

The Path of Moderation: The Science of Demons
in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century France

by
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Since the eighteenth century, critics and historians have looked with embarrassment and horror at the belief in and persecution of witches in France, as well as in the rest of Europe, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which has seemed to them to be either an example of the evils of traditional religious bigotry, or an odd aberration in the march of progress following the Renaissance. The definers and propagators of the learned theories of witchcraft - its reality and dangers, and the need for severe persecution of witches - have been almost universally depicted as oppressive, bigoted extremists. Historians, in the last ten years or so, have applied new approaches, including quantitative methods, to the problem of witchcraft, and have provided interesting new interpretations of the social and cultural matrix of witchcraft beliefs and persecutions - what actually took place in many parts of Europe, and the significance of these developments. But, in this process of reevaluation, little attention has been paid to the work of the demonologists, and historical views of these writers have changed very little. Recent studies describe the demonologists as the representatives of a unified social and intellectual elite, who developed and applied elaborate theories of diabolical involvement in the affairs of men as part of a broad effort to bring the masses, violent and ignorant, to heel. As a part of the acculturation of the countryside¹ by the urban

elites, witchcraft was a tool for the undermining of popular culture.

It should not surprise us that the writers of demonological works did not see themselves in this light. They perceived themselves as living in a dangerous age of violence and disorder, in which heresy had become rooted and flourished in many parts of Europe, and was, in France officially tolerated after 1598. For them, heresy was inspired by the Devil who was able, through its existence, to bring an army of demons into Europe. The demonologists lived in a world of a multiplicity of religious ideas and a variety of philosophical approaches that included skepticism and Renaissance neoplatonic magic, all of which existed through the weakness of men and their dangerous curiosity.

Demonology books were written by clerics and by dedicated laymen to defend Catholic orthodoxy and to provide an offensive weapon in the fight against devil-inspired heresy. This literature flourished between roughly 1570 and 1630. The primary concern for these writers was the definition of a correct orthodox position that would support the central doctrine of the Catholic religion and would enable preachers to teach their flocks and judges to punish those who transgressed.

The demonologists included in this study did not see themselves as extremists, but rather as learned moderates caught between major diabolically inspired errors. All the writers were concerned with skepticism and unbelief, major

enemies of religious belief. But a significant number of authors also pointed out the dangers of too much belief based on the wrong approaches, which they considered superstition. Blind credulity was perceived mainly as a problem of the common people, especially women, and could lead to dangerous consequences.

The demonologists' statements on popular credulity reveal a mixture of sincere pastoral concern and patronizing scorn for the simple peoples' ignorance. Pierre Le Loyer, in a very influential and much copied work of 1586, stated that superstition was a common vice. He wrote, "For as the impious person does not believe that there are good and evil spirits, and does not apprehend supernatural things, the superstitious person believes too easily, and from fear of evil spirits invents a thousand mad dreams in his brain ... They have a vehement fear that the spirits will seize them, so that they are afraid of the night, so that they cross themselves a thousand times as if they see something, abhor hearing Devils spoken of, and never sleep well, thinking that a thousand phantoms fly about them." ²

The common people were likely to believe in such mistaken phenomena as the transformation of men into wolves. Several theologians took pains to refute this notion, which seemed to make the Devil equal to God through his power to create a new being in the process of the transformation. J. de Nynauld pointed out that this belief "gives all powers

to Demons (common refuge of those [who are] little instructed in the knowledge of causes), a very impious opinion." ³

These writers, typical men of their time, agreed that women were more easily led into superstition than men.

Sebastien Michaelis stated that "women are easy to all persuasions because of the natural simplicity of their sex" and this led them to be easily duped by the Devil. ⁴ For Valderama a Spanish Jesuit, women were more easily taken in because they were "weaker, more curious, and more ignorant than men." ⁵

Writing of the need for judges to believe in witchcraft and punish witches severely, Pierre de Lancre summed up the orthodox middle position. He stated, "We should avoid the extremes. It is not necessary to line up with the Platonists who attribute everything to Demons; but one must even less hold the belief of the Pythagoreans who laugh at Demons, magicians and witches ... One must be a Christian, and hold Christian beliefs according to the Holy Scriptures and the doctrines of the Holy Fathers and confirm these apparitions, not from stories gathered from everywhere, but by visions of holy personages, by daily experience and by the testimony and confessions of witches." ⁶

As de Lancre indicated, the demonologists perceived that the alarming incidence of skepticism and unbelief among the learned classes was a far greater danger than popular credulity. We know little about the extent of skepticism and unbelief in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries,

but the Catholic demonologists were convinced both of the reality and grave danger of these errors. In order to defend Christianity careful definition of orthodox doctrines was necessary. Demonology was an integral part of orthodoxy that had to be defended. The sad state of the world could only be understood as the result of the Devil's work. Demons and angels were incorporeal beings who rewarded or chastised the immortal soul of men after the death of their bodies. To scoff at the reality of angels or demons was thus to attack the crucial doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Demonology was not seen as a minor peripheral belief, but as being at the very heart of the Catholic religion.

Virtually all of the important demonological tracts of 1570-1630 were written with this problem in mind. Their writers were eager to debunk dangerous incredulity. The terms "atheists" and "libertines" were used constantly. A typical statement is by R. DuPont (1602) who wrote, "Our libertines disdain all religions and mock all that is ordered by God, having no other care than to practice the old Epicurean proverb, "Let us Drink, Let us eat and follow our desire/After Death, there is no pleasure." ⁷ As to the torments of Hell, Du Pont stated, "Our libertines repute all this to be fables, and say there is no evidence that Hell is so terrible; but when they are there, they will confess that the warnings were true." ⁸

The Spanish demonological work of the Jesuit Father Valderama was translated into French in 1619. Valderama stated

flatly "That demons make agreements with people, all Theologians, ancient and modern, agree." ⁹ He too had been troubled by non-believers, reporting irritably, "I hear these incredulous atheists importune with me their jargon and their impertinent questions. They ask me, why believe in a God we've never seen? Oh, madmen without judgement ... These men are blinded by ignorance, of bad birth, subject to their pleasures, vicious, possessed by devils, who have violated all the laws of God, man and even nature, who take no account of God or of their souls and who, to give more weight to their beliefs, permit themselves to commit all sorts of impieties and have impudently sustained that the soul dies with the body, that there is no divine justice ... and no eternal punishments for their evil deeds." ¹⁰

Pierre de Lancre was a judge from the Parlement of Bordeaux who, in 1609, acted as a special one-man commission in a major witchcraft inquiry in the Basque region. According to his own testimony, which he published in detail in 1612, he sentenced six hundred people to death in that inquiry. He must have received many comments on his accomplishments, and one could suppose that they did not all agree with him. Ten years later, he published a very lengthy and impassioned work on the problem of incredulity in witchcraft. He appealed to the unbeliever, "Many people have held that there are no demons and that it is foolish to dispute and even more to believe the evil deeds attributed to them and to their supporters, witches ... But all

philosophy and theology, approved by Christians has recognized good and evil Angels ... all of which are incorporeal ... Unbeliever, I beg you to leave the error of those who do not believe in good or evil Angels ... Do you want to leave the belief of the universal church which prays for you daily." ¹¹

It is difficult to know who these libertines and atheists were, or how widespread their ideas were. Only a few skeptical writers like Montaigne and Charron were well known. The few who went farther, into heresy or immorality were dealt with severely, like Vanini, burnt in Toulouse in 1619. Pierre de l'Estoile recorded many executions in Paris for witchcraft, atheism and blasphemy, and attributed the crimes to the injustice and avarice of his times, and the impunity with which the blasphemies of the upper classes were committed. ¹² One of the chief adversaries of the libertines and atheists, Father Francois Garasse, wrote "In writing against atheists, I do not know against whom I write: for there is no one so abandoned who has enough effrontery to declare himself an atheist ... Is it not strange only four or five who, like attendants of the Antichrist, have had enough impudence to appose themselves to the light of reason and write in horrible blasphemous words against the truth of our religion ... All the rest of the libertines, atheists, Epicureans and deists keep themselves hidden." ¹³

Several writers saw the royal court in Paris as the centre of immoral living. For one G. de Rebreviettes the evil of libertinage originated there, among effeminate young nobles,

who he calls, "bearded women, who do not know virtue or courage." ¹⁴ He called them atheistic hermaphrodites: "Man, no longer man, but a horror, a plague that infects Christian air, through its corruption wasting our minds and making them ill, without hope of cure. Man, no longer man, but a fury from Hell who gives us the cup of abomination and makes us swallow the verminous drink of atheism." ¹⁵

For all the French denomological writers, libertinage skepticism and atheism were perceived as grave and pressing concerns. Inspired by heretical ideas and filled with wreckless curiosity, doubters and unbelievers threatened the ability of the Catholic church to fight its other opponents. Louis Richeome, a Jesuit who wrote a lengthy work in defense of the immortality of the soul stated that the Devil was the author of atheism, "Who does not believe the soul to be immortal is infidel and Godless, ... He is not Christian who injures God by his incredulity and he should be instructed by fire and torture." ¹⁶ Richeome believed that curiosity was dangerous in an age of competing ideas and could lead a person of weak belief to blasphemy and heresy. He stated, "It is necessary to believe in order to understand ... Those who follow the Christian method, which teaches belief first, see clearly the reasons and secrets of nature illuminated by a supernatural light." ¹⁷

Of especially great concern to several writers was what they perceived as a dangerous tendency in the direction of incredulity on the part of some judges who should have been

front-line fighters in the battle against the Devil. France had no inquisition to deal with cases of witchcraft, blasphemy, heresy and atheism. All these religious matters came under the jurisdiction of the lay courts, made up of lay judges. The highest courts of the kingdom, the Parlements, were composed of judges who were of the social and intellectual elites and who were affected by all the complex intellectual, political and religious issues of their day. Their personal beliefs were important in their jurisprudence, for judges who were unbelievers or skeptics would be unlikely to take witchcraft very seriously. Modern historians have generally seen a shift in the opinion and practice of the judicial elite, from a position of almost total credulity and severity to witches, to one of uncertainty mixed with skepticism around the 1630's. But the demonologist lawyers and theologians perceived uncertainty and skepticism far earlier. In 1586 Pierre le Loyer wrote, "Never have there been so many witches of both sexes who are left unpunished by the judges, who by this means establish the reign of Satan ... Many judges are up till now blind so that they deny that there ever have been witches even though the laws and all antiquity give them the lie and everyday experience silences them. Who causes this, if not Satan, who in this miserable age that we are come to, breathes the poison of his evil doctrine with which depraved and corrupted men are easily imbued and instructed." ¹⁸

Pierre Crespet, in a discussion of the evil consequences of judicial incredulity, indicated that this incredulity was well

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known to his audience. He wrote, "We say now that the minister of Satan; Heretics, atheists, witches and evildoers are welcomed, prancing freely," and good people were distrusted and mocked "because of the evil arts, which are practiced with impunity in France." ¹⁹

Judicial incredulity was extremely distressing to Pierre de Lancre. In his account of the mass trials of 1609 he argued for the necessity of publishing his experience. "The first (reason) is to lift the error of many who deny the principals of witchcraft, believing that it is only illusion and to make them see clearly that doubt and the impunity or leniency that our fathers and the Parlements have shown up till now have nourished and maintained false belief and engendered a multiplicity (of witches)." ²⁰ Ten years later he returned to this idea, stating, "Many judges believe, as le sieur de Montaigne, that (witchcraft) is only imagination. In this category are some from the Parlement of Paris where they say that belief in all that pertains to witchcraft comes only from torture." ²¹ He argued that judges must believe in witches and put them to death. "If they do not put them to death," he went on, "does this not authorize witchcraft and establish it to the prejudice of the laws of God, and by means of the impunity that follows this lack of belief give the means to witches to waste, infect and ruin all." ²²

Modern readers might be tempted to dismiss all these arguments as simply a matter of rhetoric which over time had

become mandatory. Or they might regard them as nothing more than scare tactics by a group of militant believers. However a recent study by Albert Soman helps the argument that Le Loyer, Crespet and De Lancre did not invent a "soft on witchcraft" scare out of nothing. Using the records of the prison of the Parlement of Paris, Soman shows that that important court had a long tradition of moderating the punishments imposed by the lower courts in cases appealed to it. Between 1564 and 1600, the Parlement of Paris confirmed only thirty per cent of death penalties, and after 1610 only twelve and one half per cent of death penalties imposed by local courts. It also consistently lightened the non-capital punishments; torture, servitude in the galleys and whipping to which witches had been sentenced by lower courts.²³ It is possible that, to some extent this consistent tendency toward moderation was based on some degree of skepticism and even unbelief and that it was, in part at least, what stimulated the demonologists to undertake the task of defining an orthodox science of demons.

The French demonologists saw their time as a dark age of violence and disorder. The Devil's hand was evident everywhere, sowing discord and doubt. On one side was the ignorant, superstitious peasantry, fertile ground for the Devil's work, who had to be taught the serious reformed Catholicism of the post-Tridentine Church. The peasants' inclination to believe in the absolute reality of lycanthropy, to believe everything said in exorcisms and to perceive themselves surrounded by demons all attributed

too much power to the Devil and elevated him, in the eyes of the simple people, to the level of God. On the other side were the educated unbelievers, influenced by the learned paganism of the Renaissance and the skepticism of Montaigne and Charron. They were seen as scoffers and mockers of the most holy doctrines of the Church. This group, the demonologists believed, threatened the unity of the Catholic Church and compromised its ability to fight its enemies. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the reality of Heaven and Hell had to be defended in its entirety and that included angels, demons and witches. The demonological treatises of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were designed to convert the doubter and unbelievers, or at least to neutralize their dangerous influence.

These theological and philosophical arguments did not take place in a void. Many, perhaps most, French Catholics were not reconciled to the permanent existence of Protestantism in their midst. The world was seen as a battleground between good and evil, religion and heresy. A sense of combat pervades the demonological literature. It is difficult to read it and not give some credence to the existence of a degree of skepticism and perhaps even unbelief that was serious enough to alarm the defenders of Catholic orthodoxy.

The authors of demonological tracts were not simply zealous propagators of old traditions or cynical oppressors of free-thought and popular peasant culture. They developed the science of demons as sincere embattled defenders of the faith. Their goal was to produce a theologically correct,

refined demonology, avoiding the extremes of credulity and incredulity.

The seeds of the decline of the witchcraft beliefs were present at the beginning of the flourishing of demonology, in the tepidness or outright unbelief of a minority of the elite. It may also be that the very process of defining a precise science of demons by dedicated churchmen and laymen who were themselves highly educated and sophisticated people even helped the decline of witchcraft. Witchcraft persecution did not disappear in France as the result of the scientific revolution, Cartesian rationalism or the publicity generated by the notorious possession cases of the 1630's. The process by which the views of a very small, hidden minority in 1600 came to have significant influence by 1640 is a fascinating one which has still to be convincingly described.

NOTES

1. Machedbled
2. Le Loyer, 226, 7
3. Nynauld, 4
4. Michaelis, 104
5. Valderama, 311
6. De Lancre, Incred, 366
7. Du Pont, 7R
8. *ibid.*, 200 v
9. Valderama, 180
10. *ibid.*, 13, 18
11. De Lancre, 7-10
12. L'Estoile, 286
13. Garasse, Somme, 14-15
14. Rebreviettes, 29
15. *ibid.*, 411-12
16. Richeome, 76, 84
17. *ibid.*, intro.
18. Le Loyer, 526
19. Crespect, 42R
20. De Lancre, Mescrance, advert.
21. De Lancre, Incred, 353
22. *ibid.*, 363
23. Soman

NOTES

1. Robert Muchembled, La Culture Populaire et la Culture des Elites(Paris,1978),p.300.
2. Pierre Le Loyer, IIII Livres des Spectres(Angers,1586),p.226,7.
3. J.de Nynauld, De la Lycanthropie, transformation, et extase des sorciers (Paris,1615),p.4.
4. Sebastien Michaelis, Discours des Esprits (Lyon,1614),p.104.
5. R. P. Valderama, Histoire Generale Du Monde, trans. Sieur de la Richardier(Paris,1619),p311.
6. Pierre de Lancre, L'Incredulité et Mescreance Du Sortilege Plainement Convaincue(Paris,1622),p.366.
7. R. Du Pont, La Philosophie Des Esprits(Paris,1622),fol.7R.
8. ibid.,200V.
9. Valderama, Histoire,p.180.
10. ibid.,pp.13,18.
11. De Lancre. L'Incredulité,pp.7-10.
12. Pierre de L'Estoile, Journal de L'Estoile,ed.Armand Brette (Paris,1906).
13. Francois Garasse, La Somme Theologique Des Veritez Capitales De La Religion Chrestienne(Paris,1625),pp.14-15.
14. G. de Rebreviettes L'Impieté Combatue Par Des Infideles Paris,1612),p.29.
15. ibid.,pp.411-412.
16. Louis Richeome, L'Immortalité de L'Ame(Paris,1621),pp.76,84.
17. ibid.,intro.
18. Le Loyer, IIII Livres,p.526.
19. Fierre Crespit, Deux Livres de la Hayne de Sathan et Malins Esprits contre l'Homme(Paris,1590),fol.42R.
20. Pierre de Lancre, Tableau De L'Inconstance Des Mauvais Anges Et DemonsParis,1612).
21. De Lancre, L'Incredulité,p.353.
22. ibid.,p.363.
23. Albert Soman, "Les Procès De Sorcellerie Au Parlement De Paris" (1565-1640)", Annales, July-August,1977.pp.794-796.