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The Popular Piety Display of the Lower Austria Museum's *Haus der Geschichte* and Its Classification in Cultural Studies

Rocco Leuzzi and Dirk Schuster

1. Introduction

Different types of folk beliefs are found in almost all societies shaped by institutionalised religion. These folk beliefs provide the faithful with a practical connection to their own religion and they help create identity. Moreover, ever since the Enlightenment, folk beliefs have often been presented as being in diametrical opposition to knowledge.

Since the nineteenth century, unique attributes including language, history, and folk beliefs have been used to define group identities. Private collectors and institutions such as museums have collected and documented items and descriptions of religious and magical practices from the region of Lower Austria, which are today the basis of the popular piety display (*Volksfrömmigkeits-Vitrine*) of the Lower Austria Museum's (*Museum Niederösterreich*) *Haus der Geschichte* (Department of History). This article uses this example to demonstrate the significance that folk beliefs have for society and how they can be presented in museums today without making judgmental comparisons between faith and knowledge. Instead of presenting a history that contrasts knowledge and belief, folk beliefs can be used to illustrate the complex interconnected histories of society.

2. Brief Theoretical Notes

The Lower Austria Museum in St. Pölten, the capital of Lower Austria, is the successor of the Lower Austrian State Museum that was founded in 1911 in Vienna (Krug 2012). In 2017, the *Haus der Geschichte* was opened at the St. Pölten site, and the museum is now divided into two sections, with nature and history being separated from the art collection on display in the new Lower Austria Gallery in Krems since 2019.

The *Haus der Geschichte* takes visitors on a journey through life in Lower Austria and Central Europe from prehistory onwards and includes all cultural and historical collections of the region. Religion is found in several places along the exhibition tour, particularly in Cluster Five (see Figures 1 and 2), which features the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and Enlightenment eras. Numerous objects from the ethnology collection are displayed here, illustrating various topics, from Lutheran and controversial literature, Haban ceramics—high-quality whiteware that can be traced back to the Anabaptists around Jakob Hutter (Chňupková 2022)—to Catholic popular piety, pharmacological objects, and even a reusable, drop-door "economy coffin." Religion plays a significant role in the educational experience, giving us a good starting point to address folk beliefs and popular piety in terms of how they are presented and assessed.

These two terms, that is, folk beliefs and popular piety may initially convey a certain aura of naiveté, which could even be interpreted as being primitive when compared with theologically more sophisticated religious concepts. In the context of fifteenth-century Christianity, the idea of superstition was branded and stigmatised as being genuinely negative, designated as "wrong beliefs" (Roth 1996: 1).

Folk beliefs and popular piety are characterised by their closeness to everyday life: "they often clearly express what moves people—far more clearly than the speculations of theologians and metaphysicians" (Topitsch 1990: 11).[1] In contrast to theological debates about meaningful questions (the meaning of life) or the paradox of the Holy Trinity (for an example from the Christian context), folk beliefs are drawn directly from everyday life and, above all, have practical features.[2] According to Ernst Topitsch (1990), folk beliefs are characterised by a rationality that expects actions to result in certain reactions; if the desired result does not occur, the action is modified or even ceased entirely.

Popular piety is a phenomenon present in all societies that are shaped by universal religious proclamations. However, these proclamations, such as those found in Christianity and Islam, were unable to completely overcome previous religious ideas, meaning that hybrid forms became established:

> The continuity and revival of folk-religious elements explains the relatively uniform character taken on by popular piety throughout all religions. [...] The practice of common religion, albeit in different ways, is strongly magical and

1 "In ihnen kommt oft sehr klar zum Ausdruck, was die Menschen bewegt – und zwar weit klarer als in den Spekulationen der Theologen und Metaphysiker."

2 For a discussion on the concept of popular piety from a theological perspective, see Daxelmüller 1990: 21–26.

> ecstatic everywhere it appears, predominantly involves specific deities with narrowly defined responsibilities, has numerous good but primarily evil or at least ambiguous spirits, and uses amulets and contact with powerful objects and individuals with the primary aim of offering help for earthly worries and urgent situations (Hoheisel 2003: 216).[3]

In recent years, the concept of "lived religion" has been established in religious studies to designate the religious practices of lay people in their everyday life. This shifts the observational focus from established religious dogmas to the individual and their religious understanding and actions:

> The term 'lived religion' is useful for distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices. This concept of religion is particularly apt for sociological analysis, because it depicts a subjectively grounded and potentially creative place for religious experience and expression. Although lived religion pertains to the individual, it is not merely subjective. Rather, people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that intersubjective reality (McGuire 2008: 12).

In the introduction to his 1998 anthology *Lived Religion in America*, David D. Hall clearly identifies the actual problem that science was confronted with:

> In their own way, religious historians in America have begun to call for attention to the same matters, usually in the context of observing that, while we know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as it is practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women (Hall 1998: vii).

In summary, it can be argued that popular piety and folk beliefs are religiously motivated behaviours and religious ideas "that are intertwined with institutionalised liturgical and doctrinal forms" (Hoheisel 2003: 214). From the perspective of institutionalised religious doctrines, popular beliefs are incompatible with institutionalised doctrines as they deviate in practice and conception from the prevailing theological concepts. However, when several

3 "Kontinuität und Wiederbelebung volksreligiöser Elemente erklären den relativ einheitlichen Charakter der Volksfrömmigkeit in allen Religionen, [...] denn die Praxis von common religion ist, wenn auch in unterschiedlicher Weise, allenthalben stark magisch und ekstatisch geprägt, überwiegend Umgang mit konkreten Gottheiten von eng umschriebenen Zuständigkeiten, mit zahlreichen guten, vor allem aber bösen oder zumindest zwielichtigen Geistern, wobei Amulette, Kontakt mit kraftgeladenen Gegenständen und Menschen mit dem vorrangigen Ziel eingesetzt werden, Hilfe in irdischen Sorgen und Notlagen anzubieten."

religious traditions exist side by side—in our case, Catholicism and various forms of folk belief—it does not automatically mean that one or more must be pushed out or fought against. If certain rules of conduct and criteria are adhered to—in this case, in relation to Catholicism—there is always room for the personal development of one's own religious practice (Ammerman 2021: 40). In the field of ancient religious history, Jörg Rüpke has established that a differentiation based solely on denominational boundaries does not in fact reflect actual religious practices (Rüpke 2016: 159). Accordingly, elements of popular piety are to be understood as an integral part of lived religious practice. Even when in contradiction to the established doctrine from a theological perspective, they made or still make up the lived religion of everyday people within a local, regional, or even transregional area.

3. From Profane to Religious Worship: The Zucchetto

The exhibition tour in the Lower Austria Museum's *Haus der Geschichte* begins by featuring time itself as a central theme. Time is the framework that codifies history, giving the museum artefacts a point of reference and connecting them with other items and references. It is not always one story alone that makes an object unique, justifying its worthiness for preservation; instead, objects can also experience shifts in the significance and value assigned to them over their lifespan. The exhibition's introduction is accompanied by selected items and stories about how they were perceived then and now.

A vivid example of this is Pope John Paul II's (1920–2005; p. 1978–2005) zucchetto (see Figure 3). He visited St. Pölten in 1988—the fourth visit by a pope to Austria in the history of the papacy—and held a mass in the government district.[4] The State Collections of Lower Austria undertook to preserve several items from this event for later exhibitions and posterity; this included one of the pope's zucchettos, which a private collector had previously received through the custom of exchanging skullcaps. Given that it was the pope himself who exchanged his cap for a new one, it made this an interesting item for the State Collections due to its relevance to the papal visit. In the meantime, John Paul II has died, was beatified, and finally canonised in 2014. This changes the frame of reference for the artefact in relation to the people; for devout Catholics, cult value was added to the already standing memorial, exhibition, and historical value (Fliegler 2013: 129). It turned the zucchetto

4 TV coverage of the Pope's visit to St. Pölten is available on the ORF-TVthek (in German): https://tvthek.orf.at/history/Niederoesterreich/13557902/Papstmesse-in-St-Poelten/13967229 (accessed: June 15, 2022).

into a second-class relic of a saint popular among Catholics.[5] In the museum presentation, this also makes the object an example of how the significance of items kept in collections can change. The object itself was neither altered nor revaluated; the change came from the outside, through human attributions—in this case, by devout Catholics. The zucchetto is now displayed in a showcase together with other objects that have likewise undergone a shift in meaning or significance, showing visitors how human–object relationships are living and interrelated. The object itself experienced no material change, but the subjective significance for the viewer shifted, a reframing that gives the object a new meaning (Hahn 2014: 39).

4. Folk Beliefs, Relic Worship, Education, and Science

Modern research literature still juxtaposes folk beliefs, common medical healing rituals, and transcendent references with modern scientific knowledge, presenting them as being in insurmountable contradiction. For example, in the introduction to her book *Rattenschwanz und Schneckenschleim. Aberglaube oder vergessene Volksmedizin?* (Rat Tail and Snail Slime: Superstition or Forgotten Folk Medicine?), Ida Pohl-Sennhauser writes that these beliefs are rooted in "the thinking of people from 'pre-scientific' times" (2007: 16).[6] Pohl-Sennhauser even goes so far as to discredit the thinking and actions of pre-Enlightenment eras as "pre-civilisational knowledge" (*vorzivilisatorisches Wissen*) (ibid.: 17), which is a clear degradation and separation from secular-rational world explanations.

Conversely, Helmut Hiller contrasts the past and the present in his *Lexikon des Aberglaubens* (Lexicon of Superstition)—a term long used by Christians to describe what they saw as "false doctrines"—in order to show that such divisive comparisons between the past (pre-scientific and irrational) and present (scientific and rational) bypasses reality. Although Hiller uses problematic and derogatory terms, such as "irrational belief systems" (*irrationale Glaubenssätze*), "errors of human imagination" (*Irrtümer der menschlichen Phantasie*), etc. (1993: 6), he also contrasts them with convictions widespread in contemporary societies: for example, believing in horoscopes, Friday the 13th being an unlucky day, and many more. Alternative medicine

5 According to the common division into first-class relics that are the physical remains of saints, such as bones, blood, or entire body parts, second-class relics that were handled by saints during their lifetime, and third-class ones that have been in contact with the first two types.

6 "Das Denken der Menschen aus 'vorwissenschaftlichen' Zeiten."

concepts with a medical efficacy not definitively proven by science and the faith-based placebo effect can also be included here. To assume that the education levels, medical progress, and science-based rationalism of the present has done away with concepts such as astrology, alternative medicine, and the belief in miracles would simply be wrong. Rather, these topics are today an integral part of the everyday life of a great many people.[7] It can thus be argued that the demarcation between folk beliefs—in whatever form—and educational and science-based knowledge—particularly in medical matters—has never been clear, and still does not exist today. Conventional medical treatment can easily be combined with taking homeopathic remedies without causing a contradiction or mutual exclusion—apart from the fundamentally dogmatic opinions found on both sides.

However, the controversies often heard in the media regarding the usefulness and risks of various medical treatment methods—as made clear once again by the COVID-19 pandemic and its vaccinations—is explicitly ignored in the museum presentation of ethnological objects for healing practices, as it is aptly summarised in the special exhibition *heilsam. Volkskunde zwischen Erfahrung und Glauben* (Healing: Folklore between Experience and Belief):[8]

> A cultural science, ethnology does not make decisions regarding what heals and what does not heal. That is not its responsibility. Ethnology does nothing more than collect and present materials and practices used in the past and present, attempt to reconstruct their origins, and explore their significance as cultural acts. However, even this openness to the effectiveness of medical actions contains an assessment. Even methods that seem absurd to us and defy all scientific examination must have worked in some way, otherwise they would not have been passed on across generations and over borders. However, the effectiveness of a remedy is fundamentally secondary from an ethnological perspective. Rather, cultural studies focus on the worldview that the communicative patterns surrounding illness and healing have led to the spread and

7 A 2017 survey of 1,020 respondents by the market research institute *statista* found that forty-three per cent of all surveyed women and twenty-three per cent of all surveyed men answered "yes, somewhat/sometimes" when asked whether they believed in astrology and horoscopes. https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/668629/umfrage/umfrage-zum-glauben-an-astrologie-und-horoskope-in-deutschland-nach-geschlecht (accessed: Ju-ly 23, 2022).

8 Only the use of the term "folk medicine" against the background of the common constructions described above evokes the question of what is meant here by the term "folk." The situation is similar with terms such as the "Volkswagen," put on the market by the National Socialists, and other "Volk" products marketed by the German *BILD* magazine in recent years, including a "Volks-toothbrush," "Volks-computer," etc.

transmission of healing knowledge, and its residual forms seen in today's cultural healing practices (Landesmuseum Joanneum 2006: 6).[9]

5. "Superstition" and Relic Worship in the Present Day

The cult of relics is still alive, even if hardly present in the general public perception nowadays. The great collapse in the veneration of relics brought by the Enlightenment was not entirely reversed by the Catholic Church. The idea of a life force remaining in the relics was too greatly shaken by modern medical findings (Angenendt 2001: 348). Nonetheless, relics did not disappear entirely from Catholic piety. Sticking with the example of Pope John Paul II, we must mention relics of blood, the popularity of which can be seen in their wide distribution and media presence. These relics include both blood that has been preserved and blood-stained clothing from papal deeds.[10]

Folk beliefs involve a more active role in carrying out practices—in contrast to the passive worship of relics by the faithful. In addition to hoping for salvation "from above," a ritual must be performed, thus establishing causality. So today, as in the past, folk beliefs move in an area between canonised belief and medicine—maintaining relationships on both sides (Kreissl 2014: 559)—even if the church and those faithful to the canon set the evaluative position. (A circumstance described by Martin Scharfe [2014: 109] as "cute," especially since it is precisely those individuals advocating belief in a higher power, scientifically inexplicable phenomena, and the influence of the afterlife who are both supporting cultic worship and defining the use of amulets and talismans as bizarre and wrong.) Conversely, magical practices are

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9 "Die Volkskunde als Kulturwissenschaft trifft keine Entscheidungen darüber, was heilt und was nicht heilt. Das ist nicht ihre Aufgabe. Die Volkskunde sammelt lediglich die Mittel und Praktiken, die angewendet wurden und werden, versucht ihre Herkunft zu rekonstruieren und ihre Bedeutung als kulturelle Akte herauszuarbeiten. Doch bereits in dieser Offenheit gegenüber den Wirkungsweisen medizinischen Handels steckt eine Beurteilung. Auf irgendeine Weise müssen selbst die uns abstrus erscheinenden Methoden, die jeder naturwissenschaftlichen Untersuchung spotten, gewirkt haben, sonst wären sie nicht über Generationen und Grenzen hinweg weitergegeben worden. Im Grunde ist die Wirksamkeit der Mittel volkskundlich gesehen von nachrangigem Belang. Die kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektive fokussiert vielmehr das Weltbild, das hinter Krankheit und Heilung steht, die kommunikativen Muster, die zur Verbreitung und Tradierung von Heilwissen geführt haben, und die Zeichen für seine Restformen in der heutigen heilkulturellen Praxis."

10 Of special mention here are blood relics made of fabric spattered with Pope John Paul II's blood during the assassination attempt against him. Containing a saint's own blood, these relics are considered to be first-class ones. The blood of a saint can also originate from blood samples taken for medical purposes while he was still alive.

closely related to folk medicine—especially prior to the Enlightenment—hence blurring the boundaries (cf. Hammer-Luza 2014).

Folk beliefs and magical practices should not be interpreted as a kind of evolutionary precursor to religion as it was seen by the sciences until the mid-twentieth century. In our case, magic is not to be seen as distinct from religion (Catholicism), but rather—from the perspective of the believer—as a system of action supplementing Catholicism. Magical practices are indeed socially rejected due to the prevailing religion of Catholicism. From the perspective of the practicing individual, however, those practices have an accepted status when carried out alongside Catholicism within the framework of lived religion. This can be illustrated with actions seen in popular piety related to health and healing: if the Catholic believer is dependent on God's will but is yet unable to actively influence it, such magical rituals create an "ordering worldview and belief system" that the believer is personally able to actively influence (Bäumer 2005: 362). In certain situations—illness, for example—the believer lacks any rational means to achieve the ultimate goal of healing. The magical ritual supports a specific purpose—healing—and thus complements religion on a practical level. Although the believer hopes for healing through a higher power—God, for example—a magical ritual allows them to take initiative without questioning their belief in the omnipotence of God.

6. Religious Objects in a Profane Space: The Museum

The objects used to carry out various rituals that will be discussed in more detail below grew out of religious ideas. The acting individual uses the object with the expectation of a direct reaction. When objects like this end up in a museum collection and are presented to visitors they are automatically divested of their purpose. A modern museum is a profane space that does not allow its articles to be used for religious purposes. From this point on, the object serves as an exhibit to be viewed by visitors, intended to visually convey the content associated with it. Whether an object is rooted in a religious and/or magical context is determined in two ways. Those who used the item for magical purposes must have attributed magical significance to it. And the collecting agent—in our case, the museum—must also classify the object as one that has been used for magical purposes (Hukantaival 2018: 186). The latter is crucial to the interpretive context of the exhibition. Presentation and description are used to frame the item as a religious object. However, it is not the task of the museum to make these objects "experiential" in order to compensate for their loss of meaning (Bräunlein 2004: 24).

7. Ethnological Collections in Identity Construction

People define themselves, their social environment, and "strangers" with the help of identities, which can vary in nature and are based on family, profession, and more. Related to Eric Hobsbawm's "nation building process," the new identity category of a national folk has emerged in Europe. In this context, individual and group-specific identities are seen as a construct to create common ground among individuals with the help of markers (language, history, religion, socialisation, etc.). These markers are not static but can change at any time, thus also changing the identity (Story and Walker 2016).

In terms of historical societies, identity can also create cultural connections to a spatially distant (and sometimes constructed after the fact) society of origin. A classic example of this is the mythological construction of the Teutons as being the ancestors of the Germans. Buildings such as the Walhalla in Donaustauf and the Hermann Monument in Detmold still bear witness to the "Germanisation" (*Germanisierung*) of a "German" history during the nineteenth century. Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, racial concepts also flowed into these supposed identity characteristics, brought in by the works of Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882), Richard Wagner (1813–1883), Anton de Lagarde (1827–1891), and many others (see, for example, Eugène 1998; Sieg 2007). The development of a "national history" was no longer exclusively based upon the equation of Teutonic = German but also made use of language and religion as identity markers. An unchanging constant of anthropological evolution over the last 3,000 years, race was also integrated into the construction of group identity. It was then used to construct claims to land and power, the origins of which reach back to antiquity, as well as to delegitimise the equality of "others" such as Jews and Slavs. This, in turn, created a lasting identity that is still being used today as a mechanism of demarcation from "others," particularly in regard to migration and minorities.

Ethnological collections, which in the nineteenth century were founded mainly upon this new "folk" identity category, are an essential part of the construction mechanism: they provide viewers with a visual representation of the specifics of a folk group, indicating where their historical roots lie, and indirectly separating the described folk group from "others." This means that characteristics or markers of one's own folk group identity can be contrasted with other folk group identities in order to construct a demarcation of being "other" from one's own identity. It is only through these special and sometimes unique characteristics that it becomes possible to construct a folk identity, which does not necessarily have to be drawn from a nation but can also be regional in nature. In the Habsburg Empire of the nineteenth century, for

instance, state museums were established in each crownland with the intention of presenting the state's individual identity within a multi-folk empire (Krug 2012), without however questioning that they belonged to Austria-Hungary.

8. The Roots of the Popular Piety Display in the State Collections

The enthusiasm for collecting objects related to popular piety and superstition was particularly pronounced among ethnologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the people who once owned these items and used them to practice their beliefs, the rituals they were related to and the hopes for effect were part of everyday life. Whereas the collecting activities often also documented the ideas associated with the items, there is an implication of passing them around as curiosities that can be inferred from many of the relevant documentations. For example, Franz Xaver Kießling (1859–1940) collected artefacts related to the practice of magic,[11] often from the Waldviertel region of north-west Lower Austria, which he documented with a brief yet exact description of intended use. One amulet is described as follows: "Luden.[12] Used against fever. Worn around the neck. A red ribbon was pulled through the loop."[13] The description goes on to provide information about how the amulet was made: "Made from pieces of eighteenth-century playing cards, spanned with leather, and containing a dried spider."[14] Such information is fundamentally welcome, as otherwise the piece would have to

11 Kießling was from the field of engineering, but in addition to being active in gymnastics, where he came out as a zealous antisemite, he was also highly enthusiastic about archaeology and folklore—fields in which he collected extensively, particularly in northern Lower Austria. After his own museum had to close, his collection was distributed to other museums, including to the still new Lower Austrian State Museum.

12 Luden is a cadastral municipality of the town of Raabs an der Thaya.

13 "Luden. Mittel gegen Fieber. Wurde um den Hals getragen. Durch die Schleife wurde ein rotes Band gezogen."

14 "Es wurde aus Teilen von Spielkarten aus dem 18. Jahrhundert hergestellt, mit Leder bezogen und enthält eine vertrocknete Spinne." The *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Pocket Dictionary of German Superstitions), helpful when viewed with a grain of salt, lists numerous references to spiders in popular belief (Bächtold-Stäubli and Hoffmann-Krayer 1927–1945).

be indexed under the broad and unpromising category of "objects not yet determined";[15] especially since taking apart the stitches of the sewn amulet—the only way to find out about the spider within—would be out of the question from a conservation perspective. However, the validity of the provided information must be assessed with great care. The collector, to a large extent influenced by a romanticised view of the raw earthiness of the "peasantry" (*Landvolk*), may well have been receptive to stories underscoring the uniqueness, originality, and, last but not least, bizarreness of the objects. It is therefore essential to question the plausibility of any information provided, which in this case was done by researching similar objects and rituals for comparison.[16]

The early inventory of the Lower Austrian State Museum's ethnological collection shows that the department heads did not at the time pay any particular attention in collecting objects related to folk beliefs. It can be assumed that the collection heads did not at that point relate folk beliefs to the identity construction of Lower Austria. The evidence of folk beliefs that did enter the State Museum's collection during this time were primarily from private collections, and often from the private collection of Kießling.

In addition to the belief in relics, which has survived to this day and can also retroactively elevate a museum piece to the status of sacred object (as mentioned in the introduction), there are several measures intended to promote health or cure disease that are still active in society today. The Walburgis oil (*Walburgisöl*), for example, is still being bottled and used today. Although the monastery proactively communicates that the oil has no medical application,[17] and that it is a secondary relic as it is the liquid that seeps out the saint's coffin, it is still likely used by the faithful in hopes of its effectiveness.[18] However, it must also be taken into account that the number of visits to pilgrimage sites motivated purely by tourism has increased sharply. Therefore, a certain proportion of Walburgis oil is bought probably not based upon faith but as a souvenir (Hilpert 2017: 289). Another vital element of popular piety is votive offerings. In particular, votive paintings in the treasure cham-

15 The ethnological collection is indexed according to the Lower Austrian Standard Thesaurus, which is based on the Hessian Museum system.

16 The spider is found as a remedy for fever multiple times in various forms in older literature on superstition; a similar ritual is also seen among Pennsylvania Germans.

17 https://www.abtei-st-walburg.de/hl-walburga/walburgisoel/ (accessed: May 28, 2022).

18 See, for example, the 2019 Baedeker travel guide to Upper Bavaria, which mentions that Walburgis oil supposedly has healing powers (Kohl 2019).

bers of pilgrimage sites document everyday life, showing how worrying circumstances have changed,[19] and how the belief in the protective power of the miraculous image or the Mother of God at the respective pilgrimage church remains alive.

There were numerous aids to help combat the *Frais*, a term used to summarise several different clinical pictures associated with fever and cramps. A fever bonnet (see Figure 4) was worn on the head or simply laid on the body and could thus be used from cradle to grave. It showed a section of the Holy Length of Saint Valentine and was intended not only to ease any fever but also the hour of death. The *Sonntagberger Fraisenstein* (see Figure 5) is an amulet and scraping stone, with the *Frais* necklace connecting different amulets and talismans. The effectiveness of secrecy is shown by the *Breverl*, a folded talisman with contents not normally seen, and by a Saint Anthony amulet of fabric which was sewn into one's clothing and worn at all times to protect the person from the temptations and influences of evil spirits and devilish powers.

9. Conclusion

The display case in Cluster Five of the State Collection's *Haus der Geschichte* makes a core statement on various forms of popular piety and folk beliefs, showing protective symbols, amulets, objects used for magical practices, and items whose use was tolerated or even supported by the Church. The focus is on historical objects, although some of the items on display can still be found today—for example, Walburgis oil or votive paintings and votive offerings. What all the items have in common is that they were used by people for protection, healing, or to express gratitude. Devotional pictures for swallowing (*Schluckbildchen*) and scraping stones like that of the *Fraisenstein* were supposed to transfer their power through incorporation and represent ideas that have become rare in Central European popular piety.[20] However, such ideas have, for example, experienced a revival in Japan over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of sweets imprinted with the mythical creature Amanbie, as seen in the exhibition *Der Wein ist schon reif in der Schale* (The Wine is Already Ripe in the Berry) by Japanese artist Maeda Haruko (b. 1983) at the museumkrems (Schedlmayer 2022).

19 For example, there are an increasing number of votive paintings showing car accidents found in the treasuries.

20 Devotional pictures for swallowing and scraping figures are currently no longer offered at pilgrimage sites.

The Church's handling of these kinds of popular piety objects varied. Whereas the use of relics such as talismans was not viewed positively (Laube 2011: 52), other elements—such as the actual foot length of Mary (see Figure 6) marked with a reference—were even confirmed by the pope as being correct.[21]

These objects reflect the variety of beliefs within a religious confession seen by the faithful themselves as being uniform, and the willingness to believe in their effects in different everyday situations out of sheer conviction. Nevertheless, they only mark the characteristics of an era, but not the phenomena that have disappeared over time.

Across the *Haus der Geschichte*'s display of objects of popular piety and folk beliefs stands a display of medical and pharmacological items. What at first glance might look like a contradiction actually illustrates a transition, a gradual absorption of competency from faith to knowledge-based science. (Yet, looking at the objects shown, this is more supposed than actual science.) The omnipotence of religion waned with the advent of the Enlightenment; people no longer trusted the clergy in all matters—scientific medicine gained in importance and began to break away from previously common ideas such as the law of similars. However, even scientific medicine cannot dispense with a belief in its own methods. The classification of urine colours and their significance in diagnostics (uroscopy) shown opposite the popular piety showcase does not have elements of religious belief but can, from today's perspective, still be regarded as a relatively naïve interpretation of possible causalities. On the side of the popular piety display, approaches based on clear ideas of the effectivity of healing substances are definitely being pursued, although the healing substance may very well be a powder scraped off an amulet made from clay containing trace amounts of the Sonntagberg holy stone (*Sonntagberger Zeichenstein*). The transition and evolution from the purely religious and magical to more scientifically supported approaches can be clearly seen in this small section of the exhibition. However, various aspects of the pre-Enlightenment world of ideas survived well into the nineteenth century. The law of similars can be found in the very popular teachings of homeopathy, albeit in a different form: whereas a crab's eye amulet (*Krebsaugenamulett*), for example, is believed to heal eyes due to its visual similarity, homeopaths use diluted substances according to the law of similars that refers to the triggering of comparable symptoms at higher doses. Here, too, the focus is on a willingness to believe in something with biochemical

21 The item is printed with a note confirming that Pope John XXII guarantees 700 years of indulgence if the foot length was properly worshiped. Its uses in popular piety—for example, to facilitate childbirth—was of course not taken into account.

effects that cannot be proven. Instead, empirical values for such treatments are used and scientific explanations are left unsought.

What can be noticed and taken from observing the display and its surroundings is an impression of the tremendous influence that different forms of belief had on daily life. The judgmental distinction between faith and superstition—the latter increasingly replaced by esotericism (Winter 2020: 89)—which now also continues to exist as an underestimated form of religiousness is probably not visible for most people when looking at the individual objects on display. This only serves to make clear how intertwined the different ideas were and how the Catholic Church's sovereignty of interpretation justified these evaluations—a sovereignty that scientific work was not always able to avoid in the past, as shown by the classification of items collected by Franz Xaver Kießling in the Waldviertel region as "curiosities." Learning about the objects in this display brings the path to the Enlightenment to life—the description of the magic needles for bursting unwanted love (see Figure 7),[22] for example, builds a bridge to the present by pointing out that the needles could be seen today as a tried and tested means to stop stalking. The people viewing these objects are not blank slates but individuals with their own history of belief (or non-belief). However, there is a broad consensus that museums objects are no longer for worship and are generally not seen as such by the faithful. They have been extracted from their religious context, and even if the zucchetto described above could also be regarded as a relic from the Catholic perspective, no cases of people visiting the Lower Austria Museum to pray in front of it have been reported.[23] Nevertheless, in museums that exhibit religious objects, it is always to be expected that individuals with the respective religious socialisation will see those objects from their own religious perspective. As a result, museums can unintentionally "become a situational place of worship" (Bräunlein 2008: 172).

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22 There is only one such group of objects in the collection, unfortunately with no precise data on manufacture and use. Documented lore states that the needles are to protect against unwanted love by being secretly brought into the living quarters of the person in love. The connection to the popular belief that pointed objects could pierce or cut feelings of friendship or love and therefore should not be given as a gift is an obvious one. In literature, the idea was taken up by Alfred Hartmann (1814–1897) in his 1841 novella *Die Stecknadel* (The Needle).

23 Bazon Brock mentions a case from Cologne that can also be found anecdotally in several places when searching online. The purported image of a peasant woman praying in the museum, which ultimately resulted in a ban to that effect, fits perfectly with the perception of popular piety as naïve. Online: https://bazonbrock.de/werke/detail/-32.html?id=32§id=80 (accessed: June 19, 2022).

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Appendix

Figure 1: View of the popular piety display in Cluster Five of the permanent exhibition of the *Haus der Geschichte* of the Lower Austria Museum. Cluster Five addresses the topics of faith and knowledge.

Figure 2: The position of the popular piety display facing the pharmaceutical and barber surgeon showcase.

Figure 3: Zucchetto from Pope John Paul II, shown in a lighted showcase in an almost dark room in Cluster 1 (The Flow of Time). The exhibit entered the collection due to the historic value of the pope's visit to St. Pölten. His canonisation made it a second-class relic of the new saint.

Figure 4: Bonnet against convulsions. The bonnet was said to protect against various feverish illnesses. Children wore the bonnet to bed or hid it under their pillow.

Figure 5: Terracotta amulet from the Sonntagberg pilgrimage site in Lower Austria. The amulet was said to help heal the Frais, a generic term for a vast array of febrile and convulsive diseases. A small amount of dust was scraped from the terracotta amulet and ingested. The amulet itself contains dust from the Sonntagberg miracle stone.

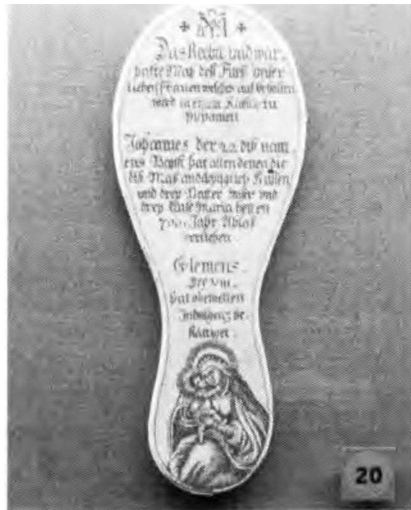

Figure 6: True length of the Mother of God's foot. True lengths of Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and saints like St. Valentin were quite popular until the late nineteenth century and used to protect women giving birth, as well as being a general amulet of protection.

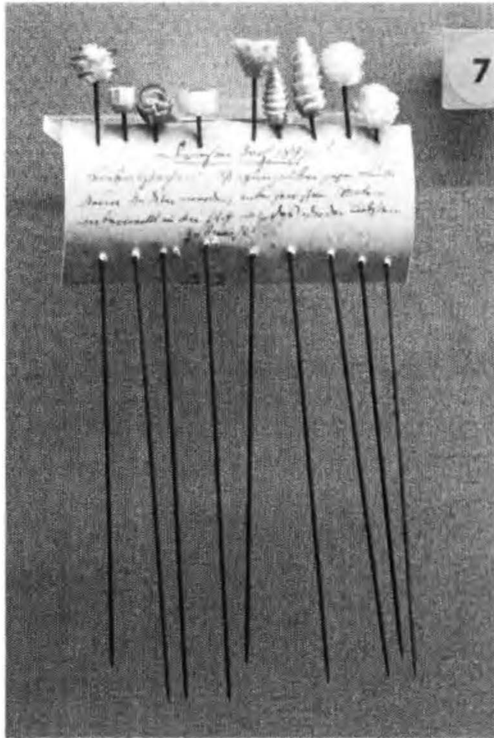

Figure 7: Magical needles to fend off unwanted love referred to the popular belief that sharp pointed objects could burst or cut a friendship when given as a gift.

Appendix: List of Items in the Popular Piety Display

(1) Staghorn amulet (*Hirschhornamulett*)

(2) *Bulla* amulet on wire necklace (*Bulla an Drahtreif*)

(3) Amulet with phallus and fig symbol (*Amulett mit Phallus und Fica*)

(4) Moon-shaped lunula amulet (*Amulett in Lunula-Form*)

(5) *Lapides cancrorum* amulet (crab's eyes) (*Krebsaugenamulett*)

(6) Orchis root, a magic aphrodisiac (*Liebeszauber*)

(7) Magic needles for "bursting" a love or friendship (*Zaubernadeln "Liebabstecher"*)

(8) Astrological dodecahedron (*Astrologischer Dodekaeder*)

(9) Mandrake (protection against almost any kind of danger) (*Galgenmännlein*)

(10) Pentacle (to protect a house) (*Pentagramm*)

(11) Lucky charm (*Glücksbringer*)

(12) Votive animal (*Votivtier*)

(13) Votive offering made of wax (kidney) (*Wachsvotiv*)

(14) Mould for wax votive offering (pair of eyes) (Model für *Wachsvotiv*)

(15) Blessing of Saint Anthony of Padua (cloth amulet to be sewn into a garment) (*Antonius-Segen*)

(16) *Breverl* (folded talisman with images of saints) (*Aufgefaltetes Breverl*)

(17) Wax cast of a swaddled infant (*Wachsabguss eines Fatschenkindes*)

(18) Votive painting made to express gratitude for surviving an accident (*Votivbild*)

(19) True length of Christ (*Länge Christi*)

(20) True length of Virgin Mary's foot (*Fußlänge Mariens*)

(21) Silk painting, a second-class relic (*Seidenbild als Berührungsreliquie*)

(22) Oil of Saint Walburga in small bottles (*Walburgisöl*)

(23) Fivefold scapular (*Fünffaches Skapulier*)

(24) Votive painting expressing gratitude for the healing of gout (*Votivbild als Dank für die Heilung von der Gicht*)

(25) Paper slips with devotional texts; to be swallowed (*Esszettel*)

(26) Chain to prevent convulsions (*Fraisenkette*)

(27) Bonnet with images of saints and Virgin Mary, to prevent convulsions (*Fraisenhäubchen mit Heiligendarstellungen und -Gnadenbild*)

(28) Clay amulet from Sonntagberg, to prevent convulsions (*Sonntagberger Fraisenstein*)

(29) Crystal amulet against fright (to protect a growing fetus) (*Bergkristallamulett*)

(30) Coral amulet against the evil eye (*Korallenamulett*)

(31) Amulet against fever (containing a dried spider) (*Amulett gegen Fieber*)

(32) Amulet for treating bunions (*Amulett zur Behandlung von Überbeinen*)