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Investigating the Syncretism of Catholicism and Voodoo in New Orleans

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Abstract

This paper discusses the syncretism of both Catholicism and Voodoo in New Orleans and explains how the adaptable Catholicism of New Orleans provides ample support for the growth rather than repression of Voodoo. Among the shared elements between Catholicism and Voodoo that permit syncretism, I discuss three means which scholarship and my own field research in New Orleans continuously reaffirm: the reliance on ritual to facilitate liturgical practices, the veneration of lesser intermediaries, and a desire for intimate union with the divine. An examination of the elements that permit syncretism lead to a conclusion that the presence of Voodoo in New Orleans is as a direct result from syncretism with Catholicism and that Catholicism in New Orleans actually serves as an assistance to the continuation of Voodoo rather than an impediment.

Introduction and Methodology

[1] "The City that Care Forgot," The Big Easy," "The Crescent City" – many clever titles describe New Orleans, Louisiana, a city so beloved for its rich culture and eccentricities, but also treasured for its resiliency through disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf Oil Crisis. Of the many interesting facts known about this city, its culture, and its people, one element of New Orleans remains clouded in mystery: the noticeable presence of Voodoo. While Voodoo has certainly been the subject of great ridicule and misconception, especially in the Hollywood or cinematic portrayal of its practices and practitioners, Voodoo as a spiritual practice is deeply invested in a reality beyond what we are able to perceive with our finite senses. With this in mind, the indomitably strong Catholicism of New Orleans adds to the mystery of the presence of Voodoo. Catholicism, which places worship of one God

incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ at its center, yet prides itself, especially in New Orleans, on devotion to the Saints and the faithfully departed, provides a "safe haven" for modern day Voodoo practitioners who, like many Catholics, seek the outward expression of a diverse and complex religious tradition. In this paper, I will argue that the pervasive presence of Voodoo in New Orleans is the result of syncretism with Catholic religious traditions; furthermore, I will demonstrate how the Catholicism of New Orleans provides ample opportunities for the growth rather than the repression of Voodoo.

[2] Before seeking to understand the elements of both Voodoo and Catholic traditions that allow for the syncretism of Voodoo to occur, it should be made explicitly clear that the type of Voodoo discussed throughout this paper is somewhat different from the more commonly understood, "Haitian Voodoo" (Long: 118). In fact, "Louisiana Voodoo," as practiced in New Orleans, is an entity of its own yet comparable in many ways to that which is practiced in Haiti and West Africa, specifically the countries of Togoland and Benin, (which one might call "Voudun"). What makes Louisiana Voodoo so distinct are the numerous Catholic elements present within it. Although some of the Catholic elements present in Louisiana Voodoo are also found in the Voodoo practiced in Haiti, one would be rather hard-pressed to find Catholic liturgical or spiritual elements within Voodoo practices in the West African countries where Voodoo originated because the individuals who reside in these countries never faced enslavement and subsequent religious persecution while under slavery. In addition, many who currently live in the countries of Voodoo origin have likely not experienced much exposure to Catholicism; the majority of native residents follow Islamic religious traditions. Louisiana Voodoo, in contrast, incorporates so many Catholic elements because when French and Spanish settlers established Louisiana, and eventually New Orleans as the chief port-city of the state, they discouraged the native religious practices of the slaves from West Africa and forced them to convert to Catholicism. Unwilling to give up their religious practices and beliefs, Africans found a way to practice their faith under the guise of Catholicism. The continual practice of indigenous African religion despite forced Catholic conversion is an issue that will be treated at greater length later in this paper. One final point of introduction: much of what is currently known about Voodoo refers to the "original Voodoo" of West Africa rather than to "Louisiana Voodoo." Because many "Louisiana Voodoo" practitioners are fearful of ostracism, ridicule, and further persecution, they have become a type of "underground" religion in New Orleans. Scholarship about "Louisiana Voodoo" exists and, for the purposes of this paper, much of it comes in the form of field research and interviews with "underground" Voodoo practitioners as well as historians who have studied and lived in and around New Orleans for more than thirty years.

[3] In October 2010, I travelled to New Orleans to investigate the ways in which Catholicism and Voodoo blend together in the region. Prior to my journey down to the Crescent City, I established a contact who would be instrumental in setting up various meetings with Voodoo practitioners whom I otherwise never would have been able to meet or interview. Shortly after my arrival in New Orleans – at the beginning of the four day trip – I was greeted by New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum historian, Voodoo expert, and lifelong New Orleanian, Jerry Gandolfo. He has published several articles and papers on Voodoo and Creole culture and has been featured on national news broadcasts and has earned the name, "Mr. New Orleans." He kindly set up two interviews for me with Voodoo priestesses

who have chosen to remain anonymous. I was never told their names and was encouraged prior to my asking them any questions to offer them a gift as a means of expressing my gratitude for allowing me to witness their Voodoo ceremonies and for responding to my questions. I attended one actual Voodoo ceremony during my research trip. It was held in an open courtyard in a grotto behind Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on North Rampart Street near St. Louis Cemetery, #1. I felt like an outsider for most of the ceremony, not understanding, for example, why a snake was draped across the participants' shoulders or why I could not touch the snake while my guide, Gandolfo, was allowed to do so. But I also recognized several things that were said in the ceremony: Catholic prayers that I have known all my life. Throughout this paper, my personal experiences and anecdotes will supplement published scholarship in support of my thesis.

What is Voodoo?

[4] Voodoo refers to a religion derived from indigenous African spiritual practices that originated in Benin and Togoland in West Africa and "was influenced by French Catholicism that became fully developed in Haiti" (Molloy: 510). In the earliest days of these religious practices, it was called "Voudun," as it is still called in some places. African ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Kongo, and Fon dominated the belief population of "Voudun." According to historian Carolyn Long, "All of these African tribes and nations recognized a supreme creator and believed in the existence of spiritual entities who acted as intermediaries between human beings and the highest god" (Long: 94). Much like Catholicism, for example, certain activities were seen as pleasing to the high Voudun god, *Mawa-Lisa*, as well as to his intermediaries. Catholics might demonstrate love and appreciation for God by performing selfless good works for others or by praying and fasting as a type of sacrifice. The earliest practitioners of Voudun, as well as Voodoo today, also offer sacrifices. Voodoo practitioners may offer a sacrifice to the high god or the spirits, referred to as *lwa*, by "offering animal sacrifices, pouring out libations, saying various prayers, drumming or playing instruments, or even giving over one's body to be [temporarily] *possessed* by the spirit itself" (Long: 96). Voodoo ceremonies are typically presided over by either a priest, called a *houngan,* or priestess called a *mambo*, or a queen in New Orleans. These individuals are usually dressed in brightly colored garments "symbolizing all the colors of earth's creation while the worshippers are usually dressed in white" (Long: 96). The earliest days of the slave trade caused a shift in religious traditions from the tribal practices of "Voudun" to the more modern practice of "Voodoo." This occurred when European explorers voyaged to Africa, ruthlessly captured slaves, and brought them to Caribbean nations. Chief among those responsible for the development of Voodoo was Saint Domingue, who continues to be a key figure in present day Haiti. New Orleans Voodoo is said "to have emerged as an organized religion with the arrival of the Saint Domingue refugees during the early years of the nineteenth century" (Long: 96).

[5] In recent years, the Catholic Church, under the authority of two Popes, has spoken openly and with welcoming, encouraging, and tolerant sentiments about "indigenous African spiritual practices," which obviously includes Voodoo, which originated in Africa, and the spiritual practices of New Orleans Voodoo. In 1967 Pope Paul VI issued an Apostolic Letter, known as *Africae Terrarum*, which states that all faithful Catholics ought to view

"ancient African cultural spiritual practices, because of their moral and religious value, with careful consideration" (#7). His letter goes on to state an important point of common ground between both Catholicism and African spiritual practices, namely, that "the presence of God permeates the African life, like the presence of an advanced, personal, and mysterious being" (#8).

[6] In 1993 Pope John Paul II spoke at length about the fundamental goodness of African traditional religions and visited portions of the African continent with the intention of entering into dialogue with practitioners of indigenous African religious practices. His Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, of 1995, makes several positive statements about both the practices and practitioners of indigenous African religious practices, and by implication, New Orleans Voodoo practices. Although the type of Voodoo practiced in New Orleans differs from that practiced in Africa, the link between different styles of Voodoo is a result of what scholars of religion refer to as *family resemblance*; several religions and religious practices are traced back to the *parent* religion. For example, a *family* of religions, including Santeria, Candomble, and Voodoo, has been traced back to one specific African ethnic group and "these three related religions are sometimes referred to as religions of the Yoruba tradition" (Molloy: 510). The Pope writes, "The adherents of African traditional religion should be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided" (#67). During the same visit, after which he authored his aforementioned Apostolic Exhortation, Pope John Paul II met with Yoruba practitioners in Benin and Togoland for a traditional Voodoo ceremony. During this ceremony, "the Supreme priest Aveto declared to the Pontiff: 'May our god of the rainbow intercede with the great god, Mawa Lisa, to bless you'" (Gandolfo 2010a). The hospitable and welcoming presence that the Catholic Church has extended to Voodoo practitioners in recent years takes on a new dimension in New Orleans, one that could best be described as cohabitation. Essentially, Voodoo and Catholic cultures "live together" and coexist well in New Orleans.

[7] Voodoo has existed in the United States as early as "when the first Africans landed in Jamestown in 1619 as indentured servants" (Mulira: 35). People who immigrated to America from other countries brought their language, culture, and religious practices. Jamestown is, however, noticeably far from New Orleans in Southern Louisiana. In 1718, the city of New Orleans was established and designated as the capital city of the Louisiana colony. Records from the earliest years of the foundation of the city indicate "that African religious and magical traditions arrived in Louisiana along with the first slaves" (Long: 93). Much of the slave trade in colonial New Orleans was facilitated through French overseers stationed in the city and throughout the Louisiana colony. The largest concentration of slave came from West Africa, the Caribbean, including Haiti, and South America. Long notes that, "in French, Spanish, and Portuguese slave-owning colonies of the Caribbean and South America, there evolved some synthesis of African traditional beliefs with Roman Catholicism" (93). Such synthesis led to a deep relationship between the Voodoo and Catholic traditions of Louisiana, specifically in New Orleans, because it was and remains the primary port-city for the state. When slaves were brought into the Louisiana colony from West Africa or the Caribbean, the first place through which they passed was the city of New Orleans. This mix of peoples resulted in syncretism, the gradual combination of different systems of religious belief and practice. Numerous elements of Voodoo spirituality as well as

Catholic spirituality provide opportunities for the syncretic relationship to evolve and become successful. These elements include the centrality of ritual to both Voodoo and Catholic worship, the Catholic veneration of saints and the Voodoo reverence of spirits and ancestors, and a desire on the part of both religious traditions for an intimate experience with the divine.

Catholic – Voodoo Syncretism: A Product of Slavery

[8] Syncretism of Voodoo with Catholicism did not likely begin as soon as slaves were "captured" and placed aboard slave-ships bound for America because "different demands were placed on them by that environment" (Fanthorpe: 55) which included basic survival, developing obedience to overseers, or attempts to ascertain from others the whereabouts of one's family. Overseers aboard ships would usually not give consideration to attempts to "Christianize" slaves because of other issues and concerns they faced in moving slaves from one point to another. Slave travel and trade was horrific not only in a moral sense, but also physically for the slaves themselves as well as their overseers. It is estimated that "on most ships between five and twenty percent of the slaves and crew died in transit" (Kolchin: 18) because of malnutrition, severe beatings, disease, or suicides. Fortunately, during these intense transport periods, because slaves were not yet forced to accept and practice Christianity, they could seek solace in their religious practices until they reached the Americas. When slaves reached the United States, several colonies absolutely forbade the practice of indigenous African religions and effectively enforced the practice of Christianity. New Orleans had a similar requirement, but surprisingly, there was considerably leniency in their colonial requirement as "the restrictions and privileges of the Code Noir were loosely enforced" (Long: 6).

[9] During French and Spanish control of New Orleans, the Code Noir, or "Black Codes," established and implemented in 1724, regulated the treatment and affairs of slaves. Under the Code Noir, it was "illegal for the slaves to practice their African religions openly" (Desmangles: 362). The Code Noir also required all masters "to have their slaves converted to Christianity within eight days of their arrival to the colony" (Desmangles: 362). Christianization in colonial New Orleans consisted of Roman Catholic doctrinal catechesis in accord with the dictates of the Code Noir, which explained that "masters were required to instruct their human chattel in the Roman Catholic faith and to have them baptized" (Long: 6). This education, through basic exposure to Catholic teachings, advanced an opportunity for the slaves who were forbidden from openly practicing their indigenous African religions to continue doing so by incorporating their indigenous beliefs with elements of the new religious system that was forced on them. Despite the domineering attitudes of slave masters, there were times in New Orleans (and throughout the Southern states for that matter) when, as if softened in heart by the reverence due to certain Christian celebrations like Christmas or Easter, they granted slaves what might be militarily referred to today as "liberty." Slaves were still slaves and under the absolute subjugation and authority of their masters; however, their master would grant them, however brief, some "time-off" to enjoy the celebrations or holidays. Major holidays were not the only times slaves could enjoy some freedom. On Sunday afternoons in New Orleans, the Code Noir granted limited free-time for the city's slave population. Many slaves took advantage of this free-time as an

opportunity to practice their indigenous religions collectively with other slaves, thus forming a bond and establishing a system of values that became dear to all the enslaved. On these Sunday afternoons, the slaves would gather in "Congo Square, the site designated by New Orleans authorities for slaves and voodoos to gather" (Mulira: 53). During these times "away from the immediate control of white authorities, slaves developed their own traditions and customs that reflected shared values" (Kolchin: 150).

[10] Several shared values that were widely diffused among slaves and celebrated in Voodoo ceremonies were matters of what I will call retention of cultural identity, voluntary service, and spiritual liberation. *Cultural identity* refers to the "way in which a person or group of persons may identify or begin to identify themselves in terms of a larger socio-cultural structure" (Livesey: 3). The development of this cultural identity among the slaves is relevant to the argument of this paper because it was a result of the growth and practice of practitioners of what is now known as "Louisiana Voodoo," which served as the larger socio-cultural structure within which a communal identity developed. No longer were slaves simply slaves, they were instead people united to support one another and worship their spirits and ancestors – those who were free before them and through whose intercession they one day hoped to attain freedom for themselves. The mere fact that slaves, even if only through syncretism with Catholicism, "retained the religious traditions of their native West Africa" (Wacker: 88) was a sign of hope. Effectively, they were able to hold on to some aspect of a life they knew prior to slavery. Voodoo also provided for its antebellum practitioners (as it does for its contemporary practitioners) an emotional outlet from the stresses of life. In the antebellum South, slaves undoubtedly resented their plight. Educated or uneducated, the feelings of injustice were apparent and universally understood by all who suffered this grave injustice. While slaves were pressed to work, the practice of Voodoo likely restored a feeling of choice and free-decision, however small or seemingly insignificant by modern standards, to slaves by the emergence of voluntary service.

[11] *Voluntary service* refers to an individual freely submitting to the service of another. In the case of the Voodoo practitioners, they willingly and happily submit to the service of the ancestral spirits in their worship ceremonies. Although Voodoo lacks any substantive written sacred text or formal theology, the Voodoo belief system has at its center a willing, active, and enthusiastic service to "the spirits whom voodooists revere and whom they believe are active in their lives" (Desmangles: 361). Through the exercise of religious practices, slaves of the Antebellum South were able to choose freely for themselves to serve a specific Voodoo spirit, but not only the spirits. They also served the wider Voodoo community of which they were members. Many slaves were subjected to subservient living conditions, brutal treatment at the hands of their masters, intensely laborious work with little to no appreciation, and separation from their families. However, from these deplorable circumstances, "in Southern Louisiana, Voodoo, a syncretic, highly ritualized practice based on African beliefs fused with elements of French Catholicism flourished" (Kolchin: 150). This voluntary service was one of many factors that contributed to the syncretism between Voodoo and Catholicism in New Orleans. If the slaves were forced to serve a master who could be cold and brutal, the Voodoo belief in ancestral and spirit veneration takes on a new and significant meaning. Through reverence to the ancestors or courting the spirits, "it would seem reasonable to expect that they could be summoned from the spirit world to help those in need"

(Fanthorpe: 66). In this way, slaves might have felt that the spirits could truly understand, sympathize with, and in some way, deliver them from their plight. Following this ideology, it becomes clearer to understand Voodoo as a spiritual practice, the "main value was and continues to be psychological" (Mulira: 36). The same statement can be applied to the next element of shared values amongst the enslaved practitioners of Voodoo in colonial New Orleans: spiritual liberation.

[12] *Spiritual liberation* refers to slaves' moments of freedom and liberation through Voodoo ceremonies despite the enforcement of slavery in colonial New Orleans. The French and/or Spanish overseers and masters may have had significant control over their slaves' lives, but whether in secret or in free-time with their community, slaves could turn to their Voodoo spirits for assistance or to succor them in their afflictions. In 1817, the mayor of New Orleans established a place in the city-center known as *La Place des Negres*, more commonly known as Congo Square. It was here that slaves could enjoy some free-time on Sunday afternoons. Typically, "a heavy African component characterized Congo Square gatherings wherein dancing, playing on African drums and stringed instruments . . . and Voodoo rituals, brought by refugees from Haiti, flourished" (Kolchin: 47). The question remains: "How is an enslaved person liberated in any way by a spiritual practice?" For a practitioner of Voodoo, the spiritual practices themselves, much like any religion deeply rooted in ritual, such as Catholicism, "gives meaning to life: it instills in its devotee a need for solace and self-examination and provides an explanation for death which is treated as a spiritual transformation" (Desmangles: 361). Although subject to masters and enslaved in a physical sense, participation in Voodoo ceremonies and rituals contain, for the believer, a transcendent power, an ability to move from the present reality of suffering and oppression and into a type of union with the divine and a higher level of meaning. Through participation in Voodoo rituals, slaves were no longer serving cruel colonial masters, but ancestral spirits who cared for them personally and who could "get things done."

Catholic – Voodoo Syncretism in New Orleans

[13] In order to fully understand, in more concrete terms, how Voodoo and Catholicism have undergone syncretism over time in New Orleans, I will now discuss several specific ways in which the two religious traditions "blend together." Religion scholar Michael Molloy argues, "It is possible that apparent similarities in belief and approach between the Yoruba-based religion and Roman Catholicism permitted syncretism" (512). In New Orleans, Voodoo–Catholic syncretism is most obvious in three forms: the centrality of ritual to both Voodoo and Catholic worship, Catholic veneration of saints and the Voodoo reverence of spirits and ancestors, and a desire on the part of both religious traditions to have an intimate experience with the divine. In each of these means of syncretism, Voodoo and Catholicism have explicitly "trusted in the power of ritual and made frequent use of ritual elements" (Molloy: 512). Each of these means is unique to New Orleans, but is practiced and understood in similar Voodoo cultures and countries of Voodoo origin, such as Togo and Benin in West Africa, and Haiti.

[14] In New Orleans Voodoo there is one God and "he is often viewed under the same conceptions in which Christians or Jews view him" (Gandolfo 2010a). Other Voodoo cultures, such as those in the countries of Voodoo origin, believe in several gods or deities

called *lwa*. However, in New Orleans practitioners refer to "spirits" rather than *lwa* (Long: 113). As in Catholicism, supreme reverence, devotion, and attention is given to the one God. In contrast to Catholics, however, New Orleans Voodoo practitioners "tend to view God has having taken a very passive role in the lives of human beings, choosing to relegate his power and responsibility instead to the spirits" (Gandolfo 2010a). With the belief that God takes a passive role in interaction with human beings, Voodoo practitioners need some point of contact with the divine that might help demonstrate a reason as to why the Voodoo spirits, often represented by Catholic Saints, would be of such sincere importance to Voodoo practitioners. Thus, Robert Tallant explains, New Orleans Voodoo practitioners "adopt many Catholic saints as their own and invoke them to aid in Voodoo work" (204). For example, the supreme deity in Haitian Voodoo, known as Mawa-Lisa, is understood as God in New Orleans Voodoo; similarly, the Haitian *lwa* known as Legba is represented by St. Peter in New Orleans. Legba serves as the guardian of the crossroads between life and death and the gatekeeper to the spirit world. He is represented by St. Peter because, according to Catholic theology, St. Peter was given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Matthew 16:19) and opens the gates of Heaven to allow the souls of the righteous to approach the throne of the Blessed Trinity. Another significant difference between New Orleans Voodoo and Haitian Voodoo is the spirit known as Li Grand Zombi. Often represented by a snake through which the spirit speaks, Li Grand Zombi has no Haitian counterpart (Long: 115-16).

[15] Perhaps one of the most interesting Catholic saints to be adopted into Voodoo tradition and highly revered, especially in New Orleans, is St. Expedite. According to Tallant, "Priests, questioned about St. Expedite, remain noncommittal" as to his authentic existence because so little is known about his life. However, he is listed in the Roman Martyrology of the Catholic Church with a Feast Day on April 19 (Roman Breviary). He is often depicted "holding a Cross in his right hand which bears the word, *hodie*, Latin for *today*, and beneath his foot, he is shown stepping on a crow which has a small ribbon in its mouth bearing the word, *cras*, Latin for *Tomorrow*" (Fanthorpe: 75). Legend surrounding St. Expedite tells that he was a Roman centurion who converted to Christianity after witnessing the Resurrected Lord. He worked tirelessly to convert pagans to Christianity as he encouraged them to convert *today* instead of *tomorrow*. In both Catholicism and Voodoo beliefs, St. Expedite is invoked as patron of those who need the answer to their prayers quickly and surprisingly enough "both the Catholic and Voodoo legends surrounding St. Expedite are accepted in New Orleans without chastisement, contradiction, or territorial offenses from either group" (Gandolfo 2010a). Ordinarily, Voodoo spirits, in their interactions with human beings, tend to have an exchange relationship. For example, during my field research, I saw numerous statues of St. Expedite with flowers, wine, pieces of yellow pound cake, or pennies at the base of the statue. The Catholic faithful or the Voodoo practitioners who invoked the help of St. Expedite would leave him a token of their gratitude for a favor received or would offer him a gift for a gift. In Catholicism, St. Expedite is revered as a holy person whose merits in life were considered exemplary, and thus he was raised as an example for others to follow in living the Christian life. However, "in Voodoo ritual, St. Expedite represents the spirit Gede or Baron Samedi, the guardian who stands at the gates of the cemetery" (Long: 115) and "instructs funeral participants when a soul has crossed over into eternal bliss so that they can

no longer mourn, but may rejoice because the soul of their beloved is now also in bliss" (Gandolfo 2010a).

[16] The first statue of St. Expedite in the United States reportedly appeared at the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in New Orleans on North Rampart Street. This church is also the home of the International Shrine of St. Jude Thaddeus, Patron Saint in the Catholic faith invoked for those in need of help in desperate situations. In the Voodoo tradition, "St. Jude represents the spirit of Ogou, a warrior spirit who defends against evil and hexes" (Long: 116). Both Saints Jude and Expedite are closely linked in Voodoo ritual and belief. This specific Catholic Church, once called "the old mortuary chapel," is adjacent to St. Louis Cemetery #1 in which Marie LaVeau, the most famous of the New Orleans Voodoo Queens is entombed along with her common-law marriage husband, Charles Glapion and her daughter Helene Euchariste LaVeau. Both St. Louis Cemetery #1 and Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church are central and "very important sites for both the city's Catholic and Voodoo practitioners" (Gandolfo 2010a), but for seemingly different reasons. St. Louis Cemetery #1 is special to New Orleans Voodoo practitioners because it is the burial site for the famed Voodoo Queen, Marie LaVeau, while the same cemetery is also important for Catholics because it was the first and is the oldest, actively maintained Diocesan cemetery in the state of Louisiana. The Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, to little surprise, is important to Catholics as a place in which Holy Mass is celebrated. However, "the parish priest of Our Lady [of Guadalupe] is aware that nearly each week after he concludes an evening Mass, several ladies in his congregation remain behind in the church for small Voodoo ceremonies; he knows they are Voodoo practitioners, but he won't deny them the Holy Sacrament because they are also good Catholics" (Gandolfo 2010a). An old Haitian Voodoo proverb seems to accurately convey this syncretistic situation in New Orleans: "one must be Catholic to effectively serve the Voodoo spirits" (Cosentino: 368).

[17] In 1819, Louisiana had been part of the United States for sixteen years, but the Americans who were still seen as foreign to the state of Louisiana and especially the city of New Orleans had not yet made a discernable impression within the region, especially not in spreading their primarily Protestant Christian practices. During this time, "Voodoo was thriving in New Orleans" (Tallant: 53) such that it had become a defining characteristic of the city of New Orleans itself as well as its surrounding region. Evidence of Voodoo's unique merger with Catholicism had become quite evident in, of all places, newspaper printings. *The New Orleans Times Picayune*, now renowned for their commitment to journalistic excellence in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, was established and printing in the earliest days of the Crescent City. In this and other local papers, Voodoo's adoption of Catholic elements is recognizable through "the custom of thanking the Saints through the medium of classified advertisement" (Saxon: 303). The linking of Catholic Saints to the Voodoo practitioners' own semi-divine spirits is evidence of syncretism between Voodoo and Catholicism in New Orleans.

[18] Yet another aspect of Catholicism which lends itself to syncretism with Voodoo in New Orleans is the belief that sacred realities are made manifest under human auspices. To simplify by example: Catholics celebrate the Holy Eucharist as the center of their liturgical celebrations. They believe that when the priest elevates the bread and wine after the proper prayers and rites – including the Litany of the Saints – have been performed, the bread and

wine are no longer profane in nature, but become sacred through the miracle of transubstantiation or by "a change of substance." In Catholic liturgy, the bread and wine change substance into the living body and blood of Jesus Christ. Although not exactly through the same methods, similar actions occur within the Voodoo spiritual tradition. In Voodoo ceremonies, after the proper prayers and rites have been performed, the Voodoo priest, or, more commonly in New Orleans, the Voodoo priestess, calls upon the various spirits to make themselves present in the ceremony. The spirits reveal themselves and become present in similar fashion to Catholic Eucharistic consecration, wherein the profane suddenly becomes sacred. The profane vessel in the Voodoo tradition is the human person who has called on the Voodoo spirits for help and "the profane person becomes sacred when they become possessed by the Voodoo spirit" (Gandolfo 2010a). In the Catholic view, a term like "possession" would most often be viewed negatively as it is typically associated with "demonic possession or that which involves the presence of evil spirits or the devil himself" (Amorth: 57). However, in Voodoo, "spirit possession" serves a benevolent purpose through which "practitioners serve the spirits" (Gandolfo 2010b: 2). The human beings serve the spirits by inviting the spirits to "act out their carnal desires through the human host by means of eating, drinking, smoking, dancing, singing, and sexual gratification" (Gandolfo 2010b: 2).

[19] Through these physical actions, Voodoo practitioners recognize that they are in the presence no longer of the Voodoo priestess or priest, but rather, the presence of a Voodoo spirit. Because Voodoo spirits "are pure spirit and are without a mortal body, they often desire to act out their worldly desires" (Anonymous Priestess at Ceremony), but this can only be done through their taking over the body of a living human person – thus the purpose of "spirit possession" in the Voodoo religion. Beyond the coming of the Voodoo spirits into physical presence and manifestation are the important psychologically and communally fulfilling aspects of "spirit possession," or "spirit mounting" as it is sometimes called. Voodoo practitioners view this practice as important in a psychological sense because for them the manifestation of a spirit is a form of what Catholics might call "evangelization" or "spreading Good News" within their Voodoo circle. For the devout Voodoo practitioner, "spirit mounting" "serves both as a means of achieving communal bonding by reinforcing a community's mythology as observed in the behavior of the possessed" (Jacobs: 59). Furthermore, these instances of "spirit mounting," confirm, in some way, to the Voodoo faithful that their prayers and devotional rituals are actually being received by the spirits. Indeed, these displays, which may seem rather frightening to outsiders, are causes for joy because it is confirmation further that the spirits are acting in compliance with their requests. These factors together serve as a spiritual force "to generate personal transformation and . . . to maintain social order and provide therapy" (Gerlach: 698) to those who have called upon the intercession of the saints/spirits.

[20] The only ways in which the Voodoo spirits can accept or partake in these offerings so as to grant aid to those who have invoked their help is to possess a human person through whom they can accept what has been offered to them (Gandolfo 2009). Unlike Catholics, who ideally desire never to experience any form of possession, for the Voodoo practitioner, "possession is a quintessential spiritual achievement in the believer's religious life" (Desmangles: 363). Beyond its being a spiritual achievement, which could be understood as a

form of direct contact with the divine, it can also be described as a form of incarnation. From a Catholic standpoint, incarnation refers to the coming of God into human likeness and physical body in the person of Jesus Christ. The same underlying idea is at the heart of what occurs in Voodoo "spirit possession:" the *lwa*, which is purely spirit, descends from its divine realm and takes on a human form in the person it possesses or mounts.

[21] Despite the seemingly strange practices of Voodoo to outsiders, the compassionate voices and intellectuals of the Catholic Church have spoken very highly of this African traditional spiritual practice which predates the beginnings of Christianity (Pope Paul VI; Pope John Paul II*)*. In the early history of New Orleans, the old cliché rang true. Actions, indeed, spoke louder than words. One Catholic clergyman, Pere Antoine, though he may have spoken little about Voodoo, certainly demonstrated his benevolent attitude toward Voodoo through his relationship with Marie LaVeau, the famed "Voodoo Queen of New Orleans," who often worked closely with him.

Marie LaVeau

[22] Born in 1801 as a "free woman of color," Marie LaVeau was raised, like so many New Orleanians, as a practicing Roman Catholic who "attended daily Mass and often assisted in various Cathedral parish ministries which led to her developing a close friendship with Cathedral rector, Pere Antoine" (Gandolfo 2010a). Despite Marie's not-so-subtle Voodoo practices, Pere Antoine continued to offer her the Catholic sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist, and Matrimony. To a true Voodoo practitioner like Marie LaVeau, "Voodoo is revealed as a true faith in the doctrine of the Catholic Church" (Gandolfo 2010a). Catholic doctrine, such as the emphasis on the importance of Mary, the Mother of God, proved to be a source of incredible spiritual power as well as positive affirmation of female authority in the New Orleans Voodoo culture. A male Catholic priest when men were viewed as chief of all domains, gave personal instruction and permitted the reception of sacred Catholic rituals to a woman who, by all accounts, should have been proclaimed a heretic by the Church in Rome. Through the friendship Marie fostered and developed with Pere Antoine, "Voodoo and Catholicism became forever wed together" (Gandolfo 2010a) in New Orleans. The "wedding" of Catholicism with Voodoo became more pervasive and noticeable as Marie LaVeau grew and matured. Many of Marie's followers and friends, knowing of her friendship with Pere Antoine, and thus, with the Catholic Church, began "undoubtedly synthesizing Roman Catholic ritual and the veneration of sacramental objects with traditional African religion" (Long: 38). Although it is likely that the synthesis of Catholic rituals with those of traditional African religion was already occurring in some ways, it was strengthened through the close relationship Marie developed with Pere Antoine. Marie's own wedding to Jacques Paris on August 4, 1819, "was performed by Pere Antoine, a cleric beloved in New Orleans history" (Tallant: 52).

[23] Despite her wide notoriety in New Orleans newspapers (not all of them positive accounts), Queen Marie wished to enjoy a simple life, according to Gandolfo. I spoke with individuals in meetings and Voodoo ceremonies in New Orleans with knowledge of Catholic Christianity who do not dare compare Queen Marie to a Jesus Christ figure, but insisted in several instances that she acted humbly in her good works, like Jesus, saying to others often, "Please tell no one that I helped you with this." The Gospels include accounts of Jesus

performing healings (which Marie LaVeau was also known to have done using herbs), but then having Jesus say to those he healed: "Go from this place and tell no one who has done this for you" (cf. Luke 5:14, Mark 7:36; 8:30).

[24] In contemporary New Orleans Voodoo, Queen Marie has earned the title, "Saint Marie." According to historian Gandolfo, Marie "was known for the most Christian characteristics of charity, humility, humanitarian concern, and love of all her neighbors. She took in homeless, visited the sick, prayed for the condemned, and fed the hungry." The actions described of Queen Saint Marie are consistent with what faithful Catholics know to be the Corporal Works of Mercy. Furthermore, Queen Saint Marie was a daily Mass attendant at the Cathedral-Basilica of St. Louis, King of France wherein she developed her life-long friendship with the future first Diocesan Bishop of New Orleans, Pere Antoine. While the actions of Queen Saint Marie (caring for the sick, sheltering others, etc.) might not seem so extraordinary, or may even be stereotypically labeled as "traditional woman's work," her works were anything but traditional. "When Yellow Fever struck New Orleans in 1853, [Queen Saint] Marie worked side-by-side with Pere Antoine" (Gandolfo 2010a) visiting all those in desperate need. Pere Antoine would typically perform the "Last Rites" or in Catholic ecclesiology, the Sacrament of "Viaticum – Extreme Unction Anointing of the Sick" to those who seemed near death while Queen Saint Marie directly at Pere Antoine's side would cover the victims with blankets. "Her methods surprised Pere Antoine and others because summers in New Orleans can be very hot and she would cover individuals in blankets" (Gandolfo 2010a). Little did anyone know, her methods worked to reduce their fever and extended or saved many lives. Although "[Marie] was believed to be illiterate and unable to write," (Long: 63) she possessed an intelligence which surprised, brought comfort to, and saved the lives of many.

[25] A large body of archival material, such as baptismal certificates, birth certificates, death certificates, and newspaper articles, has "proved firmly the historical significance of this figure whose charitable nature, courage, wisdom, and good connections to Spanish colonial white elites created the legacy that she was the most powerful woman" in New Orleans history. But others viewed her as anything but a saint, and instead as "an evil witch, the notorious leader of New Orleans' counter-culture religion Voodoo, and an unscrupulous and dangerous person" (Fandrich: 614). Fortunately enough for her and all those she helped with her good works, those disparaging rumors began circulating after she had discontinued her "public ministry." Many of the rumors which circulated contrary to Marie's good reputation were based on competition from other Voodoo queens. One of the most popular examples of this negative attention was when Marie was first chosen to become a Voodoo queen by Marie Saloppe who was "a pure-blood Congolese and a specialist in unhexing people" (Mulira: 50). According to legend, "Marie Saloppe was hexed into insanity by her trainee and chosen successor, Marie LaVeau" (Mulira: 51). As a result of this incident, many began to question: Why would the apprentice hex the teacher?

[26] After Marie's death at nearly one-hundred years of age in 1881, "so many citizens of this city [New Orleans], rich and poor, upper class and peasant class cried out to have her venerated as a saint" (Gandolfo 2010a). Queen Saint Marie naturally had a Catholic funeral in the Cathedral of St. Louis where she was a life-long member. The woman who began her mission, work, and sometimes controversial spiritual practices as the self proclaimed "Queen

of the Voodoos" in New Orleans left an empowering legacy to the Crescent City. Modern Voodoo queens seek to follow her example, even though most present day Voodoo ceremonies, meetings, and rituals "take place secretly in private homes or in remote places such as swamps hidden from public gaze" because of misconceptions. Only months after Queen Saint Marie's death, "the most powerful figures among blacks in New Orleans were the Voodoo queens" (Mulira: 49) who rose up to take her place, exercising supreme authority in the realms of the spiritual practices (Fandrich: 16).

Conclusion

[27] Although visible interaction between Voodoo and Catholicism in New Orleans has seen more active periods, the majority of "organized Voodoo ceremonies became less public and more secretive" (Mulira: 56) as a result of numerous "misconceptions from Fundamentalist Christian groups who perceive the Voodoo spiritual and religious tradition as evil" (Gandolfo 2010a). The view of Voodoo as an evil practice, in any way, is simply the result of "social, cultural, racial, and religious ignorance and prejudice propagated, perpetuated and exaggerated by movies and others" (Gandolfo 2010b: 2), which can be seen through modern Hollywood and cinematic portrayals, however inaccurate, such as *The Skeleton Key* and *White Zombie*. Prior to popular culture's interest in New Orleans Voodoo, New Orleans tourism thrived economically on the rich musical, historical, and entertainment aspects of the city – attracting yearly vast numbers of jazz enthusiasts, civil war and southern history enthusiasts, as well as perhaps, most of all, individuals simply seeking a weekend getaway in a city known not only for its religiosity, but probably more so, for its reputation for raucousness and extravagant partying. However, "items of material culture such as 'Voodoo dolls,' blessed chicken and/or fish bones, love potions, luck candles, and gris-gris bags" (Cosentino: 365), which were either fashioned or blessed by authentic Voodoo or Yoruba priestesses and priests and are are widely available for sale in shops like *Voodoo Authentica* or *Marie LaVeau's House of Voodoo* throughout the French Quarter, have also contributed to New Orleans tourism. Although this Voodoo material culture is promoted as "authentic Voodoo merchandise," much of it often incorrectly portrays negative acts of Hoodoo (a malevolent magical practice focused on controlling others which is often confused with Voodoo) rather than Voodoo as a religion. Thus, the visible Voodoo material culture is often only for the benefit of tourists. In order to preserve the sacredness of their tradition, Voodoo practioners have largely withdrawn from public; the vast majority of authentic "Voodoo has virtually disappeared from the public eye" (Mulira: 60).

[28] Although authentic New Orleans Voodoo remains hidden from public view, the Catholic tradition with which the original Voodoo syncretized to create the type of Voodoo unique to New Orleans is as visible as ever. It was the religious and cultural practice of Catholicism in the region that made the syncretism with Voodoo possible. New Orleans is the only major city in America that has been officially and almost exclusively Catholic since its founding. This "foundational Catholicism" is outwardly visible by simply strolling along the streets of New Orleans and noticing the many street names named after Catholic saints, religious orders, or French-Catholic rulers from "days of old." The long-standing mutual interaction between Catholicism and Voodoo and the similar practices of the traditions themselves, such the centrality of ritual to worship, Catholic veneration of a vast host of

saints and the Voodoo reverence of spirits and ancestors, and a desire on the part of both religious traditions to have an intimate experience with the divine, contributed to the syncretistic process.

[29] Finally, according to Gandolfo, "the Church in New Orleans has always been a far distance from the Church in Rome. The clergy, consequently, were often as much likely to be converted by the local customs as to do any converting. The 'big easy' attitude that has always pervaded New Orleans has also constituted a uniquely liberal and adaptable Church." The Church in New Orleans must have seen opportunities to be inclusive based on religious commonalities with the Voodoo practitioners. Both Voodoo and Catholic religious traditions believe "in a single High God, in supernatural beings who mediate between God and human beings, and in the existence of spirits of the dead" (2010a). It is for that reason that syncretism between Voodoo and Catholicism has been successful in New Orleans and thus, the pervasive presence of Catholicism in New Orleans has not hindered the growth, development, and perpetuation of the Voodoo, but has proven to be of significant assistance to it.

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