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## Oral and Written History Misconceptions that Influence Common Knowledge

1. Does Latin stand above all other languages? – 2. Was everyone a practicing Christian in the Middle Ages? – 3. Was the Second Vatican Council harmful to the Catholic Church?

It is well-known that misconceptions can influence many, especially if it does not require too much energy to understand. Hoaxes and misleading interpretations are attractive especially for the less educated. The fact that forgeries and conspiracy theories spread much faster than ever before by the help of mainly unfiltered social media is clearly visible in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this article, by using three examples, I present how much a biased interpretation in oral history can influence the formation of misconceptions, and *vice versa*, how a misconception can influence the common knowledge of a society and in the end its cultural memory.

When in ancient times authors had written for instance the *vita* of an emperor, it was considered natural that the result had to meet the expectations of the commissioner. All the more so as the profitableness of writing a work was highly dependent on how satisfied the commissioner was with the results. Thus, historical objectivity was not a default at that time and it was affordable only for few. As a result, a mandate to sum up the history of an event or an autobiography bore on itself the signs of tendentiousness and these works were only in exceptional cases unbiased. This was similar to composing the *vitae sanctorum*. When the life of a saint or

one's martyrdom was composed retrospectively, it was decorated with miraculous elements, with many signs that proved the unquestionable sanctity of the person. Sometimes these *vitae* were even composed and understood allegorically<sup>1</sup>. The objectivity as basic expectation in different writings such as in autobiographies or in newspapers appeared later<sup>2</sup>. The discovery of Gutenberg was a revolutionary one in multiplying written texts, especially the text of the Bible translated to vernacular. Since the Roman Catholic Church assessed the harmfulness of the printing and spreading of Bible translations, the clergy tried to control the printing houses of the time as much as it was possible<sup>3</sup>. Since it was visible that even a tight control would be insufficient, the Church shifted the focus to the other end, namely it set up and continuously enriched the list of prohibited books present in the *Index librorum prohibitorum*. The system of presenting one's sources systematically is considered as a discovery of modern times although its origins are already present in rabbinic literature, namely, in the Talmud. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scientific writings published in humanities, had to stand on the research of sources, especially of primary ones, consulting from these as many as possible. Of course, clear scientific expectations did not end the presence of tendentiousness in scientific writings, it decreased, however, considerably the number of these attempts. The larger, international printing houses remained to some extent the filters of scientific works in cooperation with the system of peer review.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century having financial means meant that you could write and edit books with the help of smaller printing houses and the process did not presuppose any scientific research anymore. The proliferation of printed books appeared as a challenge to scientific writings, first of all, because with the increase of available sources the ratio of exact knowledge is decreasing<sup>4</sup>. With the mentioned proliferation, nevertheless, the earlier idea which considered printed text and truth as synonyms, was not valid anymore. This process opened the possibility of printing almost whatever one wished and consequently, there appeared many pieces of oral history, unreferenced stories, gossips in printed form. These stories influenced the views of different religious, ethnic groups. In the following lines, I would like to pres-

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<sup>1</sup> Lynda L. Coon. 1997. *Sacred Fictions. Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1–27.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Galison. 2015. „The Journalist, the Scientist and Objectivity”. *Objectivity in Science*, 1: 60–75.

<sup>3</sup> On this regard see the outstanding account of Wim François. 2020. „Bible Production and Bible Readers in the Age of Confessionalisation: The Case of the Low Countries”. *Lay Readings of the Bible in Early Modern Europe* 68: 191–216.

<sup>4</sup> Balázs Ablonczy. 2015. *Trianon-legendák*. Budapest: Jaffa, 35.

ent some examples from European church history which could prove the assumption that oral history or interpreted history influences the less scientific writings like blogs, informative journals etc. The problem is not the mere fact that we might receive an already interpreted, shaped version of the events but it becomes problematic when a large *stratum* of the society is influenced thanks to semi-scientific writings.

### **1. First Example: Does Latin stand above all other languages?**

Here I present one of the most well-known and widespread myths among Christians, especially among Catholics. It states not less than Latin is more important in the liturgy than any vernacular language. Whenever one finds oneself in a discussion with ordinary Catholics about the language of the Sunday liturgy, one will sooner or later hear the idea that the language of the liturgy was always Latin and local languages should not have been introduced. Among the reasons one might find ignorance, religious fundamentalism or the combination of the two. For instance, due to ignorance, Latin is considered the original language of the New Testament or it is simply considered a sacred language. These explanations neglect obvious facts and just as in the case of my second example, could be dangerous. At the heart of the above-mentioned statement there is a certain longing for the past, for the solemnness of the liturgy where incense, Gregorian chant and other accessories were present. Many imagine an ordinary Sunday liturgy, for instance, as it is represented in movies in the case of crowning the kings of the Middle Ages. This idea is often compared with the almost-empty churches in many European countries. This comparison is awkward but in the best case unfair. We should not forget that not every Sunday mass looked like the coronation ceremony of a king. If we turn back to the question of language and one sheds more light on different languages and their importance in the liturgy, surprises await us. First of all, as we all know but we too often tend to forget that, according to the gospels, Jesus was a faithful Jew, following the ancient rules of his own tradition. The event of the last supper is considered the founding of the Eucharist, for instance, but was in fact a faithfully organized Passover-feast. At the event, Jesus and his disciples, being all Jews, were talking Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew. As Christianity spread across the Eastern regions of the Roman Empire and pagans also wished to follow the new religious community, liturgy was celebrated by using *koine* Greek, the language spoken in everyday life<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the motivation for using a widely

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Pecklers. 2014. *The Genius of The Roman Rite. On the Reception and Implementation of The New Missal*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 7.

spoken language in the liturgy was the principle of understanding the ceremony. This can be considered a normal, natural reaction from any believer who would like to be part of a religious community. In the Western part of the Roman Empire up until the third century, both Latin and Greek were spoken, and the latter was part of any education. In the third century, especially due to the influence of North-Africa, there would appear a shift in languages. In this process, Latin started to eliminate Greek from its original place and in the Western part of the Roman Empire constantly less inhabitants used Greek as a language of communication<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, the language of the liturgy in the West had to be changed to the language that everyone understood, namely to Latin. This is how Latin became the language of the liturgy in the West. At this point one could rightly pose the question: if understanding the liturgy was the primary goal of the communities in ancient times, why did the Roman Catholic Church not opt for the introduction of local languages much earlier? Or introduce them at least at the turn of the millennium when already only a thin *stratum* of the society understood Latin properly. The answer is manifold but one of the reasons to keep Latin as the language of the liturgy was the schism between East and West since for the West a language was needed as an identity marker, if not for national identity then for religious identity. At the time of the appearance of Protestantism we faced the same reason: since Luther put the issue of vernacular to his flag, Catholicism had only one option, namely to oppose to it if the Catholic Church did not want to recognize the validity of Luther's wish. For these reasons the Catholic Church introduced the use of vernacular languages only at the II. Vatican Council (1962–1965) but never giving up or forbidding the Tridentine liturgy, i.e., the one celebrated by using entirely Latin. Today, a half century after the introduction of vernacular we meet the arguments of returning to Latin exclusively since we should return to the roots or to the sources of Christianity. At this point it should be underlined: if we would like to return to the sources (even on the expense of not understanding and therefore not being able to participate actively in the liturgy), we should not return to Latin as it embodies only one stage of the development of the liturgy. Since Latin was at least the third language of the liturgy, returning to the sources would mean Aramaic and/or in the best case, Greek.

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<sup>6</sup> Pecklers. 2014. *The Genius of The Roman Rite*, 7–8.

## 2. Second Example: Was everyone a practicing Christian in the Middle Ages?

In the following lines, I present another misconception. According to this, everyone was a believer in the Middle Ages, practicing one's own faith in public. Such simplification could not be further from the truth and it raises questions or it should raise questions even for those who do not have any higher education in history: what does Middle Ages mean and where, in which part of Europe might the argument be true? Just like today, Europe consisted of countries which had developed with great variety, the situation was very similar in the period of the Middle Ages with many differences in exercising religion. And at what time slot this argument tries to limit itself because the Middle Ages was *grosso modo* a thousand-years-long period. The roots of the idea go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the period of the Middle Ages was assessed differently by church history and civil history<sup>7</sup>. For the latter, the medieval period was described as turning back or in the best case slowing down in development which was partially true: Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire due to the barbarian attacks, lost the majority of its population and became a small city. Building infrastructure ended for centuries with the collapse of the Western part of the Roman Empire and the people were using the roads and bridges constructed by the Romans. Large scale constructions experienced a great revival only after the rise of Europe in the second millennium. Generally speaking, from the modern period onward, medieval times were viewed by European historians as something that bridged the valuable periods of ancient and modern eras, seeing the thousand years between as something to be surpassed, characterizing it with negative adjectives such as dark. As antidote and at some extent as a reaction, medieval times were viewed as an ideal period for church historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though we are cautious today with the romanticizing view of history, a view which usually turns against us, this danger was not considered two centuries earlier<sup>8</sup>. Medieval times were presented as an exemplary age when the church had enough capacity to influence the society.

As in the heart of every myth or legend there must be a particle of truth<sup>9</sup>, the idea that everyone was practicing Christian or Catholic in medieval times, also consists of some truth. First, it is unquestionable that the Roman Catholic Church and its hierarchy became the leading power in Europe thanks to the alliance between the Kingdom of the Franks and the papacy. In the second period of medie-

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<sup>7</sup> Máté Gárdonyi. 2012. *Bevezetés a katolikus egyház történetébe*. Budapest: Jel K, 97–98.

<sup>8</sup> Ablonczy. 2015. *Trianon-legendák*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ablonczy. 2015. *Trianon-legendák*, 41.

val times (1050–1300 AD) popes declared themselves the first earthly power and clearly stood above kings. In these two periods, new tribes and kingdoms turned to Christianity which made the papacy as strong as never before. Additionally, after the great schism between East and West in 1054, the Roman Catholic Church or more precisely the pope got rid of its main competitor, namely of the patriarch of Constantinople. This favorable setting, however, changed very fast in the third part of the Middle Ages (1300–1500). The papacy lost considerably from its fame during the period of the so-called Avignon papacy when the French king had a great influence on popes. The western schism when two and later three popes were reigning parallel, also contributed to this decline, facts which paved the way to Protestantism<sup>10</sup>. The renaissance popes and their royal court, as part of the last days of the medieval period, could not have been further from Christianity or from Christian principles. Though there are few sources we could rely on, one can presuppose that the number of practicing believers was among 30–60% of the European societies in medieval times. Though these numbers are convincing, especially compared to the 10% of practicing Catholics today, we still stand far from truth by claiming that in medieval times everyone was a practicing Catholic. As we see, the origin of the idea came from a reaction the Catholic Church historians gave to civil history. Nevertheless, the idea became cornerstone of the common knowledge about medieval times and became influential for our conception of the medieval church and religious life of the time. This popular error would not be dangerous in itself, just as there are many other harmless misconceptions in our tradition. The true danger lies in the fact that some Catholics promote a return to the medieval church, when “all were practicing Catholics”. We should, however, emphasize that this is a myth and such a Church had never existed. The Church that always needs to be renewed, the *Ecclesia semper reformanda* is of course a valid expectation in all ages and we always must return to the sources. If we, however, really want to return to the sources, we should point our views to the ancient church and we should not stop halfway at the invented example of the medieval Catholic Church.

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Ullmann. 2016. *A Short History of the Papacy in the Middle Ages*. London – New York: Routledge, 182–199.

### 3. Third Example: Was the Second Vatican Council harmful to the Catholic Church?

My third example is taken from recent times and tackles the role of the Second Vatican Council. As we can hear from many Catholics, Vatican II, the major turning point in modernizing and reinterpreting Catholic theology, is considered at least partially if not totally erroneous. This misconception is relative strong in several fundamental groups not only in European countries and the reasons behind them are similar to the one presented in my previous example: longing for the strong church which maybe has never existed in the imagined form. Those standing behind the accusation often mention the lack of vocation and secularization processes as it were the fault or results of Vatican II. The accusation against Vatican II stand, however, on false ground. The catalyst for secularization processes throughout Europe got underway, especially more so, after the French revolution<sup>11</sup>. Since the power of kings and emperors was no longer traced back to God, and the Church was no longer needed to confirm their divine power, the Church was closed off from the decision-making processes in the political arena, losing not only its attractiveness for many but also its power to influence<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, the tradition to send children to seminary or to motivate them to become religious in the frames of any order, ceased to exist. One should also not forget that the changing world was expecting the Catholic Church to speak up in many important issues, such as in the case of the miserable situation of workers. Though there were good examples, such as Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, the bishop of Mainz<sup>13</sup>, the papacy was silent regarding this issue up until the *Rerum novarum* of Leo XIII at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, the true sources of Vatican II theology is largely unknown for instance in Eastern Europe: believers have only minimal knowledge about the theology of Yves-Marie Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu or Henri-Marie de Lubac. The main commentaries of Vatican II which present the proceedings of the council, the conciliar history of the documents are still not translated into

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<sup>11</sup> On this matter see the outstanding work of Hugh McLeod (Ed.). 2014. *The Cambridge History of Christianity*. Cambridge UK – New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Hugh McLeod, Werner Ustorf. 2011. *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000*. Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 8–9.

<sup>13</sup> See George Metlake, William O’Connell. 2008. *Christian Social Reform. Program Outlined by its Pioneer, William Emmanuel Baron von Ketteler, Bishop of Mainz*. Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing.

<sup>14</sup> Roger Aubert, David A. Boileau. 2005. *Catholic Social Teaching. An Historical Perspective*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 182–87.



any Easter European languages and as such, not accessible for most of the believers<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, expressing the condemnation of Vatican II without any deeper knowledge is not more than a groundless and dangerous presupposition. It is groundless since the most important decisions brought about structural changes in the Roman Catholic Church of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And indeed, these statements are dangerous, since they destroy the unity of the church, a destruction we need the least in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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To sum up, I would like to underline that oral sources, or orally transmitted ungrounded statements can harm both the Church on the inside and on the outside. It belongs to the task of professors to break these vicious circles at the formation of history teachers. And second, the task of teachers of religious education to point out and fix these misconceptions by using scientific approaches on the level of any children.

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<sup>15</sup> The five-volumes-long history of Vatican II, for instance is translated only to English, German and French. Compare Giuseppe Alberigo, Joseph A. Komonchak (Ed.). 1995. *History of Vatican II. Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II: Toward a New Era in Catholicism*. Vol. I. Maryknoll, NY – Leuven: Orbis, Peeters.



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**Abstract:** It is well-known that misconceptions can influence many, especially if it does not require too much energy to understand. Hoaxes, misleading interpretations are attractive especially for the less educated. The fact that forgeries and conspiracy-theories spread much faster by the help of the mainly unfiltered social media than ever before, which is especially visible in the time of Covid-19. This article, by the help of three examples, presents how much tendentious interpretation in oral history can influence the formation of misconceptions, and vice versa, how a misconception can influence the common knowledge of a society and in the end its cultural memory.

**Keywords:** misconceptions, Latin, Middle Ages, liturgy, Vatican II.

**Streszczenie: Historia ustna i pisemna. Błędne przekonania wpływające na powszechną wiedzę.** Powszechnie wiadomo, że nieporozumienia mogą wpływać na wiele osób, zwłaszcza jeśli ich rozumowanie nie wymaga zbyt wielkiego wysiłku. Żarty, oparte na błędnej interpretacji historycznej, są atrakcyjne zwłaszcza dla mniej wykształconych. Nie ma wątpliwości, że fałszerstwa i teorie spiskowe rozprzestrzeniają się znacznie szybciej niż kiedykolwiek wcześniej, głównie dzięki pomocy niekontrolowanych mediów, co daje się zauważyć również w okresie przeżywanej pandemii. Artykuł, opierając się na trzech przykładach, przedstawia jak tendencyjna interpretacja historii mówionej może wpływać na kształtowanie się nieporozumień i jak błędne przekonanie może wpływać na powszechną wiedzę o społeczeństwie, a ostatecznie na jego pamięć kulturową.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nieporozumienia, język łaciński, średniowiecze, liturgia, Sobór Watykański II.

