

# More Powerful than Mere Matter? Forbidden but Practiced Material Religion among the Late Medieval German Waldensians

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## Introduction

It is no wonder that the complex relationship of matter and the divine, object and the holy, caused tensions, misinterpretations and opposition in medieval Latin Christendom. Everybody agreed that the divine intersected with the material, but to what extent a holy image or object participated in the divinity it represented was theologically such a complicated question that even Thomas Aquinas displayed discomfort when discussing it. Orthodox theologians could very well agree that images or relics were signs pointing to their divine exemplar and thus directing the devotion of the faithful. The actual presence of divine power in material objects was much more difficult to explain in scholastic terms, and yet there was no denying it. In the eyes of the faithful, both clerical and lay – or at least the majority of them – it was the objects that were the bearer of the holy, be it a relic in the pilgrimage site or blessed herbs to ward off evil.<sup>2</sup>

Some misinterpretations, though persistent and common, were not deemed dangerous. For many of the faithful, the distinctions of materiality in sacraments (baptismal water as prerequisite for the sacrament), in sacramentals (herbs, candles and water blessed on certain feast days and used, for example, in healing) and other holy or magical objects not consecrated by a priest were not clear, and all these were used for theurgic purposes. This disturbed some theologians, but the practices went on.<sup>3</sup> Yet sometimes interests conflicted and contesting interpretations were sorted out. This happened, for example, when reformers or visitors from outside disapproved of cults promoted by a local clerical and lay elite. In the late middle ages, a typical example is the *Dauerwunder*, that is, hosts bleeding or resembling human flesh, often suspected of frauds or superstition.<sup>4</sup>

The participants in the above-mentioned malpractices were deemed to be misinformed at worst. There were, however, more dangerous propositions: condemned, dissident and heretical. This article is about these radical alternatives. From the beginning of the conflict between dissident groups and the high and late medieval Catholic Church, the tangible holy objects were a point of disagreement. Bishop Gérard of Cambrai was forced to explicate the presence of divine power in baptismal water and relics to the dissidents in Arras in 1025, although, according to Guy Lobrichon, there were no absolute contradictions in the respective interpretations of the bishop and the heretics.<sup>5</sup> The violent opposition of Peter of Bruis to the crucifix in the

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<sup>2</sup> BYNUM 2011, 153–55.

<sup>3</sup> BYNUM 2011, 147, 151–53; the fundamental work on sacramentals and other blessings is still FRANZ 1909, vol. 1; see also SCRIBNER 1984.

<sup>4</sup> One of the famous sceptics was the scholar, reformer and bishop Nicolas of Cusa, see RINSER 2013, 203 et passim; On the famous case in Wilsnack, see BYNUM 2011, 171–74.

<sup>5</sup> LOBRICHON 1999, 101–5.

twelfth century as well as the rigorous anti-materialism of Cathars<sup>6</sup> in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century are well known, and their story has been often told.<sup>7</sup> In the later middle ages, it was the destruction of relics and images by the Hussites in Bohemia and Lollards in England that caused terror in conventional Catholic clergy.<sup>8</sup> The Viennese scholar Thomas Ebendorfer wrote in his chronicle of the bishops of Passau, composed in the 1450s, about heretics “who, aroused by the hate of clergy, defile all the ecclesiastical sacraments, pollute holy temples and, fallen to all kinds of crimes, these men who do not live in accordance with nature are not afraid to perform any cruelty, as Bohemian fury in our unhappy times, infected by this Waldensian pestilence, has demonstrated as clearly as day in its deeds.”<sup>9</sup>

It is the Waldensians of the late fourteenth century and their opposition, real and imagined, to material cult objects and images that is the subject of the present article. Interestingly but not surprisingly, they were far less radical and violent than in the description by Thomas Ebendorfer more than a half century later. As we shall see, some of them venerated images and consumed blessed matter, although in principle they were supposed to disavow those practices. The views of the late-fourteenth-century Waldensians are revealed in inquisitorial documents, treatises and shorter descriptions that were produced in the course of the persecutions all over German-speaking Europe from ca. 1390 till 1404.<sup>10</sup> The most accurate texts originate from the inquisitorial proceedings as well as from literary works of the Celestine provincial Petrus Zwicker.<sup>11</sup> Especially important are the 195 protocols that have survived from the more than 450 interrogations conducted by Zwicker in the Pomeranian town of Stettin in 1392–1394.<sup>12</sup>

The movement of Waldensians, often known as the ‘Poor of Lyons’ (*Pauperes de Lugduno*), had its roots in the conversion of a merchant called Valdés or Valdesius in Lyon in the early 1170s. Valdés and his followers wanted to imitate Christ and Apostles as poor, itinerant lay preachers. They, however, crossed the ecclesiastic authorities and were consequently excommunicated and declared heretical in 1184. Nevertheless, the movement spread and survived despite occasional persecution. In the later Middle Ages, the Waldensians had strong support areas in Piedmont, Lombardy and around Germanophone Europe from Fribourg in Switzerland to Stettin in Pomerania and Austria and Hungary in the south.<sup>13</sup> The late medieval German Waldensians differed both in organisation and in doctrine from the rather undefined *imitatio apostolorum* practiced by Valdés and his followers. By the end of the fourteenth century, they consisted of groups of laymen and – women sympathetic to Waldensian beliefs, who confessed their sins to and listened to the preaching of itinerant lay preachers and confessors, called ‘brethren’ or ‘masters’. These had committed themselves to poverty, chastity and pastoral care, moving in pairs and visiting Waldensian communities dispersed in a large geographic area. The late medieval Waldensian doctrine was more sharply anticlerical and at odds with the Catholic teachings than early Waldensianism. The late medieval Waldensians denied

<sup>6</sup> I am fully aware of the problems with the nomenclature of dualist heretics in the medieval Western Europe. Since no alternative, convenient shorthand term has won general acceptance, I have resorted to the common practice of acknowledging the problem and then using ‘Cathar’. Cf. most recently SPARKS 2014, xi; SENNIS 2016.

<sup>7</sup> In general, see LAMBERT 2009, 52–56; 115–57; For recent discussions of Cathar dualism, see TAYLOR 2013; ARNOLD 2016, see also BYNUM 2011, 163–64.

<sup>8</sup> On Lollard iconoclasm, see ASTON 1988, 96–159.

<sup>9</sup> EBENDORFER 2008, 227–28.

<sup>10</sup> While there is no comprehensive treatment of the prosecutions of German heretics in the last decade of the fourteenth century, the best survey is offered by MODESTIN 2007a, 1–12; see also KOLPACOFF 2000, 247–61; VÄLIMÄKI 2019, 32–37.

<sup>11</sup> On Zwicker’s career and life, see VÄLIMÄKI 2019, 22–37; MODESTIN 2010; SEGL 2006, 165–66.

<sup>12</sup> Edited in summarized form in KURZE 1975, 77–261.

<sup>13</sup> On Medieval Waldensians in general, see GONNET & MOLNÁR 1974; SCHNEIDER 1981; AUDISIO 1999; CAMERON 2000; BILLER 2001a.

the cult of saints and Virgin Mary, as well as relics, claiming that the saints were unable or uninterested to intervene on behalf of the living. They also rebuked the wealth of the Church and the worldly lifestyle of its prelates. They adhered word for word to biblical morals, including the rejection of taking oaths and capital punishment. An integral part of Waldensian teachings was the denial of the existence of Purgatory, and consequently masses and prayers for the dead as well as indulgences. They likewise considered many material aspects of the medieval Christian cult, such as blessed water, images, church buildings, graveyards, or vestments of the priest to be superfluous and pernicious.<sup>14</sup>

It is the last aspect of Waldensianism that is discussed in the present article. In theory, the late medieval Waldensian Brethren, at least in Germany, deemed all material aspects of worship invalid. Thus, holy water or blessed salt was considered to be nothing more than ordinary water and salt. The knowledge of this prohibition was demonstrated by the average Waldensian followers when interrogated by an inquisitor. Nevertheless, many of them had continued, for example, to sprinkle of holy water. Sometimes this was without doubt done in order to assimilate to the surrounding community, but some of those interrogated clearly stated that they believed in the beneficial effects of blessed material objects, despite the teachings of the Brethren. This ‘double heresy’ enables us to pin down the meanings assigned to the tangible religion, by those interrogated as well as by the interrogators.

Interpreting lay beliefs from inquisitorial and polemical sources is far from simple. Indeed, it involves the most crucial question in heresy studies during the past four decades: should we regard heresies and heretics primarily as polemical constructions of their enemies, Catholic prelates projecting their own fears and models of patristic literature on to the dissidents of their own time? Or can we find, behind the hostile descriptions, a genuine dissident theology and organised groups challenging the Catholic Church?<sup>15</sup> My own approach lies between the extremes.<sup>16</sup> It is certainly true that Waldensianism as a distinct, idealised doctrinal system exists only in the polemical constructions by inquisitors and theologians, and in some reconstructions by modern historians. However, as Peter Biller has forcefully argued, there is no denying that the medieval Waldensians were a real dissident group with their own sense of identity, history and doctrine.<sup>17</sup> In the particular group studied in this article, the late medieval German Waldensians, we can observe migration between different, geographically distant Waldensian communities,<sup>18</sup> as well as Brethren who served the spiritual needs of their flock from the Pomeranian countryside to Austria, Rhineland and Swiss cities.<sup>19</sup> The Waldensians made the distinction themselves: they called themselves ‘the known’ (*die Künden/notos*), and those outside their group ‘the strangers’ (*die Fremden/alienos*).<sup>20</sup> Part of this distinct, heretical religious profession was the (theoretical) rejection of material objects of devotion, from images of the saints to sacramentals intended for the personal use of the faithful. As I will argue in the conclusion of this article, careful analysis of dissident approaches to material religion not

<sup>14</sup> On the doctrine and organization of the late-fourteenth-century German Waldensians, see KURZE 1968, 77–91; CAMERON 2000, 125–39; BILLER 2001b; SEGL 2006, 163–75; MODESTIN 2007a, 124–47.

<sup>15</sup> It is not possible to cover this discussion in this essay. ARNOLD 2016 offers a balanced overview of this historiographical and methodological debate.

<sup>16</sup> VÄLIMÄKI 2019, 18–21.

<sup>17</sup> BILLER 2006; On the Waldensian sense of identity, see also AUDISIO 2004.

<sup>18</sup> MODESTIN 2007b, 2.

<sup>19</sup> For example, the Brethren Konrad of Saxony and Klaus of Solothurn appear in depositions both in Stettin and in Strasbourg, see KURZE 1968, 79–80; Cf. MODESTIN 2007a, 121; In Fribourg there are no names of the Brethren mentioned, but there are references to their German and Bohemian origin, UTZ TREMP 2000, 53.

<sup>20</sup> The distinction is prominent in Stettin protocols, and discussed e.g. in CAMERON 2000, 131; cf. BILLER 2001b, 282–83.

only provides new insights into the question of holy matter but can also do justice to the messiness and complexity of late medieval dissident lay beliefs.

### The Sacramentals that were Denied

In terms of tangible religion, the most intriguing part of the Waldensian criticism of the Church was the condemnation of the sacramentals. These included for example herbs, candles and water blessed on certain feast days, and they were used by faithful for healing purposes and as a protection against demons. Although the sacramentals were blessed by a priest in church, their use often took place in domestic spaces by lay persons, outside the supervision of the clergy. Moreover, the sacramentals required intense involvement with the divine through matter: baptismal water was sprinkled on top of oneself and blessed salts were eaten. However disturbing it was to some medieval theologians, the majority of the faithful held that the words of the blessing added to the matter a physical efficacy which in turn was transferred to the person who consumed it.<sup>21</sup>

The explicit denial of the material sacramentals is a particularity of the late-fourteenth-century Waldensians, while the general criticism of church buildings and their decorations and images, as well as of clerical vestments and ornaments, can be found repeatedly in the descriptions of Waldensians at least from the thirteenth century onwards. These opinions should be understood as conclusions derived either from literal biblicism (the Old Testament prohibition of images) or from the opposition to ecclesiastical property and the worldly lifestyle of the prelates. This was also observed by the contemporary orthodox authors. The Anonymous of Passau, writing in Austria around 1260, comments on Waldensians' condemnation of decorations in churches: "They say the decoration in a church to be a sin, and that it would be better to clothe the poor than the walls."<sup>22</sup> However, the condemnation of blessed water (other than baptismal water), candles, ash, palm-leaves or herbs is only rarely present in the thirteenth-century German treatises exposing the Waldensian doctrine and way of life. Only the Pseudo-Reinerius redaction of the Anonymous of Passau treatise lists various blessings among the ecclesiastical practices that the heretics condemn.<sup>23</sup> Nor does Moneta of Cremona, who composed perhaps the longest medieval treatise against heretics in Lombardy around 1240, discuss sacramentals in his *Adversus Catharos et Valdenses*.<sup>24</sup> And the sacramentals are not mentioned in the short treatise against Waldensians known by its incipit as *Attendite a falsis prophetis* that was composed in the German context in the late fourteenth century, at the latest by 1390.<sup>25</sup>

The sacramentals appear on the stage, to my best knowledge, in the 1390s. The earliest appearance is in the list of errors compiled in Mainz, according to Jennifer Kolpacoff, soon after September 1390. The seventeen articles of faith include the affirmation "that the blessed water and the salt of the exorcism have

<sup>21</sup> BYNUM 2011, 147 et passim; SCRIBNER 1984, 69–71.

<sup>22</sup> *Ornatum ecclesie dicunt peccatum, et quod melius esset vestire pauperes quam parietes*. PATSCHOVSKY – SELGE 1973, 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Item omnes dedicationes, benedictiones et consecrationes candelarum, cinerum, palmarum, crismatis, ignis, cerei, agni paschalis, mulierum post partum, peregrinorum, sacrorum locorum, sacrarum personarum, vestium, salis et aque derident*. NICKSON 1967, 301.

<sup>24</sup> Moneta, writing primarily against Cathars, treats materiality in several chapters, but from the anti-dualist point of view. Baptismal water received its own chapter, but all the arguments are directed against Cathars, not against Waldensians, see MONETA (CREMONENSIS) 1743, Lib. 2, Cap. 2, 116–129; Lib. 4, Cap. 1, § iii, 279–283; On Moneta's treatise, see SACKVILLE 2011, 14–15; SACKVILLE 2016.

<sup>25</sup> On the dating of the treatise, see BILLER 1974, 261, 365; BILLER 2001b, 290; VÄLIMÄKI 2019, 18. Since Biller studied the treatise in 1970s, it has been edited by Romolo Cegna, but mistakenly attributed to a Silesian inquisitor and dated, likewise erroneously, to 1399. See CEGNA 1982. I have checked the treatise from the manuscript Sankt Florian XI 152, 48v–50v.

no effect for salvation.”<sup>26</sup> A similar question is then asked by the inquisitor Petrus Zwicker in Stettin 1392–1394. Not surprisingly, we find questions concerning blessed water, salt, herbs and other consecrated matter in the two questionnaires that can be connected to Petrus Zwicker’s inquisitorial process.<sup>27</sup> It appears also in the list of Waldensian errors, *Articuli Waldensium*, that circulated in Zwicker’s inquisitorial material,<sup>28</sup> and in another 1390s list of Waldensian tenets.<sup>29</sup> The Waldensian attack on the consecrated objects features in Zwicker’s letter to the Austrian Habsburg dukes, written in 1395 in order to secure their help in the battle against heresy. Zwicker not only lists as separate errors the refusal to venerate the instruments of Christ’s passion and death, from the Crown of Thorns to the Holy Sepulchre (articles 41–55) and the denial of the sanctity in baptismal water and sacramentals (articles 59–63), but he also claims that the Waldensians condemn the plant ornaments, clothing and lights that the faithful use in processions.<sup>30</sup> Without doubt, the inquisitor wanted to make sure that the dukes, and everybody else who would read or hear the letter, would be convinced that the Waldensians threatened everything that was deemed holy and dear by the good Christians. A great deal of this was material and tangible.

Moreover, Zwicker gives theoretical and theological treatment to the validity of sacramentals and the consecration of other material objects and buildings in his long, polemical treatise against Waldensians, written in the middle of his inquisitorial career in 1395 and known as *Cum dormirent homines*, “When men were asleep.”<sup>31</sup> The foundation of his defence was also one of the cornerstones of Christian materiality and materialism of the later middle ages: Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, when wine and bread are transformed through the words of the consecrating priest. This, according to Zwicker, proves that the words of consecration and benediction have the capacity to bring sanctity into the consecrated matter.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the *Refutatio errorum*, another draft-like treatise by Zwicker that closely resembles the *Cum dormirent homines*, has a chapter discussing the sanctity in material objects, but it is much more conservative and closer to thirteenth-century examples in the objects it mentions. In this earlier treatise, Zwicker lists only churches, their bell-towers, bells, and decorations of altars, cemeteries, organs and especially clerical vestments.<sup>33</sup>

After Mainz and Stettin, the same belief appears in Alsace. Those interrogated in the preliminary investigation in Strasbourg 1400 revealed that Waldensians had no faith in the blessed water and generally in the things blessed by the priests. Nevertheless, they received the water and sprinkled it on bread or cakes

<sup>26</sup> For the edition of the list, see KOLPACOFF 2000, 283–84, for the dating 158.

<sup>27</sup> The shorter interrogatory, used probably in Stettin, has *Credidisti, ecclesiasticam sepulturam, aquam benedictam, sal consecratum, herbas, palmas, cineres, candelas, [--] hec omnia esse sancta et catholica?* See KURZE 1975, 74; The longer interrogatory has: *Aspersisti te aqua benedicta, gustavisti sal benedictum? Habes herbas et palmas benedictas in domo et candelam?* See edition in WERNER 1963, 273. On the two interrogatories and Zwicker’s use of them, see VÄLIMÄKI 2019, 109, 116–19.

<sup>28</sup> *Item quidquid benedicatur ab episcopis et presbyteris, siue, sit ipsa ecclesia, siue fons baptismali, sal, aqua, herbe, cimiteria, paramenta, palme, candele, dicunt penitus von valere et si quandocumque intersunt, hoc faciunt ne notentur.* WERNER 1963, 268.

<sup>29</sup> Augsburg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. II. 1. 2° 78, 245vb: *Item minime curant de aqua benedicta et de aliis misse huius ceremoniis ecclesie.*

<sup>30</sup> PREGER 1877, 247, Article 37: *Item damnant et reprobant ornamenta florum et graminum, vestium et luminarium, que Christi fideles in ipsa processione faciunt ad dei laudem.*

<sup>31</sup> See esp. Cap. 15: *De incredulitate vestium sacerdotium, salis & aquae, cinerum & aliorum* in ZWICKER 1677, 291F–92C.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 291G. Cf. BYNUM 2011, 156–58, 241–42, 250, 270.

<sup>33</sup> Gdańsk, PAN Mar F. 295, f. 215vb: *Item dicunt ecclesiarum dedicationes esse irracionales et edificaciones turrium, ecclesiarum, campanarum, ornatuum altarium, consecraciones cyminteriorum [sic], cantus organorum et plurima ymmo quasi omnia que pro sollempnitatibus fiunt in ecclesia dampnant, reprobant dicentes esse pompas et superbias deo displicitas. [--216ra] Item de ornatu vestimentorum sacerdotium. Respondetur, quod ad mandatum domini moyses fecit fere aaron et filiis eius vestimenta sacerdotalia [--]; cf. MONETA (CREMONENSIS) 1743, 454–55 (on church buildings), 457 (clerical vestments), 458–59 (church music), 459 (incenses); PATSCHOVSKY – SELGE 1973, 94–97 (church buildings, decorations, church music, incense, imagines). On Zwicker’s authorship of the *Refutatio errorum* and the different redactions of the work, see VÄLIMÄKI 2019, 39–64.*

(*die fladen*) “so that, if somebody asked if the thing was blessed, they could then answer ‘Yes’”.<sup>34</sup> And as in Stettin some years earlier, not all Waldensians in Strasbourg disapproved of these practices, or they were at least uncertain about their position.<sup>35</sup> Also, even before the Strasbourg trials and roughly contemporary to the trials in Stettin, the Waldensian opposition to blessing of objects is to be found in the list of errors from Augsburg, where the persecution was led by the inquisitor Heinrich Angermeyer in 1393.<sup>36</sup>

Was the Waldensian opposition to sacramentals originally an invention of the inquisitors, imposed by them on the interrogated Waldensians, perhaps adopted from the error list in the Pseudo-Reinerius? This would be a probable explanation of the sudden appearance of this ‘error’, first in Mainz and then elsewhere, if the depositions from Stettin did not indicate that this opinion originated from the teachings of the Waldensian Brethren. Heyne Tramburch, a sixty-year-old Waldensian, even remembered the name of the preacher who had prohibited the consummation of salt and blessed water as well as the singing of *den leyse*, which apparently was a processional song sung when carrying relics.<sup>37</sup> This heresiarch was Nicolaus Gotschalk, also known as Clauss de Brandenburg. What makes his role significant is that he was not only one of the most important Brethren who visited Stettin and its surroundings, but was also one of the Waldensians who had converted to Catholicism around 1391. After his conversion, he became a Catholic priest in Vienna and even witnessed there an abjuration of heretics, supervised by Zwicker in 1404.<sup>38</sup> Petrus Zwicker was involved in the conversion of these Waldensians in 1391, and the accurate knowledge he had about Waldensian doctrine and customs was most likely due to the discussions with these converts.<sup>39</sup> Now, it seems that the denial of blessed material objects was included in the pastoral instructions given by the Waldensian Brethren to their followers at the end of the fourteenth century. It was certainly not the core of their message, but it was taught, and the teachings were remembered. When Nicolaus Gotschalk and other converts revealed their knowledge of Waldensianism to the inquisitors, they in turn updated their apparatus of questions to include this article. Zwicker also updated the *Cum dormirent homines* to refute this teaching, whereas the earlier, more compilatory *Refutatio errorum* had merely presented the oft-repeated criticism of church buildings, decorations and clerical vestments – an example that shows how the authors of anti-heretical polemics could adapt to new situations and did not simply repeat old *topoi*.

### Belief, Unbelief and Sacred Matter

How then, was this discussion (sometimes real, but mostly merely rhetorical, taking place in treatises) between the inquisitor and the heresiarchs observable on the level of Waldensian laity? When we investigate the reasons for practiced material religion among Waldensians, we encounter a difficult question of belief. What did

<sup>34</sup> “umbe daz, frogete sie jaman, obe ir dinge gewihet werent, daz sie danne mohtent sprechen ‘Jo’”. MODESTIN 2007b, 171 [K145]; See also MODESTIN 2007a, 127, 131.

<sup>35</sup> MODESTIN 2007a, 147.

<sup>36</sup> *Item de consecratione Ecclesiarum, caemeteriorum, palmarum, herbarum, salis, candelarum & aliarum rerum juxta ritum Ecclesiae statutorum nihil omnino credebant*. OEFELE 1763, 620; See also KIESSLING 1971, 317; on the trials in Augsburg, see MODESTIN 2011; SMELYANSKY 2016.

<sup>37</sup> *Item quod audiverit predicaciones eorum, respondit, quod sic et maxime a Nicolao Gotschalg, qui inhibuit eis sal et aquam benedictam etc. et cum reliquiis cantare den leyse*. KURZE 1975, 164–65. ‘Leyse’ or ‘Leise’ could refer to various songs sung by the congregation. Also, Grete Doerynk remembered that the Brethren had prohibited the acceptance and use of sacramentals, see KURZE 1975, 198.

<sup>38</sup> Gotschalk, his conversion and his family connections to Stettin have been discussed by KURZE 1968, 79–81; on his later involvement in inquisition, see BILLER 1974, 372.

<sup>39</sup> KURZE 1968, 70–71; BILLER 2001b, 272.

Waldensian laymen and -women think when they sprinkled holy water or consumed blessed salts? Did they believe in it or doubt it, or did they perhaps outrightly disavow it? This, not coincidentally, was also the question asked by the inquisitor. Petrus Zwicker's interrogatory asks about the sacramentals, blessed objects, relics and many other practices: "Did you believe this all to be holy and Catholic?"<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the historian must take care not to ask the same questions in a thought-policing way, not to stand beside the inquisitor.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, by setting aside or bypassing the question of belief, this treacherous, immaterial and hard-to-define phenomenon, we may also do injustice to our objects of inquiry. This danger has been identified by Steven Justice with regard to the saints' lives and by Christine Caldwell Ames regarding the inquisition of heresy. From different perspectives, these scholars have showed how there is a tendency in the study of miracle stories and of the inquisition to explain religious discourse as a sign of something else, something that is more comfortable and less disturbing to us than belief and faith: the quest for political power, real or cultural capital, or attempts to maintain ideological hegemony.<sup>42</sup>

How then should a scholar address something as personal and inaccessible as belief? Justice proposes that we look at the medieval concept of belief in order to find ways of explaining and understanding it. He has proposed, on the basis of Thomas Aquinas's theology and of examples from hagiography, that doubt was an integral part of medieval belief, even a prerequisite for believing in something miraculous that defied common sense. By definition, *credere* was to knowingly believe in something that could not be grasped. The belief needed to be interrogated and questioned, and then be assented to, and this was done constantly, whether by university theologians or by laity without a formal education. This view has been more recently endorsed and applied to the study of material religion by Caroline W. Bynum. Concerning the things such as Eucharist, holy images or blessed objects, there is tension in religious reactions, and it exists at every social level.<sup>43</sup> John H. Arnold, in his study of belief and unbelief in medieval Europe, has come to similar conclusions, proposing that there existed large, messy discussions at all levels of society concerning the faith, and that this is observable to us only in rare cases, such as when heresy was suspected.<sup>44</sup>

This doubt, inquiry and negotiation is what I see happening among the Waldensian laity. This tension by no means was exclusively with Catholic practices. There is more than enough evidence to show that the heretical laity who were interrogated also took much what was said by their heresiarchs with a grain of salt. Sometimes, they even entirely refused to comply. Katherina, the wife of Hans Mews from the village of Selchow, was called to the inquisitor towards the end of the trials in Stettin, in March 1394. She confessed that she had once, at the invitation and urging of a certain woman called Mette, attended a meeting where a heresiarch had preached. When it was Katherina's turn to confess privately to this heresiarch, she decided to challenge him: "And she had previously heard from a certain priest, that one must not act according to their [heretics'] word, and that they taught that one is not allowed to have blessed candles. Therefore she [Katherina] asked, if it were good to have this kind of candle. And he [the heresiarch] [said] No."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> KURZE 1975, 74: *Credidisti [--] hec omnia esse sancta et catholica.*

<sup>41</sup> Regarding the danger of standing with the inquisitor despite the historian's wish to stand with the deponent, see ARNOLD 2001, 14–15.

<sup>42</sup> JUSTICE 2008; Ames first expressed this concern in her essay, see AMES 2005. Following this program, she later demonstrated how persecuting heretics was an integral part of devotional life in the Dominican Order, see AMES 2009.

<sup>43</sup> JUSTICE 2008; BYNUM 2011, 130 et passim.

<sup>44</sup> ARNOLD 2011, 27–28.

<sup>45</sup> KURZE 1975, 250: *et ipsa audivisset prius a quodam sacerdote, quod secundum verbum eorum non deberet facere, et quod candelas benedictas non liceret habere, docerent; quare ipsa interrogaverit, an eciam bonum esset habere huiusmodi candelas, et ipse: non.*

The rest or the exchange between the heresiarch (whose name is never mentioned) and Katherina is difficult to piece together from the cryptic protocol, but apparently the heresiarch asked her to keep her mouth shut about what she had witnessed. In any case, the result was that Katherina never confessed to the heresiarch. She also said that she may have done so, if it had been daytime, but that she was very afraid at night because of the lack of light.<sup>46</sup> Nor, according to her oath, did she confess on any later occasion to a Waldensian Brother. She was rewarded for this by the inquisitor, as one of the two persons released from the Stettin trials with their reputation cleared from accusations of heresy. We have here a laywoman who seems to have balanced between and then chosen from two conflicting theological authorities: Catholic priest and Waldensian Brother. Katherina chose the former, and in her case it was the material, tangible religion that weighed more heavily in the scale: she was afraid that by committing herself to a Waldensian way of life, she would not be allowed to take home the blessed candles.

Many, however, decided to uphold the Waldensian position, and denied that blessed material objects could possess any power beneficial to souls. A man called Cuene Hutvilther had not believed that blessed water, salt and ashes (and so on), possessed any worth or power beyond their matter.<sup>47</sup> Another Katherina, the wife of Heyne Fricze, had heard from the Brethren that the blessed objects were contrary to the faith and inventions of the clergy.<sup>48</sup> A woman called Sophya did not think that the blessed water, salt, palm-leaves, herbs, candles or the sound of the church bells possessed any more sanctity than they would have had without consecration.<sup>49</sup> A similar position was held by Sybert Curaw, who incidentally had led the opposition against the inquisitor and was the last person interrogated and absolved in Stettin.<sup>50</sup> What seems to be at stake here is precisely the transformation of the material objects through the words of the priest. The protocols are frustrating in their concise, laconic formulation, and we are unable to access the underlying belief behind Sophya's deposition. It could have been a simple suspicion of rituals practiced by the clergy, or a more fundamental conviction that words are unable to convey sanctity into matter. The inquisitor clearly interpreted this and other similar statements as the latter, to his great dismay. Regarding the blessings of various sacramentals, ecclesiastical buildings and even the consecration of the priests, the Celestine inquisitor laments that the Waldensians claim that "these consecrated things do not acquire any sanctity at all from these words, even if the words as such were holy and good."<sup>51</sup> Zwicker then continues his exposition at a very general doctrinal level: are rational or irrational things able to attain sanctity at all? According to Zwicker this was doubtless the case, but the position of the Church was not as clear as the inquisitor presented it to be. While it was in practice granted that the sacramentals and other blessings had physical effects, theologians as influential as Bonaventure had held that the blessing adds nothing to the matter: "in the consecration no new quality is given to a church."<sup>52</sup>

Many Waldensians did not believe in sacramentals, but accepted them from churches and sprinkled the holy water in order not to draw attention to themselves.<sup>53</sup> Others did not believe in them, but continued

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. *et sibi confessa fuisset, si dies fuisset, sed in nocte maxime perterrebat propter ablacionem luminis in commodo, ubi sedebat.*

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 147–48.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 129–31.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 219–20: *Item de aqua benedicta, sale, palmis, herbis, candelis, de pulsu campanarum nichil credidit, quod plus sanctitatis in se haberent, quam si non essent consecrate.*

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 260: *Item quod sal, cineres, palmas etc. non crediderit meliora benedicta quam alia a natura.*

<sup>51</sup> ZWICKER 1677, 291F–G: *Dicentes illas taliter consecratas nil omnino singularis sanctitatis ex illis verbis percipere, licet verba in se sancta sint et bona.*

<sup>52</sup> *in qua consecratione ecclesiae non datur nova qualitas*, cit. in FRANZ 1909, 29. See also SCRIBNER 1984, 68.

<sup>53</sup> KURZE 1975, 86, 157, 173, 205, 210, 258.



the practice out of habit.<sup>54</sup> Heyne Vilter the Younger, apparently a prominent member of the local Waldensians who had drawn the attention of the diocesan officials already in the previous decade, took a defiant position in his hearing and declared to the inquisitor that he had not used the holy water to get rid of the sins, but had instead sprinkled it to his face in summer in order to cool himself.<sup>55</sup> A similar derision of the blessed water was expressed by an elderly man named Heyncze Wegener.<sup>56</sup> While some of these answers are probably reactions to explicit inquiries made by the inquisitor,<sup>57</sup> it is nevertheless clear that Waldensians around Stettin had widespread suspicion about the efficacy of blessed objects.

This opposition, however, was not universal and monolithic. Several deponents who subscribed to the Waldensian teachings and life-style, some of whom even had relatively accurate knowledge of Waldensian doctrine, also continued to accept, consume and use sacramentals, and not only in order to hide their true beliefs. Grete Doerynk remembered that Waldensian Brethren had prohibited the use of blessed water and salt, because “they did not help”. Grete believed this of the salt, but not of the blessed water.<sup>58</sup> Yet another Katherina, the wife of a weaver, had sprinkled holy water on herself. She was ambivalent (or opportunistic) about its powers, believing, on the one hand, that it did not remove sin. On the other hand, she thought that if it helped other people in this, perhaps it would also help her. And if it did not help, neither did it do any harm (apparently because it was acceptable to use it for concealment).<sup>59</sup> A forty-years-old wife, Tylls Ermgart, was firmly Waldensian, having yearly confessed to the Brethren. She adhered to Waldensian tenets and, for example, completely denied the intercession of the saints on behalf of the living. Nevertheless, the notary wrote down that, of the blessed water and similar objects as well as of the church music “she understood in the Catholic way”.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, two deponents did not believe in any spiritual effects of the holy water, but somehow considered it to be unlike normal water, and stated that it did not go stale so quickly.<sup>61</sup>

However, the most intriguing of all the statements concerning blessed or holy objects was made by Mette Döryngische, a widow more than ninety years old, who believed that holy water and salt could take away sins, and yet she knew from the “doctrine of the heresiarchs”, that these were not valid for this purpose. When the inquisitor Petrus Zwicker accused her of having “two faiths” (*duas fides*), she explained, to the dismay of the inquisitor and the notary, that “they [the faiths] are obscure and therefore illuminated by heavy expenses and work”.<sup>62</sup> Apparently, after reaching the age of nearly one hundred years, one can afford to school the inquisitor in the subtleties of theology.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 91–93: *Interrogatus, quod crediderit de aqua benedicta, sale, cineribus etc., respondit, quod panem bene crediderit benedici et quod plus asperserit se aqua benedicta in estate quam in yeme, ut infrigidaret sibi faciem, non quod aliqua peccata sibi deleteret.*

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 160–61.

<sup>57</sup> The longer of the two interrogatories that can be traced to Zwicker takes into account the possibility of attempted concealment in the use of sacramentals: *Aspersisti te aqua benedicta, gustavisti sal benedictum? Habes herbas et palmas benedictas in domo et candelam? Fecisti talia puro corde sicut alii homines christiani, quos tu alienos, id est di ffremden nominas uel fecisti solummodo talia ad ostentacionem, ne notareris?* See WERNER 1963, 273.

<sup>58</sup> KURZE 1975, 197–98: *Item quod prohibuerint eam aquam benedictam, sal etc. recipere, quia non iuarent, et hoc non crediderit de aqua, sed de sale sic.*

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 209–10: *Item quod se asperserit aqua benedicta, non credens, ad delecionem peccati aliquid facere, sed si alios iuaret eciam ipsam, et si non, eam non inpediret propter homines.*

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 161–62: *Item de aqua benedicta etc. et cantu ecclesiastico katholice sapuit.*

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 119–20, 222–23; see also CAMERON 2000, 135.

<sup>62</sup> KURZE, 1975, 154–55: *Item aquam benedictam, sal etc. receperit et crediderit ad delecionem peccati valere, et ex doctrinis heresiarcarum, quod non, et addidit racionem, cum fuisset redarguta, qualiter duas fides habuisset, dicens, quia – proch dolor! – essent exce(ca)ti et iam quare illuminari gravibus expensis et laboribus.*

Mette's position in relation to orthodox and heretical doctrines was perhaps unusually explicated and independent, but nevertheless a part of the general spectrum of interpretations revealed in the Stettin protocols. Waldensian laypersons attended heretical meetings as well as official services. They listened to both Waldensian Brethren and parish priests. Some denied the Catholic cult and customs completely, and even derided them. Others were closer to their Catholic neighbours than to heretical preachers, and many more occupied the grey area in between. Even when committing themselves to one or another doctrine, they did not do so without questioning, doubting and choosing. Dietrich Kurze remarked already in the 1960s that a whole scale of interpretations was possible for the Waldensians in Stettin, from the borders of Catholicism to aggressive polemic against the Church.<sup>63</sup> Euan Cameron has since further elaborated this, and rightly pointed out that the persons making statements contradictory to the teachings of the Brethren were not misinformed or marginal individuals, but important members of the community.<sup>64</sup> This was by no means exclusively a Waldensian phenomenon. The renewed interest in the lived religion of the non-elite members of the Cathar movement has shown that there too, some ardent supporters of the heretics also challenged them in important items of faith, such as baptism and marriage, and navigated their own way between the church and the "good men".<sup>65</sup>

The Catholic practices among Waldensians have been explained either as a survival strategy of a persecuted minority in a hostile society, or as deriving from the constant, irresistible influence of the surrounding Catholicism, or simply as a result of a poor level of theological understanding on the part of some Waldensian followers.<sup>66</sup> All this is true in the case of some Waldensian laypersons, but by no means of all. There were many who evidently disapproved, and even felt contempt towards Catholic rituals and kept their participation to a minimum required in order to avoid persecution. However, the examples above bear witness to several deponents who actively chose some Catholic, some Waldensian practices and perhaps somewhat doubted both. Moreover, what is (consciously or not) presupposed in the studies quoted above is that there existed some kind of ideal Waldensianism that was preferred by those who attended the sermons of Waldensian brethren and confessed to them, and that the syncretism displayed by the Waldensian followers was a diluted form of this. There seems to be at work here a phenomenon recently explored by Christine Caldwell Ames: the almost inescapable propensity of historians to sort and categorise religion into authentic and non-authentic, a tendency partly inherited from the inquisitors we study.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the picture drawn by modern historians comes surprisingly close to the view of the inquisitor Petrus Zwicker. When he wrote to the Austrian Habsburg dukes in 1395, asking for their support, he listed approximately 90 errors of Waldensians. At the end of the list he added, that "All and every heresiarch of the Waldensian sect believes in these heretical, damned and condemned articles, holds them and asserts them, but their believers do so to a greater or lesser degree, according to their capacities."<sup>68</sup> I do not pretend to be free of this propensity, but I have tried to shed some of it by making visible, as best as I can, the different forces, opinions, interpretations and practices at play in the sources, both Catholic and dissident – and by not assuming that either of them was uniform.

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<sup>63</sup> KURZE 1968, 84.

<sup>64</sup> CAMERON 2000, 134–37.

<sup>65</sup> SPARKS 2014, 5–6, 41, 109–11; TAYLOR 2013, 337.

<sup>66</sup> KURZE 1968, 84; BILLER 2001b, 203; SCHNEIDER 1981, 129; CAMERON 2000, 136; MODESTIN 2007a, 129.

<sup>67</sup> AMES 2014, 109–10 et passim.

<sup>68</sup> PREGER 1877, 249: *Hos articulos hereticos dampnatos et reprobatos tenent et credunt et asserunt omnes et singuli heresiarche secte Waldensium, sed credentes ipsorum pro suis capacitatibus plus et minus.*

## Conclusions

Defining lived religion is a messy and frustrating business, to the inquisitor as well as to the historian. A layperson could have decided from the preaching of the Waldensians that eating the blessed salt was superstitious and that the salt was in no way different from the ordinary salt. And yet he or she, like Grete Doerynk, could nevertheless simultaneously believe in the powers of the holy water to confer grace.

The Waldensian laity challenged the dominant practices of the Catholic culture with teachings they had learned from the Brethern, but they also, albeit to a lesser degree, challenged some parts of the Waldensian doctrine on the basis of what they have learned in their parish churches. We are able to catch a glimpse of this negotiation because these people were summoned before the inquisitor because of their Waldensian sympathies. In many ways, these contradictions emerged in the inquisition on heresy only when the deponents were confronted by the inquiry and were forced to discern their beliefs and juxtapose the sermons of the Waldensians to instructions of the clergy.

Along with the practiced material cult there was also widespread suspicion of the efficacy of blessed material. We cannot be sure if the Waldensian laity saw the relationship between blessings and blessed objects as the inquisitors thought they did: namely, that matter cannot be transformed into a vessel of sanctity. However, their disapproval of the practice should not be doubted. In a way, the tables are turned on our expectations of learned and lived religion. What we have here is the university-educated inquisitor belonging to an ascetic monastic order defending and promoting quasi-magical practices, and heretical laymen and -women doubting the link between words and matter, the very same doubt that was expressed by such figures as Bonaventure.

The link between matter and the divine was crucial to late medieval Christianity. It was also under criticism, negotiation and reaffirmation. Both the intellectual elite of the church and its outer margins took part in this messy discussion, and their positions were not always what we expect them to be. Waldensianism – and Catholicism, for that matter – had clear borders only in the polemical treatises.

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