

The Conflict Perspective: Witch-Hunts and Women's Roles

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In the Chapter 10 we discussed the fact that racial prejudice is often caused by deeper economic conflicts between groups and is then justified on religious terms. Obviously, both sexes are represented in each social class, ethnic group, and religious organization in the Western world. Nonetheless, Marxian conflict theory can be useful in understanding religious expressions of sexism. When social tension and conflict are at a peak, especially in the economic arena, the conflict may find expression in the religious realm. For example, in traditional patriarchal societies, beliefs in the innate avarice and pollution of women are related to women gaining independence from men (Douglas 1966; Gluckman 1965). One anthropologist has also pointed out that belief in evil female witches almost always occurs when women are attaining economic independence from males (Hoch-Smith 1978). In other words, negative religious views of women frequently develop at precisely those times when men are losing the economic advantages of having a subordinate female class to serve their needs. Mary Nelson has explored the foundations of the European witch burnings of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and has found the Marxian conflict perspective to be particularly helpful in understanding this phenomenon.¹

Interestingly, belief in the existence and efficacy of witchcraft was for many centuries considered a pagan superstition, an illusion or fantasy that originated in dreams. Until the thirteenth century, the belief that there was such a thing as a witch was considered by church officials to be superstitious nonsense (Bullough 1973; Nelson 1975; Ruether 1975). It is true that sorcery was practiced by some Europeans—a legacy of local pre-Christian religions.² Herbs and potions were used to cure illnesses and to ward off evil spirits. This folk religion affirmed the existence of all sorts of supernatural forces and evil spirits that inhabit the earth, and a sorcerer was often used to ward off misfortune. The Christian missionaries and church hierarchy believed that as local communities were Christianized, such magical fears and beliefs would disappear. In fact, when inquisitors in the thirteenth century began to run out of heretics to prosecute, they appealed to the Pope to let them extend their jurisdiction to sorcery. However, Pope Alexander IV held to the official church position that witchcraft and sorcery were illusions. The appeal was denied; the Pope would not have church officials prosecuting something that he was convinced did

¹ Witch-hunts were substantially tools for the suppression of women, and that theme is developed on the following pages. Yet other factors were at work as well. Readers interested in exploring some of these other factors may want to see Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1980) and Christina Lerner (1984) for good overviews of the literature.

² There is much disagreement about whether modern Wicca is an ancient religion that can be traced back to prehistoric times. Margaret Murray (1921) set forth the thesis that witchcraft is an ancient religion. Others have challenged this thesis, claiming that witchcraft as a religion was largely a countercultural response to the repressive climate of the witch-hunt hysteria (see Adler 1986: 3–70).

not even exist. At an earlier time, Charlemagne had imposed the death penalty for killing a supposed witch; witch-hunters were superstitious and delusional (Clark and Richardson 1977). Nonetheless, by 1426 the church would be punishing as a heretic anyone who even used the services of a "witch" (Nelson 1975).

During the period from 1400 to 1700, an estimated 500,000 to 1 million people were burned as witches (Ruether 1975; Nelson 1975). Most of these victims were women. In fact, the loss of lives was so staggering that it has been referred to by some scholars as a holocaust. Hugh Trevor-Roper reports that "in twenty-two villages 368 witches were burnt between 1587 and 1593, and two villages, in 1585, were left with only one female inhabitant a piece" (1967: 16). This sort of massive attack on women represents a kind of genocide, but one that focuses on one sex rather than on an ethnic or religious group. Perhaps *gynocide* is a more appropriate term, for more than 90% of those killed were women.

A number of scholars have sought to address this question: Why were women identified as witches? This is not the case in all cultures. In fact, in many hunting-gathering and agricultural societies, witches are exclusively males. Witchcraft carries a prestigious and highly protected status in these societies, and women are frequently excluded from the ranks entirely. Nonetheless, in Reformation Europe it was overwhelmingly women who were tried as witches. In Germany and France, more than 80 percent of those burned or drowned as witches were women, and in some areas of the continent women comprised well over 90 percent of the victims. In England 92 percent of those convicted and put to death were women, and in Russia the figure was 95 percent (Larner 1984; Ben-Yehuda 1980).

It was not until 1484 that Pope Innocent VIII issued a bill making witchcraft a form of heresy and empowering inquisitors to eradicate this cancer from Christendom. Two Dominican priests, armed with this authority, wrote a book that became the handbook for witch-hunters. *The Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Witches' Hammer*) by Jakob Sprenger and Henry Kramer became a classic statement of misogyny as it articulated the reasons why women were witches. The importance of this book cannot be overestimated for it was widely circulated—being one of the first books printed on the recently invented printing press (Ben-Yehuda 1980).

The authors claimed that the term *female* came from the word *femina*, which meant "lacking in faith." The basic premise of the *Malleus* was that witches are pawns of the devil and that the devil recruits his agents through carnal lust. As they put it in the *Malleus*, "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable." In fact, the inquisitors taught that witches ride broomsticks at night to "black Masses" in which they fornicate with the devil and feast on roasted children (Nelson 1975).

It appears that the distinction made between witches (which henceforth were strictly female) and wizards or warlocks (who were the male counterpart) was a product of this period. It was only the female practitioners of witchcraft who were believed to be duped by carnal lust. Because women were viewed as

fickle, feeble in intelligence, spiritually weak, and innately carnal, they were considered to be much more vulnerable to Satan than men. Furthermore, because the devil was viewed as male, it was clear to everyone at the time that his paramours would be female. As Ruether puts it, "the devil was a strict heterosexual!" (1975: 97). Thus, the most evil sorcerers were (female) witches, for only they engaged in sex with the devil. Note that even the application of different terms for male and female sorcerers (wizard or warlock versus witch) had a sexist foundation. See the next "Illustrating Sociological Concepts" for translated passages from this historic book.

Illustrating Sociological Concepts

Excerpts from *Malleus Maleficarum*

. . . Since women are feebler both in mind and body, it is not surprising that they should come under the spell of witchcraft. For as regards intellect, or the understanding of spiritual things, they seem to be of a different nature from men; a fact which is vouched for by the logic of the authorities, backed by various examples from the Scriptures. Terence says: Women are intellectually like children. . . .

But the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations. 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, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives. . . . And it is clear in the case of the first woman that she had little faith.... And all this is indicated by the etymology of the word; for Femina comes from Fe and Minus, since she is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith. And this as regards faith is of her very nature.

Therefore a wicked woman is by her nature quicker to waver in her faith, and consequently quicker to adjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft. . . .

If we inquire, we find that nearly all the kingdoms of the world have been overthrown by women.... Therefore it is no wonder if the world now suffers through the malice of women.

And now let us examine the carnal desires of the body itself, whence has arisen unconscionable harm to human life. Justly may we say with Cato of Utica: If the world could be rid of women, we should not be without God in our intercourse. For truly, without the wickedness of women, to say nothing of witchcraft, the world would still remain proof against innumerable dangers....

Let us consider another property of hers, the voice. For as she is a liar by nature, so in her speech she stings while she delights us. Wherefore her voice is like the song of the Sirens, who with their sweet melody entice the passers-by and kill them. For they kill them by emptying their purses, consuming their strength, and causing them to forsake God....

To conclude. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in woman insatiable. See Proverb 30: There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, a fourth thing which says not, It is enough; that is, the mouth of

the womb. Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils. More such reasons could be brought forward, but to the understanding it is sufficiently clear that it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft. And in consequence of this, it is better called the heresy of witches than of wizards, since the name is taken from the more powerful party. And blessed by the Highest Who has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime: for since He was willing to be born and to suffer for us, therefore He has granted to men this privilege.

Source: Jakob Sprenger and Henry Kramer. 1970. *Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. and trans. by Montague Summers. New York: Benjamin Blom, pp. 44-47. (Originally published in 1486.)

The *Malleus* made it clear that witches were dangerous for three reasons: They took away men's generative powers (both economic and sexual); they killed infants, frequently while the babes were still in the womb; and they indulged in sexual intercourse with no goal of childbearing but for the pure gratification of sexual lust. Surprisingly, Nelson suggests that all three of these charges against women had some foundation in reality.

Witch-hunts always seem to arise at times of profound social upheaval, which was certainly the case in Europe during the period in question. Nelson (1975: 343) writes: "The development of an industrial system of producing goods and urban living patterns made the medieval family structure obsolete and required changes in the makeup of the labor force. Both of these new conditions made it necessary for women to step outside their traditional social roles." The property-holding function of the medieval family made it necessary for women primarily to bear male heirs and to maintain the household. Yet, commercialization required people to move to the city, and cash income became increasingly important; in some cases, it was necessary for wives to seek work. As women entered the labor force, they entered into direct competition with men for jobs. In so doing, they did "threaten the generative force" of some men. Many women provided herbal remedies to illnesses or became midwives because, in a society that did not offer women many job opportunities, these activities did provide a source of income. However, these midwives and herbalists were taking business that otherwise would have gone to male doctors. So it was not only laboring-class males whose economic generative powers were threatened by women.

Second, because families could not afford to support members who did not work, women were expected to marry when they came of age. Unmarried daughters either joined convents or had to fend for themselves. Many young men at this time joined trade guilds in order to make a living, but most guilds had regulations forbidding apprentices from marrying until they were well established in the trade. This usually meant they were in their thirties or forties before they could marry. For this reason, there were many young women who could not find husbands, had difficulty finding a job that would support them, and yet were on their own. Some of these women found employment and displaced men from their work;

others turned to prostitution. In the latter case, they "participated in sex with no eye to childbearing and for the sole purpose of satisfying the sexual drive" (albeit of the male partner).

Finally, the economically marginal family in the city found children to be a tremendous financial liability. Various forms of birth control were used, including coitus interruptus and abortion. There is also some evidence that infanticide increased significantly. This meant that "babies were being killed, many of them while still in the womb" (abortion).

The events that so alarmed witch-hunters were to some extent occurring, and women came to be blamed for these things. Nelson insists that women were not merely scapegoats; they were in fact competing with men for jobs. It is noteworthy that witch-hunters primarily accused women who were independent of men (widows, divorcees, and never-marrieds) and women who deviated from the established norms (midwives, healers, and individuals who were considered very wise). The witchcraft hysteria was a religious expression of larger social conflicts: conflict regarding gender roles, the role of the family in society, the morality of contraception, and priority rights of one sex to employment. In the midst of these social conflicts, two forces emerged to entice women to return to the traditional role. One was the great increase in the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Mariolatry became a cultic obsession as she was made a model of traditional female virtue. Second, fear of being accused of witchcraft caused women to think twice before they deviated from accepted norms of proper female behavior (Nelson 1975; Ben-Yehuda 1980).

Elements of pagan sorcery no doubt existed in Europe during the time of the witch-hunt hysterias, but they appear to have existed before and after as well. Only an understanding of the tensions caused by social upheaval can adequately explain the impetus behind the massacre. On the other hand, recent research on collective behavior makes it clear that social tension is necessary—but not sufficient—to cause a collective movement (Smelser 1962). Such factors as a conducive "generalized belief system" must be present.

Ruether picks up on this insight and insists that the general belief system of post-medieval Europe must be taken into account in understanding the witch-hunts. She maintains, with Murray (1921), that pagan sorcery practices did exist and were commonly used by village folk. There also existed a folk belief in supernatural forces and spiritual beings that could be controlled through magic. Because women tend to be more involved in folk religion and folk magic than men (largely because women have been denied full access to official religion), women were much more vulnerable to charges of witchery (McGuire 2002). Yet perhaps the most important shared belief was the view that women were more carnal than men. The theology of the day was one of ascetic dualism: the self-denying children of light were in perpetual conflict with the lascivious children of darkness. Ascetic Christianity identified carnality with femaleness and spirituality with maleness (Ruether 1975). This assumption allowed the easy association of evil and

witchcraft with women. If an understanding of ideology is not enough to explain the witchcraft hysteria, neither is the existence of social tension sufficient in itself. It was the combination of the worldview *and* the tensions involved in the changing social structure (in gender roles, economics, and family structures) that allowed for this religiously sanctioned holocaust.³

There are three major explanations for the decline of the witch hysteria. Trevor-Roper (1967) has maintained that witchcraft declined because of a general scientific enlightenment that made belief in witches implausible. This approach assumes that the movement died when belief was undermined. Clark and Richardson suggest that the witchcraft hysteria came to an end because a new male-female equilibrium was established so that men were no longer threatened by new gender-role relationships: "If the persecution of witches was rooted in male anxiety about the sexual power of women, an anxiety that burst forth in persecution as the old patriarchal culture was disintegrating, then the witch craze would end only as women attained a new status and men began to find themselves relatively secure with it" (Clark and Richardson 1977: 120).

A third view is that charges of witchcraft had come to be used as a blatant form of secular political exploitation. Although most victims were poor, this explanation suggests that enterprising judges in the seventeenth century occasionally accused rather wealthy people of witchcraft because the judges were allowed to keep all property confiscated from witches (Currie 1968; Nelson 1975; Ruether 1975). According to this interpretation, witch-hunts came to an end when the self-interests of the powerful were threatened. Political structures were modified so that local judges lost their unchecked capacity to exploit people for their own benefit (Nelson 1975). This view is illustrated in the way the brief witch hysteria (1692) of Salem, Massachusetts, came to an abrupt halt; when powerful and prestigious members of the community were accused as witches they used their influence to stop it (Erikson 1966; Bonfani 1971).⁴ Less powerful members of the society had not been able to shed the label of "witch" so easily.

³ There were no doubt other conducive factors as well. Larner (1984) insists that the rationalization of the legal-criminal justice system and the invention of the printing press were contributing factors. Ben-Yehuda (1980) adds that anxiety caused by European plagues heightened the anxiety or tension of people, making them more susceptible to hysteria. Anderson and Gordon (1978) also suggest regional and denominational variables.

⁴ The causes of the witch hysteria of Salem are somewhat different from those of the three-century-long hunt in Europe. In Massachusetts twenty people were hanged or pressed to death (fourteen of whom were women), and 150 others were being held in prison when the hysteria abated. The hysteria had lasted only one year, and within four years colonialists were holding yearly fasts to repent for their behavior. In 1709 the General Court also ordered a small payment to surviving victims as a redress of damages. The general atmosphere of skepticism combined with a threat to the interests of the powerful to bring this movement to an end. However, misogynistic theology may or may not have been central to the American hysteria. Based on a study of sermons and inspirational literature, Laurel Ulrich (1980) suggests that Puritan New England between 1668 and 1735 was much less sexist than Europe at the time of the witch-hunts. While this remains controversial, some scholars believe that the Salem witch-hunts are better explained by theories of collective hysteria.

However, some historical researchers challenge this latter theory as it applies to Europe. Although such economic motivation may have been at work in a few cases in Germany, prosecutions were more often a burden on local authorities, and in most cases the victims remained poor and elderly women (Midelfort 1972; Lerner 1984).

All this points to the effects of social processes on religious behavior and attitudes. Marxian theorists suggest that religious discrimination is often merely an expression of deeper economic and political conflicts. Social conflict between men and women over jobs and family roles was central in the witch-hunt holocaust that was sanctioned by the Christian church. However, without the presence of a worldview that made this discriminatory action toward women seem right and just (i.e., consistent with the laws of the universe), it is unlikely that it would have taken place. All of this may be more than distant history. Some scholars believe that the anti-Satanism hysteria at the end of the 20th century was rooted in similar processes (see the next Controversies in the Field feature).

Controversies in the Field

Changes in Gender Roles and the Contemporary Satanism Hysteria

Since the early 1980s, rumors, sensationalized press reports, and unsubstantiated assertions on talk shows have fueled fears of Satanic cults that supposedly engage in ritual abuse, animal mutilation, and even human sacrifices of babies or innocent youth. There is not space here to discuss the overwhelming evidence that no such massive Satanic activity is taking place, but most sociologists and investigators at the FBI agree that what is really occurring is a mass hysteria akin in many ways to the witch-hunts of yesteryear. (Those interested in more detailed discussions of purported cases of Satanic cults and Satanic abuses and the lack of evidence of these will want to see Richardson, Best, and Bromley 1991; Lanning 1989; and Shupe 1991.)

David Bromley (1991), one of the first sociologists to investigate the satanic cult hysteria, has concluded that, like the witch-hunts, the sources of the anti-Satanism movement reside in structural tensions within the society; furthermore, in both cases the stressors involve changing women's roles. He notes that when people continue to assert the reality of an event (e.g. the existence of massive numbers of Satanic cults abusing children) despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, one must look to structural tensions and system-based anxiety as the cause of the continuing hysteria.

Bromley points out that American society is characterized by two kinds of relationships: 1) *covenantal ties* involving caring, commitment, nurturance, bonding, and self-sacrifice on behalf of others, and 2) *contractual ties* governed by impersonal transactions based on mutual exchange, negotiation over resources and exchange, and pursuit of self-interest. The former is characteristic of familial and religious institutions; the latter is characteristic of economic, managerial, governmental, and bureaucratic settings. The covenantal realm also

seems to be shrinking and the contractual dimension expanding and taking over many functions traditionally defined as covenantal.

Most legal cases which include accusations of Satanic abuses have involved day-care centers and other child-care facilities (Bromley 1991). As gender roles have changed and women have started working outside the home, an important shift has occurred in the United States: a covenantal task—the care and nurture of children—has been subsumed in the contractual domain. People are being paid in a *market exchange* to provide a *nurturing* environment for children. This has created enormous anxiety in Americans, with surveys showing widespread feelings of guilt and discomfort about the new trend of leaving young children in the care of "hired hands." Anxiety about care of children has come out in a distorted and mystified expression: accusations of Satanism and urban legends about danger to innocent youth (especially blue-eyed and blonde-haired virgins, the cultural paradigm of innocent vulnerability).

In the case of witchcraft, charges against women as witches were distorted and mystified; but it is true that women were engaging in some behaviors that resembled those attributed to witches—competing with men, engaging in sexual activity for non-procreative purposes, and ending pregnancies with abortions. Likewise, while the accusation that there is an epidemic of child abusing Satanic cults seems entirely unfounded, it is true that the care of children generally in our culture has been compromised, and some children may be in jeopardy. The solution proposed by many anti-Satanists is to try to entice women to return to the traditional role of mother and homemaker, a remedy reminiscent of that enforced by the witch-hunters in Medieval Europe.

Ironically, another solution proposed by anti-Satanists is to impose further governmental regulations on child-care facilities. The irony is that this imposes still more contractual control over a covenantal function: bureaucratic solutions to regulate the love, care, and nurturance of children (Bromley 1991).

Critical Thinking: What is unique about a sociological analysis of sexism in Christianity? What issues does a sociological exploration raise that would not likely be explored by philosophical or psychological analysis?

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