



# Witch-Hunting in European and World History

## Professor Ronald Hutton

5 June 2024

### Definitions

There are four equally viable definitions of a witch circulating, two old and two modern. The two old examples are that a witch is somebody who uses magic to harm others, and that a witch is somebody who uses magic for any purpose, good or bad. Those who have employed the latter definition have often qualified it by referring to malevolent witches as 'bad' or 'black', and the benevolent as 'good' or 'white', but the distinction (and resulting confusion) is plain. Both go back to the middle ages, but it seems that the use of the term for any magician was a smear tactic deployed by writers who disapproved of magic to smear all who claimed to work it with the bad reputation of witches. The pejorative usage was always the more common and used by ordinary people, while the broader one was that of an educated elite.

The two modern definitions, which appeared in the nineteenth century, are that a witch is an independent and feisty woman, persecuted by men to uphold patriarchy, and that a witch is a practitioner of a pagan, nature-focused religion. These are now commonly used and as legitimate as the others. In this lecture, I am going to concentrate on the first, sinister, usage, and its consequences. My concern is with the fear generated by the belief that some humans can use uncanny power to harm their neighbours, and its consequences.

### The Problem Today

If you want to attend a witch trial at the present day, you only need to go to Cameroon, Ghana, Malawi, Ivory Coast or Saudi Arabia. All make harmful witchcraft a criminal offence. In nations that do not have laws against it, suspected witches are often murdered. The Tanzanian Ministry of the Interior estimated that 5000 people were burned to death by their neighbours because of this suspicion in 1994 to 1998 alone. Such murders are found all over sub-Saharan Africa, and in much of South Asia, Indonesia, Melanesia and Latin America.

Two arguments are used by those who support witch-hunting in these areas, to prevent interference with their activities. The first is that a belief in witchcraft is indigenous to their societies, and to question it is to perpetuate colonialist attitudes. The second is that it is medically proven that witchcraft can kill if people really believe in it. This is because those who think themselves fatally bewitched often cease to eat and sleep adequately and their body is bombarded with waves of adrenalin. It only then needs for a latent flaw to exist in some vital organ for the stress to activate that weakness and the person to die.

My own reply to these arguments is that outsiders of a state do not have the right to compel its governments to any actions but do have the right to articulate concerns about the treatment of people within it. A programme that educates humans out of a fear of witchcraft not only spares suspects from attack or prosecution but prevents individuals from dying if they believe themselves bewitched. That is why I was part of a group which drafted a resolution for the United Nations Human Rights Committee, to call for the ending of witch-hunting in all parts of the world. This was adopted by the committee in 2021.

### The European Example

In many respects, Europe shows a pattern of witch-hunting typical for the world, but in two respects it has been unique. One is that it is the only continent until recent times to link witchcraft to a fully formed anti-religion, venerating a cosmic power of superhuman evil. The second is that it is the only one in which an

official belief in witchcraft has been spontaneously transformed into an equally vehement official disbelief. To understand these developments, we need to look at the ancient sources of European belief.

## The Ancient Context

Ancient Europe and the Near East, like much of the world, were divided into clearly defined regional traditions of attitude to witchcraft. In the Fertile Crescent, from Palestine to the Persian Gulf, witchcraft was greatly feared, and a criminal offence. Its practitioners were believed to work in partnership with evil spirits, to which the Greeks gave the name of demons. Ancient Rome also feared witches, whom it stereotypically characterized as wicked old women, and unlike the other cultures named, engaged in large-scale witch-hunting. Pagan Rome may indeed have staged larger witch hunts than Christian Europe was to do. Early Germans believed that certain women went about at night feeding on the vital force of men, which they removed magically from their bodies for cannibal feasts. The death penalty was inflicted for this imagined crime.

## The Christian Impact

Christianity inherited the Near Eastern belief in demons, the Roman proclivity to prosecute witchcraft en masse, and the German one in gatherings of cannibal witches. All this, however, did not initially make it a witch-hunting religion. This was because of its unusual focus on an all-powerful, all-good and universally present God. It seemed initially hard to believe that such a deity would allow evil human beings to dispose of magical powers. Christians therefore focused on fighting demons, not their human allies, and outlawed belief in the German cannibal witch and discouraged witch persecution. Penalties remained for using magic to harm others, but this was regarded as a rare, and individual act, and the burden of proof was put on the accuser. Between the years 1100 and 1300, when we have good records, there are less than fifty trials of malevolent magic recorded in the whole of Europe.

## The 'Great Witch Hunt'

### Extent

Subsequently, however, there was a tremendous change. From 1420 a new idea appeared, that God had allowed Satan to enable bad humans to work destructive magic on good people, using the powers of his demons. The death penalty for witchcraft was reintroduced in state after state, and the accused were made responsible for proving their innocence. Executions according to this new belief started in 1428 and went on until 1782. Between forty and fifty thousand people died in total. This is not a large body count in the annals of early modern European atrocity: between twenty and forty thousand people were murdered in two days after a Catholic army stormed the German Protestant town of Magdeburg in 1631. It was however concentrated in space, in zone stretching from Britain in the west to Poland and Hungary in the east, and also in time, eighty per cent of the victims dying in one long lifetime, between 1560 and 1640.

### Origins

So why did early modern Europe, supposed much more informed and advanced than medieval Europe, do this to itself? Behind it seems to lie three great developments in the period 1300 to 1500. The first was a growth in the status of the Devil. He is a minor character in the Bible itself, but in the course of the Middle Ages his powers, the extent of his hellish kingdom, and the threat he posed, all became slowly more expanded. By 1420, as said, the belief had appeared of a new satanic crusade launched by him in partnership with witches, allowed by the Christian God to test human worthiness. The second development was a new obsession with hidden groups of enemies within Christian society. Medieval Christianity had long feared and persecuted external opponents, such as Muslims, Jews and heretics, but after 1300 it acquired a terror of outwardly normal Christians, who secretly worshipped the Devil and were conspiring to destroy the rest of humanity. The third development was a new interest in hidden thoughts and desires. Priests had long been expected to get parishioners to confess their sins, but a sin was defined as an action. Now they were urged to ask after people's dreams and fantasies. As a result, a new world of imagined misbehaviour and fear flooded into the confessionals.

It may be suggested that three other developments of the same period lay behind this new anxiety in European Christendom. The first was that it was contracting. For much of the Middle Ages it had been triumphantly expanding, converting the north of the continent, driving back Islam in Spain and Sicily and going beyond Europe to conquer Palestine, Lebanon and much of Syria. By 1300, however, the Asian

crusader states had been lost, and from the 1350s Islam was breaking back into Europe in the form of the Ottoman Turks. In 1453 they captured Constantinople, one of the two capitals of the Christian world, and by 1530 they had conquered the Balkans and Hungary and had attacked Vienna. During the next half a century they engulfed the whole north coast of Africa, so that they could strike anywhere in the south of Europe. They remained a serious menace for most of the seventeenth century. The second change was in the climate, which had been unusually benign for the central medieval period but turned much colder and wetter after 1300. Much agricultural land had to be abandoned, and life became generally less easy. The third blow was medical. Europe was free of major epidemics for about seven hundred years, but in 1346 the Black Death, bubonic plague, appeared from the east and killed almost half the population of Europe in three years. The bacillus then settled in, to create new epidemics that removed up to a quarter of the inhabitants of a region in each generation. Nobody knew what caused it, just as nobody understood the change in climate. All this indicated that God seemed to be very angry with Europeans, who became fearful and introspective in response, and witch-hunting may have been one feature of that reaction.

## Take Off

Nonetheless, the new stereotype of the devil-worshipping conspiracy of witches was slow to spread. For the whole of the fifteenth century, it was largely confined to the Alps and the Rhine valley, and claimed no more than a few thousand victims. In the first half of the sixteenth century, witch trials actually declined, because Western Christendom was distracted by the sudden and novel trauma of the Reformation crisis, in which the appearance of Protestantism tore the traditional Church apart. The reason why the great majority of trials were concentrated in the period 1560 to 1640 was that this was the time in which the initial attempts to heal the division proved to have failed. Instead, Protestant and Catholic now set out to destroy each other, in Europe's full-blown wars of religion. The result was a huge rise in the religious temperature, in which a belief in a satanic crusade to wreck Christianity seemed especially credible.

## Patterning

As a result, witch-hunting was always part of a wider reforming agenda, by zealots of either faith who set out to remove all perceived enemies to a godly and well-regulated society and purify their communities. They did not just attack witches, but Catholics (or Protestants), Jews, vagrants, drunkard, and fornicators, and often attempted to relieve the poor and prevent plague outbreaks as well. Witch-hunting was always worst along the fault-lines between the two rival forms of Christianity, where their adherents were most insecure. It was stopped by the authorities in those areas – Spain and most of Italy – where the Catholic Church felt most secure. It was especially bad in two kinds of state. One was the kind with small territories, where the rulers felt vulnerable to popular panics against witches and were forced to arrest all suspects. The other was where justice was decentralized, so that local people could conduct the trials themselves, and convict those whom they suspected. That was why the worst body counts were found in the many tiny states of Germany, in the self-governing cantons of Switzerland, or in the decentralized judicial systems of Norway and Scotland. Witch trials were most carefully controlled, and executions limited, in large states with centralized, professional systems of justice like England, France, Bavaria, Saxony and Prussia.

Almost everywhere, the push to hunt witches came from below, from ordinary people who were terrified of bewitchment by neighbours whom they had come to suspect and distrust. Across Europe, these neighbours were mostly women, because across much of the continent these were regarded from prehistory as being the more magically gifted sex. By contrast, in areas where men were traditionally regarded as the natural workers of magic, such as Iceland, the Baltic states, Normandy and parts of Austria, men were the majority of victims. This was despite the fact that in politics, society, religion and gender relations, they were identical with areas where women were mostly accused.

## Decline

So why did the trials peak so rapidly, and decline in most areas from 1640 onward? In one sense they could be regarded as a failed experiment, in what was after all the era of the Scientific Revolution. Bluntly, witch-hunting was tried out and found not to work: Places that staged hunts did not then enjoy better weather, healthier children and livestock, more reliable machinery and generally superior luck, to those that avoided it. On the contrary, they were generally left decimated, traumatized, and divided. Moreover, the religious thermometer sank again. It was plain by 1650 that neither Protestants nor Catholics were able to annihilate the latter, and that northern Europe would remain mostly Protestant and southern Europe mostly Catholic. As a result, tolerance of other kinds of Christian, Jews, and suspected witches, all rapidly

increased together.

Moreover, God seemed suddenly to be in a better mood. In 1683 the Turks were defeated while besieging Vienna, and within ten years had been pushed out of Poland and Hungary. By 1700 they were forced back into the Balkans and were clearly no longer a threat to Europe. In the mid-seventeenth century, also, the climate began to improve, and European agriculture could expand and begin to produce a surplus. At the same time bubonic plague began to recede from Europe, forced back by ever more effective quarantine regulations. Everybody could start to lighten up again.

The process by which witch-hunting was stopped was nevertheless protracted and took several stages. First doubts grew about the reliability of the evidence, and so convictions declined and stopped. Then, as the laws seemed redundant, they were repealed. These two developments took one to two centuries. Then vigilante attacks on suspects by a frustrated populace burgeoned, and usually a century to a century and a half was needed to control them. The final stage was to educate ordinary people into a disbelief in witchcraft, which took about a hundred more. This suggests that any worldwide effort to eliminate witch hunting in the present is going to take a very long time to succeed: especially as the existence of witchcraft cannot be objectively disproved any more than it can be proved. Nevertheless, it is my personal belief that the effort needs to be made, and that a fear and hatred of witches can be banished from the world even as smallpox has been, and as polio and malaria may be on the way to being. In this fashion one of the great traditional scourges of humanity could be removed forever.

© Professor Ronald Hutton, 2024

## References and Further Reading.

Hutton, Ronald. *The Witch*. 2017.

Gaskill, Malcolm. *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*. 2010.

Goodare, Julian. *The European Witch-Hunt*. 2016.

© Professor Ronald Hutton, 2024