chronicles the phenomenon of zombification in detail in her study of Haitian Vaudou, *Tell My Horse*, there are no zombies described in the one-hundred-plus pages devoted to Hoodoo in her *Mules and Men*, a study of the folk tales and beliefs of southern African American culture.”⁹⁸ There are stories of poisons that render people insane and songs about being among the dead, but “if there is evidence of a properly American zombie,” admits Lauro, “I haven’t found it.”⁹⁹ Neither have I.

Notes

1. For a collection of other biblical verses that some readers find to be zombic, see: “[100 Bible Verses About Zombies](https://www.openbible.info/topics/zombies),” OpenBible.info, <https://www.openbible.info/topics/zombies>, last accessed July 7, 2021. See also Stephen L. Cook, “Isaiah 14: The Birth of

- the Zombie Apocalypse,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73, 2, 2019, 130–142. [↵](#)
2. Elizabeth McAlister, “The Color of Christ in Haiti,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 2, 3, 2014, 415. [↵](#)
 3. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
 4. Pierre–Corneille Blessebois, *Le zombi du Grand Pérou: ou La Comtesse de Cocagne*, Brussels, n.d. [↵](#)
 5. Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint–Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue, Tome Premier*, Philadelphia, 1797. For details about this book, see Chapter Five. [↵](#)
 6. Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 47. [↵](#)
 7. Ann Crawford–Roberts, “[A History of United States Policy toward Haiti](#),” *Modern Latin America*, Web Supplement for Eighth Edition, Brown University Center for Digital Scholarship, <https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/>, last accessed July 8, 2021. [↵](#)
 8. Arthur Scherr, “Arms and Men: The Diplomacy of US Weapons Traffic under Adams and Jefferson,” *The International Historical Review* 35, 3, 2013, 600–648. [↵](#)
 9. Crawford–Roberts, “A History of United States Policy toward Haiti,” n.p. [↵](#)
 10. Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001, 97. [↵](#)
 11. *Ibid.*, 52. [↵](#)
 12. Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 119. [↵](#)
 13. Renda, *Taking Haiti*, 10. [↵](#)
 14. Roger Gaillard, “Memories of Corvée Labor and the Cacos Revolt,” trans. Laurent Dubois, in Laurent Dubois, Kaiama L. Glover, Nadève Ménard, Millery Polyné, and Chantalle F. Verna (eds.), *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020, 195. [↵](#)
 15. Cited in John Cussans, *Undead Uprising: Haiti, Horror, and the Zombie Complex*, London: Strange Attractor Press, 2017, 37. [↵](#)
 16. Cited in Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 130. [↵](#)

17. Cussans, *Undead Uprising*, 37. [↵](#)
18. For more on the U.S. Marines and Vodou in Haiti, see David J. Ulbrich, “Stability or Disruption: The U.S. Occupation and the Voodoo Trials in Haiti, 1926–1930,” *Marine Corps History*, 5, 2, 2019, 21–38. [↵](#)
19. Cited in Ramsey, *Taking Haiti*, 41. [↵](#)
20. Renda, *Taking Haiti*, 236. [↵](#)
21. Cited in Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 131. [↵](#)
22. Spencer St. John, *Hayti, or The Black Republic*, London: Cass, 1971 (1884). [↵](#)
23. Alex Goodall, “[Zombies, Cannibals, and Werewolves](#),” *History Today* 3, 1, 2021, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/zombies-cannibals-and-werewolves>, last accessed July 14, 2021. [↵](#)
24. Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 152, 163, 166. [↵](#)
25. Cussans, *Undead Uprising*, 37. [↵](#)
26. It is not clear that Wirkus was actually initiated; perhaps not, as he does not discuss such an experience. He was, however, coronated as a king in the religion. [↵](#)
27. Cussans, *Undead Uprising*, 23. Obeah is a form of ritual practice found throughout the Caribbean that is widely feared as sorcery. On this, see Diana Patton and Maarit Forde (eds.), *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Religion and Healing in the Caribbean*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. [↵](#)
28. Cussans, *Undead Uprising*, 24. [↵](#)
29. Susan Zieger, “The Case of William Seabrook: Documents, Haiti, and the Working Dead,” *Modernism/Modernity* 19, 4, 2013, 738. [↵](#)
30. “The earliest references to zombies in the United States were closely associated with slavery and connected the word to African traditions. The word ‘zombie’ – which for years was spelled without the ‘e’ at the end – first appeared in print in an American newspaper in a reprinted short story called ‘The Unknown Painter,’ in 1838.” Lakshmi Ghandi, “[Zoinks! Tracing the History of ‘Zombie’ from Haiti to The CDC](#),” KPBS, December 16, 2013, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2013/dec/16/zoinks-tracing-the-history-of-zombie-from-haiti/>, last accessed July 9, 2021. [↵](#)
31. Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 43. [↵](#)
32. William Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929, 92. [↵](#)
33. *Ibid.* [↵](#)

34. Ibid., 93. [↵](#)
35. Ibid., 94. [↵](#)
36. Ibid., 95. [↵](#)
37. Ibid., 100–102. [↵](#)
38. Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 78. [↵](#)
39. This book was not universally well received. On its critics, see Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History*, London: Reaktion Books, 2015, 101–107. [↵](#)
40. Bernard Burrell, “Nine Night: Death and Dying in Jamaica,” *American Visions* 11, 5, 1996, n.p. [↵](#)
41. Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003, 289–290. [↵](#)
42. Ibid., 293. [↵](#)
43. Cited in Ibid., 296. [↵](#)
44. Cited in Ibid., 298. [↵](#)
45. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1942, 169. [↵](#)
46. Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012, 245. [↵](#)
47. Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, New York: Harper and Row, 1990 (1938), 179. [↵](#)
48. Ibid. [↵](#)
49. Ibid., 180. [↵](#)
50. Ibid., 182. [↵](#)
51. Ibid., 183. [↵](#)
52. Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, 299. [↵](#)
53. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 195. For an interesting discussion of Hurston’s work in Haiti, see Rita Keresztesi, “Hurston in Haiti: Neocolonialism and Zombification,” in Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (eds.), *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017, 31–41. [↵](#)

54. See, for example, Amy Fass Emery, "The Zombie in/as the Text in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*," *African American Review* 39, 3, 2005, 327–336; and Raphael Hoermann, "Figures of Terror: The Zombie and the Haitian Revolution," *Atlantic Studies* 14, 2, 2017, 152–173. [↵](#)
55. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 195. [↵](#)
56. Wade Davis, "Afterword: William Seabrook and the Haitian Zombie," in William Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 2016 (1929), 337. [↵](#)
57. *Ibid.*, 338. [↵](#)
58. Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. Hugo Charteris, New York: Schocken Books, 1972 (1959), 281. Métraux goes on to cite Seabrook's work on zombies two pages later without leveling any charges of superstition against him, despite Seabrook's long history of freewheeling occultism. One can only wonder whether race and gender played a role in Métraux's castigation of Hurston, especially in light of a long history in Haiti of white people, especially white men, condemning Vodou as "superstition" or, in this case, rejecting the work of an African American woman because she was "very superstitious." [↵](#)
59. Hoermann, "Figures of Terror," 156. [↵](#)
60. Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, 300. [↵](#)
61. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1937. Though this novel is not about Haiti but about African American life in the rural U.S. South, set mainly in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, some scholars see many influences of Haiti on the classic. See, for example, La Vinia Delois Jennings, "Introduction: Zora Neale Hurston, Seven Weeks in Haiti, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in La Vinia Delois Jennings (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston, Haiti, and Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013, 3–27. All of the chapters in this excellent volume are relevant to this matter, of course, while I allude here just to Jennings for her special focus on Vodou. [↵](#)
62. Terry Rey, *Polskayiti: Polish Permutations in Haitian Religious History and Culture*, book manuscript under preparation. [↵](#)
63. Faustin Wirkus and Taney Dudley, *The White King of La Gonave: The True Story of the Sergeant of Marines Who Was Crowned King on a Voodoo Island*, New York: Ishi Press International, 1931, 38. [↵](#)
64. *Ibid.*, 18. [↵](#)
65. *Ibid.*, 31. [↵](#)
66. *Ibid.*, 3. [↵](#)

67. Ibid., 31. [↵](#)
68. Ibid., 33. [↵](#)
69. Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 174. [↵](#)
70. It is interesting to note that the white horse was also key to Rastafarian prophecies in Jamaica around the same time concerning Emperor Haile Selassie as identified as the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and that St. James the Greater, who is identified as the Vodou spirit Ogou in Haiti, also rode into battle against the Moors on a white horse, patron saint of the Kingdom of Kongo, home to many enslaved Africans who were brought to both Jamaica and Haiti against their wills. See Randy R. Goldson, “Jah in the Flesh: An Examination of Spirit, Power, and Divine Envessement in Rastafari,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Religion, Temple University, August 2020, 62, 179, 186. [↵](#)
71. Ibid., 127. [↵](#)
72. Wirkus and Dudley, *The White King of La Gonave*, 131–132. [↵](#)
73. Ibid., 195. [↵](#)
74. Ibid., 197. [↵](#)
75. Ibid., 198. [↵](#)
76. Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 175. [↵](#)
77. Wirkus and Dudley, *The White King of La Gonave*, 274. [↵](#)
78. Ibid., 275. [↵](#)
79. Ibid., 277. [↵](#)
80. Ibid., 167. [↵](#)
81. Faustin E. Wirkus, “The Black Pope of Voodoo, Part 1,” *Harper’s*, December 1933, 38–49; Faustin E. Wirkus, “The Black Pope of Voodoo, Part 2,” *Harper’s*, January 1934, 189–198. [↵](#)
82. Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 168. [↵](#)
83. In Autumn Womack, *The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880–1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022, 159. [↵](#)
84. Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 169. [↵](#)
85. Ibid., 170. [↵](#)
86. Ibid. [↵](#)

87. Wirkus and Dudley, *The White King of La Gonave*, n.p. [↵](#)
88. Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 43. [↵](#)
89. Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 161–162. [↵](#)
90. Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007, 31. [↵](#)
91. “Envesselement” is a term that I coined “to explain the key belief that just as bottles, gourds, graves, trees, temples, churches and amulets serve as vessels for supernatural powers, so too do human bodies.” Terry Rey, “[Saut-d’Eau](#),” in David G. Bromley, *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, 2017, <https://wrldrels.org/2017/10/24/saut-deau/>, last accessed July 21, 2021. [↵](#)
92. Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 132. [↵](#)
93. *Ibid.*, 133. [↵](#)
94. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
95. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
96. *Ibid.*, 52. [↵](#)
97. Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 66. [↵](#)
98. *Ibid.*, 65. [↵](#)
99. *Ibid.*, 70. [↵](#)

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Glossary

Anse-à-Galets

The capital of the island of La Gonâve, its largest town and administrative center. Once home to [Faustin Wirkus](#). ↴

Black Bagdad

A 1933 book published by [John Houston Craige](#), sensationally recounting his experiences as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps during the [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#). ↴

Boas, Franz (1858–1942)

The pioneering figure in the field of anthropology in the United States. German born, professor at Columbia University, and mentor of [Zora Neale Hurston](#). ↴

Bòkò

Haitian Creole word for “sorcerer,” one who makes zombi. Also a healer on occasion. Ritual specialist in Haitian Vodou. ↵

Cacos

Movement of armed resistance against the 1915–1934 [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#). ↵

Cannibal Cousins

A 1933 book published by [John Houston Craige](#), sensationally recounting his experiences as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps during the [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#). ↵

Corvée

Form of forced labor employed by the U.S. Marines during the [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#). ↵

Craige, John Houston (1890–?)

Captain in the U.S. Marine Corps who served during the [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#) and would later write two books about his experiences there, [Black Bagdad](#) and [Cannibal Cousins](#). ↵

Crowley, Aleister (1875–1947)

The most influential witch of the modern era, a Brit. Once befriended [William Seabrook](#) and performed esoteric rituals with him. ↵

Duppy

The spirit of the dead, or a ghost, in Jamaican popular culture.

Epic of Gilgamesh

Ancient Mesopotamian poem (written sometime between 2100 and 1400 b.c.e) that features resurrected dead. Some even ate human flesh, but they are more like ravenous ghosts than fleshy entities. Really not zombies, alas, but... ↵

Faustin I (1782–1867)

Faustin Soulouque, elected president of Haiti in 1847, who transformed himself into Emperor Faustin I from 1849 to 1859. Believed in some circles to have been the preincarnation of [Faustin Wirkus](#). ↵

Felix-Mentor, Felicia

Haitian woman who, in 1936, was in a mental hospital and was photographed by [Zora Neale Hurston](#), who believed that she was a [zombi](#). ↵

Gathas

Ancient Zoroastrian scriptures, the first written instance of apocalyptic prophecy. [↵](#)

Girard, Stephen (1750–1831)

French émigré and one of the wealthiest people in colonial and early republican America, whose fortunes were tied to Saint-Domingue, colonial Haiti. A Philadelphia resident for much of his life. [↵](#)

Haitian-American Sugar Company (HASCO)

Massive early-twentieth-century sugar company in Haiti that was widely believed to employ zombies as laborers in its cane fields, mills, and rum distilleries. [↵](#)

Haitian Creole

The language of the Haitian people, a mix of French and African dialects. [↵](#)

Haitian Revolution

The world's only successful national slave revolt, a retracted war spanning from 1791 to 1804 and involving multiple nations. Ultimately transformed the French slave plantation colony of Saint-Domingue into the independent Republic of Haiti. [↵](#)

Harlem Renaissance

Literary and cultural boom among African Americans in New York's Harlem neighborhood during the 1920s and 1930s, in which [Zora Neale Hurston](#) participated. [↵](#)

Herskovits, Melville J. (1895–1963)

American anthropologist, one of the first to do fieldwork in Haiti and write about Haitian religion and culture. Former student of [Franz Boas](#). [↵](#)

Hoodoo

African American folk tradition of spirituality, healing, and sorcery. [↵](#)

Hurston, Zora Neale (1891–1960)

Anthropologist and literary giant. African American woman who did extensive field work in Jamaica and Haiti, as well as the American South, toward writing influential texts on religion and culture, including pioneering discussions about Vodou and zombies. [↵](#)

Kanzo

Vodou ceremony of initiation, of the second grade, which requires a week of isolation.

[↵](#)

Kindoki (Ndoki)

Sorcery or witchcraft, in KiKongo, a language of many West African slaves who were forcibly brought to the Americas. Supernatural arts, often employing natural poisons, that are exercised to inflict harm or steal elements of one's soul. [↵](#)

Kongo (Kongo Society; sosyete kongo)

Vodou rite or community, based on Central African indigenous religious traditions, one into which [Faustin Wirkus](#) was initiated. [↵](#)

La Gonâve

Large island in the Gulf of Gonâve, in Haiti, about forty miles from the capital city of Port-au-Prince. Roughly 280 square miles and hilly, once ruled by Faustin Wirkus and the site of field research of both Zora Neale Hurston and William Seabrook. [↵](#)

La Reine Julie

Subordinate queen of Haitian Vodou on the island of [La Gonâve](#) during the kingship of [Faustin Wirkus](#). [↵](#)

The Magic Island

Sensationalist 1929 travelogue by [William Seabrook](#), which detailed his experiences in Haiti and introduced the zombie to the American public. [↵](#)

Maroon

Escaped slaves in the Caribbean and in South America who settled in communities either in the forest or the mountains beyond the control of slavers. [↵](#)

Minkisi (Nkisi)

Medicine, in KiKongo, a language of many West African slaves who were forcibly brought to the Americas. Usually forms of herbs and the ritual for using them to heal.

[↵](#)

Monroe Doctrine

Promulgated in 1823, U.S. foreign policy that stipulates that “further efforts by European nations to colonize land or interfere with states in North and South America would be viewed as an act of aggression.” Legal foundation for the [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#). [↵](#)

Mules and Men

1935 ethnographic book by [Zora Neale Hurston](#) recounting African American folk culture in the U.S. American South. ↵

Neocolonialism

A form of imperialism, or the domination of a smaller nation by a richer one, bent on establishing regional supremacy and cultural hegemony. ↵

Nine Night

Funerary ritual in Jamaica that occurs nine nights after the death of a loved one. Intended to prohibit the escape of the [duppy](#), or ghost, of the departed. ↵

Obeah

Witchcraft or sorcery in West Indian folk culture and religion. ↵

Sakpata

West African snake spirit. Also a minor lwa in Vodou who plays a role in initiation ceremonies. ↵

Sam, Vilbrun Guillaume (1859–1915)

President of Haiti briefly, in 1915, whose assassination precipitated the [U.S. Occupation of Haiti](#), which began that year. ↵

Seabrook, William (1884–1945)

American occultist and travel writer whose 1929 book *The Magic Island*, about his experiences in Haiti, introduced the American public to the zombie. ↵

Sociophobics

The social fears that drive people's consumption patterns, and the study thereof.

St. John, Spenser (1825–1910)

British diplomat and author of the 1884 book *Hayti: or The Black Republic*, a sensationalist account of Haitian culture and religion. ↵

Sufi (Sufism)

An Islamic mystic, or a practitioner of Sufism, the most widespread form of Muslim mystical practice and community. ↵

Taino

Native American people who inhabited the Caribbean when Europeans arrived in the

late fifteenth century; quickly succumbed to imported diseases to which they were unimmune. ↵

Tell My Horse

1938 anthropological book by [Zora Neale Hurston](#) that details popular culture and religion in Jamaica and Haiti. ↵

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Classic 1937 novel by [Zora Neale Hurston](#) depicting African American culture in the rural U.S. South; written entirely in Haiti and widely considered to be her most important book.

Ti Memenne

Vodou queen of the island of [La Gonâve](#), who coronated [Faustin Wirkus](#) as the Vodou king of the island. ↵

U.S. Occupation of Haiti

United States intervention in and overtaking of the sovereign Republic of Haiti, mostly through the deployment of marines, from 1915 to 1934. ↵

Vodou

African-based religion, infused with Roman Catholicism, of the Haitian people. ↵

Voodoo

American rendition of the term *vodou*, also the title of a 1930s film by Faustin Wirkus, which has seemingly been lost to history. ↵

The White King of La Gonave

1931 book by [Faustin Wirkus](#) detailing his experiences in Haiti as a U.S. Marine and a [Vodou](#) king on the island of [La Gonâve](#). ↵

White Zombie

The first zombie movie, produced in 1931 and based largely on [William Seabrook's](#) 1929 book, [The Magic Island](#). ↵

Wirkus, Faustin (1896–1945)

American marine who served in Haiti during the U.S. Occupation; was coronated a Vodou king on the island of La Gonâve, which he ruled for three years in the 1920s. Author of [The White King of La Gonave](#) (1931). ↵

Zonbi

Haitian Creole for “zombie,” a person who is both dead and living, though this can take many forms, including the capture of part of a dead person’s soul for the work of sorcerers, [bòkò](#). ↵

10. Zombies and the Zombie Apocalypse in Cinema and Literature

Overview

By the 1930s, zombie films illuminated theaters across the United States, captivating and horrifying audiences with a new monster that they seem to need and one they have run with (or from) ever since. Hollywood launched its first feature-length zombie film in 1932, [White Zombie](#). It was based largely on [William Seabrook's](#) 1929 book [The Magic Island](#). Horror movies had recently become quite the rage, hence a new monster could be highly profitable, which the zombie has proven to be ever since. People have written about and feared ghouls, ghosts, and flesh-eating humanish creatures for thousands of years. For just as long, they have also feared the end of the world, the apocalypse, which is covered extensively in the first section of this book. In this chapter we will revisit some [protozombie](#) mythology and literature and summarize the most popular forms of zombie literature in the twentieth century. Then we will consider zombie cinema and how, when, and why the ideas of the apocalypse and the zombie collided in the 1960s in Pennsylvania. The world has never been the same since.

Zombie Purists

Disclaimer: I am one of these, someone who rejects arguments that zombies are actually quite ancient and can be found in a long history of literary traditions stretching back to the [Epic of Gilgamesh](#) and the Bible. I agree with Sarah Juliet Lauro that the zombie is actually a modern monster and that earlier literary manifestations of the living dead or resurrected dead—however dreadful and dangerous they might be—are really no more than “protozombie myths.” This is because they do not have “the crucial element of the resurrected’s enslavement by a master.”¹ In *White Zombie*, such a crucial element is featured, as the victims, the living dead—who, incidentally, are all white—toil mindlessly in a sugar mill in Haiti under the domination of their master. As we will see momentarily, the zombie would soon move away from such forms of mindless, sauntering enslavement and actually speed up and become contagious and cannibalistic.

In this chapter, we carefully consider earlier literary efforts that some claim to be zombic, but my position is that the zombie comes from Haiti, and that the apocalypse was first wed to the zombie in Pennsylvania in 1968—much more on that fateful and profitable marriage in another section. In addition to Lauro, other zombie purists feel the same way, including two of France’s most influential twentieth-century philosophers, [Félix Guattari](#) and [Gilles Deleuze](#).

As they put it, “The only modern myth is the myth of the zombies – mortified schizos, good for work, brought back to reason.” Furthermore, “the myth of the zombie is a work myth, not a war myth.”² Earlier, although he didn’t have any knowledge of zombies, [Karl Marx](#), perhaps the most influential philosopher in world history, employed the vampire as a metaphor for the capitalistic exploitation of mindless laborers, as Steven Shaviro explains:

Marx himself describes capital as “dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and the more it lives, the more labor it sucks”. . . . More and more, living labor is transformed into dead labor, through the extraction and realization of surplus value, and the zombification of the work force. Productivity increases, and prices are driven down, because the same amount of living labor is progressively able to produce more commodities, by setting more dead labor into motion.³

But before dismissing outright claims that some zombies preceded those that emerged in Haiti, let us briefly consider relevant historical texts, some of them quite ancient, that have been thought to be zombic. Our procedure will be chronological, before making our way to the twentieth century with more focus and detail. First, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was written in what is today Iraq, then [Mesopotamia](#), sometime between 2100 and 1400 B.C.E. It is perhaps “humanity’s oldest work of literature,”⁴ and it discusses a great deal of suffering, gloom, ghouls, and doom. Gilgamesh, the title character, is an ambitious king. Upon his close friend’s death, the king becomes distraught and wanders aimlessly, disheveled and filthy, in search of eternal life. Without going into too much detail, per Jim Kline, this epic recounts the king’s “wildly entertaining episodic adventures, and its main themes have universal appeal: the striving for lasting fame and glory, the fear of death, and the longing for immortality.”⁵

But are there really zombies in *Gilgamesh*? There is a scene in which the king rejects the advances of the goddess of love and war, Ishtar. Enraged, she threatens to “knock down the gates of the netherworld: I will smash the door posts and leave the doors flat down, and will let the dead go up and eat the living.”⁶ Now, while that might sound like divine wrath unleashing the zombie apocalypse, this passage is actually a citation of an earlier poem. And later in *Gilgamesh* these risen dead are hardly enslaved or menacing, but are “cold, lonely souls imagined as dust-eating birds.”⁷ Nonetheless, that didn’t stop The History Channel from alluding to *Gilgamesh* as the first historical instance of the zombie.⁸ They were more ghostly than revived beings in the flesh, however, and they had nothing to do with the apocalypse and had no masters.

There are multiple passages in the Bible that some interpreters claim as evidence of very ancient zombies. To quote one such passage ([Ezekiel 4:12](#)): “And this shall be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths.”⁹ There are also many biblical passages about the resurrection of the dead. Indeed, all the dead are prophesied to be resurrected at the end of time, as we saw in the earliest chapters of this book. But they are not zombies, not unearthed, enslaved former cadavers that a sorcerer either uses for work or sells or rents out.

Beyond the Bible, one of the earliest classic texts of Jewish literature, with roots in the

thirteenth century B.C.E., portrays something of a monster in the form of [The Golem](#). Golem means “unformed mass” in Hebrew. There are certainly things about the golem that evoke zombies, as this monstrous being “performs persons’ labor;”¹⁰ but it is made of clay. I agree with Lauro that the golem is not a zombie per se “because it is not reanimated but merely animated from clay.”¹¹ It was a major influence, though, on Mary Shelley’s classic 1818 novel, [Frankenstein](#). Shelley’s monster was not really a zombie either, being made up of multiple parts from multiple dead people, whereas each zombie is a total and unique human being.

Concerning more modern literature, there are some interpreters who find [William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet](#) to be zombic, as the deceased Juliet is revived by Friar Laurence, who, in Act V, Scene II, utters a memorable line, “Come from that nest/Of death, contagion and unnatural sleep.” There was a play on Broadway recently called *Romeo and Juliet and Zombies*, followed by a movie called *Warm Bodies* that Lauren Davis describes as “a funny and soft-hearted film that plays far more on zombie- and date-movie tropes than it does on the Bard, and puts an optimistic spin on the undead apocalypse.”¹² Meanwhile, one Haitian Vodou priest, Patrick Sylvain, reflects on Juliet’s deathlike state in the Bard’s original masterpiece as follows:

The so-called primitive people, whether the Mayans, Egyptians, or Scots, or the Irish, they’ve had a knowledge of the earth for a long time. And, we could also think of *Romeo and Juliet*, right? The alchemist, the priest, who put Juliet in a state like death. And we celebrate that, right? Because that was beautiful literature that Shakespeare gave us. She was, in a sense, a zombie.¹³

Some 225 years after Shakespeare bequeathed *Romeo and Juliet* to humanity, another English writer swept a zombie-like being into one of his books. Lots of them, actually. Far more famous for having penned [Robinson Crusoe](#), one of the most widely translated books in history, [Daniel Defoe](#) (1660–1731) published a historical novel in 1722 about an epidemic of bubonic plague in England. This plague actually occurred in 1665 and killed nearly 100,000 people. Based in part on his uncle’s recollections of the plague, [A Journal of the Plague Year](#) is set in a [dystopian](#) world of nearly dead, infectious victims of the plague. “Many people had the plague in their very blood and were themselves but walking putrefied carcasses whose breath was infectious and their sweat poison.”¹⁴ It was all quite apocalyptic, a large city in which wandering semi-corpses could infect you with their sweat, unwitting agents “evidently from the secret hand of Him who had first sent this disease as a judgment upon us.” Even doctors, per Defoe, believed “that it was all supernatural, that it was extraordinary.”¹⁵ The afflicted undead are enraged and revolting and seek to infect others throughout the diseased city. But they are not the risen dead, thus not really zombies.

A
JOURNAL
OF THE
Plague Year:
BEING
Observations or Memorials,
Of the most Remarkable
OCCURRENCES,
As well
PUBLICK *as* PRIVATE,
Which happened in
L O N D O N
During the last
GREAT VISITATION
In 1665.

Written by a CITIZEN who continued all the
while in *London*. Never made publick before

L O N D O N :
Printed for *E. Nutt* at the *Royal-Exchange*; *J. Roberts*
in *Warwick-Lane*; *A. D:dd* without *Temple-Bar* ;
and *J. Graves* in *St. James's-street*. 1722.

Inner cover page of Daniel Defoe's 1722 historical novel *A Journal of the Plague Year*. | [Defoe Journal of the Plague Year](#) by Daniel Defoe is in [the public domain](#).

Andrew Stott compellingly reflects on how such scenes presage some of the most influential zombie apocalypse films of the current age:

For something so grounded in fact, *A Journal of the Plague Year* conforms to the expectations of zombie narratives in almost every way. People look to the skies for the origin of the pestilence, as in [George A. Romero's *Day of the Dead*](#); its city of spacious abandonment and grassed-over streets anticipates the empty metropolis of [Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*](#); and as the King takes flight and the law implodes, the living are faced with the decision to team-up or go it alone in the style of [Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*](#), where zombie-battling is merely a skull-cleaving interlude between the real battles for resources.¹⁶

However, Stott adds, “What *A Journal of the Plague Year* doesn't have is zombies—at least not explicitly. Still, the numberless, suppurating victims are apt to behave like the undead at every turn.... Thus, babies kill their mothers, and men tackle women in the street hoping to infect them with a deadly kiss.”¹⁷ There were no such things as vaccinations or antibiotics or germ science (or Clorox!) to save us then, but by the grace of God the plague subsided. However, the following year was just as dreadful and apocalyptic, as London burned in 1666. The [Great Fire](#) began in a bakery.¹⁸ “The scale of the damage was immense.”¹⁹ As one observer of the aftermath remarked, “The people who now walked about the ruins, appeared like men in some dismal desert, or rather in some Great City, lay'd waste by an impetuous and cruel Enemy.”²⁰ Some 100,000 people, a quarter of the city's population, were left homeless.²¹ A doomsday scenario, indeed, and quite a precursor to the zombie apocalypse film, as noted by Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lens: “In cinema, the contemporary zombie and the rhetoric of plague are never far removed from each other.”²²

Appearing a couple of hundred years after Defoe's remarkable *Journal*, two works of literary fiction that would better qualify as novels, and are sometimes touted as the first zombie novels, are [H.P. Lovecraft's](#) 1922 six-part series of stories [Herbert West – Reanimator](#) and [Richard Matheson's](#) 1957 [I Am Legend](#). Kevin Alexander Boon calls the former “the first work of literary fiction to qualify as zombie literature” and “one of the most important works of early zombie fiction,” though admitting that Lovecraft's classic “does not feature either a Haitian zombie or a variant of the zombie drone.”²³ Because of that conflictive caveat, I disagree with Boon and instead embrace Angela Tenga and Kyle William Bishop's observation that in Lovecraft we merely “glimpse the approach of the more popular figure of the zombie.”²⁴ It would take several decades before any novel in English got closer to featuring a zombie, although the creature had already for decades enjoyed marked success in cinema, “primarily because the monsters are primarily visual in nature” as Bishop has argued.²⁵

I Am Legend features most of the right ingredients for modern and postmodern zombie fiction and film, like plague, pandemic, and contagious, formerly human creatures. There are really no zombies; they are more like vampiric monsters. But Matheson's classic can be credited with fertilizing popular fascination with the zombie apocalypse. Published in 1954, *I Am Legend* was a bestselling book of horror fiction that has been adapted as a movie three

times, all of them highly successful. The last, starring Will Smith, was released in 2007. *I Am Legend* is apocalyptic and features monstrous beings, who are the only human survivors of a pandemic, with one exception (Robert Neville). The drama centers on Neville's efforts to survive and to kill these beings. The novel had a profound influence on George Romero's epochal 1968 zombie apocalypse film [Night of the Living Dead](#), but the creatures in Matheson's classic are not really zombies. Romero is quoted as saying, "It seemed to me that it was about revolution, underneath.... The dead are coming back to life, *that's* the revolution."²⁶



Zombie Research Society booth at Comikaze, 2011. Photo by Srinji Rajan. | [Zombie Research Society](#) by [Srinji Rajan](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 2.0 License](#).

But whether there are zombies in either *Herbert West – Reanimator* or *I Am Legend* depends, of course, on how one defines *zombie*. [The Zombie Research Society](#), which is quite trustworthy in the realm of American cultural studies, offers the following definition of the zombie: “a relentlessly aggressive human or reanimated human corpse driven by a biological infection.” Though in Haiti, zombies are often biologically infected and reanimated corpses, they are not “relentlessly aggressive.”²⁷ So I take issue with this definition. The Zombie Research Society includes excellent scholars and professionals in the literary and cinematic worlds (including, up until his death, Romero himself), but although “hundreds of thousands of active members, experts, and volunteers around the world” comprise the organization, evidently few of them have extensive experience in Haiti or in West or Central Africa.²⁸

The 1697 erotic thriller by [Pierre-Corneille Blessebois](#), *Le zombi du Grand Perrou*, was the first mention of a zombie in print, in a short novel no less. No other zombie fiction would appear for centuries. It is thus a moot debate about what the first zombie novel is. It is Blessebois, plain and simple, case closed. Subsequent writings mentioning zombies were, in the interim, few and far between. And they were usually either in travelogues or in anthropological accounts, like the pioneering texts by Seabrook, Hurston, and Wirkus, which were not novels per se. Per Kyle Bishop, “No short fiction, novels, or films depicting herds of flesh-eating zombies predate 1968,”²⁹ the year that Romero released *Night of the Living Dead*. (It seems that neither Bishop nor Romero ever read Blessebois.) But in the 1950s, as this genre of literature became increasingly popular, zombies found their way into comic books. Per Tim Lazendörfer:

Zombies and their close relatives also took to the pages of the rising tide of comic books, most notably in the *Tales from the Crypt* series from EC Comics. Many rising dead bodies populated this and other series, bent on revenge, seeking to return to their homes without realizing they are dead.³⁰

Appearing from time to time as a powerful and compelling chief subject in Haiti’s long and rich literary history, the zombie is the central being, motif, symbol, platform, villain, and foil in one of the most celebrated Haitian novels, Frankétienne’s 1975 classic *Dézafi*, “(t)he definitive literary revision of the Haitian zombie.”³¹ At times abstract and poetic, structured in a rather unorthodox “spiralist” way, it is the story of a cruel Vodou priest named Sintil who “has stolen souls,”³² and has the power to enslave people by zombifying them, which he does *en masse* in the village of Bouanèf. This all goes well for Sintil until his daughter and one-time accomplice, Siltana, falls in love with Klodonis, a zombie on her father’s plantation, and liberates him from his deathlike state by feeding him salt. Her plan for romance backfires, however, when the awakened zombie “hits Siltana with a bone-breaking bone-crushing body-felling backhanded slap.”³³ Feeding the other zombies on the plantation a salted broth, Klodonis wakes them to rise up and revolt, and they soon torch the plantation and kill Sintil, tearing his body into “tiny bits and pieces.”³⁴ It was a daring and dangerous book for Frankétienne to write during the Duvalier dictatorship, as many have interpreted *Dézafi* to be a critique of the brutal dynastic regime,³⁵ with the zombies representing the oppressed Haitian masses and the Vodou priest the regime. As such, the book can be read as both a call for rebellion against oppression and a stoic reminder that zombies are both human and curable. A book of hope, alas.

There was a marked uptick in interest in zombies among Americans in the 1990s, thanks in part to the popularity of George Romero’s films and their remakes (*Night of the Living Dead* [1968], *Dawn of the Dead* [1978], and *Day of the Dead* [1985]).³⁶ But there was also “a resurgence of zombie fiction in the USA and Europe in the 2000s,”³⁷ including youth novels (some in South Africa, too). Then the real zombie book uprising happened around 2005 and ramped up steeply after the global economic recession of 2008. When the world seems like it is about to end, zombies captivate us, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. And, of course, a number of scholars “credit the resurgence to the events of September 11, 2001.”³⁸

John Vervaeke, Chistopher Matropietro, and Filip Miscevic estimate that more than “600

zombie films have been made.” What is striking in their calculations, published in 2017, is that “over half of them have been in the last ten years”:

Two great waves have lapped onto the shore of American cinema: one around 2001, and then again in 2008. *Twenty-Eight Days Later* comes out in 2002, George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* is remade in 2004, and *Zombieland* becomes the highest-grossing zombie film to date in 2009. This is quickly overtaken in 2013, first by *Warm Bodies*, and then by the Brad Pitt epic *World War Z*. By 2015, there are three TV series based on zombies: *Z Nation* on Netflix, *iZombie* on CW, and AMC’s breakthrough hit, *The Walking Dead*.³⁹

Zombie comic books and graphic novels have recently also proliferated, literary and artistic genres that thrive mightily in the twenty-first century. And, like a sprawling horde, the zombie has entered virtually all other forms of literature.⁴⁰ This especially took flight in the United States in late 2001, for “the anxiety about contagious otherness is a dominant discursive strain in the post-9/11 world.”⁴¹ Within a few years after the disaster of the World Trade Center, one could “find a hefty selection of zombie literature in the fantasy or young adult section of the book store, and among the graphic novels and comic books,” as Lauro notes. Fast forward a bit, and “now one finds an increasing diversity of zombies even in the humor section . . . and in the children’s section . . . and they are featured in highly lauded works of contemporary fiction.”⁴²

Zombie literature has multiplied and prospered ever since then. It seems that Amazon has tired of counting the number of zombie books it sells, because when you search for zombie literature it simply abandons precision in its counts and indicates “over 50,000!”⁴³ eBay is a little less prolific, but as of today it lists 28,374 items in a search for books about zombies.⁴⁴ Seemingly the most popular have to do with Minecraft, the bestselling video game in history. This is all part of a “major rise in zombie fiction,” per Lazendörfer: “The origins of this perhaps surprising development lie in a series of films, comics, and books that appeared in 2002 and 2003.”⁴⁵

Then a few years later, in 2010, the most popular television series in history was launched, Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead*, which ran over a hundred episodes until 2022. It’s worth noting that the word “zombies” is not used in this graphically violent drama—the monsters are usually referred to as “walkers”—but these are unmistakably zombies, and the apocalypse is afoot. If you watch it with Spanish subtitles, you often see the word *zombi* used as a translation for these hording, ferocious, slumbering, flesh-eating, horrific, undead creatures. The entire series is based on Kirkman’s successful series of zombie apocalypse comic books.⁴⁶

The sprawling hordes of zombie books make it impossible to provide but a surface sketch of some of the most popular and influential. But, to speak of another sprawling zombic literary horde, such is also the case with the number of scholarly publications on zombies, which, according to Daniel Drezner, has multiplied by “five times” in recent years. “Since the start of the 2008 financial crisis, the zombie has supplanted interest in all other paranormal phenomena.”⁴⁷ Up until then, the zombie trailed hobbits, wizards, and vampires, but that had changed dramatically by 2008, with the zombie surging and, within a year, surpassing all other monsters in popularity. The peak of this was around 2013, but with the coronavirus pandemic,

zombie searches on Google multiplied by an equally impressive rate. I have no idea what this regional breakdown might mean, if anything, but the leading place in the United States for zombie searches was West Virginia, while New York and Washington, DC ranked at the bottom of the list.⁴⁸ In the millions of books that Google has scanned over the years, meanwhile, a simple Ngram search demonstrates that in the late 1960s an uptick in zombies appearing in print began, with a dramatic increase as of 1999.⁴⁹ Perhaps that had something to do with Y2K and an expanded popular belief that when the end of the world comes, zombies will be part of the drama. It should be added here that the zombie film boom of the early decades of the twenty-first century has been fueled in part by the work of “amateur enthusiasts, with little training, financing, or technical support,” according to Peter Dendle, with “the vast majority” of recent zombie films being “backyard affairs accessible only to hardcore fans who don’t mind non-budget filmmaking.”⁵⁰

Arguably, Kirkman’s comic book series *The Walking Dead* is the most influential recent zombie publication, in large part because of the unsurpassed success of the spinoff TV series by the same name. But what are the bestselling zombie books in recent years, say, of 2001 in particular? In the teen and young adult books category, Amazon sells more copies of these titles than anything else, in descending order of popularity: *Attack on Titan 1*, by Hajime Isayama; *Hell on Earth*, by Tony Urban; *The Silver Eyes*, by Scott Cawthon; *Hollow Men*, by Amanda Hocking; *Dread Nation*, by Justina Ireland; *Road to Riches*, by Wesley R. Norris; *Dead America*, by Derek Slaton; *Zombie Road VIII*, by David A. Simpson; *Dead America – Low Country*, by Derek Slaton; and *Rot and Ruin*, by Jonathan Maberry. In the more general category of bestselling recent zombie novels, here are the top five from the now-closed Penn Book Center in Philadelphia:

- *The First 30 Days*, by Lora Powell (2019)
- *The Complete Undead Apocalypse Series*, by Derek Shupert (2021)
- *The Living Dead*, by George A. Romero and Daniel Kraus (2020)
- *The Zombie Survival Guide*, by Max Brooks (2003)
- *World War Z*, by Max Brooks (2006)⁵¹

To quickly consider these books in that order: I could not find any scholarly reviews of *The First 30 Days*, but on one website people raved about the book, like Mandy Andersen:

Fantastic zombie read that had everything I want in a zomb apoc book. I could have done with a smidge more romance since there was practically none. But it still packed a mighty punch and I loved it. Even though it wrapped up pretty well, I would love more. 5 Stars!

“A smidge more romance” is something many people would like, I guess, especially zombies, who are people, after all ... sort of.⁵² At least they once were.

Shupert’s *Series* consists of four novels, *Genesis*, *Deadfall*, *Riptide*, and *Dead Reckoning* and

is self-described as “an action-packed story of surviving the end at all cost.”⁵³ Romero died in 2017, thus his novel, *The Living Dead*, is posthumous, coauthored with Daniel Kraus, a novelist and longtime zombie aficionado.⁵⁴ One reviewer calls it “in the end a story about something unexpected: the quality of mercy.... zombies are ... essentially victims caught up in a cosmic mystery that no one will ever solve.”⁵⁵ **Max Brooks** has two novels on this list, *The Zombie Survival Guide* and *World War Z*, work that brought him this praise from one reviewer: “a luminary on the subject of zombie pandemic preparedness.” *Guide* “is firmly rooted in parody,” D. Ben Woods offers, more a handbook than a novel, which “presents an entertaining view of how to prepare for and deal with the unexpected – whether pandemic, natural disaster, failed state, or the rise of the undead.”⁵⁶ And, of course, *World War Z* would be adapted into the most expensive Hollywood movie ever made.

That is but a quick glimpse of a few zombie novels that, over the last twenty years, have sold tens of millions of copies. Thousands of others were published during this period, as well as e-zines, comic books, and zombie poetry. In fact, by 2011, there was enough zombie poetry swarming the literary world that performance poet Rob “Ratpack Slim” Sturma saw fit to collect work from some fifty poets who specialize in this emergent subgenre in a volume titled *Aim for the Head*.⁵⁷ It even includes zombie haikus and, for *New York Times* critic William Grimes, is the first attempt to have zombie poetry taken seriously. Sadly, though, “the genre has struggled to rise above the gross out, mass-murder sensibility of the comic book and video games.”⁵⁸ Some slam poets have tried, and at times succeeded valiantly, beautifully, and powerfully, though, like Melissa Lozada Oliva (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-Y9zgOSUnk>).

Not to be outdone, playwrights have also been incorporating zombies into their work, like Richard Henry (*Shakespeare and the Zombie Plague of 1590*), Wade Bradford (*Downtown Zombie*), and Don Zoldis (*Ten Ways to Survive a Zombie Apocalypse*). Some even write zombie plays for kids; for instance, Sarah Mayo Tighe published in 2018 a play for older children and young teens titled *Zombies in the Staffroom*.⁵⁹ And three years later, a senior-year theater enthusiast at Hutchinson High School named Samantha Hagberg wrote a play called *Love Bites*, “a teen rom-com set in the 1980s, [that] is a mash-up of ‘The Breakfast Club’ and ‘Scooby Doo’ featuring wild hair, zombies and familiar tropes from an iconic era of American cinema.” *Love Bites* was staged that year, 2021, by the Minnesota student’s school.⁶⁰

Novels, short stories, poetry, plays, comics, e-zines ... any literary genre imaginable has been part and parcel of the vast sprawl of zombie writings, which by now seem countless, thousands upon thousands of items, and that is only English-language texts. One book reviewer at the *New York Times*, Terrence Rafferty, felt as early as 2011 that the market had become saturated and “wearying”:

All these literary products are, in varying degrees, worth reading, or at least dipping into on one of those days when you’re not feeling unambiguously alive yourself. But taken as a whole the recent onslaught of zombie fiction is wearying. There’s a certain monotony built into the genre: in too many of these tales, the flesh-chompers advance, are repelled, advance again and are repelled again, more or less ad infinitum.⁶¹

The scholarly literature is also vast, as already noted, with work in recent decades across a range of disciplines. “The humanities are replete with decompositions of flesh-eating ghouls,” for instance, while even zoologists, political scientists, computer scientists, and physicists have studied and written about zombic matters and matter.⁶² And, of course, many scholars have written about zombie cinema, to which our attention now turns.

Zombies in Film: A Brief History

“It’s official,” writes Ian Olney. “The zombie apocalypse is here. The living dead have been lurking in popular media and culture since the 1930s.” Nowhere more so than on film (whether the silver screen or television) do zombies sprawl, spawn, lurk, infect, and cannibalistically devour. They are also amazingly, if unsettlingly, diverse: “fast zombies and slow zombies, flesh-eating zombies and brain-eating zombies, plague zombies and rage zombies, voodoo zombies and demonic zombies, redneck zombies and nazi zombies, teen zombies and period zombies, sex zombies and pet zombies.”⁶³ He could have also added stripper zombies, as there is a 2008 movie called *Zombie Strippers*, which is basically about a strip club in a fictional Nebraska town named Sartre, where the female dancers become zombies and zombify the male clientele. Toss in zombie monks, while we are at it, and dockworker zombies.

There are many other zombies—too many, to be sure—even on *The Simpsons*. In one episode titled “Treehouse of Horror Halloween,” Bart is responsible for the zombies’ emergence in Springfield, where they eat brains, only to find that Homer Simpson doesn’t have one of those. So Bart’s dad survives, but not before killing several zombies. One could reasonably argue that the ultimate platform for zombies today is television, with the monsters roaming from *The Simpsons* to *Scooby Doo* to the most successful TV series of all time, *The Walking Dead*. After all (until the advent of the internet and smartphone), according to Pierre Bourdieu, “television enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think.”⁶⁴ Launched in 1949, the television soon eclipsed the newspaper as the leading source of information for Americans. This monopoly has offered easier access to zombies; people don’t have to leave their homes to find them. It has also offered a medium through which screenwriters and directors continue to make interesting and often profitable adjustments to the monster, something that is truly global today. It all began on this monopolistic medium with a late episode of the spectacular hit series *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964), described here by Luiz H. C.:

Considered a mashup between Science Fiction and Horror genres, one of its last episodes was “Mr. Garrity and the Graves,” set in the late 19th century American West. There (Happiness, Arizona) and then, the title character dupes people into thinking that he can resurrect the dead! Being a recently arrived outsider, and making a seemingly ridiculous claim, Mr. Garrity gains the trust of the locals when he resurrects a dog that had been run over by a horse and wagon! Soon thereafter, Garrity resurrects a man who was shot by his own brother, and Happiness goes into total freak

mode, as most folks in the Boot Hill cemetery are likewise murder victims and could exact revenge. I won't spoil the plot for you, but it is cool that Garrity's wagon driver was a resurrectee named Ace!⁶⁵

There was something of a zombie lull after that, but the undead came raging back on TV screens in the 1990s, with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reigning supreme. Only once, however, did the series turn zombic. It was in Season Three, to be precise, with "Dead Man's Party" and "Zeppo." In "Dead Man's Party," "a macabre Nigerian mask begins to reanimate the deceased residents of Sunnydale, resulting in undead party-crashers at Buffy's welcome-back celebration." "Zeppo" is about "Xander befriending a rabble-rousing group of undead high-schoolers in an attempt to look 'cool.'"⁶⁶

As Paul Scott observes, "Some recent television series promote a new category of zombie that is neither mindless nor predatory: the British *In the Flesh* (2013–2014); the French *The Returned* [*Les Revenants*] (2012–2015); the Australian *Glitch* (2015–2019); and the American *Resurrection* (2014–2015)." Though successful, none of these series were nearly as popular as *The Walking Dead*, yet they offer a "radical inversion" of the "walkers" hunted down by Rick Grimes and his ever-shifting group of survivors, and they are not "outbreak narratives,"⁶⁷ which *The Walking Dead* clearly is. Furthermore, there is no shortage of new takes and cultural adjustments to the zombie in Asia, evinced by the recent popular series in Japan *Love You as the World Ends* and the Netflix series in Korea *Zombiiverse*. It would take an entire book to survey zombie television, a book that would quickly be outdated, given the diversification and cultural and global sprawl. So in this chapter, while tipping our hat to TV, we will focus instead on cinema intended for consumption in theaters (or via streaming services). With popcorn. Loaded with melted butter and salt—and the salt will come in handy should the zombies leap from the screen and toward your seat.

Turning fuller attention to cinema, returning to its very origin, *White Zombie* appeared in 1932 and captivated audiences throughout the United States. It was an interesting moment in the history of cinema, as the first feature film with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, had just premiered in 1927, starring the most popular entertainer in America, Al Jolson, a white performer who controversially appeared in blackface throughout much of the movie. Produced by Edward Halperin and directed by his brother Victor Halperin and starring one of the greatest horror actors of all time, Bela Lugosi, *White Zombie* was filmed entirely in the United States, but the setting is Haiti. It attempts to stick to the Haitian notion of the living dead zombie (*zonbi kò kadav*) who is forced into labor, the kind portrayed by Seabrook and Hurston, whose writings introduced the Haitian zombie to a receptive American readership in the 1920s and 1930s. *White Zombie* is based largely on Seabrook's *The Magic Island*. The one important deviation is that the zombies who work the sugar mill in the movie are all white, and others who are zombified as the plot thickens are also white. One other key twist in the film is that the zombified are not people stolen from graves and barely resuscitated, but victims of poisoning who never experience interment.



Scene from the first zombie movie, *White Zombie*, with Bella Lugosi playing Murder Legendre, here walking with some of his zombies. | [White Zombie](#) by United Artists is in [the public domain](#).

By 1940, at least five other zombie films had appeared on the silver screen, including a second by Victor Halperin, *Revolt of the Zombies*, in 1936. That very year saw another zombie movie appear. This one had the exotic title *Ouanga*, which was spelled in various ways over the years (the correct spelling in Haitian Creole is *wanga*) and means “magic charm, amulet, talisman or powder used for either good or evil magic.”⁶⁸ In 1943, the highly praised film [I Walked with a Zombie](#), though set on a fictional Caribbean island, kept the Hollywood zombie rooted in Haiti. That would soon change, but the centrality of whiteness and the otherness of Blackness have long marked zombie cinema, as Olney opines:

The zombie film . . . invites contemplation of white deathliness, specifically in the West’s treatment of racial Others, from the colonial era to our own age of neocolonialism. While its representations of blackness have changed over time, zombie cinema has been remarkably consistent in portraying whites as dead and as bringers of death.⁶⁹

It all launched this way (and more zombies would lurch this way) just after the U.S. Occupation of Haiti, as the bringer of death in *White Zombie* is a white man named Murder Legendre,

played by Lugosi, while the uncured zombified are also white and mindlessly walk off a seaside cliff to their deaths far below—most of them, at least, while Legendre is himself pushed off.

Several other zombie films followed and “generally flopped.” The creature crept out of Hollywood and into places like the Bowery and Broadway, in New York. By the late 1950s, more than twenty zombie movies had been produced, films that are often “most obviously concerned with the appropriation of female bodies, and the annihilation of female minds, by male captors.” There is also a “charged racial tension that pervades these films.”⁷⁰ But it wasn’t until the 1960s that “the protean zombie concept crystallized into its currently recognizable form,” as Dendle argues. The dean of zombie movie studies credits two feature-length films with launching this crystallization, “one in England and one in America: [The Plague of the Zombies](#) and *Night of the Living Dead*.” This is because “*Plague* established the zombie’s decaying appearance and nasty appearance, while *Night* established its motives and limitations.”⁷¹ Let us take a brief look at each of these pivotal zombie films.

Produced by Anthony Nelson-Keys, directed by John Gillig, and based on the screenplay written by Peter Bryan, *The Plague of the Zombies* premiered in 1966. Despite the word “plague” in the title, the zombies in the film are not contagious. There is, however, an ample number of newly dead and buried, victims of a local plague, and many of them are transformed into zombies. Though the setting is England in the nineteenth century, the zombie master, Squire Clive Hamilton, had lived in Haiti, where he learned the secrets of resurrecting the dead. He does this locally, in Cornwall to be exact, to have unpaid laborers toil in his tin mine, so these are Cornish zombies. One unique twist is that Hamilton keeps effigies of his zombies in coffins, which evidently function to keep his workforce zombified. Spoiler alert: It all falls apart for the zombie master when the dolls are torched and the zombies gain awareness of their state, as if they had eaten salt, which is how they come to realize their undead state in Haiti.

Drendle, author of *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, feels that this film, *Plague*, has been underappreciated in zombie cinematic history and analysis, and I agree. Here he underscores the importance of the film: “*Plague* is at the threshold – it relies on the old codes of zombie behavior but pioneers the appearance of the zombies to come.” The new twist with the zombies in *Plague* is that, though being “still the subservient, mostly passive, non-cannibalistic drones of early zombie films,” in this film we have zombies who “are decayed, blotchy cadavers, staggering around clumsily rather than walking in perfect mechanical rhythm.”⁷² *Plague* was thus verily a groundbreaking film. In part, this was because it was the product of Hammer Film Productions, which had by then surpassed Hollywood to dominate “the world of cinematic horror.”⁷³ And, although the film does not feature contagious zombies, the outbreak of zombies in the film was “caused by a mysterious illness – albeit one provoked by Haitian rituals,” as Nick Redfern explains. This “ensured that Hammer’s zombie-themed classic significantly helped pave the way for future productions in which matters of a viral, rather than Voodoo, nature were all-dominating.”⁷⁴

George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is widely considered to be the most important and influential zombie movie of all time, for “Romero is the Shakespeare of the zombie film, and this is his *Hamlet*.”⁷⁵ Filmed on a low budget (the blood was actually “Bosco chocolate syrup”),⁷⁶ with mostly amateur actors in western Pennsylvania, *Night* has been the subject of countless scholarly interpretations, commentaries, and at least one documentary,⁷⁷

while Ben Hervey has written an entire book about the movie, “a film that has been called the most terrifying ever made.”⁷⁸ It is based largely on Matheson’s 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, which had been made into a film in Italy, *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), starring the legendary [Vincent Price](#) (1911–1993), four years prior. Born in St. Louis, Price is widely considered to be one of the greatest horror movie actors of all time. He starred in numerous terrorizing films, including several based on the work of Edgar Allan Poe, and even in a 1969 Western that has nothing to do with zombies or the apocalypse, despite its zombic title, *More Dead than Alive*. But there really weren’t zombies in any Vincent Price movies, leaving the door open for Romero to release his creatures to rummage, pillage, conquer, devour, and roam.⁷⁹ In *Night* the word *zombie* is not used; instead, the dreadful, cannibalistic, contagious, infected beings are called “ghouls.” And it appears that the end of the world is nigh.

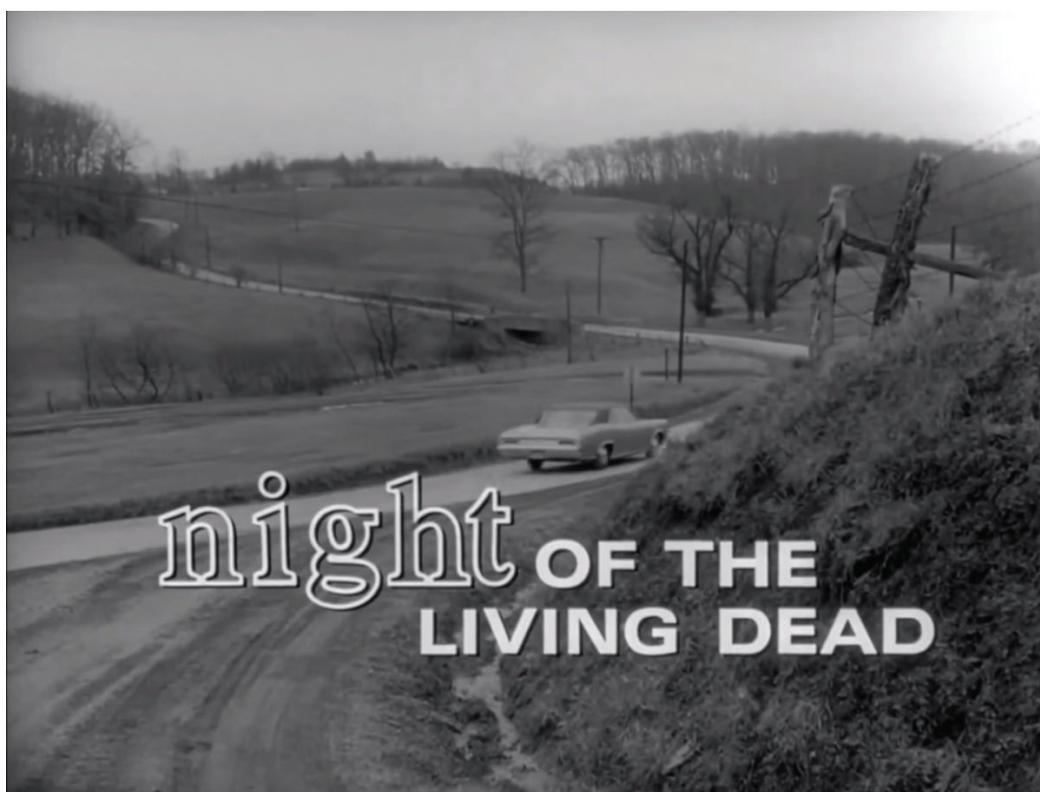
Whereas *Plague* has a central Haitian component, *Night* does not. Even as earlier zombie films had abandoned Haiti, none were nearly as influential or horrifying as Romero’s classic, in which zombies first shuffle about in a cemetery and then seek to eliminate, if not all of humanity, a bunch of terrified people in Pennsylvania. How did they become zombies, or ghouls, in the first place? Why, radiation from Venus, of course! Some sort of satellite had returned from Venus’s orbit and brought back radiation that turned humans into zombies. In *Night*, scientists speculate that the reanimation of the ghouls, the living dead, was sparked from space. That is, from a space probe that had been sent to Venus only to explode upon reentering the earth’s atmosphere. This is perhaps why, when Kirkman was asked about the cause of the apocalypse in his imagination and work, especially, of course, *The Walking Dead*, he replies “space pore,”⁸⁰ tipping his hat to Romero and *Night*.

Night of the Living Dead premiered in 1968 and was probably the most graphic horror movie ever made up until then. It was also hugely successful, selling out theaters nightly for weeks on end and being the haunting center for midnight viewing parties. It was not a Hollywood production made in some mainstream studio, but an independent effort. And it was totally shocking and revolutionary. The film has been hailed as a statement against capitalist greed, as a reflection of how “othered” civil rights and antiwar activists in America had become, and for having reflected our nation’s gravest fears and social concerns. The timing of *Night*’s production and appearance have led many to believe that Romero was trying to make a political statement about the war in Vietnam or the civil rights struggle, in part because he cast an African American, Duane Jones, as the protagonist—Ben—who (Spoiler Alert) was heroic in the face of the sauntering zombie attacks but ultimately gunned down by white police officers in the film’s last scene. Furthermore, some have seen the film as a critique of American consumerism, though that seems more resonant an interpretation of his later film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which, after all, is set almost entirely in a Pennsylvania shopping mall. *Night of the Living Dead* features no shopping malls, just a cemetery, winding country roads, fields, and a farmhouse. In the film’s opening scene, Johnny and Barbara, the latter played by Judith O’Dea, drive to visit their father’s grave. They encounter their first zombies in the cemetery, appropriately, when Johnny utters the iconic line, “They’re coming to get you, Barbara!”⁸¹

Whether Romero intended *Night* to be a commentary on the war in Vietnam or on racism and the civil rights movement is unclear. (He contradicted himself on this question across

numerous interviews.) Nonetheless, many have interpreted it that way. Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed that year, 1968, the nation was roiled in antiwar protests and racial unrest, cities burned, businesses collapsed, and young Americans died every day in Vietnam in a losing war effort.⁸² This *real* horror and the relevance of Romero's masterpiece are stated powerfully by W. Scott Poole:

Romero's zombies shambled on-screen as Americans became increasingly used to real-life images of graphic death, gore, and body parts being blown to pieces. . . . Romero's images of rotting corpses on a violent landscape covered with entrails and viscera, and a band of survivors battling it out with faceless hordes and deeply divided among themselves perfectly suited the American mood.⁸³



Title card from George Romero's epic 1968 zombie film *Night of the Living Dead*. | [Night of the Living Dead](#) by George Romero is in [the public domain](#).

The United States enjoyed no monopoly on civil unrest in 1968, as riots and strikes in France, led mostly by university students, brought the economy and government to a halt and actually compelled a president, Charles de Gaulle, to seek refuge abroad. The world was on fire. What

better time to launch a zombie apocalypse film? Fast forward to when we were mired in a global pandemic that killed millions of people and forced many of us to seek our own refuge, wear masks, and stock up on toilet paper, bottled water, and hand sanitizer, it was impossible to watch *Night* without thinking about COVID. It was highly contagious, it had killed millions and, in 2020, the end of the world seemed at hand. Romero was the first to wed the zombie, contagion, and the apocalypse, as in the film “the contagious aspect was preeminent, as a deep bite from an afflicted zombie ensured a painful death and transformation into the zombie state.”⁸⁴ But people have always thought that the world was about to end, which is all the more reason to study the history of apocalyptic belief. Our society *will* persevere through this pandemic and find a way into the future.

Another compelling reading of the film comes to us from Kersten Oloff, who interprets *Night* in terms of environmental exploitation. Oloff reminds us that the zombie emerged in Haiti out of a culture of the exploitation of human bodies and the earth to serve humanity’s sugar addiction, while “Romero’s zombies are creatures of a petromodern world ecology that took shape with the rise of suburbia and the emergence of automobile culture; the emergence of oil-fueled global transport networks.” The earth once again exploited, only now for oil instead of sugar, et voilà, new valences for the zombie. What unites such valences, despite their differences, is that they are rooted in greed, for “unlike the sugar zombie, the petro-zombie gestures towards representing the unrepresentable: towards the multifaceted and, it would seem, terminal crisis of the capitalist world-ecology.”⁸⁵

Romero’s ghouls were and remain captivating. The movie was “an international hit,” a production of “vast artistic significance,” in Hervey’s assessment, and “the most successful independent film” ever made.⁸⁶ The ghouls in *Night* are also significant for being removed entirely from Haiti, unlike those in *Plague*, in being contagious, and in being an elemental and centrally triggering operative part of the apocalypse. For *Night* is “the first in a new genre of zombie films that would relegate the Haitian folkloric *zombie* and classic cinematic zombie-sleepwalkers to relics of a bygone era,” as John Cussans explains:

From *Night* onwards there are no more Svengali-like controllers of remote minds, no more witch doctors with *ouanga* charms or voodoo dolls capturing the souls of feckless visitors to primitive and exotic lands, no *zombie* work slaves laboring mindlessly in the mill and no top-hatted Baron Samedi laughing maniacally in the cemetery. From here on, the *zombi* no longer looks back to Haiti.⁸⁷

The zombie goes so many other places, though, literally all around the world. Later in this chapter we consider the globalization of the zombie film, but first a few words on just a handful of the most important zombie flicks since *Night of the Living Dead: 28 Days Later*, [Shaun of the Dead](#), *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, and *World War Z*. First, though, a tip of the hat to Romero, who, following up on the success of *Night of the Living Dead*, made several other well-received zombie films: *First Dawn of the Dead* (a sequel to *Night*) appeared in 1979, a movie chock full of “thoughtful and entertaining social allegory.”⁸⁸ The Shakespeare of the zombie film rounded out his trilogy with *Day of the Dead* (1985), which Jamie Russell describes

as “darker than the rest and considerably gorier, yet it has a remarkably upbeat ending,” unlike *Night of the Living Dead*. The film is also “a grim vision of apocalyptic dysfunction.”⁸⁹

Up until the turn of the millennia, the 1980s saw the production of more zombie films than any other decade. That has all changed, however. Since 2000, zombies have become so mainstream that *The Guardian* observed in 2005 that “there were zombies everywhere,”⁹⁰ while the following year the *New York Times* could speak of “a zombie literary invasion.”⁹¹ Soon thereafter, that “invasion continued, with more than 41 films listed for 2008 alone, and the debut of the most popular basic cable drama of all time—*The Walking Dead*, AMC’s contribution to the zombie canon— in 2010.” Since then, as Dahlia Schweitzer points out, “there are now too many to count.”⁹²

A geographic interlude here, as I love maps and my brother is a distinguished geographer.⁹³ Does it make a difference whether the zombies are in rural or urban spaces? The earliest zombie films, including *White Zombie* and *Night of the Living Dead*, take place in rural places. In later films, however, including the blockbuster Hollywood film *World War Z*, zombies often first appear in cities. Does this make any difference in the processes of othering and the way in which sociophobics of the zombie apocalypse might be considered? Sociophobics doesn’t really offer much help with this question, being more attuned to national societal fears and anxieties. But it does matter—and this is a key point in sociophobics—what contemporary fears and anxieties mean in making sense of popular consumption of zombie lore, especially zombie horror films. So with post-9/11 films, as with the 1968 classic *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie film—especially the zombie apocalypse movie—is and has always been “a filmic mechanism for articulating social ills and crises.”⁹⁴ Especially fear, whether rational or irrational. In an urban setting there is more to fear, like crime, getting run over by a car, congestion, pollution, and the proximity of too many people. On the other hand, the celebrated 2017 Australian apocalyptic zombie film *Cargo* comes to mind, which is compelling for its dramatic outback setting, a film that one critic said George Romero would have enjoyed.⁹⁵ Here, Australia is beset by a horrific virus and resources are depleting, so Aussies arm themselves to ward off not just zombies but other humans who threaten their survival. So, I don’t believe the setting matters much at all, as it is all about othering and fear.

Though we cannot discuss apocalyptic cinema in any broad sense, it is clear that by now zombies have taken over both the horror and the apocalypse genres of film. Still, one should affirm that the apocalypse has enjoyed a rich cinematic history of its own, most of it long before its collision with the zombie in 1968. Per Stephen Prince:

Apocalypse narratives have held great appeal throughout human history, and their roots lie in legend, folklore, and religions. The stories focus on cosmic battles between good and evil (readily lending themselves to Marvel superhero narratives)... In cinema, these dangers take two forms: alien invasions and collisions with celestial objects such as meteors and asteroids. Each can be severe enough to trigger an apocalypse.... In doing so, these films light a candle. They fashion beguiling visions from daunting conditions that have seemed inescapable to the human psyche throughout its centuries of existence.⁹⁶

Then just add zombies, stir, and the world is transformed and on the precipice of *fin*!

In 2002 Danny Boyle released a British film that takes its landmark place in zombic cinematic history, *28 Days Later*. As Maria Pramaggiore explains, this movie is highly significant for, among other things, being “a turning point that marked the transition from the slow, shuffling zombies associated with George Romero to a new, fast and furious version for the 21st century.”⁹⁷ Some might argue that an earlier comedic zombie, Dan O’Bannon’s celebrated 1985 *Return of the Living Dead*, is the first to have speedy living dead. While it is true that here we watch zombies moving faster than they ever had in cinematic history, they are more or less only capable of jogging and hardly lightning fast. As Dendle puts it, the film’s “sleek, shambling zombies . . . aren’t slow, but run as fast as their mucky legs can carry them.”⁹⁸ It is likely, though, the first movie in which zombies eat brains, so credit is due there, certainly, but *Return of the Living Dead*’s zombies are easily outrun by any able-bodied living human being. In any case, zombies have sped up, and it’s been out of control ever since, although they still saunter in *The Walking Dead* and in other meaningful places. Not everyone is happy about fast zombies:

We Zombiephiles feel that it’s time this trend stopped! Zombies are zombies, and vampires are vampires. Zombies belong in zombie movies, and vampires belong...well, we won’t share how we feel about most vampire movies.

The point is, the Zombie, and the central lore of zombieness, should be considered as set in stone, irrevocable, immutable and unchangeable. It’s movies like *28 Days Later* that had to come along and “up the ante” on zombie movies – like that even needed doing.

Join us in our stand against fast, agile zombies! We demand the return of slow, shambling, brain-craving re-animated corpses, not virus-infected, flesh-eating cannibals! Zombiephiles of the world, unite!”⁹⁹

This zombiephilic rant against the vampire is a little over the top, as the vampire was the original contagious monster, not the zombie, and one can wonder if the zombie would ever have become contagious without Dracula, who paved the bloody way.

All that aside, two years after *28 Days Later* appeared, another highly praised zombie movie hit the big screen, *Shaun of the Dead*, and the zombies slowed back down again. Produced by Edgar Wright, it has been hailed as “the film that single-handedly saved contemporary British horror.”¹⁰⁰ Like in *Night of the Living Dead*, there is an outer-space connection to zombification, but unlike Romero’s zombie films or *28 Days Later*, this is a comedy, one that succeeds marvelously in making zombies and modern life in the capitalistic Western world out to be both laughable and regrettable matters.¹⁰¹

Already we have a sense of the global spread of the zombie film, a topic that we are about to leap into in some detail, but there are a couple of other influential movies to briefly consider first. Seth Grahame-Smith’s 2009 “ultraviolent reappropriation novel” [*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*](#) made the *New York Times* bestseller list and was made into a film in 2016.¹⁰² Lauro is not exactly a fan of the book, which she describes as an example of a quirky literary trend of “appropriations, adaptations, and mash-ups,”¹⁰³ and her opinion matters, as one of the leading

zombie scholars in the world. The novel is, of course, an appropriation of the classic 1813 Jane Austen romance *Pride and Prejudice*. I, for one, cannot say that I enjoyed reading the zombie mash-up, but the book was a hit, although the 2016 film by the same title was something of a commercial flop. As one cluster of critics put it, “*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* manages to wring a few fun moments out of its premise, but never delivers the thoroughly kooky mashup its title suggests.”¹⁰⁴

Judging from the frequency with which people look them up on Google, since 2004 the most captivating zombie films have been *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Zombies 2*,¹⁰⁵ but we should add a word here on the *Resident Evil* film series, the first of which appeared in 2002. The series is based on a highly successful Japanese video game, first released for PlayStation in 1996. This is quite unique in zombie cinematic history, as usually it is the other way around—films become video games, backpacks, pinball machines, lunch boxes, and so on. *Resident Evil* movies and their successful game forebear inspired many other popular video games, while the films themselves, though “featuring decapitations and torrents of blood, never move much further from the game.”¹⁰⁶

Finally, we briefly turn our attention to the most expensive zombie movie ever made, *World War Z*, which premiered in 2013. Based on Max Brooks’s successful novel by the same title, the film has been criticized as being little more than “an empty vehicle for ‘Hollywood himbo’ Brad Pitt to once again save the world.”¹⁰⁷ That the savior is a white male, furthermore, distances the film significantly from Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, though even there Haiti is entirely absent. Hugely successful, *World War Z* grossed over half a billion dollars and is significant for, at least, having made the zombie apocalypse global. Pitt’s lead character, Gerry Lane, was once a UN agent and finds himself confronting the first waves of the zombie invasion while sitting in traffic in Philadelphia. There, the dashing Lane commandeers an RV and makes it to Newark, New Jersey, where the UN has him helicoptered onto a U.S. naval vessel somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, from which our white savior is flown to South Korea and then on to Jerusalem. Next he winds up in a Cardiff lab, where he figures out the secret to defeating zombies, and later he is in Nova Scotia to effectuate matters. Then a vaccine is produced and, voila, the world is saved.

Globalizing the Zombie

Speaking of globalization, let us here briefly consider the international spread of the zombie film and the zombie apocalypse film, which has been altogether impressive, and take note of some of the most acclaimed foreign films in the genre. Writes Drendle:

Meanwhile, the zombie has internationalized in unprecedented manner, with feature-length offerings from such places as Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Turkey, Serbia, Finland, Pakistan, and Malaysia, and others being filmed in Bulgaria, the Cayman Islands, and West Africa. There are zombie films in Hebrew and Russian, and the DVD for *Attack of*

the Moon Zombies! (2011) comes with a menu option for subtitles in Esperanto. Thus the zombie has expanded into settings hitherto unimagined.¹⁰⁸

The zombie gets around, as it were, and the apocalypse implicates us all. Although recently zombie films have been mass produced and are extremely popular in South Korea and Japan, one might suggest that the first foreign zombie film was made in the United Kingdom in 1958, *The Woman Eater*. However, in this film the zombie-like creature is actually a tree that devours women, hence the title, even if an Amazonian serum to revive the dead is part of the story. So it is not really a zombie film. In 1961, two truly zombic foreign films were produced and premiered. Benito Alrazaki made *Muñecos infernales* (lit. “Infernal Dolls,” released in English as *Curse of the Doll People*) in Mexico, while George Fowler produced one of the first color zombie films, *Doctor Blood’s Coffin*, which would find its way into theaters around the world, from Argentina to Greece. A year earlier an obscure independent zombie film appeared in color, *The Dead One*, which features a zombie that is “the snappiest dresser in the film,” a film that was lost to history for over forty years and recently rediscovered.¹⁰⁹ Significantly, “Alrazaki tried his hand at more living dead cinema by creating the first in a series of zombie movies starring masked wrestler El Santo (a.k.a. Rudolfo Guzmán Huerta), who became a popular icon in Mexican cinema,” as Russell explains:

In *Invasion of the Zombies* (*El Santo contra los zombies*, 1961), the first of a series of several Mexican wrestling/zombie mash-ups, the masked wrestler fights an evil mastermind sending radio-controlled zombies on a crime spree across Mexico. Despite talk about Haiti, they are more like high-tech automatons that are kitted out with special belts that let their master use them as his goons.¹¹⁰



El Santo. Tracing by El Cire, 2006. | [Mask of El Santo](#) by [LeCire](#) is in the public domain.

Thus, by the early 1960s the zombie had begun to globalize beyond Haiti and the United States, as it was enculturating elsewhere, whether in English mines or in Mexican wrestling bouts.

Like Mexico and England, Spain would also develop something of a cottage industry for zombie films, a bit later, in the 1970s. Chiefly credited and celebrated in this regard is Amando de Ossorio, who produced four popular zombie films, *Tombs of the Blind* (1971), *Return of the Blind Dead* (1973), *Horror of the Zombies* (1974), and *Night of the Seagulls* (1975).¹¹¹ Russell esteems Ossorio's films as "something of a breath of fresh air" for "having reworked emphasis on the physicality of the body into a curious blend of sex, violence and death." The productions were also timely, as the brutal fascist Franco regime was falling, though Ossorio was still forced to do much of his work abroad, in Portugal.¹¹² Italian zombie films would soon follow, most notably Lucio Fulci's *Zombi*, "a bravura piece of exploitation filmmaking that was so successful it was rumoured to have out-grossed the very film that it was unabashedly imitating, Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*."¹¹³ It was the first of Fulci's three zombie films.

Those are a few of the earliest influential foreign zombie movies, and admittedly much is being glossed over and ignored here, as the zombie genre of cinema was becoming more expansive as the twentieth century steamrolled toward its end. Our attention now turns to Asian zombie cinema, and perhaps the best way to transition here is to include another long, relevant quote from Russell, whose *Book of the Dead* offers the best, most detailed discussion of the globalization of the zombie film:

By the mid-2000s zombies were taking over the world. Z-culture had spread to even the most unlikely nations. Greece, Chile, Norway and Pakistan were among those who would make their contributions to the genre as the zombie renaissance grew and grew. It seemed that the more popular zombies became, the more assured local producers could be that there was a viable, international market for their movies.¹¹⁴

Although Pakistan has since proven to be a minor contributor to the zombie genre of cinema, other Asian nations have been at the forefront of its globalizing popularity, none more so than Japan and Korea. Filmmakers in India, the Philippines, Thailand, and Taiwan all joined the gravy train, but Japan and Korea reign supreme in the cinematic Asian zombie universe (as they do in Asian zombie television). The first Japanese zombie film evidently appeared in 1999,¹¹⁵ while the earliest Korean entry, *Strange Dead Bodies*, dates to 1981. It should be noted, though, that the very first Asian zombie film appeared in Hong Kong in 1959: *Zombie in a Haunted House*. Sadly, it is evidently lost to history. Meanwhile, as Jaecheol Kim explains, there has been a "recent zombie craze in Northeast Asian films from Japan and Korea." Zombies "are now flourishing in an East Asian cinematic context preserved in a globalized form."¹¹⁶ There now seem to be more Asian zombie films than can be counted, a centerpiece among many appropriations of the zombie in Asian popular culture. But here we concentrate, with Kim, on just two films that have been highly influential and popular, the 2015 Japanese movie [I Am a Hero](#) and the 2016 Korean movie [Train to Busan](#).¹¹⁷

Kim interprets both movies to be critiques of capitalism and its ramifications, for "the

zombie has come to Japan and Korea amidst growing concerns about accelerated capitalism, reflecting the general economic conditions of post-IMF neoliberal Korea and post-bubble neoliberal Japan.¹¹⁸ Since the 1960s, concerns about a capitalist absorption of humanity and its dehumanization of laborers and the poor (something that Karl Marx already saw in the nineteenth century) has been one of the leading theoretical interpretations of the zombie craze. These concerns seem quite relevant to understanding the rise in popularity of zombie cinema in East Asia.

Because *I Am a Hero* became “a stunning blockbuster” in Japan, it is the heart of what was “the year of the Japanese zombie renaissance,” 2015, with several other films of this genre also filling theaters and gaining critical acclaim.¹¹⁹ Like *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Walking Dead*, the creatures that devour and infect in this film are not called zombies. Here they are called ZQNs, and I don’t know what that might stand for. The ZQNs are viral, as they “attack the living and devour human flesh, thus creating swarms of undead.”¹²⁰ *Train to Busan*, meanwhile, is the most successful Korean zombie film ever, one that gained international acclaim and is quite innovative in that most of the action during a zombie invasion happens “across a series of horrifying train journeys.”



Busan, Republic of Korea. | [Fantastic Nightscape of Busan Korea](#) by [Chang Ho Min](#) is used under a [CC BY 3.0 License](#).

Will McKeon’s interpretation of the film is the most common reading of zombie cinema,

especially since Romero's classics: as critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism. Of course, zombie films are also about survival, fear, and sacrifice, but we should place them in social, cultural, and political contexts:

What *Train to Busan* ultimately demonstrates is that the impulse to self-sacrifice channels this neo-liberal tendency and maps out its pressures, but because of this impulse the trains of thought carrying the neo-liberal compulsion fall ironically short of their destination.¹²¹

Conclusion

The universe of zombie literature and film is vast and ever expanding. As soon as humans could write, they expressed their captivation with dead-like or resurrected human beings, from Gilgamesh, through the Bible, and on to the present spate of zombie comic books and novels. But technically speaking, the zombie first emerged in the Caribbean in the seventeenth century, a creature who seems to have originally been a blend of West African notions of a fearsome nocturnal bogeyman who haunts forests and the French folk belief in the [revenant](#), a human who returns from the grave. Those origins are discussed at length in Chapter Five, while here we have refuted claims—in ancient and modern literature, from Gilgamesh to Defoe, Shakespeare to Shelley—of the presence of zombies in print.

Also in Chapter Five, we detailed the first true zombie novel, Blessebois's 1697 *Le zombi du Grand Perrou*, which was written on the colonial French Caribbean island of Guadalupe. In the previous chapter we considered the first influential English texts that brought the zombie and Vodou to the popular American imagination: those by Hurston, Seabrook, and Wirkus. A turning point in the zombie apocalyptic literary world would follow in the form of Matheson's *I Am Legend*, which, though not really featuring zombies, is an apocalyptic prelude to the explosion of zombie literature and films that would soon follow. The pivotal moment in that explosion is, of course, Romero's classic 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, which is based largely on Matheson's novel.

Despite a saturation of texts and movies, zombie literature and film remain enormously popular, not just in the United States but throughout much of the world. In this chapter we have only scratched the surface, limiting ourselves almost entirely to texts in English, though we did take a brief trip to Mexico, England, Spain, Italy, South Korea, and Japan for a glimpse of the dizzying globalization of zombie cinema. Somewhat ironically, for these genres that are usually quite apocalyptic in form, there is no end in sight, for they are highly profitable and millions of people clearly need them. And capitalism, and the critique thereof, is one of the central forces that led to the merger of the zombie and the apocalypse in literature and film in the first place. In a review of Lauro's important book *The Transatlantic Zombie*, I argue that the author makes "a shaky case for the zombie being as much about resistance as it is about capitalism or empire."¹²² I stand by that critique, for how can one resist when one is catatonic

and when the catatonic hordes produce five billion dollars a year in the capitalistic zombie industry?

Notes

1. Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 47. [↵](#)
2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, London: Continuum, 2004 (1972), 335, 425. [↵](#)
3. Steven Shaviro, "Capitalist Monsters," *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 10, 4, 2002, 281–282. [↵](#)
4. Jim Kline, "The Oldest Story, the Oldest Fear, the Oldest Fool: The Religious Dimensions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*," *Jung Journal* 10, 2, 2016, 24. [↵](#)
5. *Ibid.*, 26. [↵](#)
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Glossary

28 Days Later

Popular 2008 British apocalyptic zombie film by [Danny Boyle](#) that is credited as being the first cinematic production to feature fast zombies. Prior to that the monsters had sauntered about in movies since the 1930s. [↵](#)

Austen, Jane (1775–1817)

Celebrated English novelist whose 1813 masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* was transformed into a zombie apocalypse mash-up book and film titled *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* in 2016.

Blessebois, Pierre-Corneille (1646–1700)

French author and libertine who, while in Guadeloupe as an indentured servant as punishment for crimes committed in France, wrote the first zombie novel, *Le zombie de Grand Perou*, published in 1697. [↵](#)

Book of Ezekiel

Book in the Hebrew Bible in which God punishes humanity with a plague that results in wandering, zombie-like humans with rotting flesh, eyes, and tongues, part of the record of visions received by the prophet Ezekiel in the sixth century B.C.E. [↵](#)

Boyle, Danny (b. 1956)

Academy Award-winning British filmmaker credited with making the first zombie apocalypse film to feature fast zombies, [28 Days Later](#), which premiered in 2008. [↵](#)

Brooks, Max (b. 1972)

American actor and author whose [The Zombie Survival Guide](#) (2003) and [World War Z](#) (2006) are among the most popular zombie books ever published, the latter being turned into the hugely successful 2008 film *World War Z*. [↵](#)

Dawn of the Dead

Classic 1978 zombie apocalypse film by [George Romero](#), filmed mostly in a Pennsylvania shopping mall. A remake by the same title appeared in 2004. [↵](#)

Defoe, Daniel (1660–1731)

English writer most famous for his 1716 novel [Robinson Crusoe](#), one of the most popular books in world history. He is also the author of the historical novel [A Journal of the Plague Year](#), which depicts the horrors of the 1665 epidemic of Bubonic Plague in

London. Some of the ill behave as if they wish to spread the disease through contact with others, presaging the contagiousness of the zombie in contemporary literature and film. [↵](#)

Deleuze, Gilles (1925–1995)

French philosopher who published several books with the French psychoanalyst [Félix Guattari](#), including *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), in which they identify the zombie as “the only modern myth.” [↵](#)

Doctor Blood's Coffin

1961 British film by George Fowler, one of the first color zombie movies, featuring resurrected dead who are murderous. [↵](#)

Dystopian

From the ancient Greek meaning “bad place,” an imagined (or real!) society or world that is full of suffering and hopelessness. The antithesis of “utopian.” [↵](#)

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Written in [Mesopotamia](#) probably between 2100 and 1400 B.C.E., it is perhaps the world's oldest book. It features a great deal of suffering, gloom, ghouls, and doom, along with threats that the dead may be resurrected to eat the living, which sounds quite zombic, though these beings really weren't zombies. [↵](#)

Frankenstein

Classic 1818 novel by British author Mary Shelley in which a monster is created from an assemblage of the body parts of other human beings. Prior to the zombie, this monster was the most popular, along with the vampire, in popular imaginations of horror. Frankenstein was actually not the name of the monster, but the doctor who created it, although it has stuck to the monster. [↵](#)

The Golem

With roots in the thirteenth century B.C.E., an ancient Jewish text that portrays something of a monster in the form of the golem. The word *golem* means “unformed mass” in Hebrew, and there are certainly things about the golem that evoke zombies, but it is made of clay and hence is not really a zombie. [↵](#)

Great Fire

Massive conflagration that torched London in 1666 and destroyed tens of thousands of homes, dozens of churches, and hundreds of businesses, with 100,000 people left homeless, then a quarter of the city's population. [↵](#)

Guattari, Félix (1939–1992)

French psychoanalyst who published several books with the French philosopher [Gilles Deleuze](#), including *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), in which they identify the zombie as “the only modern myth.” [↵](#)

Herbert West – Reanimator

1922 horror story consisting of six sequels written by American novelist [H. P. Lovecraft](#), in which the title character possesses a serum that resurrects the dead; a precursor to zombie fiction from the second half of the twentieth century to today. [↵](#)

Hurston, Zora Neale (1891–1960)

Anthropologist and literary giant. African American woman who did extensive field work in Jamaica and Haiti, as well as the American South, toward writing influential texts on Africana religion and culture. These included pioneering discussions about Vodou and zombies.

I Am a Hero

Blockbuster 2015 Japanese zombie apocalypse movie in which creatures called ZQN infect and devour humans, who thereby become members of their sprawling zombic horde. Based on a series of comic books by Kengo Hanazawa. [↵](#)

I Am Legend

Bestselling 1954 horror novel by American author Richard Matheson, which is both apocalyptic and features bloodsucking vampire-like creatures, who, except for Robert Neville, are the only human survivors of a pandemic. It has been adapted as a movie three times, all of them highly successful. The last, in 2007, starred Will Smith. A major influence on [George Romero's](#) *Night of the Living Dead*. [↵](#)

I Walked with a Zombie

One of the first zombie films, by French producer Jacques Tourneur, made in America and set on a fictional Caribbean island evocative of Haiti. First appeared in 1943 and is widely considered to be one of the most important zombie films of all time. [↵](#)

A Journal of the Plague Year

1722 historical novel by Daniel Defoe depicting the horrors of the 1665 epidemic of Bubonic Plague in London. Some of the ill behave as if they wish to spread the disease through contact with others, presaging the contagiousness of the zombie in contemporary literature and film. [↵](#)

Kirkman, Robert (b. 1978)

Author of the apocalyptic zombic comic book series [The Walking Dead](#) (2003–2019), which was transformed into the most successful television series ever, by the same name. It has run across eleven seasons, beginning in 2010 and running through 2022. [↴](#)

Le zombi du Grand Perrou

1697 novel written in Guadeloupe by a French indentured servant named Pierre-Corneille Blessebois, which contains the first known instance of the word *zombi* in print. [↴](#)

Lovecraft, H. P. (1890–1937)

American horror and science fiction essayist and novelist whose 1922 six-story series [Herbert West – Reanimator](#) is an important precursor to zombie fiction from the second half of the twentieth century to today. [↴](#)

Lugosi, Bela (1882–1956)

Hungarian-American actor who is widely considered to be one of the greatest performers in the history of horror cinema. After playing Dracula, he portrayed a Vodou doctor with the power to zombify people with poison in the first zombie film, [White Zombie](#) (1931).

The Magic Island

Sensationalist 1929 travelogue, by [William Seabrook](#), that details his experiences in Haiti and helped introduce the zombie to the American public. [↴](#)

Marx, Karl (1818–1883)

German philosopher, one of the most influential thinkers of all time, inspiration behind socialism and communism. Though Marx never wrote, or likely knew, about zombies, he once described wage laborers in capitalism as “vampire-like.” The zombie would have been a better metaphor for what he meant. [↴](#)

Matheson, Richard (1926–2013)

American author of the highly influential 1954 bestselling horror novel [I Am Legend](#), which is both apocalyptic and features bloodsucking vampire-like creatures, who, except for Robert Neville, are the only human survivors of a pandemic. It has been adapted as a movie three times, all of them highly successful. The last, in 2007, starred Will Smith. A major influence on [George Romero's](#) *Night of the Living Dead*. [↴](#)

Mesopotamia

Ancient Middle Eastern empire and civilization where [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#), perhaps the world's first book, was written, probably between 2100 and 1400 B.C.E. The book features a great deal of suffering, gloom, ghouls, and doom, along with threats that the

dead may be resurrected to eat the living. This sounds quite zombic, but these beings really weren't zombies. [↵](#)

Muñecos infernales

Released in 1961, one of the first foreign zombie films, produced in Mexico by Benito Alrazaki. The English version is titled *Curse of the Doll People*. Features the famous Mexican lucha libre wrestler Santo in a struggle to save the world from zombies. [↵](#)

Night of the Living Dead

Classic 1968 horror film by [George Romero](#) that is widely considered to be the first true zombie apocalypse film, or the first moment in cinematic or literary history in which the zombie and the apocalypse are combined and in which zombies are contagious. A pivotal production in zombic history. Filmed in western Pennsylvania. [↵](#)

The Plague of the Zombies

Pivotal 1966 zombie apocalypse film, British and set in nineteenth-century Cornwall, that is credited with having crystalized the characteristics of the zombie for the subsequent maelstrom of apocalyptic zombie movies. Also significant for its ties to Haiti, where the film's zombie master once lived and learned the secrets to raising the dead to labor in his English tin mine. [↵](#)

Price, Vincent (1911–1993)

Legendary American actor, mostly cast in lead roles in classic horror films, like the first cinematic iteration of *I Am Legend* and the 1964 classic *The Last Man on Earth*, which was filmed entirely in Italy. [↵](#)

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

2009 novel by Seth Grahame-Smith, a mash-up of [Jane Austen's](#) 1813 classic English novel *Pride and Prejudice* and zombies, hence the title. Made into a successful film by the same title in 2011. [↵](#)

Protozombic

Term used to identify zombie-like creatures and related cultural dimensions in ancient, premodern, and modern cinema and literature, material produced before, sometimes long before, real zombies appeared in books and on the silver screen. [↵](#)

Resident Evil

A gory and popular video game first produced in 1986 and then adapted into a series of successful films by the same title, from 2002 to 2016. [↵](#)

Revenant

Literally, the “returning” in French, reference to a folkloric belief in France of the dead rising from their graves. This belief probably had a significant influence on the early development of zombic ideas in the French Caribbean, including Guadeloupe and Haiti.

[↵](#)

Robinson Crusoe

1719 novel by English writer Daniel Defoe, one of the most popular in the history of world literature. A story about the survival of a man stranded on a desert island. [↵](#)

Romeo and Juliet

William Shakespeare’s epic play, a love tragedy, which was first staged in 1597. Some scholars and critics today see Juliet as a [protozombie](#), as she was poisoned and in a deathlike state. The play inspired the popular 2009 movie *Romeo and Juliet against the Living Dead* and the 2013 movie *Warm Bodies*. [↵](#)

Romero, George (1940–2017)

American filmmaker and director who is widely considered to be the greatest zombie screen writer and producer of all, having made a series of dramatic, violent, and terrifying movies in the genre, including *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which is the first film to wed the zombie to the apocalypse, and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). [↵](#)

Seabrook, William (1884–1945)

American occultist and travel writer whose 1929 book [The Magic Island](#), about his experiences in Haiti, helped introduce the zombie to the American public. [↵](#)

Shakespeare, William (1564–1616)

English playwright and poet, considered by many to be the greatest writer in the history of English-language literature. Among his most celebrated works are *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, which have all recently been the bases for zombie mash-up books, movies, and plays. [↵](#)

Shaun of the Dead

2004 British comedic zombie film by Edgar Wright, one that is highly acclaimed. A lovely twist is that the lead character, Shaun, and others seek refuge from the zombie apocalypse in a pub. [↵](#)

Train to Busan

Premiering in 2016, the most successful Korean zombie film ever made, directed by Yeon Sang-ho, one that gained international acclaim and is quite innovative in that most of the action during a zombie invasion happens on passenger trains. [↵](#)

The Walking Dead

Launched in 2010, [Robert Kirkman's](#) television series is the most popular show in the history of TV, running across over a hundred episodes and eleven seasons, through 2022. Based on Kirkman's earlier comic book series by the same title (2003–2019). ↵

White Zombie

Premiering in 1931, the first ever zombie film. Though not apocalyptic, it is set in Haiti and features victims, the living dead—who, incidentally, are all white—who toil mindlessly in a sugar mill. Starred [Bela Lugosi](#) as the zombie master. ↵

Wirkus, Faustin (1896–1945)

American marine who served in Haiti during the U.S. Occupation. He was coronated a Vodou king on the island of La Gonâve, which he ruled for three years in the 1920s. Author of *The White King of La Gonave* (1931).

World War Z

Wildly popular 2006 book by [Max Brooks](#) that was turned into the most expensive zombie apocalypse movie ever made, premiering, with the same title, in 2013 and starring Brad Pitt. ↵

The Zombie Research Society

A scholarly association, founded in 2007, including researchers of the living dead and others in the literary and cinematic worlds (including, up until his death, [George Romero](#)). ↵

The Zombie Survival Guide

Published in 2003, a quasi-novel by [Max Brooks](#) and, as the title implies, a tongue-in-cheek guide to surviving the zombie apocalypse; one of the bestselling zombie books ever.

Zombies 2

One of the most popular zombie movies over the last twenty years, premiering in 2020 on the Disney Channel. ↵

II. Gaming and Walking the Undead: The Sprawling Zombie in Popular Culture

Overview

We are now moving on from literature and cinema to gaming and walking. We have certainly come a long way from [Zoroaster](#) and ancient Persia. Our fears of the dead and of the apocalypse continue to drive us and shape our lives, but nowadays we have new outlets for their exploration and release, a wider diversity of arenas and technologies, certainly, than Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad had. And recently apocalyptic zombie gaming has become a very big deal. As Peter Dendle, whose work on zombie films is the most expansive to date, observes: “Video games provided one of the more important vehicles for zombies in the late 1990s and 2000s, and [Resident Evil](#) (Capcom 1996) was the first (with its sequels) and most successful of these.”¹ Zombie gaming is indeed prolific, sprawling, spawning, and infecting like a horde, of, well, zombies. How do we make sense of this? Why are people so obsessed with zombies? Why do people continue to obsess with the apocalypse? What are the ethical implications of enjoying the thrill of seeking to kill the afflicted? Do we ourselves become zombies as we lower our heads while walking and looking at our phones while mowing them down?

There is something zombifying about walking around a large urban university’s campus and seeing thousands of people strolling about with their heads thus lowered, their gaze fixed on their little screens, earbuds in place, thumbs sometimes frantically tapping away. It actually is frightening, a bit apocalyptic, and some of them are surely setting out rows of plants to ward off zombies, or playing Pokémon Go, which now features creatures that have, for all intents and purposes, been zombified and gives the gamer an opportunity to eliminate or cure (“purify”) them. In another reflection of the zombie’s almost unparalleled ability to captivate in popular culture, there are also [zombie walks](#) throughout the world, in which people saunter around masquerading as zombies, oozing fake blood, and eating equally fake brains. As major pieces of the massive global zombie economy, and as reflections of humanity’s ancient and ongoing fear of an apocalyptic End of Time, such walks and games raise deep philosophical and sociological questions.

Zombie Games People Play: A Necessarily Brief History

At least since Zoroaster, humans have feared the end of the world because it is inevitable and no one knows how or when it will happen—plus, prophets like him inspired them to

fear. Millions around the world today think of the apocalypse as involving zombies, and one wonders why so many are fascinated by the living dead, and why they watch them, play with them, kill them, dress up like them, and walk like them. Both the apocalypse and the zombie are the stuff of fear, but why are they centerpieces to a huge gaming industry? Stephen Webley offers this interesting answer:

Game studies scholars have pondered “the rise of the zombie” in papers and conference proceedings. . . . It appears the only firm agreement among zombie game scholars is that the zombie is so prevalent because the zombie makes for a less controversial victim to dispatch in the most violent fashion, and that its basic behavior and uniformity of appearance make for easy artificial intelligence programming routines and easily replicated game art; in short, they are convenient.²

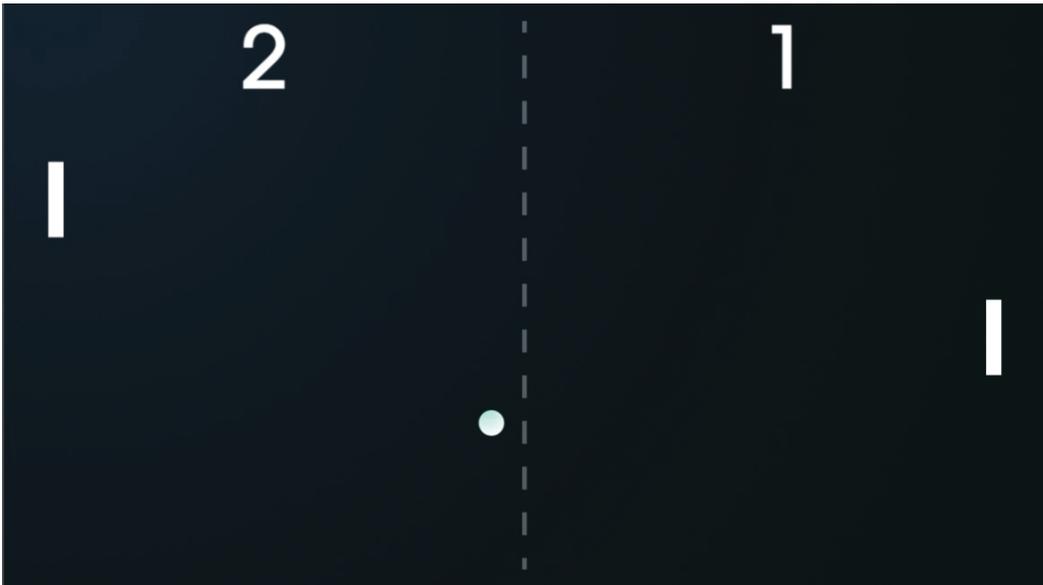
Seeing as philosophers have for hundreds of year contemplated questions about human rights, animal rights, and environmental ethics, it is unsurprising that zombies have become a big deal in the field of philosophy, for all of the intriguing moral questions they raise. Especially the question about the ethics of killing them. In Robert Kirkman’s [The Walking Dead](#) (the blockbuster television series), one of the scenes that I found most compelling philosophically was when Rick Grimes and his wandering posse of survivors take up residence at the farm of a retired veterinarian named Hershel Greene, an elderly God-fearing man who is something of a philosopher. Hershel reasons correctly that viruses like the one that has spawned the zombie apocalypse have always risen to powerfully challenge humanity and threaten our very existence, but this is nature’s way of creating balance. Shock rocks philosophy, though, when Grimes and his band discover a pit in one of Hershel’s barns where he is keeping zombies, or “walkers,” alive, members of his own family, in the hope that one day they might be cured. For Jeffrey Hinzmann and Robert Arp, what is philosophically compelling about this discovery is that “the main reason people extend any moral consideration to zombies in any form or fashion is that *they used to be people*.”³

I would like to suggest here that philosophical contemplations of the meanings and implications of the zombie could be amplified by considering leading theories in religious studies and anthropology concerning ritual sacrifice in the history of religion, especially [René Girard’s mimetic theory](#). (*Mimetic* is related to the word *mime* and derives from the Greek *mimetic*, meaning imitative).⁴ As Wolfgang Palaver explains, “mimetic theory . . . is centered upon a hypothesis regarding the origin of sacrifice,”⁵ based more deeply on Girard’s idea that human desire, and human culture itself, is ultimately about imitation. As Girard puts it: “Man is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind. We desire what others desire because we imitate their desire.”⁶

In this scheme of things, sacrifice was often driven by the belief that it could stave off punishment from the gods, and perhaps even the apocalypse itself. Furthermore, throughout the ages humans have performed “sacrificial rites, hoping in this way to protect themselves from their own violence by diverting it into expendable victims.”⁷ Such victims are the targets of “scapegoating,” or “the violent and arbitrary convergence around a victim or group of victims who are seen as uniquely responsible for a particular group’s misfortune.”⁸ Such a

convenient, expendable, dispatchable, scapegoated victim makes a splash in video games, especially as the zombie. With a few notable exceptions, it is always acceptable to kill a zombie while gaming, to take down a suitable victim who is somehow responsible for the unspeakable plight in which the gamers find themselves.

Video games are not nearly as old as ritual sacrifice, of course, though many of them are full of sacrifice. We spend money and time on them, after all, and they sometimes afford us opportunities to eliminate sacrificial victims to let off steam. This diverts our innate propensity for violence in a safe manner. Video games emerged ten years before the appearance of [George Romero's](#) epic apocalyptic zombie film [Night of the Living Dead](#), which shocked audiences with its graphic scenes and horror as soon as it appeared in 1968. In 1958 a physicist named [William Higinbotham](#) created the first video game, *Tennis for Two*.⁹ He had previously worked in Los Alamos, New Mexico, on the first atomic bomb, so the video game was born out of violence.¹⁰ Higinbotham (1910–1994) created the game for the annual visitor day at the Research Laboratory where the A Bomb was made, and although it was popular among those who wandered in, he never patented or marketed it. But it was “eerily similar” to a mass-produced and highly successful video game by Atari that would appear ten years later, [Pong](#).¹¹ Pong, though highly popular and soon available on home consoles, was just plain boring.



Atari's Pong, the first massively popular video game, a basic simulation of ping pong or tennis, first launched in 1972. | [Pong](#) by Azerion is in [the public domain](#).

Action games would soon take over the new universe of video gaming though—including [Asteroids](#) (1978), [Pac Man](#) (1980), and [Super Mario Brothers](#) (1985)—setting the stage for the zombie to enter the emergent fray. The zombie and the video game were a match made in

heaven, a match that would earn creators and production companies an incredible amount of money.¹²

This seemingly inevitable tryst was consummated in 1984, when the first zombie video game appeared, *Zombie Zombie*, produced initially in Europe. You, the player, with the toggle looming beneath your attentive and surely sweaty hands, drop into a maze from a helicopter and wander about, luring zombies to climb up on ledges and fall off. That is how you kill them before they kill you.¹³ Your helicopter can build the ledges, which you then jump across without falling. And that is how you save humanity from the zombie apocalypse.¹⁴ Evidently, zombies cannot jump, at least they couldn't in 1984.

In 1988, an iteration of one of the biggest blockbuster franchises in the history of gaming, *Super Mario Brothers 3*, was released, and it featured action and antagonists, by another name, that were effectively zombies. Innovative in this classic Japanese game for Nintendo were “its unintimidating skeleton turtles (a.k.a. *Dry Bones*),” which are “fleshless, and like traditional zombies they're nearly impossible to kill – Dry Bones resurrect themselves a few seconds after Mario or Luigi stomps on them.”¹⁵ Four years later, the hugely successful video game *Wolfenstein 3D* came out, which featured zombie-like beings in a far more graphic and violent fashion. *The Undead Guard* “have a surgically implanted gun grafted into their chest.”¹⁶ Making these horrific beings doubly evil, they are also Nazis. This was soon followed by the “cult classic” *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*, which launched in 1993 and positions players as teenagers who have as their objective saving “neighbors from being devoured by flesh-eating zombies and a host of other enemies, including a demonic giant baby.”¹⁷ Then the zombic doors blew wide open in gaming, in 1996, when the first of fourteen iterations of *Resident Evil* came out, a “highly influential” and madly popular zombie apocalypse game that we discuss more extensively later in the chapter.¹⁸

Another key entry into the zombie gaming universe is *Pokémon Snakewood*, which is something called a “rom hack,”¹⁹ a pirated alteration of another game called *Pokémon Ruby*. The player is wandering about in a recently devastated place called Littleroot Town and is bewildered by the inexplicable ruin all around. Embarking on this adventure requires a sidekick, so one chooses from three different *Pokémon* (weird fighting creatures with roots in the wildly successful card trading/fighting game launched from Japan in 1996). Then one wanders about, only to find Professor Birch being attacked by a zombie, who has a zombified Pokémon as his pugnacious wingman. You must defeat them, which is a constant in zombie fiction, film, and gaming (albeit not elemental to zombie walks):

After defeating the zombie and its zombified Pokémon, Birch takes the player to Oldale Town, which has been turned into a fortified safe-zone. There the player is informed that the entire region has been taken over by a zombie apocalypse, and that the player's older brother Landon (who is also the Champion) and his rival, May, have gone off to fight the zombies. They haven't been seen since.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, many of the most successful zombie video games are either derived from or inspire television series or movies. For instance, in *Last of Us*, which debuted on PlayStation in 2013, the third-person player seeks to escort a teenaged girl through a post-apocalyptic

America that is awash with zombic creatures who have been infected by a fungus and seek to infect the heroic player and his charge. It won the British Academy Games Award for Best Game of the Year and quickly became one of the most popular video games ever. Ten years later, in 2023, an HBO television series by the same name launched to rave reviews. The order is reversed in the case of *The Walking Dead*, the most successful television series ever, which debuted in 2010 and ran across twelve seasons. It is a drama of human survival in a post-apocalyptic America flooded with hordes of zombies. In 2012 the first of several video games based on the series appeared, and they have enjoyed accolades and popular success ever since. Chances are, somewhere in the world at any given moment countless people are playing either of these gaming masterpieces, testimony to the power of the visual in zombie apocalyptic culture and the ready transfer across media of the living dead and the end of the world.

But beyond the visual, the human obsession with death, and the human passion for fear and the evasion thereof, what explains the explosive success of violent video games? One of the most legendary game creators in history, Tim Schafer, the mastermind behind numerous classics including the 2009 *Brutal Legend*, offers that the answer lies in self-discovery and in having an outlet, a pressure valve, for our own violent impulses. The “idea of exploring in the shadow, the shadow archetype inside your own mind, I think is valuable.” Furthermore, “It’s important to explore, how does it feel to be mean to someone, how does it feel to be cruel in a safe environment?”²¹ The echoes of René Girard are unmistakable.

And what about violent zombie apocalypse games in particular? Peter Malloy has something very interesting to say about this:

To fully appreciate the struggles of zombie survival, we know that we must try it firsthand. Only then can we understand the anxiety, the insanity, the sick satisfaction that comes with outlasting the undead. This is how we will begin to truly understand the zombies and perhaps...ourselves. But how? Will you need a machete? Yes, eventually. But also, like with many of life’s problems, there is a lazier solution. The answer is – of course – video games.²²

Early zombie video games, furthermore, place an “emphasis on rescue” and “self-preservation,” themes that remain central in zombie cinema and gaming to the present day.²³ Given the newness of video gaming technology, however, those early games may seem somewhat crude and “childish.” But that all changed with the appearance of *Resident Evil*, which “set the standard in zombie gaming,” adds Malloy. “The original *Resident Evil* broke onto the scene when graphics were just sharp enough to produce a reasonable level of unmitigated dread. The creepy music, the puzzle/survival format, the [cheesy voice acting](#) – it was all perfect.” Over the course of *Resident Evil*’s sequels and spinoffs, though, there is a notable thematic shift from “survival/suspense to action/horror.”²⁴ This game was a game changer in the zombic gaming world, “one of the biggest horror franchises of all time, with 16 games and expanding into films, comics, novels, and action figures.”²⁵

Along with *Resident Evil*, we will now look at [Plants vs. Zombies](#), [DayZ](#), [Minecraft](#), and [Call of Duty](#). There are so many other zombie video games that it makes one’s head spin, as do

the countless films, books, e-zines, and comics, such that we cannot really profile more here, because later in this chapter we have to go on zombie walks. But, before analyzing these five games, let us just consider a couple of other interesting-sounding video game offerings that Malloy profiles and praises, and then we'll gaze momentarily upon an impressive app made by a Chicago teenager. The settings and sagas of zombie games are as diverse as they are sometimes surprising, like fighting zombies on a Russian whaling ship at sea in a major storm, which is where you are when you play [Cold Fear](#), or on a spaceship, which is where you are when you play *Dead Space*. Patrick Shaw also lists among the best zombie games *The House of the Dead* (1996), *Land of the Dead: Road to Fiddler's Green* (2005), the "light-hearted" *Dead Rising* (2006), *Left for Dead* (2008), *Call of Duty: Nazi Zombies* (2008), and *Dead Rising 2* (2010), among a couple of others, including *Plants vs. Zombies*, which has made my own top-five list.²⁶

In 2015, a Chicago teenager invented a zombie game app for the iPhone. Then fifteen years old and a sophomore at Riverdale High School, Ryan Robinson, a huge fan of the TV series *The Walking Dead* and a zombie aficionado, "wanted to continue his thirst for zombie destruction online," so he got creative and did something about it.²⁷ A veteran of *Mario Brothers* and other classic Nintendo games, Robinson set out to create a game that would both captivate those seeking to destroy zombies and be a "throwback," a nod to the technically cruder graphics of earlier-era gaming. He realized, by virtue of being, well, a teenager with an iPhone who was really into zombie gaming and other forms of gaming: "A lot of kids are into throwbacks."²⁸ The game is called [Bashy Zombie](#), and here is a summary by Tammy Joyner:

The player becomes a man holding a hammer. There are two buttons on either side of the screen. One button is for changing directions. The other is for bashing zombies. You score a point for each zombie you bash. The game gets harder the longer you play. It also includes a tutorial Ryan developed to help newcomers.²⁹

Created by Robinson in just three weeks, it soon attracted many users and earned him fifty dollars a day. One veteran insider of the gaming industry calls the app "incredibly impressive."³⁰

Bashy Zombie evidently still enjoys a small cult following and is impressive on many levels,³¹ but other zombie games attract millions of players daily. Meanwhile, certain leaders in a number of professional fields, like health care and education, have found zombie games to be helpful to educate or train. As such, there are zombie games designed to enhance elementary school learning and at least one designed for students in med school.³² There is another that is part of "an effort to stimulate interest in the nursing profession," a joint effort between nursing professors in Canada and Qatar. Players, as nurses, try their hand at "wrestling zombies into a 'de-zombification' station." It is about healing, as is nursing itself.³³ There is also an audio fitness game called [Zombies Run!](#), which "uses Augmented Reality (AR) to allow players to stage their own zombie encounters," as Kris Darby explains. "Through the intimacy of a pair of headphones, such engagements establish an imaginary space for the player to kinesthetically engage with the figure of the zombie and to deliberate on how it defines us as human beings."³⁴

As of this writing, in 2021, Wikipedia lists 148 zombie video games, but that is surely an

undercount, as some of them spin off into series and others have been missed here.³⁵ Plus there are underground zombie games that are not marketed but just shared and played informally among friends. Before going on our international zombie walk, let us consider the following games in less-than-minute detail: *Resident Evil*, *Plants vs. Zombies*, *DayZ*, *Minecraft*, and *Call of Duty*. We'll do this in chronological order, sticking to the original versions rather than chasing the sprawl of subsequent versions or spinoffs down the proverbial rabbit hole or opening the proverbial Pandora's box or can of worms—or can of zombies.

Resident Evil

Resident Evil was inspired by George Romero's films and by earlier games like [Alone in the Dark](#) (1994) and [Doctor Hauzer](#) (1994).³⁶ Though *Alone in the Dark* and *Doctor Hauzer* were not zombie games per se, they quickly became classics in the genre known as [survival horror](#) gaming. But over and above those earlier games, *Resident Evil's* creator, Shinji Mikami, took Romero's 1978 film [Dawn of the Dead](#), which when released abroad was actually called *Zombie*, as his chief influence.³⁷ Mikami's effort was hugely successful, and the game is widely considered a, if not *the*, pioneering survival horror video game. To date, the franchise/series has sold nearly 120 million copies, more than any other horror or zombie game ever.

Produced by the Japanese gaming company Capcom and released on PlayStation in 1996, the first iteration in the *Resident Evil* series launched as a [shooter game](#), one in which the player goes around shooting zombies. The player uses [tank controls](#) in going about a dreadful life, confronting horror, and seeking to not only survive but to save the world from the zombie apocalypse. Matt Perez explains what this means, why some gaming reviewers deride it, and why it is largely a thing of the past in gaming, kind of like the dial function in *Pong*:

Tank controls refers to movement that is relevant to the character's orientation rather than the camera's orientation. Pressing up always propels characters forward, while left and right rotate with no acceleration. Pressing down causes the character to walk backwards instead of turning around and running in that direction. Criticism, and the mechanics name, come from the obvious fact that humans can move in any direction, making tank controls feel unnatural. It's like pushing around an invisible shopping cart at all times.³⁸

Later versions of *Resident Evil* games would drop tank controls and shift to “first- and third-person” perspectives, or “over the shoulder” perspectives, but in the interest of spatial conservation let us focus on the first iteration of this blockbuster game.³⁹ The original initially carried the subtitle [Biohazard](#) in Japan, indicative of the element of contagion that spawns the zombies, but for copyright purposes that name had to be abandoned and, voilà, *Resident Evil* it became. Its setting is a fictional midwestern American town called “Raccoon City,” where a lab creating viruses for use in biological warfare leaks one into the world, and this pathogen turns humans into zombies.

In an effort to stop the virus from spreading beyond Raccoon City, the place is nuked by the United States government. That doesn't quite work, though, as it and other pathogens soon spread about the world, something that must sound quite relevant during our present COVID saga. For our purposes, *Resident Evil* is highly significant, too, for inserting the zombie into survival horror gaming at the very outset of the genre. It's not about tennis anymore and is getting serious and deadly. "Zombies take a star turn as the key enemy, surrounding your location, slowly breaking in," explains Malloy, and technology had just become advanced enough to make playing *Resident Evil* dramatically interactive, captivating, and terrifying. "*Resident Evil* is the truest instance of a zombie game: defined by the pressure to conserve necessary equipment, to investigate, and to avoid being eaten."⁴⁰ For a walk-through of a remake of the original *Resident Evil* zombie survival horror game, one can go to YouTube,⁴¹ but for now we should move on to plant biology—sort of.

Plants vs. Zombies

First launched in 2009 and initially and poetically called *Lawn of the Dead*, *Plants vs. Zombies* seems rather childish compared to many zombie games, with a cartoonish horde of zombies advancing slowly toward the player's house and absorbed by crude graphics. "Rather than look like many other horror games, it has a parodic quality," as K. J. Donnelly explains, complete "with comic zombies, a deranged neighbor (called Crazy Dave) with a saucepan on his head, and bizarre varieties of anthropomorphic plants."⁴² To ward off or destroy the zombies, the players deploy these plants in their yards to shoot seeds at or launch bombs upon the menacing but shuffling undead enemies.

Despite a rather meager marketing budget to promote the app, *Plants vs. Zombies* soon developed a cult following that mushroomed into global success, with actors on talk shows speaking about their fondness for the game and moms baking birthday cakes iced with images of its characters.⁴³ It became especially popular for players using iPads, although more frequently it has been played on smartphones. Because it centrally is "a siege with enemy's relentless forward movement toward the player's battlelines," it is categorized as a "tower game."⁴⁴

The original *Plants vs. Zombies* offered players five modes, with "Adventure Mode," consisting of fifty levels, seemingly the mainstay. And, as is the case with many video games, the more success you have (in this case by killing zombies), the higher level you reach. The zombies move in a unidirectional linear fashion as they saunter toward your house. Their master, who rarely appears, is [Dr. Edgar George Zomboss](#). There is a monetary dimension to the game, as the player starts out with a limited number of seeds and purchases more as the supply runs dry. Some plants are more effective during the day and others at night, so a good deal of planning and strategy needs to be employed to advance. And different kinds of zombies appear:

Certain plants are highly effective against specific types of zombies, such as the

Magnet-shroom, which can remove metallic items from a zombie, such as helmets, buckets, ladders, and pogo sticks. The zombies also come in a number of types that have different attributes, in particular, speed, damage tolerance, and abilities. Zombies include those wearing makeshift armor, those who can jump or fly over plants, and a dancing zombie able to summon other zombies from the ground.⁴⁵

One can also plant vegetables and flowers to ward off the dancing zombies, who sometimes find that they must get across a swimming pool. One dancing zombie actually first appeared in *Plants vs. Zombies* as the “Thriller Zombie,” depicting Michael Jackson in his zombic video for his smash hit “Thriller,” but his estate protested, thus he is no longer a menace to the homes, lawns, and gardens of suburbia.⁴⁶ Not to be outdone, there are also zombies that ride dolphins and others who pole vault.



Plants vs. Zombies cosplay couple. | [Plants vs. Zombies Couple](#) by [Joe Crawford](#) is used under a [CC BY 2.0 License](#).

And just what happens if a zombie breaches the vegetal wall of defense and saunters within reach of the player's house? Since the battlefield in *Plants vs. Zombies* is a suburban lawn, why, there must be a lawnmower somewhere, right? Sure enough, as if by magic, a lawnmower suddenly appears to mow down the breacher, as well as any zombies behind him in his lane. But once used, that mower is no longer available to protect the home against subsequent zombies lumbering up the same lane, and, alas, "the other plants and zombies stop moving while that zombie enters the house. Crunching sounds will be heard, accompanied by a scream and a message saying, "The zombies ate your brains!"⁴⁷

Minecraft

What is *Minecraft*? Here is a succinct answer about this multiplayer game, a bit of a techno throwback, from Ty Hollett:

At its most simple, *Minecraft* enables players to break and place textured three-dimensional blocks to produce various edifices. Players can freely move through a three-dimensional, algorithmically generated open world, collecting resources, crafting tools, and building structures. Single-player and multiplayer options are available, with a vast amount of user-driven multiplayer servers emerging – unique game worlds hosted by individual players themselves on their computers – that cater to various styles of play.⁴⁸

That doesn't make *Minecraft* like a survival horror or zombie game per se, but you can die; you must endeavor to survive. In fact if one plays in "survival" mode, as opposed to "creative" mode, zombies appear, some of whom are human babies and pigs. It is not nearly as graphic as any of the other games summarized here, but there is blood.

Because *Minecraft* is the most popular video game ever, having sold more than 200 million copies since its 2009 launch from Sweden, its zombies clearly demand our attention in this chapter. In *Minecraft*, zombies "are generally slow-moving (except for their babies) and are fairly easy to defeat if you are prepared." However, as Cori Dusmann explains, "If you don't have a good weapon or armor, they can still kill you. And even if you manage to kill one, it will summon other zombies to spawn in the area."⁴⁹

To begin my research on this game, I tried playing it but soon abandoned all hope of advancing, so I turned to my daughter Izzy, our resident *Minecraft* whiz, a seventeen-year-old veteran of *Minecraft* coding summer camps and a recent vanquisher of the Ender Dragon. She also has built and maintains an amazing village and goes on all sorts of plundering raids. Though *Minecraft* is not centrally a zombie game, and it often seems to me decidedly unapocalyptic, there are all sorts of zombies in its orbit or universe, and they are actually called zombies.

Following are Izzy's zombie observations:

Minecraft Zombie Lore

- One of the first monsters added to the game looks very much like a zombified version of the player.
- Variations include:
 - *Zombie villager*: a zombified version of the only other humanoid creature in the game aside from the player. Zombie villagers can be turned back into regular villagers, called curing. One does so by giving the zombie villager a potion of weakness made from a fermented spider eye (a mix of spider eye, sugar, and brown mushroom) and a golden apple, a magical apple with restorative health properties.
 - *Stray*: A zombie exclusive to the deserts, savannas, and badlands. Acts identical to a normal zombie; the differences are purely aesthetic.
 - *Giant*: Essentially just a massive zombie that acts the same as a normal one. It has now been removed from Minecraft.
 - All zombies walk very slowly, groan, and are hostile toward the player as well as the villagers.
 - All zombies, with the exception of drowned, burn in sunlight.
 - An enchantment, a.k.a. a magical power up called “smite,” when applied to a sword damages zombies, as well as all undead mobs, quite effectively.
 - *Drowned*: Underwater zombies that sometimes use tridents to attack the player. They have underwater monuments that contain loot. Confronting drowned is the only way that players can obtain the trident weapon as well as nautilus shells.⁵⁰

I take it that most drowned spawn in seas and rivers, while others are simply drowned zombies. Sounds a bit confusing to me, but evidently there is more to it than what my daughter just explained, her brilliance and expertise notwithstanding. For one thing, zombies in *Minecraft* cannot take too much sun and can actually catch fire if they do, enabling them to burn you with flames and fury. Furthermore, there are the Endermen, which “are mobs that come from the End, but they can also spawn in the Overworld. They are not hostile unless you look them directly in the face, at which point they will attack.”⁵¹ Sounds downright apocalyptic and zombic, though the Endermen are not called zombies in *Minecraft*. There are also other menacing and creepy beings to watch out for as you create your village and roam the Overworld, like skeletons, spiders, and creepers, while Izzy’s village at times has been invaded by polar bears that swim from a distant iceberg to raid. But another category of zombies in *Minecraft*, per Dusmann, are the Zombie Pigmen, which used to be pigs but became zombified when struck by lightning, though thankfully “this is rare.”⁵² Time to escape the Zombie Pigmen and move on to DayZ.

DayZ

“The survival genre owes a great debt to DayZ,” opine Jordan Sirani and Jared Perry, in large part because the game, first released with the since-abandoned subtitle of [Standalone](#), “contrasted the surrealism of a zombie infestation with the hyperrealism of exposure, infection, hunger, and the degeneration of human nature in the face of disaster.” Given such a range of (virtual) realities and the creativity and resourcefulness required for the player to succeed (and survive), it is categorized as a [sandbox game](#). Because of the aforementioned human degeneration, the players “simply never knew whether the next person you met was out to help you or murder you.” The result is “an addictively captivating experience” for the player, helping DayZ land at number ten on Sirani and Perry’s ranking of the greatest zombie games in history.⁵³ It is also unique insofar as it “has no quest chains to complete or any goal aside from survival.”⁵⁴

DayZ first appeared on the market in 2018. The setting is a rather expansive fictional former Soviet republic called Chernarus; one would not be wrong to wonder if the game’s creator (a Kiwi named Dean Hall) came up with that name to evoke the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the Ukraine. Infection is the premise here, as some sort of contagious plague has infected many humans and turned them into zombies. The player’s goal is to survive in the face of the zombie apocalypse, finding resources to do so and wiping out the infected along the way, to avoid becoming one of them. For Lars Schmeink, DayZ is also noteworthy for moving away from the “first-person shooter” that had come to predominate in zombie games, situating “the player into an ongoing zombie apocalypse.” Furthermore, “the game shifts the emphasis of gameplay from a mission-oriented, narrative-driven shooter to a non-scripted open-world survival game.”⁵⁵

Given that the horizon is vast and the player in DayZ must find resources to survive, over and above killing zombies, you must “Slay, Scavenge, Survive,” to cite the title of Schmeink’s excellent paper. You start out on the shores of Chernarus, called by the game “a harsh post-apocalyptic landscape,”⁵⁶ in only what you happen to be wearing when you wind up there and possessing just “a flashlight and batteries.” Then things get real: You “will have to scavenge for food, water, medicine, and shelter, as well as deal with both zombies and human bandits to survive.”⁵⁷ But the flashlight is hardly useful for repelling or eliminating zombies and bandits, so the search for weapons is an integral part of scavenging and survival. Because DayZ is configured technologically to be a multiplayer game, once you make allies (or get your roommate or a sibling to play with you), you don’t have to face these challenges alone. Be forewarned, though, that other players can “tend to be hostile” and represent “a continuous threat.”⁵⁸

An advanced player of DayZ will have found food, water, weapons, and shelter and survived zombies and bandits. They continue to roam about Chernarus, scavenging, in the quest to survive. It is helpful to find vehicles that still work to get around, and usually they are near buildings, though some are damaged beyond hope or out of fuel. But once you die, that is it. You lose all that you have gathered and must start over on the Chernarusian shore as a new character with just a flashlight and batteries. The goal is to survive as long as you can,

but ultimately there are no winners, and the post-apocalyptic horror just spins on and on ad infinitum. Once dead, though, you can come back to life and play again to explore this dystopian world and sift through eerie “dilapidated villages, decrepit military bases, or rotting urban centers.”⁵⁹

This chapter opened with one expert’s opinion as to why zombies have become so common in video games and why so many people play them every day. Other experts actually polled frequent players of *DayZ*, or “Survivors,” using “a theological and psychoanalytical framework” to help us understand what the experience is like for them.⁶⁰ Robert Geraci, Nat Recine, and Samantha Fox got intriguing responses to their queries: Only a handful of players expressed fears of “dying” in *DayZ*, whereas more players simply indicated that one result of death is that “It is fun to start over.” One respondent replied: “I am a pretty good survivor. I can get well geared up pretty easily and am a force to be reckoned with. . . . But I am still so bloody scared.”⁶¹ Most players indicated, furthermore, that they rather enjoy “the fear of being frightened in *DayZ*.”⁶² But one must fear not only zombies in *DayZ*:

The terrifying possibility that other players are the monsters who hunt raises the stakes and reminds us of the evolutionary response to agency in the environment. A shadow flitting across the screen could be a sign of impending doom, but more likely at the rifle of a hidden human sniper than at the hands and mouth of a mindless zombie.⁶³

Finally, fears in *DayZ*, along with other zombie apocalypse games, literature, and film, are philosophically quite intriguing, as Schmeink observes:

The zombie apocalypse is . . . both a poignant commentary on the anxieties of the present and an extrapolation of consequences for the future. Zombie apocalypses comment upon current issues of systemic control in times of crisis and on anxieties about future sociopolitical realities.⁶⁴

How much of this sounds so familiar to us right now? How might considerations of notions of othering, sociophobics, and the outbreak narrative shape our reading of what we all went through during the COVID pandemic? How can we take all that we have learned about apocalypticism in human history and about zombies and make sense of this horrific global disease and promote compassion and a more understanding future in which, instead of blaming the other, we unite as a species and make this a better world? We turn to these questions in Chapter 12, but now let us answer a call to duty.

Call of Duty

So popular has been the *Call of Duty* franchise of zombie games that Matthew Barr calls it a “perennial sales behemoth.”⁶⁵ Publishing that comment in a book on zombie gaming, Barr,

though referring to the entire *Call of Duty* franchise, especially has in mind the 2009 *Call of Duty: Zombies*.



Gamers playing *Call of Duty* and warding off zombies at the 2011 *Zombie Challenge* in Los Angeles. | [Call of Duty](#) by [The Community – Pop Culture Geek](#) is used under a [CC BY 2.0 License](#).

In this section, we focus just on the spinoff, but first a few words on the storm by which the *Call of Duty* franchise has taken the gaming world. The first iteration of this behemoth was released in 2008 and called *Call of Duty: World at War*. It is a first-person shooter game in which the player is armed and gazes down the barrel of a rifle during combat. It features multiplayer options and is rather violent and gripping to play, especially in **zombies mode**, as reflected here by Adam Rosenberg:

Zombies mode is the sort of wave-based survival minigame that’s become so prevalent in modern day game development. There’s no end to the mode, and no real script either. It just continues. The more you play, the tougher the zombies get. Eventually, the size and strength of the horde overcomes the firepower available, and the players – up to four of them, playing cooperatively – succumb.⁶⁶

At first glance, zombies mode might seem the only thing zombic in *Call of Duty: World at*

War, but there are also zombies. They are not in the central mechanics of the game, but they do appear in a “map,” which, if you click on it, brings you to a “minigame.” When you open the map that carries the name “[Nacht der Untoten](#),” which is German and literally translates as “Night of the Undead,” you will also find “Nazi zombies.” It is a complicated place to enter, and Nazi zombies are doubly dreadful, as they are, well, zombies and Nazis. Here is a brief description from *Fandom*, which, by the way, has a massive amount of material on almost every video game you can imagine:

It begins with a short cutscene where your character sees a swarm of Nazi zombies heading towards him after his plane (which was carrying 1–4 people depending on how many players are in the game) crashes in “No Man’s Land” near an abandoned bunker. Nacht der Untoten features many weapons from both the campaign and multiplayer modes (although there are no Russian or Japanese weapons available), and introduced the Ray Gun.⁶⁷

The original zombie map in *Call of Duty* is fairly basic, featuring a bunker and three rooms in a structure, but the enemies are terrifying, dressed as German soldiers and sometimes as SS officers. They must be combated as they swarm and attack. Other zombie maps and amplifications of zombies’ powers would be added to later iterations of the game, but for now let us look briefly at the second, *Call of Duty: World at War: Zombies*, released in 2009.

We’ll just call it *Zombies* here for the sake of fluid reading. In this game, the player is tasked with defending a single bunker against a wave of attacking Nazi zombies. One is armed up, bunkered in, hunkered down, and spraying bullets against the undead enemies. You earn points for kills, which can be exchanged for additional weapons and ammo in a shop. Blades also come in handy here, because “when a zombie gets too close, you can slice it with a knife.” Grenades are good to have, too, as they can take out groups of zombies at a time.⁶⁸ It is violent, and the graphics are quite advanced. The timing for the success of *Zombies* could not have been better, as this occurred just two years after Apple introduced the iPhone, the platform for which the game was initially designed. On the iPhone, and subsequently the iPad, millions of people soon found themselves slicing apart, blowing up, and shooting zombies. And what is it like to play? Let’s turn to a reviewer named arn for a brief intro:

The game begins with you in a house with boarded up windows. Waves of zombies slowly start attacking and you need to defend against their attacks. Windows are repaired with the press of a button, though having your attention split across the different entrances is a challenge. The ramp up is rather slow, but soon you’ll have trouble surviving the oncoming hoard of zombies. As you kill zombies, you earn coins which can be used to buy better weapons which are found throughout the structure.⁶⁹

So killing zombies makes you richer, but you soon lose your fortune by stocking up on other weapons to kill them. It’s a catch-22 scenario of utter dread, but millions of people love inserting themselves into it, at least fictionally.

Conclusion: Zombies in Video Gaming

Most zombie video games are quite apocalyptic in tone. They force us to philosophically confront our own death, if not the end of the world as we know it. Many of these games are “Romeroesque.” According to Webley: “The video game zombie has its origins with one man – the independent film maker George A. Romero.”⁷⁰ Let us also consider the following commentary by Tanya Krzywinka on why zombies are so popular in gaming:

The popularity of zombies in video games may in part be informed by the way that they articulate, in a mediated fantasy context, contemporary cultural fears about the loss of autonomy or the capacity of science to create apocalyptic devastation. . . . Game zombies provide the ideal enemy: they are strong, relentless, and already dead; they look spectacularly horrific; and they invite the player to blow them away without guilt or a second thought.⁷¹

Perhaps this downright Girardian comment is the perfect segue from gaming to walking. For, unlike zombie gaming, in which we are never zombies and seek to “blow them away,” in zombie walks people revel in dressing up as and behaving like the undead. This is altogether mimetic, indeed.

Walking the Undead

A [zombie walk](#) “is not actually the apocalyptic rise of the undead,” as Julia Round explains, “but instead . . . an organised event that has become an established cultural practice at a global level since the early 2000s.” That is indeed the case, as people gather, dressed as zombies, to saunter about city streets, through forests, along boardwalks, and over fields throughout the world, from Toronto to Cape Town, from Asbury Park to Cleveland, from Hong Kong to Sydney, from Bristol to Tokyo, from Paris to Buenos Aires, and so on ad infinitum. Some of them are formally organized, while others are more of the “flash mob” variety. Some take the form of “pub crawls, zombie marathons, zombie LARPs, and zombie ice-skating parties. Like the zombie plague itself, such events are becoming ubiquitous, perhaps even endemic.”⁷² Why? Where did this come from and what is the point? Round provides part of the answer, stating that they are sometimes forms of “political protest” (think Occupy Wall Street) or part of “a movie tribute, or simply a Halloween celebration.”⁷³ Furthermore, it is about fun, evidently, and often about booze:

The pursuit of fun is the most common reason, although community spirit and a love of zombies also feature. Families and children can often be found in the horde. The activity itself seems to be motivated by a dual imperative toward group bonding (zombies are never alone) and individualism (both costume and performance are

frequently elaborate and unique). The walk inscribes the duality of fear and play so often found in the gothic.⁷⁴

Where Girard's mimetic theory seems, at least to me, very helpful in understanding the popularity of zombie games, it also has limited application to the analysis of zombie walks. In these gatherings there is really no scapegoating at play, no surrogate victims to sacrifice toward allaying the human proclivity to intraspecies violence, but clearly these participants imitate zombies. Rather than being potential sacrificial victims who are cathartic to kill for the participant to survive, here the walkers are make-believe zombies intent on having a good time and perhaps getting hopelessly inebriated while contributing to the next world record for the largest zombie walk ever.

Let us take a brief look at the history of zombie walks before putting on our Indiana Jones hats to specifically consider a few of them. Then we explore further just what they mean and why they are so popular. Zombie walks are a somewhat new form of [cosplay](#), a word that is a mash-up of "costume" and "play." The term was coined in 1984 by Japanese journalist and publisher Takahashi Nobuyuki after he attended the World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles, where many in attendance were costumed.⁷⁵ [Worldcon](#), as it is commonly known, dates from 1939. That year the first fan to dress in costume appeared, a man named Forrest Ackerman. In other forms, cosplay has a longer history, with much earlier roots—as deep as the Middle Ages, really—in events like masquerade balls, carnivals, and costume parties.

A few years ago I was visiting Philadelphia's Reading Terminal Market and was quite struck by the hordes of people strolling around dressed up like any cartoon or anime or manga character one could possibly think of. They did what anyone else does at the Market—eat, drink, buy fresh produce, gourmet cheeses, spices, crafts, etcetera. I even saw Batman getting a shoeshine! A boot shine, actually. I had spaced out on what month it was, but I reassured myself that it was not Halloween, and, as it turned out, it was May. So I sat at the bar and chatted up Wonder Woman, who was pounding Bloody Marys at 9:00 in the morning. This tipsy superhero, fresh in from San Diego, informed me that Wizard World Comic Con was being held over three days in the adjacent Pennsylvania Convention Center. That explained it, as Comic Con is one of the most popular forms of cosplay in the world, with masses of superheroes and villains flocking annually from all over the country and sometimes from abroad to cities like Philadelphia and Chicago. I wish I had asked Wonder Woman if she had flown to Philly from San Diego in costume. Fitting (pun intended), as the first Comic Con was held in San Diego in 1970.⁷⁶

So zombie walks are not monolithic; they don't just fall from the sky. In addition to cosplay, the walks are also heirs to the emergence of the [flash mob](#) (or flashmob, sometimes called smart mobs). Flash mobs largely rely on social media, which obviously is a recent phenomenon but one that has transformed much of the world, for better or for worse. Some are for charitable purposes. That said, the pioneering flash mob did not rely on social media, as far as I can tell. Myspace was the first social networking site, and it launched in 2003, the very year of the first ever mob event, in New York in a Macy's rug department. Facebook began the following year, in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006. The senior editor of *Harper's* magazine, Bill Wasik, came up with the weird (not sure what other word to use here) idea to

invite a large number of people to go to several New York bars and prepare to be instructed on what to do next. More than a hundred people then followed the instructions to head to Macy's and gather to visit the rug department en masse. Cynthia Bix explains what happened next: "When approached by a salesperson they were supposed to say that they lived together and were shopping for a rug for their warehouse loft." Wasik later managed to get two hundred people to gather in the Hyatt Hotel lobby in New York to clap together for fifteen seconds. "With the Macy's and Hyatt events was born the flash mob."⁷⁷



A flash mob occupies the main hall of an art museum in France in 2014, not to protest but to make their own dance or art. Most of them were night students there. | [Flash Mob in France](#) by [Palais des Beaux-Arts](#), [Photo J.M.Dautel](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

Online networking would soon enable flash mobbing in many parts of the world. Not all of it has been good, though. A flash mob is basically a gathering of "a large group of people" who "assemble at a public place, more or less spontaneously. They do something wacky or surprising for a short period of time and then disperse."⁷⁸ Given that the first flash mobs occurred in the bowels of such bastions of capitalism as Macy's and the Hyatt Hotel in New York City, I would not disagree with Aristita Ioana Albacan that they are "proven to be performative acts that reconnect individuals with their environment in a collective and creative, playful manner [and] challenge the everyday life routine and the associate mainstream." Not all of them are so "playful" though.⁷⁹ They have also served as effective forms

of protest, but when honest citizens' lives are disrupted or are harmed by such events, they no longer should be thought of in such terms, in my humble opinion. As someone living and writing in Philadelphia during violent "flash mobs" in the city in 2009 and 2010, I can hardly think of them as "playful," though perhaps the term "flash mobs" for those events, which were mainly composed of African American teenagers, was simply misapplied by the media.⁸⁰

From cosplay and flash mobs to zombie walks. The first zombie walk was staged in part as a mockery of the vampire, and it all took off from there. The year was 2000 and the setting Milwaukee, at a [Gen Con](#) convention that brought together enthusiastic gamers of many interests. *Dungeons and Dragons* was then all the rage, and many conventioners role-played as wizards and such, but the vampire remained popular. Irrked that too many conventioners were taking over the event by playing a vampire role-playing game, a few creative, other-thinking men decided to disrupt matters by dressing up as zombies. They gathered sixty folks to paint their faces, tear their clothes, and lurk about the convention space. They called their "[LARP](#)-disrupting event . . . Zombie the Hunger," as the chief architect of the mission recalls. "When we were all properly zombified we extended our arms, started muttering 'brains' and lurched towards the closest Vampire LARP." The groundbreaking zombie walkers were soon urged to disperse and leave by security guards. As they left, they chanted "equal rights for the equally dead!"⁸¹

The following year an innovative event was organized in Sacramento, called a "zombie parade."⁸² Things really started to take off in 2003, when "400 people took part in a zombie walk in Vancouver, Canada," while twice as many "transformed themselves into hungry monsters in October 2006," as Redfern explains, "when a similar event was held at the Monroeville Mall, in Monroeville, Pennsylvania."⁸³ The mall was chosen for the walk because it was the setting of George Romero's epic 1979 zombie film *Dawn of the Dead*.

Immediately after the Monroeville zombie walk, the popularity of such events "reached near apocalyptic proportions." To wit, Ledbury, England witnessed 4000 zombies invade in 2009, the same year that 5000 lurchingly descended upon Brisbane, Australia, and another 8000 sauntered about Grand Rapids, Michigan. South America soon caught the fever, as evinced by upward of 13,000 participants in a zombie walk in 2012 in Santiago, Chile, and some 24,000 at a walk that same year in Buenos Aires, Argentina. But those numbers were smashed when a zombie walk in Minnesota's Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, attracted 30,000 undead.⁸⁴ The Ledbury event once held the distinction as the largest zombie walk ever in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, but, obviously, that has since been absolutely shattered, first by Asbury Park, New Jersey (my own hometown), then by Mexico City. *Guinness* started listing zombie walks in 2006, honoring Pittsburgh as the first holder of the turnout record, although a meager 846 walkers were counted. Asbury Park regained its title in 2013, with 10,000 zombies walking on its iconic Atlantic front boardwalk. Minneapolis would soon wrest the title from the Jersey Shore thanks to a zombie pub crawl and the participation of some 30,000 humanoid.



About 900 zombie walkers set the world record in 2006 by gathering, adorned in fake blood, outside the Monroeville Mall, near Pittsburgh, where George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* had been filmed in 1977, and released the following year. | [Zombie Walk in Pittsburgh](#) by [MissDeeCS](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 2.5 License](#).

As with zombie video games, we will limit ourselves to briefly discussing five instances (in this case, locations) from among countless significant zombie walks: Asbury Park, Cape Town, Cleveland, Mexico City, and Tokyo. We'll go about this alphabetically:

Asbury Park, New Jersey

In 2010 and 2013, this Jersey Shore town broke the record for the most zombie walkers ever gathered at a single event, with 4093 falsely bloodied participants tallied.⁸⁵ Asbury Park is named for the father of Methodism in America, Francis Asbury (1745–1816), and one can only wonder what he might think of thousands of zombies sauntering about his namesake city. In 2020, the Asbury Park zombie walk was virtual because of the COVID pandemic, but it has since resumed live and in-person, or undead and in-person.⁸⁶ The first was held there in 2008, the very year [World Zombie Day](#) was created (though by some accounts *World Zombie Day* was launched in 2006). So there is a good bit of history here, in a city most identified with Bruce Springsteen, The Boss. Even though the rock star did not grow up here (that was in

Freehold), he lived here as an emergent musician and cut his teeth in local venues, especially the legendary Stone Pony, a favorite spot of some of the walking zombies who need a break from the nearby boardwalk to have a drink.

As Asbury's zombie walk grew more popular, interesting features were added along the boardwalk. For instance, there are now souvenir stands in Convention Hall and professional makeup artists, which is great if you have no idea how to make your face look zombic. There is also a "Thriller Dance Workshop" for walkers who wish to partake in a performance later in the day or evening, and an inimitable "Jell-O Brains Eating Contest."⁸⁷ Many walkers converge in bars following their bloody sauntering and brain-eating march along the boardwalk. Booze and zombies seem to go well together. And there are plenty of bars in Asbury, the Stone Pony being but one of them.



Long before zombies ever walked there, fashionable African American women enjoyed strolling along Asbury Park's iconic oceanfront boardwalk. Asbury Park South, by Florine Stettheimer, 1920. | [Black Women on the Boardwalk of Asbury Park](#) by [Florine Stettheimer](#) is in the public domain.

One striking thing about the two zombie walks I attended as an observer years ago in Asbury Park was that most participants seemed to be from out of town, and almost all of the zombies were white.⁸⁸ The city has been gentrifying heavily in recent years, mostly and literally “on the other side of the tracks,” and it is unclear how much of this development benefits Black people on the other side, west of the tracks. One could also raise the question of what good zombie walks do for the marginalized in American cities. To walk, you need time, money for makeup, transportation, etcetera. But the organizers laud the zombie walk as part of Asbury Park’s renaissance after decades of poverty, sadness, racial violence, abandonment, and decay:

When it comes to zombies the dead never die... they just keep coming back. It is my sincere hope that everyone who joined us for this (or any) Zombie Walk in Asbury Park over the years will return to do it again in the future. The Zombie walk . . . has played a tremendous part in the revitalization of the City of Asbury Park.⁸⁹

It’s obvious that zombies are big money these days, but it is more than a bit ironic to hear them spoken of as agents of “revitalization.” Walk on, my undead brothers and sisters, walk on.

Cape Town, South Africa

Cape Town is home to a few “zombie monuments,” plinths or pedestals on which once stood statues of colonialists and imperialist figures, like, in this instance, Cecil Rhodes.⁹⁰ The beautiful South African city is also a key setting in a series of celebrated zombie apocalypse novels by Lily Herne, the [Mall Rat Series](#).⁹¹ It thus makes perfect sense that Cape Town should be home to a popular annual zombie walk, and it is interesting to reflect on the zombie’s return to Africa (please see Chapter Five) in the form of masqueraders covered in fake blood. It’s been quite a journey for the undead, indeed, around the world and back again to square one.

Like most other zombie walks, Cape Town’s happens annually, is “family friendly,” and generates support for a local charity. The Zombie Walk South Africa website touts it as follows: “An event for all-ages making it fun for the entire family to participate and is the only pet friendly event of its kind.” I would differ with that statement, as zombie dogs are not uncommon sights at zombie walks elsewhere in the world. But I digress. The Cape Town walks, furthermore, “help raise funds for local charities like the Lucky Lucy Foundation for abused and neglected animals and they continue to do so.”⁹² The paradox of (symbolically) eating human brains while raising funds to save animals is worth contemplating here.

Tied to Halloween and clearly the city’s largest event during that holiday period, the first zombie walk in Cape Town was held in 2009 with just under 200 participants. In 2015, some 3500 zombie walkers took part, and soon Cape Town went on a campaign to break the *Guinness Book* record for largest zombie walk ever, aggressively marketing the event by tying it to the city’s lively party culture and assuring potential walkers that “Zombie Walk has a 100% safety record with no real blood ever spilled.”⁹³ Here are the rules:

- Obey the marshals, security staff, and medical staff and all traffic officers at ALL times.
- Mock weapons are welcome, however all blades MUST be fake.
- All firearms must have an ORANGE TIP.
- Consumption of alcohol during the walk is prohibited.
- Stay hydrated at all times please.
- Have a plan – if anyone in your group gets lost have a meet-up point.
- Share the event, invite everyone you know, attend on the day.
- Have fun!

Sober, obedient zombies! Go figure! The 2020 event, like many zombie walks around the world, was canceled due to COVID.⁹⁴ There is something additionally ironic about zombies cowering in the face of a viral pandemic, which foiled Cape Town's effort to beat out Minneapolis for the record as the largest zombie walk ever. Maybe some other year.

Cleveland, Ohio

Chicago was a contender for consideration in this chapter, as it does have an annual zombie walk that is massively popular, one of the largest in the United States.⁹⁵ Seattle too. But I chose Cleveland just to do something less obvious. Usually Cleveland's zombie walk takes place in a ring suburb on the lake, a town called Lakewood. As in Asbury Park, Cleveland's zombie walk is tied to drinking, as observed by local journalist Julie Washington: "Within the hour, the zombies' thirst will turn from blood to beer, and from chomping human brains to taking pictures of one another."⁹⁶ The starting point is outside a pub, after all, the historic Five O'Clock Lounge.

Cleveland was an early entrant into zombie walkdom, with Ohio's largest city launching its first event of this deadening, sauntering kind in 2007. That year, a modest seventy-five participants showed up, with "a couple of volunteer makeup artists" on hand for the ghoulish cause. "From there it has always grown," said chief organizer and underground horror film producer Joe Ostrica. The walk quickly became so popular that by 2009 it was being held twice a year. Cleveland's zombie walk enjoyed a serious dose of undead cred when one of the actors from Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, Bill Hinzman, who played a graveyard zombie, was the event's "special guest," made up the very way he had appeared in the greatest zombie movie ever.

One of the curious things about zombie walks in general is that they are often designed to be "family-friendly events."⁹⁷ So, in the Cleveland zombie walk, instead of setting up a

lemonade stand, entrepreneurial children set up a stand from which they sell “zombie blood.” This is evidently a successful stop along the walk among the performing, lurching undead, who seemingly stop for nothing else—save, of course, to pose for pictures or grab a beer. In addition to being welcoming of children, in Cleveland the walkers, who each pay five dollars for their tickets, are all required to bring two nonperishable food items, which in 2009 netted over 500 pounds of food for a local charity. Meanwhile, passersby in cars, at the intersection of Clifton Boulevard and 117th Street, take notice and slow down to take pictures of the walking dead and to honk their horns.

And, like many cities, Cleveland also hosts a spinoff 5K zombie run, in which runners “have flags which represent their health. Zombies will try to steal those flags.” The runners are not zombies, but they have to navigate “a zombie-infested course.”⁹⁸ Another spinoff that might well be unique to Cleveland is an inimitable event called “Zombies on the Lake Paintball Annihilation,” where you can pay twenty bucks for a spot on a “zombie annihilation vehicle” and a rented paintball gun with 100 rounds of ammo. It is something like a hayride, and you stealthily maraud on your annihilation vehicle through the zombie-infested woods and try to shoot them. If you run out of ammo, five dollars will get you another 100 paintballs.⁹⁹

Mexico City, Mexico

Mexicans have long painted their faces to look like skeletons and walked through and slept in cemeteries in the amazing and beautiful tradition known as the Day of the Dead. In ancient Aztec religion, the dead were believed to live among the living, while in ancient Mayan religion there is a dreamworld in which “men and women transform into Flesh Dropper and Fallen Flesh: as their name suggests, they lose their skin and parade around as skeletons.”¹⁰⁰ Add to that the Catholic feasts of All Souls Day and All Saints’ Day, and you have, in this deeply Catholic country, the perfect baseline on which to launch one of the world’s largest zombie walks. Recall from the previous chapter that Mexico was also the first place where a foreign zombie movie was made, and there have been quite a few produced there ever since.

In 2011, Mexico City beat out Asbury Park for the record number of zombie walkers, topping 10,000 and entering the *Guinness Book*, a triumph that received worldwide press coverage, especially in Asia. Asbury Park bounced back two years later to retake the title, which New Jersey has since lost to the Twin Cities, as noted above. Mexico City has an advantage in being one of the largest cities in the world with some of the worst traffic in the world, so the feeling of being zombified in a car is very common there. In the view of Victor Ramirez Ladron de Guevara, the zombie’s wild popularity in Mexico has much to do with identity, for “the figure of the zombie points variously (and simultaneously) to past, present and (imagined) future Mexican national identities that are suppressed and/or encouraged.”¹⁰¹

For zombie walks, 2011 was a watershed year, as Mexico emerged supreme. Here is Guevara’s description and take on the events:

In this event, participants not only dressed as zombies, they also performed zombified

versions of iconic Hollywood characters (zombified versions of Charlie Chaplin, Wolverine and Marilyn Monroe were highly visible during the march). Other Zombie Walks across the world privilege the recreation of a specific number of zombie types, such as “nurse zombie, business person zombie, geek zombie, sports zombie.” However, in Mexico’s Zombie Walk participants reinforced their condition as globalized citizens.

In Mexico City, the zombie walk is also readable as a form of resistance, he adds, for it “reactivates the memory of thousands of Zapatistas in a nation that has continuously and successfully suppressed its indigenous roots.”¹⁰² Zombies thus vicariously channel and celebrate Zapata and thereby bolster pride in indigenous Mexican history and culture.

Tokyo, Japan

Japan has a tremendously vibrant zombie culture, having produced dozens of films, video games, anime, and manga that are zombic in some way, shape, or form. Its largest city and capital, Tokyo, launched its first zombie walk in 2013, in a substantial and leafy place called Yoyogi Park. Michael d’Estries ranks this among the best eight zombie walks in the world, along with those in Asbury Park, London, Mexico City, Pittsburgh, Toronto, and Strasbourg, placing it in quite interesting, lofty, and global company.¹⁰³ Tokyo’s zombie walk is sponsored by an organization called **Zombiena**, “a self-proclaimed ‘zombie performance unit’ whose members refer to each other by number rather than name.”¹⁰⁴ Zombiena also takes over a local city bar for zombie nights once a month, a “fetish bar” called Crow, where late afternoon on the last Sunday of each month you can go in for a drink and soon “see the limp shapes start to shuffle toward you.”¹⁰⁵ Those would be zombies.

The zombie walk in Yoyogi Park features mostly Japanese nationals dressed up as any number of zombie sorts, including clowns, schoolgirls, and Buddhist monks or nuns, while toddlers with blood painted on their faces sip juice boxes as they are pushed around the park in strollers by their zombie parents or zombie nannies. The event, pre-COVID at least, has always attracted a good number of foreigners, as many people actually travel around the globe to participate in major zombie walks, such being the world’s obsession with the zombie. An American visitor asked a couple of young Japanese women walkers what the appeal of participating was, and one replied: “Freedom! Nothing to think and nothing to do.” Another replied, somewhat ironically for sure, “Because it makes me feel alive.”¹⁰⁶

Yoyogi Park is the largest zombie walk in Tokyo but not the only one, and there are others in other large Japanese cities, like Kyoto. In Tokyo, another takes place at Universal Studios, and zombie walkers have even ambled through the city’s red-light district. The one in the park, though, features “(simulated) flesh eating.”¹⁰⁷ The question remains: Why? Why have so many cities around the world taken up the zombie walk, and why do so many thousands of people participate? It is to that question that our attention now turns. But first, further acknowledgment is due to Tokyo, and to Zombiena, for hosting an unprecedented “girls-only”

zombie walk in 2011, one featuring “an all-girl zombie army in bikinis terrorizing ramen shops and assorted bars.”¹⁰⁸ To their credit, they also drank a lot of beer, unlike the walkers in Cape Town.

Figuring Out Dead-ish Walkers and Gamers Who Kill Them

Games and parades are generally about fun, but they can also be about violence and protest, and about expunging the deep proclivities to violence in our species, ala René Girard’s theory of ritual sacrifice. Recall that the first zombie walk was held at a gaming convention and was something of a protest against there being too many LARPing vampires in Milwaukee that year. Many scholars read protest into zombie walks as well. So, it seems that it is all about fun, protest, and violence, though the violence actually hurts no one, and zombies seem to be morally easy victims of players’ potentially fatal gunshots, bombs, and plant seeds. Unlike players of zombie games, walkers are not armed with any lethal weapons (just fake ones), plus they are zombies and, out of solidarity, not about to wipe each other out. Solidarity and what Emile Durkheim calls “collective effervescence” (an intoxicating “delirium” produced by collective rituals) are sometimes on full display on such walks, as well as in most forms of multiplayer zombie video games.¹⁰⁹

In the following chapter we extensively cover zombie theory: interesting intellectual commentary as to why people are so obsessed with zombies and what philosophical questions the zombie raises and sometimes even answers. But for now let’s stick to some of the leading theoretical points made by scholars of gaming. Brandon Kempner makes the following observation: “Zombies and capitalism are cut from the same cloth. Both are relentless, multiplying without bounds, showing no mercy, no compassion, and no empathy.” And although “films and novels may have lost their revolutionary powers, the violence, spectacle, and immersion of zombie video games retain their ability to disrupt capitalist realism.”¹¹⁰ But is that entirely true? When zombie games generate billions of dollars for large companies in Tokyo and Silicon Valley—bastions of capitalism that they are—can we really conceive of them as anticapitalist? No one really needs to play zombie video games, after all, while so many people in our world wake up hungry every single day and must scramble to find food and potable water, feed and clothe their children, pay for their schooling, and acquire other basic necessities.

Similarly, some scholars have tried to read “resistance” to capitalism and to injustice in zombie walks, and here they are on firmer ground than the game theory folks, at least when it comes to those walks that are “explicitly intended to be read as political acts,” as Kee reminds us. “As part of ‘Buy Nothing Day’ protests, zombie walkers sometimes converge on local malls and shopping districts,”¹¹¹ for instance, and zombie walkers participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Meanwhile, in 2007, as Elizabeth McAlister explains, “a zombie flash mob invaded a San Francisco Apple Store to stage an anticonsumerist performance piece where zombies pretended to eat the computers on display.”¹¹² That is clearly an anticapitalist form of

protest, though most zombie games and zombie walks seem not to be. Despite having been told by walkers themselves “that the zombie walk wasn’t a form of protest but was just for fun,”¹¹³ Sarah Juliet Lauro disagrees; then again, “protest” and “resistance” are the tropes that Lauro explores in relation to zombies throughout their history, dating back to the slave era.¹¹⁴

Concerning the majority of zombie walks that are not explicitly designed as protests, Kee also begs to differ: “The rise of zombie walks [and gaming] has coincided with growing post-9/11 reservations about the war on terror as well as global economic security. The fact remains, though . . . most walkers [and, I suspect most gamers] aren’t necessarily making these links when they participate.”¹¹⁵ If you have the spare cash to splurge on video games and the spare time to participate in a zombie walk, can this all really be about anticapitalism and resistance? There is much more to it than that, and we consider leading theoretical commentaries about zombies and the zombie apocalypse in the next chapter, some of which have deep and impressive philosophical roots. Enough with the games and the parades! Time now to get serious and deep.

Notes

1. Peter Dendle, *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia, Volume 2: 2000–2010*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012, 164. [↵](#)
2. Stephen J. Webley, “Zombies, Zombies Everywhere, What Is One to Think?” in Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson (eds.), *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, New York: Routledge, 2019, 3. [↵](#)
3. Jeffrey A Hinzmann and Robert Arp, “People for the Ethical Treatment of Zombies (PETZ).” In Wayne Yuen (ed.), *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2012, 191. [↵](#)
4. At least two other scholars, whose work I discovered after having drafted this chapter and come up with the idea that Girard would be an excellent thinker for understanding all of this, have applied Girard’s theory in analyzing the zombie apocalypse: Shelly Pruitt Johnson, “[Zombies, Imitation and Apocalypse, and the Resurrection](#),” *Love is Stronger*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.shellypjohnson.com/zombies-imitation-and-apocalypse-and-the-resurrection/>, last accessed February 24, 2023; and Duncan Reyburn, “Love in the Time of Zombie Contagion: A Girardian-Weillienne Reading of *World War Z*,” *Studies in the Fantastic* 5, 2017, 47–77. [↵](#)
5. Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard’s Theory of Mimesis*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013, 31. [↵](#)
6. René Girard, “Generative Scapegoating” in Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly (ed.), *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987, 122. [↵](#)

7. René Girard, *Sacrifice*, trans. Matthew Pattillo and David Dawson, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011 (2003), x. ↵
8. Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, and Joel Hodge, *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred*, Volume I: *Girard's Mimetic Theory across Disciplines*, New York: Continuum, 2012, 266. ↵
9. Heather Bode, *E-Sports and the World of Competitive Gaming*, San Diego: Reference Point Press, 2019, 4. ↵
10. Andrew Ervin, *Bit by Bit: How Video Games Transformed Our World*, New York: Basic Books, 2017, 28. ↵
11. James D. Ivory, "A Brief History of Video Games," in Rachel Kowert and Thornsten Quant (eds.), *The Video Game Debate: Unveiling the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Video Games*, New York: Routledge, 2015, 2. See Ivory for some interesting historical context on earlier efforts at computer gaming, *Ibid.*, 4. The first commercial video game appeared in 1962: *Spacewar!* See also Ervin, *Bit by Bit*, 27–32. ↵
12. By 2013, the video game industry was generating over 90 billion U.S. dollars per year in profits. Ivory, "A Brief History of Video Games," 15. That year, roughly half of the ten top-selling games were military-themed, like several iterations of *Call of Duty*, with a few sport simulation games, like *Madden: NFL 25*. *Ibid.*, 6. ↵
13. The game should not be confused with one called *Zombies Zombies Zombies*, which appeared in 2013 and became a popular iPad app. ↵
14. For a walk-through of this rather numbing, however pioneering, game, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xc5isZsK>, last accessed August 29, 2021. ↵
15. Patrick Shaw, "[A History of Zombies in Video Games](#)," *PC World*, October 1, 2020, https://www.pcworld.com/article/206769/history_zombies_video_games.html#slide3, last accessed August 28, 2021. ↵
16. *Ibid.* ↵
17. *Ibid.* ↵
18. *Ibid.* ↵
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Glossary

Alone in the Dark

1994 protozombie video game that helped inspire soon-to-emerge real zombie video games. ↴

Asteroids

Classic 1978 action video game featuring a single spaceship floating around the universe and trying to survive collisions with asteroids, which the player shoots. ↴

Bashy Zombie

2015 zombie game created by a Chicago teenager named Ryan Robinson; largely app-based. ↴

Biohazard

Original subtitle of one of the most successful zombie video games ever, [Resident Evil](#), indicative of the element of contagion that spawns the game's zombies. ↴

Call of Duty

Hugely popular video game franchise launched in 2008. Features a number of zombies in the action, especially in the 2009 *Call of Duty: Zombies*. [↴](#)

Cold Fear

2005 video game of the survival horror genre, in which the player wards off zombies on a Russian whaling vessel. [↴](#)

Cosplay

Coined in 1984, a mash-up word conjoining “costume” and “play,” which would identify an increasingly popular social phenomenon where people gather in costumes and, well, play. [↴](#)

Dawn of the Dead

1978 movie filmed in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, and written by the Shakespeare of zombie flicks, George Romero, with James Gunn. [↴](#)

DayZ

2018 zombie apocalypse video game. Created by a Kiwi, it gears off of a contagious plague, leaving the player to ward off zombies and distrust other players in a multiplayer format, though you can play it alone. [↴](#)

Doctor Hauzer

1994 protozombie video game, a classic of [survival horror](#) gaming. [↴](#)

Dr. Edgar George Zomboss

The zombie master in the epic video game *Plants vs. Zombies*. Rarely appears but is the total boss. Game was launched in 2009 and is usually played on a smartphone app. [↴](#)

Dry Bones

Among the first zombie-like beings in video game history, fleshless and relentless enemies in the classic game *Super Mario Brothers 3*, which launched in 1988. [↴](#)

Flash Mob (aka flashmob or smart mob)

A usually hastily organized gathering of people, either by email, smartphone, or social media, with participants clustering en masse to protest, make some kind of statement, or just have fun, usually in urban settings. The first was launched in New York City in 2004 at Macy's. [↴](#)

Gen Con

Convention of tabletop gaming enthusiasts, usually held in large cities, launched in 1968 and today attracting tens of thousands of gamers. [↴](#)

Girard, René (1923–2015)

French philosopher and anthropologist most renowned for his development of [Mimetic Theory](#) and his work on literature and ritual sacrifice. [↴](#)

Higinbotham, William (1910–1994)

American physicist and atomic scientist who invented the first video game in 1958, [Tennis for Two](#). [↴](#)

LARP

Interactive role-playing game, usually involving players who are costumed to represent and embody the fantasy figures they take on. An acronym for Live Action Role Playing. [↴](#)

Last of Us

Award-winning third-person player zombie apocalypse video game, one of the most popular ever. Debuted in 2013 and made into an HBO television series ten years later. [↴](#)

Mall Rat Series

A collection of popular zombie apocalypse novels by South African writer(s) Lily Herne, the first in the series published in 2011. Also called the Deadlands Series, the books are geared toward adolescent readers. [↴](#)

Mimetic Theory

Theory developed by French philosopher [René Girard](#) that human desire (and culture) is driven by imitation, leading to violent impulses that were originally allayed by ritual sacrifice. [↴](#)

Minecraft

The most successful video game in history; launched in 2009 in Sweden, a multiplayer [sandbox game](#) and something of a throwback, where you use three-dimensional blocks to build a village and sometimes encounter all sorts of zombies. [↴](#)

Nacht der Untoten

Subgame map in [Call of Duty: World at War](#). Open the map and find yourself confronted with Nazi Zombies. German for “Night of the Undead.” [↴](#)

Night of the Living Dead

Classic 1968 zombie apocalypse movie by legendary filmmaker [George Romero](#); widely considered to be the greatest ever in this cinematic genre. ↵

Pac Man

Early action video game, first released in 1980 and wildly popular. Not a zombie game, but enemies make their way through a series of mazes, seeking to eat you. ↵

Plants vs. Zombies

Launched in 2009, and initially to be called *Lawn of the Dead*, a hugely popular video game featuring a cartoonish horde of zombies advancing slowly toward the player's house. The player deploys plants to ward off the dully approaching zombies. Normally played on an iPad or a smartphone. ↵

Pokémon

Pugnacious creatures that first appeared in the wildly successful card trading game by the same name, launched from Japan in 1996. The basis of a franchise that has subsequently produced highly popular video games. ↵

Pokémon Ruby

2002 role-playing video game in the Pokémon franchise; though it does not feature zombies, it was soon hacked into a zombie game called [Pokémon Snakewood](#), which seems to have appeared in 2010. ↵

Pokémon Snakewood

Rom hack of the 2002 role-playing video game [Pokémon Ruby](#), which brings zombies into play. Appears to have launched in 2010. ↵

Pong

Two-dimensional video game, produced by Atari in 1972, that pits two players against each other in a simulated tennis-like or ping-pong-like match. Dials are used to move paddles up and down and hit the ball back toward the opponent. A single-player version pits one against a computer-controlled paddle. ↵

Resident Evil

1996 zombie apocalypse game considered to be the pioneering instance of the “survival horror” genre, a shooter game that would, over several iterations, sell over a hundred million copies, making it one of the most successful video games of all time. ↵

Rom Hack

Pirated alteration of an earlier video game, like [Pokémon Snakewood](#). ↵

Romero, George (1940–2017)

Perhaps the greatest-ever zombie filmmaker, an American whose [Night of the Living Dead](#) (1968) and [Dawn of the Dead](#) (1978) are widely considered classics and have influenced not just subsequent zombie cinema but also zombie video games. ↴

Sandbox Game

Usually a multiplayer video game in which players enjoy and exercise a great deal of creativity to solve problems and achieve objectives. *Minecraft* is the leading example of such a game. ↴

Shooter Game

Form of video game in which a player occupies the point of view and visual perspective of a shooter, navigating dangerous terrains and other venues and sometimes shooting zombies or Nazi zombies. ↴

Standalone

Original subtitle of the influential and innovative 2018 zombie apocalypse game *DayZ*. ↴

Super Mario Brothers

Highly popular action video game that launched in 1985 by Nintendo and enjoyed a run of success with a series of later iterations, with zombies eventually finding their way into the franchise. ↴

Survival Horror

A genre of action video gaming in which the player is surrounded by horror and seeks to survive in the face of any range of threats. *Resident Evil* is the pioneering and quintessential example of such a form of gaming. ↴

Tank Controls

Form of operating system for playing video games in which a joystick or keyboard is used to move the visible player's character in any number of directions, rather than controls that are operated from the visual perspective of the camera. ↴

Tennis for Two

Invented in 1958 by atomic physicist [William Higinbotham](#), the world's first video game, in which two players used flatlined paddles to knock a ball back and forth across a screen trying to get the opponent to miss.

The Undead Guard

Zombie-like enemies, who are also Nazis, in the classic 1992 first-person shooter action video game [Wolfenstein](#). ↵

The Walking Dead

The most popular television series ever, a zombie apocalypse drama that was launched by AMC in 2010 and ran through 2022. ↵

Wolfenstein

Classic 1992 first-person shooter action video game; not a zombie game per se but it does feature armed zombie-like enemies who are also Nazis. ↵

World Zombie Day

Pretty self-explanatory, the first held in 2006. It is usually held internationally in September or October of each year. Often tied to zombie walks in cities around the world. ↵

Worldcon

The World Science Fiction Convention, an event of much popularity, garnering international participation, that first met in Los Angeles in 1939. ↵

Zombie Walks

Dating from 2000, and drawing upon [cosplay](#) and [flash mob](#) traditions, these organized events happen, often annually, in cities around the world. Hundreds or thousands—sometimes tens of thousands—of participants dress as zombies and saunter about public spaces. ↵

Zombie Zombie

Dating to 1984, the world's first zombie video game. Players drop into a maze from a helicopter and wander about, luring zombies to climb on ledges and fall off. ↵

Zombiena

Tokyo-based “zombie performance unit” that organizes the city's various zombie walks and hosts a monthly zombie night at a local bar. ↵

Zombies Ate My Neighbors

Cult classic 1993 zombie video game in which players go about the world as teenagers and seek to save their neighbors from the living dead. ↵

Zombies Mode

A form of gaming control—most associated with *Call of Duty*, though quite prevalent in

zombie video games—in which hordes of the living dead swarm relentlessly as players seek to survive the onslaught. ↴

Zombies Run!

Augmented reality fitness game in which players use headphones to engage zombies and presumably get exercise while engaging with them or running from them. ↴

Zoroaster (Zarathustra)

Persian prophet and founder of the Zoroastrian religion; lived sometime between 1700 and 1000 B.C.E; presumed author of the Gathas. Likely the world's first apocalyptic visionary. ↴

12. Why Zombies? Sociophobics, Othering, Contagion

Overview: What is Fear?

Etymology is often a particularly good place to start any inquiry, so here is the origin of the word [fear](#):

Middle English *fere*, from Old English *fær* “calamity, sudden danger, peril, sudden attack,” from Proto-Germanic **feraz* “danger” (source also of Old Saxon *far* “ambush,” Old Norse *far* “harm, distress, deception,” Dutch *gevaar*, German *Gefahr* “danger”), from PIE **pēr-*, a lengthened form of the verbal root [*per-](#) ... “to try, risk.”

The sense of “state of being afraid, uneasiness caused by possible danger” developed by the late 12c. Some Old English words for “fear” as we now use it were *fyrhto*. . . . Meaning “feeling of dread and reverence for God is from c.1400. To *put the fear of God* (into someone) “intimidate, cause to cower” is by 1888, from the common religious phrase.¹

Meanwhile, this is the best answer I have found to this important question: What is fear? From Irena Milosevic and Randi McCabe:

Fear is a fundamental and universal emotion that has been adaptive in ensuring our survival as a species – it serves as an alarm system that enables us to perceive and react to danger in an instant, without conscious thought. . . . However, when the fear alarm system goes awry – by misfiring in response to nonthreatening stimuli, for example – the consequences may be significant. Maladaptive fear can lead to severe psychological distress and interference in one’s ability to engage in daily activities and function normally. With this presentation, fear becomes what we call a phobia – an excessive and persistent fear that is disproportionate to the degree of danger in a situation.²

Thus, fear is pervasive and “normal,” as echoed in the work of Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen:

In fear we are met by something outside ourselves, and what we meet is a negation of what we want. We fear the important things in life being destroyed or taken away from us, such as our freedom, dignity, health, and – taken to its extreme – our lives. We fear not only for ourselves but also for others, especially those dear to us. When any of this is threatened, fear is a normal reaction.³

How paradoxical it is that we desire fear when fear itself is a threat to the acquisition of the very things that we desire.

This chapter takes a careful look at fear and its manifestations and functions, focusing on three key phenomena and concepts, relevant to our analysis of the zombie apocalypse: [sociophobics](#), [othering](#), and contagion. Obviously fear has everything to do with the zombie craze, but the idea of the zombie and our infatuation with the zombie and with fear itself are decidedly complex, as is human nature. So they require serious philosophical consideration in order to be analyzed and grasped on a deeper level. Such consideration is the chief orientation that will guide and perplex us over the following pages.

Fear, Fascination, and the Births of Religion, the Apocalypse, and the Zombie

Most people probably experience fear every day of their lives, whether triggered by paranoia, distorted thoughts, or rationally demonstrable threats to their well-being or that of beloved others. Take the great American artist Georgia O'Keefe: "I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life." I return to her words time and again in contemplating and living with my own fears, ultimately finding hope in the latter phrase of O'Keefe's arresting statement: "I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing that I wanted to do."⁴ To be terrified, to fear, is often unpleasant, if not horrible, but sometimes this emotion causes us to do salubrious things, like getting a COVID booster shot; cutting down on cigarettes, booze, salt, and fried foods; exercising more often; fixing the brakes on the vehicle; and so on.

Fear is also something that we desire, a tantalizing emotion, an experience to which we return again and again, out of a deep-seated evolutionary necessity, and its triggers are often overwhelmingly fascinating and revolting at the same time: [Mysterium tremendum](#) (terrifying Mystery) and [Mysterium fascinans](#) (fascinating Mystery). The Mystery, this numinous "entirely Other," that terrifies and attracts, inspires a dual emotion that the great German scholar [Rudolf Otto](#) (1869–1937) identified as "the starting point for the entire religious development in history.... the basic factor and the basic impulse underlying the entire process of religious evolution."⁵ Otto calls this other "[the Holy](#)," but "minus its moral factor" and "minus its rational factor altogether."⁶ Defined as such, the holy could be God, a demon, a zombie, an impersonal energy, or the apocalypse. When we encounter it, we are launched into a sense of awe and dread, which takes multiple forms across the history of religion:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping as a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul. . . thrillingly vibrant and resonant It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering.⁷

In the hazily intense, transcendent experience of the sacred, *Mysterium tremendum* is usually accompanied by *Mysterium fascinans*, for the Holy has “at the same time another aspect, in which it shows itself as something uniquely attractive and *fascinating*.”⁸ One may think here of Moses and the burning bush in Genesis or of Arjuna’s vision of Lord Visnu in Bhagavad Gita, the great Hindu scripture:

There an angel of the Lord appeared to him in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed. So Moses decided, “I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned.”

When the Lord saw him coming over to look at it more closely, God called out to him from the bush, “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” God said, “Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father,” he continued, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God (Genesis 3: 2-3).

Krishna, the great lord of discipline, revealed to Arjuna the true majesty of his form. It was a multiform, wondrous vision, with countless mouths and eyes and celestial ornaments, brandishing many divine weapons. . . . Arjuna saw all the universe in its many ways and parts, standing as one in the body of the god of the gods. Then, filled with amazement, his hair bristling on his flesh, Arjuna bowed his head to the god, joined his hands in homage and spoke: “Seeing the many mouths and eyes of your great form, its many arms, thighs, feet, bellies, and fangs, the worlds tremble and so do I. . . . my inner self quakes and I find no resolve or tranquility. Seeing the fangs protruding from your mouths like the fires of time, I lose my bearing and I find no refuge; be gracious, Lord of Gods, shelter the Universe ... Tell me – who are you in the terrible form? Homage to you, Best of Gods! Be gracious! I want to know you as you are in your beginning. I do not comprehend the course of your ways” (Bhagavad Gita 10:8–31).

Other great thinkers besides Otto have seen fear as the root of religion, though theirs are entirely materialist analyses, whereas Otto’s was theological insofar as he believed that the Holy is objectively real, or *sui generis*. For the pioneering anthropologist [Bronislaw Malinowski](#) (1884–1942), “when there is uncertainty and unpredictability and danger, people engage in religious rituals to try to ensure a particular outcome,” as Karl Thompson explains. Here religion functions “to reduce anxiety by providing confidence and a feeling of control over the situation.”⁹ Great Western philosophers have come to similar conclusions about fear’s nurturing religion, like [David Hume](#) (1711–1776) and [Bertrand Russell](#) (1872–1970). In his 1757 *Natural History of Religion*, Hume argues that “agitated by hopes and fears . . . men scrutinize, with trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.”¹⁰ Nearly two centuries later, Russell published the provocative book *Why I Am Not A Christian*, where he argues in like vein:

“Undoubtedly the most important source of religion is fear; this can be seen in the present day, since anything that causes alarm is apt to turn people’s thoughts to God. Battle, pestilence and shipwreck all tend to make people religious.”¹¹ Put more colloquially, there are no atheists in foxholes.

Whether or not we agree with Hume and Russell as to religion’s being an epiphenomenon that results ultimately from human doubt and despair, it is undeniable that fear influences religion on a profound level. It probably does so by way of some combination of Otto’s vision and Hume’s. Many of us grew up being taught to fear God, after all, and fearing things in life that are more demonstrably real. But just how does fear influence human consumption and mimicking, gawking over, playing with or against, and killing zombies?

I would argue that Otto’s *Mysterium tremendum – Mysterium fascinans* diptych can go far in answering this question, by peeling off more of the veil covering the collective psychological taproot of human fascination with and fear of the undead. That and evolutionary biology, capitalism, and the chili pepper, about which I’ll say more in a moment. We fear zombies and evidently we like to do so—at least the Hollywood or video game version. At times they do ambush, however sluggishly or lightning fast. Yet we are so infatuated with them in the imaginary because they can harm us, kill us, or infect us to become one of them, and we get to kill them in video games or walk out of the theater without harm, our hearts sometimes racing. Thus, gripping but safe fear is at the heart of it all when it comes to zombies, coupled with an equally gripping fascination. This also underlies the apocalypse, in terms of human psychology. It is extremely risky to venture about when zombies are around, or to be unprepared spiritually for the apocalypse. We fear the end, the apocalypse, and “zombies have served as an archetype of the fear of the return of the dead,” as Philippe Charlier offers, “an outlet for the harshest of anxieties and fantasies, and sometimes also the most harebrained.”¹² Phillip Cole adds, fear of zombies transcends the fear of death itself “because they bring the threat of our destruction with them from beyond the grave.”¹³

I once met a former zombie in Haiti. The man had been liberated from his zombic state by a [Pentecostal](#) preacher. He explained to me that while he was a zombie he feared absolutely nothing, but that later, once liberated, he so feared being re-zombified that he changed his religion, abandoning Vodou and becoming a Pentecostal, believing that to be the surest form of protection against re-zombification.¹⁴ As Donald Cosentino rightly puts it, “Rather than fearing zombies, what Haitians would fear is either becoming a zombie or else great sadness at looking at someone whose life and death plans have been interrupted . . . by a bad magician.”¹⁵ In the same documentary in which Cosentino makes that comment, J. Lorand Matory opines that “the zombie seems to represent a set of fears and dilemmas deep in the hearts of most US Americans that we have not processed consciously. Consequently they emerge in the form of nightmares. Repeated, obsessional nightmares.”¹⁶

Based on research into why people eat and enjoy chili peppers despite the pain, perspiration, indigestion, and watery eyes that they can cause, Matt Kaplan offers that “there is pleasure in the mind in watching the body react negatively while knowing perfectly well that nothing bad is actually going to happen.” This is referred to as “mental mastery”: “in this realization there is a sense of mastery of mind over body that is, in itself, pleasurable.”¹⁷ So chili peppers might well be another key to understanding why people are so infatuated

with zombies. Fear and mental mastery can also lead people to fetishize zombies, a form of “maladaptive fear,” because zombies, at least the kinds seen in comic books, novels, movies, and video games, rarely and barely exist, even if at times they *do* exist quite explosively, and spawn and sprawl virally, in the captivating but ultimately fictive imaginary realm. So we can fear them without really fearing them and enjoy the mental mastery that they enable. Chili peppers would not, however, explain human captivation with the apocalypse, because the end of the world is very real and inevitable, whether or not it involves the Antichrist, four horsemen, dragons, a split moon, locusts, earthquakes, pestilence, or divine judgment. Heat is the common denominator between chili peppers and the apocalypse—blazing heat. But in the latter, some of that heat is eternal, while in the former we can just put down the plate when our mouth is temporarily burning, just as we can put down the joystick when we need a break from evading or slaughtering zombies, walk out of the theater, or turn off the TV unscathed.

We have traveled far in this book, beginning some three thousand years ago, from Persia to Haiti, covering much ground and crossing seas, meeting the dead and the undead, and contemplating the afterlife, the apocalypse, and our fate. En route, we have seen apocalyptic and zombic splendor, angst, disaster, and fascination. This chapter concludes Section Three of *Zombie Apocalypse*, while in the conclusion the End Time and Judgment Day will be recentered. But presently we are getting philosophical and theoretical and raising the question of how, when, and why people in places like the United States, Korea, Japan, Australia, Argentina, Mexico, South Africa, and France have become so captivated by zombies. Why do they watch them, fear them, dress up like them, walk like them, axe murder them, and spend tons of money on them? Before launching into a few of the most compelling philosophical forays into these and related questions, recall that the zombie in most films, novels, comic books, video games, and zombie walks shares very little with the zombie in Haiti. The Haitian zombie, per Kaiama Glover, “is not at all the crazed, bloodthirsty monster raised from the grave by some compulsion to hunt down humans and feast on their brains. Such a conception of the zombie – drooling, stiff legged, arms outstretched – is strictly a Hollywood invention. . . . the zombie in Haiti is a victim, and not a predator; deserving of pity more than fear.”¹⁸

Recall, too, from Chapter Ten, where we explored several influential zombie novels and films, that many analysts seem to agree that their popularity is largely about fear—not so much the fear of zombies per se but the fear of everything that they might represent. To wit, following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, America witnessed both a rise of [Islamophobia](#) and a recharged obsession with zombie cinema, especially in its apocalyptic form. As Eric Hamako rightly observes, “Rising fears about Muslims are one factor driving the current surge in zombies’ popularity. Demonized Muslims and zombies are both Orientalist projections of the negative repressed qualities that Western Whiteness anxiously denies about itself.”¹⁹ Although the first four chapters focused on the apocalypse, in Chapter Ten we looked only at zombic apocalyptic cinema and not more “purely” apocalyptic films. That was chiefly a function of the book’s tripartite structure, but let us be reminded here that the apocalypse has gripped humanity for much, much longer than the zombie: for millennia. But humans have for just as long dreaded earlier forms, imaginings, and possibilities of the undead, of protozombies, if you will.

As already noted, Stephen Prince argues that prezombic or unzombic apocalyptic movies, at their very best, “fashion beguiling visions from daunting conditions that have seemed inescapable to the human psyche throughout its centuries of existence.”²⁰ To be daunted is to fear, especially when the source of the daunting appears to be “inescapable to the human psyche.” Over the first two years of teaching the class for which this book is primarily written, the one purely apocalyptic feature-length film that I have shown is the 1972/73 evangelical thriller [A Thief in the Night](#). The movie, the most influential of its genre ever, depicts the [rapture](#), which is not explicitly found in the Bible, but based on biblical interpretations that have relatively recently thrust the notion to the center of Protestant Christian [apocalypticism](#).



apud: phillip medhurst THE RAPTURE: ONE AT THE MILL. MATTHEW 24:41. JAN LUYKEN exudit: harry kossuth

Jan Luyken's *The Rapture: One at the Mill*. 1740 engraving. Based on the passage in Matthew 24: 41: “Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.” | [The Rapture](#) by [Jan Luyken](#) is in [the public domain](#).

As Timothy Beal explains:

Building from these [biblical] fragments an image of the saved, dead and alive, being raptured up from the earth to heaven, this rapture theory is then inserted back into Revelation as an event that, although not explicitly described in the text, will take place

before the reign of Satan and his beasts. During that time of terror, those “left behind” will be forced to worship the beast and take its mark, or be persecuted and killed.²¹

In other words, the “[tribulation saints](#)”—those not quite evil enough to worship the beast but not quite “ready” enough to be assumed into heaven during the rapture—are forced to stay on earth for seven years and are urgently challenged to fend off Satan’s bastions and to resist becoming one of them, infected with evil, totally succumbing to and annihilated by their sin. In Beal’s reading, it seems that the tribulation saints are endeavoring to survive what is like the zombie apocalypse in five ways: “First, both story worlds emerge . . . in the theological vacuum of a perceived withdrawal of God from the world.” Each is also “built on a dynamic of us-versus-them,” as in the living versus the living dead, or the tribulation saints versus the beasts of Satan. “Third, both story worlds are constructed to scare the hell out of us. . . . Fourth, both story worlds are especially popular in times of war, terrorism, and mass death”—like today, surely, a time of COVID, Al Qaeda, and environmental destruction. “Fifth and finally, not only do both story worlds resonate with the war-tornness of Revelation, but both draw literally from elements of it.” So just as in Revelation people are brought back to life but not yet saved, thus is the zombie.²²

It was [neocolonialism](#) that brought the Haitian zombie to life (pun fully intended) in Hollywood and in the pages of American novels and comic books, a monster that has been abducted, stolen, appropriated, and transformed in ways that are highly profitable in the United States and globally. But the Haitian zombie has been thanklessly left in the dust, abandoned, an entity whose stolen other has been remade for massive profits that never trickle down to the Caribbean. Zombies in Haiti are not contagious, nor are they really feared, nor do they run or eat brains. “Cultural theft”—racially inflected, [neo-imperialist](#) thievery—is, for Sarah Juliet Lauro, central to the zombie’s success in Western economies.²³

A pitiful victim of sorcery, yes, but more expansively the zombie is and always has been a pitiful victim of capitalism. “Whether in Haitian religious practices, art, and cultural mythology, or in US films,” as Elizabeth McAlister explains, “the zombie serves to index the excessive extremes of capitalism, the over-lap of capitalism and cannibalism, and the interplay between capitalism and race in the history of the Americas.”²⁴ To be othered in such a way that one serves an unjust social system is thus to be cannibalized, zombified by that very system. To labor incessantly to service debt, for instance, zombifies those who are straddled with debt, as many, if not most, people in the United States are.

Largely because of the exploitation that is the essence of global capitalism, the next thing you know, a bunch of mostly white, Latin American, or Asian folks are dressed up as zombies and shuffling about city streets, around the world, chanting “brains.” Meanwhile, on Amazon and eBay you can shop for hundreds of thousands of zombie things, including a *Plants vs. Zombies* PVC action figure toy set, LEGO zombies, and an anti-Joe Biden American Horror zombie T-shirt, to say nothing of all of the games, movies, books, and other merchandise. Why? How and why did all of this happen? We seek to answer these questions here, in our final chapter, but first I would opine that, though enabled by imperialism and fueled by capitalism, on a deeper level it is really about human need and human fear and the human need to fear. A need to know that we have nothing to fear, or at least a need to fear something unreal in order

to escape contemplation of real things that should absolutely terrify us. An outlet. A pressure valve. For Daniel Drezner: “The spread of the living dead into every nook and cranny of American popular culture mirrors societal fears about the amorphous, asymmetric threats in the world today – the ‘unknown unknowns,’ as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it.” Furthermore, the CDC and “other actors ... have exploited the zombie apocalypse to spread a millenarian message of imminent societal collapse.” Even “gun rights advocates and their political allies” have gotten into the fear game and used zombies to promote their cause.²⁵

For reasons such as these, Camille Fojas finds the zombie to be “a loaded cultural figure that symbolizes a number of social fears about disaster, ruin, and dehumanization. The zombie marks the return of something long dead, something unresolved, put to rest, but never really mourned or purged.”²⁶ Thus, if in America we have never reconciled the debt crisis or the civil rights struggle, or truly embraced that **Black Lives Matter**, or come to terms with the related vastness of wealth inequality and racial injustice in our country, the zombie will keep returning as a constant reminder of that, and of how it could all come tumbling down any day. Meanwhile, being pitched into a life of indebtedness is itself a form of zombification. Think of those zombies in **White Zombie** working in the mill, mindlessly pushing the wheel in circles toward nothing more than staying unfree and perpetuating Monsieur Murder Legrande’s wealth and white privilege. It’s not a stretch to say that the zombies are the debtors, Legrande is the bank, and the mill is the structure of society. Meanwhile, the potion that zombified the millworkers is a form of socialization that dupes us into believing that our “otherness” is natural. “Debt demands the reanimated corpse of the indebted, resulting in the living debt of indentured servitude.”²⁷

In a similar theoretical analysis to mine, Kyle William Bishop, a leading scholar of the zombie in popular culture, draws upon celebrated literary critic Gayatri Spivak’s idea of the sub-subaltern toward understanding the symbolic and metaphoric registries of *White Zombie* and the subsequent pioneering zombie movie *I Walked with a Zombie*:

Spivak’s critique of the colonial class system can be related to the social system of the zombie narrative as well. When it is applied to movies such as *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie*, the essentially subordinated mindless creatures are subordinated for two reasons. . . . (1) the master has no responsibilities towards a group of automatons that require little food, no pay, and no time off, and (2) the zombies have no voice, no opinions, no consciousness, and (most importantly) no ability to organize.

But, adds Bishop, the zombie as “the sub-subaltern differs from Spivak’s conception in kind and not just degree. They are truly ‘other’ both because of their fundamental lack of ‘humanity’ and because their physical appearance, their ‘stain’ of the human, makes them decidedly uncanny.”²⁸

Underlying the zombie’s uncanny sub-subalternity are three forces: sociophobics, othering, and contagion, which, when it comes to the undead, are almost inevitably overlapping and interconnected, as we’ll see. They all have to do with fear. Some of these ideas have been briefly touched upon earlier in the book, as well as René Girard’s relevant **mimetic theory**, but

here the aim is to understand and interrogate them on a deeper level. Toward that end, we should turn to philosophy and social theory, with a bit of psychology tossed into the mix along the way.²⁹ Let us begin with the intriguing concept of sociophobics.

Sociophobics

American anthropologist David Scruton coined the term *sociophobics* in the early 1980s for “the study of human fears as they occur and as they are experienced in the context of the sociocultural conditions that humans have created.”³⁰ How does one employ this concept for cultural, psychological, philosophical, or social analysis? One relevant example is found in the study of horror films, where the understanding that “the wide variety of fears present in society when the film is created is made manifest in the movie” is carefully considered, as Kevin Wetmore explains.³¹

The notion of sociophobics should not be confused with *sociopathy*, which is a diagnosable psychological condition of someone “who is devoid of conscience, but who may or may not be prone to violence,” a person who exhibits symptoms of an “antisocial personality disorder.”³² Sociophobics is, rather, the study of the fears that are reflected and evoked in a sociocultural object of human production—especially when they gain popularity, like, for instance, horror films, Ouija boards, the Magic 8 Ball, pet rocks, boy bands, Steven King novels, etc. One fears loneliness, but one can buy a rock for a companion or immerse oneself in a crowd of thousands to watch cute young men sing sophomoric love songs; one fears the unknown, so one can consult a piece of plastic to gain insight into the future. One needs a thrill in a safe way, so one reads horror novels and watches horror films. And, of course, one fears fear itself but desires control in the face of it, and zombies are a very convenient form of such control, and they are morally bankrupt and devoid of human value, so we are free to imitate them and kill them with impunity.

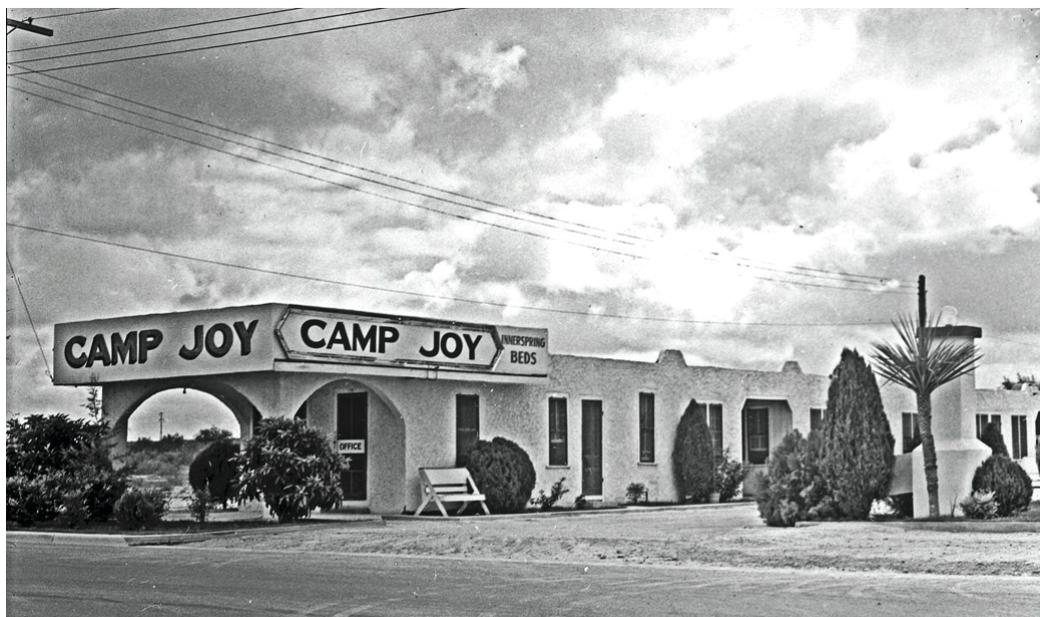
The concept of sociophobia is, I believe, especially relevant for understanding current zombie mania in terms of racism, as reflected by César Rundoles: “The most crude and racist aspect of sociophobia is the fear of a barbarian invasion, of a magma of social holism erupting over our exquisitely and meticulously individualist lives.”³³ Many people deeply fear, for instance, change to the social order or threats to their “way of life,” which is perhaps why interest in zombies spiked during the [civil rights movement](#) and the [Vietnam War](#). And when things are happening in our world that are widely perceived as capable of changing the social order, it elicits fear that has a real social impact on what we do, say, buy, watch, and hoard, and on how we vote and even on whom we love and whom we hate. Hoard, like toilet paper, bottled water, and hand sanitizer when the COVID pandemic broke out.

Horror films are analyzed by scholars in this light, in light of their underlying and propelling sociophobics. And now so are zombies and their immense popularity. Douglas Cowan has applied the notion of sociophobics to the attractiveness of horror cinema, for instance, particularly horror that is somehow rooted in or reflective of religion. As we have seen, the zombie certainly fits that bill, being derived from Haitian Vodou and Vodouist notions of the

soul. He writes, “Religiously oriented cinema horror remains a significant disclosure of deeply embedded cultural fears of the supernatural and an equally entrenched ambivalence about the place and power of religion in society as the principal means of negotiating those fears.” In terms of sociophobics, one source of people’s captivation with horror—and, I would add, with zombies—is precisely “the fear of change in the sacred order.”³⁴

It thus stands to reason that Americans so feared the threat of Muslims after 9/11, and that they have so feared an influx of Mexican immigrants, that they elected a president in 2016 who campaigned on promises of “a Muslim ban” and of building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, one that he would make Mexico pay for. Donald Trump is running for reelection as I write this and recently commented on the arrival of thousands of Haitians to the Texas border with Mexico, stating that “many of those people will probably have AIDS” and that this was “like a death wish for our country.”³⁵ The association of Islam with terrorism and of Haitians with [AIDS](#), however deeply paranoid, ignorant, and irrational it may be, are leitmotifs in this narrative about the sacred order in America. Consider the words of seasoned U.S. diplomat Richard Haass in a 2001 speech before the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations: “The challenge of terrorism is . . . akin to fighting a virus.”³⁶ Given the long-standing application of the “epidemiology metaphor” in U.S. immigration policy, it is quite in keeping with the [xenophobia](#) gripping Haass’s hallowed homeland that Islam became understood in America to be a disease.³⁷ Just as Haitians allegedly bring diseases like AIDS—and zombies.

Many Americans seem to fear that the sacred order of white privilege is threatened not just by Muslims, but by hordes of Brown or Black people—most Muslims around the world, in fact, are “people of color”—who speak other languages and practice “dangerous” religions, invading the so-called land of the free, which was brutally stolen from “people of color” in the first place. Sadly, but relevantly, I write this as U.S. border agents in Texas, on the U.S.-Mexico border, storm about on horseback with whips to keep Haitian refugees away. In the United States, the sacred order is, and one could argue always has been, about white privilege. Contrary to what kids are taught in schools in the United States, the American Revolution was, per Gerald Horne, “a revolt driven in no small part by opposition to abolition.”³⁸ To abolish slavery would have rocked the sacred order of colonial America, after all, just as refugees and Muslims are accused of threatening to do today, thereby allegedly “poisoning the blood of our country,” in the Hitleresque words of Trump at an Iowa campaign speech in December of 2023.



1939 photo of Camp Joy, a motor inn in Del Rio, Texas, with innerspring beds. Del Rio would be the site of a camp for hundreds of Haitian migrants in 2021/2022, beneath an inner state freeway, though few would find any joy there. | [Del Rio, Texas](#) by [dok1 / Don O'Brien](#) is used under a [CC BY 2.0 License](#).

So, one must wonder, do such fears of others and their threatening disruption drive people to kill zombies in video games and root for the human heroes in zombie films, novels, comic books, and TV shows? Who roots for the zombie anyway? In certain ways, the zombie is the perfect other from whom we need to save the sacred order, a somewhat human being who is a dreadful and victimized creature that we ourselves might become. Expendable, fearsome, and pathetic. Since its debut in our world, as Lauro reminds us, the undead have always been other, after all: “The original zombie ‘other’ was a helpless slave of a Vodou master and, thereby, was implicitly connected to the transatlantic slave trade, furnishing commentary on the legacy of oppression and abuse of persons of African descent under colonial and postcolonial rule.”³⁹ Similarly, Jean and John Comaroff opine that “the mounting preoccupation with zombies” is ultimately rooted “in an unprecedented mix of hope and hopelessness, promise and impossibility, the new and the continuing.” And in the present sociocultural configuration in the global north, zombies are refugees and immigrants, “pariah citizens of the global order.” Furthermore, “because industrial capital chases cheap, tractable labor all over the earth,” it compels a “stream of immigrants in pursuit of employment – and to the likelihood that they will be despised, demonized, and even done to death.”⁴⁰

Refugees, immigrants, and zombies must be stopped, therefore, before they disrupt the normative order, just like in [World War Z](#). Though clearly not fans of the film, Penny Crofts and Anthea Vogl consider “zombie and monster theory” to read the movie in terms of the dehumanization and fear of refugees. Theirs is a fascinating interpretation and an illumination

of the sociophobics at play in the popularization of zombie apocalypse films and zombie culture. They argue that the movie's tremendous success in the United States is largely about xenophobia, in this case about the fear of refugees flooding upon American shores or crossing borders and disrupting "our" way of life:

The portrayal of the zombies – as a heaving undifferentiated mass of dangerous border crossers – with the potential to take over a city if they gain access – mirrors and directly calls up metaphors and images used to describe and depict refugee arrivals. The scenes of an infected mass breaching the new border wall directly references (and willfully exaggerates) the usually placeless images of masses of refugees or migrants in transit, at sea or climbing over the top of border fences.⁴¹

This "zombie as refugee trope" is centrally about othering, about the fear of the other, and, in the American context, about white fear of the spread of Blackness, Brownness, "strange" languages, "dangerous" religions or ideologies, and their threat to white privilege. Think white flight during the Civil Rights Movement as Black people in the United States marched, protested, and even rioted against dehumanization. Think, also, the Vietnam War and the [Cold War](#) in which it was situated and the Communist witch hunts under Senator Joseph McCarthy.

When sociophobics of this kind swirl people into their collective effervescence, zombies fester, the apocalypse seems nigh, and people spend five billion dollars a year to service their twisted addiction to the zombie apocalypse. In his study of music in the popular zombie game [Plants vs. Zombies](#), K. J. Donnelly offers a specific example, in the gaming realm, of the zombie as refugee or immigrant, or of zombies as the underclass masses creepingly grappling to take away the privileges of the privileged:

The game's scenario adumbrates a clear metaphor: the zombies appear to be the social underclass invading the lawns of respectable suburbia. Here, garden plants – which are a seemingly useless sign of the cultivated middle class – prove effective against the great unwashed. Thus, cultivation destroys barbarism. . . . While it is not explicit, it is tempting to impute the use of a tango/habanera [the game's background music], as the basis for the first assault on the house, as in some small way ascribing a Latin or Hispanic character to this underclass invasion of civilized suburbia.⁴²

What to do? Get a handsome white man like Brad Pitt to save the world, build higher fences, prohibit foreigners with misunderstood, unfamiliar religions, or who are otherwise infected, from entering your sacred, orderly world, put Brown children in cages, and send white cowboys on horses to whip and corral marginalized Black human beings and fly them back to the "shithole countries" from whence they came. That is our world. It's downright dreadful, even more so than the zombie itself, a helpless monster that "cannot help but both represent and critique fears that refugee populations will both contaminate systems of national order, as well as unsettling present-day responses – of containment and securitization – to the so-called refugee crisis."⁴³

Interesting and timely words: "containment and securitization." Trump: build a wall. Muslim ban. Only want migrants from places like Norway and not "shithole countries" like Haiti or

African nations that he could never name. Biden: white cowboys on horseback brandishing whips and corralling Black migrants in the Rio Grande before they have a whiff of “freedom” or of the American dream. Fly kids back to Haiti who weren’t even born there. Could anything be more racist and inhumane than such “policies”? Is anything in the United States more embodying of the sociophobics rooted in white privilege? Speaking of the United States, did you know that some 14 percent of all Americans have plans to prepare for the zombie apocalypse?⁴⁴ Do you have one? If the other is always a threat—the Mexican, the Muslim, the Haitian refugee—and if that threat swells to the point where we might be infected and become part of the threat, then we should prepare for the resurgence of the menacing other, right?

The great French philosopher [Michel Foucault](#) (1926–1984) writes “that in each epoch . . . there have been privileged forms of monsters.”⁴⁵ Today it is clearly the zombie who is precisely this, our epoch’s ultimate metaphor of the menacing other. Two other great French philosophers have, in fact, said as much: [Gilles Deleuze](#) (1925–1995) and [Félix Guattari](#) (1930–1992), who argue that “the only modern myth is the myth of the zombies – mortified schizos, good for work, brought back to reason.” Furthermore, “the myth of the zombie is a work myth, not a war myth.”⁴⁶ Let us now consider yet another great twentieth-century French philosopher in our exploration of the concept of othering, [Simone de Beauvoir](#) (1908–1986).

Othering and the Other

Also French, and one of the most widely cited scholars of our age, [Pierre Bourdieu](#) (1930–2002), a philosopher-*cum*-sociologist, has this to say about the social world and hence about the human condition: “Every established order tends to produce . . . the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.”⁴⁷ To grow up and be socialized in the United States during the Cold War, as I was, for instance, was to accept as natural that democracy is good while Communism is evil, even though democracy is as arbitrary, or as random or without ultimate reason, as anything and everything else, including Communism, a la Bourdieu. Honor, religion, patriarchy, and love are all arbitrary, not essential, and we are socialized to accept them to be natural, to be objectively real. The disruption of that sense of [moral realism](#) can be gloomy,⁴⁸ but there is something quite liberating in arriving at an agreement with the legendary French sociologist on this notion. Take gender, for instance. For Vivienne Jabri, Bourdieu’s notion of the naturalization of the arbitrary “is nowhere more pertinent than in the naturalisation of the gendered order of things in every aspect of cognitive and social being.”⁴⁹ In other words, “a woman’s place is in the kitchen,” and many of us grew up during the Cold War believing that and believing that Communism is evil and democracy is central to the sacred order of things. In Simone de Beauvoir’s words: “One is not born, but one becomes a woman.”⁵⁰ Bourdieu would call such a process socialization, while de Beauvoir calls it “mediation,” but they are essentially talking about the same thing.

Though she is unfairly dismissed by Bourdieu in his work on gender, perhaps no philosopher has been of greater influence on feminist theory than de Beauvoir.⁵¹ de Beauvoir was a close

reader of Hegel, as were all of the first generation of existentialist philosophers. [G. W. F. Hegel](#) (1770–1831) is one of the most influential thinkers ever, having inspired the world's two most important recent schools of thought, [Marxism](#) and [existentialism](#). Hegel developed a system to understand all of universal history, called [dialectical idealism](#). It is a deeply religious approach to understanding everything, with Spirit or Mind (*Geist*, basically God) progressively coming to a total self-realization through humanity's own self-realization. It all unfolds as a triad: Thesis – Antithesis – Synthesis. To offer a crude example of how this works: Thesis – *All swans are white*; Antithesis – *I just saw a black swan*; Synthesis – *Most swans are white, but not all of them*. One thereby, through this dialectic, arrives at a higher level of truth and awareness. This has much to do with our very identity, insofar as we know who we really are only when we encounter and are close to others, whom we need to be themselves so we can be ourselves and be self-aware. Hegel famously maps this out, in terms of human interaction and identity, especially in his 1807 magnum opus *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁵² Usually referred to as the “master-slave dialectic,” here Hegel alludes to the radical otherness of the slave and its infusion of freedom on the master.⁵³ As Susan Buck-Morss has demonstrated,⁵⁴ Hegel was paying much attention to Haiti (whose slave revolution was won in 1804) while developing his famous metaphorical dialectic, which would be the foundation of the notion of othering. So the most compelling philosophical way of understanding zombies is rooted in Haiti, like the zombie itself.



The great French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). | [Simone De Beauvoir](#) by Moshe Milner is used under a [CC BY-SA 3.0 License](#).

In her classic 1949 feminist philosophical treatise *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1908–1986) argues that one’s very own self-identity requires the construction of “the other.” She writes:

The reason why otherness in this case seems to be an absolute is in part that it lacks the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts. A condition brought about at a certain time can be abolished at some other time, as the Blacks of Haiti and others have proved: but it might seem that natural condition is beyond the possibility of change.⁵⁵

de Beauvoir had Hegel’s (in)famous “master-slave dialectic” in mind in recrafting the notion to develop her groundbreaking feminist philosophy. It is not clear, however—despite her mention of Haiti here—whether she was aware that Hegel had developed his thesis while reading enthusiastically about the French plantation colony of Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti) and

the [Haitian Revolution](#). Though de Beauvoir employs Hegel's concept of the other primarily to philosophize about identity and gender, she clearly believes that the notion is central to human consciousness writ large, as reflected here:

The category of the Other is as fundamental as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most antique mythologies, one finds a duality, that of the Self and the Other; this division was not originally placed under the sign of the division of the sexes. . . . In the couples Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, Day-Night no female element is originally implied; not more than in the opposition of Good and Bad, fortune and misfortune, right and left, God and Lucifer; otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself without simultaneously positing the Other facing itself.⁵⁶

Subsequently, the term and its gerund *othering* have gained wide currency in a number of academic fields beyond feminist theory. Here is the best definition that I have found, from Lajos Brons:

Othering is the simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in-group has and the other/out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks. Othering thus sets up a superior self/in-group in contrast to an inferior other/out-group, but this superiority/inferiority is nearly always left implicit.⁵⁷

So how does it work? For Lawrence Cahoon, as for de Beauvoir before him, identity itself requires difference and opposition. How can you be one thing unless you are not another, hence the importance of the other? That is to say, identity is only defined “if other units are represented as foreign or ‘other’ through a hierarchical dualism in which the first is privileged or favored while the other is deprived or devalued in some way.” This harkens back to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, clearly. But the “process must itself be hidden or covered up, so that the hierarchy can be assumed inherent in the nature of the phenomena, rather than a motivated construction.”⁵⁸ So the black swan as antithesis is still a swan, just not a white one, so the white ones can knowingly get on in life as white swans—as if swans care about difference! Humans certainly do, though. They need it to understand themselves, and often they fear it deeply.

Thus, just as Foucault states that every era has its privileged monster, and just as Beauvoir so powerfully writes about othering, we now have the zombie, who fits both profiles and roles perfectly. As Kevin Boon tells it: “The proliferation of zombie mythology into mainstream culture over the past three decades has made the zombie the predominant manifestation of the monstrous other.”⁵⁹ This is manifest in zombie movies, in which “the other is foregrounded,” per Jeff May. “Zombies themselves are often faced with extreme othering. . . . Zombie otherness is so extreme in many cases that even the most humanist characters will kill a zombie if it threatens the sanctity of his or her own body.”⁶⁰ “Zombie otherness.” A reflection of human otherness and the fear of contagion.

Although in interpreting Hegel and developing her notion of the other, de Beauvoir never mentions zombies,⁶¹ one of today's most important philosophers and leading interpreters of Hegel does, rooted also in considerations of Hegel's reflections on Blackness. [Slavoj Žižek](#) (b. 1949) reads Hegel's master-slave dialectic quite differently than de Beauvoir, insofar as Africans, Black people, "stand there for the human spirit in its 'state of nature' ... a kind of perverted monstrous child."⁶² For Žižek, Hegel's thinking here is evolutionary and racist: that the human spirit needs, in the ultimate scheme of things, to move beyond its "state of nature," to transcend its Blackness, an idea that is embedded in the notion of the zombie:

This is why a zombie par excellence is always someone whom we knew before, when he was still normally alive – the shock for a character in a zombie-movie is to recognize the former best neighbor in the creeping figure tracking him persistently. . . . What this all means is that at the most elementary level of our human identity. . . . The shock of encountering a zombie is not the shock of encountering a foreign entity, but the shock of being confronted by the disavowed foundation of our own humanness.⁶³

Put otherwise by William Larkin, zombies "unearth intuitions that bear significantly on the philosophical problem of human identity," for they "provide a distinctive blend of terror and tragedy that helps reanimate the view that persons are most fundamentally corporeal objects."⁶⁴

Outbreak and Contagion

And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. And I, Agnolo di Tura, called the Fat, buried my five children with my own hands. And there were also those who were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city. There was no one who wept for any death, for all awaited death. And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world. ~ Agnolo di Tura, *Cronaca Senese* (1348).⁶⁵

Plagues are horrific realities that drive us either to our knees or to graveyards. Or to cry as refrigerated trucks in New York City pull up to hospitals to bring out the dead for mass burial, during the COVID pandemic, in 2020.



Nurse graffiti, COVID-19, Malaga, Spain, 2020. | [Covid Nurse Mural in Spain](#) by [Daniel Capilla](#) is used under a [CC BY-SA 4.0 License](#).

In writing about the Black Death, the plague that killed di Turi's five children and at least one-third of Europe's human population in the late Middle Ages, John Aberth invites us to consider the following: "Imagine that, tomorrow or the next day, every other person you see around you could be dead and you may grasp something of the terror that this disease could inspire."⁶⁶ Inspire? Aberth further informs us that the very word *plague* derives from the notion that God might actually "blow" pandemics into our midst: *plaga*.

When I first moved to the northern Congo in 1986, a doctor there warned me about two things: [Ebola](#) and AIDS. I will never forget his words: "If you behave and always carry clean syringes with you, you can protect yourself from the latter. But, if you are in a remote village and people all around you start dropping dead, bleeding from every orifice, get on your motorcycle and flee immediately, as fast as you can." At the time, those diseases were both 100 percent fatal, and their transmission routes were still not well understood. I had good reason to fear contagion. Then one day I was wandering down a path, exploring the forested, remote African world in which I newly found myself, when a Zairean nurse stopped me to ask, "Where are you going?" My reply: "I don't know... just exploring." She grabbed me by the shoulders,

spun me around, and said, “Never go that way; there is a colony of lepers there. Believe me! You do not want to become one of them!”

Contagion is indeed something to fear, especially during pandemics, like the 2020–2023 COVID pandemic, an illness that still poses a threat. My experience in Africa hopefully lends some encouraging perspective: COVID is far less fatal than AIDS and Ebola were in the 1980s and 1990s or the Bubonic Plague in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, pandemics have always rocked humanity, at least once or twice a century, in fact. In recent times, the following are the most notable, the dates here being just the identifiable starting point:

- 1800–2000: Tuberculosis
- 1918: Spanish Flu
- 1950: Polio
- 1982: HIV/AIDS
- 2003: SARS.⁶⁷

To this list we should add the N1N1 influenza virus, against which millions were inoculated around 2008, and then there was MRSA—anyone remember that? And COVID-19.



AIDS Quilt on the National Mall in Washington, DC. | [AIDS Quilt](#) by [National Institutes of Health](#) is in [the public domain](#).

Priscilla Ward refers to the [contagion narrative](#) as the “outbreak narrative,” which since HIV/AIDS and advances in medical sciences, as well as advances in communications technologies, has in recent decades taken on new meanings and forms:

Following the introduction of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in the mid-1980s, accounts of newly surfacing diseases began to appear with increasing frequency in scientific publications and the mainstream media worldwide. These accounts put the vocabulary of disease outbreaks into circulation and introduced the concept of “emerging infections.”⁶⁸

She affirms, however, that although the outbreak or contagion narrative was amplified in the twentieth century, it is as old as anything else in human history and is, like fear itself, elemental to the emergence of religion. Prophets have long foretold that plagues are signs that the end is near, that the apocalypse and Judgment Day are at hand. Consider this passage from the Hebrew Bible: “Their flesh shall consume away while they stand on their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holds, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth” (Zachariah 14:12). The book of Revelation features a “swarming imagery of trumpets, thrones,

seals, vials of wrath, lamps of fire, angels, plagues, lightning, thunderings, earthquakes, falling stars, fire, blood, black sun and bloody moon, a menagerie of fantastic beasts.”⁶⁹ And, in the Quran, “plague is described as punishment from the Lord.”⁷⁰ These plagues at the End of Time seem as unavoidable as they are inevitable, and they are present in our world today. In the meantime we try to survive them and, though they might seem to be apocalyptic, life continues. Survival largely entails the avoidance of contagion. Zombies grafted themselves onto all this quite swimmingly.



Fourteenth-century German illustration, for a Bible, of the fourth rider of the apocalypse. | [Fourth Rider of the Apocalypse](#) by Thuringia is in [the public domain](#).

Just as people love zombie films and games, they also seem to love plague movies, and

there are actually video games in which one creates plagues and seeks to wipe out humanity, like *Plague Inc.* One of the most successful plague movies of the nonzombie variety, Stephen Soderbergh's 2011 *Contagion*, opens with a black screen and the sound of human coughing. "We shortly learn who is coughing," writes Annu Dahiya: "Gwyneth Paltrow, sitting at a bar in a Chicago airport, enjoying a beer and grazing from a bowl of communal peanuts. She already looks unwell, her skin pale and clammy, her nose slightly red." She pays for her beer, and just as the bartender swipes her card, the movie goes frenetically global. Then the viewer is graphically whisked across the perilous and immeasurable interconnectivity of our world and how globalization has enabled contagion like never before in human history, readily and rapidly touching and torching bodies throughout the world. Launching forth from the airport bar, "the camera makes it a point to linger on *what* these sick bodies touch: public transportation surfaces, elevator buttons, office work documents, taxis and cars, bus and airplane bathroom handles, and drinking glasses." It also lingers on "*who* they are physically near and touch: their loved ones, neighbors in a cramped elevator, fellow public transit passengers, and coworkers."⁷¹ Sound familiar?

To any student who has ever taken a class with me, it will come as no surprise that I was delighted to see Dahiya's article on contagion open with etymology! Taken here from the 2020 *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Contagion (n)

Contâgiōn-em: A touching, contact, contagion.

Con- together + tangere to touch.⁷²

To turn once more to etymonline.com:

late 14c., "a communicable disease; a harmful or corrupting influence," from Old French *contagion* and directly from Latin *contagionem* (nominative *contagio*) "a touching, contact," often in a bad sense, "a contact with something physically or morally unclean, contagion," from *contingere* "to touch," from assimilated form of *com* "with, together" (see [con-](#)) + *tangere* "to touch," from PIE root [*tag-](#) "to touch, handle." Meaning "infectious contact or communication" is from the 1620s.⁷³

It thus all makes sense. Quarantine if you are sick, and steer clear of anyone who is coughing, like Paltrow or the guy who is hoarding the eggs and toilet paper from your local supermarket. And when the zombies come, do everything possible to keep them from getting close to you or, God forbid, touching you, from biting you, and from eating your brains. Build a wall. Ban Muslims. Preserve the sacred order. And return to your own body, gaining a new awareness of it. According to Dahiyaany, "threat of contagion returns us to our body, but it does so from a fear-stricken sense," a sense in which "our corporeality becomes forcibly evident to us through fear and prohibition: do not touch your mouth, nose, or eyes; distance yourself from others; be mindful of and be sure to disinfect the surfaces that you touch; sanitize and thoroughly wash your hands for at least 20 seconds."⁷⁴

Much like viruses and plagues, zombies are contagious; at least they are now, though

they never were in Haiti. They are mindlessly and deeply invested in outbreaks in most zombie films, a threat to all of us, a quintessential example of Dahlia Schweitzer's take on the "outbreak narrative":

The "outbreak narrative" generally begins with the discovery of an emerging infection and follows it as it spreads, documenting the journey to contain or neutralize it. Some versions incorporate terrorism, while others use zombies . . . Security – and how to maintain it – is a pervasive theme in all outbreak narratives. . . . Othering is the second key thematic trope of the outbreak narrative, both as a way to reflect on how a disease would (and could) spread and as a way of placing blame and indulging implicit racism and stigma.⁷⁵

Fear, outbreak, contagion, othering. And the zombie. It has all come full circle, and the zombie apocalypse has all of this in spades.

Conclusion

Fear has enabled our species to survive, something deeply natural to which we are quite indebted for existing today. When our ancestors in the primeval era heard sounds in the bushes, they picked up their babies and ran for safety. And, at least for Hume, Malinowski, and Russell, they invented religion out of fear, and religion invented other deep fears. For Otto the fear underlying and motivating religion is rooted in something real, our encounter with the Holy. Eventually, also out of fear, our ancestors taught themselves to turn stones into weapons for defense. Once they smelted iron, humans had an epic advantage over the rest of God's creatures, in the seas, savannas, deserts, and forests. And our religion advanced, too, as that enabled our tilling of the earth and our establishment of civilization, as we conceived of gods of iron and mother goddess of fertility to ensure the advancement of "civilization."

But once again, the innate fear deeply embedded in our very nature, our DNA, our evolution, could not be squelched and thus had to go somewhere else and find other things to do, like religion. Innate dread is restless and cannot tolerate boredom. In America, it went to the movies and to voting booths. When the other, whether a threatening animalistic beast or a human immigrant, has wrought fear about our sacred order, we have consumed zombie stuff and enacted legislation to keep the other away, or we have clustered them in Home Depot parking lots (or ghettos or prisons). From there, they can come temporarily into our hallowed midst to paint our houses, mow our lawns, clean our toilets, prepare and serve our food, care for our toddlers and dying elders, and then just leave us alone, uninfected. You see, zombies are useful, after all; please just don't let them turn our kids into Muslims. For the privileged, fight or flight, our primordial survival instinct, has morphed into fights of otherness and entrenchment, and of flights to suburbia. That is why we like zombies. They scare us into liking ourselves and protecting our own.

Notes

1. “Fear,” *etymonline.com*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=fear>, last accessed October 4, 2021. [↵](#)
2. Irena Milosevic and Randi E. McCabe, *Phobias: The Psychology of Irrational Fear*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clío, 2015, xiii. [↵](#)
3. Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Fear*, London: Reaktion Books, 2008, 12–13. [↵](#)
4. “10 Quotes from Georgia O’Keeffe,” Denver Art Museum, <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/blog/10-quotes-georgia-okeeffe>, last accessed March 18, 2023. O’Keeffe is also quoted as saying something quite profound for our consideration of zombies (same website): “It never occurs to me that (skulls) have anything to do with death. They are very lively. I have enjoyed them very much in relation to the sky.” [↵](#)
5. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, London: Oxford University Press, 1924 (1917), 15. [↵](#)
6. *Ibid.*, 6. [↵](#)
7. *Ibid.*, 12–13. [↵](#)
8. *Ibid.*, 31. [↵](#)
9. Karl Thompson, “[Malinowski’s Perspective on Religion](#),” *ReviseSociology*, June 18, 2018, <https://revisesociology.com/2018/06/21/malinowskis-perspective-on-religion/>, last accessed October 1, 2021. [↵](#)
10. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion: A Dissertation on the Passions*, Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 2007 (1750), 38–39. [↵](#)
11. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, London: Routledge, 2004 (1929), 36. [↵](#)
12. Philippe Charlier, *Zombies: An Anthropological Investigation of the Living Dead*, trans. Richard J. Gray II, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017 (2015), 1. [↵](#)
13. Phillip Cole, “Rousseau and the Vampires: Toward a Political Philosophy of the Undead,” in Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad (eds.), *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*, Chicago: Open Court, 2010, 186. [↵](#)
14. With a coauthor, I have written a bit more on this man. See Terry Rey and Alex Stepick, *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith: Haitian Religion in Miami*, New York: New York University Press, 2013, 91. His case is also briefly discussed in Chapter Eight. [↵](#)

15. Donald J. Cosentino, Commentary in the documentary [Zombies Are Real: The Haitian and American Realities behind the Myth](https://sacredart.caar.duke.edu/content/zombies-are-real-haitian-and-american-realities-behind-myth), Duke University, March 23, 2016, <https://sacredart.caar.duke.edu/content/zombies-are-real-haitian-and-american-realities-behind-myth>, last accessed October 14, 2021. I am in accord with Cosentino on the present in Haiti concerning zombies, though the earliest texts on the undead in Saint-Domingue, which are considered in Chapter Five, clearly reflect dread among Africans of zombies as having the potential to kill them. [↵](#)
16. J. Lorand Matory, Commentary in the documentary [Zombies Are Real: The Haitian and American Realities behind the Myth](https://sacredart.caar.duke.edu/content/zombies-are-real-haitian-and-american-realities-behind-myth), Duke University, March 23, 2016, <https://sacredart.caar.duke.edu/content/zombies-are-real-haitian-and-american-realities-behind-myth>, last accessed October 14, 2021. [↵](#)
17. Matt Kaplan, *Medusa's Gaze and Vampire's Bite: The Science of Monsters*, New York: Scribner, 2012, 3. Here Kaplan refers primarily to Paul Rozin and Deborah Schiller, "The Nature and Acquisition of a Preference for Chili Peppers by Humans," *Motivation and Emotion* 4, 1, 1980, 77–101. [↵](#)
18. Kaiama L. Glover, "Exploiting the Undead: The Usefulness of the Zombie in Haitian Literature," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 11, 2, 2005, 107. [↵](#)
19. Eric Hamako, "Zombie Orientals Ate My Brain: Orientalism in Contemporary Zombie Stories," in Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (eds.), *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017, 107. [↵](#)
20. Stephen Prince, *Apocalypse Cinema*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021, 120. [↵](#)
21. Timothy Beal, *The Book of Revelation: A Biography*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018, 177. [↵](#)
22. *Ibid.*, 194–196. [↵](#)
23. Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 147–148. [↵](#)
24. Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, 2, 2012, 462. [↵](#)
25. Daniel W. Drezner, "Metaphor of the Living Dead: Or, the Effect of the Zombie Apocalypse on Public Policy Discourse," *Social Research*, 81, 4, 2014, 842. [↵](#)
26. Camilla Fojas, *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers: Race and Capitalism in Pop Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017, 80. [↵](#)
27. *Ibid.* [↵](#)

28. Kyle William Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010, 71. Bishop is here referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. [↵](#)

29. Though it is beyond the scope of this book, there has been a great deal of work done by philosophers concerning the implications of the zombie for thinking about identity, epistemology, human ontology, consciousness, perception, and such. Philosophers have even devised something called the "philosophical zombie," which "are physical and behavioral duplicates of normal conscious humans, without consciousness," as David Chalmers explains at the opening of his amazing collection of readings on the [philosophical zombie](#) and something called "the conceivability argument": "The conceivability argument against materialism runs roughly as follows: (1) Zombies are conceivable; (2) If zombies are conceivable, zombies are possible; (3) If zombies are possible, materialism is false; therefore (4) Materialism is false." David Chalmers, [Zombies and the Conceivability Argument](#), <https://philpapers.org/browse/zombies-and-the-conceivability-argument>, last accessed March 23, 2023. On this, see also Robert Kirk, *Zombies and Consciousness*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005. For more philosophical explorations of the meanings and implications of the zombie, see Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad (eds.), *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*, Chicago: Open Court, 2010; Jack Lyons, *Perception and Basic Beliefs: Zombies, Modules, and the Problem of the External World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009; Christopher M. Moreman, *Dharma of the Dead: Zombies, Mortality and Buddhist Philosophy*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018; and Wayne Yuen (ed.), *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*, Chicago: Open Court, 2012. [↵](#)

30. David L. Scruton, *Sociophobics: The Anthropology of Fear*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986, 9. [↵](#)

31. Kevin J. Wetmore, *Back from the Dead: Remakes of the Romero Zombie Films as Markers of Their Times*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2011, 5. [↵](#)

32. Martha Stout, *Outsmarting the Sociopath Next Door*, New York: Harmony, 2020, 19. On antisocial personality disorder, see Richard Howard, *Antisocial Personality: Theory, Research, Treatment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022. [↵](#)

33. César Rendueles, *Sociophobia: Political Change in the Digital Utopia*, trans. Heather Cleary, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017 (2013), 8. [↵](#)

34. Douglas E. Cowan, *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008, 6, 13. One leading cultural zombie scholar, Christopher Moreman, is critical of the sociophobic theorizations of the undead because "sometimes they only apply when forced into the critic's preconceived ideas. . . . For

my part, I contend that all sociophobic fears boil down to one universal human fear – that of death.” Moreman, *Dharma of the Dead*, 2. Moreman proposes that Buddhist philosophy offers a preferable alternative to Western philosophy for theorizing zombies and their popularity, though I don’t find his reading of either Buddhism or Haitian religious culture to be convincing. ↵

35. Sweeney St. Vil, “[Donald Trump Claims that Migrants Seeking Refuge from Haiti ‘Probably Have AIDS’](https://www.revolt.tv/news/2021/10/8/22716525/donald-trump-says-haitian-migrants-probably-have-aids),” *Revolt*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.revolt.tv/news/2021/10/8/22716525/donald-trump-says-haitian-migrants-probably-have-aids>, last accessed October 9, 2021. Four years later, while in office, Trump called Haiti a “shithole” and insinuated that Haitian migrants “all have AIDS.” Haass’s entire speech can be found here: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/p/rem/5505.htm>, last accessed April 7, 2023. ↵
36. As cited in Bruce Magnusson and Zahi Zalloua, “Introduction: The Hydra of Contagion,” in Bruce Magnusson and Zahi Zalloua (eds.), *Contagion: Health, Fear, Sovereignty*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012, 7. ↵
37. *Ibid.* ↵
38. Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America*, New York: New York University Press, 2014, 243. ↵
39. Sarah Juliet Lauro, “Zombies and Other(ed) People,” in Sarah Juliet Lauro (ed.), *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 186. Lauro’s article contains helpful directions to other scholarly work that treats the zombie as an “other” trope. ↵
40. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, 2, 2002, 780, 797. ↵
41. Penny Crofts and Anthea Vogl, “Dehumanized and Demonized Refugees: Zombies and World War Z,” *Law and Humanities* 13, 1, 2019, 35. ↵
42. K. J. Donnelly, “Lawn of the Dead: The Indifference of Musical Destiny in *Plants vs. Zombies*,” in K. J. Donnelly, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner (eds.), *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, New York: Routledge, 2014, 161-162. ↵
43. Crofts and Vogl, “Dehumanized and Demonized Refugees,” 30. ↵
44. Linley Sanders, “[14% of Americans Have a Zombie Apocalypse Plan](https://today.yougov.com/topics/entertainment/articles-reports/2019/10/01/zombie-apocalypse-plan),” *YouGovAmerica*, October 1, 2019, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/entertainment/articles-reports/2019/10/01/zombie-apocalypse-plan>, last accessed September 29, 2021. ↵
45. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France, 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell, New York: Picador, 1999, 66. ↵
46. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans.

- Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, London: Continuum, 2004 (1972), 335, 425. For a brief, helpful explanation of the meaning and context of their reference to zombies, see Moreman, *Dharma of the Dead*, 5–8. [↵](#)
47. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977 (1972), 164. [↵](#)
 48. For an interesting discussion of moral realism and the zombie apocalypse, see Bryan Hall, *An Ethical Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse: How to Keep Your Brain without Losing Your Heart*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. [↵](#)
 49. Vivienne Jabri, “Gender: Bourdieu, Gender, and the International,” in Rebecca Adler-Nissen (ed.), *Bourdieu in International Relations*, London: Routledge, 2012, 154. [↵](#)
 50. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier, New York: Knopf, 1953 (1940), 337. [↵](#)
 51. Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine*, Paris: Seuil, 1998. On Bourdieu’s dismissal of de Beauvoir, see Michael Burawoy, *Symbolic Violence: Conversations with Bourdieu*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, 110–132. [↵](#)
 52. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977 (1807). [↵](#)
 53. Gerard Aching, “The Slaves Work: Reading Slavery through Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic,” *Theories and Methodologies* 10, 1, 2012, 912–917. [↵](#)
 54. Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. [↵](#)
 55. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 13. [↵](#)
 56. *Ibid.*, 18. [↵](#)
 57. Lajos Brons, “Othering: An Analysis,” *Transcience* 6, 1, 2015, 70. See also Jean-François Staszak, “Other/otherness,” in Rob Kitchen and Nigel Thrift (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008, 43–47. [↵](#)
 58. Lawrence Cahoon, as cited in Brons, “Othering,” 73. [↵](#)
 59. Boon, Kevin, “The Zombie as Other: Mortality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age,” in Jennifer Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (eds.), *Morality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, 50. [↵](#)
 60. May, Jeff, “Zombie Geographies and the Undead City,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 11, 3, 2010, 288–289. [↵](#)
 61. For an interesting feminist discussion of the zombie, see Elizabeth Aiossa, *The*

- Subversive Zombie: Social Protest and Gender in Undead Cinema and Television*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018. [↵](#)
62. Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, London: Continuum, 2009, 97. [↵](#)
63. *Ibid.*, 100. [↵](#)
64. William S. Larkin, “Res Corporealis: Persons, Bodies, and Zombies,” in Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad (eds.), *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*, Chicago: Open Court, 2010, 15–26. [↵](#)
65. As cited in John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, London: Routledge, 2010, 79. [↵](#)
66. Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, 80. [↵](#)
67. Stephen J. O’Brien, “Plagues, Populations and Survival,” in Jonathan L. Heeney and Sven Friedmann (eds.), *Plagues*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 116. [↵](#)
68. Priscilla Ward, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 2. [↵](#)
69. Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs throughout the Ages*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, 30. [↵](#)
70. Sayyed Bacha Agha, “Contagiousness and Diseases in Light of the Share’aa,” *Hazara Islamicus* 6, 1, 2017, 25. [↵](#)
71. Annu Dahiya, “The Phenomenology of Contagion,” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17, 2020, 520. [↵](#)
72. *Ibid.*, 519. [↵](#)
73. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=contagion>, last accessed October 1, 2021. [↵](#)
74. Dahiya, “The Phenomenology of Contagion,” 520. [↵](#)
75. Dahlia Schweitzer, *Zombies, Viruses, and the End of the World*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018, 43–44. [↵](#)

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Glossary

AIDS

Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, a disease brought on by the HIV virus (human immunodeficiency virus), which rose to pandemic proportions in the 1980s. Spreads primarily through sexual contact, but also blood transfusions and syringes, and weakens the immune system. Once 100 percent fatal, there is still no cure but effective treatments and preventive measures have since been developed. More than 36 million people have died of the disease, while many live with the infection today. ↴

Apocalypticism (Apocalypse)

From the ancient Greek *apocápsyis*, meaning "unveiling" or "revelation," the belief in the catastrophic end of the world as we know it and the impending divine judgment of the living and the dead. ↴

Black Lives Matter

Protest movement in the United States that was sparked as of 2012 by multiple police shootings/killings of black men then and in ensuing years. Millions have participated in marches across hundreds of cities and towns. The movement has since become international. [↵](#)

Bourdieu, Pierre (1930–2002)

French sociologist and one of the most widely cited scholars of our time. Renowned for developing sophisticated theories for understanding human distinctions, social class, and social domination. [↵](#)

Civil Rights Movement

Antiracist protest movement that emerged in the United States in the 1950s, seeking to gain equal rights under the law for African Americans. It succeeded in large measure, forcing the repeal of legislations that discriminated against Black people. A highlight of the movement was the March on Washington in the summer of 1963, where the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his epochal “I Have a Dream” speech. [↵](#)

Cold War

Not a war, per se, but a post–World War II era of momentous political maneuvering, pitting the United States against the Soviet Union, hence democracy against Communism, in an effort to achieve global dominance. It spanned roughly from 1947 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, It was shadowed constantly by the nuclear arms race and the threat of nuclear war. [↵](#)

Contagion Narrative

Also referred to as the “outbreak narrative,” a variegated theoretical articulation of an ancient fear of being infected with disease by way of contact with other human beings. A notion that is effectively employed to help analyze and understand the present-day fascination with and fear of zombies. [↵](#)

de Beauvoir, Simone (1908–1986)

French philosopher and author of one of the most influential feminist books of all time, *The Second Sex*, first published in 1940, with the English translation appearing in 1953. [↵](#)

Deleuze, Gilles (1925–1995)

French philosopher who published several books with the French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, including *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), in which they identify the zombie as “the only modern myth.” [↵](#)

Dialectical Idealism

Philosophical theory first developed by the German thinker [G. W. F. Hegel](#) that understands all of world history as a process that unfolds in a triadic dialectic, or formula, wherein Geist, the Godly mind, spirit, or idea behind all reality, comes to achieve self-realization. ↵

Ebola

Highly fatal virus that first emerged in the 1970s in Central Africa. Because of its most dangerous symptom, it is also referred to as hemorrhagic fever. It produces profuse internal bleeding and the replication of white blood cells in one's vital organs, as well as external bleeding from most of one's orifices. ↵

Existentialism

Influential school of philosophy based on the central notion that there is no essence to existence. Most associated with European thinkers like [Simone de Beauvoir](#), Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Emerged in large part out of a deviation from [Hegel](#). ↵

Fear

A common emotion rooted in our evolutionary history, one that enabled our species' survival in prehistoric times by triggering our ancestors to fight or to flee in the face of danger. Etymologically derived from notions of pending danger, peril, and calamity. ↵

Foucault, Michel (1926–1984)

Highly influential French philosopher who is most renowned for his work on the history of human sexuality and on human understandings or assumptions about abnormalities, social power, discipline, and morality. ↵

Guattari, Félix (1939–1992)

French psychoanalyst who published several books with the French philosopher [Gilles Deleuze](#), including *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), in which they identify the zombie as “the only modern myth.” ↵

Haitian Revolution

Protracted insurgency and world history's only successful national slave revolt, in which, beginning in 1791, enslaved Africans and Creoles in the French Caribbean plantation colony of Saint-Domingue overthrew the French and established the independent Republic of Haiti, in 1804. ↵

Hegel, G. W. F. (1770–1831)

One of the most influential philosophers of all time, a German thinker whose work would inspire the most important schools of twentieth-century philosophy:

[existentialism](#) and [Marxism](#). A major influence on [Simone de Beauvoir](#) and [Slavoj Žižek](#). ↴

Holy, the

Term coined by [Rudolf Otto](#) for the “entirely other” divine being or energy that humans encounter during a mystical experience, whether God, a demon, or an impersonal transcendent energy of force. ↴

Hume, David (1711–1776)

Influential Scottish philosopher who argued, in his 1757 masterpiece *The Natural History of Religion*, that religion ultimately originates in human fear and uncertainty. ↴

Islamophobia

The fear of Islam and its allegedly terroristic tendencies. A form of [sociophobics](#) and racism that has been on the rise in the United States since 9/11. ↴

Lugosi, Bela (1882–1956)

Hungarian-American actor who is widely considered to be one of the greatest performers in the history of horror cinema. After playing Dracula, he portrayed a Vodou doctor with the power to zombify people with poison in the first zombie film, [White Zombie](#) (1931).

Malinowski, Bronislaw (1884–1942)

Pioneering Polish-American anthropologist who argued that religion springs out of human fear. ↴

Marxism

School of philosophy inspired by the writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883), who opined that human history is a history of class struggle and that a better future for all would rely on a departure from capitalism and an arrival to communism. ↴

Mimetic Theory

Theory developed by French philosopher René Girard (1923–2015) that human desire (and culture) is driven by imitation, leading to violent impulses that were originally allayed by ritual sacrifice. For more on this, please see Chapter Eleven. ↴

Moral Realism

The belief that there are values that are objectively real, concrete, and unchangeable. Like the sanctity of human life, for instance, and the wrongness of murdering another human being. ↴

Mysterium fascinans

Latin term meaning “fascinating Mystery” that was coined by [Rudolf Otto](#) for the powerful attraction one feels when experiencing [the Holy](#), the “entirely other, God or some other spiritual, divine entity or energy.” ↴

Mysterium tremendum

Latin term meaning “terrifying Mystery” that was coined by [Rudolf Otto](#) for the powerful attraction one feels when experiencing [the Holy](#), the “entirely other, God or some other spiritual, divine entity or energy.” ↴

Neocolonialism

Although colonialism ended in the second half of the twentieth century, some nations, like the United States, France, and the Soviet Union, have intervened in and occupied other nations, which is a new form of colonialism. ↴

Neo-imperialism

Although imperialism still exists in largely symbolic form (think the queen of England), imperialism as a global political force ended in the second half of the twentieth century, though some nations, like the United States, France, and Russia, have intervened in and occupied other nations, which is a new form of imperialism. ↴

Night of the Living Dead

Epochal 1968 movie by American producer George Romero, filmed in Western Pennsylvania in black and white; likely the first collision of the idea of the apocalypse and the zombie in cinema. Widely considered to be the most important and influential zombie film of all time.

Othering

As cited earlier in this chapter, here is a passage from Lajos Brons, “Othering is the simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in-group has and the other/out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks.” ↴

Otto, Rudolf (1869–1937)

Influential German theologian and historian of religion who developed the notions of [Mysterium tremendum](#) and [Mysterium fascinans](#) to explain the root and historical thread of religion in his 1917 masterpiece *The Idea of the Holy*. ↴

Pentecostal (Pentecostalism)

Popular and growing form of Christianity, which takes many forms but is generally ecstatic and based on the teachings of the book of Acts in the Bible and on the belief in the healing power of the Holy Spirit. [↴](#)

Philosophical Zombie

A theoretical idea employed in philosophy, used to explore the implications of a human being devoid of will and consciousness for exploring such matters as ethics, identity, ontology, and death.

Plants vs. Zombies

First launched in 2009, and initially to be called *Lawn of the Dead*, a hugely popular video game featuring a cartoonish horde of zombies advancing slowly toward the player's house. The player deploys plants to ward off the dully approaching zombies. Normally played on an iPad or a smartphone. [↴](#)

Rapture

Belief in Christianity that just prior to the End of Time, living and dead believers will be assumed into heaven by Jesus Christ on the eve of the Apocalypse and Judgment Day. This notion is not found in the Bible, though subtly intimated in places, like in First Thessalonians 4:16–17. [↴](#)

Russell, Bertrand (1872–1970)

British philosopher who, in his 1929 masterpiece *Why I Am Not a Christian*, argued that religion is ultimately rooted in human fear and misunderstanding. [↴](#)

Sociophobics

As quoted above in this chapter, here is the definition from the coiner of the term, David Scruton: “the study of human fears as they occur and as they are experienced in the context of the sociocultural conditions that humans have created.” [↴](#)

A Thief in the Night

1972/1973 American film about the [rapture](#); a highly influential, pioneering evangelical movie, which portrays [tribulation saints](#), or those who were not assumed into heaven during the rapture but left on Earth to evade or battle the agents of evil, of Satan. [↴](#)

Tribulation Saints

Human beings who were not quite holy enough to be assumed into heaven during the [rapture](#) and thus are left on Earth to fend off the beasts of Satan and those totally condemned before the true End of Time. [↴](#)

Vietnam War

From 1955 until the fall of Saigon in 1975, a protracted military conflict in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Centrally a struggle between South Vietnam and North Vietnam, the United States became involved, supporting South Vietnam, as part of its [Cold War](#) against Communism. Several million civilians and soldiers were killed during the ill-fated conflict. [↵](#)

The Walking Dead

The most successful TV series of all time, an American drama featuring somewhat dead people from whom we need to protect ourselves; the creatures are not called zombies but walkers. Aired from 2010 to 2022. Based on the zombic apocalyptic comic book series by the same title by Robert Kirkman.

White Zombie

Premiering in 1932, the first ever zombie film. Though not apocalyptic, it is set in Haiti and features victims, the living dead—who, incidentally, are all white—who toil mindlessly in a sugar mill in Haiti. [↵](#)

World War Z

Wildly popular 2006 book by Max Brooks that was turned into the most expensive zombie apocalypse movie ever made, premiering, with the same title, in 2013 and starring Brad Pitt. [↵](#)

Xenophobia

The fear, distrust, or revulsion of foreign or ostensibly “strange” human beings and their cultures, languages, religions, etc. [↵](#)

Žižek, Slavoj (b. 1949)

Slovenian philosopher and leading interpreter of [Hegel](#). [↵](#)

Zombie

In Haitian Creole, a zonbi is a human victim of sorcery who is either disinterred and forced to labor or who has part of their soul captured in a bottle or gourd that can be put to work by a sorcerer. The living dead is the most common notion, while in the United States and globally the zombie subsequently became contagious, developed an appetite for human brains, and became an object of sprawling capitalistic consumption. On the etymology of the word, please see Chapter Five.

Conclusion

Knowing this first, that in the last days there will come scoffers walking after their own lusts. ~ St. Peter.¹

~

Our sleep is interspersed with macabre visions. We howl amidst our nightmares. We awaken to the bitter purges. False hopes. Rusty daggers. Gangrened flesh. Paraded before our carnivalesque strings. We swallow the pungent oil of failure. Poison of lightning paralyzes our muscles. Perforation of the intestines. Zombies head slowly adjacent to shadows; approaching heavily, rocked by the soft, deaf music of their half-hearted souls. ~ Frankétienne.²

In November of 2009, “a voice both familiar and mysterious” spoke to the great Haitian writer and painter [Frankétienne](#) (b. 1936),³ imploring him to pen a play about an earthquake. He duly complied by writing *Melovivi ou Le Piège*.⁴ It was scheduled to be first staged in Haiti’s capital city of Port-au-Prince, where he lives, on January 29, 2010. But during a rehearsal on January 10, the whole world came tumbling down, literally, with a massive earthquake crushing the city and environs and killing a quarter of a million people in a few terrifying minutes. I lost people dear to me that day, as did he. Frankétienne’s home was seriously damaged, as was mine. Living in Philadelphia at the time, I felt dreadfully helpless, awaiting news from loved ones, which was mournfully slow in coming. I thought, What else to do but pray?

In a way, for me at least, writing is like prayer, as I imagine it is for Frankétienne and it was for St. Peter. So, once I regained some composure, the next morning, in tears, I wrote a short essay for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, stating that “several reports from Port-au-Prince tell of people gathering to pray and to sing hymns. The healing process begins immediately in Haiti; it always has, and this is reflected every time when someone says—a common expression in Haiti—‘Bondye bon’ (‘God is good’).” That same day, Haiti’s president, René Préval (1943–2017), lamented that “once this first wave of humanitarian compassion is exhausted, we will be left as always, truly alone, to face new catastrophes and see restarted, as if in a ritual, the same exercises of mobilization.” Like the day before, the sun set over a crushed city, only now it was “covered with rising smoke and human wailing.”⁵ How could this not be the end of the world? Though most Haitians probably had no concern then about zombies, from afar others would wonder if zombies would soon arrive or emerge out of the rubble and dust or out of mass graves to finish us all off, “scoffers walking after their own lust.”

One thing that zombies and earthquakes have in common—beyond their capacity to upset, overturn, transform, or annihilate us and the sacred order, whether that be the status quo, orthodoxy, cushiness, the episteme, or privilege—is their association with the apocalypse. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as we have seen, all prophesy that a catastrophically destructive earthquake is a sign that the end is at hand. Interestingly, though,

Haitian [Vodou](#) does not; in fact, Vodou harbors no apocalyptic concerns. But Vodou did concoct the zombie, who has subsequently been appropriated by the wider world and metamorphosed into the other, into a contagion, an agent of culminating doom. A soldier in a war to devour us and bring our world to an end, perhaps by biting you, infecting you, and transforming you into one of them before it is truly over. We hear often of ways to survive the zombie apocalypse, and we might manage to evade or eliminate the contagion, but there is no surviving the apocalypse. The infected other bites, infects, and portends the end. Though formerly human, it is thus okay to slaughter them, deport them, demonize them, ghettoize them, or imprison them to preserve that order and all the social, racial, religious, cultural, and economic privileges that it cocoons. For its part, the apocalypse doesn't bite, of course. It simply swallows everything in creation: Muslims, immigrants, walls, America, the sacred order, the homeless, the affluent, the master, the slave, and even zombies—all.

God is great.... *Allah hu akbar*. This is the most important thing, the most sacred thing, that a Muslim utters every day, that Muslims first hear at birth and last hear at the moment of death. Recall from Chapter Four that the [Quran](#) warns us that a massive earthquake will harken the End and Judgment Day. In fact, there is an entire *sura* (99), or short chapter, in this world-transformative text that reads as follows:

When the earth is shaken with its (final) earthquake.

And when the earth throws out its burdens,

And man will say: "What is the matter with it?"

That Day it will declare its information (about all what happened over it of good or evil).

Because your Lord has inspired it.

That Day mankind will proceed in scattered groups that they may be shown their deeds.

So whosoever does good equal to the weight of an atom (or a small ant), shall see it.

And whosoever does evil equal to the weight of an atom (or a small ant), shall see it.

Islam is a culmination of monotheistic revelation on many levels, so it is unsurprising that the [Hebrew Bible](#), "The Book," contains earlier apocalyptic references to an earthquake at the End of Time. To cite just one example, in the book of Isaiah (9:6) we read: "Thou shalt be visited of the LORD of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire." In that part of their Bible that Christians often refer to as the "[New Testament](#)," such trembling prophecies are reiterated echoingly, as in this passage from the Gospel of Matthew (24:7): "For nation shall rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places." Furthermore, in the [book of Revelation](#), the last book of the(ir) Bible, we read that the end of the world will be accompanied by "swarming imagery of trumpets, thrones, seals, vials of wrath, lamps of fire, angels, plagues, lightning, thunderings, earthquakes, falling

stars, fire, blood, black sun and bloody moon, a menagerie of fantastic beasts.”⁶ That is robustly telling and terrifying, but there is no mention of zombies here. Thankfully. I think vials of divine wrath, earthquakes, and plagues are more than enough already. Along with the “menagerie of fantastic beasts.” But who knows? Perhaps zombies *will* be part of this menagerie, like St. Peter’s lustful deriding walkers.

In the aforementioned religions, save Vodou, plagues are also signs of the end, the apocalypse, doom, gloom, and Judgment Day. As I conclude this book, we are in the midst of a plague that has killed millions throughout the world. And there is still more destruction and pain swirling all around us. Earthquakes recently killed more than 50,000 people in Turkey and Syria, for instance, and floods throughout the world thousands more. There has always been this swirl of pain and destruction. In this time of devastating human-induced climate change—which, when you think about it, is kind of like a slow earthquake—it is so striking that the Quran speaks of the apocalypse as being in part the fault of humanity: “when the earth throws out its burdens.” As in, cast off the perpetrators. It is arresting to consider here that “climate crisis is killing many more people around the world than coronavirus, but there is no panic about this,” as [Slavoj Žižek](#) (b. 1949) points out. There will come a day when such panic, should it awaken, will be muted, powerless, and pointless, whether regarding a dying earth that kills us or the latest pandemic that does the same on a lesser scale. In the latter, and thinking speciocentrically with the great Slovenian philosopher, “the present crisis demonstrates clearly how global solidarity and cooperation is in the interest of the survival of all and each of us.” It is a “sad fact,” furthermore, “that we need a catastrophe to be able to rethink the very basic features of the society in which we live.”⁷

From the biblical prophet [Daniel](#) to the sixteenth-century false messiah [Sabbatai Sevi](#) (1627–1676) and the toweringly influential modern philosopher [G. W. F. Hegel](#) (1770–1831), throughout history many sages have thought, preached, and taught that we human beings have a crucial role to play in bringing about the apocalypse, and millions have listened and heeded their call. They surely did not have global warming in mind, but that is precisely what we are doing, playing a role that perhaps Daniel, Sevi, and Hegel did not have in mind when receiving visions and ideas of the apocalyptic stripe. So, as the Quran prophesizes, we will indeed be thrown out, a tired burden that can no longer be endured and thus must be done away with and judged. The will of God salvaging the earth, transforming it into a kingdom or garden over which to rule and revel eternally with the righteous believers, the reviled be damned—*literally*.

Or perhaps humans will (or already do) make or become zombies to do the work of God in annihilating humanity as we know it and transforming the world into a heavenly paradise for the righteous? In one of the first, if not *the* first, short stories to give zombies at least a fuzzy/furry apocalyptic role, the 1961 “Doctor Zombie and His Furry Little Friends,” [Robert Sheckley’s](#) (1928–2005) narrator and, I guess you could say, protagonist is a vague though pensive man (seemingly a professor doing research), who lives alone in an apartment in Mexico City. This nameless American is called by the locals “Doctor Zombie” because he won’t eat salt. (Recall that in Haiti, salt has the power to wake zombies up to their condition and either drive them back to their graves or awaken them to a life of seeking revenge against their oppressors.) Doctor Zombie faces eviction when suspected by a local police magistrate of

breeding puppies in his small dwelling, where pets are strictly forbidden. However, neither the magistrate nor the landlord suspects that, in fact, Doctor Zombie is using his “small permeable apartment for secret *ungodly experiments of a terrible nature*”: breeding his little furry friends to, in effect, play the role of zombies during the apocalypse. The point: “You see, something must be done. I intend my hybrids to act as a counterbalance, a load to control the free-running human engine that is tearing up the earth and itself.”⁸

We have covered too much ground in this book—3500 years, five plus religions, numerous novels, scriptures, video games, zombie walks, and now zombie puppies in Mexico City—for me to provide a suitable summary of the key points, but please let me try, albeit briefly. The ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism is the origin of the idea of the apocalypse, and its central ideas were picked up in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Of course, there are differences in these great religions’ eschatologies, but several key beliefs are shared across all these faith traditions. Most people in the world today, and most people since the advent of Christianity and the remarkable emergence of Islam, have accepted these key beliefs as truth. Therefore, we are talking here about some of the most momentous ideas in world history. To provide an ecumenical sketch:

- God is the creator of all and prescribes laws for us to follow.
- We are to worship God and God alone (though in Christianity this gets a bit complicated with the notion of the Trinity, One God in Three Persons, as it does in Zoroastrianism with Mithra).
- How we live, think, act, worship and feel should be in accordance with said laws.
- Our eternal fate depends on the whole of our thoughts, acts, devotions, and feelings.
- The world as we know it will end one day, and it will be cataclysmic, apocalyptic.
- There is a heaven and there is a hell, the former for the righteous and the latter for the unrighteous.
- The living and the dead, the latter to be resurrected for this moment, will be judged at the End of Time.
- Heaven will be paradise eternally, while hell will be fire and suffering eternally (though each of these ethical monotheistic religions has a long history of theology that debates the permanence of hell—hopefully, in the longest run, we will all wind up in heaven!).

There is nothing about zombies in these religions. So the question is, how, when, and why did they crash the apocalyptic party? It really was in 1968, a most turbulent and trying year for America and much of the Western world, when George Romero launched his epochal film *Night of the Living Dead*. It is providentially or otherwise downright fitting that Pennsylvania

would be the place for the collision of the zombie and the apocalypse, a place that its founder [William Penn](#) (1644–1718), an English Quaker, referred to as a “Holy Experiment.” Penn first arrived in America in 1682, but already there was apocalyptic fervor here, fueled by a widespread belief that this was where the Second Coming of Jesus Christ would occur. There was also an obsession with monsters in the “New World.”

Virtually all schoolchildren in the United States learn that Philadelphia is named as the City of Brotherly Love, something that is echoed by docents and guides for the thousands of tourists who visit this city each year. Though that is not terribly incorrect, the truer fact is that Penn had in mind the book of Revelation, Chapter Three, in choosing a name for the capital city of his commonwealth/colony: “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: . . . I am coming quickly.” And, as we saw in some detail earlier in our book, Revelation is altogether replete with monsters, some of whom make witches and sorcerers and even zombies pale pitifully in comparison. Penn, who owned slaves and officiated over the only known witch trial in the history of Pennsylvania, thus envisioned his colony as ground zero for the apocalypse: “God will plant in America & it shall have its ... Glorious day of Jesus Christ in us Reserved to the last dayes, may have the paste part of the world, the setting of the son or western world to shine in.”⁹

English Puritans in Massachusetts had executed their first “monster,” their first “witch,” a few decades earlier, in 1648, while religious leaders there, like [Cotton Mather](#) (1663–1726), would construct a “New World mythology” that “imagined the Christian experience as a war with monstrous beings inspired by the devil,” as W. Scott Poole explains. “The Puritans embodied the American desire to destroy monsters,” while their witch hunts reflected “the American tendency to desire the monster, indeed, to be titillated by it.”¹⁰ When you read both Mather and Penn, it almost sounds as if the two would have been excellent co-screenwriters for Hollywood’s next zombie apocalyptic blockbuster. A line from Mather’s rather gripping 1698 thriller *The Wonders of the Invisible World*: “An army of Devils is horribly broke in upon the place which is the Center, and after a sort, the First-born of our English Settlements: and the Houses of the Good People there are fill’d with the doleful Shrieks of their Children and Servants, Tormented by Invisible Hands, with Tortures altogether preternatural.”¹¹ Entertaining, indeed.

It is also fitting for the collision of zombies and the apocalypse to have occurred in the United States during one of the most horrendous years in the nation’s history, 1968, a year when thousands of Americans were dying in the Vietnam War and thousands of others were returning home maimed and/or suicidal. A year of protests against the war and against racial injustice, race riots, and the tragic assassinations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy. The collision of the zombie and the apocalypse seemingly also could only have happened in a nation that had by then become the world’s greatest bastion of capitalism and that was, of course, home to Hollywood, and responsible for the theft of the zombie from Haiti. Out of this sociocultural cocktail, the colonial millenarian theologies of the likes of Mather and Penn, and the obsession with monsters, zombies found the perfect time and place to become contagious and seize the day as barely but adequately agentival beasts of doom for the End Time. And entertaining and profitable, to boot. Zombies’ incorporation

into apocalyptic thought, which is thus quite recent, has been forcefully driven by capitalism. It has been driven by the quest to take advantage of humanity's subconscious (or conscious) fears to sell movies, books, video games, and Zombie Pillow Pets (which are currently out of stock, but presumably can be purchased at Walmart for a mere \$31.25).

The undead have changed dramatically over the years, and they have been appropriated and culturally stolen from Haiti as cash-churning others, monsters, unpaid slave laborers. I cannot help evoking President Préval, who could just as well have been speaking about zombies as the earthquake: once the zombie has been culturally stolen and generated billions for foreigners, "we will be left as always, truly alone, to face new catastrophes and see restarted, as if in a ritual." Never in Haiti have zombies been fast or contagious, but Hollywood didn't care, leaving Haiti "truly alone" and speeding them up and sending them out as the fictitious infectious other who pulls the strings of our deepest fears of the real other. Fear is profitable, after all, and so, obviously, are zombies. As are slaves.

Zombies do make lots of money, not for themselves, of course, but for filmmakers, toy makers, video game makers, actors, artists, and musicians, to the global tune of five billion dollars a year. Slaves in a capitalist system of exploitation. Our fears are among the most profitable things in life, alas, just as our fears have made people religious throughout history. Death is mysterious, after all, and to most people, I believe, terrifying. Thus, beliefs about the apocalypse and, much more recently, the zombie captivate without consoling, titillate without tenderness, unless, of course, you have faith. For faith wards off "the menagerie of fantastic beasts" and at times effaces the haunting depths into which nightmares can plunge us, at least when we awaken. Yet faith itself is born in fear and, paradoxically, it is faith itself that created the zombie.

For many scholars in the neurosciences and evolutionary biology, fear is elemental to our survival and has been throughout the history of our species. We are, in fact, prewired to fear unseen things, and in our mind exists something enduring from our evolutionary past and survival instinct, something referred to by scholars as the [HADD: Hyperactive Agency Detection Device](#). What is this? Out of the instinct to survive, our earliest ancestors detected agency in things that were uncertain but, in some way, real, like ruffling leaves in a bush. Perhaps it was caused by the wind but, for the sake of survival, better to pick up the baby, abandon your effort to gather berries, and run like hell when the bush starts making noise. Recent advances in cognitive science have piqued the attention of some scholars of religion, and, per Anders Lisdorf, "The consensus in the cognitive science of religion is that some sort of hyperactive agency detection in the human mind is responsible for the spread of beliefs in supernatural agents, such as gods, spirits, and ancestors among human populations."¹² Zombies have replaced the wind, just as death is wind, *Kundabu*. It is all about fear—of ruffling leaves, death, the other, the end of the world—and about survival, at least until the zombies come to usher in the apocalypse.

With or without zombies, there is so much that is utterly dreadful in our world that each day one can find signs of the apocalypse, surely. But *Men anpi, chay pa lou*: "When there are many hands, the load is not heavy." Solidarity can take many forms and is altogether vital during times of crisis, and one can engage in it each day and hopefully make the world a better place or make someone else smile or feel touched by your love. With or without zombies, the end is

inevitable, though. This we know, and there is a potential zombie in each of us, vaguely tuned in to deaf music resonating from our halfhearted souls and our prehistoric ancestor running from some barely imaginable phantom that makes a bush shiver, shish, and shake. This fear is central to all the great religions covered in this book. With the exception of Vodou, they might not feature zombies, but they have no shortage of evil beasts that are even more terrible. Some of them, like the zombie itself, used to be us—living, breathing human beings—becoming what we once were and still might become, agents of contagion, destruction, dehumanization, and the apocalypse itself.

Notes

1. 2 Peter 3:3. KJV. [↵](#)
2. Frankétienne, *Les Affres d'un défi*, Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Deschamps, 1979, 173. [↵](#)
3. Anonymous, "Frankétienne, A Voice from under the Ruins," UNESCOPRESS, March 22, 2010. [↵](#)
4. Frankétienne, *Melovivi ou Le piège suivi de Brèche ardente*, Paris: Riveneuve, 2010. [↵](#)
5. Terry Rey, "[Haiti's Agony: History, Faith and Hope](#)," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 15, 2010, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/opinion/20100115_Haiti_s_Agony__History__faith__hope.html, last accessed November 6, 2021. [↵](#)
6. Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs throughout the Ages*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, 30. [↵](#)
7. Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic. COVID-19 Shakes the World*, New York Polity, 2020, 69, 68, 41. [↵](#)
8. Robert Sheckley, *Can You Feel Anything When I Do This?* New York: DAW 1961, 60. This is a collection of some of Sheckley's short stories, and "Doctor Zombie and His Furry Little Friends" is on pages 51–62. [↵](#)
9. Cited in J. William Frost, "William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness: Promise and Legend," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 107, 4, 1983, 580. [↵](#)
10. W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011, 39. [↵](#)
11. Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. Boston: n.p., 1693, 7. [↵](#)

12. Anders Lisdorf, "What's HIDD'n in the HADD?" *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 7, 2007, 241. [↵](#)

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Glossary

Book of Revelation

The final book in the Bible and the most important apocalyptic text in Christianity, written in the late first century C.E. by John of Patmos, as detailing of visions that he received while banished on an island in the Aegean Sea. [↵](#)

Daniel

A pious and righteous Jew in the Babylonian diaspora. Supposed author of the biblical book of Daniel, likely written in the second century B.C.E. [↵](#)

Frankétienne (b. 1936)

Haitian writer and painter; author of *Dézafi* and *Les Affres d'un défi*, two gripping, poetic, and highly acclaimed novels that features zombies. [↵](#)

HADD: Hyperactive Detection Device

Key to human survival, evolutionary part of the human mind that leads one to detect agency where there is none, like ruffling leaves in a bush. Perhaps it was caused by the wind, but this instinct leads one to flee out of fear that there is a dangerous agent lurking in the bush. [↵](#)

Hebrew Bible

The earlier part of the Bible, which Christians often refer to as the “Old Testament.” Originally written in Hebrew. The scriptural foundation of Judaism. [↵](#)

Hegel, G. W. F. (1770–1831)

One of the most influential philosophers of all time, a German thinker whose work would inspire the two most important schools of twentieth-century Western philosophy: existentialism and Marxism. [↵](#)

Mather, Cotton (1663–1726)

Boston-born Puritan minister in Massachusetts who scripted a narrative about witches that would be a cornerstone to America’s obsession with monsters and with killing them. [↵](#)

New Testament

The latter third of the Bible that Christians believe in, beginning with the Gospels and ending with the [book of Revelation](#). Understood among them to be the extension and completion of the “Old Testament,” or the [Hebrew Bible](#). [↵](#)

Penn, William (1644–1718)

English Quaker who founded the colony of Pennsylvania in 1682 and named its chief city Philadelphia after an apocalyptic passage in the book of Revelation. [↵](#)

Préval, René (1943–2017)

President of Haiti when the tragic 2010 earthquake struck the Caribbean nation. Served two terms in this position, from 1996 to 2001 and from 2006 to 2011.

Quran

“Recitation,” the final revelation to humanity, as transmitted by the angel Djibril from Allah to the Prophet Muhammad, over the course of roughly twenty years, in Arabic. Believed in Islam to be the culminating scripture and the word of Allah. ↵

Sabbatai Sevi (1626–1676)

Sephardic Jew and rabbi from the ancient Turkish city of Smyrna (today’s Izmir). Sevi (also spelled Tzvi, Zevi, etc.) was a renowned and charismatic kabbalist who was identified by Jews all around him as the Messiah, meaning that the End of Days was at hand. Converted to Islam in 1666 while under arrest. ↵

Sheckley, Robert (1928–2005)

American writer who was one of the, if not *the*, first to pen a short story featuring zombies (well, not actually zombies, but puppies that the title character, Doctor Zombie, breeds to bring humanity to an end). ↵

Vodou

The African-derived religion of most people in Haiti. In the West African language of Fongbe, the word *vodun* means spirit or sacred object, but it was also the name of a divinity in the pantheon of the Fon people. ↵

Žižek, Slavoj (b. 1949)

Slovenian philosopher and leading interpreter of [Hegel](#). ↵