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'The Devil Made Me Do It' *Electus per Deus* and Quasi-Occult Crime in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the phenomenon of 'occult crime' in South Africa, focusing on the perspectives of crime such as *Electus per Deus*, the murder of Kirsty Theologo, Hansie Cronjé, and the context behind the assumed connection between criminal culpability, *mens daemonica*, and the occult. These beliefs frequently espouse individuals ascribing criminal actions to 'demonic' authority or spiritual possession, thus reinterpreting typical criminal culpability as inherently occult-related. Therefore, by examining the religious, psychological, and socio-economic factors that contribute to the development and continuation of such beliefs, espousing that 'the Devil made me do it' in the interpretation of motives in crime and criminality. Noteworthy examples such as the Krugersdorp murders, the Samurai sword murderer, the Klawer murderer, the murder of Rina Radloff, and others frequently suggest an occult motive for crime, according to mainstream news media. The paper therefore seeks to examine the influence of Afrikaner Christian religious narratives on the way individuals and communities understand responsibility, morality, and justice (*vis-à-vis* crime and criminality). Identifying select South African case studies and theoretical frameworks involving religion and news media to analyse why such popular inferences are made, based on Ward & Voas' 'conspiratoriality' and John Calvin's doctrine of election. This study also aims to establish an understanding of occult crime as a conspiracy theory in South Africa by examining the relationship between religious belief systems and criminal behaviour. Therefore, it provides accurate information on occultism and Satanism for future academic discussions and practical considerations in jurisprudence, criminology, and alternative religious discourse in South Africa.

1 | Introduction

In 2019, headline reports rocked South Africa, detailing a crime group infamously known as *Electus per Deus* (Latin, 'Chosen by God'). Who carried out 11 murders in Krugersdorp, Johannesburg, Gauteng, over a 4-year period from 2012 to 2016 (see Mjonondwane 2019, 1–2; cf. Grobler 2019). The members consisted of Cecilia Steyn (38), Zak Valentine (34), and John Barnard (43); including family members, Marinda Steyn (51), Marcel Steyn (21), and Leroux Steyn (23)—the latter two

(Marcel & Leroux) operated under pressure and manipulation from their mother, Marinda (see Grobler 2019). Cecilia Steyn led the crime group, and her religious manipulation collectively influenced them to commit atrocities (Daily Maverick 2021). Following her claims to be a '42nd generational Satanic witch' and 'the devil's wife' (Singer 2021; cf. Bartsch and Schütze 2023), she alleged that she fled persecution from Satanists (Maphanga 2018). However, since the group members' conviction and sentencing, it became evident that Cecilia Steyn and her associates' killing spree was not motivated by a *mens*

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daemonica (see Kapp 2024b, 9–10; cf. Rupcic 2021, 1–4), involving any *macabre* occult or Satanic influence. Rather, their motives were firstly revenge, followed by financial gain as a secondary motive (Le Roux 2024; cf. Mjonondwane 2019, 2).

The infamous crime spree by the Krugersdorp murder group has garnered significant media attention in South Africa since 2019. Several works (within and outside of general news media) have been dedicated to the unravelling of these murderers and the details surrounding their motives and ‘mystical’ *modus operandi*. Notable coverage includes the popular television series, originally aired on *Showmax* in 2021 and called ‘Devilsdorp’, 2023 Winner of the *SAFTA Golden Horn Award* (T. Ferreira 2022); directed by David Enright and narrated by Jana Marx (cf. Smith 2021). In addition to a number of local –and international– true crime podcasts and books (refer to Pheasant 2017; Coetzer 2020; Marx 2020; Booysen and Gules 2022; Rijavec 2022).

Notwithstanding a small number of scholarly investigations dedicated to this specific case (see Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 125–144; Scholtz 2023, 43 & Van den Heever 2024, 250–262). As a result, what this study aims to contribute is engaging the problematic association of the occult (i.e., Satanism) with violent crime and criminality in South Africa. This study therefore aspires to discuss the religious, social, cultural, psychological, and economic *zeitgeist* that shape popular ‘conspirituality’ meta-narratives. Often combining conspiracy theories and distorted understandings of esoteric spirituality (see Kapp 2024b, 52; cf. Zoccatelli 2017, 10–19). Towards understanding the probative motivations behind violent crimes often accused of occult/Satanic involvement.

2 | Conspirituality: Electus per Deus and Mens Daemonica?

Being ‘chosen by God’ (in and of itself) has inherently been a theological stance, which (specifically in the historical context of South Africa) can be traced back to the foundational doctrines of the Protestant Christian religion’s reformed tradition (see Zhao 2017, 257–259). More specifically, this idea falls under the denomination of Reformed Calvinism, based on the teachings of the early church reformer, John Calvin. One of the formative works in the establishment of his Protestant theology is the treatise, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (McGrath 2013, 24). In the text, Calvin proposes that ‘salvation flows from the mercy of God’ (Calvin 1536a, 766), maintaining that, based on the Pauline epistle to the Romans (11:6), salvation is predestined by God and that ‘he does not adopt all promiscuously to the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others’. Therefore, ‘we arrive at the knowledge that God saves (i.e., chooses) whom he wills [out] of his mere good pleasure’ (Calvin 1536a, 766–768).

This notion becomes particularly relevant when contextualising the prominent and polemical history of Calvinism as a theological premise in the *Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRCSA)*. Which had been instrumental in the theological justification of apartheid and a racist state under the infamous National Party (Gordon 2016, 166). Allan Boesak, a famous coloured minister

from the *Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)* and eventually head of the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC)*, from 1982 to 1991. Was one of the most prominent voices, along with the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, on the influence of John Calvin’s Institutes in the ‘struggle and longing for justice in our world’ (Gordon 2016, 167–168; cf. Van Wyk 2016, 1). It is therefore worth mentioning that Calvinism was not just a mere denomination; rather, it was integral to the formation of de facto Afrikaner Christian identity (Oliver 2019, 3–6).

D.F. Malan of the *Purified National Party (PNP)* first introduced and promoted the idea of Afrikaners being closely associated with Biblical Israel as ‘God’s chosen nation’ in the early 20th century. A notion which originated in early Israel and is seen reflected in the Hebrew Bible (see Van Wyk 2016, 3–4). Malan also espoused that the Afrikaner was ‘chosen by God to spread civilisation and Christianity’, a presupposition rooted in the first 11 chapters of Genesis: most notably the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11:1–9 (Dobošová 2009, 311–313). Muller (2021, 72) supports Dobošová in stating that Calvinism had been the cornerstone of Afrikaner Christian nationalism, quoting an article by Dr Andries Treurnicht, the first editor of the apartheid-era *Hoofstad* newspaper, in which he writes:

Dutch Reformed concepts have long served to bolster Afrikaner nationalist ideas; for example, the Calvinist notion of ‘election’ has become synonymous with that of a racial elite; ‘vocation’ with a superior mission; a ‘priesthood of believers’ with an aristocracy [and] power deriving from a sovereign God with an authoritative rule.

(Muller 2021, 71–73; cf. Bloomberg 1990, 4)

This allows for the contextualisation of the Calvinist doctrine of election as a fundamental aspect of Afrikaner culture and religion. Such a nationalistic theological attitude is still common among Afrikaner Christians in South Africa, as it has been strongly influenced by contemporary Afrikaners who are still clinging to this ‘holy history’ (see Tamarkin 2020, 1–6; Strauss 2020, 2–4; cf. Oliver 2019, 1–7; Van Niekerk 2018, 4–5). The nomenclature used by the Krugersdorp killers, *Electus per Deus* (Chosen by God), consciously or unknowingly, clearly embodies this. As such, this sentiment is not just a grasping at straws; it evidently stems from a conservative way of thinking present among Christian Afrikaners today, who refuse to adapt to post-apartheid equality, as attested to by former South African public protector Thuli Madonsela (see Maromo 2025; cf. Tamarkin 2020, 2–6). A way of thinking which is bolstered by the roots of evangelical (Calvinist) Christianity in South Africa among Afrikaners, combined with the remnants of apartheid-era nationalism (Dunbar 2012, 40–43), followed by the death of white privilege (Falkof 2023; Dunbar 2012, 85–86, 127; cf. Dunbar and Swart 2012, 607–610). It reinforces stories of oppression and election (see Calvin 1536b, 803–807), which is directly responsible for conspiracy theories and moral panics such as the so-called ‘Satanic Panic’ in South Africa (see Kapp 2024b, 2–4).

Professor Nicky Falkof, from the Department of Media Studies at the *University of the Witwatersrand*, supports this in her own

research, arguing that the post-Apartheid *Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)* and Afrikaner Christianity (as a whole) remain rooted in Calvinist theology, thereby reinforcing the stronghold of Afrikaner conservatism in the country (Falkof 2019, 134). Consequently, South Africa after apartheid is still engulfed in myths about a past ‘Satanic panic’ (Kapp 2024a, 305–306), marked by the frailty and identity crisis of white Afrikaners in the face of rising racial diversity and globalisation, including the loss of white privilege (see Falkof 2012, 3; 2019, 133–135; 2023, 1–9; cf. Kapp 2024b, 4). This inevitably led to the creation of a new ‘folk devil’ (namely, ‘occult crime’), which still serves today as a scapegoat for the country’s social, economic, and political instability (Rupcic 2021, 14–16; De Wet 2011, 147–149).

With the contextual relationship between the nomenclature of the Krugersdorp killers (*Electus per Deus*) against the backdrop of post-apartheid Afrikaner Calvinism and the ‘Satanism scare’ established. The question, however, remains: how does this converge with the occult as a perceived motive for violent crime and criminality? The answer lies in understanding the idea of *mens daemonica*, which comes from the Latin words for ‘demonic mind’ and was created by Rupcic (2021, 2–3). This term describes how occult criminal responsibility can be seen as an alternative to *mens rea*, which means ‘criminal mind or intent’, in South African law. The former term refers to the notion of a ‘hijacked selfhood’, where criminal intent is characterised by spirit possession or bewitchment. Rupcic maintains that while *mens rea* and *mens daemonica* both serve as theories for criminal culpability or blameworthiness, the former refers to the conscious autonomy and will of a self-governing person (Rupcic 2021, 3).

Whereas the latter, *mens daemonica*, involves the extra-legal idea of intentional actions as captured willpower. It assumes that there is an explicit connection between occult forces and intentional actions, influencing a legal subject, which cannot be fully located in the physical world (Rupcic 2021, 3–4). Although Rupcic’s theory establishes a relevant conceptual framework for occult-related crime in the field of South African jurisprudence and criminology. From a critical stance, the notion of a ‘juridical subject operating outside of the physical realm’ (Rupcic 2021, 4) requires significant extraordinary empirical evidence as per the Law of Evidence Amendment Act (1988, 1–3) and Criminal Procedure Act (1977, 107–116), or as stated by Theophilopoulos and Bellengère (2022, 2, 14–19):

... ‘principles [that] are based on traditional philosophical notions of logic and inferential reasoning where an adjudicator is required to draw common sense inferences from evidentiary facts to test a particular hypothesis and to justify a particular substantive conclusion’ (Theophilopoulos and Bellengère 2022, 2, 14–19). Proving an extra-juridical (supernatural) subject as logically probative; the de facto missing link. Or common denominator, between the occult, Satanism, and violent criminality is therefore evidentiary problematic.

(cf. Theophilopoulos and Bellengère 2022, 24–26)

Roelofse and Bezuidenhout conducted a discussion aimed at proving such a hypothesis (see Roelofse 2016, 225–242; cf.

Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 79–96). They propose that ‘scientism’s’ biases (see Gasparatou 2017, 799–802), which come from a secular view that keeps spiritual matters in the private sphere, taint investigations into this phenomenon, therefore making it harder for scientists to be objective (Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 80–81). They further this through espousing that the link between Satanism and violent crime (in South Africa) ‘is clear due to the inherent nature of Satanism being violent’ [*sic.*] (cf. Petrus 2008, 143). However, Roelofse and Bezuidenhout both admit that there are no official statistics justifying the inference. Pointing out, ironically, that ‘very little objective information is available regarding individuals or groups involved in satanically motivated crimes’ (Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 80).

This, consequently, brings to mind the famous maxim popularised by Carl Sagan in 1979: ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence’ (Tressoldi 2011, 1; cf. Deming 2016, 1319–1323). Which is based on the original anecdote by the famous French scholar and polymath, Pierre Simon Marquis de Laplace (1749–1827), who argued that ‘the weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness’ (Gillispie et al. 1999; cf. Tressoldi 2011, 1–4; Deming 2016, 1323). Qualifying an extraordinary claim, in this instance, is the assumption that there is a clear link between Satanism, the occult, and violent crime, as hypothesised by Rupcic, Roelofse, and Bezuidenhout.

Nevertheless, arguments such as that proposed by Roelofse and Bezuidenhout only manifest in environments where there is a strong Christonormative bias (see Ivey 1997, 31–32; Falkof 2010, 5–6, 2012, 3, 2019, 134; cf. Kapp 2024b, 5). A clear example of this can be seen with the *Occult-Related Crimes Unit (ORCU)* of the South African Police Service, founded in 1992 under the leadership of Col. Kobus Jonker (a.k.a. ‘God’s detective’). Who claimed to be a ‘reborn evangelical Christian’ and espoused that Christianity was a prerequisite for serving in this specialised unit, as its fight was against Satan and the occult (see Kapp 2024b, 5–6). Furthermore, despite being criticised for wasting state resources to pursue an unfounded moral crusade against Satan and Satanism (Rousseau 2013; cf. Ivey 1997, 31–33). This moralistic witch hunt was primarily based on reported occult-involvement symptoms, such as depression, heavy metal, fantasy games, and other elements of pop culture serving as evidence of occult/Satanic involvement (see SAPS 2006; cf. Faure 2006, 153–181 and Kemp 2014). Aside from this, however, at the height of Jonker and *ORCU*’s popularity from 1992 to 1998, out of the hundreds of thousands of murder statistics recorded in South Africa at the time (see O’Malley 2007), the unit collectively made < 250 confirmed arrests (Dunbar 2012, 123–124; cf. Kapp 2024b, 7–11).

Following this, the arguments and instances brought forward by Roelofse and Bezuidenhout qualify the occult as something inherently ‘obscure’, ‘secretive’ or ‘concealed’. Associating Satanism with ‘monotheism’—involving instances of sacrifice and the consumption of blood or human organs, elaborate training, hierarchies, initiations, and a lifestyle of pure hedonism. As well as conflating ‘muti-ritual murders’ and African witchcraft (*ukudlisa/isisdliso*), as examples of how occultism is linked to crime (see Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 80–86; cf.

Ndebele 2023, 140–143). Serves as an example of such irrationally reductionistic and highly exaggerated views of occultism, as well as *African Traditional Religion (ATR)*, as purported roots of criminal motive. It also echoes a well-known ‘Satanic Panic’ trope; rooted in Afrikaner Christians’ apartheid racism, fragility, and moral panic persisting since the fall of apartheid in South Africa (see Kapp 2022a, 2–3; cf. Kapp 2024a, 305–306).

In fact, Roelofse and Bezuidenhout briefly allude to the aforementioned panic as a central part of their framework in identifying (quasi-)occult crime, noting that Satanic modus operandi involves *Satanic Ritualistic Abuse (SRA)*, which especially affects (Christian) children (Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 90; cf. Falkof 2015, 32–42). In addition, they qualify this with the revivification of Satanic panic propaganda myths, citing references to ‘Satanic Sabbaths’, ‘holidays’, ‘ceremonies’, ‘recruitment’, and ‘sacrifices’ (Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 87–91). Allegations which still beg objective and unbiased evidence, outweighing the already extant mountain of evidence, proving these myths as alarmist fabrications and moralistic witch hunts. Confidently establishing them as elaborate socially constructed misrepresentations, primarily entertained by evangelical Christian religious fanaticism and conspiracists (see Lanning 1989, 62–83; 1992, 14–20, Engela 2021, 11–17; 2023, 1–22, Waterhouse 2014, 38–42 & Kapp 2024a, 135–136; Falkof 2025, 59–74).

More appropriately, these myths are demonstrably classified under what Ward and Voas (2011, 103–104) consider ‘conspirituality’. A ‘hybrid worldview’ or ‘politico-spiritual philosophy’ characterised by a belief system that uses spirituality tropes to propagate or interlink with pseudoscience and socio-political conspiracy theories (Ward and Voas 2011, 103; cf. Ostrowick 2025, 9–10). The reason behind this is that Western esotericism and conspiracy theories both occasionally foster a common lack of confidence in established institutions of authority (cf. Cotter et al. 2022, 2917–2919). As such, Ward and Voas thus identify three fundamental principles which are present in nearly all conspiratoriality vis-à-vis conspiracy theories: no events occur by chance, nothing is as it seems, and everything is interconnected (Ward and Voas 2011, 103–104). Asprem and Dyrendal add to this theory by observing that the perceived threat of ‘secret groups exercising control over everything’ often characterises these conspiratorialist beliefs, especially when manifesting in conjunction with spirituality and traditional religious belief (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015, 367–369; cf. Ostrowick 2025, 9–10).

In addition, Barkun (2014, 702) further showcases how such conspiracist meta-narratives manifest. Noting that people who subscribe to said conspiracies often harbour paranoia about a certain ‘occult menace’, which they perceive as being a threat to society or a specific group in society (Barkun, 2014, 702; Falkof 2019, 139–140; 2015, 6–11; 2012, 753–767; 2010, 115–135). Furthermore, Barkun maintains that individuals who adhere to these conspiracy theories also perceive the external malevolence they need to expose as originating from a well-structured occult hierarchy (Barkun, 2014, 702–703; cf. Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 86–87; Roelofse 2016, 233–234). Hence, such an ‘evil cabal’ therefore manifests as a group of witches, magicians, or other individuals (in this case, Satanists) belonging to the ‘occulture’ demographic as a perceived imminent external

threat (see Partridge 2015, 315–316; cf. Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 87–89). These individuals, according to said conspiracies, are usually therefore also actively seeking to use their influence and abilities towards malevolent ends (see Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 90–93).

Moreover, Barkun (2014, 702–703) further asserts that a moderate form of such conspiracies exists in which the aforementioned occult cabal actively strives to acquire influence and authority in order to overthrow the proverbial ‘powers that be’. Regrettably, both South African society and its criminological scholarship, engaging with this specific issue, as seen with Cornelis and Roelofse, appear to reflect the aforementioned notions of conspiratoriality in their contextual approach to Satanism and the occult in relation to South African crime (see Petrus 2008, 139–149, Roelofse 2016, 225–238, Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 80–94, Rupcic 2021, 599–606 and Scholtz 2023, 38–41). Another prime example of this is Roelofse, who approaches his discourse on the occult from a starkly Christocentric hermeneutical bias in his delineation of occultism and Satanism, presuming their alleged link to crime (Louw-Carstens 2024; Du Plessis 2017, 117–120; De Wet 2011, 147–149). Notwithstanding his overt misrepresentation and post hoc confluence of *African Traditional Religion (ATR)*, *iSangoma* (see Kapp 2024a, 312–319), and *Voodoo/Hoodoo* (see Kapp 2024b, 350–357) as on par with contemporary Satanism (Roelofse 2016, 225–231; cf. Petrus 2008, 145–146).

In light of this, Roelofse’s allegations therefore clearly reflect Barkun’s conspiratorialist typology, not only misrepresenting Satanism as the ‘inversion of Christianity’ (Roelofse 2016, 231–232). Also in perpetuating a Christian apologetical hermeneutic of the occult riddled with post hoc fallacies, biases, and appeals to the supernatural. Ultimately, it is rooted in the theological dilemma (or false dichotomy) of cosmological dualism (i.e., good vs. evil). While additionally portraying not only Satanism but also traditional African esotericisms: *iSangoma*, *Voodoo*, and *Santeria* as representative of the ‘struggle between good and evil’ (the good, in Roelofse’s case, being Christianity) by involving sacrificial practices (Roelofse 2016, 234–236). Eventually, he arrives at a conclusion, assuming that the aforementioned spiritualities are resemblant of worldviews that ‘opposes Christ’ [*sic.*] (Roelofse 2016, 238) and which invariably embodies ‘a position that is not neutral but displays behaviours that are in opposition to Christianity’ (Roelofse 2016, 238–239); therefore justifying Satanism and the occult as ipso facto criminological threats, targeted at Christian existence. Evidently, Roelofse subsequently adopts Barkun, Ward and Voas, as well as Asprem and Dyrendal’s delineations of a conspiratorialist worldview, by misrepresenting the occult as imminent ‘evil’ and therefore existential threat to–Afrikaner–Christianity (see Falkof 2018, 131–151; cf. Ward and Voas 2011, 103–104; Barkun, 2014, 702; Asprem and Dyrendal 2015, 367–369).

However, this remains only half of the story. Why does such conspiratorialist epistemologies manifest in *de rigueur* academic scholarship? Even when reliable and authoritative interdisciplinary research has comprehensively rectified such alarmist allegations of existential occult threats, by proving them as elaborate social constructions from a bygone socio-cultural and religious *zeitgeist*? Drawing from Michel Foucault’s *The*

Archaeology of Knowledge (1972, 31–38), Van den Heever (2024, 250) echoed by Ostrowick (2025, 2–10), presents compelling grounds for this: Van den Heever posits that the creation of knowledge constructions, or intricate realities, similar to ideas of spiritual possession: involves the logical arrangement of phenomena and facts through various guiding mechanisms (Van den Heever 2024, 250–251; cf. Ostrowick 2025, 2–5).

These mechanisms, as attested by Ostrowick, include fundamental assumptions, theories, cultural scripts, and social-psychological frameworks as well as digital influences, many of which operate subconsciously (Foucault 1972, 31–38; cf. Van den Heever 2024, 250–251; Ostrowick 2025, 3–4). Phenomena which are collectively embodied by, for example, the documentary television series *Devilsdorp* (2021), which tells the tale of the *Krugersdorp* killings. Including also various other cultural productions on this subject essentially engaging with social, cultural, and ideological work as agency-media (cf. Ostrowick 2025, 7–8). Moreover, in addition to social media platforms, the sensationalised narrative embodied by *Devilsdorp* and other media iterations of the occult as existential threat. Significantly influences the subconscious construction of social history and perception (Van den Heever 2024, 250–251; Ostrowick 2025, 9–10).

Furthermore, van den Heever maintains that cultural artifacts (e.g., religious symbols) are interconnected with various social realities and locations of social activity (see Searle 1995, 6–7; cf. Kapp 2020, 1–3). Adopting these aforementioned sensationalised notions, subsequently eliminates the differentiation between cultural productions and history; thereby making history no longer a scenic backdrop for interpreting cultural artifacts. Instead, it becomes a collective noun for the multiplicitous imaginations and practices that contribute to a sense of self, within a society and its sub-contexts (Van den Heever 2024, 251).

As such, *Devilsdorp*'s success in contributing to the infamy of the *Electus per Deus* murder group (purportedly motivated by Satanism), was not solely due to its shocking and graphic contents. Rather, it is because these narratives invoke and sensationalises various—perceived—occult-related paraphernalia (pentagrams, rituals, black attire, candles, etc.). Including embellished references to alleged satanic practices; demonic possession, and spiritual warfare against Satan, among other things. Together with other contemporary sensationalised so-called 'true crime' stories, these notions consistently reinvoked long-standing social anxieties, which are then expressed through Afrikaner (Calvinist) Christian evangelical theologies (Ostrowick 2025, 9–10; Van den Heever 2024, 251–252; 253–259; cf. Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 28–29).

Such hermeneutics, therefore, successfully establish a presuppositional discourse framework: enabling the conspiratorial justification of the inherent correlation between the occult and Satanism, as criminally deviant. Understandings exclusively based on socially constructed realities/beliefs (e.g., moral panic), devoid of critical interrogation (see Petrus 2008, 142–143; cf. Ostrowick 2025, 5–8). And in doing so, they reaffirm bygone Afrikaner Christian conspiratorialist occult phobias—strengthening their irrational beliefs about occult crime as dangerous, deviant, and de facto existential threat to Christianity and society.

3 | The Devil is in the Detail: Denial and Displacement of Personal Responsibility

Twenty four years ago in April 2000, the South African cricketing community was shocked by a scandal, involving (then) Proteas cricket captain, Hansie Cronjé. Delhi police accused the late Cronjé and three other South African cricketers of rigging matches ('match-fixing'), during a Cricket test match against India (Bull 2020). Following this scandal, Cronjé confessed his transgressions to the late Ray McCauley: then, a prominent church leader from *Rhema Bible Church* in Johannesburg (News24 2000; cf. Kapp 2025, 15–17). McCauley, according to *The Guardian* newspaper, eventually relayed the information to the formal Commission of Inquiry, after which Cronjé confessed:

In a moment of stupidity and weakness, I allowed Satan and the world to dictate terms to me ... the moment I took my eyes off Jesus, my whole world turned dark....

(Szreter 2000)

Engaging with this notorious event, it is important to highlight various reactions from the public at that stage: some people were shocked, others were amused, while many saw this statement by the late captain of the Proteas cricket team, as a reliable account of true events: of course, 'the Devil made him do it' (Jonker 2017, 348; cf. Spangenberg 2013, 214). However, Jonker (2017, 348) argues that, although this is just one well-known instance of attributing wrongdoing to Satan, it is not unusual for Christian religious circles in South Africa to blame the devil for wrongdoings (see Luka 2023, 5–8; cf. W. I. Ferreira 2019, 2–5; Kruger and De Wet 2015, 6–7; Jonker 2017, 348). Many of the (social, political, or economic) challenges faced by a society or individuals are often attributed to 'the Devil' or Satan in these religious frameworks (Spangenberg 2013, 14–15; cf. W. I. Ferreira 2019, 3–5).

Because such a theological approach often involves the delegation of guilt as a means to avoid being held accountable, even for injustices committed against others (Jonker 2017, 348–349). In this instance, the injustice here is unethical and potentially unlawful behaviour; therefore criminal (De Klerk 2017, 254). De Klerk as such echoes Jonker by arguing that 'blaming the devil is a popular projective defence mechanism to diffuse responsibility and explain away offensive behaviours' (De Klerk 2017, 254; Conradie 2015). Furthering that one key motive in the subconscious psychological rationalisation of offenders towards acquitting or indemnifying themselves from wrongdoing is where offenders seek to avoid accountability by either denying personal responsibility or shifting it to others (De Klerk 2017, 259).

Additionally, De Klerk subsequently identifies behavioural examples of such strategies: (1) denying personal responsibility (ascribing it to external circumstances or being a situational victim without control over one's own actions—e.g., demonic possession or *mens daemonica*); (2) displacing (transferring responsibility to another individual or entity, such as the Devil/God); and (3) diffusing (proposing myriad justifications such as,

‘In a moment of stupidity and weakness, I allowed Satan and the world to dictate terms to me’). Whether these actions were conscious or subconscious, De Klerk (2017, 259–260) demonstrates various relevant strategies, where malevolent entities and divine forces are invoked, to evade personal accountability. Perhaps more relevantly, in this particular context, De Klerk (2017, 259) identifies a particular theme involving the acquittal of personal accountability, which he understands as ‘... the deceptive belief that one can escape moral culpability and avoid being held responsible for unethical actions by externalising blame and accountability, and in doing so, absolving oneself’ (De Klerk 2017, 259–260).

Scharnick-Udemans echoes De Klerk’s sentiments when she argues whether Cecilia Steyn and Electus per Deus were either Christian or Satanists (cf. Shange 2018), as per their consistent invocation of the Devil, Satanism, and the occult is irrelevant—rather, the *Devilsdorp* documentary is driving this acquittal narrative surrounding the Krugersdorp killings. Consequently reaffirms the socially constructed biases bolstered by Afrikaner Christianity during the anti-Satanist scene (Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 36). Furthermore, Scharnick-Udemans maintains that these biases obscure the contributions of authoritative figures within the Afrikaner Christian community (namely, police officers, evangelical religious leaders, therapists, academics, and others). Indirectly absolving them from bearing responsibility and accountability for their roles in socially constructing a fearful and hyper-vigilant culture (see SAPS 2006). Resulting in the continual persecution, discrimination, susceptibility and vulnerability of certain communities (i.e., the occult and Satanism).

When it comes to issues of impending evil, harm, and depravity in society, their automatic association with the perceived threat of Satanic intrusion intensifies (Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 36). It is therefore also worth mentioning that Scharnick-Udemans bolsters this by pointing out the crucial factor that forms the crux of this study, which is that by promoting such Satanic panic-*esque* conspiratoriality, the ‘anti-Satanist scene’ deliberately ignores the crucial fact that traditional religious institutions (e.g., Afrikaner Christianity) have time and time again, similarly, appeared as a prominent culprit behind the same accusations—taking the form of sexual, spiritual, and physical abuse—often projected towards the occult and Satanism in South Africa, as scapegoats (Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 36–37; cf. Van den Heever 2024, 262).

She maintains that ‘refusal to at the very least acknowledge that Electus per Deus maintained a Christian origin story and identity also demonstrates how the social and religious esteem of Christianity is protected in South Africa’ (Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 37). This sentiment is again also evidenced by the death of Kirsty Theologo (14) in October 2011, murdered in what was said to be a ‘satanic ritual performed by a group of friends’ (see Du 2013a, SAPA 2013b; cf. News24, 4 November 2013 and Falkof 2017, 426–427).

In the weeks preceding the so-called ‘ritual murder’, media networks identified that the six defendants accused of Theologo’s murder compared Theologo to the infamous biblical prostitute, known as the ‘great whore of Babylon’ (Revelation 17:16; cf. König 2022, 3–6). This vindication was identified by

‘matchmaker’, a soothsaying game. Moreover, the initial friendly gathering ended up being fuelled by drugs and alcohol, which ultimately motivated the crime of Theologo’s murder (SAPA 2013b; cf. Falkof 2017, 433; Van den Heever 2024, 12). Even though media at the time narrowed in heavily on the accused youths who had drawn a pentagram on the ground. Strategically positioning candles at each point to indicate the occult and satanic essence of the ceremony (see News24 2013; SAPA 2013a, 2013b). One of the defendants later confessed to being the son of a pastor and being compelled to attend church regularly while simultaneously engaging in ‘satanic experimentation’ (Du 2013a, 2013b).

In response to this, Van den Heever (2024, 12–13) notes that of more importance is not a de facto occult or Satanism motive but Theologo’s tumultuous childhood, upbringing, and home environment. As one of seven siblings with a single mother engaged in unstable relationships, oscillating between poverty, living in squalor, and sometimes strict maternal discipline, Theologo was yet known among her peers for being the ‘freaky wild chick’, noted for her excessive preening and flirting with boys (Van den Heever 2024, 12–13). Van den Heever therefore contends that the focus here is not Satanism or the occult per se, but rather (Christian) youths, who used *pseudo-occult* horror *mise-en-scène* as a form of anti-discourse (see Kapp 2022a, 2022b, 7–11). Anti-discourse is most notably present in contexts where a certain ideology forms the hegemonic discourse (see Tropinka 2022, 393–394). Where the broader—in this case, South African—society is accepted as Christonormative and individual members, even self-identifying as such (Van den Heever 2024, 262–265; cf. Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 37–41; Falkof 2017, 430–433). This is, yet again, consistent with the earlier research findings by Roelofse (2016, 227–237) and Petrus (2008, 139–149), who exemplifies South Africa (despite its objectively secular democratic status) as ‘strikingly Christonormative’ (cf. Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 24), especially in their interpretations of violent crime.

Falkof (2017, 248–249) relevantly adds to the above case, mainly involving Kirsty Theologo, but which similarly applies to the Electus per Deus murder group. In addition to this, she simultaneously supports De Klerk’s arguments on personal accountability vis-à-vis culpability, promoting that projections of ‘evil’ enable us to explain the inexplicable through appealing to its inexplicability in lieu of satisfying the need for a more sufficient explanation (Falkof 2017, 428). Falkof maintains that to discursively construe certain phenomena as ‘evil’, such logic eliminates the need to interrogate meaning or causation, due to evil signifying itself and thereby serving as an explanation in and of itself (Falkof 2017, 428). As a result, asserting that ‘evil just is’ obfuscates the necessary imperative requiring closer inspection and critical evaluation (Falkof 2017, 428–429). Where does that leave Satanism and the Occult in South Africa, then?

In the case of Electus per Deus, Judge Ellen Jacob Frances, presiding over Cecilia et al. in his final sentencing of the Krugersdorp murderers, issued the following statement:

... Satanism, which is not a criminal offence in our country, is not on trial. But the evil deeds that were committed by the accused are heinous, barbaric, and

cold-blooded crimes in terms of the laws of our country [are]

(Scharnick-Udemans 2022, 36; cf. Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 82)

4 | The ‘Devil’s Advocate’: Contemporary Satanism and the Occult

In attempting a working definition of Satanism and the occult, Roelofse and Bezuidenhout point out, ‘It is hard to provide an inclusive definition of Satanism’ (Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 81). Due to the supposed relativity of its theological, moral, political, sociological, and legal manifestations (Roelofse and Bezuidenhout 2018, 81–82). This is not quite true; it completely ignores the extensive scholarship which has been done by leading scholars of Western esotericism and religion studies. Confidently defining Satanism as a spirituality of the self and corporeality, aimed towards a hedonistic spiritual lifestyle, self-empowerment, and self-knowledge (Lap 2012, 90–95; Karlson-Weimann 2013, 24–31; Petersen and Faxneld 2014, 424 and Dyrendal 2016, 59). The fundamental Satanic ethos is that of secular rationalism, but its religio-spiritual (theological) character lies in the drive towards liberation of the individual self and one’s body from oppressive theocratic regimes. Which, although misunderstood, is quite characteristic of occult philosophies belonging to the left-hand path (see Du Toit 2006, 1253; Petersen and Faxneld 2014, 399–407; Granholm 2012, 210–214; Petersen 2010, 77–85; cf. Kapp 2024a, 214–221).

Therefore, contra the assertions by Roelofse and Bezuidenhout (2018, 89–90), who argue ‘ritual homicide, ritual child abuse, and blood rituals appear to be common features in Satanism-related crime in the United States, Britain, and South Africa...’ –allegations of *Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA)* remain, yet again, largely socially constructed fabrications and unsupported by any credible data or evidence (see Lanning 1989, 62–83; Waterhouse 2014, 38–42; Falkof 2018, 278–279, 281; cf. Kapp 2024a, 131–135). Occultism derives from the Latin *occultus*, meaning ‘hidden’, ‘secret’, or ‘concealed’. It is commonly demarcated as an umbrella term comprising mostly *New Religious Movements (NRMs)*, following the modern ‘occult revival’ in the late 1900s (see Holt and Petersen 2016, 441; Partridge 2014, 116–117; cf. Dyrendal et al. 2015, 6–7). This definition does not, however, indicate a deliberate or inherent attempt to be elusive, obscure, or secretive; rather, the myriad practices associated with the occult are mostly considered pre-Enlightenment (Faivre 1994, 7–8; cf. Asprem 2016, 1–4). Magico-religious traditions, borrowing from a wide range of ancient indigenous beliefs and cosmologies, categorically belong to the realm of Western esotericism (Rudbøg 2013, 15–16; Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2014, 14–20). Employing mystical approaches to understand the transcendental nature of the self and/or in relation to divinity, the latter is occasionally understood as one and the same thing (Kapp 2024a, 161, 168–172). The lack of an ancient ‘paper trail’, however, complicates a comprehensive historiographical investigation of the occult, in addition to Western esotericism lacking a singular origin in and of itself; therefore, in order to make sense of its historical complexity, this demands a decent historiographical and comparativist approach to begin with (see Strube 2023, 356–357; cf. Kapp 2024a, 379–380).

5 | Conclusion

The paper sought to examine Calvinism’s lingering presence in South African reformed Christianity, contextualising its ties to apartheid Afrikaner (Christian) nationalism and the post-apartheid Christonormative *zeitgeist*. In the face of growing diversity in South Africa, Calvinism eventually evolved into nationalism followed by alarmist reactions and moral panics, such as the ‘Satanic panic’ or ‘Satanism scare’. Such hegemonic meta-narratives perpetuated (and continue to perpetuate) a distinct and inherent—perceived—connection to the occult, Satanism, and criminal deviance, which purportedly manifest as hijacked personhood (or *mens daemonica*). In demonstrating, at the hands of select case studies (i.e., *Devilsdorp*, the murder of Kirsty Theologo, and the case of Hansie Cronjé), this paper contends that popular notions such as ‘the devil made me do it’ reflect a deeply rooted social history entrenched in the Apartheid-born Christian, Calvinist, and nationalist predispositions of Afrikaners.

In post-apartheid South Africa, this subsequently manifested as sensationalist media narratives and socially constructed fears of the occult and Satanists. The emergence of such alarmist perceptions involving (*quasi*-)occult crime and purported *Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA)* is demonstrably rooted in the decline of whiteness and increasing diversity after 1994. Moralistic witch hunts that, to date, still beg objective evidence, in accordance with the *Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977* and the *Law of Evidence Act 45 of 1988* within South African jurisprudence.

Arguing that such myths espousing alleged occult-related criminality were, by and large, strictly influenced by Kobus Jonker’s unjustified moral crusade. Most notably through his establishment of the South African Police Service’s *Occult-Related Crimes Unit (ORCU)*. Collectively, these manifestations, in addition to several others, have fostered a culture of conspiratoriality: a religiously driven conspiracy, attributing illegal and unethical actions to the looming threat of an occult cabal. Conspiracy appeals to emotion, blame shifting, and post hoc reasoning, endorsing moral absolution and displacement via *mens daemonica*. Satanism, the occult, devils, and demons do not suffice as valid justifications for temporal offences. Especially not when deliberately employed as religious scapegoats to distract from the necessity for legal accountability in the context of crime and criminality.

Satanism (and the broader occult) enjoy equal constitutional protections, privileges, and guarantees under Section 15 of the 1996 South African Constitution, which guarantees *inter alia* freedom of religion. The main concern here, however, is that in light of South Africa’s Christonormative *zeitgeist*, the true extent of religious equality remains subject to dispute. Though it remains *ipso facto* that Christianity continues to enjoy a socially privileged status in the country. As a result, discrimination, misrepresentation, and the stigmatisation of occult-related beliefs remain commonplace in, mainly, but not limited to, Afrikaans Christian communities. However, based on the discussion above and in light of the lack of reliable evidence proving the contrary, it is confidently ascertainable that the idea of occult crime vis-à-vis the occult and Satanism being inherently ‘evil’ or

'deviant' remains an outdated and unfounded conspiratorial meta-narrative.

Unnecessarily discriminating against the non-derogable rights afforded to religious minorities in South Africa. Simultaneously it perpetuates disinformation and obscures the prima facie motivations behind crime and criminality. Conclusively, this study also recognises its limitations, acknowledging the need for increased interdisciplinary research and mixed-methods approaches to be done in future research towards better understanding the relationship between religion and crime in South Africa and beyond.

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Ethics Statement

This article does not involve human participants, animal research, or the use of sensitive or personally identifiable data. Ethical considerations are rooted in the responsible representation of belief systems and the critical analysis of violent crime. The author is committed to avoiding sensationalism, while acknowledging the real and harmful consequences of religiously coded criminal narratives. The author affirms that no plagiarism has been committed, and that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the drafting of the article. All relevant sources have been cited appropriately. The author encourages readers to critically engage with the consequences of harmful misinformation in both academic and public discourse.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No new datasets were generated or analysed for this study. All information is based on publicly available sources, including media reports, court records, and existing academic literature.

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