Chapter 6. The witch-craze as holocaust: the rise of persecuting societies

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, with the experiences of systematic genocide and totalitarianism, new developments in sociological and political analysis began to emerge, such as the logics of persecution and victimology. The history of ethnic minorities and of ideological crimes also assumed greater prominence. As a consequence there was a general reassessment of the historical significance of the witch trials. The study of the persecutions both before and during the war and the study of early modern witch hunts seemed mutually supportive. Furthermore, in the post-war period the term 'witch hunt' became a common descriptor for contemporary persecutions, such as the McCarthyite campaign against suspected communists and political purges in the Soviet Union.

This new academic interest in the European trials was initially most evident in the research of German law students and in the work of German émigré sociologists,[1] but the writings on the subject that achieved the widest appeal and greatest influence were by two British historians, whose perspectives were strongly influenced by the experience of war and their understanding of the Holocaust. The first was Hugh Trevor-Roper's essay 'The European Witch-Craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries', which was first published in a collection of essays in 1967 and then published in its own right two years later.[2] Then in 1975 Norman Cohn, a founder of the Centre for Research in Collective Psychopathology and the Centre for the Study of Persecution and Genocide, produced *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt.*[3] In these works, the 'witch craze' was presented as the result of elite fears of ideological or social enemies, conspiring ‘others’, projected onto witches more or less consciously. On the one hand, the irrationality of persecutions – the unfoundedness of the suspicions of conspiracy – was as prominent in these interpretations as it had been in previous studies of witchcraft. On the other hand, ‘mass irrationality’, which was once believed to belong firmly in the past but which, it seemed after the wars, had returned, drew attention to the notion that conceptions of the rational and irrational were defined by time and context: the persecutions of witches could be explained rationally in the context of early modern religious strife and power struggles. The witch hunts were, as Geoffrey Scarre, a philosopher who has written on the witch trials and the Holocaust, put it, a phenomenon that historians dared to explain rather than apportion blame. Terrible as the trials were supposed to have been, the judges and the demonologists could still be given the moral benefit of the doubt, in the sense that because of their cultural and religious circumstances, they earnestly believed they were doing right in the eyes of God.[4]

stereotypes of conspiracy: witchcraft as anti-society?

The main focus of Trevor-Roper’s and Cohn’s interpretations was on the stereotyping of fear and conspiracy, with persecution being seen as expressing social and cultural fears, particularly of the ‘enemy within’. As Cohn explained:

> The essence of the fantasy was that there existed, somewhere in the midst of the great society, another society, small and clandestine, which not only threatened the existence of the great society but was also addicted to practices which were felt to be wholly abominable, in the literal sense of anti-human.[5]

The fear of a hidden ‘other’ created frustration and tensions, which generated mythologies, or theories, concerning that ‘other’. These mythologies were often alike. Ritual murder and cannibalistic feasts, for example, had long been attributed to perceived conspiracies or secret societies hungry for power, whether Christians in the early first millennium, Jews in the medieval period or witches in the early modern.[6] In the introduction to *Europe’s Inner Demons*, Cohn also compared the witch persecution to the late medieval and early modern chiliastic movements he had examined in his earlier work, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. In both phenomena, the aim was to purge and so save society through the annihilation of those who were though evil and destructive. In one case, it was the establishment judging marginal groups; in the other, the fantasies of those in the margins were central.[7]

Whether or not originally so, the mythology regarding witches soon became widely shared and believed. As soon as the authorities in the trials had internalised the theory, each witch would have to not only comply with it in his or her confession but also add something personal to it in order to make the confession credible. Once the mythology had been established, all individual deviations could be interpreted through it and so become evidence for it.[8] Such ideas regarding the fear of conspiracy have great dramatic potential, and were perceptively exploited in Arthur Miller's famous portrayal of the Salem trials in his play *The Crucible*. Although Miller, according to the ideals of realism, claimed historical accuracy, the play is the work of an artist, not an academic historian, and should be read as such. It is relevant here, because it has profoundly influenced the popular conception of witchcraft in America, as have its Trevor-Roperian counterparts in Europe. One of the reasons for the vast publicity attracted by Miller's play was obviously that it linked the Salem religious persecution to the 'American' identity, the declared basis of which had been the religious and ideological freedom sought by the Puritans. The play was also influenced by Miller's own experience of the McCarthyite hunt. But it is also an investigation into the stereotypes of fear and hate, their psychology and their capacities for identity-building that were later examined by scholars like Cohn and Kurt Baschwitz, the German journalist and sociologist who fled Nazi persecution in 1931, and who wrote an influential German text on the witch trials in 1963.[9] Understanding the nature of the fear of conspiracy, furthermore, made it possible to show the terror of both the persecuted and the persecutor. In his introduction to an edition of his collected plays, for example, Miller highlighted how it was worse to 'have nothing to give' persecutors than to be able to relieve the collective guilt and fear by confessing.[10]

Cohn's view that witchcraft, and especially the Sabbat, represented an anti-society has been influential on subsequent witchcraft historiography. The Sabbat is often interpreted as an anti-fertility rite where the witches caused hailstorms and frost or made babies ill in festivities that were the reverse of the semi-Christian village festivals and rituals to ensure good crops.[11] Descriptions of Satan and Hell and the activities of witches were characterised by ritual backwardness. Witchcraft presented a social and hierarchical inversion of the whole cosmic order. Contemporary rhetoric legitimised the power of the ecclesiastics and secular magistrates by claiming these authorities had been selected by God. Stuart Clark has linked this notion of the world upside-down in learned demonology to a general conception of a polar world, which can be found in many areas of elite culture from literature and theatre to science and theology. In this understanding of the world, order was dependent on both the opposite polarities. Witchcraft was seen as a force that disrupted the balance.[12] The witches' Sabbat as an anti-society also helped to establish a polar relationship between God and Satan, something that seems to have been part of the elites' educational projects in late medieval and early modern Europe.[13] Through these interpretations, scholars emphasised a more or less conscious blackening of the persecuted. The imagery was also used to reinforce the Christian faith by showing not only its opposite but also what happened to the subversionary opposition: Jews and witches could, in fiction, be made to defile sacred objects and consequently be punished.[14]

We can see the language of subversion in numerous trials, most obviously those involving stories of the Sabbat – the core of Trevor-Roper's 'crazes' – but also in more mundane charges of *maleficium* and even benevolent magic, where popular mentalities are revealed more clearly than in the Sabbat trials. Take, for example, the following questioning of Valpuri Kyni, an accused Finnish witch in Finland, tried in the Turku High Court in November 1649:

After a few questions concerning her name, parents, children and place of domicile, she was asked if she had previously been in court accused of harming the Pastor's cattle or any other witchcraft that she had committed? Answer: No, I have neither bewitched the Pastor's cattle nor anything else. God takes cattle and humans as He pleases. They can say whatever they want of me, but it is all just envious talk and I am innocent before God and man.

Question: Why has she allied herself with Satan and hurt the Pastor's cattle by her witchcraft? And why had she taught the Pastor's maid to practise witchcraft and harm her master's cattle? Answer: God preserve me from any connections with Satan, I intend to be God's child just as well as anyone. I have not done or taught anything wrong. She had only taught the maid how to stay in service and eat what her master and mistress would give her as her food, be it gruel, cabbage or whatever.

Question: She had indeed given the Pastor's maid a snake's skin, with which she was to bewitch the milk so it would turn into blood? Answer: Denied this altogether.[15]

After a few questions regarding her previous trials and other harm she was accused of by her fellow-villagers, the court 'pointed out to her that her mother's father and her mother had indeed been burnt as witches when the late Nils Bielke of noble birth had been judging and they had indeed taught her the same arts'. Answer: 'She knew not nor remembered that her parents were burned; they had taught her nothing unnecessary.'

Valpuri's case is one that totally lacks any notion of a Sabbat, but it serves to illustrate the use of the conspiracy theory. The court seems to have tried to present Valpuri joining Satan, conspiring with him and other witches and luring the maidservant to hurt and ruin the pastor. Valpuri used the same polar rhetoric when she repeatedly mentioned God in her defence. Later on, the court pursued a rather unexpected line as Valpuri was asked to recite the Creed and her inability to remember the third article was thought suspicious.[16] In the rest of the record, destructive traits towards the good of the community were as clear as in any *maleficium* charges. Valpuri was said to have harmed not only the pastor but also the crops of some villagers, and was subsequently accused of having bewitched the father of her maid and of having brought forth wolves to attack people. Conspiracy against society is hinted at, but is it the only explanation?[17]

Cohn's identification of the stereotypes of conspiracy and their appearance in certain kinds of witch trials has not received as much criticism as other aspects of the comparisons between the witch hunts and other persecutions, although Ginzburg countered the criticism Cohn levied on his theories of the connection between ancient fertility cults and night-flying witches, which are discussed in another chapter of this book.[18] It is important to stress that Cohn never meant to explain *all* witch trials. He was primarily interested in the mechanisms of persecution, though his ideas about stereotyping, anti-societies, inversion and, to some extent, conspiracy, have influenced broader scholarly interpretations of witchcraft, borrowing from psychology and literature, which move beyond the setting of elite and state fears.[19]

confessional conflict, newly established powers and 'the persecuting society'

Whereas Norman Cohn's conception of the general fear of conspiracies throughout history eventually became – for good reason – highly influential in academic circles, Trevor-Roper's earlier and slightly different perspective had more popular appeal. Trevor-Roper presented the 'witch craze', as he called the phenomenon, as a persecution of social and cultural deviants, of scapegoats, by Catholic and Protestant elites competing for power. Whereas Cohn situated his analysis of the witch trials within a broad comparative context of persecutions across hundreds of years, Trevor-Roper's understanding was shaped by the focus on a very specific time-frame. He wrote his essay on the witch craze as a part of a larger collection of older essays published under the title *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*.[20] Trevor-Roper argued that there was not only a political and economic crisis in early modern Europe, but also an ideological and intellectual one, of which the Reformation, Counter-Reformation and the witch trials were an integral part. The collection, in Trevor-Roper's own terms, was a favourable reconsideration of the sociologist Max Weber's thesis that the Calvinist ethic was crucial to the birth and development of the 'Spirit of Capitalism'.

According to Weber (1864–1920), the formation of new states and the struggle of new rulers to establish their power was likely to create a state monopoly of violence – local power would be channelled and enforced via the judicial system. In addition to the mundane crimes concerning the interests of individuals in local communities, more abstract crimes against the ruler, the state and religion would emerge. These were crimes that seemed to undermine the newly established powers, but their prosecution actually served to enhance the influence of the judicial system, and thus the ruling order.[21] Trevor-Roper's description of the witch craze was very similar. The newly established powers were the Protestant and post-Tridentine Catholic Churches and their secular supporters. Persecution, he claimed, attained new vigour wherever either side had won a major ideological or actual battle: demonising and persecuting the opposition helped enforce the new theologies, ideologies and regimes. Weber's ideas were already influential in his lifetime and some of their popularity in continental Europe may have been related to the changing political world order after the First World War. From the post-war point of view, competing and emerging new powers might appear again and again in history, and initiate similar persecutions.

This scenario of the behaviour of new powers in times of social, political and cultural crises is evident in the comparisons made between the witch persecution and the twentieth-century persecution of the Jews. The Nazi regime used anti-Semitism and judicial persecution to establish itself against a background of dire economic problems and a cultural crisis born of the terms of the Versailles Treaty, while some historians have likewise linked the witch panics to economic and agricultural crises, as well as the Trevor-Roperian model of cultural upheaval.[22] Such comparisons are obviously tempting, but can lead to over simplification; likewise, the comparisons made by Gerhard Schormann, for example, between authoritarian witch-hunting rulers and Nazi leaders. Although Schormann is aware of significant differences, he nevertheless sees close parallels between the witch 'extirpation' programme undertaken by Elector Ferdinand of Cologne in the 1620s and 1630s and the Third Reich's 'final solution' for Jews. Lucy Dawidowicz, in her influential book *The War against the Jews 1933–1945* (1975), had already pointed out the parallels with the Holocaust, and Schormann took the case further by paraphrasing her title for his own study – *Der Krieg gegen die Hexen*, and sharing terminologies like ‘*Ausrottung*’ (‘extermination’) and ‘*Endlösung*’ (‘final solution’) with Dawidowicz’s book.[23] As Behringer points out, though, Ferdinand seemed to interest himself in the persecution late in his career, and only after the persecution was well on its way and so the elegant comparison was only vaguely supported by facts.[24]

In *The Rise of a Persecuting Society*, R. I. Moore wrote regarding the rise of the persecution of lepers, Jews and heretics in the Middle Ages that:

> When rulers begin to assert themselves, and to create a recognisable apparatus of state, the earliest developments always include the appearance of a hierarchy of specialized agencies for the enforcement of order … and law itself becomes coercive, imposing from above a pattern of guilt or authority, rather than a mediatory, seeking agreement or compromise.[25]

Yet the rise of the state and central government not only brought with it stronger central control and oppression, but also produced new ways for the populace to influence matters that interested them through the extension of the judicial system, the parliamentary estate or Diet systems of governance. It could be said that early modern state formation would not have been possible without the co-operation of the people and therefore a real and continuous negotiation with them. The coercive power of Machiavellian princes was more an ideal than a reality.

The theory that the establishment of new central powers will lead to the development of persecution is teleological to an extent that may have served the older sociology of Weberian ideal types, but not perhaps modern historians. Yet it would be erroneous and somewhat unfair to read Trevor-Roper’s theory as a mere claim that Protestants persecuted Catholics and Catholics persecuted Protestants as witches – of which there is no evidence – or that they did it simply or cynically for power. The theory claims that the power struggle between the creeds and the new great powers in Europe created both a social and religious fear of ideological deviants and the machinery of legitimate violence to deal with the fear. The link there, too, is ‘far from direct’, explains William Monter, although religious fervour may have made people more aware of and therefore more likely to demand punishment for sins of all kinds.[26]

The Trevor-Roperian view of confessional conflicts, as well as the Nazi comparison, has attracted few supporters among recent scholars, though both remain influential in general works on history and in the popular media. State formation as a factor behind the trials in some areas and their moderation in other places, however, has attracted several scholars in both a way that emphasised the civilisation process and a way that emphasised the development of judicial systems as part of the power struggle in general. Wolfgang Behringer, who is otherwise very critical of Trevor-Roper, points out that the great German persecutions were used by the princes to gain popular support for the centralising of legal government. One reason why some German territories did not experience as drastic hunts as others, he suggests, was that they did not embark on programmes of state formation or confessionalisation.[27] The reverse point is included in the argument: There has to be a popular interest involved in the methods with which popular support is to be gained.

elite guilt

The conspiracy and state-building theories regarding the witch trials were concerned primarily with elite society. The question of the responsibility of general populaces for persecutions is a difficult one, whether in the past or the present. It is easier to apportion guilt to ruling elites. Sill, Trevor-Roper's focus on elites was understandable; the 'history from below' approach to witchcraft only began to emerge in the early 1970s, most notably in the work of Keith Thomas, and there had been few scholarly local and regional studies. Regarding the latter, Alan Macfarlane's (1970) study of the county of Essex, H. C. Erik Midelfort's (1972) work on south-western Germany, and William Monter's (1976) research on witchcraft in eastern France and Switzerland, would do much to reveal the inadequacies of Trevor-Roper's thesis.[28] Monter revealed, for example, that Trevor-Roper's characterisation of Calvin's Geneva as a centre of witch persecution and terror was far from accurate.

The top-down view was long dominant, partly also because of the way Trevor-Roper and his predecessors had defined witchcraft and 'witch craze' as ideological, dramatic and destructive miscarriages of justice: if it was 'of the people', it was defined as something else – sorcery, or the 'scattered folklore of peasant superstitions' – but not the type of witchcraft which had European significance.[29] During the 1970s, research by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane discovered the importance of the interpersonal relationships in village-level accusations, and Norman Cohn and Richard Kieckhefer almost simultaneously discovered that the thesis of the guilt of the Inquisition, on which Trevor-Roper had placed considerable emphasis, was based on forgeries. Nevertheless, some historians pointed out that the elite diabolical views – or in Cohn's words 'the other notion of a witch' – and the machinery of legitimate violence were necessary for the panics, too. Only if the accused could be made or tortured to tell stories according to demonological theories, of meeting accomplices in Sabbats, could the trials accumulate so that villages would be emptied. The witch hunt as an organised enterprise needed elite leadership, and even though the populace may have been willing to co-operate, for a long time it was not thought to be able to produce a persecution by itself.[30]

Since the 1970s numerous scholars have found that witchcraft trials were initiated by or needed the co-operation of whole communities and not just its elite members.[31] In the case of Valpuri, too, we see a record of an elite- led interrogation after an accusation made by a supposed member of a local elite, the local pastor. Only after that did the record refer to harm suffered by peasants. But how far did that reflect the initiatives in the trial? Before the High Court, Valpuri's case had been tried in the lower courts in the parish of Huittinen. Then, too, the pastor, supported by his maid, made the original accusation. During the trial, however, many villagers volunteered information on the harm Valpuri caused: making people ill, threatening to bring forth wolves if not given enough alms and even causing the death of a child. In all of the testimonies, even those made by the pastor, Valpuri's *maleficium* was a personal threat to the accusers, rather than abstract or targeted against the Crown and religion.[32] Were the neighbours here responding to pressure from the elites or were they using the state judicial machinery for their own purposes? Scholars have also noted that whereas state formation may have created new and tighter judicial machineries in Europe, the grip of central governments also served to moderate and control the excesses of local governments, as well as extra-legal popular justice.

irrational crazes nevertheless?

Irrationality is inherent in the term 'craze', as well as other epithets used to describe the witch trials, such as 'panics', 'psychosis', 'hysteria' or '*Massenwahns*' ('mass delusions') as Kurt Baschwitz described them. Those employing such terms also made the most of extreme examples of torture or seemingly 'absurd' aspects of the trials to highlight the sense of irrationality. For some the use of such terminology can been seen as a way of coping with the tragedy of persecution, but it is also a device for writers and scholars to distance themselves and their readers from the persecutors as well as to condemn the persecutions as a whole.[33]

Historians of the 1960s and 1970s made clear their disbelief in demons and witches flying to Sabbats and causing harm by supernatural means, and in the other features of the stereotype of conspirators. Cohn repeatedly acquitted the victims of the persecutions he investigated of the terrible crimes that formed the stereotypes of persecution.[34] Similar implications appear in the use of the word ‘victim’. Those who thought of a persecution of innocents saw the victims of the witch crazes and witch hunts in the accused and convicted, whereas many recent scholars have been interested in the victims of witchcraft, that is those who claimed damage from the witches and consequently feature in the trials as the accusers and witnesses. The interpretations saw the persecutions as labouring to find the accused guilty even against the better judgement of individual judges or other members of the courts. This has also produced a popular rhetoric of victimisation, of innocence employed by individuals who have felt themselves persecuted or threatened – or have wanted to appear so, from feminist and environmental activists to people publicly accused of various vices from political corruption to child abuse. Appropriating the ‘witch hunt’ serves to highlight innocence. The use of such a comparison often comes in for heavy criticism for being ill-founded, some exaggerating and some belittling the suffering caused to and by different parties. Nevertheless, they persist in the popular understanding and use of the history of witch trials.

The emphasis on irrationality, as well as the emphasis on the elites, was both an adoption from the earlier literature and a by-product of Trevor-Roper’s definition of what the important manifestation of the witch trials was: ‘the crazes’. If it did not include torture, the Sabbat and an escalation into a ‘panic’, if the accused were treated with legal caution, punished leniently or freed, it was not important. The effect of Cohn’s original interest in the mechanisms of persecution was similar. This is a notion that still influences a great deal of the present scholarship on witchcraft. Scholars whose approaches and interests are vastly different from Trevor-Roper’s still share his focus and see the major episodes as the most important kind of witchcraft and witch trials.[35]

By this definition, persecution became an inescapable machine of destruction, which secured its success and produced the evidence for its necessity by torture – every victim would be forced to tell a story to provide further evidence of the terrors of witchcraft. Many students have followed Trevor-Roper and Rossell Hope Robbins in illustrating the mechanisms of persecution by invoking the heart-breaking letter of the tortured burgomaster Johannes Junius (1628), who, when facing execution, tells his daughter how his confessions and the names of accomplices were extracted from him.[36] We could also refer again to Valpuri’s trial in Turku. If the record began with leading questions, they turned continuously more menacing as the interrogation went on. After a few more questions the record has a paragraph stating that:

> she was seriously told to confess whether or not she had been questioned many times both in the lower courts and in this High Court for her witchcraft and even been thrown

> into water by the executioner as a test, as the lower court records show. Finally she admitted this.
>
> Question: Why did she not sink even though her hands and feet were tied? Answer: I kept my mouth shut so I could not sink.
>
> Question: She had well been whipped in the pillory in Tyrvää and then been banished? She could not deny this.

At some point she was again admonished to tell the truth, 'because she had nothing before her but death for all the bad things she had done'. Her reply sounds quite as tragic and almost as articulate as Johannes Junius':

My death is yours to decide, good lords, many better persons than I have lost their heads. But one thing she new for sure, that before a drop of her blood falls to the ground, God will take her soul.[37]

Valpuri could not be made to confess, and in the end she was told to prepare for her death, for she would get what she deserved. The guards were told to take her to Turku Castle to be detained there – a harsh response not only considering the prison conditions but also the fact that imprisonment was often reserved for those who had a pending capital sentence. The serious warnings to tell the truth might be an indication that torture may have been applied or at least threatened, although it was strictly illegal. The allusions to the former use of violence may have seemed like a veiled threat of its new application. The final command to prepare for her death, despite her professed innocence, could be read as proof of the court's intention to convict her.

It is cases like this on which the interpretation of the courts' eagerness to convict is based. In many European courts this seems to have been a standard procedure. Lyndal Roper, for example, reads the trial records of the Augsburg magistrates as a discourse forced by the threat of torture.[38] There were cases where the careful examination of whether or not someone had done or tried to do some magical harm turned into 'crazes' that convicted on the slightest suspicion. Salem, perhaps, had such a character, although Miller's vocabulary of evil in his portrayal of the judges is a simplistic exaggeration.[39] The witch hunt instigated by Matthew Hopkins in England, for example, and the Swedish Blåkulla trials in Dalarna, Göta, Åland and Ostrobothnia, as well as many other local epidemics, share these features.[40] Much of the best-preserved and most easily accessible material is, of course, that which attracted most contemporary attention either in pamphlet literature or in the courts themselves. Those were usually the most sensational cases. This even applies to Valpuri's trial record: it has survived because it was published by a late eighteenth-century newspaper for the entertainment and self-gratification of 'enlightened' readers, a task which may have been best served by choosing the most 'irrational cases' for publication.[41]

The emphasis on the most extraordinary and extensive trials, designated as 'crazes', has attenuated since Trevor-Roper's thesis and the initial comparisons with the Holocaust. It is apparent now that most of the trials in Europe were of the milder, endemic type, with none of the excesses that Trevor-Roper felt important. These trial processes were moderate and meticulous according to all legal provisions. This reassessment of the severity and nature of the witch trials over the last three decades is illustrated by the rise and fall of the mythology of the 9 million supposed witch executions, as described by Wolfgang Behringer.[42] It was a number arrived at during the late eighteenth century through a few arbitrary calculations based on an assumption that all places and all decades of Christian history had experienced witch hunts of equal severity. The estimated number had been reduced in scholarly circles by Trevor-Roper's time, although he presented only the numbers involved in specific 'crazes', avoiding any grand total. Since then the number has fallen even further. The current estimates of British and continental trials range from 100,000 to 200,000, and the estimates of death sentences from 40,000 to 50,000. Where cases of minor witchcraft and 'superstition' – often confused and mixed in the courts with witchcraft and *maleficium* – have also been studied, death sentence rates are considerably lower; for example, in Finland only 10 per cent of the lower court sentences were death penalties. The remaining convictions were fines and lesser forms of corporal punishment (birching was common) but half of the accused were actually acquitted. In Sweden and Finland lower court sentences were automatically sent to the High Court for review, and the High Court seems to have mitigated a majority of the death penalties, mostly to fines or lesser corporal punishments.[43] This was the case with Valpuri, too. Despite her gloomy farewell at the end of the hearing, the High Court seems to have shown clemency towards Valpuri. She was still alive ten years later, though she was executed for some other crime in 1665.[44]

Considering the popular influence of Trevor-Roper's essay, his focus on the atypical mass trials and intellectual origins of the witch persecution, and neglect of the popular inspiration for the majority of witch trials, generated a distorted understanding of the early modern experience. Trevor-Roper responded irritably to such criticism: 'those critics who have censured me for not entering more sympathetically into the mental processes of the peasantry are barking up the wrong tree'.[45] He argued that the 'witch craze' was a separate phenomenon from 'mere witch-beliefs', and had much more important historical significance.

moralism and rationality

From their inception, histories of witch persecution have included a strong moral undercurrent. For Enlightenment writers, witch persecution was an example of the evils of religious bigotry and ‘superstition’. Today there are also pressures for historians not only to research and understand but also to moralise and condemn persecutions. As far as post-war historians of witchcraft were concerned, this need was heightened by the comparisons with recent persecutions. Consequently, as Trevor-Roper observed, there had been a great deal of reluctance among historians to take up such ‘disgusting subject[s], below the dignity of history’.[46] Even those who came after Trevor-Roper were aware of the dangers: explaining could be misinterpreted as excusing.[47]

The terms ‘witch craze’ and ‘witch hunt’ were used by post-war generations of scholars until the 1980s, as Joseph Klaits very bluntly put the matter in his introduction to *Servants of Satan,* to ‘connote an unfair judicial proceeding of the McCarthyite type, undertaken for cynical purposes’.[48] Moreover the finger pointed mostly at the Churches. For modern historians, accustomed to a modern western separation of religion and secular politics, the early modern Churches’ role in the witch persecution was an appalling display of violence and venality. Rossell Hope Robbins asserted, for example, that the witch persecution was ‘the official policy of the churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant’. ‘What makes witchcraft so repellent, and morally lower than fascism’, he suggested provocatively, was that ‘the clergy led the persecutions and condoned them in the name of Christianity’.[49] The Inquisition had for long had the worst reputation in this respect, in part due to several centuries of successful Protestant propagandist history.

Historians should have known better, of course. The modern western separation of religion and politics did not exist at the time of the witch trials. Religion and politics were not mutually exclusive but inseparable. Accordingly, the rationalist idea, dismissing the rhetoric of faith and belief as mere recourse to religion for political purposes, has attracted much criticism since the 1980s.[50] The Trevor-Roperian interpretations, however, should not be singled out for particular criticism in this respect. He, like his successors, was careful to point out that the persecuting elites were motivated by real religious zeal, sincere in their own faith and convinced of the existence of an opposing, dangerous, satanic culture.[51] They were not cynically blackening their perceived enemy, since as these elites believed they were on the side of right, it followed from their cosmology that the enemy must be evil. There are echoes of this dichotomy in historians' conceptions of human nature. While earlier generations of historians had seen humans as progressing from a stage of iniquity and ignorance, the twentieth-century post-war generation expressed doubts regarding societal progress, but not necessarily regarding fundamental human nature: failing miserably in their efforts to be good, humans were still not essentially evil.

Corrupt leadership has long been a strong moral theme in the histories and dramatisation of the witch craze, and it became even more so when the witch craze was compared to the twentieth-century persecutions. The dramatic appeal of this can be seen even in Miller's approach. *The Crucible* points an accusatorial finger at the local leaders in Salem and elite judges and their responsibility for the 'evil' that broke out.[52] Trevor-Roper seems to have felt the blame he was placing on his own kind when he claimed that the clergy, as the educated ideological leaders and the generators of new ideas, were responsible for the spread of the persecution as well as for its decline. For many of the established scholars of the 1960s, it was easier to identify with the elites than with the masses of the past.[53] Trevor-Roper took a great deal of trouble to state that the demonological theories of witchcraft, like all stereotypes of fear, were inextricably linked with the learned demonologists' native cosmology. Almost apologetically, he pointed out that a 'majority' of the early modern demonologists were 'philosophers in a wider field' who wrote upon demonology not necessarily because they had a special interest in it, but because they had to do so. Men who sought to express a consistent philosophy of nature could not exclude what was a necessary and logical, if unedifying extension of it.[54]

Not everyone was as merciful. The history of the 'witch craze' became a point of identification for many users of history and most of them identified with the victims of persecution rather than the persecutors. One of the most obvious examples was the radical feminists' stance on the witch trials. Witches were made a point of identification, as described in a later chapter in this book, an example of those who had fought and suffered the grip of patriarchy and misogyny throughout history. Radical feminists evocatively used the vocabulary of persecution. Writers like Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin named the witch craze a 'Women's Holocaust' or a 'gynocide'. It is no coincidence that Daly, too, identified the male historians of her time with the persecutors, accusing them even of continuing the gynocide as their interpretations of the witch craze seemed to hide the persecution of women. What Trevor-Roper and Cohn had interpreted as an elite fear of conspiracy against established society, Daly interpreted as a conspiracy of established male society against women. Both identifications were to crumble, as detailed research from the 1970s onwards made the witch trials look both more moderate and more complicated in nature, and thus less stereotypical.[55]

Historians have largely accepted their task as explaining the phenomena of the past instead of (or sometimes in addition to) passing judgements on them. There has certainly been reluctance in the last 15 years to equate witch persecution with Nazi genocide, at least in academic circles. There is no doubt that chronological proximity to persecutions affects the way they are analysed. Geoffrey Scarre, having written on both witchcraft as a historian and the Holocaust as a philosopher, offers the explanation that whereas the religious zeal that fed the witch trials is not present in our society (despite some newly awakened antagonism between some forms of Christianity and some forms of Islam), racism, which fed the Holocaust, persists.[56] The moral risk in the comparison, however, may be not in explaining – for it is not excusing – but in exaggerating or belittling the suffering of some and the guilt of others. There are also factual risks. Most of the explanations we now find credible for the witch trials have withdrawn from comparisons with any modern persecutions.

notes

1. See Barbara Schier, 'Hexenwahn und Hexenverfolgung. Rezeption und politische Zurichtung eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Themas im Dritten Reich', *Bayerisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde* (1990) 45–6; Wolfgang Behringer, 'Witchcraft Studies in Austria, Germany and Switzerland', in Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 69.

2. Trevor-Roper's 'The European Witch-Craze of the 16th and 17th centuries' was first published in 1967 in a collection of his essays called *Religion, Reformation and Social Change: The European Witch-Craze*, and republished on its own 'in slightly revised form' in 1969 by Pelican. The Pelican edition is used here because it is used more frequently by students of witchcraft and it has an illuminating foreword.

3. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975).

4. Geoffrey Scarre, 'Moral Responsibility and the Holocaust', in Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre (eds), *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 111–12.

5. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, pp. ix and xi (quotation). See also, for example, Hans von Hentig, *Die Strafe I: Frühformen und kulturgeschichtliche Zusammenhänge* (Berlin: Springer, 1954), pp. 193ff.

6. Cohn repeated similar features throughout *Europe's Inner Demons*; for example, pp. 1, 3–4, 6, 7, 17–18.

7. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, p. xiii.

8. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze*, pp. 52–3, 93. See also R. I. Moore, *The*

Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 90.

9. Kurt Baschwitz, *Hexen und Hexenprozesse: Die Geschichte eines Massenwahns und seiner Bekämpfung* (München: Rutten & Loening Verlag, 1963).

10. Here is a distinct reference to the supposedly torture-led witch hunts, where confession was the only way out. In Salem it really was a way out, for it was only those who confessed and turned to accusing others who were saved from the gallows. Arthur Miller, ‘Introduction’, in *Arthur Miller’s Collected Plays* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), pp. 39–47, quotation p. 40; Bernard Rosenthal, *The Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 204ff.

11. Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 40–4.

12. Stuart Clark, ‘Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft’, *Past and Present* 87 (1980) 98–127; Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 3–147.

13. Jan R. Veenstra, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon’s Contre les devineurs (1411)* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1997), p. 166.

14. Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 207ff.

15. *Åbo Tidningar*, No. 20, 18 May 1795. My translation. The alternation between the first- and third-person singular in the answers is from the newspaper original.

16. Citing catechism articles and churchgoing or praying as evidence in Finnish witch trials was rare but did occur.

17. *Åbo Tidningar*, 18 May 1795.

18. See Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990).

19. Per Anders Östling, *Blåkulla, Magi och Trolldomsprocesser. En Folkloristisk Studie av folkliga trosföreställningar och av Trollsomsprocesserna inom Svea Hovrätts jurisdiktion 1597–1720* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2002), and Jari Eilola, *Rajapinnoilla. Sallitun ja kielletyn märitteleminen 1600-luvun jälkipuoliskon noituus- ja taikuusta- pauksissa* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2003), p. 152, see even the Sabbat stories as popular creations. On other popular antisocial and invertive traits see, for example, Annabel Gregory, ‘Witchcraft, Politics and “Good Neighbourhood” in Early Seventeenth-Century Rye’, *Past and Present* 133 (1991) 30–66, and Raisa Maria Toivo, ‘Marking (Dis)Order: Witchcraft and the Symbolics of Hierarchy in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century Finland’, in Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt (eds), *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe* (Manchester:

Manchester University Press, 2004).

20. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, The Reformation and Social Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). The book was first published the year before as *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change*.

21. Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 901–4. The English version of *Economy and Society* first appeared in 1968 but most British and US academic historians and sociologists were familiar with Weber's ideas, both from the earlier translations of his various piecemeal works and from the German editions of the works.

22. See also Hentig, *Die Strafe I*, pp. 90ff.

23. Gerhard Schormann, *Der Krieg gegen die Hexen: Das Ausrottungsprogramm des Kurfürsten von Köln* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1991); Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933–1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975) – published in Germany as *Der Krieg gegen die Juden 1933–45* (Wiesbaden: Fourier Verlag, 1979).

24. Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 115–17. See also Thomas Becker, 'Hexenverfolgung in Kurköln', *AHVN* 195 (1992) 202–14.

25. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, p. 109. On the parallel with witches and earlier persecutions see pp. 35, 79.

26. The critique has been presented in, for example, Geoffrey Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 39–40. On later research see William Monter, 'Witch Trials in Continental Europe', in Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (eds), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials* (London: Athlone, 2002), pp. 10–12 (quotation).

27. Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts*, pp. 113, 117–19 (quotation).

28. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in South-Western Germany, 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972); E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).

29. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze*, p. 12; Rossel Hope Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959), p. 9.

30. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, pp. xii, 126ff., 252; Richard Kieckhefer,

European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture 1300–1500 (London: Routledge, 1976), pp. 16ff., 86–7, 105; Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours,* p. 404; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 5.

31. A summary of the still ongoing discussion of the *makt-stat* in Scandinavia. See, for example, Antti Kujala, *The Crown, the Nobility and the Peasants 1630–1713. Tax, Rent and Relations of Power* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2003), pp. 16–23.

32. *Åbo Tidningar*, 18 May 1795. On the lower court records see Marko Nenonen, *Valpuri Kyni – noitanainen* (undated), <www.chronicon.com/noita/valpurikyni.html>.

33. In this sense, considering the purpose of showing the persecution fantasies and stereotypes in their absurdity to the presumably western reader, the way Cohn began his book by describing the attitudes against early Christians is excellent. On excesses and obscurities see Klaits, *Servants of Satan,* p. 149. Antero Heikkinen, *Paholaisen liittolaiset. Noita- ja magiakäsityksiä ja -oikeudenkäyntejä Suomessa 1600-luvun jälkipuoliskolla* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1969), p. 230, includes a similar and often used story of a witches' salve that turned out to be the prison guard's boot grease. For similar stories during the McCarthy era see Eric Hobsbawn, *The Age of Extremes. A Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, [1994] 1995), p. 234.

34. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons.*

35. Again, Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze,* pp. 9, 12–13. On current scholarship see, for example, Lyndal Roper, *The Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 4–12. For a different approach see Allison Rowlands, *Witchcraft narratives in Germany: Rothenburg 1561–1652* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). For expressions presuming that witch trials were miscarriages of justice, where the judges laboured to convict instead of finding the truth see, for example, Schormann, *Der Krieg gegen die Hexen,* pp. 18–19; James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996) p. 7. Even when Robin Briggs, in *Witches and Neighbors* (pp. 399–400), argues that the majority of witch trials might not have been of the kind of the crazes, his wording 'the persecution was a relative failure' makes one think that something else was aimed at.

36. For example, Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze,* p. 84; Jeffrey Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980); Klaits, *Servants of Satan,* pp. 128–31; also, in books of rather different emphasis, see Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers,* p. 6, and Marko Nenonen and Timo Kervinen, *Synnin palkka on kuolema* (Helsingissä: Otava, 1994), pp. 267–70.

37. The wording was not Valpuri's own, but the scribe had translated it. Still, the content of the reply seems articulate for the uneducated peasant/beggar woman that Valpuri was. Sometimes the way in which Valpuri's trial mirrors later fiction makes one wonder if the editors of *Åbo Tidningar* took some liberties with the printing of the High Court record. The actual events and charges, as well as Valpuri's grounds for defence can be

confirmed, however, from the extant lower court records.

38. Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994).

39. Arthur Miller, Introduction, pp. 42–3.

40. See Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchfinder: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy* (London:

John Murray, 2005); Bengt Ankarloo, *Trolldomsproceserna i Sverige. Rättshistorisk Bibliotek* (Stockholm: Nordiska Bokhandeln, 1971), pp. 67–76, 231–62; Per Sörlin, *Trolldoms- och vidskepelseprocesserna i Göta Hovrätt 1635–1754* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993), pp. 47–65; Bengt Ankarloo, 'Witch trials in Northern Europe 1450–1700', in Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark and William Monter (eds), *Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Witchcraft and Magic in the Period of the Witch Trials* (London: Athlone, 2002), pp. 78–80.

41. On similar points concerning the material see Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London: Routledge, 1999); Marko Nenonen, 'Historiankirjoittajien Paholainen, Noitavainojen uusi kuva', in Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo (eds), *Paholainen, moituus ja magia – kristinuskon kääntöpuoli. Pahuuden kuvasto vanhassa maailmassa* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2004). This also points out that research on the witch trials has overemphasised the continental Sabbat trials. Nenonen also sees other and less edifying reasons than
the mere fact that some source materials have survived better and some are easier to use than others.

42. Wolfgang Behringer, 'Neun Millionen Hexen. Entstehung, Tradition und Kritik eines populären Mythos', *GWU* 49 (1998) 664–85; Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts*, p. 157.

43. The current European numbers can be read in any textbook. See, for example, Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1987), pp. 19–21; Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours*, p. 8. The figure of 200,000 trials is an estimate by Nenonen, based on the fact that minor witch trials have in many areas not been counted in the statistics. See Marko Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus ja noitavainot Ala-Satakunnan, Pohjois-Pohjanmaan ja Viipurin Karjalan maaseudulla 1620–1700* (Finnish Literature Society, 1992), pp. 376–7.

44. The original records of Valpuri's High Court interrogation or decisions were lost in the fire of Turku in 1828.

45. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze*, p. 9. 46. Trevor Roper, *The European Witch-Craze*, p. 7. 47. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons.*

48. Klaits, *Servants of Satan*, p. 3.

49. Robbins, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, p. 17.

50. This critique has been levelled by, for example, Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History:*

Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations (London: Routledge, 1996), at students of English witchcraft, as well as many scholars after her. As an example of the difficulties, however, see the trouble Sharpe takes in stating his (and his readers' presumed) disbelief in witchcraft: Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, p. 7. .

51. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, pp. 254–5. Cohn's descriptions of some of the earlier persecutions, and especially those concerning the Knights Templar, are different in this account; Klaits, *Servants of Satan*, p. 61.

52. Arthur Miller, 'The Crucible', in *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, pp. 225–9, 234, 239, 242–3.

53. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze*, p. 100.

54. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze*, pp. 106–7 (quotation).

55. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology. The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press,

1978). On feminist readings of witches see Purkiss, *The Witch in History*.

56. Geoffrey Scarre, 'Moral Responsibility and the Holocaust', pp. 112–13. He also claims, perhaps quite rightly, that we tend to feel more personal sympathy for those to whom we feel close than for those who just appear as numbers in a chart – and that we generally know more about the lives of the victims of the Holocaust than those of the witch trials.