

## 1 Introduction

The subject of this Element is official and semi-official contemporary attitudes to witchcraft (and to belief in witchcraft) among the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church in the period since the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. While many of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics may well believe in some form of witchcraft, the focus of this study is not the vast subject of popular Catholic belief in witchcraft,<sup>1</sup> but rather the ways in which the hierarchy of the Catholic church (and its delegated specialists, the diocesan exorcists) has responded to such beliefs in the modern world. While 'witchcraft' has a variety of meanings in contemporary culture (including positive ones), for the purposes of this Element, 'witchcraft' refers to a belief in the possibility of occult harm caused by or channelled through other human beings, including curses, hexes, the 'evil eye', and other cultural variations on the theme of preternatural harm projected by a third party.

In the process of writing my book *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*,<sup>2</sup> which was focussed on understanding the historical background to the resurgence of the practice of exorcism within contemporary Catholicism, I became aware that a separate study was needed of the church's current approach to witchcraft. The relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and witchcraft matters because, more than any other aspect of Catholic demonology, it is a site of contestation between official theologies and popular religion. The issue of witchcraft exposes the extent of the church's willingness to accommodate and assimilate culturally specific beliefs about preternatural harm. It is an issue that reveals the competing imperatives of teaching the essentials of the faith without 'superstition' on the one hand and responding to the pastoral needs of the faithful on the other – imperatives that have been in tension since at least the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. The study of the contemporary church's official and semi-official responses to belief in witchcraft thus offers revealing insights into the operation of authority within the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the ways in which the church negotiates its relationship with the beliefs of the faithful and with its own tradition.

Exorcism and associated practices are the contemporary Catholic church's foremost official response to the presumed presence of spiritual evil, and the practice of exorcism is informed by underlying theoretical demonology that usually acknowledges the possibility of witchcraft. Witchcraft was a relative

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<sup>1</sup> On belief in witchcraft in contemporary worldwide Catholic cultures, see Boi-Nai and Kirby 1998: 533–53; De Blécourt 1999: 143–219; Green 2003: 120–40; Behrend 2007: 41–58; Zocca and Urame 2008; Lado 2009: 71–92.

<sup>2</sup> Young 2016.

latecomer to Catholic demonology, first appearing as a serious concern of churchmen in the late Middle Ages, but it has historically served an important explanatory purpose in demonology, since it accounts for demonic attacks on the innocent. Early accounts of demonic possession emphasized the demoniac's sin as the cause of demonic activity. In 417, Pope Innocent I referred to 'baptized persons, who are afterwards possessed by a demon on account of some vice or intervening sin'.<sup>3</sup> The idea that demonic vexation of the faithful was the result of sin remained the dominant interpretation until the fifteenth century when witchcraft was adopted by some theologians as an explanation for how innocent people came to experience demonic vexation.<sup>4</sup>

This study approaches the Catholic church's relationship with belief in witchcraft from the perspective of contemporary church history, drawing on documentary evidence such as official Vatican documents, papal locutions, documents authorized by national bishops' conferences, and the writings of priests authorized to function as diocesan exorcists. Although the highest level of the church's official approach to witchcraft is found in liturgical and catechetical documents such as the rite of exorcism and the *Catechism*, canon law entrusts the ministry of exorcism to the diocesan bishop, and therefore, to his discretion and to the discretion of any priest whom the bishop appoints as a diocesan exorcist within the norms of canon law and the liturgical norms of the authorized rites. Responses to the problem of witchcraft in the writings of episcopally authorized exorcists and other clerical demonologists thus express the attitudes of those empowered by the church to deal with demonic activity. While the writings of exorcists on witchcraft represent their personal views and often include individual and cultural idiosyncrasies, they also often reflect the views of the exorcist's bishop and the culture of dealing with witchcraft within a particular nation. Moreover, they reflect the academic formation of would-be exorcists and, often, the nature of the training offered by bodies such as the International Association of Exorcists.

The approach adopted in this Element is by no means exhaustive; the church's relationship with witchcraft belief could also be approached from the perspectives of anthropology, folklore, canon law, theology, and the sociology of religion (and indeed, Giuseppe Giordan and Adam Possamai have recently demonstrated that the practice of exorcism can be approached from a sociological perspective, drawing on interviews, oral testimony, and quantitative data).<sup>5</sup> Even within the limits of published sources, this study cannot be a comprehensive one, since new writings on witchcraft by diocesan exorcists are appearing all the time throughout the world. However, this study sets out to

<sup>3</sup> Young 2016: 45.    <sup>4</sup> Young 2016: 68.    <sup>5</sup> Giordan and Possamai 2018

introduce the subject of official and semi-official Catholic approaches to witchcraft by analysing the relevant liturgical and catechetical documents, the approaches of a selection of exorcists from across the world, and major events in the development of contemporary Catholic attitudes to the problems of witchcraft and witchcraft belief. This is a new area of research where a great deal of more work is needed, from the perspectives of multiple disciplines, and the conclusion outlines some potential future directions for research.

All translations from languages other than English are my own, with the exception of quotations from the English edition of Gabriele Amorth's *An Exorcist Tells His Story*.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Historical Background

### 2.1 Defining Witchcraft

The challenge of defining witchcraft is a notoriously difficult problem in historiography, but fortunately, the scope and nature of this Element do not require a single, universally applicable definition of witchcraft. This Element is concerned only with what those authorities might consider 'witchcraft' to be. However, since the term is used quite broadly by some modern Catholic demonologists to mean any form of magic, occultism, esotericism, or even non-Christian spirituality, there is clearly a danger that the term may lose any vestige of meaning at all unless some boundaries are imposed. In fact, the use of 'witchcraft' in such a general way by Catholic demonologists is a very recent phenomenon; historically, what Catholic demonologists called 'witchcraft' invariably included an element of directed supernatural harm. The anthropologist Garrick Bailey's definition of sorcery as 'the performance of rites and spells intended to cause supernatural forces to harm others' broadly corresponds to what Catholic demonologists have traditionally considered witchcraft to be.<sup>7</sup>

Although Bailey goes on to distinguish sorcery from witchcraft, defining witchcraft as 'the use of psychic power alone to cause harm to others',<sup>8</sup> a distinction between sorcery and witchcraft is not usually acknowledged by Catholic demonologists, and the two terms are used interchangeably. The category of 'witchcraft proper' (as opposed to spiritual practices deemed undesirable and labelled *pejoratively* as witchcraft) is still quite an expansive one, including curses, the evil eye, and the casting of spells, but the common characteristics of all witchcraft proper in Catholic demonology are the intent to cause harm and the mediation, in some way or another, of a human agent. This 'witchcraft proper' may be called malefic witchcraft (from the Latin

<sup>6</sup> Amorth 1999. <sup>7</sup> Bailey and Peoples 2013: 265–6. <sup>8</sup> Bailey and Peoples 2013: 266.

*maleficium*) to distinguish it from other uses of the term because it is classically directed towards the working of evil.<sup>9</sup> A further feature of witchcraft – and one that may distinguish it from other forms of magic and from sorcery – is its association with the marginalized in society. In most areas of Europe, witchcraft accusations usually targeted women, but on a global scale, gender is not the only factor in witchcraft accusations, not even the dominant factor in some societies.<sup>10</sup> For example, in much of Africa, it is the elderly, the disabled, and children (of either sex) who tend to be accused of witchcraft.<sup>11</sup>

The rarity (or perceived rarity) of traditional malefic witchcraft in large parts of the developed world may be one reason why the term ‘witchcraft’ is now applied by many Catholic demonologists to various forms of occultism, esotericism, ‘New Age’ spirituality, and neo-paganism that are ultimately rooted in the occult revival of the late nineteenth century. In many regions of the developing world, by contrast, witchcraft retains its core meaning as directed spiritual harm. This variation in usage of the term exposes the challenge the church faces in formulating a single coherent response to witchcraft and belief in witchcraft across the entire Catholic world, where cultural perceptions of what witchcraft is may be very different. However, as we shall see, the perception that traditional malefic witchcraft is largely a thing of the past in the developed world may be misplaced.

Further difficulties of definition are raised by the fact that every language has its own distinctive term for witchcraft that has specific and sometimes unique cultural associations so that no translation will ever be exact. The problem is illustrated by the fact that even the Italian language, widely used in the Roman Curia and in most cases the successor of Latin, has a term for witchcraft (*stregoneria*) that does not exactly correspond to the Latin terms *maleficium* and *sortilegium* that are normally used in Latin documents referring to witchcraft. In languages unconnected with Latin with only a recent tradition of Catholic theological vocabulary, especially in the developing world, the problem of translation is significantly magnified.

While a church reluctant to discuss witchcraft has long faced the question of how to evangelize societies where belief in witchcraft is particularly intense, the rapid rise of Pentecostalist churches in former strongholds of Catholicism, such as Brazil, has left the Catholic church facing spiritual competition from denominations and styles of Christianity that do not hesitate to affirm the reality and danger of witchcraft. The need for sensitive pastoral responses in societies where belief in witchcraft is widespread is complicated by an additional

<sup>9</sup> Young 2017: 13.    <sup>10</sup> Clark 1997: 106–33.

<sup>11</sup> Van der Geest 2002: 437–63; Mayneri 2016: 185–96; Ndlovu 2016: 29–39.

evangelistic imperative to encourage people to remain faithful to the Catholic church and to vindicate the Catholic church as the true church of Christ exercising spiritual authority. In the developing world, these challenges have created a tension between the Catholic hierarchy's duty to affirm Rome's generally cautious and reticent approach to matters concerning witchcraft on the one hand and the perceived pastoral importance of tackling a major dimension of people's spiritual (and indeed everyday) lives on the other.

Recent growth in the ministry of exorcism in the developed world, where exorcisms declined significantly in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, has meant a revival of demonology and, with it, a resurgence of interest in the reality and nature of witchcraft. Factors such as the influence of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and the introduction of ideas from the developing world into the Catholicism of developed countries (through immigration and other means) have weakened the church's traditional hostility to engaging with belief in witchcraft, which has been a characteristic of official Catholicism since at least the eighteenth century. At the same time, however, evidence suggests that the church in the developing world is ill-equipped to deal pastorally with an intense fear of witchcraft that can spill over into violence and bloodshed.

## 2.2 Historic Catholic Attitudes to Witchcraft

Before the fourteenth century, ecclesiastical interest in harmful magic was largely confined to discrediting such beliefs and suppressing magic as a deluded form of undesirable superstition, an attitude most famously expressed in the tenth-century canon *Episcopi*.<sup>12</sup> It was not until the fourteenth century that theologians began to take an interest in the idea that the devil might be involved in witchcraft as something other than a mere deceiver, owing to development in the doctrine of the devil occasioned by the church's struggle against the Cathar heresy.<sup>13</sup> What followed was a steady 'diabolization' of magic and witchcraft, culminating in the notion that witches were a sect of devil worshippers who renounced their baptism and sacrificed children to Satan at their Sabbaths.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the idea of witches as devil-worshipping apostates remained a localized one in the late Middle Ages that never took hold in many nations. In Mediterranean Europe, for example, concern about the harmful potential of people believing in witchcraft continued to predominate over concern about witchcraft itself.<sup>15</sup> Medieval Catholicism thus produced both the myth of the witches' Sabbath and the intense witch persecutions in the fifteenth-century

<sup>12</sup> On the canon *Episcopi*, see Halsted 2020: 361–85. <sup>13</sup> Baroja 1990: 19–43.

<sup>14</sup> Cameron 2010: 193–5. <sup>15</sup> Baroja 1990: 40–2.

Rhine Valley on the one hand and a tradition of scepticism regarding the reality of witchcraft on the other. Those demonologists who believed most passionately that they were waging war against diabolical witchcraft emphasized the importance of the secular authorities' involvement in witchcraft prosecutions, with the inquisitor Heinrich Kramer (author of the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*) arguing that the church's remedies were useless against witches in comparison with judicial punishment: 'the only possible way for [witchcraft] to be remedied is for the judges who are responsible for the sorceresses to get rid of them.'<sup>16</sup> The role of the church was to be the ideological engine of the war against witches, while the duty of the civil authorities was to extirpate them.

While Kramer's intention was to convince rulers and magistrates of the seriousness of the threat posed by witchcraft, by downplaying the role of the church, he made it possible for secular authorities to take charge of the prosecution of witchcraft in Protestant nations after the Reformation. Furthermore, Kramer weakened confidence in the church's sacraments, such as exorcism, as remedies against witchcraft.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, others began to link the ancient idea of demonic possession with bewitchment,<sup>18</sup> with the consequence that exorcists and practical demonologists turned into experts on witchcraft. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, manuals of exorcism became increasingly preoccupied with witchcraft, to the point where exorcism merged with apotropaic counter-magical practices derived from popular religion.<sup>19</sup> By 1596, the Italian exorcist Girolamo Menghi was able to assert with confidence that all exorcists now accepted that most (if not all) cases of possession derived from witchcraft.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, however, the methodologies of the exorcists were increasingly alienated from those of inquisitors who (in Italy at least) were finding it harder to convict accused witches, with trials running on for years and ending in acquittals.<sup>21</sup>

As we shall see later in this Element, the tension between demonological experts and the ecclesiastical authorities would continue to be a theme in Catholic approaches to witchcraft. The eighteenth century saw the development of what Owen Davies has called a 'witchcraft without witches', where belief in and fear of bewitchment survived while the identification of specific individuals as culprits receded into the background – largely because neither secular nor ecclesiastical courts were willing to convict anyone for witchcraft.<sup>22</sup> From the late seventeenth century onwards, the concept of witchcraft became abstracted and depersonalized in demonological writings, and one reason for this was surely the withdrawal of judicial authorities from the detection and prosecution

<sup>16</sup> Institoris 2009: 413.    <sup>17</sup> Young 2016: 66.    <sup>18</sup> Midelfort 2005: 9.

<sup>19</sup> Young 2016: 110–11.    <sup>20</sup> Sluhovsky 2007: 85.    <sup>21</sup> Sluhovsky 2007: 81.

<sup>22</sup> Davies 1999: 280.

of accused witches. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, many jurisdictions switched their judicial focus from the prosecution of witches to the prosecution of vigilante action against supposed ‘witches’.<sup>23</sup>

Far from being an ‘Enlightenment’ development prompted by secularization and opposed by the Catholic church, the eighteenth-century church supported and encouraged the decriminalization of witchcraft. In Poland–Lithuania, for example, bishops threatened to excommunicate anyone involved in the prosecution of witchcraft in the secular courts – not because Polish bishops did not believe in witchcraft but because they were determined to recover the church’s sole right to try cases of witchcraft in the church courts.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, decriminalization of witchcraft became part of a conservative Catholic political agenda that sought to assert the church’s authority over the state. The Spanish Inquisition, for example, was interested in witchcraft primarily as a superstitious imposture and executed no one for the crime throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth century, Catholic theologians increasingly argued that the power of the devil was more restricted than had hitherto been believed, retaining their allegiance to an orthodox belief in the existence of the devil and demons, and even the theoretical possibility of witchcraft, but restricting its field of operations. Theologians such as Ludovico Muratori, Scipione Maffei, and Ferdinand Sterzinger adopted a de facto scepticism regarding witchcraft that, even if it did not go so far as denying the possibility of its existence, eliminated witchcraft (to all practical intents and purposes) from the Catholic worldview.<sup>26</sup> While priests in rural areas continued to be involved in unbewitching in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and Catholic belief in witchcraft continued unabated in mission territories, the scepticism of the eighteenth century largely endured into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries among educated clergy.

### 2.3 Witchcraft and the Rise of ‘Neo-Demonology’

As I outlined in *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, it was Pope Leo XIII’s encouragement of conspiracy theories involving Satanic elements at the end of the nineteenth century that was the proximate cause of a slow revival of practical demonology in the church, although this was initially focussed on a fear of politically motivated Satanism rather than on witchcraft.<sup>27</sup> However, an alternative anti-demonological strand also began to develop in Catholic theology that gained traction in the church in the aftermath of the Second

<sup>23</sup> Young forthcoming. <sup>24</sup> Ostling 2011: 55–6. <sup>25</sup> Lehner 2016: 136.  
<sup>26</sup> Lehner 2016: 143–51. <sup>27</sup> Young 2016: 184–91.

Vatican Council in the 1960s and 1970s. Theologians questioned the scriptural and doctrinal foundations of belief in the demonic realm and all that it entailed, and by the 1970s, even the existence of the devil as a personal being seemed to be in question in Catholic theology.<sup>28</sup> Jesuit theologians such as Herbert Haag, Henry Ansgar Kelly, and Juan B. Cortés led the attack on traditional belief in the devil, which became so serious that Pope Paul VI felt compelled to respond in 1972 with a reiteration of the church's traditional teaching on the existence of Satan as an evil personal being.<sup>29</sup>

However, while these theologians' willingness to question the *existence* of Satan and demons was new, there was nothing new about Catholic theologians exercising extreme caution when it came to 'interference . . . by malignant agencies at the request of man'.<sup>30</sup> In a 1915 dissertation on the subject, the Notre Dame Sister Antoinette Marie Pratt dismissed the witch trials as the product of hysteria and excessive imagination, echoing much the same explanations then offered by secular historians. The attitude of the Jesuit theologian Christiano Pesch, writing at the very end of the nineteenth century, reflected a general disengagement of Catholic theologians from the issue of witchcraft that continued into the twentieth century:

*A priori* we ought to be very slow in admitting in a given case that diabolical influence exists unless it is proved by irrefutable arguments. In matters of this kind, the greatest incredulity is preferable to credulity, when there is question of men who make a business of such things. On the other hand, not all the narrations about compacts with demons are simply to be rejected as fables . . . . But in passing such judgements, the greatest caution is required, because in things so remote from the senses mistakes are very easily made.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to condoning almost unlimited scepticism with regard to witchcraft, it is noteworthy that Pesch worked on the assumption that judgements about the reality of demonic pacts would largely be a historical exercise. It should come as no surprise that the clergy of the post-Vatican II era found it easy to disbelieve in witchcraft; such disbelief was already rooted in an earlier theology that, while paying lip service to demonology, had to all intents and purposes abandoned its practical implications.

The Catholic clergy's cautious approach to claims of witchcraft and Satanism in the early 1970s is exemplified by their response to an apparent outbreak of 'black magic' in the north of Ireland, then riven by sectarian armed conflict, during 1973–1974. While rumours of occult rituals may have been fanned (or even started) by the British army in an effort to keep people in their homes after

<sup>28</sup> Giordan and Possamai 2018: 42–6. <sup>29</sup> Young 2016: 213–15. <sup>30</sup> Pratt 1915: 118.

<sup>31</sup> Pesch 1898: iii, 445.

dark, Catholic priests tended to confine themselves to denouncing ‘dabbling’ in the occult from the pulpit and distributing holy water.<sup>32</sup> It is possible that priests blessed some of those houses in which the paraphernalia of occult rituals were allegedly found, as children interviewed at the time referred to priests blessing houses.<sup>33</sup> However, one priest interviewed by a local newspaper attributed people’s dabbling with the occult through the use of Ouija boards as a result of boredom and wearily observed that ‘If [black magic] practices are going on, we would probably be the last to know about them.’<sup>34</sup> Certainly, there was little sign that rumours of ‘black magic’ in the north of Ireland produced moral panic in the Catholic clergy, who surely had many more pressing pastoral problems to deal with.

For those theologians sceptical of the very existence of a personal devil, the question of the existence of witchcraft scarcely arose. However, a highly publicized exorcism in Germany during 1975–1976 brought the supposed role of witchcraft in demonic possession back to public attention. In September 1975, the bishop of Würzburg authorized the exorcism of a young woman named Anneliese Michel, who underwent months of exorcism before dying of malnutrition (while still being exorcized) in July 1976. The resulting criminal case against the exorcists resulted in their extensive notes and recordings (usually kept secret) becoming public. One of the exorcists, Arnold Renz, recorded a conversation with the ‘demon’ allegedly possessing Michel that revealed the reason for her possession was witchcraft:

It is the village that lives and breathes in the answer to the question of why Anneliese was being possessed. [The demon said] ‘She was not born yet when she was cursed.’ A woman had done it out of envy. Who was she? ‘A neighbor of her mother’s in Leiblfing.’ Did she also curse others? Obstinate silence . . . Anneliese’s parents tried to check the story out, but the woman had died.<sup>35</sup>

As the exorcisms went on, however, the idea of witchcraft receded into the background as the exorcists began to believe the possession was first and foremost a trial sent by God to test the saintly Anneliese.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the case demonstrated that belief in witchcraft as a cause of the demonic attack was not only very much alive in rural Catholic Bavaria, but exorcists were also still prepared to entertain the possibility of such things.

Perhaps partly as a result of the fallout from the death of Anneliese Michel, willingness to deal with the problem of witchcraft was at a low ebb in the church in parts of western Europe in the 1970s. For example, by the early 1980s,

<sup>32</sup> Jenkins 2014: 209.    <sup>33</sup> Jenkins 2014: 176.    <sup>34</sup> Jenkins 2014: 211.

<sup>35</sup> Goodman 2005: 97–8.    <sup>36</sup> Young 2016: 216–19.

Belgian monks who had long been the last resort of rural people who believed themselves to be the victims of witchcraft often had to be tricked into ‘unwitching’ people. The monks found themselves walking a tightrope between retaining the trust of local people and reinforcing beliefs they considered superstitious. Since the monks were increasingly reluctant to distribute the blessed salt, holy water, and medals that had once warded off witchcraft, people began to resort to the parish clergy they considered less powerful. However, the monks could still sometimes be induced to give a blessing that was then construed as an ‘unwitching’ by its recipients.<sup>37</sup> In her research in the bocage in the 1970s, Jeanne Favret-Saada found that the diocesan exorcist had been appointed specifically *because* he was sceptical of peasant belief in witchcraft.<sup>38</sup> The exorcist made a sharp distinction between witchcraft (which was superstition) and demonic possession (which might be genuine).<sup>39</sup>

In comparison with the cultural influence of the book and film, *The Exorcist*, the latter of which was released in 1973, the real-world exorcism of Anneliese Michel was a rather insignificant event. The central role played by the awakening of an ancient curse in the plot of *The Exorcist* strengthened the popular perception of a link between curses and demonic possession (in contrast to the traditional link between possession and sin emphasized by the church over centuries), and the novel and film may also have influenced exorcists and demonologists themselves.<sup>40</sup> The cultural influence of *The Exorcist* represented the beginning of what might be termed a ‘neo-demonological’ Catholic backlash against the demonological scepticism of post-conciliar theologians like Haag.

The ‘neo-demonology’ that first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s differed from the traditional demonology that preceded it in its relative absence of sceptical caution and in its willingness to draw on non-Catholic theological sources, most notably Pentecostalism (through the Catholic Charismatic Renewal). While the abandonment of the demonological reticence that characterized much Catholic theological writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was begun by Pope Leo XIII at the end of the nineteenth century, it intensified in the 1980s as a result of the emergence of the ‘Satanic Abuse Panic’ in the United States. Psychiatrists noticed that children undergoing treatment claimed to ‘remember’ horrific Satanic rituals in which they had been abused by family members and communities. The idea soon spread to Europe, where the testimony of supposed survivors of Satanic Ritual Abuse was used to bring convictions that were later deemed unsound, on the grounds that psychiatrists

<sup>37</sup> De Blécourt 1999: 185–6.    <sup>38</sup> Favret-Saada 1977: 18.    <sup>39</sup> Favret-Saada 1977: 127.  
<sup>40</sup> Young 2016: 219.