

Session 3
2:000-3:30 pm (90 minutes)
EUROPE'S INNER DEMONS: THE DEMONIZATION OF CHRISTIANS IN
MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Frank Chalk
Professor of History and Director,
The Montreal Institute of Genocide and Human Rights Studies
Concordia University

NORMAN COHN'S APPROACH TO THE EARLY MODERN STATE AND THE
SIGNIFICANCE OF TORTURE

I. Maleficium, Imaginary, Threatening Fantasies, and the Role of the State in Manufacturing Fears and Making Them "Self-Evident Truths"

In September 1983, Norman Cohn came to the Montreal Institute for Genocide Studies as a Commonwealth Visiting Research Fellow for the second of the three fall semesters he would work with us at Concordia University. And, as fate would have it, it was on Halloween eve, a month later, that Norman delivered to a packed audience an unforgettable lecture which posed this challenging question: "Did Medieval Heretics Worship the Devil?"

Norman began by outlining for his audience of students, faculty members and ordinary Montrealers the rising belief in Europe from 1100 to 1300 AD in the existence of satanic orgies replete with black cats and toads, culminating in a Papal Bull of the 13th century alleging the existence of such orgies. Soon, he noted, the Popes began to detect heresies among groups of mystics ranging from the Cathars and Waldensians to the Quakers. Acknowledging that cults of the devil might well have existed, Norman insisted that it was not the proliferation of the standard manuals used by inquisitors prior to 1400 to identify heretics which precipitated the Great Witch-Hunt of the succeeding centuries—in fact, the Waldensians and other victims of the early inquisitors were burned as heretics, not as witches, he observed. But the situation changed markedly for the worse, he proposed, when states professionalized themselves, eliminated amateur interrogators, and created an entirely new cohort of professional witch-hunters and inquisitors authorized to extract confessions through the use of torture. Shaped by the growing use of torture, the crime of worshipping the devil at clandestine sabbats where witches conspired to overthrow Christian kings now spread like wildfire from several centers in Europe—and that crime was widely detected and punished through the cooperation of Church and State.

As if to give Norman one more opportunity to make his point, in the question period, two women introduced themselves as housewives coming from an English-speaking suburb of Montreal and made a statement: "Prof. Cohn," they said, "you are wrong. There are witches. WE are witches. Witches exist and are real." "Yes," Norman replied cordially,

“witches like you do exist, but I am willing to wager that you did not fly here on your broomsticks or copulate with the Devil.” His key point—that at the heart of the Great Witch-Hunt lay the standardization and sanctification of a state-imposed consensus affirming the existence of conspiratorial and malign pacts between witches and the Devil to overthrow Christian kings—had found its local anti-type.

Norman had made his point even more elegantly several years earlier in *Europe's Inner Demons*, when he wrote:

“The great witch-hunt can in fact be taken as a supreme example of a massive killing of innocent people by a bureaucracy acting in accordance with beliefs which, unknown or rejected in earlier centuries, had come to be taken for granted, as self-evident truths. It illustrates vividly both the power of the human imagination to build up a stereotype and its reluctance to question the validity of a stereotype once it is generally accepted.”

While Norman wrestled with what processes had contributed to popular fears about the malicious acts of witches in league with the devil, he also recognized the important role played by states in manufacturing fear. In his postscript to *Europe's Inner Demons*, Norman reminds readers that fantasies about the Christians of Lyon in the second century and the Knights Templar in the fourteenth were “cynically and consciously exploited to legitimate an exterminatory policy which had already been decided on.” In contrast, he notes, in the case of the Great Witch-Hunt, it could only have reached “massive dimensions where the minds of the authorities were obsessed by the central fantasy itself. The law was re-shaped to take account of it: in the form of the witches’ sabbat it became the core of a new offence And on the charge of that imaginary offence, many thousands of human beings were burned alive.” (p. 259)

In her book *Enemies of God*, historical sociologist Christina Lerner, who was influenced by Norman as he was influenced by her, concluded in 1981 that “the extermination of thousands of persons falsely accused of demonic witchcraft was part of a process by which the rulers of seventeenth-century Scotland sought to impose the new notion of a nation-state upon a recalcitrant peasant population.” Lerner contends that Scotland’s rulers asserted the legitimacy of their new social order and compelled conformity and loyalty to it by imposing Calvinist Christianity on a peasant population still far from Christianized and by inventing new mechanisms of social control to monitor peasant behavior, enforce orthodoxy and punish deviance.

II. The Role of Torture

Central to the annihilation of the Cathars and the Knights Templar was the role of state-sanctioned and organized torture. With the growth of state-instituted judicial codes and courts, confessions extracted under torture became crucial to demonizing and confiscating the wealth of whole groups of people such as the Templars of France under King Philip the Fair. It was torture that forced confessions by Templars to such crimes as heresy and worshipping the Devil, practicing sodomy, and anointing idols with the fat of roasted infants. In cases such as these, the monarch had already decided on an

exterminatory policy and he did not see torture as an instrument that could break the Devil's grip, nor did he view the torture ordeal as a struggle between the forces of God and the forces of the Devil. Rather, when some Templars retracted their false confessions, Philip the Fair quite cynically labeled them as unrepentants and immediately condemned them to be burned at the stake.

The work of Norman Cohn reminds us that torture is an odious instrument which ultimately backfires on those who employ it. It was the torturers, authorized by Church and State, who extracted the false testimony which distorted public understanding of the religious beliefs of the Cathars, justified their destruction, and sabotaged the Church's chances of reforming itself centuries before Martin Luther appeared. It was the torturers who extracted more and more false accusations of flying on brooms to meetings with the Devil who were instrumental in the spread and duration of the Great Witch-Hunt. And centuries later, it was the torturers who provided the fodder for Stalin's Great Purges, until they, too, were killed with a shot fired into the back of the neck. These observations about state sanction of torture are only a few of the insights developed by Norman in *Europe's Inner Demons*.

But perhaps the most important insight Norman left us, and perhaps his most encouraging legacy, comes at the end of *Europe's Inner Demons*, in his Postscript. It concerns what we might call "The Cohn Paradox of Unexpected Research Outcomes." As Norman stated it in outline:

"What began as an enquiry into the origins of the great witch-hunt has led in some unexpected directions and has produced unexpected results. On the one hand various widely accepted notions have turned out to be baseless, while on the other hand various factors which have generally been overlooked have turned out to be of decisive importance. The story itself, I think, is now tolerably clear. But again and again I have felt that the fears and hatred which I was studying had origins and meanings which were unknown to those who were moved by them to torture and to kill."

That is an observation, I suggest, whose portent we would do well to ponder and study.

* * * * *