

To what extent was the Protestant Reformation responsible for the witch-hunts in the years 1520-1650?

By Dan Horn

The Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) initiated a period of doctrinal insecurity within the early modern mind. In challenging the carefully cultivated Medieval Catholic worldview, Protestant Reformers engendered drastic social, political and theological change to the very fabric of European society. Of particular importance among the new ideas of the Reformers was their increased emphasis on the Christian Bible as being the absolute word of God, to be read in the vernacular languages. This led to a rejection of the Catholic clerical hierarchy, with Papal authority being criticised as lacking a textual basis. Each man, according to the Reformers, was free to study and interpret the Bible unhindered by Priests, Bishops and Popes. However, the Reformation was not entirely theologically motivated. Many amongst the political elite of Europe saw the adoption of the Protestant Religion as a way of bypassing the high Papal taxation, and seizing the vast clerical wealth within their kingdoms.

Religious fervour provoked a century of violent conflict, with the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) utterly devastating much of modern Germany, causing an estimated eight million casualties. The French Wars of Religion (1562-1598), brought about by the rise of Calvinism caused a traditionally pious Catholic society to utterly factionalise along Religious lines. Whilst fighting was inconsistent and regional, it resulted in the ruin of entire provinces. However, violence was not confined merely to warfare in this period. The historian Robin Briggs estimates that “some 40,000, to 50,000 people were executed as witches in Europe between roughly 1400 and 1750.”¹ The role of the Reformation in these persecutions is contentious; there is much debate about the influence of organised Religion in their cause, as opposed to existing folk beliefs concerning witches. The historian Keith Thomas argued that “Religious beliefs in terms of witch hunting were a necessary precondition.”² However multiple other factors present themselves. Geographical evidence points to the possibility that during the period, Europe suffered a “mini ice age,” in which reduced temperatures and high snowfalls, rendering the growing of crops increasingly difficult. A series of poor harvests in the 1590s led to widespread famine and starvation, presenting the opportunity for accusations of a supernatural and malevolent cause among a superstitious and scientifically ignorant peasantry. Economically, Europe was suffering acutely. The influx of Spanish silver from the New World catastrophically damaged the European economy, resulting in massive inflation. This vast quantity of wealth had little in the way of goods and services to compete for; currency was utterly devalued, causing an increase in food prices which those on the breadlines simply could not meet. Pestilence ravaged throughout Europe, particularly in the overpopulated European cities and towns, marked by their poverty and lack of sanitation. The transmission of disease was also aided by widespread malnutrition and the movement of large armies of infected soldiers across the countryside. The unpleasant synthesis of these causes required only what historians Scarre and Callow call the “catalyst” of Religion, creating an atmosphere of suspicion and hatred which allowed witchcraft trials to flourish.³

¹ Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*.

² Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

³ Geoffrey Scarre and John Callow, *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*.

Religious explanations of the witch-hunts are among the earliest attempts by modern scholars to comprehend the bizarre phenomenon of the Early Modern Period. Among the first was that of Historian Hugh Trevor Roper, who advocated a confessional explanation for the spread of witch persecutions. As well as this, he notably critiqued the assumption of Whig historians that history is a progressive in nature, arguing instead that all periods of history have “a Janus face,” and that of the Protestant Reformation is “a return not only to the unforgettable century of the apostles but also to the unedifying centuries of the Hebrew Kings.”⁴ In this, he argues that far from ushering in a new age of Religious textual understanding and enlightenment, the Reformation damaged the existent understanding of the Christian faith and returned it to a more petty and confused comprehension. This could go some way to explaining the pervasion of Religious violence in the period.

According to Hugh Trevor Roper, Protestant states executed their Catholic minorities, and vice versa. Witch-hunting was a facade; a means for secular and Religious authorities to execute members of the opposing confession in large numbers, thereby showing their “Godliness.” This policy was enacted during times of peace, when Religious wars were not raging, and were a means of relieving Religious tensions caused by a close proximity of differing confessions. This view is today considered too simplistic, however the importance of confession within the context of the witch hunts is worthy of some consideration.

The confessional explanation is particularly true of the Holy Roman Empire throughout the period. The multiplicity of small, weak states abiding by the newly established principle of “Cuius regio, eius religio” (by his Rule, by his Religion) led to many Religious borders and boundaries forming. In particular, northern states tended towards Lutheranism and southern states were overwhelmingly Catholic. The frequently shifting borders caused by Religious warfare and further decentralisation led to minority members of opposing Religions frequently finding themselves to be citizens of a new state. This often led to their violent persecution at the hands of the clerical authorities. The historian Robin Briggs notes that “the ten most violent persecutors of witches in Germany were all Catholic prince-bishops.”⁵ This shows the paranoid and hostile attitudes of the Catholic clergy towards those under their control, but does not show that those whom they were persecuting were exclusively, or even notably Protestants. It cannot be conclusively proven that differences in confession were the cause of the excessive witch persecutions within the Holy Roman Empire, as other important factors affected it. In particular, The Thirty Years War’s impact, as well as the extreme political decentralisation of the area makes it unsuitable for use as a typical example of a European state.

Robert Thurston uses the French town of Ban de La Roche in Alsace as his case study of a typical 16th-17th century town. It collectively converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism and experienced witchcraft trials in the years 1620-1630. It was surrounded by Catholic areas, and had a significant Catholic minority. Its historical

⁴ Sir Hugh Trevor-Roper, The European Witch Craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

⁵ Robin Briggs, Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft.

records are unusually rich for the period. Through analysis of the records, Thurston shows that “None of the surviving documents indicates that members of one Religion harassed adherents of the other under the cover of witchcraft charges.”⁶ This is a major blow to the confessional explanation; one of the best documented towns of the period yields no evidence in its favour. As well as this, there is a twenty year gap between the towns’ conversion to Protestantism and the first recorded witch-trials, implying that the two events were in no way linked. It could be critiqued that Ban de la Roche is not typical enough for the period, in that it experienced relative peace throughout its abjuration from Catholicism, sheltered from the Religious radicalism of other areas, but as it presents such excellent recorded evidence it speaks fairly authoritatively.

Scarre and Callow criticise the view of Hugh Trevor-Roper, arguing that his confessional interpretation of the witch trials is invalid, arguing that whilst “there are some grounds for associating witch prosecution with the concerns of state and church to establish their authority over their populace, there is no evidence that Roman Catholics normally prosecuted Protestants, or conversely.”⁷ Whilst there is ample evidence to suggest that Europe-wide, those in positions of power abused their positions in the interest of retaining control, it cannot be asserted that they used this influence as a tool of persecution. It should be noted that Trevor-Roper was writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the spectre of religious and cultural persecution hung over Europe, so his attempt to identify the witch hunts with a fear of the “other” and scapegoating is understandable, but mistaken regardless. The confessional view is thusly rejected.

The schismatic nature of the Reformation, and the degree of Religious zeal present during the attempted restructuring of Western Christianity made Religious warfare eventual and inevitable. The degree to which war in Europe caused the witch-hunts is a matter of debate. It can be noted that the period of The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was the period of most active witch hunts in the 1600-1650 period. However, whether this suggests causality is inconclusive; other factors may be at work. It could be argued that the nature of Religious warfare itself generated the superstition and fear necessary for the massive increase in recorded witch-hunts. Equally plausible is the hypothesis that the unpleasant side effects of the wars such as starvation, disease, and poverty caused the citizens of Europe to suspect the hand of the devil in their affairs, thus causing the high number of witch accusations.

Brian Levack notes that “If witch-hunting was more widespread and intense and areas that were religiously divided, then the converse was also true.”⁸ In addition, he argues that “Religiously homogenous or monolithic states generally experienced only occasional witch-hunts and relatively low numbers of executions.” This geographical trend is shown in the statistical evidence of the number of accused and executed individuals by area. States such as Spain and Italy, which remained Catholic and were relatively unaffected by the Protestant Reformation have the some of the lowest rates of witch accusation and execution (Spain =3687 accused, 101=executed. Italy =2193+

⁶ Robert Thurston, A History of the Witch Persecutions in Europe and North America.

⁷ Geoffrey Scarre and John Callow, Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe.

⁸ Brian P. Levack, The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe.

accused), despite their large populations.⁹ As to whether this was caused by the unity of Christendom found in these states and therefore lack of Religious conflict, or by the fact that the Catholic authorities were more interested in rooting out Jews and Muslims than witches, is open to question.

As Levack correctly observes, the opposite is also true. In the Religiously divided Holy Roman Empire, and French states, an extraordinarily high number of people were accused of witchcraft, with a 50% rate of execution (HRE=100,000+accused, 50,000+executed. France=10,000+accused, 5,000+ executed). These extraordinarily high rates of accusation and execution occur within states which were throughout the period marked by their heteronymous and divided religious confession, and their devastation by religious war.

Within the British Isles, the trend also appears evident. Despite having a far lower population, religiously divided and zealous Scotland has a higher rate of both witch accusation and witch execution than religiously cohesive and moderate England (Scotland=3069 accused, 1337+executed. England=2000 accused, 1000 executed). This conclusion is also subject to debate; was Religious radicalism responsible for an increase in Scottish witch executions, or was it instead due to a lack of centralisation, lower urbanisation, and differences in law between the two kingdoms? Of particular note is the more frequent use of torture in Scotland. The use of torture during the witch hunts is well known for generating a chain of accusations and confessions, so this could go some way to explaining the increased rate of accusations despite a lower population.

Levack argues against the proposal that Religious warfare was a direct cause of the witch-hunts, citing it as being “simply not true.” He argues that whilst the European witch-hunt did coincide with an age of Religious warfare, “the outbreak of hostilities in a particular area usually had a negative effect on the process of witch-hunting.” This could be said to be evidence in favour of the confessional interpretation; Witch hunting between different Religious groups ceased at the point when open war began, rendering a covert war of persecution no longer necessary.

However, it could be better argued, as Levack does, that “Warfare often impeded the operation of the regular judicial machinery that was used to prosecute witches.” This argument avoids the unwarranted and evidence-lacking assumption that Protestants and Catholics were constantly attempting to kill each other propagated by the confessional interpretation, and offers a far more common sense explanation for the lower numbers of witch persecutions during bouts of warfare; the ordinary systems of legislature necessary simply collapsed, making judicial process impossible.

Scarre and Callow address the apparent correlation between the Thirty Years War, and the one of the highest peaks of witch persecution throughout the period, arguing that “it has not proved possible to discern any significant causal relationships between disaster and witch prosecution.” Whilst it is true that the period is marked by war, other factors present themselves, such as outbreaks of bubonic plague and very poor harvests. It is therefore difficult to blame the increased witch-hunting solely on Religious warfare. As well as this, the twin factors of pestilence and famine were rife

⁹ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, Witchcraze: a new history of the witch hunts.

during another peak period of the witch persecutions, the 1590s. This is a period which is free from the Thirty Years War and yet still suffers from high persecutions. On the basis of this evidence, it would be better to conclude that malnutrition and disease were the causal factors, not Religious conflict.

William Monter argues in favour of a confessional explanation of the witch trials in the same vein as Hugh Trevor-Roper, however his conclusion regarding the connection between the factors is negative. He argues that “any correlation between these two phenomenon [European witch-trials and Religious warfare] is indirect,” firstly on the basis that “the outbreak of warfare, whether or not Religiously motivated temporarily ended witch-trials whenever and wherever it occurred.”¹⁰ This critique of the argument from war is particularly stinging, as it shows the sheer lack of necessity of peace time witch hunting. The outbreak of warfare clearly rendered witchcraft both impossible logistically, and unimportant socially. If a sociological interpretation of the need for a society or group to have an enemy or scapegoat is accepted, and this is applied to witches in the 16th and 17th century, it is clear that this phantom enemy would be replaced by a very real and threatening “other,” namely the members of the opposing confession with whom the community was at open war. As Levack notes “War, in other words, focused the hostilities of a community on people other than witches.”¹¹

War can therefore be rejected as a direct causal factor in witch persecutions. However, War may be said to be a “catalyst, not a cause,” worsening other factors that may be more directly responsible, e.g. starvation, disease, and fear of the “other,” in a post war context. Scarre and Callow note that “The [French] Wars of Religion also helped to establish the conditions in which persecution might take root: destruction, despair, and political uncertainty (not to mention higher incidence of plague and disease which often came in their wake).”¹² It may be critiqued that this is true of all wars, so specifically Religious warfare may not be cited as being of particular importance. However, the prevalence of Religiously inspired conflict, as opposed to secular war throughout the period when compared to previous and subsequent epochs and the higher incidence of witch-craft trials may be pointed to, as well as the particularly dogmatic and hateful nature of religiously as opposed to nationalistically inspired war.

The Protestant Reformation had its roots in the Christian humanism of the renaissance, where the revived interest in the study of classical texts led the Dutch scholar Erasmus to attempt a first retranslation of the original Greek texts, and noticing significant differences between his translation of the text, and the standard Roman Catholic Vulgate in common use at the time. Mistranslations, additions and deletions were obvious, and this led to the call for the ability to read holy writ in the living vernacular languages. A proliferation of new translations developed within all of the contemporary tongues of Europe. As well as this, the earlier invention of the modern printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1440 made the transmission of ideas far easier than it had been previously; allowing Protestant works such as Luthers “Ninety-Five Theses” and Calvins “Institutes of the Christian Religion” to spread far

¹⁰ William Monter, The Witchcraft Reader, Second Edition.

¹¹ Brian P. Levack, The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe.

¹² Geoffrey Scarre and John Callow, Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe.

beyond the geographical range possible until that point. The profound changes that the Late Middle Ages had brought about to medieval society had resulted in a far improved literacy rate among the laity, a trend which continued into the Early Modern Period. A profusion of literature surrounding the topic of witchcraft developed, often printed alongside lurid woodcut illustrations depicting the actions of witches, allowing both the literate and illiterate to understand the threat witches presented to respectable Christendom.

Protestant Theology placed renewed emphasis on the importance of Biblical scripture; the concept of Sola Scriptura (By scripture alone), led to a far more dogmatic and literal interpretation of the Old and New Testament. These works were believed to present and contain the absolute divine truth. For this reason, passages concerning witches were given far more emphasis than they had been under Catholic Theology.

Of great relevance within the context of the witch-trials was the passage Exodus 22:18. The meaning of this verse has been greatly adulterated by the process of translation, and is in the modern New International Version translated by Christians as “Do not allow a sorceress to live.”¹³ The original Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament work use the word “Kashaph” of which the precise meaning is unknown, but is usually translated as “sorcerer.” This prescribes that those who practice magic (both good and evil), and is genderless. The Greek Septuagint (completed by 132 BCE) translates this verse from the Hebrew using the Greek word “Pharmakeia,” meaning “one who administers medicine or drugs.” The Latin Vulgate, standard text of the Roman Catholic Church renders this passage as “maleficos non patieris vivere,” Maleficos meaning “Evil-doers.”

This is interesting, as the Suffix “os,” is gender neutral within the Latin language, implying that Evil-doers of both genders should not be tolerated. As it is clear to see, whilst it is a mistranslation of the original texts, the Catholic version does not call for the death of witches, but of evil doers of any kind. The importance of this is great, as Protestant versions of the text diverge from the Catholic greatly. Martin Luthers translation of the passage translates the greek “Pharmakeia” into the German “Zauberinnen,” meaning “witches.” Similarly the King James Version translates the passage into English as “Thou Shalt not Suffer a Witch to Live.”

Due to the changing meaning of the term “witch,” a transition towards a much more sex related term had begun. The existing demonology of the period held that the witch was far more typically female, however the meaning of the term witch was not a sex specific one; both males and females could be accused of and executed for witchcraft throughout Europe. The use of witch in both German and English Protestant translations therefore tied biblical precedent to what was generally considered a scripturally lacking folk concept; that of the witch.

The significance of this is that the Protestant texts both alter the meaning and emphasis of the traditional Roman Catholic interpretation. Reformers stressed the Biblical precedent for the execution of gender specific witches, within a language understood by the laity. The fear of witches and the threat they presented predates the Reformation, but an increased clerical and scriptural backing within Protestant states,

¹³ <http://www.biblestudytools.com/exodus/22-18-compare.html>

and its affect on the more theologically educated and literate laity may go some way to explaining the increased rates of witch persecution post-Reformation.

The Literature of the period also aided the spread of different ideas and conceptions regarding witchcraft. William Shakespeare's "Macbeth," for example, introduced to England, the more continental idea of a group or coven of witches, coming together and plotting. This idea was rare within the British Isles, until this point witches were viewed to be solitary individuals, however Macbeth introduced the idea of a conspiracy of witches. Whilst this cannot be directly tied to Protestantism, without the Protestant inspired increase in literacy, these ideas would have been incapable of taking root within a more educated urban peasantry. Also of particular note is John Milton's "Paradise Lost," which features the character of Satan, depicted in a far more human manner than previously possible. The devil, far from being the personification of evil, is a failed character, showing flaws and a "fallen" nature, tying him to the progenitor character of Adam and Eve in his rejection of God. This more worldly conception of Lucifer can be said to show the devil as a real world entity, a direct and real threat to all men and women via temptation and destruction, as well as being a representation of the evil present in all humanity. This increased worldliness in demonology is typical of Protestant works, in which the very real nature of demonic possession was stressed, and the powerlessness of humanity to resist the will of the devil was rhapsodised.

In conclusion, whilst the witch hunts can be said to be an incredibly multi-causal phenomenon, religion played a vital role in incubating the sectarian violence and hatred of the period. Whilst confessional interpretations fail in their attempted explanations, and arguments from war are easily critiqued, the changing nature of theology and demonology brought forth by the Reformation can go some way to explaining the rampant increase in persecutions in the period of 1560-1630.

