Reformers on Sorcery and Superstition

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Calls for reform and renewal were nearly universal across Western Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. While reverberating through much of Christian society, these calls were especially intense within late medieval religious orders. Also during these two centuries, concern over superstition and sorcery escalated across Western Christendom, particularly among certain ecclesiastical authorities who eventually began to articulate still-fluid but coalescing stereotypes of diabolical witchcraft. These paired developments share some intriguing similarities. While both issues generated heightened levels of energy and anxiety in the late medieval period, neither entailed concerns that were entirely new. The idea of ecclesiastical reform had been prevalent in Christian thought practically from the beginning of the Church itself, developing powerfully in the patristic era, and emerging as an ever-present concern from the time of the Gregorian reform in the eleventh century onwards. In the late middle ages, however, ecclesiastical authorities deployed traditional rhetoric with a new intensity and in new contexts. For example, James Mixson has shown how age-old concerns about Christian poverty and propertied religious orders meshed with new social and economic realities, especially in the post-plague West. Likewise, a dialectic of proper Christian religion opposed to superstition extended back to the time of the early church fathers,

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2 As cataloged in Kaspar Elm (ed.), *Reformbemühungen und Observanzbestrebungen im spätmittelalterlichen Ordenswesen*, Berliner Historische Studien 14, Ordensstudien 6 (Berlin: 1989).
as did clerical condemnation of all forms of sorcery as inevitably demonic, but such trends gathered new force in the late medieval period, culminating in the fifteenth century with notions of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft and Europe’s earliest major witch hunts.\(^5\) Scholarship has also fashioned another similarity, here purely historiographical, between reformist concerns and increasing anxiety about superstition and diabolical sorcery in the 1300s and 1400s, insofar as it has frequently characterized important late medieval developments as mere preludes to Reformations both Protestant and Catholic, and to Europe’s witch hunts.\(^6\)

The overshadowing importance of sixteenth and seventeenth century developments in terms of both reform and renewal on the one hand, and sorcery and superstition on the other, is in the broadest sense undeniable. Nevertheless, late medieval developments demand to be understood on their own terms. Here I set these two trends in relation to one another as contemporary developments, rather than reading them in light of their well-known historical outcomes, to see how such a comparison might enrich our understanding of fourteenth- and especially fifteenth-century religious culture. My contention is that the particular drive for reform that emerged in this era often interacted with and (at points) reinforced specific concerns over superstition and diabolical sorcery that many authorities now perceived as infecting Christian society. I do not argue for any necessary causality. By no means were all religious reformers aggressive opponents of witchcraft, and likewise, one could certainly detest superstition and sorcery without being an active proponent of ecclesiastical reform. Such preoccupations did, however, overlap in important ways. In order to give some contours to this claim, I will first chart key examples of that overlap through a simple prosopography of church reformers who also engaged with issues of superstition and sorcery. I will then explore the connections between these areas of concern more deeply through case studies of two figures, Bernardino of Siena and Johannes Nider, who were both leaders within the Observant movements of their respective religious orders and prominent opponents of witchcraft in the early fifteenth century.

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