Witchcraft Prosecutions and the Decline of Magic

Prosecutions for witchcraft were relatively rare in Europe before the second half of the 1500s. They involved a combination of scattered trials focusing on individuals suspected of practicing harmful magic and occasional mass trials—mainly in Switzerland and neighboring territories—driven by fear of an underground conspiracy of devil worshippers. In the second half of the century, the number of prosecutions for harmful magic increased, particularly across Northwestern and Central Europe, and routinely led to investigations searching for a diabolic cult. By the early seventeenth century, ordinary people and the governing elite shared a conviction that harmful magic intimated traffic with the devil and participation in an organized cult that threatened the Christian order. Different Europeans emphasized different elements of this belief, with the common people more concerned about harmful magic, or maleficium, and the elite more concerned about diabolism. Western Europeans were more likely to view the danger as an integral whole, whereas Eastern Europeans were only beginning to connect local witches and sorcerers to any larger diabolical threat.¹

By the end of the middle third of the seventeenth century, however, a critical mass of leaders in Western and Central Europe (though not yet in Northern and Eastern Europe) had lost their certainty about the prevalence, if not the potency, of maleficium; the danger, if not the existence, of a diabolical conspiracy; and the practicality, if not the possibility, of identifying and punishing those involved in either pursuit. Over the next century, these doubts gradually evolved into hardened certainties held by leading members of the social and cultural elite across Europe that all
magic was impotent, the devil was at most a moral influence and possibly a complete fiction, and those who believed in the physical reality of either were either foolish or mentally ill. Although occasional vigilante actions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries testify that popular fears of witchcraft did not completely disappear, the virtual cessation of legal actions against witches by the end of the eighteenth century confirmed the profound change that Europe had begun to undergo in the previous century.  

Traditionally, historians have concentrated more on the rise in witchcraft fears, and the prosecutions that they engendered, than on their decline. The reason for this imbalance is that whereas the triumph of illusory beliefs seemed problematical, the reason for their defeat seemed self-evident: Influenced by the rational and scientific thought of the Enlightenment, educated Europeans simply came to their senses. More recently, however, social historians have noted that the trials stopped well before the Enlightenment had come to dominate even educated opinion, and pointed instead to such changes in social life as growing prosperity, various forms of insurance, technological development, and the triumph of individualism to explain the defusing of the tensions that they argued had generated accusations and sustained prosecutions. However, since most of these changes occurred well after the prosecutions died down, and popular suspicions continued to be expressed long after the socioeconomic developments that purportedly lessened the tensions generating them took place, the social-historical explanation has been found wanting, too.  

Historians of witchcraft now reverse the traditional assumption and see the decline of witch beliefs as—at least in Western and Central Europe—an important cause, not an effect, of the change in elite mentalities. Furthermore, changes in both popular practice and unconscious behavior during the very period of the witch hunts contributed to the decline of elite concerns about witch-

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craft. The actual consequences of the witch prosecutions and the elite’s simultaneous “crisis of confidence” about them were vital components in a more general “crisis of authority” during the mid-seventeenth century and the larger decline of magic during the latter half of the early modern period.  

The Long Tradition of Skepticism

The skepticism about witchcraft and magic that triumphed in Europe’s official culture during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries culminated developments in both philosophy and religion that stretched back to antiquity. Hebrew monotheism, which began as monolatry, a stricture that Jews worship Yahweh alone, gradually evolved into an insistence that Yahweh was the only true source of spiritual power. Early Christianity continued this tradition by distinguishing miracles (miracula)—truly supernatural events attributable to the one true God—from wonders (mira)—phenomena that appeared to be supernatural effects created by other gods, demons, or magicians, but were really caused by occult, or hidden, physical processes. This distinction, derived from a philosophical skepticism originating in classical Greece, did not deny the possibility of magic entirely but disparaged many purportedly magical effects as natural or fraudulent. This tradition of minimizing the scope of the supernatural played an important role during the Middle Ages, because after the fall of the Roman Empire, the alternative—suppressing magical activities by force—became impractical. A series of Church pronouncements, most notably the Canon Episcopi, focused on the illusory nature of magical practices. Denial thus formed an alternative to repression of heterodox spiritual systems,


This skeptical tradition influenced late medieval theologians even as they developed the demonology that would inform the witch prosecutions. For example, most theologians considered animal metamorphosis to be delusional; a number conceded that many reports of Sabbats and sexual encounters with demons were illusory; and some admitted that maleficium might work through natural causation in addition to, if not instead of, magic. Furthermore, a skeptical opposition to the demonology and the aggressive prosecution of witchcraft also developed during the same period. In the 1460s, the Italian jurist Ambrogio Vignati argued that since the devil is incorporeal, he could not have physical contact with humans, thereby making most of the activities that witches professed impossible and any testimony extracted from them insufficient evidence to torture other suspects. In 1489, the Austrian jurist Ulrich Molitor argued that most witches’ magical crimes were illusory and that God had ultimate control over the rest. Although he conceded that people who turned from God to the devil deserved death for their apostasy and idolatry, he also emphasized that resisting the devil’s blandishments was not difficult.\footnote{Matteo Duni, “Skepticism,” in \textit{ew}, 1044–1045; Bever, “Molitor, Ulrich,” in \textit{ew}, 776. Walter Stephens, \textit{Demon Lovers} (Chicago, 2002), argues that uncertainty was actually the predominant, if unstated, attitude toward the supernatural, and the demonology manifested a need to affirm its reality (366). Hans Peter Broedel, \textit{The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft} (Manchester, 2003), 66–67, 102, 135–138, offers a more moderate interpretation that emphasizes the extent of skepticism about witchcraft at the time while also acknowledging the evidence of actual practices. Both works advance the insight that the demonology presupposed doubt, which Clark first proposed in \textit{Thinking with Demons} (New York, 1997), 195.}

A few years later, the French humanist physician Symphorien Champier was apparently the first to suggest that people who thought that they had participated in a Sabbat were suffering from a mental illness that called for medical treatment, an opinion echoed by Agrippa von Nettelsheim in 1509, who also denounced the cruelty and greed of inquisitors. The leading Italian jurist Andrea Alciati gave weight to the psychological interpretation of the Sabbat by citing the \textit{Episcopi} tradition’s rejection of magical flight
and advocating medical cures for those who confessed to it. Girolamo Cardano further depicted witches as poor, malnourished women whose black bile and melancholic humors made them susceptible to delusions and hallucinations. The Aristotelian philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi argued that although demons might exist, they could not act on humans, and he proposed natural explanations for apparently magical effects.7

Thus, at the same time that the witch demonology was coming into its own, all three lines of the skeptical counter-argument that would eventually defeat it were also in evidence: questions about the physical reality of the supernatural powers and experiences attributed to witches, explanations of these in terms of natural processes and mental deficiencies, and concern about the motivation and methods of the legal procedures used to prosecute them. However, it is worth noting that none of the skeptics completely denied the reality of all aspects of witchcraft or the existence of people who engaged in it and had the experiences associated with it. In fact, the very division of early theorists about witchcraft into “skeptics” and “demonologists” is misleading; most writers on the subject rejected some ideas about witchcraft while accepting others. For this reason, the so-called skeptics’ participation in the discussion actually contributed to the growing concern about witchcraft, despite their questions about the physical reality of the witches’ powers and experiences and the legal procedures used against them.8

During the late sixteenth century, however, even as the period of intense witch hunting began, a series of comprehensive skeptical arguments against it appeared. In 1563, Johann Weyer, a former apprentice of Agrippa serving as physician to the tolerant Duke of Cleves, said that old women who thought they were in league with the devil were either victims of drug-induced hallucinations or mentally incompetent, and therefore deserved religious instruction or medical treatment rather than punishment. Weyer questioned the relevance of biblical passages for modern cases on philological grounds and disputed the validity of witches’ pacts with the devil on legal grounds. The more radical English skeptic Reginald Scot went beyond Weyer by denying that demons had

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8 Clark, Thinking, 210; Bever, “Crisis of Confidence,” 146.
any physical power, ascribing injuries and ailments to God’s providence or natural causes and treating magic as “a ‘cousening art’ fit to be believed only by children, fools, melancholics, or Roman Catholics.” Less systematically but even more broadly, Michel de Montaigne observed a symbiosis between demonological theories and the delusions of old women. He also maintained that such women were better treated with medicine than punishment, concluding that “it is putting a very high value on your opinions to roast a man alive because of them.”

The Legal Ramifications of Witchcraft Although the work of these skeptics failed to stem the rising tide of prosecutions at the time, even in their immediate environs, it apparently exercised some direct influence on the legal system. For example, when the Dutch authorities brought torture in witchcraft cases to an end in the 1590s, they drew on Weyer to make the argument that most accused witches were melancholic women. Weyer’s position also informed discussions on a more informal level, as when the Swabian pastor Thomas Birch in 1600 incorporated Weyer’s ideas along with the Episcopi tradition into a play entitled A Mirror of Witches. Similarly, Scot’s ideas influenced a number of plays, like Thomas Middleton’s The Witch, and reputedly they were shared by many of England’s Justices of the Peace—the lowest rung of the judicial administration—thereby contributing to an informal reluctance to prosecute that helped to keep England’s trial rate relatively low. Montaigne’s skepticism about witchcraft was similarly shared by many of his fellow members of the Bordeaux parlement, which was the last French jurisdiction to approve the executions of witches and which strongly resisted Pierre de Lancrée’s later attempts to prosecute witches vigorously. It also inspired the libertins érudits of the early seventeenth century, who started a tradition of undermining magical beliefs through ridicule, irony, and appeals to class snobbery.

Skeptical writers like Weyer, Scot, and Montaigne contributed to a growing caution about witchcraft in the judicial system, but, contrary to the traditional rationalist understanding of the de-

cline of witchcraft, they did not provide the primary impetus for the reversal of the upward trend in prosecutions. Instead, the primary instigators were jurists who, even though they accepted that legally competent people might ally themselves with the devil, attend Sabbats in spirit (if not in body), and practice maleficium, were determined to follow proper legal procedures to avoid the abuses to which witchcraft trials proved eminently prone. Concerns about legal issues—in particular the rationale for torture and execution—played a role in early skeptical critiques of the emerging demonology, and jurists were prominent among the early skeptics. Later, as the pace of prosecution increased in the late sixteenth century, central authorities, where they existed, began to insist on their right of review to curb the improprieties that led to both individual miscarriages of justice and judicial witch hunts in which torture produced not only confessions but also endless denunciations of accomplices purportedly seen at Sabbats.\(^{11}\)

The imposition of central control happened early in much of France. In the 1590s, the Parlement of Paris, which had jurisdiction over more than half the kingdom and set an example for the rest, began to exert its control over torture and death sentences. It made appeals mandatory in 1604 and codified its supremacy in an edict of 1624. It overturned an increasing number of sentences on procedural grounds. Since appeals involved an expensive process of bringing suspects to Paris and keeping them there until a verdict was reached, and local officials were punished if abuses were found, indictments at the lower level declined, and acquittals at the higher level became almost automatic.\(^{12}\)

Similarly, in Spain and Italy, the high authorities of the Inquisition succeeded in restraining the number and conduct of witch prosecutions. Spain’s central tribunal, which was responsible for supervising the regional tribunals, issued a comprehensive set of procedural rules in 1526 that included a prohibition of the arrest or conviction of a suspect solely on the basis of another’s testimony and restricted the confiscation of property. In 1614, after inquisitor Alonso Salazar de Frias stopped a mass hunt in the Basque

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country—fueled largely by apparently free confessions—and punished officials for improper conduct, the tribunal added regulations on how to take confessions and denunciations. The Roman Inquisition was even more successful in restraining local officials, both secular and ecclesiastical. After an early period of relatively intense witch prosecutions in northern Italy during the first decades of the sixteenth century, the peninsula became notable for the moderation of its trials. When trials began to escalate after a mid-century lull, the Roman Inquisition intervened in specific cases, and, in the 1620s, it began circulating a draft of comprehensive reforms based on the Spanish precedents, thus helping to reduce the number of trials to negligible levels.13

**The Example of Württemberg** A good number of German imperial cities and other small sovereignties had records of relatively restrained prosecution, thus showing that the intervention of central authorities was not necessary for judicial caution to prevail. However, since most of Europe had multiple levels of judicial administration, the experience of Württemberg, a medium-sized duchy in southwestern Germany, provides a good illustration of how judicial restraint tended to unfold. Overall, Württemberg’s record of prosecution was moderate. The duchy’s constitutional foundation, the *Tübinger Verlag* of 1514, had established the right of Württembergers to a legal and systematic trial, and the ducal High Council, a body of legally trained bureaucrats, steadily asserted its supervisory control over witchcraft and other capital trials during the sixteenth century.14

The pace of reform quickened in the 1620s, when the High Council mandated restraint in launching investigations, quick reports upon arrest, and a cautious approach to torture. In subsequent decades, it insisted on the need for scrupulous investigation of contested testimony, punishment of false accusations, the involvement of lawyers in proceedings, and the cessation of prosecution after a defendant’s acquittal. The ducal government’s efforts received support and guidance from the local university’s law faculty. Between the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth century, legal consultations before torture and sentencing became routine.

The jurists’ insistence on sufficient evidence for arrest, torture, and conviction, as well as on proper procedures, not only helped keep criminal proceedings on course but also created precedents that guided officials in future trials. By the 1660s, the Tübingen jurists were recommending against torture and for acquittal in most cases, and, more often than not, the High Council, if not the local magistrates, were in agreement.\(^{15}\)

Most of these measures did not target witch trials specifically but were part of broader legal reforms and institutional developments. However, because witch trials comprised a significant proportion of the capital trial load at the time and involved subtle and controversial issues that required considerable deliberation, and hence time and money, they were both prime generators and prime targets of the reforms. Furthermore, the witch trials were particularly targets in one legal area, the resort to torture. Alciati and Weyer, among others, had already noted the problems surrounding torture in witchcraft cases, especially its potential to generate false confessions and denunciations, but in the 1620s and 1630s, a number of authors emerged to give these concerns new urgency. The Jesuit Friedrich Spee had the greatest impact. He systematically criticized the routine disregard of legal criteria for the use of torture, denounced the barbarity with which it was administered, and denied the validity of the confessions and denunciations that it procured. Though careful not to question the reality of witchcraft itself, he couched his arguments in a way that contributed to larger doubts, insisting that the most commonly cited evidence for maleficium—an expression of animosity followed by some misfortune—was invalid, since misfortune would inevitably occur at some point after any utterance. He also pointed out how gossip contributed to witchcraft suspicions.\(^{16}\)

**Mass Arrests, Torture, and the Crisis of Confidence** Judicial skepticism clearly continued a long tradition of concern for legal procedures and a general uneasiness with the capital prosecution of occult crimes, but in most instances, major innovations in legal procedure grew out of an immediate crisis. The German tracts against torture, for example, followed directly from horrible mass

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hunts in the writers’ communities. In France, the Parlement of Paris began insisting on reviewing all witchcraft convictions in 1587/88 as the result of a mass panic in the Champagne-Ardennes region where hundreds of suspects were summarily executed. In Spain, the Inquisition issued guidelines for investigations of witchcraft in 1526 after officials played a leading role in a large-scale hunt, and in 1614, it was the mass panic in the Basque country that led to the revised, stronger version. In Italy, the Roman Inquisition intervened in witchcraft cases when their numbers rose markedly late in the sixteenth century, while in Scotland, the privy council asserted control over torture after a particularly virulent hunt in 1661/62. In England, judicial caution followed a number of notorious cases of demonic possession at the turn of the seventeenth century; it became routine after a second surge at mid-century. Prosecutions ceased in America after the infamous Salem trials, in Sweden after two mass panics around 1670, and in Hungary after the mass trials of the 1750s. The crisis point in Württemberg was a mass panic in 1656 that led the duke to rebuke a number of officials for their “appalling errors,” dispatch a retired prefect to end the proceedings, and institute a series of reforms in trial procedures.  

Midelfort termed this process of disillusionment a “crisis of confidence” in the witch demonology. He coined the phrase to describe the way in which mass panics in the autonomous jurisdictions in the German southwest came to an end, observing that “chain-reaction” trials started with a few stereotyped suspects but gradually widened to include previously unsuspected commoners and eventually friends and relatives of the magistrates—and sometimes even magistrates themselves—which led the government to lose confidence in the ability of the trials to distinguish the innocent from the guilty and bring them to an end. This process occurred repeatedly in various jurisdictions in the region, and Midelfort labeled the cumulative effect a “General Crisis of Confidence” that took place between the mid-1620s and the mid-

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1680s. Some historians have pointed out that the process did not work so neatly or universally, and Midelfort himself insisted that the individual smaller crises of confidence that created the general crisis ended only the mass panics, since small witch trials involving one or two suspects at a time continued well into the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, Midelfort’s thesis came to be widely accepted as a model of how witch hunts came to an end.\(^\text{18}\)

The idea of a crisis of confidence has wider applicability if freed from Midelfort’s view of torture as the mechanism that undermined the social structure by threatening members of the elite. Instead, torture was just one way, among others, for the wild conspiracy theory involving devil-worshipping witches to get out of hand. Other mechanisms included uncoerced testimony mixing dream experiences and suggestive questioning (as in the Basque country and the “Blåkulla” trials in Sweden); the diabolization of widespread popular anger about perceived maleficium and other interpersonal conflicts (as happened frequently in northwestern Germany, where local “witch committees” often initiated trials); and the agitation of witch finders (as in England’s last surge of trials during the 1640s).\(^\text{19}\)

Furthermore, a witch hunt did not have to threaten members of the elite to create a crisis of confidence; instead, the trials just had to become so numerous and undiscriminating that a critical mass of citizens and officials lost confidence that justice was being done. During a torture-driven hunt in 1608 Württemberg, for example, the husband of one of the suspects complained to the High Council, “It seems as if the prefect’s private obsession has taken over this place,” thus contributing to the ducal government’s decision to end the hunt. Later, during the critical trial in 1656, the High Council resisted the duke’s suggestion that one of its members supervise each witch trial on the grounds that such a commission was “not commensurate with a councilor’s class and honor,” since “personal interviews, confrontations, and attendance at torture” involved “things which plague even the hardest conscience

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have cost honorable people . . . their health and well-being,” and turned on issues that were “very abstruse, because one can understand” them “in uncountable ways.” Measures that had seemed valid and necessary came to seem obscure and repugnant as their difficulties and dangers became increasingly clear during the first half of the seventeenth century.20

**Pious Skepticism and Legal Reform** We have seen that such crises of confidence contributed to judicial reforms in France, Scotland, Sweden, England, New England, and Hungary, as well as various locales in Germany. Although they did not end belief in the devil, or even in a witches’ conspiracy, they went beyond a mere disenchantment with trial procedure. Moderation in these matters was tantamount to a repudiation of the notion that the devil’s conspiracy constituted an urgent threat to Christendom. The “General Crisis of Confidence” did not just lead to the rejection of troublesome ideas and practices, but to the adoption of “new answers to old problems,” to the resolution of the problems associated with the old ways. A new attitude accompanied the collapse of the demonological consensus, a “pious skepticism” combining firm religious conviction with deep doubts about witchcraft that characterized the period after the general crisis.21

The key change was the repudiation of a diabolical conspiracy that required extraordinary measures to counteract. In legal terms, participation in the witch cult had been treated as a *crimen exceptionum*, an exceptional crime justifying the suspension of normal rules of evidence and procedure. The Spanish and Roman Inquisitions and the Parlement of Paris had never accepted this doctrine, but many courts did. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, most of them were abandoning the policy in practice as a legal technicality without formally renouncing the demonology. By putting good legal form and avoidance of injustice above the campaign to exterminate witches, they were acknowledging that the threat of witchcraft was not significant enough to justify the costs of trying to eradicate it.22

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20 A209, b. 844, d. 26, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart; Bever, “Crisis of Confidence,” 153.
These growing doubts about the danger posed by witchcraft were also manifested in other judicial trends, including a greater involvement of lawyers for the defense, a significant reduction in the use of torture, and a shift in the criminal lexicon from common terms like *hexerei*, *sorcellerie*, or *brujeria* to legalistic ones (often in Latin) like *maleficium* (a magical offense in its own right rather than evidence of diabolism), *veneficum* (magical poisoning), and *magia*. The adoption of this vocabulary signaled a new precision in prosecution, emphasizing suspects’ specific actions rather than their general moral orientation. Moreover, the use of theological examinations to assess a suspect’s knowledge of the basic doctrines of Christianity declined—in Württemberg, at least—while consultations with physicians about witchcraft increased. As a result of all these changes, the number of executions, which were handled by the judicial administration, dropped sharply. Indictments, however, showed a more gradual decline, since they still remained subject to popular initiatives and the discretion of local authorities.

The increased use of medical consultations reveals the interconnection between the new orientation toward evidence and the greater skepticism. Jurists required that allegations of maleficium be substantiated by proof that the harm attributed to a witch was supernatural in origin. Since the burden of proof was on the prosecution, the mere possibility that an illness might have a natural cause was enough to undercut an accusation of witchcraft or transform it into a suspicion of ordinary poisoning. Medical judgments also were sought about confessions; Weyer’s argument that confession could simply be a reflection of melancholy or senility undercut the certainty that this “queen of proofs” had once brought.

In the long run, both the intellectual and the institutional implications of the medicalization of witchcraft beliefs contributed significantly to the decline of magical beliefs in general, but in the short run, accommodation to, rather than rejection of, religious
beliefs—the “pious” part of “pious skepticism”—was the order of the day. The re-evaluation of witchcraft meshed with long-standing religious traditions and dovetailed with contemporary religious currents. In southwestern Germany, for example, the regional elite revived a local “providential” school of thought that viewed God, not the devil, as the source of all spiritual power; misfortune reflected divine displeasure rather than any malevolent power. This line reasoning also contributed to a decline of witchcraft prosecutions in Denmark during the 1620s, and it found a home in the German Pietist movement, which emerged in the second half of the seventeenth century. The Pietists opposed the orthodox Lutherans’ notion that the devil could cause disease, insistig that to blame intermediate agents, including the devil, was to lose sight of the relationship between disease and moral condition.

In England, witch fears clearly persisted in the general populace even as some late seventeenth-century authors began to dismiss them. One of these commentators, John Webster, argued, “It is simply impossible for either the devil or witches to change or alter the course that God hath set in nature.” The dominant attitude appears to have been the latitudarianism of the Restoration period, a generalized opposition to religious enthusiasm that did not deny the possibility of witchcraft but repudiated concern about it as a combination of popery, radical sectarianism, and plebian passions. In Catholic Poland, a similar climate of tolerance at the turn of the seventeenth century may have prevented a significant number of witch trials, although the kingdom experienced a surge at the turn of the eighteenth century, and if religion had any connection to the decline of witchcraft in other Catholic countries, it was by disconnecting diabolism from maleficium. The Italian and Spanish Inquisitions resolutely dealt with suspected demoniacs as heretics and apostates whose souls needed saving more than their bodies needed burning, and the French law of 1682, the first to abolish witchcraft as a crime, maintained separate sanctions against sacrilege, poisoning, and “pretended magic.” In all of these cases, change in the nature of religious beliefs, rather than any absolute

decline in them, was responsible for skepticism about demonology.\textsuperscript{26}

\textit{Law, Materialism, and Demonology} The crisis of confidence that climaxed in the middle third of the seventeenth century was but the opening act of a larger crisis of authority that would take another century to resolve. The threat posed by witchcraft and demonology was no longer thought to be severe, but how valid were its other contested elements? The reality of magical flight and, by implication, the Sabbats was contradicted not by some new innovation in thought, but by the venerable \textit{Episcopi} tradition, which was far older than the demonology itself. The veracity of self-identified witches was called into question on medical grounds, and even the power of malefic magic, the bread-and-butter of popular accusations, was open to doubt. Piousness and skepticism formed an unstable alliance that may have solved the immediate problem but did not resolve the fundamental issues. Hence, the legal challenges continued, metaphysical attacks intensified, and the total discrediting of witchcraft would become one of the paradigmatic underpinnings of the Enlightenment and the modern worldview.

The legal challenges to demonology came on three main fronts—theory, practicality, and intellectual context. First of all, the theoretical opposition to prosecution reached a new level in 1701 when the pietist law professor Christian Thomasius brought together the legal, medical, and providential standpoints to deny the possibility of pacts with the devil, the reality of Sabbats, and the physical power of evil spirits, concluding unequivocally that “witchcraft is only an imaginary crime.” Thomasius’ critique was influential on an international scale, and was reinforced by changes in the nature of trials in the late seventeenth-century that judges had to contend with in practice: Like the Salem trial in America and the Blåkulla trials in Sweden, cases came increasingly to be based on the testimony of children, and seemed more and more to focus on decrepit old women. Finally, although neither Thomasius’ legal criticism nor skepticism about children’s testimony and old women’s mental competence required any new modes of

thought, they were in fact bolstered by an intellectual current that had its roots in the early to mid-seventeenth century but began to acquire force around the turn of the eighteenth century—the new materialist, mechanical philosophy, which posited a world in which supernatural agency beyond God’s ultimate creative power was simply impossible.\(^{27}\)

This new paradigm was primarily associated with René Descartes, who never wrote about witchcraft but who categorically insisted on a fundamental dualism of matter and spirit, and Thomas Hobbes, whose materialism flatly denied the possibility that magic could have any efficacy or the devil any extra-psychological reality. Hobbes remained a relatively isolated figure because of his apparent atheism, but Descartes enjoyed the indirect support of Pierre Gassendi, who also developed a theory of physics that excluded magical forces, and the direct support of Marin Mersenne, who vigorously promoted the new worldview. Descartes inspired a series of later thinkers who developed his dualistic metaphysics and materialist physics, and despite telling critiques by competing philosophers, entrenched opposition from established academics, and fervent denunciation by the devout of every confession, his influence widened through the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Newton’s synthesis of physics and astronomy later in the century may have secured a place for at least one nonmaterial force—gravity, which Newton defined to be as incontrovertible as any material substance—but it failed to secure an opening for God, or any other spiritual agency, to intervene in the physical world.\(^{28}\)

Descartes’ influence undoubtedly lay behind Louis XIV’s curt dismissal of magical powers in the act that abolished the crime of witchcraft in France, but it was issued with no rationale and had


little direct or immediate impact beyond France’s borders. The most powerful direct influence that Cartesianism had on witchcraft beliefs was in Dutch Calvinist minister Balthasar Bekker’s massive and comprehensive refutation of them, *The World Bewitched* (1691–1693). Asserting that spirit beliefs originated in paganism, Bekker explained that disembodied spirits like the devil could not possibly influence physical processes, which work with uniform regularity through purely physical interactions. He further advised that because God had cast the devil and all demons into Hell where they were chained for all eternity, biblical references to magic and witches actually referred to tricksters, frauds, delusions, and illusions. Bekker concluded by pointing out the cruelty and irrationality of the witch trials, calling for their complete cessation.29

*The World Bewitched* was an international bestseller, but dozens of refutations were published in English, French, and German. Even the normally tolerant Dutch, who had not burned a witch in a century, reacted adversely: The Reformed Church condemned the book, expelled Bekker from his ministry, and excluded him from communion. Although most people agreed that the mass hunts were regrettable, most also thought that to deny the reality of witchcraft and magic was to contradict the lessons of history, the Bible, and innumerable sober and honorable witnesses. Most troubling to early modern orthodox believers, the denial of magic led logically to denial of miracles and ultimately to atheism. Arguments along these lines continued to be voiced during the eighteenth century: Although the leading English jurist William Blackstone celebrated the abolishment of the crime of witchcraft in 1736 because of the manifest abuses that its prosecution had involved, he still asserted, as late as 1769, “to deny the possibility, nay the actual existence of witchcraft and sorcery is at once to contradict the revealed word of God.” The Danish jurist C. D. Hedegaard defended belief in witchcraft on biblical grounds in 1760, and in 1749, the Jesuit Georg Gaar, during the public execu-

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tion of an accused witch, railed against those who protected her kind by denying their existence.  

A rejoinder by the Italian abbot Girolamo Tartarotti’s to Gaar’s diatribe triggered the last great debate on witchcraft. Subsequent publications in Italy denounced Tartarotti for either being too skeptical or for not being skeptical enough. Ensuing arguments spilled over national and linguistic frontiers, inspiring a number of French responses, including a scathing comment by Voltaire, and leading to the Bavarian “War of the Witches” in Germany—a deliberately staged confrontation between champions of the Enlightenment and defenders of the old order. Prince-Elector Max III Joseph’s request that Ferdinand Sterzinger deliver an “Academic Lecture About the Presumption That Witchcraft Can Produce Effects” ignited a controversy that lasted five years and involved writers from all parts of Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Switzerland, and Italy—one of the most extensive debates in Central Europe during the Enlightenment. It helped to set the stage for a series of secularizing reforms in Bavaria and was widely celebrated as a sign that the Enlightenment had finally come to Catholic Central Europe. A few years later, the German priest Johann Joseph Gassner, a self-professed exorcist, at first attributed peoples’ ailments to witchcraft but declined to identify them, and he stopped mentioning witches at all when he and his supporters were accused of reviving the bad old days of the witch hunts. Witchcraft had gone from being a live issue in learned discourse to a disreputable relic of the past.

This transformation of witchcraft into a bad memory was the culmination of a larger process of relegating witchcraft to history. Some English commentators in the early eighteenth century wrote that witches had once existed but did not exist anymore. Similar arguments were made against miracles: God had performed them in biblical times but stopped once the one true religion had been established. Likewise, the devil’s power on earth ended when Christ cast him and his demons into Hell. Witchcraft had thus shifted gradually from being a clear and present danger to being a

clear but past danger, eventually to become an obscure delusion in
the past.  

*From Pious Skepticism to Dogmatic Disbelief*  Another way that
the Bavarian witch war and the controversy over Gassner showed
that Catholic Central Europe was entering the Enlightenment was
the prominent role of satire and ridicule in its polemics. Despite
innovations in serious intellectual discourse about supernatural
phenomena in Western Europe during the mid-eighteenth cen-
tury, most notably David Hume’s questioning of even biblical
miracles, the most important development during the two genera-
tions after Bekker was the rise of a new cult of reason and reason-
ableness that gave no credence to the “brainless caprices of an ig-
norant villager . . . the crack-brained head of a ridiculous
shepherd.”

The transformation of witchcraft from a hotly contested in-
tellectual issue to a laughable relic of a bygone era was a two-stage
process, each phase of which spanned approximately one genera-
tion. The first one, which lasted from around the turn of the eigh-
teenth century to the 1730s, began with the firestorm of contro-
versy about Bekker’s book and ended with an embarassing scandal
in France about miracles and the almost uncontested, indeed al-
most unnoticed, repeal of all English witchcraft statutes in 1736.
The one member of Parliament who spoke against it was politi-
cally crippled by his stance. In fact, the entire exercise was part of
larger struggle between the dominant Whig party and their more
conservative and provincial Tory opponents. The bill’s introd-
cution was probably motivated more by a desire to sucker the Tories
into defending an already lost cause than to call a halt to witch tri-
als, which had ended in practice almost twenty years earlier. The
repeal was part of new dynamic of political progressives versus
conservatives that was replacing religious conflict as the foremost
issue in public life.

In France, the miraculous healings attributed to the revered

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32 Levack “Decline and End,” 59; Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture* (Manches-
ter, Eng., 1999), 7–8; Porter, “Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic, and Lib-
34 Porter, “Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic, and Liberal Thought,”
Françoise de Paris led to a series of increasingly tumultuous gatherings by Jansenist sympathizers at his grave. The established church labeled the followers of the new cult “convulsionaries” and denied the miracles, and the government closed the cemetery and outlawed private convulsionary activities. Even the majority of Jansenists eventually repudiated both the movement and the miracles. Meanwhile, champions of the Enlightenment had a field day lampooning both the extravagant displays of the convulsionaries and a Church that denied the possibility of miracles in the present while insisting on the reality of miracles that had occurred almost 2,000 years earlier.\(^\text{35}\)

The use of witchcraft beliefs as a political trap in England in 1736 indicates that a critical mass of men from the upper class who had come of age since 1700 was steeped in a widely shared, relaxed latitudinarianism. Similarly, the resistance of the French civil and religious establishments, not to mention mainstream Jansenists, to miracle claims in the 1730s indicates how weakened the belief in supernatural interventions (at least in the present) had become. At the same time, the brazen ridicule to which both sides of the religious debate were subjected shows how far disbelief had advanced. In the next generation, the champions of the Enlightenment would make full use of this tactic not only as a way of further discrediting magical beliefs themselves but also, and more importantly in their minds, as a way of indirectly criticizing established religion by mocking the elements of supernaturalism in it.\(^\text{36}\)

The tradition of ridiculing magical beliefs began with the early seventeenth-century libertins érudits, but their mockery was that of a small avant garde bolstering its sense of exclusivity in the face of an overwhelming majority who did not share their beliefs. Skeptics later in the seventeenth century echoed their portrayal of magical beliefs as the foibles of simple peasants, old women, and fools, but their criticism was more earnest. Ridicule did not begin to play a prominent role in the discourse until the turn of the eighteenth century, with Pierre Bayle’s dismissal of astrology in his *Dictionaire* and Laurent Bordelon’s *A History of the ridiculous Extravagances of Monsieur Oußle; Occasion’d by his reading Books treating of Magik*. It came into its own in the 1640s with the Marquis


d’Argens’ satirical *Cabalistische Letters* and the start of Voltaire’s barrage of invective against magic in general and witch beliefs in particular. Exasperation with the tenacity of such human folly found its way into the *Encyclopedie* and numerous other works of the *philosophes*.37

During the middle third of the eighteenth century pious skepticism gave way to a dogmatic disbelief in the minds of Western Europe’s leading intellectual and administrative figures. The great majority of people continued to believe in magic and, to a lesser extent, witches, while many of the elite in France, Britain, and Holland were skeptical about magic but unconvinced that it was totally impossible. In neighboring countries—Spain, Italy, and Germany—only a minority within the elites could be called disbelievers. Farther east, the elites were still conducting old-fashioned witch trials into the middle of the century, although they were halted rather abruptly in the next decades by high officials influenced by the intellectual currents flowing from the West. Just as in the crisis of confidence a century earlier, a crucial tipping point had been reached.38

The rapid cessation of trials in Eastern Europe just mentioned was one sign of this; another was the changing definition of “superstition.” The word shifted from designating outmoded and presumably invalid spiritual beliefs to designating outmoded and presumably invalid beliefs about physical reality (interestingly, the actual content of what was designated as superstitious did not change). As disbelief in magic spread throughout Europe and eventually much of the world, magical experiences first and then the very belief in magic turned into psychological disorders.39

### Changing Beliefs and Changing Behaviors

Disbelief in magic developed a vitriolic tone because it was becoming a critical social marker, a sign of membership in the forward-looking, modern-

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thinking, cosmopolitan elite, as much opposed to staid, conservative provincial leaders as to the great unwashed. It played into a dramatic schism between the upper and lower strata of society that had been forming for centuries, and that increased sharply in the late seventeenth century. The ruling classes gradually gave up their campaign to reform the masses and their traditional culture in favor of celebrating their superiority over them and their emancipation from outmoded thinking. The “theater of everyday life” saw the upper classes adopt an ever-more elaborate set of mannerisms, behaviors, beliefs, and taboos to distinguish them from their social inferiors. Not only were expressions of disbelief in magic used to proclaim membership in the cultural leadership but also, whether manifested as a regal hauteur or a levelheaded practicality, to sustain an immunity to the unreasonable fears and hopes through which magical beliefs could become self-fulfilling prophesies, a visceral imperviousness that was both a sign and effect of membership in the new elite. This elite was further defined along gender boundaries. A well-bred woman might be susceptible to the fear and the allure of the occult, but a well-bred man could no more succumb to an old woman’s curses than indulge in some ritual hocus-pocus to advance his own interests. Disbelief in magic played a critical role in defining the new autonomous individual in rational control of his own actions and feelings, internally integrated and essentially isolated from the outside world.40

As noted above, France in 1682 and England in 1736 revised their statutes to make all claims of magic prosecutable as fraud. Only Poland and Sweden, however, went so far as to decriminalize witchcraft completely in the late eighteenth century. Prussia, the Habsburg Empire, and Russia reformed their laws to bring a significant limit to prosecutions, but trials involving witchcraft and magic in these countries remained theoretically possible. In this respect, the decline in those countries was not much different from that in the great majority of jurisdictions where the laws remained unchanged until the nineteenth century. This process, in which the number of witchcraft trials dwindled from their post-crisis low level to nothing, while trials for nonmalefic magic also

decreased, has not attracted much scholarly attention. But the available information sheds valuable light on the informal process by which a generalized sentiment of pious skepticism gave way to a dominant attitude of dogmatic disbelief. 41

Recent studies of witchcraft and magic after the period of the witch hunts tend to focus on the continuation of beliefs, seeking to correct the mistaken assumption that the decline of witch prosecutions corresponded closely with a decline in witch beliefs. Besides showing that popular witchcraft fears and magical practices continued through the eighteenth and nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, they reveal that local elites’ attitudes were far more variegated, and changed far more slowly, than traditional historical discussions allowed. Nevertheless, elite attitudes clearly changed over the course of the eighteenth century, not just in intellectual circles and the cosmopolitan courts but across the board. In the core areas of the Enlightenment, the social leaders who dismissed magic out of hand grew from a small and beleaguered minority c. 1700 to a dominant majority by century’s end. In the more peripheral areas, such naysayers became more influential, at least forcing traditionalists to go on the defensive and modify their arguments to accommodate new points of view. 42

**The Decline of Magical Practices in Württemberg** The progress of this evolution is mirrored by changes in how officials in Württemberg stigmatized magical practices over the course of the eighteenth century. In the first decades of the century, the government focused primarily on the religious implications of magical offenses, referring to them as “sinful,” “disobedient,” and “superstitious” (in the sense of illicit spiritual practice). During the decades around mid-century, the government continued to exhibit concern about the religious and moral implications of magical activities but also began to characterize them more frequently as

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41 Levack, “Decline and End,” 75.
fraudulent or foolish. After 1780, their deceptiveness and irrationality, along with the disobedience that they involved, replaced their religious implications entirely. Notwithstanding differences in timing from one locality to another, the trend was the same throughout Europe, concluding by the end of the nineteenth century where not by the end of the eighteenth.43

In Württemberg, the diffusion of scientific progress and French fashion were important in the transition from pious skepticism to dogmatic disbelief, but they do not fully account for it; the government’s own experience with popular magical practices played a role as well. In particular, divinatory treasure hunting—a by-product of the new monetary economy that provided charlatans with a new way to fleece the public—became the most commonly prosecuted form of magic early in the eighteenth century. It was largely responsible for the tenfold rise in magic trials from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. Furthermore, the steady decline in prosecutions for treasure hunting from the 1760s into the first decade of the nineteenth century reflected a decline in commoners’ use of this form of magic; officials continued to prosecute it vigorously even as their conception of it changed from sinful disobedience to fraudulent foolishness. Common people lost their taste for the practice after mid-century because they, too, came to see its folly, partly because more dependable ways to make money were available and partly because the punishment for it—stiff fines, banishment, prolonged imprisonment, and even repeated flogging—was prohibitive.44

Changes in the rate at which other magical activities were prosecuted also reflected changes in the frequency and openness of their occurrence, at least to some extent. Even though a practice like magical healing, for example, continued through the nineteenth century, it was not necessarily unaffected by prosecution. The penalties for illicit magical activities were similar to those for treasure hunting. Furthermore, conviction of, arrest for, and even just suspicion of criminal behavior could result in a damaged reputation that could affect a victim’s entire family, as well as descendants. Economists emphasize that “informal (that is, illegal) black markets” involve “high costs and risks” that affect “the options

44 Ibid., 370–371, 419–428.
and behavior of many members of society, and thus the development of the entire economy,” and much the same is true of the effects of repression on the development of a culture. As late as 1775, a magistrate in Württemberg commented, “it is indeed well known that magical healing is in full swing everywhere, and where not openly then secretly.” Once upon a time, though, such activity was both ubiquitous and conspicuous; even sporadic repression meant that it assumed an increasingly furtive, illicit character that prevented it from expanding with the growing population, burgeoning economy, and developing culture. At the end of the eighteenth century, Württemberg had three times the population of the 1660s but only half the number of trials for beneficent magic. Officials’ indifference can account for only part of this inversion; the authorities took their responsibility to protect the public from swindlers seriously. The relatively low number of trials for beneficent magic reflects at least in part its lesser place in provincial culture.

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The Effect of the Witchcraft Trials on the Development of Culture and Society. The repression of magic during the Enlightenment clearly had a significant influence on provincial society and popular culture, and there is reason to think that the earlier witch persecutions, which were considerably more severe, did as well.

To begin with, while the early skeptics and the demonologists disagreed about the physical reality of magical crimes and how those who committed them should be treated, even the skeptics accepted that some people in late medieval society sought out encounters with malign spirits and attempted to use harmful magical powers. Only toward the end of the witch-trial era did questions arise about whether such people existed in significant numbers, and in the generations that followed, there was a transitional period when witchcraft was said to have been a reality in the past but had ceased to exist. The questions raised about the nature and extent of witchcraft that helped to end the trials were certainly salutary, given the exaggerations and distortions that pervaded the demonology. But attention to the changing nature of the high intellectual and juridical discourses about witchcraft, as well as to the substantial issues raised in many of the small trials, show that

not only beneficent but also malevolent magical practices and practitioners were an integral part of late medieval culture and society. The former were employed to help people; the latter conveyed righteous anger or malicious animosity in ways intended to cause harm. The variety of maleficient techniques ranged from poisons to surreptitious battery of children and animals, to noxious or symbolic items hidden in living areas, to curses, to subtle playing on peoples’ fears, and to subliminal signals that could trigger somatic ailments and accidents. Furthermore, a small but significant number of people did not just employ magical techniques; they also lived in a world of spontaneous or cultivated magical experiences, altering their consciousnesses via autosuggestion, vivid dreams or apparent out-of-body experiences, hallucinogenic salves and potions, or involuntary dissociation. The spirits that they perceived during these experiences could be amoral or even malevolent as well as benign.  

The prosecution of witches for malevolent attacks and diabolical associations was just one front in a wider campaign to suppress all forms of magic and, indeed, all popular practices deemed improper by the governing and religious elite. Combining secular “social discipline” and religious “confessionalization,” this campaign worked through a collaboration of state, church, and local community to purge unwanted practices, practitioners, behaviors, and experiences. This campaign began in Protestant countries with the Reformation and then spread to Catholic lands with the Counter-Reformation, reaching its high point during the first half of the seventeenth century, when witch hunting was also at its peak.  

Many currents combined to produce this surge of reformism. In the case of the witch prosecutions, the rising tide of trials from the late sixteenth into the early seventeenth century seems to have been connected with the “scissors effect” of limited resources, due

to the “Little Ice Age,” and a steadily rising population, which created the kind of competitive environment conducive to both witchcraft fears and the employment of maleficium. In these dire circumstances, many ordinary people were ready to believe that neighbors who employed techniques like curses, the evil eye, or emotional bullying were actually the devil’s minions. Similarly, many clergymen and some officials came to believe that beneficent magicians were also agents of the devil who secretly practiced witchcraft and openly seduced the unwary into reliance on magic. Other people interpreted their own impulses or spiritual experiences as concourse with the devil, and some even deliberately invoked him in order to draw on his power.\footnote{Behringer, “Little Ice Age,” in \textit{ew}, 660–663; Bever, \textit{Realities}, 60–63, 386, 73–92, 106–118; 173–180; 183–185.}

Most of the people who were caught up in the witch hunts were neither malevolent witches nor beneficent magicians but ordinary commoners victimized by malicious enemies, communal hysteria, or tortured denunciations. The accusations show how the demonology was incorporated into popular culture, transforming neighborhood feuds, interpersonal conflicts, idiosyncratic spiritual experiences, and individual fears and angers into local manifestations of a cosmic struggle between good and evil, and thereby shifting ordinary peoples’ moral frame of reference from the values and interests of their immediate surroundings to the universalized standards of the Christian commonwealth. Other developments contributed to this process—better educated clergymen, the propagation of catechisms, public confession, and religiously oriented elementary education—but the widespread dissemination of the witch demonology was surely a major factor.\footnote{Bever, \textit{Realities}, 434, 73–92, 387–389, 399–400.}

This assimilation of the demonology into popular consciousness was just the first stage of its effect on European society and culture. The evidence from Württemberg suggests that during the crisis of confidence, a whole series of shifts in popular practices and behaviors came as a reaction to the concern about, and prosecutions for, malicious and illicit magic. One change was an evolution in the symptomology of bewitchment, first as people adopted the demonology’s readiness to ascribe ailments to witchcraft and later as their descendants manifested increasingly blatant symbolic symptoms in reaction to officials’ growing reluctance to attribute
illnesses to it. Another was a decline in poisonings, partly because of an increased regulation of apothecaries and partly because of poison’s association with witchcraft and the danger that the suspicion of using it entailed. Yet another was a decline in the number of women assuming the role of semiprofessional healer (at least in Württemberg). Before the witch hunts, these women comprised a significant proportion of the public magical practitioners. During the trials, a woman’s reputation as a healer could trigger, or contribute to, her prosecution for witchcraft. By their end, women healers had essentially vanished from public practice.50

This suppression of female healers was but one change in women’s behavior caused by the witch hunts. The trials punished the extreme forms of perceived female misbehavior, aggressiveness and overt sexuality, that were held in check more generally through moral admonishments and social disapproval. Evidence from trials, as well as from the learned discourse, suggests that early in the period, society considered women’s sexuality and aggression to be significant problems because they were routinely manifested in everyday life. By the end of this period, women had come to be regarded as delicate and asexual by nature. In between, a critical mass appears to have learned to curb their anger and violent impulses, and to see their own sexuality as devilish. The change was hardly uniform or complete, and many sociocultural forces beyond the witch trials pushed in the same direction. But the widespread, brutal, and protracted persecutions seem to have formed the cutting edge. Hartman has suggested that northwestern Europe’s unusual family structure created far more unmarried women with relative autonomy in the community, thus generating unusual tensions in society. The analysis herein suggests that the witch trials were part of a much broader effort to substitute internalized controls for the supervision exercised by the family to regulate women’s behavior in other traditional cultures.51

A final phenomenon that shows the important role that the witch trials played in the transformation of Europeans’ behavior and self-conception was the wave of child-centered trials that took

50 Ibid., 400–408.
place toward the end of the era. During the initial phase of the trials, children figured mainly as victims, but by the late seventeenth century, they had become regular accusers, often the primary ones. In some cases, they denounced older people for introducing them to magic, and they often claimed to have flown to witch sabbats and engaged in related activities. In a few cases, the children had engaged in play modeled on the witch beliefs, but in most, it is clear that they were reporting fantasies and dream experiences. What they reported were generally not stock appropriations of the demonology but admixtures of demonological elements and aspects of their own life situations, combined in ways that suggest they were using witch beliefs to make sense of their personal situations. These dreams and fantasies manifested the process of enculturation that made up the larger process of acculturation to which the trials and the larger campaigns of social discipline and confessionalization contributed.\textsuperscript{52}

The crisis of confidence in the witch demonology occurred in the mid-seventeenth century not only because of the gross abuses and manifest injustices to which it had led but also because these gross abuses and manifest injustices changed the reality against which the demonology was measured. In the mid-sixteenth century, magical techniques were public and pervasive, openly performed by both ordinary people and expert professionals. By the mid-seventeenth century, magic was in much shorter supply, as people learned to avoid or hide practices and behaviors that were associated with it. What had seemed to be a clear and present danger to one generation had become an obscure exaggeration three or four generations later.

Discussing a variegated historical phenomenon like the witch trials by tracing an overarching narrative arc is like drawing a trend line through a scatter diagram; it helps to show the overall pattern in the array of specific instances. Despite enormous regional and local variations, prosecutions for witchcraft in Europe rose dramatically during the late sixteenth century, peaked in the first half of the seventeenth century, declined during the second half, and dwin-

dled away in the following one. This trajectory was directly related to a changing consensus in European culture that first viewed devil-worshipping magicians as a unified threat, then suffered a legal and intellectual crisis of confidence about the demonology, resolved into a pious skepticism about the significance of the threat posed by witchcraft, and eventually evolved, at least within the social and cultural elite, into a dogmatic dismissal of any suggestion of magic at all.

This trend line also helps relate the witch prosecutions to parallel developments. The crisis of confidence in the demonology was part of a larger crisis of authority in the seventeenth century, which in turn was the cultural dimension of a more general crisis. In the sixteenth century, administrative policies went hand in hand with religious goals, but by the eighteenth century, secular professionals like physicians and lawyers were more involved in the legal and political system than religious authorities were. The trajectory of the witch prosecutions also dovetailed with larger socioeconomic trends, rising with population growth and economic constriction, climaxing with Europe’s religious wars, and declining with economic recovery and the relaxation of elite concern about popular behavior.

The witch trials, however, also influenced social trends. They came to an end in part because they changed reality, marginalizing or suppressing roles and behaviors that had once flourished in European society. Similarly, the larger campaigns of confessionalization and social discipline may well have dissipated because their success made them obsolete. It has become fashionable to stress the limited effectiveness of these efforts, but in actuality the quality of life in the late eighteenth century was appreciably different from that in the early sixteenth century. Innumerable forces contributed to the change—among them, printing, education, economic growth, political consolidation, and the development of transportation infrastructure—but, as we have seen, deliberate cultural reform was also a major contributor to it.

Finally, carrying the examination of the rejection of witchcraft beliefs forward from the crisis of confidence into the eighteenth century shows that, far from being a minor episode in the pre-Enlightenment, it was critical to the larger decline of magic. From an intellectual and social standpoint, the demonology was the most vulnerable part of magical belief. It conflated a wide vari-
ety of phenomena, distorting their nature, cohesiveness, and significance, and countless innocent lives were sacrificed in its name. In the process, however, the witch hunts changed the reality that had given rise to them, thereby contributing to the eventual discrediting of the demonology and ultimately of magical beliefs in general.