Was Magic a Religious Movement

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Abstract
Few works of historical analysis manage to exert a fundamental influence over an entire field of study. Fewer still continue to do so for the better part of a century. Such, however, is the case with Herbert Grundmann's *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* and its pathbreaking identification of the issues framed by its long subtitle - *The Historical Links Between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*. In a seminal historicographical article in 1986, John Van Engen declared *Religiose Bewegungen* to be "the foundation for the historical study of [all] medieval religious life," and in the introduction to the English translation in 1995, Robert Lerner mustered a long list of eminent scholars who placed Grundmann at the very center of their respective fields of study within the history of medieval religion. In 2015, a series of panels that were organized to examine "Grundmann's legacy" at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at the University of Leeds revealed much nuancing and some outright rejection of portions of his arguments, but also much continued utility and vitality.

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WAS MAGIC A RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT?

Michael D. Bailey

Few works of historical analysis manage to exert a fundamental influence over an entire field of study. Fewer still continue to do so for the better part of a century. Such, however, is the case with Herbert Grundmann's *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* and its pathbreaking identification of the issues framed by its long subtitle—*The Historical Links Between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism.*¹ In a seminal historiographical article in 1986, John Van Engen declared *Religiöse Bewegungen* to be “the foundation for the historical study of [all] medieval religious life,” and in the introduction to the English translation in 1995, Robert Lerner mustered a long list of eminent scholars who placed Grundmann at the very center of their respective fields of study within the history of medieval religion.² In 2015, a series of panels that were organized to examine “Grundmann’s legacy” at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at the University of Leeds revealed much nuancing and some outright rejection of portions of his arguments, but also much continued utility and vitality.³

Among the many topics he covered, Grundmann did not address magic or magicians at any point in *Religious Movements,* nor might they immediately appear to fit into his model of religious history shaped by official ecclesiastical orders and defined heretical sects. The only magical sects that existed in the Middle Ages, after all, were the entirely imaginary ones that supposedly gathered at witches' sabbaths, and these first appeared only in the fifteenth century, outside the period of Grundmann’s main investigations. Scholars of late medieval magic and witchcraft rarely refer to Grundmann, although Richard Kieckhefer has noted the influence of Grundmann's important article “Ketzerverhöre des Spätmittelalters” on his now-classic study *European Witch Trials,* and Kathrin Utz Tremp has drawn on Grundmann’s “Der Typus des Ketzers” to frame
the analysis of "real" and "imaginary" sects in her monumental *Von der Häresie zur Hexerei.* Neither, however, engages directly with Grundmann's broader arguments about the nature of medieval religion.

Nevertheless, magic clearly could be included in the project that Grundmann advanced in *Religious Movements* in the sense that he endeavored to write an encompassing cultural history of medieval religion, conceived, after the manner of his mentor Walter Goetz, as "total history with an emphasis on intellectual history." His omission of magic might then be seen as an example of Grundmann's lack of attention to "mundane religious practices," as some later critics have noted, and his preference for focusing instead on highly motivated religious elites, whether they ultimately were categorized as orthodox or heretical. Of course, there were practitioners of magic among educated elites in the Middle Ages, but they never coalesced into a full-blown movement, in Grundmann's sense of the word, nor did contemporary critics ever cast them as such. Looking especially at the recent historiography of medieval magic, however, it is clear that many scholars have been engaging in a very Grundmannesque endeavor—namely, to explain how practices that have frequently been categorized as aberrant or even oppositional in fact fit coherently into the dominant cultural, intellectual, and religious systems of their time.

In this essay, I first consider how the history of magic reflects some of the larger historical dynamics of the medieval period. I then discuss the vexing issue of whether our limited and often clearly biased sources reveal actual magical practices that medieval people really performed, or whether they more often present us only with a magical *imaginaire* constructed by their authors, a point on which Grundmann can offer insight and guidance. Finally, I suggest how the actual religious movement identified by Grundmann, grounded in the *vita apostolica* and, in his analysis, instrumental in the formation of group identities but ultimately driven by individual and personal perceptions of what constituted true religiosity, informs the history of magic and in particular the dilemmas church authorities faced as they tried to differentiate magical practices from religious rites. Such efforts at discernment became especially intense in the late Middle Ages, after the period of Grundmann's main analysis, but they adhere to patterns that he would have recognized.

**Magic and the Dynamics of Medieval History**

Magic is an expansive subject, so much so that some scholars argue it should not be treated as a single, coherent category at all. In particular, the range of practices that could be classified as common, traditional, or everyday magic is
extremely broad. Experts cannot even agree on basic terminology or general demarcations. More coherent categories exist for various elite forms of magic, with details of their operations and intellectual framework laid out in texts written by proponents and practitioners, as well as by persecuting authorities. Here too, however, there is some debate about what range of practices should be grouped together. Should quasi sciences such as alchemy and astrology, for example, be kept apart from necromantic conjurations? While critical medieval authorities typically lumped these practices together in their condemnations of magic arts, since they suspected that demonic entanglements lay hidden within them all, careful research into codicological traditions has shown how texts containing naturalia frequently circulated separately from those dealing with ritual magic and spirit conjuring.

Because of this diversity, I cannot possibly replicate Grundmann's elegance and identify a single dynamic that fundamentally shaped the entire history of medieval magic. Nevertheless, as Richard Kieckhefer has insisted, magic does have a history, and that means it has been shaped by other historical developments. In the early Middle Ages, magic as it had been known and practiced in the late ancient world was reshaped by the forces of Christianization and subsequent, long-enduring concerns about residual paganism in European society. The history of magic was then dramatically affected by the intellectual revival of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Finally, although concerns about magic had always existed within Christianity, they increased considerably in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, driven in part by dynamics of reform that dominate so much of late medieval religious history.

From the earliest days of the church, Christian authorities linked magic to pagan practices. The church fathers declared that pagan deities were in fact Christian demons, and so in their analysis all pagan rites became inherently superstitious and magical. For many centuries, critical clergymen continued to frame magical practices as the residue of paganism not yet fully eradicated from the Christian world. Perhaps the most famous early medieval text dealing with magic, the canon Episcopi, encoded into ecclesiastical law around the beginning of the tenth century but believed by medieval authorities to date to the early fourth, described "wicked women, who have given themselves back to Satan and been seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons, [who] believe and profess that, in the hours of the night, they ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of the pagans." Because of this, they "wander from the right faith and return to the error of the pagans." Equally explicit is the mid-eighth-century Carolingian Indiculus superstitionum et pagnariarum, which, as one expert states, "stands at the core of any discussion of magic in the early medieval West." This simple list includes among its (presumably proscribed)
points "sacred rites of Mercury and Jupiter," "the observance of the pagans on the hearth or in the inception of any business," and "wooden feet or hands in a pagan rite." These are intermingled with points mentioning "amulets," "incantations," "auguries," and "diviners and sorcerers," and the belief that certain woman "command the moon, and that they may be able to take away the hearts of men, according to the pagans."14

It is important to note that the identification of magic with paganism, which initially stemmed from an age of real pagan-Christian competition, did not simply linger on as a trope in clerical writings as Northern Europe became more thoroughly Christianized. Rather, such connections were strongly reaffirmed from the late seventh and early eighth centuries onward, most likely owing to the greater emphasis on correct and uncorrupted forms of Christian piety advocated by Anglo-Saxon missionaries to the Continent and then by the powerful Carolingian reform movement within the Frankish church. These dynamics, and not simply a perduring Christian assertion that pagan rites were magical and magical rites were pagan, shaped characterizations of medieval magic down to the end of the first millennium.15 By the eleventh century, however, paganism no longer resonated as a threatening "other" against which Latin Christianity constructed itself, and it began to fade from conceptualizations and condemnations of magic. Some discourse about magic as pagan persisted through the later medieval period and even into the early modern, but this was increasingly an empty rhetoric, kept in place for the sake of tradition but not reflecting ongoing historical developments.

Of course, how much paganism really characterized magical rites as they may actually have been practiced in early medieval Europe is a subject of much debate. Yitzhak Hen has argued that church opposition had effectively eliminated most real pagan practices as early as the sixth century.16 Others maintain that to dismiss completely the myriad descriptions of at least a strong residue of pagan practices surviving into later centuries is to be "too pessimistic" about the possible veracity of our sources.17 Nor should we dismiss the possibility that clerical rhetoric could shape real practices. From the far better documented period of the Reformation, for example, we know that Protestant fulminations against certain Catholic practices such as supplication of Mary or the saints, or conversely reformers' valorization of biblical texts and "the word" itself, caused ordinary parishioners either to expunge or emphasize certain elements of common magic to create distinctly Protestant magical rites.18

Returning to the Middle Ages, and moving into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, scholars have long recognized how the general intellectual revival within Western Christendom during this period altered conceptions of magic, particularly among educated elites.19 Magical texts of considerable sophistica-
tion flowed into Europe from the Byzantine east and especially from the Muslim world, and scholars began to debate the nature of the occult forces that lay behind astrology, alchemy, astral image magic, the crafting of amulets and talismans, and the invocation of demons. Whereas earlier critics had lambasted magical practices as empty superstition or mere demonic trickery, able to ensnare only the feebleminded (a characteristic line from the canon Episcopi asked “who is so stupid and foolish as to think that all these things which are only done in spirit happen in the body”\textsuperscript{29}), opponents now saw magic as a very serious threat indeed. A clerical underworld of magic emerged in schools and later universities, and a magical demimonde developed at aristocratic courts as well.\textsuperscript{21}

In addition to new attitudes, new practices also emerged in this period. Both chiromancy (divination by reading lines in the palm) and spatulamancy (divination using animals’ shoulder blades) appeared in Western Europe in the twelfth century, imported via Arabic texts.\textsuperscript{22} Likewise the first alchemical treatise in the medieval West appears to have been an 1144 translation of an Arabic source.\textsuperscript{23} Clearly some bright young minds rushed to experiment with rites found in these alluring texts. Critics recognized new kinds of practice, as well, although they continued to assert that almost all magic ultimately relied on demonic power. Already in the mid-eleventh century, the Italian rhetorician Anselm of Besate described how his own cousin possessed a book of demonic invocations, and also that he learned some of his dark arts from a Saracen doctor.\textsuperscript{24} In the twelfth century, the English clergyman John of Salisbury discussed magic in a work criticizing the “follies of courtiers.” In particular he described how he himself had been made to take part in magical rites as a young boy by the priest who taught him Latin.\textsuperscript{25}

As always with texts written to criticize and condemn magical practices, we can question how accurately such writings depicted real practices. Led by Richard Kieckhefer, however, scholars have increasingly turned to magical texts themselves, exploring their authorship, content, and circulation, in order to understand how magic was actually conceptualized and employed, at least among elite practitioners.\textsuperscript{26} I will discuss these learned magicians’ goals and motivations in the next section of this essay, but here we should briefly consider whether these men comprised a kind of movement. Again, better evidence comes from a later period, so let us jump forward a few centuries and work our way back.

Scholars often associate the emergence of a distinct form of “Renaissance” magic with Marsilio Ficino’s \textit{De vita libri tres}, written in the 1480s. Thereafter, a diverse but still coherent intellectual tradition of magic grounded in Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, and Hermeticism proliferated among humanist scholars:
men such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, Paracelsus, John Dee, and Giordano Bruno, who were as much philosophers, physicians, and protoscientists as they were magicians. They knew each other’s works and can certainly be seen as representing a distinct intellectual movement, and a spiritual one as well. Frank Klaassen has stressed basic continuities between elite medieval and Renaissance forms of magic, as has Richard Kieckhefer, although he notes that Renaissance mages took a more philosophical approach to their art. This is a weighty point, given that much of the coherence of Renaissance magic as a movement resides in its philosophical bent. In addition, Renaissance magicians enjoyed the benefits of the printing press when they sought to circulate their ideas. Still, given that the prodigious manuscript production and circulation patterns of the late medieval period are only beginning to be studied, it is tempting to postulate at least a nascent movement among practitioners of learned magic in this era, albeit less sophisticated than what subsequently developed. Frank Klaassen has noted, in fact, that ritual magic texts circulated in ways quite similar to those of one well-studied religious movement in this period, that of heretical Lollards. Moreover, as I will suggest in the next section of this essay, the movement of late medieval magic could easily have grown more sophisticated itself if only the church in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had not opposed it so vigorously, which was perhaps not as much of a foregone conclusion as might be assumed.

Before coming to that point, however, I want here to turn to those final medieval centuries and consider the vexing question of why concerns about magic darkened so dramatically, culminating in the construction of diabolical witchcraft as an accusation directed mainly against ordinary Christians engaging in magic rites but affecting elite practitioners as well. Scholars of witchcraft and magic have been trying to explain this phenomenon for a long time. The rise of inquisitorial procedure and standing inquisitorial courts provided a mechanism. Refinements in Scholastic theology and what some have identified as the first serious demonology in Latin Christendom since late antiquity offered an intellectual framework. The broadest dynamic, however, and the one most easily defined as a religious movement, was the drive for religious reform that flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I have written extensively elsewhere about the connections between reform and rising concerns about sorcery and superstition, so here I will offer only a sketch.

The reform movements that began in several religious orders in the late medieval period were not inherently concerned about magical practices. Many ecclesiastical reformers, however, also sought to promote a more general religious renewal across Christian society, and in this capacity a number of them
targeted what they considered to be dangerous superstitions and magical practices among the laity. Of course, not all religious reformers were concerned about magic, and not all critics of magic were otherwise involved in reform, but the overlap between these two areas is notable.

In Vienna, Nicholas of Dinkelsbühl, although not a monk himself, penned *Reformationis methodus*, which, because of support from the Austrian duke Albrecht, became a foundational text for Benedictine reform, particularly as it emerged from the major reforming center at Melk. Nicholas also wrote an influential treatise on the Decalogue, which targeted diabolical magic and superstition as an affront against the first commandment. The Dominican order had among its reformist leaders Johannes Nider, who was also the author of a major early work about diabolical witchcraft, *Formicarius*. A generation later, Nicolas Jacquier, author of *Flagellum haereticorum fascinariorum*, was closely associated with the reformist Dominican Congregation of Holland. The Franciscan order’s first reformist saint, Bernardino of Siena, was a fierce opponent of witchcraft as well as other moral failings among the laity, castigating spells and superstitions in fiery sermons that inspired at least a few early witch trials in Italy. The Carthusian order produced Jacob of Paradise and Denys the Carthusian, important reformers who also wrote extensively against magic and superstition. And the reformist councils of Constance and especially Basel appear to have served as clearinghouses for information about early conceptions of diabolical witchcraft.

When reformers preached or penned treatises against superstitious and magical practices, they typically stressed their utterly corrupt and corrupting nature, rooted in the inevitable involvement of demons as the main actors in such rites. Undoubtedly many reformers believed their own message, but it also provided them with a powerful rhetoric through which they could, essentially, frighten laypeople into more rigorous adherence to approved devotional practices. Johannes Nider, for example, explicitly argued that people should rely on prayer, the sign of the cross, and the power of holy relics rather than magical rites when they faced hardships or crises in their lives. Even if they regarded themselves as having been bewitched, they should never turn to further witchcraft to effect a cure, for this would jeopardize their souls. Bernardino of Siena was even more aggressive. In a famous sermon against magic and witchcraft delivered in his hometown in 1427, he warned the Sienese that the common “spells and divinations” on which they were accustomed to rely—including such practices as palm reading, wearing protective talismans, casting lots, and various healing rites—were all demonic abominations, and if they did not abandon them, God’s vengeance would rain down and wreck their beloved city.
It is certainly not the case that reformists' concerns alone drove churchmen to develop the conceptions of diabolical witchcraft that took root in the fifteenth century. But the natural tendency of reformers to see, or to project, corruption and demonic threat at every turn made them more liable to accept and propagate darker imaginings about the practice of magic than had troubled even zealous opponents of magic and superstition in previous centuries. My point here, again, is not to postulate a single, Grundmannesque unifying cause behind multifarious developments, but to show how the history of medieval magic interweaves with other aspects of medieval religious history.

Real and Imagined Magic

The critique could be raised, at this point, that much of what I have described so far pertains not to how actual magical practices were shaped by or reflected broader currents of medieval history, but rather how clerical authorities' perceptions of such practices were reshaped over time. This is true, and it is an inevitable problem that scholars of medieval magic must confront. Most of the surviving sources that discuss medieval magical practices are hostile ones: condemnatory accounts by theologians, jurists, moralists, and preachers, along with some scattered trials records, mainly from the late medieval period. The descriptions of magic that these sources present, from the supposedly pagan-inflected rites of early medieval discourse to the horrific imaginaires of the witches' sabbath that emerged only in the fifteenth century, can be extremely formulaic. Of course, the history of medieval heresy raises the same problems, and in some ways so, too, does the history of religious orders. Certainly the hagiographies of their leading figures, through which the orders often constructed much of their own identities, are replete with stock formulas of sanctity. Some orders may even have re crafted their own early history in light of later developments and to justify later practices and organizational structures.

Grundmann confronted this problem when he engaged with the history of heresy, and he certainly knew that clerical condemnations of heretical depravities could not be taken at face value. More deeply, he recognized a formulaic "Typus des Ketzers" that informed clerical accounts and even clerical perceptions of supposed heretical groups. Although he never discussed a "Typus des Magiers," he recognized the applicability of his insights about heretics to later stereotypes concerning supposedly diabolical witches. Moreover, in Religious Movements Grundmann suggested that what ecclesiastical authorities constructed as the late medieval heresy of the Free Spirit never comprised a coherent sect, as Robert Lerner later conclusively proved. Grundmann's
skepticism did not run so deep with other heretical movements, such as the Cathars, but some scholars now suggest that even the great high medieval heresies existed more as figments of clerical imagination than in reality.\textsuperscript{45} Other scholars continue to see more substance to heresy’s existence, and I do not intend to venture too deeply into these debates here.\textsuperscript{46} I merely want to point out that, as the lines between “real” and “imagined” heresies become increasingly fluid, the reasons to bracket off the imagined sect of witches categorically from other heretical sects encompassed in Grundmann’s religious movement become less substantial as well.

In the history of witchcraft, one of Richard Kieckhefer’s early contributions was to show that elements of diabolism in witchcraft accusations emerged only at the very end of the medieval period, mainly in the fifteenth century, and then to demonstrate how those elements were, for the most part, crafted by clerical authorities onto more basic accusations of simple maleficium in the course of early trials.\textsuperscript{47} His conclusions in this regard have been generally confirmed by subsequent studies of late medieval witch trials.\textsuperscript{48} Although witch trials typically were driven by multiple causal factors, Kathrin Utz Tremp has demonstrated how some of the earliest major outbreaks of witch-hunting in Western Europe arose when, for various reasons, inquisitorial authorities shifted their concerns from more “real” heresies to these new, “imagined” sects.\textsuperscript{49}

There have, of course, been many attempts to discover an actual movement of some kind underlying the elaborate stereotypes of diabolical witchcraft and the witches’ sabbath. Though the famous but ill-founded arguments of Margaret Murray have been repeatedly debunked,\textsuperscript{50} Carlo Ginzburg’s discovery of the Friulian benandanti has gained more sustained traction, and other scholars have confirmed how shamanistic or other kinds of visionary experience helped support the idea of diabolical witches gathering at sabbaths.\textsuperscript{51} For the most part, however, such structures of belief appear to have survived in relatively diffuse ways within certain cultures or subcultures. Particular people claimed or were recognized to have such abilities, but these individuals did not become members of coherent, organized movements. In a different vein, Michael Tavuzzi has suggested that a “very loose, informal movement” of laypeople resistant to church authority, and perhaps anti-Eucharistic in focus, may have existed in certain Alpine regions in the fifteenth century, and this movement could have provided the genesis of inquisitors’ ideas about witches’ sabbaths.\textsuperscript{52} Such speculation, however, has never been supported by any close studies of Alpine trials. The most “real” element of medieval witchcraft, by general agreement, has always been the practice of harmful magic, or at least the very real fear felt by the laity and clerical elites alike that harmful magic was being practiced widely within Christian society.
Rather than continue to search for elements of a movement, shamanistic or otherwise, that may have underlain stereotypes of diabolical witchcraft in the late medieval period, I want to follow Kieckhefer's insight that we often gain useful perspective by pulling back from witchcraft and studying magic as a whole.53 I will begin by observing that diabolical witchcraft was not the only "imagined" form of medieval magic. In some respects, almost all of them were. Obviously, in many cases practices that came to be labeled as magical were quite real. For various kinds of elite ritual magic, manuals were composed and then used by actual practitioners.54 Yet, as Frank Klaassen has observed, such magic could be both a real practice and still an imagined construct.55 Meanwhile, across all levels of medieval society, people could access a host of common healing, divinatory, or protective rites, such as are described in a wide range of sources, albeit perhaps not always with complete fidelity to the real nature of actual practices.56 Some of these people may have thought of themselves as performing magic or even identified themselves as magicians, but more typically those appellations emerged only when such practices came to be condemned. Moreover, even if practitioners conceived of what they did as magic, they almost always understood it differently from the authors of condemnatory accounts.

For most ecclesiastical authorities throughout the medieval period, magic was an inherently illicit activity. This conclusion rested on the influential early declarations by Augustine and other church fathers that magic always entailed demonic agency.57 Just like many people accused of more "real" heresies, however, most people who performed what authorities came to identify as demonic magical rites probably thought of themselves as good Christians engaged in entirely permissible and even laudable acts. The simple spells and charms that proliferated across Europe in the medieval era almost always incorporated explicitly Christian ritual, often drawing directly from the liturgy or otherwise including patently religious elements. People might erect crosses in fields to protect crops from hailstorms, for example, or invoke the wounds of Christ to achieve the same end. Invocations of Christ's wounds were also used to cure injuries, and gospel verses could be copied out and placed on the sick to reduce fever or avert other ailments. Herbs and roots were used to similar effect, but people often fortified their power by reciting certain prayers while gathering these medicinal plants. They also took holy water from churches to wash wounds, for it was believed to stave off infection, and it could supposedly cure toothaches and other ills.58

Among elite magicians, too, even avowed necromancers thought of themselves as commanding demons in Christ's name, not supplicating and worshiping them as their opponents insisted. Hence authorities writing throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries felt the need to assert again and
again far narrower limits to legitimate exorcism, usually drawing on Thomas Aquinas’s influential arguments in this regard.\textsuperscript{59} Moreover, much elite ritual magic in the Middle Ages was actually not demonic, but scientific (natural magic) or theurgic in nature, and scholars have recently begun to pay more attention to this reality. Such magic provided a means to explore the wonders of the divinely created universe, but also a mechanism by which to obtain visionary experience, the desire for which was becoming increasingly widespread in the later medieval period. Sophie Page has demonstrated how monks at St. Augustine’s monastery, Canterbury, incorporated magical texts into their religious vocation, and Claire Fanger has shown how a French monk relied first on the \textit{ars notoria} and then developed his own rites to achieve visions of the Virgin Mary.\textsuperscript{50}

Men such as these clearly did not believe themselves to be magicians in the sense that opponents meant when they deployed that term. Comparing the distinctions drawn between different kinds of magical practices by both opponents and proponents (when we are able), it soon becomes clear that both sides usually agreed on the basic conditions that rendered practices licit or illicit. Subservience to demons was to be avoided at all costs, but demons were profoundly deceitful creatures bent on deluding otherwise faithful Christians into sin. Thus the most basic charge leveled by opponents of magic, who always spoke with a louder voice, was that proponents seriously misunderstood the rites in which they engaged. So profound were the dangers of demonic deception, and ultimately so pronounced became the allegations of critics, that no category of permissible theurgic magic ever gained broad legitimacy in the Middle Ages. But one can imagine that it might have. And if so, then those who engaged in such practices might well have come to comprise a movement in the sense meant by Grundmann.

To clarify this speculation, let us return for a moment to the history of heresy. There, too, we find those accused of a terrible crime proclaiming their innocence, with the rank and file often declaring that they did not realize what they believed or had been taught was wrong, whereas others, frequently more educated elites, professed that their beliefs and practices were not what their opponents made them out to be but instead represented a pure and laudable form of Christianity. In Grundmann’s analysis, the church itself recognized some truth to these claims. He identified the “decisive turning point” in the history of the overall medieval religious movement as occurring during the papacy of Innocent III, who codified certain aspects of that moment into approved religious orders even as he harshly condemned other groups that he deemed to be heretical.\textsuperscript{61} I would suggest a comparable turning point in the history of medieval magic, but one that was not so evenly balanced.
In the early fourteenth century, Pope John XXII, fearful of magical practices rife within Christian society, and above all of magical assaults on his own person, convened a panel of legal and theological experts to determine precisely what sins these practices entailed, and then promoted the condemnation of almost all such magic as demonic and heretical through a series of papal pronouncements.62 Certainly much Scholastic theology was already moving in this direction. Thomas Aquinas had subverted the possibility of any major categories of nondemonic magic in the mid-thirteenth century, and the majority of theologians followed suit, progressively eliminating intellectually respectable space for most kinds of natural magic by the early fifteenth century.63 But it was John who added the weight of papal censure and paved the way for inquisitorial action against a host of magical practices by declaring that all magic involving demons automatically entailed heresy.64 Later authorities drew on notions of tacit demonic pacts to declare that those accused of practicing magic should be considered heretics even if they performed their rites without any nefarious intent or even any awareness that they might covertly be invoking demons. Magic conceived in this way conforms remarkably well to Grundmann’s description of earlier religious movements that the church had proclaimed to be heretical, even though they lacked “a particular heretical doctrine defining the nature of the heresy.”65

If, however, John XXII had been less suspicious, or less driven, the story might have been different. If the monks of St. Augustine’s and others had been allowed or indeed encouraged to pursue their experiments with magical rites for intellectual and devotional purposes openly and free from any significant threat of censure or reprobation, then we might have seen a split develop in medieval magic very much like the fundamental division that Grundmann saw in other religious movements: certain groups condemned in strident terms as demonic heretics, but others, upholding similar ideals and engaging in similar practices, exalted as exemplars of religious virtue. In fact, as I have already noted in the previous section, a kind of movement promoting intellectually and even morally respectable magic was soon to reappear in Europe, grounded in “Renaissance” Neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, and Kabbalah.66 The church never comfortably accommodated itself to these new systems either, and for the most part Thomistic thought continued to shape mainstream theology and demonology deep into the early modern period. If the church had taken a different stance in the later Middle Ages, however, all this might have been different, too. Rather than a clerical underworld, an explicitly magical religious movement might have emerged as a recognized manifestation of Christian piety.

Of course, this proposition is counterfactual. Nevertheless, the very real problems that inquisitors, magistrates, and theologians faced when trying to
separate what they held to be demonic magical rites from legitimate devotional practices illustrate how illusory that boundary was. By the late Middle Ages, defining magic more stringently and punishing its manifestations, real or perceived, more severely had come to be an important part of the church’s effort to control increasingly personal, individual religiosity. Here too, we will find magic fitting into the framework of Grundmann’s movement.

Magic and Personal Religion

As Grundmann notes in *Religious Movements*, after Innocent III bestowed papal approval on certain apostolic movements in the form of new religious orders in the early thirteenth century, many of his bishops had trouble differentiating these new religious from heretics that the pope had ordered them to eradicate. In particular, some of the first Franciscans to venture north out of Italy were taken by church authorities in the Rhineland as Waldensians, “since there was in fact no basic or visible difference between them.” Likewise there might be no readily discernable difference between a pious blessing and a magical spell. According to one fifteenth-century demonologist, a man living in the diocese of Constance had been injured through witchcraft and sought to cure himself by means of other magical rites. These all failed, until finally he turned to a pious woman he knew who murmured the Lord’s Prayer and Creed and also made the sign of the cross over his injury. Feeling immediate relief, the man demanded to know what “spells” (*carmina*) she had used to heal him, and she berated him profusely for not recognizing legitimate prayer when he saw it. In fact, however, many educated clerics had the same problem. In 1405, a clergyman from Landau, Werner of Friedberg, stood before a panel of theologians from the University of Heidelberg, accused, among other counts, of using a superstitious healing spell. Fifty years later, however, another cleric, the Zurich canon Felix Hemmerli, wrote a tract defending the rite Werner had used, calling it an entirely laudable Christian blessing.

Another murky issue that clerical authorities had to debate was whether some kinds of magical practices were better than others. Established doctrine proclaimed that all demonic magic was heresy, no matter how it was used. Yet inquisitors seeking to enforce this position also faced a long legal tradition that concerned itself only with magic used to cause harm. Magistrates who tried to pursue a stricter line could face considerable resistance. Even the most infamous inquisitorial witch-hunter of the fifteenth century found himself reluctantly countenancing, or at least less vociferously condemning, forms of magic used for positive purposes, especially to defend against diabolical witchcraft.
Like other demonologists before him, Heinrich Kramer admitted that witchcraft could be used to heal as well as to harm, although faithful Christians should never seek to benefit from such inherently corrupt and diabolical practices. He then muddied the waters, however, by asserting that, so long as one did not turn to an actual witch, to be healed by “witch-like rites” (maleficiales ritus) was at least somewhat less condemnable. He also gave equally marginal approval to various other magical rites intended to provide protection against the diabolical witchcraft that was the main target of his fulminations.

For all that the medieval church propounded a putatively clear line between illicit magic and tolerable or even laudable rites, that line was in fact a shimmering abstraction laid over far more complex realities. Some scholars have seen a certain hypocrisy, or at least an easy opportunism, in the occasionally facile means by which early medieval missionaries converted pagan rites into Christian religion. Richard Kieckhefer gives an example of a Germanic charm intended to heal a horse’s leg that invoked Odin, who was said to have once healed his horse when it came up lame while he rode it through some woods. Later Christianized versions simply replaced the figure of Odin with that of Christ riding into Jerusalem. Yet according to the categories those missionaries understood, this alteration was not mere window dressing but instead fundamentally changed the nature of the act from one that called on demonic power (since pagan deities were all demons in disguise) to a pious supplication of Christ’s mercy.

In the later medieval period, clergymen no longer worried about explicitly pagan rites but rather about objectively Christian ones that could become corrupted through misuse or even unintentional misunderstanding. As Christian religiosity as a whole came to emphasize more personal and internalized forms of devotion, so, too, the line separating illicit magic from proper prayer or blessing became more a matter of the interior condition of the practitioner. Thus Heinrich Kramer could argue that a “witch-like rite” was at least somewhat less execrable when performed by someone other than an actual witch, that is (in his understanding), a committed servant of the devil.

Again we confront the conundrum of real versus imagined magic, but as I have shown already, that distinction is not always a meaningful one. Of course, by suggesting that magical practices were enmeshed in the late medieval drive toward more personal and internalized religion, I do not mean that there were actual groups of diabolical witches motivated by a deeply felt allegiance to Satan. Neither do I mean that ordinary Christians were driven by any profound internal piety when they performed some rite that they hoped would heal a sick loved one or protect their crops from storms. They probably did think of many such acts as drawing, at least in part, on divine power, however, and thus in a
loose way as an expression of their basic faith. It is clear that the monks and other elite practitioners who saw magic as a means for expressing personal devotion or attaining visionary experience participated in a general religious culture in which desire for such experience was becoming increasingly pronounced.\textsuperscript{77} To speculate again, one might wonder whether, if that form of magic had become the basis for a religious movement in its own right, it would have come to inform the devotional practices of the laity as well.\textsuperscript{78} Clearly, however, magic was most fully implicated in the flowering of more personal religion when it became part of the church’s drive to impose systems of control on those forms of religiosity.

Grundmann argued that, in the wake of the Gregorian Reform, Christian religion in Western Europe came to be perceived as a “way of life immediately binding upon every individual.”\textsuperscript{79} The increasingly individual and internal nature of religiosity created a dilemma for ecclesiastical authorities, however. How could purely internal states be monitored or regulated effectively? The faithful were instructed through sermons and other mechanisms of pastoral care, and then asked to monitor themselves through the process of yearly confession, but this was soon deemed to be insufficient. The close connection between the dynamics of personal confession, imposed as an obligation on all Christians by the Fourth Lateran Council, and the growing apparatus of inquisition in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has often been noted.\textsuperscript{80} Still, accurately perceiving the internal state of individual souls remained a daunting task. One fundamental response was to rely on structures: quasi-clear categorizations of religious orders and heretical sects, and then other groupings, such as beguines or mystics, that fell either in between or just outside of these categories. These were the manifold offspring of Grundmann’s singular religious movement.

Magic, at least as church authorities conceived of it, was also caught up in this dynamic. Once demonic magic was declared to entail heresy, magical practices of all sorts became another prism through which authorities tried to discern the practitioner’s soul. The practices themselves, however, or at least their observable elements, were often ambiguous. As Denys the Carthusian wrote in a treatise castigating magic and superstition and composed around the middle of the fifteenth century, “however much the aforesaid blessings and adjurations may not be superstitious or illicit in themselves . . . they must nevertheless be shunned and forbidden due to attendant dangers, because often some superstitions get mingled into them.”\textsuperscript{81} Driven by such ambiguities, authorities began to fashion more or less clear categories of demonic magic and ultimately of diabolical witchcraft that would serve to inform and guide their processes of discernment. Especially around the category of witchcraft, they
clustered all the stereotypes that had long been directed against supposed heretics, and many more besides. This represented more than just their inclination to ascribe set “types” of characteristics to their targets. It was also an extension of one of the basic dynamics that Grundmann saw underlying the development of medieval religious movements—namely, the church’s need to try to clarify loose and often dangerously uncertain sets of behaviors by ascribing them to different groups, real or imagined. These groups could then be sharply distinguished from and ideally set in opposition to one another.

Scholars have long recognized how stereotypes of diabolical witchcraft represent an inversion of multiple proper orderings of Christian society. The image of the witch gave authorities a perfect target against which they could judge a range of more ambiguous practices. So did the idea of learned necromancers who explicitly worshiped the demons they invoked, “inasmuch as they sacrifice to them, adore them, offer up horrible prayers to them . . . burn candles or incense or aromatic spices, [and] sacrifice animals and birds.” Although learned magicians undoubtedly tried to conjure demons in the Middle Ages, that they did so in such a patently worshipful manner may have been as much an imagined construct as any witches’ sabbath.

Medieval authorities never depicted necromancers operating as part of an organized group, as they did with witches at a sabbath, but that does not undercut this analysis. Grundmann did not argue that the imperative to parse sets of practices into distinct groups was so powerful that it utterly blinded church officials to the more nuanced realities they regularly encountered, and neither would I. These stark dichotomies were tools through which they sought to resolve the sometimes very complicated problems of discernment that their reality presented, although once established they could take on a terrible force of their own. That force helped shape medieval understandings of magic, which authorities from the later medieval period onward often approached as if it were a kind of dark and oppositional religious movement.

NOTES


5. *RM*, xvi.

6. Ibid., xxv.


15. See ibid.


27. On magic as an intellectual movement within Western history, see Brian P. Copenhaver, *Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).


40. On the rising number of trials in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, esp. 10–26, 106–47.


43. Grundmann, "Typus," 326. I know of no scholarship that employs the concept of a "Typus des Magiers," but the phrase "Typus der Hexen" appears at least as early as Ludwig Meyer, "Die Beziehungen der Geisteskranken zu den Besessenen und Hexen." *Westermanns Monatshefte* 10 (1861): 258–64, at 258; referenced in the 1880 edition of Wilhelm Soldan,
49. Utz Tremp, Von der Häresie zur Hexerei.
53. Kieckhefer, Magic in the Middle Ages, ix.
56. See n. 8 above.
60. Page, Magic in the Cloister; Fanger, Rewriting Magic.
61. RM, 31.
63. E.g., Béatrice Delaurenti, La puissance des mots—”Virtus verborum”: Débats doctrinaux sur le pouvoir des incantations au Moyen Âge (Paris: Cerf, 2007).
64. Hansen, Quellen und Untersuchungen, 5–6.
66. See n. 27 above.
67. RM, 49.
68. RM, 66.
71. Kieckhefer, Magic in the Middle Ages, 176.
73. Kramer, Malleus 5.4, p. 496.
75. Kieckhefer, Magic in the Middle Ages, 45.
77. Page, Magic in the Cloister, 126.
79. RM, 8.
81. Denys the Carthusian, Contra vici superstitionum (Cologne, 1533), 607.