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Forgotten Victims from the Age of Atrocity

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This last lecture of this series on religious atrocities in the age of the Reformation and the religious wars, is about victims who were denied the limelight, who did not receive the full on-stage treatment in their own time. One of the features of atrocities that we have seen again and again is that not all victims are equal. Some – only a few, really – of those who died untimely deaths in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries died in just such a way that their deaths were useful to their contemporaries and successors; they could be made into myths, they helped to populate the world with heroes and villains, to warn successive generations against lowering their guard, or to train them in self-sacrificial virtue, or to remind them of why some truths could never be compromised. Meanwhile, most of the dead were passed over in silence because no-one, or not enough people, had a point they wanted to use them to make. A single death is a tragedy, Stalin supposedly said, and a million deaths are a statistic: but neither is an atrocity, not until someone makes it one, by deciding who needs to be celebrated, who needs to be blamed, and what lessons the survivors and successors of the dead should draw.

And as we have also seen throughout this series, the making of atrocities never stands still. Some atrocities fade into memory, like the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Atrocities that were once terrifying become the stuff of jokes, like the Spanish Inquisition. But in this final lecture I want to look at atrocities that have made the other journey: the victims whose sufferings were neglected in their own era, but whose memory has become more significant as time has gone on. Some of these we have already noticed. For example, very few Christians in the fifteenth or sixteenth century were troubled by the execution of thousands of Jews and Christianised Jews by the Spanish Inquisition, while the same tribunal's execution of dozens of Protestants became notorious; only in modern times has that balance been redressed. But today I want to focus on two other cases, contrasting and perhaps also connected. These are the stories of the Anabaptists and of the witches.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century is, conventionally, the process by which some European Christians became Protestants, while others remained Catholic. But 'Protestant' was a big and quarrelsome category, and as well as the big coherent groups that emerged from the schism, the Lutherans and the Calvinists, there were a great many smaller splinters, groups of dissenters whom modern historians tend to call the 'Radical Reformation' and who at the time were often lumped together, rather inaccurately, under the umbrella term *Anabaptists*. These were a very eclectic set of groups, but the conviction they shared was that Martin Luther's Reformation had not gone far enough; that Luther and his allies had settled for superficial reforms to the Church when in fact nothing less than a wholesale remaking of Christian society was called for. These groups read the New Testament and saw that it described the Church as a small, select group of dedicated believers surrounded by a hostile pagan world, passionately dedicated to Christian living, sharing all that they owned with each other, rejoicing in their persecution, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit manifested in visions, prophecies and miracles, and fired with the expectation of Christ's imminent return. And they compared the Church of their own times to that Biblical vision and found it utterly unrecognisable. So, in different ways, they set about trying to re-create that original vision as best they could.

The name *Anabaptist* came from one of the most fundamental concerns that united most of the radicals – most, not all. This was that the practice of baptism, the fundamental Christian sacrament of initiation, had become hopelessly corrupt. The New Testament only ever describes the baptism of adults who have made a conscious and deliberate profession of faith, not of infants or children – although it does, with unhelpful ambiguity, talk about whole households being baptised. Still, this idea of believer's baptism made intuitive sense to the radicals. How could you be part of a select, passionate group of Christians unless you had deliberately chosen to join it? And what ritual other than a baptism would be sufficient to mark the shattering conversions that the radicals themselves had experienced? But if there was one thing on which all Christians agreed – and surprisingly, this is



something that as far as I know has never been seriously challenged by any Christian sect – if there was one thing on which everyone agreed, it is that baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event, as unrepeatable as birth itself. So if you are baptised as an adult – and from 1525 onwards some radicals began to do this – you are necessarily renouncing and denouncing the event that happened when you were a newborn, when a priest sprinkled you with water and mumbled some Latin words. That was not, could not be a true Christian baptism. And so, you were necessarily saying that most of the so-called Christian society around you in fact consisted of unbaptised heathens, Martin Luther himself no less than any of the others. Whereas to that majority, you looked as if you were desecrating this once-in-a-lifetime sacrament by this farcical repetition of it: hence the label *Anabaptist*, which literally means a *rebaptiser*, a term for people who had chosen to put themselves beyond the pale. This was not, then, simply about the correct age to administer baptism. The heart of the radicals' view of baptism was choice; some would choose baptism as adults, others would not. In which case the very notion of Christendom, of a universal or a national Church to which everyone belonged by default, was an impossibility. Christians were bound to be a subgroup, in all likelihood a small minority, sedulously separated from the godless society around them.

So, you can perhaps see why the majority left behind, the Catholics and the more conventional Protestants, would feel not only insulted but also threatened. The radicals were questioning the whole nature of Christian society, a deeply frightening thing to do in a world which took for granted the idea of the body politic, of the fundamental unity knitting society together. Nor did it end with baptism. For example, many radicals refused to swear oaths, on the grounds that a strict reading of the New Testament forbids it. But swearing oaths to guarantee pledges was an indispensable part of life in premodern Europe; refusing to swear an oath was like refusing to sign your name or to provide your identity would be today – it made it impossible for anyone else to do business with you or to trust you.

If all that still sounds a little abstract, consider the apocalyptic violence which some radicals embraced. The so-called Peasants' War, the huge rural rebellion which convulsed Germany in 1524-5, was not driven by Protestant radicals, but did have some very visible radical leaders, who ended up as the scapegoats for the whole affair: people who wanted to turn a spiritual and theological revolution into a political and social one. The rebellion was defeated, as apocalyptic peasant risings usually are, but one of the effects of defeat was to radicalise the survivors. Surely Christ's return and their vindication was near, if only they could keep the flame burning, or pour petrol on it and see how far they could spread it.

The result was the event which, in its own time, became the best-known atrocity of the age, the story which for well over a century made the western German city of Münster into a byword to scare children. In 1532, the city's pastor and several of its leading citizens were converted to Anabaptism. Like-minded believers from across the region converged there and succeeded in taking over the city's government. A Dutch baker named Jan Matthys prophesied that Münster was the new Jerusalem to which Christ would imminently return. Over a thousand adults accepted baptism. They threw the bishop out and began to muster an army. The bishop laid siege to the city in 1534. Matthys was killed in a suicidal sortie early in the siege, but one of his comrades, a tailor named Jan Bockelson, was now proclaimed king. Within his besieged Jerusalem, he set about building the new world. Private property was abolished, including the property relationship known as marriage: polygamy was legalised, and Bockelson led the way by taking sixteen wives for himself. When one of them crossed him, he apparently beheaded her himself, in public. The sense that all households were dissolved and Bockelson himself was the city's father was reinforced by his insistence that he himself would choose the names of every newborn child. After a year-long siege, the city was finally overrun. Bockelson and his fellow-prophets were tortured and executed. The gibbets in which their bodies were displayed still hang from the cathedral tower. And the city became a tale of horror which showed why fanatics and enthusiasts could never be given an inch. You can still find preachers well over a century later on the other side of Europe who refer to 'Münster' without needing to explain what they meant: like all the best atrocities, the memory was kept burning.

As so often, however, the atrocity-mongers were fighting the last war. After the Münster debacle, a handful of Anabaptist-bitter-enders did continue with sporadic terrorist attacks, but most Anabaptists took the catastrophe as eloquent proof that Bockelson and his disciples had taken a disastrously wrong tack. The future of Anabaptism was symbolised by a very different figure, the Dutch priest Menno Simons, who was radicalised by his brother's death during the battle for Münster. Early in 1536 Simons abandoned his priesthood and sought a



new baptism, but he would be an Anabaptist of another kind. The Mennonite movement he founded would not preach revolution and war, but withdrawal and pacifism. The Mennonites did not speak for everyone and even the Mennonites rapidly splintered into a dizzying array of different groups, but from the mid-1530s most of them had one thing in common: they foreswore violent revolution and aimed to create pacifist, self-governing communities which asked nothing more of the world around them than to be left alone. And in return, they were persecuted with unrelenting fear and hatred as the successors of Münster. We know of over 2000 Anabaptists executed as heretics or blasphemers in Europe before 1560: almost double the number of mainstream Protestants burned for heresy, although the radicals were of course far less numerous.

Catholic bishops and regimes persecuted Anabaptists, especially in Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands; after all, from the Catholic point of view, they were heretics just like other Protestants. But Protestant governments of most stripes were equally energetic in pursuing them. German Anabaptists were no less liable to be persecuted in Lutheran than in Catholic territories: Martin Luther insisted that he respected freedom of belief but that it was his duty to punish blasphemy, a distinction without a difference. The very first executions for Anabaptism that we know of took place in the Protestant cantons of Switzerland. So did the most notorious single killing: the execution of the Spanish radical Miguel Servetus in Geneva in 1553, notorious chiefly because of John Calvin's starring role in the proceedings. It was not especially controversial at the time; Calvin, aware that Servetus was notorious and that the world was watching, carefully canvassed opinion from a wide range of Protestant theologians, who agreed that Servetus both deserved death and had to be silenced. The execution was as much a political as a legal and ethical decision. Calvin was well aware that Catholics used the bogeyman of Münster and radicalism to discredit more conservative reformers like himself. To convince Christendom that he stood for scholarly, moderate, pious reform, drawing a clear line between himself and the radicals was urgently necessary: and what better way to draw it than in their own blood? In fact, the more a Protestant country proclaimed that it was moderate, the more enthusiastically it persecuted Anabaptists. A succession of English kings declared themselves to be reasonable and moderate in religion, and produced the body counts to prove it. During the late 1530s dozens of suspected Anabaptists, most of them Dutch immigrants, were executed by Henry VIII and his reformist chief minister Thomas Cromwell: a fact which Hilary Mantel, I am afraid, has chosen to leave out of her recent account. King Edward VI's aggressively Protestant government stopped executing people for loyalty to the Pope, but it did burn two Protestant radicals for heresy. The last burnings for heresy in England took place in 1612, under James I, a king who gloried in his reputation for learning and religious inclusion.

And if the executions as such stopped thereafter, persecution did not. The English Civil War and Republic in the mid-seventeenth century brought radical groups to this country, the most hated and feared of them being the Quakers, who believed neither in infant nor adult baptism, but rejected the entire sacrament as an empty ritual; they also rejected all hierarchies and churches, preached a terrifyingly extreme equality and – generally, though not absolutely – embraced pacifism. They claimed to have Christ dwelling within them to such an extent that in some sense they actually were Christ. Notoriously, the Quaker preacher James Nayler rode into Bristol in 1656 as his companions cast their cloaks on the road and sang hosannas. He was prophetically claiming that Christ's ministry was continued through him; that was the spirit in which his wife wrote him a letter saying 'Thy name is no more to be called James but Jesus'. For virtually everyone else in England, though, this was the most outrageous blasphemy: he was, controversially, spared execution, but was branded, had a hole bored through his tongue with a hot iron and was sentenced to two years' hard labour, and died not long after his release. After Charles II's restoration in 1660, the crackdown on Quakers became systematic, and those years were long remembered by them as the Great Persecution, though the only actual executions were in Puritan New England. Like the Mennonites before them, the Quakers experienced persecution which only intensified as their behaviour became less threatening. The community's own records have it that over ten thousand Quakers suffered imprisonment during the period from 1660-89, and over three hundred died in prison. Only after that did they find a grudging toleration; and like the Anabaptists, the Quakers found only one place where they were truly free, in the American colonies, especially the Quaker-founded colony of Pennsylvania which also became an Anabaptist refuge.

Very few people outside the persecuted communities of radicals saw any of this as an *atrocitiy*. The commemoration and celebration of these waves of suffering was entirely down to the persecuted communities themselves, communities which did not often have easy access to printing presses or indeed the settled security



to produce substantial books. While Protestants and Catholics were producing weighty martyr-books in the later sixteenth century, Anabaptists were only managing occasional short pamphlets; often their stories were handed down by word of mouth, with martyrological songs being a regular part of the community's life. This is one of those early books: *The sacrifice of the Lord*, first published illegally in 1562, in a tiny 16mo copy smaller than your hand, and then running through at least twelve editions in Dutch during the rest of the century. This expanded one dates from 1578, and as you can see from the fancy dual-colour title page was a relatively luxury edition. But it was not until the relatively peaceful days of the later seventeenth century that the definitive Anabaptist martyrology was produced, the *Martyrs' Mirror*, a Dutch production but with universal coverage which traced the tradition of non-violent Christian defiance and suffering from the apostles to their own time. Here I'm showing you the 1685 edition for the simple reason that it was sumptuously illustrated, and these pictures, drawings produced with all the vivid humanity of the Dutch golden age, became an important part of its appeal: from a great many burnings, such as this mass execution in Salzburg in 1528, through more idiosyncratic deaths such as this drowning from 1552, or dignified but unsparing depictions of torture, such as this one from 1570. She could almost be in a rapture of prayer, her eyes fixed on heaven, even her feet lifted off the ground. Interrogation scenes like this visually contrast the simple innocence of the victim to the ruffs and ornaments of his persecutors. Or there are vivid depictions of the moment of arrest: you can feel the movement in this image of the baker suddenly spotting the inquisitors at his door. Others show the ingenuity of Anabaptists remaining faithful under persecution, such as this group who put to sea together to worship on a boat. This one is the most famous of all, the iconic story of Dirk Willems, who in 1569 was arrested as an Anabaptist in his native Gelderland in the Netherlands. According to the story, he escaped from the bishop's prison with a rope he had made from rags and fled across a frozen pond to escape. A guard pursued him, but where the half-starved and unencumbered fugitive had been able to cross safely, his heavily armed pursuer fell through the ice. Whereupon Willems turned back and pulled the man from the water, saving his life; the delay, of course, meant that the other pursuers caught up with him, he was rearrested, and executed by burning on 16 May 1569. That tale of peace, mercy and self-sacrifice summed up everything that Anabaptists aspired to be, and it became and has remained much treasured. He is still celebrated in his hometown; there has been a novel about him; this image in particular has become ubiquitous amongst Anabaptists, endlessly recycled, so familiar that it is spoofed as well as revered. This statue to him was erected in Canada only a couple of years ago. It's a sign of how well the *Martyrs' Mirror* tradition has endured amongst Anabaptist communities. A German-language edition was published in Pennsylvania in 1749, the largest book published in pre-revolutionary America; an English edition eventually appeared in 1837. For generations it was *the* book, along with the Bible, that Mennonites and others who claimed the Anabaptist heritage aspired to have in their homes: indeed, it was and still is often given as a wedding present, a little gruesome for that occasion you might think, but a marker of what it meant to be a Christian home and to pass that memory on to the next generation. It is still in print, along with various abridged versions and study guides.

Since that first age of persecution ended, these communities have treasured these stories and the identity of peaceful, blameless sufferings they have given them. They have not used them to foster hatred or revenge, but to teach the community that this is what their faith means. Which is perhaps one of the most harmless things one can do with an atrocity story, and I hate to cast a shadow on it, but even this can have a poisonous consequence, in this sense: if your community's identity is built around the unjust sufferings that your forebears innocently endured, then you may be inclined to write out parts of your history which do not fit with your myth, or indeed to take your own status as persecuted innocents so much for granted that you do not consider the possibility that sometimes the jackboot may be on the other foot. In modern times various inheritors of the pacifist tradition of the radical Reformation have been less assiduous in adhering to it than they wish to remember. In Britain during the First World War, a great many Quakers refused to bear arms, or in some cases to serve in the military at all, as a matter of conscience; that was their legal right, but nevertheless many of them suffered considerable victimisation and in some cases lengthy terms of imprisonment as a result. That witness is now celebrated by British Quakers; the fact that more than half of the Quakers conscripted by the British Army during that war duly served in arms is forgotten. American Quakers rightly celebrate how, thanks to them, the United States has permitted conscientious objection since its founding; they tend not to celebrate the most recent Quaker president, that famous peacenik Richard Nixon. The Seventh-day Adventists, another, more recent radical Protestant grouping of American origin which is also nowadays firmly committed to pacifism, nevertheless provided substantial numbers of volunteers for the Union army in the American Civil War: for, as it seemed to them, that was a struggle whose righteousness meant that scruples about violence could be and



must be set aside. In the First World War, the Seventh-day Adventist church in Germany split bitterly over the subject, with the majority deeming patriotism more important than peace. Even the Mennonites, the original radical pacifists, were not immune. In 1929, persecution of German-speaking Mennonites in Soviet Ukraine sent over ten thousand refugees fleeing west. The cause of these innocent suffering Germans was taken up by the ascendant Nazi Party, who were quick to point the finger at what they called Judeo-Bolshevism. They managed to persuade the German government to accept 4000 of the refugees and a series of films depicting their sufferings were made from 1933 onwards, as in this 1941 re-release of a film originally made in 1935, now retitled *The Village in the Red Storm*, whose posters make a contrast between the stoic Aryan villagers and their persecutors that hardly needs explanation. Naturally, under the circumstances, some Mennonites went beyond mere gratitude to their protectors to willingness to fight against the forces of godlessness that threatened to overwhelm all Christendom. This is a rare photo of an all-Mennonite squadron in the Waffen-SS. When the Nazis occupied Mennonite-majority towns in Ukraine in 1942, they were greeted as liberators. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian Jews were murdered near the Mennonite settlements. I don't mean to imply that the Mennonites share disproportionately in the blame for these atrocities, but simply to say that if you always think of yourself as the innocent victims, you can lose sight of the possibility that, in another time and another place, you may also be guilty.

And that brings us to our other, our final set of atrocities. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, a few thousand Europeans were executed for heresy; 80% or more of the victims were men; and those killings were vigorously contested at the time, for and against. During the same period, perhaps ten times as many people – somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 – were executed for a very similar crime: witchcraft. In this case, however, around 80% of the victims were women. And at the time not much more than a murmur was heard about this. Yet these neglected killings have resonated louder and louder down the centuries, to the extent that they nowadays seem to us a defining event of the era, and this long-ago, collective atrocity has become an important part of our culture. The story of the atrocity that is the great witch-hunt – to use a contentious term – is a story that is about us as well as about them.

Europeans had believed for centuries that some people were witches, that is, that they harnessed supernatural powers to harm others. In the medieval era, such witchcraft was usually understood as happening on quite a small and local scale, and it was often associated with marginal, misfit figures in rural communities: cranky, malevolent or eccentric loners, often poor or elderly, people who had very little real power or security and who therefore might find it useful or even appealing to attract a reputation for uncanny powers. If a beggarwoman comes to your door you may well turn her away – but if you believe that she is a witch, you will probably not dare. This was a dangerous game to play, since the Church did not approve of magic, malevolent or otherwise, but nor did it generally pursue such characters with any particular zeal. Most of them could expect to die in their beds. Most but not all of these so-called witches were women – in parts of Scandinavia, male witches were more common. We still do not really understand the origins of this pattern, in which witchcraft was seen as predominantly but not exclusively female, the mirror image of the situation with most mundane crime. That itself may be a clue: malicious men were assumed to inflict harm on people by physical violence, whereas women needed to be more creative; you could link this to the fact that the stereotypically female means of committing murder in this period was poison, a method which, like witchcraft, required cunning and knowing your way around a kitchen rather than bodily strength or physical courage.

But until the late fifteenth century witchcraft was rarely dealt with by the law and very rarely led to executions. Legal interest and the rate of killing then began to climb, and in the sixteenth century both skyrocket. The peak of witch-hunting was in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and it was very unevenly spread. Both Catholic and Protestant territories did it, using different theological justifications to reach similar results. Some territories, such as Spain, saw very little witch-hunting. These tended to be places with strong, centrally managed legal systems which were good at resisting local pressure. Even England falls into this category, a place where there were certainly hundreds of witchcraft executions, but probably less than a thousand; and the acquittal rate of those accused under the various English Witchcraft Acts was over 80%, reflecting the persistent legal problem that it is difficult to prove that someone is guilty of an imaginary crime. The fact that the only real mass witch-hunt in England took place in the midst of the Civil War of the 1640s proves the point. Other places took a much darker turn: these tended to be small or decentralised territories whose courts were liable to be overwhelmed by political or popular pressure. For example, Scotland, where King James VI's conviction that he



and his new wife had survived an attempt to sink their ship with weather magic in 1590 produced a mass purge, with the king himself presiding at trials. But the real heartland of the European witch hunt was a strip roughly a hundred miles either side of the river Rhine, embracing eastern France and western Germany, and running all the way from to the Netherlands to the cantons of Switzerland, where there were waves of panic about witches supposedly spreading plague. This tended to be where the mass purges took place, with dozens of suspects executed together. Those purges had a different flavour from the low-level cases of village malice: these people tended not to be accused of petty harm such as putting a curse on a neighbour's cow, but of heresy, gathering in covens at night to practice foul rituals of devil-worship, cannibalism and, of course, illicit sex. It was cases like this where suspects were burned, like heretics: in England, by contrast, convicted witches were hanged like common criminals. The fear of this vast, hidden, diabolical conspiracy gripped people who otherwise look like sober, rational and moderate philosophers and jurists. A few individuals spoke out against it, mostly suggesting that it was going too far; only very rare voices wondered whether witchcraft existed at all.

Exactly why this surge in executions took place in at that time and in those regions remains mysterious, but one promising thread of historical explanation is worth mentioning: that this story, and the story of the persecution of Anabaptists, were tied up with one another. Anabaptists, who were often described as devilish, both for their doctrines and for their behaviour. Their steadfastness under torture looked like the devil's work. So did some of their behaviour. In Amsterdam in February 1535, during the height of the Münster crisis, a group of Anabaptists (seven men, four women) burned their clothes in an upper room in Amsterdam and ran out naked into the street, proclaiming woe and claiming to be preaching 'the naked truth'. When forcibly dressed after their arrest, they tore their clothes from their bodies, wanting to be rid of the rags which Adam and Eve had donned in Eden and which symbolised the corruption of fallen humanity. But to outsiders they looked more like a coven of witches. Two years later, a Dutch Anabaptist was burned as a witch. In the records her crime was initially given as adult baptism, but that was scratched out and replaced with witchcraft.

The leap from anti-Anabaptist paranoia to witch-panic was all too easy. Their secret meetings did not help; nor did the persistent rumours about nudity and unconventional sexual morals – rumours that were largely but not completely baseless. Worst of all was the Anabaptists' refusal to baptise infants and their practice of rebaptising converts, since baptism was for most Christians the primary means by which the devil is cast out of an infant: it was all too obvious that the Anabaptists were on the devil's side, and it fit neatly into rumours that witches met at their sabbats to sacrifice and feast on the bodies of the unbaptised babies born from their depraved sexual excesses. Adult baptisms only made matters worse, since everyone knew that the Devil forced witches to renounce Christian baptism and to accept his own diabolical parody of it, and new devil-parents instead of godparents. By the mid-sixteenth century, the categories of 'Witch' and 'Anabaptist' were becoming blurred. In 1562, in the southern German town of Wiesensteig, a clandestine Anabaptist meeting was discovered. Shortly afterwards, a freak summer hailstorm did terrible damage to crops in the area, and the period's first really major witch-panic followed, in which at least 63 men and women were executed, charged not only with weather-magic but also with robbing infants of their baptism. It was a hinge moment: as witchcraft prosecutions accelerated across Europe, so prosecutions of Anabaptists began to dry up. Assaulted on all sides, good Christian people did not trouble too much to distinguish one variety of the devil's minions from another.

And then, quite suddenly, it stopped. In the third quarter of the seventeenth century, witchcraft prosecutions dried up dramatically across Europe: not because of any change in the law – in fact the old laws tended to remain on the books long after they stopped being used – but because of a change in the climate. It's still mysterious. But it's plain that stories that had once seemed terrifying began to seem ridiculous, and that even as ordinary people continued to believe in witches as much as they had ever done, lawyers and churchmen were suddenly scrambling to distance themselves from this kind of fanaticism. One freak exception to this proves the rule. The most notorious single episode of witch-hunting nowadays is the panic that swept the Massachusetts town of Salem in 1692-3, leading to nineteen hangings and at least six other deaths. This is the site where the actual hangings took place. One of the reasons this became so notorious is not only that it was the only major panic of this kind in North America, but that by the 1690s it was an aberration: a grisly fluke event, triggered when village tensions met an unstable local political situation, in a colony where a secular government had just taken over control from a more theocratic Puritan leadership and was flailing around, trying to apply the blunt methods of the law to solve what had traditionally been theological and pastoral problems. Still, what really sets the Salem trials apart is the response to them. There was open opposition to the proceedings even at the time,



some of those opponents being caught up in the purge itself. While the colony's establishment closed ranks to defend the trials, in 1695 a local Quaker published a book denouncing them, and when put on trial for this, a jury acquitted him. In 1697 Samuel Sewall, one of the judges involved in the trials, publicly apologised for what he had done; a number of the jurors subsequently did the same, as did some of the accusers – something which, to my knowledge, had never happened following a witch-trial before. A trickle of other books followed, and legal petitions to overturn the convictions: which were initially resisted, but eventually, in 1711 – nearly twenty years after the fact – 22 of the convictions were overturned by the colony's government and over £500 of compensation was paid to the survivors and to the families of the dead. That did not extend to everyone, and petitions to extend the pardon were renewed, only finally being fully granted in 2001, when the state's governor proclaimed everyone convicted or suspected in the purge to have been innocent.

By then, the Salem Witch trials had become a cultural touchstone. The list of novels, plays and films inspired by or referring to them is dauntingly long; there are even two operas. In the 1890s an enterprising Salem silversmith even tried to cash in on the enduring fascination with the story; how successful he was at the time I don't know, but they sell for around \$120 each on eBay. The novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, and his great-great-grandfather was one of the trial judges, indeed the only one who stood by his actions throughout his life; Hawthorne changed the spelling of his name, dropping in the W, as a young man to distance himself from that shameful history, and his famous 1835 story of loss of faith, 'Young Goodman Brown', is set in the midst of the trials. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote a story about Salem; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a play about them; they even surface in the horror stories of H. P. Lovecraft. And of course, above all, in 1952 Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* used an impressively close and detailed account of the trials as a polemical metaphor about Senator Joe McCarthy's House Committee on Unamerican Activities. The play has been filmed twice, this 1996 version's screenplay being by Miller himself, and as that shows it has long outlasted its immediate political context: it has turned 'witch-hunt' into a generic term for fanatical pursuit of an imaginary crime without regard for natural justice, a term which has been embraced with particular enthusiasm by the current President. As his case might indicate, the memory of the witch-hunts has now largely been cut adrift from the historical record: this has become a free-floating atrocity of use to almost everyone.

To take a slightly more respectable example, here is what the bestselling 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown, has to say on the subject. 'During 300 years of witch hunts, the Church burned at the stake an astounding five *million* women.' That is not by any means the novel's most ridiculous historical claim but notice two things about it. First, the number: he says five million witches, a number that is roughly a hundred times larger than it should be, but that claim is actually comparatively modest. The canonical number of deaths often cited by modern accounts of the witch trials is actually nine million, a number first produced by the German Enlightenment philosopher Gottfried Christian Voigt in the course of an argument with Voltaire in the 1780s: Voltaire estimated the number of witchcraft executions at several hundred thousand, which is high but not a bad stab at the question given the information available to him, and Voigt used some heroic back-of-envelope calculations to question it: extrapolating from the 40 executions which had taken place in one German principality in the 1570s and 1580s, and assuming that that rate of execution had held constant across all of Europe for eleven centuries, produced a figure of 9,442,994. The calculation was ridiculous but the number stuck, usually rounded down to nine million. For Romantics, for early women's-rights campaigners, and many others the figure was too appealing to question. Maybe the primary reason for its appeal is plain in the other plainly false part of Dan Brown's claim: that these deaths were the work of the Catholic Church, when in fact they were shared by Protestant and Catholic jurisdictions, and were usually the work of secular legal systems rather than of churchmen. Given that the best-known trials, at Salem, were plainly the work of Puritans, this recurrent insistence that the witch-trials were a Catholic conspiracy is surprising – or rather, it is a sign of how much some strains of modern thought want or need to have atrocities which they can hang around Catholicism's neck; this is of course only one of the many anti-Catholic myths which Brown's book recycles. The nine million figure was picked up and given fresh respectability by Margaret Murray, the British archaeologist, folklorist and feminist whose theories about the history of witchcraft were widely taken seriously in her time, even though they've subsequently been proven to be entirely baseless. Support for wildly inflated numbers of witchcraft executions also came from Nazi Germany, which welcomed the notion that German women representing authentic Aryan folk wisdom had been slaughtered by a Christian-Jewish conspiracy; its cheerleaders pressed the case in books like this one, which repeated the nine million number. The SS, in one of



its lesser-known activities, actually conducted some of the first thorough research of trial records, incidentally, helping to prove that the real number of executions was far lower.

Even so, the notion that there were been nine million, or at least many millions, of executions has become one of those zombie statistics that lumbers on no matter how many times it is knocked down: which is a sure sign of a number that has an appeal beyond the merely factual. In addition to its regular use in anti-Catholic and more broadly anti-ecclesiastical rhetoric, the image of the witch as victim was of course most seriously taken up by twentieth-century feminism: after all, whether we are talking about millions or ‘merely’ tens of thousands, the execution of enormous numbers of women for an imaginary crime is a fact that deserves feminist attention, and the modern scholarship which has traced the deep currents of misogyny behind the phenomenon is of course both correct and hugely important. My point today, though, is simply to underline how far the witch as a cultural figure has changed. Even in the children’s fiction where she has taken refuge, there has been a reversal within living memory: the wicked witch as the default figure has vanished, Roald Dahl’s Scandinavian-inflected version perhaps being the last really substantial figure in that canon, to be replaced by a succession of comic or even heroic witches. The twentieth century’s best-known wicked witch, in L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, had to be reinvented as a heroine in Gregory Maguire’s 1995 novel *Wicked* and the hugely successful musical based on it. In all this, notice, the gender signification of the word *witch* has subtly shifted: once a predominantly feminine category, it is now exclusively so, such that in J. K. Rowling’s Potterverse, *witch* and *wizard* are simply equivalent feminine and masculine labels. The idea that this label, *witch*, a label that was once shameful and indeed lethal, should be claimed and owned by feminists has been and remains a hugely powerful one. It is not true that the women executed for witchcraft in the sixteenth century belonged to an underground tradition of female knowledge or to a pre- or anti-Christian matriarchal religion which was systematically targeted by the Church: no doubt if such a tradition had existed the Church would have targeted it. But the idea is too good to let go of, and in these postmodern times it is good enough to reinvent it. In 1968 a group of New York feminist radicals formed a group called WITCH, standing for the Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell. They protested Richard Nixon’s inauguration, disrupted a bridal fair – in part by releasing boxfuls of white mice into the event – and interrupted a Senate hearing on population control. One of their regular campaign chants ran, ‘Nine Million Women Burned as Witches’. ‘If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself,’ one of their early pamphlets declared, ‘you are a Witch. You make your own rules.’ A series of local groups, calling themselves covens, were established: some changed the meaning of the acronym to more anodyne alternatives, like ‘Women Inspired to Tell their Collective History’ – a name which still shows how that imagined past matters. WITCH as an organisation fizzled out in the 1970s but a group claiming the name was re-established in Chicago in 2015, often quoting this phrase from a 2015 novel by Tish Thawer as the movement’s new slogan: ‘We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn.’ The resurgent group has thrown itself enthusiastically into America’s culture wars.

So as the self-proclaimed witches battle with the man who claims to be the victim of history’s greatest witch-hunt, historians should perhaps simply accept defeat gracefully and leave the subject to the mythmakers. This is what atrocities are for: to be recruited to fight today’s battles. But I cannot quite bring myself to leave the many women and the rather fewer men who died for no very good reason to the mercies of modern recruiting-sergeants. Women like these, the famous Pendle Witches from Lancashire, ten of whom were hanged in 1612, were not the active agents of the devil their accusers thought they had caught; nor were they secret pagan cultists, or political campaigners, or symbols of anyone or anything. What they were, we do not really know: apparently a group of people caught up in local family rivalries, swapping accusations, trading in small-scale magic, until a chance set of events caught up with them and they were killed. They do not owe us anything; nor would they recognise the many ways their memory has been used. If we want to claim that memory, then I hope we can at least try to remember them rather merely invent them to suit ourselves. Perhaps, even, we might be able to let them rest in peace.

Further reading

Ben Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton University Press, 2017)

Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999)

Brad S. Gregory (ed.), *The Forgotten Writings of the Mennonite Martyrs* (Leiden: Brill, 2002)

Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2006, cf. first edition 1987)



Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London: Routledge, 1996)

Gary K. Waite, *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe, 1525-1600* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)

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