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# Magic Revived: Theological Controversies Surrounding Animal Magnetism in Italy (1838–1858)

**Abstract:** Diese Studie untersucht die vielschichtige katholische Reaktion auf den animalischen Magnetismus im Italien des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts. Während sich frühere Forschungen vor allem auf die Bemühungen des Vatikans konzentrierten, den Mesmerismus durch das Heilige Offizium zu regulieren, werden in dieser Arbeit die breiteren theologischen Debatten um die inquisitorischen Dekrete untersucht. In den 1840er und 1850er Jahren entwickelten katholische Denker verschiedene Erklärungsansätze für die unheimliche Phänomene des animalischen Magnetismus, die von Theorien über Pathologie und Täuschung bis hin zu Spekulationen über dämonische Einflüsse reichten. Als sich der Mesmerismus von einer umstrittenen medizinischen Praxis zu einer neuen Form der “übernatürlichen Technologie” entwickelte, die mit Spiritismus und Okkultismus verflochten war, wurden die katholische Diskurse zunehmend polemischer und spiegelten die reaktionäre Wende der Kirche nach 1848 wider. Einige Priester versuchten jedoch, den tierischen Magnetismus mit dem christlichen Dogma in Einklang zu bringen, indem sie behaupteten, er könne ekstatische Zustände hervorrufen oder theologische Wahrheiten bestätigen – Bemühungen, die innerhalb der Kirche zu erheblichen Kontroversen führten. Indem sie die Komplexität der theologischen Debatten beleuchtet, zeigt diese Studie das Wechselspiel zwischen Tradition und Innovation im Katholizismus in Bezug auf neue Spiritualitäten auf, das letztlich das Aufkommen alternativer Formen des Christentums vorwegnimmt.

## 1 Introduction

This study examines the multifaceted Catholic response to the development of animal magnetism in nineteenth-century Italy. While previous scholarship has focused primarily on the Vatican’s efforts to regulate the practice of animal magnetism through the Holy Office,<sup>1</sup> here I aim to broaden the scope by addressing the intellectual and theological debates surrounding the official decrees.

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<sup>1</sup> See the studies by David Armando listed in the bibliography.

During the 1840s and 1850s, Catholic intellectuals developed various theoretical frameworks to explain the uncanny phenomena of animal magnetism. These explanations included theories of pathology and delusion, as well as speculation about demonic influence. As we explore the topic further, it becomes clear that the Church's increasingly polemical discourse reflects both its reactionary turn after 1848 and the transformation underway in the French context – in particular, the evolution of mesmerism from a controversial medical practice into a “supernatural technology” deeply intertwined with occultism and early spiritualism.

This study also delves into the efforts of certain priests to reconcile animal magnetism with Christian doctrine. The speculations of these authors, suggesting that mesmerism could induce ecstasy or confirm theological truths, sparked controversy within the Church. However, their existence underscores that in Italy, despite the hegemonic influence of the Vatican and its efforts to exert ideological control and curb heterodoxy, the Catholic response to mesmerism involved traditional methodology as well as innovation. By exploring this interplay, I aim to move beyond simplistic categorizations that depict the relationship between the Church and animal magnetism as inherently conflictual.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, I will endeavor to illuminate both the heated reactions to mesmerism and the dissemination of alternative spiritualities rooted in its theories and practices. This, in turn, may provide insights into the emergence of novel and “esoteric” forms of Christianity.

## 2 The Cultural and Regulatory Context

Despite the controversy it had caused in France, mesmerism enjoyed widespread popularity throughout Europe in the early nineteenth century, especially after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815.<sup>3</sup> This success was due, at least in part, to a broader transformation of the medical frameworks of the time. The theoretical principles of animal magnetism, centered around the idea of a subtle and universal fluid affecting living beings, aligned with the energetic–vitalist perspective of

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<sup>2</sup> A recent example of this approach can be found in Mazzagatti, Roberto et al.: *Animal Magnetism in Italy during the Nineteenth Century: the Conflicting Relationship with the Catholic Church*, in: *History of Psychiatry* 33(4)/2022, 459–466.

<sup>3</sup> On this phase, see Méheust, Bertrand: *Somnambulisme et médiumnité: 1784–1930*, 2 vols., Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond 1999, vol. 1, 351–469.

Romantic medicine.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, they intersected with scientific issues concerning the impact of the atmosphere on the human body and disorders related to nerve excitability.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the range of anomalous psychic phenomena that had arisen in 1784 from the discovery of “magnetic sleep” by the Marquis de Puységur (capacity for self-diagnosis, hyperesthesia, remote vision, telepathy, precognition), ignited the interest of philosophers and scientists in those submerged psychic realms, the study of which would eventually lead to the notion of “unconscious”.<sup>6</sup> The resonance of these ideas was in turn amplified by Romantic culture, particularly within the German-speaking context.<sup>7</sup>

Mesmerism, however, posed thorny challenges to the religious establishment. In addition to the moral concerns surrounding its practices,<sup>8</sup> animal magnetism threatened to provide secular explanations for phenomena that were traditionally attributed to supernatural causes, such as demonic possession, the ecstasies of the saints, miracles, and prophecies.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the Church tended to see

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4 On Romantic medicine, particularly within the German context, see Wiesing, Urban: *Kunst oder Wissenschaft? Konzeptionen der Medizin in der Deutschen Romantik*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1995 and D’Orazio, Ugo: “Romantische Medizin”. Entstehung eines medizinhistorischen Epochenbegriffs, in: *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 32 (2)/1997, 179–217.

5 Zanetti, François: *Magnétisme animal et électricité médicale au dix-huitième siècle*, in: Mesmer et mesmérismes. Le magnétisme animal en contexte, ed. Bruno Belhoste /Nicole Edelman, Montreuil: Omniscience 2015, 103–117.

6 In addition to Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, see the classic works by Ellenberger and Crabtree (Ellenberger, Henri F: *The Discovery of the Unconscious. The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, London: Penguin 1970; Crabtree, Adam: *From Mesmer to Freud. Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1993), as well as Monroe, John W.: *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France*, Ithaca: Cornell University 2008.

7 In this regard, see Gruber, Bettina: *Die Seherin von Prevorst. Romantischer Okkultismus als Religion, Wissenschaft und Literatur*, Paderborn: Schöningh 2000; Sawicki, Diethard: *Leben mit den Toten. Geisterglauben und die Entstehung des Spiritismus in Deutschland 1770–1900*, Paderborn: Schöningh 2002; Baier, Karl: *Romantischer Mesmerismus und Religion*, in: *Finden und Erfinden. Die Romantik und ihre Religionen*, ed. Daniel Cyranka et al., Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2020, 13–54 and Brand, Klaus: *Wissenschaft und Religion in Mesmerismuskursen des 19. Jahrhunderts. Ein Beitrag zum Religionsbegriff und zur Entstehung moderner Spiritualität* (2014), Hildesheim: Georg Olms 2023.

8 Gallini, Clara: *La sonnambula meravigliosa: magnetismo e ipnotismo nell’Ottocento italiano* (-1983), Rome: L’asino d’oro 2013, 61–81 as well as Carroy, Jacqueline: *Les personnalités doubles et multiples: Entre science et fiction*, Paris: PUF 1993, 3–22.

9 Armando, David: *Scienza, demonolatria o “impostura ereticale”? Il Sant’Uffizio romano e la questione del magnetismo animale*, in: *Giornale di Storia*, 2/2009; <https://www.giornaledistoria.net/saggi/articoli/scienza-demonolatria-impostura-eretica-santuffizio-romano-la-questione-del-magnetismo-animale-2/> (30.6.2023), 3.

mesmerism as a dangerous influence promoting the secularization of society. But there was more at stake. In its theosophical and spiritual variants, magnetic somnambulism could be seen as a modern “religious technology” based on access to extraordinary states of consciousness and contact with non-physical entities. As such, it could serve as a matrix for deviant spiritualities.<sup>10</sup> As shown by Faivre, Hanegraaff, Baier, and other scholars, this was especially the case in Germany. Here, in the early decades of the century, the recognition of animal magnetism as a branch of university medicine increasingly brought Christian theosophy back into play in the context of natural philosophy, Romantic mesmerism, and its interest in “magnetic gnosis”.<sup>11</sup>

Before examining the regulatory framework established by the Church to address animal magnetism, it is crucial to underscore the turbulent period experienced by the Vatican in the decades following the Conservative Order. This era was characterized by heightened tensions between Rome and society at large. Gregory XVI, in his 1832 encyclical *Mirari Vos*, adamantly rejected any attempts to reform the Church, arguing that its divine origins made its statutes immutable. In his attempt to curb the spread of secularism and liberalism, the pope condemned freedom of conscience, thought, and press, as well as the separation between Church and state. During the pontificate of Pius IX (1846–1878), these tensions escalated as new political and social challenges arose. A pivotal moment in this era occurred in February 1849 when, amid the broader wave of European revolutions, radical republicans seized control of Rome. This marked the establishment of the Roman Republic which, despite its brief existence, significantly amplified the tensions between the Catholic Church and surrounding society. This event became entwined with the drive for Italian unification, culminating in the capture

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**10** Hanegraaff, Wouter J.: *Magnetic Gnosis: Somnambulism and the Quest for Absolute Knowledge*, in: *Die Enzyklopädik der Esoterik: Allwissenheitsmythen und universalwissenschaftliche Modelle in der Esoterik der Neuzeit*, ed. Andreas Kilcher et al., Paderborn: Fink 2010, 259–276. On this point, see also Crabtree: *From Mesmer to Freud*, 196–203 and Edelman, Nicole: *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France: 1785–1914*, Paris: Albin Michel 1995.

**11** Baier, Karl: *Romantischer Mesmerismus und Religion*. See also Faivre, Antoine: “Éloquence magique”, ou descriptions des mondes de l’au-delà explorés par le magnétisme animal. Au carrefour de la Naturphilosophie romantique et de la théosophie chrétienne (première moitié du XIX-ème siècle), in: *Aries* 8/2008, 191–228 and Hanegraaff: *Magnetic Gnosis*. Focusing on German romantic culture, Baier explains: “In the mesmeric setting, the somnambulists had a space to unfold religious experiences [. . .] that was not supervised by church authorities, but rather by physicians and lay magnetizers. Although the influence of Christianity can be assumed overall, in comparison to traditional pastoral care they opened up new possibilities for individualized religiosity” (Baier: *Romantischer Mesmerismus und Religion*, 31).

of Rome in 1870. As such, the year 1849 is generally viewed as the beginning of the reactionary phase of Pius IX's pontificate.<sup>12</sup>

In order to confront the challenges posed by modernity, the Church could rely on two primary agents: the Holy Office and the Jesuits.<sup>13</sup> In March, 1814, Napoleon released Pius VII, who triumphantly entered Rome on May 24 after five years of captivity. Soon after, both the Inquisition and the Jesuit Order were revived to reassert ecclesiastical authority and orthodoxy. The Jesuits regained control of the Roman College in 1824, marking a return to traditional Counter-Reformation education and a rejection of trends toward modernization. Around the Roman College, the "Roman School" of theology developed, supporting the papacy against modern errors such as rationalism, socialism, and liberalism.<sup>14</sup> Its leading figure was Giovanni Perrone (1794–1876), regarded in his time as "the prince of Roman theologians"<sup>15</sup> and still recognized today as "one of the main architects of the restoration of Catholic theology in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century".<sup>16</sup> His curriculum, *Praelectiones theologicae*, which underwent thirty-four editions between 1835 and the early 1870s, shaped clerical education for decades.<sup>17</sup> In this work, Perrone, inspired by the Bible, the Greek Fathers, Thomism, and contemporary theologians such as Möhler and Newman, emphasized theological methodology, arguing that human reason required the authority of the Church to access religious truths. As such, he condemned Protestantism as the historical source of all modern heresies.

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12 Filoramo, Giovanni / Menozzi, Daniele: *Storia del cristianesimo. L'età contemporanea*, Bari: Laterza 2002, 148–149.

13 See Armando, David: *L'argine e il remo: Inquisizione e gesuiti nella Restaurazione romana*, in: *La compagnie de Jésus des Anciens Régimes au monde contemporain (XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. Pierre-Antoine Fabre et al., Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu / École française de Rome 2020, 257–273, 263–264.

14 Mondin, Battista: *Storia della teologia 4: Epoca contemporanea*, Bologna: ESD 1997, 222–223. See also Neufeld, Karl H.: "Roman School": Observations and Reflections on a More Precise Determination, in: *Gregorianum* 63/1982, 677–699.

15 The expression is by F.E. Chassey, quoted in Shea, Charles Michael: Faith, Reason, and Ecclesiastical Authority in Giovanni Perrone's *Praelectiones Theologicae*, in: *Gregorianum* 94(1)/2014, 159–177, 159. See also Shea, Charles Michael: Giovanni Perrone's Theological Curriculum and the First Vatican Council, in: *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 110 (3–4)/2015, 789–816.

16 Mondin: *Storia della teologia*, 137.

17 See Shea: Faith, Reason, and Ecclesiastical Authority and Shea: Giovanni Perrone's Theological Curriculum According to Shea, Perrone's work offered the seminarians "a comprehensive, penetrating, and highly polemical interpretation of the modern world", and "arguably ranks among the most influential pedagogical texts in the modern history of the Church" (Shea: Giovanni Perrone's Theological Curriculum, 174–175).

In 1866, Perrone authored a lengthy treatise condemning mesmerism (and spiritualism) as a modern conspiracy against God and the Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup> Here, his pugnacious anti-Protestantism provided a suitable template for identifying modern heterodoxies. Perrone viewed mesmerism, artificial somnambulism, and spiritualism as three stages of the same process: the restoration of pagan demonolatry, which Protestantism paved the way for by fostering spiritual anarchy and dismantling the faith in the authority of the Church of Rome.<sup>19</sup>

The role of the Inquisition in this context warrants a separate discussion. Following the opening of the Holy Office archives to the public in 1998, deeper insights into the activities of the Inquisition in the nineteenth century have become possible thanks to the wealth of newly available documentation.<sup>20</sup> As shown by research, in 1825 the Holy Office regained its own palace and resumed its activities, having previously suffered the loss of its headquarters and archives during the French occupation (1808–1814). During this period, local tribunals were reopened across the Papal States.<sup>21</sup> Although its coercive power was greatly diminished compared to the pre-revolutionary era, the Holy Office still retained its doctrinal authority and intervened in matters referred to it by bishops worldwide.<sup>22</sup> One of its main objectives was to curb the spread of revolutionary ideas, working alongside the police and playing a crucial role in suppressing all forms of political dissent.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Holy Office reaffirmed its role as the guardian of tradition against new heterodoxies, collaborating with Pius IX in drafting the *Syllabus* and condemning the doctrines of Catholic thinkers such as Georg Hermes (1835) and Casimir Ubaghs (1866).

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18 Perrone, Giovanni: *Praelectiones theologicae de virtute religionis deque vitiis oppositis, nominatim vero de mesmerismi, somnambulismi ac spiritismi recentiori superstitione*, Regensburg: Pustet 1866.

19 Perrone: *Praelectiones theologicae*, 351.

20 Armando, David: *Nel cantiere dell'Inquisizione: la riapertura dei tribunali del Sant'Uffizio negli anni della Restaurazione*, in: *Prescritto e proscritto. Religione e società nell'Italia moderna (secc. XVI-XIX)*, ed. Andrea Cicerchia et. al., Rome: Carocci 2014, 233–254. Notable publications in this line of research include the *Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione*, ed. Adriano Prosperi, in collaboration with Vincenzo Lavenia and John Tedeschi, 4 vols., Pisa: Edizioni della Normale 2010, and the volumes of sources and repertories of the series *Römische Inquisition und Indexkongregation. Grundlagenforschung: 1814–1917*, ed. Hubert Wolf, 7 vols., Paderborn: Schöningh 2005/2007.

21 Armando: *L'argine e il remo*, 266.

22 Armando, David: *Spiriti e fluidi. Medicina e religione nei documenti del Sant'Uffizio sul magnetismo animale (1840–1856)*, in: *Médecine et religion: compétitions, collaborations, conflits (XII<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. Maria Pia Donato et al., Paris/Rome: Éditions de l'École française de Rome 2013, 195–225, 198.

23 On the political role played by the Inquisition, see Armando: *L'argine e il remo*.

In recent years, David Armando has carried out groundbreaking research on the dossiers on mesmerism preserved in the archives of the Holy Office. As his publications show, the earliest document on the subject is a letter written in March 1838 by a young French priest named Emmanuel d'Alzon (1810–1880), who happened to be a relative-in-law of the Marquis of Puységur. D'Alzon wrote to the General Commissioner of the Holy Office, the Dominican theologian Maurizio Benedetto Olivieri (1769–1845), asking specifically whether it was permissible to be magnetized.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the Holy Office began a systematic study of animal magnetism and issued a first decree in June of that year, which was later refined into a more comprehensive formulation on June 23, 1840. In this later version, the decree stated that “the sole use of physical means [of animal magnetism], which are otherwise licit, is not morally forbidden, provided that it does not tend towards an immoral or in any case depraved end”.<sup>25</sup> The text specified, however, that “the application of purely physical principles and means to truly supernatural things and effects, in order to explain them physically, is but an utterly illicit and heretical imposture”.<sup>26</sup> This decree, reiterated in 1841, had a clear purpose: safeguarding as far as possible therapeutic magnetism while condemning all its supernatural applications. Widely disseminated, it constituted the official position of the Holy See for the following sixteen years.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, the decrees issued between 1838 and 1841 did not provide a definitive solution to the problem. A theoretical framework was clearly lacking, and the Vatican continued to be inundated with requests for clarification. These were sent by sovereigns, bishops, confessors, doctors, and magnetizers from the various states of Italy and France, as well as from other French-speaking areas of Europe and Canada.<sup>28</sup> A new phase began in 1841 when Guillaume Pascal Billot, a French doctor who had studied under the renowned scientist Joseph Philippe François Deleuze, wrote to Pope Gregory XVI seeking approval for his book *Recherches psychologiques sur la cause des phénomènes extraordinaires observés chez les modernes voyans, improprement dits somnambules magnétiques* (Psychological Inquiries on the Cause of the Extraordinary Phenomena Observed in Modern Clairvoyants, Improperly Called Magnetic Somnambulists, 1839). In this work, Billot advocated for a spiritualistic, Catholic-oriented theory of magnetism involving communication with guardian angels and spirits.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Amando: Scienza, demonolatria o “impostura ereticale”, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Text quoted in Armando: Spiriti e fluidi, 202.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Armando: Scienza, demonolatria o “impostura ereticale”, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> Armando: Spiriti e fluidi, 206 ff.

The Holy Office then commissioned two expert opinions, one from the physician Onofrio Concioli (1778–1851) and the other from the Jesuit scholar Giovanni Battista Pianciani (1784–1862), professor of physics at the Roman College.<sup>30</sup> Concioli acknowledged the reality of magnetic clairvoyance to some extent, but attributed magnetic phenomena to pathological causes. More surprisingly, Pianciani recognized the value of animal magnetism in challenging materialism while emphasizing the need to distinguish its occurrences from Christian miracles and prophecies. Probably influenced by the physicist Francesco Orioli (1783–1856), Pianciani believed that the extraordinary phenomena of somnambulism could provide evidence for the doctrine of spirituality and, as a consequence, the immortality of the soul, and even for the reality of demonic possession.<sup>31</sup> In 1843, however, the Inquisition ultimately suspended judgment on Billot's book and refused to approve its printing. Further studies were commissioned, but the Holy Office's investigation ended without a definitive position.<sup>32</sup>

In the decades that followed, the Inquisition's dossier on animal magnetism continued to expand through new denunciations that emphasized the political implications of magnetism, its alleged connections with Freemasonry, and its purported infiltration into the Papal States. Additionally, a handful of books and journals on the subject were added to the Index of Forbidden Books.<sup>33</sup> After a further decree issued in 1847,<sup>34</sup> the inquisitorial process culminated in 1856. That year, the Holy Office published two lengthy documents: one in Italian, addressed to the bishops and inquisitors of the Papal States, and another in Latin, intended for all Catholic bishops worldwide. Here, as Armando notes, "Pius IX banned as superstitious and deceiving the 'abuses' of animal magnetism, practiced outside of the legitimate context of scientific research, particularly by women who dared 'to preach on Religion itself, to summon the souls of the dead and receive their replies; to perceive unknown and distant things'".<sup>35</sup> The aim of this dual circular was not only to advocate for more stringent measures against spiritual magnetism, but also to forbid the practice of communication with the dead, which was

30 On Pianciani, see Mantovani, Roberto: Pianciani, Giambattista, in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 83, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana 2015, 44–47.

31 Armando: *Spiriti e fluidi*, 218–222; Armando, David: The 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism Viewed from Rome: the Holy Office's decrees, in: *Laboratorio dell'ISPF* 19(11)/2022; [http://www.ispf-lab.cnr.it/system/files/ispf\\_lab/documenti/2022\\_RMD.pdf/](http://www.ispf-lab.cnr.it/system/files/ispf_lab/documenti/2022_RMD.pdf/) (30.6.2023), 6.

32 Armando: *Spiriti e fluidi*, 223–224.

33 Armando: *The 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism*, 7.

34 Armando, David: Documenti sul magnetismo animale nell'Archivio del Sant'Uffizio (1838–1908), in: *Rivista di storia del Cristianesimo* 2(2)/2005, 459–477, 470; see also Armando: *The 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism*, 4, note 13.

35 Armando: *The 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism*, 7.



becoming increasingly popular throughout Europe due to the vogue of table-turning and the rise of spiritualism.

### 3 Theological Frameworks

This regulatory framework intersected with theological literature in several ways. On the one hand, Catholic intellectuals sought to supplement the concise – and sometimes cryptic – decrees of the Inquisition. Their erudite works carefully examined the issue, delved into its historical background and pointed out the dangers of mesmerism, thereby facilitating public understanding of the Holy Office's pronouncements. At the same time, however, they served as a theoretical laboratory, expanding the range of interpretations available to the Church and providing a solid foundation for theological discourse. While the inquisitorial decrees established cautious regulations that implicitly mediated among different perspectives, these treatises unveiled a spectrum of interpretive models, often quite different from one another.<sup>36</sup>

The first hypothesis put forward to explain, if not all, at least the particularly perplexing aspects of mesmerism – i.e., somnambulism and its phenomena – suggested that they were the products of deception: a fraud orchestrated by the magnetizers, the somnambulists, or both. The primary advocate of this interpretation within the Roman context was Vincenzo Tizzani (1809–1892), a Canon Regular of the Lateran, professor of ecclesiastical history at La Sapienza University, and future bishop of Terni.<sup>37</sup> On July 21, 1842, Tizzani – who was quite close to Pope Pius IX himself – presented a detailed dissertation at the Academy of Catholic Reli-

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36 Here we follow Armando's general remark: "in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Italy, the phenomenon of magnetism was generally categorized into known frameworks of the demonic, the insane, fraud, or plagiariism, in a process reminiscent of previous encounters/conflicts between subaltern cultures and institutional knowledge, from the Friulian benandanti to tarantism" (Armando, David: *Fluidi, sonnambuli e spiriti fra Napoli, Roma e l'Europa*, in: *I demoni di Napoli. Naturale, preternaturale, sovrannaturale a Napoli e nell'Europa di età moderna*, ed. Francesco Paolo De Ceglia / Pierroberto Scaramella, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura 2021, 181–205, 184).

37 Tizzani later became senior chaplain of the papal army (1850) and Latin patriarch of Antioch (1886). See Croce, Giuseppe M.: *Una fonte importante per la storia del pontificato di Pio IX e del Concilio Vaticano I: I manoscritti inediti di Vincenzo Tizzani*, in: *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 23/1985, 217–345; *Le opere ed i giorni*, in: Vincenzo Tizzani, *Effemeridi romane, I: 1828–1860*, ed. Giuseppe M. Croce, Rome: Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano 2015, xxix–ccclvi; Tizzani, Vincenzo, in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 95, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana 2019, 768–773.

gion.<sup>38</sup> Following in the footsteps of Perrone,<sup>39</sup> Tizzani wanted to prevent magnetists from using their theories to explain religious phenomena, particularly the prophecies and miraculous healings of Jesus and the Christian saints.<sup>40</sup> He argued that while therapeutic crises associated with magnetism could be attributed to the power of imagination, somnambulism was an imposture perpetrated either jointly by magnetizers and magnetized individuals, or solely by the latter to ridicule the former. According to Tizzani, this deception was not new, as Mesmer had merely revived in a different form the “ravings of the ancients”.<sup>41</sup> In his work, Tizzani meticulously scrutinized every recorded instance of fraud in the French context in order to draw a clear distinction between magnetic fraud and Christian miracles.<sup>42</sup>

In Tizzani’s intentions, exposing the “hoax” of mesmerism served not only to refute the claims of magnetizers, but also to dismiss a rival interpretation suggested in an 1841 pamphlet by Ignazio Giovanni Cadolini (1794–1850), secretary of the Congregation de Propaganda Fide and future archbishop of Ferrara. In an unpublished manuscript, Tizzani wrote that Cadolini attempted “to insinuate [. . .] that the Devil was the real author of the prodigious events attributed to animal magnetism”,<sup>43</sup> adding that his pamphlet had aroused ridicule among scholars and expressing concern that it might damage the reputation of the Church outside Rome.<sup>44</sup> Cadolini’s demonological approach, however, was not new. The idea of

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38 Tizzani, Vincenzo: *Sul magnetismo animale: discorso storico-critico letto all’Accademia di religione cattolica il dì 21 luglio 1842*, Rome: Tip. Salviucci 1842.

39 Perrone, who briefly addressed mesmerism in the second edition of his *Praelectiones theologiae* (1840), was probably the first among Roman theologians to deal with the issue of animal magnetism (Armando: *Spiriti e fluidi*, 212 note 79).

40 “Animal magnetism is particularly employed by rationalists as a means to explain the remarkable miraculous acts of the Prophets, the Apostles, and Christ, as well as all those known as Christian thaumaturges. The aim is to undermine the credibility strongly based on the miracles of our holy religion” (Tizzani: *Sul magnetismo animale*, 6–7).

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 121–160.

43 Tizzani, Vincenzo: *Manoscritti contenenti la storia di alcuni pontificati scritta da monsignor Vincenzo Tizzani (1882–1883)*, AAV, Segreteria di Stato, Spoglio Leone XIII, box 13, file 72, ff. 404v–405r.

44 Ibidem, f. 404. In this text, Cadolini claimed that “the colossal mysterious power of animal magnetism does not reside in the occult forces of the magnetizer, nor in the faculties inherent to somnambulists, and much less in those of other men or animals or inanimate beings; there is no doubt that it is supernatural” ([Cadolini, Ignazio]: *Sul magnetismo animale*, Rome: De propaganda fide 1841, 8–9). This “supernatural power” is *ipso facto* diabolical since, as all subsequent literature would endeavor to demonstrate, angels (let alone God) do not concern themselves with such trivial matters.

satanic involvement in mesmerism had long been embraced by the conservative faction of the French Church, the originator being a former Jesuit, Jean-Baptiste Fiard (1736–1818).<sup>45</sup>

In Italy, the theory of demonic intervention was championed by Antonio Peruzzi (1764–1850). Peruzzi was a poet, a local historian, and canon at the cathedral of Ferrara – but also a close associate of Cadolini.<sup>46</sup> In his 1837 translation of the Book of Revelation, Peruzzi proposed that humanity, having passed through the “fifth epoch” marked by the Reformation, was now living in the “sixth epoch”. This era, built on the foundation of those “heretical reforms”, is “still unfolding, and God knows how long it will last. The epoch is that of Socinianism, Pharisaic Jansenism, and philosophical unbelief”.<sup>47</sup> The seventh epoch, according to Peruzzi, would follow, heralding the arrival of the Antichrist, the triumph of the Catholic Church, and the Last Judgment.

Within this apocalyptic framework, Peruzzi delved into the realm of mesmerism. His *Sul mesmerismo o come altri vogliono Magnetismo animale* (On Mesmerism or, as Others Will, Animal Magnetism, 1841) is, to the best of our knowledge, the

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45 In his 1803 volume (see bibliography), Fiard had linked political turbulence to spiritual disorder fueled by mesmerism, demonizing both phenomena and implicating an anti-religious conspiracy orchestrated by the Illuminati, Freemasons, Enlightenment thinkers, and Jansenists. Later considered inclined to conspiracy theories and paranoia (Jacques Marx observes that Fiard’s work is based on a “blind mechanism of accumulation of quotations and absolute indifference to context that reveals an authentic psychosis”; Marx, Jacques: *L’abbé Fiard et ses sorciers*, in: *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 124/1974, 253–269, 263), Fiard was probably the first to attempt to prove that the effects of magnetism were solely the work of the Devil. On Abbot Fiard see also Armando, David: *Des sorciers au mesmérisme: L’abbé Jean-Baptiste Fiard (1736–1818) et la théorie du complot*, in: *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 126(1)/2014, 43–58, and Introvigne, Massimo: *Satanism: A Social History*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 71–73. Fiard’s conspiratorial interpretation was further elaborated upon by authors such as Fustier, Wurtz, and de la Marne (see bibliography). About anti-masonic conspiracy theories in general, see Cazzaniga, Gian Mario: *Il complotto: metamorfosi di un mito*, in: *Storia d’Italia. Annali. 12. La Massoneria*, ed. Gian Mario Cazzaniga, Turin: Einaudi 2006, 312–333; Kreis, Emmanuel: *Quis ut Deus? Antijudéo-maçonnisme et occultisme en France sous la IIIe République*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres 2017 and Szymański, Tomasz: *Anti-Masonic Conspiracy Theories and Universal Religion*, in: *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories. Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends*, ed. Francesco Piraino et al., London: Routledge 2023, 57–83. The names of Fiard, Fustier, Wurtz, etc., were soon to appear in Italian treatises by Verati, Caroli and Perrone.

46 On Peruzzi, see Pauri, Luigi: *Notizie della vita di Monsignor Agostino Peruzzi*, Modena: Per gli eredi Soliani 1850; Sgarbanti, Romeo: *Lineamenti storici del movimento cattolico ferrarese*, Rocca S. Casciano: F. Cappelli 1954, 124–133; Cenacchi, Giuseppe: *Tomismo e neotomismo a Ferrara*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1975, 103–107.

47 Peruzzi, Agostino: *Apocalisse di S. Giovanni Evangelista recata in versi italiani da Agostino Peruzzi*, Ferrara: Tip. di G. Bresciani 1837, 16.

first monograph on animal magnetism in Italian published in the 1840s. Here Peruzzi identifies the “predisposing cause” of mesmerism with the “libidinous excitement” common in young female hysterics. Consequently, the treatises on magnetism suggest that the therapist should have a vigorous and healthy physique, be “strong in every limb”, and exercise complete dominance over the magnetized person.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the mesmeric method is deemed “most indecent and immoral”. However, Peruzzi argues that the “producing cause” of magnetic phenomena is different. Employing a classic method of Thomistic argumentation, Peruzzi proceeds through exclusion. First, he rejects the existence of magnetic fluid. Second, he posits that the soul, being passive during magnetic sleep, cannot generate the prodigious facts of somnambulism on its own. Lastly, he dismisses the possibility that the will of the magnetizer could influence the body of the magnetized person. From these premises, Peruzzi concludes that magnetic phenomena cannot be attributed to natural forces alone, and that a supernatural agent must be involved. However, given the moral characteristics of magnetic phenomena, this agent cannot be of divine origin, leaving only one possible source: the Devil. Drawing on the demonology of Thomas Aquinas, Peruzzi points out that the first sign of diabolical intervention is the extraordinary abilities of somnambulists, which far exceed those of humans.<sup>49</sup>

The demonological explanation gained widespread acceptance in the second half of the 1850s, coinciding with the rise of table-turning and spiritualism in Europe. As noted above, this period witnessed a significant clash between the Catholic Church and modern society, reaching its pinnacle with the 1864 *Syllabus* and the first Vatican Council (1869–1870). Within this context, the demonological paradigm provided an ideal hermeneutic framework for Catholic polemicists. The latter saw both political turmoil and the rise of new heresies as manifestations of a broader subversive agenda aimed at dismantling Christianity altogether. This diabolical project, rooted in Protestant subjectivism, was fostered by Freemasonry, supporting liberal movements and threatening the temporal power of the Church. During this era, therefore, the satanic paradigm inspired a substantial corpus of literature. Its primary proponents included Jesuit Antonio Monticelli (1777–1862) and Franciscan

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48 Furthermore, the magnetizer should be allowed to touch a woman’s body (even “its most sensitive parts”), subjecting it to repeated touching and groping, while transmitting seductive influences detected through “the vivacity and intensity of his gaze” (Peruzzi, Agostino: *Sul mesmerismo o come altri vogliono magnetismo animale: dialoghi*, Ferrara: presso Domenico Taddei librajo co’ tipi Pomatelli 1841, 21–23).

49 *Ibid.*, 52–79.

Gian Francesco Nazareno (then: Giovanni Maria) Caroli (1821–1899), who published comprehensive works on the subject in 1856 and 1858 respectively.<sup>50</sup>

In stark contrast to Tizzani's viewpoint, these works overtly affirm the inescapable *reality* of paranormal phenomena related to magnetism. Monticelli's voluminous 800-page publication, for instance, diligently presents evidence of such phenomena and emphasizes their incompatibility with science. These events are due to extraordinary causes and, as Monticelli argues, "cannot be introduced into the domain of physics without destroying it".<sup>51</sup> Although the faith and the will of the participants play a role in somnambulism, they alone cannot explain its phenomena. The presence of another force is therefore required: a moral and intelligent agent, activated by the will of the magnetizer and capable of understanding and carrying out his intentions. The enigma surrounding the nature of this agent is easily solved as Monticelli delves into the historical antecedents of magnetism. As magnetists themselves acknowledge, magnetic phenomena have existed since antiquity, when they were ascribed to supernatural causes. It was only in modern times that they were attributed to the forces of the soul, particularly imagination and will.<sup>52</sup> Here Monticelli embarks on a historical survey of the occult sciences, from the Chaldeans and Persians to the Renaissance proponents of "new Platonic and Kabbalistic mysticism" such as Ficino, Reuchlin, Agrippa, Pomponazzi, and Van Helmont. Monticelli describes Mesmer as a true disciple and "alter ego" of Paracelsus, thus establishing a direct connection between mesmerism and magical, cabalistic, and astrological arts.<sup>53</sup>

For Monticelli, all forms of magic or magnetism are based on demonic forces. According to him, the extraordinary abilities observed in these phenomena – such as reading through opaque objects, deciphering unknown languages, and divination – can only be attributed to the influence of the Devil, whose goal is to deceive and mislead humanity. Mesmerism is thus described as a kind of theatrical performance in which the Devil, like a skilled actor, wears different masks. The first mask is a linguistic one: Satan hides behind seemingly neutral and scientific terms such as "magnetism" and "mesmerism", suggesting that only natural

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50 Monticelli, Antonio: *Sulla causa dei fenomeni mesmerici*, 2 vols., Bergamo: Tipografia Mazzoleni 1856; Caroli, Giovanni Maria: *Del magnetismo animale, ossia Mesmerismo in ordine alla regione e alla rivelazione* (1858), Naples: Biblioteca Cattolica 1859. On Caroli, see Torre, Achille: *Il pensiero filosofico di Giovanni Caroli: Memoria originale, con alcuni cenni biografici sul medesimo*, Naples: Stab. Tip. R. Pesole 1899, and Themelly, Mario: Caroli, Gian Francesco Nazareno, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 20, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana 1977, 517–520.

51 Monticelli: *Sulla causa dei fenomeni mesmerici*, vol. 1, 28.

52 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 42–43.

53 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 57.

causes are involved. On the other hand, the “visions, the revelations [. . .] ridiculously simulated by the evil spirit in magnetic crises”<sup>54</sup> and the “buffoonish imitations of true ecstasies” create the illusion that behind every utterance of the somnambulists lies some sort of inspired or divine intelligence. Lost in this web of scientific and spiritual deceptions, magnetists adopted false doctrines such as metempsychosis and pantheism.<sup>55</sup>

As to Giovanni Caroli, its *Del magnetismo animale* (On Animal Magnetism, 1858) stands out as a theological summa, unparalleled in its wealth of information and rhetorical efficacy, at least within the Italian context. First Provincial Minister, then Commissioner of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual (a branch of the Franciscan Order), Caroli was a significant intellectual figure. After studying at Ferrara’s seminary, he taught at the Pontifical University of the same city, where he was appointed a member of the Philosophical-Mathematical College by Pius IX through the intercession of Cadolini.<sup>56</sup> In this capacity, Caroli possessed extensive knowledge of theological debates related to mesmerism. Unlike his predecessors, however, the Franciscan also had firsthand experience with animal magnetism. Not only had he observed Francesco Guidi at work, but – during a trip to France – he had also attended sessions led by well-known figures like Cahagnet, Millet, and Legallois. This convinced him of the reality of the somnambulists’ faculties, even if they were not always consistent and infallible.<sup>57</sup>

Having (effortlessly) demonstrated the diabolical nature of mesmerism in the first two chapters of his work, in the third Caroli highlighted the proliferation of abominable doctrines in recent magnetic treatises, showing how the Devil was working to undermine the Church.<sup>58</sup> Here Caroli thoroughly captured the shift taking place in the French context, foreshadowing the emergence of occultism as a prominent cultural trend in the decades to come. This occult magnetism often took on a distinctly millenarian tone. Aubin Gauthier, for instance, believed that magnetism was the dawn of a “new era” into which humanity was about to enter, and spoke of a “new kind of priesthood”, echoing a trope already present in late

54 Ibid., vol. 2, 189.

55 Ibid., vol. 2, 215–216 and 222.

56 Torre: *Il pensiero filosofico di Giovanni Caroli*, 7.

57 Caroli: *Del magnetismo animale*, 26. See the account of the experiences of vision through opaque bodies by the somnambulist Luisa ibid., 106 and 259.

58 Caroli’s extensive 450-page argument follows a typical scholastic approach. Caroli, like many authors before him, methodically dismisses all the explanatory hypotheses that he finds implausible. He rejects materialistic hypotheses based on fluids, psychological-subjective hypotheses attributing magnetic phenomena to the magnetized person’s soul, psychological-objective hypotheses explaining the phenomena through the magnetizer’s influence, and objective-angelic hypotheses implicating benevolent spiritual entities.

eighteenth-century Illuminism.<sup>59</sup> Baron Jules Du Potet de Sennevoy, speaking with “satanic eloquence”,<sup>60</sup> described magnetism as the “key to ancient mysteries”, capable of giving humanity access to divine intelligence through ecstatic experiences. Similarly, Adolphe Gentil regarded magnetism as an “immense and primordial truth that will set the world on fire and radically change most of our common ideas”.<sup>61</sup>

This mesmeric “New Age” enthusiasm was disturbing enough in itself. But what Caroli found particularly repugnant were the attempts to elaborate a “secarian Christianity” based on an occult interpretation of animal magnetism. For instance, in *Les ressuscités au ciel et dans l'enfer* (The Resurrected in Heaven and Hell, 1855), Henri Delaage drew on mesmerism to construct his own esoteric brand of Christianity. Delaage’s version emphasized initiation, tradition, and the study of the occult constitution of man; this included the soul, the material body, and a “spirit of life” “whose qualities have been handed down to us by tradition”.<sup>62</sup> The profoundly sensitive heresiological radar of Caroli also did not fail to notice that in France:

Even a priest [. . .] rebellious to his most sacred duties, having made himself master and legislator of Magic in the middle of the nineteenth century [. . .], openly confessing also the intimate kinship of Mesmerism with Magic, and refreshing the most foolish and frightening blasphemies of heresy, crowns and completes them with the most horrible that a depraved

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59 See Gauthier, Aubin: *Traité pratique du magnétisme et du somnambulisme*, Paris: Baillière 1845, 703 (and Caroli, *Del magnetismo animale*, 493). Brach writes in this regard: “Such a claim is certainly not new in Masonic, Pietist or Illuminist circles and it will also be taken up by many later occultists. Moreover, the idea that Magnetism will be an important aspect of the future evolution of Christianity, if not the very last stage of its historical becoming, is already familiar to Henri Delaage and other spiritualist exponents of Animal Magnetism. For these, in addition to the Christian tenets, the universal law of ‘sympathy’ and ‘attraction’, once mastered, will finally come to exercise its beneficial effects over the entire human society” (Brach, Jean-Pierre: *Psychic Disciplines. The Magnetizer as Magician in the Writings of Jules Dupotet de Sennevoy, 1796–1881*, in: *Innovation in Esotericism from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Georgiana Hedesan / Tim Rudbøg, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2021, 185–200, 196).

60 Caroli: *Del magnetismo animale*, 498.

61 Du Potet de Sennevoy, Jules: *Essai sur l’enseignement philosophique du magnétisme*, Paris: René et Cie 1845, 60 (see Caroli: *Del magnetismo animale*, 495). On Dupotet see Brach: *Psychic Disciplines*, and Jeanson, Anne: *De la thérapeutique au spiritualisme: le baron du Potet de Sennevoy (1796–1881), prophète du magnétisme à Paris*, in: *La Révolution française* 24/2023; <http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/7359> (30.6.2023).

62 Delaage, Henri: *Le monde occulte ou mystères du Magnétisme dévoilés par le Somnambulisme*, Paris: Paul Lesigne 1851, 25–26.

intelligence could concoct: *the identification of Christianity with Magic: the identification of Christian dogmas with the impious cabalistic ravings*.<sup>63</sup>

The reference is obviously to Éliphas Lévi, who, although never a priest – he had been a seminarian and a subdeacon instead – boldly combined an occultism influenced by animal magnetism with a Christian inspiration in his *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* (Dogma and Ritual of High Magic, 1856).

The mere content of these books would suffice to prove that “animal magnetism is a new and fearsome weapon of rebellion against the Church, against the divine revelation of Jesus Christ”.<sup>64</sup> But Caroli goes on to show that such teachings spring directly from the revelations of the somnambulists. These are the ultimate source of the magnetic heresy and offer the most compelling evidence of its satanic origins. The doctrines of pantheism, the divinity and pre-existence of the soul, metempsychosis, and even the abominable notion of “the communal sharing of women and goods” stem directly from these deplorable practices.<sup>65</sup> The leading figure in this field was undoubtedly Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet, author of the *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilés* (The Mysteries of Future Life Revealed, 1848–1849–1860).<sup>66</sup> Caroli’s disdain for this work is not only provoked by its deficient prose,<sup>67</sup> but also by its doctrines, which had already been condemned by the Congregation of the Index in 1851.<sup>68</sup>

By 1858, then, mesmerism was no longer seen as a medical tool to be evaluated for its efficacy or legitimacy, but rather as a diabolical device through which

<sup>63</sup> Caroli: *Del magnetismo animale*, 635–636.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

<sup>65</sup> The latter themes are alluded to in, for example, Olivier, Joseph: *Traité de magnétisme suivi des paroles d'un somnambule et d'un recueil de traitements magnétiques*, Toulouse: Jouglé 1849 (308 and 314; see Caroli: *Del magnetismo animale*, 527–530).

<sup>66</sup> On Cahagnet, in addition to Faivre: “Éloquence magique”, see Pierssens, Michel: *Le merveilleux psychique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in: *Ethnologie française* 3(23)/1993 (special issue *Science/Parascience*), 351–366; Brach, Jean-Pierre: *Histoire des courants ésotériques dans l'Europe moderne et contemporaine*, in: *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études (EPHE), Section des sciences religieuses*, 119/2012, 245–252 and Hanegraaff, Wouter J.: *The First Psychonaut? Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet's Experiments with Narcotics*, in: *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, 7(2)/2016, 105–123.

<sup>67</sup> Caroli laughs at Cahagnet’s “typographical jumbles”, “grammatical errors” and “rude ignorance” (Caroli: *Del magnetismo animale*, 329).

<sup>68</sup> On this condemnation, see *infra*. Cahagnet’s writings, Caroli says, are full of “the most repugnant heresies that have saddened the Church over the centuries”: Christ is not God but simply his son, like all men; hell does not exist, nor does the Devil; the world is eternal; the Church has only preserved the outer shell of Jesus’ teachings (*ibid.*, 531). It is not surprising, then, that the Vatican condemned these abominable practices – a condemnation which, according to Caroli, applies to all magnetism, not just to its supernatural applications (*ibid.*, 569).



new heresies were spreading across the globe. These doctrines produced both new forms of paganism and distorted, sectarian interpretations of Christianity. While the demonological thesis was not explicitly articulated in official Vatican documents, it gained some popularity during the 1850s, finding support among some members of the Inquisition<sup>69</sup> and in the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Here, both magnetism and spiritualism were defined as “wonders of arcane origin and amphibious nature, which seem to partake of the human and the diabolical”.<sup>70</sup> As a matter of fact, the demonological paradigm was reinforced not only by the occultist penchants of French animal magnetism, but also by the popularity of table-turning, which gained momentum across Europe during 1853 and 1854. The echo of this new phenomenon had soon reached Rome, alarming the Holy Office.<sup>71</sup>

The third interpretation traced spiritual somnambulism to the sphere of mental disorders. In this view, the visions and revelations obtained through magnetic trance were not due to an intervention of the Devil, but to a pathological alteration in the psyche. The “magical eloquence” of somnambulists, however, was also favored by a specific cultural milieu, well-known for promoting heterodox beliefs: Protestantism. It is likely that the first to propose such an interpretation was the future cardinal Antonino De Luca (1805–1883).<sup>72</sup> In an 1839 article published in the *Annali delle scienze religiose*, De Luca scrutinized a case of mystical somnambulism reported in a book first published anonymously in Germany in 1834.<sup>73</sup> The volume narrated the celestial journeys of a young seer, later identified

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69 Armando: Spiriti e fluidi, 198–201; Armando: The 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism, 511.

70 [Brunengo, Giuseppe]: La moderna necromanzia, in: *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 4/1856, 129–144, 130. Brunengo’s insights were later incorporated into the volume *La Negromanzia Moderna Esaminata nei Portenti delle Tavole Giranti e Parlanti* (1857).

71 Scaramella, Pierroberto: Chiesa e antispiritismo a Napoli, in Italia, in Europa (1853–1932), in: *I demoni di Napoli. Naturale, preternaturale, sovrannaturale a Napoli e nell’Europa di età moderna*, ed. Francesco Paolo De Ceglia / Pierroberto Scaramella, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura 2021, 207–238, 224.

72 See Monsagrati, Giuseppe: De Luca, Antonino, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 38, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana 1990, 325–330.

73 Anonymous: *Reisen in den Mond, in mehrere Sterne und in die Sonne. Geschichte einer Somnambule, Weilheim an der Teck im Königreich Würtemberg in den Jahren 1832 und 1833. Ein Buch, in welchem Alle über das Jenseits wichtige Aufschlüsse finden werden. Hrsg. von einem täglichen Augenzeugen und Freunde der Wahrheit und der höhern Offenbarungen*, Augsburg: Schälzler 1834. In the trance state, the seer outlined a doctrine of universal salvation based on moral law. She described schools on the moon where the souls of Jews and Muslims learned the Christian doctrine, enabling transit between celestial spheres. As Faivre noted, this fascinating case stirred the curiosity of German *Naturphilosophen*, including Justinus Kerner and Johann

as Philippine Demuth Bäurle, who, guided by the spirit of her deceased brother, traversed the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Jupiter, and Ceres, encountering the souls of Goethe, Jung-Stilling, Socrates, and Luther, as well as angels and the Virgin Mary. In a vehement polemic against Protestantism, De Luca traced Bäurle's clairvoyance back to a clearly identifiable heresy: theosophy, an aberration whose progenitors were Böhme and Swedenborg. Here, Bäurle is labeled not as a fraud, but as a "deluded infirm", a "pitiful wanderer", author of an "ignominious book".<sup>74</sup>

The interpretation of somnambulism as a psychopathological condition was supported by Pianciani. As seen above, during the early 1840s the Jesuit suggested that somnambulatory phenomena, due to an increased sensitivity of internal organs and certain innate mental abilities, could demonstrate Christian truths such as the spirituality and immortality of the soul. Yet, the burgeoning occultist trends within French animal magnetism gradually tempered his initial enthusiasm. The Jesuit later revisited these topics in a series of articles published between 1851 and 1852 in *La Civiltà Cattolica*.<sup>75</sup> Here, Pianciani aimed to distinguish religious prophecy from somnambulatory precognition. Unlike true prophets, somnambulators suffer from a pathological condition. Therefore, their predictions are based on a "natural prophecy", which according to Thomas Aquinas, only allows for the foretelling of events with determined natural causes, such as the progression of a disease or an astronomical phenomenon. Somnambulators, on the other hand, cannot predict "contingent futures" based on free will; this ability belongs only to "true prophets". On another level, Pianciani criticized "mystical" and "necromantic somnambulism". These practices offered the possibility to communicate with spirits or angels, thereby transforming mesmerism into a detestable theurgy, or into a supernatural technology bypassing any priestly mediation.<sup>76</sup>

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Friedrich von Meyer, who discussed it in the journal *Blätter aus Prevorst*. See Faivre: "Éloquence magique". For additional information on this volume, see Wałowski, Paweł: *Der (neue) Mensch und seine Welten: Deutschsprachige fantastische Literatur*, Berlin: Frank & Timmer 2017, 35 ff.

74 *Annali delle scienze religiose* 9(27)/1839, 383.

75 *La Civiltà Cattolica* was founded in 1850 at the behest of the pope as a bulwark against the rationalist and liberal revolution that was shaking the continent and as an instrument to defend Catholic doctrine. See Dante, Francesco: *Storia della Civiltà cattolica, 1850–1891: il laboratorio del papa*, Rome: Studium 1990.

76 "We call *mystical somnambulism*", writes Pianciani, "the doctrine of those magnetizers, who teach that the strange phenomena of magnetic somnambulism, or at least a large part of them, are produced by spirits superior to man: for I see as *mystical doctrines* those of the so-called theosophists, who claim to communicate with spirits" ([Pianciani, Giovanni Battista]: *Sonnambulismo mistico*, in: *La Civiltà Cattolica* 8/1852, 397–413, 398).

Here Pianciani argues that the idea of communicating with spirits through a technique is absurd. According to the Jesuit, such communication can only be the result of divine grace:

Nor does it seem more in accordance with common sense or the teachings of the Catholic Church to hold that communication with the blessed spirits is not a rare and extraordinary favor of Heaven, which man should not seek and should judge to be above his merit, but rather a kind of craft [*una specie di mestiero*], in which, as in others, many, though not all, can succeed. Just as we can communicate with, say, the Chinese by visiting their country and learning their language, can we really, and even more easily, communicate with celestial spirits? And the means to do so are laughable techniques, including hand crawling, tracing ellipses from head to knee, magnetized water, glass or steel rods, carafes filled with sand or iron filings or powdered glass, magnetized trees, and the like?<sup>77</sup>

In the last article of this series, “On Necromantic Somnambulism”, Pianciani combines the condemnation of early spiritualism with criticism of Swedenborgianism. The article examines Cahagnet’s work, on which Pianciani had written a report for the Congregation of the Index in April 1851. In his report, Pianciani was unambiguous: “Cahagnet’s entire doctrine”, wrote the Jesuit, “is utterly reprehensible, as are these works, which openly profess it. Regardless of one’s opinion about the artificial somnambulism of ordinary magnetizers, this is a system fundamentally based on necromancy, that is, the evocation of the shadows and spirits of the dead”.<sup>78</sup> In addition to the methodology, Pianciani also censured the content of Cahagnet’s volumes. According to the spirits channeled by the somnambulists, souls are eternal, all religions are equally valid, and the eternity of hell is explicitly denied:

It seems pointless to burden the reader with the search for other errors, since these alone sufficiently demonstrate the reprehensibility of these books and of the so-called Spiritualist Society, to which no Catholic should legitimately belong. The aim of this society is to establish a relationship with spirits and thus gain knowledge of the afterlife, and to promote religious ideas that require nothing more than simple and spiritual devotion. This Society has taken as its patron Sevedenberg [*sic*], a heretic and madman, from whose soul we imagine we shall hear greater blunders than he has uttered alive.<sup>79</sup>

Pianciani reiterates the trope of the Swedenborgian influence on Cahagnet’s work in his 1852 article. He argues that, like contemporary somnambulists, Swedenborg

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 402–403.

<sup>78</sup> ADDF, Archives of the Congregation of the Index, 1849–1857, n° 606, 1. Pianciani’s report, dated April 28, 1851, is a four-page text. On June 6, 1851, the Index promulgated the decree condemning Cahagnet’s books *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilés* (first volume, 1848) and *Guide du magnétiseur* (1849), as well as the journal *Le magnétiseur spiritualiste*.

<sup>79</sup> ADDF, Archives of the Congregation of the Index, 1849–1857, n° 606, 3.

was sick, and his visions were the product of a “physically bewildered mind”. The nervous disorder suffered by the Swede, “compounded with his Protestant upbringing, which granted him the freedom to interpret sacred scriptures at his whim”, explains how he managed to incorporate “such a degree of folly, heresy, and superstition into his writings”.<sup>80</sup> Pianciani illustrates how the Swedenborgian movement, first in Sweden and then in other countries, promptly attempted to “colonize” somnambulism and manipulate it to fit its own interpretations. The outcome was Cahagnet’s “new necromancy”, the teachings of which are critically examined by Pianciani.<sup>81</sup>

## 4 The Advent of a Christian Magnetism

Despite these condemnations, in mid-nineteenth-century Italy animal magnetism did not fail to arouse the curiosity of some clergymen. Already in the early 1840s, as shown above, Pianciani suggested that somnambulism could be used to demonstrate the spirituality of the soul. In the following years, at least two priests explicitly attempted to reconcile mesmeric practices with Christian faith. The first, G.M. Taddeo Consoni (1801–1855), published a surprising volume in 1849, *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del Mesmerismo, altra prova dell'esistenza e divinità dell'anima contro i materialisti* (Essay around the Main Phenomena of Mesmerism, Another Proof of the Existence and Divinity of the Soul against the Materialists).

Consoni belonged to a noble Lombardy family from a small town in the Valtellina valley. After studying philosophy in high school, he enrolled at the University of Padua and was ordained as a priest in 1825. In 1826 Consoni published a method of shorthand. Later he joined the De Propaganda Fide and planned to

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<sup>80</sup> [Pianciani, Giovanni Battista]: Del sonnambolismo negromantico, in: *La Civiltà Cattolica* 9/1852, 45–67, 46.

<sup>81</sup> The school founded by Cahagnet, as Pianciani notes, “professes to be in constant contact with the souls of the deceased, who, according to these modern necromancers, are much more amiable and responsive than they were in life. Moreover, they do not hesitate to interact with the somnambulists, who are mostly women, and to answer their questions” (ibid., 48). However, the “scientific” doctrines taught by the dead are absurd: the sun is regarded as a spiritual entity; the stars are alive and communicate with humans; there are societies on other planets that practice hermeticism and alchemy; all elements of the physical world are imbued with spirits, which implies that medicine also possesses a spiritual force. Pianciani also finds the somnambulistic theory of the soul unsatisfactory; it proposes that the soul is an intermediate substance between spirit and matter, with consciousness representing its spiritual aspect. When separated from the body and entering Heaven, the soul perceives God “in the form of the most brilliant sun”, which is the sole tangible manifestation of God.

take part in an evangelizing mission to Honduras in 1837, but he was “deterred by his mother’s tears”.<sup>82</sup> During the 1840s this eclectic priest – who by his own admission favored “uncommon topics”<sup>83</sup> – conducted studies on tobacco plants, the moon’s influence on terrestrial bodies, the devastation and restoration of forests in Valtellina, and pedagogy.<sup>84</sup>

Consoni’s work on animal magnetism stands out for its unique focus. Rather than merely extolling the therapeutic benefits of mesmeric practices, Consoni aimed to demonstrate that magnetism could be employed to induce ecstasy. In order to understand this “ecstatic” twist of animal magnetism, it is necessary to recall the French context. In the 1840s, Abbot Jean-Baptiste Loubert emerged as the most ardent defender of mesmeric practices within the French Church. According to him, the somnambulistic state allowed the latent faculties of the soul to manifest,<sup>85</sup> a concept already embraced in the previous century by mystical Freemasonry and Swedenborgian theosophy, then elaborated by *Naturphilosophen* such as von Carl August Eschenmayer and Joseph Ennemoser.<sup>86</sup> During ecstasy, argued Loubert, the soul of the magnetized person would not leave the body, but hover on the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds, exposed to the unknown influences of the latter.<sup>87</sup> In the following years, renowned

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82 Giucci, Gaetano: Cenni biografici intorno al canonico professore Taddeo De’ Consoni estratti a pagina 166 e seguenti dall’opera intitolata Degli scienziati italiani: notizie biografiche raccolte da Gaetano Giucci e nuovamente riprodotti dal marchese commendatore Carlo De Ribas, Naples: Avallone 1845, 40.

83 Consoni, Taddeo: Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo, altra prova dell’esistenza e divinità dell’anima contra i materialisti, Pisa: Vannucchi 1849, V.

84 Giucci: Cenni biografici, 57–58.

85 Loubert, Jean-Baptiste: Défense théologique du magnétisme humain; ou, Le magnétisme est-il superstition, magie, Paris: Poussielgue-Rusand 1846, 138. This is why Loubert considers this condition to be advantageous for patients, who often turn out to be able to diagnose their own illnesses (Loubert: Défense théologique, 90; see also 177). Loubert used various techniques, including the “magnetic chain”, and induced states of somnambulism even at a distance.

86 “The notion that animal magnetism enabled humans to recover the state that preceded the Fall, particularly the ability to communicate with angels, already appeared in the earliest mystical-spiritualistic forms of mesmerism. Around 1785 in Lyon, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin and the Chevalier de Barberin developed variants of mesmerism based on this idea” (Armando: Spiriti e fluidi, 208). On these notions, particularly within the German context, see Baier: Romantischer Mesmerismus, as well as Crabtree: From Mesmer to Freud, 190–212.

87 As a result, Loubert maintained that seeking such a state out of mere curiosity, or to uncover moral and supernatural truths was both immoral and impious. Instead, the magnetizer should be cautious and use the somnambulistic state to gain valuable insights into the subject’s condition or the ailments of others (Loubert, Jean-Baptiste: Le magnétisme et le somnambulisme devant les corps savants, la cour de Rome et les théologiens, Paris: Germer Baillière 1844, 193).

French magnetists such as Charles Lafontaine and Jules Charpignon reported their ability to induce such states.<sup>88</sup>

It was precisely Lafontaine who introduced Consoni to animal magnetism in April 1849 in Florence. In his volume, Consoni offers a compendium of Lafontaine's system, often blurring the lines between his own interpretations and the teachings of his mentor. The author reports a series of detailed observations on magnetizing techniques, along with various illustrations, and claims to be able to elicit twelve types of phenomena, using different kinds of music.<sup>89</sup> Consoni's theory of ecstasy is based on "subtle physiology" that draws upon traditional anthropological models typical of Renaissance esotericism and *Naturphilosophie*, and differentiates between the soul, life (or spirit), and the body.<sup>90</sup> The "thinking soul", according to Consoni, is "a simple and indefinable substance, capable only of intelligence and will", a "portion" of the divine soul,<sup>91</sup> while the "sensitive spirit" is an intermediate substance: it receives sensory impressions through the nervous system – where the magnetic fluid flows – and relays them to the soul.<sup>92</sup> In the somnambulistic state, the nervous fluid disassociates the soul from the body "to a well appreciable degree", restoring it to a state of primitive freedom and ultimately inducing a "state of Ecstasy and Prayer". Here, one finds irrefutable proof of the existence and divinity of the soul.<sup>93</sup>

The second edition of Consoni's treatise, published in 1855, shows that the book had raised suspicions among the local medical community and alarmed the

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<sup>88</sup> During ecstasy, Lafontaine wrote, the soul leaves the body behind and finds itself in prayer or contemplation before God. See Lafontaine, Charles: *L'art de magnétiser, ou Le magnétisme animal considéré sous le point de vue théorique, pratique et thérapeutique*, Paris: Germer Baillière 1847, 50 ff., and 137–138; Charpignon, Jules: *Physiologie, médecine et métaphysique du magnétisme*, Paris: Germer Baillière 1848, 96 ff.

<sup>89</sup> "In the state of magnetic somnambulism, in addition to ecstasy and prayer influenced by music, I have also obtained singing, dancing, and even a kind of fury that sometimes alarmed the bystanders. In fact, some fear was not unwarranted, because in manifesting extraordinary forces, the subject invaded by threatening inspiration could have degenerated into delirium and frenzy [. . .]. However, the tone of the music was gradually modified and changed, transitioning from vibrant and heroic to pathetic and plaintive, to then cease after a short period and restore the subject to a state of wakefulness and normality" (Consoni: *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo*, 38, footnote). See Lafontaine: *L'art de magnétiser*, 137 ff.

<sup>90</sup> Consoni, *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo*, 25–26. See in this regard Faivre: "Éloquence magique". On this notion of tripartition within Western esotericism, see Faivre, Antoine: *Le Cheval entre la voiture et le cocher (Exemples de la tripartition corps-âme-esprit dans des courants ésotériques et apparentés)*, in: *Corps Âme Esprit*, ed. Claude Cohen-Boulakia / Jacques Gorot, Paris: E.D.K. (Éditions médicales et scientifiques) 2000, 139–147.

<sup>91</sup> Consoni: *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo*, 20.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. See Lafontaine: *L'art de magnétiser*, 50–51.

archbishop of Florence due to its potential heretical implications.<sup>94</sup> The author reports experiencing “a hornet’s nest of persecutions” to which he responds with virulent polemics.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, he states that he was the first to observe the essence and spirituality of the soul, distinguishing it from the merely sensitive spirit. This discovery, he writes, not only won him unanimous applause from the scientific community, but was later shared (or appropriated) by some famous French magnetists such as Delaage.<sup>96</sup> As a proof of his orthodoxy, Consoni points out that his first volume was not condemned by the Catholic Church, while “the works of other magnetizers were placed in the Index [of Forbidden Books]”.<sup>97</sup>

From a theoretical point of view, in this new version of the text Consoni ventures even further. Here, his notion of magnetism is embedded in what could already be described as an occultist framework. Noting that animal magnetism was practiced in antiquity by priests “perhaps of all nations”, Consoni suggests that these “Ministers of the Sanctuary [. . .] concealed with arcane signs the most presti-

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94 Consoni, Taddeo: *La esistenza e spiritualità dell’anima distinta dallo spirito sensitivo prodotto del meccanismo organico contro i materialisti fatta rilevare in più fasi di mesmerica lucidità mediante una trentina di pubbliche gratuite accademie*, Florence: Bencini 1855, 30.

95 The experiment took place on September 14, 1850, and apparently caused quite a stir in the local medical community. Consoni aimed, among other things, to “induce magnetic lethargy in the test subjects immediately and secretly, and to use the influence of music to send them into ecstasy” (ibid., 263; for more on these experiences and the ensuing controversy, see ibid., 38–88, 228 ff. and 261 ff.; on the influence of music, see Consoni: *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo*, 38). Consoni also mentions performances held in the residences of the Florentine nobility, such as the Palazzo Standish (a private palace, housing a theatre, in Via San Leopoldo, now Via Cavour).

96 “Indeed”, writes Consoni, “applause came from all sides, and many wished to repeat the experiments I had begun [. . .]. Following my example, various mesmerists, after having induced insensitivity in the whole body of their patients, and even partial or total numbness of the human machine, learned the method of isolating the soul, placing it above the sensitive spirit, in such a way that it shows the desire to free itself from the material envelope that confines it, and to return to the bosom of its Supreme Maker, whose image it bears. In addition to the numerous journals from different nations in which my mesmeric discoveries were discussed, there were honorable mentions in academic acts, diplomas sent to me, and other authoritative and flattering testimonies of approval, not to mention the citations and praise given to me in the works of the most illustrious authors and mesmerists, as it is fitting to emphasize” (Consoni: *La esistenza e spiritualità dell’anima*, 20).

97 It is likely, however, that Consoni’s volume had limited circulation, since only occasional traces of it can be found in later literature. Francesco Guidi mentions Consoni in a long list of magnetizers “who have acquired greater reputation by their deeds or writings” (Guidi, Francesco: *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale considerato sotto il punto di vista fisiologico e psicologico*, Milan: Carlo Turati 1854, 36), but not among the priests who defend magnetism (ibid., 37). Caroli mentions him in a list of Italian authors on animal magnetism (Caroli: *Del magnetismo animale*, 2, footnote 1), but does not seem to have read his work.



gious and powerful of their mysteries, entrenched behind the curtain of specious enigmas".<sup>98</sup> Therefore, here magnetism embodies, in Eliade's words, an esoteric "technique of ecstasy", known to the ancients and kept secret for centuries.<sup>99</sup> This interpretive approach appears influenced by earlier efforts, within the French and German context, to establish a structural connection between "magnetism" and "magic". Among the French magnetizers, the primary proponent of this equivalence was the aforementioned Baron Dupotet.<sup>100</sup> According to Dupotet, the source of all magic was the power of the soul when separated from the body; and this power is precisely the force acting behind magnetic practice. Through animal magnetism, he argued, one could perform the miracles described in the Scriptures. As Brach notes, Dupotet therefore tended to "attribute to the magnetizer a "sacerdotal claim",<sup>101</sup> portraying "the practitioners of Mesmerism [. . .] as the real priests, as opposed to an essentially Roman Catholic clergy whose discourses he considers actually devoid of "power" and, accordingly, of any real efficacy".<sup>102</sup> By 1855, thus, Consoni fully adopted Dupotet's occultist discourse while steering it toward a distinctly Christian perspective. From another point of view, in embodying the model of a "magnetic" priest, Consoni was in line with a stream of thought that permeated German Catholic Mesmerism. Here magnetic therapy was portrayed as a religious act, and the ideal physician was described as a "priest-doctor".<sup>103</sup>

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98 Consoni: *La esistenza e spiritualità dell'anima*, 1.

99 Practitioners included "Priests of Paganism, like the Bonzes of the Indies, the Sibyls of the Greeks and Chaldeans; the Magi of Egypt, the Druids of Gaul, the Priestesses of Vesta, and other ministers of the Sanctuary of Thoth, Brahma, Vishnu, Hermes, and Serapis" up until to Cagliostro (ibid., 33–34).

100 From the beginning, the practice of animal magnetism was often compared to the occult sciences. This comparison was made both by the detractors of mesmerism, who sought to discredit it, and by Mesmer and his followers, who saw in animal magnetism the ultimate scientific explanation for ancient mysteries, occult phenomena, and biblical miracles. During the era of German Romanticism, this idea was systematically taken up by *Naturphilosophen* such as Carl August von Eschenmayer and Joseph Ennemoser (Crabtree: *From Mesmer to Freud*, 190–194). As to Dupotet, as early as 1845 he referred to animal magnetism as "the key to the ancient mysteries" and exclaimed: "We shall restore the oracles: the secret, so long lost, of communicating with the past has been recovered. A limited being will know the laws of all things and reveal them to you, if you are worthy of this revelation" (Du Potet: *Essai*, 33). In 1852 Dupotet published *La magie dévoilée ou principes de science occulte* (1852), "a detailed attempt to explain and justify the reasons for this obvious but unexpected association between magic and mesmerism" (Brach: *Psychic Disciplines*, 192).

101 Brach: *Psychic Disciplines*, 196.

102 Ibid.

103 Baier: *Romantischer Mesmerismus*, 23 ff. According to Karl Joseph Hieronymus Windischmann (1775–1839), for instance, "animal magnetism as the "art of friendly treatment" is the crowning of a truly Christian art of healing" (ibid., 23). A description of the ideal physician in terms of a priest – the "priest-doctor" – can be found also in the work of the physician Nepomuk



As mentioned above, Consoni took great pride in having evaded the clutches of the Inquisition. However, a different fate awaited Barnabite Father Enrico Dal Pozzo (1822–1893). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Dal Pozzo, a professor of experimental physics at the University of Perugia, pursued an original line of research that led him to renounce the clerical life, embrace evolutionary theory, and profess philosophical monism.<sup>104</sup> But Dal Pozzo did not wait until the end of the century to broach subjects rather controversial from a Catholic standpoint. As early as 1852, while serving as a philosophy lecturer at the public Gymnasium of Livorno, the young priest published the volume *Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della natura* (Animal Magnetism According to the Laws of Nature, 1852).<sup>105</sup> Not content with this, the following year he became one of the first Italians, and possibly the first priest, to address the phenomenon of table-turning, publishing a book whose heterodoxy was promptly detected by the Holy Office.<sup>106</sup> In the same year, Consoni authored a book on the topic as well.<sup>107</sup>

While the criticism of his book on table-turning did not have any significant consequences for Dal Pozzo, the repercussions of his treatise on magnetism were more serious. In April 1856, the Holy Office opened a case against the Barnabite (who had by then moved to Bologna) as a “propagator of mesmerism in a heretical sense, having already converted 150 individuals there [in Livorno]”, fearing

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Ringseis (1785–1880). On these authors see also Sziede, Maren: Priest-Doctors and Magnetisers: Mesmerism, Romantic Medicine, and Catholic Thought in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century, in: *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World*, ed. Lukas Pokorny / Franz Winter, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2021, 35–57.

**104** Dal Pozzo Enrico: *Un capitolo di psicofisiologia*; Giordano Bruno, Foligno: P. Sgariglia 1885; *Il monismo: conferenze tenute nell’Università di Perugia nel maggio 1889*, Città di Castello: Tip. dello Stab. S. Lapi 1890.

**105** Dal Pozzo Enrico: *Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della natura: idee teoriche*, Siena: Carrozzi 1852.

**106** Dal Pozzo Enrico: *Nuove scoperte sui tavoli e corpi semoventi e metodo per bene eseguirne l’esperienze*: lezione dettata il 6 maggio 1853 agli scolari di fisica e chimica nelle pubbliche Scuole di S. Sebastiano in Livorno, Pisa: Carrozzi 1853. Here, Dal Pozzo sets out to demonstrate, based on his own experience, that the “motive force of these Bodies is truly and solely *biotic* and akin to that of animal magnetism” (*ibid.*, preface). The Holy Office examined the treatise in October 1853. Commissioner Giacinto de Ferrari himself handled the case (ADDF, Holy Office, *Censura librorum* 1851–1856, n° 20). In de Ferrari’s report, Dal Pozzo is accused of portraying matter as “self-propelled” since it possesses a “single force” that animates it. The Inquisitor sees in this theory a dangerous variation of the concept of the *anima mundi*, as well as a tendency to depict matter as alive, whereas according to Christian doctrine it is “essentially inert, indifferent, passive” (*ibid.*, 24). See also *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2(3)/1853, 191–199.

**107** Consoni, Taddeo: *Varietà elettro-magnetico-animale negli oggetti che si muovono e relativa spiegazione*, Florence: Bencini 1853. Both Dal Pozzo and Consoni rejected the spiritualistic interpretation and believed that the movement of the tables was due to animal magnetism.

that he would “do the same in Bologna where he began to disseminate the same errors in the literary cabinet with the gravest scandal”.<sup>108</sup> The documents collected during the trial show that Dal Pozzo was seen by many as an enthusiast of magnetism and a habitu   of progressive circles.<sup>109</sup> As a result, the Holy Office decided to transfer him from Bologna to the Barnabite college in Perugia, where he would be closely monitored by the local inquisitor and bishop.<sup>110</sup>

In October 1856, the Inquisition commissioner Giacinto de Ferrari (1804–1874) examined Dal Pozzo’s work on magnetism, where he noted several doctrinal errors. Not only did Dal Pozzo address the controversial subject of the soul’s “primitive faculties” as revealed in somnambulism, but he also proposed an even more subversive idea: that the soul, separated from the body after death, will “in an instant make a full judgment of its past life; hence the future judgment will be made by the soul itself, just as one who looks in a mirror judges their own outward appearance”.<sup>111</sup> De Ferrari attached to his report a letter from the General of the Barnabites, Francesco M. Caccia, as well as a communication from Dal Pozzo.<sup>112</sup> Regarding magnetism, the latter stated that he was “convinced of the reality of its principle, of its dependence and relationship with other physical and physiological phenomena, and of its great usefulness in the treatment of nervous diseases”.<sup>113</sup> He emphasized, however, that he practiced it only for therapeutic

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**108** “Il magnetismo animale del P. Enrico Dal Pozzo Barnabita. Relazione del Rmo Maestro Fr. Giacinto de Ferrari De Predicatori Commissario Generale del S.O., Roma, October 1856”, ADDF, Holy Office, Censura librorum 1863, folder 6, n   78, 1.

**109** In the draft of the letter sent to the Father General of the Barnabites on August 5, we read: “In addition to his presence in the Cabinet of the Medical-Surgical Society, where well-known politicians and immoderate progressives meet, with whom he seems to have a close relationship, his exaltation of magnetic phenomena and of so-called mesmerism has already made him conspicuous, scandalized many, and in this respect placed him in the position of propagator of anti-Catholic principles. This is confirmed by some of the booklets he has printed on this subject, which are not without reprobate and erroneous maxims in matters of faith. Having examined all this, the Fathers Inquisitors [. . .], judging that it is a very dangerous thing for such a person to be in charge of studies and moderator of the youth, and also to prevent greater aggravations against him, [. . .] propose, with the full approval of the Holy Father [. . .] to remove [. . .] Eugenio [sic] Dal Pozzo from Bologna and send him to another monastery far away, but within the Papal States” (ADDF, Holy Office, Minutari 45, 1856, 221v–222r).

**110** On August 13, the Holy Office decided to write to the inquisitor of Perugia and the bishop of the same city “*ut sedulo P. Dal Pozzo invigilent*” (ADDF, Holy Office, Censura librorum 1863, folder 6, n   78, 7).

**111** *Ibid.*, 13.

**112** Having acknowledged the 1856 encyclical on magnetism, Caccia emphasized Dal Pozzo’s “sincere reverence and submission” to “all Superior authority” (*ibid.*, 15).

**113** *Ibid.*

purposes and did not induce somnambulistic phenomena (meaning in healthy individuals), but merely studied them when they occurred.<sup>114</sup> In addition, he denied holding “ultra-progressive political views” or associating “with those who hold them”.<sup>115</sup> In January 1857, in view of de Ferrari’s report, the Holy Office asked Dal Pozzo to repent. The latter complied, and in May the Inquisition absolved him, but with the condition that he “publish an article in a newspaper to retract what he had printed on magnetism”.<sup>116</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

From a theoretical perspective, the Catholic debate over animal magnetism in mid-nineteenth-century Italy reveals underlying tensions between what we might term “hard” and “soft” explanatory paradigms of mesmeric phenomena. The “hard” paradigm, rooted in demonology, posited a supernatural entity as the causal factor, while the “soft” paradigm, encompassing fraud and pathology hypotheses, relied on natural and conventional causes. Although these divergent models emerged simultaneously, the appeal of “soft” explanations quickly faded as they proved unable to account for the increasing complexity of animal magnetism and related practices. As a result, the demonological model became dominant.

This intransigent paradigm, which attributed all mesmeric phenomena to diabolical forces, was perfectly suited to an era of growing conflict between the Church and secular society, where most cultural innovations seemed to threaten the authority of the Vatican. The approach of Catholic anti-magnetists resonated, in particular, with the conservative turn taken by Pope Pius IX following the uprisings of 1848. However, political factors alone cannot account for the triumph of the demonological model, as other significant dynamics were clearly at play. The occultist evolution of French animal magnetism, for instance, has certainly played a major role in this process. In the view of many Catholics, only a diabolical project could explain (alongside political turmoil) the revival of “necromancy” through Cahagnet’s magnetic spiritism. These new forms of sorcery, in turn, seemed to rejuvenate a plethora of ancient heretical beliefs, such as pantheism, the ideas of divinity and pre-existence of the soul, the non-eternity or even the non-existence of hell, reincarnation, and more. In this context, the demonological

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–16.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>116</sup> ADDE, Holy Office, Minutari 46 (1857), 117r.

paradigm implemented “negative selection”, rejecting innovations deemed incompatible with orthodoxy.<sup>117</sup>

Magnetic spiritism, however, was by no means the final stage in the transformation of mesmerism, and things were only to get worse. From 1853 on, table-turning and spiritualism spread like wildfire, and the boundary between these practices and therapeutic mesmerism became increasingly blurred. In this context, the Church was clearly unsettled by what Ernesto de Martino called the “scandal” of paranormal events – or to be more precise, by their uncontrolled manifestation outside of any traditional religious framework.<sup>118</sup> Both the fraud hypothesis, which dismissed all paranormal phenomena, and the purely pathological hypothesis failed to explain the bewildering physical manifestations of spiritualism. As a result, many opted for the familiar explanatory model of demonology.

In a sense, the demonological paradigm can be interpreted as a drastic survival mechanism, and as an extreme reaction to the rapid modernization of Western society. Through their secular concepts and techniques, magnetists not only explained but also *produced* spiritual experiences, thereby usurping the exclusive control of religious institutions and creating space for private and autonomous spiritualities. While the approach of Catholic demonologists may have lacked interpretive sophistication, it provided comfort through its simplicity, attributing both societal and spiritual unrest to Satan’s malevolent influence.

The debate over mesmerism also sparked theological controversies within the Church. Fringe figures such as Consoni and Dal Pozzo advocated for an alternative, “soft” explanatory model that could be labeled as “physiological”. These authors viewed animal magnetism not only as a therapeutic tool, but also as a means of proving the existence and spirituality of the soul and exploring its faculties once freed from bodily constraints, following earlier speculations of *Naturphilosophen* and French spiritual magnetists. Despite its heterodox tendencies, this approach echoed earlier attempts by Catholic authorities to interpret spiritual phenomena through secular categories.<sup>119</sup> From another point of view, these

117 I modi della cultura. Manuale di etnologia, ed. Italo Signorini, Rome: Carocci 1998, 59.

118 De Martino, Ernesto: *Il mondo magico* (1948), Turin: Bollati Boringhieri 2007, 52–53.

119 In this context, we should mention at least Pope Benedict XIV, born Prospero Lambertini (1675–1758), author of the monumental treatise *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione* (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1734–8). Drawing on the scientific and medical literature of his time, Lambertini developed a complex reflection on the paranormal, elaborating innovative concepts of “natural prophecy” and “natural ecstasy”. See Vidal, Fernando: Prospero Lambertini’s “On the Imagination and Its Powers”, in: *Storia, medicina e diritto nei trattati di Prospero Lambertini-Benedetto XIV*, ed. Maria Teresa Fattori, Rome: Ed. di storia e letteratura 2013, 297–318.

perspectives aligned with the work of scientists like Francesco Orioli, whose *Critical Letters on Mesmerism* (1817) and subsequent publications anticipated the concerns of future parapsychology.<sup>120</sup>

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**120** See Orioli, Francesco: *Del mesmerismo. Lettere critiche di Francesco Orioli dottore in medicina*, Bologna: Annesio Nobili 1817 and Cogevina, Angelo / Orioli, Francesco: *Fatti relativi a mesmerismo e cure mesmeriche con una prefazione storico-critica*, Corfù: Tip. del Governo 1842. On Francesco Orioli, see Biondi, Massimo: Francesco Orioli e il “meraviglioso”, in: *Intersezioni* 26(2)/2006, 233–250, and Polizzi, Gaspare: *Alla ricerca dello “specioso” e dell’“insolito”*. Francesco Orioli e Giacomo Leopardi, in: *Lettere Italiane* 60(3)/2008, 394–419.

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