

Catholics vs witches ©

Normally, when we use the phrase, **Catholic taste**, we mean that someone has a wide-ranging or universal interest, but here the phrase has a double meaning, because this text takes a look at the Roman Catholic Church and its quest for medieval world domination. But it's not a general rant against the Vatican – what is covered (briefly) is an overview of the strange history of papal decisions, the inquisitions and the looking-glass world of Catholic dogma in medieval Europe and, in particular, some of the effects on witches.

Before starting, it is worth saying that many pagans either have Roman Catholic influences in their backgrounds or still have friends/family within that faith. This article is intended as a historical review and **not** an anti-Catholic polemic. Pagans have now been admitted to Interfaith UK and it is our tolerance of other faiths that is our strength. OK, sermon over – so onwards and upwards.

World domination?

Did you know that the month of June represents an important date in the history of papal pronouncements, as it is the anniversary of the Treaty of Tordesillas in June 1494? Tord-what? Briefly, Pope Alexander VI divided the world between the Catholic nations of Spain and Portugal, with consequences that still affect us in 2018.

It could be said that the whole problem started with **Columbus**, but this is too simplistic. The real issue lay in the rivalry between the fiercely Catholic countries of Spain and Portugal, both of which were major trading powers in medieval Europe and this idea of trade extended to new territories.

So, when Columbus returned from his exploration in 1493, bearing news of islands in the west with only native tribes, but loads of gold, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella saw it as a chance to increase Spanish wealth and power. The problem was that King João II of Portugal claimed that any new trade routes to heathen lands belonged to him, by papal decree – and the Portuguese fleet made ready to conquer the lands discovered by Columbus. It seemed that a war between Spain and Portugal was likely, but Spain sent a message to the Pope to decide on the matter.

Pope Alexander VI issued a new decree "by the authority of the Almighty God" (the *Inter Cætera*), that the Spanish king and queen (and their heirs) had the exclusive right to travel in, trade with and colonise the lands discovered by Columbus. All other people had to have the formal permission of Spain to trade or visit there.

Where did this leave Portugal? The Pope drew an imaginary line on the map that bisected the Atlantic Ocean from north to south and all lands to the east of that line belonged to Portugal and all lands to the west belonged to Spain. Punishment for ignoring this decision was excommunication.

This decision was ratified in the **Treaty of Tordesillas** in 1494 between Spain and Portugal, but the imaginary line was tweaked a little so that Portugal's domain included all of Africa and Brazil: the known world had been divided formally between two European nations and both became the 16th century equivalent of world super powers. The treaty gave the following freedoms, which still exist today:

- Freedom of the seas for trade and travel
- The right of innocent passage
- Definitions of territorial waters
- Definitions of internal waters
- Definitions of a nation's exclusive trade zone
- Definition of the continental shelf.

Note: the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1994 is based on the Treaty of Tordesillas.

It would be fair to say that both Spain and Portugal profited very well from this papal decision – Portugal grew rich from the eastern trade routes to India and the Spice Islands. Spain conquered the Inca, Aztec and Mayan peoples and obtained huge amounts of gold and silver.

Interestingly, the treaty stayed in place, even when it was found that Columbus had not discovered Asia, but the world was larger than first thought (due to Magellan's circumnavigation). And the damage did not stop there, because other European nations challenged the legitimacy of the treaty over the following 200 years, as Spain and Portugal declined as trading nations. For example, English, French and Dutch buccaneers preyed on Spanish or Portuguese merchant ships and there was both piracy and smuggling, particularly in the Caribbean in the 1700s and 1800s.

It should be noted that in the interim between the Middle Ages and the 20th century, the Treaty of Tordesillas was in decline as Spain and Portugal lost power to other nations and later treaties allowed for the exclusivity to be negotiable, eg English colonies in America.

So, does the treaty have any relevance today? Well, the general answer is **yes** and not only for the maritime legal conventions listed earlier. Brazil is the only country in South America with Portuguese as its main language and here are some fairly recent examples of the papal decision in Tordesillas being used for power politics.

1. In the 20th century, Chile proposed sovereignty over the Antarctic, based on the demarcation line of Pope Alexander VI.
2. Argentina has also laid sovereign claim to the Falkland Islands on the grounds that the Falklands fall into the Spanish half of the world. Argentina's claim is based on the fact that it won a war of independence from Spain and inherited the treaty's benefits and rights.

Inquisitors vs witches

"Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition", as they say in Monty Python and yet, there have been at least 4 inquisitions over the centuries, starting with the one against the Cathars in about 1100 CE.

Later Inquisitions included the one against witches, another against Lutheran Protestants and, today, Catholics accused of acting or speaking against the faith may be tried and excommunicated by a special committee, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (SCDF). Set up in 1542, the SCDF basically serves to protect the Roman Catholic Church from heresy and still operates today. In 2013, Father Greg Reynolds (a Catholic priest from Melbourne) was excommunicated via the SCDF and Pope Francis, because he spoke up for the ordination of women and also for gay marriage.

However, here we're looking at any inquisitor's handy guidebook to witchcraft in the Middle Ages, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (roughly translates as the Hammer of Witches). First written in 1486 by two Dominicans, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, it was published in 1487. With an introduction by Pope Innocent VIII, this book was written with the express purpose of identifying, prosecuting and executing witches anywhere in the known world.

As a set of key questions and definitions for Catholic inquisitors, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was regarded as literal truth and as an answer against sceptics who saw the existence of witches as superstition. It also set out the very real possibility of a person being accused of **heresy**, if he or she disputed the existence of witches at all, ie asking questions about inquisitors. In fact, it might be said that a residual effect of the *Malleus Maleficarum* has been to maintain a general belief in the threat of witchcraft by Christians, even up to this century.

What is interesting is that there were few witches actually on trial during the period of the Second Inquisition (some 250 years, although the last witch was drowned in Prussia in 1836). In most cases, the accusation alone was sufficient for the inquisitors who sent the unlucky people for torture and then to the stake for burning. It is difficult to estimate how many people died as a result of such accusations, but anyone who did not fit in with Christian (Catholic) mainstream faith at that time were accused – not only old women in villages, but midwives, Jews, poets, scientists (who challenged parts of the Bible), writers, dissenters and gypsies. An estimate of victims across medieval Europe is 400,000 deaths, but it should be noted that this total is only an extrapolation from fragmentary records.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* should be seen as a tool of the Catholic Church at that time, ie a time where many people did believe in magick and wise women were commonly found in many villages to help cure local people. However, this book was mainly responsible for taking such beliefs and imposing anti-magickal, canonical law instead and, to some extent, validating the existence of the Inquisition. The book lay on the bench of every judge and on the desk of every magistrate. By 1669, there had been 30 reprints. Here are a couple of examples of what the *Malleus Maleficarum* has to say:

- Page 6: "For witchcraft is high treason against God's Majesty. And so, they are put to torture to make them confess – all their goods sold by public auction – those who consulted or resorted to witches were punished with exile and confiscation of all their property."
- Page 47: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable."

And then, in 1590, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was reinforced by a work written by King James I of England. The book, *Dæmonologie*, also set out ways of identifying witches by physical marks. The king used parts of the *Malleus Maleficarum* for his work, also the quote from Exodus 22 and his own dreams or advice from courtiers – loads of good quantitative facts, as they say – but he was the king.

With the SCDF, the outcome of most cases is excommunication, ie sinners cannot take part in ceremonies of confession, redemption or absolution. However, in the Middle Ages, this sanction took on a new stance – Catholic priests or bishops could use excommunication as a ban on beings that could never have taken part in worship and that is where we go next.

Excommunicants Anonymous

Another notable date in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, (which falls a little outside the scope of this piece) is 1717, but it is interesting, because Pope Clement XI issued a decision that the excommunication of **animals** would no longer be permitted. You might be forgiven for thinking that I've lost my mind here, but the medieval Catholic Church was noted for the (fairly) frequent excommunication of animals and insects.

Let's start with an example and some of the earliest records come from France in 1120-21, when Bishop Laon (Picardy) decided to excommunicate all the caterpillars that were feeding off the crops in his diocese. Shortly afterwards, St Bernard of Clairvaux was irritated by swarms of flies during his preaching at the Foigny monastery (also in the Aisne region). He excommunicated them all on the spot. Apparently, all the flies were found dead on the floor of the church next day and had to be swept out.

To make matters worse, some such excommunications were show trials, where the accused animals were put in the dock of an ecclesiastical court to hear evidence against them. For example, from France in 1510, the area of Autun (Burgundy) was infested with rats and many farmers asked the bishop of that region for help. An Episcopal court was convened with judge, prosecutors and defence counsel for the rats. The defence lawyer argued that the rats had not been summoned properly and that such summoning was very dangerous due to the numbers of local cats. The trial went on and on due to the long list of witnesses against the rats, but the sentence was decisive: the rats were excommunicated.

Here are some more cases from the 15th-16th centuries from France, Austria and Italy, but the general idea is clear – to protect crops and livestock, excommunication was an authorised Roman Catholic tool against vermin or insects.

1. Flocks of sparrows that pooped on the Church of St Vincent the Martyr were excommunicated.
2. In Burgundy, a relative of the Duke of Burgundy bought an orchard, but one tree was barren. The local priest explained that the tree had been excommunicated by virtue of the fact that young people of the parish had abandoned mass on one occasion, to collect the ripe fruit from that tree.
3. Back to the region of Autun in 1480 where more very hungry caterpillars were excommunicated by an Episcopal Court and the local priests were asked to repeat the sentence until the insects went away.
4. Still in Autun region in 1488, a similar sentence was passed against snails.
5. In Normandy, in 1516, there were identical proceedings against grasshoppers.
6. In 1587, there was a formal ecclesiastical trial to prosecute the weevils that were attacking crops in the area around St Julien in the Bordeaux region of France. The sentence is not known, but the trial itself lasted for over 8 months!

Conclusion

Does any of this stuff have implications for today? The Tordesillas treaty does have some residual effects, but many of the absurdities have now been corrected by successive popes. A show trial against an ant or a dog could not be supported in 2018, or could it?

On 5 March 1986, some villagers near Malacca in Malaysia beat a dog to death after a local trial; they believed the dog was one of a gang of thieves who transformed themselves into animals to carry out their crimes. The story was reported in the *Financial Times*. It is interesting though that Malacca, a former Portuguese Catholic colony under the Tordesillas treaty, supports several religions today - Islam, Taoism and local customs that still reflect Roman Catholic ceremonies and feasts. Excommunication remains part of Roman Catholicism as does the infallibility of the pontiff when proclaiming Christian doctrine, transubstantiation and praying the rosary. That is their faith and, rather than mocking it, tolerant pagans should acknowledge Roman Catholic beliefs and move on.