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 ovládání 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; ovládání 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 mučit 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 Fearns (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 Ethiopean[18], 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 Rivalta, 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. Jahrhuderts*, 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 imaginäre Sekten im Spätmittelater*, 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 'Naissaince' 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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