

MISOGYNY – WILL IT EVER END?

One-hundred-and-fifty to two-hundred Years of Rationality versus Irrationality

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This paper is an attempt to understand a complex period of time in Western Civilization which most of us perceive as a period of great accomplishments in the field of art, literature, science, and the awareness of the humanities. It is the time of Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, it is the time of Rembrandt, Dürer, etc. etc. However, there is also a counterpart to the Europe of the Scientific Revolution, to the Europe of monuments and art: it is the Europe that produced one of the most malicious attacks against humanity.

I shall be talking about the period of roughly between the end of the 15th century and the end of the 17th century, a period, which is also referred to as the late medieval time and early modern time, or, the Renaissance. To be precise, I shall be looking at the Janus face of the Renaissance where on one side the element of rationality is portrayed and on the other side irrationality reins supreme as expressed in the movement of the Witch Craze.

Let me just briefly explain what is generally understood by the term of European Witch Craze: it refers to a period of about 150 - 200 years from the end of the 15th century through the 16th century. During this time mostly elderly women, some men, females in their twenties and thirties and even children were accused of witchcraft for consorting with the devil. Most Europeans believed in a major conspiracy of witches for the purpose of overthrowing the Christian order; and for those intentions, witches had to be persecuted, prosecuted, and consequently executed. Executions were by fire, burning at the stake, by hanging, or by drowning. Admissions of guilt were solicited through the use of torture. The exact number of people who fall victim to the Witch Craze is unknown. Estimates range from in the 100,000s to 300,000. It may be of interest to know that the number of deaths by the Spanish inquisition only reached about 5,000. The Witch Craze phenomenon was, indeed, a craze: it erupted quickly, was violently pursued and then subsided rather quickly when one country after another abolished

the witch hunts. I personally prefer the term Witch Craze versus witch hunts since it implies an element of madness, which it actually was.

In order to understand the dichotomy of the Renaissance movement and the Witch Craze, both have to be put into its historical context. Europe, as it is known to us today, did not exist. The term *Italy*, for example, was just a geographical description. The country itself was made up of a myriad of small political units like the Republic of Venice, the Republic of Florence or the Kingdom of Naples, etc. and – quite frequently – these city-states were at war with each other. At the beginning 15th century, most Europeans still lived in rural areas and about 80% of Europe's population was illiterate. Society consisted mainly of a small, educated elite versus a large popular culture of the uneducated. It was also a time when popes and worldly rulers relied heavily on the recommendations and horoscopes by their astrologers or their magi as they were called. No pope or ruler of a European court made any major decision without prior consultation with his astrologer; superstition was very much part of religious practices. But it was not only the elite that embraced superstition, life of the general populace was also totally intertwined with superstitious beliefs. This is an important factor to remember when one tries to understand the Witch Craze.

The question as to the definition of the term “witch” or “witchcraft” has to be addressed because what is perceived as being a witch or as witchcraft in Western culture may not apply to, for example, African or Asian cultures; in other words, the definition has to be seen in a local context. – In the 16th century, the French historian and philosopher Jean Bodin gave the following definition: “A sorcerer, or a witch, is one who by commerce with the devil has a full intention of attaining her own ends.” In 1587C.E. , George Gifford defined a witch as “one that worketh by the Devil or by some devilish curious art....which the Devil hath devised to entangle and snare men's soul withal into damnation” and a reference to witchcraft by Martin Del Rio who in 1599C.E. explained that it is ”an art which, by the power of a contract entered into with the Devil, some wonders are wrought which pass the common understanding of man.” According to dictionary.com, the word ‘witch’ has its origin in the old English term ‘wicca’ which means necromancer.

Historically, witches or witchcraft were not Christian inventions, but rather ancient pagan customs; they were already mentioned in old Babylonian texts, in antiquity, in the old testament, in ancient China, in pre-

Columbian Mexico, etc. I do believe the origin of witchcraft lies in the dualistic form in which nature presents itself: sun and moon, day and night, light and dark, and later, the concept of a God and a devil. Darkness in our culture was often associated with an element of fear, magic and evil; and over time, evil became synonymous with the devil. The following question arises: how were witches and the devil perceived during the centuries prior to the Renaissance and did that eventually change as the Middle Ages came to its end? I think it is best to let history speak on this development: It was stated in the Lombard Code in 643C.E.: “Let nobody presume to kill a foreign serving maid or slave as a witch, for it is not possible, nor ought to be believed by Christian minds”. Charlemagne proclaimed in 789C.E: “If anyone, deceived by the Devil, shall believe, as is customary among pagans, that any man or woman is a night-witch, and eats men, and on that account burn that person to death...he shall be executed.” Spoken by the man who imposed Christianity on the Germanic tribes! And similarly in line with the previous quotations were the teachings of the Canon Episcopi of about 900C.E. which clearly stated that witchcraft did not exist and that to believe in it was heretical. “To believe that witchcraft could possibly have any power is to deny the supreme power of God.” These quotes clearly express the Church’s view on witches and witchcraft. However, social, economic, political, and religious changes gradually occurred, predisposing Western European Culture to the Witch Craze.

By the year 1000 C.E. most of western Europe was an agrarian society which consisted of a divinely ordained, centuries-old three class system: one group was made up of members of the Church, the clerics, the next category were the knights, or those who were bearing arms for the purpose of defending the Christian world. The third category were the peasants, the working class, who made up about 95% of the population. By the 12th century this system had started to crumble: small towns and cities emerged, creating a new social class, the bourgeoisie. Unlike the peasants who were bound by feudal obligations to their lords, they were free people. They were craftsmen or were in some form engaged in commerce. In other words, what one sees here, is an early manifestation of free enterprise. But this development also brought along an increase in the number of the poor.

When the 14th century came along, dramatic social and economic transformations were in process: nation-states had been formed and cities had become centers of higher learning. Whereas in the Middle Ages one believed to understand, where belief meant knowledge, we now see a

separation of belief and knowledge. After a dormant period of about 900 years, an awareness of self, an awareness of the individual and its uniqueness resurfaced. The element of time, as expressed in historical consciousness, is “born”. In other words, the perception of time is experienced in a secularized manner. Interest in classical civilizations arose; classical writings and ideas are resurrected. And, with the fall of Constantinople, Greek scholars started to move westward bringing with them valuable ancient scripts and knowledge. Now, ancient texts were read and studied in the original language, Greek. – In the field of science, in medicine for example, the interest in anatomy was pursued. Medicine was transformed from an herbal and sometimes mystical approach to a field of science in its early stages. However, this development was two-sided: it brought advances on one side, it secured men a position in science and medicine and pushed the so-called “wise” women, who had great knowledge and experience in herbal healing and folk medicine out of the field. The result of which was, that an enormous amount of knowledge in medicinal herbs and its applications eventually was lost, often forever. But men had secured an exclusive grip on medicine and kept it for centuries. (This development is crucial to remember when we finally get to the Witch Craze) One further economic transformation has to be mentioned: better farming techniques in the form of larger horse-drawn plows came in use. This resulted in larger areas to be tilled and consequently higher yields. Europe’s population reached the highest number ever and then, disaster struck: severe climate changes occurred: colder and wetter summers resulted in food shortages which caused severe famines. There were peasant uprisings and the 100 years’ war was raging in Europe leaving an unbalanced population: surplus of women, old and young, and old men. And then, in 1348-1350 Western Europe was overrun by the Black Death, the plague. About one third of Europe’s population was wiped out in two years!

Social and economic instability lead to unrest and uncertainty all over Christian Europe. The number of poor people had increased drastically. Wars had left countless women, young and old, without any form of support forcing them to beg as a form of survival. During the Middle Ages, beggars were also around but they were fewer in numbers and, most importantly, the attitude towards them always included an element of charity. They were perceived as God’s children in need. However, this kind of perception underwent a major change when nation-states came into existence. Now, people were required to obtain a license to beg which was issued by the

king. No license – no begging. Poverty underwent a devaluation, the poor were shunned – they became socially marginalized.

People started to wonder if all the misery was a message from God. The papacy had become disgustingly corrupt and, certainly, was in no position to offer moral support. Also, the Church was not only under attack politically but was also challenged on the way how Catholicism was practiced. Early signs of the reformation were seen at the horizon. A scapegoat, responsible for all the hardship, had to be found. And it was found – what surfaced was the phenomenon known as the Witch Craze. It was primarily directed towards women. Western culture – as we all know – was always profoundly misogynist but what became unleashed here was misogyny in its most violent and irrational form. It was a malicious “gencide”, a women’s holocaust.

Again, the predisposing elements for the Witch Craze were social, economic and philosophical/religious transformations which occurred during the late Middle Ages and the early Modern Time. Great theologians, among them the obese Dominican monk Thomas Aquinas, contributed heavily to the appalling practices of witch hunts by their elaboration of the “devil-doctrine”. Thomas had a vivid imagination: he describes in detail how witches have intercourse with the devil (please remember that not so long before Thomas Aquinas, the belief in witches would have caused the believer his/her head) Thomas writes “that the same devil, who as a woman, has intercourse with a man and can also, in the form of a man have intercourse with a woman”. This is the famous “succubi” (underlying or female devils) and “incubi” (overlying or male devils). Just for the record, the idea of this scenario, again, was not a Christian invention but goes back to an ancient Babylonian myth. It is just an example of how pagan customs were very much part of the Christian doctrine although the Church condemned paganism as heretical. I think it can be safely said, that Aquinas, a saint of the Catholic church, contributed to the ensuing witch hysteria. And also for the record: it was about one year after Thomas’ death (1274 C.E.) that the first female was burned as a witch for having intercourse with the devil. Her accuser was the Dominican monk and inquisitor Hugo de Beniols.

Backed by Pope Innocent’s 8th Bull of 1484 C.E. (“Summa desiderantes affectibus”) two Dominican monks, Heinrich Kramer, also known as Henricus Institoris and Jakob Sprenger, set out to investigate

reports of Catholics who had strayed from the faith by cohabitation with the devil! The pope instructed the two: "...our dear sons, Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger....I now send them to make a report..." Both monks were experienced inquisitors, well-versed in torture techniques to extort confessions from the simple, uneducated, primarily female victims. Their report eventually became the infamous "Malleus Maleficarum", "The Hammer of Witches", a three-part book which was first published in 1486 C.E. (Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 1450s made it possible to publish and distribute copies of the "Malleus" for broader use and subsequent abuse of women.) The first part of the book describes in detail witches' activities like copulation with the devil, making man's penis disappear, etc. The second part advises on how to deal with these happenings and the third part addresses the issue of identifying witches and spells out methods for extracting confessions via torture and recommending the form of punishment. There were two options: execution or life in prison if a mitigating circumstance could be seen. Execution may have been preferable; it meant a shorter period of suffering versus continuous rape and abuse in prison. When guards found themselves sexually aroused, they assumed that the desire emanated from the imprisoned witch! In her book "Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven" Dr. Ranke-Heinemann, a Catholic theologian, labels messieurs Kramer and Sprenger as "the two criminals and sexually pathological authors". I fully agree with her on the second part of her sentence: the sex deprived celibates of the church certainly went into fabrications about women, magic, and sexuality; something they seemed to have missed most in their lives! For the coming centuries, however, the "Malleus", an unbelievably misogynistic book, was absolutely detrimental to the cause of women.

Kramer and Sprenger found biblical justification for their book in Exodus 22:18: "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live" and Deuteronomy 18:10: "There shall not be among you a witch." They also reasoned that since God acknowledged witches, it would be heresy to deny the existence of witches. The two monks, in addition to the Bible, also cited their fellow celibates Augustine and Aquinas as their principal authority; both of whom seemed to have experienced unresolved struggles with the dichotomy of the almost irredeemable wickedness of Eve (in reference to women in general) versus the purity and unattainable goodness of the virgin Mary. In a short time, the "Malleus Maleficarum" become the hand-book for witch-hunters. The authors perceived women as the embodiments of inexhaustible negativity. Kramer and Sprenger stated that women are more likely to

become witches “because the female sex is more concerned with things of the flesh,... they are formed from a man’s rib, they are only imperfect animals and crooked whereas man belongs to a privileged sex from whose midst Christ emerged.” Another brief quote of theirs: “Women are by nature instruments of Satan – they are by nature carnal, a structural defect rooted in the original creation.” - The “Malleus” spells out in detail what witches do and how trials had to be conducted. Again, women were accused of devotion of body and soul to the devil, engaging in orgies and intercourse with the devil, of sacrificial infanticide, cannibalism, desecration of the Eucharist and the crucifix, renunciation of the faith, etc. Witches also were credited with possessing magical powers, like causing impotence and diseases, casting spells, giving an “evil eye”, preventing cows from producing milk, causing storms, etc. Before a trial, the accused had to be stripped naked and all hair was removed from the body for the purpose of checking for the Devil’s mark: moles and warts bore evidence of an amorous relation with the devil. Since confessions were mandatory, various methods of torture were applied to extort an admittance of guilt. One of the preferred objects used in torture was “The Spider”: a cluster of pointed metal hooks, which were attached to a ring, were put over a woman’s breasts and/or genitals. Pulling on the ring caused the hooks to deeply penetrate the skin followed by tearing flesh away from the underlying areas. It is not difficult to imagine that with this kind of treatment confessions were forthcoming quickly. Another test was considered as sure proof of guilt: the accused witch, with hands and legs tied, was thrown into water. If she sank and drowned, she was innocent – if she floated, she was guilty. A no win situation. Over time, people had adopted the belief that witches were to be accountable for any misfortune and, as the witch craze picked up momentum, victims became younger and younger; females of all ages were targeted. In Würzburg, Germany, the bishop’s chancellor wrote in a document dated 1629 C.E. that “A week ago a maiden of nineteen was put to death of whom it is everywhere said that she was the fairest in the whole city....she will be followed by seven or eight others of the fairest. There are three hundred children of three or four years of age who are said to have had intercourse with the devil.” Midwives were also easy targets since they had knowledge of contraceptive methods which the Church adamantly condemned.

It seems that the witch-hunts became most violent in areas where the church was challenged most: Spain and Italy had considerably fewer witch-trials than the northern countries like England and especially Germany. In

1631 C.E., on a trip to Cologne, Cardinal Albizzi wrote: “A horrible spectacle met our eyes. Outside the walls of many towns and villages, we saw numerous stakes to which poor, wretched women were bound and burned as witches.” The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology reports that in 1651 C.E. “an executioner in Silesia had constructed a special oven in which he roasted within nine years over one thousand persons, including young children of two to four years of age”; all were accused of witchcraft.

Catholics, Protestants and Calvinists alike embraced the lurid stories about women as portrayed in the “Malleus”. They all used the book to bring witches to trial and execute them, indirectly though. The churches were quite clever: they extorted confessions, recommended executions and then turned the cases over to the secular authorities which had to cooperate with the churches’ recommendations. Otherwise, the judges ran the risk of being put on trial and be executed. This notion goes back to a decree of 1215 C.E. by pope Innocent 3rd who wrote in reference to secular authorities:”...strive in good faith, to the utmost of their power, to exterminate from the lands subject to their obedience all heretics who have been marked by the Church”.

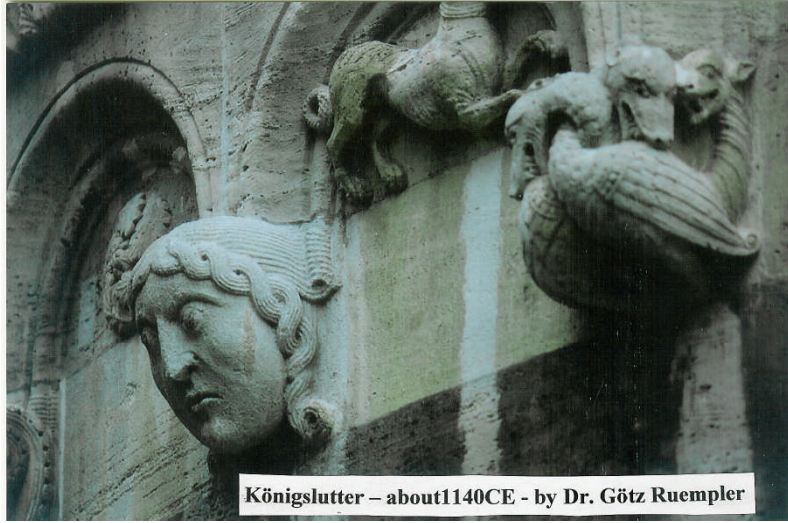
What brought the Witch Craze eventually to its end? Actually, all the social, economic, political, and philosophical/religious changes that had originally started the Witch-Craze, also brought it to an end when society became more balanced again. The formation of nation-states eventually lead to greater stability, the Church had lost its monopoly as a result of the reformation, and life in general had become more secularized. Renaissance Humanism asserted personal independence and individual expression versus unquestioning obedience, blind belief, and self-annihilation as previously demanded by the Church.

At the beginning I stated that this paper was an attempt to understand a rather complex period of time. Historically, it is understood, however, from the philosophical, religious or humanistic viewpoint the dichotomy of Renaissance and Witch-Craze, which lasted for several generations, still remains incomprehensible to me. The Church invented the crime of witchcraft which men, Catholics as well as Protestants, in position of central authority accepted and used as their official policy. Church officials, with the popes’ blessings, exerted atrocious torments on uneducated, superstitious and gullible individuals for the sole purpose of keeping the masses in check

and for securing the continuance of the patriarchal order of Christianity. On March 12, 2000, shortly before his visit to the Mideast, Pope John Paul II made an unprecedented apology for the sins of the church in reference to the treatment of Jews, the Crusades, Inquisition and treatment of women: “We humbly ask for forgiveness for the part that each of us has played in such evils thus contributing to disrupting the face of the church. At the same time, as we confess our sins, let us forgive the faults by others towards us.” A remarkable statement, however, can admittance of collective guilt be taken seriously when an expression of willingness to change is missing? Yes, the tone has changed since the era of the Witch Craze, but women still encounter discriminatory attitudes and actions from the Catholic Church. It seems that Renaissance Humanism has not yet conquered the minds of the celibates of the church. Or, differently expressed, will there ever be a “Pope Joan”? Is there even any hope of ever achieving true co-existence between men and women? Will misogyny ever be put to rest?



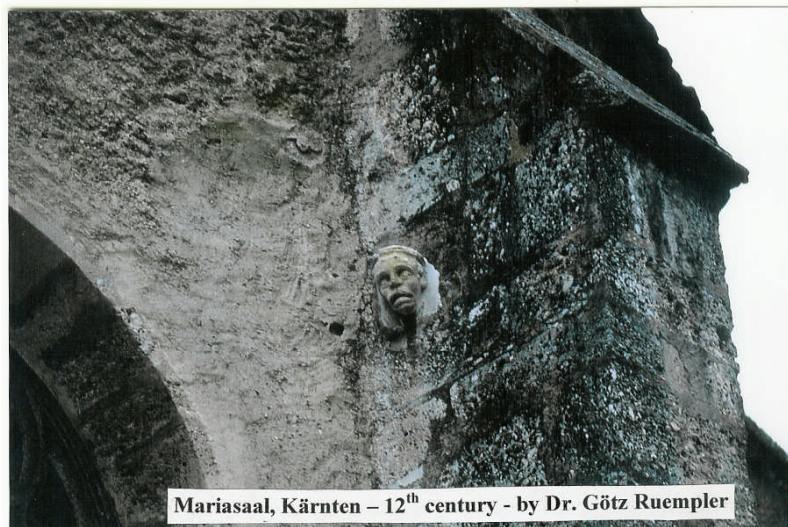
**St. Petri-Dom, Bremen – about 1230CE
by Dr. Götz Ruempler**



Königslutter – about 1140 CE - by Dr. Götz Ruempler



Zweinitz, Kärnten – before 1170 CE - by Dr. Götz Ruempler



Mariasaal, Kärnten – 12th century - by Dr. Götz Ruempler