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Title: “Church Repression of Ritual Magic”

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Abstract

Throughout the Middle Ages, Europeans practiced magical acts that could be perceived as being outside the realm of Christianity. The individuals who practiced ritual magic were members of the lower clergy and academia. They used ritual magic as a way to live out their fantasies and unfulfilled life goals. The Catholic Church at first tolerated these magical acts as they did not cross vitally important boundaries, but later in the Middle Ages, the Church cracked down on magic. There were biblical prohibitions against ritual magic such as necromancy, but these prohibitions could not be the primary motive for the repression of magic because it would have occurred centuries earlier.

To find out what motivated the Church to persecute magicians, it is more useful to focus on the Church’s political situation during the 14th and 15th centuries. During this time, Pope Boniface VIII’s power struggle with secular rulers damaged and embarrassed the Church. Shortly afterwards, Pope Clement V moved the papacy to Avignon, which caused tensions among Catholics and financial problems for the Church. The worst political crisis the Church faced during this time was the Great Schism, when Church became fragmented under the rule of multiple popes. This situation was resolved by the Council of Constance in 1414, but the ordeal had done much to hurt the Church’s reputation and led to incoherency within the Church structure.

One of the best ways to unite people is to find a common enemy. The Church saw ritual magicians as a very attractive common enemy. They were widespread throughout Europe, secretive, and powerless to resist oppression. In other words, ritual magicians were a scapegoat that helped the divided Church distract itself from its political problems. Although there were theological reasons for seeking to eradicate magic from society, the primary motive for the Church’s crackdown was a means to unify a divided Church by using a vulnerable outside enemy—ritual magic.