



SUFFERING WITCHES

"Witches" were vigorously hunted, prosecuted and executed by the tens of thousands in the early modern era in Europe and its North American colonies, roughly from the 15th to the 18th Centuries. It is not accidental that this coincided with the beginning of the Reformation and especially the wars of religion in Europe during the 16th and 17th Centuries when the witch craze peaked.

Protestantism is generally held – as the term "Reformation" indicates – to be in some way an improvement on the Christian religion as promulgated by the Roman Catholic Church. But it can also be viewed as something of an entirely new religion, one based solely on the Bible. And familiarity with these texts followed rapidly after Gutenberg's innovations in printing after 1450. Indeed, the sudden availability of written works of many kinds was so revolutionary as to seem, perhaps, "miraculous" and conferring an even more special status on the Bible. And the Bible, at Exodus 22:18, unequivocally and without qualification commands that "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." The problem is that it is not explained who is "a witch." Even the "witch" of Endor, whom Saul consulted with to call up and speak with the ghost of the dead prophet Samuel, is referred to only as "a woman that hath a familiar spirit." The word "witch" doesn't even appear in the New Testament, although Galatians includes "witchcraft" as "works of the flesh" along with "uncleanness," "heresies," and "revellings."

Fear of magic and witchcraft was common in the ancient world. And we know that the Old Testament borrowed freely from many other religious and cultural traditions of the region which certainly included this fear. The Code of Hammurabi deals with malevolent sorcery, for example, as did the Law of the Twelve Tables, which was the basis of Roman Law. The Roman historian Livy (64/59BCE-17CE) wrote that in 331 BCE 170 women were executed for witchcraft. Another 2000 or so were said to be executed in 184 BCE, and another 3000 a few years later, all in the context of outbreaks of epidemic illness. These abuses were curtailed after about the 4th Century when Christianity became the official state religion. Perhaps this was because the practice was considered to be "pagan." Or perhaps the idea

that individuals could command supernatural forces outside of and in opposition to the authority of a single omnipotent deity was rightly considered to be untenable.

During the Middle Ages, the authorities, including the church, opposed the hunting and killing of "witches." Augustine of Hippo (354-430) taught that witchcraft did not exist and that to suppose otherwise was heresy, a view that was incorporated into canon law that took the view that beliefs in magic were delusions induced by Satan. The Council of Paderborn of 785 made it a punishable offense to believe in witchcraft and a capital offense to cause the death of persons accused of "witchcraft." The Council of Frankfurt, called by Charlemagne in 794, followed the same approach, calling the belief in witchcraft "superstitious."

But when Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) systematized Christian theology he did not take the same approach. Rather, he established a credible basis for "demonology" including the idea that involvement with any sort of magic meant that a pact had been made with the devil. Only a little more than two centuries later, in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued a bull calling for the suppression of those who "give themselves over to devils male and female, and by their incantations, charms, and conjuring" cause crop failures (actually caused by the onset of "The Little Ice Age") and other calamities. Three years later, in 1487, the infamous Malleus Maleficarum was published, though its chief author, Dominican monk Heinrich Kramer, did not meet with much personal success in prosecuting witches. For his efforts, Kramer was expelled from the city of Innsbruck by the local bishop who called him a "senile old man." Although Kramer's book became popular in the secular courts of Europe, it was not used by the Inquisition and was condemned by the Catholic Church in 1490. Interestingly, the Malleus Maleficarum taught that God's permission was necessary for witchcraft. If so, it would seem that any and all human efforts against it are opposed to the will of God. Or the execution of "witches" would have to be a part of God's Divine Plan in the same way that the brutality of cockfighting and dogfighting is a part of the "fun" of the sadists who delight in such "sport."

The last execution for witchcraft in England took place in 1716, in Scotland in 1727, in Germany in 1738, and in Austria in 1750. "Witchcraft" figured in some other crimes and there were sporadic lynchings subsequently. But in 1735 the British Parliament made it a crime to accuse anyone of witchcraft, with the maximum penalty set at a year's imprisonment.

Witchcraft remains a criminal offense in countries such as Cameroon and the Central African Republic. In Africa, belief in witchcraft is allied with political strife, human trafficking and fraud on a large scale. And it has been hampering the containment of the Ebola outbreak and the ongoing epidemic of AIDS there. In South Africa, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and elsewhere, "witches" are murdered by individuals and mobs with near impunity.

In 2009, Saudi Arabia formed a special Anti-Witchcraft Unit in its religious police agency. By 2011 bureaus had been established in nine cities and at least 586 cases of "magical crimes" had been or were in process. In that year, a man and a woman, in separate cases, were sentenced to beheading after being convicted of sorcery. A Lebanese television "psychic" was arrested on pilgrimage to Medina, convicted and sentenced to death. His beheading was commuted to a 15-year prison term after an international outcry. In most cases the accused are foreign domestic workers. In 2013, two Asian maids received the "light" sentence of 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison for casting spells on their employers. Such foreign household workers, if they complain of mistreatment or not being paid by their employers, may find themselves accused of witchcraft. An article in The Atlantic last year quoted a senior Islamic cleric in Saudi Arabia as saying that: "Some magicians may ride a broom and fly in the air with the help of the jinn [supernatural beings]."

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"PERSONAL GROWTH &
TRANSFORMATION"**
>>> Sunday, November 2nd, 2014 <<<
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS
TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED,
APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**



All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:

**- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion. Today we meet at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

"I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing. I think it's much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong. I have approximate answers and possible beliefs and different degrees of certainty about different things, but I'm not absolutely sure of anything and there are many things I don't know anything about, such as whether it means anything to ask why we're here. ... I don't have to know the answer. I don't feel frightened by not knowing things, by being lost in a mysterious universe without any purpose, which is the way it really is as far as I can tell. It doesn't frighten me."

-Richard Feynman

(from The Pleasure of Finding Things Out)

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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