

THE WESTERN HERITAGE, SINCE 1300

Tenth Edition

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religion must eventually be reconciled. Natural theology based on a scientific understanding of the natural order would thus support theology derived from Scripture.

Later in the seventeenth century, with the work of Newton, the natural universe became a realm of law and regularity. Most natural philosophers were devout people who saw in the new picture of physical nature a new picture of God. The Creator of this rational, lawful nature must also be rational. To study nature was to come to a better understanding of that Creator. Science and religious faith were not only compatible, but also mutually supportive. As Newton wrote, "The main Business of Natural Philosophy is to argue from Phaenomena without feigning Hypothesis, and to deduce Causes from Effects, till we come to the very first Cause, which certainly is not mechanical."¹¹

The religious thought associated with such deducing of religious conclusions from nature became known as *physico-theology*. This reconciliation of faith and science allowed the new physics and astronomy to spread rapidly. At the very time when Europeans were finally tiring of the wars of religion, the new science provided the basis for a view of God that might lead away from irrational disputes and wars over religious doctrine. Faith in a rational God encouraged faith in the rationality of human beings and in their capacity to improve their lot once liberated from the traditions of the past. The scientific revolution provided the great model for the desirability of change and of criticism of inherited views.

Finally, the new science and the technological and economic innovations associated with its culture came again, especially among English thinkers, to be interpreted as part of a divine plan. By the late seventeenth century, natural philosophy and its practical achievements had become associated in the public mind with consumption and the market economy. Writers such as the Englishman John Ray in *The Wisdom of God Manifested in His Works of Creation* (1690) argued it was evident that God had placed human beings in the world to understand it and then, having understood it, to turn it to productive practical use through rationality. Scientific advance and economic enterprise came to be interpreted in the public mind as the fulfillment of God's plan: Human beings were meant to improve the world. This outlook provided a religious justification for the processes of economic improvement that would characterize much of eighteenth-century Western Europe.

▼ Continuing Superstition

Despite the great optimism among certain European thinkers associated with the new ideas in science and philosophy, traditional beliefs and fears long retained their hold on Western culture. During the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries, many Europeans remained preoccupied with sin, death, and the devil. Religious people, including many among the learned and many who were sympathetic to the emerging scientific ideas, continued to believe in the power of magic and the occult. Until the end of the seventeenth century, almost all Europeans in one way or another believed in the power of demons.

Witch Hunts and Panic

Nowhere is the dark side of early modern thought and culture more strikingly visible than in the witch hunts and panics that erupted in almost every Western land. Between 1400 and 1700, courts sentenced an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 people to death for harmful magic (*maleficium*) and diabolical witchcraft. In addition to inflicting harm on their neighbors, witches were said to attend mass meetings known as *sabbats*, to which they were believed to fly. They were also accused of indulging in sexual orgies with the devil, who appeared in animal form, most often as a he-goat. Still other charges against them were cannibalism—particularly the devouring of small Christian children—and a variety of ritual acts and practices, often sexual in nature, that denied or perverted Christian beliefs.

Why did witch panics occur in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries? The disruptions created by religious division and warfare were major factors. (The peak years of the religious wars were also those of the witch hunts.) Some argue that the Reformation spurred the panics by taking away the traditional defenses against the devil and demons, thus compelling societies to protect themselves preemptively by searching out and executing witches. Political consolidation by secular governments and the papacy played an even greater role, as both aggressively conformed their respective realms in an attempt to eliminate competition for the loyalty of their subjects.

Village Origins

The roots of belief in witches are found in both popular and elite culture. In village societies, feared and respected "cunning folk" helped people cope with natural disasters and disabilities by magical means. For local people, these were important services that kept village life moving forward in times of calamity. The possession of magical powers, for good or ill, made one an important person within village society. Those who were most in need of security and influence, particularly old, impoverished single or widowed women, often made claims to such authority. In village society witch beliefs may also have been a way to defy urban Christian society's attempts to impose its orthodox beliefs, laws, and institutions on the countryside. Under church persecution local fertility cults, whose semipagan

¹¹Quoted in Baumer, *Main Currents of Western Thought*, p. 323.

practices were intended to ensure good harvests, acquired the features of diabolical witchcraft.

Influence of the Clergy

Popular belief in magical power was the essential foundation of the witch hunts. Had ordinary people not believed that “gifted persons” could help or harm by magical means, and had they not been willing to accuse them, the hunts would never have occurred; however, the contribution of Christian theologians was equally great. When the church expanded into areas where its power and influence were small, it encountered semipagan cultures rich in folkloric beliefs and practices that predated Christianity. There, it clashed with the cunning men and women, who were respected spiritual authorities in their local communities, the folk equivalents of Christian priests. The Christian clergy also practiced high magic. They could transform bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (the sacrament of the Eucharist) and eternal penalties for sin into temporal ones (the sacrament of Penance or Confession). They also claimed the power to cast out demons who possessed the faithful.

In the late thirteenth century, the church declared its magic to be the only true magic. Since such powers were not innate to humans, the theologians reasoned, they must come either from God or from the devil. Those from God were properly exercised within and by the church. Any who practiced magic outside and against the church did so on behalf of the devil. From such reasoning grew allegations of “pacts” between nonpriestly magicians and Satan. Attacking accused witches became a way for the church to extend its spiritual hegemony.

In working its will, the church had an important ally in the princes of the age, who were also attempting to extend and consolidate their authority over villages and towns within their lands. As the church sought to supplant folk magic with church magic, the princes sought to supplant customary laws with Roman law. Here the stage was set for a one-sided conflict. Witch trials became one of the ways church and state realized their overlapping goals. To identify, try, and execute witches was a demonstration of absolute spiritual and political authority over a village or a town.

Who Were the Witches?

Roughly 80 percent of the victims of witch hunts were women, most single and aged over forty. This has suggested to some that misogyny fueled the witch hunts. Inspired by male hatred and sexual fear of strong women, and occurring at a time when women were breaking out from under male control, witch hunts were a conspiracy of males against females.

A perhaps better argument holds that women were targeted in higher numbers for more commonsensical

reasons. (See “Why More Women Than Men Are Witches.”) Three groups of women appear especially to have drawn the witch-hunters’ attention. The first was widows, who, living alone in the world after the deaths of their husbands, were often dependent on help from others, unhappy, and known to strike out. A second group was midwives, whose work made them unpopular when mothers and newborns died during childbirth. (See “Encountering the Past: Midwives,” page 440.) Surviving family members remembered those deaths. Finally, there were women healers and herbalists, who were targeted because their work gave them a moral and spiritual authority over people whom the church wished to reserve for its priests. These women found themselves on the front lines in disproportionate numbers when the church declared war on those who practiced magic without its special blessing. Social position, vocation, and influence, not gender per se, put old, single women in harm’s way. Nowhere do we find women being randomly rounded up for burning. The witch hunts targeted specific women.

End of the Witch Hunts

Several factors helped end the witch hunts. One was the emergence of a more scientific point of view. In the seventeenth century, mind and matter came to be viewed as two independent realities, making it harder to believe that thoughts in the mind or words on the lips could alter physical things. A witch’s curse was mere words. With advances in medicine, the rise of insurance companies, and the availability of lawyers, people gained greater physical security against the physical afflictions and natural calamities that drove the witch panics. Finally, the witch hunts began to get out of hand. Tortured witches, when asked whom they saw at witches’ sabbats, sometimes alleged having seen leading townspeople there, and even the judges themselves! At this point the trials ceased to serve the interests of those conducting them, becoming dysfunctional and threatening anarchy as well.

▼ Baroque Art

Art historians use the term *baroque* to denote the style associated with seventeenth-century painting, sculpture, and architecture. As with other terms used in art history, the word *baroque* covers a variety of related styles that developed during the century and moved in different directions in different countries. Baroque painters depicted their subjects in a thoroughly naturalistic, rather than an idealized, manner. This faithfulness to nature paralleled the interest in natural knowledge associated with the rise of the new science and the deeper understanding of human anatomy that was achieved during this period. These painters, the most famous of whom was Michelangelo Caravaggio (1573–1610), also were devoted to picturing