
The Normalisation Choir: Bratislava Catholic Youth Choirs as a Case Study of Youth Activities in Slovakia Under Late Socialism

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Abstract: The article helps fill the gap in the study of activities of the young generation in late socialist Slovakia by presenting the case study of Bratislava Catholic youth choirs, drawing on eight oral interviews conducted by the author. The first part highlights that youth activities in late socialist Slovakia remain understudied. The second part offers an interpretative summary of the phenomenon constituted by four leading Bratislava choirs: Céčko, Ursus Singers, Káčko, and Kufříkovci. It describes their apolitical motivations, activities beyond singing and beyond Bratislava, and their conspirative operation. The third part interprets the case study in light of existing historiography. It highlights the rootedness of choirs in the context of traditional Slovak religiosity, their exemplification of social movements contributing to the revolutionary carnival of the late 1980s, the a-legal nature of their activities, and the likely enduring relevance of categories such as “living in truth” in describing late socialist life in Slovakia.

Keywords: youth activities; popular culture; Catholic church; late socialism; normalisation; Czechoslovakia; Slovakia

Abstrakt: Článek pomáhá zaplnit mezeru ve studiu aktivit mladé generace v pozdně socialistickém Slovensku tím, že představuje případovou studii bratislavských katolických mládežnických sborů, přičemž vychází z osmi ústních rozhovorů vedených autorem. První část vysvětluje, že aktivity mládeže v pozdně socialistickém Slovensku zůstávají nedostatečně prozkoumány. Druhá část nabízí interpretační shrnutí fenoménu, který tvořily čtyři přední bratislavské pěvecké sbory: Céčko, Ursus Singers, Káčko a Kufříkovci. Popisuje jejich apolitické motivace, aktivity mimo zpěv a mimo Bratislavu a jejich konspirativní působení. Třetí část interpretuje případovou studii ve světle dosavadní historiografie. Zdůrazňuje zakořeněnost sborů v kontextu tradiční slovenské religiozity, jejich exemplifikaci sociálních hnutí přispívajících k revolučnímu karnevalu konce 80. let, a-legalní povahu jejich aktivit a pravděpodobnou stálou relevanci kategorií jako „žít v pravdě“ při popisu pozdně socialistického života na Slovensku.

Klíčová slova: aktivity mladé generace; populární kultura; katolická církev; pozdní socialismus; normalizace; Československo; Slovensko

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Introduction

Ever since the student demonstrations in November 1989, it has been clear that the activities of students and young people played an essential role in destabilising the late socialist regime in Czechoslovakia. Historians of late socialist Czechoslovakia have since advanced many accounts regarding the nature and the role of the activities of the young generation. Little attention, however, has been paid to Slovakia as such and hence to differences in the nature and role of youth activities between the Czech and the Slovak context. This article aims to take the first steps towards filling these gaps. The first part of this article summarises the historiographical debates concerning the nature and the role of activities of the young generation in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and the 1980s in order to highlight that the Slovak context has been largely understudied. The second part presents one case study of a hitherto undocumented youth activity in Slovakia: four choirs that spontaneously emerged across the 1970s and 1980s, drew in several hundred (mostly) young Catholics, and made a name for themselves in Bratislava and beyond. The case study is presented as an interpretative summary of key characteristics of this minor phenomenon, drawing on eight oral interviews conducted by the author.

The third part places the case of Bratislava youth choirs in the context of the aforementioned historiographic debates and identifies noteworthy similarities and differences between the Czech and the Slovak contexts. Firstly, given the apolitical, playful, transnational, and vis-a-vis the socialist state somewhat careless nature of the activities of these Catholic choir communities, Bratislava youth choirs constituted a minor yet typical case of the social movements that flourished in Czechoslovakia and across Central Europe and that contributed to what the American historian Padraic Kenney called the revolutionary carnival of the late 1980s. Secondly, Bratislava youth choirs constituted a milieu wherein young people sought deeper meaning under the “bleak” normalisation conditions. This “island of freedom” conditioned by the specific Slovak context of relatively high persisting institutional religiosity partly filled the function played by the folk, underground, or tramp movements in the Czech lands, characterised instead by deinstitutionalised religiosity.

Thirdly, Bratislava youth choirs constituted an example of what the Dutch legal theorist Hans Lindahl calls an a-legal activity: they emerged and flourished precisely because, thanks to the very nature of their activities, they avoided the binarity between legal and illegal. Přemysl Houda recently argued that a-legal activities, a category which Houda in his analysis likens to a creative participation in the authoritative discourse of late socialism and exemplifies on the cases of normalisation folk-festival organisers, challenge the binary distinction between “rare islands of freedom” and “vast seas of unfreedom” (Miroslav Vaněk) or “living in truth” and “living in a lie” (Václav Havel). Houda sees these as entrenched in previous historiographic accounts of everyday life under late socialist Czechoslovakia. The case of Bratislava youth choirs is a phenomenon mostly describable as just another case of “carnavalesque social movement” or “island of freedom” or “living in truth”, i.e., involving partici-

pation in the authoritative discourse of late socialism only in minor ways. As such, it does little to disprove Houda's primary thesis about the so-far-overlooked diversity of everyday life under late socialism. Houda entertains a further *hypothesis* that perhaps a-legal activities rather than dissident activities constituted the real spectre for the late socialist regime. The case of Bratislava youth choirs, however, suggests that Houda's further *hypothesis* is perhaps less likely to hold in the Slovak than in the Czech context – as can be anecdotally suggested based on the case of Fr. Štefan Záreczký, who played a conflicted role in both regulating and protecting the normalisation choirs, but vigorously agitated against the Candle Manifestation in March 1988. When explaining the role of the activities of the young generation in the implosion of the late socialist regime in the Slovak context, characterised by a higher level of persisting institutional religiosity and, in turn, a more significant role of the underground church of which the normalisation choirs were a particular a-legal expression, the narrative distinction between living in truth and living in lie arguably remains vital.

Youth Activities Under Late Socialism in Czechoslovakia

A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989 by the American historian Padraic Kenney constitutes the prime explanation of the role of young people in the revolutions of 1989 across Central Europe in foreign historiography. Kenney argues that the revolutionary moment of 1989 – traditionally explained by a trio of causes: “the Gorbachev factor” symbolising reformist political processes at the heart of the Eastern bloc in the Soviet Union, the inevitable collapse of the system of the planned economy due to structural deficiencies, and the role of dissent and its intellectual, cultural, or religious varieties – cannot be explained without a view to the social movements that swept the Eastern bloc since the early 1980s and especially in the latter half of the decade. In short, young people did not march into the streets of Prague, Bratislava, Budapest, Wrocław, or Warsaw in 1989 because of Gorbachev's popularity, nor because all of them read the writings of dissident intellectuals such as Václav Havel, nor because the economy was crumbling at the moment – in fact, market liberalisation was already successfully experimented with in Central Europe by then. Kenney argues that they marched into the streets because that was what they were already intensively doing in the latter half of the 1980s to support numerous concrete causes ranging from world peace, nuclear disarmament, fears of ecological crisis or restrictions of religious freedom. The older generation of the opposition who remembered the Stalinist period and personally experienced the disappointments of 1956 or 1968 often remained sceptical to hopes of change or focused on theoretical critiques. The younger generation, termed the “konkretný” generation by Kenney, instead focused on “doing” by organising ecological petitions (Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros), religious pilgrimages (Velehrad), or artistic street happenings (Wrocław), scoring both symbolic and practical concessions from the late socialist state already in the years before 1989. Transnational connections within the Eastern Block or behind the Iron Curtain were

often an invaluable asset for the leaders of the “konkretny generation”, first when they de facto domestically enacted a pilot civil society in the underground, and second, when they, thanks to this prior experience, not infrequently rose to prominent social and political roles after 1989. Kenney likens the revolutions of 1989 to a carnival because of the radical variety of social movements involved and because they were fundamentally playful: protests featured theatre plays and music concerts, and the protesters never took themselves or the regime too seriously.¹

In the Slovak context, Kenney identifies several such significant social movements. Firstly, Kenney repeatedly highlights the role of the underground church, a vast clandestine network of Catholic activists around the secret bishop Ján Korec, as a key instrument of mobilising Christian youth in concrete moments, such as the pilgrimage in Velehrad in 1985, the so-called “Navratil” petition of 1987, and the Candle Manifestation in 1988.² Secondly, Kenney recounts the importance of Bratislava Nahlas, the peak of the sustained activities of the Slovak environmentalists in the 1980s. This 62-page report distributed in 4000 copies calling out the environmental degradation in the Slovak capital became the Slovak equivalent of Charta 77 and, in Kenney’s words, “the most comprehensive condemnation of developed socialism published anywhere in Central Europe.”³ Between the lines, Kenney illustrates a variety of characteristically pluralist carnivalesque Slovak moments, such as Martin Šimečka’s experience of getting soaked during the Candle Manifestation or the notorious trial of the so-called “Bratislavská päťka” involving figures as diverse as Ján Čarnogurský, Miroslav Kusý or Hana Ponická.⁴

Ostrůvky svobody: Kulturní a občanské aktivity mladé generace v 80. letech v Československu, a volume of studies edited by Miroslav Vaněk and published by the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in 2002, presents the most comprehensive domestic historiographic account of the kind of social movements to which Kenney draws his attention. While the transnational scope of Kenney’s work necessarily covers only the most famous social movements of the late 1980s in Czechoslovakia, Vaněk’s edited publication is more comprehensive and detailed. In this book, Petr Blažek describes the activities of youth devoted to the cause of peace, Jaroslav Cuhra the relationship between the state, the Catholic Church and the youth, Libuše Cuhrová the history of the officially suppressed scouting movement, Pavel Žáček the State Security policy devoted to monitoring youth agenda, while Vaněk contributes two studies on ecological movement and the so-called new wave in music, including the spread of punk music. While highlighting a wide range of causes to which the youth devoted itself in 1980s Czechoslovakia, this volume falls

¹ PADRAIC KENNEY, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2003, p. 1–16.

² KENNEY, *A Carnival of Revolution*, p. 36–37.

³ KENNEY, *A Carnival of Revolution*, p. 82–84.

⁴ KENNEY, *A Carnival of Revolution*, p. 216–217, 288.

short of its ambition to cover the whole of Czechoslovakia.⁵ With the noted exception of Jaroslav Cuhra's mention of the greater relative importance of Catholic youth activities in the Slovak part of the federation – the most significant Catholic public activities in the Czech lands drew heavily on Slovak support, as was the case in the Velehrad pilgrimage of 1985 or the Navrátil petition in 1987⁶ – this volume tells us little about the differences in the plurality, intensity, and hence relative importance of these social movements between the Czech and Slovak parts of the late socialist federation. Since the early 2000s, Czech historiography has produced specialist literature on some of these and related youth movements such as scouting, tramping, underground or folk music covering much of the 20th century, including the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly to Vaněk's early edited volume, however, they mostly confine their subject to the history of these activities among the Czech youth.⁷

Out of the specialised publications on various youth activities in the period of late socialism, the one that continues to stimulate new interesting historiographical debates about the nature and role of these activities is devoted to the phenomenon of folk music. Akin to the way the scholarship of Michal Pullman seeks to challenge what Pullman calls the totalitarian-historical narrative in the histories of the late socialist state, a recent monograph by Přemysl Houda – *Normalizační festival: Socialistické paradoxy a postsocialistické korekce* – seeks to challenge a certain kind of narrative bipolarity that has long characterised the discourse surrounding the phenomenon of folk music.⁸ In Houda's view, volumes such as Vaněk's on "islands

⁵ In the introduction, Vaněk does reflect on the limits of the project, e.g., the failure to answer the question "just how much of Czech youth was engaged in these activities". Yet even this explicit mention of "Czech" rather than "Czechoslovak" youth hints that despite the reference to Czechoslovakia in the volume's heading, it does not reflect on potential differences between the Slovak and Czech contexts. MIROSLAV VANĚK (ed.), *Ostrůvky svobody: Kulturní a občanské aktivity mladé generace v 80. letech v Československu*, Praha: Votobia and Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR 2022, p. 9.

⁶ JAROSLAV CUHRA, "Skrytý zápas: Stát, katolická církev a mládež v druhé dekádě normalizačního režimu", in VANĚK (ed.), *Ostrůvky svobody*, p. 126–127, 134. On the Navrátil petition, see also Kenney above.

⁷ For more details on the histories of these youth movements in the 1970s and 1980s, see the following literature for an introduction of each movement. On scouting and the related yet distinct phenomenon of "foglaring": PAVEL HOŠEK, *Evangelium podle Jaroslava Foglára*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2017; STANISLAV BALÍK, "Junák-skaut. Příklad Rudolfa Plajnera, in LUKÁŠ FASORA (ed.), *Člověk na Moravě ve druhé polovině 20. století*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2011. On tramping: JAN KRŠKO, JAN MAREŠ, JAN POHUNEK, JAN RANDÁK and JAN ŠPRINGL, *Putování za obzor: Tramping v české společnosti 1918–1989*, Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2020. On underground, see the topical journal issue: ZDENĚK NEŠPOR, "Thematic Issue on the Religion of the Czech Underground under Communism: Editorial", *CEJCR* 2 (1–4, 2020): p. 1–4. On folk: ZDENĚK NEŠPOR, *Děkuji za bolest... Náboženské prvky v české folkové hudbě 60.–80. let*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2006; PŘEMYSL HOUDA, *Intelektuální protest, nebo masová zábava? Folk jako společenský fenomén v době tzv. normalizace*, Praha: Academia 2014.

⁸ MICHAL PULLMAN, "Sociální dějiny a totalitněhistorické vyprávění", *Soudobé dějiny* 15 (3–4, 2008): p. 703–717. See further discussion of totalitarian-historical narratives below. PŘEMYSL HOUDA, *Normalizační festival: Socialistické paradoxy a postsocialistické korekce*, Praha: Karolinum 2019.

of freedom” helped to perpetuate a simplifying understanding of life under late socialism, implicitly separating the rare “islands of freedom” from vast “seas of unfreedom”. However, the day-to-day reality of how cultural activities among the young generation actually took place remains obscured. With regards to folk music, Houda argues, such discourse does little to help explain how exactly “forbidden” or “persecuted” folk singer-songwriters managed to regularly perform in front of crowds despite their supposed “forbidden” and “persecuted” status. To illustrate the mass nature of folk music happenings when describing everyday life in late state socialism, a metaphor more appropriate than “islands of freedom” is that of a “Möbius band”: a circular band with a single side of the surface making the appearance of being double-sided, when in fact one side continually turns into the other. Through the analysis of several case studies of folk singers as well as the hitherto overlooked figures of folk festival organisers, Houda makes the argument that the late socialist phenomenon of folk music as such existed precisely because many of its protagonists did not lead black-and-white lives: the historical reality of the phenomenon of folk music cannot be sufficiently grasped by the dichotomy between “living in truth” and “living in lies”.⁹

To explain the mass nature of folk happenings, Houda analyses how its protagonists participated in what Houda refers to as the “authoritative discourse” of the hegemonic late socialist state – they spoke the newspeak with its mottoes of youth and building the future, voted in local party conferences, obtained and sustained membership in senior and junior associations controlled by the socialist state – and they did so in entrepreneurial, creative ways.¹⁰ Houda’s analysis is inspired by the landmark study by the American-based cultural historian and social anthropologist of Russian origin, Alexei Yurchak, titled *Everything Was Forever until it was no more: the last soviet generation*. In this work, Yurchak sought to explain the paradox that for the last Soviet generation, while the collapse of the Soviet system seemed “unimaginable before it began, it appeared unsurprising when it happened”.¹¹ To explain this paradox, Yurchak describes the “hypernormalization” of the authoritative discourse of Soviet socialism in the epoch after Stalin’s death, whereby upholding the form of its key ideological representations became much more important than upholding their

⁹ HOUDA, *Normalizační festival*, p. 12–29.

¹⁰ HOUDA, *Normalizační festival*, p. 24. Houda defines “authoritative discourse” by implication through Yurchak from Bakhtin on p. 30. See Yurchak’s words: “For Bakhtin, authoritative discourse coheres around a strict external idea or dogma (whether religious, political, or otherwise) and occupies a particular position within the discursive regime of a period. It has two main features. First, because of a special ‘script’ in which it is coded, authoritative discourse is sharply demarcated from all other types of discourse that coexist with it, which means that it does not depend on them, it precedes them, and it cannot be changed by them. Second, all these other types of discourse are organized around it. Their existence depends on being positioned in relation to it, having to refer to it, quote it, praise it, interpret it, apply it, and so forth, but they cannot, for example, interfere with its code and change it. Regardless of whether this demarcated and fixed authoritative discourse is successful in persuading its authors and audiences, they experience it as immutable and therefore unquestionable.” ALEXEI YURCHAK, *Everything was forever until it was no more: the last soviet generation*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2005, p. 34–35 (epub).

¹¹ HOUDA, *Normalizační festival*, p. 16.

literal meaning. The meaning behind the endlessly repeated ideological symbols began to destabilise and opened itself up to unexpected, new content. Houda argues that in this regard, late Czechoslovak socialism was similar to the Soviet one and that Czechoslovak folk music illustrates the processes of hypernormalisation particularly well.¹² The primary aim of Houda's analysis is to underscore the variety of everyday life under late Czechoslovak socialism and the inability to capture and explain this variety and its paradoxes with the established vocabulary of terms such as: "islands of freedom", "living in truth" or "grey zone".¹³ Yurchak's work, as well as the possibilities of transposing his analytical model to the context of late socialist Czechoslovakia, have been both praised and contested in Czech historiography and public debate.¹⁴ While Houda's monograph seeks to defend the usefulness of this model in studying late socialist Czechoslovakia and Czechoslovak folk music, it is silent on the question of what might be the relative merits of his theses when comparing the Czech and Slovak parts of the federation.

Bratislava Youth Choirs as a Case Study: Why and How

Bratislava youth choirs constitute a potentially insightful field for studying the differences in the nature and role of youth activities between the Czech and Slovak contexts because they lie at the intersection of two significant sites of youth activity in late socialist Czechoslovakia: underground church on the one hand and popular (music) culture on the other. According to the rare previous remarks in existing historiography, across the 1970s and 1980s there, four music choirs emerged spontaneously in Bratislava, amounting to several hundred regular and more occasional members in sum, with many more accidental onlookers during performances at liturgical services in Bratislava and beyond. While church choirs devoted to experimenting with modern music sprang up locally across Slovakia frequently in the aftermath of the liturgical reform wrought by the Second Vatican Council, perhaps none attracted as many members and existed as long and thus had as many performances as the four choirs that emerged in the Slovak capital and attained a wide-ranging reputation beyond Bratislava. Ján Šimulčík, a leading historian of the Slovak underground church, recounts the existence of these choirs as one of the several significant external expressions, e.g. alongside samizdat,¹⁵ of the "secret church" or "underground church" defined as "non-official activities of the Catholic Church officially active in Slovakia between 1948 and 1989"¹⁶. Juraj Lexmann, a leading music theorist and formerly

¹² HOUDA, *Normalizační festival*, p. 30.

¹³ HOUDA, *Normalizační festival*, p. 172–173.

¹⁴ For an overview, see e.g. the first footnote in PŘEMYSL HOUDA, VERONIKA HOUDOVÁ and ALEXEI YURCHAK, "Nechtěl jsem socialismus ani romantizovat, ani démonizovat: Rozhovor s Alexejem Jurčákem", *Soudobé dějiny* 27 (1, 2020): p. 127–141.

¹⁵ JÁN ŠIMULČÍK, *Generácia nádeje: Malé kresťanské spoločenstvá, 1969–1989*, Bratislava: Ústav pamäti národa 2021, p. 56–57.

¹⁶ ŠIMULČÍK, *Generácia nádeje*, p. 13.

the head of the Musical Department at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, recounts that these choirs served as “models worth following and a basis, which set in motion a new trendy current across the whole of Slovakia”.¹⁷

Given the absence of classical archival sources or developed secondary literature documenting the existence of these choirs, this research resorted to oral history methods, which are well suited for this task, given the continuing presence of many potentially relevant narrators. Eight semi-structured interviews with two members of each of the four choirs, known as “Céčko”, “Ursus Singers”, “Káčko”, and “Kufríkovci” were conducted with a view to engage choristers in leading musical and organisational roles, men as well as women.¹⁸ The interviews had a semi-structured form, collecting both an open-ended testimony about the narrators’ experience in the choir and answers to specific questions, for example, about the motivation for participation, week-by-week common activities relating to the choir, the kind of music performed, or the interactions with the security bodies of the socialist state. Interviews were recorded with the narrators’ permission, and transcripts were produced using specialised software. The collected material contains a large amount of detailed information, allowing for the construction of a first brief chronological history of the phenomenon to be published elsewhere.¹⁹ The following text offers a brief characteristic of this phenomenon through an interpretation of the interviews, proceeding thematically rather than chronologically, focusing on the foremost common themes that arose in the interviews and occasionally complementing the collected material with secondary literature.²⁰

This method is not without apparent pitfalls. Oral history material is prone to subjectivity, and testimonies fall prey to the selectivity of human memory. The fact that narrators participated in choirs in the “spring of their lives” as twenty-somethings, one even mostly as a teenager, calls for extra caution. This attempt at formulating a characteristic of the phenomenon is necessarily far from definitive, given these pitfalls and the limited sample of eight narrators. As such, the aim is to take the material for what it is – warm impressions and memories rather than hard facts.

On the one hand, the author avoided excessive verifications in the interviews and their interpretation. On the other hand, the text makes some general conclusions in

¹⁷ JURAJ LEXMANN, *Teória liturgickej hudby*, Bratislava: vlastným nákladom 2015, p. 275.

¹⁸ See Appendix A for a summary of information on the interviewees. One of the narrators is a relative of this study’s author. The inclusion of the narrator in the sample was justified given the fact that the Trizuljak family, along with the Babál family, played an important role in the activities of Ursus Singers, as recounted by other sources beyond the interviewed narrators, e.g. IVAN ŠIMKO (ed.), *Céčko: “Každý ma svoj kúsok pravdy”*, Bratislava: vlastným nákladom 2009, p. 121–122; LEXMANN, *Teória liturgickej hudby*, p. 275.

¹⁹ SAMUEL TRIZULJAK, “Môžem vám zaspievať...”. Pilotné spracovanie orálne-historických materiálov k fenoménu katolíckych speváckych zborov v Bratislave v období normalizácie, accepted and forthcoming in *Pamäť národa*.

²⁰ The selected method of thematic interpretation of oral interviews draws inspiration from a topically related study: TOMÁŠ NIESNER, “Katolícky dissent na Moravě v období tzv. normalizace”, in MIROSLAV VANĚK (ed.), *Mocní? a Bezmocní? Politické elity a dissent v období tzv. normalizace: interpretativní studie životopisných interview*, Praha: Prostor 2006, p. 59–104.

cases when the collected material suggested them. Further research into Bratislava youth choirs would benefit from a comparison of the collected oral-historical material mapping the perspective of the choristers against relevant archival materials documenting the perspective of state organs such as the Public Security or State Security, which, however, might prove very difficult to identify.²¹ Despite inevitable deficiencies, the pilot analysis will hopefully serve as a first step in directing scholarly attention to topics at the intersection of youth, Catholicism, and popular culture in late socialist Slovakia.

Bratislava Youth Choirs: A Brief Summary Based on the Oral Interviews

Apolitical Motivations

When it comes to the motivations behind involvement in choirs, the narrators all see the choirs as places where the members deepened their faith, where they did so, crucially, as a community, and often for the benefit of others. All this stems from Slovakia's underlying widespread traditional Catholic religiosity.²² Katarína Horváthová, the long-time musical director of Káčko, says:

The type of music was secondary. To me, the strongest idea was that of brothers living in unity [...]. It was a strong community in every respect. I was somewhat younger, and I felt that I was moving forward a lot, especially in matters of faith. That we were living the faith, that we could talk about it, that it affected our concrete lives and that it was not just that we ticked off the obligatory random Catholic Mass on Sunday while life itself was on a totally different rail.²³

Pavol Kaločaj, who founded and led Káčko, reflects on the audience aspect:

That kind of community of young people was invaluable in those times. We could meet, and we could do something together. This work brings people together, all the more if that something is beautiful music [...]. And then we realised it was a service to the grateful, supportive, fan-like listeners: we received much feedback that we needed to carry on even when it occasionally got more difficult and required sacrifices. We encouraged others in faith and prayed together ourselves.²⁴

²¹ For example, according to my inquiries, the file that the State Security kept on Vladimír Krčméry was destroyed on December 2, 1989; see the results of a search using the online tools available from Ústav pamäti národa: <https://www.upn.gov.sk/projekty/regpro/zobraz/?typ=kraj&kniha=82&strana=17&zaznam=75754>. Searches for files regarding other narrators yielded no results.

²² On the roots of the continuing high levels of traditional religiosity in 20th century Slovakia in contrast to the Czech lands, see e.g. ZDENĚK NEŠPOR, *Česká a slovenská religiozita po rozpadu spoločeného štátu: Náboženství Dioskúrů*, Praha: Karolinum 2020, first two chapters: *Česko-slovenská religiozita jako téma, Společné výchozí body*.

²³ Interview with Katarína Horváthová.

²⁴ Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.

František Horváth, the co-founder of Cěčko and its long-time musical director, also stresses the reinforcing interplay between the choir and the listeners, growing in faith together through music:

It was a Christian community, where we lived our faith together actively rather than formally [...]. I understood Cěčko as the place where we met and where we felt welcome. Living out our spiritual lives, in our case, was inseparable from the lyrics we composed [...]. It mattered a lot to us that we were there to deliver something to the listeners who would come – and that is what we lived from ourselves. A good song was one with strong lyrics; that was our mode of spiritual expression.²⁵

For many narrators, joining the choir as a teenager was a natural extension of an intentional lifestyle pursued by families seeking to preserve the Catholic faith during the communist era. “This is how it has gone in our family since time immemorial. I was simply born into this. Even my parents already had a ‘stretko’ [a small Christian community convening for the purpose of religious formation, see more below, S. T.] of families. We took it as a given. Yes, we were born under socialism. We lived in socialism, and we lived out our faith this way [...]. My mother was asked to write for a samizdat so in our family, it took various forms. But the essence was the same: we lived our faith in this environment; one got used to wearing the mail shirt, and one wore it and strove to wear it in all situations,” shares the long-time Kufříkovci chorister Gabriela Šaturová.²⁶ Ursus Singers, founded in the 1970s under the leadership of Michal Maco, developed from a children’s choir formed originally by a few large Bratislava Catholic families in the freer, pre-normalisation context. “When the political situation grew softer, my mother said: we shall sing at midnight mass. It was something unheard of until then. About 20 children, a half-an-hour programme, Christmas 1967. We were curious to see what would follow. Nothing followed. So we carried on, more kids, better prepared,” recalls Pavel Babál, who, along with nine siblings, formed the core of the kids’ choir and eventually Ursus Singers.²⁷ “Our mother and Mrs. Babálová had a shared vision: if I am to raise my children well, I need to include children from other families, meetings of families. It was all born on the basis of a sense of solidarity between large families, and also as Christians,” adds Klement Trizuljak, a long-time Ursus Singers chorister involved from the beginning, along with seven of his siblings.²⁸

Besides music, faith and community, Trizuljak recalls that what drew people in was a sense of doing something contrarian. “As for motivation, definitely music. But then, the community aspect was very strong. It was, after all, the period of normalisation. And we, normalisation notwithstanding, met as young Christians, and we met in families that had the courage to open the doors for us. Thanks to that, we could

²⁵ Interview with František Horváth.

²⁶ Interview with Gabriela Šaturová.

²⁷ Interview with Pavel Babál.

²⁸ Interview with Klement Trizuljak.

experience something neither quite allowed nor quite forbidden. We enjoyed the idea that we were staging a provocation against the general atmosphere in society then.”²⁹ A certain kind of religious contrarianism, spreading the Gospel precisely in spite of the times, mattered even more intensively to the founder of Kufříkovci, Vladimír Krčméry: “We were simply annoyed that religion was thought to be a matter of old people, and as such, sentenced to death. This annoyed us, but there was nothing political about it. Our job was to say we are here, and religion is not dead; it is on the rise instead.”

The apolitical nature of the choir activities, highlighted by Krčméry, was a shared feature among the choirs. “When we wanted to express ourselves politically, we went to a Jaroslav Hutka concert. But neither I nor Fero [František Horváth, S. T.] took the choir as opposition to the regime. We simply wanted to contribute to our liturgy actively [...] the fact that the regime disliked it made it an adventure, but it was never our intention to bring down the regime in any way,”³⁰ says Horváth’s co-founder in Céčko Ivan Šimko. “It was no rebellion, no activity seeking to push through religious values. I would not attribute any heroism or pathos to this; it was merely a creative expression of religious freedom”³¹, says Trizuljak. “We were aware of being on the radar because of our contacts with secret priests, but we did not fight the regime in any way. We sang our things, and we were happy to spend time together” – Kaločaj’s summary captures all the aforementioned motivations.³²

Activities Beyond Singing and Beyond Bratislava

From their founding (Céčko in 1973, Ursus Singers around 1976, Kufříkovci in 1980 and Káčko in 1981) broadly until 1989, the choirs typically performed weekly with a membership between 20 and 40 core stable choristers at a time and dozens of less stable members. Céčko and Káčko derived their names from their stable venues in St. Cyril and Methodius Church and the Capuchin Church in Old Town Bratislava, respectively, while the Ursus Singers and Kufříkovci *modus operandi* was to perform in a different parish each time, around Bratislava regularly during the year and across Slovakia and sometimes abroad during holidays. While all choirs sang a bit of every kind of Christian music, the *modus operandi* influenced the repertoire. While Ursus Singers and Kufříkovci relied on guitars and voices, thus focusing, for example, on folk arrangements or African-American spirituals, Káčko and Céčko, benefiting from a stable venue, engaged a greater variety of musical instruments and focused on classical, sacred music or their original productions, respectively.³³

²⁹ Interview with Klement Trizuljak.

³⁰ Interview with Ivan Šimko.

³¹ Interview with Klement Trizuljak.

³² Interview with Pavel Babál. For another concise summary of motivations and the phenomenon of Bratislava youth choirs, see Appendix B: the foreword to an LP produced by all four choirs jointly in 1990, written by the long-time Ursus Singers leader, Michal Maco.

³³ TRIZULJAK, “Môžem vám zaspievať...”.

Characteristically, however, the activities of these choir communities reached beyond regular performances. Káčko became an unofficial platform of semi-professional instruction in the fundamentals of liturgical music thanks to long-term collaboration with the local organist and a leading musical theorist, Juraj Lexmann. “Lexmann was a full-fledged professional in liturgical music. In him, we had a school that no one else had at the time. He taught us what it is to interpret, what liturgy is, and what it is for. We had an education that even formally enrolled seminarians probably lacked,” recalls Kaločaj. Šaturová, who sang with Kufříkovci throughout the 1980s and with Káčko in the late 1980s, compares both experiences: “We [Kufříkovci, S. T.] had the feeling that we were, spontaneously, the mainstream of modern church music. But it was somewhat amateurish. What established itself professionally in the post-conciliar era in Slovakia was all brought by Juraj Lexmann.”

The extent to which choirs became a platform of religious instruction in the basics of the Catholic faith of the kind that was systematically organised by the clandestine network of small Christian communities varied. These communities were the so-called “stretká” – revolving around people such as Ján Korec or, in the younger generation, František Mikloško. Káčko was something of an exception: its liturgical bent attracted many of those who secretly pursued a religious vocation, and this particular make-up of membership, in turn, affected the atmosphere and activities among the choir members outside performances. “There were among us – often unbeknownst to ourselves – priests, or almost-ordained priests, praying, talking, and sharing experiences of faith with us, which was great and very rare in that age [...]. They gave talks or spiritual exercises, led us in reading the Scriptures regularly [...]. After the revolution, someone counted up to 20 religious vocations among regular choir members – priests, monks and nuns,”³⁴ recalls Kaločaj. The founders of Céčko, Horváth and Šimko, attended a “stretko” run independently of Korec’s network by Šimko’s father. However, as regards religious instruction, the key factor in Céčko’s atmosphere was the formative ministry of the coincidentally rather charismatic priests running their home church, who personalised the post-conciliar church.³⁵ As Horváth recalls: “Fr. Doležal immediately ‘turned the table’ towards the people; he was very faithful to these ideas and very open. We were similarly lucky that afterwards, we got Fr. Homolka and then Fr. Bubák, who stayed the longest.”³⁶

Krčméry separated choir activities from religious instruction, but since he was also intensively involved in the network of “stretká” alongside his uncle, “whenever someone joined the choir, we asked if he wished to join a ‘stretko’,” he says. “The response was yes, always. So I gave further directions.”³⁷ Pavel Babál viewed Ursus Singers as constituting the less pious end of the implicit spectrum:

³⁴ Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.

³⁵ Interview with Ivan Šimko and interview with František Horváth.

³⁶ Interview with František Horváth.

³⁷ Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

In contrast to other existing communities that were more prayerful and meditative [...]. We were more open and dynamic. We knew how to enjoy ourselves and have a glass of wine – many were against this. Activity number one was church music and singing. Of course, occasionally, we read or discussed translations of the Gospel or other materials, but it was never strict or conditional: let's pray the rosary, and we will only sing after that.³⁸

Finally, Káčko and Céčko influenced Catholic youth beyond Bratislava on a musical and spiritual level, largely because they drew the attention of students who came to the capital for university studies and later left. Ursus Singers and Kufříkovci, on the other hand, pursued choir trips across the whole of Slovakia as a primary *modus operandi* and often combined performing with tramping style tourism. “We went on trips and sang in parishes. Run downhill to the village, sing and return to the tents. Our main mission was to travel Slovakia and give joy through singing [...]. As far as I recall, there was no region we would not visit. Muráň, Kriváň, Kráľova hoľa, we went to all those places and in the High Tatras and Low Tatras, Eastern Slovakia. Basically everywhere, we partook in liturgy. We had strong connections to a choir, a very strong community, in Banská Bystrica, another centre of the youth movement,” recalls Šaturová. In the case of Ursus Singers, Trizuljak recalls one-day trips around Bratislava and weekend trips across Slovakia: “We all became members of a ‘telovýchovná jednota’ [an official local association for sport/exercise, S. T.] as a tourist branch. Everybody had a member card and thus railway discounts. Thanks to this, we travelled almost for free to Eastern Slovakia, where we stayed in tourist or parish accommodation.” Out of the four choirs, only Ursus Singers travelled and performed abroad. Trizuljak recalls Romania, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Poland.³⁹ “Perhaps the most important was a performance at Sacrosong in Czestochowa in Poland in the summer 1978, a huge festival of church music – where bishop cardinal Karol Wojtyła sat in the first row”, according to Babál.⁴⁰

Conspiracy Without (Much) Confrontation

When asked how the context of long-lasting tensions between the socialist state and the Catholic Church influenced this sort of religious musical activism, the first theme the narrators draw attention to was how the choirs discerned navigating around the so-called “state approvals” policy. To pursue pastoral activities publically, priests had to possess an official state approval, which could be withdrawn by a decision of the local state administration if the given priest committed a criminal offence. In practice, state approvals were frequently withdrawn even in the absence of criminal offences, and during the normalisation period, they became a key tool that the state increas-

³⁸ Interview with Pavel Babál.

³⁹ Interview with Klement Trizuljak.

⁴⁰ Interview with Pavel Babál.

ingly used to regulate the activities of clergy in Slovakia.⁴¹ The narrators converge in claiming that, indirectly, state approvals became the tool for attempts to regulate the activities of Bratislava youth choirs, too.

Ivan Šimko recalls being invited to a meeting in the spring of 1978 with the dean of the parish, in which the church where Céčko performed was located, Fr. Štefan Záreczký. Fr. Záreczký informed Šimko that officers from the Bratislava headquarters of the State Security were concerned by the choir activities and asked Šimko to scale them down. For a few months after that, Céčko performed monthly rather than weekly. After lengthy internal discussions among choir members about the importance of not giving in to the regime, the choir resumed its weekly activities. “And after we sang two or three weeks in a row, Fr. Doležal’s state approval was withdrawn. Though, of course, no one can prove whether it was connected or not.”⁴²

Kaločaj and Krčméry remember similar dynamics. “Fr. Vojtech [one of the Capuchin friars administering the church, S. T.] had a hearing in which they threatened to withdraw his approval. He did not give a damn and had us continue singing.”⁴³ Krčméry links the very name of his choir with this dynamic, Kufříkovci meaning “those with travelling cases”.

I always carried a travelling case. We could never sing at the same place twice since the priests would get in trouble. We wanted to avoid priests having their state approvals withdrawn. So, we ended up being migratory birds. I always arranged new places with priests I knew through Silvo (his uncle, see appendix A, S. T.), who were not Pacem in Terris members.⁴⁴

While in Šimko’s and other members’ memories of the early history of Céčko in the mid-1970s, Fr. Záreczký plays a rather negative role,⁴⁵ Kaločaj and Krčméry remember him as someone who held a sort of protective hand over the choirs in the 1980s instead.

While Gejza Navrátil, the dean of the Cathedral parish and the head of Pacem in Terris, was known to ban choirs in the churches of his parish, Štefan Záreczký tolerated the classical choir at the Capuchin Church, singing in Latin, and protected the chaplains in dangerous situations in St. Cyril and Methodius Church.⁴⁶

He was in Pacem in Terris, but he was supportive. When the meetings of young people started becoming a problem, he told us to go to a park or a cafe instead. Just do not meet

⁴¹ For further details regarding the practice of withdrawing state approvals, see: JAN PEŠEK and MICHAL BARNOVSKÝ, *V zovretí normalizácie: Cirkvi na Slovensku, 1969–1989*, Bratislava: Veda 2004, p. 69–70.

⁴² Interview with Ivan Šimko.

⁴³ Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.

⁴⁴ Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

⁴⁵ ŠIMKO (ed.), *Céčko*, p. 28–30, 93, 199.

⁴⁶ Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

for a few weeks to sing. And when things calm down, I will let you know – he said [...] for a time he even let us rehearse in his sacristy in the main parish church.⁴⁷

Secondly, the narrators recall intentionally developing conspiratorial or self-protective practices. Káčko used what Kaločaj calls a “protective mechanism”. If someone wished to join the choir, one first had to regularly partake in activities outside of performing, such as outings or socials, which allowed the choir to distinguish serious interest from other intentions. Moreover, as the chief organiser of Káčko’s activities, Kaločaj deliberately never kept a list of choir members.⁴⁸ The conspiratorial attitude strongly affected the overall atmosphere of Kufříkovci. Krčméry, drawing on a popular dissident manual on avoiding the State Security put together by Ján Čarnogurský, implemented a number of conspiratorial practices such as nicknames for places of meetings and for choir members or scheduling group activities using the Greenwich Mean Time. “When we agreed to meet at seven at Jožo, it meant six at the Jesuit church. Fero stood for the Franciscans, and Karol meant the Capuchins.”⁴⁹

Šimko recalls that from the early 1980s onwards, motivation to keep security measures such as only using nicknames and first names within the choir gradually disappeared. Finally, what is arguably most interesting is the ambiguity about the extent to which these worries about state approvals and the need for conspiratorial operation – perceived by the narrators – contributed to the fact that this religious musical activism actually only experienced direct repressive action from the state security organs relatively rarely. Šimko concludes his thoughts about “security measures” revealingly: “We had luck, perhaps, or some kind of a guardian angel. It was clear we were under surveillance, but everyone who regularly attended choir could finish university. Nobody was kicked out of university. And if they were, it was not because of singing.”⁵⁰

Both Šaturová and Krčméry agree that conspiratorial practices contributed to the light-hearted mood that characterised the choir. However, both also insist it was not mere youth folly, recalling specific situations when the activities of Kufříkovci were intercepted by law enforcement. These included a skiing trip in the Low Tatras in the mid-1980s or the pilgrimage in Šaštín in 1987, leading to follow-up hearings with numerous choir members.⁵¹ Of the narrators interviewed, Pavel Babál experienced the most intense repressive action personally. After having one performance of Ursus Singers in the countryside outside Bratislava intercepted and reported by a colleague from Comenius University Medical Faculty, who, according to Babál, later turned out to be a State Security collaborator in the rank of captain, he was called up for irregular hearings for weeks, often spontaneously in the middle of the night, sometimes involving blows. “How can you do church music and teach at university at the same time?”, he recalls being asked. “I said, fine, well, I do not have to teach. I knew well there was

⁴⁷ Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.

⁴⁸ Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.

⁴⁹ Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

⁵⁰ Interview with Ivan Šimko.

⁵¹ Interview with Vladimír Krčméry and interview with Gabriela Šaturová.

a lack of teachers, and they would never fire me. But they were trying all they could.” Babál was never fired, and despite further hassles, he was eventually allowed to leave for an academic exchange to Paris in 1983, even if he only got his back passport just the day before leaving.⁵² Neither Babál nor Trizuljak recalls any other similar episodes among Ursus Singers.⁵³

The ambiguous dynamic between priests risking state approvals and choristers practising conspiracy, which characterised the regular activities of the choirs without serious repressive interception, is aptly described in a final impression of Kaločaj.

This is a miracle. I consider it a miracle. They went after all the young people; they hated gatherings of young people. And we were able to get away with it. Of course, with some blisters and scars. In retrospect, I see a certain kind of divine protection that accompanied us even when they sought to break us from the inside. They sent in strange people, but we were able to identify them quickly. And, of course, the local priests supported us. They knew what was going on, and they went to the hearings instead of us; they were that wall.⁵⁴

Bratislava Youth Choirs in Light of the Historiography on Youth Activities in the Period of Late Socialism in Czechoslovakia

What concluding insights, bearing in mind the limits of the presented case study, can be drawn about the similarities or differences in the role of youth activities in the Czech and the Slovak contexts under late socialism? Firstly, as some of the specialist literature on youth movements and related popular cultural phenomena suggests, one plausible explanation for their mass appeal calls attention to the ways in which these movements became – in the specifically Czech context of advanced and widespread deinstitutionalised spirituality – places where religious or spiritual values could be encountered, experienced, or lived out.⁵⁵ In contrast, the mass appeal of the secret church among Slovak youth noted by Kenney and Cuhra and confirmed by the narrators interviewed for this study seems consistent with the relatively stronger persistence of institutionalised spirituality in the Slovak part of socialist Czechoslovakia. While Czech youth turned to deinstitutionalised spiritual practices in scouting (“foglaring”) and folk or underground music, Slovak youth continued turning to – certainly not solely, but still in a comparatively significant way – institutionalised spiritual practices, and as this case study shows, one such practice, due to internal

⁵² Interview with Pavel Babál.

⁵³ Interview with Pavel Babál and interview with Klement Trizuljak.

⁵⁴ Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.

⁵⁵ ZDENĚK NEŠPOR, “Religion in the Lyrics of the Czech Underground”, *CEJCR* 2 (2, 2020): p. 53–55; NEŠPOR, *Děkuji za bolest*, p. 36–40; HOŠEK, *Evangelium podle Jaroslava Foglara*, p. 55–97; BALÍK, “Junák-skaut”, p. 101.

church processes in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, was modernising church music.

Secondly, as noted by both Cuhra in the Czech context and Pešek and Barnovský in the Slovak context, the conflict between the official Catholic Church and the socialist state grew stronger across the 1970s and 1980s, confounded by factors such as the election of the Polish prelate Karol Wojtyła to the papacy as John Paul II in 1978.⁵⁶ While Pešek and Barnovský do not cover youth activities, Cuhra notes that this intensification of conflict coincided with the rise of Catholic youth activities in the Czech lands. The emergence of the Bratislava youth choirs from the mid-1970s onwards, and their consequent growing popularity seems consistent with similar trends in Slovakia. To elaborate on Šimulčík's observation that they constituted an external expression of the underground church, these choirs enriched the diversity of secret church activities in Slovakia: while at one end, there was the serious business of samizdat production and distribution, religious instruction for laity, and even clandestine seminaries for future priests and consecrated, at the other end there was the merry business of youth choirs – not infrequently combined with elements of subcultures more widely popularised in the Czech lands. All four choirs, for example, performed folkish musical arrangements, and two were famed for their frequent tramping-style trips across Slovakia (Kufříkovci) or even across the Eastern Bloc (Ursus Singers).

Thirdly, the minor phenomenon of the Bratislava youth choirs seems to provide another example of the kind of social movements contributing to Kenney's revolutionary carnival in the Slovak context, albeit in a less consequential way than the more famous and significant examples already identified by Kenney. This is well illustrated by Krčméry's story about the experience of the then musical director of the Kufříkovci choir, Jana Kováčová, during the hearings that followed after the group was "deconspired" during the pilgrimage in Šaštín in 1987.

When asked at the end whether she would like to add anything to the testimony, she said she had nothing to add, but if they insisted, she was willing to sing for them. The policeman, thinking "to sing" means "to speak" in mafia language, misunderstood her, and after she sang a beautiful song about Our Lady, he trashed the records, threw her out and told her to get gone.⁵⁷

This story illustrates the playful, apolitical and somewhat careless approach typical of the "konkretny generation" when facing law enforcement.

Furthermore, the inspiration from foreign musical genres such as African-American spirituals, folk or nascent gospel music, as well as the occasional performances abroad (Ursus Singers in Czestochowa or Rome⁵⁸), further highlights that social movements of the "konkretny generation" relied on their success in maintaining international connections both within the Eastern Bloc and to the West. Finally,

⁵⁶ CUHRA, "Skrytý zápas", p. 118–120; PEŠEK and BARNOVSKÝ, *V zovretí normalizácie*, p. 108–122.

⁵⁷ Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

⁵⁸ Interview with Pavel Babál.

similarly to other social movements of the “konkretny generation”, the membership and the activities in the Bratislava youth choirs were primarily apolitically motivated. Nevertheless, it was precisely the context typical of these social movements that coincidentally served as a sort of training ground for future civil society leaders. The choirs were no exception: the co-founder of Cěčko Ivan Šimko pursued a political career in the KDH and SDKÚ parties in the 1990s and 2000s, rising to senior governmental posts⁵⁹, while the founder of Kufříkovci, Vladimír Krčméry, pursued a career spanning between medicine, higher education, and humanitarian work, rising to an international prominence⁶⁰. Despite their avowed apolitical character, the attraction of choirs for young Catholics in Bratislava seems to have rested on the particular political conditions of late socialist Czechoslovakia in which they emerged. Like other social movements of the “konkretny generation”, they too lost their original character or vanished soon after 1989.⁶¹ Overall, Bratislava youth choirs did constitute a minor social movement of the kind identified by Kenney. However, its importance in contributing to the revolutionary carnival is smaller in its scale. Its influence could hardly be compared to the clandestine network of small Christian communities embodied by people like Ján Korec or František Mikloško, the ecological activism of Ján Budaj or the legal activism of Ján Čarnogurský, all already noted by Kenney.

At last, what scope for a Möbius-Band-style analysis of everyday life under late socialism and for challenging the binary narrative does the presented case study open up? On the one hand, as the interviews with the narrators suggest – see, for example, Gabriela Šaturová’s comments above about growing up wearing a “mail shirt” – some Slovak Catholics were brought up in a sort of “parallel polis” from a young age. Their participation in the choirs or the “stretká” of the secret church often naturally followed from intentionally nurtured family lifestyles. The phenomenon of the Bratislava youth choirs constitutes an example of a youth activity that involved striving “to live in truth” – even if it did not necessarily mean anything particularly heroic, even if it was far from any dissident-style political activity. All narrators, independently of each other, described one of their primary reasons for joining the choirs was the desire to grow in Christian faith through community life – a kind of meaning or values they could not imagine seeking in the associations and culture sanctioned by the late socialist Czechoslovak state. The ways in which the Catholic Church in Slovakia found itself to be the central pillar of opposition between 1948 and 1989 and the ways this translates into the everyday lives of Slovak Catholic communities, families, and youth over the four decades may justify the prevalence of the totalitarian-historical storytelling typical for the scholarship on the history of Slovak Catholicism in the latter half of the 20th century. This storytelling manifested itself abundantly in the testimonies of the choristers interviewed for this study.⁶²

⁵⁹ Interview with Ivan Šimko.

⁶⁰ Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

⁶¹ On vanishing of the choirs after 1989 see, TRIZULJAK, “Môžem vám zaspievať...”.

⁶² Pullman defines totalitarian-historical storytelling as historical narratives in which the abstract category of the “regime” becomes the key agent, implicitly separating historical actors according

On the other hand, the interviews with narrators reveal that the continued semi-public existence of each of the four choirs was at least partially mediated by persons, institutions, or practices that did not lend themselves to such straightforward black-and-white bipolarities. To facilitate and cover up frequent choir trips across Slovakia, Vladimír Krčméry and Michal Maco had members of their choirs register as members of state-sanctioned youth associations.⁶³ The ultimate folk music festival organiser in Old Town Bratislava during the 1970s and 1980s, to speak (only partly) analogically to Houda's study, was Fr. Štefan Záreczký, himself a leading member of the pro-regime association of Catholic priests, *Pacem in Terris*. While the co-founder of Céčko Ivan Šimko, remembers Fr. Záreczký as instrumental in the attempts to limit the activities of Céčko in the mid-1970s, other narrators attest to a non-negligible degree of protection both the activities of Céčko and Káčko enjoyed from Fr. Záreczký throughout the 1980s.⁶⁴ As documented by church historian Jozef Haľko in a separate study, Fr. Záreczký was viewed with suspicion by state organs for his support of the activities of youth choirs, illegal religious instruction taking place at the Capuchin Church, and for letting priests lacking state approvals minister in the churches of his parish across the 1980s.⁶⁵

to the black-and-white binarity between a powerful, controlling regime and a powerless, controlled society. PULLMAN, "Sociální dějiny a totalitněhistorické vyprávění", p. 704–705. While Pullman's theses in recent years provoked substantial debates overflowing the bounds of Czech academia, they have not substantially affected Slovak historiography or public debate. For our purposes here, it suffices to illustrate that the assumption of the "regime" as a key agent also animates much of the professional as well as lay discourse on Slovak Catholicism under communism. See, e.g. "Rather than resorting to judicial trials, the communist regime preferred to spread fear among those partaking [in 'stretká', S. T.]; ŠIMULČÍK, *Generácia nádeje*, p. 69. "It was an activity that the regime did not favour, and that added a flavour of adventure [...]" Interview with Ivan Šimko.

⁶³ Interview with Klement Trizuljak and interview with Vladimír Krčméry. In the interview, Krčméry discussed using the membership in *Socialistický zväz mládeže* (Socialist Association of Youth), *Robotnícke odborové hnutie* (Workers Trade-Unionist Movement), and *Zväz československo-sovietskeho priateľstva* (The Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Association) in underground church activities but not specifically in relation to the choirs. Since Krčméry suddenly passed away while this research was being completed, Gabriela Šaturová was asked to verify whether this practice applied to Kufříkovci and confirmed it was likely. Email correspondence with Gabriela Šaturová.

⁶⁴ In addition to the quoted testimonies of Krčméry and Kaločaj, see also the testimony of Fr. Milan Bubák. "In the beginning, I was afraid of Záreczký since that man had a very bad reputation [...]. However, on the other hand, when I got to know him as his chaplain, I began to respect him. I saw his personal battle, which he fought as an old man, likely as a result of certain steps he took in his life. And there, one could very clearly see the desire to make amends in his old age. And thus, it seems to me that Záreczký had the choir's back. Held a protective arm. Over the choir and over other things. For example, secret priests who gathered at the Capuchin church. He knew very well of them. And yet, despite his reputation, he, to a certain extent, made it possible for them to work there. And he acted similarly towards the choir in 'Céčko' [...]. Záreczký knew the atmosphere of those times and had these things, apparently, mapped. That is why he was such a diplomat. It seems to me that he was trying to navigate the confusion of that age. That the choir survived then is partly to the credit of the canon." ŠIMKO (ed.), *Céčko*, p. 110–111.

⁶⁵ JOZEF HAĽKO, "Spory o Štefana Záreczkého – K postojom a činnosti bratislavského kanonika", *Historický časopis* 52 (4, 2004): p. 684, accessed in March 2023, available online at <https://digitalnkniznica.cvtisr.sk/zoom/516/view?page=86&p=separate&tool=info&view=0,0,1698,2466>.

The main ambition of Houda's *Normalizačný festival* is to “reinforce the thesis that the late socialist everydayness was such a varied time that it is unsatisfactory to describe it with the use of categories such as ‘living in truth’ or ‘living in a lie.’”⁶⁶ To the extent that Houda seeks to underscore the various ways in which people gave meaning to their lives by participating in and creatively interpreting the authoritative discourse of late socialism or seeks to explain the actual existence of particular late socialist phenomena, such as folk music festivals, the case of Bratislava youth choirs does not contradict his central thesis in any way. It merely represents another example of “living in truth” at the upper end of the spectrum with its middle-of-the-spectrum folk music festival organiser.

Moreover, the conceptual tools introduced by Houda help explain the phenomenon of normalisation choirs. Rather than, or theologically speaking, besides, owing to the work of a miracle (Kaločaj) or a guardian angel (Šimko), the largely stable and uninterrupted existence of the choirs was plausibly the result of the *a-legal* nature of the choirs' activities. Houda introduces this category at the end of his monograph to describe the activities of normalisation-era folk music festival organisers, and it aptly captures the dynamics of the activities of normalisation-era choirs, too. Drawing on the legal theorist Hans Lindahl, Houda understands “a-legal” activity as one that denies the binary of legal/illegal.

While illegal activity reinforces the (temporal, spatial, etc.) borders that define the permissibility or impermissibility of a particular activity, a-legal activity challenges these borders. The essence of a-legal action, according to Lindahl, is its indeterminacy. A-legal activity, through its indeterminacy, disorients many people (observers, co-actors), who in turn tend to interpret such activity in terms they understand, and hence they often “criminalise” it (designate it as illegal).⁶⁷

Houda invokes the categories to show how the activities of a folk music festival organiser such as Milan Kaplan could, at a particular point – in this case, when organising the festival “Folkový kolotoč” in 1984 – turn from a-legal to illegal. The normalisation-era folk music festivals were largely allowed to exist thanks to their a-legal nature. However, occasionally, they were assigned an illegal status. Similarly, normalisation choirs largely flourished thanks to their a-legal nature, yet occasionally, they too would assume an illegal status.

In the final lines of the final chapter of the book, Houda entertains, in addition to this central thesis, a further hypothesis, namely that it was “perhaps precisely the innovative (a-systemic or, in Lindahl's terms, a-legal) reading of (any) hegemonic language – rather than the anti-system (dissident) position – which in consequence constitutes, for such hegemonic language and the order founded thereupon, the real

⁶⁶ HOUDA, *Normalizační festival*, p. 175.

⁶⁷ HOUDA, *Normalizační festival*, p. 164.

spectre”⁶⁸. The final argument of this paper takes the form of a hypothesis since, similar to Houda’s thesis, it is based on evidence from anecdotal case studies. It is that the specific case of Bratislava youth choirs, its folk music festival organiser, and its context of being one of the external expressions of the secret church movement would suggest that Houda’s further hypothesis is less likely to hold water in the Slovak than in the Czech context of the era of late socialism.

Fr. Zárčický might have been the ultimate normalisation-era folk music festival organiser in Old Town Bratislava. However, Houda’s hypothesis that an “a-legal reading of hegemonic language” – exemplified perhaps precisely by Fr. Zárčický’s mix of activities affecting the choirs, mediated by the long-term Pacem in Terris reputation – contributed to the implosion of the late socialist state more fundamentally than the “anti-system (dissident) position” seems unlikely in the Slovak context, based on the case study presented here. The account of Fr. Zárčický’s activities ends with repeated public attempts, including in a lengthy TV address, to dissuade Slovak Catholics from participating in the largest open religious demonstration to be brutally suppressed by Czechoslovak law enforcement bodies and thus one of the most important blows “for the hegemonic language and the order founded thereupon” – the Candle Manifestation in March 1988.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ HOUDA, *Normalizační festival*, p. 165.

⁶⁹ For Zárčický’s agitation against the Candle Manifestation see HALKO, “Spory o Štefana Zárčického”, p. 687.

Appendix A: List of respondents in the oral interviews.

František Horváth (1955) graduated from the Electrical Engineering Faculty, Slovak University of Technology and pursued a career in the electrical energy industry for over 40 years. A married father of ten children, he co-founded the “Céčko” choir at the Cyril and Methodius Church with Ivan Šimko in 1974, and he has been the leading member of the choir and community that developed around it, directing the choir musically until the late 1990s.

Ivan Šimko (1955) graduated from the Economy Faculty, University of Economics and the Law Faculty, National and Comenius University and started a career as an urban planning economist. After 1989, he pursued a political career, becoming an MP in the National Council of the Slovak Republic, briefly serving as Minister of Justice, Minister of Interior and Minister of Defence for KDH and SDKÚ. A married father of four, he co-founded and co-led the “Céčko” choir between 1974 and 1982, writing lyrics while František Horváth composed music. In 2009, he self-published a memoir collection of 16 interviews with leading choir members *Céčko: “Každý má svoj kúsok pravdy”*.

Pavel Babál (1955) graduated from the Medical Faculty, Comenius University, where he currently serves as a professor after a career in medicine, practising, researching, and teaching, specialising in pathology. A married father of three children and the third child out of ten in the Babál family, which initiated a children’s choir on Christmastide in 1968, Babál sang with “Ursus Singers” from its start as it evolved from a children’s choir around 1973 when Michal Maco took over the leadership of the choir, and then across the 1970s and early 1980s. Babál played guitar, composed music, and briefly co-led the choir from 1978 to 1979 while Maco was in military service.

Klement Trizuljak (1958) studied architecture at Brno University of Technology and Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava and consequently pursued a career in architecture in a state-owned company before 1989 and an independent studio afterwards. He married in 1982 and is the father of four children. He, along with others among the 8 siblings, sang with the “Ursus Singers” choir (and the preceding children choir formed by Trizuljak, Babál and other families) while travelling in Slovakia and abroad in the Eastern Bloc across the 1970s and until the mid-1980s. During this period, the Trizuljak family house became one of the most common venues for choir practices.

Pavol Kaločaj (1954) graduated from the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Comenius University, married in 1983 and is a father of four children. Before retiring recently, he pursued a career in the gas industry and completed two doctorates: from the University of Ostrava in Engineering and Comenius University in Physics. After briefly leading a small choir at the Ursuline church in the late 1970s, he led the “Káčko”

choir at the Capuchin Church in Bratislava, organising its activities and helping to lead it musically from 1981 until the mid-1990s. After a visit to Taizé in the mid-1980s, he initiated regular public Taizé prayers at the Capuchin Church across the second half of the 1980s and thus contributed to the spread of Taizé prayers across Slovakia.

Katarína Horváthová (1964) graduated from the Faculty of Natural Sciences, Comenius University. She married in 1990 and is the mother of three children. She pursued a career in primary and secondary teaching alongside conducting choirs of children, youth and adults from the 1980s until now. From 1982 until 1990, she conducted the “Káčko” choir. When Pavol Kaločaj brought Taizé chants to Slovakia in the mid-1980s, she was instrumental in translating the Taizé chant book into the Slovak language.

Vladimír Krčméry (1960–2022) graduated from the Medical Faculty, Comenius University. He was a medical doctor, researcher, and professor, as well as an expert in the areas of tropical medicine, infectology, and oncology. He was the founder and former rector of the University of St. Elisabeth in Bratislava and the founder of dozens of health, social, and missionary institutions in developing countries. He was the nephew of Silvester Krčméry, a leader of the underground church movement. From 1978 until the mid-1990s, he was the chief organiser of the activities of the “Kufříkovci” choir, named after the suitcase, “kufor”, he would always carry around. His future wife, Terézia, with whom he had four children, served as the choir’s musical director.

Gabriela Šaturová (1966) graduated from the Pedagogical Faculty, Comenius University and the State Conservatorium in Bratislava. She married in 1990, stayed at home with three children and resumed a career in therapeutic pedagogy, specialising in music therapy in 2007. She sang with the “Kufříkovci” choir in the late 1970s and 1980s. Towards the late 1980s, she also occasionally sang with the “Káčko” choir.

Appendix B: The front and back cover of the LP “Celý svet” by “Bratislavské spevácke zbory”, featuring Cěčko, Ursus Singers, Káčko, and Kufříkovci published by Pontón in Bratislava in 1990.



Fig. 1: The front cover of the LP “Celý svet” by “Bratislavské spevácke zbory”.



Fig. 2: The back cover of the LP “Celý svet” by “Bratislavské spevácke zbory”.

Michal Maco's foreword from the back cover summarises the ethos of the choirs:

The songs that you are about to hear or have just heard were composed in an age when their authors would not have dreamed that they may ever appear on an LP. In that schizophrenic age, many people felt that what was being offered daily from all the official sources did not satisfy them. In this atmosphere, small communities of discontent and seeking Christians emerged. People trying to resist all that and have their own heads on their necks. In their meetings, they debated, enquired, prayed, and sang. They sang with a guitar; they sang songs from songbooks published still in the Sixties. Gradually, new songs appeared as an attempt to express one's inner convictions. Songs with simple melodies, often involving non-theological texts and edgy rhymes, songs sung during trips and in churches. The record presented here is a selection from the repertoire of four Bratislava-based youth choirs, and it presents a documentary of an age, which is, we hope, now definitively behind us [...].

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In the Rhythm of Lorien: Czech Community in the Context of Alternative Spirituality

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Abstract: This article deals with the Czech community Lorien, which serves as a center of alternative spirituality for many of its visitors. The first half of the article provides basic information about Lorien community, the course of the author's field research, and community members' attitudes to the concepts of religion, spirituality, and esoteric. Furthermore, the text discusses the widely shared teachings and practices of followers of alternative spirituality, which then compares with the ideas and actions of Lorien community members in the second half of the article. Residents consider the vision of the community expressed in three pillars to be the most essential aspect of their shared life. The pillars are the following: caring for common relationships, caring for common space, and organizing self-development seminars. First pillar is very strongly inspired by the principles of the book *The Different Drum* by Morgan Scott Peck, the second by the ideas of eco-spirituality and the third one with 5Rhythms Movement and other religious traditions.

Keywords: Lorien; community; Morgan Scott Peck; community-building seminars; dance celebrations; alternative spirituality; self-development

Abstrakt: Tento článek se zabývá českou komunitou Lorien, která slouží mnoha svým návštěvníkům jako centrum alternativní spirituality. První polovina článku podává základní informace o komunitě Lorien, průběhu terénního výzkumu autora tohoto textu a postojích členů komunity k pojmům náboženství, spiritualita a ezoterika. Dále text pojednává o široce sdíleném učení a praktikách následovníků alternativní spirituality, které pak v druhé polovině článku srovnává s představami a jednáním členů komunity Lorien. Obyvatelé za nejpodstatnější aspekt svého společného života považují vizi komunity vyjádřenou ve třech pilířích: péče o společné vztahy, péče o společný prostor a organizování seberozvojových seminářů. První pilíř je velmi silně ovlivněn knihou *V jiném rytmu* napsanou psychiatrem Morganem Scottem Peckem, druhý myšlenkami eko-spirituality a třetí tanečním hnutím 5 rytmy a dalšími duchovními tradicemi.

Klíčová slova: Lorien; komunita; Morgan Scott Peck; community-building semináře; taneční oslavy; alternativní spiritualita; seberozvoj

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Some researchers consider the focus on one's own self as one of the main features of alternative spirituality, sometimes called New Age, and therefore criticize it as too narcissistic, individualistic, and almost solipsistic.¹ Dutch religious scholar Wouter Hanegraaff considers the authority of the self to be so central to alternative spirituality that, in his view, it prevents it from functioning as a religious collectivity, creating institutions and binding people into one larger community.² Although followers of New Age milieu share this point of view and see themselves as non-institutionalized, they get together with like-minded people and form groups that become increasingly formalized.³ Already in the early days of alternative spirituality, various spiritual seminars were held, but it was only in the eighties that the organization of various spiritual lectures and workshops became so widespread that the whole milieu is sometimes referred to as the spirituality of seminars. Ann Taves and Michael Kinsella showed in their article *Hiding in Plain Sight*⁴ that the institutions of alternative spirituality are right in front of our eyes, but no one notices them.

To show that alternative spirituality certainly forms some sort of institutions, let's borrow William S. Bainbridge and Rodney Stark's division of organizations into audience cults, client cults, and cult movements⁵. Audience cults have the least degree of organization and are characterized by the individual enthusiastically adopting the views of teachers of alternative spirituality from reading their literature or watching their programs on television or listening to their lectures on the Internet without meeting them in person. Client cults are already based on the personal contact of the client or several clients with the service provider and require a greater degree of organization – for example participation in a group meditation, self-development seminar or lecture on astrology. Client cults leave visitors with a great deal of independence, clients may retain ties to other religious organizations, and their participation is entirely voluntary. In contrast, cult movements seek to fulfil all the religious needs of their members, sever member's ties with competing organizations, and want to change the world through conversion.

A significant role in the spread of alternative spirituality is played by spiritual communities. Communities can have an audience cult influence on someone who only reads spiritual literature, watches videos, or uses products they have created or distributed, but he never really visits them. Communities can also have a client cult influence when someone really goes to visit them and attends their events in person.

¹ HANA DOLEŽALOVÁ, "Individuální a kolektivní uvnitř spirituality New Age [Individual and Collective Inside New Age Spirituality]", *Sociální studia* (3–4, 2008): p. 111.

² WOUTER HANEGRAAFF, "New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion", *Social Compass* 46 (2, 1999): p. 155.

³ DOUG OMAN, "Defining Religion and Spirituality", in RAYMOND F. PALOUTZIAN – CRYSTAL L. PARK (eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, New York: The Guilford Press 2014, p. 37.

⁴ ANN TAVES and MICHAEL KINSELLA, "Hiding in Plain Sight", in STEVEN SUTCLIFFE and INGVLID S. GILHUS (eds.), *New Age Spirituality*, New York: Routledge 2014, p. 84–98.

⁵ WILLIAM SIMS BAINBRIDGE and RODNEY STARK, "Client and Audience Cults in America", *Sociological Analysis* 41 (3, 1980): p. 199–200.

And they can influence some at the level of a cult movement if they demand a greater degree of devotion. Communities can arise spontaneously, sometimes they are deliberately established, some exist within a city or village, and some exist outside of them in complete solitude. There are communities which are highly communal, “members pool their assets, their incomes, their living spaces, their jobs, communal domestic duties (cooking, cleaning), their childrearing, and just about everything else but their toothbrushes.”⁶ And there are also communities where members only share ownership of land or sharing can disappear entirely. Well-known communities with global reach are, for example, Findhorn in Scotland, Sedona in the United States, Glastonbury in England, Damanhur in Italy, Auroville in India, or many others. We will now deal with one specific example of alternative spirituality’s organization, which is the Czech community Lorien.

Lorien Community

Lorien community, located in the Nenačovice village, not so far from Prague, is one of the centres of alternative spirituality in the Czech Republic. The place is well-known thanks to its regular dance celebrations of solstices and equinoxes, community-building seminars inspired by psychiatrist Morgan Scott Peck and many other self-development events.

The community consists of eight adults (five men and three women) and three children. They live in area about 7 hectares in two family houses, a dome, and a cabin. The owner of the complex, who wants to be mentioned by his pseudonym Premesh, lives with his partner Bronislava Bučková and their daughter Tara in a two-story house and rents out the remaining apartment units to other members of community. Residents share a common space, spend their free time together at least once a week, plan and prepare events for the public, and borrow garden equipment and tools from each other. However, they wouldn’t call Lorien a community, because in “a true community”, they felt, they would have to share far more things and activities. Premesh would imagine a much greater involvement of members in common events. Therefore, everyone for Lorien prefers the label “conscious neighbourhood” rather than community. Nevertheless, it is evident from the statements of the residents, that they mostly understand their coexistence very positively as being with people who are united by a similar worldview, cooperation on the same goal, “mutual tolerance”, “full acceptance”, or even “love”. According to them, living in Lorien gives them an unmistakable feeling of “safety”, “harmony”, “peace”, “sharing”, “understanding”, and “closeness to nature”.

The official establishment of the community dates to the winter of 2010, when Premesh and his friends organized the first winter solstice dance celebration and

⁶ TIMOTHY MILLER, “The Evolution of American Spiritual Communities”, *Nova Religio* 13 (3, 2010): p. 28.

decided to organize other celebrations at least once every three months during the transitions of the seasons.

The name of the community refers to the elven forest of Lothlórien, which appears in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Premesh is very fond of the Tolkien's works, he read them at least seven times and in the book *Silmarillion* he looked for other connections in the fictional world of Middle-earth. This is the main reason why when we enter the Lorien we are welcomed by a carved statue of Galadriel, and we can see a miniature of the door to Moria in the corridor before the ballroom. Originally, Premesh wanted to name the community Rivendell, but the web domain of that name already existed, so he chose the name Lorien instead. However, for the other inhabitants of the community, the connection to the narrative of *Lord of the Rings* is not important, except that they like to be symbolically part of the hidden forest Lothlórien.

The community chooses all the rules by consensus, when only such a decision is passed that all members of the community agree with or at least undertake to respect it. This rule is not always fulfilled, because Premesh has the last word in matters related to his property and he does not have to give in to the will of the community. Members agreed on several unwritten rules, including regular attendance at Monday circles where organizational matters are shared and agreed upon, at least once a year participate at Peck's weekend seminar and at least one hour a week dedicate to working in the area. If someone new wants to join the community, he must participate in the Monday circle seven times within three months. If this way of life suits him and no one is against it, then he can move in. Since then, he has been on a probationary period, when the community will finally decide whether to accept him among them or not. The whole process can take up to nine months.

Data Collection and the Problem with "Religion"

I collected my data with the method of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and analysis of materials published on the community's Facebook profile *Tvořivý Lorien*⁷. I visited the Lorien community for the first time in June 2020 during the summer solstice dance celebration. The second time, less than a week later, I participated in the Monday circle to present to the residents my intention to write a master's thesis about the community. After that, I spent three days in the community in July 2020, two days in July 2021, and two hours in April 2022. I personally participated in two dance celebrations, two smaller Peck's seminars, meditation, a concert, and four yoga exercises in the community. For other activities that took place in the Lorien, and I did not visit them myself, I collected data from the information published on the community's Facebook profile.

⁷ "Tvořivý Lorien" [online], *Facebook.com*, accessed January 2023, available online at <https://www.facebook.com/tvorivylorien>.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with four community residents on my first longer visit during July 2020 and one on my second visit in July 2021. Interviews were recorded on a mobile device and then transcribed into text. They lasted from a quarter of an hour to an hour and a half. The selection of respondents was based on availability and voluntariness. Therefore, I conducted the interview with whoever was willing to make time for the interview. In total, I interviewed five people, three men and two women. I know the civil names of all my respondents, but two wished to be anonymized, one didn't mind giving his first name, but didn't wish to present some of his personal details, and two respondents didn't mind giving their full names and personal details at all.

First community member prefers to stay completely anonymous. We will address him as Ivan. Ivan is about 40 years old, used to work in telecommunications but is now on full disability pension due to multiple sclerosis. He has lived in Lorien community since June 2020.

I conducted the second interview with Michal, who is almost 30 years old and works as a programmer mostly from home. He came to Lorien in March 2020. Michal and Ivan are both single and childless.

The third interview took place with Premesh, the owner of Lorien, who is over 50 years old. He worked as an entrepreneur, owned a company, and then taught physics and mathematics in a nearby town. Now he lives by renting premises in the complex for accommodation and organizing spiritual seminars.

The fourth interview was conducted with Hana Perglerová (*1978). She worked as a lecturer in education and care for babies and children under three years of age. Now she is masseuse and lecturer of community-building seminars by Morgan Scott Peck. She has been living in Lorien since May 2013.

The last interview was with Bronislava Bučková (*1983), who comes originally from Slovakia. She used to work in a florist, but now she works in a sewing workshop and sometimes cooks. She has been living in the community since 2011.

When I told community members during the Monday circle in July 2020 that I intended to research religion in their community, they immediately took notice and repeatedly told me that there was no religious activity at all. Some residents saw a certain kind of threat in me because I might write and publish something that they don't think is true. After some time, they were calmer, but I have the impression that some of them never quite lost their fears. The interviewees expressly did not wish to be pigeonholed as a cult or religious organization and they many times asked if I even had anything to write about, because they couldn't imagine in what way Lorien could be interesting for religious studies. It was clear that they perceived the word religion very negatively as something too binding, blinding, and dogmatic. The term esotericism had also negative connotations and they associated with excessive simplicity, superficiality, naivety, and immaturity.⁸ On the other hand, the word spirituality they

⁸ This is typical especially for the Czech environment, where words like "ezo" or "esotericism" are perceived pejoratively, similar to how the term "New Age" has become almost a swear word in English-speaking countries.

perceived very positively as something very free, spontaneous, authentic, creative, and supporting individual development. Therefore, when I was asking about their religious ideas; I used the phrase “personal spirituality” which they found suitable.

This is something very typical for the followers of alternative spirituality. They articulate the relationship between words spirituality and religion as a stark contrast between individual and institutional, dynamic and static, or even as opposition between good and evil. The term spirituality has gained great recognition, because it is seen as “the deepest of human needs, the connection to the higher forces of the universe, the language of one’s inner or higher self and the most important and purest part of every human being,” whereas the word religion is expressed in terms of rigidity, impracticality, spiritual emptiness, moralism, dogmatism, restriction of human freedom, suppression of natural needs, rejection of sexuality, authoritarian approach towards its members and a dismissive or even violent attitude towards non-members.⁹ This simplistic view leads to a completely uncritical idealization of spirituality, which is understood as individual search for truth that is deeply meaningful, fulfilling, liberating, and associated with alternative spirituality, and demonization of religion which is associated with traditional Christian churches.

We should emphasize here that New Age milieu’s intolerance of term religion is a characteristic that reveals more about the milieu itself than about reality as such. Even thou alternative spirituality understands itself as “non-religious”, it has characteristics typical for religion. Even thou alternative spirituality understands itself as “non-dogmatic”, we can see in its core many shared teachings. Even thou alternative spirituality understands itself as “non-institutionalized”, we can see that it creates many organizations. The “non-dogmatic”, non-institutionalized”, and “non-religious” character of alternative spirituality is a discursive strategy more than a verifiable reality.¹⁰ In next paragraph we will focus more on the teachings and practices of alternative spirituality which give us good context for the beliefs and actions of members of Lorien community.

Alternative Spirituality in Teachings and Practices

Wouter Hanegraaff in his famous book *New Age Religion and Western Culture* distinguishes between the New Age in a restricted sense (*sensu stricto*) and in a general sense (*sensu lato*).¹¹ In restricted sense he speaks about the people who are waiting for arrival of astrological Age of Aquarius which should be the beginning of spiritual transformation of the whole society. In general sense New Age can be described as umbrella term which includes many themes eclectically taken, adjusted, and simpli-

⁹ ZUZANA MARIE KOSTIČOVÁ, “Religion, Spirituality, Worldviews, and Discourses”, *Central European Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2, 2018): p. 86.

¹⁰ JAN KAPUSTA and ZUZANA MARIE KOSTIČOVÁ, “From the Trees to the Wood”, *Journal of Religion in Europe* 13 (2020): p. 193.

¹¹ WOUTER HANEGRAAFF, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, Leiden: Brill 1996, p. 94–103.

fied from religious and non-religious traditions of West and East. We can mention for example western esoterism, mystical teachings, occult, or magical practices, romanticism, psychospiritual exercises, quantum mechanics, conspiracy theories, indigenous people, extinct civilizations and so on.

Although the alternative spirituality consists of different streams of thought and has no single umbrella organization that sets clear and universally binding teachings, there are common characteristics within it. As some of them, we can mention the effort for radical personal and collective transformation associated with emphasis on healing and self-development in the physical, psychological, and spiritual spheres, a healthy lifestyle, a positive relationship with other people and nature. Another feature is regard for personal authentic spiritual experience, belief in supernatural beings and communication with them, or belief in impersonal energy penetrating the entire universe and animating whole world.¹² Words such as alternative medicine, aromatherapy, astrology, chakra, chi, feng shui, yoga, karma, meditation, paganism, reiki, reincarnation, spirituality, shamanism, tai chi, and more are increasingly appearing in the vocabulary of our society at large.¹³

An eminent Czech psychologist of religion Pavel Říčan summarized the main themes present in alternative spirituality as follows:

“Mystical experience (a feeling of unity with something greater than human, an absolute inner peace, an ecstatic fascination with art, etc.), eco-spirituality (a feeling of unity with nature, a feeling of holy responsibility for her, Earth as a mother, tree as a brother, a respect for nature both living and lifeless), togetherness (a joy of human belonging and closeness, an amazement by unity in diversity), moral solicitude (a desire to start again and better, compassion with suffering, disgust with evil, admiration for the good in people), and latent monotheism (a fascination with the greatest truth, or the highest reality, death as returning home).”¹⁴

Followers of alternative spirituality also share dissatisfaction and fierce condemnation of contemporary Western culture,¹⁵ because according to their opinion, it is under the domination of ideological reductionism and dualism, which divides the original unity of human and nature, of male and female, of matter and spirit, of human and divine, of body, soul and spirit, of good and evil.¹⁶ The goal of new agers is to construct a new, monistic and holistic paradigm which will again bring lost peace, harmony, health and spirituality to our society. This view is supported by the astrological prediction of the arrival of the Age of Aquarius, which is supposed to replace the two-thousand-year period of Pisces characterized by the dominance of Christian-

¹² HELENA EXNEROVÁ, *Český šamanismus v rozhovorech [Czech Shamanism in interviews]*, Praha: Dingir 2018, p. 51.

¹³ PAUL HEELAS and LINDA WOODHEAD, *The Spiritual Revolution*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2005, p. 7.

¹⁴ PAVEL ŘÍČAN, *Psychologie náboženství a spirituality [Psychology of Religion and Spirituality]*, Praha: Portál 2007, p. 58–59.

¹⁵ WOUTER HANEGRAAFF, “New Age Religion and Secularization”, *Numen* 47 (2000): p. 291.

¹⁶ JÖRG STOLZ and JOËLLE SANCHEZ, “From New Age to Alternative Spirituality”, in MICHAELA MORAVČÍKOVÁ (ed.), *New Age*, Bratislava: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví 2005, p. 531.

ity, and once and for all restore wholeness, unite opposites, and promote the values of love, tolerance, and cooperation.

This view also found scientific justification thanks to Thomas Samuel Kuhn's work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*¹⁷. He suggests that scientific progress is not a straight path, on which we simply keep adding new facts to existing knowledge, discovering objective reality, and reaching the ultimate truth. Our knowledge is instead interrupted from time to time by scientific revolutions, during which the foundations of existing knowledge are completely revised, and thus occurs a paradigm shift, which then completely changes our perception of the world. Followers of alternative spirituality believe in the arrival of a new paradigm that will replace the existing one and that our society will transform from mechanistic science to quantum physics, from rationalism to mysticism, from partiality to wholeness, from obedience as a primary moral virtue to creativity, from personal salvation to collective healing, from theism (God outside of us) to pantheism (God within us and we in God).¹⁸ According to the followers of the New Age milieu, the old dualistic paradigm still rules, but its values are already condemned. The old culture still exists, but the life has long been drained from it and they believe that new holistic paradigm will be here very soon or that it is here already, but it is still not recognizable for us.

It is important to say that even if followers of alternative spirituality accuse contemporary society of being too dualistic and divisive, they themselves create a duality by seeing holisms as good and dualism as bad. Any so-called holism cannot be even defined without reference to its opposite and is necessarily based on dualistic presuppositions, and therefore a holism itself is very dualistic view of the world.¹⁹ And even if new agers distance themselves from mainstream society, they themselves often draw on its achievements and are very closely linked to the practices of market capitalism.

People engaged in alternative spirituality share not only similar beliefs, ideas, and opinions, but also various sets of practices. On an individual level there is a very typical phenomenon of seekers. Seeker is someone who has no fixed doctrine or institution and eclectically uses both according to his needs. Any idea, practice, ritual, institution, or object from whatever religious or non-religious tradition, can be added to seeker's worldview and everyday life when it is perceived as useful and removed when it is not. Therefore, can seeker's engagement in any practice vary greatly in intensity and degree. One trainee of alternative spirituality can, for example, daily meditate, exercise yoga, qigong, or tai-chi, use tarot cards, read horoscope, or use products of alternative medicine. On a weekly basis he can meet with card reader, fortune teller, doctor of Chinese medicine, depth psychologist, or use psychedelics at home.

On a public level many new agers can participate at spiritual seminars, workshops, retreats, concerts, conferences, and festivals usually presented as self-development. They can, for example, work there on their self-confidence, create, deepen, or repair

¹⁷ THOMAS S. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996, 212 p.

¹⁸ HANEGRAAF, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, p. 331–332.

¹⁹ HANEGRAAF, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, p. 276.

relationships with other people, visit events involving firewalking, sweat lodge, cacao ceremony, group meditation, ecstatic dance, holotropic breathwork, shamanic drumming, men and women circles, family constellations, art or music therapy and many other activities. Another very typical shared events are rituals or celebrations of important dates of the solar calendar (solstices, equinoxes, Walpurgis Night, New Year's Eve, etc.), of the lunar calendar (full moon), or of the civil/church calendar (Good Friday, Easter Monday, etc.).²⁰

Sometimes there can be connection with an alternative lifestyle, when individuals give up some of the achievements of modern technology and go to live outside the city in the countryside, closer to nature. Intentionally they are heading the “green way of life” towards self-sufficiency, grow own vegetables, harvest fruit, keep animals, save water and electricity, prefer to use natural products rather than chemical ones, lower carbon print. They try to live a healthy lifestyle, consume organic food, start vegetarianism or even veganism, limit their food with various other diets or fasts, exercise, walk in nature, and use natural medicine. New agers can also dress in brightly coloured clothes made of natural materials and listen to meditative music.²¹

Beliefs and Actions of Lorien Community Members

Although Lorien community has no written doctrine and each member can believe what he or she wants, most residents share ideas typical for the alternative spirituality. Their statements featured pantheistic descriptions of something that transcends all and at the same time permeates everything. They believe in higher unity which connects everything together, that life does not end with death, and that in every human is something divine. Members of the community specifically mentioned various spiritual traditions neo-shamanism, Buddhism, Christianity, Tantra, psychedelic spirituality, spirituality of Native Americans, New Age, or teachings of Indian religious leader Bhagwan Rajneesh, better known as Osho, as their sources of inspiration.

Despite the typical alternative spirituality's condemnation of Western society, no one in the community is having a negative view of the world or society around him. There is also no strong expectation of the astrological arrival of the Age of Aquarius, but many Lorien members think that future is in their hands. They are involved in activities that are presented as trying to bring the values of a new, holistic paradigm such as harmony, peace, understanding, cooperation, tolerance, health, love, and spirituality.

Premesh, the owner of the complex, has very rich background in alternative spirituality. He tried many different spiritual traditions and met many different spiritual teachers, of which he explicitly mentioned the follower of Osho – Michael Barnett,

²⁰ HELENA DYNDOVÁ, “Praxe alternativní spirituality [Practice of Alternative Spirituality]”, *Dingir* 26 (2, 2023): p. 54.

²¹ IVAN O. ŠTAMPACH, *Na nových stezkách ducha [On New Paths of the Spirit]*, Praha: Vyšehrad 2010, p. 190.

who gave him the spiritual name Premesh. But nowadays main source of his spirituality is the book *A Course in Miracles*²², text allegedly dictated by voice of God to Helen Schucman. Premesh for himself repeats and try to remember passages of this book every morning.

Bronislava Bučková, Premesh's partner, thinks that there is some kind of "unity of everything", which somehow "connects all things together" and "gives them the proper place". She also believes that there is "higher power, divinity, which is in us, but also transcends us at the same time." She thinks that "the world is created by us".

Hana Perglerová is a lecturer of community-building seminars by Morgan Scott Peck. She had many times some kind of "extrasensory experience", felt "energy of the group", experienced "group meditation", or "common resonance" and was able to predict what will happen in a few seconds during Peck's seminar. She thinks that proper communication according to Peck's principles could improve global relationships and maybe even bring world peace.

Michal considers himself as "the least esoteric member of the community", because he needs a lot of arguments and proofs before he starts to believe anything. He considers other members sometimes as too naïve, because they hold many opinions without any good scientific reason. Although he is open to the idea, that "miracles can happen in Lorien," and that "dance celebrations add spirit to the community."

Ivan is a member of Roman Catholic Church, but he doesn't agree with all the teachings, he rather likes "freedom than doctrines" and he thinks that what people do is much more important than what they believe. The most important thing for him is "faith in God of love", that he understands as "unity of all with everything". He considers Jesus Christ to be his spiritual teacher, but he doesn't believe that Christ is a Son of God.

All the members of Lorien community agree on three pillars, which include caring for mutual relationships, caring for common space and caring for self-development events held on the premises.

The first pillar dealing with the caring for mutual relationships is supported by the principles of psychiatrist Morgan Scott Peck (1936–2005), who was very intensively devoted to the creation of communities and in December 1984, together with several colleagues, he founded the Foundation for Community Encouragement (FCE). This non-profit organization has set itself the goal of supporting the creation of communities in an environment where none exist and helping existing ones to strengthen relationships between its members and to other communities, thereby cultivating greater global understanding. Peck also wrote a book *The Different Drum*²³, the principles of which were brought to the community in 2012 by Hana Perglerová. Residents try to communicate according to Peck's principles at least during regular Monday circles and once a year during Peck's weekend seminar and reach a state of true community. Principles of proper communication include, for example, avoiding general

²² HELEN SCHUCMAN, *A Course in Miracles*, Omaha: Course in Miracles Society 2009, 1103 p.

²³ MORGAN SCOTT PECK, *The Different Drum*, New York: Touchstone 1998, 334 p.

statements or trying to change someone or exclude them from the group. Participants should talk about their own experiences, present ideas, and feelings, and listen carefully to others, so that they can fully accept them. Peck believed that the state of true community is usually reached through a process that passes through the phases of pseudocommunity, chaos, and emptiness.²⁴ In the first phase of community formation, people approach each other very friendly and kindly. They try to avoid conflict, so their conversation tends to be polite, skim over the surface and don't dig into anything too personal. They talk about things they expect everyone to agree with. No one wants to offend anyone, so they keep their opinions to themselves, and if any differences occur, the group either ignores them or tries to hide them. This phase does not lead to the experience of true community because nobody is honest and express their true self. But once someone starts to be authentic, the shared facade of superficial contentment and pretended conformity breaks down. Chaos ensues.

In the second stage, individual differences are shown quite openly, but the group tries to eliminate them at all costs. There are many exchanges, arguments, and verbal fights. Opinion factions arise, which are defined against opponents. Everyone tries to convince others of their truth and change them. Peck characterizes this phase very positively, because clarifying opinions is a good way to move to the next phase. From chaos to emptiness.

The stage of emptiness is the bridge between chaos and true community. People are freed from anything that has prevented them from communicating, such as their own ideologies, prejudices, ideas, opinions, and beliefs. It's not that they completely get rid of it, but rather that they put it on the back burner so that they can better share and fully listen to others. They abandon their expectations, stop fitting others into their boxes, correcting, or changing them. They reduce their desire to be in control. They learn to trust each other, be empathetic, vulnerable and create a safe place to share their failures, doubts, fears, weaknesses, and imperfections. According to Peck members should experience the metaphorical death of the group and immerse themselves in peaceful silence and peace.

The final stage of a true community should then be a state where people are not afraid to show their differences, accept each other as they are, and communicate with each other honestly, openly and at the most authentic level possible.

Members of Lorien community see Monday circles and Peck's seminars as opportunity to "be together", "open to each other", "share feelings, opinions, and ideas", "be authentic", "listen to one and other", "accept their differences", and "resolve conflicts wisely and effectively, if it is needed". Some of the members during the circles experience almost mystical feelings of "deep connection", "understanding", "safety", "acceptance", "resonance", or "unity". Some of them used words as "group contemplation", "transformative experience", or even "intense field of unconditional love".

The second pillar stating care for the common space is based on eco-spirituality. Some residents try to be kind to nature by growing their own vegetables with the idea

²⁴ PECK, *The Different Drum*, p. 86–106.

that they would someday like to achieve the ideal of a permaculture garden. They use a root cleaner, recycle waste, compost, some try to limit their meat consumption and one of them has started beekeeping. All respondents agreed that life in nature is very important to them, they try to “live in harmony with it”, feel as “its part”, and understand it as “a source of peace and life”.

However, one of the former residents of the community confided in me with his criticism that much more could be done to protect nature and he gave the example of the Slovak community in the village of Zaježová, where, according to him, they cooperate more and buy as little plastic packaging as possible.

The last pillar states organizing self-developmental events. In its early years, the community held shamanic drumming, firewalking, purification ceremonies in sweat lodges, or chakra alchemy classes. However, most of these activities were abandoned, and today the community primarily hosts five other events each year: four dance celebrations of the transition of the seasons and Summercamp. Lorien also organize once a year the Peck’s seminar, but it is not open to public.

Summercamp is roughly week-long festival in the July or August where those who are interested can visit the community and participate in various activities. Participants who wish to stay for more days, sleep in their own tents or on a mattress in the ballroom. During the festival vegetarian food is cooked and served. Mornings usually start with a yoga exercise and breakfast. During the several years of the community’s operation they organized various kinds of activities such as moccasin making, a tour to the local glass workshop, swimming in the pond, archery, planting trees and flowers, grinding rye, making sourdough, baking homemade bread, stargazing, community-building seminar, family constellations, fortune-telling, theatre performances, shamanic travelling, massages, tea, cocoa and coffee rituals, painting, reading fairy tales or guided Osho meditation. The evening program is usually filled with ecstatic dancing, singing, chanting, drumming, listening to music or sitting and talking by the fire.

Lorien community organizes dance celebrations at least once a quarter. They try to place them on the date as close as possible to the spring and autumn equinoxes or the summer and winter solstices. It has maintained this tradition since the winter of 2010. Dances are also often held at Summercamp or at various other events throughout the year. Events usually take place in the ballroom, which is decorated with paintings representing the four elements: fire, water, earth, and air. During the dance, low tables covered with scarves are placed near the images as altars, on which angel cards, healing stones, burning candles and Buddha statues are spread out. In the middle of the hall, a small shrine consisting of a piece of cloth and a vase with plants typical for the given season is built.

Dance celebrations are often presented on the community’s Facebook profile *Tvořivý Lorien*²⁵ as “an opportunity to align with the natural rhythm of the planet

²⁵ “Tvořivý Lorien”, <https://www.facebook.com/tvorivylorien>.

Earth”, “to live freely in the present”, “to find balance”, “to realize oneness with nature and all humanity”, “to heal body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit”, and “to achieve enlightenment”, “awakening” or even “rebirth”. The dance celebrations are seen by some Lorien residents as “important milestones throughout the year”. They consider them “a natural part of their community”, which “helps them stay in touch with the public” and “bring spirit, rhythm, life, and joy to the community area.” Some community members have described experiencing “expanded states of consciousness”, “ecstasy”, or “a touch of transcendence” during dance celebrations.

The events are based on the 5Rhythms movement founded by the dancer and musician Gabrielle Roth (1941–2012). The movement adopted various elements of shamanism, Eastern philosophy and mysticism, transpersonal psychology, the human potential movement, and Gestalt therapy. It is based on the belief that everything, including humans, is made of energy, that everything moves in waves, regular patterns, and rhythms, and that everything is a dance. The music is designed to gradually alternate different musical instruments, styles, and genres, and to gradually go through five waves of rhythms from the phase of flowing, through staccato, chaos, to the phase of lyrical to stillness. Each phase is further associated in the following order with specific emotions: fear, anger, sadness, joy, and compassion; specific life stages: birth, childhood, puberty, maturity, and death; in the way of perception: being, loving, knowing, seeing, and healing, and aspects of the self: body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit. According to Roth, the goal of dance is to stop your mind, explore your inner self and connect with your soul, which is a source of inspiration and unlimited possibilities.²⁶

In addition, many other events are held in the community, for which Premesh rents space to the organizers, but in the preparation of which the residents of the community are not directly involved. These include, for example, concerts of indigenous music, yoga meetings, women’s and men’s circles and occasional lectures by foreign guests connected with Eastern religions or the teachings of indigenous people. Lorien was visited, for example, by Kosi Sunyata, a follower of Raman Maharshi, shaman Temok following the Aztec tradition, Tito La Rosa promoting healing using the vibrations of music, and Don Carlos José Castillejos promoting the teachings of Carlos Castaneda.

Conclusion

The Czech community Lorien was presented here as one of the centres of alternative spirituality. Lorien offers the public to participate in dance celebrations of solstices and equinoxes at least once a quarter, to visit it during the Summercamp at least once a year, to try short Peck’s community-building seminars, and many other spiritual

²⁶ “5Rhythms Cosmology” [online], *5rhythms.com*, accessed January 2023, available online at <https://www.5rhythms.com/gabrielle-roths-5rhythms/5rhythms-cosmology/>.

events focused on self-development and operating with the terms of holistic paradigm, Eastern religions, indigenous cultures, or other religious and non-religious traditions.

If we use the topology presented by Bainbridge and Stark²⁷ dividing the organizations into audience cults, client cults and cult movement, then we can find that Lorien community by offering the dance celebrations, Peck's and many other spiritual seminars, functions as a client cult to the participants and spread believes and practices of alternative spirituality among them. The community cannot serve as an audience cult, because none of the members publish books, record lectures on the Internet, or appear on television. I also believe that in case of Lorien community it is impossible to talk about a cult movement, because the level of commitment required from members is very low.

If we use the five characteristics of alternative spirituality by Pavel Říčan²⁸ we can see that all members of Lorien community sometimes have mystical experiences at the dance celebrations, Monday circles or Peck's seminars. Everyone agrees that nature is a "source of peace", they "feel as its part" and "try to be in harmony with it." All are committed to deepening their relationships and togetherness in the community by following Peck's principles. Their goal is supporting individual and social physical, psychological, and spiritual growth by organizing various self-development events. And finally, almost every Lorien members believe in existence of something beyond us, what at the same time unites everything together.

I believe that it is in the interest of researchers to observe spiritual communities and examine how they will develop over time. The American sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter predicts that spiritual communities like this will have a very short life because they do not generate enough commitment and place more emphasis on the personal freedom of individuals than on collective's interests, which then leads to high turnover of members, a large amount of unfinished work, various conflicts and sense of mutual alienation.²⁹ However, I think that in case of Lorien the situation will be different. Even if the community does not force its members to strongly commit or make any excessive demands on them, it has the potential to last. After all, the residents are united by the common values of the three pillars of the community. They care for their mutual relationships, for the common space and for organizing various self-development events. In addition, most Lorien members see their community as a place of "unconditional acceptance", "safety", "peace", "contact with nature", and "love".

I believe it's in our best interest to give communities like this our attention because, they offer their members the opportunity to engage in joint work, experience deep relationships and give them a higher meaning in building something that transcends

²⁷ BAINBRIDGE – STARK, "Client and Audience Cults in America", p. 199–200.

²⁸ ŘÍČAN, *Psychologie náboženství a spirituality*, p. 58–59.

²⁹ ROSABETH M. KANTER, *Commitment and Community*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1977, p. 184–190.

the lives of each of them. I think it is likely that influence of spiritual communities will grow in the future and scientists should have their eyes open, be near them, and listen to their rhythm.

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Heretical Mind Control: Cultist ‘Brainwashing’ Theories and Their Pre-Modern Parallels

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Abstract: The article discusses parallels between the central medieval narratives about maleficent bewitchment in heretical sects and the late 20th century beliefs about “brainwashing” practices in the so-called destructive cults, which constituted an integral part of the anti-cult moral panic, emerging in the 1980 and 1990s. It emphasizes the importance of discerning between trans-temporal elements of sectarian mind control narratives, which seem to be anthropological constants, and situation-specific layers. The article further argues that the trans-temporal elements constitute non-trivial set of motifs, particularly related to sharing of community with the sectarians (namely, common meal in the medieval narratives), which cannot be reduced only to basic human fears and anxieties.

Keywords: sectarianism; mind control; middle ages; anti-cult movement; history; anthropology

Abstrakt: Článek rozebírá paralely mezi ústředními středověkými narativy o zlovolném očarování v kacířských sektách a přesvědčeními z konce 20. století o praktikách „vymývání mozků“ v tzv. destruktivních kultech, které tvořily nedílnou součást antikultovní morální paniky, jež se objevila v 80. a 90. letech 20. století. Zdůrazňuje důležitost rozlišování mezi nadčasovými prvky narativů o ovládnání mysli v rámci sekt, které se zdají být antropologickými konstantami, a jejich situačně specifickými vrstvami. Článek dále tvrdí, že nadčasové prvky tvoří netriviální soubor motivů, zejména souvisejících se sdílením společenství se sektáři (zejména společné jídlo ve středověkých narativech), které nelze redukovat pouze na základní lidské strachy a úzkosti.

Klíčová slova: sektářství; ovládnání mysli; středověk; antikultovní hnutí; historie; antropologie

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Introduction

In the course of the past two decades, a couple of scandals related to the phenomenon of new religious movements struck Czech mass media. First, in 2008, there was the case of child abuse within a small group that had split from the so-called Grail Movement.¹ Then, throughout the 2010s, the controversial figure Jaroslav Dobeš, nicknamed Guru Jára, faced allegations of sexually abusing his female followers.² And most recently, there was the criminal investigation into the death of a self-proclaimed healer in the town of Kutná Hora, who had been killed by two of his followers at his own request.³

All these cases had a significant impact on the Czech public debate. They revived seemingly obsolete ideas about alleged sophisticated methods of mental manipulation within some of the new religious movements – those that were, in the English-language literature of the 1970s and 1980s, often referred to as *cults* or even *destructive cults*.

Theories about such forms of cultist manipulation can range from relatively ‘soft’ concerns about individuals’ dependence on a charismatic authority to ‘hardcore’ allegations about refined technologies of mind control, known in the context of the anti-cult literature as *programming* or *brainwashing*. In this article, I will discuss these more extreme theories, not from a sociological or psychological perspective, but through a comparison with temporally distant, pre-modern beliefs.

Allegations concerning the phenomenon of ‘brainwashing’ first emerged in the 1950. They were linked to the cases of U.S. soldiers who were taken prisoners of war during the Korean Conflict, and who then, after their return from captivity, expressed pro-communist stances. The allegations were prominently tied to the works of American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1926–2025).⁴ While they were quickly debunked as unwarranted, the idea of brainwashing persisted in popular thinking and some semi-academic works, and in the 1960s and 1970s, it began to merge with the moral concern surrounding the rise of new religious movements.⁵ In Dick Anthony’s words:

¹ In the summer of 2008, this affair became one of the most intensively media-covered judicial trials in Czechia and it re-introduced the controversies surrounding several new religious movements in the Czech public debate. Selected media articles: Kauza Kuřim: Týrání chlapců zřejmě mělo souvislost se sektářstvím / Kuřim: Chlapci prý museli být převychováni, ohrožovali sektu – ČT24 – Česká televize; Hospodářské noviny (HN.cz); Kauza Kuřim: Jak mučít chlapce? Nápad měla Kateřina – Brněnský deník.

² Selected media articles: Odsouzený „guru Jára“ skončil v rukou filipínské policie – ČT24 – Česká televize; Znásilnění, nebo využití bezbrannosti? Soud začal znovu projednávat případ „guru Járy“ – ČT24 – Česká televize; Konec případu. Dovolání státní zástupkyně nepodá, guru Jára zůstane na svobodě / Plus.

³ Selected media articles: iROZHLAS – spolehlivé a rychlé zprávy; Znalec ke smrti kutnohorského léčitele: Nechal se zabít kvůli zachování charismatu, mohlo to skončit daleko hůř – Novinky.

⁴ ROBERT JAY LIFTON, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of ‘Brainwashing’ in China*, New York: Norton 1961.

⁵ DICK ANTHONY, “Religious Movements and Brainwashing Litigation: Evaluating Key Testimony”, in THOMAS ROBBINS – DICK ANTHONY (eds.), *New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America (New Edition: Revised and Expanded)*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 2009, p. 295–344.

According to the ‘brainwashing theory’ [...] converts have been ‘programmed’ to claim adherence to alien belief as the result of diabolically effective psychotechnological manipulation...⁶

The brainwashing paradigm has been subjected to vocal criticism from social psychologists and sociologists, especially in the second half of the 1980s.⁷ In 2000, Italian sociologist of religions Massimo Introvigne (born 1955) wrote that “by the end of the 1980s, the first ‘crude’ theories of brainwashing had been largely debunked in English-speaking debate.”⁸ However, in the same paragraph, he also admits that somewhat softened, ‘new’ versions of the brainwashing theory continued to be proposed by some authors.

American sociologist Thomas Robbins provided a brief but apt analytical overview of a typical brainwashing theory, focusing on the writings of an influential American anti-cult author, lawyer, and legal scholar Richard Delgado (born 1939). Although Robbins was careful not to refute all possibilities of psychological manipulation within religious groups, he still evaluated the brainwashing theory as unwarranted. Notably for this article, he identified three important elements of a typical ‘brainwashing process,’ as reported by Delgado. These will be explored below in connection with the medieval ‘conversion through bewitchment’ scenarios.

According to Robbins’ analysis, the brainwashing theory assumed the process to be rapid. Sometimes, all it took was a single meeting with the cultist recruiters and the target’s decision-making capabilities became reduced. Next, the recruiters were supposed to typically target weakened and vulnerable individuals: lonely youngsters, students coming to a new social environment etc. Finally, the main tool of brainwashing manipulation took the form of collective activities within the group.⁹

In this article, I will attempt to compare the brainwashing paradigm to a partially analogous yet many centuries older phenomenon: the central and late medieval idea of heretical movements recruiting new members via practices of bewitchment, typically by offering a special meal with mind-altering effects. I will aim to show that while one aspect of the brainwashing theory is specifically modern – the ‘psychotechnological manipulation’, in Dick Anthony’s words – the theory also contains a much more universal, anthropological element. Specifically, it is the victimization of a con-

In Gods We Trust, ELIZABETH AILEEN YOUNG, “The Use of the ‘Brainwashing’ Theory by the Anti-Cult Movement in America pre-1996”, *Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft* [Online] 7, 2012, p. 4–5.

⁶ ANTHONY, “Religious Movements and Brainwashing Litigation”, p. 295–296.

⁷ See for instance JAMES T. RICHARDSON, “A Social Psychological Critique of ‘Brainwashing’ Claims about Recruitment to New Religions”, in DAVID G. BROMLEY and JEFFREY K. HADDEN (eds.), *The Handbook of Cults and Sects in America*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press 1993, p. 75–97.

⁸ MASSIMO INTROVIGNE, “Moral Panics and Anti-Cult Terrorism in Western Europe”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12/1, 2000, p. 47–59.

⁹ THOMAS ROBBINS, “Constructing Cultist ‘Mind Control’”, in LORNE L. DAWSON (ed.), *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, Malden – Oxford – Victoria – Berlin: Blackwell 2003, p. 167–180, 171–174.

vert to a ‘scandalous’ religious group by claiming that the person did not act out of their free will.

I will argue that such claims emerge from the anxiety about potential success of a group or doctrine that has been condemned as defying socially accepted or at least authoritatively promoted norms. I will further claim that that this anxiety is by no means exclusive to the modern world of the 20th and 21st century and its new forms of religious life. I will then identify several specific motifs shared by both the medieval and the modern narrative. These motifs prove that the analogy between the two narratives is structurally deep, not merely superficial. I will eventually raise the question of whether phenomena deemed religious are, in the Euro-American context, more likely to be associated with quasi-magical abilities to affect a person’s mind than phenomena deemed secular.

Allegations of Heretical Mind Alteration in the Middle Ages

Conversion to movements that were considered heretical disturbed medieval literates as much as the mere existence of such movements. The central concern was not so different from what many members of modern societies experience vis-à-vis conversion to the so-called destructive cults. The reappearing question is: ‘What makes these abominable doctrines attractive for some people?’ This concern becomes apparent when looking at the early papal documents dealing with the issue of heresy in the late 12th and early 13th century. For instance, the influential bull *Vergentis in senium* (*Turning old*), issued by the Pope Innocent III in 1199, described heresy in dark eschatological terms as a poison that is being poured by the heretical teachers into this world and offered to the people ‘in the golden chalice of Babylon.’¹⁰ Gregory IX’s bull *Ille humani generis [inimicus]* (*Enemy of human kind*) from the turn of 1232 developed this metaphor further, with an important nuance. According to this bull, the heretics “pretended to offer sweet things, then stung with their tail, like a scorpion pouring the poison of pestilence into the golden chalice of Babylon.”¹¹

The subtle difference between the two versions of this poison metaphor fittingly illustrates the crucial point in the central medieval approach to heretical conversion. The heretics were not only supposed to seduce people with the pretended sweetness of their teaching, but also to forcefully attack them, ‘sting them with the scorpion tail,’ and thus make them join their sects. We can already observe certain mind control connotations in these metaphors. Mid-13th century Dominican inquisitor Raniero Sacconi wrote about the Cathar heretics residing in Lombardy:

¹⁰ OTHMAR HAGENEDER – WERNER MALECZEK – ALFRED STRNAD (eds.), *Die Register Innocenz III. 2. Jahrgang (1199/1200)*, Rome – Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1979, p. 4.

¹¹ JAMES FEARNES (ed.), *Ketzer und Ketzerbekämpfung im Hochmittelalter*, Göttingen: 1968, p. 73–74.

The venom of their error, which they drank from the serpent's mouth, does not allow them to feel pity about their sins.¹²

Heresy was further frequently described as an infectious disease, usually pestilence or leprosy, and the heretical converts as its victims, ill people who could possibly be cured. Yet another of Gregory IX's bulls, *Vox in Rama* (*The voice in Ramah*) from 1233, expressed this assumption clearly:

May ye go [to the heretics] like angels of peace, and show the remedy for their disease, and with diligent care and careful diligence work on their correction.¹³

Only in the case of unsuccessful treatment, the individual heretics were expected to be put to death to protect the rest of the mystical body of the Church.

While the official papal documents limited the 'poison' and 'disease' concepts to metaphors, some less formally authoritative sources used them in a much more literal sense. They supposed that the heretical teachers possessed actual skills to bend the minds of unvigilant Christians to their own doctrine. The core of these beliefs was markedly similar to the brainwashing concept of the anti-cult moral panic: the victim allegedly made one imprudent decision, and ever since that moment, they were merely a toy in the manipulator's hands.

The idea of a person falling into heresy against their will, as a result of an external intervention, appeared in prominent medieval writings from as early as the 6th century. An influential Frankish chronicler Gregory of Tours depicted a man who was working in a forest when a swarm of flies invade his body through his mouth. Consequently, the man became a false prophet of the Antichrist.¹⁴ A similar story, possibly just a variation of the same, was told at the onset of the new millennium by another Frankish chronicler, Ralph Glaber. According to him, a certain man called Leutard had his bodily openings violently penetrated by bees and as a result he turned into a heretical iconoclast.¹⁵

The scenario of conversion by mind alteration was however only partially similar to these motifs, which are conceptually close to demonic possession. The narratives discussed in this article include the character of a heretical leader or a recruiter who tricked their victims into what can, without any oversimplification, be called bewitchment. Typically, the victim was offered a meal, and after consuming it, their free will was bent so that they had no choice but to join the heretical group.

The first records of people being forced into heretical conversion by insidious mind alteration appeared in the medieval West. More specifically, it was in the early

¹² FRANJO ŠANJEK (ed.), "Raynerius Sacconi O. P. Summa de Catharis", *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 44, 1974, p. 42–60.

¹³ GEORG H. PERTZ – KARL RODENBERG (eds.), *Epistulae Saeculi XIII e Regestis Pontificum Romanorum selectae* I (MGH epp. Saec. XIII. I), Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung 1883, p. 434.

¹⁴ GREGORY OF TOURS, *Historia Francorum* X.25.

¹⁵ RAOUL GLABER, *Le cinq livres de ses histoires* II, ed. MAURICE PROU, Paris: Alfonse Picard 1866, p. 49.

11th century, when heresy started to resurface as a perceived issue. In 1022, ten canons from the chapter of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross of Orléans were burnt at the stake at a direct command issued by the French King Robert II the Pious. The rationale behind this act was apparently a tangle of political controversies. The conflict between the king and the powerful Count Odo II of Blois gradually intermingled with yet another struggle, this time over the succession of the episcopal see in Orléans. Additionally, King Robert's attempt to divorce his wife Constance of Arles seemed to be yet another part of the plot, with the queen's confessor accused of being an alleged leader of a heretical group.¹⁶ In the later chronicle records, however, the affair was reshaped as a case of a nefarious diabolical sect.

Chronicler Adémar of Chabannes wrote about the canons' heresy some twenty to thirty years after the event, but still managed to describe it with macabre detail:

About that time ten canons of St. Cross in Orléans, who appeared pious, were convicted as Manichaeans.¹⁷ After they refused to return to the Faith, King Robert ordered to first degrade them from their priestly status, then excommunicate them from the Church, and finally burn them in fire. It turned out that they were deluded by a certain rustic from Périgord, who claimed to perform virtuous deeds, and was carrying with him the ash of dead children. Whoever consumed that ash instantly became a Manichaean. They worshipped the Devil, who was appearing to them first in the form of an Ethiopian¹⁸, then in the form of an angel of light, bringing them every day a bounty of silver. They followed what he told them to do, secretly fully renounced Christ, and clandestinely did things which are horrible to speak about. And they all the time pretended to be proper Christians.¹⁹

The statement about the ash of dead children, the consumption of which forced the canons to become heretics, is obviously greatly important for this article. The method that the alleged heretical recruiter used to bend the will of the clerics was quite straightforward. A repugnant substance, which was undoubtedly manufactured with the Devil's aid, was offered to the clerics by an individual who was, in fact, the Devil in disguise. Once they consumed it, they were no longer in control of their own decisions. Even priestly orders were unable to protect them. It is worth highlighting a few key themes from this story, which basically set the pattern followed by most of

¹⁶ For an overview: ROBERT I. MOORE, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, Oxford: Blackwell 1987, p. 15–16.

¹⁷ The label “Manichaean” was frequently used in the 11th–13th centuries for various ascetics, sometimes dualist heterodox movements, under the influence of the heresiologist writings of Augustine. Refer to R. I. MOORE, *Formation*, esp. p. 60, 115. It is almost certain that the late antique Manichaean movement did not persist in Latin Europe until the high Middle Ages.

¹⁸ For an overview about the widespread association of dark skin with the Devil in the Middle Ages, see RUDOLF SIMEK, *Monster im Mittelalter. Die phantastische Welt der Wundervölker und Fabelwesen*, Cologne – Weimar – Wien: Böhlau 2015, p. 200–201.

¹⁹ MARTIN BOUQUET et al. (eds.), *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France X*, Paris: Imprimerie royale 1884, p. 159.

the later narratives discussed in this article. I will compare them with the main points of the brainwashing process as described in the abovementioned chapter by Thomas Robbins.

- a) *One dose is enough*. The mind alteration was supposed to be a matter of a single decision and act. Consumption of the maleficent substance marked the point of no return. This corresponds to what Thomas Robbins identified as one of the crucial elements of the brainwashing theory: already upon attending the first meeting of the cult, the victim's decision-making capacities could be reduced.²⁰
- b) *Nobody is immune*. Even ordained clerics were allegedly prone to becoming victims. In this aspect, the medieval scheme *differs* from Robbins' analysis of the 'brainwashing theory.' According to Robbins, the cults were believed to primarily target significantly weakened individuals, typically lonely young people.²¹
- c) *Community matters*. The narratives paid attention to the fact that the victims not only consumed the substance, but did so in form of a shared meal with the heretics. They dined together, even shared a part of their cultural identity. Carlo Ginzburg duly noticed that Adémar's record used the Latin verb *communicare* for the consumption of the macabre meal,²² the term primarily denoting reception of the Eucharist, i.e., the participation in the highest common mystery of the Church. This, once again, corresponds with Robbins' analysis of the brainwashing theory: the indoctrination typically takes form of a collective activity, sometimes performed in an isolated environment.²³

Adémar's record was by no means isolated in its content. A story closely resembling Adémar's narrative notably appeared in the autobiography of an early 12th century Benedictine monk Guibert of Nogent.²⁴

Even the most powerful leaders of the Christian world were supposedly not safe from the heretics' attempts to take over their free will. The late 12th century collection of exempla (short moralistic stories designed to be used in sermons) from the famous Cistercian Clairvaux Abbey includes a story about the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I, or Frederick Barbarossa. In 1160, he allegedly had to deal with an extraordinarily insidious heretical sect. Its leaders apparently possessed marvellous abilities: after being thrown into burning ovens, they came out unharmed.²⁵

After a rapid spread of the unspecified heretical movement in Germany, and after failed attempts to eradicate it with military force, Frederick decided, following a consultation with one of the local bishops, to personally confront the sect's master.

²⁰ ROBBINS, "Constructing", p. 173.

²¹ ROBBINS, "Constructing", p. 172.

²² CARLO GINZBURG, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, New York: Pantheon Books 1991, p. 75.

²³ ROBBINS, "Constructing", p. 173–174.

²⁴ GUIBERT DE NOGENT, de Vita Sua, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, *Patrologia latina* CLVI, Paris: 1853, p. 951.

²⁵ OLIVIER LEGENDRE (ed.), *Collectaneum exemplorum ac visionum clarevallense* (Corpus Christianorum 206-A), London: Brepols 2005, p. 365.

Armed with the Eucharist, he entered the camp of the heretics and accepted an invitation to their meal. However, he was forewarned by the bishop to not eat or drink anything the heretics might offer to him. If he did, he would instantly become their follower. Once the best foods and drinks had been brought to the table, Frederick made the sign of the cross and pronounced the blessing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Immediately, all foods and drinks transformed into faeces and urine. The heresy was hence exposed and ultimately suppressed with a sword.²⁶

This story summarizes the main points of the ‘forced conversion’ scenario. Faithful Christians were not helpless against the heretical bewitchment. They had their chance not to make the step into the trap. But once they did make it, they had no choice but to blindly follow the erroneous doctrine. This motif aligns quite precisely with the warnings of the 1980s anti-cult activists: no person should ever expose themselves to the cultist recruiters. Sometimes a single meeting, or even one brief participation in an event, was enough – and the person could become their thrall.

The tale about Frederick I incorporates a character that was absent in the previous narrative: a knowledgeable, well-equipped specialist who can afford to sit at the heretics’ table, demask and destroy them. Where an ordinary person would fall victim, the specialist prevails – but only an expert can do so. One should not attempt to do the same unless properly educated and armed by the bishop, the holder of proper Church authority.

Within the modern anti-cult moral panic, specialists who could afford to interact with cultists became an inherent part of the milieu. They were demasking the tricks of the enticers and sometimes even engaged in highly controversial practices of the so-called ‘deprogramming.’ In extreme cases, this involved kidnapping the supposed victims and subjecting them to involuntary ‘therapies.’²⁷

An interesting variation of the mind-alteration scenario appeared in the bull *Vox in Rama*, issued by the Pope Gregory IX in the summer of 1233. It was already mentioned above in connection with the framing of heresy as a potentially curable disease. The bull contained – besides practical and rhetorical exhortations to the heresy-fighting Church authorities – an extraordinarily graphic description of a heretical ritual, during which Lucifer himself was allegedly worshipped. This part of the bull was most probably based on the reports from a pioneer of the papal inquisition Con-

²⁶ LEGENDRE, *Collectaneum exemplorum ac visionum clarevallense*, p. 365–366.

²⁷ For an overview: ANSON SHUPE – SUSAN E. DARNELL, *Agents of Discord: Deprogramming, Pseudo-Science and American Anticult Movement*, New Brunswick – London: Transaction Publishers 2006; GORDON J. MELTON, “Anti-Cultist in the United States: A Historical Perspective”, in BRYAN R. WILSON (ed.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, London – New York: Routledge 1999, p. 213–234. One of the most prominent figures in the North American Anti-cult movement, Steven Hassan, proposed a somewhat softer version of ‘deprogramming’, called ‘exit counseling,’ which would not include the violation of law by physically kidnapping people. He nevertheless remained in many aspects positive towards the hard-line ‘deprogramming.’ STEVEN HASSAN, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, Rochester – Vermont: Park Street Press 1998.

rad of Marburg, active in the western parts of today's Germany from 1231 until his assassination in July 1233.²⁸

The first part of the description focused on the initiation of a new member into this vicious sect. The process was reportedly two-fold. As the first step, the adept was allegedly instructed to kiss a giant, hideous toad right at the entrance to an underground sanctuary of the heretics. But this was not the point after which there was no turning back. That came only a moment later, when the adept encountered "a strange pale human being with utterly black eyes, swarth and scrawny, whose meat had been consumed, and bare bones can be seen beneath their skin."²⁹

When the adept kisses this abomination, they suddenly 'feel icy cold sensation,' and just after that, 'memories of the Catholic faith vanish from their heart forever.'³⁰ In this narrative, the point of no return lies not in accepting the heretical community by sitting down to their common meal, but in further participating in a ritual activity, despite its disgusting requirements towards the adept.

The last source this article is going to discuss comes from as late as 1388. That year, a series of inquisitorial interrogations was conducted in the palace of Giovanni of Rivolta, the Bishop of Turin.³¹ Two men were subjected to repeated questioning which most probably involved harsh methods such as torture. This was basically a sequel to the investigations of the anti-clerical Waldensian movement that had been conducted throughout the previous year in the town of Pinerolo, the diocese Turin, just at the Alpine foothills. After encountering growing resistance from the local lordship, the inquisitor, Dominican Anthony of Settimo, relocated his tribunal under the bishop's direct protection, bringing with him two suspects: Anthony Galosna and Jacob Bech. When Galosna, a member of the third order of the Franciscans, eventually gave up all resistance, he confessed not about Waldensian doctrines, but about an obscene sect whose members allegedly gathered for carnal orgies and directly venerated Satan.

One of the strangest of parts of his deposition was the statement about heretics from the Alpine village of Andessello. Galosna confessed that there used to be a special woman among the local sectarians:

²⁸ For an overview: ALEXANDER PATSCHOVSKY, "Zur Ketzerverfolgung Konrads von Marburg", *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 37, 1981, p. 641–693; DANIELA MÜLLER, "Conrad de Marbourg et les cathares en Allemagne", in MARIE-PAULE GIMENEZ (ed.), *Europe et Occitanie: Les pays cathares* (Heresis 5), Carcassonne: Centre d'Études Cathares 1995, p. 53–80; BERND-ULRICH HERGEMÖLLER, *Krötenkuss und Schwarzer Kater: Teufelsdienst, Idolatrie und Unzucht in die inquisitorische Phantasie des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Warendorf: Fahlbusch Verlag 1996, p. 1–80; UWE BRUNN, *Des contestataires aux "cathares": Discours de réforme et propagande antihérétique dans les pays du Rhin et de la Meuse avant l'Inquisition*, Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes 2006, p. 497–540.

²⁹ G. H. PERTZ – K. RODENBERG (eds.), *Epistulae Saeculi XIII e Regestis Pontificum Romanorum selectae* I (MGH epp. Saec. XIII. I), Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung 1883, p. 433.

³⁰ PERTZ – RODENBERG, *Epistulae Saeculi XIII e Regestis Pontificum Romanorum selectae* I, p. 433.

³¹ For an overview: GRADO G. MERLO, *Eretici e inquisitori nella società piemontese del Trecento*, Turin: Claudiana 1977; KATHRIN UTZ TREMP, *Von der Häresie zur Hexerei: "Wirkliche" und imaginaire Sekten im Spätmittelalter*, Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung 2008, p. 254–274.

Bilia La Castagna, who had already died. She offered a potion to all who were there as soon as they sat around the table. She brought that potion in a certain vial, and the potion looked filthy at first glance. And whoever drank much of it swelled a lot. One man, who drank a lot of it, even died. And he himself and all the others were drinking this potion each time they were launching the aforesaid synagogue. And (the potion) had, or should have had, such effect, that who had drunk it once, was never able to leave the society of the synagogue. And there was a rumour that (Bilia) was keeping a giant toad under her bed, feeding it with meat, bread, and cheese. Interrogated as to why she was keeping that toad, she answered that it was in order to make the abovesaid potion of its excrements, or the abovesaid *beneficia* [...] Interrogated as to what she was putting into the potion, she answered that it was the excrements of the mentioned toad, and that she was accused of burning her hair, and hair from her groin, and adding them into the potion. She manufactured the potion during the vigil of Epiphany, in the evening, in a fire.³²

The label *synagogue* used for the heretical gathering together with the repugnant ingredients of the alleged potion closely resemble the first descriptions of the so-called Witches' Sabbaths, which appeared in the more northern regions of the Alps, in the territory of the Swiss Confederation, around the year 1430.³³ The leading expert in the research of related events, Kathrin Utz Tremp, even proposed a direct connection between Galosna's deposition and the first Sabbath descriptions.³⁴

From the perspective of this article, a slightly different aspect of Galosna's deposition appears significant: the circumstances under which the sectarians were said to drink the hideous potion. This was not only upon their initiation into the sect, but 'each time they were launching a *synagogue*,' i.e., their regular gathering. The *first dose is enough* motif appears here once again, yet in this case, it even more patently reveals the deeper structure of the mind-alteration narrative. Reception of the potion or food not only reflects the anthropologically universal fear of bewitchment, but also denotes a more specific anxiety of the late medieval heresiologist: the fear of accepting the sectarians' invitation to a shared activity. It was precisely this side of the mind-alteration motif which the medieval stories share with the modern anti-cult moral panic. The sole acceptance of such invitation, even out of curiosity, might be fatal for the victim. While the context-conditioned element of the narrative

³² GIROLAMO AMATI (ed.), "Processus contra Valdenses in Lombardia Superiori, anno 1387 II", *Archivio Storico Italiano* 3/2, 1865, p. 3–61, 12–13.

³³ For an overview: MARTINE OSTORERO – AGOSTINO P. BAGLIANI – KATHRIN UTZ TREMP (eds.), *L'imaginaire du sabbat: Édition critique des textes les plus anciens (1430 c. – 1440 c.)*, Lausanne: Université de Lausanne 1999; M. OSTORERO, "Concept of the Witches' Sabbat in Alpine Region (1430–1440), text and context", in GÁBOR KLANICZAY – EVA PÓCS (eds.), *Demons, Spirits, Witches 3: Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions*, Budapest: CEU Press 2008, p. 15–34; RICHARD KIECKHEFER, "Mythologies of Witchcraft in the Fifteenth Century", *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1/1, 2006, p. 79–108; KATHRIN UTZ TREMP, *Waldenser, Wiedergänger, Hexen, und Rebellen: Biographien zu den Walnenserprozessen von Freiburg im Üchtland (1399 und 1430)*, Freiburg: Freiburger Geschichtsblätter 1999.

³⁴ KATHRIN UTZ TREMP, "La 'Naissance' du sabbat", *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 2, 2011, p. 243–253.

differs in time – bewitchment by a maleficent substance vs. through a psychological trick – the fear seems to be universal at least in the context of the (post-)Christianized Europe.

Conclusions

The anxiety over the success and growth of religious movements deemed scandalous appears to be a trans-temporal phenomenon within the Euro-American cultural space. It seems to be inherently associated with this question: ‘Why would anybody adhere to something so absurd and disproven?’ While the modern ‘brainwashing theories’ ascribed the ‘cultist’ mastery to refined psychological manipulation, the pre-modern central and late medieval narratives were generally based on the idea of what can be called bewitchment. Typically, this happened by sharing a meal with the heretics, and sporadically by other means such as a ritual kiss.

Furthermore, the comparison between the modern and the medieval narratives reveals other specific trans-temporal motifs, both corresponding and differing. Importantly, in both medieval and modern descriptions of a sectarian manipulation, even the very first dose of sectarian influence could mark the point of no return. However, while the modern ‘psychologized’ theories view certain groups of people as especially vulnerable to sectarian mind control (those who are young, lonely, etc.), virtually nobody was completely safe from heretical mind-altering bewitchment in the medieval narratives, except for a few exceptional figures. The notion of the trained specialist who can dare to engage with dangerous sects then again appears to be in line with the modern brainwashing theories. Perhaps most importantly, the experience of sharing a community with the sectarians is perceived as the most dangerous tool of mind alteration, in both the medieval and the modern period.

By pointing out a few corresponding as well as differing motifs between the medieval and modern anti-sectarian imagination, this article aims to contribute to discernment between anthropologically universal trans-temporal collective anxieties and culturally specific elements of moral panic. I do not claim that the modern idea of dangerous religious manipulation is a straightforward continuation of pre-modern phenomena. Rather, I seek to separate some of its historically general layers from the historically specific ones.

The brainwashing theory, which was developed in the context of the Cold War panic over espionage and internal security threats, subsequently became a major driving force of the anti-cult movement. Here, some forms of the theory persist until today. I assume that a crucial question which needs to be addressed reads as follows: ‘To which extent does the general cultural division between the religious and the secular support the association between the religious and various kinds of mind manipulation, even mind control?’ In different words, can the perception of religion as something mysterious, not completely intelligible, and at the same time touching the deepest levels of human personality, contribute to the persistence of the notion of a

religious leader as a master of exclusive mental-manipulative powers? I believe that a cross-cultural comparison could assist sociologists and anthropologists of religion with addressing this question.

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