

READERS' FORUM

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in human history, nor to minimize the suffering of those arrested, tortured and killed. However, it is important to understand why this episode has become central to the Pagan sacred narrative, especially when there are few, if any, documented historical links between contemporary Witches and Pagans and the victims of the witch hunts.

I would hypothesize that one reason for the popularity of this narrative in the late 20th century is that in the current climate of identity politics, narratives of past oppression are important elements legitimating the identity of any minority group. In the 1960s and 70s, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, gays and lesbians, and other minority groups made forceful claims to identity and power by reminding the dominant culture of the very real violations of civil rights they had repeatedly endured. Somehow, these narratives became models for any group claiming a legitimate and authentic identity: victimhood has become a necessary step in constructing authenticity. Narratives of past oppression may be functioning to legitimate our current identity; this is one reason why we cling to them so strongly.

This may be especially so since most Pagans are white and middle-class—members of a group which is supposed to have all the privileges in American society. The trouble with this paradigm is that it reduces complex power interactions to one or two variables. Every group has been at one point or another the victim of some more powerful group; victimhood is no guarantor of authenticity or spiritual legitimacy.

Perhaps it would be more fruitful to recognize that all traditions are legitimate and authentic, no matter when they have been constructed or by whom, and regardless of

whether or not their practitioners have suffered oppression. What is authentic is always a matter of cultural construction.

Sabina Magliocco

California State University—Northridge

To the editors:

I've been following the articles in the last few journals about the great witch hunts. As someone who is by no means a scholar, I've found myself in the uncomfortable position of not being able to defend my gut feeling that the entire 9 million women scenario is incorrect. I was pleased to read Jenny Gibbon's article in issue #5. She provided a good argument as to why basing historical opinions on 'propaganda' such as witchhunting manuals can provide faulty conclusions.

Max Dashu provides at least a partial rebuttal to Gibbon's article, but in making her argument that the hunt was a specific dedicated campaign against the old religion, Dashu relies heavily on the witchhunting manuals about which Gibbons warns us. Further, she suggests that the trial records that might support her position have been intentionally destroyed. I am always uncomfortable with "the dog ate my homework" reasoning. It seems too convenient to me, particularly in the light of the more credible and less inflammatory sources to which Gibbons has referred.

This is obviously a developing and exciting area of study. Thanks so much for airing both sides of the issue. I'm hoping that studied differences of opinion will result in a complete and defensible history of that turbulent time.

Jennifer Alcott

Oberon Zell writes:

There has been quite a debate raging on some of the Pagan lists regarding Jenny Gibbons' article "The Great European Witch Hunt", with some people trying to say that, according to modern research, the Inquisition



hardly bothered the Witches and Pagans, so we shouldn't keep alluding to it as victims thereof.

This has come up particularly because of the letter to the Pope, which has been created by an international joint Committee of concerned Pagan leaders and liberal Christians, and which will be sent to the Vatican along with over a thousand signatures. This letter respectfully asks the Pope to be sure and include Witches and Pagans in his planned Millennial Apology for the Inquisition, wherein he has already stated he will be apologizing to the Jews, Protestant Christians and Moslems for the persecution their people suffered under the Inquisition.

In case you are not already familiar with this project, check Circle's web site for the Lady Liberty League: circle@mhtc.net.

Here is a little statement I wrote in reply to some of those aforementioned critics:

The excellent article to which so many critics allude, "The Great European Witch Hunt", by Jenny Gibbons, republished in the Autumn 1999 issue of *PanGaia*, contains several interesting statements apropos of the criticisms. One of these statements is on p. 30 of *PanGaia*:

"In 1258 Pope Alexander IV explicitly refused to allow the Inquisition to investigate charges of witchcraft: 'The Inquisitors, deputized to investigate heresy, must not intrude into investigations of divination or sorcery without knowledge of manifest heresy involved.' 'Manifest heresy' meant: 'praying at the altars of idols, to offer sacrifices, to consult demons, to elicit responses from them ... or if [the witches] associate themselves publicly with heretics.' In other words, in the 13th century the church did not consider witches heretics or members of a rival religion."

Well, that's certainly not the conclusion I would draw from those quotes. If "knowledge of manifest heresy" was required for an Inquisitorial investigation, and "Manifest heresy" meant: "praying at the altars of idols, to offer

sacrifices, to consult demons [*ie*, other deities than Jahveh—OZ], to elicit responses from them ...," then that would certainly indicate to me that this is a reference to "a rival religion," and a specifically Pagan one at that! I mean, who else besides Pagans and Catholics prays "at the altars of idols"? So how does the quoted statement confirm the author's point, that: "Pope Alexander IV explicitly refused to allow the Inquisition to investigate charges of witchcraft"? It seems to me that the quote specifically refutes that point!

Ms Gibbons also states, in bringing down the estimated total number of executions for Witchcraft, that: "To date, less than 15,000 definite executions have been discovered in all of Europe and Americas combined." Following this statement, she lists other recent estimates, of 60,000; 40,000; and 100,000. But even the lowest estimate of "less than 15,000" seems to me to be a considerable number. I mean, the entire country has been in a justifiable uproar over the recent hate-killings of a handful of gay men. Suppose the number had been 15,000? Would we have thought that this was insignificant, and not worthy of protest?

I don't wish to comment further on this article at this time, as, according to a note at the end of the article in *PanGaia*, a full rebuttal has been prepared by Max Dashu, and appears in the August 1999 issue of *The Pomegranate*: 501 NE Thompson Mill Rd., Corbett, OR 97019; antech@teleport.com.

*Never Thirst,
Oberon Zell-Ravenheart*

Jenny Gibbons replies:

I'd like to address a couple of the thoughtfull points that Oberon Zell raises.

First, the citation from Pope Alexander states that the Inquisition cannot investigate charges of sorcery (witchcraft) without evidence that there is heresy ('incorrect' interpretations of Christianity) involved. Obviously,

... shouldn't we Witches be apologizing too? Many of our spiritual ancestors, the wise-women and cunning men ... accused their neighbors, and watched them die.

then, witchcraft and heresy are not the same thing. Magick was not the Inquisition's provenance at this point—only magick practiced by Christian dissidents (Cathars, Albigensians, etc).

And this also cannot be a reference to a rival Pagan religion, as Mr Zell suggests. The Inquisition investigated heretics, and only Christians could be heretics. Other religions, like Judaism and Islam, were not heresies and therefore not the Inquisition's concern. Non-Christians were considered infidels, and poorly treated, but they were not heretics. This is why the Spanish government forced Jews to 'convert' to Christianity. If it had not done so, the Spanish Inquisition would not have had jurisdiction over them. If the Church considered witchcraft a non-Christian religion, then the Inquisition could not have touched witches.

Second, I do not mean to imply that 'only' 15,000 people died in the Witch Hunts. We know of 15,000 definite executions, therefore scholars believe that 40-60,000 people died. The 15,000 figure is the evidence that scholarly estimates are based on, not an estimate itself. Many trial records have been lost, therefore we know the death toll must be higher than 15,000. And no one suggests that the Witch Hunts were less important if 'only' tens of thousands of people died. The Great European Witch Hunt was an atrocity of staggering proportions. We don't need to have nine mil-

lion deaths to be horrified by it. These were people, not statistics.

But the question remains, is it an atrocity that the Catholic Church bears the sole responsibility for?

Recent research shows the answer is a definite 'no'. All segments of European society bear some of the blame; no one's hands are clean. The Church helped created the stereotypes and religious intolerance that led to the Witch Hunts. But it was secular courts of

Europe that killed the vast majority of witches, not the Church. It was ordinary, everyday people who sent their neighbors to the stake. If we ask the Pope to apologize, why shouldn't we ask the same of all Europeans and Euro-Americans? And shouldn't we Witches be apologizing too? Many of our spiritual ancestors, the wise-women and cunning men of Europe and America, were active witch-hunters who blamed illnesses and misfortunes on 'black' witchcraft. They accused their neighbors, and watched them die.

I thought that the letter to the Pope was well-written and moderate, and yet I chose not to sign it. In part this was because I disagree with the history the letter is based on. It implies that the Church and Inquisition were somehow especially guilty, that the Witch Hunt was mainly their fault.

But more importantly, it reinforces Neo-Paganism's 'myth of victimization'—and that's not just bad history, it's dangerous history.

As Witches, our biggest obstacle to understanding the Witch Hunt is our insistence that we were victimized by it. When we look at the past, we split the world into Good Guys and Bad Guys. There are Bad Guys (witch-hunters, doctors, the Church, Christians—people we don't identify with). There are Good Guys (women, witches, Pagans—all groups we like). And the Bad Guys did terrible things to the Good Guys. We don't stop to think that this



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dualistic world-view is precisely the philosophy that allowed the Witch Hunt to occur. We don't acknowledge that reality is far more complex than these dualistic stereotypes. Worse, we do not recognize that we were, and may continue to be, part of the problem.

In the 1980s, America went through a dress-rehearsal for the Burning Times: the panics over Satanic ritual abuse. For the most part, the Pagan community failed to notice the similarities. We began to make all the same mistakes that our ancestors made. Mistakes that, in another time and place, killed tens of thousands of people.

During the Witch Hunt, our spiritual ancestors believed the Church's demonology. They knew that they were not the Satanic witches that the Church warned about. But they were willing to believe that their neighbors belonged to this devil-worshipping conspiracy. And when people came to them, asking them to lift a curse or divine the name of a witch, they did so. Their expertise, their confirmation of suspicions of bewitchment, led to the convictions and deaths of their neighbors.

In the 1980s the exact same stereotypes arose. Fundamentalist Christians, like the

Catholic Church before them, resurrected an age-old myth of a nocturnal, murderous Satanic witch-cult. And like the wise-women and cunning men before us, many Neopagans accepted this demonology. We knew that we didn't do the horrific things that Satanic witches were accused of. But many of us were willing to believe that our neighbors did. Many of us (and I include myself in that number) believed we ought to use our magic to protect our communities from these Devil-worshipping 'Satanists'. Many of us made all the mistakes that created the witch-hunting witches of the Burning Times.

And the reason we did this was because our myths blinded us. We saw others as villains, ourselves as victims and so we did not break the cycle of fear that fed the satanic panics of the 1980s, and the witchcraft trials centuries before. I believe our community must break through the myth of victimization. We need to stop seeing the Witch Hunt as what *They* did to *Us*. There was no *Them* in the Burning Times. There was only a great *Us*, and we did terrible things.

Blaming others achieves nothing. Light a candle for the fallen, and remember them.

Jenny Gibbons