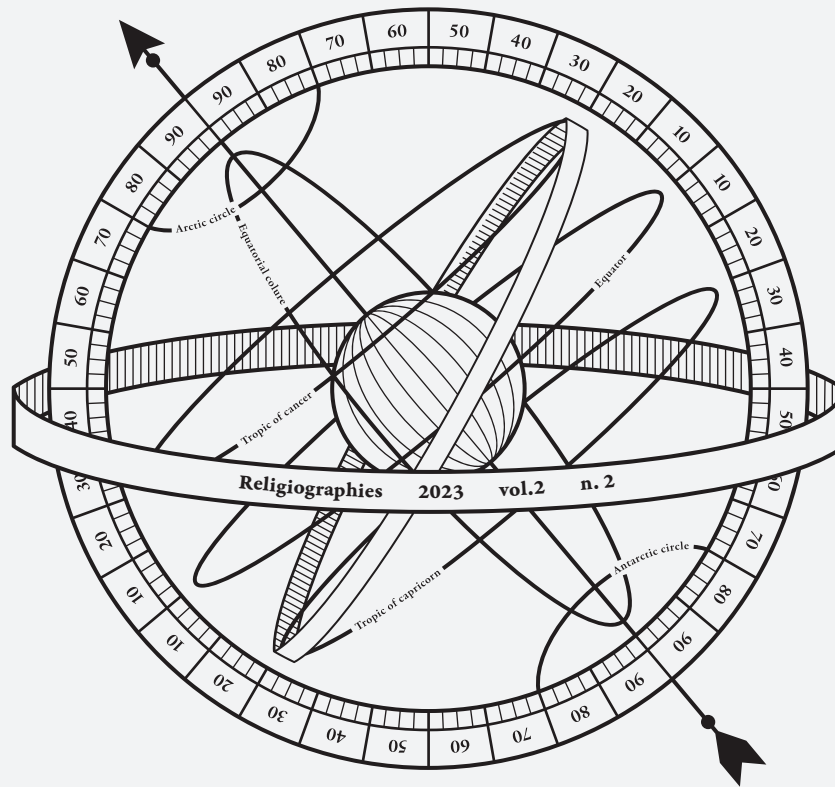


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*The Religious Dimensions
of the Esperanto Collective
Identity*
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Abstract

This paper shows how religious dimensions play a role in shaping the collective identity of Esperanto, the most successful planned language ever. Esperanto is the only project that has succeeded in becoming a full-fledged living language. Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, its original author, had in mind not only a *ponto-lingvo* ("bridge language") but also and mainly a *pontoreligio* ("bridge religion"). While his first plan eventually became what is known now as Esperanto, the latter—called at first Hillelism, and later Homaranism—turned out to be a spectacular failure in terms of acceptance. Nowadays, while there are Esperanto associations throughout the world, there are neither Hillelist temples nor active Homaranist societies. However, Zamenhof planted a tiny seed of his religious dimension inside the Esperanto community from its inception, called the *interna ideo* ("internal idea"), which flourished within the Esperanto Movement in further religious dimensions, starting from his only daughter, Lidia Zamenhof, a prominent Bahá'í figure. Even if most Esperanto supporters have a "neutralistic" attitude to Esperanto, claiming absolute neutrality concerning religion as well as political views, an anti-essentialist analysis of the Esperanto "national character" paradoxically reveals typical elements of (Romantic) nationalism, such as a hymn and a flag, as well as postmodernist interpretations.

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This view of language comes from an interdisciplinary field called the sociology of language. See for example, Joshua A. Fisherman "The Sociology of Language: An Interdisciplinary Social Science Approach to Language in Society," in *Advances in the Sociology of Language*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman, vol. 1, *Basic Concepts, Theories and Problems: Alternative Approaches* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2019), 217–404.

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Unless stated otherwise, all quotes are author's translation from Esperanto.

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Joshua A. Fishman, "Antaŭparolo [Preface]," in *Vocabolario Italiano-Esperanto*, ed. Carlo Minnaja (Milano: Cooperativa Editoriale Esperanto, 1996), 7.

1. Esperanto as a linguistic-cultural artefact

Human beings constantly use languages—whether spoken, signed, written—to connect with others, constructing shared norms of behaviour. Therefore, the understanding of linguistic phenomena passes through not only mere language description but also its usage, including language attitudes and ideologies. The latter may be either overt or covert, and they pertain to both language users and non-users, who also have ideologies concerning language and its users.¹ Even if it may appear counterintuitive at first sight, the Esperanto phenomenon is no exception. In his preface to the bilingual Italian–Esperanto dictionary, Joshua Fishman presents it in these words:²

"I spent most of my professional life researching and writing about minor ethnic languages, that is, languages that are undervalued even by their own speech communities and are sometimes neglected or even persecuted by their own governments. Esperanto was born in the mind of L. L. Zamenhof, a native speaker, teacher, and even researcher of one such language: Yiddish. Sometimes you hear that Esperanto should substitute the many supposedly superfluous ethnic languages; according to this view, Esperanto would be yet another opponent of minor ethnic languages, which already bear an undue load of adversaries. However, we can also consider Esperanto to be the most typical of all interlanguages, languages that act as bridges. As such, Esperanto is against no other language, but, on the contrary, facilitates communication between speakers who share no common language. This is the function of Esperanto, a function that merits everybody's support and admiration."³

Of over a thousand “interlanguage” projects—following Fishman’s wording—proposed from the advent of the Scientific Revolution in Europe until the first half of the 20th century, only Esperanto fully succeeded to pass from the stage of a written-only, one-man project to that of a spoken, community-driven, living language.⁴ With the important exception of sign languages, human languages build up societies in spoken form before being written; this historical “priority of speech” (Lyons’ wording) is systematically violated by interlanguages such as Esperanto, which are therefore attacked as being artificial, in the pejorative sense of unnatural.⁵ We maintain that Esperanto is not merely a set of grammatical rules written in a book but a linguistic artefact (without any pejorative connotation!) that has produced—and continues to produce—a culture, intended as a collective effort of making meaning of the world, following the constructive view of culture-as-a-verb.⁶ From this starting point, we draw from the existing literature the following preliminary observations. First, Esperanto is a living language, belonging to a specific community of practice: applying Wenger’s definition, Esperanto speakers are an aggregate of people who share similar interests in Esperanto as a common practice that shape their participation in the world and their orientation towards it, creating connections between group members in mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and shared repertoires, such as discourses, routines, and rituals.⁷ Second, the Esperanto sense of belonging nurtures its community of practice through a collection of language attitudes and ideologies sustaining the creation of Esperanto artefacts, which, ultimately, constitute its culture. Finally, it is worth noting that, in the case of Esperanto, intergenerational transmission occurs mainly outside the domain of the family: the majority of Esperanto speakers consciously choose to become proficient in the language as teenagers or adults. Therefore, in order to understand the Esperanto collective identity, it is crucial to give an account of the sense-making processes behind the Esperanto practice across different contexts, in both time and space.⁸

In this paper, we abstract from linguistic consideration over the Esperanto language, so as to focus specifically on its cultural artefacts. In particular, our main research question is to investigate why religious dimensions often remain as an undercurrent in the main Esperanto discourse while they overwhelmingly arise at specific points through its complex history. The main thesis is that we should go beyond a naïve essentialist view of Esperantism as a homogeneous ideology; on the contrary, we should analyse Esperanto ideologies under the lens of its “cultural history,” both in the sense of *Kulturgeschichte*, especially useful for its pioneering stage and classic period, and in the sense of pop culture analysis, which is especially useful for Esperanto postmodernism.⁹ Without any pretense of exhausting all aspects of this rather rarely scrutinised topic, we shall see that, in the case of Esperanto, religious dimensions engage in a constant—and passionate—dialogue with nationalistic symbols used to define its ideology of neutralism. An important corollary is that, despite common beliefs, even among Esperanto speakers, its ideology of neutralism is far from being ideologically neutral.

2. Nationalistic matters in the early Esperanto Movement

The choice of using nationalism as a key concept for the Esperanto phenomenon merits an explanation; after all, Zamenhof, who defined himself as the *iniciatoro* of Esperanto, that is, the one who started it, called his project *lingvo internacia*, “international language.”¹⁰ Is it paradoxical that the Esperanto

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The common trait of interlanguages is to be non-ethnic, i.e., not bound to a specific ethnic group. A classic encyclopaedic work registering all interlanguage projects is by Louis Couturat and Léopold Leau, *Histoire de la Langue Universelle* (Paris: Hachette, 1903). Already the second edition has a lot of new projects, most of them ephemeral. A somehow analogous work published almost one century later showed a bunch of new projects, with little or no social impact: Paolo Albani and Berlinghiero Buonarroti, *Aga magèra difùra: Dizionario delle lingue immaginarie* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1994). From the late 1990s, some projects had small revivals under the label of “conlanging,” but no significant extra-Internet impact in terms of community formation. Observations that are still valid can be found in: Federico Gobbo, “The Digital Way to Spread Conlangs,” in *Language at Work: Language Learning, Discourse and Translation Studies in Internet*, ed. Santiago G. Posteguillo et al. (Castellon: Publicacions de la Universitat Jaume I, 2005), 45–53.

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Lyons sets the historical and biological priority of speech as the basis of naturalness in languages; see John Lyons, *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and John Lyons, *Natural Language and Universal Grammar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also discussion in Federico Gobbo, “Are planned languages less complex than natural languages?,” *Language Sciences* 60 (2017): 36–52, and Federico Gobbo, “Alan Turing creator of Artificial Languages,” *InKoj: Philosophy and Artificial Languages* 3, no. 2 (2012): 181–94. For an in-depth critical analysis from the point of view of philosophy of language, see Ida Stria, “Towards a Linguistic Worldview for Artificial Languages” (PhD thesis, Adam Mickiewicz University, 2015). On the sources of ideological attacks against Esperanto, see Federico Gobbo, “The language ideology of Esperanto: From the world language problem to balanced multilingualism,” in *Contested Languages: The Hidden Multilingualism in Europe*, ed. Marco Tamburelli and Mauro Tosco (Amsterdam: John Benjamins), 213–26.

6

This felicitous expression was coined by Brian V. Street, “Culture is a verb: Anthropological aspects of language and cultural process,” in *Language and Culture: papers from the annual meeting of the British association of applied linguistics held at Trevelyan college, University of Durham, September 1991*, ed. David Graddol, Linda Thompson, and Mike Byram (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1993): 23–43. An application of the concept on English linguistic competence is found in Judith Mader and Rudi Camerer, “Culture is a verb: The training and testing of intercultural communicative competence,” in *Autonomie und Assessment: Erträge des 3. Bremer Symposiums zum autonomen Fremdsprachenlernen*, ed. Arntz Reiner, Hans P. Krings, and Bärbel Kühn (Bochum: AKS-Verlag, 2012), 117–29.

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The notion of Community of Practice was proposed in the 1990s by Penny Eckert and Etienne Wenger in the context of research on learning, then applied to linguistic community as well; see Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

This starting point and these preliminary observations are shared by the most renowned researchers of the Esperanto phenomenon. From an anthropological and, so to speak, ethnographic perspective, see Guilherme Fians, *Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks: Language Politics, Digital Media and the Making of an International Community* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021). From a sociolinguistic perspective see Sabine Fiedler and Cyril Robert Brosch, *Esperanto: Lingua Franca and Language Community* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2022). Both perspectives are complementary to the one proposed in this paper. We intentionally leave out of the discussion the subgroup of Esperanto family speakers, the Esperanto *denaskuloj*, as they did not contribute as a distinct subgroup to the Esperanto collective identity, except for the fact that they serve as tangible proof that Esperanto is a full-fledged human language.

I follow the comparative approach for investigating the relevance of “culture” in cultural nationalism to frame Esperanto in a larger context, proposed by Joep Lerssen, “Nationalism and the cultivation of culture,” *Nations and Nationalism* 12, no. 4 (2006): 559–78.

The word “Esperanto” means “the one who hopes,” and at first it indicated the pseudonym of Zamenhof as the author of the language, not the language itself.

A terminological clarification may be useful here: the “Esperanto phenomenon” indicates all cultural aspects surrounding the language, while “Esperanto community of practice” indicates the practice of the language that actually produces its cultural aspects. Finally, “Esperanto Movement” indicates the ideological aspects of the community of practice. The latter term comes from the classic sociological inquiry by Peter G. Forster, *The Esperanto Movement* (The Hague: Mouton, 1982).

Zamenhof reserved his attention to the solution of the Jewish question thanks to/due to his religious project, Hillelism, which will be presented in the next section.

The letter was published under the title “L. N. Tolstoj kaj Esperanto,” *La Esperantisto* 7(1894): 99–100. At the time there was a heated debate about the structure of Esperanto among the first generation of Esperantists, who were mostly Russian. Most probably, Tolstoy’s authority influenced Esperantists in doubt that Esperanto did not need structural reforms, rather staying loyal to Zamenhof’s project, as the referendum among the readers of the monthly review conducted a few months later would attest. Most probably, Tolstoy’s later paper on religion “Prudento aŭ Kredo?” [Common sense or belief?], *La Esperantisto* 2 (1895): 28–30 was the cause of the ban by Tsarist censors on publishing *La Esperantisto* in Russia. All issues reprinted in *La Esperantisto: Gazeto por la amikoj de la lingvo Esperanto*, postface by Reinhard Haupenthal (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1988).

movement shows traits of nationalism from its beginning while having internationalism at its very core? The answer to this question relies on how the pioneers of the Esperanto community of practice structured the first ideological lines while laying the very grounds of the Esperanto Movement;¹¹ the first two generations of Esperanto speakers (1887–1904 and 1905–1932) started a tradition that cannot be overlooked by subsequent Esperanto speakers.

In 1887, Zamenhof published his language project in Warsaw, at the time part of the Tsarist Empire. That book became known in Esperanto as *Unua Libro*, the First Book, with an all-too-obvious aura of sacrality. In her analysis of its content, O’Keefe convincingly shows, backed up by first-hand sources, that Esperanto was never an exclusively Jewish project.¹² Zamenhof’s conscious choice in this regard is confirmed by the letter that Lev N. Tolstoy wrote in 1894 responding to Russian Esperantists on the applicability of Esperanto as *lingvo tutmonda*, a worldwide language. While acknowledging that it is a more rational choice to learn an ad-hoc international language than hoping for a natural convergence on one of the world’s many existing languages or widespread plurilingualism among the masses, Tolstoy argued that Esperanto:

“Appears very easy to any European, [but] for an absolute world language, that is, one to connect Indians, Chinese, African people, etc., another language would be needed. . . . After two hours of studying, I could already, if not write, at least freely read in this language. [. . .] I experienced many times how human beings remained hostile toward each other only because of the barriers against mutual understanding. And, for this reason, learning and propagating Esperanto is without any doubt a Christian matter, which helps to bring about the Kingdom of God, that matter that is the main and only definition of human life.”¹³

According to the address book of the readers of the first journal written in the language, significantly entitled *La Esperantisto*, approximately 90% of its subscribers came from the Tsarist Empire and were Russian speakers. It was only in the early years of the 20th century that Western Europeans, in particular the French, superseded Russian Esperantists in number. Another reason this occurred was that in Tsarist Russia of the late 1890s, censorship did not allow publications in a language not listed in the restricted club of approved foreign tongues, and inevitably the centre of the Movement had to move elsewhere. It was only after the Russian Revolution of 1905 that relative freedom of the press made room for publication in Esperanto: the flagship journal became *Ruslanda Esperantisto* (1905–1910), targeting Esperantists “from Russian countries” (so, not necessarily ethnically Russian), which conveyed ideas, in O’Keefe’s words, of “patriotic cosmopolitanism” and Esperanto as a “narrow elite pastime.”¹⁴ In the tumultuous fin-de-siècle years in Russia, it was a Frenchman who saved the Movement from oblivion: Louis de Beaufront, “the second father of Esperanto.” He became an extremely controversial figure in the Esperanto Movement, as he initially devoted himself to the Esperanto Cause (in the language: *l’Afero*), but then left Esperanto for a rival project, called Ido (in the language: offspring). De Beaufront was a fervent Catholic, and he interpreted Esperantism through that religious lens. Evidence for this is one of his early publications in Esperanto that appeared as early as 1893: it was a prayer book, published with the blessings of the Bishop of Reims.¹⁵ However, the *Société française pour la propagation de l’Espéranto*, established in 1898,

was set up not on religious grounds but on national grounds; eventually, de Beaufront's society evolved into *Esperanto France*, the association representing Esperantists in France.¹⁶ The importance of de Beaufront should not be underestimated: he established the basis of what became the standard way to frame the Esperanto identity: a secondary identity alongside the national one. For this reason, unless they strongly identify themselves with left-wing ideologies such as anarchism, Esperanto speakers in general refer to themselves as French Esperantists, German Esperantists, and so on. The mainstream Esperanto Movement is defined along the lines of so-called “country associations,” but note that some of these associations do not represent a sovereign state, examples being Esperanto associations in Catalonia and Scotland.

If it was clear from the start that Esperanto never pertained to a single nation, the relation between nationhood and the Esperanto collective identity was nonetheless already ambiguous in Zamenhof's public speeches. One of them addressed the external world in particular, meaning the non-Esperantists. From the outside, the role of Esperanto was always quite clear, in Zamenhof's words. In particular, the public speech delivered at Guildhall in London on 12th August 1907 addresses nationhood explicitly. Zamenhof solemnly declared:

“The second attack that we often received as that we Esperantists are bad patriots. As those Esperantists who treat Esperantism as an idea, preaches reciprocal justice and brotherhood between the peoples, and as in the opinion of national chauvinists (*gentaj ŝovinistoj*) patriotism consists of hating everything that is not ours, for that reason, according to them, we are bad patriots; they say we do not love our country (*patrujon*). Against this ignoble lie and calumnious attack, we protest with all our energy, with every fibre of our heart! While pseudo-patriotism, that is, national chauvinism, is part of that common hate, which destroys everything in the world, the genuine patriotism is part of that large worldwide love, that constructs everything, preserves, and makes all happy. Esperantism, which preaches love, and patriotism, which also preaches love, can never be enemies.”¹⁷

From the beginning of the Esperanto Movement, internationalism was literally presented as inter-nationalism: the ideological frame in which Esperanto relies on is found in between imagined nationalism for in-group identity and cosmopolitanism for the external relations, so to avoid excesses in the name of exceptionalism.

On the other side, Zamenhof's wording addressing Esperanto pioneers was of a different tenor. The internal definition of the collective identity of the community of practice brings potential clashes with the Esperanto idea just mentioned of being situated between nations. The foundational myth of Esperantism in an institutional sense¹⁸ is the first World Esperanto Congress in Boulogne-sur-Mer, 1905, whose rituals are repeated every year in July–August, when speakers of the language gather for one week from all over the world.¹⁹ On 9th August 1905, Esperanto delegates signed the Boulogne Declaration, which lays out the core of Esperantism, defined as (author's translation) “the effort to spread the usage of a human neutral language throughout the world,” the latter being identified with Esperanto, which is nobody's property. Moreover, the Declaration defines an Esperantist as “any person using Esperanto

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Brigid O'Keefe, *Esperanto and Languages of Internationalism in Revolutionary Russia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

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In Esperanto cultural history, de Beaufront was known as *judaso*, referring to Judas Iscariot, as he left Esperanto for Ido, a reform influenced by French that enjoyed a certain following by scientists and scholars for a few years, as told by Michael Gordin, *Scientific Babel: How Science was Done Before and After Global English* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015). Following the analogy of traitor and betrayed, Zamenhof should be then playing the role of Jesus. Russian Esperantist Korzhenkov, well known in the community for his biography of Zamenhof, wrote a newspaper article on de Beaufront with his main biographic points: Aleksander Korzhenkov, “Louis de Beaufront, la dua patro de Esperanto,” *La Ondo de Esperanto* (February 2015).

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From a linguistic point of view, it is interesting that in classic Esperanto (from the First World War to the Second one, included: 1905–1945) such associations were called *naciaj societoj* “national societies”; in modern Esperanto (from the aftermath of the Second World War until the end of the Cold War: 1945–1991) they started being called *landaj asocioj* “country associations.”

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Johannes Dieterle, ed., *Originala Verkaro de L. L. Zamenhof* (Leipzig: Ferdinand Hirt & Sohn), 382–83.

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Here, I follow the conceptualisation of mythopoesis as institutional, if not political, legitimation, as framed by Samuel Bennett, “Mythopoetic legitimation and recontextualisation of Europe's foundational myth,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 21, no. 2 (2022): 370–89.

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World Esperanto Congresses did not take place during the World Wars for obvious reasons. In 1967 the event was moved from Tel Aviv to Rotterdam due to the conflict between Israel and the surrounding Arab states in June. Due to the Covid pandemic, in the years 2020 and 2021 it was substituted by Virtual Esperanto Congresses. The World Esperanto Congress 2022 in Montreal, Canada, was number 107.

The opening speech in Boulogne-sur-Mer is in Dietterle, *Originala Verkaro*, 350–65.

Dietterle, *Originala Verkaro*, 361.

Comprehensive accounts concerning Lanti are only in Esperanto; see Eugeno Lanti, *El verkoj de E. Lanti* (Laroque Timbaut: Broŝurservo de S.A.T. ĉe Cercle Espérantiste de l'Agenais, 1982). Eduard Borsboom, *Vivo de Lanti* (Paris: Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda, 1976). The more the mainstream Esperanto Movement flirted with totalitarian regimes led by Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, the more anationalistic Esperanto grew, until the tragic events of World War II, where Esperantists were persecuted, including by left-wing inspired regimes, such as Stalin's. See Ulrich Lins, *Dangerous Language: Esperanto and the Decline of Stalinism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Discussions about ideological positioning vis-à-vis nationalism still appeared in the last years of the Cold War, then they mostly faded out. For a late-coming comprehensive internal view of a-nationalism: Simon Aarse, *Naciismo kaj esperantismo* (Laroque Timbaut: Broŝurservo de S.A.T. ĉe Cercle Espérantiste de l'Agenais, 1981).

Quoted from the SAT Congress of 1978 in Lectoure, France. In the 1980s, a specific *Sennaciista Frakcio*, literally “A-nationalist Fraction,” tried to revitalise Lanti's *sennaciismo*, a-nationalism, without much success. The Fraction remained dormant in the 1990s. In the SAT Congress of 2001 in Nagykanizsa, Hungary, Esperanto a-nationalism attacked the defense of language minorities as based on ethnicism and micro-nationalism, to be rejected as part of the New Right. Debates can be found in the official SAT bulletin *Sennaciulo*.

The principle of subsidiarity is the foundation of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church in its classic definition by Pope Pius XI in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931.

For an account of the mainstream Esperanto Movement vis-à-vis nation-states and its transformations see Federico Gobbo, “Beyond the Nation-State? The ideology of the Esperanto Movement between Neutralism and Multilingualism,” *Social Inclusion* 5, no. 4 (2017): 38–47. The story of impossible compromise between the Universal Esperanto Association and the Nazi regime in the World Esperanto Congress in 1933 is told by Ziko van Dijk, *Historio de UEA* (Bratislava: Eldonejo Espero, 2012) which gives an account of the whole history of the association. For the situation of Esperanto in Italy under Mussolini's regime, see Carlo Minnaja, *L'esperanto in Italia: Alla ricerca della democrazia linguistica* (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2007).

whatever the goal of its use.”²⁰ But what if someone uses Esperanto for the sake of national chauvinism, to use Zamenhof's expression? This brings Esperantism to a paradox that eventually leads to a short circuit if we read the first words by Zamenhof from his solemn speech delivered at the same venue:

“In the small town on the French seaside, individuals have come together from the most diverse countries and nations, and they meet each other not mute and deaf, but they understand one another; they speak with each other as brothers, as members of a single nation.”²¹

Zamenhof's ambiguity is to frame Esperantists as a cultural community building up its own tradition, as if they were an ethnic group, while by definition Esperantists want to transcend ethnic differences.

If the Esperanto collective is a (sort of) nation, how does it position itself in relation to the other nations? Over time, Esperanto intellectuals gave different answers to this question. At one extreme, there is Eugeno Lanti's ideology of *sennaciismo*, anationalism: nation-states are treated as the enemy, and ultimately Esperantism should destroy them. In particular, this view was developed by the members of the *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda*, literally “Anationalistic Association Worldwide” (SAT), starting from Lanti himself, the founder of SAT.²² Lanti interpreted the political role of Esperanto as a tool to attack the very existence of nation-states for the sake of the world revolution led by the working class. Esperantists belonging to the working class, he argues in his writings, should frame Esperanto as “the Latin of the Proletarians”: my brother is not my compatriot, with whom I share a national language, but my fellow worker in a factory, with whom I share Esperanto. After his death in 1947, however, SAT framed its ideology to include “preservation of people's languages and cultures as part of the fight for a new social order,” not without lively internal discussions.²³

At the other extreme, Esperanto should be purely an auxiliary language, never impinging upon the internal affairs of nation-states, in a sort of linguistic version of the principle of subsidiarity,²⁴ where Esperanto comes to the fore only when nation-states do not suffice in managing language issues. This policy of non-intervention became mainstream Esperanto ideology, identified with “neutralism,” and by the end accepted any kind of compromise with clearly chauvinistic political regimes such as Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany, up to the point when Esperanto was forbidden or declared *lingua non grata*.²⁵

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note that the relation between Esperanto and nationhood was taken into account explicitly by Zamenhof and the pioneers both in the discourses aimed at non-Esperantists and in the internal definition of the ideological standpoints that, in one way or the other, situate the Esperanto phenomenon within the world. In the next sections, we will see how the religious dimensions of Esperanto were treated less openly in the same, crucial years.

3. Jewish and Catholic dimensions in the early Esperanto Movement

In his *Unua Libro*, the First Book, Zamenhof illustrated his language project with some illustrative texts: the first of these was entitled *Patro nia*, which is the translation of the (Christian) Lord's Prayer, while the second one was entitled *El la Biblio*, from the Bible, specifically, the first chapter of Genesis,

which narrates God's creation. Zamenhof's religious point of departure is his Jewishness. In the first version of his "audacious attempt to craft a revisionary Jewish covenant for modernity," to use Esther Schor's words to describe Zamenhof's Hillelism, published in Russian in 1901 as a pamphlet, under the pseudonym Gomo Sum, he explains his view of the Jewish question (Schor's German translation from Zamenhof's Russian):

"We are simply chained to a cadaver. The regional-racial form of the Jewish religion now is not only a philosophical-religious absurdity, but also the fullest possible anachronism: and until such time as this form will exist, the suffering of the Jews will never, never cease, neither because of [ethnic] liberalism, nor because of Zionism, and after one hundred and after one thousand years, will Heine's prophetic words still pertain with the same strength: Judaism is not a religion it is a misfortune."²⁶

The only way to solve the Jewish question, in Zamenhof's own words, was "to create in Judaism a normal sect and strive to ensure that this sect come into being, in the course of time—say, in 100 or 150 years—to include the whole Jewish people."²⁷ His model for Hillelism was the early history of Christianity, which started as a small sect before becoming a worldwide phenomenon. In a private letter to Kofman, one of the readers of the brochure Gomo Sum, dated 15th May 1901, he clarifies the relation between Hillelism and Esperantism:

"As long as Jews don't have a language and are obliged in their practice to play the role of "Russians" or "Poles" and so on—they will always have a stigma, and the Jewish question will never be solved. However, do not worry that the project of Hillelism with a neutral language will be dangerous for Esperanto! [. . .] As Hillelism cannot exist without a neutral language, the idea of a neutral language will never be really in place without Hillelism! An international language will fortify itself forever only provided that a group exists that accepts it as a family language, as heritage. A hundred such persons (*homoj*) are for the idea of neutral language much more important than a million other persons. A heritage language of the smallest and most insignificant little people (*popoleto*) has a life much more guaranteed and inextinguishable than a language without a people, even one used by millions of individuals. Yes, I am deeply convinced that, neither the solution of the Jewish question nor the grounding of a neutral language is even possible without Hillelism, that is, without a creation of a neutral people."

Such radical ideas were welcomed neither by Russian Jewish Esperantists nor by Esperanto pioneers in other countries, who in many cases were Christians.

It should not come as a surprise that the Jewish elements in Zamenhof's thinking did not enter Esperantism, at least not directly. In the so-called *belle époque* (which, for the purposes of Esperanto history, should be considered: 1887–1914), it was Christianity more than Judaism that was the Esperantists' religion of reference. It is not by chance that the oldest periodical in Esperanto still published today, on a monthly basis, without substantial interruptions, is *Espero Katolika*, Catholic Hope, whose first

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For an analysis of Zamenhof's Hillelism at first and then Homaranism, in comparison with other conceptions of Judaism, in particular Reform Rabbi Eugene Borowitz's, refer to Esther Schor (personal communication). A critical edition of Zamenhof's pamphlet *Gillelizm: proekt' rieseniia evreiskago voprosa*, 1901, is edited by Adolf Holzhaus, bilingually Russian and Esperanto, published in 1962.

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The only source directly in English of Zamenhof's thinking is an interview by Isidore Harris entitled "Esperanto and Jewish ideals," *Jewish Chronicle*, September 6, 1907, 16–18.

Also known as Aleksandras Dambrauskas in Lithuanian, in Esperanto Aleksandro Dombrovski, he was put in exile from Russia in 1889 for five years for refusing to obey the law that all students should pray in Russian in Orthodox churches, even if they are part of a Catholic school. Once back, he eventually became a national hero of Lithuania. For a profile of his many activities as an Esperanto pioneer, see entry “Dambrauskas, Aleksandras,” in Geoffrey Sutton, *Concise Encyclopedia of the Original Literature of Esperanto, 1887–2007* (Mondial: New York, 2008).

Dietterle, *Originala Verkaro*, 338–43.

See the definition of “philosophical religion” in Carlos Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5. An alternative framing of Zamenhof’s thinking is put forward by Davide Astori, “The seven Noachian precepts between monotheistic religions and human liberties,” *Dionysiana* 4, no. 1 (2010).

issue appeared as early as 1903. Many Esperanto pioneers, like de Beaufront, were fervent Catholics. In 1906, a year after the first World Esperanto Congress, Zamenhof published a second version of Hillelism, this time in Esperanto, in which he writes the rules of Hillelist conduct in the form of dogmas. Of particular interest here is Dogma 11, which states, in the opening:

“When a Hillelist temple is founded in my city, I must visit it as often as I can, so as to come together there as brothers with Hillelists from other religions and elaborate together with them neutrally human (*neŭtrale-homajn*) customs and festivities and thus contribute to the step-by-step elaboration of a philosophically pure, but at the same time beautiful, religion; poetic and warm, it should be commonly human (*komune-homa*), to regulate practical life, such that that parents will be able to transmit to their children without any hypocrisy. . . . This temple should educate the young as fighters for truth, good, justice, and fraternity with any human being.”²⁸

Hillelism was attacked immediately after the pamphlet’s publication, as an attempt to substitute Jesus with Hillel and therefore contesting the validity of Christianity. The *j’accuse* was brought by a prominent figure of the early Esperanto Movement, the Lithuanian Esperanto pioneer Adomas Jakštas, himself a patriot, Catholic priest, and cultural activist in his country.²⁹ This is the core of his criticism: “even if it may be helpful for people with no previous religious or philosophical principles, [. . .] Hillelism has one goal only—to transform all people and nations into one big “neutrally human” anthill, where no difference exists of any sort.” Zamenhof’s reply, under the pseudonym Homarano, was published in *Ruslanda Esperantisto* in 1906, but eventually proved to be insufficient for the initiator of Esperanto. In fact, Zamenhof needed seven more years to elaborate what would be the definitive version of his project, now called Homaranismo.³⁰ In contrast with Hillelism, in Homaranismo the references to Judaism were omitted, taking as the starting point the tradition of humanities starting from Terence’s motto *homo sum*—“homarano” literally means “a member of humankind.” Any reference to temples, circles, and families speaking a neutral language at home were eliminated: in practice, what remains is a set of precepts and practices for behaviour in the private sphere, more than an established programme for public life. I argue that Zamenhof put himself in line with philosophical interpretations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that Carlos Fraenkel calls “philosophical religions,” from Plato to Averroes and Maimonides, up to Spinoza.³¹

Within the Esperanto ideologies, Lanti’s a-nationalism was another source of criticism against Homaranism, even if posthumous:

“[Homaranism] is only a fantasy by a good-hearted man, a free-thinking religious idealist. . . . The author of Esperanto lacked a clear understanding of the infinite fight that exists, more or less sharply, between social classes. . . . However, his goal is similar to ours. He wanted to unite people in ‘a large family circle.’ But tolerance on religion, race or nation, and chance of mutual understanding are not enough to eliminate fraternal opposition (*malfrateco*) and obtain justice. And, without justice, it latently hides war. Zamenhof’s Homaranism can flourish only under socialist

management.”³²

4. *The genesis of Esperanto semi-nationalism*

Zamenhof wanted to inspire Esperantists in his public speech at the first World Esperanto Congress in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1905, which is the foundational myth of the Esperanto collective identity, presenting the sibling project of Hillelism. However, under the pressure of the local organising committee, he did not make any direct reference to Hillel the Elder, the first-century rabbi whom Zamenhof took as the religious reference for naming his project Hillelism. French Esperantists were worried that Esperantism could be considered a Jewish project, as public opinion in France in 1905 was divided between pro-Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards. For this reason, Zamenhof reluctantly agreed to downplay the religious dimension of his speech. This does not mean that a strong sense of the sacred is not present there: Zamenhof’s speech ends with the prayer under the Green Flag, a tradition that was inaugurated in precisely that moment. These are the words he used to introduce the prayer:

“But so as I am, in this moment, not a member of a nation, but a simple human being, likewise I feel that in this moment I do not belong to a national or party religion of any sort, but I am only a human being [reference to Terence’s motto *homo sum*]. And in the present moment before my soul’s eyes all that appears is that high moral Force that lives in the heart of any human being, and it is to this unknown Force that I turn with my prayer.”

The prayer refers to an unknown or mysterious Force that blesses the Esperanto collective as a sign of good, love, and truth, in their mission to make the walls between the people fall. Only the last stanza was omitted, where Zamenhof clearly invokes religious peace (author’s non-poetic translation): “let brothers unite, people shake hands, going forward with peaceful weapons! Christians, Hebrews, and Muslims, we all are God’s children.”³³ Eventually, another original poem by Zamenhof, *La Espero* (“The Hope”), written in 1893, became a quasi-national anthem of Esperantists.³⁴ The Hope, is sung at the opening and closing of every World Esperanto Congress since 1905, to the score by Félicien Menu de Ménil, a French pioneer of Esperanto, originally a baron from Flanders. Not surprisingly, the music is vaguely reminiscent of *La Marseillaise*. This is the poetic translation by Janet Caw of the first stanza:³⁵

“To the world has come a strange new glory,
Through the world a mighty voice is crying:
On the wings of every breeze the story
Now from place to place is swiftly flying.”

The “every breeze” (*facila vento*, which became an idiom in Esperanto) is a typical Romantic metaphor of new ideas that spread upwards; the opening words in the Manifesto of the Communist Party, “a spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism,” are structurally similar.³⁶ This is the second stanza:

“Not with thirsty sword for blood
It would draw earth’s family together:
To a world towards war for aye aspiring
It will bring a holy peace forever.”

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Lanti wrote his fundamental pamphlet already in February 1922, after the sending of the letter and the report by the Under-Secretary-General of the League Of Nation, Inazo Nitobe, in January 1922. For details, see Federico Gobbo, “Linguistic Justice, van Parijs, and Esperanto,” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, European and Regional Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): 55–61. Inazo Nitobe wrote the report once back from the Thirteen Universal Esperanto Congress in Prague, held in Prague in August 1921, in which he pledged for the teaching of Esperanto in public schools worldwide. For details, see Eugeno Lanti, *For la Neŭtralismo!* (Leipzig: Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda, 1923).

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Dietterle, *Originala Verkaro*, 586–87.

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Interestingly, the national anthem of Israel is also called “The Hope.” A comparison of the two texts would lead us beyond the scope of this paper.

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In Paul Gubbins, ed., *Star in a Night Sky: An Anthology of Esperanto Literature* (London: Francis Boutle, 2012), 41.

36

Both Zamenhof and Karl Marx were Jews. Persecutions of Esperantists were also linked to Zamenhof’s origin; see Lins, *Dangerous Language*. For a broader view on the ideological base that justified persecutions, see Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Not by chance, in his bilingual “appeal to the diplomats” of 1915, echoing Mazzini and Victor Hugo, Zamenhof advocated for the “United States of Europe,” and many Esperanto pioneers in the belle époque were also pacifists.

See chapter “Beyond the nation-state?” in the book by Leerssen mentioned earlier.

Zamenhof did not use the word “race,” a concept he fiercely rejected. See his talk in the Congress of Races of July 1911 in London, reproduced as Treaty 12 in Dietterle, *Originala Verkaro*, 345–53.

In Hroch’s model of the three phases of nationalism, Esperanto fulfills Phase A, which is self-identification as a culture of its own, while it lacks Phases B and C. See the critical view of Hroch’s model in Leerssen, “Nationalism and the cultivation of culture.”

This expression is due to Esther Schor, quoted in Federico Gobbo, *Interlinguistiek, een vak voor meertaligheid. Interlingvistiko, fako por multlingveco. Interlinguistics, a discipline for multilingualism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

The idea of “holy peace” (*sanktan harmonion*) resonates with the idea of French Esperanto intellectuals in the early years of the 20th century that nation-states will create a system that will foster Kant’s “Everlasting Peace”; therefore, Esperanto, aspiring to become the main medium for international diplomacy, will be the “language of peace.”³⁷ The Esperanto sense of belonging is a recognition of human fraternity as the ultimate horizon: no war can be justified on the basis of one nation’s alleged superiority among others.³⁸ The following stanza illustrates the Green Flag, la Verda Flago, as the vessel of the “single neutral tongue”:

“Neath the sacred sign of Hope’s fair banner
Here are gathered hosts for peaceful fighting:
And the cause will grow in wondrous manner,
Hope and labour hand in hand uniting:

Strongly stand those age-old walls which sever
All the peoples fiercely rent asunder:
But the stubborn walls will fall for ever,
By Love’s holy passion beaten under.

On a single neutral tongue foundation,
Understanding ev’ry race the other,
All the tribes of earth shall make one nation,
And no longer man shall hate his brother.

So our faithful band will toil and labour
Will not cease their peaceable endeavour,
Till the glorious dream—each man a neighbour—
Realised, shall bless the earth forever.”

Esperantists are the ones who hope (*esperantoj*), described as “hosts for peaceful fighting” (*pacaj batalantoj*) that will eventually break the walls that divide “the tribes” (*popoloj*)³⁹ in their “peaceable endeavour” (*laboro paca*). Paradoxically, a register apt for war is used to foster peace. Also paradoxically, Esperantists should unite the nationalities under the Green Flag, representing the neutral tongue foundation (*neŭtrala lingva fundamento*), constituting what I propose here calling “semi-nationalism.” Unlike Romantic programmes for national uprisings that took place in Europe a few decades before, Esperanto lacks the second step of nation-building: there is no political programme to find a land—and, therefore, form a state—for an ethnically defined people. This second aspect was never taken up seriously in the Esperanto agenda.⁴⁰

To sum up, in the formation of the collective identity in those crucial early years of the 20th century, elements from European nationalism were borrowed; in particular, we can see a tension between elements from Romanticism, such as the common destiny of Esperantists in unifying the world nations in peace, and classic Enlightenment, echoing Renan’s voluntarism in nations, as being an Esperantist is an act of will, a conscious choice. On the other hand, the Jewish dimension in the foundation of Esperantism as a collective effort was hidden with care, safe from prying eyes. This explains why Esther Schor characterised the history of Esperanto as “a series of Chinese boxes with a Jewish ghost inside.”⁴¹ To summarise, I argue that the blessing of the Green Star strengthens the idea of Esperantism as a peculiar version of semi-nationalism: non-ethnic



Charles A. Sheehan, *Amikajn salutojn*. Postcard ([London]: Raphael Tuck & Sons, 1909). Vienna, Esperanto Museum.

but civic, not political but cultural.

The fact that pioneers of Esperanto consider the language holy is also testified by the personification of Goddess Hope in postcards like “Friendly greetings” (*Amikajn salutojn*) and other iconic representations of the Esperanto Movement during the *belle époque*.

5. Other religious dimensions of Esperanto

After Zamenhof’s passing in 1917, a few months before the October Revolution in his fatherland, his influence started to fade, slowly but steadily.⁴² Despite the atrocities of World War 1, the Esperanto Movement succeeded in surviving and organising itself. Some figures of “cultural saints” started to emerge on the Esperanto landscape, quite often idolised posthumously, and in connection with some religion.⁴³ I will give only two examples: Lidia Zamenhof and András Cseh.

Lidia Zamenhof was one of Ludwik Lejzer’s daughters, and, unlike her brothers and sister, she took the spiritual heritage of her father upon her shoulders. In 1921 she founded, together with other Zamenhof family members and close friends, an Esperanto circle in Warsaw, called Konkordo.⁴⁴ In 1925, Lidia was invited by Martha Root, an Esperantist whom she did not know, to give a talk about the points in common between his father’s Homaranism and the principles of Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Bahá’í faith. This invitation changed her life: Lidia abandoned atheism to embrace the Bahá’í faith. In fact, among the other principles, the Bahá’í faith calls for the adoption of an international auxiliary language, “thus will the earth be regarded as one country and one home” (from Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet *Ishráqát*).⁴⁵ She started teaching Esperanto abroad not for the sake of Esperanto but for the sake of the Bahá’í faith, as Lanti was doing for anationalism in the same years. This is a trait shared with a number Esperanto cultural saints: the language Zamenhof initiated is part of a larger picture for the regeneration of humanity. After the concessions made to the Nazis by the Universal Esperanto Association to try to save Esperanto in Germany, and the consequent schism in 1936–1937, Lidia fiercely denounced cowardice and flew to the United States. When she returned

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It is only in the last years that historians have underlined the imperial Russian origins of Zamenhof as an essential frame for understanding the Esperanto phenomenon. See at least: Brigid O’Keeffe, “An International Language for an Empire of Humanity: L. L. Zamenhof and the Imperial Russian Origins of Esperanto,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 49, no. 1 (2019): 1–19.

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For the concept of “cultural saints,” I refer to the framing of this concept by Jón Karl Helgason, “The Role of Cultural Saints in European Nation States,” in *Cultural Contacts and The Making of Cultures: Papers in Homage to Itamar Even-Zohar*, ed. Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Gideon Toury (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2011), 245–52.

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A vivid and informed portrait of Lidia Zamenhof’s life is in chapter 7, appropriately entitled “The Priestess,” of the book by Esther Schor devoted to the Esperanto history and contemporary life. Esther Schor, *Bridge of Words: Esperanto and the Dream of a Universal Language* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016).

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Lidia Zamenhof described her spiritual journey in the magazine *World Order*, December 1938 (vol. 4, issue 9), under the title “How I found my faith.” Her de facto official biography is by Wendy Heller, *Lidia: The Life of Lidia Zamenhof, Daughter of Esperanto* (Oxford: G. Ronald, 1985). It was also translated into Esperanto, for the purposes of propagating the Bahá’í faith among Esperantists.

For a detailed account of the relation between Esperanto and Spiritism, see David Pardue, “Uma só língua, uma só bandeira, um só pastor: Spiritism and Esperanto in Brazil,” *Esperantologio/Esperanto Studies* 2 (2001): 11–27.

I wish to thank Emil Larsson (Uppsala) for having clarified to me that Oomoto claimed not to originate from Shinto in the aftermath of World War II, when the Shinto Directive came into place (15th December 1945). Unlike Neo-Shinto religions, Oomoto is neither militaristic nor ultra-nationalistic, and never was.

For a detailed account, see Nancy K. Stalker, *Prophet Motive: Deguchi Onisaburo, Oomoto, and the Rise of New Religions in Imperial Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

A detailed account of the two sides of Ivo Lapenna's Esperanto activity is only in Esperanto. See Ulrich Lins, “La du flankoj de Ivo Lapenna,” *Beletra Almanako* no. 19 (2014): 121–37.

Tanquist's results are critically scrutinised by Garvia, *Esperanto and its Rivals* (2015).

to Europe in September 1942, she was sent from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka and did not survive, becoming a martyr in Esperanto culture. In the words of Esther Schor: “She had intended to give her life for the Bahá'í faith, but died as an Esperantist, a Zamenhof, a Jew.”

András Gergely János Cseh was born in 1895 in Marosludas, a Romanian citizen of the Hungarian-speaking minority, who wrote his Czech family name Čech as Cseh according to the Hungarian convention or as Ĉe according to the Esperanto convention. He encountered Esperanto in 1911, became a Catholic priest in 1919, and obtained permission from his bishop to conduct Esperanto courses across Romania and abroad. He developed a natural naturalistic method for learning Esperanto that is known as the “direct method” (*rekta metodo*), similar to the Berlitz method, as his learners came from different linguistic backgrounds. In 1927 he was invited by the Swedish prince Charles to conduct a course in Stockholm, including in the Parliament. After a tour for teaching in Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Norway, Poland, and Switzerland, in 1930 he moved to Arnhem in the Netherlands, where he founded what is now the International Esperanto Institute (IEI), together with Julia and Johannes Isbrücker. They opened the *Arnhem's Esperantohuis*, the Arnhem Esperanto House, which was active until 1944, when a bomb destroyed the building. He lived in the Netherlands until 1979 and became the model of the ideal Esperanto teacher: a person who can teach the language to anybody, regardless of their linguistic repertoires, without books or any technological aids.

Other relevant religious dimensions of Esperanto are in place via the connections with various religions, which give a place of honour to Esperanto; in particular, brief mentions should be given at least to Spiritism and Oomoto, without any pretense of exhaustivity. The French educator Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, already famous for having brought to France the method of Pestalozzi, an Italian pedagogist, to teach mathematics, once had a revelation. After that mystical experience, he published *Le Livre des esprits* (1857) in Paris, The Book of Spirits, which is considered the first book of Spiritism, under the name of Allan Kardec. Kardecism became a religion with views of its own on science and philosophy as well, which was especially popular in Brazil, where Esperantists traced parallels between the figure of Zamenhof and Kardec.⁴⁶ Another religious dimension of Esperanto comes via the Japanese new religion Oomoto.⁴⁷ Founded in 1892, Oomoto was spiritually guided from 1900 to 1948 by Deguchi Onisaburo, who introduced Esperanto into the religion. The first Oomoto book in Esperanto was published in 1924, and the language is a way to bring Deguchi's revelation to Western culture, starting with Paris. Persecutions against Oomoto and World War II signaled a halt in the Esperanto activity, which was resumed after the war.⁴⁸ In his account of Ivo Lapenna, the founder of modern Esperanto Movement (1945–1991) in the aftermath of World War II, the historian Ulrich Lins reports that Lapenna lamented the excessive presence of religious rituals (more than 30) during World Esperanto Congresses.⁴⁹ The first sociological study of the Esperanto community of practice was conducted by Tanquist in 1927, where “religious propaganda” was found to be one of the reasons why people learn Esperanto, according to the interviewees.⁵⁰ Subsequent sociological inquiries, from the 1980s until the 2000s, clearly show that the modern Esperanto Movement has become secularised, as the presence of religions using Esperanto in Esperanto gatherings becomes less and

less relevant.⁵¹

7. *Postmodern Esperanto: the end of ideologies?*

After the end of the Cold War, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of mass digitisation thanks to the invention of the World Wide Web, in 1991 the Esperanto Movement entered a period of deep transformation that I call “postmodern Esperanto.” The last document with a relevant ideological influence in the Esperanto community is the Prague Manifesto, issued in 1996, for the first time not only in Esperanto but in many languages, from the moment of its publication. That document is entirely secular and frames the Esperanto identity in terms of support for human rights and fostering multilingualism, as a unifying synthesis of previous documents, which went in different directions.⁵² Esperanto clearly shows traits of “banal nationalism,” as Billig defined it.⁵³ Let me give two brief examples. In 2015, when the 100th World Esperanto Congress was held in Lille, significantly close to Bolougnesur-Mer, the pseudo-national Esperanto football team played its first match against Western Sahara within the Non-FIFA tournament, reserved to “state-

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See Foster, *The Esperanto Movement* (1985); Irene Caligaris, *Una lingua per tutti, una lingua di nessun Paese: una ricerca sul campo sulle identità esperantiste* (Torino: Aracne, 2016); Fians, *Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks*.

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See Gobbo, “Beyond the Nation-State?”.

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See Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995).

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See also reflections and fieldwork observations by Fians, *Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks*.



Eugenio Hansen, *Parolu Esperanton*. Photo-edited image, adapted from *Flower Thrower* of Banksy. Source of the image: Pinterest, accessed 1st November 2023, <https://www.pinterest.it/pin/397372367117046431/>.

less people.” The Worldwide Esperanto Football Association (TEFA) was founded.

As a second example, mixing contemporary art like Banksy’s with traditional signs of Esperanto, such as the five-pointed green star that is a synecdoche of the Green Flag became a normal phenomenon, without any ideological load.⁵⁴

Such recent developments demonstrate that, even if Zamenhof’s influence has been without any doubt fundamental for Esperanto, from its inception, Esperanto language ideology was shaped not only by Zamenhof

On the relation between the study of national movements and the concept of nationalism in Hroch's model, see the insights in the starred footnote in the foreword to the third edition of Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*.

but also by key figures of the Esperanto Movement. Furthermore, the greater the temporal and cultural distance, the less influence by Zamenhof and the other pioneers.

As concluding remarks, we argue that on the one hand, the Esperanto collective identity can be framed as an “imagined community” in Benedict Andersen's sense. However, the analysis conducted in this paper shows that framing it in terms of nation-building shows evident limitations. Following Hroch's conceptualisation in three phases, phase A, in which the cultural specificity is defined, can be considered a relative success for the solidity of Esperanto as a language, up to the point that banal nationalistic traits can be also found. But in contrast, the political empowerment of the Esperanto Movement was revealed to be scarce, perhaps because its political vindications always remain vague and contradictory, such that the Hroch's phases A and B cannot be really applied easily.⁵⁵ For this reason, in the case of Esperanto the term “semi-nationalism” is proposed.

On the other hand, the religious dimensions of Esperanto are very complex, as they have embraced different cultural grounds, depending on the context where the language is practised: in particular, if Judaism and Catholics played a crucial role in the early years, other dimensions entered the arena, such as Bahá'í, Oomoto, and Spiritism. This shows that, without any doubt, Esperanto is far from being ideologically neutral or lacking any cultural background, unlike the prima facie impression that an “interlanguage,” to repeat Joshua Fishman's wording mentioned in the introduction, could give. Esperanto is not only an interlanguage, but a much more multi-faceted human phenomenon.

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