***RELIGION***

Connections between religious conflict and witch hunting have always been suggested due to the uneven geographical distribution of witchcraft prosecutions throughout Europe. For example Germany, where large witch hunts were seen, consisted of many political units, where official religion was determined by belief of the local prince.

This is perhaps why countries in Southern Europe such as Portugal and Spain which maintained Catholicism had some of the lowest persecutions – in these countries approximately 1000 people were executed, comparatively a very small number compared to the total 80,000 seen across the rest of Early Modern Europe. In countries where religious conflict was prevalent, its nature created the ‘right conditions’ for the witch hunts to occur because the side effects of these conflicts were devastating.

***Wording of Bible***

The Protestant Reformation established the bible as the soul source of religious truth, but more importantly it also led to scriptures being translated into every major European Language. However with these translations came factual errors, including the most drastic in Exodus 22:18 “Thou Shalt not suffer a witch to live.” With printing and distribution at its peak by the late 16th and early 17th Century this mis- translation of witch compared to the correct “prisoner” or “someone who works in darkness” rather than a sorcerer or “a devil worshipper” increased an atmosphere of willingness to hunt and stamp out witches from society.

The mistranslation of “kashph” (which is usually translates into “sorcerer,” this describes those who practice magic and is genderless) was translated into “sorceress,” a sex specific witch. It is mistranslations like this that acted as a catalyst to the witch-hunts being gender driven.

Also, increase in reading of the bible, which during the beginning of the witch-craze could now be translated into vernacular since 1480 and the introduction of the printing press, had huge emphasis of the literature inside as well as a weak understanding of the actual writings in the bible.

***Development of Calvinism***

The development of the Calvinist movement in the 16th Century cannot be overlooked either in analysing why witch hunting increased so dramatically from 1580 onwards. Calvinists had a strong belief in pre- destination and therefore attempted to achieve religious moral perfection. In order to rid themselves of guilt they were feeling, many people attempted to transfer their emotions onto someone else, and the witch made a perfect scapegoat. In Scotland (a mainly Calvinist area) “the clergy applied a number of pressures on the state to …. conduct large witch- hunts” on the basis of information from clearly “claims in search of a scapegoat” (Levack). Therefore although the Calvinist reformation took place before 1580, it did not die out until well into the 17th Century and finding a scapegoat was therefore always likely to cause an increase.

***The Reformation***

Historians have always rightly assumed that the reformation served as a catalyst for witch hunting.

The religious reformation was a period of insecurity throughout early modern Europe, Protestant reformers threatened drastic social, political and theological change. The idea of change and the threat of social disorder could be argued to have put Europe out of sync and into a time of uncertainty; especially as religion was emphasised as creating stability and wellbeing. Due to the religious struggle between the Catholic and Protestant regions during 1550 – 1660 each would make accusations against one another which would cause either religion to become discredited as it would seem that the religion accepted the worshipping of the devil.

It can be suggested that due to the creation of new religions, hysteria caused rivalry between religions, seen in Macfarlanes study of Essex, a Protestant area where “Roman Catholics were often the victims of witch craft prosecutions.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus he establishes a “direct connection between religious affiliation and those involved in witch craft prosecutions.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Levack suggested that “Catholic reformers were likely to see Protestantism itself as the devils work.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Furthermore, religious reformation also led to an increase in religious legislation, in particular in Germany. For example, in 1532 the ‘Carolina Code’ condemned all witches from the Holy Roman Empire (Catholics) to be tortured and executed immediately. This meant stronger religious groups could use religious legislation to target smaller groups of the opposite faith. Levack supports this as he quotes “… eliminating individuals who were believed to be in the league with Satan and corrupting society […] generally stronger in areas where the ‘heretical’ activities of either a protestant or catholic minority were close, visible and threatening”.[[4]](#footnote-4) This shows that the religious reformation was a formal driver of the witch-hunts and that religious power and control meant that hierarchy of both religions would consistently target opposing religious minorities and accuse smaller communities of committing witchcraft. This led to extremist religious state control, and bishops/leaders to make sure opposing religions wouldn’t affect their own states. This also took a different and more extreme look on hunting witches and evidently increased the mass of witch-hunts for example; the Prince-bishop Johann Dornheim of Bamberg, known as the ‘Witch-bishop’, built a “witch-house” completed with torture-chambers surrounded with multiple biblical texts as an extreme form of witch execution. In his reign from 1623–33, Dornheim had executed and burnt 600 witches, which shows how religious control had huge impact on driving the witch hunts. This is backed by Briggs who notes that “the ten most violent persecutors of witches in Germany were all Catholic prince-bishops.”[[5]](#footnote-5) From this it shows that reformation, as a catalyst as well, led to extremist beliefs from extremist groups who believed that reformers were ‘in line with the devil’, increasing the number of prosecutions as well as executions, showing that religion and the religious reformation drove then witch hunts.

Both faiths broadly subscribed to the idea that conversion to the other faith was an act of the devil and believed that people who lived near heretic communities, were seemingly looking for ‘Satan’s Allies’, among their own and therefore the accusers believed they were defending faith.. The huge spread of religious reformation across Europe, predominantly Germany, is important when concluding that the witch-craze was entirely driven by the religious reformation. For example, devil literature printed by different faiths had printed 99,000 independent copies in Germany from 1550-1569, which shows that conflicting religious beliefs were spread throughout Germany and created hysteria throughout the Germanic states and increased the spread of witchcraft. Indeed this is shown most effective when analysing the amount of copies printed and therefore led to a huge wave of different religious beliefs running through Germany, as well as a majority of Europe.

The period of the Protestant Reformation challenged the rigid beliefs of the Catholicism and changed people’s perception of the Devil. Changes of the perception of what witches were capable of also occurred during this period which is a key feature when discussing the reasons behind the witch hunts. As Scatter and Callow stated - the ‘catalyst’ of Religion created an atmosphere of suspicion and hatred which allowed witchcraft trials to flourish. [[6]](#footnote-6)The dramatic theological shift left many people confused about what is the right way to live their lives in order to please God, a confusion best echoed by the numerous religious shifts in countries such as England and France between these years. According to Levack ‘From the pulpit people from all social classes, not just a small literate elite, acquired…, the sense of the immediacy of diabolical power that was so apparent in the writings of Luther and Calvin.’[[7]](#footnote-7) The ‘immediacy’ of the diabolic power combined with the new diabolical belief that witches ‘by nature instruments of Satan’ [[8]](#footnote-8)led to people feeling threatened by the Devil, experiencing the need to fight against the diabolic powers. Therefore, this contributed to the witch hunts because people were suspicious about everything that happened around them, constantly looking for a scapegoat to blame for their misfortunes.

**HOWEVER**

Levack states ‘the witch-hunts began a century before the start of the reformation’[[9]](#footnote-9) and there were limited amounts of witch-hunts in the ‘first 30 years of the reformation’[[10]](#footnote-10).

Furthermore whilst there is the possibility that religious wars between Protestants and Catholics inspired witch hunting, however the largest hunts in Paris were during religious peace. Conflict or warfare very often obstructed the operations of regular judicial machinery needed and used to prosecute witches.

1. A, Macfarlane. (1970) Witchcraft in Tudor Times and Stuart England P.186 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A, Macfarlane. (1970) Witchcraft in Tudor Times and Stuart England P.186 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. B.Levack (2013) *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*. P.114 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brian P. Levack, 2006 ‘The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robin Briggs, 1996. ‘Early modern witch-hunts’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Geoffrey Scare and John Callow, “Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe” pg. 122 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Levack, Brian “The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe” pg. 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Katz, Steven T., *The Holocaust in Historical Context, Vol. I*, pg. 438-39 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Levack, 2006, *The Witch-Hunts in Early Modern Europe,* Page 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Levack, 2006, *The Witch-Hunts in Early Modern Europe,* Page 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)