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(Review) Witchcraft and the Papacy: An Account Drawing on the Formerly Secret Records of the Roman Inquisition

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BOOK REVIEWS

Witchcraft and the Papacy: An Account Drawing on the Formerly Secret Records of the Roman Inquisition. By Rainer Decker. Translated by H. C. Erik Midelfort. Charlottesville, VA, and London: University of Virginia Press. 2008. Pp. xiv + 262. Cloth \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-8139-2747-3.

Rainer Decker has produced a major study of the policies and attitudes of the papacy toward the prosecution and punishment of (so-called) witches. This is the first book on this subject based on extensive use of the archives of the Roman Inquisition, which were only opened to scholars in the late 1990s. *Witchcraft and the Papacy* traces papal policy from the eleventh and twelfth centuries into the nineteenth century, with a focus on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the peak of the great witch hunt in Europe. The book is also a study of the Inquisition, or rather the several different “inquisitions,” including the medieval Inquisition, the Spanish Inquisition, and the revived Roman Inquisition of the early modern period. These “inquisitions” have been considered the legal arms of the papacy and as the defining legal institutions of the Catholic Church, at least for nonspecialists, and have an ugly reputation as misogynistic persecutors of innocent people, particularly women.

Decker’s book seeks to revise this widely held view of the Catholic Church by showing the complex response of Church leaders to accusations of witchcraft. In several ways, however, the book’s title is misleading, and Decker deals with more than just witchcraft and the papacy. First of all, Decker discusses a range of crimes, real and imagined, including a variety of magical practices, astrology, and necromancy, as well as witchcraft. Second, although he uses the newly opened records of the Archive of the Holy Office at certain important points, the book is mostly based on German and Italian archival sources, with excursions to France and Spain mostly based on secondary works. In one sense, this is a deeply scholarly book, based on extensive archive research into local and regional events and embedded in a wide knowledge of historical scholarship.

On the other hand, this is a book aimed at a wide audience of educated non-scholars and presents few conclusions that will surprise historians. The argument that the Catholic Church, the Papacy, and the Inquisition did not encourage the hunting of witches and in the seventeenth century actively worked to prevent the execution of accused witches is well known by historians of early modern Europe. Historians also know that the Spanish Inquisition was not an arm of

the Church, but rather of the Spanish crown, and works on the witch hunts in Germany have for decades argued that local and regional conditions drove prosecutions there. Books by H. C. Erik Midelfort and Wolfgang Behringer (and many others) have shown that Protestants and Catholics hunted witches with equal fervor and that the most gruesome witch hunts took place in small, weakly governed principalities, while strong states (such as Catholic Bavaria) had few executions. In these areas, Decker's points are aimed at students and nonscholars.

Decker's study has many strengths, including its broad chronological span. By tracing the attitudes of popes and their advisors through the Middle Ages, one can see the evolution of the Church's view of witches. Importantly, Decker shows that witch beliefs were always contested and that in all periods there were influential Catholic leaders who were skeptical of popular ideas about witches. Even the influential *Malleus Malificarum* of the fifteenth century had many opponents, particularly in Rome. Decker shows how important the debate was about the nature of the witches' sabbath and the ability of witches to fly. Theologians and judges who were skeptical of these elements of the belief in witches generally rejected convictions based on denunciations of witnesses at sabbaths. The Spanish Inquisition consistently denied the validity and legal standing of such denunciations and by the middle of the sixteenth century, so did the Roman Inquisition in Italy. The official position of the papacy and the Roman Inquisition was eventually codified in the papal *Instruction Concerning Witchcraft*, written in the 1590s and distributed throughout the seventeenth century. Although it acknowledged the reality of witchcraft and the threat of the devil, the *Instruction* was very critical of the conduct of most witch trials and rejected the use of denunciations based on eyewitness accounts of witches' sabbaths. Furthermore, the *Instruction* insisted that superstitious people could practice magic without "a formal renunciation of God in favor of the devil" (p. 119), thus eliminating a large category of so-called witches.

Decker shows that this skeptical position toward witch trials was not just theoretical. Officials of the Inquisition increasingly intervened in trials in Italy and Switzerland in an attempt to prevent executions. In the most dramatic case, officials of the Inquisition, working with the papal nuncio, rescued a group of fifteen children who had been convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to death in the Grisons (Graubünden) region of Switzerland. The children, orphans of parents executed as witches, were brought to Milan where they were provided with homes and upkeep. Decker shows that the Inquisition in Italy focused its efforts on identifying and prosecuting people who practiced magic, which was, after all a "real crime," in the sense that people actually attempted to use magic. Two clergymen, for example, were executed in 1630 for organizing a magical attack on Pope Urban VII. The Roman Inquisition, however, only executed thirty people after 1600 in Rome itself.

This moderation was in great contrast to conditions north of the Alps, especially in Germany. The Inquisition had no authority in Catholic Germany, and the papacy's influence was limited. Nevertheless, Roman officials, working with bishops and nuncios, tried to stop or limit witch crazes. An outbreak of demonic possession in the Bishopric of Paderborn in the 1650s came to the attention of Pope Alexander VII, who was reported "to wonder not a little at the simplicity of the superstitious, on the one hand, and at the malice and deceit of others, but finally also at the ignorance of those who had written these records" (p. 168). Papal officials denounced exorcisms conducted by a Jesuit father in Paderborn and argued that the denunciations of the possessed should not be used as evidence against witches in court. Yet Roman influence was limited and local trials led to the execution of dozens of innocent people in this region in the 1650s.

Decker convincingly argues that over the course of the sixteenth century leaders of the Catholic Church came to reject the fully developed view of witchcraft so forcefully presented in the *Malleus*. As a result, few witches were executed in southern Europe, where the jurisdiction of the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions held sway. In northern Europe, particularly in Germany and Scotland, secular courts, succumbing to pressure from the common people, the lower clergy, and local elites, executed witches in large numbers. As Decker insists, "one should not speak of the witch hunts as a policy of 'the' Catholic Church" (p. 215). There had always been articulate opponents of the witch hunts within the Church, such as the Jesuit Friedrich Spee and the physician Johann Weyer, and most popes and leaders of the Inquisition were skeptical of witch beliefs. It is also clear from this book, and from many other studies of Catholicism in the medieval and early modern periods that the Catholic Church was never as monolithic as it has been presented in popular culture and general historical studies.

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Catholic Germany from the Reformation to the Enlightenment. By Marc R. Forster. Houndsmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007. Pp. x + 265. Cloth \$93.50. ISBN 978-0-333-69837-2. Paper \$32.95. ISBN 978-0-333-69838-9.

This book is welcome both for the information it provides and for what it indicates about the state of research into early modern German history more generally. A generation ago, one would not have expected a series on European History in Perspective to include the topic Early Modern Catholic Germany,

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