Was there an association between the Protestant and Catholic Reformations and the revival of intense witch-hunting in the late sixteenth century? While the wars of religion of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tended to suppress witch-hunting, the tensions that gave rise to the persecution of religious dissidents and the religious wars were similar if not identical to those that fuelled the witch-hunts. There was, however, no direct causal connection between confessional conflict and the burning of witches. This chapter will therefore discuss the role of religious reform, zeal, and conflict, polemical sermonizing, demonizing rhetoric, and changing views of women in the intensification of witch-hunting. It will highlight the relationship between the prosecution of witches and that of other heretics, and discuss the relevance of both spiritualism and Biblicism to the rise and fall of prosecutions.

27.1 The Scholarly Debate

Ever since social historians exposed the inadequacy of Hugh Trevor-Roper’s 1967 argument that the Protestant and Catholic Reformations were directly responsible for the intense witch-hunting that began in the 1560s, few scholars have revisited the subject. Historical attention has turned instead to identifying local social pressures to prosecute witchcraft. Nevertheless, since the demonological construct that turned

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1 H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, 1969); see also Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional*
practitioners of maleficient magic into members of a diabolical sect was essentially religious in nature, several scholars have noted ways in which the Reformation shaped this template.\textsuperscript{2} Other scholars have challenged any such causal connection. Robert Thurston, for example, argues that since trials for witchcraft pre-dated the Reformation, religious reform had little to do with early modern witch panics.\textsuperscript{3} This argument is flawed in two respects. First, witchcraft prosecutions did increase during the first four decades of the Reformation, especially in the Holy Roman Empire, where the number of prosecutions had entered a period of decline before the turn of the sixteenth century. Between 1520 and 1560 most secular and ecclesiastical authorities were more concerned with real heretical sects than with witches, but a significant number of witch trials did take place across Europe during these decades. Second and more important, witchcraft trials intensified greatly after 1560, precisely at the time when confessional divisions throughout Europe hardened. During these years many new witch beliefs, including that of a more terrifying devil, and a more fully elaborated concept of the witches’ sabbath, changed the nature of the fifteenth-century stereotype. At the same time scientific discourse made the definition of the nature, power, and limitations of demons an issue of prime importance.\textsuperscript{4} Religious preoccupations, persecution, and conflict must be considered, therefore, as immediate and important triggers in the resurgence of witch-hunting, especially major panics, after 1562.

Only a few surveys of the Reformation era discuss the relationship between Reformation theology, polemics, and witch-hunting. Diarmaid MacCulloch argues that the Reformers’ preoccupation with fighting the Antichrist in the Last Days inflamed concerns about diabolical witchcraft.\textsuperscript{5} Peter G. Wallace suggests that since ‘all religious parties dichotomized confessional struggles’ as part of the apocalyptic battle between God and the devil, it was natural that theologians and prosecutors ‘believed that the


magic-laced religiosity of the people grew out of explicit or implicit negotiations with the devil. Other scholars see the witch-hunts as products of the efforts of Reformers to cleanse communities of godlessness and the pollution of false worship that made them liable to God’s wrath. This fear of God fed the demonizing polemic of the Reformation era, and explains why so many reform-minded individuals risked life and limb to publish forbidden books or preach illicit sermons or destroy religious images, and why Catholics were willing to kill so many for the sake of their faith. Much work remains, however, to explicate the relationship between religious reform and the trial of witches.

The elaboration of the diabolical witch stereotype in the century before the Reformation reveals something of this complex relationship. Witchcraft prosecutions began in the early fifteenth century—another important period for ecclesiastical reform—after inquisitors fused the image they had developed of mostly male Waldensians with that of devil-worshipping Luciferians and practitioners of magic. Several decades of prosecution of groups of witches who were now believed to be members of a large diabolical sect followed, although considerable scepticism towards the sabbath conspiracy remained. For example, in 1486 the German Dominican inquisitor Heinrich Kramer (Institoris) published his witch-hunter’s manual *Malleus maleficarum* in a spirit of frustration with his ecclesiastical and secular superiors who, disgusted with Kramer’s extreme interrogation techniques, had just ordered an end to the witch trials he had been conducting in Innsbruck. When further efforts to inspire witch-hunting likewise failed, Kramer returned to prosecuting male religious heretics in Bohemia and defending Catholic sacramental miracles against the anti-sacramental teachings of ‘Waldensians’. For Kramer, religious dissidence and witchcraft were related as distinct wings of the devil’s assault on the Catholic faith, the former dominated by men and the latter by women. He therefore helped pull apart the fusion of Waldensian heresy and maleficient magic that had preoccupied courts and inquisitions earlier in the century.

This ‘gendered’ depiction of heresy also helped set the stage for the distinctive pattern of heresy prosecution that followed in the wake of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation.

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27.2 The Reformation and Religious Conflict

Martin Luther and the other major Reformers had not intended to alter beliefs about witchcraft; instead, their concern was to improve the relationship between humans and God, revive religious fervour, and reintroduce biblical norms for behaviour. Challenging the medieval church’s strict control over biblical interpretation, Luther wanted everyone to read the Bible, his sole religious authority, but was shocked at the variety in interpretation that resulted. Anabaptists, for example, who first appeared in Zurich in January 1525, made Jesus’ teaching their core, thereby advocating the baptism of believers instead of infant baptism and refusing to swear oaths or bear arms. They also affirmed free will in salvation, while Luther and Calvin, appealing to St Paul, proclaimed the bondage of the will as a means of emphasizing the sovereignty of God. All Protestants rejected five of the seven Catholic sacraments—confirmation, last rites, holy orders, marriage, and confession—leaving only baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist) as the sacramental signs of divine grace or favour. They also rejected the Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy and the special status of the priesthood, promoting a simpler model of ecclesiastical organization, and declaring the priesthood of all believers. Protestants won the support of many princes and magistrates hoping to profit from the sale of church property.

Luther’s message appealed greatly to laypeople; his slogans of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ and the ‘freedom of the Christian’ were widely used by commoners during the German Peasants’ War of 1524–6. While the rebels principally sought social and economic amelioration, Reformation propaganda depicting the papacy as the Antichrist and the devout peasant as the carrier of the gospel offered commoners biblical justification to oppose their masters. Some preachers, such as Thomas Müntzer, encouraged the peasants to destroy the godless lords and clergy on the eve of Christ’s return. In reaction, a shocked Luther advised the princes to hunt down the rebels like dogs, advice that lost him popular support.

Luther was angered also by his fellow Reformers’ take on the Eucharist. In the Catholic Mass priests transformed the communion wine and wafer into the real body of Christ in a miraculous process called transubstantiation. Reformed Protestants such as Ulrich Zwingli and Calvin interpreted Jesus’ phrase ‘this is my body’ metaphorically. For his part, Luther took Jesus’ words literally, affirming the Real Presence of Christ along with the sacramental bread and wine (consubstantiation), but as a miracle based solely on Christ’s promise to his disciples during the Last Supper. Despite their intense disagreement over the nature of the Eucharistic elements, all Reformers rejected the priest’s ability to ‘conjure’ Christ’s body. They also affirmed the right of laypeople to partake of the wine during the Eucharist, something that had been denied them by the medieval church. By the fifteenth century, many laypeople had become fed up with what they saw as the depreciation of their spiritual maturity, evident by their mass
participation in the Bohemian religious revolt sparked by the burning of the popular preacher of reform Jan Hus in 1415. By 1436 most Bohemians had been granted the right to the chalice. Luther’s opponents accused him of following Hus on his critique of the priesthood and advocacy of ultraquist communion (in both kinds) and threatened him with the same end. Luther stood firm against both Catholic transubstantiation and the Reformed symbolic interpretation, making a Protestant political and military union against the Catholic Habsburg Emperor Charles V impossible.

The emperor was an implacable foe of Protestant heresy, especially its Calvinist and Anabaptist variants. Regardless, Calvin’s followers established Reformed communities in France, Germany, England, Scotland, the Low Countries, Hungary, and Switzerland. Calvin’s repudiation of Catholic idolatry and sacramental ‘magic’ was unequivocal, leading to intense purification efforts and iconoclasm, while the Habsburgs feared the divine wrath that such apostasy would bring. In 1529 Charles V therefore made rebaptism a capital offence and in 1532 oversaw the reform of imperial law, the 
Constitutio Criminalis Carolina, which made heresy a secular offence. While harsh for Anabaptism, this legislation treated witchcraft mildly by reserving capital punishment for cases of undoubted harmful magic. By granting secular courts the jurisdiction over both heresy and witchcraft, the Carolina excluded inquisitions from Germany, in stark contrast to Habsburg Spain and the Low Countries. Without any effective central court, heresy and witch persecution could now easily run out of control in the empire.

For Luther, the cosmic war between Christ and the devil was escalating with the approach of the Last Days. In such an atmosphere, religious compromise was demonized and confessional lines politicized. In 1555 the Peace of Augsburg divided the Holy Roman Empire between Lutheran and Catholic territories, but excluded Calvinists and other sects. What followed were religious civil wars across northern Europe, a partially successful counteroffensive by the new Jesuit order, and the creation of a new Roman Inquisition in 1542. Everywhere political conflict was sharpened by religious hatred, division, persecution of dissidents, and fear of divine wrath and diabolical plots.

### 27.3 The Reformation and Witchcraft: General Intersections

The Reformations inaugurated a severe crisis in religious belief that, combined with social and economic crises, created an environment favourable to scapegoating. While the Protestants’ emphasis on divine providence should have led to scepticism about the diabolical elements of the witches’ sabbath, it also escalated concern over false religion, idolatry, ‘superstition’, and apostasy. All clergy sought to reform popular religiosity by depriving ordinary folk of the preternatural weapons they had traditionally used against magical and demonic assault in favour of approved religious practices. Reformers also raised religious expectations for laypeople, since they were to be as godly as the
clergy, whatever their vocation. These expectations took, in Brian Levack’s words, a ‘heavy psychological toll’ on parishioners, relief for which was sought by projecting guilt onto the community’s ‘outsiders’ and by recourse to judicial processes.¹⁰ Witch-hunting was thus neither Protestant nor Catholic, but arose where rulers were motivated by an intense reform agenda combined with anxiety over demonic agency and divine displeasure.

27.4 Biblicism

Since all Reformers emphasized obedience to the scriptures, the gospel record of Jesus’ miracles, especially the exorcism of demons, encouraged preachers to emphasize the reality of demonic beings and their nefarious interaction with humans. Biblical injunctions such as Exodus 22:18, ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’, also seemed to sanction witch-hunting, although sceptics of the witch stereotype, such as the Dutch physician Johann Weyer (Wier), chief surgeon to the Duke of Cleves and author of the 1563 De praestigiis daemonum (The Trickery of Demons), pointed out that the Hebrew term for ‘witch’ here should really have been translated as ‘poisoner’.¹¹ Such efforts fell largely on deaf ears. Similarly, those wishing to deny that witches could do anything preternatural had to contend with the account in 1 Samuel 28:3–25 of King Saul’s visit to the witch of Endor, during which she obligingly raised the deceased prophet Samuel. Most interpreters, not wishing to grant witches such preternatural authority, argued that a demon in disguise had appeared to Saul. If so, the demon’s prediction of Saul’s demise was also a knotty problem.

It all came down to which biblical passages to interpret literally; Luther’s general position was that whatever was not explicitly forbidden in scripture was permissible, while Reformed and Anabaptist leaders argued that whatever was not explicitly approved in scripture was forbidden, including religious images and organs.¹² Reformed preachers therefore castigated a wide array of popular ritual and magical practices as non-Christian or proto-Catholic. Faith, prayer, and the Bible remained Luther’s weapons against demonic temptation, since the proper protection of the soul was more important than warding off magical assaults on the body. In 1535 Luther interpreted Paul’s question in Galatians 3:1, ‘who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth’, affirming,

we, too, must labor with the Word of God against the fanatical opinions of the Anabaptists and the Sacramentarians . . . For we have recalled many whom they had

bewitched, and we have set them free from their bewitchment, from which they
could never have been untangled by their own powers if they had not been
admonished by us and recalled through the Word of God . . . So great is the efficacy
of this satanic illusion in those who have been deluded this way that they would
boast and swear that they have the most certain truth.

For Luther, spiritual bewitchment was a diabolical act in which a ‘false opinion’
opposed to Christ overwhelmed the reason and senses. Those only mildly afflicted
could be redeemed, but harsh judicial action was required for recalcitrant Anabaptists.
Even though the spiritually possessed were mad, Luther still held them responsible for
their evil acts.

Luther distinguished between the ravings of misguided zealots and the malice of
diabolical witches, but many others did not. Over the decades parishioners listened to
sermons expounding the present fulfillment of the apocalypse. For example, in his 1596
published collection of fifty sermons on the book of Revelation, the English Puritan
George Gifford commented that he had preached these sermons twice through for
his congregation. Regarded as a moderate on the question of witchcraft prosecution,
Gifford’s Revelation sermons depicted the pope as the Antichrist, with his allies the
Anabaptists, Libertines, Familiants, and other such ‘filthy monsters’. Since the
papacy could no longer legally interfere in the religious life of the English common-
wealth, these secret agents of Satan were spreading immorality and atheism from
within. Seeking to divert his parishioners’ eyes away from vain fears of witchcraft,
Gifford affirmed divine providence and denied the devil’s ability to create storms
or spread disease. Do not be so foolish to imagine, he fumed, that the mighty devil,
transformed into a small familiar, ‘lyeth at the witches house’ to be fed by the
unfortunate old hag. More dangerous for Gifford were Catholics and religious dissent-
ers, who were members of an apocalyptical conspiracy of frightening proportions.

While increasing anxiety over diabolical agents, such providentialists eventually
undermined the intellectual basis underpinning the stereotype of diabolical witchcraft.
Those governments that renounced enforced confessional conformity, such as the
officially Reformed Dutch Republic, conducted few if any witch-hunts. As Alexandra
Walsham explains, to ‘live alongside dissenters without an angry God striking one dead
for tolerating falsehood was to see the transparent and comforting polarities of truth

13 Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians, in Jaroslav Pelikan, gen. ed., Luther’s Works, American edn,
vol. 26 (St Louis, MO, 1955–86), 194–7. See also H. C. Erik Midelfort, A History of Madness in Sixteenth-
Century Germany (Stanford, CA, 1999), 92–7; and Heiko A. Oberman, Luther: Man between God and the
Devil (New Haven, CT, 1989).
14 George Gifford, Sermons vpon the Whole Booke of the Revelation (London, 1596). See also Andrew
Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and
Death in Reformation Europe (Cambridge, 2000); Robin Barnes, Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in
the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation (Stanford, CA, 1988); and Clark, Thinking with Demons, 321–74.
15 George Gifford, A Discourse of the Subtill Practises of Deviles by Vvitches and Sorcerers (London, 1587), fol. G3r–v. Gifford’s obsession with the devil is seen in his innocuously entitled A Godly and
comfortable treatise . . . (London, 1585).
and falsehood, good and evil, that underpinned persecution dissolve and evaporate.\textsuperscript{16}

Increasing confessionalization, however, delayed the full development of this attitude.

As confessional lines hardened around mid-century, the need for church leaders to prove the verity of their faith and enforce parishioners’ proper moral conduct increased; Lutherans conducted clerical visitations to monitor their parishioners’ attitudes and behaviour; Calvinist consistories prosecuted members of their congregations for moral offences; and Catholic inquisitors investigated a growing list of spiritual crimes, including blasphemy, love magic, and divination. The presumption was that full civic obedience required submission to the one true faith; tolerating alternate confessions was risky business. Moral policing became the norm, not just of blasphemy and magical offences, but also all forms of previously tolerated sexual misconduct. Associating non-approved beliefs with the devil was one technique to suppress dissidence.

\section*{27.5 Spiritualism}

Religious persecution tends to drive unapproved beliefs underground; Jesus’ secret disciple Nicodemus (John 19:39) provided the justification for those wishing to hide unorthodox beliefs from public view in the Renaissance. Deciding against martyrdom or exile, many persecuted dissidents adopted spiritualism, thereby deprecating doctrinal confessions and rites in favour of a religion of the heart; pretending public orthodoxy for them was no sin. Prominent spiritualists such as the German Sebastian Franck and Caspar von Schwenckfeld, and the Dutch David Joris, Henrick Niclaes (founder of the Family of Love), Matthias Wier—brother to Johann Weyer—and the playwright and secretary Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert, saw Jesus’ prescription to love God and one’s neighbour as the core of true religion. Their spirit/flesh dualism depreciated physical aspects of religion, leading Calvin to label them libertines, that is, those wishing to live without laws altogether.\textsuperscript{17} Some joined the Neoplatonic quest for inherent unity in all religions, seeking true, spiritual meaning in the occult sciences. Among these were Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, more commonly known

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as Paracelsus, the medical reformer and alchemist whose religious reform ideas were as radical as his medical ones.\textsuperscript{18}

In the 1570s Coornhert helped persuade Prince William of Orange to make religious toleration a principle for the Dutch Republic, which established a national Reformed church without requiring membership for all citizens. While opposing the more narcissistic claims of his predecessors, Niclaes and Joris, Coornhert supported their condemnation of theological dogmatism, intolerance, and sectarianism. Like them, he identified persecution and confessional strife as the devil’s true work.\textsuperscript{19} Several key players in Holland’s renunciation of witch-hunting were influenced by such arguments, as were anti-witch-hunting authors Weyer and the Englishman Reginald Scot.\textsuperscript{20} Not bound to a literal reading, spiritualists’ biblical interpretation could be quite creative; Joris argued that scriptural references to the devil were merely figurative representations of the inner evil desires of an individual’s fallen nature, a view that quickly became infamous.\textsuperscript{21}

For orthodox polemicists, the spiritualists’ depreciation of a personal devil was diabolical and proto-atheistic. Many jurists made belief in the devil’s powers ‘a criterion of sound religion, since doubt on this point might reveal scepticism, unwillingness to accept the authority of scripture, or “atheism”.’\textsuperscript{22} Hence, efforts to dispute spiritualism’s tolerance and depreciation of diabolical interference led, in the short term, to increased fear of satanic plots. Ultimately, however, spiritualism’s ethos eventually undercut belief in diabolical conspiracies.

\section*{27.6 Religious Propaganda and the Exorcism of Demons}

Many Catholic clergy sought to neutralize both the Protestant challenge and their own parishioners’ doubts about orthodox dogma by proving their control over the supernatural through staged exorcisms, something Calvinists avoided as a remnant of Catholic superstition. Luther took the middle ground, exorcizing infants as part of

\textsuperscript{18} Charles Webster, \textit{Paracelsus: Medicine, Magic and Mission at the End of Time} (New Haven, CT, 2008).
\textsuperscript{19} Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert, \textit{Wercken} (Amsterdam, 1630/1), i, 89r.
the baptismal rite, although by mid-century some Lutheran ministers were also doing away with this. Fearing association with Anabaptists, orthodox Lutherans assured parents that their children and foetuses were not possessed; as the pastor Adam Crato warned, removing paedo-exorcism would imply that ‘Christian children prior to holy baptism are not heathens, nor under the authority of Satan, nor physically nor spiritually possessed’, as demons sought ‘to establish their dwelling in the children’.23

This dispute was merely part of the growing Lutheran obsession with the diabolical, evidenced best in the series of ‘devil books’ (Teufelbücher) linking particular vices to their corresponding demons.24 In a major compendium of these published in 1569, Sigmund Feyerabend attacked those who propagated the proverb: ‘Hell is not as hot as the priests make it and the devil is not as black as the artists paint him’, or who taught that sermons about demons were ‘vain falsehood . . . to frighten the people and bring the priests money’. He was especially concerned about suggestions that the devil existed merely as the evil thoughts of humans.25 Just as Heinrich Kramer had compelled witches to confess to impeding sacramental marriage,26 Feyerabend explained the failure of Luther’s gospel to transform human relations by blaming Satan’s machinations. These arguments about exorcism clearly raised interest in the subject, sparking a rise in demonic possession cases in Lutheran Germany, some of them including ‘revival sermons and angelic visions’.27 Some possessions led to accusations of bewitchment.

Propagandistic exorcisms were particularly important in France, where zealous Catholic polemicists sought to prove the power of their sacraments against Protestant scepticism. The famous staged exorcisms of the teenager Nicole Obry (Aubrey) in 1565–6 in Laon enthralled thousands. Consecrated hosts were the principal weapon in the exorcists’ arsenal, while Beelzebub, speaking through Obry, agreeably identified the Protestants as his servants, encouraging them to desecrate hosts.28 Nervous Huguenots called the possession a hoax, yet when, on 8 February 1566, Beelzebub finally abandoned Nicole’s body in a cloud of smoke and thunder, many Protestants converted. The Crown immediately suppressed further public exorcisms, but once the Edict of Nantes ended the religious warfare in 1598, the propagandistic exorcisms returned, culminating in the infamous possession of several Ursuline convents in the seventeenth century. Exorcists used these opportunities to inculcate greater zeal among Catholics.


25 Sigmund Feyerabend, Theatrvm Diabolorum (Frankfurt, 1569), Ir.

26 Walter E. Stephens, Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and Belief (Chicago, 2002).


In three of these group possessions, a controversial priest was executed for allegedly causing the bewitchment of the nuns, most notably the burning of the Jesuit-educated priest and anti-celibacy writer Urbain Grandier at Loudun in 1634.

The Calvinists’ response was to demonstrate that Catholic sacred images and objects were devoid of supernatural power. In France, Protestant iconoclasm was repaid by Catholic mobs seeking instead to purify the realm of the sacrilegious iconoclasts, replicating on Huguenot corpses the desecration the victims had performed on Catholic saints. In the Low Countries, the iconoclastic fury of 1566 was as elaborately staged as Obry’s exorcisms. As iconoclasts publicly stabbed and smashed saints’ images and vessels containing consecrated hosts, they revealed the impotence of these sacred objects. Such counter-propaganda had limited success, as by 1600 in Calvinist Geneva the single most common act of maleficium was causing the demonic possession of another, while many citizens frequented Catholic exorcists.

### 27.7 The Reformation and Women

The Reformation profoundly changed religion, but it also affected other areas of human relationship, including those between women and men. The Reformers did little to alter the traditional, negative views of women, leaving in place Aristotle’s polarity system whereby women were seen as dominated by the cooler, baser humours and men by the hot humours, which promoted intellect. Protestants, furthermore, removed any option of a religious vocation for women, closing convents, sometimes after years of struggle, and insisting that the normal vocation for woman was marriage and motherhood. In this they sought to promote married life, rather than celibacy, as the ideal state for Christians, alleviating the sense of inferiority that married laypeople had long endured. Options for single women were generally bleak. Even within Catholic territories, the reforms of the Council of Trent (1545–63) restricted the freedom of religious women, as convents were more strictly cloistered and their inmates more closely supervised, contributing to the oppressive atmosphere of the Ursuline convents that made them susceptible to claims of demonic possession and to the manipulation of male exorcists pursuing their own agendas.

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30 Waite, Heresy, 143–4.
Catholic and Protestant leaders were both reacting to the infamous actions of some women in the early Reformation era. Many women interpreted Luther’s ‘priesthood of all believers’ as tacit permission to preach the gospel, despite St Paul’s proscription against women teachers in I Timothy 2:12. Some women were inspired by radical preachers to participate in the Peasants’ War or to protect evangelical preachers, such as the group of women who, in 1522, sprang Hendrik van Zutphen from his Antwerp prison. Even here the perpetrators were only mildly punished since it was assumed they must have been misled by men.\(^{34}\) In 1529 some women preachers of Zwickau were exiled, while Memmingen’s magistrates forbade servant women from discussing religion when drawing water from wells. An English statute of 1543 outlawed women from reading the Bible; all authorities remained suspicious of women who discussed the scriptures.\(^{35}\)

Anabaptist women, however, at times asserted a greater level of religious leadership as prophets, informal teachers, and martyrs. The visions of the Strasbourg prophetesses Barbara Rebstock and Ursula Jost convinced the Anabaptist leader Melchior Hoffman to become the prophet of the Last Days. Despite the tendency of jurists to excuse Anabaptist women as victims of men, hundreds of Anabaptist women were arrested, tortured, and executed. Male Anabaptist leaders also sought to limit their women’s leadership aspirations. For example, in 1534 when the Anabaptist-controlled city of Münster was under siege, women greatly outnumbered men, presenting a problem for the newly crowned king Jan van Leiden. On 16 June, Hille Feicken, inspired by stories of the biblical Judith who had delivered Israel from a Babylonian siege by slipping into the Babylonians’ camp and beheading Holofernes, snuck out of Münster to assassinate the besieger, Bishop Franz von Waldeck. Although caught before fulfilling her mission, her attempt shocked van Leiden, who shortly afterward mandated polygamy, so that every woman would be under the control of a husband.\(^{36}\) In such ways Anabaptist women inspired parallels with earlier Waldensian women preachers.

Catholic and Protestant leaders therefore reinforced patriarchalism to impose tighter control over all women, whom they believed were easily tempted by the devil. In the process, the image of the potential witch was broadened to include any non-submissive woman; the polar opposite of the young, obedient, and sexually passive wife and mother, the witch was so assertive and sexually ravenous that she could be satiated only by demon lovers. Such an image heightened anxiety over female sexuality,

\(^{34}\) Waite, Heresy, 71; see also Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Women on Top’, in Society and Culture, 124–51.


inspiring powerful fears of the witch, and focusing the idea of the witch increasingly on women as the gender most susceptible to the charms of Satan.\textsuperscript{37}

\section*{27.8 Anabaptists and Witches}

Between 1525 and 1540, the number of Anabaptists persecuted was comparable to moderate witch-hunts, with one notable exception: roughly two-thirds of Anabaptists executed were men, while roughly three-quarters of accused witches were women. By 1570 at least two thousand Anabaptists had been executed, and thousands more arrested and interrogated. Execution of Anabaptists preceded or alternated with the punishment of witches, and almost never occurred in the same year. Both persecutions were motivated by the need to purify realms of blasphemous heresy in the Last Days. Claims to piety by Anabaptists were ignored, as orthodox preachers, stinging from Anabaptist anticlerical rebukes, described Anabaptist ‘hyper-piety’ as a cover for diabolical deception.\textsuperscript{38} Protestant and Catholic theologians saw heresy and witchcraft as distinct arms of the devil’s plot, and Anabaptists were not normally charged with performing magic. Lower clergy and parishioners, however, often interpreted Anabaptist activity in a magical direction, as when, in Schwäbisch-Gmünd, ‘witch dances were said to take place at the same location that served in “1529 as the secret meeting place of Gmünd’s Anabaptists”’.\textsuperscript{39} Inquisitors ascribed Anabaptist women’s literacy to magical agency, while some jurists applied preternatural techniques to extract confessions from Anabaptists.

Yet there were key differences between the persecution of Anabaptists and witches: for one thing, many Anabaptists happily confessed their beliefs as a form of witnessing, while witches were surely innocent of diabolism, if not of maleficium. As efforts to inculcate commoners with anti-Anabaptist fervour failed, the clergy’s demonizing rhetoric was transferred by the people onto witches. Court officials learned how to extract confessions from Anabaptists, and applied their experience to interrogations of witches. Since some Anabaptists actually desecrated sacraments, including hosts, it became easier, at least for demonologists, to imagine witches performing such sacrilege. Similarly, the idea that witches were rebaptized into the devil’s sect only became prominent in the literature after the advent of Anabaptism.\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Spee} On excessive piety as an indication of witchcraft, see Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld, \textit{Cautio Criminalis, or a Book on Witch Trials}, ed. and tr. M. Hellyer (Charlottesville, VA, 2003), 24.
\bibitem{Waite} Gary K. Waite, ‘Naked Harlots or Devout Maidens? Images of Anabaptist Women in the Context of the Iconography of Witches in Europe, 1525–1650’, in Gary K. Waite, Els Kloek, Marion Kobelt-Groch,
A central difference between Anabaptists and witches is gender, and this helps explain why Anabaptists were not demonized successfully, as the Waldensians had been in the fifteenth century. Anabaptist women were treated with mildness relative to their male compatriots because most jurists and inquisitors followed Kramer’s gendered heresy perspective, by which women were mentally incapable of participating actively in intellectual heresy and were instead the pawns of male leaders. For a ‘dumb’ woman to be misled by a man to follow a heresy she could not truly comprehend was perhaps excusable, but to make a willing pact with the devil in a quest for wealth, power, sexual fulfillment, or revenge was another matter entirely. In these cases, there could be no excuse, and, for many jurists, no leniency.

27.9 Witch Trials during the Early Reformation, 1520–60

Even during the tumultuous decades of the Reformation, there were a number of witch trials across Europe, especially in Italy, northern Spain, parts of France and Switzerland, and the Low Countries. The worst seem to have been areas suffering from the plague, including northern Italy, where the Inquisition at Como alone possibly executed hundreds. That said, mass prosecutions had already petered out before the Reformation in most areas of the Holy Roman Empire.41

Both Luther and Calvin supported witch-hunting, with Luther approving the execution of four witches at Wittenberg in 1541 and Calvin, a few years later advising Geneva to ‘extirpate the race of witches’, resulting in the city’s infamous plague-spreading trials.42 Yet, until 1560, most jurisdictions were reluctant to treat witchcraft as a criminal conspiracy involving large groups of suspects. Similarly, few publications appeared on the subject, and there were no known printings of the Malleus maleficarum between 1521 and 1569. Witchcraft remained a concern within the local community, and people continued to counteract evil magic by a variety of means.43 Most accusations of witchcraft involved maleficent magic, such as the cursing of agricultural implements and livestock, the brewing of crop-destroying storms, arson, love magic, or the discovery of stolen objects. In the Netherlands, there were some trials of groups of witches, such as in Namur, where judges tried traditional Waldensian witches, largely because they did not have to deal with large numbers of Anabaptists.44 The eastern

Mirjam van Veen, Anna Voolstra, and Piet Visser, eds., Myth and Reality of Anabaptist/Mennonite Women, c, 1525–1900 (Leiden, forthcoming).

41 Behringer, Witches and Witch Hunts, 76–81.
44 Waite, Eradicating, 76–7.
province of Groningen also saw a significant number of trials. Twenty accused witches were executed there in 1547, and five more in 1562. Both of these witch-hunts were sparked by news of witch trials in the neighbouring portions of the western Holy Roman Empire.

27.10 JOHANN WEYER (WIER)

It was, in fact, these particular cases that caused the Dutch court surgeon for the duchy of Cleves, Johann Weyer (Wier) to publish his famous treatise opposing the prosecution of witches, in 1563. Weyer’s book provoked both admiration and anger—the latter especially from Jean Bodin, who responded in 1580 with his defence of witch-hunting, Demonomania (On the Demon-Mania of Witches). Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, tr. Randy A. Scott; ed. Jonathan Pearl (Toronto, 1995).

Weyer explained witch confessions as caused by diabolical delusions on the minds of old women already mentally disturbed by the humoral imbalance of melancholia. He admitted that some ‘deluded old women are convinced...that crimes of this sort are perpetrated by them’, but argued that this is merely ‘phantasms’ arising from unbelief. Hence, when subjected to torture ‘they confess to crimes which are purely imaginary on their part, and which truly proceed from Satan, with God’s permission’. Mora, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance*, 285; see also 498–9 and 521.

For their delusion, Weyer prescribed medical and spiritual treatment. Based on correspondence with his brother Matthias and David Joris, it seems Weyer’s religiosity was spiritualistic rather than orthodox Lutheranism, and his affirmation of the reality of a powerful devil was likely a spiritualist’s cover for the depreciation of corporality in religious matters. Reginald Scot’s similarly sceptical treatise was heavily indebted to Weyer’s work, and it was very clearly spiritualistic in approach. Wooton, ‘Reginald Scot’.

Weyer also called inquisitors and persecutors of witches ‘the special slaves of the Devil; some may call them diviners, but for me they shall stand as the real evildoers’.

46 Mora, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance*, 285; see also 498–9 and 521.
47 Wooton, ‘Reginald Scot’.
27.11 WIESENSTEIG: WITCH-HUNTING REVIVED

Unfortunately the 1560s witnessed ‘the last gasp of the “third way”’ of a moderate, compromising approach to reform that Weyer’s prince, the Duke of Cleves, had pursued. By 1563 confessional lines were hardening, as evidenced by new doctrinal statements, most notably the Heidelberg Catechism for the Reformed, the Thirty-Nine Articles for the English Church, and the conclusions of the Council of Trent. At the same time new, tougher witchcraft statutes were passed in England and Scotland in 1563. Moreover, as Weyer was finishing his manuscript, Count Ulrich von Helfenstein, ruler of the region around the south-western German city of Wiesensteig, was directing a witch-hunt that ultimately destroyed over sixty witches for causing a destructive hailstorm in August 1562, robbing children of their ‘holy baptism’, and infanticide. The count’s decision to pursue a diabolical sect of witches, rather than the more typical few individuals, set a new precedent. At that very moment Ulrich was debating whether to adhere to the Lutheranism of his powerful neighbour, Duke Christoph of Württemberg, or return to Catholicism at the urging of his family. Until he made his decision in favour of the latter a few years later, Ulrich was considering a variety of religious positions, including that of the spiritualist Schwenckfeld, and attended the interrogations of arrested sectarian.

Why did the count, in the midst of this religious turmoil, suddenly decide to attack a sect of witches? Witches were traditionally blamed for hailstorms, yet other recent storms had resulted in trials of only a few individual witches. Three factors relating to the Reformation were involved in expanding the alleged conspiracy. First, the demonizing invective of polemists aggravated religious confusion and fear. Second, all confessions believed that the devil was running amok during the Last Days. Finally, the decades-long attack on the Anabaptists had made credible a belief in the existence of an underground, diabolical, heretical sect, even though most people no longer feared the Anabaptists.

Just weeks before the 1562 hailstorm, an Anabaptist nocturnal meeting was discovered in a mountain forest near Esslingen, Württemberg and twenty-eight individuals were arrested. Several of the suspects had travelled many kilometres to participate in this worship meeting. The authorities, however, quickly released seven women suspects, leading one bailiff to complain that one of these women had been misled by ‘Satan’s true minister’, an Anabaptist preacher. When these same officials were required to oversee accusations of witchcraft the following month, they immediately

49 MacCulloch, The Reformation, 570.
51 Waite, Eradicating, 144–53.
thought of women witches, whom they now imagined worked in a large group. Since witches were believed to fly long distances to their sabbaths, news of the Anabaptists’ arrests further inflamed the popular imagination about secretive nocturnal gatherings. Duke Christoph, however, was convinced by his Lutheran preacher Johannes Brenz that witches could not alter the weather. Count Ulrich, for his part, followed the approach of the Esslingen Lutheran preacher Thomas Naogeorgus, who was subsequently sacked by the city council for his provocative witch-hunting sermons. While Count Ulrich’s example was not immediately followed by other princes, the precedent was set, so that when similar storms struck in the 1580s and 1590s, the people automatically assumed a sect of witches was responsible.

27.12 Conspiratorial Arson

Added to this ‘sectarianizing’ of witchcraft were growing fears of arson gangs in the crucial two decades before Wiesensteig. The government associated several such groups with the Anabaptists, such as the Batenburgers and the ‘children of Emlichheim’, who killed livestock and set haystacks aflame in the eastern Netherlands in revenge for the Anabaptist persecution. Unable to catch the perpetrators, magistrates were forced to calm fears of plots to set entire cities alight. The crimes of these quasi-religious groups were analogous to those of alleged witches: destruction of crops and livestock, arson, and murder.

These conspiracies were comparable also to the plague-spreading panics that gripped Geneva in 1530, 1545, and 1568–71. The first two of these saw plague workers accused of profiting from the epidemic by smearing plague essence on door handles and then stealing from the homes of the deceased. Interrogations therefore focused on the suspects’ accomplices, the oath of secrecy they had apparently made to each other, and how they made the plague grease they used to commit their crimes. Few confessions related these actions to witchcraft. In the third outbreak, however, such practical issues receded into the background as investigators pursued diabolical elements to explain the


53 William G. Naphy, Plagues, Poisons and Potions: Plague-Spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps, c. 1530–1640 (Manchester, 2002), 199.

perpetrators’ motivation. Here too the image of the accused switched from a conspiracy led primarily by male plague workers, to a witch sect made up almost entirely of women, working under Satan.\(^{53}\) This shift coincided neatly with the turn from persecuting real sectarian Anabaptists in south-western Germany up to August 1562, to hunting demonic witches thereafter. In the process, spreading plague, arson, and the large-scale destruction of crops and livestock were now more strongly emphasized in portrayals of sectarian witchcraft.\(^{54}\)

### 27.13 Religious Features of Witch Prosecution, 1560–1630

Shortly after Bodin’s rejoinder to Weyer in 1580, another set of devastating storms and crises helped spark a new, more terrifying wave of persecution, engulfing the Holy Roman Empire, the southern Netherlands, Switzerland, Burgundy, and elsewhere from the late 1580s to the 1630s. Here we will highlight some aspects of the witch panics that can be linked to the Reformation.

Diabolical sabbaths were inversions of Christian ritual, as witches were alleged to venerate Satan in physically and sexually perverse ways, rather than the spiritual veneration required in Christian worship. They were allegedly rebaptized by the devil himself; said prayers backwards; gorged themselves on tasteless food blessed in the name of Beelzebub in a mockery of the Eucharist; desecrated Christian ritual objects; used consecrated hosts in their magical potions; and murdered and boiled down unbaptized infants, in a disturbing revival of ritual murder charges that had for centuries hounded the Jews.

The most infamous panics occurred in the heartland of the religious conflict between Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic territories and cities. Only rarely was the confessional polemic front and centre in the witch trials, such as when the prince-bishop of Würzburg, Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, accused Protestants of witchcraft as part of his re-Catholicization campaign.\(^{55}\) Instead, the fear of witchcraft prosecution was used to warn the populace away from heresy and superstition in general, and to reinforce the veracity of their ruler’s faith, especially in the small Catholic bishoprics. For example, between 1581 and 1595 Archbishop Johann VII von Schönemberg oversaw a frightening panic in Trier involving hundreds of accused. Surrounded by larger Protestant territories, the archbishop used popular demands for witch trials to drive out any residual doubts about the verity of Catholic dogma. He was ably assisted by the

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Jesuits and his suffragan bishop, Peter Binsfeld, whose *Treatise on the Confession of Witches and Sorcerers* (1589), detailed how witches profaned the sacraments, threatened to bring down the wrath of God, and destroyed crops and livestock. To hesitate in the task of eradication merited divine punishment. For this reason, the mildly sceptical treatise *The True and False Magic* by the Dutch priest Cornelius Loos, which argued that witch-hunting was a distraction from the real dangers of Protestant heresy, led to Loos’ own trial, since only those in league with Satan doubted his own danger. In 1593 Loos saved his skin by renouncing his book.56

While most witch accusations arose out of the complex neighbourly dynamics of village life and conflict, major witch prosecution required officially approved belief in a sectarian conspiracy of witches in league with the devil. Although there were sceptics among them, such as Friedrich Spee and Adam Tanner, Jesuits often took the lead in promoting witch persecution, as they did in Trier and Ellwangen. The Ellwangen witch confessions focused on the renunciation of God, the Church, and baptism, submission to diabolical versions of the sacraments, and desecration of Eucharistic hosts, as well as maleficium and infanticide. Witch confessions, like exorcisms, thus became a weapon in the Catholic arsenal to reassert theological hegemony, reassure the faithful, and counteract Protestant and Anabaptist challenges to the reality of sacramental power.

### 27.14 Conclusion

In the 1560s, as jurists and inquisitors switched their focus from heretics and conspirators to demonic witchcraft, the gender of suspects changed abruptly from men to women. Once revived, witch panics took on lives of their own, spreading to realms that had either long suppressed their religious dissidents or had never had to deal with them. The fusion of elite-demonizing rhetoric against anticlerical heretics with popular anxiety over militant conspiracies, fear of divine anger, and intensified suspicion of assertive women, were significant features in the revival of witch-hunting in the 1560s in Germany. Thanks to anti-Anabaptist rhetoric, rebaptism was added to the diabolical sabbath, which became more credible thanks to rumours about Anabaptist nocturnal meetings and fears of arson gangs. The orthodox also sought to suppress the alleged atheism of spiritualists. At the same time, increasing pressure from the people to identify and punish those believed responsible for disasters and disease, presented desperate rulers with a ready-made tool to enforce religious conformity. Although many Reformers remained sceptical, the Reformation on the whole made the diabolical and conspiratorial aspects of witchcraft more credible in the short term, at least until the logic of providentialism could take hold. It had done so by 1600 in Protestant realms, as rulers and jurists now tended to see witchcraft accusations as specifically

Catholic. Where rulers gave up on efforts to create the spiritually pure kingdom of God, major witch trials could now begin to collapse under their own illogical weight.

These insights into the interrelatedness of the religious reform movements and the revival of witch-hunting require further testing and deeper analysis, both at the elite and popular levels. While preachers frequently bemoaned their lack of success in reforming popular religiosity, we know that clerical visitations, sermonizing, and confessional advising were powerful means of shaping popular opinions. We therefore require further study of the role of clergy, both Protestant and Catholic, in encouraging or discouraging fear of the devil and the religious opponent in the local community. While we know that the publication of demonological treatises such as Binsfeld’s followed rather than preceded witch trials, it is likely that sermons on the subject were preached to local citizens long before the trials began. Closer analysis of these sermons, both printed and manuscript, could reveal much about the shaping of attitudes in the local community that made it more or less conducive to conspiratorial thinking. The correspondence between the delivery of sermons promoting or opposing baptismal exorcism in Lutheran Germany and the rise of mass possession cases on the eve of the witch-hunts provides one intriguing possibility. Following on Walter Stephens’ insights into the mentality of demonologists, research into sermonic literature should further illuminate the doubts and anxieties that preachers felt and expressed, which may help explain why they projected those fears onto others. On this score their efforts to rebuff anticlerical sentiment presents a valuable starting point.58

Second, the relationship among demonic possession, diabolical witchcraft, and religious propaganda needs closer attention in regions outside of France, such as the German cases cited above or Brian Levack’s intriguing study of demonic possession cases in Scotland.59 Third, the dynamics of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation movements need to be more fully integrated into the witch-hunts narrative. Some of this has been done for the Holy Roman Empire, the Netherlands, Scotland, and England, for example, but other regions need further study.60 The transition from the persecution of ‘real’ heretics to ‘imagined’ witches in the fifteenth century, so richly

59 Brian P. Levack, ‘Demonic Possession in Early Modern Scotland’, in Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin, and Joyce Miller, eds., Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland (Basingstoke, 2008), 166–84.
61 Utz Tremp, Von der Häresie zur Hexerei; see also Waite, Eradicating.
documented by Kathrin Utz Tremp, should be pursued more closely for the sixteenth century. And how did these changing views of heretics and witches relate to the always problematical beliefs about Jews? There was, in the late Middle Ages, a great deal of cross-fertilization among stereotypes of heretics, Jews, and witches, and pursuing these through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could bear much fruit. For example, the rich source material relating to the persecution of Anabaptists in the Swiss territories has yet to be compared to the region’s significant witch trials. Local lore about radical dissidents such as Anabaptists on the eve of the witch-hunts could also bear closer scrutiny, especially as these relate to women.

Fourth, the significant variations in attitude towards the prosecution of witchcraft within particular reform camps need greater clarity. For example, why could Dutch Reformed theologians and ministers generally oppose or ignore pressure to justify witch trials when their counterparts in Geneva, England, Scotland, and New England were at times vigorous proponents? What interpretive strategies did anti-witch-hunting preachers adopt in their efforts to explain the problematic scripture passages? Fifth, while the intersection between religious reform movements and conflict and the rise of the witch-hunts is becoming clearer for the sixteenth century, the ongoing relationship among these various features in the seventeenth century needs further analysis. Finally, the question of how changing notions of religious toleration and accommodation with the religious other influenced (or not) waning fears of diabolical conspiracies is worth exploring across Europe, as is the significant impact of spiritualism on the pulling apart of the demonologists’ construct. The picture on this score is becoming clear for the Dutch Republic, but spiritualism was not restricted to this realm, and its impact on the development of proto-Enlightenment ideas of toleration and reason is the subject of exciting new research. The depreciation of the role of the devil in human affairs, including the possibility that he did not exist outside of the human imagination, was not merely a response to the devastations of the witch-hunts, but was an integral element of early spiritualism.

Further Reading


Waite, ‘Naked Harlots’.


Naphy, William G., Plagues, Poisons and Potions: Plague-Spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps, c. 1530–1640 (Manchester, 2002).
Waite, Gary K., Heresy, Magic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe (Basingstoke, 2003).