

# “God Damn”: The Law and Economics of Monastic Malediction

Peter T. Leeson\*  
George Mason University

Today monks are known for turning the other cheek, honoring saints, and blessing humanity with brotherly love. But for centuries they were known equally for fulminating their foes, humiliating saints, and casting calamitous curses at persons who crossed them. Clerics called these curses “maledictions.” This article argues that medieval communities of monks and canons used maledictions to protect their property against predators where government and physical self-help were unavailable to them. To explain how they did this I develop a theory of cursing with rational agents. I show that curses capable of improving property protection when cursors and their targets are rational must satisfy three conditions. They must be grounded in targets’ existing beliefs, monopolized by cursors, and unfalsifiable. Malediction satisfied these conditions, making it an effective institutional substitute for conventional institutions of clerical property protection. (*JEL* D83, K11, K42, K49, N43, Z12)

Whoever wishes to know what the malediction is really like should read . . . divine law and find out for certain how terrible and horrible and frightening that malediction is.

—Council of Aachen to Pepin of Aquitaine, 837 AD<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Today monks are known for turning the other cheek, honoring saints, and blessing humanity with brotherly love. But for centuries they were known equally for fulminating their foes, humiliating saints, and casting

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\* Department of Economics, George Mason University, MS 3G4, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA. Email: pleeson@gmu.edu.

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1. Quoted in Little (1993: 105).

calamitous curses at persons who crossed them. Clerics called these curses “maledictions.”<sup>2</sup>

This article investigates malediction. To do so it uses the theory of rational choice. I argue that medieval communities of monks and canons used maledictions—liturgical curses, clamors, excommunication and anathema, and contract cursing—to protect their property against predators where government and physical self-help were unavailable to them.<sup>3</sup> To explain how they did this I develop a theory of cursing with rational agents.

A curse is an appeal to a supernatural power to physically, emotionally, spiritually, or otherwise bring harm to another person. I show that curses capable of improving property protection when cursors and their targets are rational must satisfy three conditions. They must be grounded in targets’ existing beliefs, monopolized by cursors, and unfalsifiable. Malediction satisfied these conditions, making it an effective institutional substitute for conventional institutions of clerical property protection.

Historians of the Middle Ages discovered medieval monks’ reliance on cursing to protect their property rights long ago (see, for instance, Little 1975, 1979, 1993, 1998; Geary 1979, 1991, 1995; Rosenwein et al. 1991; Bitel 2000). The idea that hocus pocus might influence people’s behavior is older still. What no one has explained is how hocus pocus could accomplish this when cursors and their targets are rational. My article does that.

Economists have said nothing about monastic malediction. But they have considered religious actors and, in particular, ecclesiastics in economic terms (see, for instance, Iannaccone 1992, 1998). Most closely connected to my analysis is Ekelund et al.’s (1989, 1996, 2002, 2006), and my previous work (Leeson 2011a).

Ekelund et al. (1996) demonstrate how rational clerics used supernatural sanctions to protect the Church’s spiritual monopoly against heretical competitors in late medieval and early modern Europe. My previous work (Leeson 2011a) demonstrates how rational clerics used “animal trials”—the legal prosecution of insects and rodents—to manufacture belief in those sanctions as a means of improving tithe compliance in Renaissance France, Italy, and Switzerland. My analysis in this article contributes to this literature by demonstrating how rational clerics used malediction to improve their property protection against equally rational predators in high medieval France.<sup>4</sup>

2. This article abuses the term “malediction” in the sense that it considers various forms of clerical cursing under this title. In fact, as I discuss below, “malediction” technically refers to a specific kind of clerical curse, the liturgical *malediction*, rather than to the variety of clerical curse-type forms I consider. Since my analysis deals with clerical curses, I use the term “malediction” to encompass all these forms and to distinguish them from other kinds of curses one can envisage, which aren’t the province of ecclesiastics.

3. They also used shaming for this purpose, the operation of which was tied with cursing. See note 19. This article’s analysis focuses on the supernatural element of cursing.

4. Like all economic analyses of criminal decision making, mine too is founded in the seminal contribution of Becker (1968).

My analysis is also connected to the literature that examines the “law and economics of superstition.” That literature explores the role that objectively false beliefs play in the legal systems of rational people. For example, Posner (1980) considers the role of witch beliefs in primitive societies’ legal systems. In joint work with Christopher Coyne (Leeson and Coyne 2012), I consider the role of magic in contemporary Liberia’s criminal justice system. Elsewhere I (Leeson 2012) study superstition’s role in medieval judicial ordeals of fire and water. And in a third paper (Leeson 2010) I examine superstition’s role in Gypsy institutions of law and order. My analysis in this article contributes to this literature by illuminating the role that citizens’ beliefs in execrations played in supporting clerical property rights in the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, this article is connected to the growing literature that examines self-governance and private institutions of property protection. For example, Friedman (1979) examines private institutions of property protection in medieval Iceland. Benson (1989) considers the evolution of self-governance in medieval international trade. Ellickson (1991) studies private governance arrangements in contemporary Shasta County, CA. Anderson and Hill (2004) study private institutions of law and order in the American West. Adolphson and Ramseyer (2009) consider private governance institutions supplied by the Buddhist church in medieval Japan.<sup>6</sup> And Skarbek (2010, 2011) explores private institutions of property protection among prison gangs.<sup>7</sup> My analysis contributes to this literature by analyzing how medieval clerics used cursing to protect their property rights where government was effectively absent. God damn.

## 2. A Simple Theory of Cursing

The theory of cursing when cursors and their targets are rational is simple. Consider a world without government inhabited by two persons,  $i$  and  $j$ .  $i$  possesses a piece of property that he and  $j$  value at  $x > 0$ . Information in this world is perfect and complete.

$j$  is physically strong. His strength gives him two choices. He may physically attack  $i$  or leave  $i$  in peace.

5. This article is also connected to the literature on shaming as an alternative method of legal punishment. See, for instance, Kahan (1996), Book (1999), Kahan and Posner (1999), and Ziel (2005).

6. In that paper medieval Japanese temples and monasteries are stronger than secular strongmen. Religious communities are capable of protecting their and others’ property, making them a solution to weak government. In my article medieval European communities of canons and monks are weaker than secular strongmen. Religious communities are incapable of protecting their property in the face of weak government. Cursing is their way of coping with this problem.

7. See also my investigation of private institutions of property protection among Caribbean pirates, precolonial African communities, and the inhabitants of the medieval Anglo-Scottish border (Leeson 2007a, 2008, 2009).

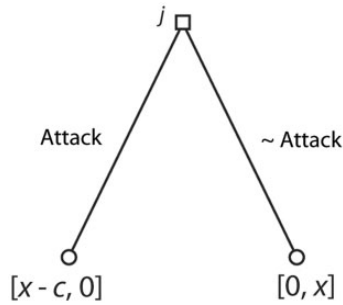


Figure 1. Unprotected Property Rights.

$i$  is physically weak—so weak that he’s unable to physically attack  $j$  and unable to defend himself against  $j$ ’s physical attacks. Because of his weakness,  $i$  has no decision to make. He sits and hopes that  $j$  chooses to leave him in peace.

If  $j$  leaves  $i$  in peace,  $j$  earns zero and  $i$  earns  $x$ . If  $j$  attacks  $i$ ,  $i$  loses his property and  $j$  gains it. But attacking  $i$  is costly. If  $j$  does so, he incurs a fixed cost,  $c > 0$ .

$i$ ’s cost of bargaining with  $j$  to arrange some tribute payment to  $j$ ,  $t$ :  $x \geq t \geq x - c$ , in return for  $j$ ’s agreement to leave him in peace is  $k > x$ . Thus no Coasean extortion bargain between them is possible. Figure 1 depicts the situation that  $i$  and  $j$  confront. The first element in brackets indicates  $j$ ’s payoff. The second element indicates  $i$ ’s.

Whether  $j$  attacks  $i$  depends on the relationship between the value of  $i$ ’s property and  $j$ ’s cost of stealing it. When  $x < c$ ,  $j$  leaves  $i$  in peace. When  $x \geq c$ ,  $j$  attacks  $i$  and plunders his property.

This result describes what we would expect in a world without government inhabited by persons with dramatically different physical strengths.<sup>8</sup> The only protection  $i$ ’s property receives is from  $j$ ’s cost of attacking him. That’s not much protection at all.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.1 The Option to Curse

Cursing alters the situation that  $i$  and  $j$  confront. It has the power to improve  $i$ ’s property protection. To see how, consider the case where  $j$ ’s cost of attacking  $i$  is insufficient to protect  $i$ ’s property against  $j$ ’s plunder—i.e.,  $x \geq c$ .

Suppose that if  $j$  attacks  $i$ ,  $i$  can curse him. Cursing involves only performative utterances (“May you writhe in hell’s flames covered in boils!”), accompanied by a wave of the hand). Thus cursing is costless.

8. Though, for a discussion of how physically weak persons confronting this problem in precolonial Africa mitigated the threat to their property that physically stronger persons posed, see Leeson (2007b).

9. Though, see Leeson and Nowrasteh (2011).

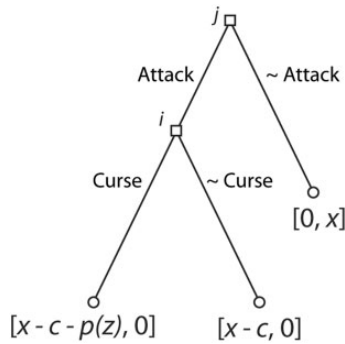


Figure 2. Improving Property Protection through Cursing.

$i$ 's curses threaten  $j$  with terrible afflictions. If  $j$  is certain that  $i$ 's curses are genuine, those afflictions impose a cost on  $j$ ,  $z$ , where  $x > z > x - c$ . But  $j$  needn't be certain that  $i$ 's curses are genuine. He may even be certain they're bogus. If  $j$  is certain that  $i$ 's curses are bogus, they impose no cost on  $j$ .

$p \in [0, 1]$  measures the strength of  $j$ 's belief in the genuineness of  $i$ 's curses.  $p$  is the probability  $j$  assigns to the possibility that  $i$ 's curses are real.  $1 - p$  is the probability he assigns to the possibility that those curses are bogus.

Cursing has defensive power only. If  $i$  attempts to curse  $j$  offensively—i.e., when  $j$  hasn't attacked him first— $i$  believes his curses will “boomerang.” Instead of hitting  $j$ ,  $i$ 's curses will inflict the harm intended for  $j$  on  $i$ . Thus  $i$  curses  $j$  only when  $j$  has attacked him first.

In addition to  $j$ ,  $i$  now has a choice. If  $j$  attacks him,  $i$  chooses whether or not to curse  $j$ . Introducing the possibility of cursing extends the decision tree in Figure 1 to the one in Figure 2.<sup>10</sup>

This game is dynamic. Its solution concept is subgame perfection. I solve it using backward induction.

The game in Figure 2 has three subgame perfect equilibria (SPE). There are two reasons for this multiplicity of equilibria. The first reason is that, once  $j$  has attacked  $i$ ,  $i$ 's payoff is the same whether he responds by cursing  $j$  or not. If  $j$  attacks him,  $i$  loses his property. Cursing can impose a magical expected cost on  $j$ . But it can't magically bring  $i$ 's property back to him. Thus  $i$  is indifferent between cursing and not cursing  $j$  if  $j$  attacks him.

10. Alternatively, I could let  $i$  move first, choosing whether to curse preemptively by announcing that anyone who attacks him is cursed, and then let  $j$  choose whether to attack. The conditions for effective cursing my model derives are the same under this setup. As I discuss below, medieval monks and canons used both preemptive and reactive cursing. An example of the former is contract cursing. An example of the latter is clamoring/clamoringly humiliation.

For now assume that  $i$ 's indifference means he's equally likely to play either of these strategies if  $j$  attacks him. Later I'll consider why it may make more sense to think that  $i$  will always curse  $j$  when  $j$  attacks him if the game in Figure 2 is repeated.<sup>11</sup>

When  $i$  doesn't curse  $j$  if  $j$  attacks him,  $j$  finds it profitable to attack  $i$ . This is the first possible equilibrium in Figure 2. In this case  $i$  doesn't exercise his ability to curse  $j$  when  $j$  attacks him. So introducing cursing does nothing to improve  $i$ 's property protection compared to the situation in Figure 1 where he's unable to curse  $j$ .

In the other two equilibria in Figure 2,  $i$  chooses to curse  $j$  when  $j$  attacks him. Examining Figure 2 under this branch of the decision tree reveals the second reason for this game's multiplicity of equilibria. It imposes no restrictions on  $j$ 's expected payoff of being cursed.  $x - c - p(z)$  may be less than, greater than, or equal to zero. Since  $z > x - c$ ,  $j$ 's expected payoff of being cursed depends on the strength of his belief that  $i$ 's curses are real:  $p$ .

If  $p > (x - c)/z$ ,  $j$ 's expected payoff of attacking  $i$  and then being cursed is negative. This yields the second possible equilibrium in Figure 2.  $i$  curses  $j$  if  $j$  attacks him. So  $j$  leaves  $i$  in peace. In this case  $i$  exercises his ability to curse  $j$  when  $j$  attacks him. Cursing improves  $i$ 's property protection compared to when he's unable to curse  $j$ .

If  $p < (x - c)/z$ ,  $j$ 's expected payoff of attacking  $i$  and then being cursed is positive. This yields the final possible equilibrium in Figure 2.  $i$  curses  $j$  if  $j$  attacks him. But  $j$  attacks  $i$  anyway. Here  $i$  exercises his ability to curse  $j$  when  $j$  attacks him. But because  $j$ 's belief in the genuineness of  $i$ 's curses is weak, cursing fails to improve  $i$ 's property protection compared to when he's unable to curse  $j$ .

These three possible outcomes of the game in Figure 2 highlight the first condition for effective cursing.

**Condition 1.** *Curses must be grounded in their targets' existing beliefs.*

Compared to when  $i$  is unable to curse, when he has the ability to do so, his property is protected more often. In the situation in Figure 1,  $j$  always plunders  $i$  when  $x \geq c$ . In contrast, in the game in Figure 2,  $j$  sometimes doesn't plunder  $i$  when  $x \geq c$ .

However, this is true only when  $p > (x - c)/z$ . Since  $(x - c)/z > 0$ ,  $j$ 's belief in the genuineness of  $i$ 's curses can only satisfy this inequality if  $p > 0$ . And in order for  $p > 0$ ,  $j$  must see  $i$ 's curses as at least potentially legitimate.

$j$  will only see  $i$ 's curses as potentially legitimate if  $i$ 's curses are compatible with, or "grounded in,"  $j$ 's existing beliefs that support the possible genuineness of those curses. For example,  $j$  may believe in the ability of particular persons to wield supernatural power. He may believe in the

11. Alternatively, it's possible that  $i$  may derive utility from cursing  $j$  when  $j$  attacks him and so always curses  $j$  in this case for this reason.

ability of persons to wield such power for particular purposes. Or he may believe in that ability when magical incantations have a particular substance or form. These beliefs may stem from recognized folk-histories of curses' genuineness, secular or spiritual authorities' certification of such curses' power, or widely accepted precedents for the genuineness of related magical incantations, such as healing spells, love potions, good-luck charms, bad-luck talismans, and the like.

If  $i$ 's curses are grounded in and thus reflect  $j$ 's existing beliefs along these dimensions,  $j$  will see those curses as potentially legitimate—i.e.,  $p > 0$ . If  $i$ 's curses aren't grounded in and thus conflict with  $j$ 's existing beliefs along these dimensions,  $j$  will see those curses as illegitimate—i.e.,  $p = 0$ .

Of course  $j$  may not have any existing beliefs that could support any curses  $i$  can conjure up. In this case  $i$ 's curses won't be grounded in  $j$ 's existing beliefs and so will fail. Further, even if  $j$  does have existing beliefs suitable for  $i$  to ground his curses in, while this ensures that  $p > 0$ ,  $j$ 's skepticism means it may still be the case that  $p < (x - c)/z$ . Grounding curses in targets' existing beliefs is necessary but not sufficient for cursing to be effective.

Above I assumed that  $i$ 's indifference between cursing and not cursing  $j$  when  $j$  attacks him means that  $i$  is equally likely to play either of these strategies if  $j$  attacks him. But examining the equilibrium outcomes in these two cases leads to a peculiar result:  $i$  sometimes chooses not to curse  $j$  after  $j$  attacks him even though if  $i$  committed to always cursing  $j$  after  $j$  attacks him, his property would be protected more often.

It doesn't cost  $i$  anything to curse  $j$ . So there's no impediment to credibly committing to such a strategy. Especially if  $i$  and  $j$  play the game in Figure 2 repeatedly,  $i$  would benefit by adopting the following policy: when cursing and not cursing yield the same payoff, curse.

In this case, too, cursing doesn't protect  $i$ 's property perfectly. It may still be the case that for  $j$ ,  $p < (x - c)/z$ . But a "curse commitment" does the most to improve  $i$ 's property protection compared to when he doesn't have the ability to curse.

## 2.2 Permitting both Parties to Curse

In the game in Figure 2 only  $i$  can curse. What happens to cursing's ability to improve  $i$ 's property protection if  $j$  can curse too?

To see what happens, consider the case where  $p > (x - c)/z$ —i.e.,  $j$ 's belief in the genuineness of  $i$ 's curses is strong enough to make  $j$ 's expected payoff of attacking and being cursed less than his payoff of leaving  $i$  in peace.

Suppose that  $j$  has the ability to hurl the same curses at  $i$  that  $i$  can hurl at  $j$ . Those curses threaten  $i$  with the same afflictions that  $i$ 's curses threaten  $j$  with. Thus they threaten to impose the same cost on  $i$  that  $i$ 's curses threaten to impose on  $j$ :  $z$ .

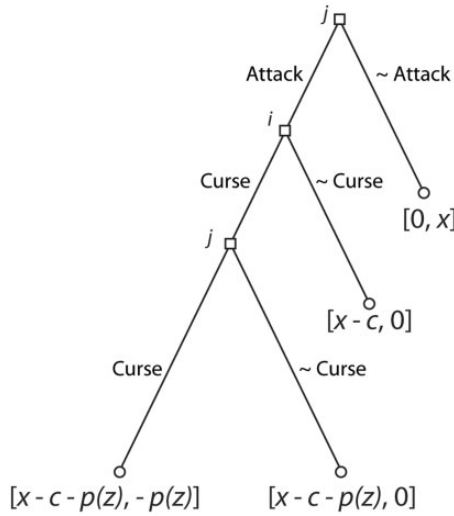


Figure 3. Weakened Property Protection when Anyone Can Curse.

*i* and *j* share the same *p*. Further, just like *i*, *j* can only curse “defensively.” Thus *j* can’t initiate an attack on *i* with curses. He can only curse *i* if *i* curses him first. The resulting game is an extension of the one in Figure 2. Consider Figure 3.

This game has three SPE. Similar to Figure 2 where *j* can’t curse, here, if *j* attacks *i* and *i* curses *j*, but *j* chooses not to counter-curse in response, *i*’s payoff is the same as when he doesn’t curse *j*. Similarly, if *j* attacks *i* and *i* curses *j*, *j*’s expected payoff is the same whether he responds by counter-cursing *i* or not.

First consider the case when *j* counter-curses *i* if *i* curses him. Here we find this game’s first possible equilibrium. If *j* attacks *i* and *i* curses *j*, *j* counter-curses *i*, leading *i* to earn his lowest possible payoff. Thus *i* chooses not to curse *j* when *j* attacks him. That makes it profitable for *j* to attack *i*. So he does. *j*’s ability to curse *i* if *i* curses him prevents cursing from improving *i*’s property protection as it does in the game in Figure 2 where *i* has a monopoly on cursing.

Next consider the case when *j* doesn’t counter-curse *i* if *i* curses him. Here we find this game’s second possible equilibrium. When *j* attacks, *i* curses him. But *j* doesn’t respond. *j*’s expected payoff is lower than if he leaves *i* in peace. So *j* does that. Despite the fact that both persons can curse, cursing improves *i*’s property protection compared to when *i* is unable to curse *j*.

Finally, consider the case when *i* doesn’t curse *j* if *j* attacks him. This case yields the final possible equilibrium in Figure 3. Since *i* doesn’t exercise his ability to curse *j* when *j* attacks him, the situation is the same as when *i* doesn’t exercise that ability in the game in Figure 2. *j* attacks *i*, leaving *i*’s property in the same state it is in Figure 1: unprotected.



These three possible outcomes of the game in Figure 3 highlight the second condition for effective cursing.

**Condition 2.** *Cursors must have a monopoly on cursing.*

Compared to when  $i$  has a monopoly on cursing,  $i$ 's property is protected less often when he lacks such a monopoly. In the game in Figure 2,  $j$  never plunders  $i$  when  $p > (x - c)/z$  and  $i$  curses him following his attack. In the game in Figure 3,  $j$  sometimes plunders  $i$  even when  $j$ 's belief in the genuineness of  $i$ 's curses satisfies this inequality and  $i$  curses him following his attack.  $i$ 's property protection is stronger when both he and  $j$  can curse compared to when neither of them can. But  $i$ 's ability to use cursing to improve his property protection when  $j$  can curse too is weaker than when he alone can curse.

As in the game in Figure 2, in this game too, it may be sensible, especially if interaction is repeated, to permit  $i$  to follow a rule according to which, when he's indifferent between cursing and not cursing, he curses. On the same grounds it's sensible to permit  $j$  to follow such a rule.

If both persons follow such a rule,  $i$  regains his ability to use cursing to support the same level of property protection he enjoys when he has a monopoly on cursing. When  $i$  can credibly promise to curse  $j$  if  $j$  attacks him, and  $j$  can credibly promise to counter-curse  $i$  in return,  $j$ 's expected payoff of leaving  $i$  in peace is higher than if he attacks  $i$ .

Still,  $i$  can render cursing a more effective means of improving his property protection if he can monopolize it. Consider the possibility of "trembling hands." If  $j$  makes a move on  $i$ 's property under the belief that he's not attacking  $i$  because, say, he believes that the property in question is truly his, but  $j$  is mistaken,  $i$ , seeing  $j$ 's move as an attack, will curse  $j$ . This will lead  $j$  to curse  $i$ . As a result  $i$  will earn his lowest payoff possible:  $-p(z)$ .  $i$  can prevent the cost of  $j$ 's trembling hands if he monopolizes cursing.

Of course, whether  $i$  also has trembling hands or not,  $j$  also wants to monopolize cursing. If he can do this, he deprives  $i$  of  $i$ 's only protection against his predation when  $x \geq c$ . However, because of  $j$ 's superior physical strength,  $j$ 's ability to protect his property (as opposed to plundering  $i$ 's) doesn't depend on his ability to monopolize cursing. In contrast,  $i$ 's inferior physical strength requires that he monopolize cursing to maximize its ability to improve his property protection.

### 2.3 The Problem of Eroding Belief

Condition 1 for effective cursing identifies the need for curses to be grounded in targets' existing beliefs. A sufficiently high  $p$  is required for cursing to improve  $i$ 's property protection. The foregoing discussion, which focused on one-shot interaction, treated  $p$  as fixed. But when interaction may be repeated or, what's similar, there's more than one potential aggressor against  $i$ 's property rights and the outcome of  $i$  and  $j$ 's interaction is common knowledge,  $p$  may change as a consequence of cursing.

For example, if  $i$  curses  $j$  with the following fulmination—“May hyenas eat you alive tomorrow at noon!”—tomorrow at noon passes, and  $j$  hasn’t been devoured by hyenas,  $j$  and other potential aggressors who learn of this outcome will downgrade the probability they assign to the possibility that  $i$ ’s curses are genuine. On the other hand, if tomorrow at noon comes and  $j$  is indeed eaten alive by hyenas,  $j$ , if he survives, and other potential aggressors if he doesn’t, will upgrade the probability they assign to the possibility that  $i$ ’s curses are genuine. In a theory of cursing with rational agents,  $j$  and other potential aggressors are Bayesian updaters.

Unfortunately for  $i$ , his curses are bogus. Thus there’s no way for him to produce the effects his imprecations threaten. If he curses  $j$  with devouring hyenas, odds are, the hyenas won’t appear.

This poses a problem for  $i$ . Even if  $j$ ’s or other aggressors’ prior belief that  $i$ ’s curses are genuine is strong, it takes only a single contradictory event to drive their belief below the threshold required to permit  $i$  to use cursing to improve his property protection.

To see this, suppose that  $i$  curses  $j$  to be eaten alive by hyenas tomorrow at noon.  $j$ ’s prior belief in the genuineness of  $i$ ’s curses is strong. He assigns a probability of 0.9 to the possibility that those curses are real and a probability of only 0.1 to the possibility that they’re bogus.

If  $i$ ’s curses are genuine, there’s a 100% chance that tomorrow at noon hyenas will devour  $j$ . If  $i$ ’s curses are bogus, there’s a 1/100,000 chance that tomorrow at noon hyenas will devour  $j$ . Man-eating hyenas are exceedingly rare. But they exist.

Noontime tomorrow rolls around and the man-eating hyenas are nowhere to be seen.  $j$ ’s posterior probability that  $i$ ’s curses are genuine becomes  $[0(0.9)]/[0(0.9) + 0.99999(0.1)] = 0$ .  $i$ ’s man-eating hyena curse has destroyed all faith in his curses’ genuineness and undermined his ability to use cursing to protect his property in the future.

This problem highlights the final condition for effective cursing.

**Condition 3.** *Curses must be unfalsifiable.*

An unfalsifiable curse is one whose genuineness can be reconciled with all states of the world. For example, the curse—“May you be miserable and die!”—is unfalsifiable. At some point in his life after being imprecated by this curse, the curse’s target will be miserable and will die. This curse’s vagueness means that when these events happen, there’s no way to know whether they happened because of the cursor’s curse or because they would have happened anyway.

Another, closely related, way to make a curse unfalsifiable is to make it comprehensive: “May you suffer pain when you’re waking or when you’re sleeping!” The vagueness of suffering pain, which is sure to be the case at some point, coupled with the fact that this curse covers all possible times in which you may suffer pain—when you’re awake and when you’re not awake—renders it unfalsifiable too.

Yet another way to make a curse unfalsifiable is to curse a target with unobservable afflictions, for example afflictions in another world, such as the afterlife: “May vicious goblins saw your limbs with rusty tree-trimmers in the Underworld!” There’s no way for living persons to tell whether such a curse has come true or not, no matter how specific it may be. So this kind of curse is unfalsifiable too.

Contrast these kinds of curses with the man-eating hyena at noon kind. The latter is readily falsifiable. Its specificity of harm and time, circumscribed effects, and worldliness render it easily confirmed or, much more likely, contradicted by its target or other observers.

Absent the power to actually bring their curses to fruition, unfalsifiability is key to cursors’ ability to use cursing to improve their property protection because it ensures that curses don’t undermine their own effectiveness. To see why this is so, consider how an unfalsifiable curse affects—or rather doesn’t affect—Bayesians’ updated beliefs.

Suppose that instead of cursing  $j$  with man-eating hyenas at noon,  $i$  curses  $j$  with the second imprecation from above: “May you be miserable and die!”  $j$ ’s prior belief that  $i$ ’s curses are genuine is the same as before: 0.9. But now the curse-is-genuine and the curse-is-bogus states of the world are observationally equivalent. If  $i$ ’s curses are genuine, there’s a 100% chance that  $j$  will suffer misery and die on account of  $i$ ’s curse. However, even if those curses are bogus, there’s a 100% chance that  $j$  will at some point suffer misery and die.

Following  $i$ ’s curse,  $j$ ’s posterior belief in the genuineness of  $i$ ’s curses is therefore  $[1(0.9)]/[1(0.9) + 1(0.1)] = 0.9$ : exactly equal to his prior belief. The unfalsifiability of  $i$ ’s curse confounds  $j$ ’s ability to update his belief in the genuineness of  $i$ ’s curses in one direction or another after  $i$  imprecates him. By rendering his curse unfalsifiable,  $i$  can preserve  $j$ ’s belief in the genuineness of those imprecations, preventing his curses from eroding  $j$ ’s faith that they’re real.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Cursing Monks

Medieval monastic communities in West Francia—the territory encompassing most of modern-day France—put the theory of cursing developed above to good use. “Maledictions were part of the stock-in-trade of monastic defense programs” (Rosenwein et al. 1991: 771). Indeed, it wasn’t

12. A curse’s unfalsifiability is no obstacle to a rational person believing in it. Rationality requires updating prior beliefs in accordance with Bayes’ rule, but doesn’t restrict the nature of those priors, including unfalsifiable ones. As long as the unfalsifiable curse in question is grounded in persons’ existing beliefs that assign a positive probability to the possibility that the curse is real—i.e., Condition 1 from above is satisfied—rational persons will continue to repose faith in the curse’s legitimacy provided that new evidence doesn’t undermine that faith. To explain a person’s prior belief in the possibility of genuine cursing—the belief in which the curse is grounded—requires explaining his prior’s origin. My historical discussion below considers the penultimate source of such prior belief in medieval France: the Bible. However, I don’t explain where individuals’ prior belief in the Bible comes from.

only monastic communities that used maledictions to defend property. Other communities of clerics, such as canons, did too.<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to contemporary images of monks and canons, which see these churchmen as paupers, medieval communities of monks and canons in West Francia were wealthy (see, for instance, Geary 1991: 20). Their most valuable possessions were their vast land holdings and the appurtenances that came with them. In much of West Francia, communities of clerics were the largest land owners in the kingdom (see, for instance, Little 1993: 208).

Between the 10th and 12th centuries these communities' significant wealth confronted great insecurity. Under the Carolingian dynasty, a system of royal justice—king-appointed counts and, failing them, the king himself—protected monks' and canons' property rights.<sup>14</sup> But beginning with the reign of the last Carolingian king, Louis the Pious, that system began to degrade.

Aided by the Viking incursions of the 9th century that did much to disrupt the previous pattern of governance, in the 10th century the Carolingian system of royal justice broke down. First, comital authority became hereditary instead of dependent on royal discretion. This rendered counts largely independent of the central government's control. Not long after, counts lost their public authority too. Local strongmen fortified in castles, or "castellans," replaced independent counts as the basic unit of governance. The result was a system of petty fiefdoms headed by strongmen accountable to no one but strongmen stronger than themselves.<sup>15</sup>

This situation might not have been dire for clerical communities if they had the physical strength—the military means—for self-protection. But most didn't. A "monastery did not directly command the physical or military means to defend its own properties" (Little 1993: 53). Monks

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13. Maledictions weren't the only method communities of monks and canons resorted to improve their property protection. But they were a major one. For a discussion of some of their other methods, see Rosenwein, Head, and Farmer (1991).

14. This wasn't from benevolence. The Church provided important benefits to royal government. The Church could curse or otherwise use its relationship to the divine to delegitimize secular rulers. Conversely, it could bless or otherwise lend divine legitimacy to secular rulers. In return for the Church's support, secular rulers supported Church property rights.

15. The degraded state of public law and order in the equivalent of modern-day France in the 10th through 12th centuries has been discussed at length by historians of the Middle Ages. See, for instance, Duby (1977), Dunbabin (1985), Bisson (1994), and Geary (1995). However, the breakdown of public law and order shouldn't be taken to imply that no courts at all functioned, for example. At the level of individual landholders, private courts with some semblance of authority often did exist. The problem was that courts with the formal authority to adjudicate and enforce decisions regarding disputes between persons from different lords did not. The years following Carolingian justice's breakdown weren't anarchic in the sense of lacking all governance. Indeed, as the case of cursing this article suggests, private governance did exist. Rather, these years were anarchic in the sense that widespread public justice was lacking. During these years, malediction was an important source of Church property protection.

and canons surrendered arms, horses, and other means of self-protection when they gave up their lives as laypersons and took up the cloth.<sup>16</sup> Their communities' extensive properties were like sitting ducks for unscrupulous, secular strongmen who, as a group, enjoyed a monopoly on the means of physical coercion.

It was in this context that clerical communities began to rely on maledictions—divine curses—to improve their property protection. Monks and canons used several kinds of maledictions to deal with persons who threatened their property rights. Lester Little (1993) has translated and compiled many of these curses. I draw from his work to illustrate their forms below.

The first kind of malediction monks and canons used to improve their property protection against castellan plunder was the liturgical *maledictio*. Liturgical benedictions are divine blessings following prescribed forms that clerics bestow on persons they want to venerate at times of community worship, such as mass.<sup>17</sup> Benedictionals are the books containing clerical formulas for these blessings.

Medieval clerics had no “maledictionals.” But they did have liturgical maledictions: divine curses following prescribed forms that they leveled at persons they wanted to *damn* at times of community worship. Consider the following malediction formula from the Abbey of Fécamp circa the late 10th century (Little 1993: 9):

[W]e curse them and we separate them from the company of the holy mother church and of all faithful Christians, unless they change their ways and give back what they unjustly took away. . . . May they be cursed in the head and the brain. May they be cursed in their eyes and their foreheads. May they be cursed in their ears and their noses. May they be cursed in fields and in pastures. . . . May they be cursed when sleeping and when awake, when going out and returning, when eating and drinking, when speaking and being silent. May they be cursed in all places at all times.

The second kind of malediction clerics used to improve their property protection was called a “clamor.” Clamors weren't technically curses. But clerics could use them to invoke curse-like effects and sometimes did so in tandem with proper maledictions.

16. This was in keeping with the monastic principle of the “renunciation of . . . the means and symbols of earthly power” (Little 1993: 51). When public institutions were well functioning, monks' and canons' expectation was that government would protect them. When those institutions eroded, their expectation was to rely on alternative mechanisms for this purpose, such the ones this article describes.

17. Ecclesiastics used negative and positive spiritual incentives to secure their ends. Just as persons who trammled Church property could be cursed, persons who contributed to Church property could be blessed.

To clamor is to make a vigorous appeal. That's precisely what monks and canons did when they used clamors to curse. Clamoring clerics appealed to God and other holy figures, such as apostles, confessors and, most frequently, saints.

Clerical communities were officially the property of the saints in whose name they were established. According to popular belief, it was those saints' duty to protect their communities. Thus, when monks' or canons' property rights came under attack, it was only natural for them to clamor their patron saints to thwart their oppressors.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes clamors were simply public supplications to saints or other holy figures for this purpose. Other times they were more severe. In these cases clerics didn't just supplicate their supernatural overseers. They publicly humiliated them.

Clerics humiliated holy figures by moving those figures' remains (relics) or related corporeal extensions (crucifixes and holy texts) from their traditional places of exaltation to the ground. There, clerics covered them with brush or thorns. Similarly, clamoring clerics sometimes humiliated themselves—God's servants—by lying prostrate on the floor.

Clerics' logic was that humiliating holy figures (or themselves) would, in the eyes of their plunderers, provoke those figures, who expected to be venerated rather than denigrated. So provoked, supernatural overseers would turn their displeasure on the plunderers prompting clerics' rude call.<sup>19</sup>

The third kind of malediction medieval clerical communities used to improve their property protection is the most familiar: excommunication and anathema.<sup>20</sup> Excommunication and anathema were predominantly the province of popes and bishops. But sometimes these higher-ranking ecclesiastics "licensed" lower-level clerics to excommunicate and anathematize the violators of Church property too.

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18. Technically, clamoring clerics clamored only God directly. Other holy figures, such as humiliated saints, clamored God on clerics' behalf together with clerics. However, it could be God's wrath or saints' (or both) that offending persons, who prompted the clamor, were supposed to fear because of the ritual.

19. Persons who prompted clerical clamors weren't only supposed to fear divine wrath for their offenses. They were supposed to face pressure from neighbors, family members, and economic partners to change their ways and make restitution for their offense. This role is common to all forms of malediction this article discusses and constitutes an additional, supportive element of curses' power to improve property protection. There's no way to empirically distinguish or weigh the separate contributions of maledictions' supernatural versus shaming elements. But it's clear that their supernatural element was expected to do some of the work. For example, contract curses, discussed below, could be private. Clerics and their contractual counter-parties witnessed and thus knew about these. Thus, if a counter-party violated his agreement, he would know he was cursed. But others may not know, precluding public shaming. In such cases the curse's expected effect operated solely through its supernatural element.

20. On excommunication in the Middle Ages, see Vodola (1986).

Excommunication came in varying degrees that ranged from cutting one off from the sacraments to cutting him off from all members of the Holy Mother Church. Anathema was a kind of excommunication with gusto. It was a more dramatic excommunication reserved for contumacious excommunicates that often involved a ceremony of snuffing out candles or stomping them on the floor to symbolize the anathema's effect on the target's soul.

Though not properly an excommunication, clerics weren't averse to throwing in some curses against major excommunicates/anathematized persons when excommunicating or anathematizing them either—especially when their property was threatened. In these cases the lines between excommunication and malediction became blurred. Excommunication and anathema became a kind of malediction. Consider the following excommunication Pope Benedict VIII launched against some persons violating the property rights of the Abbey of Saint-Gilles in 1014 (Little 1993: 43):

May they be cursed in the East, disinherited in the West,  
interdicted in the North, and excommunicated in the South.  
May they be cursed in the day and excommunicated at night.  
May they be cursed at home and excommunicated while  
away, cursed in standing and excommunicated in sitting . . . .  
May they be cursed in the spring and excommunicated in the  
summer, cursed in the autumn and excommunicated in the  
winter.

The final form of malediction clerics used to improve their property protection isn't so much a different kind of malediction as it's a different use for it: contract cursing.<sup>21</sup> Besides imprecating strongmen who sought to violently seize their land and possessions, clerics threatened to imprecate persons who violated their land contracts.

A common way that clerical communities came to possess property was for lay benefactors to gift it to them. A not infrequent occurrence was that some person might give land to, say, a monastic community, only to have his lord, his lord's heirs, or his heirs challenge the community's property right to that land in the future. In an attempt to prevent this, a gifting layperson's lord, heirs, or both were often asked to make their consent to the gift explicit. Their consent was then recorded in a charter remembering the gift and held by the receiving clerics.<sup>22</sup>

To strengthen the enforcement of these persons' promises, clerics commonly included "curse clauses" in their charters.<sup>23</sup> These clauses,

21. Besides Little (1993), see also, Tabuteau (1988).

22. On the problems that consent rules created in Norman England and the peculiar legal system they gave rise to, see Leeson (2011b).

23. Some charters involving Church property seem to have involved laypersons praying for curses to fall on contract violators. Presumably such persons only did so with churchman



witnessed and consented to by the charter counter-parties, threatened to imprecate them if in the future they tried to violate the Church's charter-identified property rights. Consider the following "curse clause" from a 12th-century charter recording a land grant from a layperson to the Church (Little 1993: 56):

And if any wish to destroy this charter . . . [m]ay they have the curses of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and of the four evangelists, Mark and Matthew, Luke and John; and of the twelve apostles and of the sixteen prophets and of the twenty-four elders and of the 318 holy fathers who deliberated on the canons at Nicea; and may they have the curse of the 144,000 martyrs who died for the Lord; and may they have the curse of the cherubim and the seraphim, who hold the throne of God, and of all the saints of God.

Excluding the entire army of saints, which was undoubtedly large, this charter invokes the curses of no fewer than 144,380 people to be brought down upon the head of anyone who might try to violate it. That's a lot of curses.

#### 4. Malediction Effectiveness

Quantitative data that could shed light on the extent to which maledictions permitted clerics to improve their communities' property protection don't exist. However, narrative sources suggest that maledictions were often effective in this purpose. The fact that clerical communities used maledictions to defend their property for three centuries suggests that they must have been at least somewhat effective too. Commenting on the invocation of saintly interventions in particular, one historian of the Middle Ages notes that, "In general, they seemed to have worked quite well, or at least better than anything else available" for the protection of clerical communities' property (Geary 1991: 20).

The at least partial effectiveness of monastic and canonical cursing in improving their communities' property protection is relatable to the theory of cursing developed in Section 2. Maledictions satisfied each of the three conditions that theory identifies as necessary for effective cursing.

##### 4.1 Grounding Maledictions in Targets' Existing Beliefs

According to the first condition for effective cursing from Section 2, curses must be grounded in their targets' existing beliefs. This ensures that  $p > 0$ , which is required for cursing to add anything to potential property

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permission/approval or under churchman authority since, as I discuss below, only churchmen were seen as wielding the power to divinely curse.



violators' expected cost of property violation. Liturgical malediction, clamoring, and the rest satisfied this condition by grounding their curses explicitly in a centrally important book that prescribed and reflected prevailing medieval belief: the Bible.<sup>24</sup>

Like medieval clerics themselves, the Bible is a curious mix of brotherly love and frightful wrath. It contains numerous curses. Consider this small sampling from Deuteronomy 28:

[I]f you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you:

You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country . . . .

You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out . . . .

The Lord will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess. The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish. The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron . . . .

You will be pledged to be married to a woman, but another will take her and rape her. You will build a house, but you will not live in it. You will plant a vineyard, but you will not even begin to enjoy its fruit. Your ox will be slaughtered before your eyes, but you will eat none of it . . . . The Lord will afflict your knees and legs with painful boils that cannot be cured, spreading from the soles of your feet to the top of your head . . . .

All these curses will come on you.<sup>25</sup>

These curses should sound familiar. They're the same ones that graced liturgical maledictions, clamors, excommunications, and charters. Compare the curses elaborated in Deuteronomy 28 with the following

24. A strongman who believes in the Bible, and thus biblical prohibitions on theft, may still be willing to appropriate Church property. For example, he may see himself as reclaiming property that's legitimately his rather than stealing, or for some other reason view his seizure as justified in God's eyes. A strongman who sees his appropriation as theft may be willing to steal because the discounted cost of the punishment he expects God to mete out to him when he dies is lower than the present benefit he expects to enjoy from the stolen property. In both cases malediction adds to the expected cost of appropriation and shifts much of that cost to the present, reducing the likelihood the strongman will take from the Church.

25. The *Book of Psalms* is another hotbed of biblical cursing. See, for instance, *Psalms* 35:6; 35:8; 55:15; 69:22; 69:23; 69:25; 69:28; 83:17; 109:8; 109:9; 109:10; 199:11; 109:12; 109:13; and 140:10. On Psalm maledictions, see Curraoin (1963).

liturgical malediction from the Abbey of Saint-Martial of Limoges circa the late 10th century (Little 1993: 60–61):

We hereby inform you, brothers, that certain evil men are devastating the land of our lord Martial . . . . May the curse of all the saints of God come upon them . . . . May they be cursed in town. May they be cursed in the fields. May they be cursed inside their houses and outside their houses . . . . May their wives and their children and all who associate with them be cursed . . . . May their vineyards and their crops and their forests be cursed . . . . May the Lord send over them hunger and thirst, pestilence and death, until they are wiped off the earth . . . . May the sky above them be brass and the earth they walk on iron . . . . May the Lord strike them from the bottoms of their feet to the tops of their heads.

Medieval clerics didn't pull the maledictions they used to improve their property protection out of thin air.<sup>26</sup> They grounded them firmly in their targets' existing beliefs. Since their targets were Christians, grounding maledictions in "biblical curse traditions" achieved precisely that (Geary 1995: 96).<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.2 Monopolizing Malediction

According to the second condition for effective cursing from Section 2, curses must be monopolized by cursors. A cursing monopoly prevents counter-cursing, which can undermine cursing's ability to improve physically weak cursors' property protection. Medieval clerics secured a monopoly on cursing through their religious monopoly.

Clerics' religious monopoly gave them exclusive authority to call on God and his holy helpers (saints, patriarchs, confessors, and so on) to sanction others supernaturally. This authority went hand-in-hand with malediction's grounding in Christian beliefs, discussed above.

26. My argument suggests that ecclesiastics had strong incentives to promulgate Christian beliefs before accumulating wealth in a particular area. I lack the historical data required to test this implication. But the logic behind it is clear. By first extending Christian belief to a new area, ecclesiastics would prevent making investments before they could be protected and begin the process of monopolizing the power to wield supernatural sanctions before that power becomes important for property protection.

27. Since maledictions' effectiveness depended on persons' belief in them, predators may have had an incentive to develop disbelief in clerical curses in particular and the Bible/Christianity more generally. I have found no evidence that they tried to do so. This isn't to say that self-delusion isn't possible or never occurred. However, it may reflect the fact that deliberately changing one's religious beliefs is difficult. A Christian who desires to drop his religious beliefs confronts a time-inconsistency problem. At the time he considers doing so, he believes that in the future, when his belief is gone, he will be damned as a consequence. To be willing to deliberately jettison one's belief in Christianity today, one must already significantly disbelieve in Christianity, and thus the consequences of rejecting it.

Christian doctrine held that only clerics could conduct the rites and rituals of the Christian faith. Only they could perform baptisms, administer communion, hear confessions, prescribe penance, and so on. Naturally, among clerics' monopoly powers over the performance of these rites and rituals was communicating with God and his supernatural assistants and invoking their supernatural intervention. In this way "monks' authority to curse as well as their capacity for doing so effectively were part of their virtual monopoly on all forms of prayer" (Little 1998: 33).

The evolution of ecclesiastical thinking about cursing leading up to the 13th century came to hold that cursing was legitimate, and thus capable of being successful, only when performed for appropriate purposes by appropriate persons. The former of course included only efforts for the preservation of the Holy Mother Church, such as protecting its property. The latter of course included only clerics. "[T]he monopoly this caste held on spiritual power, itself parallel to the monopoly on military power held by the warrior class, gave it the only access to divine authority and the only means of communication between the living and the dead" (Little 1993: 195). That monopoly in turn gave it the only access to the power to curse successfully.

The effect of clerics' cursing monopoly was two-fold. First, by presenting themselves as uniquely capable of cursing successfully, clerics undermined the idea that others might be able to curse successfully too. Second, to the extent that clerics truly believed that only they could curse successfully, they undermined the potential power of non-clerics' imprecations to impose any costs on them if such persons tried and, in doing so, undermined the potential power of non-clerics' imprecations to weaken clerics' ability to use cursing to improve their property protection.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.3 Preventing Eroding Belief in Maledictions

According to the final condition for effective cursing from Section 2, curses must be unfalsifiable. If a curse can be easily falsified, it can undermine cursing's ability to improve cursors' property protection. Curses that can't be falsified prevent themselves from eroding the belief in their genuineness that makes them effective.

Recall that there are at least three, closely related ways to make a curse unfalsifiable: make it vague; make it comprehensive; and make it afflict the

28. In my model cursing has defensive power only. However, especially when cursing is monopolized, one might expect cursing to have offensive power too. For example, McChesney's (1987) analysis of rent extraction shows that regulators who wield monopoly gate-keeper power may use this authority to extort producers. In the case of the ecclesiastic-cursing monopoly this article considers, cursing's potential offensive power was neutered by a belief that God would respond only to requests for supernatural sanction that were legitimate—i.e., conducted for holy ends. Cursing for theft, extortion, and so on was in principle precluded by this belief.

target in unobservable ways. Medieval clerics used each of these methods to make maledictions unfalsifiable.

Consider the following curse clause in a clerical charter from Conques circa 910 (Little 1993: 56):

If anyone presume to contradict this charter, let him be excommunicated and cursed as well as damned forever with Judas the traitor and with the devil.

This malediction combines two methods for making curses unfalsifiable: vagueness and other-worldly affliction. I'll discuss the latter below. Here the important item to notice is the first part of this curse which, quite literally, imprecates would-be charter violators via the spell: "let . . . him be cursed." This curse is exceptionally vague. Indeed, it couldn't be any vaguer. Something bad was going to happen to the target. But what, exactly, could be just about anything.<sup>29</sup>

As the examples considered in Section 3 and earlier in this section demonstrate, clerics also cursed their malediction targets comprehensively—in all places, at all times, doing all things, in all ways. In a single malediction targets could be cursed in the fields and in the towns; while eating and while drinking; standing and lying down; when talking and when being quiet; in the fall, the winter, the summer, and spring. Similarly, in a single malediction targets could be cursed with physical afflictions and emotional ones; afflictions of their heads and of their feet; with illnesses and plagues; with afflictions of their parents and their children; and so on.

These particulars lent the appearance of specificity to clerical curses. But this appearance is no more than that. By covering all, or nearly all, possible contexts, those curses were in fact completely general. In one of the maledictions recounted above, targets are literally "cursed in all places at all times." No matter what bad thing may happen to a malediction target after being imprecated, or where he may be, it fell under the purview of some malady issued by the curse.

Finally, clerics commonly cursed malediction targets with unobservable afflictions. Consider again the examples in Section 3. Maledicting clerics cursed targets to hell; to burn in eternal fires after they die; and to spend forever with traitors to God. Malediction targets have their "lights . . . extinguished in eternity" and their names "stricken from the book of life."

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29. Some maledictions came closer to being truly specific—to being the kind of curse that might in principle be falsified. One excommunication curse fulminates, "May they drain out through their bowels, like the faithless and unhappy Arius." Another declares, "May they be buried with dogs and asses; may rapacious wolves devour their cadavers" (Little 1993: 36; 47). But these, too, are left too vague to be falsified in practice. When are the targets' bowels supposed to drain out? When are rapacious wolves supposed to devour their cadavers? What's more, these more-specific curses are mixed in with the typical host of clearly unfalsifiable kinds discussed below.

Did any of these curses come true? We'll never know. And, at least while they were alive, neither did the persons they were leveled at or other potential predators of clerical property.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In the 13th century monks and canons put away their malediction formulas. Two reasons stand out as particularly important for clerical cursing's decline. First, even in malediction's heyday, justifying clerical cursing required considerable contortion and hoop jumping by ecclesiastic elites.

In addition to containing numerous instances of divine cursing, the Bible contains numerous passages that seem to condemn cursing. These had to be explained away. This was accomplished by parsing seeming Biblical prohibitions on cursing in a way that prohibited "illegitimate" cursing, leveled malevolently or for private purposes, but recognized scope for "legitimate" cursing, leveled without malevolence and for the preservation of the Church.

This parsing solved the cursing dilemma that ecclesiastic intellectuals clearly saw. But it did so in a rather strained way. When the opportunity to safely abandon divine cursing came along, it was therefore easy for clerics to do so.

That opportunity was provided by the second reason driving clerics' abandonment of malediction in the 13th century: the resurrection of public institutions of property protection under King Philip II (aka Philip Augustus). Perhaps most important for property protection among Philip's reforms was the establishment of a system for the regular administration of royal justice throughout France. Philip achieved this by appointing salaried baillis who held monthly judicial forums at which they heard and handled property complaints across the realm. The result was a marked improvement in government-supplied property protection compared to the previous state of affairs in which justice, to the extent that it was administered at all, was administered by independent, powerful lords.

Besides enabling clerics to let go of the awkward justification behind malediction, the (re)emergence of functional institutions of state-supplied justice permitted clerics a more reliable way to enforce their property rights. Unlike execrations, conventional and very much worldly institutions of property protection don't depend significantly on whether would-be property transgressors believe their victims wield magical power or not. Those institutions of property protection work equally well no matter what citizens' spiritual beliefs may be.

It is unsurprising, then, that in the early 13th century communities of monks and canons substituted away from malediction and back to reliance on functionaries of the state. When more effective, public alternatives for property protection became available, clerics said good-bye to "God damns."

While excommunication and the specter of hell of course remain, the contemporary Catholic Church continues to eschew malediction. It's not alone. Modern mainstream Christianity has little role for clerical cursing. My analysis suggests one reason for this: modern churches can rely on state-provided institutions of property protection instead. Not only may those institutions offer a more reliable form of property protection but, as secular government authority has grown, government may have largely displaced religious authority, eroding the belief required for cursing to be effective.

Other factors may also contribute to contemporary Christianity's dearth of "God damns." For example, after the Reformation, Catholicism's religious monopoly broke down. In consequence, so too did Catholic clerics' monopoly on the ability to divinely curse. As my theory suggests, when cursing is unmonopolized, it may lose part of its effectiveness. Thus competing Christian denominations in the post-Reformation era may have been able to benefit considerably less from cursing.

A related reason for the absence of cursing in modern Christianity may stem from denominational competition in the post-Reformation period. Christian consumers may prefer to be consumers of denominations that lack the power to curse. When the clerics in one's religious community wield cursing authority, members face the prospect of themselves being subjected to clerical imprecations at one time or another.

Under certain circumstances at least, the expected cost of being a member of such a community in terms of being a potential subject of imprecation outweighs the expected benefit in the form of, for example, helping to keep other community members in line. In this case, while clerics would still prefer to wield the power to curse, competition from other religious communities—denominations that don't bestow the power of divine cursing on its clerics—may lead competing denominations to jettison a professed ability of their church administrators to imprecate members.

A third factor that might contribute to the absence of divine cursing in contemporary Christianity is the ascendancy of scientific knowledge and corresponding decline of religious superstitions.<sup>30</sup> Science suggests that our calamities have wordly causes rather than supernatural ones. Thus, as science has grown, individuals' belief in curses has shriveled.

This explanation for modern Christianity's dearth of "God damns" is attractive and intuitive. But it faces at least one important obstacle. Malediction's converse—benediction—remains alive and well in contemporary Catholicism and Christianity more generally.

If science has squeezed out citizens' belief in divine curses, it seems that it should have squeezed out citizens' belief in divine blessings too. It's no more scientific to cling to a belief that priestly blessings bestow God's

30. Rising incomes and education levels could play a similar, or complementary, role here.

grace on us in this world and the next than it is to cling to a belief that priestly curses bring God's wrath on us in this world and the next. Yet the former belief remains an important part of modern Christianity while the latter is all but forgotten.

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