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Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity

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Making Selves and Marking Others: Identity and Late Antique Heresiologies

EDUARD IRICINSCHI & HOLGER M. ZELLENTIN

“The Other may not be very other at all.”
Kwame Anthony Appiah¹

As influential catchwords, “heresy” and “identity” have recently acquired the sense of entitlement and hazard that only a dominant academic paradigm would impart. In a famous manifesto of the 1970s, for instance, sociologist Peter Berger associates modernity with the “universalization of heresy.” According to Berger, the freedom to choose among different versions of plausibility characterizes the post-Enlightenment person. Under these new circumstances, heresy surrenders itself to the imperative of multiple worldviews and becomes the very label of modern religious life: “For premodern man, heresy is a possibility – usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity.”²

Academic success has not been easy on “identity” either. In the last three decades of shifting cultural geographies, identity has become an ever-present theoretical tool in the Humanities and Social Sciences to the point where Siniša Malešević has invoked the utopia of an identity-less world.³ A number of social scientists and historians concur that the birth of

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¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979), 28. Closer to our disenchanted twenty-first century, Arthur Versluis identifies the origins of totalitarianism in “the emergence of historical Christianity,” more precisely, in its incipient heresiology and the unabated history of witch-hunting in Christianity; *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-Hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), ix.

³ Siniša Malešević, *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Basingstoke U.K.; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13–14.