

Witchcraft and Women in Medieval Christianity

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Witches and the Church

Witches and vampires draw much attention on Halloween day, in the Harry Potter novels, and in vampire movies. Whether or not they believe in them in a religious sense, many people nowadays simply assume that sort of world and witchcraft might exist somewhere. Personal preference, imagination, and imitation to witchcraft simply cause a grudging complaint from Christianity. In the medieval world, alleged magicians and witches were out there but their activity was restricted by the watchful eyes of the church.

Witchcraft refers to a certain power that generates a supernatural phenomenon by means of humans, often called witches, not directly by means a divine being. Witches were believed to conduct various harmful deeds in society and to the church with the help of devils. Witchcraft frequently appears to be related to a diabolic power, to magic, and to evil in a negative and pejorative sense.¹

A witch is often described as someone who invokes evil passion, brings calamity, and even calls up the dead. Witches were believed to have the power to cast magic spells, dance with the devil, and ride brooms to attend at the Sabbath. Are witches realities, fantasy, fiction, or the presumed belief-system of certain people? Documents and stories from the middle ages tell that people conducted black masses and worshipped strange gods. In spite of the controversy over the factuality of phenomena, many people seemed to regard witchcraft as a genuine experience, whether religious, cultural, or psychological.

Coexisting and competing with pagan beliefs and sorcery in medieval Christianity, witch trials and related controversies came to the forefront in the 14th–15th centuries, and reached its peak between the 16 and 17th centuries. Richard Kieckhefer's "Calendar of Witch Trials" tells that witchcraft was a wide phenomenon in the 1300–1500.² This was the beginning stage of the witch controversy, but it provided a real momentum for further witch trials. Even if Kieckhefer's use of the term witchcraft includes sorcery, invocation, diabolism (similar to witchcraft), we can see that witchcraft emerged as a major issue in late medieval Christianity.

In the witch controversy, women were the main victims in most of cases. In England and Germany more than three-quarters of the victims were women. Demographic surveys are not so different in European countries, so we can assume that this was the case in other European countries as well. Why did "these fragile women" fall victim to widespread witchcraft? What was the attitude of the medieval church toward this issue? What was the attitude of the medieval church toward women between "the devil's gateway" and "the bride of Christ" from the time of Jerome and Tertullian on? With these questions in mind, I will look at the relationship between witches and medieval Christianity. I will begin with a definition of witchcraft, a short history of witches, and some examples from medieval texts, and will then offer a hermeneutical evaluation and theological interpretation of this issue.

Witches—"It is As If They Are Seized by a Demon"

Two approaches will be helpful in locating witchcraft in medieval Christianity. First, let us look at the following three stages of activity as they were labeled by the Church: paganism, sorcery, and witchcraft. In labeling unbelievers and theological

¹ For general issues of definition, see Darren Odlridge, *Witchcraft Reader*, 1–20.

² Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 106–149.

outsiders, the medieval church had developed three different categories. When Christians evangelized early medieval Europe, they struggled against and competed with many “pagans.” Once they had established Christianity to a certain extent, the church defined outsiders or the unfaithful as “magicians.” From the 14th century on, the Church developed the idea of witchcraft in a fuller sense to eliminate “weeds in their own gardens.” Christian theologians have shown a common line of argument in treating these three categories.

As J. Russell argues, a tripartite diagram of science, magic, and witchcraft would enable us to better understand witchcraft.³ I will briefly mention magic, which holds an important position between science and witchcraft. While sharing some aspects with science, magic usually allows humans an almost divine status. The magical world view as a whole is belief in a homo-centric universe. Magic in general was rejected by the official religion, i.e. Christianity. We can divide magic into two sub-categories: high magic and low magic. High magic, *divinatio*, is rather religious, philosophical, and scientific, and based upon occult knowledge. It is more philosophical and theoretical. With an emphasis on fate, high magic is concerned with personal destiny, herbal and natural powers, and cosmic powers. Low magic, *maleficium*, primarily focuses on evil-doing and immediate practical effects, which makes it rather similar witchcraft in the later period.

Witches are people who allegedly follow the devil, an agent of evil, and employ various means of witchcraft. According to the definition of low magic above, witches could be included in the category of “sorcerer.” In this sense, we can say the term ‘witch’ contains an exclusively theological meaning, but with connections to folklore. The religious cult of witches, even though built on the foundations of low magic and old traditions, was shaped and further defined by the Christian society in which those cults and witchcrafts functioned. Henry A. Kelly’s statement also supports this definition of witches: “In the context of Christian demonology, witchcraft means any human activity attributed to the help of [an] evil spirit. From the theological point of view, there is no difference between witchcraft, sorcery, and magic.”⁴ From a theological perspective, only opponents have changed as time has gone by. Andrew D. White is also in line with this view that “witchcraft arose within the context of a coherent and widespread magical world view and developed in the context of medieval Christianity.”⁵ Therefore, we can assert that witchcraft is a composite phenomenon drawing from folklore, sorcery, demonology, heresy, and Christian theology.

Witch-related phenomena were various, but they shared the foundation of certain core beliefs. Witches had peculiar powers to harm other people, enemies, neighbors, and churches. A witch was branded as someone who was motivated by ill-will, animosity, and lack of proper sense. They were viewed as misfits in their cultural, social, and religious circumstances. They were victims and at the same time instigators of certain tragedies, especially in times of deprivation, conflict, resentment, and rapid social and religious change. Alleged attacks by witches, or any harm to the church that was attributed to them became the main motivation for the oppression of witches. Oftentimes witches had a furtive and conspiratorial anti-society tendency. They were archetypical figures, frightening, numinous, threatening, associated with awe, obstinate wildness, and devilish behavior. In this sense, to the medieval church, they were more serious and sensational targets than those who

³ J. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 3–5.

⁴ J. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 16. Recitation.

⁵ J. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 65.

were charged with sorcery.

What brought out phenomena such as witchcraft, a popular religion? It is hard to prove the reality of the supernatural power of witches, but we can trace three reasons for witch-related phenomena. (1) In socio-cultural contexts, outcasts like Jews, lepers, and women were often branded with offensive titles. People who didn't belong to the established dominant socio-cultural group had to find other social group, even unorthodox groups. (2) In religious-psychological contexts, medieval people were in need of a certain religious belief system to address to their deep human needs and anxieties. A spiritual world view was more prevalent than a materialistic world view. Most standard belief and behavior systems were shaped by Christian and feudal mythology. For religious and social discontents, witchcraft emerged as the strongest possible religious expression following in the tradition of pagans and magicians from before. Sometimes witches were more dangerous to the Church than infidels like Jews and Muslims. The Church's fear of witches' increases as the depression of religious outcasts grew, especially in periods of stress and instability. (3) We can assume that there were really some people who believed in witchcraft as a religious faith. Even though the mythological origins and interpretative system for witchcraft was disjointed, illogical, and only symbolically meaningful, some people seem to have found a religious meaning and value within a certain accepted structure of witchcraft. Proving the reality of witchcraft is not our concern here, but we cannot ignore the deep-rooted religious necessity in the mind of the people. Some might have confessed involvement with witchcraft because they were coerced into confession by the inquisitors and religious authorities. On the other hand, as many people had practiced magic and heretical beliefs before, we assume that some people likely really practiced witchcraft. In this sense, medieval witchcraft provides a strong mirror image of the mental, social, religious world of our ancestors. However, witch-related phenomenon, not belief in witchcraft, is our primary concern here.

Witches versus Bulls

Medieval Christendom had slowly but steadily issued various edicts, bulls, and statements against paganism, sorcery, and witchcraft. From the early middle ages, a series of edicts had been issued. In the Council of Elvira in 306, for example, the church refused the holy viaticum to those *per maleficium*, including devil and idol worshippers. In the Council of Trullo in 692, those people were excommunicated.

The Canon *Episcopi* is the most famous and controversial text in the history of witchcraft. Probably originated around 906, it was included in Gratian's *Decretum*, the law of the Catholic Church. It described many evil and unorthodox things concerning "the wicked women,"⁶ and it was a model for later controversies and writings on witchcraft.

Witches and witchcraft were a thorny issue for the church. The church entertained the general perception of witchcraft that I mentioned above. The church assumed that witches spread diabolic and evil power. The theme of compacts and

⁶ "Have you believed or have you shared a superstition to which some wicked women claim to have given themselves, instruments of Satan, fooled by diabolical phantasms? During the night, with Diana, the pagan goddess, in the company of a crowd of other women, they ride the backs of animals, traversing great distances during the silence of the deep night, obeying Diana's orders as their mistress and putting themselves at her service during certain specified nights. If only these sorceresses could die in their impiety without dragging many others into their loss. Fooled into error, many people believe that these rides of Diana really exist. Thus they leave the true faith and fall into pagan error in believing that a god or goddess can exist besides the only God."

contracts with Satan increased the negative image of witches in the eyes of Christendom. Also, witches abjured and criticized Jesus. Furthermore, they denounced the offices of the church, including the sacraments, the *Opus Dei*, and the mass.

Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* in 1435 offers detailed descriptions of the witches as viewed by contemporary Christians. The activities and characteristics of witches described in this text include cannibalistic infanticide, renunciation of Christianity, the appearance of demons in human shape, and instruction in harmful magic.⁷

In dealing with witches, the medieval Church employed every means from torture and burning to educational instruction. The bull of Pope Innocent VIII promulgated in 1484, *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, authorized the power to use against witches. In addition to these edicts, the Church tried to provide various other means of responding to witchcraft: catechism, confessional guides, sermons, and devotional and visual aids. Such tools, means, and instruments of repression that the Church employed eventually followed a tightly controlled hierarchical system. They also reflected the views of a coherent body of canon law. For internal and external purification and reform, the Church used all means.

Women in Medieval Church

There are certain conditions in dealing with female witch issues. First, historical sources from victimized women are sparse and records of many cases are dependent on documents produced by the male elite. Second, witch-hunting and accusations were the activity of men, the clergy, and politicians. Third, the witch-hunting craze took place in so many different social and political contexts, that it is not easy to approach it simply from a gender-based perspective.

Nevertheless, I accept as a historical phenomenon that women were the primary victims in the witch-hunting craze. The beings that witches followed were exclusively female, like Diana, Herodias and Holda. Even the *Malleus Maleficarum* agrees to that point, "A greater multitude is found among the weaker sex of women than among men." Old hags were often called "cursed old women" (*vetulas maledictas*).

Alexander of Hales (1183–1245) and Thomas Aquinas mentioned magic and women. Even though mostly repeating the theory of Augustine, Aquinas argued that all magic was caused by the exercise of demonic power, and that women are more prone to witchcraft.⁸

From the 14th–15th centuries, women appear significantly as major victims. The majority of those accused for witchcraft were women, esp. in Germany, England. Thus Christina Larner asks "Was witch-hunting women-hunting?" The question Larner raises is justifiably related to the question, "Is it sex-related but sex-specific?"⁹

First, let us consider the situation of a medieval widow and the phenomena of *dementia*. In medieval society, it was dangerous for women to live alone. The loneliness of women sometimes appeared related with mental disturbances. A woman's *dementia* was liable to harm her husband, the family, and society. Furthermore, mental disturbances were believed to affect domestic animals, thus causing agricultural damage.

⁷ *Formicarius, Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns unter der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter*, trans and ed. By Hans Biedermann (Akadem. Druck-u. Verlagsanst, 1971).

⁸ *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.2

⁹ Larner, *The Witchcraft Reader*, 205–212.

Second, midwives, medical female specialists, were frequently accused of being witches. When miscarriage and stillbirths occurred, people accused the midwives of eating the flesh of un-baptized children and of using the remains to make poisons with the help of devils. In other words, midwives could easily provide bodies for the devils.

Third, there is the issue of sexual images in *incubis*. Since the trial of Dame Alice Kyteler in Ireland (1324), sexual relations with an incubus demon became a typical story.¹⁰ The case of Dame Alice shows instances of what became regarded as typical phenomena related to witchcraft: multiple murders, the summoning up of demons, and sexual intercourse. It did not as yet show the witches' Sabbath. As Innocent VIII mentioned in the bull *Summis desiderantes*, women were believed to impede fertility.

Interestingly, it seems that women were simply accused of the opposite of the roles that they traditionally kept. Marienne Hester calls this the "reversal of accepted female roles,"¹¹ and it oftentimes happened to restructure gender relations during a period of change. Women were the child-bearers, but they were accused of being "chattels created to bear children." Women's menstruation and post child-birth melancholy were often regarded as witch-related phenomena. The multiple roles of cook, nurse, midwife, and house-keeper were linked to accusations of the various roles of sorcerers. Herb collecting and the use of charms, which were usually part of a woman's domain, were considered suggestive of the predisposition to witchcraft. It will be interesting to see why women were accused of the roles that they usually followed in their routine life.

The *Malleus maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), written by Heinrich Kramer & Jacob Sprenger and submitted to the University of Cologne in 1486, contains a couple of interesting statements about women.¹² Its main purpose was to challenge all arguments against the existence of witchcraft and to instruct magistrates and religious leaders on how to identify, interrogate, and convict witches. The *Malleus* provided a judicial support to oppress and murder alleged witches. Since its first public appearance, it became the de-facto handbook for witch-hunting and inquisitions, and it went through many reprintings—13 times between 1486 and 1520¹³. We can easily see its popularity and the tremendous influence of this book in the witch trials.

Two points from Kramer's arguments draws our attention. First, he argued that witches really exist, as shown in the night ride with Diana and (canon *Episopi*); second, women are prone to being witches mainly because of their intellectual feebleness, moral weakness, and sexual passion. Women's weakness can be seen in *incubi* itself (copulation with devils). Talking about *crimen exceptum* (special crime), they claimed that inquisitors and clergy required even torture to eliminate them (I.13).

The *Malleus* clearly blames women in witchcraft, and is permeated with a hostile and negative view of women. The form and the contents of the *Malleus* can be seen as a self-conscious literary attack on the female gender in general. The Latin title of this book itself is female in gender! This book undoubtedly shows how, in the context of Christian history, women were understood as *Ianua diabolic* (the devil's gateway),

¹⁰ *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, eds. L.S. Davidson and J.O. Ward. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Binghamton, NY, 1993).

¹¹ Marienne Hester, *The Witchcraft Reader*, 276–862.

¹² *The Malleus Maleficarum*

¹³ 19 times reprinted between 1569 and 1669. *The Malleus* consists of 3 parts, (Part I has 18 questions; Part II has 2 questions, within it 24 chapters; Part III has 35 questions).

a view that has a long, controversial history since the patristic epithet for women in early Christianity.

A simple look at the chapter title reveals the logic of the *Malleus*. Question 6 of Part I discusses the following issue: “Concerning witches who copulate with Devils. Why is it that women are chiefly addicted to evil superstitions?” Question 11 of Part I: “That witches who are midwives in various ways kill the child conceived in the womb...” Chapter 5 of Part II raises the following question: “Witches commonly perform their spells through the sacraments of the church. And how they impair the powers of generation, and how they may cause other ills to happen to God’s creatures of all kinds...” Question 19 of Part III even justifies the use of torture.

Women were in every way considered morally and mentally inferior to men, so eventually witches were necessarily women! But they are not simply “the chattels created to bear children.”

“Anxiety in the Secured Garden” –Concluding Remarks

The witch-hunting craze of medieval times was only the prelude of the later full scale witch-hunting craze. We have various sources based upon learned tradition, popular tradition, and actual practice. Medieval witchcraft can be explained in many ways. It can reflect an innate and perennial religious pursuit of human nature, often directed to the ‘dark side’ like paganism, magic, and witchcraft. As we have examined, there can be many ways to interpret the predominant number of women victims. Nevertheless, our main interest lies in the fact that there were an outstanding number of women accused of witchcraft, as opposed to men, and the relationship between witches and the Christian perception. How can we interpret the phenomena of witchcraft and the interaction between female witches and medieval Christianity? The following points help to open further arguments.

From persecuted minority to persecuting mainstream: When Christianity was still a minority, the church seems to have had a certain capability of assimilation by which they could embrace and digest pagan culture and belief in some degree. As Peter Brown indicates, saints’ cults and festivals in early and late-antiquity Christianity showed this aspect. As the dominance and the power of the church grew, the room for assimilation lessened, and a spirit of condemnation and persecution grew. The changing of the labels for the church’s opponents, from pagans, to magicians, heretics, and witches, illuminates this probability. Once the church secured its garden, it could not endure any difference and deviation.

It is also related to the issue of Institutionalizing or de-institutionalizing process. Witches appear frequently at the peak of the church’s power, for example right after the 14th century. When the church thought it had attained a complete Christendom, at least in its own understanding, it was not willing to show any mercy to rebellious ‘wolves.’ The rules of inquisition and conviction were clear. And, ironically, “as popular hysteria about witchcraft grew, more people convinced themselves that they were witches.”¹⁴ But the official and institutionalized church power couldn’t eradicate other voices and religious pursuits completely. In another sense, Witches and witch-related phenomena can be seen as a ‘de-institutionalization process’ in medieval Christianity. The fact that the number of witches increased could have been a result of coerced confession, but this can also be seen as a social and theological product and another face of medieval Christianity.

We can also see the great anxiety experienced in a changing world, religiously, and socially. Even though the medieval church thought it ruled its spiritual territory

¹⁴ Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 288.

without any uncertainty, it failed to meet the perceptible changes that were taking place rapidly. It caused greater anxiety in the maleficent acts of witches and dissenters. The religious and symbolic order and power the Church had worked so hard to secure was cracking in its own back yard. As S. M. Lowe mentions, in this sense, it is noteworthy to look at three points: institutionalization, symbolic order, and perception of the people! In anxiety, alienated and neglected people pursued a certainty—religious, social, and psychological. At the same time, the church felt anxiety in the midst of its secured power. Both anxieties and instabilities clashed, and the weak and lowly people especially stayed outside the dominant religious ideology and became scapegoats. In this respect, I agree with the point that “The witch and the witch-hunter were children of one bewilderment, sharing one blind vengefulness, reflecting one mentality, and stemming from one inner necessity.”¹⁵ The same elements of human psychology, the magical world view, and the social tensions that produced an atmosphere of fear and tension leading to the rise of witchcraft also produced the craze against witchcraft!

As a theologian, where can I find my place in this argument? Honestly speaking, it is sad to recognize the role of the medieval theologians. Kieckhefer’s following phrase simply challenges my mind and heart.

“One must surely conclude that the drastic increase in trials for sorcery came about primarily because of anxieties felt throughout the society... The jurists and theologians who suggested this charge supplied a new dimension to the craze that was already under way, adding fuel to an already blazing fire. The masses and the intellectual elite combined their energies in a task of common concern and demonstrated that the fruits of such cooperation are by no means necessarily salutary.”¹⁶

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¹⁵ Lynn White, “The Spread Wolves,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, XXXVII(Nov. 13, 1954), 33.

¹⁶ R.Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 105.