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Negotiating with the Sacred Other:
The Ancient Mechanisms of the Personal Vow Practice

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By questioning the anthropological definition of vows as instrumental prayers, which has been generally accepted since William Christian (1989) introduced it, the paper will discuss the notion of a vow as a personal prayer in the effort to expand it beyond the mere request for a miracle or fulfilment of a pilgrim’s or believer’s wish. The votive prayer is mentioned already in the Bible (Deut. 23) as a somewhat problematic way of communicating with God due to a promise it contains. Based on the Amir Mashiach’s (2014) interpretation of prayers as performative utterances in the Jewish tradition and Radoslav Katičić’s (1990) linguistic research of the (pre)Slavic and Indo-European connection between legal and religious texts, the analysis will give an insight into the ancient mechanisms behind the practice of vowing, which has been continued as a part of personal piety in different religions. From this viewpoint, some of the reasons why vows have been inextricably related to sacred places and pilgrimage will be shown. The interpretation will in part lean on specific issues as opened by the researchers in the field of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage (among others, Badone, 1990; Coleman and Eade, 2004; Eade and Sallnow, 1991; Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans, 2012), as well as on some of the historical changes of this practice (Andrić, 1999; Cartledge, 1992; Hahn, 2007; Hyman, 2009). The examples used in the paper have been gathered from archival materials, and open and semi-structured interviews.

Keywords: vow, law, speech act, pilgrimage, sacred

Introduction

It is challenging to trace the ancient mechanisms of any cultural practice, and this includes religious practices as well (cf. Robbins, 2007). For this purpose, I will rely on some of the linguistic (Katičić, 1990) and historical (Cartledge, 1992; Hahn, 2007; Hyman, 2009) research which can show deep historical layers of the practice of praying in the form of a vow. In my research, I have so far observed more than 2,000 examples of vow prayers in Croatia, mainly connected to the national shrine of the Mother of God of Bistrica (Figure 1) and Blessed Ivan Merz shrine in Zagreb. Also, vow prayers directed to other sacred entities (God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ) and other places have been analysed (I use the sacred to refer to that which is considered as such by the believers of different religions, such as God, Jesus Christ, Mary, saints, spirits of nature and so on). I compared my insights with the research on such prayers from Spain (Christian, 1989), France (Herberich-Marx, 1989), Greece (Dubish, 1990), and Portugal (Brettell, 1990, Yel, 2002). The data analysed come mostly from the 17th until the 20th century. For insights into the mediaeval notions on personal vows, I have used the work of the historian Stanko Andrić (1999) about Saint Ivan Kapistran.

In addition to those insights, researchers in the field of pilgrimage studies have shown how multilayered pilgrims’ practices and contexts can be, while also considering some of the aspects of the vow prayers (Badone, 1990, Coleman and Eade, 2004, Eade and Sallnow, 1991, Morinis, 1992, Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans, 2012 and others). Most of the anthropological research on Christianity has observed vows as prayers in the context of their functioning in relation to sacred places such as shrines (Belaj, 2007; Christian, 1989; Čapo, 1991; Dubisch, 1990; Yel, 2002). Some researchers, such as Morinis, concluded that ‘pilgrimage is inclined to vows and promises because the solutions to the seemingly insurmountable difficulties that motivate a sacred journey must come from a higher order of power’ which is, as many pilgrims believe, present at the sacred place (Morinis, 1992: 27). Until now, some of the research has confirmed that pilgrimage to the sacred place can be either a part of the vow prayer or the vow itself (Christian, 1989: 115).

The underlying cultural anthropological approach to the interpretation of the practice of vows in this paper relies on the Simon Coleman’s suggestion that it is not possible to observe
the category of religion, and everything associated with it, as ideally an autonomous, isolated realm of human activity, and therefore as an autonomous, isolated realm of anthropological theorizing (Coleman, 2002: 263).

Therefore, I will discuss some of the views on the vow as ‘a personal and a dyadic relationship between the individual and the supernatural in the form of a contract’ (Yel, 2002: 71–72) and a ‘contractual relationship’ with the sacred which ‘has obviously characterised the practice of Catholicism throughout western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era’ (Brettell, 1990: 72). Such insights would be broadened by Amir Mashiach’s defining of prayers within the traditional Jewish law system (halakhah) as ‘performative utterances,’ which is the concept introduced by John Austin (Mashiach, 2014). Also using Austin’s work, Hahn similarly noted a specific performative power in various Roman prayers, including personal vows (Hahn, 2007: 236–240). The analysis will compare those ideas with the notion of oath and its mechanisms in the context of (pre)Slavic and Indo-European oral law as explained by the linguist Radoslav Katičić (1990).

Defining the Personal Vow Prayer

Various written sources note that personal vow prayers were practiced in the time of the old cultures of the Near and Middle East (Cartledge, 1992), so they were known among ‘Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites’ (Hyman, 2009: 232). The practice was present in Ancient Egypt as well (Luiselli, 2014), and in the Antiquity in the Mediterranean among the Greeks and Romans (Hahn, 2007). Judaism and Christianity have known the practice for a long time, and it has also been recorded within other large world religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism as well as other religious systems (cf. Davidson and Gitlitz, 2002, Raj and Harman, 2006).
The Latin word for the vow - *votum* - denotes a pledge, a plea. The Greek word for the vow *eijjē* (*eukhe*) means a wish, and it is as such confirmed in the analysed data:

*To the Mother of God of Bistričica! Mother of God I pray to you, please help me and fulfil my wishes. Let me be healthy and ensure that my family is well. Thank you, a lot!* (Hrvatsko nacionalno svetište Majke Božje Bistričke, 2012).

The Slavic, and also the Indo-European origin of the word vow *rota* connects it to oral law, because it is the ‘ancient word’ for oath and corresponds to the ‘Old Indian *vratám* ‘vow’ and Old Iranian Avestan *urvāta* - ‘promise’ (Katičić, 1990: 80). This is why it is mainly defined in general as a type of prayer that usually contains a promise as a subcategory of the oath or pledge. The notion of promise as part of a vow is confirmed in the gathered data:

*I promised that I would say my thanks if he fulfilled my prayer and now I am fulfilling my promise* (1973 - Blaženi Ivan Merz, s.a.).[1]

According to the definition in *The Bible* (Deut. 23, 22–24), the personal vow is ‘voluntary and cannot be retracted’ (Hyman, 2009: 232). According to *The Old Testament* and the other data about the ‘ancient Near East various people differentiated several types of prayers, among which the vow had a distinctive meaning’ (Cartledge, 1992: 11). For example, while the oath signified the promise by which a certain curse or punishment would be defined, in the case where the one who prays does not fulfill what was promised, the vow was considered to be a plea within which a conditional promise, ‘some gift or service’, would be made by the one who prays. The votive promise had to be fulfilled, that is, the ‘promise served to strengthen an earlier petition’ (Cartledge, 1992: 16-17). Unlike other prescribed Jewish religious practices which were obligatory for believers (such as sacrificial offering), the practice of praying by vowing was mostly in the sphere of personal piety. So, individuals could decide for themselves what activity or gift they would promise, and those were mostly the practices they knew from their cultural and religious contexts. For example, they could make an offering similar to the sacrificial one (*The Bible*, Lev 7, 16).

As sacrificing and providing gifts to the sacred is a very old practice within the religious domain (Hyman, 2009, Cartledge, 1992), it seems that the vow practice is part of this activity. In this context, it is often related in the research to the social practice of giving as part of one of the most widespread concept of *do ut des* as ‘social mechanism of reciprocal obligations’ which was an important part of Roman culture, law and religion (Bijsterveld 2007: 190). With time this concept changed due to social circumstances, so it shifted from a ‘transactional model of interaction’ to a more profound ‘gift giving’ (Bijsterveld 2007: 31), which has been reflected in the vow prayers as well. However, in many cases of vow prayers it is not giving that precedes the plea made by the supplicant, which Čapo defines as ‘ante interventum’ vows, but rather it comes after the request is granted, which are denoted by Čapo as ‘post interventum’ vows (Čapo, 1991: 21-22). Those different aspects of vow prayers show that a gift can be considered by the believers as a gift to establish a connection with the sacred, as well as a counter-gift and an expression of gratitude for the received grace, thus confirming ‘multivocality of the gift’ (Bijsterveld, 2007: 29). Still, a gift does not suffice in establishing nor maintaining the relationship with the sacred, so there are other aspects of vows which show the complexity of the interaction of believers with the sacred.

Gifts and sacrifices are some of the reasons why vows have been closely connected to ancient sacred places, mostly natural sites. In early Christianity, churches, chapels and other objects were built at those ancient sacred places and they were consecrated to the saints, to Mary and to the other sacred (Bugslag, 2007: 8). Due to the connection of vow practice to pagan beliefs, the early Christian councils from the 5th to the 7th century tried to forbid the practice of making ‘vows to rocks, trees or springs’ (Bugslag, 2005: 9) and started recommending the official rites and giving to the poor as replacements for vows (Grdinić, Dugac and Biškupić Bašić, 2007: 33). In spite of those efforts, praying in the form of personal vows with most of its ancient traits as a non-religious practice continued well into the first centuries of Christianity.

The vow prayer of the laity as a non-institutional, personal practice, has been defined in Christianity as late as the 20th century in the Roman Catholic Church Canon Law, by which it is ‘a deliberate and free promise made to God about a possible and better good,’ and ‘must be fulfilled by reason of the virtue of religion’ (*The Code of Canon Law*, 1983/1996, Can. 1191). As the data show, the believers also perceive it to be a serious obligation and not an easy task to be done. One of my interviewees would be worried if she

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[1] The citations from the shrine records and other sources, including literature, in Croatian are my own translation.
could not fulfil what she would promise, especially if it concerns some regular practice during a longer period of time, for example the annual pilgrimage to a shrine (Interviewee 1). Although the Bible or rather recently drafted Canon Law do not prescribe the specific circumstances in which a personal vow needs to be undertaken (Hyman, 2009: 232), according to the research and data so far, vows have mostly been made in the state of some great need such as an illness or dangerous situation.

However, the Jewish halakhah considered those states of ‘high spirits and at moments of intense excitement’ unreliable when making promises and decisions (Mashiach, 2014: 182; cf. Come and Hear, s.a.). Therefore, as any such obligation implies some consequences, especially if made to the sacred, already the Jewish religious leaders in the ancient times discouraged their people from making vow prayers and giving promises. In addition to the Jewish, the Christian religious leaders have advised believers against personal vows up to the present day. What is clearly mentioned and what significantly separates the vow from other types of prayers, is that it has to be kept due to the obligation implicit in the promise itself and that it cannot be withdrawn (Hyman, 2009: 232).

It seems that the need people have gained via the tradition to approach the sacred with a vow as a more personal way of communicating with the sacred has remained strong until today in Christianity (see Brettell, 1990: 72). In a way, the practice opposes the official prayers and pious way of life prescribed by Christian leaders. However, the practice would not cease, and the Roman Catholic Church could not entirely annul it (Brettell, 1990: 72). Therefore, a lot of effort was made for several next centuries to re-direct it towards more moderate ways of praying (Bugslag, 2007: 4) by the use of instructions in the prayer books, pamphlets, sermons and other means (cf. Christian, 1989). In Europe, the practice of making vows was particularly shaped in the medieval period. First, it served as proof of the sanctity of a monk or a priest (Andrić, 1999: 281), and later, it was included within the increased veneration of numerous adorations of Mary and of different saints (Bugslag, 2007: 8, 16).

As some researchers have noted, the official discourse in Christianity and Catholicism has changed from miraculous to sacrificial, from the Middle Ages until today, due to the attitude of the Church which regarded the importance given to the saints and their miracles as overexaggerated (Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 19).

These ideological shifts revolve ultimately around the central and inextricably entwined symbols of the sick body and the possibilities for cure, and the sin-stained soul and the possibilities for redemption (Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 19).

This has in a large part been reflected in vow prayers as well. In recent times, the Church has been diminishing the role of the miraculous discourse and offering as a substitute Jesus Christ's redeeming sacrifice (Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 23). Within this context, the former rector of the Croatian national shrine of the Mother of God of Bistrica monsignor Lovro Cindori states that ‘the fact that Christ performed miracles means that the Kingdom of God is already here, on Earth’ (Interviewee 2). In some cases, the two discourses coexist not only with each other, but also with various other religious, political and social notions, processes and realities (Coleman, 2002: 360).

In his research, William Christian defines the vow prayer as ‘the most common form of petition prayer’ and ‘a conditional pledge that specifies what reciprocal action the pledger will take in the event of a favourable outcome’ (Christian, 1989: 119). He observes vows as one of the four types of the so called ‘instrumental prayers’ (others are: a prayer without obligation, a concomitant pledge without a reciprocal act, a gratitude prayer). However, this division of prayers proves to be an ethnographic and specific one, because other researchers have shown much overlapping and unclear divisions between many types of personal prayers, including the vow (Belaj, 2007, Čapo, 1991, Herberich-Marx, 1989, Hrovatin, 2015). Although ‘the Romans made very careful distinctions among ritual performances: petition, vow, oath, thanksgiving’ (Hahn, 2007: 239), this division was not kept entirely in Christianity due to many cultural and historical changes (see also Robbins, 2007). Thus, in recent centuries various prayers seem to be differently defined by various individuals (Čapo, 1991: 38–42). However, using vows as a certain type of personal prayer, regardless of all the varieties of meaning (with or without a promise included, in the shrine or at home, and so on), has until today remained in large part a practice undertaken by individual believers mainly outside the institutionalised religions with a strong relation to the sacred place.
The Personal Vow as a Speech Act

When relating human to God, ‘in Jewish tradition … spoken language … in its world-creating capacity, is much more than a means of communication’ (Mashiach, 2014: 173). For transactions between humans the Jewish law prefers written documents over oral statements (e.g. for land ownership), when it comes to communicating with God, however, the oral statement is as binding as any legal document (Mashiach, 2014: 173). Furthermore, the close connection between ancient legal and religious texts is confirmed in the research of prayers in Antiquity (Hahn, 2007: 242) and (pre)Slavic cultures (Katičić, 1990: 74). Katičić explains that this connection is the result of the oral transmission of both types of texts, which is also why they inherently shared some of the notions on customs, ethics, morality, sacredness and so on (Katičić, 1990: 74). Hahn confirms that some poetic techniques were used for the creation of those texts in Antiquity, due to which, their formulaic patterns are similar, and the singing of both types of texts was common practice (Hahn, 2007: 236).

Katičić compared some ancient Russian legal documents with the 13th-century Croatian Law Codex of Vinodol (Vinodolski zakonik), because both documents define the blood revenge. He extracts a special formula by which the rule of the right for revenge or recompensation of the family whose member is murdered is legitimised. The formula starts with the ‘conditional dependant sentence, introduced by the Slavic word ako’, in English if (Katičić, 1990: 76). The conditional structure if that, then (follows) that ‘makes legally valid the right and duty [obligation] to the blood revenge’ (Katičić, 1990: 78). Such a conditional language structure is also used to form the vow as a prayer, which has been confirmed for the votive practice in Antiquity (Hahn, 2007, Hyman, 2009). This pattern is clear in many other examples during various centuries until today in Europe, including the ones in Croatia:

The mother made a vow to the Mother of God of Bistrica, that if she found her child and it was alive, she would leave all her chores aside and visit with the child Her miraculous statue (1726 - Berke, 1775: 148).

In 1936 she vowed to the Mother of God of Bistrica that she would often go on pilgrimage to Her in Bistrica, if She restored her health (Hrvatsko nacionalno svetište Majke Božje Bistričke, 2012).

So, the idea behind the vow prayer in the (pre)Slavic and Indo-European context would be similar to the ancient legal way of thinking about the right to something and recompensation for it: if you sacred fulfil what I ask, I will do something.

Furthermore, Katičić claims that ‘the oath is the ancient institution of the legal procedure,’ by the use of which ‘the supernatural forces are included in the procedure’ (Katičić, 1990: 80). Mashiach similarly claims that the oath in the Jewish religious tradition is related to the conventional language of the court, and the vow is not an exception (Mashiach, 2014: 178, footnote 11). So, it seems that in its older historical form, the vow does not imply the condition upon which the one who prays can ask for the fulfilment or make the sacred fulfil the request, as is usually presumed in most of the recent interpretations of the vow practice (cf. Christian, 1989). Rather, in its ancient context, the vow represents a legally binding and, therefore, a serious confirmation and defining of the obligation which is taken over by the person who prays for something. When compared to this, the idea of do ut des proves that the ancient mechanism of trying to establish a serious connection with the sacred via the vow prayer has continued from Roman times into the early Christianity and the Middle Ages (Bijsterveld 2007: 31).

However, a vow made to the sacred does not simply function as a speech act where the person takes the obligation upon themself, but also at the exact moment when it is spoken, it confirms that personal vows are ‘speech acts which themselves produce action in the world’ (Mashiach, 2014: 175). This is why vows as personal prayers have been used mainly in the cases of an accident, trouble or when a person could not travel to a shrine or the grave of a sacred person, as many examples from the data show:

In 1928 his mother vowed him to the Mother of God of Bistrica that she would go on pilgrimage to Bistrica if She restored his health. Since that moment he felt better ... when he would say or only thought these words: ‘Mummy, are you going to leave me again’, the cramps would stop at the same moment. And later, even the smallest signs of the disease ceased. He comes every year on pilgrimage ... to thank her for this great mercy of healing (1957 - Hrvatsko nacionalno svetište Majke Božje Bistričke, 2012).

It is noted in the mediaeval times that quick help after the invocation of a saint was very important for believers:
She immediately, while falling to her knees and with tears in her eyes, started to call for help from the blessed father … she could soon sense how that disease was leaving her body, 15th century (Andrić, 1999: 238).

The same belief continued into the following centuries:

As she said this [the vow prayer], the child came to life (1759 - Berke, 1775: 148).

Hahn notes how in Ancient Rome the ‘prayer … not only accompanied all ritual acts but could stand alone as an independent speech act’ (Hahn, 2007: 235). What is more, ‘speech – even inner speech, or perfectly complete thought … is what makes contractual ties and obligations totally binding … in human-divine relations’ (Mashiach, 2014: 205). In traditional Jewish law, just as in the old Slavic tradition, the ‘verbal-performative utterances provide for the bond between humans and God’ and the obligation is effectively established by human speech on ‘the principle of acquisition’, due to which the gift is not needed (Mashiach, 2014: 201). According to these insights, the ancient concept of the personal vow implies that ‘no physical act is required in dealings between man and God in order to create binding obligation’ (Mashiach, 2014: 205). This is probably why the vow has been mostly used as a type of prayer by which one does not have to visit the sacred place or do something (e.g. regular sacrifice) to ensure that the divine controls or intervenes in the person’s life, health and so on. This is probably why in the data it seems that it does not matter where the prayer is made, at home or in the shrine, as well as whether it is spoken or thought:

Everybody presumed that she would never be able to speak … But the merciful Mary of Bistrica … turned this around … when [she] vowed in her heart to Mary and asked for Her mighty help, she suddenly started talking to the nearby people, who, as they saw that miracle, could not praise enough the goodness and mercy of Mary of Bistrica (1716 - Berke, 1775: 130).

In the previous example it is clear how the ‘definitive … intention suffices … in the absence of an utterance’ to consecrate something to the sacred, so what ‘effects the acquisitions’ is ‘generosity arising from the heart – from thought’ (Mashiach, 2014: 198). Thus, some people believe they should keep their personal vows for themselves and not talk about them publicly (Interviewee 3; Yel, 2002: 91). In this way, the notion of making connection to the sacred only by thought remained until today a part of personal piety among Catholics and believers of other religions.

It can be concluded that the vow prayer proves to be a performative utterance in that it ‘creates a new … reality’, so it is not used only for communicating, but ‘is itself the performance of an action’ (Mashiach, 2014: 175).

However, in most cases people feel the obligation to express their gratitude for the received mercy in various other ways, usually doing what is done as a part of regular, official practices (going to the sacred place, giving alms and so on). This aspect of the vow practice has also been continually changing. For example, today in Catholicism an ordinary prayer can be a vow if the person defines it as such, and it does not even have to include a promise, or the promise can be fulfilled before the sacred acts or after that, and so on (see also Čapo, 1991: 21-22, 42; Hrovatin, 2015). The research so far has also shown that pilgrimage to a sacred place is implied after a person receives mercy from the sacred, the reasons for which are explained in the next section.

**Personal Vows, Sacred Places and Objects**

In the Jewish tradition, the ‘utterance said to the Most High … is the same as handing the item over to an ordinary person’, therefore ‘the act of speech’ made by the person in relation to the divine ‘is the same as an act of acquisition’ when people trade their goods (Mashiach, 2014: 196). So, the promise by which something can be dedicated to the sacred, strengthens not only the relationship with the sacred, but also the verbal expression of a person’s request. Here maybe lies the reason why people in ancient times determined already in their prayer what the offering to the sacred would be, otherwise it would be considered as a donation for the upkeep of the temple, as Mashiach explains (Mashiach, 2014: 196). Only in the case that something is in this way consecrated, it does not matter where this object might be, for example e.g. a sheep in one’s field (Mashiach, 2014: 196). It seems that this was true also for pilgrimage, so that it does not matter when the journey to the sacred place will be undertaken. In many examples it is usually within a year after the received mercy that people fulfill their promise (Hrovatin, 2015), reflecting probably the Indo-European measurement of time as circular and connected to the cycle of one agricultural year.

Furthermore, the word ‘vow’ in the Slavic languages (zavjet) is etymologically connected with movement, going away to some special (sacred) place, as noted by Katićić. In the legal texts this word is ‘connected to walking’, but ‘the verb of movement can remain
unspoken because it is implied’ within its meaning (Katičić, 1990: 80). In order to ‘take a valid oath’, one has to ‘go to the place designated for that’, go to ‘that customary place where rotas are made’ (Katičić, 1990: 81). Katičić linguistically reconstructed the old ‘pre-Slavic formula go/walk rota/on rota (idetB/hoditB rote/na roto’) which means to make an oath (Katičić, 1990: 81). With the replacement of the word rota with the word vow, it is clear that going on a vow (in Croatian examples: иći na zavjet) might once have meant a visit to the sacred place in order to take a legally valid, solemn oath and responsibility to fulfil one’s promise made to the sacred present there. A more recent syntagm in Croatian suggests that to make/do a vow might have been taken over from ‘the Latin and Italian phraseology’ for legal matters such as ‘iuramentum facere’ which means ‘to take an oath’ (Katičić, 1990: 81). In the mediaeval ‘collections of the miracles of Ivan Kapistran’ the phrase ‘votum facere’ is mentioned in one of the testimonies in Latin:

\[Q\]uo duos menses nichil vidit: et facto voto ad tumulum beati patris ire et ab infirmitate et a cecitate statim liber evasit;

The following is the translation by Andrić:

Who could not see for two months: and made a vow on the tomb of the blessed father and he was immediately relieved from weakness and blindness (Andrić, 1999: 100).

In mediaeval times, it was considered that believers could pray for mercy either at the sacred place (a shrine, a grave of a saint) or by making a vow away from the sacred place, and the latter almost by rule included the promise to come to the chosen sacred place (Andrić, 1999: 76, footnote 10). Vowing at home or outside the shrine has been done in many cases almost only when a person is in a great danger or very ill, making the visit to the shrine impossible. Also, the one who prays in such circumstances usually has no time to make a promise, which is why the pilgrimage to the sacred place or the expression of gratitude in the public has been implied after the mercy is received (Andrić, 1999: 220):

When she quickly [asked the Mother of God of Bistrica for help], the enemy of her soul was forced to leave her. After that, she came [to the shrine] to express gratitude and bring the gift herself (1690 - Berke, 1775: 103).

Going to the shrine and making a prayer there has been important because of belief in the presence of the sacred at that place (Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 7-8) and the assurance that prayer would be heard as some of the interviewees mentioned (Interviewee 1). The same is true for other sacred places besides the shrines, such as the graves of martyrs and saints, places of apparitions of the sacred and so on. The power of prayer has not only been contained in its oral form, but for believers it has also been functional when written down, especially after the general increase in the literacy. A lot of examples from the shrines in Croatia show a direct addressing of the sacred in letters containing personal prayers which they leave in the shrine, usually on the main altar.

The need to articulate the vow, and especially gratitude, orally or in writing appears to be connected not only to the sacred place as such, but also to ancient law. According to Katičić, the signs and testimonies of witnesses within a trial were important in the (pre) Slavic and Semitic legal systems for proving that an event (for example, an attack) indeed took place (Katičić, 1990: 79). In order to get the right to be repaid or recompensated for what has been wronged, the plaintiff had to prove what happened either by showing a clear mark on the body (e.g injury) or by having at least two witnesses who could testify in the case there are no marks on the body to be shown (Katičić, 1990: 79). The same has been done for centuries within the Christian vow practice, with the aim to prove that the sacred intervened as the result of prayer, especially if the priest could not see the physical or psychological (often called spiritual) state of the believer before and after the prayer. The sign has remained until recently mostly connected to the votive gift (Figure 2), gratitude or obligation as a symbolic confirmation of the fulfilment of the votive promise to

Image 2: The gifts left by the pilgrims behind the main altar in the national shrine of the Mother of God of Bistrica,

photo by author
the sacred, as the recent data show:

*This is the votive gift to the Mother of God of Bistrica as a sign of gratitude* (2nd half of the 20th century - Hrvatsko nacionalno svetište Majke Božje Bistričke, 2012).

‘The difference between a vow and voluntary contributions’ is that vows make ‘the person uttering them responsible for them’ what is in the Jewish tradition considered ‘problematic’ (Mashiach, 2014: 197). In other words, when an individual makes a personal vow, they have to be careful and attend to the fulfilment of the obligation. The object to which the person refers in their vow prayer is affected by this verbal act, so the object needs to be used as ‘an acquisition belonging to the Most High’ (for example, ‘one may not derive any benefit from it’) and it is regarded as a ‘consecrated object,’ so there is no need to mention, for example, that it will be brought to the altar (Mashiach, 2014: 197, 198).

According to the Old Testament guidelines, activities done as a part of a personal vow do not exclude or deliver the individual from the obligation of participating in regular official religious sacrificial rites or providing gifts (Exod. 29, 38; Lev. 23, 38; Deut. 12, 4-14). Aziz, for example, comments on how many pilgrims’ practices are motivated by personal reasons and each individual sees their plea as something unique, but they also personally take responsibility for the gift by which they express gratitude (Aziz, 1987: 253). So, people have been, as a part of their vow practice, bringing to sacred places, various objects, including their personal valuables, or objects connected to their previous physical condition (for example, crutches). In recent times, Catholic pilgrims have been presenting not gifts, but themselves at the sacred place, for example, by changing their behaviour as a consequence of their religious experience and similar.

In traditional Jewish law ‘what is consecrated for the altar is physically sanctified’ (Mashiach, 2014: 196). In many examples in Christianity it is indeed the (main) altar within the shrine which is the focal point for making or fulfilling a vow. One of the historical records in Croatia confirms that the altar was also very important for dealing with legal issues in the past. In the Cathedral of Split, in the 10th century, the Croatian king Trpimir’s son Mutimir ‘placed upon the altar the document with the verdict’ he made as a judge in a trial between two bishops (Katalinić, 1998: 16). By this act, Mutimir validated the judicial verdict (Katalinić, 1998: 16). The example shows that the sacred place was closely connected to traditional legal practices in the

past. Besides leaving their notes or praying at the altar, many Catholics also tend to circumambulate the altar or the saint’s grave one, three or more times while fulfilling their vow (Figure 3). This practice might be connected to the ancient Jewish tradition of repeating an action in order to make a future obligation (Kaganoff, s.a., *My Jewish Learning*, s.a.). So, going on a pilgrimage to a shrine confirms not only that a person fulfilled what they had promised, but may also mean a constant re-confirmation of the obligation to visit the sacred place. Indeed, the data confirm that pilgrimage to the shrine or grave of the sacred to which a person prayed in their vow is in many cases repeated annually until the end of one’s life, without the necessity of the believer to say so explicitly in their prayer.

In addition to gifts, there are many cases of mentioning witnesses in the records of vow prayers, which has been noted well into the middle of the 20th century in Croatia:

*This stated his wife under the oath, who vowed him* (1957 - Hrvatsko nacionalno svetište Majke Božje Bistričke, 2012).

A valid confirmation of saints’ miracles has been important in Christianity, especially so in mediaeval times, which is why the validity of one’s record of testimony was undertaken by naming the witnesses. The miracle collections in the Middle Ages were usually sealed in a legal manner – with the signatures of trustworthy citizens and oaths of reliable witnesses (Andrić, 1999: 90). However, Vidal notes that the
Church in the past used ‘testimony under oath’ as a legal procedure by which it was not important to prove whether the event took place, but whether the causes of the event are natural, divine or demonic (Vidal, 2007: 481). After the 16th century, medical evidence played a more important role in confirming testimony about miracles (Vidal, 2007: 481). So, many believers proved the validity of the miracles in their testimonies by providing detailed medical documentation, which has continued until today:

With this letter I attach the medical report (2006 - Blaženi Ivan Merz, s.a.)

Added to this change, the head doctor and lawyer of the Papal Court Paolo Zacchia determined in the 17th century the basic criteria for proving miracles in the Catholic Church, which include the gravity of the disease, getting well in a short time and not becoming ill again with the same disease (Vidal, 2007: 481). These new criteria have, until today, been reflected in many of the stories about miracles resulting from vows (Vidal, 2007: 488):

The baby had severe cramps all over the body ... the physician said there is no help for him, but his mother vowed him to the Mother of God of Bistrica and the baby got well. ... the cramps have never returned since then (1957 - Hrvatsko nacionalno svetište Majke Božje Bistričke, 2012).

Besides the medical proof, since the 16th century a personal testimony and conviction that the miracle took place has started to be accepted (Vidal, 2007: 481). Such personal testimonies of believers have been very important to confirm Mary’s intercession, and especially her many adorations at specific sacred places:

I am convinced that this is the help and miracle from the Our Lady of Trsat (1950s - Hrvatsko nacionalno svetište Majke Božje Bistričke, 2012).

Notice that Mary in the testimony (Our Lady of Trsat) is not from the same shrine where the testimony was written down (in the shrine of the Mother of God of Bistrica).

Not Fulfilling a Vow

It is a general belief in Christianity that in the case where an individual does not fulfil what one has promised as a part of their vow, they would suffer certain consequences (Andrić, 1999: 207, footnote 194, Dubisch, 1990: 138, footnote 14, Yel, 2002: 71). In some examples it has been noted that the ‘fear of being punished prevents devotees from breaking their promises, and as such their relationship with Mary’ (Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans, 2012: 10). The need to apologise to Mary or the other sacred because they have not fulfilled their part of the promise is clearly stated in some of examples from the Croatian national shrine:

Thank you, the Most Holy Mother on Thy sacred mercy ... Please excuse me for not coming to You before, but You know best all my weaknesses! (the middle of the 20th c. - Hravtcko nacionalno svetište Majke Božje Bistričke, 2012)

In ancient Rome, it was similarly believed that if the promise made by the vow was not fulfilled, the deity to which it had been promised would punish the person and ‘fulfil the vow instead’; but if the deity had not fulfilled the vow, the person was released from the obligation to fulfil it (Belayche, 2007: 285). These contexts show how the concepts of ‘recompensation, transaction and reciprocity’ based on the notions of ‘equity and divine punishment’ are reflected in the vow practice (Badone 1990: 16).

Many Christians believe that the unpleasant state in which a person finds themself in their life is a sort of punishment from the sacred because one has not lived by the prescribed religious rules. In a 1990s testimony from Portugal a parent realises that he does not have to invoke the sacred because his child is not deadly ill, however, he has decided to make a vow nonetheless and take ‘the responsibility for the child’s illness because he believed that it was due to his sins that God sent this trouble to his daughter, as a warning’ (Yel, 2002: 71). The problem of sin and the importance of sacrifice to be released from it has been a major issue since ancient times, also in Jewish tradition (Yel, 2002: 71).

Andrić notes how the ‘mediaeval Church inherited’ some notions connected to vow practice from ‘Roman religions and law’. He mentioned how in Antiquity ‘the promise given to the deity was irrevocable and sacred’, how ‘through it the individual became’ a debtor, and how ‘its possible breakage was, in essence, fatal’ (Andrić, 1999: 249, footnote 194). The author mentions mediaeval Catholic miracles connected to vows that would not help, but did the opposite - punish pilgrims if they, for example, had doubts about the sainthood of a saint (Andrić, 1999: 181). So called, ‘punitive miracles’ or ‘ultiones (retaliations)’ are ascribed to God, which is why saints have no power
over them, they can only ‘foretell’ them (Andrić, 1999: 182). In this context, vows are not to be considered as an investment, but repentance and contrition which are a part of a vow, as Andrić notes. In punitive miracles, the worst ‘punishment for sin’ is death, which ‘is not only an incorrigible worldly loss, but it intrinsically implies – which is its most fearful dimension – eternal catastrophe: judgment in the afterlife’ (Andrić, 1999: 184). In the Middle Ages the Catholic Church added its mark to such notions by giving a pilgrimage as a penance to believers (Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 21). Besides personal confession of guilt, in the Middle Ages one could have blamed the devil, a demon, a witch or any other negative supernatural beings for the state one finds oneself in, and then pray by using a vow to God, Mary or saint for help.

In the centuries following the Trent Council, the goal of the Church was to lead the personal piety of the believers towards religious practices focusing on individual salvation (Brettell, 1990: 58), in which vows again found their special place. In the 18th century in the shrine of the Mother of God of Bistrica one of the priests ‘invited the pilgrims from Zagreb to bring their hearts as a votive gift to Jesus through Mary’ and criticised devotees for coming to the shrine because of a ‘personal vow ... to show it there or relieve one's consciousness’, due to which the holy confession becomes ‘more of a causal self-accusement than a joyous conversion and an experience of reconciliation’ with the sacred (Maračić, 2000-2001: 644, 546-547). Later also ‘Protestant reformers were opposed to pilgrimages undertaken in fulfilment of a vow or for penitential reasons. Luther early objected to pilgrimage as a type of 'good work' by which people sought to save themselves, rather than to rely on the merits of Jesus Christ’ (Thompson, 2000: 115). After the Reformation and Counter Reformation, focus on the saints and Mary has been continually redirected onto a more theoretically (sacramentally) acceptable motivation, so the personal vows also reflect these changes as the data show.

What is more, it seems that the idea of human guilt which is brought up when communicating with or asking something from the sacred, existed in much older religious systems. For example, Katičić describes ritual against the plague in which a special formula is used for the confession of guilt by the Near Eastern Hittite king Mursili II with the aim to receive mercy from the sacred for his people:

It is so. We have done it. [and ] I confessed the sin. It is so. I have done it (Katičić, 1990: 83, footnote 17).

Hahn noted that in Roman temples individuals would pray by using vows for their personal needs, but also he notes that the army commanders would make a vow before going into a battle (Hahn, 2007: 238-239), which was also mentioned in the Bible (Judges 11, 30). This type of a vow is on the border between a personal and a communal (group) vow, which were often made in the Middle Ages by the whole community, usually against a common threat such as the plague.

Therefore, in its legal meaning, the ancient ‘Indo-European formula confirms guilt before the court’ and in it ‘the king solemnly speaks out loud the prayer in which he, in his own name and in the name of his people, confesses the guilt because of which the plague came as a punishment’ upon them (Katičić, 1990: 83, footnote 17). This formula consists of the anthetic expressions it is so – it is not so with the meaning of proving the true state of the matter at the court:

The wrong is revealed not only by movement but also by speech. Out of this originated the verb to show (kazati) which means both: showing [that the person is guilty] and speaking [saying that the person actually is guilty]. ... The justice starts ... when someone is accused of being guilty. ... And it is made right again if it is revealed that [the person] is guilty. Therefore, during a trial before the court it should be shown that it is so. ... By the procedural and formally spoken estЂ or nĕstЂ in the ancient Slavic law the legal dispute would be solved. Then the truth is determined in the justice (?nstina), that is, that what is (estЂ). ... By taking an oath they showed that it is (Katičić, 1990: 82–83).

Katičić states that the verbs ‘to show(point to’ in Old Indian dīsāti and German zeigen, and ‘to speak’ in Latin dicere, are etymologically connected to the Greek word ‘δική ‘justice, trial, verdict’ (Katičić, 1990: 82). Such revealing of the true state of the things has also been known in the procedure of ‘acquisition by admission’ in traditional Jewish law by which the person making an oath states explicitly what is the debt in question, and this is as valid as ‘a hundred witnesses’ (Mashiach, 2014: 194–195). Furthermore, in Judaism ‘no court can’ make someone ‘fulfil’ the promise made orally, ‘regardless of whether a religious or civil oath is involved’, but rather ‘the duty to fulfil unwritten verbal obligations is rooted in ethics, not in the law’ (Mashiach, 2014: 183). Similar to Hittite beliefs, the confession of guilt by a person in this context actually ensures that no reason is given to the sacred to be mad or not help the person who prays (Singer, 2002: 10). When connected to this
mechanism, it seems the confessions of sins that people have for centuries been making within their vow prayers are the most that they could have done to make the prayer as strong as possible and contribute to their relationship with the sacred.

As Mary does not need to be canonised by the Church (she was taken into Heaven by Jesus and thus clearly made sacred), it is obvious that the noted testimonies of received mercy in Marian shrines have followed the old notions of the need to confirm Mary’s intercession. Mary is in those examples often called a lawyer, representative, proxy, which are also the legal terms in their narrower meaning. Such testimonies have been a means to prove ‘that what is’ or ‘the truth’ about what happened after the prayer, and in many cases the believers state their guilt or highlight the confession of their sins:

Oh. Mother of Bistrica! Everybody testifies about you, that you have not forgotten, nor abandoned even one sinner who comes to you, (1710 - Berke, 1775: 124-125).

In this way vows reflect one of the mechanisms of pre-Slavic and pre-Indo-European oral law in which the one who is actually guilty is determined as such in a trial (pravda):

_The anthitesis right:wrong (pravЪ:krivЪ) ... is basic for the pre-Slavic law. The noun right relates to the verb ‘to do’ in the sense ‘to make right (again), repair, make’ and ‘alignment. ... Opposite to justice (right) is wrong (curved) ... which is made right again by justice. The one who is to blame for something, who has bent the curve is the guilty one. ... In justice the person needs to be proved as the guilty one, ... because the legal sanctions are applied only ... if the guilty one is shown (Katičić, 1990: 82)._

The formula of either–or was used in a way that the guilty person would be either convicted by saying that he is (guilty) or released by saying that he is not (guilty). Katičić states that the verb mastiti (to revenge) present in this formula, was later used in the old Slavic Church texts to refer to the God’s punishment or human-driven revenge (Katičić, 1990: 77, footnote 6). Therefore, one of the notions present in this context is definitely revenge, so, in order to make amends and make things right again, one has to do what is expected. Not only that, such practice remained present until the 20th century in the vows mostly made by believers at sacred places, but it remained present in the belief that if a person does not fulfil the promise made in their vow prayer, they would be punished in some way. This is comparable to the traditional Jewish understanding that in ‘the relationship between human beings and God, an oral contract – verbal obligation alone – is totally binding, and violators are punished’ (Mashiach, 2014: 195).

Therefore, confessing guilt when praying, which is very often seen in the vows made by Catholics as the data from various centuries show, is reminiscent of the ancient precondition of establishing a good relationship with the sacred and thus ensuring that the promise made during prayer is fulfilled. This notion has influenced probably the feeling of guilt if the promise is not fulfilled, so in many examples the believers try to justify themselves and state the reasons for not keeping their promise:

But I didn't do the vow as I should have done. I have, but not in time. I had not said the exact deadline for fulfilling it. I had said that I would go to the Mother of God of Bistrica [and several years passed by, so she felt guilty for not fulfilling it sooner] (2011 - Interviewee 4).

In more recent times, the faith among Christians who make vows has been more important than the promise. Yel also notes that in any religious practice, including vows, faith in the sacred to whom one prays is a precondition in order for a relationship with the sacred to take place and achieve the fulfilment of one's prayer (Yel, 2002: 74, Christian, 1989: 119-120).

Dubisch states that some people want to keep their vows and experience at the sacred place or somewhere for themselves, away from the public (Dubisch, 1990: 129). What is more, some believers do not choose vows for various reasons other than the fear of not fulfilling their vow. For example, some people think all that could be accomplished with the vow prayer, could also be done via official or less extreme religious practices (Yel, 2002: 68, Hrovatin, 2015). These different interpretations of recompensation reflect recent changes in the Catholic Church. Retaliation is achieved through holy confession and communion as the ways of reconciling with the sacred for the sins one commits in one’s life (cf. Eade and Sallnow, 1991). In this way, the relation between human and sacred has been shifting from notions based on ancient oral law and transaction mechanisms towards ‘negotiation’ and connecting with the sacred, what many examples from the 20th century show (Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans, 2012: 9, Hrovatin, 2015). Since the 20th century these changes have been significant and some pilgrims I have interviewed believe that humans are so much lower hierarchically than the sacred, so that even
if the individual does not fulfill the given promise, this can be compensated by other means, for example, by praying for forgiveness because Jesus Christ always forgives those who repent.

Conclusion

The notion of the vow as a personal prayer is a very complex one, as any other cultural practice. Pre-Slavic and Pre-Indo-European oral law show some similarities with the characteristics of the conventionality of legal issues in Jewish traditional culture and law. The analysis has revealed how the basic ancient legal and religious mechanisms were embedded in the form and even the content of the personal vow throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages and remained a part of practice until recent centuries. These and other aspects of the vow prayer have been changing and transforming in different ways until today, depending on the cultural, religious and historical contexts, yet the notion of vow prayer as a very intimate way of communicating and establishing connection to the sacred has remained its essential trait.

Personal non-institutional vows proved to be a good ground to conduct anthropological and historical research on how the changes in different official religions, belief systems and societies have influenced the ways people think about themselves, their communities and the sacred other. Further research on the practice of vows could show more layers and details of religious, social and historical changes as well as the various mechanisms and processes that govern specific cultural contexts. The interdisciplinary comparison and approach has contributed to a more holistic insight into the vow as part of a broader cultural context and inseparable from other notions and mechanisms that are inherent in many other social and religious practices, such as law, economy and everyday human interaction.

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Interviewees:

Interviewee 1, born around 1950s, lives in Zagreb, interviewed in 2010. 
Interviewee 2, msgn. Lovro Cindori, a former rector of the national shrine of the Mother of God of Bistrica, interviewed in 2014.

Interviewee 3, born around 1950s, lives in Split and Zagreb, interviewed in 2009.

Interviewee 4, born around 1960s, lives in Slavetić near Zagreb, interviewed in 2011.