

Witchcraft in the Middle Ages and Its Impact Today

Joe Early

Christianity has a long history of humans attempting to use magic against God. Magic took the forms of divination, necromancy, the casting of spells or charms, and the interpretation of omens. The practitioner—called witch or sorcerer—was perceived to stand second only to demons.¹ Indeed, as this article will show, unjustly labelling certain women as witches eventually became a tool for silencing women.

In the early centuries following the NT era, witchcraft was not understood as magic performed by a human agent. Rather, a demon was believed to take control of a person and use them to perform the act.

In the Old and New Testaments, witches were denounced as evil. Witches were condemned: “Do not allow a sorceress to live” (Exod 22:18 NIV); “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft” (Deut 18:10 NIV). The myth of Lilith in the medieval *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, based on the first account of creation in Genesis, portrays her as a sex demon or witch. The name “Lilith” is mentioned in Isaiah 34:14: “Wildcats shall meet with hyenas; goat-demons shall call to each other; there also Lilith shall repose and find a place to rest” (NRSVue).² In the NT, Galatians 5:20 warns against witchcraft (*pharmakeia*).

Within the wider Greco-Roman world, with cultural nuances, a witch was perceived in the same way as in the biblical text. In the early centuries following the NT era, witchcraft was not understood as magic performed by a human agent. Rather, a demon was believed to take control of a person and use them to perform the act. Representative church fathers who held this interpretation include Hippolytus,³ Tertullian,⁴ Augustine,⁵ and John Chrysostom.⁶

Before the eleventh century, witchcraft was often confused with traditional pagan practices or with medicine (*pharmakeia*). The first “witches” were often women who possessed a deep understanding of nature and herbal medicine. These “wise women” provided natural cures which medical practitioners could not explain. As long as these healers were believed to be using their power for good, they were left alone. Emperor Charlemagne (800–814) even protected them and ordered the death penalty for anyone who killed a witch.⁷

In the first millennium, as the church sought to christianize Europe, nature worship was forbidden. The church viewed such practitioners as lunatics or as pagans.⁸ The worship of spirits that inhabited trees and streams was considered ignorant practice but not heretical. Further, according to the *Canon Episcopi* (ca. 900), witchcraft did not exist. So-called witches were either dreaming

or mad. However, if it was believed the devil was involved, these beliefs demanded immediate action: “Bishops and their officials must labor with all their strength to uproot thoroughly from their parishes the pernicious art of sorcery and malfeasance invented by the devil, and if they find a man or woman follower of this wickedness, to eject them foully disgraced from the parishes.”⁹

The church of the Late Middle Ages (1300–1492) was suspicious of lay involvement in religion. Lay movements, such as the Waldensians and the Cathars, were prominent targets. Because women were permitted to serve as ministers in these groups, their female members were often labeled witches and accused of having given their allegiance to the devil.¹⁰ In cases where the priest, sacraments, confession, and patriarchal hierarchy were challenged, such activity was ruled heretical. However, as late as 1258, Pope Alexander IV (1185–1261) forbade the Inquisition from persecuting witches unless they were charged with heresy.¹¹

In the thirteenth century, witchcraft began to lose its connections with wise women and natural healers. By the fourteenth century, witches were considered the devil’s accomplices. The Franciscans and Dominicans argued that witchcraft was heresy because it involved making a pact with the devil. In 1398, the Inquisition was given jurisdiction over cases of witchcraft.¹²

During the High (1000–1300) and Late Middle Ages, women were accused of witchcraft four times more than men.¹³ Women were midwives at a time when infant mortality rates were high, and these deaths were often attributed to witchcraft.¹⁴ The extraordinarily high number of women being accused of witchcraft was the direct result of the church’s belief system that women were more susceptible to evil than men.¹⁵ All this led to the gendered definition of a witch as female.¹⁶

The Black Death of the fourteenth century killed up to two-thirds of Europe’s population. Atrocities marked the Hundred Years’ War between England and France. Islamic warriors were slowly closing in on the remnants of the Eastern Empire. The “Little Ice Age” led to crop failures, widespread starvation, and increased crime. With the rise of commercialization, trade, and the emergence of the middle class, women began to join guilds and enter the workforce. Their economic status improved. With commercialization came regional migration. These newcomers were often seen as outsiders. If the community suddenly suffered adversity, the newcomers were blamed. Moreover, the rise of the middle class disrupted the traditional economic structure. In a period of such turmoil, a scapegoat was needed and found: the witch.

In the late fifteenth century, a Dominican friar named Heinrich Kramer (1430–1505) petitioned Pope Innocent VIII (1484–1492) to allow the Inquisition to investigate rumors of witchcraft in Germany. In response, Innocent issued the *Summis Desiderantes* on December 5, 1484:

It has indeed lately come to Our ears, not without afflicting Us with bitter sorrow, that in some parts of Northern Germany, as well as in the provinces, townships, territories, districts, and dioceses of Mainz, Cologne, Trèves, Salzburg, and Bremen, many persons of both sexes, unmindful of their own salvation and straying from the Catholic Faith, have abandoned themselves to devils, incubi and succubi, and by their incantations, spells, conjurations, and other accursed charms and crafts, enormities and horrid offences, have slain infants yet in the mother's womb, as also the offspring of cattle, have blasted the produce of the earth, the grapes of the vine, the fruits of the trees, nay, men and women, beasts of burthen, herd-beasts, as well as animals of other kinds, vineyards, orchards, meadows, pasture-land, corn, wheat, and all other cereals . . .¹⁷

Innocent proceeded to approve the Inquisition:

Wherefore We, as is Our duty, being wholly desirous of removing all hindrances and obstacles by which the good work of the Inquisitors may be let and tarried, as also of applying potent remedies to prevent the disease of heresy and other turpitudes diffusing their poison to the destruction of many innocent souls, since Our zeal for the Faith especially incites us, lest that the provinces, townships, dioceses, districts, and territories of Germany, which We had specified, be deprived of the benefits of the Holy Office thereto assigned, by the tenor of these presents in virtue of Our Apostolic authority We decree and enjoin that the aforesaid Inquisitors be empowered to proceed to the just correction, imprisonment, and punishment of any persons, without let or hindrance, in every way as if the provinces, townships, dioceses, districts, territories, yea, even the persons and their crimes in this kind were named and particularly designated in Our letters.¹⁸

**Scholars estimate that as many as
eighty-five percent of those accused
of witchcraft were women.**

Kramer and James Sprenger (ca. 1435–1495) wrote *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches") in 1486 and included *Summis Desiderantes* in the introduction. This was the most authoritative book on witchcraft produced by the church. No book did more to associate witchcraft with women and promote the witch hysteria of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It cited the Church Fathers, the Old and New Testaments, Cato (95–46 BC), and Seneca (4 BC–AD 65). It also contained generalized attacks on women. The *Malleus* explained why women were more likely to practice witchcraft than men:

When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil . . . I have found a woman more bitter than death, and a good woman subject to carnal lust. They are more impressionable than men and more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit . . . They have slippery tongues . . . Since they are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves in witchcraft. They are feebler both in mind and body. It is not surprising that they should come more under the spell of witchcraft. As regarding

intellect or the understanding of spiritual things, they seem to be of a different nature than men . . . Women are intellectually like children . . . And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, the rib of the breast which is bent in the contrary direction to a man . . . And since through the first defect in their intelligence, they are always more prone to abjure the faith, so through their second defect of inordinate passions, they search for, brood over and inflict various vengeance, either by witchcraft or some other means. Wherefore it is no wonder that so great a number of witches exist in this sex . . . Women have weaker memories, and it is a natural vice in them not to be disciplined, but to follow their own impulses without any sense of what is due . . . She is a liar by nature . . . Let us consider her gait, posture and habit, in which she is vanity of vanities . . . Woman is a wheedling and secret enemy. For the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils.¹⁹

Sprenger brought a millennium's worth of religious misogyny to the *Malleus*. J. A. Phillips summarizes his arguments:

[Woman] is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations. She is deceitful, with a "slippery tongue," "a liar by nature." She is naturally credulous and impressionable, therefore, "quicker to waver in her faith, and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of all witchcraft." Since women are "feebler both in mind and body," they have weak memories, are undisciplined, impulsive, and particularly dangerous when given authority over anything. The authors' conclusion is a testimony to the strength and tenacity of the blending of the stories of Eve and Pandora: "Beautiful to look upon, contaminating to the touch, and deadly to keep"; "a wheedling and secret enemy."²⁰

The *Malleus* linked women's sexuality and witchcraft to devil worship. Witchcraft had its basis in carnal lust.²¹ The devil could take on a form that was sexually attractive to women,²² as evidenced by Eve's capitulation to the serpent. What is more, women were so lustful by nature that they were not strong enough to allay Satan's advances. They were susceptible to becoming Satan's lovers and worshipping him. The *Malleus* then stated that these witches had power over men via sex. Men were largely immune to the temptations of witchcraft because Christ was incarnated as male.²³ However, witches could make men potent, impotent, or even kill them through sex. Sometimes they physically stole their masculinity: "Witches who in this way sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn."²⁴ Another belief was that a demon—a succubus—would take on the form of a woman, have sex with a man, and collect his semen. The demon would then take the form of a man and impregnate the witch. The child of this illicit act was a demon.²⁵

Scholars estimate that as many as eighty-five percent of those accused of witchcraft were women.²⁶ The accused tended to be marginalized women such as widows, eccentrics, the poor, and those living on the outskirts of the community.²⁷ Others were women of means who lived independent of male authority. They were blamed for spoiled food, bad harvests, and dead livestock.²⁸ In

these times of high infant mortality, the *Malleus* accused midwives of using witchcraft to kill babies. If a child was born with a physical deformity, a midwife's pact with the devil was often to blame.²⁹

In regions where the Inquisition gathered strength, people accused of witchcraft were forced to confess under torture. Angela of Toulouse (1230–1275) was accused of having sex with an incubus and producing a baby that was part wolf and snake. After being tortured, she was burned at the stake.³⁰

Few people in the twenty-first century believe in witchcraft as it was defined in the Middle Ages. However, the idea of heresy as a tool to enforce male superiority in matters of faith remains. How does one determine what or who is orthodox and who or what is heretical?

An accused witch would first be stripped and shaved so that her body could be examined. It was considered a sign of witchcraft if a woman had any birthmarks, moles, or blemishes. To eliminate any doubt, the alleged witch was asked to confess. Under physical duress, the accused would describe their participation in the witch's sabbath, black Masses, in night flying, and in the casting of spells.³¹ If the accused refused to confess, it was believed the devil was behind her resistance. In Europe, she was often burned or drowned. In America, she was hanged.³²

In Europe, witch persecution was at its height from the mid-sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century. The most widespread witch hunts occurred in the Holy Roman Empire. The Spanish, Roman, and Portuguese Inquisitions rejected the *Malleus*. They were more concerned with heretics and with *conversos*, Jews and Muslims who had converted to Catholicism under duress. England and Scotland participated in witch hunts but did not permit torture. They used witch trials instead.³³

Witch hunts were not limited to the Catholic Church. Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) held that witches should be burned as heretics. While it is doubtful he believed it to be true, Henry VIII of England (1509–1547) accused Anne Boleyn (1501–1536) of witchcraft, or rather, of bewitching him.³⁴ A firm believer in witchcraft, King James VI of Scotland (later King James I of England, 1603–1625) wrote *Daemonologie* (1597),³⁵ which later empowered Matthew Hopkins (1620–1647), better known as the Witch Hunter General, to torture hundreds of women. The Salem Witch Trials of 1692 and the treatment of Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643) are defining events in the history of the Puritans who settled New England. The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, with their emphasis on reason, contributed to the end of the era of witch hunts. The last known witch burning was in Switzerland in 1782. According to one estimate, between fifty thousand and one million accused witches were put to death between 1450 and 1750—the majority of whom were women.³⁶

Few people in the twenty-first century believe in witchcraft as it was defined in the Middle Ages. However, the idea of heresy as a tool to enforce male superiority in matters of faith remains. How does one determine what or who is orthodox and who or what is heretical? Within Catholicism, the pope and the magisterium make the decision, based on church tradition. Though the terms “witch” or “sorceress” are not frequently used today, women still cannot be ordained, and their roles within the church remain highly constrained. There can be no doubt that the hundreds of years of church tradition that have labeled women as being lustful, weak-minded, and conspiring with the devil remain in residue. Turning back centuries of teaching and indoctrination is not easy. In this regard, orthodoxy can lock women into their traditional subservient position. The equivalent of a heretic, therefore, might be a woman striving to do more in the church than years of decrees and canon law permit.

Within many Protestant denominations, such as Southern Baptists, women are viewed as orthodox if they do not attempt to take on leadership roles in the home and church. These compliant women are often known as “women of God” or as displaying “biblical womanhood.” If women do step out of these roles, their behaviour is viewed as unbiblical and described as “haughty,” “pretentious,” and even “heretical.” These descriptors, one could argue, are today's equivalent of the descriptor, “witch.”

Secondly, Christianity, in its worst form as a religion, has been used to control people. Fear has been a primary tactic for keeping the faithful obedient. The witch-hunting era was a time when people were religious and had low life expectancy. Their hope for the future was in a heaven, the entry into which was mediated by the church. Witch-hunting was a demonstration of the power of the church to pronounce the verdict on one's eternal destiny—heaven or hell. The church's use of power to induce fear, and thereby to control, is not unfamiliar in the present day. Fear can also be good. We are told to work out our salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12–13 NIV). This is a healthy fear of a God who loves us and saves us. These are two different kinds of fear. One is good and honors God, and the other is coercive and employs God as a tool to establish control.

Thirdly, men have always been the gatekeepers of the church in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. They have often baptized theology with superstition and misogyny and used it to keep women in line. The church in the Medieval era did not want the world to change. It was the most powerful institution in the world—it could call kings to kneel before it. When women showed extraordinary spiritual gifts, such as the mystics did, the church often rid itself of them by cloistering them. If not for the preserved writings of mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), and Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), their extraordinary experiences in spirituality may have been lost to history. If these women were not locked away from the world, the Catholic Church would well have tried them for witchcraft. In the modern era, talented women with gifts that can be given to God continue to be “cloistered.”

The age and the practices of witch-hunting, it would appear, are not entirely past.

Notes

1. A witch or sorcerer is identified as the same entity. They allegedly gained supernatural powers not granted by God or angels for their own motives. A demon is an alleged evil supernatural being most often portrayed as a follower or servant of Satan.
2. References to Lilith in this passage can also be found in NRSV, CEB, ISV, and many others.
3. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies. Book VI*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Christian Literature Publishing, 1886) 74. Hereafter cited as ANF.
4. Tertullian *Apology*, ANF: 3:23, 36.
5. Augustine, *The City of God*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Christian Literature Publishing, 1887) 374. Hereafter cited as NPF.
6. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Timothy*, NPF 13: Homily 12, 444.
7. Paul Edward Dutton, ed., *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (University of Toronto Press, 2004) 44–45.
8. Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 44–45.
9. Gratian, *Decretum*, C. 26 q. 5 (Canon Episcopi), in *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Emil Friedberg, vol. 1 (Tauchnitz, 1879); <https://websiteofahistoricalpolymath.wordpress.com/2018/04/29/canon-episcopi/>.
10. Julia O'Faolain and Lauren Martines, eds., *Not in God's Image* (Harper and Row, 1973) 207.
11. Pope Alexander IV, *Quod super nonnullis*, papal letter (Dec 13, 1258).
12. Joseph Hansen, ed., *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Carl Georgi, 1901) 2–3.
13. Barbara MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in the Christian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Fortress, 2006) 66.
14. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) 260.
15. Kathleen M. Crowther, *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) 48.
16. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Pilgrim, 1989) 36.
17. Innocent VIII, *Summis desiderantes affectibus* (Rome, 1484), <https://pages.uoregon.edu/dluebke/Witches442/SummisDesiderantes.htm>.
18. Innocent VIII, *Summis desiderantes affectibus* (Rome, 1484).
19. Henrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (Dover, 1971) 41–47.
20. J. A. Phillips, *The History of an Idea: Eve* (Harper and Row, 1984) 70. Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 41–47.
21. Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 47.
22. The belief that demons could have sex with humans is found in early Jewish thought and taken over by Christians.
23. Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds., *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (HarperCollins, 1977) 118.
24. Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 121.
25. Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 21–28.
26. Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*, 119.
27. Brown and Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, 36.
28. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern*, 258.
29. Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 140.
30. Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity: From 1000 to the Reformation* (Orbis, 2001) 2:216.
31. Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 218.
32. Brown and Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, 37.
33. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern*, 268–69.
34. G. W. Bernard, *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions* (Yale University Press, 2010) 98.
35. James was the King of Scotland at the time. With his ascension to the English throne in 1603, England became more aggressive in persecuting accused witches.
36. Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*, 116.



Joe Early is Director of Research and Creative Scholarship and Professor of Church History at Campbellsville University. He has authored nine books, two manuals, and numerous journal articles. His latest book is *Because of Eve: Historical and Theological Survey of the Subjugation of Women in the Christian Tradition*.

Capacity Builders for Women's Biblical Equality

Simplify giving with automatic monthly donations.

CBE's monthly partners receive:

- A free digital or printed book every Spring.
- An invitation to donor gatherings during CBE's conferences.

Join the CBE team of monthly Capacity Builders for Women's Biblical Equality at cbe.today/recurring. Or scan this QR code.



CBE
INTERNATIONAL

Designate your monthly donations for one of the following needs or let us know if there is another amount you would like to give.



\$150/mo.

Grow CBE Online Resources

\$150 or more per month

Grows CBE's free online multimedia resources that change lives.



\$125/mo.

Advocate for Mutuality

\$125 or more per month

Builds global partnerships to advocate for biblical mutuality.



\$75/mo.

Publish CBE Resources

\$75 or more per month

Publishes transformative resources distributed worldwide.



\$50/mo.

Promote Biblical Mutuality

\$50 or more per month

To be used where most needed to advance biblical mutuality.