General Introduction

> The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.
> L. P. Hartley, *The Go-between* (1953)

From the fifteenth through the early seventeenth centuries, continental Europe saw the "witch craze" (German *Hexenwahn*), in which official prosecution of those believed to belong to a cult dedicated to the practice of malevolent magic and presided over by Satan himself led to the execution of tens of thousands of victims.[1] The *Malleus Maleficarum* of 1486 was the first major treatment of Satanism to appear in print and remains far and away the best-known handbook on the subject from the early modern period. If the truism cited above holds true, then there are few areas of the historical past that are more foreign (and uncongenial) to the modern mind. The world laid out in the *Malleus* is a place where demons inhabit the area above the earth, which is fixed at the center of the universe, and plot to ensnare humans (especially susceptible women) in their schemes and, after trapping the humans in their society, guide them in their evil-doing and have sex with them. It is a place where an implacable God reacts savagely to this betrayal of loyalty to him and in retribution gives the demons further permission to implement their nefarious plans. It is a place where the tenets of the Catholic Church are held to be absolutely true and it is the duty of the secular authorities to burn alive those convicted of deviating from the Church's truth. It is a place where clever inquisitors can make use of sagacious stratagems to track down the perpetrators of unspeakable crimes committed through magic and have them turned over to the authorities for burning as heretics. The first purpose of this introduction is to explain

---

[1] For a short introduction to this period, see Ankarloo and Clark (2002), especially 13–16 for the numbers of victims. Previously, much larger estimates in the hundreds of thousands were made, but it now seems that in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire (the central area for witch-hunting) during the mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries (the height of the craze) the victims numbered something like 25,000–30,000.

1

a number of the institutional and intellectual premises that are taken
for granted in the *Malleus* but may not be so self-evident to the modern
reader. In addition, both the composition and publication of the work
and a few aspects of the translation will also be discussed.

OUTLINE OF GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1) Ecclesiastical background
   a) Heresy
   b) Inquisition
   c) The Dominican Order

2) Intellectual background
   a) University background
       i) The medieval university
      ii) Scholasticism and scholastic theology
     iii) *Quaestio disputata*
      iv) Use of sources in scholasticism
          α) Borrowing from earlier authors
          β) Use of quotations
       v) Cosmology
          α) The nature of "substance"
          β) "Motion"
          γ) Cosmology proper (astronomy, physics, etc.)
          δ) Astrology
          ε) Psychology
          ζ) God, Satan and evil
   b) Misogyny
   c) "Magic"
       i) The reality of magical practices
      ii) Previous ecclesiastical views on magic
          α) The canon *Episcopi*
          β) The scholastic view of witchcraft and magic
     iii) Satanism
          α) Origins of the concept of Satanism
          β) Institoris's interpretation of Satanism
          γ) Institoris's understanding of the Satanic nature of all heresy
          δ) Apocalyptic conception of Satanism in the *Malleus*

3) Legal background
   a) General legal context

I ECCLESIASTICAL BACKGROUND

The *Malleus* is the work of two Dominicans, about the existence, ceremonies and procedures of a group that was thought to practice malevolent magic, and about the means of undoing the evil done by this group and of exterminating it through investigation and prosecution in court. Thus, it is necessary to place the work within its ecclesiastical setting in terms of both the conceptions and the institutions that are presupposed in it.

1a Heresy

The notion of heresy goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. The texts of the New Testament leave much theological detail unclear, such as the exact relationship between Christ the Son and God the Father, and early Christian writers spent much time and energy defining the doctrines of the new creed. One called the views one accepted orthodoxy ("correct thinking" in Greek), while adherence to a different view was called heresy (the term literally means "choice" in Greek, and the word was used to signify the adherents of various philosophical schools or "sects"). Within a generation after the crucifixion, St. Paul was already complaining bitterly about those whose views he considered to be erroneous. Since there could logically be only one correct view on doctrinal matters, it was natural for those who considered their own views orthodox to castigate their opponents as evil and characterize their opponents' views as the Devil's work.

For the first three centuries of Christianity's existence, when it was no more than an illegal and persecuted cult in the Roman Empire,

this disputation about dogma was merely a matter of invective. All this changed once the Roman emperor Constantine (305–337) and his successors adopted Christianity as the religion officially sanctioned by the state. Before the time of Constantine, the Christians had already developed an elaborate organization of their own with a formal hierarchy of priests, the whole being known as the church. Once a Christian became emperor, presumably by the will of God, it seemed natural for the church organization to look to the emperor, whom it too recognized as the supreme governmental authority, to help settle doctrinal disputes. Thus, with the complete agreement of the church hierarchy, Constantine became involved in purely ecclesiastical disputes. While Constantine himself was comparatively deferential, he nonetheless used the powers of the Imperial government to enforce the decisions reached under his aegis about the theological disputes, and many later emperors were rather less forbearing. In effect, once the authority of the state was invoked in settling purely doctrinal disputes, it was up to the state (in the person of the emperor) to decide what was or was not orthodoxy. By the late fourth century, laws had been passed not only against pagan practices but also against heretical forms of Christianity, that is, those that did not adhere to the doctrines about Christianity accepted by the government. So important was the policy of enforcing the correct views on religion that the Codex Justinianus, the collection of Imperial decisions drawn up by Justinian in the sixth century, begins with a chapter defining orthodoxy and laying out the laws against heretics.

In the West, the Imperial government faded away in the fifth century as various Germanic kingdoms were established on its territory, but the church lived on in the old territory of the Empire, and in successive centuries expanded through missionary activities into northern Europe. This church referred to itself as the Catholic Church and is the linear ancestor of the modern Roman Catholic Church. For present purposes, however, the term "Catholic Church" will be abandoned. The term "Catholic" implies an equivalence with the modern Church, but in fact the church of the medieval period was in something of a doctrinal flux; there is much overlap in the doctrines of the two periods, but the medieval church tolerated many views that would be unacceptable in modern Catholic doctrine, while conversely certain aspects of modern Catholic doctrine and practice had not yet developed. In fact, the modern period of Catholicism dates to the Council of Trent (1546–1563), which clarified and defined the earlier church's views in light of the challenge presented by the various forms of Reformation objections to them. For

6   *Malleus Maleficarum*

lack of a better term, the western church of the Middle Ages will simply be called the medieval church.[2]

For several centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, a period when the church was occupied with converting northern Europe and then surviving in the chaos caused by the invasions of the Arabs in the south and the Vikings in the north, there was little challenge to official doctrine in the form of heresy. This began to change in the eleventh century when the burning of heretics is first attested.[3] From then on, there was a constant succession of religious movements that were deemed unacceptable by the ecclesiastical authorities and suppressed as heretical. Two rather different sorts of late medieval heresy contributed to the development of the view that sorcery was a form of heresy: the Cathars and the Waldensians.

The Cathars were a religious group that took root, apparently from eastern origins, in southern France from the eleventh century on.[4] The Cathars held to a modern sort of gnosticism, that is, a religious view that saw the world as a battle ground between two basic elements of the universe, good and evil. This view held that good and evil were completely incompatible and opposed and thus could not simultaneously subsist in any being, least of all God. Hence, there were two divine figures, the "real" God, who was good, and the sham God, who created the evil material world. The Cathars in various ways associated the sham, evil God with the God of the medieval church, a view that the authorities of the medieval church not surprisingly found offensive. In the early thirteenth century, secular forces from northern France conquered the south in the name of the true religion during the so-called Albigensian Crusade. Although there was much bloodshed at the time, many covert Cathars were thought to subsist, and organized efforts were undertaken to destroy these secret enemies of God. In particular, the foundations of the Dominican Order and of the medieval inquisition can be ascribed to the perceived need to stamp out the remains of the Cathars (see General Introduction, 1b and 1c).

The other sect that contributed to the development of the belief that witchcraft was a form of heresy was the Waldensians.[5] While the Cathars clearly rejected major tenets of the medieval church, this was not the

---

[2] See the comments of MacCulloch (1996), 3, where he opts for the terms "traditional" and "conservative", terms which make sense in the context of the Reformation but are not appropriate for the earlier period.
[3] For a general treatment of medieval heresy, see Lambert (2002).
[4] For a general treatment of the Cathars, see Lambert (1998).
[5] For a general treatment of the Waldensians, see Audisio (1999).

case with the Waldensians, who basically accepted all the theological
doctrines of the church. The problem was with the church's hierarchy.
In about 1177, a merchant in Lyons named Waldo became inspired
to preach the word of God. This aspiration was rejected by the church,
which claimed the exclusive right to preach. For their part, Waldo and his
followers rejected the church's pretensions, at the same time censuring
the extravagance and immorality of the episcopate. This led to their
excommunication, and again stringent (and only partially successful)
efforts were undertaken to stamp out the sect.

With their firm renunciation of the material world, the Cathars lived
a strictly ascetic life; this was also true of the Waldensians, though for
rather different reasons. The rejection of various fundamental tenets of
the doctrines of the medieval church on the part of these two sects,
however, led the church to develop a rather different view of them.
This view saw the heretics as members of a sect whose heresiarch (the
leader of the heresy) was Satan himself. In their rituals, the heretics were
thought to practice infant sacrifice and to indulge in sexual promiscuity,
including incest. These stories can be traced back to claims made in
the Greek east about a group of heretics called Paulicians in the ninth
century. By the eleventh century, such stories came to be told in the west,
and were eventually attached to the Cathars and Waldensians, despite
the fact that the truth of their asceticism was known to some at least in
the church.[6]

What then is the motive for these sorts of slanders? To some extent,
they represent a logical elaboration of the views of the Cathars. Since
they clearly believed the exact opposite of certain tenets of the medieval
church (holding, for example, that the Christian God was the source
of all evil), it is not surprising that it was considered plausible that
the Cathars did the opposite of all things that were considered good
by the medieval church. Hence, it was perfectly reasonable to expect
sexual misbehavior from such perverse people. This view of heretics as
subverters of the natural order is completely consonant, though, with
the universal pretensions of the church. If, on the one hand, the church
is the sole church of God and its doctrines represent the only correct
view, and, on the other, Satan is viewed as the enemy of God, then it
is hard to escape the conclusion that those who oppose the true church
must be the tools of Satan and are completely evil. In effect, organized
religious sects that opposed the medieval church were taken to adhere to

[6] For the development of the calumnious accusations made against heretices, see Cohn (1993), esp.
35–78.

antipodian inversions of the norms of the medieval church. Whatever the church endorsed, they did the opposite.

Regardless of the motivations for concocting these calumnies, the idea became firmly entrenched in orthodox circles of the late medieval period that there were sects of heretics who practiced promiscuous sex, killed children and engaged in harmful magic. In the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, this conception of heresy developed into the idea that there was a heresy that had no actual doctrinal basis at all and existed simply for the sake of perpetrating unspeakable acts of malevolent witchcraft. This notion is known as Satanism and is the fundamental basis of the interpretation of witchcraft laid out in the *Malleus* (see General Introduction, 2c.iii).

1b Inquisition

The medieval inquisition is an institution that is subject to much misunderstanding. It is not to be confused with two related but later forms of inquisition, namely the Spanish Inquisition (set up in the Spanish kingdoms under royal control with papal consent in 1478 in order to control the doubted orthodoxy of forcibly converted Moslems and Jews) and the Roman Inquisition (established under direct papal control in 1542 to stamp out the spread of Protestant beliefs in Italy). The medieval inquisition (which naturally set the model for the later versions) was a very different institution that was devised to deal with the problems of religious deviancy in the late medieval setting.

It had traditionally been incumbent upon bishops to stamp out heresy within their dioceses.[7] They were to do so by "investigation", and the term "inquisition" is simply a nominal abstraction derived from the Latin verb *inquirere* ("to look into" or "investigate").[8] By the late twelfth century it was clear that they had signally failed to carry out this task in southern France, where the Catharist and Waldensian heresies were widespread, and, in his bull *Ad abolendam* of 1184, Pope Lucius III urged the bishops to undertake their task and laid out the methods for doing this. While there is no substantive innovation in these provisions (they are based on the standard practices of the past), this bull would serve as the cornerstone of later inquisitorial procedure. In 1199, Pope Innocent III

[7] For discussions of the legal and institutional establishment of the inquisition, see Peters (1988), 47–58, Lambert (2002), 108–111.
[8] The term is thus etymologically related to the English words "inquest" and "inquire", which have a broader signification without ecclesiastical connotations.

overtly equated heresy with treason (and thus implied that the crime was worthy of the death penalty) in the bull *Vergentis*. In 1208 (just before the launch of the Albigensian Crusade to subjugate the heartland of the Cathars), the pope spelled out more concrete measures against heresy with the Bull *Cum ex iniuncto officio*, ordering the convicted heretic to be turned over immediately to the secular authorities (presumably for execution), and introducing further penalties such as the confiscation of the heretic's property. Finally, the second bull *Excommunicamus* of 1231 authorized that convicted heretics should be turned over to the secular authorities for *animadversio debita* ("due punishment"), which is a euphemism for execution. The death penalty could not be carried out by the church on its own, so at the same time secular states indicated their cooperation by enacting the requisite legislation, and in the present context the relevant laws were a series of savage measures against heretics issued by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II in the 1220s and 1230s.

These measures laid the legal foundation for the inquisition's jurisdiction over heretics, but the bishops continued to show themselves unequal to the task of dealing with heresy in southern France. In the aftermath of the conquest of the area of the Cathars during the Albigensian Crusade, an attempt was made to stamp out heresy through investigations carried out by the pope's legate, but this was an ad hoc measure that did not provide a general solution. The medieval inquisition was finally instituted through the appointment of members of the newly founded mendicant orders (especially Dominicans, rather less frequently Franciscans) as inquisitors. Such appointments are already attested in 1220, and the first documentary evidence for such appointments appears in two bulls of the early 1230s, *Cum ad capiendos* (enjoining ecclesiasitics to cooperate with Dominicans who had been appointed to aid in the task of extirpating heretics in France and adjoining territories) and *Ille humani generis* (addressed to the Dominicans of Regensburg and their prior and authorizing them to hunt out concealed heretics in the area). In the beginning, these appointments were ad hoc affairs, but the efficiency of the system soon became obvious and over the next few decades it was regularized into a permanent institution.[9] Even when the bishops were properly trained in the matter of dealing with heretics (and many

[9] A major bone of contention involved turf wars between the bishops and the new institution of the inquisition, which encroached upon the bishops' previously recognized jurisdiction in the sphere of suppressing heresy. Eventually, it was decided that the local bishop and the inquisitor should work in cooperation, but loopholes in the regulations readily allowed the inquisitor to go his own way if necessary.

were not), they were distracted by many other administrative duties, but the Dominicans appointed as inquisitors were thoroughly trained in theological matters and felt it to be their particular task to hunt out and exterminate heresy (and eventually worked out an elaborate procedure for detecting the often secret devotees of prohibited forms of worship). Sometimes the inquisitors were appointed by provincials (heads of the provinces of the Dominican Order), and at other times received direct appointment from the pope. Normally, the district covered by a given inquisitor was equivalent to the Dominican province. The title for such inquisitors was *inquisitor heretice pravitatis* ("inquisitor into heretical depravity").

These inquisitors, whether appointed by the local provincial or the pope, acted by virtue of delegated papal authority, and they were trusted to act on their own initiative in investigating, tracking down and stamping out local instances of heresy. As the examples of Jacob Sprenger and Henricus Institoris show, the level of activity on the part of an individual inquisitor could vary greatly (while there is very little evidence for Sprenger acting as an inquisitor, this seems to have been Institoris's main occupation; see General Introduction, 4a and 4b). In effect, the inquisitors were to serve as itinerant agents whose mission was to stamp out any form of religious deviation, and anything that could be construed as heresy was subject to their jurisdiction. By the late thirteenth century, Catharism had largely been suppressed, but the Waldensians had spread throughout Germany and Italy, and other forms of religious heterodoxy arose. Some heretics belonged to more or less organized movements (for instance, the followers of Wycliffe and Huss, the beghards and beguines, and the so-called Free Spirits). Others were merely people who considered themselves to be dutiful Catholics but whose activities struck an inquisitor as superstitious (see General Introduction 4b on Institoris's attack on some pious women, whose crime was – of all things – excessive devotion to taking communion).[10]

Thus, the medieval inquisition represented an attempt by the old universal church to set up a mechanism to enforce religious conformity by hunting down and wiping out religious deviants by means of well-educated local investigators who were zealously devoted to the

---

[10] The institution of the more or less independent inquisitor of heretical depravity was rendered obsolete during the course of the sixteenth century by the need for a more concerted effort to eradicate religious dissent, when those governments that wished to suppress the new religious ideas in defense of the Catholic church had to undertake extreme and coordinated measures that were incompatible with the capricious ad hoc procedures of the old inquisition.