

## The Economics of the Evil Eye

### I. What is the Evil Eye?

Superstitions and supernatural beliefs have remained prevalent across diverse societies for millennia, often intertwining with religious beliefs. The belief in the evil eye, a superstition dating back 5,000 years, spans across various cultures including ancient Greece and Rome, as well as traditions within Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). The evil eye is the belief in a curse brought about by a malevolent stare—though most traditions believe it may not always be intentionally cast with ill-intent. Described as the destructive force of envy projected through the eyes of the envier, it is said that people can cause harm by a mere envious glance at coveted objects or their owners (Gershman, 2014). The consequences attributed to the glare can encompass a variety of misfortunes, spanning from mild ailments such as headaches to more severe outcomes, including physical illness leading to death. It is widely acknowledged that women and children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the evil eye; intensified especially if beautiful—a pregnant woman or bride (Berger, 2011). Generally, the evil eye is of greatest concern to those who are unusually blessed or successful, whether it be with physical attractiveness, wealth or prosperity. On the other hand, individuals possessing blue/green eyes are thought to have a higher likelihood of passing the curse onto others—likely because light-colored eyes are not common throughout the Mediterranean.

Given the severe consequences associated with the evil eye, believers have an incentive to take active measures to ward off the curse. One of the most notable defenses against the evil eye is to wear the evil eye charm in the form of jewelry, such as bracelets, necklaces or rings. Particularly in Greece and Armenia, children wear blue "eye beads" conspicuously on their clothing (Jones, 1951) to deter the effects of an envious glare. Refer to Figure 1, depicting a

conventional eye-bead bracelet, a common purchase by tourists in Greece, and other Mediterranean countries.

Figure 1



## II. The Ritual

In this paper, we will specifically focus on examining the cultural practices within Greek tradition that are utilized to counteract the effects of the curse. The process begins with a secret prayer called the xematiasma—meaning “undoing of the eye”—that is performed by a “healer” on the cursed individual. The prayer is passed over from an older relative of the opposite sex and revealed only under specific circumstances. The healer sets a small bowl of water before the individual and gently lowers a finger coated in oil above it. Three drops of oil fall from their finger into the bowl, each drop separated from the other. At first, the oil drops float individually in the water. However, if any of the oil drops eventually merge into one bigger drop, the individual is confirmed to have been cursed. Observe Figure 2, which displays how the oil drops would behave if the victim were found to be cursed.

Figure 2



The ritual is completed after the victim sips from the bowl, and the healer draws a cross on the victim's forehead with the water. At this point, the victim should be relieved of the evil eye's detriment.

### III. What Makes the Evil Eye So Believable?

Traditionally, the evil eye oil-drop ritual is performed three times—each drop requiring the silent recitation of the prayer. However, depending on how intensely the victim was cursed, or the number of people assumed to have participated in casting the curse, the healer will repeat the process several times more. Thus, the results of the oil-drop process are effectively randomized. Randomization is a key feature of oracles that ensures the credibility of the results and produces a correlated equilibrium. If the oil-drop process identified every individual who participated in the ritual as cursed, then individuals will struggle to have confidence in the outcomes. Note that randomization alone will not provide a solution for the cursed individual. The evil eye, along with many other alike oracles, don't simply randomize. They randomize optimally (Leeson, 2014). That is, the results of the ritual produce a signal that induces the

victim to take some sort of action. The cursed individual faces the choice between one of two decisions: attempt to identify who had cast the curse, or back down from the situation, and instead adopt measures for future protection. This dilemma is what we refer to as the correlated equilibrium. Taking the time to identify all possible culprits behind who had cast the curse is time-consuming. Assuming the individual successfully identifies a culprit, direct confrontation will be costly, and likely at the expense of friendships, or familial ties. With these factors in mind, it will always be less costly for individuals to accept the outcome of the ritual and move on. Thus, the evil eye makes it rational for an individual to invest their time—and much less of it—in protective measures, like buying an evil eye bracelet, instead of in “investigation” that will possibly result in even further conflict erupting than before.

#### IV. When is it Rational to Believe in the Evil Eye?

Note that at the conclusion of the oil-drop ritual, the individual’s distress imposed by the curse should be resolved. In most cases, it is individuals suffering from mild symptoms such as migraines, or brief headaches that will seek treatment from the ritual. Then, firm believers in the powers of the evil eye are more likely to be cured via the placebo effect. That is, when someone believes they have been affected by the evil eye, their mind can create physical symptoms that align with their cultural expectations (Suttle, 2018). In return, engaging in the ritual may instead provide the victim and the healer with utility in the form of cultural identity. This is because the sacred prayer necessary to heal an individual is passed down through generations, making the belief in the evil eye a significant aspect to one’s cultural belonging.

On the other hand, though the evil eye is said to cause harm to the extent of death, it is not likely individuals will seek remedy from the ritual in high-stakes scenarios. This is because individuals bear the most cost in life-or-death situations for their adherence to erroneous beliefs.

In this case, it would be rational for individuals to prioritize getting proper medical care. Thus, the evil eye can be useful in solving low-stakes conflicts, where the ritual could replace a trip to your local Walgreens in search of a bottle of aspirin, while simultaneously providing confirmation of one's identity.

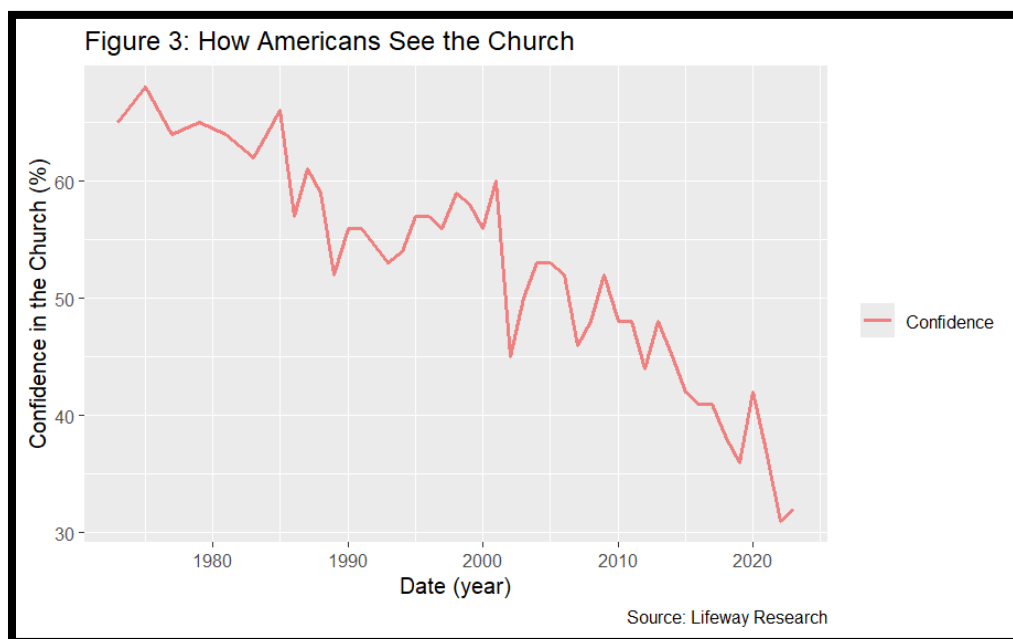
## V. The Evil Eye in Religious Communities

One commonality in the evil eye belief is that it is widely accepted in regions known for firm adherence to religious values. However, what is unusual about this observation is that the Greek Church does not openly recognize the existence of evil eye; in fact, its members actively discourage it. Thus, how can we explain the widespread acceptance of this belief despite it being counter to one's faith? One possible rationalization for this is that the Bible fails to explain why misfortunes happen to "good" people, or more precisely, those who refrain from sin. Individuals who adhere to the word of God generally expect to reap profound benefits from doing so, ultimately in anticipation of earning an afterlife in Heaven. However, even the most virtuous individuals, or innocent beings like children experience adversity. The religious perspective is rather vague, stating how individuals may not comprehend God's purposes, yet we must simply trust in His doings. Whereas the evil eye offers an explicit response: bad things can happen to anyone, especially the best of people due to envy. Thus, the evil eye addresses the infamous question: "why do bad things happen to good people," in ways that religion cannot.

The evil eye's persistence in religious communities can also be rationalized by the general lack of need or trust in the church. Firstly, the evil eye allows individuals to resolve their conflicts alone, without much need to rely on the church. Attempting to schedule and meet with members of the clergy to address low-grade conflicts will arguably be more costly than dealing with the issue at hand, without intervention. Appointments may require monetary costs (typically

not obligatory, but frowned upon if not offered), or time-consuming waiting periods. It would be impossible for the church to keep up with resolving many conflicts, from several individuals at once. Granted, the churches may not even have the means to offer such services to few individuals in most poorly funded areas. Conversely, these expenses can be avoided simply by performing the ritual at home, requiring nothing more than water and oil.

Additionally, it may be the case that the general lack of trust in the church inclines individuals to redirect their faith into other beliefs, like that of the evil eye. Given the recent firestorm of accusations against priests of the sexual abuse of minors (McKenna, 2023), Catholic Americans are starting to reevaluate their faith. According to a recently released Pennsylvania grand jury report, the 1,400-page document compiled over two years, implicated 300 priests in the sex abuse of over 1,000 minors across six of the state's eight dioceses (Burton, 2018). Judging by the looks of these exceptionally disturbing statistics over such a short time span, it is no surprise Americans are losing their trust in religious institutions. Observe Figure 3, depicting the general decline in the amount of confidence Americans have reported to hold in the church.



Results from annual surveys performed on Americans show confidence levels hitting a record low, dipping under 40% for the first time ever. Given how central of a role religion plays in the shaping of one's identity, it may be the case that believers now have a greater incentive to opt for other forms of belief systems. Additionally, developing trust in some form of hierarchal power can be comforting to individuals enduring hardship. Thus, if the church is losing its credibility amongst its followers, the evil eye poses an accessible alternative.

## VI. Takeaways from the Evil Eye

In conclusion, since the evil eye offers individuals utility in the form of cultural belonging, the belief may be rational to hold in some circumstances. The evil eye is useful in resolving low-grade conflicts, allowing individuals to avoid direct confrontation, and costly visits to the church—which may not have the means to settle disputes. Additionally, individuals in modern society may be incentivized to adopt beliefs systems like the evil eye, out of distrust in the church. The evil eye can be seen as a substitute for religious institutions that lack credibility.

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