

Medieval Witchcraft

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Mention the word 'witch' today, and, more often than not, connotations of an old woman, dressed in black swiftly flying through the air while riding on a large broom handle, comes to mind. Although witches and witchcraft are not common place today, these have existed throughout the past centuries¹. During the Patristic Period both Tertullian and Augustine accepted the validity of witchcraft,² whereas Chrysostom and others rejected it. Possibly the most well-known witch is the 'Witch of Endor' who was called upon to revive the 'spirit of Samuel' so that Israel could receive counsel from him.³ Dr. Margaret Murray conjectures that witchcraft may have had its origins in Paleolithic festival rites practised by shamans in Africa and/or Hawaii.⁴

A witch is one,⁵ who, "through a deliberate mockery and inversion of faith, as he/she willingly submits to, and is eventually overtaken by the demonic influences of Satan, becomes the embodiment of evil, and the tool of its works."⁶ The undertakings of witches are plausible "because they have learned the secrets of angels, and all the violence of Satan, and their most secret powers flow forth to the earth through them to cause damnation on mankind".⁷ The term 'witch' may be applied to either sex, but during the Middle Ages it was primarily attributed to women, because they embodied the negative qualities of human nature that bend magic to ill intent.⁸ During the Medieval Period witchcraft was openly practiced, and it is estimated that there were over one hundred sixty thousand witches in Europe and the surrounding areas. Presently witches are called 'Wiccan', and are thought of in more respectable terms.

Two types of witches were recognized - the 'white witch', who pronounced omens of health and wealth on people, and the 'black witch', who pronounced omens of ill health and poverty on them. The most notorious and feared witch was the 'black witch' whose endeavours usually entailed collusion with Satan for the transferral of an evil outcome through supernatural means.

Witchcraft Prior To The Medieval Church Period:

Prior to the Middle Ages, (4th-8th centuries), the Church had autocratic control over parishioners; individuals submitted to its dictates as if they were rendering obeisance to God, Himself. Based upon this premise, the family unit was role structured with the husband working outside the home as the breadwinner, while the wife remained at home as the housekeeper and children bearer/raiser. In this setting women had little social interaction beyond the confines of the home, and dared not contravene the Church's instructions that they be compliant to their husband's

1. Exodus 22:18 & Deuteronomy 18:10.

2. De Civ. Dei, 21.6I

3. Samuel 28:7

4. Margaret Murray, *Witchcraft – Earliest Practice and Meaning*, (San Francisco: Harper & Rowe Publishers, 1968), 45

5. Either a male or female, but more frequently to be recognized as a female because women embody the negative qualities of human nature that bend magic to ill intent. (Griffon "History Of The Occult"

6. Richard Kieckhefer, "The Holy And The Unholy: Sainthood, Witchcraft And Magic In Late Medieval Europe", *The Journal Of Medieval And Renaissance Studies*, (Vol. 24, No. 3, Fall 1994) p. 356.

7. R. C. Charles, "The Book of Enoch, 65:6 –10", *The Apocrypha And Pseudepigrapha Of The Old Testament In English*, Vol. II (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 230 – 231.

8. T. Wynne Griffon, *History Of The Occult*, (London, Ontario: Bison Books Ltd., 1981), 22.

perogatives.

Any deviancy from the Church's strict 'authoritarian control' designated one as being rebellious against God, and Satan's servant. Therefore, parishioners were continuously warned about such ruinous conduct, and were implored to remain under the 'sacred canopy' of the Church, which would protect their souls from error and eternal damnation which would certainly befall them.

Because believers willingly conceded to the Church's demands, metaphysical and para spiritual activities, including witchcraft, were regarded as being congruent with its teachings, and, therefore, were readily welcomed by the Bishops. Four reasons are proffered for the Church exhibiting no disavowing concern about witchcraft at this time. First, witches were considered as being 'benevolent gracers' of humanity as they extended solace, comfort, special 'love blessings', and 'healing services'; second, witchcraft was considered personal and private; third, witches made no open claims to subversive spiritual alliances while fulfilling their deeds; and fourth, witchcraft was reckoned as nothing more than "folklore of the day that was accepted on the same terms as the activity of astrologers, and other workers of common magic".⁹ Charles Williams further asserts that assent to witchcraft, by the Church, may also have been necessitated due to its teaching of 'alteration', or "the notion that oneness with God could be known through praise, worship, and special rituals or invocations."¹⁰ Due to this, witchcraft 'enjoyed' notable, uninhibited growth within Europe and the surrounding areas, relatively free from investigation or condemnation by the Church.

Around the beginning of the ninth century the Church began to cast dispersion on witches when they claimed that they could fly by the help of 'special spirit aids', but still it welcomed their 'benevolent graces' within the community. However, by the eleventh century, when witches brazenly announced outlandish claims that they could cause storms, or cause cattle to miscarry, bishops became disconcerted with their claims and began scrutinizing their activities; yet, even with this, the Church gave nothing more than a verbal reproof to the witches. Witchcraft only became of grave concern to the Church when there was a charge that the witch's actions caused criminal hurt, and then these concerns were presented to the civil court for examination, and possible prosecution.

Witchcraft In The Medieval Church:

A) - Contributors To The Numerical Increase Of Witches:

During the twelfth and thirteen centuries the number of witches within Europe increased immensely. A number of factors contributed to this:

First, there was an unprecedented migration of villagers to nearby cities. No longer did the Bishops have dictatorial oversight of the populace, and therefore, 'spiritual practices' were less austere followed by the people. Witches, who were formerly limited in their practice because of Church scrutiny, began formulating stronger mystical alliances with Satan so they could be "hand maidens of evil within the big world"¹¹ while they performed grotesque, seditious and harmful acts.

Second, as economic conditions advanced because of city life, both men and women entered the labour force, either working together in the same business or separately. This sense of 'liberation' facilitated women greater social interaction. Whereas most married women remained

9. Keith Thomas, *Religion And The Decline Of Magic* (New York: Hodder & Rowe Publishers, 1971), 34.

10. Charles Williams, *Witchcraft*, (New York: Meridian Publishing, 1951), 80 - 81.

11. Elspeth Whitney, *Renaissance Quarterly*, (Volume 24, No. 4, 1997), 672.
Publishers, 1971), 34.

sexually faithful to their husband, older widows and single women, who had openly professed being witches, turned to prostitution, and used their charm as an enticement for men to become sexually involved with them. If men ignored their advances, they would place a hex on the noncompliant person, and thereby inflict harm on them. In some instances married women reported that after the husband was bewitched, they no longer retained interest in marital sexual relations. Nachman Ben-Yehuda opines:

Among married women who probably did not, or could not, indulge in illicit sex, there must have been strong feelings against ‘bad women’ who might ‘bewitch’ their husbands or sons who had actually done so. Therefore, the female witch, using sex for corrupting the world on behalf of Satan, was a ‘suasive image’ of great power which could not be overlooked in this new setting of sexual freedom.¹²

Thirdly, the Black Death, (1347-1350) “which is said to have reduced the male population of Northern Europe by as much as a third and that of England by a half,”¹³ and left thousands of married women single also contributed to the rise of witchcraft. With the decreased opportunities for marriage by younger women, and dramatically increased number of elderly widows on hand, this meant that more women were open to investigate the mystical practices offered by witchcraft. In light of this factor, by the time the Witchcraze started in the sixteenth century, it is estimated that over two hundred thousand witches were living in Europe and England.¹⁴

B) - A Reassessment Of Witch’s Power:

As the witch’s subversive and pernicious ‘magical powers’ became more apparent to the Bishops, the Church drastically revamped its assessment of witchcraft. Instead of being ‘accredited’ as a benevolent blessing from God, it was delegated as an erroneous and superstitious, demonic force, which, if left uncontrolled, would damn the very soul of the redeemed who unfortunately were brought under its spell. No longer could the Church turn a ‘blind eye’ to the witch’s increasing malevolent activity that were being reported. Alan Dundes comments:

People once blamed witches for unexplained misfortune, such as a sudden illness, a sudden death, or a crop failure. Many persons accused witches of marrying demons and bearing monster children. Witches might make cows go dry by stealing their milk or cast a spell on a churn to prevent butter from forming. People also thought witches could raise storms or turn people into beasts. In addition, witches were thought to be able to ride through the air on a broom, and make themselves invisible. Others were certain that witches and warlocks gathered

12. Nachman Ben-Yehuda, “The European Witch Craze Of The 14th To 17th Centuries: A Sociologists Perspective”, *The American Journal Of Sociology*, (Vol. 86, No. 1, July 1980), 22.

13. Kenneth S. Latourette, *History Of Christianity*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1953), 602-603.

14. *Ibid.*, Nachman Ben-Yehuda, 21.

15. Alan Dundes, “Witchcraft”, *The World Book Encyclopedia*, (Chicago: Scott Fetzer Publishing Company, 1988), 374.

16. Henry Charles Lea, *A History Of The Inquisition Of The Middle Ages*, Vol. III, (New York: The Harbor Press - Publishers, 1955), 502 - 503.

17. T. Wynne Griffon, *History Of The Occult*, (London, Ontario: Bison Books Ltd., 1991), 18. Meetings were traditionally held in conjunction with the eight great solar feasts or sabbats that correspond to the Winter Solace, Candlemas, May Eve, 1 August, Fall Equinox and Halloween.

yearly on October 31 in meetings at secretive places to worship their master so they could replenish their evil arsenal.¹⁵

Based on numerous similar reports, the Church began investigating by what power(s) the witches purportedly did their deeds. Upon interviewing selected candidates, it was noted that many witches openly confessed that they had willingly “denied the redemptive work of Christ, their baptism, the Sacraments, and that they had resigned themselves to Satan, through an irreversible pact, so they could be empowered to do their acts.”¹⁶ But, grievous concern regarding the witch’s conduct was heightened when the Church learned that witches gathered at weekend evening Sabbat Meetings, as opposed to Sunday Masses, in the Synagogue of Satan eight times a year,¹⁷ to gain both knowledge and skill in disseminating their ‘trade’. As to exactly what happened during these meetings, there is no certainty, but the following account indicates that the Church had sufficient reason to be concerned about the Sabbats. Henry Lea comments:

During these meetings men and women were transported through the air, either spontaneously or astride of a stick or a stool, or mounted on a demon in the shape of a goat, a dog, or some other animal, and where hellish rites were celebrated and indiscriminate licence prevailed.¹⁸

Along with witches attending these Sabbat Meetings, it is purported that they also formed explicit pacts with Satan to have sexual intercourse with incubi and succubi,¹⁹ while others entered into formal, written accords with Satan, so that by a single word or by a single act, they might be able to perform whatever evil they desired. As cohorts with Satan, it was not “unusual for witches to go to Holy Communion, and instead of consuming the Host, they spit ‘God’s Body’ from their mouths into a handkerchief or cloth so they could take it away and blaspheme it in their horrid demonic Sabbat worship service.”²⁰

With the witch’s complicit, irrevocable allegiance to Satan, as his ‘frontline army’ in the working of evil, now before the Church it could no longer tolerate witchcraft, for through this deed devastating consequences were befalling its congregates. Michael D. Bailey comments:

By submitting to the devil, worshipping demons, and engaging in these diabolical Sabbats, witches damned themselves, and by performing maleficarum they harmed others; but, perhaps their foulest act, in the minds of the clerical authorities, was that by deceiving others about the true nature of witchcraft and tempting them into seeking the aid of witches, they corrupted innocent Christian souls.²¹

As the number of witches in Europe increased, and as their powers became more inflamma-

18. Ibid., Lea, 87.

19. A female demon who is believed to have had sexual intercourse with sleeping men.

20. _____, “The Bull Of Innocent VIII” *The Malleus Maleficarum*, Internet Download: (<http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/mm00e.html>), September 12, 2006, Section 241.

21. Michael D. Bailey, “The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature”, *The American Historical Review*, (Vol. 8, Fall 1997), 224.

tory, “this general spiritual malaise was compelling some of the finest intellects of Europe to the conviction that Satan’s power was in the ascendant, and that some heroic measures must be taken to save humanity.”²² And, so, determined to eliminate witchcraft the Church implemented a number of coercive, remedial actions.

First, it began correcting errors associated with witchcraft by teaching how Christians could rightly or wrongly interact with supernatural forces, demonic or divine, and what should be the practices associated with Christian allegiance to God. By emphasizing that Christians are protected by God from evil forces, the Church wanted to diffuse any further discussion about the powers witches might possess so that the devotees would wholeheartedly return to the doctrines and practices espoused by the Church.

Second, it again more forcefully warned parishioners of the dangers connected with associating with witches. In order to empower parishioners to avoid contact with witches, Bishops instructed parishioners to make the sign of a cross upon seeing or meeting a witch so that God’s divine protection could guard them against Satan’s pernicious deeds. If enacting the sign of the cross did not induce strength and courage, the parishioner was instructed to “say prayers, meditate on the passion of Christ, attend Church rites and ceremonies, or make a pilgrimage to saints’ shrines”²³ as soon as it was deemed possible.

Third, to bring sensibility to the witches, and in an attempt to curb their pernicious acts, the Church informed practicing witches that witchcraft was a *heresy* because the “witches, firstly, denied God, and, secondly, because they did not follow the doctrines of official belief held by the Church.”²³ Along with this, the Church stipulated that those who would not recant, repent, and return to the ‘sacred canopy of the Church’ would be brought under the Church’s corrective discipline.

In spite of these, and other corrective efforts implemented by the Church, little progress in curbing witch growth and activity was realized by the Church. Witches, by the thousands, spurned the entreaty of the Church, and continued their seditious practices to sorrowful ends.

C) - The Witchcraze And Purging By The Church:

Regardless of numerous attempts by the Church to persuade witches to recant and return to its care, little favourable response to their efforts was realized. By the middle of the fourteenth century Europe ‘boasted’ of having over two hundred thousand witches.²⁴ With the witch’s forthright, determined noncompliance to the Church’s requests, it publicly declared that “witches had pacted with Satan, the Lord of Darkness, and they were opposed to God and His Church,”²⁵ and because of this, the Church had no alternative but to progress with enacting stronger edicts by which it would be able to arrest, try, convict witches as heretics, and then punish them as offenders of the faith. Using the writings of the Church Fathers, who pronounced witchcraft as nothing more than a delusion from Satan which entrapped believers to entertain heresies as they strayed from the faith, the Church “erected the Inquisition whereby witchcraft and heresy became one and the same,

22. Marion L. Starkey, “Witchcraft”, *The Collier’s Encyclopedia*, (New York: Macmillan Educational Company, 1988), 554.

23. _____, “Witchcraft”, *The New Lexicon Webster’s Encyclopaedic Dictionary Of The English Language*, (New York: Lexicon Publications, Inc., 1988), 1129.

24. Ibid., Richard Kieckhefer, 359.

25. Jacob Basista, “Heresy, Magic, And Witchcraft In Early Modern Europe”, *Canadian Journal Of History*, (Vol. 40, No. 3, December 2005), 498.

and imposed death on those found guilty.”²⁶

The ‘purging effects’ of the Inquisition were limited for two reasons: first, the number of people suspected of heresy was too great, and could never be dealt with by the Inquisition, and secondly, heretics who recanted were set free to return to their demonic work. Something more powerful was demanded if witchcraft were to be eradicated from Europe so, in 1484 Pope Innocent VIII published his Bull, *Summas Desiderantes Affectibus*. Its intent was unmistakably clear:

By it, the disease of heresy and other turpitudes of witchcraft, diffusing their poison to the destruction of many innocent souls will be cleansed out of every province, township, diocese, territory, through just correction, imprisonment and punishment, the penalty being adapted to the offence, of any person, without hindrance, designated as a witch by this order.²⁷

To hasten the desired purging of witchcraft, two Dominican inquisitors, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger published the *Malleus Maleficarum* also known as the *Witches’ Hammer*, which “codified the existing belief about their powers, their practices and their actions”.²⁸ Like Pope Innocent III’s Bull, the purpose the *Malleus Maleficarum* was also indisputably clear. Emily Oster adds:

The book was divided into three parts. It was instrumental in codifying the existing belief about witches, their practices, and their actions. It gave specific guidelines about how suspected witches should be ‘questioned’ until they confessed their crimes. In addition, it calls our attention to our extant beliefs about witches, weather making and crop destruction at this time. Without dispute, the document makes no apology that witches enacted troublesome spells to cause great woes upon humanity, and calls for severe punishment for evils that cannot be humanly measured.²⁹

With the Bull of 1484, and unrestrained authority to seek out, try and punish witches now in hand, the Church swiftly crusaded to making witch trials its main focus because “so heinous were the sins of witches that they exceeded even the sins of ‘bad angels’ for ‘bad angels’ fell into sin once, but witches continue to fall by influencing others to evil even when they know the consequences.”³⁰ What, at first, had been regarded as nothing more than folklore and traditional ‘spirit blessings’ was now regarded by the Church as a malignant Satanic assault on God’s people, and, therefore, the Church had no other recourse than to militantly counter-act and remove his cohorts of perdition by

26. F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary Of The Christian Church*, (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 1165.

27. Smauel M. Jackson, ed. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia Of Religious Knowledge*, (New York: Funk And Wagnalls Company, 1912), 391.

28. _____, “The Bull Of Innocent VIII” *The Malleus Maleficarum*, Internet Download: <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/mm00e.html>, (Downloaded September 12, 2006).

29. J. P. Chaplin, *Dictionary of the Occult and Paranormal*, (New York: A Laurel Original, 1976), 169.

30. Emily Oster, “Witchcraft, Weather and Economic Growth in Renaissance Europe”, *The Journal Of Economic Perspectives*, (Vol. 18, No. 1, Winter, 2004), 217.

the severest judgement available to it. Reporting on the Church's intense resolve to counter-act the deviancy of witchcraft. Henry Lea writes:

When once the belief was started in the existence of witches possessing great powers, and their activities were engendered by motives purely malignant, it was destined to inevitable extension under the stimulus afforded by persecution. Every misfortune and every accident that occurred in a hamlet would be attributed to witchcraft. Suspicion would gradually attach to some ill-tempered crone, and she would be seized, for inquisitors held that a single careless threat, such as 'You will be sorry for this' if followed by a piece of ill-luck, was sufficient to justify arrest and trial. The circle of evidence shows that in some villages most of the citizens were considered to be slaves of Satan, and nothing better could happen than for that community to be freed from such malignant vengeance even if it meant that all those possessed should be exterminated.³¹

The Trials:

Now being fully 'armed' with authority to prosecute witches, the Church determinately embarked on its quest to arrest, try, and punish those who recklessly disobeyed its call to renounce witchcraft. The trial of a witch could consist of a number of steps.

First, the Church tracked down women suspected of witchcraft. This could be facilitated through the open, wilful confession of a witch, or by an accuser, who suspected a woman of being a witch, informing the Church of his suspicions. The woman, now having been identified, was then summoned by a Church delegate to appear before the Inquisition, without recourse to an advocate,³² to answer to the charges. Immediately upon appearing at the Inquisition, the suspect's home was searched for evidence such as ointments, herbs, potions, wands, or documents and she, herself, was examined for physical marks such as cold sores, welts, or deep scarring by which "Satan may have sealed her for his work".³³

Second, while the aforementioned searches were in progress, interrogation of the arrested also took place. Interrogation of the witch was regarded to be most profitable if it were done on the more "Holy Days" or on the solemnization of the Mass because it was during this time that the interrogators "were most open to receive Divine help in questioning and to invoke prayers of the Saints against all the plagues of the Devil."³⁴

Third, during the trial, a witch was offered a warm bath, clean clothing, a comfortable bed and opportunity to confess privately before a priest. By providing these comforts, the Church set the stage by which a woman felt she would be released for an honest confession; however, release was never a consideration of the church. If a witch did not confess with these amenities at her disposal, the Inquisitors turned to more violent acts. Griffon provides the following:

31. Ibid., Henry Lea, 509.

32. Ibid., Herzog, 391.

33. Ibid., Bailey, 227.

34. Ibid., *Mallaeus Maleficarum*, Section 265.

When a witch (usually a woman) would not willingly confess to her transgression she was subjected to public humiliation, physical and mental exhaustion, torture, dunking, whipping, solitary confinement, and denial of sleep as an indicator of what later would befall her because of being a tool in Satan's court.³⁵

Third, once the examination and interrogation were concluded, the witch was given the opportunity to redeem her soul by confessing the grievous Satanic alliance, and then recanting for the contrivance to do evil. If a young witch recanted, or if it could be concluded that because of her mental state a woman did not understand the ill-will of her acts, and if the inquisitors were gracious, she might be excommunicated as an example to others, or be sent to a convent for corrective teaching. Any witch that did not recant, regardless of her age, immediately was pronounced as being a heretic and was condemned to death either by the "hot torch treatment" or by being burned.³⁶

During the early period of the trials, the Church did not kill anyone; instead, a witch convicted of heresy was turned over to the Civil Courts for killing. However, by the middle of the sixteenth century, during which time both the Catholic Church and Protestant Church were intently determined on ridding Europe from witchcraft, the Church took onto itself this act. By the end of the 15th century the 'great purging' was well on its way. To add strength and immediacy to the purging, The Elector, August of Saxony "included in his criminal code witchcraft as a capital offence because anyone who should forget his Christian faith and make an agreement with the devil is worthy of nothing more than death and eternal damnation."³⁷ Throughout Western Europe and England the witch's destiny, regardless of their intent, was signed and sealed; the Church knew its task, and without hesitation it set itself to accomplishing it!

Conclusion:

Whether witchcraft was a real or imagined danger to the Church will never be known. We do know, however, that during the seventeenth century it is estimated that over three million witches were searched out, and unjustly slaughtered. Second to the Holocaust of 1939 - 1945, this may be regarded by historians as the greatest travesty against humanity, and a call to repentance on the part of the Church would not seem to be out of order. In light of this it is imperative that God's Church never allow such unrighteousness to occur again, regardless what the threat might be!

35. Ibid., T. Wynn Griffon, 21.

36. Leland L. Este, "Joan Of Arc And Female Mysticism", *Journal Of Religious Studies*, (Fall 2000), 31. (Example: Joan Of Arc).

37. Ibid., Michael S. Jackson, 392.

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