Witchcraft and The Papacy in Renaissance Europe

Jessica Racanelli

The term occult was first used in 1545, and alluded to apprehension beyond the range of empirical knowledge. Occult sciences, such as witchcraft, were concerned with producing illusionary effects beyond the natural powers of humankind. Witchcraft incorporated the idea of a diabolic pact with and the intervention of evil spirits to invoke death, natural disaster, or bring impotence upon enemies. After the “Dark Ages” and during the centuries of dynamic intellectual experimentation — the Renaissance and the Reformation — Europeans engaged in a systematic persecution against men and women believed to be witches. Witchcraft was viewed as a competing alternative to the dominant religious belief of Catholicism. As a result, the Catholic Church believed it was their moral responsibility to actively seek out witches and suppress further development of this cult.

Traditionally, the Church responded to competing religious beliefs with teachings and faithful observance of the sacraments; however, with the emergence of religious reform movements and rapidly expanding cults, ordinary devotional methods often seemed ineffective. Instead, a stronger, more dramatic approach was deemed necessary to combat the growing issues within European society. Consequently, the Roman Inquisition was established. This article will demonstrate that the Roman Inquisition was a campaign to religiously stigmatize Protestantism and emerging mystic groups in an effort to preserve Catholicism as the predominant denomination of Christianity, and that the emergence of Enlightenment ideals, such as personal freedom and individual rights, led to greater societal interest in competing religious beliefs. This fascination in emerging forms of religious expression marked the end of the Roman Inquisition as an intolerable suppression of individual rights.

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Church Responses: Excommunication and Papal Authority

From the late thirteenth to the late fifteenth century, ecclesiastical pronouncements and judicial decisions reflected both the attempt to preserve Catholic doctrines and an increasing awareness of new dangers. Magic and witchcraft were seen as subversions of God’s will for the world, as they produced acts resulting in an adversarial defiance and contraction of the natural world that God ordained, and increased interest in formal demonology resulted in a wide range of treatises on witchcraft. In 1258, Pope Alexander IV issued the first papal letter that initiated a potent Inquisition to deal with witchcraft that “manifestly savored of heresy.”3 As late as 1310, the Council of Treves proposed the withdrawal of the sacraments from those convicted of witchcraft, and, for those who remained unrepentant, excommunication. In Catholic belief, the Holy Communion preserves the supernatural life of the soul by giving the communicant strength to resist temptation and weaken the power of concupiscence; it reinforces the ability of free will to withstand the assaults of the devil. Excommunication naturally supposes a grave offence and is the most serious penalty that the Church can inflict on an individual, as it is the spiritual condemnation of a member of the Catholic Church. When an individual commits an act of heresy, the Church believes a spiritual separation occurs due to the nature of the act. Therefore, excommunication is intended to act as both a warning and formal proclamation of exclusion from Christian society.4

Increased occurrences of excommunication triggered a widespread response from Catholic missionaries and Christianizing conquests in attempt to preserve Catholic unity and belief. This is predominantly visible in Pope Paul IV’s decree Cum Ex Apostolatus. Pope Paul IV (1555-59) was the first pope to deal directly with the witchcraft dilemma. Cum Ex Apostolatus was issued during the Council of Trent in February 1559, and it reasserted the Pope’s authority and validity in cases of heresy and apostasy. The tone of Cum Ex Apostolatus reflects the doctrine of papal infallibility, and provides insight into how papal authorities viewed their role in witch

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4 Rainer Decker, Witchcraft and the Papacy: An account drawing on the formerly secret records of the Roman Inquisition (United States: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 32.
trials and crimes of heresy; it can be seen in this document that Pope Paul IV expanded the number of crimes punishable by death and the scope of heresy. This document notes that denial of the faith, either temporal or spiritual, must be addressed thoroughly by the Roman Pontiff and Catholic Church, as evident in the following quote:

We are bound to be diligently watchful after the manner of a vigilant Shepherd and to ensure most carefully that certain people who consider the study of the truth beneath them should be driven out of the sheepfold of Christ and no longer continue to disseminate error from positions of authority. We refer in particular to those who in this age, impelled by their sinfulness and supported by their cunning, are attacking with unusual learning and malice the discipline of the orthodox Faith, and who, moreover, by perverting the import of Holy Scripture, are striving to rend the unity of the Catholic Church and the seamless tunic of the Lord.5

During this period, a denial of Catholic dogma appeared as a denial of the papacy and its validity. Challenges to papal authority posed a problem for the Catholic Church, as it could lead to challenges against the whole Church, which is why officials responded to external threats such as heresy so harshly.

**Church Responses: The Roman Inquisition**

The function of the Roman Inquisition was to suppress all heretics’ rights and deprive them of their estate and assets, which subsequently became property of the Catholic treasury.6 The main forum for condemning heretics was trial, where they were offered the opportunity to deny the existence of witches.7 The Roman Inquisition was a means for the Church to declare its authority and demand obedience from its followers, and illustrates the Catholic Church’s large-scale use of violence to punish heretics and ensure religious control. Such punishment methods included lengthy imprisonment, torture-induced confessions, public executions, and confiscation of family estates. Inquisitors believed that they were guardians of the integrity of the Christian faith, thus making them obliged to combat all forms of heresy.8

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7 Thomsett, 198.
8 Ibid.
A major goal of the Roman Inquisition was to eliminate acts of heresy and rising counter-Catholic influences, such as Protestantism and mystic movements. An examination of the Society of Jesus — more commonly known as Jesuits — established in 1540, illustrates the Church’s dedication to eliminating sources of political and moral dissent. The Jesuits answered directly to the Pope and dedicated their efforts to combating heresy. They made conversion their main priority, especially the conversion of those who had joined Protestant sects. Furthermore, the Inquisition’s campaign to eliminate heresy subjected many groups to papal intervention since the Catholic Church often confused religious movements with movements of witchcraft. The Church aimed to keep the efforts of the Inquisition alive by vilifying a variety of groups, such as the Waldensians. This is seen in the 1440 papal bull, Ad Perpetua Rei Memoriam, where Pope Eugene IV claimed Waldensians to be witches. In addition, in his letter to the Inquisitor Pontus Fougeyron, Eugene IV writes, “among many heretics there are found also many Christian and Jewish diviners, invokers of demons, bewitchers.” Therefore, the underlying goal of the Inquisition was to eliminate non-Catholic influence and maintain the ideological purity of the Christendom. The Church was able to achieve this goal by recruiting Jesuits, labelling predominant religious denominations and groups, such as Protestants, as witches, and suppressing their influence in the Papal States.

Another way the Catholic Church explicitly addressed their concern of competing forces was through the treatise *Malleus Maleficarum* (“The Hammer of Witches”). This treatise gave full papal approval for the Inquisition to move against accused witches, and enforce necessary methods to abolish them. The publication of the 1486 document enabled the Catholic Church to stress urgently and cogently the case for vigorous prosecution and punishment. The “Hammer of Witches” became the first encyclopedia of witch-beliefs, and was constantly cited by Catholics in

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9 Thomsett, 201.
10 Thomsett, 201.
support of its manifesto. This treatise exhaustively analyzed the entire problem of witch-beliefs
and meticulously set out the methods by which witches could be found, convicted, and executed
during witch trials.\textsuperscript{14} It supported Inquisitors in their efforts to abolish competing religious
practices, and was widely accepted and utilized due to the religious turmoil of the period. It took
advantage of the increasing intolerance of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe,
where the Protestant and Catholic sects, pitted against one another, attempted to maintain the
purity of the faith. The \textit{Malleus Maleficarum}, not only promulgated prosecution of an ominous
practice, but also silenced all opposition with its rigour and irrefutable authority.

Despite efforts to suppress competing religious practices, however, the Church had
difficulty enforcing its doctrines outside the Papal State. The Inquisitional tribunals outside of the
Papal States relied on secular authority to enforce their activities, including executions.\textsuperscript{15} With the
rise of nationalistic movements which focused on individual rights, the Church and Inquisition
became obsolete and enabled movements such as the Enlightenment to flourish. The emergence
of Enlightenment ideals in the 17\textsuperscript{th}-18\textsuperscript{th} centuries, such as personal freedom and individual rights,
rended the Inquisition obsolete. Traditionally, Church beliefs and dogma were centred upon
faith, as the clergy were among the few literate groups.\textsuperscript{16} This additional knowledge enabled the
Church to wield substantial power and control over the Papal States. Revolutionary ideas
promoting the recognition of individual rights in the 17\textsuperscript{th}-18\textsuperscript{th} century, however, resulted in a
significant power shift. Political theorists such as John Locke and John-Jacques Rousseau
expressed these ideas in treatises, which later inspired national constitutions. The works of both
Locke and Rousseau urged for the individual rights of humankind and the concept of a “social
contract.” Rousseau saw the social contract as a means to establish legitimate political authority
in society. In an ideal social contract everyone was free, as they possess and forfeit the same

\textsuperscript{14} Heinrich Krämer and Jacob Sprenger, “Malleus Maleficarum,” in \textit{Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A
\textsuperscript{15} Thomsett, 201.
\textsuperscript{16} Thomsett, 212.
number of rights and duties.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, this led to the denial of Church authority and an overriding demand for separation of Church and state. The idea that a person could be called a heretic for individual beliefs went against Enlightenment ideals, resulting in the diminution of Church power and the Inquisition becoming obsolete.

The Enlightenment also led to fundamental changes in individual temperaments toward and perceptions of the Church’s role in society. No longer did individuals accept blind faith in the Church as an acceptable premise for political control over the state. Further Enlightenment ideals about religion are echoed in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant questioned the role of religion in society; he believed that an adherence to a fixed set of doctrines prevented “further enlightenment to mankind forever.”\textsuperscript{18} Kant believed it was immoral for one generation to impose its beliefs on the next, because change in opinion was required for social progress.\textsuperscript{19} He believed that the main point of the Enlightenment was “man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage- primarily in religious matters,” and that religion was “not only the most harmful but the most dishonourable” to the Enlightenment cause.\textsuperscript{20} Kant felt religious doctrines that prevented public debate or criticism are wrong and result in religious immaturity.\textsuperscript{21} Church control over doctrine made the institution a political force, thus resulting in the limitation of personal reason. As a result of these revolutionary ideas, the entire outlook of the Christian world transformed. The emergence of these Enlightenment ideals led to greater social progress and marked the end of the Church oligarchy and its ability oppress heretics. Some scholars argue that Enlightenment ideals, such as the desire for personal freedom and individual rights, mark an emerging period of tolerance. Enlightenment figures such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant are main players in the historical debate for toleration and advocacy for humanity. In his book \textit{John Locke, Toleration and Early}

\textsuperscript{19} Thomsett, 212.
\textsuperscript{20} Kant, \textit{What is Enlightenment}.
\textsuperscript{21} Thomsett, 212.
Enlightenment Culture, historian John Marshall argues that figures such as Locke and Kant advocated for human tolerance and civility during a period when magisterial force promoted ignorance and violence. The historical argument for toleration is further supported in the work of Joseph Laconte, who argues that Locke and Kant’s outward defence for religious tolerance “smoulders” the beliefs of the persecuting prelates. Enlightenment philosophers argued for political liberalism and religious toleration, thus rendering the foundation (i.e. Catholic dominance and superiority) of the Roman Inquisition obsolete.

The Roman Inquisition was intended as a repressive approach to eliminate sources of moral and political dissent. It relied heavily on the stigmatization of individuals to obtain its main goals and fulfill its needs. Specifically, the Roman Inquisition focused on maintaining the ideological dominance and influence of Christendom and undermined competing, non-Catholic denominations in Europe. The collapse of what had been noted as a major intellectual and social force in the life of Europeans for three centuries occurred so rapidly that few individuals were aware of the momentous changes. In a society undergoing accelerated and fundamental alterations, almost all new major intellectual movements strayed from an active fear of and belief in witches and the widespread, demonic activities of Satan. Defenders of witchcraft beliefs were not silent; on the contrast, the cumulative impact of new ideas on natural philosophy and theology undermined the conceptions, traditions, and authorities upon which witchcraft had stood. By the seventeenth century, new patterns of social organization altered and eliminated many of the social pressures which contributed to the emergence of many witch scares. This led to the eventual loss of Church power to inflict capital punishment upon or imprison accused heretics. As a result, the Church was encouraged to make changes in their thought, organization, and dogma. This is evident through the Vatican Councils and its promotion of the renewal of Catholic dogma in a modern era.

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Bibliography

Primary documents


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Secondary documents


