

Devil Worship in the Middle Ages

by Denise Horton

The chaos and upheaval that characterized European society in the Middle Ages served as a breeding ground for many peculiar ideas and events. One of the most interesting is undoubtedly the explosion of witch hunts and related activity. This "witch mania" eventually spread throughout most of the continent leaving behind it a trail of death and distorted ideas that made an impression upon popular opinion which is still felt in the 20th century.

The scope of this subject is so wide that it cannot be satisfactorily discussed in a paper this size; therefore, it will be necessary to narrow the area of concentration. Devil worship was a very common element in much of the witchcraft controversy of this period, and it is this topic that we will confine our inquiry.

At this point it would be helpful to define exactly what is meant by "the devil." For our purposes, the concept will be confined to the devil, the "Satan" of Christianity. The reason for this is that it is in relation to the Christian idea of god that the devil became such a symbol of iniquity.

The reasons set forth by scholars for the epidemic of Devil worship are many and varied. One of the most popular is that witchcraft and devil worship could be traced to pre-Christian Europe's ancient religious practices. As Christianity spread in the years following the disintegration of Greco-Roman practices, it is thought that it did not fully penetrate outlying areas for some centuries. In many cases, Christianity was observed simultaneously with the old nature religions. Elements of the two fused, and hybrids such as Dualism (which will be discussed in detail later) emerged which were considered heretical by the Church, and called "Devil worship."

Another reason for the witch craze and resulting Inquisition given by some scholars recently is that the whole Devil worship idea was fabricated by the Church in order to control pockets of heretics, and/or to increase Church or state land holdings as a result of confiscating property of convicted Devil worshippers. This is an interesting idea, but not very convincing. Why? Because although the Church and state did stand to gain quite a bit from the possessions of such groups as the Templars, this did not hold true in all cases. Also, that idea discounts the fact that belief in God during this period was extremely intense, and anything seen as contrary to Church doctrine (which, in many places, was the strongest source of order) was looked upon as a threat to the status quo.

Probably the most reasonable explanation of the Devil worship phenomenon at this time is a combination of both of these hypotheses. Lingering ideas of pre-Christian cults of Diana and the Horned God became entwined with the doctrine of the Catholic Church concerning evil. Church officials perceived these as both evil and a threat to the tenuous state of order in medieval society. It is from this that the crisis sprang. According to an expert in the area: "one can perceive that European witchcraft is best viewed as a

religious cult of the Devil, built on the foundations of low magic and folk traditions but formed and defined by the Christian society within which it operated." <1>

The group given credit for initiating the spread of pseudo-Devil worship in the Christian world are Gnostics. Their dualist theory of the universe included reversals of Christian belief, such as the idea that the world is really hell, and that mankind was created by a race of rebel angels known as Archons. <2> (Since the world is evil it could not have been created by a good God.) The supreme Archon was identified with the God of the Old Testament, whom the Gnostics saw as savage and cruel. Still other groups of Gnostics believed that the world was created by seven fallen angels, led again by the Old Testament God. It is he who inspired the prophets to lead mankind astray. Astray from whom? The Devil, who was a good angel in opposition to the evil God of the Jews. Strangely enough, many of them saw Jesus Christ as a savior who was to liberate humans from the evil God who had led them astray. This was not enough to convince Christians that they were not worshipping the Devil, however, and the Church Fathers sought to warn good Christians to steer clear of these heretics. <3> It also did not help the Gnostics to believe, in some cases, in a reversal of Judeo-Christian moral values.

It is the reversal of the Christian concepts of good and evil that make genuine Satanists an anathema to members of the Church. If God in the Christian model is bad and Satan is a good and benevolent deity, it logically follows that denial of the Judeo-Christian moral code and any rules based upon it is almost necessary. Actions usually condemned as evil are cherished for their mystical effects. It has been said that Devil worshippers get "perverse pleasure in doing things which are felt to be evil combined with a conviction that doing these things is really virtuous." <4>

In light of these ideas, it is obvious that medieval churchmen and anyone else interested in preserving order would do everything within their power to curb this disintegration of organization. Starting with the Gnostics and similar groups in the first few centuries after Christ, the Church was faced repeatedly with what they perceived as threats to Christendom; these came both from outside of Europe by Muslims, and from within by heretics. It is by surveying various outbreaks of heresy that we are able to see the progressive development of the concept of Devil worship on the part of Europeans in the Middle Ages.

One of the first groups accused by the Church of worshipping Satan in the traditionally accepted way were the Paulicians. They were a group of Armenians who lived in the Southeastern part of the Empire, out of the direct control of the Armenian Church. At a synod in 719, John of Ojun, who headed the church in that area, declared that Paulicians were "sons of Satan." <5> He asserted that they gathered at night in order to "commit incest with their own mothers" <6> as well as put infant blood in a Eucharist-like mixture. Also, he said that they paid homage to Satan while prostrating themselves and foaming at the mouth. These ideas were to become a model for later descriptions of the activities of Satanists <7> for they form an integral part of the conception of the Black Mass.

According to Norman Cohn in his book *Europe's Inner Demons*, Western Christendom had been troubled far less than the East by religious dissent. <8> In the year 1022, however, a group of heretics in the French city of Orleans were among the first in western Europe to be executed for their crimes. For the first time since the mass executions of maligned Christians by Pagans in that area 800 years before, cannibalism and incest were rumored to be a part of religious worship. <9>

These heretics, which included the queen's former confessor, nuns, and others, lived a simple and pious life, and this is probably how they attracted followers. <10> The problem was, according to contemporary reports, that they were tricked into worshipping the Devil by a man who gave them the ashes of unborn children to eat, and took part in ceremonies in which the Devil appeared in the form of an animal. They were also supposed to have concocted potions (probably hallucinogenics), burnt babies, and had orgies. <11> Here again we see the elements set forth by John of Ojun which were steadily becoming fixtures in any tale of Satanic festivities.

The Orleans group also denied key elements of Christian doctrine, including the ideas of virgin birth, the Resurrection, Baptism, the Eucharist, and prayer to the saints. They did feel, however, that they were the recipients of divine grace and would be protected by the Holy Spirit, even while being burnt at the stake for heresy.

After the Orleans heretics had been taken care of, another sect took root in essentially the same area. This movement, known as Catharism, was a blend of Greek and Persian dualist ideas fueled by the dualist elements in Christianity itself (such as the separation of the divine and material worlds, the superiority of the flesh to the spirit). <12> By 1150, Catharism was present in most of Southern France, as well as Flanders and parts of Germany. There was even a Cathar Bishop in Northern France, and travelling missionaries in Northern Italy.

Cathars believed, as did the Gnostics, that the God of the Old Testament was the Devil, who created this world. He was lord of the physical body, death, and the material world. In true Dualist fashion, most Cathars believed that he existed as an equal rival of the true God, and would continue to be for all eternity. Morally, they offended Christians by believing that it was a sin to procreate, because the command to be fruitful and multiply was given by the evil God of antiquity. <13> Higher-ranking Cathars abstained from all forms of sex, violence, lying, property holding, oath taking, and food of animal origin. They were held up as embodiments of Christ.

Lower echelons of the Cathars, however, believed that they were enslaved by the Devil and that nothing that they did could possibly hurt them. In addition to encouraging vice in this way, Cathars also denounced the Church and their Baptism at the time of initiation. This was seen as such a threat by the Church that Pope Innocent III preached a Crusade against the Albigensians, as the Cathars of Southern France were called, in 1208. By 1230, the Albigensians were no longer seen as a threat to the Church. <14> Catharism did last a bit longer in other areas, but the Inquisition wiped out most of what was left. No one can really say if the Cathars actually worshipped the Devil in earnest, but the idea

that the Devil was in fact the God of the Old testament, coupled with the fact that most had been raised to worship this God might have resulted in Devil worship. <15> But whether or not these individuals worshipped Satan, their importance in the area of European Devil worship lies in the fact that the Church said that they did, and persecuted them for doing so in many areas of the continent, thus spreading the conceptions inherent in traditional Devil worship.

In 1179, another group of heretics gained the attention of the Church. The Waldensians, or Vaudois, were accused of cannibalism, holding orgies, worship of the Devil in the form of a dog, and sorcery. This group originated as a sect of aesthetes founded by a rich young man who disposed of all his worldly goods in imitation of the apostles. Their problems began when, unlike the Franciscans who originated in a similar way, they were denied papal approval to preach. When they continued to do so, they were excommunicated in 1181, and condemned as heretics in 1184. <16>

The actions of the Church caused the Waldensians to wander throughout Europe, being turned out of one diocese after another. Whether some Waldensians were actually advocating worship of the Devil cannot be proved, however it is doubtful. In some areas of Europe, though, the name "Waldensian" was freely applied to any heretic on trial, especially in the Alpine. There are treatises, such as the *Errores Valdensium*, that associate this group with an manner of Satanic ritual. Factors such as these probably contributed to the conception of Waldensians as Satanists. <17>

In the 13th century, a group of people called Luciferians attracted papal attention for Devil worship, and this time there can be little doubt that this is exactly what was going on. The Pope sent Conrad of Marburg, a gentleman described as a "sadistic fanatic who had been spiritual director of St. Elizabeth of Thuringia and had delighted in beating and humiliating her," <18> to Germany in order to squash the heresy taking place there. These Luciferians believed that Lucifer and his host of demons had been unfairly expelled from heaven. Some day, they claimed, he would return and overthrow the Christian God at which time he would reign forever. They did everything they could to offend God, since their reward would be everlasting paradise with Lucifer. <19> At least half a dozen contemporary sources give details of the Luciferians, and confessions by those accused were not made under torture.

Elements in the story of the Luciferians show further progress toward the conception of Devil worship that has been handed down to us through history. Initiates were made to kiss a toad, or sometimes a duck or goose, in either of two distasteful areas. New members also kissed a pale man who was icy cold, and in this instant they were supposed to have lost their Christian faith. There was a large feast with a huge black cat present, and those worthy of the honor kissed the cat's rear end. The candles were then extinguished, and a massive orgy ensued. After they were through with that portion of the ceremony, a man appeared from a dark corner whose bottom half was like a cat. He was given a piece of the initiate's clothing, and before he disappeared, he commended the leader of the group for his service. <20>

There are two opinions stemming from this story concerning the Luciferians. The first is this: "This account of an initiation carries a certain conviction and it could have been stage-managed without too much difficulty." <21> The second is: "Where a source contains untrustworthy or demonstrably false statements it should be treated with skepticism throughout; and that is the case with all the sources that tell of a Luciferian doctrine." <22> That seems to be a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water, so to speak. The entire thesis behind the book that includes the latter statement is that witchcraft probably never existed in medieval times except for inside of the imaginations of hysterical Christians. That, according to a modern Pagan and expert in the field of witchcraft is because the author has a limited conception of what is possible in reality." <23> She gives as an example that author's opinion that all accounts of ceremonial orgies are false, and counters with the assertion that "Orgiastic practices were a part of religious rites in many cultures of the ancient world, and are fairly widespread today." <24> The deductive reasoning behind this being that if there were orgies in early rites, as well as in present day rites, there were most probably also orgies in medieval ceremonies, especially in light of the profuse reports of their occurrence.

Now that the Luciferians have been established with some credibility as genuine devil worshippers, we can see that there is some reason for the steadily increasing alarm with which the Church met cases of heresy. This next case, however, is somewhat different than the ones previously discussed; it is the persecution of the Knights Templar. The origin of the Templars lies in the Holy Land around 1118. Inspired by the example of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem (who supplied pilgrims with medical care and other forms of charity), a Champagnois knight called Hugues de Paynes began the Templars as an order to defend pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. They took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience just as monks did, and in 1128, they were recognized as a holy order at the suggestion of St. Bernard. <25>

Soon the Templars became well known throughout Christendom as the defenders of pilgrims in need. King Louis VII was one of the recipients of their aid during the Second Crusade, and in return for it he granted them a large tract of land outside of Paris which became their European headquarters. Other monarchs, including the Pope, were assisted by them and showed their gratitude with money or other gifts. The Templars soon had outposts throughout Europe which sent their surplus funds to aid in the struggle of their colleagues in the Middle east. Tithes and money collected for the Holy Land began to be entrusted solely to the Templars, and eventually they went into banking. (Trade was increasing at this time, so there was need for a credit system.) At the beginning of the 14th century, Hugues de Pairaud, treasurer of the Paris temple, was made treasurer of the French king. Many other members of the order were employed in similar positions around the continent and enjoyed great privileges. <26>

Aside from the political and financial prerogatives that the Templars had, they enjoyed a great degree of religious autonomy. In 1163, Pope Alexander was so grateful for their support of his candidacy for papal office that he issued a bill making the Order subject to the pope alone in all matters. They were permitted to appoint their own confessors, and to

exclude all outsiders from their meetings. <27> For the Templars, this secrecy would spell disaster.

The first accusations of bizarre practices were leveled against the Templars in 1305 by a Frenchman, Esquiou de Floyran. He first sought the the ear of James II of Aragon, but this proved fruitless because the Templars in his kingdom were extremely devoted to the king. On returning to France, he saw King Philip and told his story once again. he said that he had been imprisoned with an ex-Templar who told him stories of such shocking activities within the order that he, de Floyran, felt it was his duty to inform the proper authority. Word reached the pope by the winter of that year. Philip the Fair pursued the subject, and in 1307, the pope, Clement V, opened an investigation. Without first waiting for the results of this inquiry, Philip had an arrest order drawn up that detailed the supposed offenses of the Temple. <28>

These offenses include many stock accusations that characterize Devil worship such as the denial of Christ, the Virgin Mary and God; abuse of the Eucharist; and traditional *osculum infame*, or obscene kiss that plays such a large role in many anti-Christian ceremonies. <29> They were said to conjure the Devil and various other demons, pay homage to idols, and make powders out of the corpses of their illegitimate children as well as dead Templars. These and many other variations common to the accusations of Devil worship at the time were leveled at the Templars, many of whom confessed under torture. Later, most recanted their confessions, but it was usually too late. Many Templars ended up dying at the stake. <30>

The order remained under persecution until it was dissolved by the pope in 1312. Their property was confiscated, with healthy chunks taken by monarchs and the pope to offset charges incurred during prosecution. The importance of this experience in the history of witchcraft is, according to an historian of that area of study, "that its extent and political importance fixed its characteristics in the public consciousness for generations." <31> These trials were a model upon which later developments in the area of persecution of Satanists and witches alike, as well as other heretics, were based.

Were the Templars actually guilty of Devil worship? Probably not. Some members of the society may have indulged in unsavory acts, but this is to be expected in any group this size. The consensus of scholarly opinion on the matter seems to be that the possessions and power of the Templars were objects of envy to many in Europe at the time. This, compounded by the facts that they were cloaked in secrecy, and that the Crusades were over for all practical purposes and they were no longer necessary, made the Templars an excellent target for attack.

These examples of Devil worship provide a background for what would occur in Europe over the next several hundred years. Two reasons for this second outbreak are the circulation of accounts of previous heresies involving Devil worship, and the assault on Europe by the Black Death. Since the plague was seen by many as God's punishment for their sins, it follows that people would be very interested in discovering any kind of behavior that would anger Him. With the widespread availability of theologically based

discourses on how to root out possession, such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* (c. 1494), it was now possible for these people to be discovered and dealt with. Although the *Malleus* was written somewhat late to serve as an example for plague-inspired heretic elimination discourses, it is the best example of the way in which Christian authorities viewed their duties in relation to this manner of heresy.

The examples of the Paulicians, Catharists, Waldensians, and the others show how the concept of Devil worship in the Christian world grew and spread. With each new heresy, elements such as the osculum infame, Devil in the form of an animal, and the ritual orgy became part of the legend, and possibly practice, of Devil worship. It is almost impossible to ascertain at this late date exactly what did happen in the Devil worship rites of the Middle ages. These people did not keep records, possibly in the interest of preserving their sacred rituals, but more probably for fear of persecution. It is because of this dearth of

Notes

1 Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft In The Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972) 16.

2 Richard Cavendish, *The Magical Arts* (London: Arkana Paperbacks, 1984) 291.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975) 18.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 20.

8 Ibid., p. 19.

9 Ibid., p. 20.

10 Ibid., p. 21.

11 Ibid.

12 Russell, p. 121.

13 Cavendish, p. 294.

14 Russell, p. 122.

15 Ibid., p. 125.

16 Cohn p. 33.

17 Russell, p. 219.

18 Cavendish, p. 296.

19 Cohn, p. 56.

20 Cavendish, pp. 296-297.

21 Ibid., 297.

22 Cohn, p. 57.

23 Margot Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979) 52.

24 Ibid.

25 Cohn, p. 52.

26 Ibid., 195.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Russell, p. 195.

30 Joseph Klaitz, *Servants of Satan* (Bloomington: Indiana University

31

[Return to 1986-7 Table of Contents](#)