
The Witch-hunt Followed The Course Of The Protestant Reformation

For decades now, the issue of the witch-hunt in early modern Europe and the discourse surrounding it has been closely tied to the Protestant reformation, and it would seem to be a logical reasoning: a subject closely linked to religion must be by default be dependant one of the most influential periods of religious history. In fact, it is possible to recover statistical evidence which points to the reformation being the main driving factor in the formation , evolution and decline of witch trials; this will however result in a superficial and far too simplistic analysis of a period plagued not only with religious insecurity but also with economic, demographic and political changes. Instead it would be more accurate to analyse the period seeing the development and intensification of the witch-hunts as the result of already existing underlying factor being channelled by the reformation. This essay will argue the complexity of the period and the issues faced by the population which might had an influence on their views on sorcery, particularly focusing on cases in France and Switzerland.

It must first acknowledge that witch-hunts in early modern Europe did not develop as a consequence of the reformation: Witch trials and beliefs existed long before Luther or Calvin challenged the catholic church ; beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery existed in Europe since antiquity but it had evolved through the middle ages not only the folklore behind it but also the response states and their population had towards it. By the second half of the 16th century Witch trials where not managed by a church inquisition or local officials, they had taken a more centralised approach with state officials and judiciary systems taking the forefront of the work in line with recent developments of politics in Europe which tended to lean with more centralised governments and absolute monarchies.

A confessional view of the witchcraft would argue that the witch trials were just a way for states during the reformation to contain or eliminate religious minorities, in fact we can see that in states with higher religious diversity such as France, Switzerland and the holy Roman empire there is a higher percentage of accusation and executions due to witchcraft. The opposite also appears as true where regions like the Iberian and Italian Peninsulas where witch executions were incredibly rare compared to the regions of central Europe, Confessionals argue, thanks to the relatively minor presence of protestant groups in these areas; It must however, be noted that these regions were widely supervised by various catholic inquisitions which focused instead on rooting out Muslims and Jewish groups. This is disputed by modern historians such as Scarre and Callow, criticising Confessional views, arguing that “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.” Besides, to see the reformation as a process completely rooted in religion would appear as one-dimensional since many of the rulers of central Europe saw the reformation as a way to cement their regional power and gain access to vast amounts of wealth and land by attacking the already decaying influence of the Catholic church. Similarly, it would be useful in assessing the importance of the reformation in events of witch-hunting in comparison to existing popular folklore.

Another piece that points towards witch-hunts following the reformation is the dramatic increase

of recorded witch trials in the period of 1618-1638 (the period plagued by the 30 years war) which shows the highest records of witch hunting in the period 1600-1650. This is often interpreted as the result of religious tension created by the schematic nature of the Reformation which made the outbreak of the 30 years war, and the violence which followed it, inevitable. This is often posted as evidence by proponents of the confessional view such as Hugh Trevor Roper, which tried to argue that the witch trials were just a way for states to contain or eliminate religious minorities. This however come into contrast with statistics from the period which point to a decline in the number of witch trials in areas directly affected by the 30 Years War , this could be a result of the nature of the war itself which made the need for “covert” hostility through witch accusations unnecessary with now open aggression. This however could be more easily explained by the lack of the standard judiciary apparatus which would have been out of reach for areas involved in the conflict, making impossible for trials to take place. Furthermore, the population residing in war-time areas would have more immediate and physical concerns such as the need to protect their land and procure basic living resources which would have made a witch-hunt counterproductive and unnecessary. William Monter, while holding a rather confessional view of the events claims that “any correlation between these two phenomena [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.” Warfare rendered persecutions impossible to pursuit and unimportant on a social level, as different aspects of war such as plague and economic recession appeared as more immediate concerns for the population.

The witch-hunts were not only being affected by the political feuds of opposing states and/or their religious views, instead Europe at the time was experiencing religious and political instability but also climate as well as weather insecurity which affected the social aspects of life and with that, repercussions regarding witch-hunting. Europe during the early modern period had been suffering from a temporary decayed climate: dubbed “The Little Ice Age” by contemporary historians, It was an event that deeply affected the social and economic aspects of life. Witchcraft and the attitudes towards it were also affected: suddenly the volatility of agriculture due to the weather was so traumatic that supernatural explanations were soon found for the misfortunes of farmers and those depending on them. As a chronicler from the Swiss confederation:

“[Anno 1626 the 26th of May] All the vineyards were totally destroyed by frost [...], the same which precious grain which had already flourished [...], pleading began amongst the peasants who questioned why the authorities continued to tolerate the witches and sorcerers destruction of the crops. Thus, the prince-bishop punished these crimes, and the persecution began in this year...!”

With a life reliant on farming, not only for self-maintenance but also for income, a crop’s failure could easily result in the death of those dependant on it, especially when talking about early modern Europe where war and plagues were not uncommon. The deterioration of the climate which lead to frequent famines and starvation of an already strained population due to plague and conflict, meant that a demoralised peasantry would hunt for a rapid solution with the authorities defaulting to prosecute the culprit. The already existing tensions in a community due to these external factors created a hostile ground within communities which fed already existing religious superstition and popular folklore where acts of malicious sorcery had been accounted for a long time, but it was only in the last 3 centuries where the idea of a “demonic conspiracy” developed . In addition, while the factor of temporary climate change might have not been taken

as seriously for most of the argument, it must be noted that while a primary condition, it would have not had the same effect on witch hunting if not exacerbated by an already stressed population due to the constant pressure from external factors. The reformation led to a state of religious uncertainty, mistrust and paranoia within communities, especially the ones embroiled in conflict such as the 30 Years War and the French Wars of Religion.

Furthermore, we can see this pattern of superstition and paranoia when it comes to other disastrous events: The plague, aided by widespread malnutrition, devastated early modern Europe on and off throughout the entire period, its effects did not limit to the human casualties but also to the relations between residents which combined to previously mentioned factors created a tense environment within communities and developed a culture of “the other”. Interestingly enough, Plague spreader (or Engraisseurs) conspiracies are some of the most common pre-reformation witch conspiracies, especially in the region of Geneva and Savoy. To add to the importance of “plague spreaders” in witchcraft, it must be noted their significantly higher execution rate compared to other witches or sorcerers: In Geneva, overall only 20% of witch suspects were convicted and executed while over 40% of Engraisseurs were killed and as William Monter notes: “[these killings] often after very hastily trials and sometimes even without confessions”. The connection between these witchcraft trials related to natural disasters once again points towards a more complex explanation to the witch phenomenon rather than relying solely on the reformation as the main driving force.

Early modern Europe was going through a period of transition and this included the topic of religion, and without a doubt the Protestant Reformation had an influence while analysing the context behind the witch trials, it brought new philosophies and more layers to international tensions which had their effect on the popular attitudes towards witchcraft and brought conflict in the continent. However, it is necessary to understand that the protestant reformation did not kickstart the witch hunts, as argued earlier, in regions of Switzerland and Savoy witch trials took place long before Lutheran or Calvinist influences spread to these areas. What changed however, was how witches were defined and persecuted: by the early modern period Witches were not just heretics labelled as such by catholic inquisitors in the south of France but instead were social phenomena, encompassing a variety of aspects of rural European life: from superstition or simple neighbour feuds to early modern dependency on agriculture. The Reformation acted as a channelling factor which intensified the effect of already existing environmental, social and economic factors resulting in the culture around witchcraft: Religious insecurity and open religious warfare fed off already existing superstitious beliefs in witchcraft and affected an already brittle population due to Famine and Plague. Confessional interpretations are far too easy to deconstruct and fail to fully explain the complexity of the period: The little ice age caused a more unstable agriculture and famine as a result combined with a broken European economy caused by the constant influx of Spanish silver from the new world and the constant factor of Plague outbreaks cultivated an environment of hostility in distrust within communities due to already existing folk beliefs; the reformation enhanced these factors.

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